



The Promposal

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Category: Romance

Description: Now that life has finally given her everything she's ever wanted, Mattie Lowe has one thing on her mind: Prom. Determined to throw the most epic prom ever, Mattie sets out to plan a memorable and magical event—one that would make the late John Hughes proud. But when her gorgeous and perfect boyfriend, Jake Kingston hasn't popped the most creative promposal of all time, Mattie starts to worry. Actually, Jake hasn't asked her at all—he's been distant and quiet. And Mattie isn't about to go to her senior prom solo.

Suddenly, it seems that everything is stacked against her and falling apart quickly. With rivals vowing to sabotage her event and her boyfriend's odd behavior, Mattie's convinced the night is headed toward ruin. Will the snarky, purple-haired manga artist lead her class to an unforgettable night of fun and frolic or will she go down in high school history as the worst president to run the school?

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CHAPTER ONE

“Where are we?” I whispered as my boyfriend, Jake Kingston, came to a stop and turned his car’s engine off. He’d mentioned his plan to drive us somewhere in downtown Los Angeles. At night. And there were no functioning streetlights, trash was everywhere, and crumbling walls covered in graffiti. This area did not look particularly safe. Yes, thanks to my rich, famous artist father, my idea of safe consisted of valets and state-of-the-art home security systems, but this really was scary.

“I’ll show you.” Then he opened his door and got out.

What? Seriously? He’d brought me to the corner of Homicide and Assault, and he was intentionally leaving our bubble of safety?

Then he came around and tried to open my door. I locked it. He raised one eyebrow at me and pushed his key fob, making the silver lock pop back up. I pushed it down. Did he really expect me to join him in this madness?

“Tills, you’re being ridiculous. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Open the door.”

Ugh. He had to go and call me Tills. Only Jake called me that—short for Tilly, which was short for my actual name, Matilda. Everybody at school called me Mattie, my family called me Tilly, and Jake called me Tills. Rhymed withchills. Andthrills. Both of which he gave me on a regular basis. Him using his pet nickname for me was kind of my kryptonite.

Which he totally knew.

Glaring, I undid my seat belt and let him open my door. His gentlemanlike behavior also fell in my kryptonite category. (Which included, among other things, every time he would touch or kiss me. Which happened frequently.)

As if to prove my point, Jake took me by the hand to help me onto the sidewalk and then pressed a soft and sweet kiss against my right temple. He shut the car door, and it seriously sounded like a prison cell clanking shut.

He started walking down the street, and I clung to his hand. His grip tightened in response, and he gave me one of his movie star smiles that made my knees feel hollow. There was a man across the street from us muttering to himself and pushing a shopping cart with all his belongings. Honestly, homeless people scared me, too. Probably because I hadn't had much exposure to them. I hated to think that I might be hobo-phobic.

But I had no problem admitting that I was definitely criminal-phobic, and I was worried this area might have more than its fair share of those. Jake would be totally fine—he was big and athletic. And if he couldn't fight his way out of something, he'd be able to charm just about anybody into submission.

Me, on the other hand? I'd be screwed.

"Here we are." We stopped in front of an old, abandoned building covered in spray paint and littered with broken windows. It gave me the bad kind of chills. "Do you recognize this place?" he asked.

"Yep. It's where we're going to get murdered."

He shook his head and let out a chuckle, slipping a key from his pocket.

“How do you have a key?” I asked.

“My dad knows a guy.” Of course his dad knew a guy. “Come on.”

We walked up some stone steps, and Jake unlocked one of the massive front doors. It literally creaked, sending shivers up and down my back. “This is the part of the horror movie where the audience would be screaming at us to not go into that spooky building.”

“You know I’d never let anything happen to you.”

It was a good thing he was so gorgeous. It was the only reason I was following him inside.

That, and I happened to be head over heels in love with him.

Jake closed the creaky door behind us once we were in, making sure to lock it. Trapping us. Then he turned on the flashlight app on his phone. We could see only a couple of feet ahead of us; everything else was plunged into total blackness. And it smelled terrible. Like animals and trash and something else I did not want to identify. I put my free hand over my nose and mouth.

“This is the Alban Havelock Hotel. Back in the day, this was the place to be seen.” His words echoed eerily around us. The ceilings must have been high. “All the big movie stars of the 1920s and 1930s came here to dance and drink illegally and party until dawn.”

“Are they still here? Haunting the place?”

That made him laugh, but I still felt nauseous and light-headed. What if that was a sign I was being possessed and didn’t know it?

It surprised me that I was such a total and complete wuss. I'd actually considered myself somewhat tough before the Hotel of Horrors.

If this was how he was planning on doing his promposal to me, he'd made a bad decision. I might even make him wait a long time before I answered, given how much he was freaking me out with this place. Obviously I would say yes, because, hello—most important moment in a teenage girl's life, and as I mentioned, I happened to love the guy—but he deserved to sweat it out a little.

It was weird to think that not too long ago I would have assumed that Jake had lured me here so that his friends (and my nemeses) Scott and Mercedes could play some kind of Carrie-type prank on me. But now Jake just made me feel safe. Or he did until he brought me to the creepy death-murder-kill building.

I heard a distant noise and couldn't help myself. I shrieked and threw myself into Jake's arms. Not as a ploy, but because I was legit terrified.

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“That was outside, not inside,” he said, and I could tell he was trying not to laugh.

“Are you sure we’re alone?” I whispered, not wanting to raise my voice too much and offend the ghosts.

“Yes, the hotel is locked up nice and tight. We’re fine.”

Yeah, because locks so often stopped ax murderers.

“In fact,” he said, putting his lips near mine, “we’re so alone we could make out as much as we wanted.”

It was a testament to how panicked I felt that I wasn’t even a little bit tempted to kiss my boyfriend. Because if my superpower was my amazing poker face, all Jake’s superpowers were centrally located in his lips. That boy could seriously kiss.

Or me not wanting to make out could have been a sign of the impending apocalypse. Which would obviously begin in this decrepit hotel. “No thanks.”

And again he laughed, and despite how much I adored the sound of his laughter, it kind of made me want to hit him.

“This way,” he told me.

We walked in silence, my ears straining to catch every little sound, real and imagined. I wondered if I should text my final will and testament to my sister, Ella. I would leave her my John Hughes DVDs, and my dad could have my manga

drawings. My mother could keep her bitter disappointment in me as my last legacy.

Jake finally came to a stop, and all I could see were some wooden floors.

“You know how I’ve been trying to figure out what I want to do with my life since I’m not going to be a lawyer?”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me. “Yeah.”

“This is what I want to do.”

“Hang out in old creepy buildings?” The hair on my forearms stood straight up. Oh Buddha, he was going to tell me he decided to become a serial killer, and this would be his lair.

“No. Let me show you. Stay here.”

Then ... he let go of my hand! I could see him walking because of his phone, but icy fear wrapped around my heart, making me shake. If any scary dolls or guys with chainsaws jumped out at me, Jake was on his own.

“Why did you leave me alone in the dark?” I asked. Well, whimpered.

“Don’t think of the dark as scary. Think of it as romantic.”

“It’s not romantic,” I informed him through clenched teeth.

“I think it’s romantic.”

“Ha. Says the guy who yelled ‘finally’ at the end of Dirty Dancing.”

He put his phone on the floor, and a moment later, light exploded, filling the entire room. I had to close my eyes for a second. When I could open them again, I saw large floodlights in the corners of this massive, beautiful room. A ballroom? It was in the process of being cleaned up. There were large metal scaffolding structures up against the walls and canvas tarps scattered around the wooden floor. The murals on the ceiling were gorgeous. Somebody extremely talented had painted those royalty-themed frescoes. I considered climbing the scaffolding to get a closer look.

Jake came and stood in front of me. “My dad has a client, a guy named John Biltmore, who has started restoring this hotel to its glory days. He came over for dinner the other night, and we got to talking, and I realized that this is what I want to do. I want to be an architect. I want to make buildings like this one.”

Whew. That was definitely better than planning on becoming a serial killer. I thought of all the elaborate Lego projects in Jake’s room, and it made perfect sense that he’d want to be an architect. “That’s great!” I told him weakly, finally feeling the blood returning to my fingertips and toes.

“Let me show you.” He grabbed my hand, lacing our fingers together in the way that always felt completely right, like our hands had been made for just this purpose. “Now today’s ballrooms in hotels are usually more generic so they can be used by different people in different ways. But this room? Look at the character. How unique it is. The man who started the hotel was from Australia. He made a fortune from gold mines and apparently loved movies. He came to the United States to live with the movie stars, and he wanted to create a place they would want to hang out at. Only the best would do. He ended up hiring Gianni Battista to design it. He was one of the world’s leading and most well-known architects at the time.”

I watched him as he went on, saying something about Spanish and Italian Renaissance influences, gilded arches, and concave-domed ceilings, and I loved how passionate he was about this. How caught up he was in explaining it to me.

When he ran out of steam, I told him, “This is definitely what you should major in when we get to college.”

“I knew you’d get it.” He wrapped his arms around me, hugging me close, and then swung me around in a circle. I couldn’t help but giggle. In a very undignified fashion.

He put me back on the ground and held me close. This had to be it. The moment. My heart thumped as he reached into his pocket and pulled out ... his cell phone? A slow song by my favorite Irish band filled the room. “Dance with me.”

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Jake might have hated romantic movies, but he sure did know how to be a romantic boyfriend. Maybe this was how he was leading up to it. We swayed to the music, one of his hands slowly traveling up and down my back as he held me close. I again had shivers, just not of the terrified variety. But he didn't say anything. Or ask anything. We just danced.

Which normally would be more than enough. But I was getting impatient, and we were running out of time. "Was there anything else? Like maybe something you wanted to ask me?"

He pulled his head back and gave me a confused look. A sincerely confused look. "Like what?"

Before I could explain what I thought all this had been leading up to, his phone rang, interrupting our song. He looked at the number, and a shadow crossed his face. "Give me a sec, Tills."

Strange. He walked across the room, out of earshot. Jake had never done that before. It felt like he was hiding something from me.

Now that shuddery "somebody just walked across my grave" feeling had nothing to do with the run-down building and everything to do with how weird he was acting. He was obviously upset. What was going on?

He hung up his phone. And stood there for a second, sporting a serious frown.

When he came back over to me, I asked, "Is everything okay?"

“Yeah, fine.” He sounded distracted, like he wasn’t really paying attention to me. “I—we have to go. I have to get this key back to my father.”

“Do you want to talk about your phone call? Who was that?”

“I said everything’s fine, Tills. Just leave it alone,” he snapped at me. Actually snapped at me. The last time he’d been upset with me was before we started dating. I didn’t know whether to be hurt or angry.

Jake unplugged the lights and then led me back through the still ghoulish hotel. Only I was so focused on what had just occurred that I forgot to be scared. Because something important had happened with that call. Something that had seriously rattled him.

Something he wouldn’t tell me about.

Did he not trust me by now? Didn’t he know I would do anything to help him? Why would he shut me out?

And as we got back into his car and drove off, I realized that of all the bad things that had just happened—there was one thing that was the absolute worst.

Jake still hadn’t asked me to prom.

CHAPTER TWO

“He really didn’t ask you?” Ella sounded totally surprised. “When he said he wanted to show you something, I just thought ...” Her voice trailed off as we walked across the school parking lot. Jake had texted that he couldn’t pick me up that morning, so Ella and I had driven in together.

“He really didn’t.” In any other school, it would be understood that Jake and I would go to prom together. But not at Malibu Prep. Those elaborate promposals all over the internet? Where guys would go to expensive and creative extremes to ask a girl to prom? That style of asking had started at our school decades ago. They caught on when social media allowed us to share them with the world. While some high schools had begun to ban them for being too distracting, ours went all in on the crazy and let kids take asking to dizzying levels.

And it was highly competitive to see who pulled off the best promposal, the one that would go viral and give the guy bragging rights for the rest of the year. Which meant that some boys asked early, hitting it hard out of the gate. Wanting to be first in case someone else had a similar kind of promposal planned. Others didn’t much care, putting in minimal effort and resorting to asking on the lid of various baked goods (“It’d be SWEET if you went to prom with me” or “Be a SMART COOKIE and go with me to prom!” or “DONUT miss the chance to be my prom date!”).

Then there were the ones who waited until almost the last minute, watching their competition closely, hoping their creative, over-the-top ask would blow up any that had come before. Sometimes it reminded me of a 1980s arm race.

My hope was that Jake was waiting because he instinctively understood how important this was to me and wanted to get it just right. That he got that our prom would be the pinnacle of my student body presidential career and the highlight of my high school experience (if my John Hughes movies were to be believed). That he would make a big, showy gesture guaranteed to melt my heart, and then we would have the most incredible night together at the dance.

“Has Trent asked you yet?” Things didn’t seem to be too great between my friend and my sister. Ella hadn’t talked very much about it, but it was just the feeling I got from her whenever I brought him up.

“Don’t you think I would have told you every detail if he had?”

True. Ella would probably tell the whole school over the morning announcements. Or hire one of those skywriters to announce it to the entire town.

Much like the noisy airplane currently overhead that had just written out, Vanessa? Prom?

Distracted, I wasn’t watching where I was going and nearly tripped over Randall Hayworth. He was covered in some kind of blood and lying on the asphalt surrounded by a white chalk outline. He had a bouquet of sunflowers in one hand and a sign in the other that read, “Allison, I am dying to go to prom with you!”

“You’re going to get run over and actually need that chalk outline!” I told him, but he didn’t even acknowledge me as I stepped over his body. “Does he really think that’s romantic? No little girl dreams of the day a boy asks her to prom utilizing pig’s blood.” In fact, based on the horror movies Ella forced me to watch, pig’s blood and proms did not go well together.

Ella shrugged. “It’s not even original. Don’t you remember when his older brother did the same thing a couple of years ago? Only he staged it in his bedroom along with fake cops, crime scene tape, blood everywhere, and his mom sobbing. He nearly gave his girlfriend a heart attack.”

Jeez. No wonder other schools had started banning these things.

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I heard Allison and Vanessa shrieking and squealing somewhere behind us as they accepted their promposals, all while being filmed.

“Listen to them,” Ella said with a sigh. “We won’t be that lame, will we?”

“Oh, please. Of course we will be. If we were horses, they would have to shoot us.” We would both be giddy and just as squealy and excited.

If it ever happened.

I caught our reflection in the front door. Ella and I looked like total opposites. Where she was petite, blonde, blue-eyed, and perfect looking, I was tall, curvy, green-eyed (literally, that was not a metaphorical statement), and currently sporting blue-purple hair. I claimed it was inspired by a specific pop star in her music video, but the truth was that the prom colors were purple and silver, and I wanted to match.

See? Super lame. Somebody would have to put me out of my misery.

“You know, it is the twenty-first century. You could just ask Jake,” Ella told me, causing me to almost trip over my own feet. Sexist as it might have seemed, girls did not do promposals at Malibu Prep. There had been a few who asked a guy to go, but then he still had to do something elaborate in front of everyone if he accepted. It was viewed as, like, a kind of consolation prize. There was no way I could ask Jake and still maintain some level of dignity.

“I’ll get on that as soon as you ask Trent.”

She gave me a look. “Be serious.”

Ha. “Hey, pot, the kettle wanted me to remind you what color you are.”

I heard a strange sound, like someone had just poured a huge bag of M&M’s into a giant bowl. I turned to see Ximena Veracruz surrounded by hundreds of Ping-Pong balls bouncing up and down. Her mouth was open, her eyes wide. She still had her hand on her locker door, as if she’d just opened it and been attacked by a Ping-Pong avalanche. A sign hung from the locker that said, “We’ll have a BALL at prom together!”

Ella sighed longingly, and I tried to downplay the gesture. “Attempting to clean all that up in the fifteen minutes before class starts kind of takes away from the romance of it all.”

Because while our headmistress, Ms. Rathbone, let the promposals take place, what she would not tolerate was a mess. I was trying to figure out whether Porter really wanted to take Ximena to prom or if he was trying to land them both in detention and banned from the dance. It was kind of ingenious, really. This way he got the credit for asking but might not have to actually go.

My sister tugged on my arm. “Come on. We’ll be late.”

Ella was my vice president, along with being captain of the cheerleading squad and spending more hours volunteering for various causes than any teen girl should. She had even gotten me involved with a tutoring program for elementary-age kids. Ella was the kind of girl who seemed like she got help cleaning our house from birds and chipmunks, and she was so often a pushover because she wanted to be kind. But when Ella wanted something, she did not mess around.

She’d volunteered to head up the prom committee in addition to all her other

obligations. Which meant she did all the hard work, day-to-day stuff while I was the visionary whose plan she executed because I'm super generous like that. But it also meant that when she decided to have a prom check-in meeting, we all had to show up.

Outside of the student government room stood Parminda (Mindi) Kandhari and Victor Kim, my treasurer and junior class rep. Sucking face like it was the only way to get oxygen into their lungs. They were the weirdest couple. Victor was a straight A student, in all AP classes, and participated in the academic decathlon. He was always serious; in fact, I couldn't remember a single time I'd ever seen him smile. Mindi, on the other hand, was all about having a good time. Well, as much of a good time as her very strict parents would allow her to have. She loved to laugh, dance, be as frivolous as possible, and was barely passing her classes.

As if she could read my thoughts, Ella said, "I still don't get what those two have in common."

"At the moment? A deep-seated interest in cleaning each other's tonsils."

"Ew."

Ms. Rathbone walked by just then, and I wondered if Ximena was about to get yelled at. Without breaking her stride, the headmistress said, "Mr. Kim, Ms. Kandhari, unless one of you is in need of CPR, please desist with the public displays of affection. Thank you!"

Our headmistress's words finally got them to stop. I kind of expected there to be some sort of seal-breaking suction sound when they pulled apart.

"Oh, hey." Mindi gave us a little wave as she followed us into the classroom. Ella took out her phone and called the meeting to order right away. She ran through her list, making sure that everyone had done their assigned roles and that we were still on

track.

I realized that neither Jake nor Trent had showed up, and they should have. Mostly because it was their responsibility as part of the student government, but also because they so obviously needed the reminder of their sacred duty to ask their girlfriends to the freaking dance.

Organizing this prom had been the biggest win for my presidency. As per my campaign promises, I'd also gotten us senior parking and casual Fridays. The board had refused to budge on the "healthy lunch" initiative, which made it so that we weren't allowed to bring our own food from home and tried to force us to eat whatever garbage they were serving in the cafeteria. Which I still counted as a sort of win considering that it had led to a thriving black market of Twinkies and Snickers contraband.

I was determined to have my way for the prom, though. Because every single dance was a fund-raiser for Malibu Prep. Alumni would always attend. The dance was never just for the high schoolers to enjoy and let loose. Not to mention that it would be kind of hard to have a magical prom with your dad and his girlfriend (no matter how much you liked her) chaperoning.

I'd convinced the board to let this prom be strictly for the students. By teenagers, for teenagers. All we'd had to do was a million extra fund-raisers to make up for the lost funds.

So worth it.

I reached out for the dog-eared prom catalog on the table. I turned to my favorite page again. The theme of our dance was "Dream Come True," which was so on the nose for how almost perfect my life had become. Since we didn't have to worry about impressing adults, we could order all the cheesy decorations we wanted. A giant

pumpkin-shaped carriage. A large clock about to strike twelve. A castle mural to put up on one wall. A cake shaped to match the mural castle. Centerpieces that would consist of calla lilies spray-painted silver in purple vases with castle confetti. Purple orchids hanging from live potted plants placed around the room. Actual paper streamers and balloon arches. I couldn't wait to see it all come together.

Her list completed, Ella turned her phone off and thanked everyone for coming. But not everyone had come. It was unlike Jake to miss a meeting. But I knew I shouldn't have been all that surprised that Trent hadn't bothered to show up. Ever since he'd told us about his parents getting divorced, he'd basically cut off all contact with us. I hadn't spoken to him in months, in part because he almost never came to school. Ella had some sporadic conversations with him that made her hold out hope because she couldn't ever give up on anybody. I kept wishing he'd go back to being himself and stop ignoring my sister.

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They hadn't actually broken up, but sometimes it sort of felt like they had.

"Boys just do this," Ella had said to me once. "When something scary like this happens in their life, they just kind of shut down emotionally. He'll come around."

It hadn't happened yet.

One of the committee members had a question for my sister.

"Go on," Ella told me. "I'll catch up."

As soon as I went out into the hallway, I felt an arm going through mine. I let out a sigh. I'd been trying to be a nicer person, like Ella. Less snarktastic. Which meant that Mindi now thought we were friends. Ish.

And my attempts at being kind were backfiring spectacularly.

Against me.

This was what I got for trying to improve myself. The saying was true. No good deed did go unpunished.

"Did I tell you what I figured out last night about Victor, my boyfriend?"

Since I was going for a kinder, gentler Mattie Lowe, I didn't say what I wanted to. Which was, "Oh, Victor's your boyfriend? I forgot because you hadn't mentioned it in the last thirty seconds." Instead I settled on, "What?"

“I realized what one of the best things about marrying Victor, my boyfriend, will be.”

No lie, when I had first met Victor, I seriously thought his name was Victor Myboyfriend. Because that was how Mindi always referred to him.

“You think you’re going to marry Victor?” I had to bite my tongue to keep from adding “my boyfriend” at the end of my sentence.

She nodded. “Definitely. And after Victor, my boyfriend, and I get married in a beautiful sunset beach ceremony, I’ll get to keep my initials.” At my blank expression, she continued, “Because both our last names start with aK.”

Taking my silence as consent to continue the conversation, she smiled at me. “He and I are going to have the cutest KorIndian babies.”

I was worried about getting a date to prom, and she was planning out her future wedding. We were not in the same headspace, and my brain filled up with unspoken insults. But I managed to keep all my sarcastic retorts to myself. Mindi wouldn’t get them, anyway. I’d be snarking up the wrong tree.

“I’m going this way!” she said. “Bye-ee!”

Must. Not. Mock.

A minute later, Ella arrived.

“The cavalry’s supposed to show up much earlier,” I told her.

She gave me a confused look and then held up her phone. “Now that I know the committee’s on track, the seamstress texted to let me know the alterations were going well.”

That made me smile. I had found the most perfect silver prom dress. The one I had known from a previous life. (Possibly. I was still fuzzy on the whole reincarnation thing and whether or not it existed.) My dress was like something out a movie, a big, full, fluffy skirt with a tight heart-shaped bodice covered in tiny crystals and sequins. And it was silver.

Yes, to match the dance.

“And I’ve confirmed our updos and mani-pedis.”

I blinked at her. “Was that English?”

“Can you please be a girl for five minutes?”

I twisted my lips together so I wouldn’t laugh. Thanks to having Ella in my life, I knew exactly what she meant. I wasn’t sure I wanted to get my hair done, though. Last time I’d gone to a salon with her they’d given me extensions, which I’d had to pull out myself. In part because they annoyed me, and the other part was because Jake liked running his fingers through my hair while he kissed me.

I was a very big fan of this.

“Five minutes? I guess I can be a girl for five minutes,” I said in an exaggerated tone.

“I mean, if we even go to the prom.”

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She nudged my shoulder. “Of course we’re going. The boys will come through.”

I made a quick wish that her optimism and faith in Trent wasn’t misplaced. That he would ask.

And that Jake would, too.

CHAPTER THREE

Jake had invited me over to his house that afternoon to “watch sports.” Turned out, he really did want to watch sports, and it wasn’t some kind of code word for make out. He’d been so busy last football season that he’d missed quite a few televised games and had saved them on his DVR.

He’d been a little standoffish at school all day, and I wondered if it was all the promatory anticipation in the air. Was he worried about how his promposal would stack up? When we had started dating, Jake had made one of the sweetest, grandest gestures imaginable. He had set up my favorite scene from *Sixteen Candles* to tell me he liked me.

Maybe he was worried about topping himself.

We sat together on the couch, his head in my lap. His dog, Scooby, sat on my other side and laid his own head next to Jake’s. I lazily ran my fingernails against Jake’s scalp while he yelled at the television. His dark brown hair lay in soft strands across my fingers, like silken threads. I liked being with him, but this game was really boring. Scooby let out a yawn, which I totally understood. We probably even watched

football in the same way. We enjoyed being close to Jake, were vaguely aware of some motion on-screen, but no real comprehension was taking place.

Some part of me wondered if he was using the game as a way to avoid talking to me. It was a weird feeling I kept having. Like something wasn't right.

But I'd been so concerned about Ella and Trent ... maybe that was just bleeding over into the rest of my life? And I was seeing things that weren't there?

I looked at my backpack, which I'd left on the closest armchair. It had my sketchpad and pencils in it. Maybe I could reach over and grab it, and Jake wouldn't notice that I wasn't paying attention.

"Oh, come on!" Jake shouted, throwing his free arm up in the air. That startled the dog, who got off the couch and curled up on the floor.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out of my pocket. There was a text from Ella. Curious, I clicked on it.

WAS THIS A SNEAK ATTACK? HAS DATE BEEN SECURED?

REPEAT, HAS DATE BEEN SECURED?

A few nights ago, Dad and Jennifer had made us watch some boring three-hour military movie where Ella and I amused ourselves by repeating the characters' lingo. Just seeing her message made me smile, which I gathered was her intent.

That's a negative. Repeat, negative. He has not asked yet.

He really did want to watch sports. Over.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket, not wanting to alert my boyfriend to the content of my discussion with Ella.

“Was that your sister?”

I needed to deflect his attention. I had discovered that if you said something sarcastically, whether it’s a truth or a lie, people tended to leave you alone and not follow up with further questions. “Possibly. Or maybe it was a text from my darling mother where she was trying to tell me how much she loved me, and it autocorrected to how much I constantly disappoint her.”

Jake gave me a “fine, don’t tell me” look before focusing on the football game again. This was the problem with having a boyfriend who knew you so well. My mom hadn’t been in touch for months. At my request. I had half expected her to reach out more just to spite me. But since my dad had stopped forcing her to interact with me with financial bribes, she had, presumably, happily moved on with her life.

“That’s a lot of violence over some change,” I said, wondering if I’d upset him by not telling him who I was texting.

“Change?” Jake repeated, turning his head to look at me. He didn’t seem angry.

“They flipped that coin at the beginning, and the entire game you’ve been yelling at them to get their quarter back.”

At that, Jake laughed and reached up to tug on my neck, pulling me down toward him. I let out a sigh of relief as his lips grazed mine, causing goose bumps to break out all along my forearms. We were definitely okay. We kissed softly, briefly, before the announcer started screaming, grabbing all Jake’s attention.

“No, no, no!” Whatever was happening was bad enough that he jumped to his feet,

his hands balled up in his hair.

“Do you ever think you shouldn’t let games played by other people have so much hold over your personal happiness?”

He blinked at me slowly. “I don’t understand the question.”

“Right. I know I can’t fall asleep at night until I’ve found out what team had hurled what ball through what apparatus.”

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Jake sat down next to me, a playful glint in his eye as he responded to my teasing. “You love the Dodgers as much as I do.”

True, but I loved giving him a hard time even more. “Baseball is civilized and makes sense. This is just ...” I held my hand out toward the massive flat-screen. “Dudes tackling other dudes for fun.”

“You know, guys aren’t the only people we like to tackle.”

“Oh?” My pulse kicked into overdrive given the predatory look in his gorgeous eyes.

Without warning, he playfully knocked me back, pinning me against the couch.

I did not mind one bit.

He kissed me then, long and hard and with an unhurried deliberation. Waves of heat spiraled through me with each movement of his mouth.

When he finally stopped, I struggled to catch my breath. “I hope you don’t do that with the opposing team,” I murmured.

Jake pressed a soft kiss against my cheek. “Most definitely not.” He lifted up his arm and checked his watch. “My parents will be home in half an hour. I should turn off the game, and we should ...” He used his lips to finish his sentence.

If he paused his game, he’d make me watch the rest later. “Maybe leave the game on. Muted.”

His eyes narrowed at me. “Do you know how much I’ll miss in half an hour?”

“Yep. Fifteen seconds of actual game time.”

Shaking his head, Jake did as I asked. He left the game on but turned off the sound. I knew that once the real kissing commenced, all brain functions would cease. While I was still desperate for him to launch his promposal, I also still wondered about his weird phone call and how he hadn’t driven me to school. How he’d missed Ella’s meeting. Or how he’d seemed distant the whole day. Why he’d spent the last two hours with me, in an empty house, watching a football game instead of doing something ... more fun.

“Before we proceed, I wanted to thank you for taking me to the building last night.” Even if it had been a staph infection waiting to happen. “I’m glad you figured out what you want to do with your life.”

Jake trailed his fingers up my right arm, and my goose bumps became goose hills. “Me too. I’d been spending a lot of time lately trying to think of what I loved most. I didn’t want to go to school and flounder around with my classes and waste time. And since I can’t major in you ...” His hand moved up to my hair, and he gently pushed a strand from my face, making me sigh happily.

“I don’t know,” I countered. “You’d still have a lot of classes to take. Like Things I Like 201 and Favorite Manga 312.”

His lips nibbled at my earlobe, and I had to close my eyes against the sensation onslaught. “I’m pretty sure I could test out of those classes.”

“O-oh?”

“Mm-hmm.” He brushed his lips against my cheek. “Especially the things you like.”

He showed this to be true with another long, limb-drugging kiss. “In fact, I think I already have a PhD in Matilda Lowe.”

I had a really clever and witty response. But all I could think about was that my Jake had returned, proving his degree-worthy status to be true by kissing me into mindless oblivion. I had to stop making mountains out of molehills. People were allowed to have off days. Right now, we were ourselves, and we were fine.

Then his lips burned against my neck, and my brain turned completely off.

When I arrived home later, Ella arched a single eyebrow at me as she took in my appearance. With a smirk, she asked, “And just what have you been up to?”

“Shut up,” I tried to grumble, but couldn’t keep the perma-grin off my face.

She was carrying three sodas, and I followed her to see where she was going. She went into my dad’s poker room where she, my father, and Jennifer were playing Scrabble at his professional poker table. I couldn’t remember the last time he’d had his buddies over to play. Whatever free time he had he now devoted to us or to his girlfriend. And because he was a world-famous/celebrated/renowned artist, he didn’t have much free time to begin with.

“Hey, sweetie,” my dad said, tapping his finger while he waited for Jennifer to take her turn. “Or should I say, Miss Happy O’Smlies? Where’s the moody teenager who lives down the hall from me?”

“Ha-ha.” I smiled other times. I did. Nobody needed to make such a big deal about it.

He pushed out a chair for me at the table, and I sat down.

“Do you want to join in?”

“No thanks. I’m not interested in homework disguised as a board game.”

My dad smiled and rearranged a couple of his tiles. “How’s school?”

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“Still there.”

Jennifer let out a frustrated sound. “I can’t move my vowels!”

“Does that mean you’re consonated?” Dad asked, and I couldn’t help but roll my eyes so hard that I almost detached my retinas. He’d always been into stupid dad jokes, but since he’d started dating Jennifer, he’d taken his puns to a whole new terrible level. The kind that made me want to deny any genetic link between us whatsoever.

But even I had to admit that my father and my favorite art teacher were a match made in dork heaven.

“So you actually saw Bradley Debeer’s promposal?” Ella asked Jennifer.

“What’s a promposal?” my dad interrupted. He looked completely confused, which made sense given that he was generally clueless about most things in life since he spent so much time in his art studio. He rarely, if ever, got my and Ella’s cultural references.

“It’s an elaborately staged request to be someone’s date to the prom. The more creative and outlandish, the better,” Jennifer responded.

“Whatever happened to the good old days? Asking was never that complicated for us.”

I slid his bowl of pretzels toward me. “Was that back when you lit a bonfire on top of the hill and hoped your date could interpret your smoke signals?”

He gave me a disgruntled frown. “I’m not that old.”

“Ask him to tell you about how people used to beep him on his pager, and he’d have to call them back on a landline or a pay phone,” Jennifer said, her voice light and teasing.

“I don’t even know what any of those words mean.”

My dad added an “ING” to the “ANNOY” already on the board, giving me a pointed look. “I meant where your best friend asks her best friend if she would go to prom with you. No need to ... what did that Brian kid do again?”

“Bradley,” Ella corrected him.

Jennifer laid down a single tile to pluralize a word. “He painted Van Gogh’s The Starry Night but turned the stars into the letters P, R, O, and M.”

Wow. That was some dedication.

“So did the girl agree to Van Gogh with him?” My father looked far too pleased with himself, and I refrained from groaning out loud from the pain he was causing my eardrums with his stupid jokes.

“She did,” Jennifer said.

Ella spelled out the word “SWIFT” from a “W” tile already on the board. “That’s not nearly as exciting as Pedro Franklin’s promposal. He used lighter fluid to spell out ‘Go to prom with me?’ in the street in front of Jenna’s house.”

“This already sounds potentially bad,” I said.

“Yep. When he lit it on fire, it burned straight toward the driveway and caught both Pedro’s and Jenna’s dad’s cars on fire. Apparently, the bottle he was using had a slow leak. I don’t think Jenna will be going with him.”

My father shook his head and mumbled something about “whole generation obsessed with being noticed thanks to their gratuitous self-promotion.”

I stood up. “Well, I’ve got some homework to finish.” Jake would call me in about an hour, and I wanted to be done with all my other stuff first.

“Your grandmother sent you a package,” my dad said as I leaned down to hug him good night. “It’s in the living room.”

I hadn’t even noticed it when I came in. My dad’s mom had passed away when I was little, but my maternal grandmother was this lovely, tiny Japanese woman that had inexplicably birthed my she-devil of a mother. My grandmother didn’t speak English, and I didn’t speak Japanese, and we had to rely on a translation app to communicate. She sent me gifts all the time. I pulled at the packing tape and got the box open. Inside was a beautiful, formal purple kimono with a garden scene in white and silver along the hem. It was good to know that she’d understood my last message to her about the prom. It was so sweet that she even matched the colors!

“That’s pretty,” Ella cooed as she perched on the couch next to me, running her fingertips along the silken edge of the kimono.

“Very pretty. I can’t wear it anywhere, but she really is the sweetest.” I’d have to send her a thank-you note before Jake called.

My dad’s laptop was next to the box, and I grabbed his computer, intending to send a note now before I forgot. By the time I got back to my room and waited for my computer to start up, it could slip my mind.

Not that that had ever happened to me before.

Okay, at least six times.

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When I pushed open the screen, I saw a frozen video of my mother's face. "What's this?"

Ella gave me a confused but worried look.

My mother had left my dad and me when I was really little. She wanted to pursue an art career and felt that we were holding her back. My dad had had to bribe her to stay in my life, and we had Skyped with each other on a semiregular basis through the years. It was like biweekly torture having to talk to her, given that she didn't actually love me and found everything I did insulting or annoying (to be a little fair, I did often try to insult and/or annoy her). I finally told my father I'd had enough, and he'd allowed it to stop. My guess was that it made both sides much happier.

I restarted the video. It was weird to see my mom again, to hear her voice. A voice that sounded happy instead of mad. I hadn't even realized that she knew how to be not angry all the time. She was at a gallery that would be hosting an exhibit of her trash sculptures (sculptures made of actual trash—I wasn't just insulting her) later in the week. The reporter asked about her influences, and she claimed herself as her primary inspiration. (Which caused massive eye rolls from me.)

"What does your family think about your show?" the reporter asked.

"My parents are thrilled, of course."

The reporter looked confused and flipped through a little notebook. "I meant your husband."

Pearl Li let out a little laugh, and I wondered if she'd strained a muscle thanks to disuse. "I'm not married."

"But I thought I read that you have a husband and a daughter."

"Your information is outdated. As I said, I'm not married." A beat passed. Then two. "And I don't have a daughter."

Ella reached over and slammed the laptop shut before I could respond.

My heart actually hurt. Twinged and twisted in pain while tiny sharp knives stabbed my stomach. Hot, scalding tears filled my eyes. My reaction surprised me. "I've already written her off. So why does it upset me that she's written me off?" My voice caught on the last word, and I was so close to full-on sobbing.

Ella put her arm around me. "Because no matter how horrible she is, she's still your mom. She's supposed to be the one person in the world who has your back no matter what." She squeezed me. "But you have me, and I'll always be here for you. You just say the word, and I'll fly to New York and punch your stupid mother."

I let out a bark that was half laughter, half sob and hugged Ella back. "Stupid, huh?" That was practically a swear word for my sister.

"Definitely stupid. And this probably won't help anything," she said in tentative tone, "but in our life story, some people are meant to be chapters, and some are meant to be little footnotes. That doesn't make them leaving the story any less painful. Not every relationship can or should be fixed. And you're so fabulous that anyone who doesn't love you doesn't deserve any of your tears. Now go get ready for bed so you can focus all your attention on your Jake phone call," she instructed me, handing me the kimono and the box it had come in.

Nodding, I got up and headed to our shared bathroom, loving that she knew my routine so well. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and changed into my pajamas.

I climbed into my bed, thinking about my mom. I wondered if there was a time when she cared about me. Our personalities had never clicked, and I couldn't remember ever getting along with her. We were like oil and that thing that always disappointed oil.

The little girl part of me felt lost and betrayed. The almost adult part of me knew that she was a selfish narcissist. And that I wasn't the only one who knew it. I'd read the scathing reviews of her shows and her behavior at said shows. I wasn't alone in my dislike of her as a person, and I wondered, for the millionth time, if my dad had been suffering from a psychotic break when he fell in love with her and married her.

I spent so much time moping that when I glanced at my phone, I realized that it was almost twenty minutes past when Jake normally called me. He called me every night before bed. Sometimes just to wish me sweet dreams, other times to chat. We spent so much time together both in school and after you'd think we'd run out of things to say, but we never did.

And Jake had never once been late before. He was scarily punctual, even when he was off at an away game for baseball.

Of course I could have just called him.

But that wasn't the point. For the first time since we'd started dating, Jake hadn't called.

And I worried what that meant.

CHAPTER FOUR

It took me hours to fall asleep. I spent time analyzing my feelings, trying to figure out why I was freaking out so much. My mom was obvious, but with Jake? I decided the reason that I was more upset than normal was due to the fact that I had been looking forward to unloading on him and getting his sympathetic response. Even though he couldn't completely understand my maternal situation because he adored his mother, he was always ready with a shoulder when I needed it.

Or he had been before last night.

That morning he wasn't in English class, and I went from being hurt to worried. What if something had happened to him? I texted him, asking where he was.

No answer.

Where could he be? I wanted to go looking for him.

I considered my options and exactly how much trouble I would be in if the school caught me ditching when I got this prickly feeling on the back of my neck. Like somebody was watching me.

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Mercedes Bentley, my nemesis, stood about ten feet away and stared with an evil grin. She'd been punished and lost her university of choice from all her bullying toward me earlier in the year. Instead of giving in and admitting defeat, it felt like she was biding her time. Waiting for a chance. Like some poisonous, vengeful viper just lying in wait until she could fill me full of poison.

Or maybe I just had a really overactive imagination.

This wasn't the first time I'd caught her blatantly staring at me. I might have been tempted to question her level of interest, only I happened to know she was madly in love with Jake and hated me for dating him. That she'd become the girlfriend of his former best friend, Scott, just to be closer to him. And despite the fact that Jake and I had been together almost the entire school year, I knew she still wanted him.

But this was more than just that. She smiled like ... she knew something.

What if she did?

I mean, Scott and Jake didn't ever hang out anymore, but they were still on the school's various sports teams together. What if Jake had said something to Scott? And he'd immediately run and told his awful girlfriend? And now she knew some secret about Jake that I didn't?

Or worse, what if she had tied Jake up and left him in a basement somewhere? I reminded myself that nobody in Malibu had a basement and he was fine. Even if he wasn't answering my texts.

In fact, I was freaking out about nothing. Jake could miss one night and one phone call. It didn't mean our relationship was falling apart. We were solid. Totally solid. Like one of those couples who smushes their names together. Jattie. Make. Totally fine.

So, so fine.

And I'd nearly convinced myself of this fact up until the moment when everybody suddenly headed to the football field and my distraction caused me to get carried along by the tide.

Scott was in the bleachers, singing a song I'd never heard to Mercedes. He actually had a decent singing voice, which surprised me. He said something about Mercedes being too good to be true, and I half expected a bolt of lightning to suddenly appear and strike him down for lying.

Then the school marching band started up behind me, playing along to Scott's song. Mercedes stood on a large wooden box that the cheerleaders used for one of their routines, enjoying every second of being in the spotlight.

Which made zero sense, because Mercedes had ignored her suspension back in September and had come to the masquerade ball. Ms. Rathbone had caught her, rescinded her letter of recommendation for college, and then banned her from every future dance. She couldn't even go to prom.

And she was still getting a promposal.

"It's from that movie. Ten Things I Hate About You? The hero does this same thing for the heroine," I heard someone in the crowd say. Reenacting a scene from a movie? That belonged to Jake and me. Even as I thought it I knew how ridiculous I was being, but I couldn't help how Scott's actions made my intestines tie themselves

up into knots.

Not wanting to subject myself to this particular kind of torture any further, I pushed my way back through the large group and headed for the doors.

My mother denied my existence, and Mercedes freaking Bentley got a marching band singing her praises. Yep, the universe was definitely fair.

Once I got back inside, I crashed right into Jennifer. Or Ms. Putnam, which was what I was supposed to call her at school.

“Mattie, are you okay? Ella told us that you saw that video of your mom.”

Jennifer looked so concerned, so kind, and gentle. I loved how soft she appeared, like a master artist had deliberately blurred all her edges. She’d pulled her hair into a high ponytail, and her brown, frizzy natural curls spread out like a halo behind her head.

I opened my mouth to tell her I was fine, but nothing came out.

“Your dad didn’t want you to see that video. He feels terrible about leaving his laptop out where you could find it. He wanted to know what your mom was saying so he could protect you.”

I didn’t need them to protect me. I just needed to find a way to cope with my mom’s crappiness. I nodded, thankful that there were some people on my side who loved me.

“Sweetie, I think you need a big hug.”

I was on the verge of telling her that I didn’t like hugs when she enveloped me in her arms.

And it was ... not terrible.

Actually, it was how I imagined a mom's hug would feel. She smelled like oil paints, chalk, and pencil lead. Which was kind of how I pictured heaven smelling.

She let go and patted me on the back a few times as the first bell rang. "We should get to class. But come find me if you need to talk."

I realized that I felt ... better. Jennifer had done that for me.

Although he hadn't proposed yet, and despite my disdain for his multiple past marriages, I found myself desperately hoping that my dad would be smart enough to make Jennifer his wife.

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Lunchtime rolled around, and Ella and I sat together since both of our boyfriends were MIA. She stared at her phone, scrolling through large blocks of text.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I pushed aside what the cafeteria claimed was a feta and quinoa salad. As I didn’t recognize either of the top ingredients, and “salad” was just code for vegetables nobody actually enjoyed eating, I wasn’t going to force it on myself. Making sure the coast was clear, I pulled out a plastic baggie filled with soft-baked chocolate chip cookies.

“Looking through my course schedule for UCLA next year. They don’t have the fashion merchandising major I was hoping for.”

“I thought you were going to major in design.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I’m good at pulling looks together or copying famous designers. I’m not very good at creating my own clothes. I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m going to try and become a fashion stylist. But it’s really competitive, so I just wanted to make sure I’m taking the best possible classes this fall.”

“If UCLA doesn’t have the major you want, why not go to a different school?”

Ella looked at me like I was stupid. “Because I want to go to UCLA.”

It had been the school her mother had attended, and Ella had never even considered another university. She’d worked hard not only to get in, but she also had a part-time job to help pay for tuition. When Ella’s mom, Dad’s second wife, had died, Ella had had no other family. So we had taken her in, and she’d seemed to feel like she had to

earn her place with us. Dad had told her that was dumb and that he would pay for all her college expenses, because as far as he was concerned, she was his daughter just as much as I was.

It had been a really emotional experience, but it had also taken a lot of the strain and stress out of Ella's life.

Especially the whole not having to get student loans and go into debt for the rest of her life part.

“Where is Belle? Has anyone seen Belle?”

I turned to see Victor Kim in a blue-and-gold suit/costume, holding a glass bell jar in his right hand. Was he actually wearing white knee-high tights? His legs were so thin it amazed me that he could walk around on them all day without them breaking. It took me a second to figure out what he was doing.

“Where is my Beauty?”

Mindi stood, both hands over her chest, her eyes bigger than any anime character I'd ever seen. “Here I am!”

He knelt in front of her, offering her the glass-encased crystal rose. “Dearest Belle, will you ‘Be My Guest’ at prom? Because this Beast needs his Beauty by his side.”

With shaking hands, Mindi took his gift. “Yes! Of course I will!”

Victor stood and pulled Mindi into a serious kiss among applause, hoots, and hollers. I couldn't believe what I'd just witnessed. Serious, straitlaced Victor Kim had made an utter fool of himself for the girl he loved.

He'd given her a literal fairy tale.

The ugly wave of jealousy that slammed into me made me feel like I was going to be ill.

After their kiss ended, Mindi rushed over to our table with Victor in tow. "Mattie! Ella! Did you see that? Did you see what Victor, my boyfriend, did?"

"Kind of hard to miss."

She nodded enthusiastically, missing my sarcasm. "Here, look at this!" She handed her rose inside a jar to Ella, who put down her phone to take it. "Beauty and the Beast is my favorite movie ever. Which Victor, my boyfriend, totally remembered. Isn't he the best?"

"He's ... something." I tugged on Ella's arm. "Come on. Sorry, guys, we need to get to class."

Ella congratulated them both and handed the rose back to Mindi. "Why are we leaving?" she said after we were out of earshot of the annoyingly happy couple. "We still have like fifteen minutes before lunch ends."

"I prefer not to throw up my cookies, thanks." I'd discovered that promposals weren't nearly as fun when you despaired of ever getting one. "Plus, I've missed enough class today already."

"Yeah, I noticed you weren't in PE today."

"That's because I'm in the Fitness Protection Program. Can't blow my cover by exercising."

Actually, I'd skipped class because I'd decided having your mother publicly disown you to the entire internet should have some kind of side benefit. So I had told Jennifer I needed a break from a couple of classes. She had, predictably, given in after enough begging and pleading. I had spent the time drawing manga, and it had improved my outlook even more.

Or it had until the Beauty and her Beast fiasco.

And the fact that we were headed to calculus, also known as the Black Arts of the Devil, didn't help my annoyed mood.

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Right up until the moment I saw Jake leaning against our classroom door. He grinned at me like nothing was wrong.

And even though I was frustrated by his recent behavior, my heart still skipped a beat at the fire in his dark brown eyes.

“There’s my girl. I’ve been looking for you.”

What did that mean? I’d been where I was supposed to be. In class (mostly) at school. I hadn’t been AWOL the entire day.

But then he wrapped me up in his arms, and I was again forced to reconsider my stance on hugs. I loved being held by him. It was the safest, warmest, most butterfly-inducing feeling in the whole world.

“Where have you been?” I asked, and watched as some of the light in his eyes died.

“Around.”

Not an answer, but he didn’t seem inclined to say more. Which frustrated me.

“Let’s go grab our seats,” he said, holding his hand out to me.

I wouldn’t say no to that! His large hand enclosed mine, and I couldn’t help but happy sigh. I followed him into the classroom, and it was only then that I noticed Ella wasn’t with us. I wondered where she had disappeared off to.

Jake ran his thumb along the inside of my wrist after we'd sat down, and my entire arm went limp in response. He winked at me. "Looks like I make you feel weak."

"If you must know, it's this classroom. I think I'm getting math-related physical disorders. Like fibromyalgebra."

Encouraged by his laughter, I kept talking. "I've also self-diagnosed a possible arithmia. And percentile dysfunction."

"I hear they make a pill for that."

I wished they made a pill for passing calculus. It would make my life so much easier.

The bell rang, and the other students filed into the classroom, chatting as they took their seats. Our teacher, Ms. Elias, began to talk over us as she passed out sheets of paper. "Today we're having a pop quiz." I was one of the people who groaned in response to her news. "Multiple choice. Or in your case, Mr. McIver, multiple guess. This quiz is something of a review and will cover some trig, some geometry, and a bit of probability and statistics."

Jake handed my quiz to me. He mouthed the words "good luck" before facing front.

The instructions at the top of the quiz told us to show our work. The first question was about finding the cosine. I wished I could tell math to grow up and solve its own problems. Or that a cosine was what you did to a bank check and not something I would ever, ever use in my real life and, thus, did not need to find it.

I worked my way through the first two problems, filling in the bubble next to what I hoped was the right answer.

When I got to the third question, I put my pencil down. It read:

3. Jonah Peterson wants to ask Amy Feldman to the prom. There is a 100 percent chance that he went to a lot of effort to get Ms. Elias to hand out a fake pop quiz. He predicts that there is at least an 85 percent chance that Amy will like his promposal and will say yes. What is the probability that Jonah and Amy will go to the prom together?

I looked up to see a nervous Jonah standing at the front of the classroom, clutching a single pink rose.

“A hundred percent!” Amy said from the front row, running up to Jonah and throwing her arms around his neck. More applause and “aws” from the female members of the class. I looked at Jake, wondering if any of this had inspired him.

Or at least reminded him.

But instead of watching Jonah and Amy get their picture taken by multiple people, Jake looked at his phone intently. Something was bothering him.

I’d spent all this time impatiently waiting for him to step up. Life was too short, and mothers pretended like you weren’t real. I should ask about prom and whatever else was going on with him instead of hoping things would just work themselves out.

“That was some promposal, huh?”

Jake made the sound he made when he wanted to pretend like he was listening to me but actually wasn’t.

I said his name, waiting for his eyes to meet mine. His eyes flashed with what looked like worry, followed by irritation.

“About prom ...”

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He let out a sigh of exasperation. “Prom is not that big a deal. It’s just one dance. I can’t believe how everyone’s acting like it’s the most important thing in the whole world.”

It felt like he’d just verbally slapped me. For a moment I sat there in stunned silence. “It’s important to me.”

“Not everything’s about you, Mattie. I have to go.”

Go? He just got here!

He stood up, grabbing his backpack and ignoring Ms. Elias telling him to take his seat. He left the classroom without even glancing back at me.

Jake had called me Mattie. Since we’d become official, he never called me Mattie. Ever.

Something big was going on. Something bigger than even the prom.

I hated that I didn’t know what it was.

CHAPTER FIVE

My dad requested that I do the dishes after dinner. Something about it building character, which was the kind of thing parents said when they wanted you to do housework for free. Why even bother paying our housekeeper if he was going to make me do everything? I tried not to take my frustration out on the plates. It wasn’t

their fault my father was in one of his “improve the children” moods or that Jake had snapped at me the way that he had.

I decided to concentrate on my plans for tomorrow. I was going to see Kenyetta, my tutee. It had (obviously) been Ella’s idea for me to volunteer as a tutor. Supposedly for my college applications, but mostly to try and become a better person. “You have no idea how good it feels to be selfless!” had been her sales pitch, and I’d done it just to humor her.

I’d thought I would hate it, but I didn’t. It also turned out that I wasn’t as noble and selfless as Ella had hoped for. I decided I was somewhat selfish because I loved the high I got from helping others.

Not to mention that it so often made my other problems fade away. They seemed so much smaller when I focused on somebody else who needed me.

I hoped that was still true.

“What’s going on with you?” Ella entered the kitchen and stopped short when she saw the expression on my face.

“Other than the illegal child labor currently taking place? My boyfriend told me the prom isn’t that big of a deal. Just a dance.” I pushed a couple of buttons on the dishwasher, not sure which one made it run. I decided on the Start button and slammed the door shut.

Ella let out a gasp. “It’s the pinnacle of your student presidential career!”

At least someone got it. “Exactly. Thank you!”

“What is wrong with guys? Why don’t they get this? And you have to add detergent.”

Holy Buddha. I found one of the little rectangle detergents thingies under the sink and added it to the dishwasher, throwing it in the bottom. I didn't know if it went there or not, but now it wasn't my problem.

"You're supposed to take the wrapper off," she told me.

I shrugged. The dishwasher could figure it out. It was one of those smart kinds, right?

Ella lifted up a stack of papers my dad had left on the table.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I can't find my phone."

I pulled my own phone out of my pocket. Where I had no missed calls or texts from Jake. "Want me to call it?"

"It must be dead because I tried that already. Which is weird because it was fully charged this morning and should still have some juice."

"Did you turn it off?"

She made an expression liked I'd just asked her if she tortured sick puppies in her spare time. "I never turn it off. My entire life is on there. My course schedule for next year, my calendar, all my prom to-dos, my homework assignments, everything."

"When's the last time you remember having it?"

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Ella opened the fridge and peered between Jennifer's health food. I couldn't blame her for looking in such a weird spot. When Dad was distracted, as he usually was, he tended to do strange things. Like stick cell phones next to kombucha.

"I know I didn't have it at cheer practice because I wanted to film London doing her backflips to show her how she twists to one side, and I couldn't find it."

"Cheer practice?" I echoed. "Aren't you done with that?"

"I was helping to run the clinic for the girls who want to try out for next year's team."

Of course she was.

Ella grabbed her purse and dumped the entire contents onto the kitchen table.

"See? Doesn't that feel better? Making a mess?" I asked, but Ella ignored me. I was always trying to get her to come over to the noncleaning side, but she loved things being spotless. She sifted through the dumped out contents, but it was plain that her phone wasn't in her purse.

"Maybe I left it at school. I'll check with the office tomorrow to see if anyone's turned it in." She let out a sigh of defeat and sat down. "Now what?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "We could watch a movie."

"I'm pretty sure I've seen all the movies." Her grumpy demeanor was so unlike her.

“All the movies?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m very industrious.”

It couldn’t have been too bad if Ella could still joke with me. “We could sit and talk about how much our boyfriends suck.”

She shook her head. “A movie. Something to make me forget about”—she waved her hand around—“all this other stuff. We can even watch a John Hughes one.”

“Seriously?” Ella loved horror movies and almost never watched rom-coms with me. “You are the best, you know that?”

“Sometimes. And you should take this as proof of how much I love you that I’m going to watch another one of your uber-romantic movies. Again.” She stood up and linked her arm through mine. “Which one do you want to watch?”

“NotPretty in Pink.” That was mostly about going to the prom. “And definitely notSixteen Candles.”

“Agreed.”

I did not need the reminder of Jake’s former romantic gestures.

The next day I sat in my US history class, wanting to stab out my eardrums so that I could no longer listen to the inane presentation on the Revolutionary War by Scott and Mercedes. They made it so boring I wished the British had won just so that this presentation would never have happened.

I watched the clock, and I swear the second hand was going backward.

Then finally, finally, finally they finished, and I let out a long sigh of relief. Ms. Robinson stood up and said, “Er, thank you, Scott and Mercedes, for that ... for that presentation. We have about fifteen minutes left, so we’re going to break up into our small groups to work on the finishing touches for your presentations. If you’ve already presented, you can spend the rest of class reading quietly in your seat.”

Ella and I hadn’t gone yet, and she pulled a desk next to me so that we could talk about Pearl Harbor.

We’d been assigned our topic, and the irony of the name of the Japanese invasion during World War II having the same name as my mom was not lost on me.

That prickly neck feeling was back, and I looked up to see Mercedes with a malicious look in her eyes. I mean, more so than normal. She gave me a weird grin, again like she knew something I didn’t and was enjoying the evilness of whatever she’d done.

It made me nervous.

Which was probably the whole point. To psych me out and upset me. Determined not to let her do it, I looked at the notebook Ella had pulled out of her backpack, filled with our notes about the battle.

Despite my resolution, the uneasy feeling remained.

“Why are you fidgeting like that?”

I gestured toward Mercedes. “Just wondering when she’s going to unhinge her jaw and finish us off.”

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As if she had eyes in the back of her horns, Mercedes again turned around to stare. Only this time she got up and walked toward us. At the last second, she veered off to the right to sharpen her pencil.

“Nice outfit, Mattie.”

Buddha give me strength. Past experience taught me that she didn’t actually mean what she’d just said. I glanced down at what I was wearing. Dark jeans and a black T-shirt because it was casual Friday and I didn’t have to wear that stupid uniform. And it wasn’t like she had room to talk. She wore a tight, red leather miniskirt and a practically see-through sheer white top. At least my clothes did what they were supposed to do. Clothe me.

Her nasal tone interrupted my thoughts. “Whose funeral are you going to?”

Was that all she had? “Haven’t decided yet. Don’t worry, though. You’re still at the top of the list.”

She continued to grind her pencil. “You know, I haven’t seen Jake’s promposal. Is there trouble in paradise?”

“If there is, it’s because the snake just entered the garden.” My chill retort did not reflect the turmoil raging just below the surface. Of course she would point out my lack of a promposal. How did she know exactly where to twist her knife?

That made Mercedes stop sharpening. “So in this scenario, I’m the devil?”

“If the cloven hoof fits.”

She let out a little laugh, shaking her long blonde hair from one side to the other. She removed her pencil from the device, now worn down to a little nub. “Do you know what I hate?”

“Since you’re Lord of the Underworld? Probably kittens. And laughter. All that is goodness and light. Maybe that there’s a black gaping maw where your soul should be.”

Mercedes cut me off before I could continue. “People who think they can get whatever they want. When it’s not true. You can’t get whatever you want.”

I would have laughed if I hadn’t been trying to figure out what she was so mad about. I mean, I had Jake. I did get what I wanted. That wasn’t really open for discussion.

And why was she glaring at Ella, too?

It was one thing to come after me, but I wasn’t about to let her start in on my doelike sister. “Okay, Mercedes, we’re done. I can’t pretend to have a conversation with someone who puts theu in stupid.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” she snapped, “there’s ani in stupid, too.”

I stayed quiet until realization dawned on her face, and then she stomped back to her seat. She made it all too easy sometimes.

“What did you do to make her mad?” I asked my sister.

Ella shrugged. “I don’t know. Be related to you?”

Technically, Ella was my stepsister. A point I used to bring up all the time. But since our relationship had changed and so dramatically improved, we both basically forgot the fact that we weren't actually sisters. Because it felt like we were.

The bell rang, and we headed out into the hallway, toward the cafeteria. "Does it seem like Mercedes has been acting strangely?" At my raised eyebrows, she went on, "I mean, more than usual?"

"I guess she hasn't been the same since that house fell on her sister. Or maybe it's the daylight weakening her."

Ella frowned slightly. "Even her fight with you felt ... weird."

"That wasn't a fight. More of a personality conflict. Which I win by default, since she doesn't have one. "

She laughed. "I'm going to run by the office to see if my phone's turned up. Save me a seat?"

"Yep." I nodded and she left. I guessed that she would probably ask Dad for a new one soon as she was going into withdrawals without her cell. She kept grasping at air in our classes, like she was reaching for her phone only to be surprised each time that it wasn't there.

I tried to go down the main hallway, but it was blocked off by a tired and oh-so-predictable flash mob dancing to what was presumably the couple's favorite song. I wanted to cut through the gym, but the school was hosting a career day for the juniors. Which I totally didn't get since in ten years most of the current student body would be spending their days drinking and blowing through their trust funds at an alarming rate.

It forced me to turn and go down a hall I didn't normally use. It was quiet, practically deserted as everyone else was watching the dancing. I stopped short when I saw Trent sitting in an alcove, reading. His black hair stuck up in short spikes down the middle of his shaved scalp. He wore more eyeliner than Mercedes and had on a black T-shirt and black jeans, which reminded me why we'd become friends in the first place. Because on the surface we had seemed so similar.

Part of me wanted to just walk by him, to give him the same silent treatment he'd been giving the rest of us.

But he needed to be hit in the head with a clue-by-four and brought back to reality. The one where he had the world's most perfect girlfriend that he totally didn't deserve.

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As I got closer, I saw the title of the book he was holding. “The Sound and the Fury? Aren’t we reading the CliffsNotes for that in English?”

“Some of us prefer to read the actual book.”

Same snark, same kinds of jokes, but they felt flat. Devoid of any warmth or friendliness. Like ... he didn’t want to talk to me and hoped I would go away. Things had been this way between us since he had announced that his father was leaving his mother for some twenty-two-year-old.

Awkward and uncomfortable.

“So ... what have you been up to?” I was this close to asking for his opinion on the weather.

“Well, I have that fantasy football league, and it’s eating up most of my time.”

He was being sarcastic, and it might have even been a jab at Jake. Because Jake actually participated in a fantasy football league. Which I kept trying to convince him wasn’t a real thing and just something invented by men to waste time and allow them to talk about sports past the designated season.

I decided to give Trent the benefit of the doubt. “So ... prom.”

Not my most graceful of transitions.

“The ultimate four-letter word,” Trent agreed, not even looking up from his book.

Might as well cut to the chase. “Do you have a promposal? For Ella?”

That finally got me his full attention. He blinked at me several times, as if I were some figment of his imagination.

It made me feel dumb. I pointed toward the main hallway, where I could still hear the flash mob’s music. “You know, like what everybody around you is doing? Asking their girlfriends to the dance?”

“How very peer-pressurey of you,” he said, closing his book and standing up. “No, I’m not going to prom.”

Panic clawed at my throat. This was wrong. All wrong. Had I done this? Messed it up somehow? “Does Ella know?”

He shrugged his shoulders and looked like he couldn’t care less that he’d just lobbed a weapon of prom destruction straight at me. “You can tell her.”

Without another word, he walked off, leaving me to stare after him, my mouth hanging open, my palms sweaty.

Was he serious?

Because there was no way I was telling my sister that she’d lost her phone and her prom date all in the same day.

And that I might possibly be to blame for half of it.

CHAPTER SIX

Kenyetta and I met at the library at her elementary school. She was in the sixth grade

and was about to turn twelve years old (a fact she brought up constantly). We'd been working together for about five months, and I suspected during that time period she'd become better at math than I was.

Today we were supposed to be working on science, but Kenyetta was especially uncooperative. She leaned back in her chair and brushed a dreadlock out of her eyes. "I'm going to be a professional dancer. When am I going to need science once I'm grown?"

"I'm probably supposed to say a lot. Which I don't think is true. But you will definitely need it for school."

She picked up one of the note cards we'd created for her test next week. "In high school I need to know that protons have mass?"

"Who knew protons were Catholic?" I joked. At her disdainful expression, I added, "You do need to know that. Until you graduate from college. Then I give you permission to forget everything. Except if you become like a scientist or a doctor. Then don't forget it." I didn't want to be responsible for a malpractice lawsuit or a nuclear meltdown.

"My dad said last night that I'm more of a visual person. Like in ballet, I need to see a step done before I can do it." As if to prove her point, she stood up and executed a perfect turn on her tiptoes with some kind of foot thingy at the end.

I pointed at her chair. "Visualize yourself as the only twenty-five-year old seventh-grader. Come on. Your dad will be here soon."

Kenyetta's dad worked harder than anyone I'd ever met. Her mom had died when she was three, just as her father had been finishing his residency to become an oncologist. He was very good at what he did, which meant he was highly in demand. One of

Kenyetta's aunts had moved in with them for a few years to help out Craig, Kenya's dad. But now that Kenya was older, her aunt had moved back to Georgia. I knew Kenya missed her terribly.

This poor little girl had lost her mother and the only mother figure she'd ever known. When I thought about her situation, I felt stupid for being such a Prom-a Queen.

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Did a promposal really matter all that much?

Yes, yes, it does, some awful part of me whispered. I told it to shut up.

Kenyetta pulled out a textbook from her backpack. “How about we work on some math?”

Oh Buddha.

“We’re working on multiplying and dividing fractions. My teacher’s not very good at explaining it. Like I’m one hundred and fifty percent sure he doesn’t know what he’s doing,” she told me, turning to the correct page in her book. It didn’t help, showing me the pages. I tried to read ahead quickly, to see if something sparked some recognition.

This was why the universe had given us calculators. So we didn’t have to do math by hand. I didn’t remember how to do any of this. Which meant I’d have to go online and watch some tutorial about it. That always made me feel guilty. I was supposed to be the one tutoring Kenyetta. Not YouTube.

“Okay. I think to multiply you just go across. But to divide you have to switch the bottom number and the top number, which is the ...” I skimmed the text. What was that top number called? The ruminator? The kilometer? “Is this all you’re working on right now?”

She smirked, as if she heard the desperation in my voice. “We’ve been doing word problems, but I don’t think words should count as math.”

“You and me both.” Words should stick to English class, numbers to math. “But with word problems you just have to listen and find the math parts. The numbers and the action. Like, say you have ten chocolate cupcakes.” I wrote down the number ten on our scratch sheet. “See? I said a number so that’s the part you pay attention to.”

“Okay.”

“Then somebody asks you for two of your cupcakes. I told you an action and a number. What number should I write down?”

Giving me a withering look for creating such a simplistic problem, she wrote down the number two.

“Right. So, considering you gave away two, how many cupcakes do you have left?”

“Ten.”

“What? No.”

“Uh-huh,” she protested. “I’m not giving anybody two of my cupcakes. I still have ten.”

I was the worst tutor ever. “Let’s say somebody forcibly took your two cupcakes. How many chocolate cupcakes would you have then?”

“Still ten. And a cupcake thief with two busted up hands.”

My phone rang then, and I was so grateful for the chance to regroup that I didn’t even check the caller ID. “Hello?”

“Hey, Ti ... um, hi.”

It was Jake. And why hadn't he said my name? According to pop music, that was like an indication that he was with some other girl. I was about to go all Beyoncé and demand he say my name when Kenyetta interrupted me.

"Is that Jaaake?" She drew out the name in his name into one long sound, fluttering her ridiculously long eyelashes. Then she let out a dreamy sigh and was back on her feet, dancing out her crush. I remembered what Jake Kingston did to me when I was almost twelve years old, so I totally got it.

Although the librarian might not appreciate her artistic expression.

Kenyetta was the reason why I didn't ask about the name thing. I didn't want to crush her innocent dreams by telling her that men could be total douchebags sometimes.

"What's up?" I asked, watching as Kenyetta did her jumps and turns. I should probably make her stop.

"I just ..." I could hear him take in a big breath before letting it out slowly. "I really need to get out of the house tonight. I was thinking we could go grab something to eat?"

That could be a good idea. It might finally give us a chance to talk. Really talk. About all this weirdness.

"Sounds good. I'm just finishing up with Kenyetta, and then I'll be home."

"I'll swing by to pick you up at seven."

He hadn't said what kind of dining establishment he wanted to go to. "What should I wear?"

“Clothing’s optional.”

“Jake!” I hissed into the phone, my gaze darting over to Kenyetta, who sported an amused smile.

He laughed. “I’ll see you later. And tell my favorite ballerina she still owes me a dance.”

Given her reaction, Jake was loud enough that she could hear him. Kenyetta squealed and did a flying leap that made her smack into the table.

Oh crap. “I gotta go. See you later.” I hung up and hurried over to her. “Are you okay?” I checked her leg. She’d let Jake distract her, and now she was injured. How was I going to explain this to Dr. Drummond?

“I’m fine,” she said in that still dreamy voice.

“You are going to bruise,” I told her. And somebody was going to call the Department of Child Protective Services on me.

“Totally worth it.” She sighed.

Had I been this boy crazy when I was twelve?

“Do you think he really likes my dancing?” Kenyetta asked.

I frowned. “He’s my boyfriend, remember?”

“For now,” she replied with way too much self-assurance.

The librarian finally appeared, shushing us and telling Kenyetta to stop dancing. We sat back down at the table, and I pulled out my phone, needing to learn the correct way to do this fraction stuff.

Something she’d said earlier struck me, making it difficult for me to concentrate on the online tutorial. Jake wastotallyworth it. So was our relationship. Even if we were off right now, it didn’t mean we would be for forever.

We just needed to talk. And I was determined to make sure it happened tonight.

I got ready for my date with Ella’s help. With no direction from Jake, I decided on dressy casual. Ella lent me an olive-green top, and I wore some black jeans. I rooted around in my closet, looking for shoes. I pulled out my favorite hot-pink Converse high-tops.

“What about these?” I asked.

“Uh ...”

“What?”

“Awful.”

I looked at the shoes. “Really?”

“Hello?”

“Okay,” I mumbled, selecting a black pair instead, which got me an enthusiastic two thumbs-up from Ella.

The doorbell rang, and I was strangely nervous, as if this was my first date with Jake.

“I’ll get it!” Ella leaped off my bed and ran for the front door. Probably partially from excitement, but also to head off my father before he started one of those awkward dad conversations with my boyfriend.

Which was why Ella was the best sister in the world.

I tugged my shoes on, tied the laces, and went out to the front door. Jake and Ella both turned to look at me at the same time. Butterflies on steroids flapped in my stomach when I saw him. It was like sometimes I would forget how gorgeous he was, and then I’d suddenly get reminded.

“Darn,” Jake said with an exaggerated sigh, coming over to hug me. “You wore clothes.”

I elbowed him and told Ella I’d see her later. We headed outside, Jake’s arm around my waist. He opened the car door for me and then ran around to get in the driver’s seat. “Have I mentioned that you’re hot enough to be your own evil twin?”

That made me start to blush, and I put a hand against my cheek, as if I could stop it. “Back at you.”

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Jake smiled at me then, and I noticed that it didn't quite reach his eyes. Instead he looked ... worn out. "So is your mom still texting you to say she loves you?"

"More like she told the whole world that she didn't have a daughter." At least now I could say it without getting choked up.

"What?" he demanded, and I told him the whole story. He was awesome and sympathetic, telling me how sorry he was that it had happened. That I deserved to be treated better. He took my hand and brought it up to his lips. He kissed it softly and then held my hand against his heart.

It was such a sweet gesture that my whole body melted.

We arrived at a steak house restaurant, and I was relieved to see it wasn't too swanky so I didn't have to feel nervous about accidentally flipping a fork across the room, catching my linen napkin on fire, or dumping my water all over the bread basket.

Not that I'd ever done any of those things.

The smell of batter-dipped onions and steak hit me as we walked inside. Delicious. Jake gave the hostess his name, and she said it would be a few minutes and they'd call us when our table was ready. Jake pulled me in close, wrapping his arms around me as we waited.

Even more delicious.

I had only a couple of minutes to enjoy it before my tranquil happiness got shattered.

“Hey, the Dothraki birthday clown is here,” he said. He and Trent had never really gotten along, and Jake had a list of colorful euphemisms for him. But why would Trent be here?

I followed his gaze to see Trent seated at a table, scrolling through his phone. This didn’t seem like it would be his kind of place. Especially since, like Ella, he was a vegetarian.

Wondering if we should say hi, especially given the amount of damage that had occurred the last time we spoke, I decided to just ignore him.

Right up until the moment when he was joined by a girl.

A girl who was not Ella.

She sat down on the bench across from Trent in their booth. I recognized her as the pseudo-hipster formerly known as Alice. She’d been a year ahead of us at Malibu Prep and had decided her senior year to change her name to Bronte. (And I was so concerned my English teacher, Mrs. Aprils, would find out and change her name to Mrs. Twain since she was so obsessed with Mark Twain, and I would not be able to call her Mrs. Twain with a straight face and would probably spend the entire year in detention. Thankfully, none of that happened.) I thought the whole name change thing was pretentious and that Bronte was trying too hard to be cool. Like now. I took in her fake nose ring, her topknot, and the fanny pack slung diagonally across a white shirt that looked like a painter’s smock my dad might wear. As if she’d copied the “What to Wear” section of *Hipsters’ Monthly*.

“Why is Trent here with Bronte?” I asked, not able to keep the suspicious tone out of my voice. Was he stupid enough and/or self-destructive enough to actually be cheating on my sister? And if so, was I going to get arrested after I killed him, or would I be able to convince Jake to drive me to Mexico?

Jake rubbed my back, making small circles with his hands. “Don’t jump to any conclusions. Maybe she’s giving him tips on the best way to apply eyeliner or how to avoid looking like a hypocrite when you condemn the rich while sponging off your wealthy parents.”

“I’m not jumping. My feet are firmly planted.” Even though I’d already jumped to a million different conclusions, all of them bad.

Then the worst thing imaginable happened.

Bronte leaned across the table and kissed Trent.

On the mouth.

For a long time.

“Okay,” Jake said, sounding just as shocked as I felt. “I think you can jump now.”

Oh, I was going to jump, all right. I was going to jump down that skank’s throat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I made my way over to their booth. I came to a stop, breathing hard, angry lava percolating through my veins. I expected them to notice me or to say something, but Bronte just kept kissing Trent. I considered grabbing the soda on the table and pouring it over her head.

Jake stood just behind me, his hand on my shoulder. I think he meant to reassure me, but all his support did was give me strength.

Fiery, rage-filled strength.

Bronte finally stopped, and they pulled their cheating heads apart. Trent seemed startled to see me, his face turning paler. “Mattie!”

Some small part of my brain registered that at least he had the decency to look panicked and guilty.

Her? Not so much.

“Can we help you?” Bronte asked, no recognition registering on her features.

“Yeah. You can stop kissing my sister’s boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” she echoed. “That’s adorable how into labels you still are.”

“Says the girl who changed her actual name,” I hissed through my teeth.

Trent started to rise. “Mattie, it’s not what you think—”

“Sit down and be quiet!” I pointed at his bench, and he did as I commanded. “I’ll get to you in a minute. And don’t tell me it’s not what I think. I think you were making out with this ... this pretentious wannabe in a family restaurant! And there is no way for you to spin that into something else.”

“Look, I don’t know what your issues are, but I’m not in a committed relationship. I’m not ‘cheating,’ however you define that construct. And I don’t control anybody else’s behavior. Life is about doing what you want when you want, and I won’t let some artificial set of ‘rules’ make me behave a certain way,” Bronte said, clearly enjoying how upset she was making me with every stupid thing that came out of her mouth.

But there was a grain of truth in there. I was blaming Bronte, but she wasn’t the one cheating on my sister.

Trent was.

So I focused my fury on him.

“How could you do this?” I asked. “Ella loves you. Even when you isolated yourself from everyone, she’s never given up on you. How could you hurt her this way?”

I saw a brief flash of regret in his eyes, but then it was gone.

“You are overreacting,” Trent told me, “and you’re making a scene.”

That part was also true. I was making a scene so big I could probably compete in Hollywood for an acting award.

But he didn’t get to talk to me that way.

“Don’t tell me I’m overreacting! That is so patronizing. If anything, I’m underreacting. If I were overreacting, there’d be little pieces of you all over this restaurant.”

“You need to calm down,” he said.

I hated when men told women to calm down. Like we were some species of hysterical creatures ruled solely by our uteruses. As if we were all in desperate need of some big, strong man to tell us whether or not we were allowed to get upset and show it.

And the fact that he was cheating on my sister while telling me how to feel?

Nope.

So I did something then that surprised even me.

I punched him dead in the face.

He yelled out in what I hoped was pain while Bronte said, “You’re bleeding!” and leaned over to press her napkin against his mouth.

“I’m feeling much calmer now! Can you tell?” I shouted at him. “And you two jerks deserve each other!”

Next thing I knew Jake had me by the waist and was pulling me out into the parking lot while I loudly and repeatedly questioned Trent’s parents’ marital status at the time of his birth.

My boyfriend got me into the car, even fastening my seat belt for me. All I wanted to do was go back and finish what I’d started. I literally saw red, and I wanted to claw some eyeballs out.

We drove for several minutes, and I took in some deep, cleansing breaths. Just like I’d learned that one time Ella had made me go to yoga class. As the adrenaline and anger receded, I became aware of the fact that my left hand was throbbing in pain.

“So I don’t think we’ll be able to go back there,” Jake said, and I could hear the laughter in his voice.

“My hand hurts,” I told him in a small voice. So did my heart. How could Trent have done this?

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“I’m not surprised. You hit him really hard. I’ll take you to my house, and we’ll put some ice on it.”

Earlier he’d told me that he’d wanted to get out of his house tonight. I didn’t want to force him into going back there. “We can go to my house.”

He shook his head. “I’m not taking you home until we fix your hand. I don’t need to deal with a furious father on top of everything else.”

I briefly wondered what the “everything else” part was. But all I could think about was Trent and how blatantly and uncaringly he had betrayed my sister and her loyalty. Her trust.

“I still can’t believe he would cheat on Ella.”

“I can. What do you expect from a refugee from Edward Scissorhands?” Jake was trying to lighten my mood. To make me smile.

It was working. A little.

As my rage receded, I was shocked at what had just happened. “I can’t believe I hit him. I don’t even like violent movies. I’m not a violent person.”

“Someone should tell that to Trent’s face.”

A few minutes later, we pulled up in front of the place Jake called his house, but it more resembled the palace of a small European kingdom.

“Come on, Muhammad Ali. Let’s get your knuckles iced.”

Scooby waited for us at the door, wagging his tail enthusiastically. He nearly knocked Jake over in his excitement at seeing him again, even though we’d been gone for only half an hour, tops. His mom walked into the front foyer where Jake was petting Scooby and saying he was a good boy. She seemed surprised to see me, even though I came over all the time.

I said hello to her.

“Hello, Mattie. I wasn’t expecting you tonight.” Mrs. Kingston glanced uneasily between me and Jake. Maybe it was because of what had just happened with Trent, but my mind went to the worst place.

What had Jake said to her? About me? What was up with her reaction? She’d always been so welcoming to me in the past.

“If you’ll forgive me, I’m exhausted, and I’m going up to my room. Jake, there’s some cake on the counter if you and Mattie would like dessert.”

It was really early for her to be going to bed. I figured she was just trying to give me and Jake some privacy. Unlike my dad, who would have told us to come watch a game or a movie with him and sat in between us.

Maybe that was the difference between being the parent of a teen boy and a parent of a teen girl.

We told her good night, and now my mind kept going back to the fact that he’d wanted to get out of his house.

Was something happening with the Kingstons?

I followed Jake into his massive kitchen, still cradling my left hand. I really hoped I hadn't done any permanent damage, or I might not ever be able to draw again and that would destroy me.

Jake got me a glass of water and some extra-strength ibuprofen. I sat down at the island on one of the bar stools. As I swallowed the pills, he dug through the freezer until he found a bag of peas. I hissed in shock and pain when he placed it on top of my hand. He sat down on the bar stool next to me.

"Maybe I should go to the emergency room. What if I'm bleeding internally?"

"You're not ..." Jake closed his eyes for a second, as if trying to relax. "You can't bleed internally in your hand. There's no organs in there."

"It could be broken," I insisted stubbornly.

He gently checked the bones in my hand. "If the swelling gets worse or the pain doesn't go away, I'll take you for an X-ray."

I nodded. "I've never hit anybody before. Not hitting people is supposed to be one of those things you learn in kindergarten."

"One"—Jake held up a single finger—"you have hit somebody before, and two, you did not learn in kindergarten that you shouldn't hit people."

Confused, I raised my eyebrows at him.

He smiled, as if remembering something that made him happy. "The first day of kindergarten you punched some kid in the face for calling you Silly Tilly."

“I did? I don’t remember that.”

“I do. Clearly.” He adjusted the bag of peas on my hand, turning it over. “It’s when I first knew I loved you.”

My heart did a series of flips and threatened to beat its way out of my chest. “When we were five?”

He leaned over to kiss me gently, and my heart swelled up even more. “You loved me? All this time? Since we were little?”

“How could I not? You’re amazing.”

How romantic and sweet was that?

And how was it possible to love him more than I already did? “I can’t believe you liked me for so long. I’ve basically been in love with you since I was nine. We wasted a lot of time when we could have been together.”

“I think we got together when we were supposed to. When we were ready for each other. Who knows? Maybe if it had happened sooner we’d never be what we are now.”

I couldn’t get over the fact that Jake had harbored this secret crush on me the whole time I’d had one on him. What were you supposed to do with that kind of information? Or how should I deal with all the warm happiness pulsating inside me?

Jake looked like he felt just as gooey as I did on the inside. “Tonight is part of the reason why I’ve always adored you. I love a girl who stands up for herself.”

I was standing up for Ella, but I’d take the win. Thinking of my sister made me feel depressed, canceling out all that joy I was just feeling.

“Ella,” I said sadly, not sure how to complete my sentence. I had to tell her about this. But it was going to break her heart.

“I think I know you well enough to know what you’re going to say next.” That was good because I still wasn’t sure. “That Trent is a lying, cheating jerk, and you have to tell Ella.”

Wow. He did know me. “Give or take a profanity, yes.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t tell her.”

“What?”

Jake shrugged one shoulder. “Haven’t you heard that phrase ‘don’t shoot the messenger’? It exists because people shoot the messenger when they get bad news. This is just going to hurt her if you tell her. And you and Ella have worked all your stuff out. I’d hate for this to mess things up for you two.”

Maybe I just had more faith in Ella than that. I knew she wouldn’t blame me for Trent being a lying scumbag.

Right?

What if she does?some annoying little voice inside me asked. I told it to be quiet. “I’d rather it come from me than for Trent to try and lie about it or for Ella to hear it from

somebody else. Her boyfriend was kissing another girl, and you think I'm not going to tell her?"

"Technically, Bronte was kissing him."

My fists balled up on the counter. "You think that makes it okay? A technicality?"

Jake held his hands out in front of him, trying to placate me. "Whoa there, Bruce Lee. Put away your fists of fury. What he did was not okay."

At that, I relaxed and even smiled a little.

"You kind of hit like a girl, by the way."

"I am a girl," I protested, indignant. And I thought I did a good job of punching Trent, given that I apparently hadn't done it in thirteen years.

"Oh, I know you're a girl," Jake replied with a wolfish grin that made my toes curl up. "But your thumb inside your fingers is a very bad idea. You could break it that way." He balled my hands up. "Keep your thumb on the outside, like this. You're also better off hitting them someplace softer. Like a nose. Plus, they bleed a lot. Although good for you on busting open his lip. He won't be kissing anybody for a while. Jaws are no fun for your hand."

As evidenced by my painful knuckles. "You sure you want to share all this insider information? Aren't you worried about me coming after you?"

He planted a soft kiss on the bridge of my nose. "I don't plan on ever giving you a reason to punch me."

There was my opening. To ask him why he'd been weird and secretive. Dismissive of

things that were important to me. Why he was so hot and cold lately.

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But even though I'd been determined to talk things out with Jake, now I was too scared to. What if he went off on me like Trent had at school? Or started kissing girls who named themselves Bronte at local eateries?

Instead I said, "Maybe Trent will man up and tell her himself."

"Maybe. And maybe the Cleveland Browns will win the Super Bowl. But if you have to bet on one or the other, I'd bet on the Browns."

"Why do I feel so bad about hitting him?" Because Trent had obviously deserved it.

"Because you have a conscience?" Jake suggested. "You could apologize. It might make you feel better."

"Apologize?" I repeated, stunned. "He cheats on my sister, and I have to apologize to him?"

"Being angry at something or someone ... that only hurts you."

"That's a helpful life lesson." I was shooting for sarcasm, but I missed the mark given that I knew he was probably right. That the only way to lessen my guilt would be to apologize for the assault.

Which made me mad all over again.

"This lesson has been brought to you by the letters K and O and the number twelve." He paused, waiting for something. "That was both a Sesame Street and a boxing reference,

FYI. What with you being the reigning champ and all.”

“Ha, ha.” I let the bag of peas fall from my hand. It had started to feel better. I flexed it a few times. I didn’t feel any broken bones.

Then again, I was not a doctor. Just tutoring the daughter of one.

“I’m not excusing what he did, but sometimes people make mistakes. We need to forgive people for making mistakes, right?” His voice sounded high and tight and suspicious. He looked anxiously at me. I kept my super poker face on, not letting on that my nerves were now frayed with worry.

“What are you talking about?”

He blinked three times. “Trent. What else would I be talking about?”

I waited and watched. If he touched his mouth, his tell for when he was lying to me, I was going to punch him, too. With my undamaged hand.

“Let me get you some more peas. These are kind of melted.”

I watched him go back to the freezer and wondered what had my boyfriend done that he thought he needed to be forgiven for.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I had Jake take me home. Much as I liked being with him, I knew I’d spend the entire evening alternating between trying to figure out how I was going to tell Ella and thinking up horrible things I could do to Trent. Neither one would be productive.

Or I’d be worrying and wondering what Jake’s comment about needing forgiveness

meant. And to be honest? I wanted to live in Denial Land and pretend like that hadn't just happened.

So I focused my attention on my sister and her drama, which was much more immediate. It would be better to just go home and rip the Band-Aid off. Because if I waited, she could find out in some other way. Bronte could put something up on social media. Or somebody in the restaurant might have filmed the fight, and with my luck, the thing had already gone viral.

Jake dropped me off with a quick kiss, and I slogged my way back into the house. Even though I knew it was a necessary evil, my stomach knotted up as I imagined Ella's reaction. Every step I took brought me closer to hurting my sister.

My dad sat on the couch with Jennifer, watching a movie. "Hey, sweetie. You're home early," he said, glancing at his watch.

"Yep."

"Do you want to join us?" Jennifer asked, and part of me was tempted to accept. If for no other reason than to delay the inevitable.

"Not tonight."

Dad paused the movie. "What's with the Incredible Sulk routine? Is everything okay? Did your mother do something?"

I almost wanted to laugh. My mother probably had done something that I just didn't know about yet. But she wasn't the reason for my moodiness. "No."

"Did Jake do something?" he asked, a deadly look in his eyes.

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Not at the moment. But if I said that, I might not be the only Lowe family member out punching people tonight. “It’s not Jake. Everything is ... fine-ish. Don’t worry about it.” I pointed with my thumb over my shoulder. “I’m just going to go to bed.”

My father’s jaw twitched back and forth. It was his poker tell. One that he was usually better at concealing and meant that he was really worried. “We’re here if you need to talk to us.”

“I know. Good night.”

I considering getting ready for bed first, but it was time to face the music. Whatever that meant.

When I stood outside of Ella’s door, I heard the unmistakable sounds of her sobbing. I didn’t bother with knocking and hurried inside.

She sat in the middle of her pink comforter, her whole body shaking as she cried and cried. My heart leaped in my throat. Someone had beaten me to the punch.

Or had told her about the punch.

“How do you already know?” I made sure to close the door behind me. I didn’t need Dad and Jennifer to overhear us. “Did somebody tell you?”

She took in several deep breaths and looked up at me, confused. Tears clung to her eyelashes until she wiped them away. “What?”

“Why are you crying?” I sat down across from her, the mattress sinking under my weight.

“Li-Liam Fiorelli,” she hiccupped.

Was that the guy who had told her? “I don’t know who that is.”

Ella threw her hands out to her side, letting out a sound of frustration. “I talk about him all the time, Tilly. Liam Fiorelli. Lead singer of the Beat? They’re my favorite group. He and the band were just in a serious accident, and they don’t know if he’s going to make it. The drummer already died.”

She started crying again, and I scooted closer so that I could put my arm around her. If she was this brokenhearted about a band being in an accident, what was she going to do when I told her about her lying, cheating scumbag of a boyfriend? Maybe I should wait. We had the whole weekend in front of us, and I could let her get over this tragedy before I gave her another one.

“Why are you in here alone? Why didn’t you go talk to Jennifer and Dad?”

“I don’t know,” she said, sniffing. “Maybe because it feels like such a stupid thing to be this upset about. I’ve had a crush on Liam Fiorelli since I was thirteen, but I don’t know him. I shouldn’t be crying.”

It wasn’t that strange. Ella had always been very sensitive and emotional.

She reached for some tissues and blew her nose. I patted her awkwardly. Physically comforting someone wasn’t really my strong suit.

“What’s with the face?” she asked, tossing the Kleenex over the side of her bed.

“It can wait.”

Ella studied me with her red-rimmed eyes. “I’m already devastated. Whatever bad news you’re carrying around, you should tell me now. You couldn’t possibly make things worse.”

I didn’t want to accept her challenge. But she deserved to know. And better to hear it from me than somebody malicious like Mercedes, who would try to hurt her as much as possible.

“Jake and I went out to eat tonight. And at the restaurant, I saw Trent. With a girl.” I held my breath for a second. “A girl he was kissing.”

My sister blinked at me several times, as if she hadn’t understood what I’d just said. “Trent ... was kissing another girl? Who?”

“That stupid Bronte who graduated last year. I don’t know why. You are so much prettier than she is.”

“So ... I don’t have a boyfriend anymore?” Ella asked, and I got her confusion. “This means we’re done, right?”

“I don’t know many other ways to so completely kill a relationship. Cheating means you need to drop him like fifth-period Spanish.”

“Wait,” she said, grabbing more tissues. “You dropped fifth-period Spanish?”

That’s what she was focusing on? “So not the point right now!”

She nodded, and I noticed that her crying had turned into little more than sniffles and nose blowing.

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How could I make this better? “I feel like I should tell you time heals all fishes in the sea or something like that. Or that thing you said to me about my mom. Something about chapters and footnotes and how people suck?”

That got me a small laugh, which I considered progress. “That wasn’t quite what I said, but yeah, people leave. I know that better than anyone.”

Her biological dad had taken off before she was even born, and her mom had died a few years ago from breast cancer. Ella was more acquainted with loss than anybody our age should be.

“Right. And Trent’s just a sucky footnote. That should probably just be deleted all together. He doesn’t even deserve footnote status.”

“Maybe. This all feels like the end of the world, but I guess if you consider the big picture ...” Ella’s voice trailed off.

“Not such a big deal?”

She leaned her head to one side, as if considering. “Nope. Still feels a little like the end of the world. And I’m so smad right now!” It was our word for when we felt both sad and mad at the same time. Which I got, because I’d been feeling that emotion for most of the evening.

“If it will make you feel any better, I punched him in the face.”

“You what?” she gasped.

I showed her my still swollen knuckles. “No one gets to cheat on my sister.”

Then, to my surprise, she started to giggle, which was about the last thing I expected, and it made me happy. I didn’t want her to keep crying. Trent didn’t deserve her tears. So I would make the ultimate sacrifice. “Do you know what we need?”

“Lots of ice cream?”

“Definitely. But I was thinking more along the lines of some expensive retail therapy.”

Ella looked over at her window. “But all the stores are about to close.”

I got up and grabbed her pink, bejeweled laptop from her desk and sat back down on her bed. “Yes. But do you know what’s not closed? The internet.” I handed her the computer, and she opened it. I saw that her web browser was already at her favorite store.

We sat against her headboard, and Ella rested her head against mine while clicking through pages of shoes.

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked.

I could feel her nod. “Yeah. So far it only hurts when I breathe.”

After we bought out the entire inventory of Ella’s online store and ate our body weight in Ben & Jerry’s, I slept in Ella’s bed, not wanting to leave her alone.

Part of me expected that Trent would step up. That he’d come to the house and explain himself to my sister. Maybe even figure out a way to make it all up to her.

It didn't happen.

Jake texted me, asking if Ella was okay. I told him she was hanging in there. He sent me a frowny face in response.

But, again, no nightly phone call from him.

The next day Ella acted more like herself. Not quite as perky and cheerful, but some shade of it.

"You seem better," I commented.

"That much sugar will cure just about anything," she said with a faint smile. "What are your plans for today?"

"I have Kenyetta's birthday party with Jake, and then after that I'm free. We can spend the rest of the weekend eating more ice cream, buying as many shoes as you want, and talking about how much Trent needs to be smacked again."

Just then my phone rang. Jake.

"Speak of the hot boyfriend ..." I muttered as I answered my cell. "Hey!"

"Hey, Tills. I hate to do this, but I'm not going to be able to make Kenyetta's party today. Something came up."

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“Something came up?” I repeated. “Like what?” I knew how much Kenyetta had been looking forward to Jake coming.

“Oh. I, uh, have something else to do. With my mom. Shopping. We’re going shopping.”

I happened to know for a fact that Jake hadn’t gone shopping with his mom since he was thirteen years old. She was the one who told me the story about how he had demanded that she drop him off and let him choose his own clothes.

Even though I couldn’t see him or his tells, I knew he was lying.

I just didn’t understand why. “Kenyetta’s going to be really disappointed.” So was I.

“Tell her I’ll make it up to her.” Then, as if he’d been able to hear my unspoken thought, he added, “And to you.”

We said goodbye and hung up.

“Jake’s not coming?” Ella asked.

I nodded. “He said he was going shopping with his mom. Which has to be a lie.”

“Don’t jump to any conclusions.”

I didn’t tell her that Jake had given me the same advice the night before, and my conclusion jumping had been correct.

Lately it was like I had been forced onto some relationship roller coaster where I was either really high up, on top of the world, and so in love with my boyfriend, or plummeting down to my doom and the end of everything. Before the last few days, Jake and I had always been on an even keel, and I knew exactly where I stood with him. Things were normal. This ... felt like an ulcer waiting to happen.

“It’s not like this is the first time he’s canceled at the last minute,” I told her, trying not to frown.

“Hey,” Ella said, breaking up my downward spiral. “What if I come with you?”

“Really? That would be great.”

“To be honest, I don’t want to stay here all afternoon and think about Trent and Bronte. It would be nice to get out of the house and have a distraction.”

Personally, I’d still be a blubbering mess if Jake had cheated on me. Ella seemed to be handling it really well.

Or she was just in deep denial.

I could respect either choice.

A couple of hours later, we were on our way to Kenyetta’s house, along with the presents I’d chosen for her. They were all ballerina themed—from a ballet slippers nightlight to a silver charm bracelet with tiny dancers in tutus.

I volunteered to drive. It wasn’t that given Ella’s current state I didn’t trust her to drive ... but given her current state I totally didn’t trust her to drive.

She used my phone to log on to her Instagram account, and she was scrolling through

her feed. “Oh no. Demarco just asked London to prom by giving her a kitten. His sign says, ‘I’ve got a feline you’d be the purr-fect date! Prom?’”

The last thing Ella should be doing was looking at promposals. Especially since she wasn’t getting one now. But why would Demarco’s ask make her say, “Oh no”?

“What’s wrong with that?”

“London’s mom is super allergic to cats. We had a cheer sleepover at Portia’s house a few months ago, and she has two longhair cats. Anyway, London’s mom had to be taken to a doctor when London got home. It’s why we had to institute a ‘sleepovers in pet-free homes only’ rule.”

“That’s going to be a fun conversation,” I said. “Good thing Demarco knows her so well and would give her such an appropriate gift.” I wanted to poke fun so that Ella wouldn’t get more depressed. I didn’t handle a depressed Ella very well. That was supposed to be my role in our relationship because I was the moody one.

“OMG! Topher Larson got the wordpromtattooed on his shoulder for his promposal!”

“Are you sure it’s not fake?” I asked, totally stunned.

“He’s got a video of him going into the tattoo parlor and getting it done.” She held my phone up for me to see, but since I was being the responsible driver, I couldn’t look. Didn’t want to look, actually.

Okay, I was all about a good promposal. But this was taking things way too far. “It’s like six hours of a single night. And he doesn’t know how things are going to go with Brie at prom. What if she breaks up ...” I let my voice trail off, realizing too late what I’d almost said.

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“Breaks up with him?” Ella finished. “It’s okay, Tilly. You can say it. I’m not made of glass. I won’t shatter if you bring Trent up.”

We pulled into Kenyetta’s semicircle brick driveway. She lived in a huge Mediterranean-style ranch home with a pink terra-cotta roof. Like somebody had picked it up out of the middle of Tuscany and dropped it into Malibu.

She must have been waiting for us, because as soon as I got out of the car, she came running over and threw her arms around me.

“Mattie! I’m so glad you’re here!” she said, and her normally dazzling smile seemed even brighter. She wore a pale pink sundress that popped against her darker skin tone.

“Me too!”

She pulled away and looked around. “Where’s Jake? I told everyone he was coming and how fine he is. They think I photoshopped the picture I have of him on my phone.”

Some part of me briefly wondered if I should be worried that she had a picture of him on her phone, but I focused on the bad news I had to deliver. “He had something come up. He’s not going to be able to make it,” I said apologetically. Her big brown eyes were so forlorn it broke my heart.

“Oh. Okay.”

“But I brought my sister Ella instead. I think you two will get along really well.”

Ella came over and introduced herself, but Kenyetta was unenthusiastic.

“Come say hi to my dad.” She paused, as if she didn’t want to add on the next part. “And Bahati.”

Oh, interesting. The infamous Bahati, huh? Kenyetta had talked about her for the last few months. Bahati was her dad’s new girlfriend, and from what I had gathered, Kenyetta was not a fan. I was looking forward to finally meeting her and finding out whether she was as bad as Kenyetta kept telling me.

We followed behind her, weaving in between the parked luxury cars. I hated that Jake had canceled, leaving me to deal with Kenyetta’s disappointment alone. For the millionth time, I wondered what was going on with him. I worried it wasn’t good.

Sometimes I would get a tickle at the back of my throat. It was like an early warning system that I was about to get really sick.

Right now I had a tickle at the back of my soul that made me think bad things were about to happen with my boyfriend.

I didn’t have time to think about him, though. I needed to cheer up my sister and console a twelve-year-old because her crush hadn’t shown up.

That wouldn’t be too hard to manage, right?

CHAPTER NINE

We said hello to Dr. Drummond, who was surrounded by a bunch of laughing adults. He stepped away from the circle to talk to us, holding hands with a tall woman with dark hair in tight ringlets and dark eyes. She smiled kindly at us, and I liked her immediately. I again introduced Ella, and he shook Ella’s hand. “Any family member

of Mattie's is always welcome in my home," he said in his deep and booming voice.

Ha. He said that now, but he hadn't met my mother. He'd rethink that open-door policy then. Instead of telling him as much, I just enjoyed his infectious smile that made me think he probably had an excellent bedside manner.

"Let me introduce my girlfriend, Dr. Bahati Okafor." I mentally ran through the things Kenyetta had told me. Dr. Okafor had moved here from Africa about ten years ago to finish up medical school and do her training. She'd met Dr. Drummond at the hospital where they both currently worked. She was training to become an oncologist.

It was her father's first serious relationship since Kenyetta's mother had died.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Okafor."

"And you as well, Mattie and Ella. But you must call me Bahati."

"Thanks so much for having us. You have a gorgeous home," Ella said, and Dr. Drummond shot her one of those "I approve of Ella" looks that adults were always giving her.

"Thank you for coming," he countered. "I know Kenyetta is especially thrilled to have you here, Mattie."

"I'm thrilled to be here," I said in my best Ella imitation.

Dr. Drummond and Bahati both smiled again and told us to make ourselves at home.

"The party's this way," Kenyetta said, tugging on our hands. We followed her out to the backyard. She was having a glamour/spa day party. The other girls were getting their nails, hair, and makeup done by professionals at different stations, and the entire

backyard was decorated in sparkles, pink tulle, and white flowers.

Kenyetta seemed a little lost, even though it was her party. I wondered whether it was just Jake not showing up, whether she was upset that Bahati was there, or if something else was going on. I was about to ask her when Ella spoke.

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“Do you know one of the things I do at school?” Ella asked Kenyetta. “I’m a cheerleader. Mattie’s told me how much you love to dance. Do you think any of your friends would like to learn a cheer routine?”

Her entire face changed into one of pure glee. “Let me go check!” Kenyetta ran off and began talking to some of the other girls.

Huh. Ella distracted Kenyetta without me having to do anything. One item off my to-do list.

“If I’m not back in half an hour, come rescue me,” my sister said. “Because I really want to get a pedicure done before we leave. The woman they have doing them is from Gigi’s, and she is the best. I’ve been trying to get in with her for weeks, but she’s always booked.”

Kenyetta returned with a handful of giggling girls, and they dragged Ella away. I took my gift bag over to a table that overflowed with presents. Like a gift volcano had erupted under the table and now it was spilling out over the top. I set it down, and the massive cake off to my right drew my attention. It was white and pink and looked scrumptious. But it hadn’t been cut yet. Darn. Despite eating all the ice cream in Malibu last night, I was still jonesing for some junk food.

I wondered if I could steal a tiny sliver from the back of the cake when I heard someone ask, “Are you stalking me now?”

Seriously? I turned around to see Mercedes Bentley scowling at me. “Stalkingyou? My standards are much higher. I mean, I could bring it up at the next Stalkers

Anonymous to see if anyone else is interested in the job, but I wouldn't get your hopes up." What was Mercedes doing at Kenyetta's house? It was so weird to see two completely different parts of my life converging on a single spot.

"I know you think you're oh so funny."

"I'm hilarious. If you're not bright enough to see it, that's on you." That would have been an excellent phrase to walk out on. I couldn't do it, though. Even though I knew that I shouldn't have cared, I had to know why she was here. "What are you doing at a child's birthday party? Hoping to trick some kids into following you back to your gingerbread house?"

Instead of looking upset at the wicked burn I'd just delivered, Mercedes appeared way too smug and self-assured. "My daddy is friends with Dr. Drummond, and he wanted us to put in an appearance. And you ... what? Travel around looking for something to do given that your life is so pathetic? Crashing a kid's party is probably a big day for you."

"I'm Kenyetta's tutor, thanks."

"That poor girl," she sighed.

I had a whole bunch of repressed feelings to unload, and I aimed both barrels at Mercedes.

But before I could say anything, she spoke. "Ella seems sad," she said, using a fake sympathetic voice. "Did something happen to the perfect princess?"

Something was off in her tone, where she sounded too innocent but actually knew exactly what had happened to my sister. Which wasn't possible. Maybe I was getting paranoid in my old age.

Even though there was no way she could know about Trent and Ella, it seemed like Mercedes knew more than she was letting on. Otherwise she'd be standing in some corner texting and chewing her hair instead of trying to aggravate me. What did she know and when did she know it? Part of me wondered if she'd somehow been involved. Which seemed farfetched because it wasn't like she had held Trent down and forced him to cheat on Ella.

But I wasn't in the mood to play her games. "I've already punched an idiot once this week. Don't think I won't do it again. And I'm sure your suck-up of a father wouldn't appreciate having to pay for another nose job."

She let out a strangled, shocked sound, which I enjoyed probably more than I should have.

And as much as I wanted cake, I wanted to be far away from Mercedes more. I would not ruin Kenyetta's party by smashing her birthday cake in Mercedes's face.

Regardless of how much that image filled me with a certain kind of joy.

"And no Jake?" she called after me, and it was like those words had rooted me to the ground. I had to turn and look at her to see what she'd say next when I should have just kept walking. "You think everything's going your way and then ... poof. It all falls apart."

Either she was intensely psychotic and trying to upset me, or more intuitive than I'd given her credit for and somehow figured out that things were not going well in my life. "Enjoy the party," I told her. "I don't want to keep you. I'm sure you have plans to convince one of these girls to trade her voice for a pair of legs."

I stormed off, not looking where I was going and nearly clotheslined myself with a row of white twinkling Christmas lights. I noticed a big white tent off to my right that

had the word “Massages” on a sign out front. I ducked inside. I was in desperate need of a massage to relieve some of this anger. I didn’t want to get kicked out for acting on some violent tendencies.

Fortunately, they had a table free and led me to a curtained off area where I did my best to relax and enjoy myself and not think about Ella, Kenyetta, Mercedes, Trent, or Jake.

Especially Jake.

About twenty minutes later, I felt tons better and remembered that I was supposed to rescue Ella from the tweenagers.

I looked all over the backyard but couldn’t find her. And since her phone was still missing, it wasn’t like I could call her.

Again not looking where I was going, I almost ran straight into Bahati.

“Mattie! Are you enjoying yourself?”

I nodded enthusiastically. I wasn’t going to let one bad Mercedes run-in ruin my day.
“I am. The massage tent is amazing.”

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She leaned in and whispered, “I thought it might be nice for the adults to have a place to escape to.”

That she had been involved with the planning kind of surprised me. Maybe she and Dr. Drummond were more serious than Kenyetta had let on.

“Good thinking,” I said. “You haven’t by chance seen my sister, have you?”

“Yes. I saw her in the house, in the library.”

“Thanks.” I started to walk away because I’d done enough interfering recently, but I couldn’t help myself. “Hey, Dr. Okafor?”

“Bahati, please.”

“Bahati. I know this is none of my business, and you didn’t ask what I thought, but I’ve been where Kenyetta is. My dad got married a bunch of times, and I’ve had more stepmoms than anyone should have. I know what it’s like to be the only person in your father’s life and then to have to suddenly share him with someone else. Maybe you could show her that you becoming part of her family doesn’t mean less time and attention, but more.” Bahati looked at me, and I didn’t know her well enough to read her expression. Had I offended her? I’d probably overstepped. She was a grown woman and a doctor, for crying out loud. She didn’t need my help. I began to walk away. “But what do I know? Still just a teenager.”

I found Ella in the library, reading a magazine.

“Mercedes is here,” I warned her. “We had some words. None of them were nice.”

“I saw her take off a little while ago.”

“Did she leave by her own choice or was an exorcism required?” I asked.

Ella just smiled and shook her head at me.

“So why are you holed up in here instead of being out with the party and getting all glamorous?” Like I knew she normally loved doing.

She shrugged one shoulder. “I kind of wanted to be alone with my thoughts for a bit.”

Uh-oh. “And what did you and your alone thoughts talk about?”

“Mostly Trent.”

I sat down in the armchair across from her. “And?”

“This morning I found out that Liam Fiorelli is going to be okay. He’ll have some scarring on his face from the fire, which is a shame because he’s ridiculously gorgeous, but he’s going to make it. And I think it’s kind of sad that I was more upset about my favorite rock star getting into an accident than I was about my so-called boyfriend kissing another girl. I’ve been trying to figure out why, and I think it’s probably because I knew this was coming. Not the him kissing somebody else part, but I’ve been preparing for our breakup for a while. I hurt the whole time he ignored me, and we drifted apart, bit by bit.”

“Oh, Ella.” It was so sad.

“I think that’s why it doesn’t hurt quite as much today. I’m not devastated, when I

probably should be.”

“Well, are you at least going to confront him?” Because Trent deserved to be confronted. And possibly slapped around.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

I hit the arm on my chair with my fist, which made it ache a little bit. Looked like I wasn’t fully recovered yet. “Don’t let your fear of confrontation let him get away with it!”

“It’s not that I’m afraid to talk to him. I know I sometimes run away instead of standing up for myself. But there’s nothing to be said. If he doesn’t know that what he did was wrong, me telling him it was messed up is not going to help. He’s a footnote, and I deserve to be treated better. I’m accepting what’s happened, and I want to let go. I’ll feel sad for a little while, and then I’m going to move on with my life.”

She was way too forgiving. “I can’t believe you’re letting him off that easy. He should suffer at least a little.”

“I think you took care of that for me.”

I snorted. “In case you were wondering, punching a cheating jerk is highly satisfying.”

“If only I’d had this article a few weeks ago, all of this might have been avoided.” She held up an issue of *Seventeen*. “Remember this? I used to love this magazine.”

We were about the right age for it now, but Ella had subscribed to it when she was eleven and then graduated to *Cosmopolitan* when she was fifteen. I had secretly read

some of her stash, and the one thing I remembered about Seventeen was an article that said I should practice kissing on my hand. Which turned out to be faulty advice since kissing Jake for the first time was nothing like kissing my hand.

“Why?” I read through a few of the article titles on the cover. “How would knowing how to straighten your hair like a pro have helped you out?”

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“No, the ‘How to Tell If Your Guy’s Cheating on You.’ Listen to this list.” Ella began to read, and as she did so, my heart started pounding loudly in my chest.

“He’s suddenly uncommunicative. Tells stories to explain his absence. Has secretive phone calls and texts. Has cheated in the past. Shows a decrease in affection. Misses important dates and events. Changes his routine and spends less time with you.”

As Ella read through the list, all I could think was Jake. That’s Jake. Jake does that. Jake, Jake, Jake, Jake ...

When she finished, I groaned and put my face in my hands. “Oh my Buddha. My boyfriend is cheating on me, too.”

That made Ella stop reading. “What? Why would you say that?”

I started using my fingers to tick off my reasons. “He’s always taking these private, mysterious calls and texts. He leaves the room to talk on his phone. Something is going on with him, and he won’t tell me. He’s missing chances to make out. He is skipping important prom meetings and didn’t come to the birthday party today. The only thing he hasn’t done on your list is cheat in the past.”

“Well ...”

My eyes went wide, and my heart slammed hard into my rib cage. What was she implying? “Well what? What does that mean?”

“I mean technically, and this is only technically, Jake had feelings for you while he

was dating me. He kind of emotionally cheated, even if you guys didn't kiss until after we broke up."

"That doesn't count!" Or did it? Had Jake been a cheater this whole time and I just hadn't known it?

Was this why Mercedes had been so smug? Had she finally accomplished her goal and landed Jake behind my back? My stomach flipped over, and I felt dangerously close to barfing all over Dr. Drummond's very expensive-looking area rug.

"I don't know why I said that." Ella put one of her hands on top of mine and squeezed. "I'm a little insane right now. You need to ignore everything I'm saying. Jake is not a cheater. You know that, right? He'd never do that to you. He cares about you too much."

"Before last night, wouldn't you have said the same thing about Trent?"

At that, Ella fell silent. There was nothing she could say. Even if he'd become distant, neither one of us could have predicted what Trent would do or who he would be kissing that was not Ella.

Was this why Jake was pulling away from me? Was it why he hadn't asked me to prom yet? Because he didn't plan on going with me?

I stood up. "If he's cheating on me, I want to know."

She looked confused. "How are you going to know? If he is cheating on you, my guess is he probably won't tell you the truth if you ask him."

"You and I, dear sister, are going to follow him. I'm going to find out, one way or another, whether he's stepping out on me."

Ella sighed. “You do know that’s crazy, right?”

I nodded. Maybe I was crazier than a bag of rabid weasels, but I was not going to keep living in this limbo. If Jake was cheating on me, I was going to catch him in the act. I wanted actual proof and not just these gut-wrenching, heart-twisting suspicions.

Time to get my Nancy Drew on.

CHAPTER TEN

Ella and I spent the rest of the weekend eating more ice cream, and instead of dwelling on Trent like I’d thought we would, we strategized on the best way to find out whether or not Jake was cheating. (Although Ella kept insisting that he would never betray me and I was acting like an insane person. And I so wanted to believe that, but when you’re a realist and a pessimist, things don’t exactly work that way.)

In our first class together Monday morning, I told her, “We need to launch our plan soon. To see where he’s going and who he’s meeting up with.” Mostly because I suspected the anxiety was currently eating away at my stomach lining, and I wanted an answer before things got much worse.

“Text him and ask him what he’s doing today,” she instructed. I did as she said, and to my surprise, Jake wrote back almost immediately. How sad that a quick response now seemed uncharacteristic.

“He says, ‘Got some baseball stuff. Sorry.’”

“So now we follow him after school. See if he goes to practice, and if he does, we’ll follow him after. We should hang out in the parking lot, too, in case he skips it. If he does, we’ll start following him right away. Those are our best options, I think.” We agreed to meet up after school as quickly as possible and stake out his beloved red

sports car.

In between third period and fourth period, Ella came running up to me at my locker. She looked so happy that for a brief moment I wondered whether Trent had come crawling back, begging for forgiveness or if that Liam Whatever guy announced that the doctors had been mistaken and his face would be fine. Instead she announced, “Mattie! Someone found my phone!”

She held her bedazzled cell phone up with both hands, like she was presenting it to all the animals on the savannah.

“Where was it?”

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“Out on the football field. I must have dropped it while I was helping out the squad for tryouts.”

She looked at it with so much love I considered asking if they needed some time alone with it. “I’m glad. Although it’s dead, right? I guess you can charge it when we get home.”

Ella raised one eyebrow. She reached into her purse and pulled out a charger.

“You have a charger with you even though you didn’t know where your phone was?” I asked, incredulous.

“Duh.” She rolled her eyes at me like I did when somebody said they’d forgotten to eat that day. I forgot things all the time. Where I put my keys. The capital of Delaware. How much money my dad had said I was allowed to spend at the art supply store. But not once have I ever done something so dumb as forget to eat.

The mounted flat-screen in our hallway turned on. It was used for announcements and the student broadcast news, which aired once a week during first period. I turned, wondering what was going on.

A very famous Irish action star who’d made a movie about his teen daughter being kidnapped appeared on-screen. Gasps and whispered conversation exploded up and down the hallway as everybody watched and waited to hear what he would say.

“Rita, Aaron wants you to know that he doesn’t have a lot of money. But what he does have is a very special set of skills, skills that include dancing, making

conversation, and opening the door for you. Skills that will make your prom night a dream come true. If you say yes to prom now, this will be the end of it. Aaron won't look for you. He won't pursue you. But if you say no, I will look for you. I will find you, and I will convince you to say yes to prom."

While the famous actor part was cool, the rest of it had me shaking my head. "I don't know if threatening a girl is the best way to get her to go."

"I thought it was sweet and romantic," Ella said. "It probably got her heart racing."

"Yeah. Out of fear."

Because my attention was still turned toward the TV screen near the windows, I spotted Jake heading toward the parking lot. So much for practice. "Ella! Jake's leaving. We have to go now!"

I slammed my locker door shut and pulled her along behind me. I kept checking on Jake's progress, and I saw that he got stopped by one of his friends, a tall football player guy named Deacon. Perfect. This would give us the time we needed to get into our car first so we could follow him.

"What are you doing?" my sister protested, but I didn't let go of her arm. "We can't just leave school."

"It's called ditching, Ella. You should try it sometime. Like right now. Come on, hurry!"

"What if we get caught?"

I kicked open the swinging outer doors using my foot. "I'm the student body president. I'll issue us pardons. Move your tiny little legs!"

We ran all the way to the car, and my breathing like an asthmatic elephant made me remember how out of shape I was. I decided to drive, given that if Ella had her way she'd just take us right back to school.

And probably turn us both in.

"He could be going home," Ella said as I pulled out of the school's driveway and parked on the street.

"Then we'll sit out in front of his house and see who else shows up."

"Are you sure you want to find out?" she asked, using our car's charger to breathe life back into her cell. "Ignorance can be bliss. Sort of. It at least lets you delay the inevitable."

I shook my head. "I want to know. I have to. Like when you got tested a few months ago for the BRCA2 gene. You wanted to know one way or the other." Ella's mom had carried the gene, and Ella wanted to know if she had the same risk. We'd all been so relieved when it came back negative.

"Are you seriously comparing your delusions about Jake with me trying to find out whether I was going to live or die from cancer?"

"No! Of course not." Yes, of course I was. This Jake thing felt very life and death to me. But I knew how shallow and pathetic that would make me sound so I stayed quiet up until I heard the roar of Jake's sports car. I hissed, "Get down!"

She reluctantly complied and might have even muttered some things under her breath, which was very unlike her. "He's going to notice you eventually, Miss Purple Hair."

“No way. I got this. I’ve seen plenty of cop shows, and I know all about how to tail someone.”

Jake turned left while I had anticipated he’d turn right. Which meant that my car was pointed in the wrong direction. Taking the name of various deities in vain, I executed a quick U-turn so that I could follow him, making the tires squeal.

“Tell me again how this is not being a stalker?” Ella demanded, clinging to her side of the car as she was thrown against the door.

“It’s not stalking if you really love the person.”

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Ella frowned at me. “I’m pretty sure every stalker thinks they really love the person.”

It was only two days ago that I was at Kenyetta’s birthday party, sarcastically telling Mercedes that I belonged to Stalkers Anonymous, and now I probably needed to apply. “I’m just verifying his whereabouts. Without him knowing it. That’s on the low end of the crazy scale.”

She started going through her purse. “You’re so far past crazy you couldn’t get back there with a map. You should just get him chipped like people do with their pets, and then you’ll always know where he is.”

“Whoa, what is up with you being all Miss Snarktastic?” I was both annoyed and proud at how much my sister sounded like me.

“I was looking for books online on how to get over a breakup, and I found that Eat, Pray, Love one, and I thought that sounded good, but I’m stuck on the first part. And I’m snarky because I’ve recently discovered that I have OCD.”

“OCD?” I repeated. Wouldn’t someone have told me if Ella had been diagnosed with something that serious?

“Obsessive Chocolate Disorder.” She pulled out a bag of M&M’s and held it up triumphantly. “Right now all I want to do is eat candy until my kidneys explode.”

“That doesn’t sound like the best plan,” I warned her, but she shrugged me off.

Jake pulled into a gas station, and I parked my car on the street, where I could see

him and he hopefully wouldn't notice us. He got out of his car and entered his credit card, then put the nozzle into his gas tank. He leaned against his car, staring at the pump.

"Why is he on this side of town at a gas station?"

"To get gas?" Ella offered sarcastically in between tossing M&M's into her mouth. "You were right. He's obviously up to no good with his nefarious schemes to put gas in his car."

"I think you may have a sugar addiction that turns you into a not nice person. Admitting you have a problem is the first step."

She swallowed her mouthful. "Says the girl currently stalking her boyfriend."

Well, she had me there.

"I'm going to call him and ask him where he is. Let's see if he lies to me." I dialed his number and waited.

I watched as he took his phone out of his pocket, looked at the screen, pushed a button, and then put it back in his pocket. I heard his voice mail on my end. I immediately hung up.

Gasping in outrage, I said, "Did he just do that? Did he seriously just do that? He sent me to voice mail?"

"I saw this news report that said it's bad to talk on cell phones around gas. Something about them making the pumps blow up."

She was not going to make excuses for him. "Isn't it like one of those Ten

Commandments? Thou shalt answer the phone when thy girlfriend calls?”

Ella started sorting out her candy by color. “I’m pretty sure those are about not killing people and stuff like that.”

“Exactly. Because when you deliberately ignore your girlfriend’s phone calls she might kill you!” I took out my phone and started to text him. Send me to voice mail, would he?

Ella grabbed my cell out of my hand.

“Hey!” I protested. “I want to text that idiot and tell him that I saw what he just did.”

“You need to curb your textual impulses because if you tell him that you saw him do it, you’ll also have to tell him that you’re watching him like a psycho. And that won’t go over well, and you’ll blow your entire operation.”

Wasn’t she the one who didn’t even want to come? “I thought you didn’t want to be a part of this.”

“Well, now I’m invested, and I want to see how it all turns out.”

I crossed my arms and huffed once or twice. She was right, of course, but I still couldn’t believe he’d sent me to voice mail. Jake finished pumping his gas and walked into the convenience store. “He just paid for his gas. Why would he go inside?”

“To use the restroom? To buy some gum? To rob the place? There could be all kinds of reasons.”

“Or because the girl he’s seeing works there.”

Ella squinted at the store. “It’s a woman old enough to be his grandmother at the register. And I don’t think he’s into that. It looks like Jake’s buying snacks.”

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A few minutes later, he came back out with several bags filled with junk food. He got out his cell phone and started doing something on it.

“Is he texting me?” I asked Ella. “To apologize for his earlier behavior?”

She checked my cell. “Nope. Tilly, he could be doing a thousand things. Watching a video where men injure themselves deliberately. Counting up all the calories in that massive amount of food he just bought. Maybe he’s looking for an address on Google Maps so he knows where to go next.”

“I’ll tell him where he can go,” I muttered. “Because that’s more snacks than just Jake can eat. I’ve seen him when he’s hungry, and it was a little like a starving hippo at the zoo during feeding time, but what he has now seems excessive even for him.”

Jake drove out to the street, and I continued stalking him. Er, vigorously verifying his whereabouts. I gripped the steering wheel tightly. Even though the bigger part of my brain kept reassuring me that he wouldn’t cheat, some smaller panicky part tried to prepare me in case it turned out to be true.

Ella announced, “I’m not really going to prom.”

“What do you mean?” I asked her. “Of course you’re going. You’re head of the prom committee.”

“No, I mean, I am going. Somebody has to make sure everything is perfect. I meant I’m not going to have that going with your boyfriend magical night that I’d always dreamed about.”

My heart squeezed hard inside my chest. I wanted that for her. “But you’ll be there with people who care about you, and that’s better than going with someone who kisses pretentious losers in steak houses.”

“I know. It’s just hard when life happens, and you have to alter your plans. When you realize that things aren’t going to be what you’d hoped they would be.” She seemed a little sad, but definitely more mellow. The candy must have done the trick.

“If we find out Jake is cheating on me, we’ll go together and be each other’s dates.”

“Sounds like an excellent plan B. For now, I just have to keep prom and carry on.”

That made me laugh, something I hadn’t been able to do for a few days what with all my worry and concern and anxiety.

Jake pulled into a parking lot, and I realized that it was for a hospital. I found a parking spot not too far off and watched as he got out of his car and headed to the main entrance, still carrying enough snacks to feed a small country.

“That’s a weird place to meet up with someone,” Ella commented.

Should I follow him inside? How would I explain it if we accidentally ran into him?

“Maybe he’s dating a nurse. Or one of those candy strippers in those skank outfits.”

“Candy stripers,” she corrected me. “Not strippers.”

“Same difference.”

“Uh, no. I used to be a candy striper, remember?”

It was probably during that time period where I saw Ella as my stepsister and my

enemy, since I was deeply envious of her life. Not so much the volunteering and cleaning parts, but the boy she dated part. “You’re not helping. Jake used to date you. Which means he has a type, and he’s gone back to their spawning ground to find another one, and I’m going to walk in on them kissing in a family restaurant, and then I’ll hyperventilate, and then my panic attack will turn into something worse, and I don’t want to die of a heart attack before I turn nineteen.”

She made a thoughtful face. “If Jake is dating a candy striper, at least she’ll be able to help you when that happens.”

I smacked her on the upper arm and she said “Ow!” and I could tell she was trying not to smile. “Maybe he’s here to see a patient.”

Who would Jake be seeing in the hospital? He would have told me if anyone he knew was sick. “Or date one.” A terrible thought occurred to me. “OMB. What if she’s one of those people dying and her Make-A-Wish dream was to date Jake?”

“Then she won’t be competition for very long.”

“Ella!”

“I’m just saying.”

She took out her phone, which finally had enough juice for her to log on. I sat and pondered my next move. Maybe her earlier suggestion of getting him chipped wasn’t so off base. It had some definite merit.

“What the—”

“What? Do you see Jake with someone?” I looked everywhere, even checking behind me, but he wasn’t anywhere visible.

Then I noticed that Ella was shaking. “Someone ... someone sent Trent a text. They pretended to be me and broke up with him.”

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I blinked several times, not really getting what she was saying. “Somebody got on your phone and broke up with Trent? Don’t you have a password?”

“Yes. And no, I don’t have a password. Why would I?”

This was part of the problem when you had all the trust and innocence of a newborn fawn. People took advantage of it. “When was it sent?”

“The day I lost my phone. No wonder he was kissing Bronte. He thought I’d broken up with him.”

The kiss I’d seen didn’t appear to have been a first date kind of kiss. More like they’d been going out for a while and felt comfortable kissing over appetizers. But I wasn’t about to rain on Ella’s parade.

“Did Trent reply to your text?”

“No.”

“Then he doesn’t get a pass. He should have talked to you first. I mean, breaking up with someone is pretty serious. You’d think he would have run it by you to make sure your phone didn’t do some weird auto-correct thing. And to find out why you would just break up with him out of the blue after you’d stood by him for so long.”

She stayed quiet for a minute. “Maybe. I don’t know. I think I should explain it to him.”

“You can if you want to. I don’t think it’ll change anything.”

“I know. I’m not trying to change anything. But I feel like we should have a final conversation. For closure or whatever.”

Maybe I should go with her. And start throwing some left hooks if dumb boys got out of line. “Up to you.” I checked my phone for the time. “Jake’s been in there a while, and we have no idea if he’s coming out soon. We’ll pick this up another day.” I started the car, and as I was backing out of the parking lot, I turned to my sister to ask the one question neither one of us had voiced yet.

“Who would send Trent a breakup message from your phone?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I tried to think through all the possibilities of who would have broken up with Trent on Ella’s behalf. Her phone had been found out in the football field, so it was possible the jocks had discovered it and thought it would be funny. Especially since Trent had so often been the targeting of their special brand of bullying.

It could have been Deacon. The tall, blond football player friend of Jake’s. Jake had mentioned a while ago that Deacon had a crush on Ella. The same guy I’d seen Jake talking to yesterday. What if he’d done it to clear the field for himself?

Or the cheerleading squad, who were constantly telling Ella to dump Trent and date someone better. Somebody like Deacon. Maybe they decided to take matter into their own freshly manicured hands.

Maybe it was some freshman or sophomore who was deeply envious of Ella and had decided to try and mess up her life.

But I had the sinking feeling that the person who did this was Old Scratch herself, Mercedes Bentley.

Problem was I didn't know anybody in the police department so I couldn't beg for a favor and get them to dust Ella's phone for fingerprints. (Not to mention that Mercedes's fingerprints probably wouldn't even show up. Like how vampires don't have reflections.) There was no way to prove my suspicions. And I could have been wrong. It could have been someone I hadn't even considered yet. But my gut told me that it was Mercedes.

Jake called at our regular time. "Hey there, Mike Tyson. I was just calling to tell you good night." His rich, masculine tone made me melt. His voice was almost as hot as his perfect face and body.

Did that make me shallow?

If it did, did I care?

He asked about my day, and I so badly wanted to demand he tell me why he'd gone to the hospital, but I couldn't. I didn't want him to know that I'd been following him because I intended to keep doing it until I had my answers. Until I figured out what he'd been up to and why he was being so secretive and distant. I knew I could have just asked him, but I was afraid he'd lie, or he'd push me away, or worse, he'd admit to everything, and then we'd have to break up.

I didn't really want that to happen just before prom. Even if that did make me superficial.

The next morning Ella and I saw a big commotion right outside the school's front doors. When we got close enough to see a man talking, it took me a minute to place him. He was Harrison Phillips, host of that reality show about bachelors pretending to

fall in love after going on two dates. There were four women lined up and in formal gowns. I wondered if they were from the show.

Right next to the host stood Alan Feldstein in a suit and tie. He cleaned up nicer than I would have expected. He held a metallic pin shaped like a heart in his hands.

His girlfriend Tori stood in front of them, hands over her mouth as she jumped up and down.

“It’s her favorite TV show,” somebody in the crowd said.

Another voice offered, “I think Alan’s dad is Harrison Phillips’s agent. Or manager. Something like that.”

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“Now, Tori, it’s time for the final heart.” The host paused, as if he were actually on television and was creating dramatic tension for the upcoming commercial break. “Will you take this piece of Alan’s heart and go to prom with him?”

Then the four evening gown women turned, and each one wore a letter on her back that spelled out PROM.

“Yes, yes, I will!”

The crowd started applauding as Tori threw her arms around Alan. Then he turned her and dipped her, kissing her soundly. More cheering and catcalling.

Ugh. Some people should get a room.

In Iceland. Or Greenland. Whichever one of those was always cold and would force people to stay inside so I didn’t have to see them.

Ella told me she had an appointment with the guidance counselor, something about submitting her current transcripts to UCLA. She said she’d see me later.

I walked slowly to my first class. If Jake was here at school already, there was no way he could have missed Alan’s promposal. There was no way he could have missed any of them. He couldn’t claim ignorance. Not only were they happening all around us, but they were being shared on every social media platform. Daily. Promposals were literally everywhere. Like ants at a picnic.

And yet he still hadn’t asked.

I spotted Trent's black, spiky fauxhawk in the hallway. A rush of anger followed by indignation that he'd dare to show his face rippled through me.

Surprisingly, I discovered that I was kind of tired of being angry at him. Like Jake had said, my anger was only hurting me. Me being mad did not affect Trent.

I mean, except for when I hit him.

Maybe Jake had also been right about the whole apologizing thing making me feel better. What if it also made me not feel so mad and churned up anymore?

There was only one way to find out.

I followed Trent until he stopped at that same alcove I'd found him in last week. He pulled out another book and ignored everyone around him. The bell rang, and I waited, just out of his eye line. I was getting pretty good at this whole stalking people without them knowing it thing.

I wasn't sure if that was something to be proud of.

As I suspected, Trent didn't go to class. After the hall had emptied, I approached him.

He glanced up at me and scowled. There was a faint purple bruise on his jaw, and I felt even guiltier. "Here to finish the job?"

"Tempting, but no." I took in a big breath. Admitting I'd been wrong was not something I was known for. "I'm actually here to apologize."

Trent's eyebrows popped straight up his forehead in surprise. "Are you serious?"

"As a punch to the face." He scowled, and I rushed on. "Er, sorry. Too soon? But

what I did was wrong. I shouldn't have hit you, and again, I'm sorry. That's not how you treat a friend."

At that, he let out a little guffaw. "You and I were never really friends, and we're not friends now." That felt like a crushing blow to my chest. Did he really think we were never friends? I had relied on him for so long. Was I that easy to dismiss and forget?

Despite me trying to move on and be the bigger person, him trying to hurt me stoked up the rage beast currently simmering in my chest. "You're the one who cut everybody off, not the other way around. But maybe you're right. No friend of mine could ever have done to Ella what you did."

"Yeah, well, no friend of mine would ever ditch me just because some jock deigned to date her."

I didn't know what deigned meant, but I caught that he was insulting me and accusing me of ignoring him. Some part of me wondered if he was right. I couldn't remember the last conversation he and I'd had. I had been very wrapped up in Jake. Maybe I had neglected Trent before he found out about the end of his parents' marriage.

But it wasn't as if I could go back in time and undo what had already been done. It was sad to think that Trent used to be there in my life, so significant and important, and then he wasn't.

Even if I hadn't been a good friend to him, I could still be a good sister to Ella. "She didn't break up with you. Somebody else sent you that text."

"Yeah, she mentioned that last night when we talked. But whatever. It doesn't matter now."

I tried to hide my surprise. Um, that was fairly significant information she hadn't

shared with me yet. Why hadn't Ella told me about her chat with Trent?

He got up from his seat, putting his book into his backpack. I probably should have let him go, but my curiosity was killing me. Had the fake text prompted all this? Or was that just an easy lie for Ella to believe? "How long have you been dating Bronte?"

“That is none of your business.”

“My sister thinks it was since she lost her phone. I believe the opposite.” He shifted from one foot to another, looking like he just wanted to escape. It was also his tell. I didn’t know why I had to know; I just did. Maybe it was because I was tired of all the not-truths in my life. “You don’t need to lie to me. I won’t tell her either way because I would never hurt her like that, but just be honest.”

He paused, considering my request. “For a few weeks. Bronte gets me.”

The implication, of course, being that Ella and I didn’t get him. I didn’t even feel any satisfaction that I’d been right. If I was a better person, I’d want him to be happy. But part of me hoped that Bronte would dump him.

Then he walked off, without saying goodbye to me. It was probably our final conversation, and it hadn’t really ended. I hoped that Ella had gotten the closure she wanted at least. I watched him go, dealing with the warring emotions inside of me. Some piece of me was relieved that it was over. That I didn’t have to think or worry about him anymore.

Another part felt so sad. I supposed some friendships were meant to die and not last forever. Like I somehow always knew in the back of my mind that our friendship wouldn’t last past high school. Especially with him going to college on the East Coast and me staying out here in LA.

It was hard to believe we weren’t friends any longer. But we weren’t enemies, either. I could never really hate him.

Which essentially made us like strangers. But with shared memories.

“Just a footnote,” I murmured to myself.

But that didn’t make it any less painful.

In my next class with Ella, I had to wait for the end of class bell to ring before I could confront my sister. “You talked to Trent last night?”

“I did.”

And she didn’t even have the decency to look embarrassed. “And you didn’t tell me why exactly?”

“I don’t know. I’m still kind of processing it. And honestly, there’s not much to tell. I told him he hurt me, and he didn’t really say much in response. It was just a chance for me to express how he made me feel, and he ... let me. How did you know we talked?”

“Because I had the pleasure of chatting him up today.” I filled her in on my conversation with him and the realizations that I had come to. That not only was she done with him as a boyfriend, but we were both done with him as friends as well.

“You never know,” my eternal optimist sister said. “Maybe someday.”

“Maybe,” I echoed. But I wouldn’t be holding my breath.

“Do you know one of the things that’s been hardest for me?” she asked.

“What?”

“I wish I had known that our last time together was our last time together. I would have tried to ... I don’t know. Enjoy it more. Appreciate it. But I guess you never really know when the last time is happening, do you?”

“Now I need M&M’s,” I told her, feeling depressed.

We walked together in silence before Ella offered, “I do have to tell you that I’m pretty impressed you apologized to Trent. That’s so out of character for you.”

“Right?” I agreed. “I thought it was very big of me.”

“What’s big of you, Chuck Norris?” I turned to see Jake standing behind me with that blinding, perfect smile, and I threw my arms around his neck. “Whoa, what’s going on?”

“I did what you said. I apologized to Trent, and he says we’re not friends and never were.”

Jake must have heard the pain in my voice as his arms tightened around me even more. “That’s not true. You guys were definitely friends. Do you know how much time I spent being jealous of that guy? Because you were always together.”

My heart skipped a beat at the idea that Jake had been jealous, but then sank again as I thought of all the time Trent and I used to spend together.

And despite Ella’s hope, I knew that he and I never would hang out again.

I turned to look for her, but she had disappeared, leaving us alone.

“I know just what to do to help you forget your conversation with that Goth jerk. We should get out of here,” Jake said.

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“And go where?” Would it be to the hospital? The place I suspected he’d been sneaking off to, like he had the day I followed him?

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead yet. Maybe we can catch a movie? Something to take your mind off things for a couple of hours.”

It sounded good, but with all the school he’d been skipping lately, I didn’t want to add to it. “You’ve been missing a lot of school.”

“I wouldn’t say I’ve been missing it,” he teased. “What can I say? I have a serious case of senioritis. We’re graduating, and I’m passing, and we’ve been already been accepted to UCSC. There doesn’t seem much point in going to school all the time.”

What about me? Spending time with me in class? Walking down the hallway hand in hand? Eating our lunches together? Was I not worth coming to school for?

And how completely insecure would I sound if I asked him any of that?

As if he sensed my hesitation, he said, “Come on. I’ll even let you pick the movie.”

“Yes! Romantic comedy, here we come!”

He let out a fake groan, and I laughed as he put his arm around my shoulders. We walked toward the exit, and I thought of how much I loved this. Feeling like I belonged to him as he held me close and that he belonged to me.

He kissed my left temple, and I sagged against him. Just a little. “I can’t believe I

agreed to go see a romantic comedy. I must really love you, Evander Holyfield.”

And for right here, right now, that was enough. I might have wanted (and not wanted) answers, but I would go, and I would be with the beautiful boy I loved and just let myself live in that moment.

I’d already had one ugly confrontation for the day. I wasn’t in the mood for another.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jake and I sat together as closely as we could in the darkened movie theater. There were surprisingly quite a few people in there with us despite it being the middle of the day. I tried to concentrate on what was happening on the screen, but I couldn’t. If I had thought talking to Jake on the phone about what was going on in his life was too scary, it was about a thousand times worse in person.

All my fears seemed more real when I could see and touch what I’d be losing. And I didn’t want to lose him. I wanted us to get our happily ever after, just like in this Chase Covington movie we were watching. Outside of the casts of John Hughes’s films, Chase Covington was one of my all-time favorite actors, but not even his swooniness could distract me.

I glanced at Jake who, despite complaining about my choice the entire drive over, seemed really into the movie. I thought about what Ella had said. About how she’d wished she’d known that her last date with Trent was the last one. Because if this was my last date with Jake, I wanted to enjoy myself. And not stress myself into an early grave.

I decided I wouldn’t even let his annoying habits get to me. Like how he took big handfuls of popcorn and dropped most of them on the way to his mouth or how he flattened the end of the straw of our shared drink, making it impossible to get any

liquid out.

Slipping my free hand into his, I resolved to just live in this moment with him so that if nothing else, at least we'd both have this happy memory to look back on.

I rested my head against his shoulder and sighed happily when I felt his cheek against my hair. "I love you, Jake."

He kissed my scalp. "I love you too, Tills."

It was amazing how much his words reassured and soothed me.

Even though I'd been anxious and missed most of the movie, it was still pretty easy to pick up on what was happening. What was it that Jake had said to me when he summarized the plot of the movie version of *Pride and Prejudice*? Oh, right. He likes her. She likes him. They find out. Pretty much the plot of this movie, too.

The story drew to an end, and I couldn't help but sigh as the hero pulled the heroine in for one final kiss.

When the lights came back on, Jake asked, "That wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. Do you want to go get some ice cream?"

"How are you still hungry?" I asked him. "You literally just ate an entire large tub of popcorn by yourself."

He patted his stomach, and I tried not to think about all the delicious muscles I currently couldn't see. "There's always room for ice cream."

"I think ice cream sounds great. Let's go," I agreed.

We walked hand in hand out of the theater. When we reached the sidewalk outside, Jake mentioned the name of a soft serve place about three blocks away. The weather was awesome, as always. Bright sun, soft breeze, the air smelled slightly of the ocean—our surroundings were all picturesque and perfect.

It couldn't have been more romantic.

“You seem ... a little off,” Jake said, kind of killing my vibe.

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And I seemed off? That was very pot and kettle of him. I didn't know quite how to respond as I was trying to make this a happy day.

“Are you worried about Trent and Ella?”

That was a safer area to venture into. “Yeah. She seems to be doing okay, despite Trent being a Cheater McCheatington.” We walked in silence for a few minutes as I wondered what had driven Trent to this. Why he'd made this choice. “Jake, you're a guy.”

“Your powers of observation are especially keen today, for I am indeed a guy.”

“Then tell me, why did Trent do it? What makes a guy cheat, especially one who has a girlfriend as great as Ella?” Or as great as me?

“I can't really say why that Night's Watch wannabe does anything. I don't know. Boredom? Fell out of love? He's self-destructive and ruining all the good things in his life?”

Was it that I really wanted to know the reason for Trent's behavior, or was it a preemptive strike so that I would understand it when I found out what Jake had been up to?

“I would go and beat him up for you, but you already took care of that.”

I nudged his shoulder with mine and couldn't help but smile. “I kind of did, didn't I?”

“And everybody knows about it.”

That made me come to a complete stop. “What do you mean everybody knows about it?”

Jake tugged on my hand to get me to start walking again. “People are talking about it at school. You know how fast stuff like this spreads.”

So Ella’s breakup and me punching Trent were making the rounds, but nobody was bothering to say anything to our faces. Lovely. “Not much we can do about that, I guess. And I think Ella’s sadness has less to do with Trent cheating and more to do with not having a date to prom.”

“There are a lot of guys who would ask her if they thought she would say yes.”

I didn’t doubt that. “But she wanted to go with someone she loves.”

Just like I did.

“At this point, I think her options are to either stay home, go solo, or go with someone she doesn’t love.”

“I know. She knows, too. And she can’t exactly stay home since she’s overseeing everything. She has to get dressed up and go. I feel bad that she’s in this position.”

His hand tightened on mine. “Me too.”

We arrived at the ice-cream shop and placed our orders—chocolate with M&M’s for me, vanilla and pieces of Oreo cookies for Jake. We didn’t have long to wait as we were the only customers, and we sat down at a table outside.

In an alternate dimension/perfect world, this was when I would have brought us up and asked him about my nonexistent promposal. (Although, realistically, in an alternate dimension/perfect world, Jake would have already asked me and wouldn't be skulking around hospitals in the middle of the day.)

But as I studied our interlaced fingers on the table, I realized that this day was going just as I'd hoped. We were both relaxed, having fun, and enjoying each other.

While I told Jake about the manga series I hoped to complete—all based on characters from classic novels who I would manga-ize—Jake finished his ice cream. Then he reached over with his spoon to get a bite of mine.

I smacked his spoon with my own. “The last person who tried that pulled back a bloody stump.”

He cocked his head and smiled at me playfully. “I thought you weren't a violent person.”

“Not normally. But unless you have a death wish, leave my chocolate alone. You've personally witnessed what I do to people who cross me. And that extends to boyfriends who try to steal my ice cream. It's an unpardonable sin.”

He threw his head back and laughed, and ice-cream-covered butterflies tried to take wing in my stomach. I loved that he could still make me feel all fluttery with something as simple as his laugh.

“How about after you finish, we head back to my place?” Jake offered, a familiar, hungry gleam in his eye that made my insides excitedly twist into ribbons.

“We're not going to watch football again, are we?”

“No.” He shook his head, that light in his eyes growing brighter and brighter, like two dark brown flames. “I can think of one or two other things we might do in my empty, empty house.”

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That sent a shudder through me, and I didn't know if it was from his words or the ice cream. I suspected it was all Jake. "I hope those things will be worth my time."

I handed him my ice cream to finish off, eager to be on our way. He laughed at how my words didn't match my actions. He got up, pulling me into his embrace. "Oh, it'll be worth it. You'll even like it. I promise."

He was right.

I totally did.

I probably shouldn't have made out with Jake until we'd talked everything through and I knew exactly where I stood with him and prom. But in my defense, he was super hot, I loved him, and he had magic lips. I was powerless to resist.

Wanting to talk things over with my sister, I tried to wait up for Ella when I got home that night. She was off doing some volunteer thingy. Petting babies and swaddling dogs. Something like that. But exhaustion overtook me, and I fell asleep in my school clothes. I had so many spinning plates that I had to make sure kept spinning, only they were all laden down with the pile of things I was worried about.

The next morning I drove with Jake. (Ella had already left.) I was excited to see her and tell her about my day date with Jake, until I realized that it might be painful for her to listen to me. It was probably better for me to keep quiet. I wondered how long it would be before I could tell her about my relationship without having to worry about hurting her.

And I wondered about how long my relationship might last.

Just after second period, I got a text from Ella.

COME TO THE FRONT OF THE SCHOOL RIGHT NOW!

THIS IS NOT A DRILL! REPEAT! THIS IS NOT A DRILL!

A fizzy elation filled my entire body. Was this it? Was it finally happening? Had Jake come to his senses and was finally, finally going to give me my promposal? Why else would she be so excited and telling me to come out front?

This had to be it! I couldn't believe it. My promposal! My heart thundered inside my chest as I raced to the front of the school, accidentally knocking people over (and apologizing for it) and generally causing a ruckus in the halls until I threw open the front doors.

I heard the sounds of trumpets being played. It was music like from a Renaissance fair. Which seemed odd. A big group of kids had gathered, and I heard a clicking, scraping noise. When I finally elbowed my way through the crowd, I saw a fully garbed knight, riding on a white horse toward the school. The horse's hooves striking the asphalt was the noise I'd just heard.

Huh.

Why would Jake dress up in armor and get on a horse? That wasn't really our thing. I mean, I guess it was sweet and romantic, just not what I'd been expecting.

"Fair Lady Ella!" a sophomore off to my left announced. He was in a costume that also had a strong Renaissance vibe to it. Billowy white tunic, a cloak that looked like it had been mended several times, and what looked a lot like brown tights/leggings.

It took me a second to realize he'd said Ella and not Mattie.

This wasn't my promposal from Jake.

This was Ella's promposal from whoever was on that horse. And the only thing I knew for sure? The guy most definitely was not Trent. Even if they were still together there was no way he'd make a fool of himself like this. Somebody else had gone to a lot of effort.

My sister deserved a guy who would ask her this way, just because it would make her happy.

Jake had been right. Not only about there being guys who would ask Ella if they knew she was single, but about how quickly the word about her breakup had spread. It had been only a couple of days since she'd officially ended things with Trent, and she already had a promposal.

"I am the knight's loyal squire," the kid in the patchy cloak said. "And Sir Deacon has fought his way through the classes of Malibu Prep, vanquished his foes on the field of football, and ridden a day and a night to make his way here. To ask you, fair Lady Ella, if you will allow him the great honor of escorting you to Ye Olde Prom. Make his dream come true and say yea, dear maiden!"

It was all so cheesy.

And if it had been for me, I would have broken out the tortilla chips to lap up all that yummy queso.

Deacon arrived then, taking off his helmet and handing it to his squire. All perfectly timed. He got down from the horse with some trouble, and I half expected him to fall over as he attempted to get clear of the animal. The squire got the horse to keep still

by feeding him some carrots.

Then Deacon made his way over to my sister and knelt down, with some difficulty, his armor making all kinds of weird metallic squeaking noises as he got comfortable. “Ella, I know we don’t know each other that well, and you just got out of a relationship, but I’ve wanted to take you out for a long time and thought this was my big chance.”

It was sweet. I could see that his words affected my sister, too.

Deacon stood back up, with the same creaking noises, and offered his hand to Ella. She took it, and he led her around to the back of the horse. There was a sign on the rear of the animal that said, “Ella, will you go to prom with me? Yea or neigh?”

Cute.

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“I would love to go to prom with you, Deacon.” She smiled at him, and he hugged her gingerly, being careful with his armor.

Cue the cheers and applause that accompanied every public, successful promposal. I was sure that all anyone else saw was her smile. And that I was the only one who witnessed the tiny bit of pain in her eyes as she accepted.

The horse chose that moment to take, um, use the facilities. Deacon and Ella backed up as several people made grossed out sounds. The poop happening right next to Deacon’s “yea or neigh” sign felt like a cosmic message meant for me.

My promposal hopes had, once again, been crapped on.

But I was happy for Ella. She officially had a date. I didn’t think that Ella knew Deacon all that well, but he seemed nice, and Jake had always spoken highly of him. I was sure she would have fun, and now she wouldn’t have to feel like a third wheel. She had a very cute boy to have a good time with.

“I thought Ella was going with that Trent guy.”

I turned to see Mindi standing a step behind me, wearing a very confused expression. How could she not know Ella’s relationship was kaput? As I’d walked through the halls today it was literally all people were gossiping about. “Trent and Ella broke up. Everybody’s talking about it.”

“Really? I hadn’t heard.”

Mindi's crowd included some of the biggest gossips I'd ever met. How could she have not heard a single word of it?

And it dawned on me that she didn't know because of how wrapped up she was in Victor Herboyfriend.

Much as I must have been with Jake, just like Trent had accused me of.

I decided to be better. To do better. To not be so focused solely on my relationship that I didn't see things happening around me. To pay more attention to other people. I glanced at Mindi. Even the ones who annoyed me.

Ella gave Deacon her contact info on his phone and handed it back to him. He grinned at her, and his enthusiasm was kind of contagious. You could tell how excited he was, even if he was trying to play it cool.

The bell rang, and they said goodbye to each other. My sister came over to me, still sporting the smile that almost reached her eyes.

"Congrats on the promposal! That dude moves fast," I told her. "That school's only known about the whole Trent thing for a couple of days. I don't know who's telling everyone—"

"Me. I told everyone."

Ella was the one oversharing about her breakup? That was so unlike her. "Why?"

"Because by talking about it, I made it real. It would have been easy to pretend that I was still in that state of limbo, waiting for Trent to come back into my life. This way, it's final. There're no delusions. I've forced myself to face the facts that it has ended and we're over."

“I guess that’s good.”

She nodded. “It is. And now I’m even a little bit glad. How sweet is Deacon? I can’t believe he went through all this effort for me.”

“Why not? You’re totally worth it.”

She squeezed my arm with a real smile this time. “Thanks. I know I’ll have a good time with him.”

“If you don’t, just say the word and I’ll take care of him. But if you start calling him Deacon Myboyfriend, I’m not sure we can stay friends.”

“There’s no chance of that happening,” she reassured me. “And don’t worry. I know your promposal is coming.”

I desperately hoped so.

For a second, I thought I heard someone calling my name. I turned in the direction of the sound, and I saw someone running toward us. It was Shoshana. She was head of the other regular dances, but was currently taking care of the decorating for the prom committee under Ella’s direction. Her face was animated, and she called my name again.

I let out a groan. Had she just gotten a promposal, too? I didn’t want to hear about it.

“Mattie!” she gasped when she finally reached us. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

“I had to see a guy about a horse.”

She stared at me, not getting my joke. “What? That ... whatever. Doesn’t matter. I have important news. I’ve been trying to find you because ... there’s not going to be a prom.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Were auditory hallucinations a thing? Because there was no other way to explain what Shoshana had just said. “Not going to be a prom?” I echoed. I must have misheard. She must have actually said, “North Korea’s going to drop a nuclear bomb” or “A 9.7 earthquake is coming and we have to stay calm.” Something that would make actual sense.

“Shoshana, what are you talking about?” Ella asked in a ridiculously mellow voice. How was she not panicking? We either had a bomb, an earthquake, or Promageddon to deal with. Was it bad that I was still holding out hope for one of the first two?

“There’s. No. Prom.” Shoshana said each word slowly.

“There’s no prom?” I repeated. This news had turned me into some kind of confused parrot, incapable of forming my own thoughts and just saying whatever the people around me said. I understood each of her words individually, but not the combination she was using them in.

“I called the manager at La Caille.”

That I understood. I had wanted to have prom at La Caille since I was twelve years old and my dad had taken me there for the wedding of some art friend. It looked like a French château. The ballrooms had been decorated with white fairy lights and had large windows that overlooked a nearby city. It had the most beautiful gardens I’d ever seen, streams and trees and flowers and bridges. They had peacocks and little families of quails that darted in and out of the bushes. It was just ... perfect. Before I

took office, the school's proms were always held at nearby hotels to make it easier for the alumni to attend. But since the students were the only ones going this year, we could have it at an out of the way château.

The day I became president, it was the first phone call I'd made, and I'd arranged our prom date based on their availability. The only French food I liked were French fries, French toast, and French vanilla ice cream, and I didn't even care about what they would serve. I only cared about how magical and fairy-tale-esque our surroundings would be.

"Why did you call the manager?" Ella encouraged Shoshana to keep talking.

"I was calling to ask them when we could start bringing the decorations over, if they had a place for us to store them because I have stuff that would interfere this week, and it would be easier to do it today or tomorrow instead of waiting for Saturday and doing it all last minute—"

"What did the manager say?" I demanded, uninterested in her tangent.

"She said that there had been a stop payment put on our deposit check, and so they rented the venue out to someone else."

"What?" Was this what a heart attack felt like? A crushing blow against your chest that made it impossible to breathe? And like your heart was going to explode everywhere?

I also couldn't understand how there was a money issue. We had tens of thousands of dollars in our activities account. There was no way this could be happening.

"Mattie?" Ella was asking what I wanted to do next.

This wasn't a time to wallow and freak out. It was a time to get stuff done. "Call an emergency student government meeting right now."

"But everybody has to get to first period," Shoshana reminded me.

"I don't care. Get them. Now." This had to be some kind of mistake. Something where when we all got together and talked it would make sense. "Before you go, give me the phone number. Let me call the manager."

Shoshana brought up the number on her phone and showed it to me. "The manager's name is Tricia Monson."

Monson. For some reason the name made me think of monsoon, which made my stomach feel even more twisty and upset.

I dialed the number and put the phone up to my ear. It rang twice before someone answered. "Can I speak to Ms. Monson, please?" I glanced at the immobile Shoshana. "What are you waiting for? Go get everyone!"

She ran off, and Ella said, "I'm going to go help round them all up."

I nodded and walked toward the student government room.

"This is Ms. Monson."

"Hello. This is Mattie Lowe. I'm the student body president at Malibu Prep, and we've had your venue reserved this Saturday for our prom since September, and now I'm being told that there's some kind of problem?"

"There's no problem on our end, I'm afraid. We were unable to deposit your check, and as per our agreement, we couldn't hold the venue. We have a very long waiting

list.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, squeezing my eyes shut. “I don’t know how that happened because we have the money. We have plenty of money.” Even if the well had somehow gone dry, I would have had my dad cover the deposit and then paid him back. “This was some kind of mistake, and we’ve sold all these tickets, and our entire senior and junior classes are expecting to be there on Saturday.”

“Ms. Lowe, I sympathize with your position, but there’s nothing to be done. We’ve already accepted a deposit check from someone else.”

“Who?” Maybe I could bribe them and get them to give La Caille back to us.

“I can’t give out that information.”

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This just kept getting better and better. “What I don’t understand is why we weren’t notified. If you’d just called us and told us, I would have driven a cashier’s check over to you myself.”

“You were notified.” I heard a rustling sound, like papers. “Let me just check my file. Ah. Yes. We called a Parminda Kandhari and told her about the situation. She said she understood and that your school was simply short on funds and to cancel our agreement.”

Mindi? Mindi had done this?

Why?

I stayed silent for so long that Ms. Monson spoke again. “Ms. Lowe, I am sorry for the confusion, and I wish you the best of luck in finding somewhere new for your dance. I am afraid you might have a difficult time of it, though, as this is wedding and prom season.”

She hung up.

I hadn’t needed the reminder that it was prom season. I’d been living for this day for so long. My perfect, amazing senior prom.

A prom that Mindi had just single-handedly gutted.

I walked into the student government room and sat at the head of our table, in my regular seat. I watched as everybody started to file in, taking their spots. When Mindi

arrived hand in hand with Victor, it was all I could do to stay in my chair.

When everyone had sat down, Ella closed the door shut behind her.

“I just got off the phone with the manager at La Caille.” I kept my eyes trained on Mindi, watching the color drain from her face. “Apparently Mindi put a stop payment on our deposit check, and we’ve lost the venue. Care to explain?”

Mindi opened and closed her mouth several times, like a fish who suddenly found herself drowning on dry land.

“Is that true?” Victor asked, still holding Mindi’s hand.

Part of me wanted to throw a textbook at them because she didn’t deserve any emotional support or comfort right now.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she nodded.

“Is the money gone? Did you steal it?” I asked. Because nothing else made sense. Mindi had her huge public Disney-themed promposal. She had obviously wanted to go. Why else would she stop the check unless she had been like embezzling funds or something?

If she told me that she’d cleaned out our prom account so that she could have her perfect dream beach wedding with Victor Herboyfriend, I was going to end her. Leap across this table, wrap my hands around her scrawny little neck, and choke her out.

“The money’s still there,” she whispered.

“Then what happened?” I demanded, slamming my hand down against the table. The sound caused everyone to jump.

“Maybe we should all just calm—”

The boy needed to stay quiet. “Do not finish that sentence, Victor. Because I have a feeling you’re somehow a part of this, and Mindi is going to explain why she ruined prom.”

The tears ran down Mindi’s face, and she didn’t seem capable of speech.

And I was not in a forgiving mood. “Every week we sat in here, and you told me it was all taken care of. We were fine. Not to worry. But you were plotting behind our backs? You lied to us on a repeated basis, even though I was nice to you.” Did she not know how hard that was for me? Because of how annoying she was? “You’re going to explain why. Now.”

She took in some shaky breaths. “Do you know that I come to school a half hour early every day?”

What did that have to do with anything? I threw both of my hands out to the side, as if to say, “So?”

“My parents are very old-fashioned and very strict. I am not allowed to wear makeup. I’m not allowed to wear my hair in crazy styles. I’m not allowed to wear the clothes I want to wear. I get here early to change, and at the end of the school day, I change back. Every day.” She wiped the mascara-stained tears from her cheeks. “And the one thing I most definitely am not allowed to have is a boyfriend. My parents would kill me and then ground me for the rest of my life. I’m expected to have an arranged marriage like theirs when I’m older. I can’t start dating until I’ve graduated from college. And I’m especially not allowed to date non-Indian guys.

“I love Victor. He is the best thing in my life. And I would do anything to protect what we have. Even ruin the prom.” He put his arm around her, like he wanted to

shield her from me.

“I’m still not connecting the dots here,” I told her.

“Mercedes Bentley came to me and said that if I didn’t find a way to stop the prom from happening, she would send my parents pictures of me kissing Victor.”

Mindi did this to hold on to her boyfriend? That was literally the stupidest thing I had ever heard. And I’d sat through Scott and Mercedes’s presentation on the American Revolution.

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Ella repeated Mercedes's name and then used some words I had no idea she even knew. Of the four-letter variety.

Some part of my brain heard Victor ask, "Why didn't you tell me?" but mostly all I could think about was that Mercedes had done this. I knew she was up to something, and here was the proof. What did she care if she ruined prom? Ever since Ms. Rathbone had caught Mercedes sneaking into the masquerade ball after she'd been suspended, Mercedes had been banned from all dances. Including prom.

And I guessed if she didn't get to go to prom, no one did.

"We just have to find somewhere else to have it," Ella said. "We have all the other elements in place. The decorations, the DJ, the crowns for prom king and queen—"

"Not the food," I reminded her.

"Okay. We need food. But Shoshana's dad owns a bunch of restaurants. Maybe he could get us some stuff to serve last minute?" she asked in a hopeful voice.

"I'll call him right now," Shoshana said, walking over to the corner of the room.

"It's prom and wedding season," I told Ella. "We'll never find somewhere else to hold it."

"Maybe we should call Dad."

That was like the one thing we couldn't do. "We can't go to the adults asking for

help. Not after we made such a big deal about them not coming.” It was bad enough that Shoshana had to ask her father for help on the food, but we didn’t have a choice there. We would find a place to hold the prom, on our own.

Ella clapped her hands together. “Okay, everyone get on their phones. Call around to hotels, restaurants, any place that has a space big enough for us to hold our prom in a fifty-mile radius.” All the kids around us did as she asked.

Except Mindi and Victor, who left. Which seemed unfair, given that she’d caused this mess. The least she could do would be to help us get out of it.

My sister and I watched them go, and then Ella said, “I am going to find that Mercedes ... and ... and rip off her head with my bare hands!”

I’d never heard her threaten someone with physical harm before. Me? I did it all the time and had even carried through with it at least once (although Jake claimed it was twice). Maybe if Ella was rubbing off on me, I was rubbing off on her, too. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “There’s no point. If you rip off one head, she’ll just grow two more to replace it.”

“Why would she even do this?”

I’d long ago given up trying to figure out why Mercedes Bentley did anything. “You know how it is for her. The end justifies the mean. I’m sure she’s off somewhere doing a victory dance or slaughtering a goat or whatever it is that makes her happy. I told you that I thought she was up to something.” I just had no idea it was something this big and this destructive.

“Just like the triangle opposite the hypotenuse.”

Huh? “You know I don’t know what that means!”

“It’s means you’re right.”

I sighed. “Fat lot of good that does me. I shouldn’t have just blindly trusted Mindi. I should have followed up. Verified her information.”

“You couldn’t have known this would happen.”

“But prom is one of those things people remember most from high school, and now it’s totally screwed up.”

She put her hand on my shoulder. “We can fix this. Don’t give up. Don’t let Mercedes win.”

“Don’t let her win?” Ella didn’t get it. “Mercedes has already won.”

That became even more evident a half hour later when we all had to admit defeat. Ms. Monson had been right. There was nothing available. Everybody was booked solid. Some places even laughed at us for trying to schedule a venue that big with such short notice.

“Maybe we can have it at somebody’s house. Lots of people here have big enough houses,” someone in the back volunteered.

It was a valid suggestion and probably our only option at this point. That didn’t mean I had to like it. “Having it at a student’s house feels like admitting to the alumni that we couldn’t pull this off.”

Ella shook her head. “We could pull this off. We almost did. We were just sabotaged, and nobody could have predicted that.”

I should have expected it, given what I knew about She Who Shall Not Be Named.

The door flew open, and Victor Kim stood there, looking a bit angry. Which surprised me. I'd never seen Victor displaying an emotion before. "You don't have anywhere to hold the prom now, right? So I have a proposition for you. My family has a ballroom. A huge ballroom. My mother's a diplomat, and they entertain constantly. Our ballroom was featured in *Architectural Quarterly* a few months ago."

“That was your house?” Ella said, her eyes going wide.

Victor nodded.

She turned to me and murmured, “It’s gorgeous. As nice as any hotel. It wouldn’t seem sad if we had it there.”

“It will still be a glorified house party.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” she whispered back.

“I’ve already called and cleared it with my parents, and they said we could use it.”

“And what is it you want in return?” I asked. Because he was making it obvious he wanted something.

“I know it’s going to be hard to forgive Mindi, and I’m hoping that by using my house it might help out a little in that area. What I’m asking is that you don’t all hate her without at least considering things from her side. You guys don’t know what it’s been like for her growing up in her house, how strict her parents really are. I just need you to try and see things from her point of view.”

What I wanted to do was make a really sarcastic retort, but I bit my tongue. I thought about me and Jake. About what I would do if my father didn’t allow us to date, despite me loving him the way that I did. There probably wasn’t much I wouldn’t have done to be with him. I wouldn’t have destroyed a prom for the entire school, but I was capable of doing something maybe just shy of that so that we could be together.

And even if Mindi was obnoxious and I was still really furious with her, Victor's request wasn't an unreasonable one.

I stood up and offered him my hand, sensing he'd appreciate the formality of it. "Done."

A hint of a smile shadowed his mouth, and then it was serious Victor again. "Thank you. She really is sorry about everything." With a nod, he left, presumably to keep comforting his backstabbing girlfriend.

Try to see it from her point of view, my conscience reminded me.

"Wow. Being in love really has changed you," my sister remarked. "It wasn't too long ago you would have torn that girl apart verbally, up one side and down the other."

"Mindi is just a pawn. Mercedes is the one who masterminded this whole thing."

"We should turn her in. Go to Ms. Rathbone with Mindi's confession."

If her parents were as bad as Victor and Mindi said, not much good would come from involving Mindi further. Especially if Mercedes decided to ignore their arrangement because Mindi turned her in. "If we do that, Mercedes could go to Mindi's parents. I don't think any of us want that. The problem is this time, Mercedes was much more careful. She got somebody else to do her dirty work. And it would just be Mercedes's word against Mindi's. There's no proof. No paper trail."

"Paper trail ..." Ella's voice trailed off as she reached for her phone. "Like the text we think she sent to Trent. That could be proof. And what if she—" She started scrolling and then suddenly gasped. "Oh no!"

“OMB, what is it?” I couldn’t take much more bad news.

“It wasn’t just the prom itself that Mercedes ruined. Look.”

All I saw was a text message. “What is it you want me to see?” I asked my sister.

“This is a text sent to our seamstress. Telling her that prom has been canceled and to sell our dresses. That we didn’t need them or want them anymore. And this is her reply saying that she did. She sold both of our dresses to a blonde teenage girl.”

My throat closed in on itself. “What?” My dress. My perfect, beautiful, silver, sparkly princess dress was gone?

“And there are more texts. To the hairstylist and makeup artists. Also canceling our appointments. Our limo is gone, as are our reservations for dinner.”

“I need to sit down.”

“You are sitting down.” Fire blazed in Ella’s blue eyes. It was one thing to attack her and say bad things, because she was a very turn-the-other-cheek kind of person. But my sister did not tolerate beauty and fashion interference. “And worst of all? All these texts were sent at the same time as the one breaking up with Trent. Mercedes has to be responsible for this. Who else would do it?”

No one else would. Nobody else hated us the way she did. It was the only thing that made sense.

“She took your phone and used it to destroy your relationship with Trent and then canceled all our prom stuff?” It was so far outside the realm of normal that I didn’t know how to react.

Or maybe I was in shock.

“What are we going to do?” Ella asked.

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“I don’t know.” I couldn’t even think of anything bad enough to do to her. “But one crisis at a time. We’ll figure it out.”

I’d have to have faith that we would fix the prom and make it an incredible night. That everything would work itself out. Getting revenge on Mercedes was way down on the bottom of the list, regardless of how much I wanted it.

Other things mattered more.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Later that evening when I got home, I collapsed onto the couch, dropping my bag on the floor. My dad wandered out of his studio at the noise. “WTF, kid?”

What had I done that was bad enough that my own father was swearing at me in an acronym? But then I remembered that he was my dad and probably had no idea what he was saying. “What do you think WTF means?”

He sat down on the couch next to me, the smell of oil paints drifting toward me. “It means ‘What’s with the face?’”

I resisted the urge to groan at his utter uncoolness. “No, it doesn’t. And yours would be WWTF. Don’t use WTF again, please.” Especially when he didn’t know the actual meaning.

“Okay. But you look upset.”

A year ago, he wouldn't have noticed. He would have been too caught up in whatever he was painting to pay attention. While I'd always felt loved, his relationship with Jennifer had turned him into a much more attentive father.

Which could sometimes be a bad thing, but other times, like now, I was glad that I could unload on him. "Life sucks. The universe sucks. Everything everywhere sucks."

"Well, it's good to know that whatever's going on with you, at least you're not being overly dramatic."

I frowned as he cracked himself up. "I'm not kidding, Dad. Everything is terrible."

"Maybe I should rent out a storage locker for all your current negativity."

This time I did groan. "You don't know all the facts. Like, Trent and Ella broke up, and I punched him for cheating on her."

"I knew that already."

"What?"

"Ella told me and then Jennifer told me. You're actually the last one to tell me the news. I also heard she already has another date?"

"She's Ella. Of course she does." And I meant that as a matter of fact, not with any bitterness. I was really glad she had someone to go with. Even if it was going to be a stupid at-somebody's-house prom. "And Mercedes Bentley blackmailed my treasurer into not paying our deposit check, and we lost our venue, and with prom being only a few days away, we weren't able to find anywhere else to hold it. So now we're having the prom at freaking Victor Kim's house."

“Do you want me to make some calls?”

Some small part of me was so tempted, but I couldn't accept. “No, we'll figure it all out.”

He looked at me in surprise.

“What? That's just part of becoming a grown-up. Handling your own problems and not running to your daddy to make it better. Legally, I am an adult,” I reminded him.

“Yes, and legally, you're still my little girl and always will be.” He kissed me on the top of my head. “Is that everything?”

“Well, there's the stupid thing mom said in that interview, and then there's Jake.”

I rarely brought Jake up to my father because of the dangerous look he got in his eyes whenever I said his name. “What about Jake?”

“He's ... being secretive.” And it seemed to be getting worse. Like after our emergency meeting this morning (which Jake wasn't there for) I saw him in the afternoon, outside the building, talking to Ella. They both had very serious expressions on their faces. When I saw them together, I thought of how not too long ago I would have assumed something was happening between them. I had assumed it, at the masquerade ball back in September. I'd been completely wrong then, and I knew Ella would never hurt me that way, but it still felt like another strange thing in a big pile of strange.

“Not that I'm on Jake's side, but people are allowed to keep things private.”

Boyfriends weren't. Which, if it wasn't already, should be another one of those Ten Commandments. Thou shalt not keep secrets from your girlfriend. I shrugged off my

father's logic. "And on top of everything else, he hasn't asked me to prom. I don't understand why."

"Have you talked to him about it? Told him how important prom is to you?"

Obviously not. “No.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why? He’s supposed to love me and ask me to go.”

My dad folded his arms and had his “I’m thinking deeply” eyebrows. “That doesn’t sound like you. You’ve always been the girl who stands up for what she wants. For what she thinks is right. Why wouldn’t you ask Jake about it?”

“I don’t know ... because look how things turned out for Ella. What if I ask him what’s going on and he breaks up with me?”

“So what if he does?”

“Dad!” He so didn’t get it. “I don’t want us to break up. I want him to ask me without having to nag him. I want us to go to prom and have a great time. It all just feels so ... so unfair.”

“Life is pretty much a massive dresser filled with drawer after drawer of unfair. And I’m sure he’ll officially ask you with one of those proposal things. Don’t count out a man in love. You’d be surprised at the lengths he’ll go to for a girl as special as you. And don’t forget that Jake loves you for you. For the girl who does ask questions. He loves the Tilly who stands up for herself when she thinks she’s being mistreated. You don’t have to change to be with him. And you shouldn’t be so worried about losing him that you end up losing yourself.” He tugged me over so that my head was against his shoulder.

Every word he said was so true. I knew better, and yet I had been choosing to live in fear. Maybe it was time for that to change. “You’re actually pretty smart about some stuff.”

“Hey, I’m kind of a relationship expert. I have been married six times.”

“That’s not a good thing, Dad.”

I sat in my room, thinking about my dad’s advice. I should have stood up for myself with Jake. I shouldn’t have let my worries or promposal obsession quiet my voice. I had been so worried about losing him that I had started losing pieces of me. And neither one of us should be happy about that.

My situation with Jake wasn’t the only recent time that I’d failed to speak my mind. I grabbed my laptop and found the interview with my mother. I listened to just the beginning, to get the reporter’s name and who she was with. After a quick Google search, I found her contact information. I fired off an email, telling the reporter that Pearl Li Mitani did have a daughter. Me.

I wasn’t doing it to be vindictive, but to take back something my mother had tried to take from me. My sense of self and who I was. I wasn’t someone she could brush under a rug and pretend like I wasn’t there. My mother had told the world that I didn’t matter enough to acknowledge. And if I wasn’t the daughter she wanted? That was fine. She most certainly wasn’t the mom I’d hoped for, either. I mean no Mothers of the Year had to worry about my mom giving them a run for their money. But I decided not to sit idly by and let her lie about me.

The reporter answered a few minutes later, which surprised me, because that meant she was really working late. The online magazine she was with was based in New York, which was three hours ahead of us. She asked me questions about myself and about my dad, and I answered them all as truthfully as possible.

Not to cause my mother pain, but to help ease some of mine. To reclaim my identity.

Now I needed to do the same thing with Jake. I had to be me, and if he didn't like it, then I'd learn how to live with it. I'd even go to prom alone, if I had to.

I realized that being true to myself mattered more.

Ella blew into my room, like a massive clothing hurricane, throwing dresses on my bed. "Okay. I have enough formal dresses that I decided to take the top from this one"—she showed me a champagne-colored dress covered in sequins—"and the skirt of this one and make a new dress. It'll be so cute." The second dress had a black tulle full skirt. I didn't get how it would work, but if anyone could make it look good, it would be Ella.

"And I was going to make you a dress out of my stuff, but we're ..."

"Not the same size," I finished. She was petite and tiny, and I was not.

"You don't have hardly any formal or ball-gown type dresses, except for the ones Jake's already seen. And that is not good. You need something new. So maybe we go shopping?"

We both knew the malls and formal wear boutiques had been picked clean. Girls from Malibu Prep who didn't have couture dresses would buy every size of the dress they picked from the store, just to make sure nobody else showed up in it (the ultimate social humiliation). And now there wasn't enough time to order anything online that would be worth wearing. Ella stood inside my closet, riffling through what I had, and I could tell from her discontented sigh that she wasn't happy. As if she'd expected the perfect dress to jump out and solve all our problems.

She even kicked the wall out of frustration and let out a yelp of pain. She yelped

again when some of the boxes on my shelves fell on her head. I ran over to see if she was okay.

Before I could ask, she had something in her hands, something from one of the fallen boxes. “This is it!”

It was the purple kimono my grandmother had sent me. “I’m not going to wear that.”

“Not like this. But I’m going to make it gorgeous. I mean, it’ll be a little matchy-matchy with your hair, but this will work. I’m going to make a new dress out of it, if that’s okay with you.”

I nodded. “Fine by me.” I’d been very worried about not having anything to wear to our downgraded prom.

She had a fixated and slightly scary look in her eyes. “It will be very Anna Niponica meets Christian Lacroix. Gorgeous.”

That meant nothing to me, but I continued to nod because that was the best way to soothe crazy people.

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“And I’ll do our hair and makeup. Our dates can pick us up in their cars. Or wait, I think Brent already reserved a limo. Once Jake asks you, tell him you guys can get in on that if you want. Which pretty much takes care of everything Mercedes ruined.”

More nodding. “Yep. Almost everything.”

Ella kept talking, as if I hadn’t said anything. “Now we just need to call all the ticket holders on the list and give them the new address.”

List? I hadn’t seen a list. Rosie was in charge of ticket sales, and knowing Ella as I did, she’d probably already had Rosie put together an alphabetical list of the students we’d have to inform about the venue change. If we each took a part, it shouldn’t take long for us to contact everyone. “Give me a section of the list and I’ll help.”

She looked at me in surprise, as if she’d forgotten I was in the room. “No, it’s fine. I already distributed the lists earlier today. We’ve got it covered.”

Why was she acting like this? “You’re being ridiculous. Let me help out. It’s kind of my job.”

“No!” she practically barked the word at me. “I mean, no, thank you. You’ve got a lot going on. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be back with my measuring tape in a minute, and we’ll get started on your new dress.”

I was too tired to fight with her about the lists. And she was right. I did have a lot going on.

At the moment, the most important thing I had to figure out was how to tell my boyfriend that I suspected he was cheating on me and I was hurt and disappointed that he hadn't given me a proposal.

And hope it didn't mean the end of us.

The next day I awoke to a mild scandal. The reporter from my mom's online clip published our interview, which caused a bit of an uproar in the New York art scene. It wasn't very wide reaching or applicable to the real world, but it was enough to embarrass my mom. Who issued a statement that read, "What I meant by saying I had no daughter was that we have no relationship to speak of, so my notion of self does not include having a daughter." Which did not make things better. It turned out most people didn't think it was cool when you denied your child's existence.

Admittedly, it made me feel marginally better that I wasn't the only one who thought she was a terrible person.

Today was the day. I was going to talk to Jake and put everything on the line. And it would end one of two ways.

I hoped the universe had one more happily ever after for me.

But he didn't come to English, our first class together. I wasn't willing to wait around for him to show up. Because there were words to be had.

After class, I saw Mindi in the hall and grabbed her. "I have a question for you."

Her mouth dropped open, shocked. "You're ... you're talking to me?"

"Yes."

Giant tears welled up in her eyes. “I thought you would hate me forever.”

I did not have time for Mindi drama when I had my own to attend to. “I can’t hate you for being in love and letting Mercedes blackmail you. You’re not the only one she’s tried to torture. I’m still not happy with you, and it might take me a while to get over it. But you can help me get there a little faster by telling me how I can find out where my boyfriend is right now.”

She gave me a tentative smile and then took my phone. “Are you friends on Snapchat?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it will be easy to find him. It’s how I track down where Victor, my boyfriend, is when we’re not together. Here.”

She handed my phone back to me, and I saw a map that had a pin for Jake’s current location.

“Thanks,” I told her.

“Thank you. For talking to me. And, Mattie? I really am sorry. I wish I could do it over.”

Me too. But it wouldn’t do me any good to hold a massive grudge against a girl who was also a victim in all this. “Victor asked us to think about things from your perspective. And while I’m not sure I’d make the same choice as you, I think I get why you did it.”

“I wish I could make things right.”

Hoping I wouldn't regret it, I said, "Why don't you go see Ella and get an assignment for setting up on Saturday?"

"Seriously?" Her hands flew to her chest, as if she wanted to hug me but settled on hugging herself instead. "You're going to let me come to prom? Back to student government?"

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Nobody had banned her. That had been more self-imposed, probably because she didn't want to be stared at and get hate looks. Which I understood. But if she needed my permission to do those things, well, I could do that. "I'd hate to be the one responsible for separating Belle from her Beast."

"Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I know you don't like hugs, and I'm sorry." Then she threw her arms around me for a brief second before letting go and running down the hall to find my sister.

I was getting seriously sappy in my old age. I looked back at my phone screen and entered the cross streets in my maps application.

Jake was at the hospital again.

Time to put all my cards on the table.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I resolved to remain cool, calm, and collected when I found Jake. I would be reasonable and logical and get all the answers I needed. I would not overreact or freak out or accuse him of anything. I would let him explain himself.

And I kept my resolutions right up until the moment where I found him on the fourth floor of the hospital hugging some girl. Some girl who obviously did not value her life. She had her back to me, which meant I could clearly see Jake's face. And he had the biggest grin imaginable.

Something about the girl seemed vaguely familiar, and I wondered if that was because I had dreaded and imagined this moment so many freaking times that I'd become temporarily psychic. She wore lavender scrubs, and I couldn't remember if that was what those candy strippers wore. Maybe this one was a nurse stripper. Who should be old enough to know better.

I had waited almost my entire life to be with him. Nobody was going to swoop in and take this from me. I marched over, ready to confront them both. "This is what you've been doing? This is why you've been missing school? Running around with some teenage tart?"

Jake and the girl let go of each other, and the girl turned around.

Only she wasn't a girl or a teenager and was someone I actually knew.

Dr. Bahati Okafor.

"Tills?"

"Mattie?"

They both said my name (well, one of my names) at the same time, and then looked back at each other. "How do you know—" Again, they spoke in unison and laughed.

I was so glad I could be amusing for them. I supposed that someone could find it funny that I accused Bahati of being a teenager and cheating with Jake, but in my defense, she was so young looking that she could have easily passed for a teen if she wanted to, especially given her smooth, flawless skin. At least that's what I would be telling myself for a long time as justification for being oh-so-jealous of someone who had at least a decade on us.

“Mattie is Kenyetta’s tutor,” Bahati said when I wasn’t forthcoming about our connection. “Kenyetta is my boyfriend’s daughter.”

“Yeah, I know Kenyetta. Tills—I mean, Mattie is my girlfriend.”

“That is why you’ve seemed so familiar to me, Jake. Kenyetta has a picture of you on her phone. I thought you were just some online model that she had a crush on.”

My mind was temporarily distracted by my fervent belief that Jake could have so easily been a model.

“That’s funny. It’s a small world!” Jake said.

“The smallest,” she agreed.

We could get on that Disneyland ride later because it had just occurred to me what kind of doctor Bahati was.

An oncologist.

“I have other patients to see, more test results to deliver. Jake, Mattie, I’m sure I will see you soon.”

She left, and I couldn’t keep quiet. “More test results? Oh my Buddha, why are you seeing an oncologist? Are you dying?” Was that why he’d been so secretive? Why he was pulling away? Because he had only six months to live and wanted to spare me the pain of losing him? Which was so something Jake would have done.

All the blood left my brain, and I felt woozy and weak. Which I didn’t realize until I felt Jake’s arms go around me, as he led me into a waiting room and had me sit down. I couldn’t imagine a world without Jake in it. My hands went clammy, and I could

feel the sweat pouring down my back.

“How you’re feeling right now? That’s how I’ve been feeling for the last two weeks. But you don’t have to worry. I’m not dying, Tills. I’m not sick. I’m not here for me.”

Relief, overwhelming and sudden, rushed through me. But that was tempered by the fact that there was a reason Jake was talking to an oncologist in a hospital. “Then why are you here?”

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He took in a big breath and leaned back in his chair. “Dr. Okafor was just telling all of us that my mom’s biopsy results were negative. She doesn’t have breast cancer.”

That cleared my head and made me sit straight up. “You thought your mom had breast cancer? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jake let out a small, deprecating laugh. “There were so many reasons. Reasons that I told myself were good and made sense. My mom asked me not to say anything to anyone. Even you. She wanted to keep it private until we knew for sure. Then that whole thing with your mom happened, and I don’t know, I didn’t want to add to what you were going through.”

I quickly filled him in on how I’d contacted the reporter and made some corrections to my mother’s version of the truth. “And just because my mom wants to turn Dalmatian puppies into coats doesn’t mean that you can’t talk about your mom. I know how much you guys love each other, and you should be able to talk to me. About anything.”

“That’s the thing, Tills.” He reached over and laced his fingers through mine, sending little shocks and thrills all up and down my arm. “You’re my girlfriend, but you’re also my best friend. You’re the person I want to tell stuff to. Sometimes it feels like things don’t really happen until I tell you. But if I told you that the doctors thought my mom had breast cancer ...”

“If you told me, then what?”

“Once I told you, it would have been real. And I didn’t want it to be real. I wanted to

pretend like it wasn't happening. That's not really an excuse, though. I should have told you."

"You should have told me," I agreed. "I could have been here for you. Helping you. So that's why you've been so weird and secretive? Because you thought your mom was sick?"

He leaned over to kiss me softly, gently, and it was over far too quickly. "That was probably most of it. But then something else happened, and I wasn't sure how you would take it."

Here it was. Now was when he told me that he'd changed his mind about us. He knew he could do better.

"You found someone else?" The words threatened to strangle me.

"What? No! How could you think that? I would never—" He paused. "Is that why you called Dr. Okafor a teenage tart? You thought that she and I were hooking up?"

"Not with her, specifically, but after that whole Trent-was-cheating-on-Ella thing there was this quiz from a teenage girl's magazine about whether your boyfriend was cheating, and you were doing all the things on the list. Taking secretive phone calls, acting distant, canceling at the last minute. And you lied about where you were."

"Lied? I wouldn't lie to you. I haven't."

"What about you missing Kenyetta's party because you were going shopping with your mom? Or that day I asked you about your after-school plans and you said you had baseball stuff, but you left school in the middle of the day?"

He looked confused for a moment before answering. "My dad was working so I did

go shopping with my mom that day. She wanted to look at hats and scarves for her head in case she had to get chemo. She deals with a crisis by preparing for it. If she was going to lose all her hair, she wanted to have everything she needed lined up first. And I did do baseball stuff after school. I left in the middle of the day to be here with my mom and dad for an appointment, then went back.”

Oh Buddha, I was the worst girlfriend ever. “Okay. Well, so you have rational and logical explanations, and I sound like I’m living on this side of crazy. I just couldn’t bear the thought of losing you.”

He took my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing against my cheeks. “I would never cheat on you.”

His words made tears start in the corners of my eyes. “Part of me knows that. But Ella had so much faith in Trent, and we saw how that turned out.”

“What Ella and Trent had? Not even a drop in the bucket when it comes to you and me. It’s like comparing ... I don’t know, a candle to the sun. They both give off light. But one lights up a room, and the other lights up the whole world.”

“Half the planet at a time,” I corrected him, while my body melted over how unbelievably sweet and romantic he was.

He laughed. “Half the planet at a time. But we aren’t the same as them. What we have is so much more.” He made sure I was looking deep into his chocolaty brown eyes. “I love you. You are perfect for me and the only girl in the whole world that I care about. Get it?”

“Got it.”

“Good.”

I believed him. A hundred and fifty percent. I knew that he was telling me the truth, and I felt so dumb for having suspected him of messing around on me. “Now I feel bad. And stupid. But mostly bad for not believing in you.”

“It’s okay. I’ll make a list of things you can do to make it up to me.” That teasing, devilish sparkle was back, and I knew I was in trouble.

“I have a pretty good idea of what that list will contain.”

“That’s because you’re so smart.” He kissed me swiftly, burning my lips with his. Like he was branding me, and I was all too happy for the world to know we belonged together.

“Wait,” I said, pulling back. “You said there was something else going on.”

“Oh. The athletic department from UCSC just called to tell me that I will be required to live in a dorm all the way across campus next year. They should have told me when I accepted my scholarship, but they didn’t. Which means I’m messing up all our plans to be close to each other.”

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Seriously? I pointed to my legs. “See these? I use them to walk. I can even walk across campus to where you are. You can do the same. You’re not messing up any of our plans because the only plan I have is to be with you. The rest is all fluff. Get it?”

That made him smile. “Got it.”

“Good.”

This time I kissed him, a lingering, loving kiss that reminded me of how very dumb I had been. When Jake and I began dating I’d made a promise to myself to not immediately go dark, to always believe in love and magic.

I needed to renew that vow. Because being with Jake? Nothing but love and magic.

Especially in his kiss.

I also reminded myself to believe and trust in Jake and the love that we shared. Sometimes it was so hard to imagine that he could be into someone like me that it might have made me a tad bit crazy.

“Anything else we should be discussing?” Jake asked when we finally came up for air. “It feels like there’s something else you want to say but haven’t.”

The knowing look in his eye made me think he knew exactly what I was going to say next. And it was still kind of scary, but I had to talk about it. “What about prom? You haven’t asked me.”

A rueful expression made the ends of his lips tilt up. “I have something planned. It just took a lot longer than I thought it would to make it all come together. Your promposal is coming.”

“Really?” I tried not to squeal. I never should have doubted him.

“You think I’d leave my girl high and dry at what is probably the most important event of our entire four years in high school?”

“It’s the pinnacle of my student body presidential career,” I said.

“That too.”

“You’re going to have a hard time topping your Sixteen Candles move.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got it covered.”

I could not wait. “So when is it happening?”

“You’re going to have to wait and see. Good things come to those who wait.”

“Oh?” I asked, running my fingertips along his forearm. “I may need clarification on what good things are.”

“I could show you.”

“Yes, please.”

Jake let out a strangled sound and had me on my feet. I giggled as we rushed down a hallway, avoiding medical personnel until he found an empty room. We went inside, closing the door shut behind us. He pinned me up against the wall, out of eyesight

from any of the windows.

He began kissing the side of my neck, his lips running along my jaw, and I sighed with pure happiness.

“You know,” he murmured the words in between kisses, “I was actually surprised that you hadn’t asked me about prom yet.”

“I didn’t want to seem needy.” My voice was high and breathy.

His fiery lips pressed against mine, nearly consuming me. “I like it when you’re needy.”

I put my hands on his face so that I could look into his eyes. His eyes that burned like two brown bonfires. “You’re all I need. I love you, Jake.”

His wolfish grin made my knees feel weak. “I know.”

The world had once again become a beautiful, fantastic place. Jake stopped skipping school since his mom’s results were in, and our lives went back to what passed for normal.

The sky was crisp and blue, and the grass on the school grounds was emerald green and perfect, and even the girls’ bathroom on the second floor was less disgusting than it normally was.

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Birds were singing, bees were buzzing ... and the girl in the stall next to me was sobbing her eyes out.

I finished my business, flushed the toilet, and then knocked on the divider. “Hey, are you okay in there?”

The other girl made a combination groan/sob, and then I heard an all too familiar voice saying, “You havegotto be kidding me!”

I opened my stall door at the same time as Mercedes Bentley opened hers. We glared at each other in the mirror, and she looked absolutely terrible. Her eyes were swollen and red with streaks of mascara running down her face.

I wondered what could be bad enough to make the devil herself cry?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What was up with me, Mercedes, and bathrooms? It was kind of becoming our thing. Not that I wanted us to have a thing. And we most definitely had already déjàed this vu.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked her as I went over to wash my hands. “Did you find out that being an evil skank is not a valid life choice?”

She threw something plastic into the sink next to me. “Even better. I just found out that I’m pregnant.”

I looked at the pee stick in the sink next to mine, stunned. “How? What? How?”

“Excellent and insightful questions.” Mercedes went to an empty sink and washed her hands as well.

“How did this happen?” I asked, not able to tear my gaze away from the pregnancy test that said Mercedes was most definitely with child. “I mean I know how it happens.” Not from personal experience or anything, but I had the general gist of it. “Is Scott the father?”

I seriously hoped Mercedes had cheated on her gross boyfriend. Because Scott was such a tool that he should have “Craftsman” tattooed on his forehead. Just to warn off other girls.

“Of course he’s the father.” She dried her hands off, threw away the paper towel, and leaned against a wall. “Although we just broke up for the millionth time.”

Right before prom? I felt a little sad for her until I remembered that she couldn’t have gone to the dance, even if she’d wanted to. And why had Scott gone through the effort to do a big promposal when she couldn’t go and he was just going to break up with her? I asked the only question I could. “Why?”

“Religious differences. He wanted me to worship him, and I wasn’t interested.” I realized that her sarcasm was an attempt at holding back tears. Tears that she now shed as she slid down the wall to sit on the floor. “What am I going to do? How am I going to tell my parents?”

Was Mercedes having a momentary lapse in evil? She seemed almost human. I reminded myself that this was the same girl who had just ruined our prom by blackmailing Mindi. Who had sold off our dresses so that we couldn’t have them. Broken up with Trent from Ella’s phone.

And I was actually feeling bad for her.

Part of me wanted to rip into her and tell her off. The other part held back, unable to do so while she cried in a heap on the bathroom floor.

I mean, what else could I do to her that would even be worse?

In comparison, I had everything in front of me. Jake. UCSC. A summer internship at a manga company. Prom. A supposedly awesome incoming promposal from Jake. All my dreams were about to come true.

And she ... didn't have those things. Mostly because of her own choices, but still.

She'd tried her best to sabotage our happiness, but the one person who was hurt the most was Mercedes.

No matter what she might decide to do about her pregnancy or her baby, right now she was terrified. And not even I was enough of a jerk to kick her while she was down.

"I'm sorry." And I was.

"Is that some kind of sarcastic comment?"

"No. I am trying to be nice here. But you don't make it very easy."

"Oh please. You think you're so innocent in all this. But you're just as mean to me as I am to you. You talk about me behind my back all the time, don't you?"

Yeah, it was called manners. "You started it."

“And you participated. You’ve given just as good as you got.” She rubbed her nose on her sleeve, and I stepped into a stall to grab her some toilet paper. Which I thought was very big of me. I handed it to her, and she actually took it, without a single snide remark.

“Jake likes you,” she sniffled.

Correction, Jake loved and adored me, but now was probably not the time to be splitting hairs.

“He’s always liked you. Ever since we were kids.” Something that I still thought should have been brought to my attention a long time ago. “Nobody else ever stood a chance.”

“Like you.”

She nodded. “Like me. He’s such a good guy, you know?”

I did know. Even if I had temporarily forgotten. And I again felt pangs of sympathy for her. I knew from firsthand experience exactly what it was like to be deeply envious of someone because they were dating Jake. Heck, I’d even been jealous of imaginary women that I thought he was cheating on me with.

“I really am sorry. I hope you figure out what’s best for you and your ...” I let my voice trail off as I gestured at her stomach. “Do you want me to get someone for you? Ms. Rathbone? Or the guidance counselor or something?”

“I’m fine. I don’t need your help.”

And here I thought we were having kind of a moment. “Okay. I have to get to class.” I started to walk away and then stopped. I didn’t have to be mean, but she deserved to get called out on her behavior. “You shouldn’t have blackmailed Mindi and nearly

ruined the prom. It's one thing to go after me and Ella and take away our dresses or whatever, but you almost destroyed one of the most important nights of everybody's lives."

"I know. I shouldn't have."

I nearly fell over from the shock of her admission. If she'd apologized, it might have led to an actual heart attack, and I would have died. And missed the prom, which would have been terrible.

And even though I knew she'd never ask for forgiveness for her actions, I forgave her anyway. Maybe it was because I'd made up with Jake and was feeling generous and happy, but I didn't want to keep being angry with her. The school year was almost over, and I didn't plan on ever seeing her again.

"Right." There was nothing else to really say, and I did need to get to class. "So ... yeah. Bye, I guess."

"You're going to tell everyone, aren't you?"

Her words again made me come to a stop. "What?"

She wiped her nose with the toilet paper I'd given her. "That's what I would do if I were in your shoes. Tell everyone."

"I'm not you. And I don't plan on telling anybody. It's none of my business."

I could tell from the look on her face that she didn't believe me. But it was the truth.

And I got the feeling she was about to become intimately acquainted with having to tell the truth to some important people in her life.

I did as I promised and kept my mouth shut. Especially since Mercedes seemed to be dealing with a lot of crap. Mindi had spread the truth of what she'd done far and wide, but she gave most of the blame to Mercedes.

Which led to Mercedes being so ostracized by the other kids that, once again, I felt really sorry for her. I even said hi to her when I saw her in the hallway.

She ignored me and my attempts at niceness.

My sister couldn't help but notice.

Later that afternoon, I was heading out to our car to drive over to Kenyetta's school for our last tutoring session. Ella was going to catch a ride with one of the girls from cheerleading. "Why are you being nice to Mercedes? Have you forgotten what she did?"

"I didn't forget. And it's kind of a long story. I've just come to realize that when people are awful to you that it usually means that terrible things are happening in their personal lives. Maybe instead of getting mad and lashing out it would be better if I remembered that everybody has their stuff that they're going through and it's better to try and be kind."

"Huh. So when did you get all enlightened and become a better person than me?" she teased.

"Not hardly."

She grinned. "Give Kenyetta a hug for me!"

I told her I would and waved goodbye. I drove over to Kenyetta's school and found her waiting for me in our spot in the library. Since this was our last session, we'd

mutually decided that we would not do homework of any kind but would spend our time talking and playing cards.

I brought Uno and Go Fish. I thought Dr. Drummond probably wouldn't appreciate it if I taught his little girl how to play poker.

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“Are you excited for your recital tomorrow?” I asked her.

She nodded. “My dad scheduled time off so he could be there. He’s even working late tonight, trying to get everything done.”

When you were one of the best oncologists in the state, it made sense that you didn’t get much free time.

“I still wish you could come, too.”

“I know. But I have to set up for prom, and it’s at the same time.”

“What’s a prom?” She asked me for a four, and I told her to go fish. She took another card from the top of the deck and added it to her hand.

“It’s like a big ball.”

She raised one eyebrow at me. “A ball?”

“Not the bouncy kind. The Cinderella kind. Like a big dance.”

Her eyes lit up. “So you get dressed up? Are you going with Jake?”

“Yep. Do you have any sixes?”

“Go fish.”

I grabbed a card and realized that Kenyetta had put her hand down and was rummaging through her backpack. “I have something I need to show you. I found it in my dad’s drawer.”

She took out what looked suspiciously like a ring box. She opened it up, and the huge rock perched on top of the tiny band nearly blinded me. I didn’t know a lot about jewelry, but this thing looked like it cost more than Jake’s car. Now I’d be having nightmares about her losing it and not returning it.

At first I wanted to ask her why she was going through her dad’s drawer, but instead, I closed the box and handed it back to her. “Put that in your backpack. Zip it up tight. And as soon as you get home, promise me you’ll put it right back where you found it.”

She returned it to her backpack and said, “I don’t want to put it back. I think he’s going to propose to Bahati.”

We had entered dangerous territory, and I needed to be careful about where I stepped. “That would probably make your dad really, really happy. He’s probably been lonely since your mom died.”

“He’s not alone. He has me.”

“I know he does. But it’s not the same. Think about how much you like Jake,” I told her, putting down a pair of eights on the table. “Grown-ups feel that same way, only a thousand times more. They like having a partner, somebody who can help them out and that they can count on. And that they can kiss and stuff.”

“Ew.”

“I think Bahati is really nice. And I’m kind of a stepmother expert since I’ve had

almost as many of them as I have fingers on my hands. Most of them were terrible. But my dad's girlfriend now? Jennifer? I really hope he marries her."

"Why?"

"I'm in the same position as you. My parents can't get back together."

"Oh." Her brown eyes looked so sad. "Is your mom dead, too?"

"Nope. Just evil. Anyway, Jennifer makes my dad happy, and I want him to be happy. I don't want him to be alone. Bahati wouldn't take your mom's place. She could be a friend to you. And who can't use more friends?"

She drummed her fingers against the table, thinking. "What if they have a baby and they forget all about me?"

"You, my dear, are unforgettable. When you add more people to your family, the love just grows bigger and bigger. And if they have a baby, you might get a sister. And having a sister is the best."

Kenyetta shot me a skeptical look.

"I'm serious!" I protested. "Did I ever tell you about how I didn't used to get along with Ella?"

"Why? She's awesome."

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“That’s why. Because she’s awesome and does everything right and everyone loves her and it annoyed me. But the thing was, she was there for me. Ella showed up. She helped me. Even when I was awful to her, she did her best to be my sister. And it made me realize how much I loved her and how important she was to me.”

I put down another pair of cards and realized that Kenyetta wasn’t paying attention to the game, but to what I was saying. “It’s okay if you start out not liking someone and then change your mind.”

She nodded, her focus back on the cards. “I’m going to be sad when you leave and won’t tutor me anymore.”

“We’ll always be friends.”

“You’re going to college in the fall,” she protested.

“I won’t be too far away. And you can call me or text me any time you want. I’ll always be just a phone call away. You’re going to have to work a lot harder than that if you think you’re going to get rid of me so easily, Kenny-the-Pooh.”

“Ugh,” she said and rolled her eyes. “I never should have told you about that.” It was the nickname her father had given her as a baby because of her big, rolly tummy. Just like Winnie-the-Pooh.

“Too late. It’s in the vault now. At your wedding, when I’m your matron of honor, I’m going to announce it to the entire room.”

“You are so embarrassing,” she mumbled, but I saw her secretive smile at me promising to be a part of her life for a long time. Her phone buzzed, and she looked at it. “I gotta go. Bahati’s waiting for me out front.”

She gathered up her things, and I stayed quiet, not wanting to beat a dead horse. I’d done my best to nudge her toward trying to work things out with her potential future stepmom.

“I’m glad we got to work together and become friends. I’m going to miss being able to hang out with you every week,” I told her.

Without warning, she threw her arms around my neck, almost knocking me out of my chair. She didn’t say anything, just squeezed. And when the hug was over, she ran from the room. I found myself having to fight back tears, and I gulped several times, trying to keep them in. I’d known it would be hard to say goodbye to her. Just not this hard.

The thing that made me feel better was that I’d been like her Yoda. Not small and green, but more of a mentor since I could help her given that I’d been where she was. Who knew that playing Musical Chairs: Stepmothers Edition would make it so I could help someone else? Like the pain and annoyance had all been worth it just so that I could try and help Kenyetta down her path.

It made me wonder if someday I’d meet someone else with a terrible mother, and I could tell them been there, still haven’t murdered that.

I mean, assuming that I hadn’t.

I gathered up my things and headed home. As I pulled into the driveway, my phone chirped at me. It was a text from Ella.

YOUR DRESS IS COMPLETE. REPEAT, YOUR DRESS IS COMPLETE. YOU'RE GOING TO DIE, AND JAKE WILL LOSE HIS EVER-LOVING MIND. OVER.

Now this I had to see.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ella practically tackled me when I walked in the front door. "Come see! Come see!"

She was wearing her "new" prom dress, created from two of her old gowns. And while I hadn't been able to picture it when she'd first described it to me, now I was blown away by how pretty it was. "Your dress is amazing!" I told her.

With a wave of her hand, she dismissed her dress, as if it didn't matter. She grabbed me by the wrist and led me into her room.

My dress was hanging on her closet door. "That's the kimono?" I asked, my mouth hanging open.

"The silk was much easier to work with than I thought it would be. So soft, but still really strong."

Ella had altered the bodice of the dress to be sleeveless and brought in the sides. She had also given it a bit of a plunging neckline, something a little more daring than I might normally wear. I didn't know what she had done to the skirt, but now it hung down like a bell, as if it would move and flow when I walked or danced. Ella lifted it down from the closet door and handed it to me.

The bottom embroidery was still intact, beautiful silver renderings of a Japanese garden with birds taking flight. I noticed that the back had a deep V as well, even

more than the front. It was a very grown-up dress.

It was absolutely perfect.

“Try it on!”

Without hesitation, I kicked off my shoes and tore off my pants and shirt. Ella helped me slide the dress on over my head, and it made that silk-whispering sound against my skin, feeling as smooth as water. I saw that she'd cut the bow down by half. I looked at my reflection and watched her tying it in the back for me.

“I didn't realize this at the beginning, but there was so much material with this thing. I guess it's a lot of padding and tucking to make it fit right when you wear it traditionally, but that also meant I had a lot to work with.” She stepped back to take a look at me, even making me spin around. “Sometimes I even impress myself.”

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“You should be impressed,” I told her as I shifted my weight from side to side, making my skirt sway softly. “You are so talented. Are you sure you don’t want to go into fashion design?”

“I’m just copying someone else’s work. I didn’t come up with the idea for either dress on my own.” She went over to her jewelry box and started sorting through it. “I think silver earrings will work best with your dress, and I have the perfect pair of dangling ones—here.” She came back over and held one of them up to my ear so that I could see it in the mirror. “I also have a matching necklace.”

“You know I’m not this kind of person, but you were forewarned. Thank you.” Then I grabbed her and hugged her. I seemed to be doing a lot of hugging lately. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as I always thought it was.

But Ella deserved a hug for saving the prom for us. Now we had really unique and beautiful dresses.

When I let go of her, she smiled at me and asked, “So what are your plans for the rest of the night?”

I had already filled her in on my conversation with Jake in the hospital. “I was going to go put on something nice and wait in my room for a phone call or invitation to go somewhere to get my promposal. But I’ve decided that’s pathetic, and you and I should do something together.”

And if a phone call came or Jake showed up, well, I was sure Ella wouldn’t mind if I bailed a tad bit early from our plans.

“Let’s binge watch something,” she suggested.

I agreed. Lately we’d been really into watching British period dramas together. Our boyfriends (or ex-boyfriend, in Ella’s case) weren’t very good company for it. It was definitely a girls-only thing.

Ella helped me out of my dress and hung it up. I put my clothes back on while she changed from formal wear to yoga pants and an oversize shirt. We sat on her bed, and she pulled up our Amazon account on her laptop. She clicked on *North & South*, which we’d recently started.

I looked at her comfy clothes and wondered if I should go change, too.

But I left my jeans on. I wanted to be prepared. Just in case.

There was nothing wrong with having a little hope, right?

Except for when your hopes get dashed and your boyfriend does not come over to ask you to the prom.

My restless night turned into an early morning, and prom was now less than ten hours away.

Still no promposal.

Whatever Jake had planned, he was cutting things awfully close.

Ella and I had created an itinerary for the day. We were in the middle of doing mud masks with cucumbers on our eyes when my phone rang. I removed the vegetable from my eye to see who was calling me.

To my surprise, it was Kenyetta.

Obviously I'd given her my number just in case, but this was the first time she'd ever called me.

"Hey, Kenyetta. What's going on?" This kid was taking me up pretty quickly on the whole "I'm only a phone call away" thing.

"There was an emergency at the hospital with one of my dad's patients. He can't come to my recital today." I could hear the wobble in her voice.

"I'll come." The words just burst out of me, with no thought behind them. I had so much to do, like, decorate an actual prom, but in that moment, none of it mattered.

Because I had been in her shoes. I grew up with a single father who often missed important events in my life because of his work. At least in Dr. Drummond's case he was saving lives, which probably made it a tad easier to deal with. My dad just usually forgot.

I wasn't going to let her feel completely alone and forgotten.

"Really?"

"Of course. Text me when and where, and I'll stand up and yell the loudest for you."

"It's a ballet recital," she said with a sad laugh. "Not a concert."

"Don't care. I'll be the one in the middle shouting, 'Kenny-the-Pooh!' and holding up my phone with the flashlight app on."

This time I got a real giggle. "You are dumb. I'll send you the information."

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I hung up my phone, and her text arrived. The recital was from one o'clock to three thirty. And it was an hour away. Realization struck me, hard. "What did I just do?"

"What's going on?" Ella asked, removing the cucumbers from her eyes, too.

"Kenyetta's dad had to cancel on her recital today. I told her I would come, but it's right when we're supposed to be decorating for prom."

Ella's eyes lit up, as if this was exciting. "That's great! I mean, that's not great. For Kenyetta. But great that you can be there for her. Support her. You should definitely go."

She was acting really strange. But since I'd jumped to such a wrong conclusion with Jake I wasn't eager to go there again. I chalked it up to prom stress.

"But what about decorating? What about us getting ready together?"

"Don't worry about setting up. Because you've made everybody so excited about having a dance that was just for us we have a massive group of decorating volunteers. There's so many people signed up that it will go really quickly. And you should be home by four thirty or five, and that's still plenty of time for us to get ready and head over."

That relieved most of my guilt. Especially since I knew that Ella would do such a phenomenal job of telling everybody else what to do.

"I'll have to take the car. How are you going to get over to Victor's house?"

“Oh.” Was that a blush I saw on Ella’s cheeks? “Deacon volunteered to help out, too. He was planning on coming by to pick me up.”

“Just you, huh?” I teased. “Isn’t it bad luck for him to see you before the prom?”

She blinked rapidly, as if she’d misspoken. “Obviously he would have taken both of us. But now I guess he’ll just be taking me. And that luck thing is for weddings. Not dances.”

I knew the thing with Trent still hurt, but I was glad to see that she could be excited about someone new. I guessed what she said was true. That she spent a long time getting over him so that when the actual ending came, it didn’t hurt quite as much.

“I better get ready,” I said. I went into my bathroom and washed the mask off my face and didn’t bother with any makeup. I grabbed some lunch to go (half a bag of Lay’s sour cream and onion chips) and got on the road.

As predicted, about an hour later, I pulled up to a small theater. I wondered what other kind of productions they held as I went in and bought a ticket and took a program.

I grabbed an empty seat in the middle of the theater. I skimmed the program for Kenyetta’s name and saw that she was performing four different times, one of them as a soloist.

The lights over the audience went down, and the stage lights came on. There was an introduction from the ballet instructor talking about the kids and their progress. She finished her speech, and the curtain raised to begin the show. The first group contained a bunch of three-year-olds in pink tutus and pigtails, and it was one of the cutest things I’d ever seen.

Then things took a turn for the boring. It was probably different if you were the parent and it was your child, but I was slowly losing the will to live.

Finally, it was Kenyetta's turn. She danced with three other girls in some complicated routine where they held hands and did really fancy footwork. I'd seen her dance around plenty of times in tutoring, but I had no idea she was this good.

Not just good. Phenomenal.

It made me sad that her dad couldn't be here to see her.

About twenty minutes later, Kenyetta walked onto the stage for her solo. She wore a red leotard and a matching gauzy thigh-length skirt. She struck a pose, and the music started. And it took all my willpower not to stand up in my chair and chant her name. She flew from one end of the stage to the other. There was so much elegance, power, and grace in her movements. Such beauty. Artistry.

I knew that someday I'd be watching this girl performing professionally.

When her dance ended, I did jump to my feet and yell "Brava! Brava!" as loudly as I could. And I wasn't the only one in the audience who did. She curtsied gracefully and waved to the crowd with a huge smile. I wondered if she could see me, but I figured she couldn't because of the lights.

She had her two other numbers, where she was every bit as good as she already had been. The show finished, and all the ballerinas came onstage to take their final bows and soak up all the applause. My voice felt a little hoarse from all the cheering I was doing.

People approached the stage and handed the girls bouquets of flowers. I groaned. I didn't know about the flowers thing, or I would have stopped and picked some up for

her on the way.

Guess I had to hope me being here would be good enough.

I made my way into the aisle and watched Kenyetta as she exited the stage. I waved both of my hands over my head and called her name. She ran up the aisle toward me, throwing her arms around my waist.

“You were so good! Seriously, so, so good. And you know I’d tell you if you were terrible. But you are gifted. So talented. You are going to be an amazing ballerina someday. And you’re right. You totally shouldn’t worry about math. Just keep dancing!”

I probably shouldn’t have said the math thing, but I was so excited for her and how amazing she was at ballet.

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“Yes, you were very, very good.” A woman’s voice sounded behind Kenyetta, and I looked up to see Bahati.

And I was much happier seeing her here than the last time I’d seen her. While she was hugging my boyfriend.

“Hey, I didn’t know you were coming!” I said with a smile, but from the grumpy expression on Kenyetta’s face, it looked like she didn’t know either and wasn’t happy about it.

“Your father told me he wouldn’t be able to make it, and he was so disappointed. I would have driven you, but he said you were getting a ride from one of your friends. So I came down early to get a seat in the front row so that I could film the whole thing for him. I was hoping that later tonight the three of us could watch it together.”

“That would be okay,” Kenyetta said, shrugging.

Bahati grinned and then handed her a bouquet of pink roses. I was so glad somebody got the memo.

“Did you know that I used to dance ballet?”

“You did?” Kenyetta’s eyes got bigger.

Bahati nodded. “I dislocated my knee when I was fourteen, and the doctors said I couldn’t dance any longer. That was when I decided to go into medicine. So that I could help other people.”

There probably wasn't anything better she could have said. It was as if I could see the ice surrounding Kenyetta begin to melt.

"I was also wondering if you might like to get some ice cream?" Bahati asked as Kenyetta nodded eagerly. "You're welcome to join us, Mattie."

"Oh, I can't. I have to go home and get ready for my prom. But you two go and have a great time!"

Kenyetta gestured toward the stage. "I just need to go grab my stuff and tell Averie's mom that I won't need a ride home."

"I'll wait here for you," Bahati said. She had so much hope in her eyes that I wished for Kenyetta to keep being responsive and accepting. And that she would give this poor woman, who was trying so hard, a chance.

"Her favorite is rocky road," I said, attempting to give her a leg up. Bahati nodded and thanked me.

Kenyetta returned, carrying a large bag over her shoulder.

That was my cue to leave. "I have to get going. You two have fun."

"You have fun tonight, too! At your dance! And thank you for coming," she told me, giving me one last hug. Which I allowed. I waved to them both as I left the theater.

And they were smiling. At each other.

I took that as an excellent sign.

Admittedly, I was just as sad about leaving Kenyetta as she was about me going. It

did my heart good to know that she'd be in such excellent hands after I left for school in the fall.

But right now ... I had a prom to get ready for.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As I closed the garage door, my phone beeped. It was a text from Jake. I was already smiling before I had even opened it.

Pick you up in an hour?

I texted him back some emojis with the hearts for eyes and said:

Sounds good. Can't wait.

Which meant he had only an hour left to pull off his promposal. I wondered how he was going to manage that, especially since I needed to get ready.

“Is that Jake? When is he coming?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Ella could have been a freaking ninja if she wanted to be. “He says he'll be here in an hour.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:57 am

“An hour?” Much as she had yesterday, Ella pounced on me. I had only a second to notice the rollers in her hair and her totally made-up face before she said, “We’re running out of time! Let’s go!”

She shoved me into the bathroom and told me to take a shower and blow-dry my hair. I did as I was told, knowing better than to mess with my sister when she was this fired up. I stayed in the soothing hot water of the shower until Ella started banging on the door. Hard. “Come on, Mattie!”

Oh, she was serious. She was calling me Mattie. That meant she had entered the I’m-not-screwing-around portion of the evening. I got out of the shower, put on my robe, and towel-dried my hair. I then used her hairdryer to get the rest of the moisture out.

Apparently deciding my time was up, Ella opened the door and told me I was finished. She dragged me down the hall to her bedroom and had me sit in at her vanity table.

“Up or down?”

The world? A little bit of both at the moment. “What?”

“Do you want your hair up or down?”

I didn’t care, but I sensed that saying so would be wrong. “You choose.”

“Up. Definitely up. That way it shows off your back and you won’t get too hot while you’re dancing. Having sweaty hair stick to your neck is the worst.”

She ran her brush through my hair, gathering it up into a big ponytail. I kind of lost interest as she started curling the ends and using bobby pins to loop them under. The final effect was pretty, but I didn't dare say anything to the currently muttering Ella.

She tackled my makeup next. I got eye shadow, blush, powder, eyeliner, mascara, the works. Makeup wasn't really my thing, but I decided not to say anything while she wielded sharp objects dangerously close to my eyeballs.

She handed me some tissue and instructed me to blot.

Then she sprayed me with glitter.

That was a step too far.

"I don't need to be bedazzled!" But all my protest got me was a mouthful of the stuff. It tasted terrible. I studied my reflection. "I look like one of those candy strippers sneezed on me."

"Striper. And it looks great. Now go get changed while I finish up in here."

Ella had made me all beautiful, like she did for every dance we went to. It always gave me an extra little boost of confidence. And much as I knew Jake enjoyed it, one of my favorite things about him was that he thought I was just as beautiful without all this stuff on my face.

He loved me for me.

I couldn't believe how close I'd come to totally forgetting that.

As I looked at my prom dress, now hanging on my closet door, a thought occurred to me.

“Ella?” I yelled.

“What?”

“How am I supposed to wear a bra in this thing?”

“You’re not!” she shouted.

That made me go back into her room. “Are you serious?”

She was sitting at her vanity table, pulling the rollers out of her hair. “Yes. I’m serious.”

“I don’t really let the girls go free range.”

“First time for everything,” she said. “I put lining in there for you, which should help. I also have these cup things you can use where you stick them onto your skin to keep your boobs in place.”

“And how do you get them back off?” I asked, alarmed.

Her expression told me all I needed to know. Free range, it was. “What if I have a wardrobe malfunction?”

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At that, she rolled her eyes and sighed. I really was rubbing off on her. “You won’t. And even if you did, it would make the prom super memorable. Which is what you want, right?”

Time-crunched Ella was no fun. I retreated back to my room and finished getting ready. “What shoes should I wear?” I hollered.

She came into my room, totally ready and looking much calmer. Her hair hung in perfect soft ringlets so that when the sun hit her hair, it made her look like she was glowing. “You’ve got those black heels you can use. It would have been better if we’d gone out and bought you, like, a pair of strappy silver sandals, but it totally slipped my mind that you don’t have a lot of appropriate shoes.”

Having big feet was kind of a hindrance to owning cute shoes. I found the heels in the back of my closet. “Got ’em! And it doesn’t really matter. I’ll just kick them off when we get there so that I can dance.”

She nodded. “Jake’s boutonniere is in the fridge, FYI. Deacon’s going to be here any minute.” She put a lipstick in my hand. “This is your color.”

“Wait, you got a boutonniere for me?”

“Don’t get too excited,” she said, giving me a silver clutch to put the lipstick and my phone in. “I just grabbed them from the grocery store. But the guys are not going to care.”

She was right.

The doorbell rang, and Ella let out a shaky breath. I realized she was actually nervous. “Deacon’s a good-looking guy,” I commented nonchalantly.

“Yes, he’s hot, and yes, I’ve noticed, and yes, it’s kind of freaking me out a little.”

“That just makes it more fun.”

She seemed to agree as she grinned at me.

“Ella?” my dad called out. He had insisted on inspecting our dates, but we had vetoed him interrogating the guys. He settled on answering the door when they came, figuring that would be enough of a show of force to make them behave.

I followed behind her and saw my dad standing there, arms folded, sporting a frown. Deacon didn’t seem even a little intimidated, which was probably helped by the fact that he had at least an inch on my father.

That, and all his attention was focused on Ella. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks. So do you.”

“We need pictures!” Jennifer declared, and started documenting Deacon and Ella’s entire interaction. Deacon opened up the plastic box and slid the wrist corsage onto Ella’s arm. She took her boutonniere and pinned it to the lapel of his tuxedo. They were so cute.

Her date wasn’t what she had originally wanted, but I could see that she was happy and excited. It was still good even if it was different.

Like me and my promposal. Because Jake was due to arrive any minute, and there was no way he was going to be able to ask me before the actual dance. I wasn’t

getting a promposal, and I had really wanted one, but I was going to spend the night dancing in the arms of my adorable boyfriend. Which was even better than “still good.”

Then Jennifer had Deacon and Ella stand together and put their arms around each other while she took picture after picture with her camera. Like she was a professional or something and couldn't use her phone like any other parent would.

“Okay, I think we're good!” Ella finally decided, which got Jennifer to stop acting like they were models in Jennifer's photo shoot. I sighed because I knew my turn was coming.

We told them good night and waved and watched as Deacon took her out to the waiting limo. “Good thing he brought that instead of the horse.”

“Why would he bring a horse?” my dad asked, sounding super confused.

“Never mind. I'll be in my room.”

Since we lived in a one-story home, we didn't have a staircase. Which I found especially devastating considering I couldn't have a 1980s movie-worthy prom dramatic reveal. So I'd settled for walking slowly down the hallway to the front door so that Jake could admire me.

I'd been in my room for only a few minutes when I heard the doorbell. My heart leaped with excitement.

My prom was about to officially begin.

Well, not technically, since there was at least another hour before the prom doors officially opened, but I guessed that Jake had made reservations for dinner

somewhere, and that would count as part of the whole prom experience.

“Uh, Mattie? I think the door’s for you.”

My dad still sounded confused. Maybe I should have explained the horse comment.

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I grabbed my clutch, gave myself the once-over in my mirror, and then headed down the hallway. Slowly. Like I was a bride marching down the aisle.

My father stood in the doorway, blocking Jake and ruining the entire effect. With a sigh, I began to walk normally and put my hand on Dad's shoulder to move him to one side. "You're totally killing my ... oh my Buddha."

I actually felt my jaw hit the floor.

Because it wasn't Jake standing at my front door.

It was the only person in the whole world who might possibly be better than him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Hello. I was told to find the most beautiful girl in the world at this address, so I'm guessing that you must be Mattie. I'm here to ask if you'd make Jake's life Some Kind of Wonderful and go with him to the prom."

My mouth refused to cooperate and form sound.

"Blink twice if that's a yes."

I settled for nodding.

"Great! That means these are all for you."

There, on my front porch, stood John Hughes's redheaded muse. The actress who had starred in my all-time favorite movies. "You're ... you're ... Mol ... Mol ... Mol ..."

Ignoring my inability to finish words, she smiled and handed me a massive bouquet of white roses, and with shaking arms, I took them.

This could not be happening. I passed the flowers over to Jennifer, and I saw that both she and my dad were just as stunned as I was.

"And here."

Then she gave me several DVDs that she had autographed. They had just become my most prized possessions.

"I heard you were a fan," she said.

That was a bit of an understatement. I again nodded enthusiastically and then immediately stopped. I kept telling myself, Don't be weird. Don't be weird. Don't be weird. But the rest of me didn't seem to be getting the message.

She must have been used to making people go dumb when they saw her because she gestured toward the driveway and kept carrying the conversation. "Come on. There's a driver waiting to take you to the dance, and I'm going to ride along with you on the way there and answer any questions you might have."

I gave my DVDs to my father and followed behind the actress. Dad and Jennifer, still in shock, stood in the doorway and watched us go.

"Your dress is pretty," she told me.

"My sister made it out of another dress." Just like in *Pretty in Pink*. Only I didn't say

that part because of the celebrity-induced daze I was currently in.

The driver held the back door of the limo open, and I crawled inside after the actress. “Your boyfriend must really love you.”

“Yeah” was all I could manage. She was right. Jake did love me, and he did get how important this promposal was to me, and he’d given me the most amazing, perfect one in the entire universe.

This actress owed her career to John Hughes. Because he’d seen something special in her and made her a star. It was something I could relate to on a very personal level—Jake had seen something special in me and made me feel like a star.

After a few more minutes of her trying to make me feel comfortable, it finally worked. My tongue loosened, and I was able to ask her questions about her experiences. She told me funny behind-the-scenes stories and had me either laughing or being completely in awe of her for the entire ride.

“Did you want to take a selfie?” she asked, and I realized then that nobody had taken any pictures of us together. Jennifer had really dropped the ball. And I definitely wanted photographic evidence. I fumbled with the button on my clutch and finally wrangled my phone free. Rather wisely, she took the camera and took several pictures. My hands probably would have shaken too hard to have a single clear shot.

“And ... we’re here. Enjoy your prom!”

“Thank you. I’m so glad I got to meet you. You’re my favorite actress ever. Ever.”

She laughed as the driver opened the door for me. “Have a good night, Mattie!”

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I stood on the sidewalk and watched as the limo pulled away from the curb. It was then that I realized I was not at Victor Kim's house. In fact, I'd been so caught up in my conversation that it hadn't registered that we'd been driving for a long time.

They'd left me in front of the Alban Havelock Hotel. The one Jake had brought me to a couple of weeks ago when he told me he wanted to be an architect. Only it looked totally different.

The windows had all been replaced, the graffiti had been painted over, and the roof looked brand-new. The murder-death-kill building had been revitalized and no longer looked like it had been rejected as a set for a horror movie for being too scary.

A purple carpet led from the sidewalk to the front doors. Two large men stood by the doors and opened them up for me, allowing me inside.

My prom committee had been here. A table had been placed next to the door to take tickets and stamp hands. I saw the photographer setting up in the lobby, near the front desk. There were lights on everywhere, and the flooring had been replaced. There was no more weird smell. In fact, the scent of fresh paint hit me. Jake had been right. This old gal was beautiful when she was scrubbed clean.

I heard the sound of music and headed over to the ballroom. The walk seemed a lot shorter now that I was no longer worried for my life. The massive ballroom doors had been propped open, and there were too many things happening in the room for me to take everything in at once.

It was completely decorated, with every cheesy and amazing thing we'd picked out

from our catalog. The giant carriage was off near the left wall, the massive clock about to strike midnight hung above the middle of the dance floor, and the large cardboard castle was up on the right side. All the restoration in this room had been finished. The wooden floors redone, the ceiling mural fixed, the columns and pillars returned to their original glory, the chandeliers bright and sparkling. It was beyond beautiful. I walked through the purple-and-silver balloon archways to enter the room.

Then I registered that the DJ was playing “If You Leave” by OMD. Just like in the movie *Pretty in Pink*.

Or in my case, pretty in purple.

Then I saw my boyfriend in a tuxedo that had obviously been tailored just for him. It amazed me that after all this time together, he could still make my heart race, my lungs feel too tight for my body, and my stomach flutter just by smiling at me.

I made my way over to him and realized that there were little pieces of candy all over the floor that I had to kick out of my way.

His eyes swept appreciatively over me, from my head to my feet. “Tills, you take my breath away. You are gorgeous.”

I definitely knew the feeling. But before I could say as much, he kissed me, so passionately, so intensely, that it made me feel like my entire body was made out of light.

When he released me, I asked, “How did you get her to come to my house and ride with me?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “My dad knows a guy.”

Of course. “What’s with the stuff all over the floor?”

Jake winked at me and reached down to pick up two foil-wrapped pieces of candy. One was a solid color, the other one striped. “These are Hershey’s Hugs and Kisses because what kind of promposal would it be for you if candy wasn’t involved?”

“I seriously love you. But this is going to be a huge mess when everybody else arrives and steps all over them.”

“We’ll get the underclassmen to pick them up. And if we miss a few, I’ve already paid the cleaning deposit.”

“Sweeter words have never been spoken.”

“Wait, I’m not done.” He put the candy into my hand. “And now that I have Hugged and Kissed the ground you walk on, will you be my date for prom?”

How cute was he? I wrapped my arms around his neck and said, “Well ... I’ll think about it.”

He pulled me in closer. “I think I could probably convince you to say yes.”

“You probably could,” I agreed. “Why is all the prom stuff here?”

His arms went around my waist, and we began dancing slowly together. “Ella told me how upset you were about the prom being at Victor Kim’s house. So I called Mr. Biltmore and talked him into letting us have it here. The thing that finally clinched it, though? Apparently it was that interview you did about your mom. Turns out Mr. Biltmore is a massive fan of your father, and then he gave me his blessing. That’s why we have the security out front. To only allow students in and make sure they’re not destructive while they’re here. And to give you and me some time alone before

the dance starts.”

“Yep. Just you, me, and the DJ.”

“He sees nothing. He hears nothing.”

I laughed. “That’s not going to work out too well since he’s in charge of the music.”

Jake kissed me again, with me giggling against his lips.

“And you got the whole prom committee here to set up without me knowing.” That was why Ella had been so excited for me to go to the dance recital. She hadn’t had to lie to me about where she was going or figure out a way to keep me from finding out.

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“Yep. Anybody can go to that French place you loved. But I looked into the history of this hotel and found out that no prom has ever been held here before. We are the first. No matter how many schools come after, we’ll always be the first ones. And that makes it pretty special.”

“You’re what’s making it special.” One of the DJ’s lights hit the chandelier just above us, turning it pink and purple for a brief moment. “I can’t believe how different this place is from the last time we were here.”

“Yeah, last time they’d been focusing on the stuff you don’t see. Electrical, plumbing, installing the state-of-the-art kitchens. Which, by the way, two of Shoshana’s dad’s best chefs are back there in that kitchen cooking for us right now.”

I heard excited voices, and I turned to see all the members of our student government arriving. The freshmen and sophomores would be taking tickets and helping out with the refreshment tables, making sure they were stocked. They worked so that the juniors and seniors could enjoy the dance. There were also some underclassmen from the yearbook and the school newspaper, ready to take pictures of this fabulous event.

Ella arrived about ten minutes later and ran over to me. “Jennifer texted me about Jake finally asking you! How amazing was your promposal?” she asked with a squeal.

“Beyond amazing. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

A song with a serious beat started, and Ella grabbed my hand. “Let’s go dance!”

I kicked off my high heels and followed her. It wasn't quite time for the rest of the students to arrive, and we were the only ones on the dance floor. But we didn't dance to impress anyone or to get attention. My sister and I were dancing it out—all our excitement and happiness, the way we'd been able to overcome all the obstacles that the universe had thrown in our way. We were young and awesome and here, together, and in this moment, everything was absolutely perfect.

A few minutes later, we were joined by Jake and Deacon, who danced every bit as goofy as we were. My sides had started to hurt from laughing so hard.

This whole day had been seriously good. I had helped fix someone else's family and their issues, and my wonderful, hot boyfriend had arranged it so I could meet and spend time with my favorite movie star, and then he had secretly set up our prom in this cool, vintage building that no longer smelled like animal carcasses and/or made me think I was going to get murdered by a sociopath.

I saw the rest of our class start to trickle in. Some claimed tables to sit at and eat. Others quickly joined us and started dancing.

Jake and I danced, we talked to people, we took pictures together, we drank a ton of punch and ate more of the castle cake than we probably should have, and then we danced some more.

And because it felt like only moments had passed, I was surprised when Ms. Rathbone went to the microphone and tapped on it to get everyone's attention. "If I may have your attention, we have the results for your prom king and queen."

My phone was in my purse so I couldn't check the time, but this meant the prom was almost over. Hours had passed in the blink of an eye.

Time really did fly when you were having this much fun.

“Your prom king is ...” She opened an envelope and announced to the surprise of exactly no one, especially me, “Jake Kingston!”

Jake squeezed my hand and kissed my cheek before going up to accept the award for yet another popularity contest. They put a crown on his head and handed him a scepter. They looked good, but both were basically spray-painted plastic.

“You’re next,” I told Ella, and she just gave me a look. Ha. As if the girl who’d won every queen title since she’d started at Malibu Prep wouldn’t take this last one.

“Your prom queen is ... Mattie Lowe!”

“She does know that’s not how you pronounce ‘Ella Christensen,’ right?” I asked my sister. This had to be some kind of mistake. I was not the prom queen type.

“Get up there and accept your crown!” She pushed me with both hands until I started walking, shocked at the hollering and applause and the people calling out my name.

How had this happened? A year ago I had exactly one friend. No one knew me. They didn’t even know my name. And now? Now they had voted for me to be queen?

Ms. Rathbone put the little sparkling tiara on my head and handed me my own scepter.

“Congratulations,” Jake said as he wrapped his arm around me.

“I’m the prom queen. I sort of want to gag.”

“Oh, you love it.” He knew me too well.

“Okay, I kind of do. But you know this only happened because I’m dating you.”

“No, it happened because you’re you, and you’re amazing.”

I glanced up at the ceiling, in large part to stop the sudden tears from falling and ruining my makeup, which would make my sister kick me.

“What are you doing?” Jake asked.

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“Just checking for buckets of blood.”

“Stop it. Enjoy your moment. Royal wave.” He lifted his hand up, waving like a beauty pageant queen, which made me laugh and dried up my tears. I copied him, and we both waved to all the people who were still cheering for us.

This was almost as good as being with Jake.

He grabbed me in his arms and, to the delight of the crowd, dipped me backward and kissed me deeply before letting me stand upright again.

Thanks to the love of my family, especially my sister, and the love of a guy as fantastic as Jake, I had changed.

From outsider to insider. From underdog to student body president. From hiding my true self to being exactly who I was. From hating so many things in my life to embracing them and moving past them.

I had gone from ugly stepsister to prom queen.

And as I held Jake’s hand and looked down at my sister’s giddy expression, I got the distinct feeling that we were all going to live happily ever after.