



The Romance Rivalry

Author: *Susan Lee*

Category: Romance, Young Adult

Description: She's read every romance...except her own.

Irene Park loves romance novels—so much so she's made a career of them as an online book reviewer with a massive following. But Irene's real life dating story? Non-existent.

So when she starts her freshman year of college, she sets her sights on finding true love using the one thing she really understands...romance book tropes.

If only it were that easy.

Enter Aiden Jeon, Irene's online book review rival and biggest nemesis. When Aiden challenges her to see who can find love-by-trope first, he becomes the one person standing in her way to getting everything she wants both professionally and personally, too.

So when the competition takes an unexpected turn, forcing the two of them to have to partner in the ultimate trope, fake dating, Irene is not prepared for everything she believed about romance, and Aiden, to flip on its head.

As Irene tackles the challenges of college life, struggles to figure out what she really wants for herself, all while trying to win the race for love, Irene realizes the answers may not be found in a romance novel. Happily Ever Afters seem so easy on page.

But for Irene to find her ultimate HEA, she'll have to get her nose out of the book and become the main character of her own story.

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Prologue

virgin romance

As a perpetual people pleaser, having a pair of very annoyed, possibly angry, definitely humiliated eyes glaring at me is my worst nightmare.

It's my senior prom. And honestly, the last place I thought I'd end up is in a limo with a group of mostly strangers. To my left is my cousin Jamie, technically the reason I'm in this mess, who is currently straddling a guy I'm not sure I've ever even seen around campus (though, granted, it's a very large school), with her tongue down his throat. Next to them, the class president has his hand up the dress of the shoo-in for valedictorian as she moans and oh my gods... honestly a little too loudly for such a small, occupied area if you ask me. There's another couple to my right, but after catching a glimpse of an indecent amount of bare skin in my peripheral vision, I'm actively trying very hard to avoid looking in that direction.

And then, sitting directly across from me, in a space so narrow our knees are almost touching and where I'm certain I can feel the heated fumes of his angry breathing, is Liam Davis.

Liam and I were freshman lab partners and, in the years since then, he's had just enough of a glow-up to be in the group of popular guys at our school, but never the main character. He's the classic second lead—or in the case of our prom night, the fourth lead, I guess—charming and lovable enough, but never gets the girl.

Especially if the only girl left in this scenario is me.

Jamie and I aren't even that close. She barely acknowledges me at school. So when she asked me into her group for prom, I was not only shocked, but pretty certain it was a pity invite.

"We'll be each other's dates," she said.

"Girls' night, just the single ladies," she promised.

That didn't sound too awful.

"Plus, everyone else will be there..." she pointed out, letting me come to my own conclusion as to what it would mean if I didn't agree to come along. "And who knows, maybe you'll finally hook up with someone."

So much for just the girls. But I appreciated her concern for my social and romantic statuses, I guess.

And maybe I should have expected it. That the moment we got to the prom, my group of single girlfriends immediately found a group of single guy friends. People started pairing up within minutes of arriving. And there I was, stuck with the one remaining unclaimed guy.

Liam Davis.

There's nothing wrong with Liam—there's just plenty wrong with me. I'm bad with social cues, I don't like anyone crowding my personal space, and I'm tortured by making decisions without ample thought and a solid plan.

So when Liam waggled his eyebrows at me, then started following me around the dance, getting handsier as his contraband flask of tequila got emptier, I didn't have time to think of what the best approach might be with someone I had to spend the

next few hours with. I just politely told him I wasn't interested.

Okay, so the words might have more accurately been "Absofuckinglutely not."

That didn't go over well with his fragile ego, and he's been pouting ever since.

Across from me, he releases a deep, frustrated sigh, followed by "What a prude. She's not even that pretty," mumbled under his alcohol-laden breath loudly enough for me to hear. He lifts his flask to his mouth, trying to capture the last drops within to drown out his bad fortune.

The word "sorry" sits at the tip of my tongue. I say it all the time. It's my go-to when I think there's going to be some kind of confrontation. But I force it back, not wanting to bring any more attention to myself.

Good times.

I should be loving all of this, right? Dancing. Drinking. Hookups. The freedom of one last high school hurrah?

I don't think I even had a first high school hurrah, or any in between. I'm not a "hurrah" type of person, I'm finding.

Instead, I'm trapped in this limo, twenty years past its prime, trying hard not to succumb to my curiosity of what happened in here to have certain parts of the leatherette patched together with duct tape that looks like it's holding on for dear life. I do not want to know the details. The smell of Axe body wash mixed with the slight sourness of stale breath and bodies forces me to breathe through my nose. Crooked bow ties. Flakes of dried mascara on cheeks.

I feel like I'm trying to cram my life into a shoe a half size too small.

It doesn't fit.

I don't fit.

I knew I should have stayed home. I'd be in my comfiest pair of sweats right now, reading the newest alien romance book I have on my e-reader.

In fact...

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I pull my phone from my purse and check the connection speed, a huge smile spreading across my face. I open the reading app and scroll through the pictures until I find it: a big, blue, muscled hunk o' lovin' with an enraptured wavy-haired redhead in his grasp.

Download.

Page 1.

Welcome to my happy place.

I am a self-professed romance-genre enthusiast... one might even say expert. I read on average about twenty or so books a month. And though I might not know a lot about romance in real life, I can tell you everything there is to know about it on these pages.

If the heroine in this book can put up with the hardships of an unknown planet with guts and determination and eventually find love with a ginormous blue alien, then I can, at the very least, survive my disastrous senior prom.

My time to be the main character will come.

For now, I'm building character. I'm figuring out my wound. I'm ripe to be misunderstood and then finally seen by the man of my dreams. And after experiencing a heartbreaking third-act breakup, we'll find our way back to each other. This is just another step toward my own eventual Happily Ever After. I'm certain of it.

I swipe my phone to the next page and continue to read. Just one chapter. Maybe two.

I can hide from this awkward situation like I always do... behind my book.

“Oh my god, Irene! Are you reading? In a limo? On prom night?”

I raise my eyes to see Jamie, dress hiked up to her waist, still straddling her date, but now with a look of total disbelief on her face. Her lipstick is smeared and her hair's disheveled. I open my mouth to answer her, but it's kind of obvious that yes, I am reading, in a limo, on prom night. And whereas this behavior seems utterly ridiculous to her, it's totally fine in my eyes.

But that's always been the issue. Most people in my life don't get my passion for reading, and they definitely don't respect my right to do it wherever and whenever I want.

“Irene is one of those book people,” Jamie tells her partner, whose glassed-over look and impossible-to-miss hard-on make it clear he has no idea what she's talking about and would rather get back to making out.

“Figures. Total nerd,” Liam says, his tone dripping with judgment.

“Well, to clarify, I'm a book reviewer,” I say. “You know... online?”

“God, *Catcher in the Rye* changed my life,” says the valedictorian. Sounds like something a valedictorian would say.

“Well, I read and review mostly romance novels. Tropes and HEAs. It's the highest-selling genre,” I explain.

Silence.

“I have over a million followers,” I add.

I don’t want to come across as too arrogant about it, but I felt it needed some more explanation. When I hit a million followers, I finally admitted to myself that this was a big thing and I should be proud of it. Plus, I’m this close to landing one of the largest brand sponsorship deals of any online book influencer... ever.

Liam spits out a laugh like that’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard. “So, you mean smut,” he says, barely able to contain himself, the mocking in his voice clear as day.

Hello, Neanderthal.

“Porn for chicks,” the guy next to me adds.

And we’ve got a misogynist here, too.

“Oh, I thought you meant you were a real reader,” the valedictorian tacks on.

Seems the literary snob didn’t want to be left out.

Weren’t all these people busy getting busy just a second ago? Why are they all suddenly so interested in judging me?

“It’s all she thinks or talks about,” my cousin adds.

It’s not all I think about. I also save space in my head for thoughts about the downfall of the US political system, the catastrophic effects of climate change, and the entirety of Taylor Swift’s dating history and its correlation to her music catalog.

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“I should’ve gone with Allie Jensen’s group instead. The chicks were hotter,” Liam says.

“You seemed interested right up until I rejected you,” I say under my breath.

“I wasn’t interested,” Liam protests. “It’s a rite of passage to get laid on prom night and I just needed a warm, willing body.” His self-satisfied smirk is my last straw.

And this is where I’m reminded how romance novels have served me. I know what a hero looks like. I know the kind of love and respect we all deserve. Why am I wasting my time here?

As gracefully as possible while decked out in a fitted prom dress in the back of a moving stretch limo, I crawl to the divider between us and the driver and knock. The glass lowers.

“Could you drop me off right there in front of the In-N-Out?” I ask, pointing to the big red-and-yellow sign on the corner at the upcoming stop light, where a long line of cars is wrapped around the parking lot.

“Wait, Irene, what are you doing?” Jamie asks.

“I’m outta here, friends. Have fun at the hotel and the after-party. I’ve got some smut to get home to,” I say, looking directly at Liam. He can try to use that word as a derogatory term, but I won’t let him.

“Why are you always so dramatic? It’s no big deal. No one meant any harm by it.

Don't go. Come party with us," Jamie says.

My time in high school has always been laced with being disregarded, misunderstood, and not taken seriously. I don't need to feel special. I just want to be seen. I can't wait to get out of here and start fresh in college.

"No thanks. I'm just gonna grab an Uber here. Have fun, though," I say.

The limo stops, and I open the door, step out, and head home.

"You're home early," my mom says from the kitchen as I unsuccessfully try to sneak into my house without being noticed.

"She went to the prom without a date, Mom. What did you expect? I can't believe you and Emo guilted Jamie into taking Irene with her and her friends." That would be my older sister, Cybil. She's a skincare model, meaning her face is on the brand packaging of some big Korean skincare brand. She's a joy to have around.

And while she may be blunt, she is not a liar.

"You guys made Jamie invite me?" I ask. Well, that explains the out-of-the-blue invitation. They probably paid her, too.

My mom tilts her head and her face scrunches into a pained, apologetic smile.

"Never mind, it's done with. And you're right. It was a good experience just for me to go," I say to appease her guilt. No use in both of us feeling crappy about this night. I'll take one for the team.

"Kiss-ass," Cybil says under her breath.

“Did you make funny faces while taking pictures?” my little brother, Eugene, asks. And as long as we’re giving out résumés for my family, he’s ranked number one in the country in junior golf. A prodigy.

“Come have ice cream with us, Irene,” my dad shouts with his head in the freezer. He uses his hip to close the door, arms full with a variety of flavored pints.

I let out a long-suffering sigh, toe off my incredibly uncomfortable sparkly sandals, and head to hang out with my family for a few.

They’re not awful; well, Cybil most definitely is awful. But, I love my parents, and Eugene is the freaking cutest thirteen-year-old you’ll ever meet.

But whenever we’re all together, it’s impossible not to be reminded that in the grand scheme of my family, I’m the ordinary, unexceptional middle child. My sister is gorgeous, and her face is all over Ulta, Sephora, and Olive Young in Korea. My brother is incredibly gifted, and you can hear sportscasters on ESPN and KBS talking about how they’re amazed at what he’s able to do at such a young age. They’re both regarded as the best in their respective fields.

And then there’s me.

I’m an online book reviewer. And though I’ve managed to make my hobby into a pretty successful gig, my family still doesn’t quite understand the importance of what I do and the amount of work it took me to get here.

But all of that could change with this pending brand deal.

SKCupid, South Korea’s biggest dating app, wants to sign me for a huge paid content deal. Six figures to start, with an opportunity for more. I’d get to talk about romance novels and plug their product as a way for people to find real-life love. I’d kinda be

the face of the brand, the face of romance, in the motherland. I might become more recognizable than either of my siblings. It's a dream partnership and would make my years of hard work building up my platform worth it.

Then my parents will have the best skincare model, the best junior golfer, and the best romance book expert out there. I won't just be the awkward middle child who they think "plays too much on the internet."

My mom, an avid reader, thinks it's fun that we can read books together and squeal over our favorite book boyfriends. And my father? He likes to brag to everyone he knows about the one thing that I, the middle child, bring to the table: I'm going to college at his alma mater in the fall. Still, fact is, I'm just not as interesting as my siblings, and that's possibly most obvious when we're all gathered together around the table. They do their best to include me in all the conversations, but the struggle to keep their interest is real.

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“So, were there no Prince Charmings at the dance? Nomessy-haired cinnamon rolls? No growly alphas looking at you intensely?” my mom asks, talking to me in romance lingo.

“Not even close,” I say, shaking my head, trying to remove all thoughts of the limo ride from hell.

“I’m sorry you didn’t have a good time,” my dad says. “Still, you look beautiful. Those high school boys don’t know a good thing when they see it. Don’t worry, once you get to Brighton, there will be plenty of smart and ambitious young college men standing in line to get your attention.”

Dad, talking about Brighton like it’s the best place on Earth again.

“And you look like a princess,” Eugene says.

“I can’t believe you went to prom without a date,” Cybil adds. “Anyways, as I was saying before Irene got home, I need the car tomorrow for my casting—the Mercedes, not the Honda.”

“Eugene has a tournament tomorrow and we have all his gear. We’ll need the bigger car,” my dad explains.

“Mom, I can’t show up to the casting in a Honda,” Cybil whines.

I stand up and grab my bowl of ice cream. Guess my three minutes of being the center of attention have ended. Now on to yet another family discussion I’m not

involved or interested in. “I’m gonna go upstairs and change,” I say.

The argument over transportation continues without a word in response to me. Per usual.

I head up to my room and close the door behind me, blocking out the sound of my family. Silence. Bliss. I put the bowl down on my desk and fire up my laptop.

I pull off my very uncomfortable prom dress and trade it for a pair of plaid pajama bottoms and my favorite oversize sweatshirt that says “Never f*ck with Nora, Debra” on the front. My battle armor, if you will. The signal that I forever stand with my queen, Nora Roberts, on any and all issues.

I bet Nora could’ve come up with an eviscerating one-liner for everyone in the limo.

I plop down in my desk chair, pulling one knee up to my chest and resting the foot on the seat while the other leg dangles. I interlace my fingers and pull, cracking my knuckles.

And I get to work.

I open up the seven platforms I use most frequently for posting my book reviews, either via text or video. And for the first time all night, I let my shoulders relax and exhale a soothing breath.

This is where I come to life: in my online circles, with my followers, my fellow romance readers.

Some people are studied in the arts or sciences. Some have bodies that can be used to create magic in dance or sports. Some have faces that look good in pictures (yay, you, Cybil). But me? My brain was meant for romance novels.

And from the first time I received a DM from a follower telling me I was the one who got them into reading romance and to keep up the good work, I knew: This is my calling.

I will fight for the HEA till my last breath.

I will discuss the nuances of romance tropes until my voice is gone.

I will read young adult, small-town, romantasy, dark, monster, mafia, hockey, and everything in between.

When I'm finished, I put my heart into reviewing them. And after posting all my reviews, I go back and respond to every comment, answer every question, and make recommendations for books as requested. I'm good at this. Maybe only this.

I scroll through my feed, saving some new trending sounds for future posts. I like and comment on a few posts by other reviewers. I download some book covers to use as thumbnails on my next monthly reading wrap-up.

Then, finally, I look at the response to my latest review, posted earlier today.

I had specifically worn a pink top to convey a carefree, unintimidating vibe for the video. I also made sure to smile from the very first moment I pressed record. I find this helps instill trust in my viewers about the content. I knew this debut author's virgin romance might not hit for everyone who reads it. But I wanted to make it clear why I loved it.

I think this review is a winner. The view count is growing, though not quite as quickly as I had hoped, and for the most part, the comments are kind, agreeable.

But then I see it.

The name.

@aidentheguyreadsromance

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I close my eyes for a brief moment and try to gather myself.

Aiden Jeon appeared in the online romance review circles a few months ago and has already built a huge following. For some reason, it's the hot new thing for a guy to read and love romance. And if he's good-looking (I mean, I guess Aiden is objectively decent in the looks category, though I refuse to be wooed by those dimples), then forget about it... he's gonna take off.

He's also the bane of my existence. The thorn in my side. My nemesis.

Because where I like to be as positive as I can about books in my reviews, Aiden takes a more critical approach. I like characters. He likes plot. I love books that make me feel. He prefers books that make him think. I will squeal over a good epilogue. Aiden finds them superfluous. Worst of all, he's unpredictable. I never know what he'll like or dislike.

And all our disagreements and opposing opinions would be just fine if he didn't enter my space and comment on my reviews, challenging my take on the trope in question. When he does, his followers always come along to troll me.

When I finally feel fortified enough to face it, I open my eyes and read his comment.

@aidentheguyreadsromance: While I agree with you that the author did a good job of not falling into the love-as-a-savior angle, I still felt we needed more explanation as to why the heroine put off love for so long.

She put off love because it wasn't a priority! She was living a life of struggle where

there was no room for love!

I let out a shaky, fury-laden breath and brace myself for a showdown.

As I'm getting ready to form my response, a new notification appears. I look down at the reply to Aiden's comment.

@spoilerqueen: Takes one to know one? Makes you wonder why Irene always loves the virgin romances. Ha

Excuse me. You don't know me. So I'm a late bloomer. There's no shame in that.

The next comment appears in thread.

@TheBookWasBetter: Irene reviews romance like a person who only knows it through a book. I like how Aiden reviews romance like someone who's lived it.

Um. Ouch.

What? Is Aiden Jeon some dating expert or something?

Followed by another.

@SilentBookClub569: This book didn't work for me at all. It was weird that the FMC was a relationship therapist but had never been in a relationship. Don't you think that lacks credibility?

Aiden's one comment challenging my point of view opened the floodgates for others to not only question my review, but to question me and my experience, or lack thereof. Why, all of a sudden, does it feel like everyone cares about my love life?

My hands start to sweat and my veins are thrumming like I've been jolted by a live wire. My anxiety spikes as I read the accusations and wonder...

... are they right?

How many times have I worried in the back of my head that the fact that I've never fallen in love, that I don't know what a true HEA feels like, might affect the way I review romance books?

Do I lack credibility? What if people start to see me as a fraud?

And with this potential brand deal looming, one where I'm being selected for being an expert on the romance genre, someone who knows it best, I can't afford to be questioned or doubted. This could put the deal with SKCupid at risk.

Here, in my safe space, I'm suddenly feeling anything but safe.

I quickly close my laptop and shut out the harsh words from my sight. I grab my journal and a pen and go sit in my bed. I need the hug of a pillow and a warm blanket for this.

People wanna question my ability to review romance books because I've never experienced love? Well, I'll show them. No one knows and understands these books better than me. And I'm more than willing to fall in love to prove it.

I open the journal to a fresh page and write my motto:

The answer to all of life's questions can be found in romance books.

And this is where I begin to plant the seeds of my foolproof plan to find love.

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Epigraph

When newcomer Adeline enters this tight-knit community, it's impossible not to take notice. She absolutely blossoms in this small town. Our MMC, Hank, has no chance. He's a goner from the get-go and everyone knows it. Isn't that the charm of small towns, though? Everyone knows their business, and thus it felt like the whole town was cheering for their HEA.

—@irene.loves.love.books

One

small-town romance

After weeks of suffering through all the “fun events” planned before high school graduation, after months of summer break where I kept myself busy by leading an online read-along of the Lisa Kleypas backlist, after days of packing my newly curated college wardrobe, and after hours of being in a car with my mom and dad as he regaled us with story after story of his glory days at college, it's finally here... move-in day.

My entire body buzzes with excitement. Or that could be the iced caramel macchiato I had on the way.

“Well, the room is a lot more charming than I expected,” my mom says.

“I wonder if these are the same desks from back when I lived in the dorms,” Dad says

in a reverent almost-whisper. He runs his fingers along the wood, reacquainting himself with every knot and scratch, and then presses down with both hands as if proving the bland furniture's sturdiness. "Yes, exactly the same. Same closet. Same bed..."

Oh god, I hope not. I don't need thoughts of all the yucky buildup on said bed from students past. They deep clean these beds, right?

I applied, was accepted, and eventually decided to attend Brighton College, a tiny private liberal arts university, for two reasons, both of which are standing right in front of me. One, this is my dad's alma mater, and if you think I'm going to disappoint him by declining their offer to come here, you'd obviously be wrong. And two, Brighton is known for their Contemporary Literature program. My mom's dream was always to be a book editor. And though she was never able to fulfill that, choosing to be a stay-at-home mom raising three kids instead, she's passed her dream down to me. We share a love of books. It makes sense, I guess.

I'm not actually the most organized person. And I've never really gotten into the craft of writing and the literariness of books. I read for vibes, not structure. But they'll teach me all of that here. I'm sure I'll make a fine editor one day.

I'd originally hoped to go to the much, much larger UCLA. I graduated from a big high school and there's something nice about being able to hide in a crowd, without everyone knowing or caring about your business. But when the rejection letter came, and the ones from every other school I applied to after that, Brighton became my only choice. I didn't tell anyone about my rejections. I wanted to make my dad feel like I'm here because it was my top choice, not just my only choice.

Anyways, I'm finally the kid that's making my parents' dreams come true for once.

I look around at my very small, very standard-issue dorm room. It's split in half so

that both sides are symmetrical. Neither side has been claimed yet, so I'm assuming I've arrived before my roommate, Jeannette.

We've FaceTimed a handful of times since we were randomly assigned to live together for the entirety of our freshman year at Brighton College. Jeannette was raised by a single dad, is the older sister to five brothers, a psychology major, and she's always humming me when I say something she wants to mull over and think about. She also uses the term "we" all the time: "We should figure out who brings what and just share," "What meal plan are we getting," "We are going to have the best year ever."

I've never been a part of a "we." I'm not quite sure how I feel about it yet. But she's clearly excited about living with a female for once, instead of a house filled with boys and the various scents and sounds that come with them. Most important, she's read *Six of Crows* and believes Kaz and Inej's HEA is canon, so she's all right by me.

Mom lets out a sigh. "Look at our Irene, all grown up," she says, clasping her hands at her chest, her lip quivering.

"Mom, please don't cry," I beg.

"We're just really proud of you. Our first child to go to college. And following your passion and your dreams. It's quite admirable," Dad says. It doesn't sound that impressive compared to what my siblings do. But if it makes my parents happy, if it makes their dreams come true, I'll take it.

Cybil didn't make the trip to Brighton to see me off. She couldn't miss her weekly facial, needed to maintain her glasslike skin for photos. Eugene is staying with my uncle Peter, who will likely stuff him with orange mac 'n' cheese and play video games with him all weekend. Good. He deserves a weekend off, not practicing or thinking about golf.

“Let’s just drop everything off here and go look around the campus,” I suggest.

We place everything on the bed farthest from the door. I hope Jeannette doesn’t mind. At least she gets the window. I just want as much wall space as possible for hanging up my reference charts. My to-be-read-this-week whiteboard along with my corkboard of all my fan castings for my favorite book boyfriends. Inspiration.

... for my plan.

“Oh, hi, you’re already here!”

I look over my shoulder and see Jeannette walking in, arms full of clothes on hangers. Behind her is someone I assume to be her dad, carrying some boxes and a laundry basket filled with toiletries.

Jeannette is tall, almost six feet is my best guess. And with her striking red hair and tiny facial features, she reminds me of a fae queen. Regal. Noticeable. But it’s when she smiles that I swear to god the entire room lights up and it suddenly feels ten degrees warmer. I’ve never met anyone whose presence impacts me physically, like taking my breath away. But that’s the best way to describe my new roommate.

“Hi, Jeannette,” I say. I stand awkwardly, as do my parents. My mom’s mouth is open like she can’t quite believe the majesty of the teen girl who stands before us. None of us move forward. We’re not good with in-contact pleasantries, apparently. But Jeannette drops the clothes on the empty bed, rushes over to me, and wraps her arms around me tightly. No such struggle with this one.

“Can you believe it? We’re in college! We’re roomies! We’re gonna have so much fun!” Did I also mention she’s very excitable? “And look at you! You cut your hair. And you decided to go with the bangs we discussed after all. I’m obsessed. So stylish.”

“Um, thanks,” I say. It was Jeannette’s suggestion, the full bangs and blunt bob, made on one of our FaceTime calls—one where she got especially animated over the new persona we were crafting. She even suggested I add blue hair color to the underlayers of my all black. I wasn’t sure I could pull it off, but she was right. It’s a whole new me.

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“The plan is all coming together!” she says excitedly.

My eyes widen in panic, and I shake my head slightly to let Jeannette know not to say any more.

I, of course, have not told my parents about the plan. In fact, I haven’t told anyone, other than Jeannette, and that was only in a moment of weakness when she was saying how as roommates, she hoped we could be open and honest with each other and then asked me what I wanted out of my first year in college.

Before I could make an excuse to get off the call before getting too deep with each other, she went first.

“In my first year of college, I want to make my family proud and show them what we’re all capable of. And”—she looked directly into the screen, directly into my soul—“to build tight, meaningful friendships that will last my whole life.”

I was overwhelmed.

I was touched.

I was put under the fairy’s spell.

I spilled it all.

So here it is—my plan is simple: For my first year in college, I want to fall in love.

Well, more specifically, to fall in love and be fallen in love with. A boyfriend. A relationship. A Happily Ever After.

And I'm using romance book tropes to do it.

No more being dateless at big events. No more having my credibility questioned in the comments. No more reason to worry if I'm not fit to be a brand ambassador for a dating app.

I'm ready for it... for love. To have someone pick me over anyone else. To find me the most interesting, to love me so much he can't live without me. I'm ready to be pushed against a wall and have lips swollen from kissing.

I'm ready to be the main character of my life's story.

And I'm going to use all my favorite romance tropes as my guide to selecting who to pursue. It's the framework I understand. One I can work within. I know how tropes work and how I should work within them.

And after plenty of scouring on Pinterest, along with some fashion advice from Jeannette, I found the look I need to fit my role as a young romance heroine. My future love interest may not know what's coming, but when I arrive, I'll make sure he takes notice.

I have a new look-at-me hairstyle, a new styled-to-fit-all-my-curves wardrobe, and, most important, a new unwavering determination to find him. The one. And when I do...

My entire body flushes at the thought, right here in my dorm with my parents, my new roommate, and my new roommate's dad.

Great.

“We were about to go look around campus,” I say quickly to change the subject.

“Oh, cool, we’ll come with you,” she suggests.

The parentals all exchange introductions and pleasantries and Jeannette throws an arm around my shoulder as we walk out into the bright afternoon sun. Everything looks so green, so peaceful, so quiet.

I can hear every anxious thought in my head so clearly.

“None of those fancy eyesores with modern glass and steel found here at Brighton,” Dad brags. We all nod and let him lead the way, the five of us off to explore Jeannette’s and my home for the next four years. My dream school, where I will study for my dream career...

... and where I’ll fall in love with my dream man.

The lecture hall is packed with young, enthusiastic, slightly terrified faces. Still, the total number of new freshmen at orientation is less than half of my high school graduating class. I’m worried that I’ll actually get to know every single person’s name, and they, in turn, will somehow know all my business.

Jeannette’s knee bounces next to me. “Look at everyone. I can’t believe this is who we’re going to be living and studying and growing into adulthood with.”

I reach over and place my hand on her knee. “You’re making me more nervous than I already am,” I say.

“Sorry. If you haven’t noticed yet, whatever you feel, I’m likely feeling it ten times

more intensely. I'm an empath."

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I smile at her and her big heart. I don't tell her I don't think I believe in empaths. No reason to concern her. Jeannette treats me as if we've known each other for years. And the friends back home that I have known for years haven't even contacted me once since graduation. The definition of "friend" seems so different from high school to college. There's a lot that's going to be different, I suspect.

I scan the room and take in the diverse group, curious where each of my fellow freshmen has come from and what they dream of doing. I wonder if any of them are in the Contemporary Literature program with me. Does anyone here read romance? Smaller class, lower odds. But still, I feel confident there are some.

My eyes are drawn to the back of someone sitting in the middle of the room a few rows in front of me. Broad shoulders, long neck, straight posture. His hair is cut tight in the back, longer in the front. He pulls his head from side to side, stretching, yet I still can't see his face. But there's something so familiar about him. Like I've seen that jawline before. Do I know him? Surely I would have heard about it if someone from my high school had ended up at Brighton as well.

"Okay, have you made an assessment yet of the options?" Jeannette leans into me while she scans the room. "I mean, you don't have to limit yourself to just freshmen, obviously. But I feel like it's a good start. Let me see..." Jeannette looks down at her phone's Notes app. Listed are some of the tropes we brainstormed over breakfast. For someone who doesn't really read romance, she seemed especially excited about friends-to-lovers and second-chance romances. I gave her a few book recommendations to check out.

"Is this seat taken?"

I look up to find a guy with an easy smile standing there. His blond hair is messy in a way that doesn't look like it's been done on purpose. And he has his hands shoved into his front pockets, shoulders lifted in an "aw shucks" kinda charm.

Wow. So guys like thatdoexist.

My mouth feels like a desert.

I'm here at a small school, technically a small town, so it very well could be that the first new person I meet ends up being The One. Just like in the books.

Okay, then, let's do this.

"Um, nope, it's available," I say with a smile. I grab my backpack and jacket off the seat and set them on the floor. "They haven't started yet, so you're just in time."

"Cool, guess it's my lucky day," he says as he takes a seat. "Hi, I'm Derek, by the way." He reaches out his hand and I grab it.

"Hi, I'm Irene, and this is my roommate, Jeannette."

"Nice to meet you both." He holds my eye for one second longer than is necessary. I feel my face blush and hope it doesn't look all splotchy. Just as I look away, I notice himdoing a once-over of me from head to toe.

I try to play it cool. Don't smile too big. Don't seem too eager. I've never been the type guys notice and look at twice. But now that I'm in my romance-heroine era, maybe things are changing.

Jeannette elbows me in a very unsubtle way and I bite my tongue not to let out the "ow" I'm feeling from it. We both need to relax, find our chill.

“Where are you from, Derek?” I ask. Small talk. Yes, good.

“New York. Manhattan,” he says.

“What’s your major?”

“I’m a poli-sci major. My dad’s a city councilman and he’d really like to see me follow in his footsteps,” Derek says.

Interesting. Big-city boy runs from his family’s overbearing expectations and lands in a small town where he unexpectedly meets the love of his life. I’ve definitely read this one.

“What about you?” Derek asks.

“I’m a contemporary literature major. I’m studying to become an editor, in publishing,” I explain. “Books are kind of my thing.”

And let the awkward silence commence, as it so often does when I mention books.

“Hey, so what are you doing after orientation? Do you wanna go and get a coffee with me?” Derek asks.

His invitation catches me off guard. It feels sudden. We’ve only exchanged pleasantries and, like, two questions about ourselves. His eagerness is unexpected. What’s wrong with him that he’s interested in me already? I haven’t had the chance to be self-deprecating in a witty and charming way yet.

“Um...” I’m uncertain how to respond.

“You just adore coffee, Irene. Weren’t you saying so this very morning?” Jeannette

says.

Well, I actually said I'd be crawling through the mud without coffee in the morning, but I guess that's one interpretation. And why is Jeannette suddenly talking like a New England debutante? She's from the Valley.

"Yeah, okay, sure, sounds good," I say. No harm in meeting someone new with my roommate.

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“I, on the other hand, have got some really important plans and simply just cannot get out of them, so you two go along without me,” Jeannette says. Again, subtlety: not her forte.

I give an awkward smile to Derek on one side and shoot daggers from my eyes at Jeannette on the other, but she’s busy frantically typing on her phone. Then mine buzzes with a new notification. I look down at the text.

Jeannette:He’s cute! And totally interested! OMG!

I feel the weight of Derek’s gaze on me to my right. I feel the buzz of Jeannette’s thumbs flying over her phone texting me to my left. I feel the pounding of my heart inside me, beating out the rhythmfirst date, first datedown my center.

I take a deep breath.

It’s your time to be the main character, Irene. Let’s do this.

I turn back to Derek.

He’s cute, but something’s missing. There isn’t an immediate, all-consuming attraction to him. No butterflies. No va-va-va-voom. It could be slow-burn over instalove, I guess. I’m interested to see how the conversation over coffee goes and if I find myself more drawn to him afterward.

I turn around as the speaker at the front asks for everyone’s attention. My eyes are drawn once again to the guy in the middle of the room. I catch him just as he turns his

head toward the speaker as well. Was he looking back at me? I wish I could get just one look at his face.

But I give up and place my focus on freshman orientation—where to park my bike if I have one, how to access campus security in case of emergency, and best tips on how to succeed in college.

I sneak a quick peek at Derek. He's taking notes like his life depends on it. I should probably write some stuff down, too, in case I miss some important information. But my head is filled with thoughts of every small-town romance I've read and how this could play out.

I didn't expect this all to happen so fast. It's only day one. Am I really ready for what's next if this plan of mine actually works?

Well, I'm about to get coffee with Small-Town Romance Derek, so I better get ready.

"So, what do you say?" Derek asks me.

I'm caught mid-sip and his question has me coughing up the coffee that has gone down the wrong pipe. He pats me on the back a few times.

"I'm sorry, you want me to pretend to be your girlfriend so that you can win back your ex?" I ask.

He nods earnestly. "You look a lot like her." He holds out his phone and shows me his lock screen. An adorable blond girl with bangs who I look nothing like smiles up at me. "I'm certain she just has to see me with a pretty girl on my arm to realize she made a terrible mistake breaking up with me. She doesn't want freedom to try new things in college. We were supposed to come to Brighton together. How can I be here on my own? I need her to realize her mistake." His voice is desperate, and with

desperation comes volume. The entire coffee shop has heard his plea and sits waiting for my response.

And considering how small this campus is, I'm sure this will be posted in some online student chat portal, passed along in whispers between classes, and featured as headline news in the school paper by end of week. I probably share a class with her, too.

Great.

This would not have happened at UCLA, guaranteed.

Thing is, I feel Derek's pain. And fake dating is such an incredible tool for love. Though it's usually the two people faking it who find themselves surprised at the very real feelings that eventually form between them. Frankly, Derek kinda gives me the ick. And he's so whipped for his ex, there's no way that's happening in this situation.

I wonder what it's like to be loved that much.

I want to help him. But I have my own plan to find love, and that's what I need to deal with right now. No time to waste.

"I'm sorry, Derek. But I think it would honestly be best if you just told her straight up how you feel. Let her know how miserable you are without her. Women love a grand gesture. Don't play games. Your love doesn't need them," I say.

"Preach," someone says at one of the two-tops in the corner.

"Listen to her," one of the baristas chimes in.

"Go get your girl," a patron behind a laptop adds.

Derek's eyes light up. "You're right, Irene. I just need to tell her how I feel. If she knows how serious I am about our love, surely she'll want me back."

"Yeah, okay, but maybe take it down just a notch," I say, pressing my forefinger and thumb together to demonstrate just how much I think he needs to chill. I don't, however, tell him how his intensity might be the reason his ex wanted space in the first place.

Derek jumps up from his seat and bends down to hug me. "Thank you so much for the advice. I'm so glad I met you at orientation." And with that, he takes off.

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I definitely didn't have tropes working against me on my bingo card.

I avoid the stares of the others around me. I grab my backpack and stand, throwing away my empty cup. I mourn the loss of this coffee shop as a regular place to patronize, as I clearly can never show my face here again.

And I walk out the door, the jingle of the bell above me ringing in my ears. I sigh as I head back to my dorm, trying to put the entire day behind me.

Because while I may have possibly saved one relationship, I, myself, am back to square one.

Luckily, the school year has just started, and I have a long list of tropes at the ready to move forward.

Epigraph

I'm gonna be honest... I wasn't sure the author was going to be able to redeem Connor of his earlier aggressive feelings and hurtful actions towards Samantha. And this is often my struggle with enemies-to-lovers. Sometimes what made them dislike each other in the first place isn't completely dealt with to my satisfaction by the time they fall in love. I'm often left wanting a lot more groveling. Though there was a lot to like about the book, in the end, this one just wasn't for me.

—@irene.loves.love.books

Auto-buy author writing my favorite trope? Let's do this! FUUUUUUCK the tension

between Connor and Samantha... kill me now. That contradiction between being pitted against each other and yet having feelings that throw these roles on their heads is so satisfying to me. I thoroughly enjoyed Connor's character arc, and his redemption of past hurts was rewarded with the HEA.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Two

enemies-to-lovers

I've changed my top three times. I think the jeans are the right choice. But do I go with a fitted wrap top or an off-the-shoulder sweater for my first day of classes? I never really cared how I dressed when I was in high school. But presenting myself as someone to be taken seriously, someone worthy to be the love interest, and someone destined to be successful in publishing all puts a lot of pressure on me.

I decide on a simple white button-down with cap sleeves and a black leather jacket. I have this look saved twice on my "Collegiate But Cool" and my "Simple Yet Sexy" Pinterest boards.

"Wow, you look great," Jeannette says to me as she steps into our room in a robe with a towel wrapped around her head. I want to respond "so do you," because she actually does look great, even in a robe. But I don't want her to think I'm just saying it as an automatic response. So I just stand there like an idiot.

My classes start at eight on Mondays and hers not until ten. I'm going to miss having her as my confidante today, but maybe it's a good thing. I need to do this socializing thing on my own sometimes, too.

"Thanks. I have Intro to Lit today and I want to make a good impression."

She nods supportively.

“Wanna meet for lunch at eleven o’clock at the cafeteria?” she asks.

“Sounds good,” I say. It’s a small gesture, but warmth spreads through my chest. I appreciate Jeannette including me in her invitation. Jeannette exudes main character energy. But since my plan is for me to step into that role, I’m claiming her as the quirky best friend who drops words of wisdom whenever the MC needs to get back on track. “Okay, I’m off. Good luck with classes and see you at eleven,” I say as I head out toward the English building across campus.

When I step into the lecture room, it surprises me how much smaller it is than I expected. Small should be comforting. But instead, it feels like a stage, where the spotlight can so easily shine on any one of us. There can’t be more than fifty people in this class. It’s an intro course, so we must all be first-years here, all in the same awkward position of being new. Or at least that’s what I’m hoping. Kindred spirits in our discomfort.

The seats have already started to fill up and I find a spot toward the middle, a couple chairs in from the aisle.

I don’t mean to be annoying, I swear. But a part of me wonders if there’s anyone in this class who follows me, who might recognize me. It happened more than a few times back in LA: at the grocery store, at The Ripped Bodice bookstore (obviously), even at one of Eugene’s golf tournaments. A mother of one of his fellow junior golfers excitedly wanted to talk about her favorite Black Dagger Brotherhood heroes. Leather-clad vampires is a topic I am always down to discuss, unless I’m surrounded by preteen golfers and their mostly non-romance-reader parents.

Anyways, I do a subtle scan of the room and don’t see anyone staring back at me. But my eye catches, once again, on the same broad shoulders and long neck I noticed the

other day at orientation. He's sitting in the front row, and at this point, I'm sure I know him from somewhere. He feels familiar.

I catch a glimpse of his profile. Today he's got on black-rimmed glasses, and I'm immediately on high alert. Glasses on a man are my weakness (along with gray sweatpants and a well-worn long-sleeved Henley shirt... the uniform of all my favorite romance heroes). I need to just get a good look at his face. I make a note to pack my bags slowly when class is done in hopes of seeing him walking out.

"Welcome, everyone, to Introduction to Literature. I'm your professor, Dr. Alan Kingston, and since most of you are here in this class at Brighton as part of the Contemporary Literature program, I will instead be focusing on the classics."

An audible groan comes from all over the room. The professor smiles as if he's going to love torturing all of us with the curriculum.

I try to take notes as he goes over the syllabus of the course for the semester. He talks about things that are completely new to me. He mentions books and tomes that everyone else seems to recognize, but I'm clueless. I give up following along two-thirds of the way through. I can already tell I'm in over my head with this class and it's only an intro.

But I'm among my people here, book people, and as long as that's the case, I'm sure I'll be okay. What could be so hard? The professor lectures, we read, we write a few things. Easy.

Except, I'm not a great writer. And though I am a most excellent reader, it's really only if I'm interested in the book. But I'm here in college to expand my horizons, to stretch my wings, to push myself past my comfort zone.

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“Now, I’d like you all to pair up—find a person you’ve never met and introduce yourselves. Go up to someone new and tell them the first line of your story. Then, when you’ve grabbed their attention, continue on with the general stuff—name, where you’re from, and the key: why you want to study literature. What is it about words on a page that excites you? Okay, get to it.”

Great. My comfort zone is blown all the way to the moon.

Once again, I scan the classroom looking for someone, anyone, really, to pair up with. I watch as people turn in their seats, smile at others, nod an invitation; some people actually get up and walk to other parts of the room to find a partner. But no one even looks my way. It’s like I’m not even here.

The sinking feeling, all too familiar, that I sometimes get when my parents are too busy taking care of my siblings’ lives to even ask about mine, or when my high school friends have plans for the weekend that don’t include me, makes its way down to the pit of my stomach. No one wants me as a partner.

Nobody picks me.

I drop my eyes, unable to look up anymore. It’s too humiliating to keep searching the room for signs of interest. I should just grab my bag and make a quick exit from class. I reach down...

... just as someone plops into the seat next to me.

“Going somewhere?” he asks.

“No,” I say, quickly dropping my bag back down by my feet. “I was just gonna grab my, um, hairbrush out of my backpack.” My hairbrush? That’s the best I could come up with? Who brushes their hair in the middle of class? Ew. No wonder no one chose me. This guy probably wants to escape without making eye contact.

I feel my cheeks turning a most certainly vivid shade of pink. I want to slap my forehead. Don’t ruin this, Irene.

Instead, I will myself to keep butt in chair and turn to inspect my new seat neighbor.

My eyes widen and I let out an audible gasp.

Black-rimmed glasses. And equally dark eyes taking in the whole of me. Is this what authors mean when they say someone’s eyes are dancing? Because as he inspects me, I can almost hear the background music—the vibe of BTS’s “Pied Piper”—and he’s amused.

I swallow.

He nods a few times, the right side of his mouth lifting slightly as if he’s come up with some answer to a question I had no idea was asked.

He leans back and relaxes into the chair, despite the fact that his long, denim-clad legs can’t possibly have enough room in this narrow row of seats. His elbows on the armrests, he clasps his hands on his stomach, not a care in the world, turns his head, meets my eyes, and says slowly...

“Exactly as I expected.”

I knew it! I knew he was someone familiar. But he’s figured it out before I have. I tilt my head right and then left, looking at him from every angle. I most certainly know

his face. But from where? I narrow my eyes and take a closer look, examining each feature.

As he watches me trying to figure out the puzzle, a slow smile spreads across his face. And when it reaches its full width, two dimples appear on his cheeks, one punctuating each corner of his mouth.

Darkness descends. A sudden dread lodges in my throat, threatening to cut off my airway. I hold up both hands, making a square with my pointer fingers and thumbs. I look at his face through this frame as if seeing him... on a screen.

No.

It can't be.

Cocky smile, mischievous eyes, deep dimples, arrogant... aura.

"You..." I whisper, unbelieving.

"Once upon a time, two popular romance reviewers end up at the same school, in the same class, no less, and fall in..."

"It can't be," I say, still unable to process this all. "You are not here." I want to stick my fingers in my ears, squeeze my eyes shut, and start this day over. "And 'Once upon a time'? Really? Original." I roll my eyes. I may be going through the crisis of seeing my online archnemesi sitting right next to me in the flesh, but the book reviewer in me can't forgive a half-assed attempt at an opening line.

"Got your attention," he says. He looks so smug, so self-satisfied. "Anyways, as I'm sure you guessed, I'm Aiden Jeon, eighteen, from San Francisco. And I've been dying to meet you."

His name feels like a slap back to reality, the ghostly sting of it burning on my cheek.

“What are you doing here?” I shriek. It’s like seeing a monster. In a hot-guy costume. And why is he so much bigger in person?

“I go to school here. I’m sure we’ve discussed this online before,” he says.

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“We don’t talk online. Except for when you’re disagreeing with my reviews and bringing your abusive followers along with you to troll me in the comments.”

He pulls back as if I’m the one who’s slapped him. At least he’s a good actor. I almost believe that he feels bad about it.

“Now, now, let’s not get aggressive,” he says, which only fuels my rage. My nostrils flare and my eyes feel like they’re going to pop out of their sockets. But Aiden? He gently pushes his glasses up his nose as a smile slowly blooms across his face, unleashing those damn dimples again. “This is exactly how I imagined you’d look when you get angry about a book. Not the perma-smile you have on-screen, but this...” He juts his chin out at me.

I don’t appreciate whatever it is he’s trying to say. I do not have a perma-smile on-screen! I open my mouth to defend myself. To argue with him. To demand he leave this school immediately.

“Look, we have all year to talk about our online history with each other. But for now, we have an assignment. So tell me, Irene, what’s the opening line to your story?”

I stare at him, unbelieving that he can just act like we’re two people who can get along. Like he isn’t my biggest rival. Like we aren’t basically enemies.

But he stares back, unfazed by my wrath. His eyebrows are lifted, waiting for my answer.

“It’s a glorious day for a murder,” I respond without thinking. This is absolutely not

how I want to present the story of my life. I'm a pacifist. But it's the only first line I can think of with Aiden sitting next to me egging me on.

He throws his head back and laughs and I try not to notice the vein that runs down his long neck as he does so. Why does a mere human have so many veins, and why am I staring? I blame years of reading Twilight fic.

"Nice. You've got me hooked already. I'm excited to read more," he says. I hate the way he says it, all cocky-like, as if I need his approval. I hate even more that his positive reaction makes me feel like I've won some kind of prize or something. He's so rarely impressed by anything I say or do. "And the intro?" He waves his hand at me, inviting me to continue. Like I need his permission.

"Oh, fine," I grumble. "Irene Park from LA. And, well, I want to study literature to be an editor, okay?"

"Really? I don't know why I just assumed you wanted to be a writer. That's why I'm in the program. Writer," he says, pointing to himself.

I drop my scowl and let out a groan, rolling my head back on my shoulders. Why does he have to be a writer? I love writers.

But I don't love him.

"How do you feel about what the professor said about studying the classics? I wonder if we'll cover any Austen books," he asks.

I don't want to make small talk with him. I don't want to get to know him. I know all I need or want to know about him already. I most definitely do not want to read Austen.

And I really don't want to be so aware of how his broad shoulders take up so much space and how soft and clear his skin looks. He's probably obsessed with skincare and has a crush on my model sister.

He also smells good, darn him. Like a woodsy citrus scent. I can't help myself. I lean in a little bit to get another whiff, pinning him to his chair like a rabid dog. He draws back, looking down his nose at me, and I turn my eyes up to look at him from under my lashes.

"Sorry," I whisper, reaching for an invisible strand of hair on his shoulder. "You've got a hair here." I pat him twice and start to pull back.

"Thanks," he says. He reaches his hand out before I've completely pulled away, and with the gentlest touch, he combs his fingers through my hair.

My breath catches. I swallow but let out a cough, almost choking on my own spit.

He draws his hand back. "I was just trying to tame this little frizzy part here in your hair. Luckily, you've got that hairbrush in your bag."

That know-it-all smirk again. It's going to be the death of me.

I glare at him as I pat down my hair with both hands. Frizzy. As if.

"I like the new look," he says.

"I didn't ask your opinion," I say. That flutter in my chest has nothing to do with the fact that he noticed at all. "Just tell me, you go here for real? This isn't some cruel prank?"

"Yes, I go here for real. Why would I prank you? That's way too much effort."

My posture collapses and I let out a sigh that sounds like a whine. I have plans to reinvent myself here in college. The last thing I need is Aiden Jeon breathing down my neck distracting me. I just have to stay away from him, avoid him. This is a small school, but it should be big enough to not have to run into him ever again. So we might be in the same classes—I can sit on the opposite side of the room, take a different exit, easy enough.

I may not be worth his effort to prank. But he's worth my effort to avoid.

“So now that you’ve introduced yourself to someone new and gotten to know why they’re here, look at your new classmate once more...” Dr. Kingston says to the room.

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I don't turn my head, but I do sneak a peek at Aiden in my peripheral vision. I most definitely can avoid him now that I know what to look for.

“This is going to be your project partner for the rest of the semester.”

Aiden Jeon lets out a little chuckle just as a miserable, agonized scream releases inside me.

Epigraph

Love at first sight is wildly romantic, in my opinion. Emily just knew she'd end up with Tucker from the get-go, and the author masterfully led us to believe in this instalove as well. Reading and waiting for Tucker to realize his own feelings for Emily was such a satisfying journey.

—@irene.loves.love.books

Instalove, when done right, is my crack. But the author has to convince me that there's a spark one character feels down to their bones towards the other. Emily's obsession with Tucker felt a little surface-level at first—not quite stalker-level, but I wouldn't blame him if he got a restraining order. Ha!

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Three

instalove

“Okay, so explain to me who this guy is again?”

“He’s my nemesis,” I say, grabbing an egg salad sandwich from the refrigerated shelf and putting it on my tray. I decided to meet Jeannette outside her lecture hall so we could walk to the cafeteria together. I also needed to process my feelings about the morning. The entire walk, I mumbled to myself about how I have the worst luck and how the world is out to get me and how there’s no way I will survive the semester with Aiden Jeon, of all people, as my project partner.

I grab an apple and, in a last-second decision, because I’m feeling out of sorts, a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos displayed by the register.

“And how do you know him?” Jeannette asks as she pays for her chili, corn bread, side salad, Jell-O bowl, chocolate chip cookie, and KIND bar for later. The metabolism on this girl.

“He’s a fellow romance reviewer. He’s kinda skyrocketed in the past year because he’s a guy and he’s contrarian, at least he is with all my reviews, and—”

“And he’s hot.”

I pass my dining card to the cashier while shooting a side-eyed glare at Jeannette. “I mean, if you’re into that type,” I mumble.

“I think the words you used to describe him were ‘tall, lean, dimpled, shoulders for days’ ... is anyone not into that type?”

“That’s not fair. You picked and chose my words to make it seem like I find him attractive or something. That’s not how I meant it when I was describing him.”

“Hmmm,” she says.

“You’re not helping,” I say.

“And he reads romance books? I mean, he’s the living, breathing, on-campus version of that IG account Hot Dudes Reading.”

I love that account. Now I’m depressed.

“What irritates me is, he’s always copying me.”

“What, like he plagiarizes your content?”

“No, not exactly. Not word for word. But he reads the same books that I do. He never has an original selection.” When I first noticed this, I just wrote it off as us both reviewing new releases. But even when I read and post about a backlist book, Aiden does the same shortly after.

“You know what they say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” Jeannette says. “Maybe he’s not even doing it on purpose.”

I look into Jeannette’s big doe eyes and wonder if she has ever had an enemy in her life. I must protect her at all costs.

We take our trays and find a table in the corner by the window. I unwrap my sandwich and take a huge bite out of it. All this angst is making me starving.

“I can’t believe this was the first time the two of you have met in person. What are the odds that you have this online rivalry and end up at the same school, and as project partners, no less? Honestly, I know you told me you hate enemies-to-lovers, but this whole setup is prime for a college romance, Irene. It’s not just the trope. It’s the fact that this is all real. Two people who share the same passion, who disagree about things but clearly have a spark...”

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“We do not have a spark,” I say through a mouthful of egg salad. Which probably looks as gross as it sounds.

“Irene, he’s got you totally bent out of shape. You know what this means. It means you care about what he thinks.”

“Actually, I think it means I find him utterly annoying,” I reply. And it’s not that special—I care about what everyone thinks. I’m a chronic people pleaser.

“But why, though? Is there a reason both of you can’t exist in the romance-reviewing space?”

It’s a totally fair question. I like and respect so many other reviewers. And I have no problem with men being in the space, as long as they respect and enjoy the genre. I also don’t find it at all odd that Aiden and I are two of the very few Korean reviewers out there.

So why does he press every one of my buttons? Something about Aiden’s existence makes me feel very...

“He makes me nervous,” I admit.

“Hmmm,” she responds again, a knowing smile on her face.

I roll my eyes, shrug, and go back to work on my sandwich.

What are the odds of me and Aiden being at the same school, in the same class, even?

Forget odds. I just have really bad luck.

“Anyways, how were your classes this morning?” I ask.

Jeannette wipes her mouth with her napkin, and when her eyes meet mine, I suddenly feel sorry I asked. My full-of-light roommate looks very dark.

“I think I’m in over my head,” she says. Her downturned mouth, the droop of her shoulders, the tiny worry line forming between her eyes. This is all very bad. I’ve never—in the three days we’ve known each other—seen Jeannette like this.

I want to tell her that I kinda know how she feels. That I don’t know what I’m doing. That my Intro to Lit class, which I thought would be a dream, has me totally confused already. That I miss my family, even Cybil, kinda sorta. That I may have been fooling myself into thinking I’m ever gonna find a boyfriend, despite my foolproof plan.

But I don’t say any of that.

“It’s just the first day. It’ll totally get better,” I say instead.

Jeannette’s frown lifts into a smile, and I swear to god, it looks like she believes me. I hope life doesn’t make a liar of me.

“Hey, if you two are interested, we’re having our first meeting of the Brighton Book Club Thursday night at the Commons.”

I look up into the green eyes of a guy clearly in talks to star in some new CW show. He’s gorgeous, in the way that no one should have the right to be—tanned skin, long, straight nose, wearing the private-school-coed uniform of light blue cotton button-down and khaki pants.

My mouth goes dry.

My eyeballs have bazoonga'd out of their sockets.

Jeannette is equally and uncharacteristically quiet. When I sneak a peek in her direction, her eyes are rounded, mouth slack-jawed, and I think I hear an audible gulp.

I'm starting to think this school pays good-looking people to come on campus and recruit people into their...

"Wait, did you say book club?" I ask. I reach and take the flyer he's been holding out toward us for what has probably been a minute or two too long for polite company.

I face my internal struggle of being curious about what's listed about this book club on the paper but not wanting to pull my eyes away from this stunning man in front of me foreven one moment of my life.

I make the choice. I look away and read the flyer.

"I did," he says, in what is of course a low, melodic voice saved for the angels. "Do you like to read?"

Talk dirty to me.

"I do," I say back. Oh god, his beauty has limited me to a mere two words. But when I look up into his eyes, I see the sparkle... the kind I've only ever read about in, well, books. He thinks I'm flirting. I'm not flirting. I'm too mesmerized to flirt. I don't flirt on my best days.

I'm certainly not flirting after having eaten an egg salad sandwich and now being

faced with a deity offering me an invite to the promised land.

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“Irene is a famous book reviewer,” Jeannette says. I’ve not only gained a roommate, I’ve also gotten a new hype girl.

His emerald eyes widen in surprise. He tilts his head in a nod in my direction. I have been perceived by the Lord of Good Looks of the Book Club Realm. “Really? That is very impressive. I’m gonna have to look you up. Where can I find you?”

My back straightens and I lift my chin. My book channels are the one place I can be the impressive one. Where I get a sense of confidence I don’t usually have any other time in my life. You want to look me up, handsome? You’re gonna like what you find.

“I’m @irene.loves.love.books across all platforms,” I say, my voice strong. I am the chosen one.

“Well, just to warn you, we’re not professional literary critics or anything. We just read and question and discuss. It’s a great exploration of stories. We’d love for you to join us. We don’t limit to a specific genre, which makes the conversations spirited and enlightened.”

“Sounds great,” I say, looking down at the flyer again. I make a mental note to add the meeting to my calendar to check it out. Though I wonder if they’d let me come only on the weeks we read romance. “I’ll be there.”

He leans his body slightly in toward me. “I really hope so, @irene.loves.love.books,” he says. He looks at Jeannette and smiles. Then one last glance at me. And, oh god, he does it. He winks.

Okay, so I cringe slightly, because it's weird to wink at strangers. But I bury the ever-so-minor misstep so I don't miss the chance to gawk at his ass as he walks away.

"Be right back," Jeannette says to me. "Gotta go change my panties."

A couple nights later, when I should be back in my dorm room unburying myself from the already massive load of studying I've been assigned in only the first week of classes, I head out, instead, to the Brighton Book Club. The Commons is on the other side of campus from my dorm room, and I leave extra early to make sure I get a good seat. One never knows how big a book club meeting can get. I'm hoping, since I'm at a liberal arts college, that it will be sufficiently attended, buzzing and spirited.

I hadn't had the chance to read the book, a thriller, but I figure since this is my first meeting, I can just sit back and watch. Take it in.

After all, book people are the best people. It's sure to be a good time.

I had trouble finding the right outfit to wear to the event. Jeannette, in her first sign of doubting my abilities, frowned when she saw me in my "just one bed" T-shirt and ripped jeans. I thought it gave off just the right vibe.

Jeannette thought I should rethink what vibe it gave off.

I ended up sticking with the jeans and going with a plain white T-shirt and gray cardigan. The outfit screams "fashionable literary mind." Okay, so maybe it's more of a loud whisper than a scream, but it'll do.

It's quiet as I walk through the greenway that runs down the center of campus. In what feels like the first time since I got here, I settle my mind. I take in the trees and the lushness of all that's around me. Brighton is gorgeous. I'm in college. My future is mine to make...

“Where you headed?”

I jerk my head around to the voice that has been tormenting me in my mind and on my screen during the (many)times I’ve (re)watched his posts (for research). Best to know everything you can about the enemy.

“Are you following me?” I ask.

“Please.” I don’t have to even look at him to see his eye roll. It’s like I can actually hear it. “I’m heading in the same direction.”

I stop in my tracks. “No. You are not going to book club.” If I don’t ask the question, if I just make the statement, it will be true, right?

“I actually amgoing to book club. And I’m guessing so are you. This should be fun,” Aiden says.

“Fun like a root canal,” I say under my breath.

He throws his head back and laughs, again, like I’ve just said the most original comeback of all time. It’s an evil sound, his laugh. I don’t trust it one bit.

I also ignore the sense of satisfaction I feel for earning that laugh.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to talk to you about how it is that we never seem to agree on a book. At first, I thought it was odd. No way our tastes are that opposed. But now I actually think it’s kinda cool. We look at books from such different angles,” he muses.

“Itisodd. Almost like you’re doing it on purpose,” I say. I don’t mean it. I actually think it’s fine that we have different tastes in reading. But the comments from his

followers sting; they feel personal. And with each new review, it feels like they're coming in more frequently.

“Why would I do something like that on purpose? Nope, we're just built differently, I guess. But I totally respect your reviews. Sometimes, I consider changing my tune on a book based on what you've highlighted and the way you see it. You make me think.”

My feet stagger and I almost trip over air. I'm taken by surprise by this bit of news. He respects my reviews? He's open to my point of view?

“It's no wonder you have so many followers. You're always so pleasant when you review books. You'd think you didn't have a mean bone in your body to say anything bad,” he says.

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I sense this is a dig. Rude. He doesn't get to dig at me. "Oh, my body can be plenty bad," I say back.

The silence lasts for eighty-five years.

He tucks his lips between his teeth, holding back the wicked smile I'm certain is fighting to be released.

I want to stomp my foot. Shake my fist in the air. Anything to release the embarrassment.

"That's not what I meant," I croak out instead.

"I don't know, Irene. I'm wondering if that's exactly what you meant," he teases.

I consider turning around and ditching book club altogether. Going back to my dorm room and hiding under the covers, erasing any memory of this conversation.

But I've got instalove on the brain, and I have to play it out and see where it goes. I need to see the guy from the cafeteria again. I think I've managed to get over the wink. I'm up for some more flirting.

So I pick up the pace and don't say another word to the gnat next to me.

His long strides easily keep up, and he seems totally at peace with the silent treatment. Does this guy ever lose his cool?

I open the front door to the flat, wide, gray, nondescript building. For all the beautiful brick and ivy around campus, the Commons seems to have gotten the short end of the stick.

I enter the main room, where there are a bunch of wooden desk chairs haphazardly gathered in a corner. No one else is here.

I walk back out the door and take another look at the lettering on the front: The Commons.

I'm in the right place.

I look down at my watch.

6:59 p.m.

I'm still one minute early.

Standing in the middle of this large, empty space, a tiny prickling builds at the back of my neck.

Do I think that maybe college book clubbers just might not be that punctual?

Do I wonder if maybe I've gotten the wrong day?

Do I consider that there may be another room here in the Commons where the book club is actually meeting?

No.

Instead, my mind goes to all the places it usually does when I fear I've been people-

ing incorrectly: This was all an elaborate scheme to make the odd freshman girl look like a fool. I was targeted in the cafeteria as the one to be punked. Everyone saw me coming and thought, No, not her, and quickly left out the back door.

My breath quickens and my chest is tight. I struggle to take in air. Because even though I know rationally that all of that is likely untrue, my social anxiety whispers all these outrageous what-ifs.

And though book people are supposed to be my safe space, I rarely get to meet any of them in person. Maybe I'm not so safe after all.

A hand settles gently at the small of my back. "Guess we're early," Aiden says softly. In the midst of my internal meltdown, I forgot he was even here.

It's oddly comforting, his barely there touch and his steady voice.

The front door opens, and I swing my head around as a group of people enters. I quickly take a step away from Aiden.

They're chitchatting, friendly, smiling. Not one of them looks like they're about to say "gotcha" and laugh in my face.

The guy from the cafeteria approaches me with two others. "Irene, I'm glad you came. I was just telling the others here that you're a famous book reviewer online."

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He's dressed in well-worn blue jeans, a plain white T-shirt, and a gray cardigan.

Oh.

It's like looking in a mirror.

Awkward.

He has on thick tortoiseshell glasses that make his green eyes pop. And to top it all off, perfectly side-combed hair, complete with a yellow pencil, fresh red eraser, tucked behind his ear.

He looks like he walked off the pages of a dictionary under the word "collegiate scholar." Unintentional couples outfit aside, I can't take my eyes off him.

"Also, I don't think I properly introduced myself this afternoon. I'm Garrett." He holds out his hand, and just as I'm about to shake it, I'm cut off at the pass. My handshake-to-lovers quest has been cockblocked by none other than Aiden Jeon.

"What's up, man, I'm Aiden."

"Hey, nice to meet you." The two shake hands like they're long-lost lovers and I'm just here to clean their chamber pots.

"I can't believe you're here," one of the others says, reaching out her hand toward me. I grab it immediately before it can be stolen from me and shake a bit too vigorously. "I'm Jenna. I follow you online and your reviews are the best. We align

on almost everything.”

“Hi, Jenna,” I say, finally releasing her hand. “So you read romance, then?”

She nods, and with each bob of her head, I feel my chest loosening and my shoulders relaxing.

More voices make their way into the Commons, and in short order, a group of about twenty of us has gathered, grabbing random chairs and sitting in a blob-shaped formation.

I sit down. Garrett takes a seat to my right and, you guessed it, winks at me. Again. And it’s not any less weird now that I know his name.

I feel the air turn frigid and black to my left. I don’t even have to look to know that Aiden has taken the other seat next to me. I can smell him.

I hate that he smells so good.

I find out that most of the group has met for years, all of them coming in and out as they’ve attended Brighton College. There’s a nice camaraderie here, and I remind myself that I’m one of them, a book person, even though this is one of the first times I’ve been this person face-to-face with others, instead of behind a screen.

“Let me kick us off since I was the one who chose this month’s selection. Hopefully you had time to read it over the summer break,” someone I haven’t yet met says to the group, giving a pointed look in everyone’s general direction. “I’ve been itching for us to get into a classic horror novel, so I felt Salem’s Lot was the perfect choice. Do you agree?”

Nods around the room.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt you, Jackson, man, but do you think we could do quick introductions first? We’ve got a couple new people joining us today,” Garrett says. “I’ll go first? I’m Garrett Karl, fourth-year philosophy major. My favorite authors are Kerouac, Vonnegut, and George R. R. Martin, in that order.”

Fourth-year. Older man. Age gap. Dude-bro taste in books aside, this could be interesting.

He holds his hand out to me, palm up. Does he want me to hold his hand, stand up and come sit on his lap, what? What are these social cues I’m unaccustomed to?

He nods, encouraging me.

“Um, yes, sorry, hi, I’m Irene. I’m a freshman here at Brighton studying contemporary literature. And my favorite authors are Nalini Singh, Ms. Beverly Jenkins, and Queen Nora Roberts...”

“Amen,” Jenna says.

I also hear a few snickers around the room. Just wait until the club pick is a romance book. We’ll see who’s snickering then.

“I, um, haven’t had a chance to read the book. But I’m excited to be here.”

I hold my breath for a second once I’m done, hoping no one is disappointed or calls me out for not reading this week’s book choice.

But all eyes quickly move on to my left.

“Hey, I’m Aiden. I’m actually newer to reading. Didn’t really grow up with books or anything, so now I’m devouring anything and everything to catch up. I’m particularly

loving romance novels, so I'm open to recs. I can't narrow down my favorites to just three authors. Call me easy, I like to play the field."

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Everyone laughs at Aiden's easy intro. Of course they do.

We go around the circle and the rest of the group introduce themselves. Everyone seems harmless enough. This might end up being a permanent thing. Look at me colleging like the best of them.

"Okay, can we get on to talking about King, please?"

And so it goes... my first book club meeting only sneaking stares at Garrett the Fourth Year every ten minutes or so, while avoiding throwing daggers at Aiden the First Year the entire time.

"Did you have a good time? Have we convinced you to read King?"

I turn around from the refreshments table with my hands full of Danish butter cookies, the kind that come in the round blue tin and only seem to make an appearance during the holidays.

"Um, yes, I had a really good time. It's fascinating to me how people can read the exact same words and come away with very different ideas of what the story is about. I love that about books," I say. Garrett's eyes lock on mine, looking deeply at me in a way that would have me physically swooning, if I knew what that actually looked like.

Instead, I swallow and try hard not to break the connection. Damn, these cookies are dry.

Garrett continues to stare. One second, two, three. Um. His gaze should make me feel... considered, seen, interesting.

But honestly, I feel more... uncomfortable, under a spotlight, suspicious.

What could a guy like Garrett possibly see in someone like me?

“I checked out some of your reviews online before I came. A million followers, that’s incredible,” he says. “I’d love to get some romance book recs from you sometime. Are you free for dinner? I promise to save you from the school cafeteria.”

Everything about him is perfect.

So why isn’t my heart racing? Why aren’t I willing to throw all caution to the wind? In a last-minute audible, I decide to switch the trope in my head from instalove to age-gap romance. I look at Garrett through a different lens. Older, more experienced, caretaker... I can go with this. I can be the inexperienced ingenue.

“Yeah, I’d love to go out for dinner,” I say. “And of course, I’m happy to recommend some novels for you to read to dip your toe into the genre. But only if you can recommendsome of your favorites in return.”

“Perfect. Let’s plan for next Tuesday night. There’s a really great Italian place just off campus, Lupa Trattoria, that you’ll love.”

He says the words with an Italian flair. He’s probably well traveled. He tells me I’ll love it, because he himself has tried it and can open up my taste buds to only the best foods.

I smile at Garrett, only briefly distracted by seeing Aiden’s familiar back heading quickly out the door.

Okay, age-gap romance. Let's do this. I am ready.

Epigraph

I can see what the author was trying to do with this age-gap romance... show that the way that Henry loved Madeline was more protective than controlling. If I look at it through that lens, I can root for their HEA and not be too concerned by the imbalanced power dynamic. I enjoyed the book. Would recommend, but make note of the trigger warnings.

—@irene.loves.love.books

Henry's deep, almost obsessive love for Madeline freaked me out and made me way too uncomfortable for my liking. Did the couple, with such differing lived experiences, have anything in common at all? This one was not for me.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Four

age-gap romance

The meeting with my statistics TA runs a little long, so I text Garrett to tell him I'll meet him off-campus at the restaurant.

"Why do you think a twenty-one-year-old fourth-year who looks like Garrett would even ask someone like me out?" I ask Jeannette a couple hours earlier while trying on outfits for the date and going through my typical list of crisis points with her before running to meet my TA. It's clear after just a week of classes that my brain was not made for statistics. Sadly, I thought my brain was made for literature, but I'm struggling equally in all my classes.

She's sitting on her bed, long legs crossed like a pretzel, holding a "yes" sign she'd quickly made in one hand and a "no" sign in the other.

"Do you have anything a little lower-cut?"

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I look down at my nonexistent chest and wonder why she thinks that's the route I'd want to take for tonight's outfit.

"I mean, don't you think it's weird?"

"I think it's weird that you want to wear overalls to this date with an older man. Do you mean to play up your youth? Come on, Irene. I've seen your Pinterest boards. You can do better than this." She's got her left hand lifted, the "no" sign screaming at me. "And he asked you out because you're pretty, you're successful, you're fascinating, and you're a hot commodity. Own it."

I unhook the straps of the jumpsuit and let it fall to ground. I grab a black dress out of my closet, the only one I brought to school with me, and pull it on over my head. Definitely trying too hard.

Jeannette's right hand immediately lifts into the air.

And this is how I find myself wildly overdressed for a first date with a man who can legally order wine as I sip a Coke. Not to mention that I'm pretty sure my Stats TA thinks I was trying to seduce my way to a passing grade this semester by wearing this to our meeting earlier.

I'm not a prude about age, but it's just one of many things about Garrett I don't get... the most obvious being, why would he want to go out with an eighteen-year-old? But also, why would this looker choose me? No matter how glowingly Jeannette describes me, the fact remains—no one in high school ever looked twice at me.

I try to pull up the most recent age-gap romance book I read and remember that it wasn't a clear-cut winner for me. For someone as inexperienced as I am, do I want to start with an older guy? Maybe I do. Maybe it's a sign that he can teach me how to be in a relationship.

Do not think the word "grooming," Irene. Get that out of your head.

My Uber driver drops me off in front of the restaurant and there's no sign of Garrett. Should I go inside and see if he's there? Or would he just expect me to wait outside? Or maybe I should go inside and tell the hostess I'm here? Should I ask her to seat me? Will people think I'm here having dinner by myself?? Will they look at me sitting at the table, dressed up, and wonder if I'm being stood up? Am I being stood up?

My palms start to sweat. It's a cool evening, the summer heat finally starting to break now that September is coming to a close. But my anxiety seems to manifest itself in inopportune perspiration.

"Hey."

I whip my head around at the greeting, trying to keep my smile natural, not strained like the muscles in my face are desperately fighting to be.

My brows lift as I see Aiden standing there with... a girl. A date? Not that it matters. I don't care. But wow, weird that he'd be here on a date at the exact same time and place I'm supposed to be on my date.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss.

"I hear the arrabbiata is amazing," he says. He stares at me, and I glare back at him. A standoff. Do I return the small talk, or do I call him out on the odd coincidence and

ask him what he's up to? He hasn't introduced me to the girl with him, so I take matters and manners into my own hands.

She's pretty. Really pretty. And I feel ridiculously out of place in this scene. At this restaurant. Likely in this entire school. Possibly in the whole town. If I add the whole world to the list, would that be overkill?

"Hi, I'm Irene. Aiden and I are in lit class together," I say.

"Maddie," she says back. She barely grabs my hand and lets me shake her limp one. She also doesn't offer up any additional information. In fact, she couldn't be less interested in me.

A part of me feels disappointed that Aiden would date someone like this. He's a romance reader. He should know better. Why are men? Why don't they have higher standards and date the fabulous, interesting, funny, smart ones?

"Where's Garrett? Did he get so absorbed in a Kerouac novel that he's running late?" Aiden's voice, which I would only ever describe as unbothered, suddenly sounds very... bothered.

Okay, so maybe Garrett did come across as a bit pretentious at the book club meeting, the more I thought it over and replayed the whole night one hundred or so times in my head.

"Irene," I hear my name called. I look around and see Garrett quickly walking up to me. "Hi, wow, you look great," he says. His smile is perfectly straight, very white, and I hear the ping of a bell in my head as the sparkle of one of his teeth almost blinds me.

Garrett turns to Aiden and holds out his hand. "Oh hey, Aaron, right?"

“Yeah, good to see you again, Gary,” Aiden says back.

This entire exchange is making me incredibly uncomfortable, but I cannot look away.

Garrett turns to me and says, “Let’s head inside.” He opens the door and holds it for me. I look over at Aiden and Maddie and give an awkward smile as I walk by.

“Ask him what he thinks of the romance in *A Game of Thrones*,” Aiden says under his breath. And somehow, I know... I know exactly what he’s trying to say to me. Incest in books is my hard limit. *Flowers in the Attic* traumatized me as a kid, and I’m still not over it. I’ve made that clear on multiple occasions online, and it’s one of the very few things Aiden and I have actually agreed about publicly. If Garrett finds Cersei and Jaime’s relationship romantic, he and I are doomed before we’ve started.

I want to acknowledge that I get it, that I understand the puzzle Aiden threw my way. But I hesitate for a second too long, and when I glance back, he’s put his arm around Maddie and is leading her through the door Garrett’s holding open.

“Coming?” Garrett asks. Perfectly nice, attentive, scorching-hot, older-man, out-of-my-league Garrett.

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You're the main character of your life, Irene, I remind myself. So I put on my romance-reviewer smile and ignore whatever confusion is happening in my head right now.

And with a view of a back I'm becoming way too familiar with, I walk in.

"So, if you trust me, I can order for us both. This is kind of my go-to spot," Garrett suggests as the hostess takes us to our table and we sit down.

I could have guessed this was going to happen. Textbook. This is when I tell him my dietary restrictions and he completely ignores me and orders something that could possibly kill me anyways.

I guess it's lucky for us both that I don't have any allergies.

"I don't particularly like spicy stuff," I say.

"Noted. Anything else you'd prefer to stay away from?" he asks.

"No, I think that's it."

He calls the waitress over and orders us a tossed-tableside Caesar salad to share, the truffle gnocchi for me, and the four-cheese lasagna for himself. He also orders a glass of wine, and I stick to water.

All this is new to me. Not just the food choices, but someone taking charge. I thought he'd be overbearing, but honestly, he's been super respectful of any boundaries I've

mentioned. Too bad he will never know that I have about five hundred other boundaries going through my head right now that I'll never let onto and will instead suffer in silence.

"In case you were wondering, dinner is on me." He holds up a hand to silence me before my brain even tells me to protest. "I'm older and I asked you to dinner." He smiles a self-satisfied smile, and I can't help smile back.

"That's very Korean of you," I say.

He furrows his brow, but it will take too much energy to explain to him if he doesn't know what I mean. Aiden would understand. He probably grew up watching his elders fight for the check all the time.

"Thank you for the offer, but we can split the check. I'm happy to pay for my part of the meal," I add.

"No, no, I remember how tight it is freshman year. First time away from home, budgeting your own life and finances, it's not easy."

He acts like I still get an allowance.

"I make a decent amount of money from my online job," I admit.

"You have an online job?"

"I told you about being a book reviewer. Because I have a large enough platform, I get sponsorships and also some financial benefits for engagement and followers." I rarely tell anyone about this side of the business. I think people expect that only makeup and lifestyle content creators make what they think is the quick and easy cash of influencer life. But I'm not kidding when I say I do really well for myself

financially.

“Not tonight, but maybe next time I can pick your brain a little bit about this. I’m thinking of starting a YouTube channel. I’m not sure about what yet. But I’ve been told I could probably get a pretty decent sized following quickly,” he tells me.

I look at him and know exactly what he means. He’s a guy. He’s incredibly handsome. And he’s charming. He could probably do live commentary on paint drying and build a following right away. I’ve seen it happen.

I do a quick scan of the restaurant and see Aiden and Maddie sitting at a small table in the corner. She tucks her hair behind her ear prettily. She jabs her fork at a single piece of lettuce and nibbles on it. She nods and bats her eyelashes as he talks. She opens her mouth and says one word.

He laughs like she’s Ali Wong or something.

She covers her mouth as she giggles in return.

I roll my eyes and stab an anchovy in my salad and go back to listening to Garrett tell me in detail his ideas about his YouTube channel, despite having just said we’d talk about it the next time.

I bury any questions, wondering if I even want a next time.

And taking a cue from Maddie, who seems to have this dating thing down pat, I cover my mouth and giggle at something Garrett says, wondering what my options are going to be for dessert.

When I get back to the dorm, Jeannette is head down studying at her desk. I try not to make any noise, despite the fact she has her headphones on, as I quietly change into

my pajamas and grab my toiletry kit to get washed up.

“You’re back!”

I yelp as I turn around and find Jeannette towering over me. “You scared the shit out of me!”

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“I’m sorry,” she says, wrapping me in a hug. She releases me. “Now, tell me everything about your date,” she insists, looking down at me.

I raise my eyes to meet hers. I want to tell her it was great. I want to report that things are going exactly according to plan. I want to share that the age-gap trope might be the winner already. Instead, I drop down onto my bed.

“I think I’m broken,” I admit.

“Whaddaya mean?” she asks.

“You’ve seen Garrett. He’s gorgeous. And despite being a tiny bit ego-forward, he’s pretty nice. And semi-interesting. And decently good at listening.”

“Wow, what a resounding endorsement. You’re clearly head over heels for this guy.”

I’ve never heard Jeannette’s voice so flat and sarcastic. I start laughing. I stop. I start again. I can’t stop.

Jeannette drops down on the bed next to me and joins in. We both laugh until we’re grabbing our sides and tears are building in our eyes, threatening to spill over.

We’re both lying down on my tiny twin bed, legs hanging over the side, feet on the ground. Well, her feet actually reach the ground, mine just dangle there. She turns to face me. “Irene, there’s something I gotta say.”

“Okayyyy...” I turn my head toward hers.

“For being such a huge fan of romance novels, you really seem to hate romance.”

I groan, because she just hit the nail on the head.

“I know,” I whine. “I’m realizing that all the things I love in books feel so off to me in real life. I cringe at romantic words or gestures. I shrink from any thought of physical touch. I try to find anything and everything wrong with any person who shows interest in me. Like I said, I’m broken.”

“Look, this is all new to you, right? Give it some time. You’ve never been out there and dated like this. And I’m not saying that as a judgment. I’m just saying, well, I won’t lie, it doesn’t get easier. But it gets less hard.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But relationships don’t tend to make sense. And what do I know? The longest I’ve ever dated someone was three weeks,” she admits.

“Three weeks? Damn, you were basically almost married.”

We both smile and she grabs for my hand. I freeze just for a second, realize I don’t hate having her in my space like I often did with my sister or my friends from high school, and squeeze her hand back.

“It’s still early. I’m all for your plan, but don’t rush it. Now that you’ve told the universe you’re open to finding someone, it’ll work its magic and he’ll come,” she says.

I let out a breath. “You’re right. It’s still early. I gotta give it some time. And I can’t just slam every door shut if I’m not feeling it right away. Maybe I will go out with Garrett again. That is, if he asks me. Hey, what about you? We never talk about if

you're interested in anyone?"

"I'm a slow-burn kinda gal," Jeannette says.

"Way to go! You're picking up on the romance stuff fast," I say. It warms my heart.

"Yeah, I'm getting into it. My roommate is kind of a big deal in the genre," she says.

"Anyways, I honestly have to focus on my schoolwork right now. This is way harder than high school, and I'm here on scholarship. Gotta keep the grades up."

I sense the tension in her, so I squeeze her hand one more time before I jackknife up to standing. I don't want to even think about classes and grades right now. It's only been a couple weeks. I have time to get caught up.

"I'm gonna go get washed up," I say, grabbing my stuff and heading toward the door to the communal bathroom.

"Yeah, I've got to get back to studying," Jeannette says.

"Hey, roomie?" I call out.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for always being there while I go through this bonkers plan of mine. I know I can be... a lot," I say. I worry that Jeannette will come to realize that I'm actually too much, that the things that go through my head are too overwhelming even for her.

"We're in this college life together," she says.

We.

I smile.

“Oh, and I downloaded one of the books you recommended on your list and noticed a brother’s-best-friend trope. We don’t have that on the list,” Jeannette points out.

“My brother’s thirteen,” I point back.

The corners of her mouth drop, and I have to laugh at the disappointment on her face.

“But hey, there’s also best friend’s brother,” I suggest, waggling my eyebrows. In fact, I recall that one of Jeannette’s brothers is only a year younger than us.

Her eyes widen.

Oh shit, did I offend her?

Or is she already planning my wedding to her brother?

“I’m...” She stops and clasps her hands in front of her heart. “I’m your... best friend?” She says the last two words in a reverent whisper.

I’m suddenly very aware that maybe I too easily shared too much. I didn’t even consider how seriously Jeannette would cling to the words.

“Um, well, you’re definitely the actual best. Period. And you’re a better friend to me

in this short amount of time than anyone I've known for all the years leading up to now. So, yeah, I consider you my best friend. Too soon?" My anxiety does one of those spikes in the EKG I see in my head. God, she must think I'm too overbearing. Too needy. Too much.

I drop my eyes and beg my feet to move and run away to the bathroom. But two arms throw themselves around me and I'm lifted up off the ground and spun around.

"We're best friends. We're roomies. And besties. We'll get an apartment together as upperclassmen. We'll be in each other's weddings. We'll have Sunday brunch every week."

I don't know why I ever thought I was too much.

I laugh and let out a squeal as she spins me one more time before putting me down.

I shake my head and laugh some more. What a nut.

"Now get out of here and get washed up, bestie," she says.

So I do. I turn and head to the bathroom.

But I've got a smile on my face.

And I don't once think about how broken I am along the way.

Epigraph

I loved the tension the author built in this workplace romance. It was part rivals-to-lovers, part will-they-or-won't-they, and part hate-sex-is-so-hot-because-I've-wanted-you-all-along. And this recipe hit all the right spots for me. I especially love when the

MCs are forced into a project together and it's through those quiet moments that they finally open up and reveal bits of themselves to one another. So good.

—@irene.loves.love.books

The buildup of wondering will they or won't they (let's get real, we know they will, but we trick ourselves into still believing that there's an option) had me flipping each page wishing I had taken a speed-reading class in the past. The way I had the deepest need for Shawn and Gwen to get past their workplace misunderstandings and admit that it was all because of their underlying feelings for each other... I have a serious book hangover after this one.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Five

workplace romance

Fit check: stretched-out old yoga pants with a hole in the left knee. Oversize church camp T-shirt. Hair pulled back with a headband. No makeup—except a little mascara because I still might pass someone on the way to the library.

A day that I have been completely dreading has finally come. I have to meet Aiden at the library to discuss our class project. Our partnered project.

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After first questioning the professor's choice to make a semester-long assignment, one that relies on another individual as much as yourself, and then wondering how the universe could be so cruel to put Aiden Jeon on my campus, in my class, and suddenly partnered with me, I finally set about trying to do anything to get out of it. I looked around the room, but there was no one partnerless. I asked the team in front of us if they'd consider trading, but they politely shook their heads and declined. I then told Aiden I'd rather fail the class than work with him, and he just laughed... he laughed... and then grabbed my phone, programmed his number into it, and called himself so he'd have my number, too... all without my permission. He clearly doesn't take consent seriously. And that was just the first day.

After having had multiple interactions with him over the course of the past week, none of which could even possibly be construed as friendly, I'm stuck in an impossible situation. So, after receiving the text to meet him at the library—no, he didn't ask me... he told me—I just responded with a thumbs-up and counted down the hours till my impending doom.

The time has come.

I've decided to put in as little effort as possible. That includes in how I present myself. Although even choosing an "I don't care about you at all" outfit took an embarrassingly long amount of time.

The AC hits me the moment I open the door to the school's Central Library. My choice would have been one of the smaller libraries, but Aiden insisted the vibe at Central was perfect. It's large and overcrowded. Perfect for an attention-seeker like him. Whatever.

I find him exactly where he said he'd be, on the second floor near the Poetry section. I don't read poetry. I can't participate in a conversation about poems or contribute anything about the poets and what they mean by their purple prose and rhyme. My heart picks up the pace and a familiar tingling sensation creeps up the back of my neck as if they're watching me—the poets, or maybe just the scholars of the poets—waiting to tell me I can't sit here, that I don't belong.

But then I spot Aiden's long neck and floppy hair, sitting alone at a long table of workstations, head down in a book. And the sight is oddly comforting.

He raises his head as if sensing my presence and the right side of his mouth lifts a tiny bit in an all-too-confident grin. My cheeks heat immediately. Did someone suddenly shut off the AC in this place?

"Hey, you made it," he says. "I wasn't sure you would."

"Why wouldn't I? I told you I'd be here." Of course Aiden has to make me feel like I'm unreliable, or hard to deal with, or in the wrong, or like I don't know what I'm talking about.

"Uh, you didn't text back so..."

"I sent you a thumbs-up."

He looks down at his phone and his brow furrows a bit. "I don't see that message," he says, raising his eyes back up to mine.

"I didn't send the emoji, I sent you a reaction to your message."

"Oh, yeah, sorry. I sometimes have trouble reading stuff like that."

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He lifts a shoulder, shrugging off my question.

“You know, you don’t always have to lead with the teeth,” he says.

It’s a phrase I’m not familiar with, but I can guess what he’s saying. I would normally say sorry, like I always do no matter what someone’s confronted me with. But I’m feeling just defensive and stubborn enough to stop myself.

“Whatever. Let’s get to work,” I say hurriedly. I take the seat across from Aiden at the very large library desk. There is a divider that runs along the center of the long wooden table. After I take out my laptop, my notebook, and a pen, I finally look up to see Aiden standing, looking down at me.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

I look down at my stuff, then to my left, then my right, wondering what I’m missing. “Uh, getting my stuff out?”

“Yeah, but how are we gonna discuss our project if you sit there, across from me, with this partition between us?”

“Where else am I gonna sit?”

It’s his turn to look to his left and then to his right. There are empty seats on either side of him. And, as I suddenly notice, no partitions on the sides of each workstation.

I sit there wondering what to do next. But apparently this takes too long for the impatient Aiden Jeon, who already has his stuff all stacked in his arms. He places it down at the spot next to me, plopping himself into the chair.

“What is all that?” I ask.

“Just some books. I grabbed a bunch in case we need them.”

“But we haven’t even discussed the project, the scope, what our focus will be, or basically anything about it,” I say. I don’t know if I’m more upset that he took the liberty of choosing titles without my input or that I didn’t think to get the head start myself and choose some books for us. “Did you just assume I wouldn’t have an opinion on which titles we’d focus on?”

He has the decency to look slightly embarrassed by this at least. He swallows and my eyes track his Adam’s apple. Prominent. Not that I find that incredibly attractive at all.

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“Sorry, I wasn’t thinking about anything in particular, to be honest. It’s just, books bring me comfort. And I like having them around, I guess. Carrying them from place to place. It sounds weird, but I got here, in this huge library, and suddenly felt very small. And so I started going up and down the fiction rows and grabbing familiar titles.”

Well, that sounds relatable. I clasp my hands together on the table and force them to stay there instead of reaching up to my heart. I will not be that person, even though my insides squeeze at his confession. Because I get it. I understand that feeling exactly.

“And I’d never assume you wouldn’t have an opinion,” he adds, his mouth scrunching to the side as he tries to hold back his smile.

“Oh, well, yeah, sorry to snap at you. I’m trying to get my bearings”—I sweep my hand at all the space and air and life in front of me—“with all this.” I should explain what I mean. How college is already overwhelming. How my classes are harder and maybe not as fun as I’d hoped early on. And how I’m trying to go through with The Plan, requiring me to put myself out there to find a boyfriend for reasons I fear would make most people laugh at me but that I suspect, just maybe, Aiden might relate to. But the words don’t come out. And I barely know Aiden at all, not to mention that in my mind, I’ve already made him out to be my enemy... my nemesis. He could use any weakness against me online.

I sneak a peek at Aiden. He’s nodding, head slightly tilted, as if seeing something in me he’s fascinated by.

“Yeah, it’s a lot,” he says. And that’s it. No jokes, no disagreeing, no debate.

I don’t have the time, and this is not the space for me to figure out how I feel about this. This small interaction that seems to carry more weight than it should. I tuck it all into the back of my head to obsess about later tonight. I open my laptop, log in, and connect to the Wi-Fi.

Aiden already has the project syllabus open and I notice he has some lines of it highlighted. I, on the other hand, haven’t looked at it once since it was sent to us after day one of class last week.

“So I was looking over the assignment and got really excited. This is totally right up our alley.” Just as expected. The man is trying to steamroll me. “I mean, I assume you agree that we should focus on romance?” He lifts his eyebrows, waiting for confirmation. Fine, I can admit that he’s hit the mark. Of course I want to focus on romance. I mean, no, I didn’t even read over the assignment, so I’m not quite sure what we need to do, but if it’s about books, romance is all I’m interested in.

“I figure we can decide what category or trope as we discuss today. But I’m glad we’re on the same page. I do think the professor was giving us a hint in class that maybe he wants us to give equal time and focus to the classics. But we have so much to work with. I mean, my first choice would be Austen, but I’m curious what you’re thinking. Too obvious a selection?”

I’ve never read an Austen book. I don’t want to admit that to Aiden, though. I don’t admit it to anyone in Romancelandia. I’d be ostracized. But I just don’t... understand her books. So I do the thing that I always do when I’m feeling overwhelmed or out of my league. I nod. Because I’m not quite prepared with an argument to disagree.

“Are you just nodding because you think this is what I want and don’t want to disagree?” Aiden asks.

As if.

“Honestly, I’m sorry, but this first week has been really crazy so I haven’t had a chance yet to look over the assignment or come up with any ideas. If we want to get the best grade possible, I think we should focus on things we know well and that fit what the class is about, the path of least resistance. Something that we could do with our eyes closed. Contemporary literature”—I hold up my right hand and then raise my left as the other side of the scale—“contemporary romance novel.”

Aiden turns his laptop screen to face me and points to the text as he recites the highlighted parts from memory. “‘Compare two pieces of literature and present the similarities of story that transcend perceived differences, deep diving into character arc (The Hero’s Journey; reference reading list), the timelessness of tropes, and the context and impact of setting.’ I don’t think it makes a compelling presentation to just compare two contemporary romance novels.” He drags his finger down to the bottom of the screen without even looking... yet lands exactly at the spot he’s highlighted in green. “Contemporary literature can include works from the modern era as far back as the 1940s. Which makes me think he wants something from back then, too, at least as a reference point if not comparative.”

I want to debate this further, but I know he’s right. “Okay, fine. It’s probably time I finally read an Austen book, anyways.”

Aiden’s eyes jump up from the screen to my face. They’re rounded in disbelief. “Wait, you’ve never read Austen? Really?”

Exactly as I expected.

“Are you gonna go post it online so your followers call me a fraud?”

“Hey, that’s the second time now you’ve basically accused me of trying to take you

down in some way online, and I'm not really sure where you've gotten that idea. Do I enjoy our rivalry? Sure. It's fun. But I've always thought it was friendly, at least."

"Friendly? Have you seen the comments?"

"I try not to read the comments."

"How do you interact with your followers, then? How do you maintain engagement? How do you build and keep loyalty?"

"To be honest, my mental and emotional health are more important to me than any of that. Anyways, rest assured, I'm not trying to drag you online in any way. I never thought of it as your followers versus mine. I thought we shared a lot of the same followers. I mean, you have over a million, and I'm getting close. We're the same age, we're both Korean American, crossover is likely, don't you think?"

This may be true, but among those followers, there are definitely some Team Irene vs. Team Aiden ones in the mix. But Aiden doesn't read the comments. Is it possible he doesn't realize what's being said about me?

"Though... I wouldn't mind some of those brand deals you're getting. People like the novelty of a guy reading romance, but no one wants to put money behind it, I guess." He shrugs. "But I was recently approached about a pretty unique opportunity to create content for a cool Korean brand. We'll see if anything comes out of that. It would be my first paid gig."

If this is his first sponsorship, maybe he isn't as big as I thought. Seems he still has a ways to go before catching up to me. I had five deals before I was even a year into all this.

"Anyways, since I made the suggestion of Austen—that is, if you're willing to give

Austen a try—why don't you go ahead and pick the comparison novel. It can be any book... the assignment is to compare and contrast across these topics.”

When faced with the choice of any romance novel, what to choose, what to choose?

“And may I suggest maybe not making too safe of a choice,” he chimes in as I’m thinking.

“What do you mean?”

“From what I’ve seen, you tend to stick with safe choices, staying in a lane, not being contrarian in any way. I realize you have your reasons. But I’m assuming you don’t actually love every book you read, and sometimes I wish people online could see that side of you, too. You can hate a book, you know. You don’t have to find something to rave about in each one. For this assignment, maybe pick a book that will challenge us both.”

“I’m not safe,” I argue. So I don’t like disappointing people. It’s just easier to focus on making other people happy.

“Yeah, you kinda are,” he says.

“You barely know me.”

“Well, you haven’t given me any reason to believe otherwise.”

“Just because I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. Just because I can find something to enjoy in every book, even if as a whole it wasn’t for me...”

“Exactly. Safe.” He leans back in his chair, that now familiar smug smile on his face.

My face heats as all the blood inside me simmers, building to a boil. How dare he judge me? And anyways...

“You only know my online persona,” I say.

“So, I’m right... you are putting on a show,” he says.

“Wait, no, that’s not how I meant it. I just meant...”

“Look, you don’t have to explain. I get it. You don’t owe your followers all of you. You can give them as much or as little of yourself as you want. I just think you should admit that who you are online isn’t entirely... you.”

I think about what Aiden just said. How he’s just nailed a truth that no one else in my life, maybe not even myself, could see. Or at least didn’t make the effort to see.

He’s leaned back into his chair, ankle crossed over knee, arms folded on his stomach, a picture of relaxed confidence. I examine him, trying to read his expression, to see if he’s baiting me in some way or if we’re actually having an earnest conversation.

“Do you hold back online? I mean, like, do you have a persona?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I don’t think I care enough about my online presence to try that hard...”

Figures.

“...but with this opportunity with the Korean company in front of me, I have thought about how I might best present myself to fit what they’re looking for.” He lets out a deep breath, the first sign that maybe he’s feeling some pressure these days, too.

“Well, good luck with all of that,” I say. “Really, I hope you sign the deal.” And, surprising even myself, I realize I mean it.

We walk out of the library and halfway across campus in silence. It’s not awkward or uncomfortable, but rather, it’s... nice. I can’t say that we’re suddenly besties just

because we shared little pieces of ourselves with one another. But maybe Aiden Jeon isn't the enemy I made him out to be. Plus, if we're going to work together all semester, I should at least try to get along with him.

"How was your date the other night, by the way? With Maddie?" I ask.

Left. Right. Left. Right. Our steps are perfectly in tandem. Even though his legs are way longer than mine, somehow, our pace is exactly the same.

"Oh, it was okay. Garrett was right about that place. It really was good. How was your date?"

Left. Right.

"It was fun, I guess. Are you going to see Maddie again?"

I pick up my pace slightly. He matches mine without hesitation.

"I doubt it. I just went out with her for research," he says.

"Research?" I ask.

Left. Right.

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“Yeah, I connected with her on Fringe—you know, the dating app? The company that’s interested in working with me is one of Korea’s biggest dating apps.”

I trip over my own foot and stumble. Aiden reaches out and grabs my arm to keep me from eating it on the sidewalk.

I look up at him in shock.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“The dating app.” I’m almost too afraid to go on, dread creeping its way up my spine as I already know the answer to my question. “Is it SKCupid?”

Aiden’s eyes widen. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

I pull my arm out of his grip and step back, trying to put space between us. How could he do this? And to think, I was almost beginning to not hate him.

“Because they approached me about the opportunity, too. I can’t believe they talked to both of us. I thought they’d already chosen me to do it, done deal. I even came up with a whole plan to strengthen my brand.” Thoughts race in my head. Have they spoken to any other creators as well? What’s their selection criteria? Are they having second thoughts about me?

“What do you mean?”

When they told me they needed a bit more time before making the final offer, I didn’t

for even one moment think it was because they were considering other people. They mentioned “market research,” not other creators. Did they approach Aiden because they doubted I could do this, that I could represent romance for them? Was it because I’ve never been in love and they somehow found out? Did they read the comments?

“What plan?”

I thought I had time—time to find a boyfriend, get some real-life romance experience under my belt, and seal the deal. Maybe I need to speed things up.

“Your plan is to find a boyfriend? How is that, in any way, gonna seal the deal for you?”

It registers that I said my last thought out loud. In front of Aiden. Shit.

God, and coming from his mouth, it sounds ridiculous.

“Forget it,” I say. I turn and keep walking, increasing my pace to an almost jog.

A hand grabs my arm and pulls me back.

“Tell me,” he says.

“No,” I bite back.

Aiden is partially to blame for me coming up with this plan in the first place. And now his mere existence could ruin it all for me. My breath is short, along with my fuse. And apparently my common sense and self-preservation as well. Shit. Did I just... spill the beans to Aiden Jeon, of all people, about my plan? Maybe he didn’t hear me.

“Irene, talk to me. I don’t just want bits of the conversation. We have to clear this up if we want to figure out what’s going on,” he says. We. Why is everyone trying to “we” me?

But he’s right. I need to hear his side, too, so that I know where I stand with SKCupid. I can’t lose this deal. And not to Aiden Jeon.

“FINE. Fine,” I concede. I’m out of bravado and energy. I just want to get the confession over with, barely survive the ridicule, hear his side of the story, and then be on my way. “I, well, I got so sick of seeing the comments about how I can’t review romance because I’ve never been in a relationship. And I got worried that SKCupid would question my ability to be the face of romance for their brand. I decided to change that. So I made a plan.” I stop and close my eyes before confessing the rest. “I’m going to fall in love. And I’m going to use tropes to do it.” I gulp back my embarrassment.

He stares at me.

He doesn’t even blink.

I don’t have it in me to go into further detail. I don’t want to admit that in the first week alone, I’ve flubbed two tropes, two dates, already. And I’m worried that my foolproof plan to fall in love may not actually work.

Aiden puckers his lips, narrows his eyes, and nods. “That’s...”

Ridiculous.

A joke.

Never gonna work.

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“...a fucking amazing idea. I’m impressed, Irene. You’re right, not safe at all. You took matters into your own hands. And using tropes, the thing you know like the back of your hand. That’s actually genius.”

I turn to stare at him, making sure he’s not mocking me. I’m both shocked and satisfied by this response. I open my mouth to say something, but no words come out. Well, shit. He’s rendered me speechless.

“It sucks that it took comments by total strangers to motivate you. But I can get behind the execution. Wait, your date with Garrett?”

“Age-gap,” I answer.

“Yeah, okay, I can see that. And that guy at the coffee shop everyone was talking about?”

“What? When? Where?”

“After orientation,” he says.

I turn beet red and look around the quad for a hole I can crawl into. I groan before explaining. “Okay, so I was going for small-town romance. But turns out it was just a poorly executed attempt at fake dating on his part.”

He nods, examining me with a look I am not trusting right now. He narrows his eyes. “You know, I really like this idea. It’s brilliant, actually. Fuel for some really prime content. You should post about it online. Let your followers come along for the ride.

They would eat this up. And I bet SKCupid would love this shit. In fact..."

I do not like where this is going.

"...what if..."

Nope, not liking the sound of this at all.

"...I do this too?"

"What?" I look around to see if my screech has disturbed or garnered the interest of any other students walking around campus. No one looks, except a frightened squirrel who books it up a tree to get away from me.

I turn back to Aiden, wondering if both my hands would fit around his neck. If I just squeeze tightly enough...

"What if I do the trope-to-find-a-mate plan, too? At the same time. We can make it into a challenge or something. It would be fun. And I bet we both get a huge bump in views and followers from it."

"Absolutely not. This is my idea. My plan. And it's, it's... personal."

"You're not doing it because you want to find love. You're doing it to prove to your followers and SKCupid that you can, that you really are the expert in all things romance." He's calling me out.

I hate that he thinks he can read me so well. And I don't correct him that it's actually his followers I'm trying to convince.

"I most certainly am not," I object. To what, I'm not sure.

“What, are you afraid I’ll find love first?” The challenge in his voice is unmistakable. He’s goading me.

“Yes. Obviously. Good-looking guys always have the leg up. And you’ve never had trouble dating.”

He guffaws. “How do you know? I’m not exactly some dating expert. And excuse me, but have you seen yourself, Irene? You’re stunning. This is gonna be so easy for you. But you’re emotionally stunted, clearly. And shy. So, I might still have a chance.” He winks, and even though my eyes only see red, I can admit that winking works for Aiden way better than it did for Garrett.

My mind is reeling. What is he talking about? “Stunning”? “Emotionally stunted”? Rude! I can’t let him find love before I do, not with a plan that I concocted!

“Why are you doing this? What do you get out of it?” I ask.

“Well, first, it could be a lot of fun. Second, I’m actually not opposed to finding my first love. That’s what college is for.”

First love.

My eyebrows lift of their own accord. That’s surprising.

“And third, well, what if we make it easy on everyone involved and the loser bows out of contention for the SKCupid deal? Clearing the way for the winner to take it all.”

My jaw drops to the ground. “What? I worked hard for that deal. No way!”

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“Why not? It’s the perfect setup,” he says.

Setup for what, I wonder.

But I can’t let Aiden take this away from me. I can’t let him win. I am determined to find love first.

I ball my hands into fists and swallow my fury. “Okay, okay. But when I win, you have to shut down all your review accounts.” The words are out before I even register saying them. It’s not exactly what I want. I don’t hate that Aiden is on the scene. I just want him to stop breathing down my neck in this unspoken race for followers and views.

His eyes don’t leave mine, and I won’t be the first to look away. I see a tiny tick in his jaw, his lips in a tight line, his left eyebrow slightly raised. He’s never taken this long to answer. He doesn’t play it safe. So why the hesitation?

I want to take it back. But before I can say something, he gives a curt nod.

“Fine,” he says. One word. And with it, a barrage of questions fills my mind. I never actually asked him why he does this, reviewing books online. Is all of this more important to him than I thought? And if so, did I just unleash a beast who’s unwilling to lose to me?

“We’ll need some ground rules,” I say. “We should each have a second. That person will keep the list of tropes that we’re targeting and keep track of those we’ve completed. Jeannette will be mine, obviously.”

He nods. “And each date should be rated with a success level of one to ten. You win by falling in love and entering into a serious relationship, or, if neither of us can manage that—”

As if. I’m definitely going to.

“—then we tally up the scores of all the dates and see whose is the highest.”

“Agreed,” I say. He’s so cocky, but the rules he just outlined still give me a chance. I will of course go for my HEA. But if all else fails, I can rack up points by pure volume. I will date till I’m blue in the face.

“Okay, I’ll have my second submit my list of tropes by end of day,” he says, all business.

“I’ll ask Jeannette to do the same,” I say, more all business.

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Game on,” he draws out as his face stretches into a full-blown smile, dimples and all.

I don’t know what the hell I just got myself into, but I’m suddenly ten times more motivated than I was before.

I’m gonna get that HEA even if it kills me.

Epigraph

They're on dueling pickleball teams and the winner takes the prize that both of them needs? YES, thank you. I stand by it... rivals-to-lovers is the superior trope. Give me that tension when they're both going for the same goal against each other. And the locker room scene? HELP ME, that was so hot.

—@irene.loves.love.books

I'm a convert. Rivals-to-lovers is now my number one trope. The sexual tension between Helena and Astrid both on and off the court had me begging and screaming "just fuck already" on every page. So good. Also, how do we convince the author to write book 2 about their respective pickleball partners hooking up?

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Six

rivals-to-lovers

A week goes by before Aiden and I connect again.

I miss our next two Intro to Lit classes. I was up late editing a couple book videos and had to refilm a bit for a brand sponsor who has proven to be extra hands-on with content deliverables. All this made getting up for my 8 a.m. class extremely difficult.

I'm not avoiding Aiden, I swear.

My phone buzzes with a new notification. I look down to see a text message saying that I've been added to a group chat with myself, Jeannette, Aiden, and Aiden's dormmate, Charles, who he's selected as his second.

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Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:12 am

Aiden:Sorry for taking so long to pick a second.

Aiden:Most of my “friends” don’t get the tropes thing and gave me shit for reading romance.

Charles:I was the only one whose ass Aiden didn’t kick.

Charles:I’ve watched enough rom-coms to get what’s going on. Nice to meet you both.

Jeannette:You guys are SO going down! We’re gonna wipe the floor with you!!!!

Jeannette:Oh and nice to meet you too!!!

“I’m sending over our trope list now,” Jeannette says, her fingers flying over her phone screen in fierce determination. “I’ve added the verbiage regarding the one ‘freebie’ trope that you each can fill in at a later date, depending on circumstances. Before I hit send, you still good with this list?”

We made the list partially based on which tropes would be the easiest to find matches for but added a few more difficult ones that might have a better payoff in the satisfaction/success score. I was least certain about the grumpy/sunshine. But when Jeannette explained that I’m the grumpy in this scenario, I realized it might be the one we check off the quickest.

My roommate-bestie is a genius.

“It all looks good to me. Send away.”

Jeannette jams her pointer finger at her screen and pumps her fist in the air. “Yes. We’re so gonna win this thing.”

“Jeannette?”

“Yeah?”

I try to hold back the wetness that seems to be fighting its way up and out my tear ducts. I’ve never had anyone be this invested in and supportive of my life. Other than my parents. But with Jeannette, I can be myself and it seems I can still trust that she’ll like me. That she’ll accept me. That she’ll support my choices. She’s proven this to be true already.

I don’t have to try to impress her or worry about disappointing her.

“Oh, honey, don’t cry,” she says as her own eyes start leaking.

I walk over to her bed, sit down next to her, and lay my head on her shoulder. “I’m so lucky. You’re the best friend in the world.”

“Irene, this is seriously the most fun I’ve had in my whole life. My brothers never ask me for help with anything.”

I squeeze her hand. “Well, I promise when this is all said and done, it’s your turn. We’ll do whatever harebrained bananas plan you want for yourself, okay? I’ll be your second any day.”

“Deal. Now, I know how much you hate feelings and intimacy, so let’s just do a quick awkward hug and then go and nourish ourselves for the battle ahead.” Jeannette

loves feelings and intimacy, so this is just for me. And I love her for it.

We embrace each other as we usually do, meaning she wraps her arms around me and I stiffly pat her back three times. And then we head over to the cafeteria. Today's lunch is sloppy joes, and I am not missing that.

The Trope Challenge shifts into high speed over the course of the next few weeks. With the cooler October weather and the promise of the holidays ahead, it seems everyone is interested in hooking up these days. The options are limitless.

Aiden is still keen to create content around our competition by announcing our dating challenge to our followers online and keeping them posted as we go along.

"A joint live Q&A. It'll be gold. Everyone will eat this up," he says, trying to convince me.

"I'm just not that interested in sharing this personal stuff with complete strangers." What I don't say is that I don't want to make a fool of myself.

"I don't know, I'm with Aiden on this one," Jeannette admits. "I'd love to see this online. And you two are a riot when you're together. Your numbers will skyrocket."

I let out a deep breath of defeat. "Let me think about it. We'll see how it goes," I cave. Everyone knows I'll end up saying yes. I always do.

The next day, I see Aiden walking across campus with a pretty brunette who seems dazzled by being in his presence. Girls make it so easy for guys, I swear.

My phone buzzes a few hours later with a new message.

Aiden: Mistaken identity—check. She thought I was her lab partner from behind.

Decent lunch date. Charles says six points and Jeannette concurs. Oh and the Thai place over on Jefferson Street is really good. We gotta all go back there sometime.

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Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:12 am

Jeannette:Six points confirmed.

Me:Opposites attract—check. Went out with a guy from the lacrosse team. Jock. Doesn't read fiction. What could possibly go wrong? Jeannette rates it a four. Harsh.

Charles:Based on details including Irene's guffaw-heard-across-campus when said jock mentioned not even owning a book, four is generous but confirmed.

Aiden:I know that guffaw. Poor guy will never recover.

Aiden:Love triangle—check. Me and the twins from Delta Chi.

Me:God, you're such a cliché.

Jeannette:You don't get double points for that.

Charles:Aiden kept calling them by the wrong names. It didn't end well. I couldn't even figure out who actually slapped him. Two points.

Jeannette:Two points confirmed.

Aiden:I can't convince you guys for three points? I still feel the sting on my cheek.

Me:Earned. I'll accept three.

Aiden:I'm good. No handouts. No reason for you to claim I cheated at the end when I beat you.

Me:As if.

Jeannette:Irene is in the middle of the best grumpy/sunshine date ever. I called it. She's especially grumpy and she's rolled her eyes at least ten times already. This sunshine is unfazed. He just keeps smiling and smiling and smiling. He's having a good time. Do we score on his satisfaction or hers?

Charles:Wait, I see you guys at the bench across the quad. That guy is in my communications class. He just had dental surgery. His jaw is wired shut. It only looks like he's smiling because that's the only way he can open his mouth to breathe. I call foul.

Aiden:LOL

Me:This is humiliating. I'm done. Just give me credit for the trope and rack up the zero points for the date itself.

Aiden:No no no. Jeannette seems to think this is a ten-pointer. Charles?

Charles:For my own personal enjoyment, I agree. Ten points.

Me:I hate you all.

Aiden:I'm using my freebie. SHIFTER ROMANCE, baby! Check that box.

Me:...

Me:Do I even want to ask?

Aiden:Went to a Halloween party and my date was dressed as a sexy werewolf.

Me:Of course she was.

Aiden:She even lifted her tail for me.

Me:I do NOT want to know more.

Charles:The fact that Aiden is texting while still on this date with said sexy werewolf who is trying very hard to get him to make her howl, I'd say it's in trouble from his side. Early odds... it'll end at a five, tops.

Aiden:You're supposed to be my second.

Jeannette:I'll throw you a bone. Let's record the five and let Aiden get out of there before she gets her claws into him.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:12 am

Me:Irene has left the chat

By the end of a couple weeks of what feels like an endless string of brutal dates, like a conveyor belt of questionable sushi going round and round, I'm exhausted. At this rate, I won't even make it to Thanksgiving. Forced social situations, it turns out, are not my favorite. And I'm no closer to finding a love match than I was before we started. The race for points is tight, however. So I have to remain focused.

The books on my desk in my dorm room remain untouched for now. Shit, I'm so far behind on everything. But as soon as this challenge is over, I swear to myself that I'll cram as hard and fast as I can on my schoolwork. It's first semester of freshman year. We're all new and everyone is going through the growing pains of change, right? We can't possibly be expected to master everything so soon.

I keep my phone with me at all times. I get a small thrill every time it dings with a new message. Our group chat has moved beyond just dating scores and updates. We share memes and gifs and gossip around campus as well. I feel a part of something. And I like it.

We put an announcement on the calendar for our joint live event after midterms to share with our followers about the dating challenge. Yes, I finally agreed to it. Though I will miss this just being between the four of us.

"What are you doing?" Aiden sets his lunch tray down next to mine and takes a seat at the table. Our little group has started making it a habit to have an early lunch after our morning classes on Mondays.

“I’m searching the student database for billionaires,” I admit, looking up from my laptop screen.

“So it’s come to this, huh?” His eyes have that sparkle in them that makes my heart skip a beat. Must be acid reflux.

“Desperate times,” I say.

“I considered going to one of the on-campus faith groups to see if I could find a ‘clean romance’,” he says, making air quotes. “I mean, if we’re admitting to desperation.”

I laugh and the two of us look at each other, smiles on our faces. For a brief second, I forget that we’re currently in a serious competition to fall in love.

“Told you,” Jeannette says.

“Yup,” Charles says back.

I didn’t even realize they’d sat down.

“What?” Aiden asks, pulling his eyes away from mine.

“Nothing,” Jeannette says.

“Nothing at all,” Charles echoes.

Jeannette:Hey Charles... starting a side text for just the two of us.

Charles:Smart.

Jeannette: These two knuckleheads.

Charles: God, when will they figure it out?

Jeannette: I hope soon. I can't follow them around these dates anymore. I'm starting to feel like a creeper.

Charles: LOL. Still, it's kinda romantic, no? Front row seat as it all happens?

Jeannette: YES! Totally.

Charles: Hey, wanna grab dinner tonight? I think they're working on their Lit project together so we're probably off duty.

Jeannette: Thank god. Maybe this time alone will enlighten them.

Jeannette: And yes, dinner sounds perfect.

Epigraph

Honestly, is there anything more swoon-worthy than knowing that two people can find their way back to each other for a second chance? I love the notion that despite time and distance, the embers of their love always stayed lit, waiting to burst into flames. Make them each other's first loves, and I'm a goner. Six out of five stars for Belle and Jake's book, the best in the series thus far.

—@irene.loves.love.books

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:12 am

I'm all for second chances in life and in love. But in this book, Jake's original feelings for his friend Belle were nothing more than a childhood crush... unrequited, I might add. So when they came back together years later, acting as if they were always meant to be, it felt disingenuous, in my opinion. I wasn't buying it.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Seven

second-chance romance

Midterms have taken over all signs of life at Brighton.

I've been to the library every day and night this week trying any way possible to get the material from all my classes to stick. Luckily, the only class I don't have a midterm in is Intro to Lit. Our grades lie completely on our weekly journal entries, class participation, and partnered project. Which is an entirely different story. Especially since Aiden and I have been so busy trying to date any person we can possibly stuff into a trope, we've barely made any meaningful progress on the project.

Jeannette has her headphones on when I get back to the dorm. Her normally vibrant red hair looks dull and unwashed. It's up in a messy bun, half of it falling out and hanging loose. She's in the same sweats I've seen her wear for the past three days. And her velvety porcelain skin shows signs of some newstress acne and redness. I'm worried about her.

She's been in a frenzied state as midterm week has approached like a train coming at full speed. Jeannette lives with the constant pressure of being the oldest daughter/sister and setting a good example for her younger brothers. It's like she's carrying the weight of her whole family on her shoulders. But I've met her dad and seen her FaceTime with her brothers. They all adore her. I wish she'd cut herself some slack.

I've tried to give her space during this time, especially since in the first couple months of school, she's been so available and supportive of me and my nutty little plan to find a boyfriend.

But I miss her.

I walk over to her desk and gently tap her on the shoulder. She jumps at the contact, too stressed and pumped full of Red Bull to be able to control her overreaction.

"Sorry," I say.

"Oh gosh, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to freak out. I had my headphones on so I didn't hear you come in," she says.

Her lips are cracked and chapped, and I just want to wrap her in a blanket, walk her to the bathroom, and push her into a hot shower. But even with it all, she still looks gorgeous. Some gals have all the luck.

I'm the type of gal who grows an unfortunate angry cystic zit on the tip of her nose. This one is so big, it actually impacts my line of sight. I'm feeling very lucky we decided to put our trope dating challenge on hold for a week until midterms are over. No guy would want to be seen with me in this state.

"Did you eat lunch? Wanna go grab something? Or I can go get something for you

and bring it back?" I offer.

"What time is it? Actually, what day is it?" she asks. "I feel like I'm just drowning in these philosophy theories." She drops her head into her hands and lets out a groan. "I'm never gonna pass this midterm."

"Yes, you are. But I think you need a break from this studying. At least to get some food into you. And a shower. A little sunshine wouldn't hurt, either."

"Knock-knock."

We both turn around to see our resident advisor, Allison, standing at the door. "It's a Brighton tradition. Midterm stress-relief kickball tournament between all the freshmen dorms. Let's go kick some ass. Meet me at the entrance in ten minutes." She points directly at Jeannette. "No one is exempt!"

Normally, any kind of organized team activity would sound like the worst idea ever to me. But I look at my bestie-roommate and her worn-down state and I wonder if these Brighton traditions are exactly what students need, and they know it. Maybe there's something to this kickball thing.

"The worst timing," I say. "But not a bad idea to let off some steam. Let's go!" I try to put on my most excited voice. It sounds a little manic, but I don't do excited that often. Today I play the cheerleader for Jeannette and do what's best for her.

"I don't think I can. I'm so far behind," she says. She looks back over at her notes and laptop on her desk, brow furrowed.

I put my hand on her shoulder and give it a squeeze to get her attention back on me.

"You heard Allison. 'No' isn't an option. I'm pretty sure they've made this a tradition

because all the poor freshmen who have come before us have also fallen prey to midterm anxieties. C'mon, we won't stay long, I promise. You know how I am with sportsball stuff." She forces a smile and I take that as I win. I hold out my hand and wiggle my fingers to get her attention, trying to coax her to take hold of it so I can pull her up and finally get her out of that desk chair. I wonder if she's left a stain.

She takes the hint and grabs my hand, flopping her way out of the chair. I push her to sit on her bed and grab some socks and her sneakers from her side of the closet. "Here, put these on," I say as I go do the same.

"Kickball, yay," she says drolly.

I grab both her shoulders and look her in the eye. I can, since she's still seated on her bed, which puts us at almost the same height. "Hey, missy. We're going to go out there and relieve some stress and kick some balls and... stuff. And then we're going to eat. And you're going to shower and put on fresh clothes. And THEN you can get back to studying. Agreed?"

She sighs heavily, but then, as if a light has been turned on inside, she smiles. "You're right. Okay, I'm with you. Let's go kick some balls!"

I laugh, and we link arms as we head out to meet the rest of our dormmates.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:12 am

“Okay, Irene. Just keep your eyes on the ball all the way until it hits your foot and then kick it as hard as you can. You’ve got this,” Allison coaches me.

I already whiffed twice in our first game. Including once when we had people on all the bases and all I had to do, according to everyone, was get the ball in play. I did not, however, get the ball in play. I swung my leg and missed it... many times.

This has not relieved any of my stress, by the way. Just gotta put it out there.

“She’s a sleeper, everyone. I wouldn’t put it past her to kick it out of the infield,” a voice says from in front of me. It’s Aiden, standing at the pitcher’s hill (mound? heap of dirt?) and smiling like I’m the funniest thing he’s ever seen. If I could just kick the ball right where his face is, I’d consider this day a win. Please, kickball gods, be with me.

I stand and wait as he pulls his arm back and then throws the ball toward me. If he were any kind of gentleman, he’d take it easy on me and not throw it so hard. But nope. Not Aiden Jeon. Figures.

I keep my eye on the ball as I’ve been told to, but as it comes rolling down toward me, and as if karma is on its (and Aiden’s) side, it hits a small patch of weedy grass, catapulting it into the air and changing its angle... so it’s coming right for my face. I tell myself to put my hands up. But I’m such a bad listener. And I watch as the red rubber ball arcs through the air and, on the downward trajectory, hits me square on the zit on the tip of my nose.

“Oh, shit,” I hear Aiden say at the exact same time as I scream, “Ow, motherfucker,

that hurt,” and grab my face with both my hands.

I fall to my butt and sit there on the dirt, too afraid to pull my hands back to see if there’s any blood.

Aiden is there immediately, and he gently takes my face into both his hands. I try to pull away. “Irene, stop,” he says quietly. “Let me take a look.”

I open my eyes, not realizing I had them squeezed shut the entire time.

“I’m gonna pull your hands back so I can see, okay?” he asks. His voice is gentle, and he moves slowly.

People are standing circled around me, all looking down at me with concern. Jeannette is here now, and she drops down next to me and puts an arm around my shoulders. Charles shows up, too, and kneels at my side, rubbing my back. I have all these people here who care about me, who are worried if I’m okay or not. A lump forms in my throat and my eyes fill.

“Oh, shit, she’s gonna cry,” Charles says.

“Everyone get out of the way and let me take a look,” another voice enters the mayhem. A young Asian guy who looks oddly familiar, though I just got pounded in the face right on my zit by a kickball, so I could just be hallucinating, pushes his way through and kneels in front of me next to Aiden. He reaches forward, grabs one of my hands, and pushes it away from my face.

“I’m pre-med,” he says, like it’s an explanation for crowding my space.

“You’ve been in classes for all of six weeks, Taejin,” Aiden says. “And stop being so rough. Get out of the way. You’re freaking Irene out.”

They both turn to look at me, and I look at Aiden and then at Taejin. Taejin. The name is familiar. And I'm not wrong—so is the face. I know him from somewhere...

“Irene? Irene Park?”

Taejin Im. We were friends in middle school. We went to the same church.

“I didn't know you went to Brighton,” I say, my nose sounding worrisomely stuffed.

“Yeah, I'm pre-med,” he says.

“You said that already,” Aiden says.

“Taejin and I went to church together when we were kids. The two of us played the three wise men in the Christmas play,” I tell him.

Aiden's eyes crinkle at the sides as he tries to suppress his smile. “I know there's an explanation for that, right?”

I nod. But my face is sore, and I don't really want to exert the energy to tell it.

“Tell me about it later, okay?” Aiden takes pity on me. God, why is his voice so sexy when he's making fun of me?

Taejin pulls a stethoscope from the back pocket of his shorts and wraps it around his neck, letting it hang there.

“Why the fuck did you bring that to the kickball game?” Aiden asks.

“I have to always be prepared,” Taejin explains. His voice is comically serious, and I would laugh if I wasn't certain it would hurt too much. Aiden rolls his eyes, clearly

annoyed, and that makes me want to laugh even more.

“It looks like it could be broken,” Taejin says, nodding his head assuredly.

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“You didn’t even examine it,” Aiden argues.

“Still, that’s my assessment.” Taejin grabs both my hands and jerks me forward onto my feet as he shifts his body to put his back right in front of me. With the forward momentum, I’m suddenly draped over his back as he stands and starts walking away from the crowd. I wrap my legs around his waist and hold on for dear life. “Gotta get you to the med center to get this checked out.” He grabs my legs, and with me piggyback, he starts jogging toward one of the buildings.

Straight out of a K-drama. And let me tell you, this is way more uncomfortable than they make it seem on those shows.

I want to tell him to put me down, explain to him that I can walk myself. But he’s got a tight grip on me.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Aiden says, running up beside us.

“Get out of the way, Jeon. I’m getting her to safety.”

“You are such a moron. Just let her down.”

But Taejin is on a mission. He’s pre-med, after all. You’d think this is what he’s been training for his whole life. So he continues to run, with me awkwardly bouncing around his back, each movement making my already sore face feel like it’s going to explode.

I feel Aiden looking my way as he keeps up running beside us. “I’m gonna kick the

shit out of him,” Aiden says under his breath. I might have been hit harder than I thought because I feel a sense of relief, safety with Aiden here.

“Then that’ll leave me as the only wise man,” I say, eyes getting heavy despite being bounced around on Taejin’s back.

“I’ll play the three wise men with you any day,” Aiden says.

I must really be hurt, because my only thought is how that’s possibly the most romantic thing anyone has said to me ever.

And even with a possibly broken nose, and at the very least a seriously damaged zit, I know me and this heart of mine are in some big trouble.

“I told you it wasn’t broken,” Aiden says, clearly annoyed at this whole thing. I want to tell him to go back to the game, if they’re all still playing. But he’s standing in the corner of the examination room, arms crossed over his chest, brooding.

Cute.

That’s the pain meds talking.

“I didn’t get a chance to make a thorough examination. It was a best-guess assessment based on limited information. And without the proper equipment for triage,” Taejin tries to explain.

“Whatever,” Aiden grumbles. “Let’s check out and I’ll walk you back to the dorm, Irene. Jeannette and Charles are waiting for us outside.” He holds me by the back of the head and looks into my eyes as if searching for a sign he might have missed that I’m not okay to leave.

“Why are you being nice to me?” I whisper.

“You haven’t figured it out yet?” he asks, still holding my gaze.

“Because you want to distract me, keep me off-balance.” It’s the only reason I can think of.

“Is it working?” His eyes sparkle with mischief, and a small part of me deflates.

Maybe this is just all about the game to him. Unfortunately, I’m not so sure I want to play anymore. My head hurts too much to think about it right now.

“Let’s just go home,” I say.

I stand up to follow Aiden. Guess we’re done here. I have a Band-Aid over the new bruise over the old zit over my nose and over my pride. I sway a little when I get off the bed and Aiden’s arm is quickly around my waist, steadying me. I may have let out a sigh.

“Hey, Irene, wait up,” Taejin says, following us.

He stands in the doorway, blocking our way out. The unnecessary stethoscope still hangs around his neck.

“I can’t believe it’s you. It’s really good to see you,” he says.

“Yeah, you too. Thanks for helping me out back there. I appreciate you using all your pre-med know-how to patch me up.”

I hear Aiden clear his throat to cover up his laugh.

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But Taejin doesn't listen. Instead, if I'm not mistaken, he puffs out his chest a bit. "No problem. Look, now that we know that we're both at Brighton, we should go out sometime." He laughs. "Did I ever tell you that you were my first crush back when we were kids?"

Oh, well, this is awkward. I just remember him calling me names and telling everyone that I couldn't memorize the lines of our Nativity play. I had one line. I memorized it just fine.

And weird timing, if you ask me, but okay. I don't think this is pre-med curriculum approved.

My brain thinks about my tropes list and how Pre-med Taejin could fill in my blank freebie spot with a second-chance romance. It's a stretch, but it could work.

But we're on an agreed-upon break from the competition because of midterms. And honestly, I'm way too tired and clearly too drugged to be thinking about this now.

"That's all really sweet, but sorry, buddy, Irene is way too busy with midterms and shit right now," Aiden says confidently. Apparently, he's never seen my very open social calendar. "Contact her in a few weeks when things have died down. Actually, make it a few months, maybe after the holidays, or in the new semester, even. You must know how tough college classes are, being pre-med and all."

I want to protest Aiden speaking for me as if I can't do it on my own. But I'm too groggy and tired to move my lips, so maybe he's doing me a favor. Aiden wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me in, leading me toward the exit and away from

Taejin. Even after a day of kickball and some hours in the medical center during a stressful midterms week, he smells so good. How does he do that?

“Oh, yeah, well, I totally get it. I have to get back to studying, too. Pre-med midterms are a beast. Irene, I’ll contact you later, maybe after the holidays,” Taejin calls out to me as we walk away.

I nod, but the movement causes a zinger in my head. I wince.

“You okay?” Aiden asks.

“I’m just tired and my face is sore,” I say, barely able to keep my eyes open. I lean farther into Aiden’s hold.

For a second, I have this ghost feeling that his lips touch the top of my head. But I know I’m just delirious.

“We should have played a drinking game for every time he said ‘pre-med,’” Aiden says.

I think I let out a giggle, but I don’t remember. In fact, when I wake up hours later in my dorm room, I can’t quite pull myself through the fuzziness enough to remember most of what happened that afternoon.

I check through sleepy eyes once to make sure Jeannette is okay. She’s sitting at her desk, headphones back on, hair back in a bun, studying. So I close my heavy eyelids, ignoring the large shoes on the floor next to my bed and what feels like a leg draped over mine. I just fall back into a deep sleep as lips gently touch my head and I’m wrapped safely in the arms of the best-smelling dream I’ve ever had.

Epigraph

That moment, you know the one, when they have to shift a little bit to get more comfortable in that tiny wine cellar and the touch ignites them? *fans self* Hottest. Thing. Ever.

—@irene.loves.love.books

They're stuck together in the too-small wine cellar and there's nowhere else to go? Inject this into my veins.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Eight

forced proximity

My palms are clammy as I get into the elevator. I press the button for the third floor and then lean my back against the wall of the small carriage. I'm not ready for this meeting.

My lit professor, in lieu of midterms, is having individual check-ins with each of his students. Just me and him. No Aiden to hide behind.

I've managed to stay pretty under the radar in this class, I think. I never raise my hand or do anything to be perceived. I just turn in my weekly assignment in the form of journal entries about what we're reading. Okay, so I've missed a few weeks, but I can make up for it with our end-of-semester project score. Maybe Dr. Kingston just wants to talk about the latest Christina Lauren book?

The elevator doors finally close slowly and I let out a deep breath. The whole metal box jerks slightly and I freeze, wondering if I'm about to drop the six feet this slow thing has pattered upward thus far and fall to my death. When the panic starts to build

just enough that I contemplate if I have time to text a goodbye message to my parents, the elevator stabilizes itself and resumes its slow climb.

My professor's office door is open when I arrive, and I peek in to find him laughing with a student, the back of whom I have become very familiar with.

Aiden.

Great, he's charmed the socks off our professor, and when it's my turn, my awkward self will obliterate any remnant of good feelings. Books are fun. Why are they not fun in the context of this class for me, I wonder. Dr. Kingston is probably wondering this, too. I hope he doesn't ask me.

"Irene, hello, come in, come in. Aiden and I were just finishing up here."

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Aiden turns around, and the cocky smile and solo eyebrow lift on his face make me want to beat him. We're not in competition in this class—technically, we're in partnership—but I still have the overwhelming sense that I have to outdo him. I need to make our professor like me more, to think I'm a greater literary mind, see me as the expert on all things about the romance genre especially.

I'm used to fighting for scraps of attention at home. Do I have to do it here with my professor, too?

"Aiden, it was a pleasure. And I'm definitely going to pickup that book you recommended and see what this 'romantasy' is all about," he says as he shakes Aiden's hand.

"I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts, Dr. Kingston. I hope you're not prone to blushing or pearl-clutching. That one's at least three chili peppers."

"Chili peppers." Dr. Kingston laughs as if he's just been told the most wonderfully charming piece of information. "I'm quite confident I can handle the"—he leans in toward Aiden as if to tell him a deep secret—"spice." And then pulls back.

What. The. Hell.

Aiden walks past me to leave with one last chin lift as he goes.

Sure, see you later, bro.

"Irene, close the door and come sit," Dr. Kingston invites me.

Close the door? How come Aiden didn't have to meet with the door closed?

The dark cloud of dread makes its way over my head and settles there. This can't be good.

I do as I'm told and then take a seat across the desk from Dr. Kingston. I would guess he's in his mid-fifties, with some grays along his hairline and wire-rimmed glasses framing his face. He's what I imagined every college professor to look like. I don't know how to impress someone like this. He likely has no idea who my sister or my brother are, so I can't name-drop my siblings. I could just take the route I do with my parents and simply agree with everything he says.

"Hello, Irene. Are you enjoying your time in this class?"

"Yes, I am, thank you."

"I hear you're quite the accomplished and prolific reader."

"Yes, I really enjoy reading."

"And I recall in one of your weekly assignments you mentioned wanting to be an editor?"

"Yes, I'm studying to be an editor."

"And you said the one genre you absolutely will not read is romance?"

"Yes, I don't read... wait... I'm sorry... what did you ask me?"

He clasps his hands in front of him on the desk and I clasp mine in my lap. My heart pounds faster and faster and I know, I just know, I'm about to get in trouble. He

caught me in agreeable robot mode and I'm busted. I've never been in trouble a day in my life.

"Irene, I have had the immense pleasure of watching some of your book review content online. You are wonderfully knowledgeable about stories, romance novels especially, and incredibly articulate and witty in delivering your thoughts. I very much was looking forward to growing with you in class this semester. But so far, your weekly assignments have been woefully surface-level, as if you're doing the bare minimum by writing what you think I want to read. And I'm wondering if you're not enjoying this class. What can I do as your instructor to help you enjoy this class?"

I immediately want to run away and hide.

Do not cry. Do not let shame overcome you.

"The class is a bit... overwhelming," I admit.

"Tell me more," he encourages me.

"Well, I'm not quite understanding all the concepts, and it makes me question if I'm fit to be talking about books at all, to be honest."

"Irene, I promise you that I am of the mindset that books and reading are meant to be fun. And understanding the general format of literature and story is meant to increase that enjoyment. I'd love for you to give this class a chance. Maybe let yourself step out of your comfort zone, not only in what you read, but how you think about what you're reading. Romance novels are wonderful. Romance in the context of the world through the eyes of so many other books is even more satisfying."

I nod as he waxes poetic, bracing myself for when he finally gets to the part where he says I'm failing and need to drop the class.

“What’s your favorite romance trope?” he asks me.

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“I’m sorry, what?” I shake my head, uncertain I heard him correctly.

“Which trope would you reach for right now if you had a full bookshelf in front of you?”

I think it over. What trope would someone like my professor want to read? What would someone of his age and background enjoy? I don’t want to recommend a book he won’t like and have him hold it against me.

“Please don’t worry about if I would like it or not. I want to know whatyoulike.”

“Um...” Well, that makes it tough. Just any trope that I personally enjoy? “Well, forced proximity, I guess?” I say, my voice laced with uncertainty. What will he think about this?

“Oooh, I’m intrigued—tell me more. What about it do you enjoy?”

I can usually do this with my eyes closed. I do this every single night in front of my computer. But right here, with the pressure to produce an answer and impress an important person sitting right in front of me, I can’t come up with one reason. I’m paralyzed. My breath shortens and my eyes widen in panic. I can’t form words.

He gives me a sympathetic smile. “Think it over, Irene. If you would feel more comfortable, maybe you can record a short video for me of what you like about it. That seems to be the format in which you flourish. Can you have it in my inbox by Friday?”

I breathe out through my nose and nod. Maybe I can just look back through my old reviews and repurpose that content.

“Good, good. Well, thank you for coming by. I look forward to hearing more about the forced-proximity trope. Sounds like it’s prime for some juiciness.” He throws his head back and laughs at his own comment.

I give a perfunctory smile, grab my bag, and get the hell out of Dodge. Then, I rush to the elevator, turn the corner, and run right into the best-smelling wall of human ever.

“Oof. Sorry,” I say, forcing myself to raise my eyes to confirm what I already know.

“How’d it go?” Aiden asks. Did he wait for me? Was he eavesdropping? Could he hear anything through the closed door?

“Fine, it was... fine,” I say. I push the elevator down button five or six times, hoping this will miraculously speed up its arrival. It finally arrives, taking a painfully long time to click into place before the doors slowly slide open. I rush in and repeat the process, jamming the button for the first floor even though it’s already lit up.

Aiden makes his way into the small steel box and sucks out ninety percent of the air, leaving an unequal ten percent for me. That’s the only reason I can’t breathe, I’m sure of it.

The doors squeak their way closed and the elevator, just as it had on the way up, moves a few inches and stalls. I know the drill this time.

I feel Aiden shuffle next to me. I wonder if he’s the type who can’t handle small spaces. What if he has a panic attack? What if I’m the one to be relied on to keep my cool in this situation? That would be tragic.

The elevator is so small that I'm suddenly very aware of how close we're standing to one another. Our arms are touching, and if I turn to look at him...

I steal a glance, which reveals he's turned to look at me, mere inches away.

I swallow.

"What did Dr. Kingston say?" he asks, his voice soft and inviting, like he's coaxing a scared cat out of the corner.

"In a nutshell, I think I'm gonna fail his class," I admit. I tuck my lips between my teeth and try to hold back my abject fear of the thought of telling my parents this news. God, the disappointment on their faces—I can already see it.

"Naw, we're not gonna let that happen," he says. His voice is light, confident, and determined. He's my partner, after all. He can't let me fail if he wants to do well.

"What did he say to you?" I ask.

"Nothing earth-shattering. We just talked books. Writing. Shit like that." His focus is on his feet, the nonchalance in his voice triggering my curiosity.

"That's it? What about class? Did you talk about..."

"So, have you heard from Pre-med Taejin?" he asks, cutting me off in my attempt to get more solid details out of him. That was weird.

It takes me a second to even make sense of what he's saying. My brain struggles to shift gears with the abrupt change of topic, and this past weekend is somewhat of a blur. "No, actually, I haven't. In fact, I think you're the one that made sure of it."

“Dude was trying to score a date with a girl in the hospital. C’mon, that’s the stuff creeps are made of.” Aiden’s mouth is twisted, his eyes narrowed. Let’s hope those pre-med classes are on the other side of campus, for Taejin’s sake and safety.

“Well, I can decide for myself who I see and when. I didn’t and don’t need you speaking for my availability. You’re probably trying to sabotage my chance at marking off another trope from my list.” I pound on the button a few more times. Why won’t this elevator move? Is it actually broken? Oh my god, are we stuck?

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Aiden takes a step toward me, and in this tiny tin box, that puts his body almost directly in contact with mine. “We were on a break from the contest for midterms, remember? And I don’t need to sabotage you to win,” he says, leaning in even closer. “So have a blast with your childhood sweetheart as he tells you all about his exciting life in pre-med.” His voice is low, even, quiet.

I open my mouth to make it clear to Aiden that I am in no way interested in Taejin. I don’t want him getting the wrong ideal. But he’s so close, I have to lean my head back to look at him. And with him staring down into my eyes like that, my mind is a jumbled mess. I swallow.

He’s somehow sucked all the air out of the elevator, and though on wobbly legs, I’m lucky I’m still standing.

“Um...” Some days I’m so eloquent.

The corner of Aiden’s mouth lifts in a cocky smirk.

“You should let loose a little, Irene. You act like you’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.” He takes a step back, giving me space to breathe again, but suddenly making the elevator feel big... too big.

“I know you’re right. I guess I just thought college would be...” I pause, unsure what I thought. “...easier? I don’t know. I hoped that I’d come to know and understand myself a little better and have fun in the process. Instead, I feel more lost than ever.”

“Be kinder to yourself,” he says. The words feel like permission. I play them over in

my head, liking the way they sound but uncertain what it would look like to do so.

I lean forward and press the first floor button again, but the elevator hasn't budged. I press the door-open button and nothing.

"Give it a second, this old thing has a mind of its own. It'll move when it's ready," Aiden says. He reaches out and covers my hand on the button, wrapping his fingers around mine, drawing my hand down away from the panel.

Both of us watch the movement. I wonder if he sees it in slow motion like I do.

I look up, examining his profile, wondering how it is that he never seems to let anything get to him. It's infuriating and also, sorta admirable.

He turns his head and looks at me, his eyes roaming over me, taking in every detail.

And maybe for the first time ever, I don't worry about what someone sees this close up. I don't fret about my enlarged pores or the freckles I often try to cover. The small cluster of scars the summer's acne left behind. The peach fuzz around my jawline. Instead, I beg him in my heart to see me. To actually see me.

His eyes move to meet mine. I don't look away.

"Forced proximity," he whispers. "You know what happens next, don't you?"

I shake my head the tiniest bit.

The side of his mouth lifts into a cocky grin as he leans in.

I hold my breath in anticipation.

The floor beneath me sways as an earthquake, the Big One, hits. Or, rather, as the rickety old elevator chooses that exact moment to kick into gear. I have either the best luck or the worst luck ever, as the connection between Aiden and me is lost. I lose my balance a tiny bit, placing my hand on his chest to right myself. His heart beats quickly beneath my palm. I push him away just a bit. He steps away, back to the opposite corner.

I let out a long, steady breath, trying to calm the neurons that seem to be firing inside every part of me. This is a good thing. The last thing I want is my enemy, my rival romance reviewer, my challenger in the race to find love, my competition for a brand deal, in forced proximity to muddy the waters even more.

Aiden clears his throat, but I keep my eyes focused on the crack between the doors in front of me.

The elevator finally stops at the ground floor and the crack slowly widens.

“I gotta get going,” I say over my shoulder, shuffling my feet forward.

He doesn’t say anything in return.

I move quickly, stopping myself just short of running. Don’t look back, I tell myself. Don’t you dare.

But because I never listen, I do it. I sneak a peek over my shoulder.

Aiden Jeon stands there, hands stuffed in his pockets, watching me as I walk away.

And his dimples are on full display.

I head straight to the indie bookstore off-campus to meet Jeannette. We’re going to

pick out some new books for her to read now that she's over her midterms hump. I'm a little early, but I'm happy to pass the time scanning the aisles of the store.

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As I get closer, I see Jeannette, the tall regal redhead already there. I lift my hand, about to shout my greeting and wave, when Charles appears next to her. He wraps his arm around her neck and pulls her in close. She folds herself into him and they embrace.

As friends of friends do.

Except the entire front of her body is plastered to the entire front of his, and his other hand travels down her back to her... oh...

I jump behind a bush and hide, not wanting to expose myself as a voyeur. And I have to get my bearings, because I'm pretty sure my very best friend, who I tell everything to, is maybe sorta having some kind of romantic thing with the best friend of my enemy. And I never even knew they'd caught feelings for each other.

She's never mentioned even one bit of this to me.

And worst of all, the selfish, ugly bit that sits deep inside me wonders how it is that everyone can so easily find love but I can't even get close.

Do I play it cool? Do I act like I didn't see anything? Do I come clean and ask her what's up?

I take out my phone and type the text.

Me: I'm so sorry but I can't make it to the bookstore. Meeting with prof ran long. Say hi to the romance section for me.

I watch as Jeannette looks at her screen and furrows her brow for one second. But then she looks back up at Charles and smiles, and the two of them walk away, hand in hand, as happy and clearly into each other as can be.

And I, per usual, turn and walk in the opposite direction, all alone.

I'm tempted to put my earbuds in and pretend I'm busy when Jeannette gets back. But I don't want this to come between us. So I wait patiently, and when she opens the door and I see the smile on her face, the vise on my heart releases a little bit and I smile back.

"Hey there. I got you something," she says. She walks over and drops next to me on my bed, opening up her bag. She pulls out a book with a cute librarian type and a guy with tattoos on his arms illustrated on the cover. "The bookseller said this is a new one by a debut author that just came out. She highly recommended it."

I look down at the book and back up at Jeannette. "Thanks, I'm sorry I couldn't make it today."

"No worries, everything okay?"

I nod, but the look on Jeannette's face says I'm not being convincing.

"I don't want to lie to you," I say, not able to hold it in any longer. "I showed up at the bookstore a little early and I saw you, um, there, with, uh, Charles."

"You did?" She pauses. "Oh, you saw us." She starts to giggle. "Well, we were gonna actually tell you today when you came, but..."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I can't hide the hurt in my voice. I know I'm new to this friend thing, but I tell Jeannette everything, and realizing that it might be one-

sided stings... a lot.

“Well, we were kinda flirting, but I didn’t think anything of it. And then it just kinda happened the other night. We went out to dinner and whether it was the relief that midterms were over or the shared laugh over the romance competition, the spark just ignited. I really was gonna tell you right away today. I don’t keep secrets from you, you know that.”

I look up at her and don’t see any sign of a lie or a cover-up.

I let out a deep sigh of relief. And then I fall back onto my bed, looking up at the ceiling.

“I like the two of you together. It’s a good match,” I say.

“Thanks. I mean, it’s new, so who knows. I wasn’t looking for anything, but I do like him.” She lies down next to me, both of us eyes upward. She reaches for my hand. I place it in hers.

“Can I say something without sounding like a dick? I mean, I might sound like a dick because I think it’s gonna be a dick thing to say. But I don’t want you to think I’m a dick.” My mind is a garbled mess that has made its way down to my mouth.

Jeannette laughs and squeezes my hand.

“Why does it feel like it’s so easy for everyone else and so impossible for me?”

“What do you mean? You’ve been going on a lot of dates recently,” she says.

“True. But I don’t feel anything for any of these dates. Not even a blip of attraction. There’s no longing, no chemistry, no...” A small elevator, the intoxicating smell, his

body leaning into mine.

“It takes time. You haven’t given any of these dates even a second chance. It’s not a race,” Jeannette says.

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“Well, it kinda is, now that Aiden’s involved,” I say.

“Speaking of... you’ve spent more time with Aiden than any other guy. Do you think...”

I was worried she might take the conversation there. I’m not ready to even think about this. There’s just no way. “Do I think what?”

“It’s just that you two get each other. I swear you have these secret codes and a language that just the two of you understand. It’s kinda sexy watching how you bicker, and it puts a sparkle in your eye I never see with anyone else. Forget the challenge. The purpose of the plan was to fall in love, find your HEA. Maybe the plan is actually secondary to the person you’re doing the plan with.”

“You mean you, right? The one I’m doing the plan with? I do love you, Jeannette,” I deflect.

“Okay, okay, I’ll let it go. And I love you, too,” she says.

“It’s just... I’m scared I’m too emotionally stunted to fall in love,” I admit. “I think this is why this plan felt like the right path in the beginning. If I see them as tropes, and not as real guys, then I’m not as afraid to try. I can play the part of the main character, just like in the books I read, and I know what to do. Like a love manual. I know these books inside and out.”

“But that’s not real life, Irene. Sounds like an easy way to avoid feelings or emotions. What are you afraid of, do you think?” God, she’s gonna make a great therapist one

day.

“I’m afraid of someone not choosing me. I’m afraid of being rejected. I’m afraid... I’m not worthy to be loved.” I look up, eyes wide with surprise. I hadn’t expected to admit all of that to anyone.

But Jeannette’s smile is kind and understanding. “Is that why you love your online presence so much? Because these people choose to press a button to follow you and to check in on you every time you post?”

“Yeah, I guess. They accept me for who I am.”

“But that’s not who you are completely. That’s just another role you’re playing. I’ve been getting to know all these colorful and deep parts of you, and it’s better than I could have expected. Why won’t you let people see this?”

“Well... you’re my bestie, so you get special privileges,” I say, nudging her with my shoulder.

Her smile spreads across her entire face and the light of it threatens to blind me. “I’m not sure if you realized this or not, but you’ve shown some of these parts to Charles and Aiden, too. Aiden most of all.”

I blush, embarrassed that I’ve let my guard down so easily with so many people.

“Well, we’re all friends, right? And I know what you’re thinking, but Aiden and I aren’t like that. You know how I feel about enemies-to-lovers. I’m not interested in reading it, and I’m not interested in living it.”

But even in my head, it doesn’t feel right calling Aiden my enemy anymore.

Epigraph

You know, the more I think about it, the more I'm certain I'd never want to end up with someone like me. Feels like the scales would be totally unbalanced that way. Would a pairing other than opposites attract work? I have my doubts. You're welcome for the unsolicited relationship advice from your resident romance book reviewer. Ha!

—@irene.loves.love.books

The author did a great job of making everything about the lives of our MCs opposite in every way while slowly revealing that inside, they're more alike than anyone would have guessed. This shit is so romantic, it has my heart in a vise grip.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Nine

opposites attract

The last thing I want to do right now is meet Aiden in the library to work on our lit project. But we're halfway through the semester and haven't made much progress. In a nutshell, we're just short of being screwed.

Aiden has never struck me as someone who gets angry. He's way too unaffected for that. Yet I feel antsy that any day now, he'll confront me about my lack of effort on our project and I'll have to admit that I am dropping the ball. Not only have I not done any of the reading, I've fallen behind on my assigned journal entries, including the ones that have specific prompts regarding our big project.

And that impacts Aiden as well.

This Intro to Lit course is currently causing my anxiety to go through the roof, thus making it my least favorite class. There's just so much writing and editing, way more than I expected. I was hoping for more reading and discussing, if I'm being honest.

Oh, and there's the quickly approaching Parents Day, when my folks will be coming to visit. Of course, there's also the very concerning data point that my online account growth has stalled almost completely. And oh yeah, there's the fact that despite wasting all this time dating a bunch of turkeys, I still haven't found a boyfriend.

With SKCupid's decision looming, I'm pretty certain I won't be their choice. Heck, if I were them, I'd pick Aiden, too. Which means no big announcement to get my parents excited about one of my accomplishments. Relegating me back into my siblings' shadows. But as I'm building a life of my own here at Brighton, a part of me wonders, would that be so bad after all?

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At the library, I make my way up to our spot among the old poets. I'm ready to see Aiden, I'm ready to apologize for slacking off, and most important, I'm ready to work.

What I'm not ready for is seeing Aiden sitting in our seats next to someone else. Her hand rests on his arm and the body language is unmistakable. She's leaning into his side. His head bows a little toward her as they talk. I'm interrupting something... intimate. I'm an intruder.

The sudden pain in my chest makes it hard to breathe. My hands ball into fists of their own accord, and in a panic, I turn on my heels to escape. I don't want to barge in on them. I can't stand to see the uncomfortable expressions on their faces as I arrive, making it clear they'd rather be with each other than have to play nice and polite with me. It's not my business who she is and what they do together behind closed doors, or at the library.

Except when I turn to leave, I run right into a library cart filled with books waiting to be reshelfed, knocking it over. The crash echoes throughout the huge library, and at this moment, I wish for this small little spot of the earth on which I stand to open up and swallow me whole.

I bend down to gather the books and place them back on the cart. A well-worn pair of sneakers comes up beside me and meets me on the ground, strong hands reaching for scattered books alongside mine.

"You okay?" Aiden asks.

I look up into curious, concerned eyes. He gives me a small smile, as if letting me know it's safe, he's safe, if I want to talk.

But my mind is a jumbled mess.

I look back over my shoulder to the table where he just was. No one else is there. Great. I scared away his girlfriend.

"Where'd your friend go?" I ask. My face immediately heats. Why did I ask? Why don't I have the self-preservation skills to just not say anything at all?

His eyes widen when he realizes I caught him. He shakes his head. "Oh, that's, um, not a friend."

"No? You two seemed tight. Is she one of your tropes, then? Looks like you're gonna end up winning this thing after all. First to fall in love and all that." I rise to my feet and pull my bag onto my shoulder. I stare at the stairs that lead to the exit.

I look anywhere but at Aiden.

He gently grabs my arm before I can bolt for the doors.

"She's not a friend."

I roll my eyes, because he said that already and I heard him, I get it.

He tightens his grip on my arm just slightly enough to get my attention, to pull me from all the conclusions I'm drawing in my head.

"She's not more than a friend, either."

He doesn't go on, doesn't elaborate. But his gaze bores into mine, and though I'd rather look anywhere but into his eyes, I don't look away. What is he trying to tell me with his eyes that he can't tell me with his words?

He's a writer, after all.

Or maybe the message he's sending me right now is that it's none of my business.

I clear my throat and pull away. "We should get to work," I say.

He looks at me for one second longer, then nods and leads the way back to the desks.

I pull out my laptop and open it up. It flickers to life back to where I'd shut the screen down, putting it into sleep mode from earlier.

I take a seat, pull out my glasses, and glance at my phone for any new texts.

"You're supposed to be working on our lit project, not trolling me online."

I whip my head around, ready to deny the allegation. But that's gonna be a little tough, considering his page is right there, filling my laptop screen. And since he's leaned over my shoulder, his face is mere inches from mine, hand on the table, crowding my space. I've suddenly lost the ability to speak.

Or breathe, for that matter.

I had been checking a review I posted this morning, wondering how it was performing. The view count had been lower than I expected. Either the algorithm is starting to bury my posts, or my followers are just not as interested in my content anymore. But even though I was late leaving for the library, I couldn't help but do a quick scroll through the comments.

And that's when I saw it—the now familiar handle@aidentheguyreadsromance.

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Great review. I totally agree, this one hit deep. Are you feeling the book hangover like I am?

I stared at the comment. I processed that he used the word “agree” and also asked me a question, like he wanted me to engage with him. That was new. Was it a trap?

So, out of pure curiosity, I pulled up Aiden’s profile and checked if he’d posted a review today, too. It was there, the smiling face moving just a fraction as a dimple appeared on the cover of the post. The view count was ten times higher than mine. It felt like everything I had been working for was slipping through my fingers.

I slammed the laptop shut.

I was frazzled and distracted. Otherwise, I would have known better and actually shut my computer off. Or I would have remembered it was on sleep mode and never risked opening it up here where Aiden could see it.

I open my mouth and close it. I open it again and close it. His eyes follow my lips as I mimic a fish out of water.

He takes pity on me and backs up a little, turning his eyes back to the screen.

“Why are the views on your post so low? Have you been shadowbanned for something?”

I shake my head slowly, trying to think through anything I might have said in the post that would make the algorithm hate me. “No, I don’t think so. My views have been

lower lately. Maybe... maybe it's time for me to give this all up." I swallow back the emotion, the deep sense of loss and grief that even the mere consideration gives me. For the past few years, this was all I had, the only thing that made me feel like I was worth something.

"Okay, Miss Doom and Gloom, why would you do that? Don't give up so quickly. Maybe you can switch it up? Try a 'get ready with me' or a 'what I eat in a day.'"

I roll my eyes and then shoot Aiden with a glare.

He lifts his shoulders in a shrug, although he at least has the sense to look sheepish and apologetic.

"Figures you'd say that," I say. "Have you ever wondered why it's always women who do those lifestyle-type posts, regardless of what their niche is? 'Get ready with me as I read a book.' 'Here's everything I eat in a day in between turning the pages of my newest novel.' Not the most compelling content, and yet..." I let the point end itself in the air. "But a guy"—I wave my hand in his direction—"can just show up all of a sudden, flash dimples, and his views skyrocket, his mailbox is filled with gifts off his wish list, and his follower count reaches a number that others took years to cultivate."

"What do you mean? Why are you mad at me?"

"It took me two years to grow my accounts. I put in a lot of work, planning, strategizing to make it successful. To get noticed by large companies who, because of my follower count, might take the romance genre more seriously. Who will take me, someone pretty unremarkable by most other standards, seriously. Consider me someone worth acknowledging, pursuing. But you, a good-looking guy, can just 'aw shucks, romance is fun to read' your way on the scene. And with barely even trying, these same companies assume you'd be a better representative for the book

community. For romance. It just... doesn't feel fair."

"That's my fault?" He sounds genuinely hurt. "I don't know what you want me to say or do about that." He rakes his fingers through his hair, letting out a deep breath. "Look, first, I didn't just 'aw shucks' my way into this. And second, I'm not in a position to turn down opportunities just because I'm the new guy." He looks at me, concerned lines appearing between his eyes, pleading for me to understand.

No, it's not his problem. It's society's problem. It's the system. And I honestly don't want to dig too deeply into the whys. Because if I do, I'm going to find a lot of other issues down in that ditch along with it: internalized misogyny, racism, bias, classism. All the things that communities, even online ones, deal with. And the stuff I usually try to not think about behind the mask of "just wanting to read romance books." Maybe that makes me the problem.

I let myself look over all of Aiden's handsome face. It's possible I've been wrong about him. That there's more to him, something deeper that drives him. He's his own kind of book to be read ...

"Besides, I shouldn't have to apologize for dimple privilege," he adds. His smile stretches slowly until said dimples make their appearance. And just like that, situation defused.

I roll my eyes again, but my smile won't stay hidden in response.

Dork.

I reach into my backpack and take out the books for our lit class as a way to change the subject.

"Sorry to lecture you about society's ills. I'm just stressed about a lot of stuff." I lift

up *Pride and Prejudice*, its well-worn pages and slightly torn cover signifying that this library copy has been much-handled. “And this just happens to be one of those things.”

Aiden’s eyes soften, and he reaches for the book.

He was worried that picking Austen’s most popular book to compare against a contemporary counterpart would be too obvious a choice. But since we’re likely the only team that chose romance novels, it ended up feeling like the right call. Plus, it forces me to finally read Austen. Once I actually get around to opening the book instead of picking something much more interesting from my TBR.

“Did I ever tell you this was the first romance novel I ever read?” he asks.

I turn to look at him as he flips through the pages of the library book, eyes wide and bright as if treasure exists inside it.

“After I finished reading a few Austen novels, I wanted to find books that gave me that same feeling. Romance, yes. But also hope. Joy. The belief that there’s something in this world that can conquer all.”

“Is that why you started the online social media stuff?? To talk about the books? Because that’s why I did it. I had so much emotion brewing inside me about these books, I knew I wanted to just find someone, anyone, who I could talk to about it. So I talked to my camera, hoping people who felt the same way would find me. And maybe those who didn’t feel the same way would somehow give it a chance.” Heat rises to my cheeks from the embarrassment of sharing so much.

“Yeah. I mean, initially, I convinced myself I only wanted to talk about craft, me being an aspiring writer and all. But honestly, it was more the emotions that I wanted to talk about, to explore with people. Sadly, people in my English class at my school

weren't that interested in talking feelings. And I didn't feel like I could just shoot the shit with my stoic, science-brained brother or really any of my buddies about it. You know, there's a stigma about guys who read, let alone guys who read romance novels. So, like you, I went online, talked to a camera. It kinda just took off and became this whole... thing... that had a mind of its own." He stares into the book, but it's clear he's lost in his own thoughts. I give him the moment.

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Because I think I know how he feels. A simple desire to talk about the thing that you love and find a community who shares that love. But it grows into something much more. And brings with it a life that you might not have been prepared for, with all its good... and its bad.

He shakes his head as if clearing his thoughts, bringing him back to me, here in the library. “It’s been a blessing in disguise, though. Without the revenue and sponsorships from my channel, I wouldn’t have been able to afford coming to Brighton.”

My eyebrows shoot up. It’s true, there’s a lot of money to be had for some in this online space. I’ve been fortunate enough to do pretty well and save up some for my future. But if Aiden is funding his own college education, he’s got to be doing better than I am.

Or maybe that’s why he wants this brand deal so much.

He senses my eyes fixed on him and turns his head to meet my gaze. He laughs. “What? Do I have something on my face?” He rubs his cheek.

“No, sorry, I didn’t mean to stare. I was just doing the internal math, I guess.”

“You really make everything into a competition when it comes to our channels, don’t you? Can’t we both exist in the space? Throw me a bone, okay? I don’t want beef. I need my online presence to continue to grow and do well.”

“Why’s it so important to you?” I ask.

He rolls his eyes like what he's about to say is just nonsense. Which makes me think that it's actually one of the most important things he'll ever share with me. "I'm basically on my own." His voice is light, easy-breezy. Too light. Too easy-breezy. I want to reach over and touch his arm, but I tuck my hand under my leg instead, forcing it to stay near me.

"Your parents..." I leave the question hanging in the air.

"I'm a Korean cliché. My mom's a doctor. My dad's a doctor. My older brother?" He lifts his brows at me, inviting me to finish the thought.

"Let me guess... a doctor?" I try to smile, but it comes out small, sympathetic.

"Tell her what she's won!" he jokes. "Anyways, that was always the expectation on me. But I was the kid in the corner reading books. And then writing stories I made up in my head. Being a writer, however, was not in the future-professions-for-Korean-kids manual. It wasn't until I started reading romance novels and seeing these stories about how a lot of these authors used to have really incredibly impressive careers as lawyers, doctors, neuroscientists—heck, even politicians—and eventually chose to be writers instead that I had the courage to say I wanted to be a writer. And when my channel took off, and the money started coming in, I finally believed it could be a reality for me."

Something shifts in my heart right at this moment. I'm not quite sure what it is, but I know it's monumental. Like the last remaining scales that hid the entirety of Aiden Jeon from me have fallen off. And I know I'm in deep shit.

"That's"—I swallow back the lump of emotion forming in my throat—"incredible, Aiden."

"Well, I'm glad you think so. My parents were, as expected, completely unimpressed."

I was to stop this immediately. But honestly, I don't think I could stop writing even if I tried. And then they resorted to the threats. I'd be disowned if I didn't go to med school. Financially cut off. No longer a member of this family." He says this in a deep, serious voice, mocking whoever it was that told him this news. His eyes close for one second, tight, brow furrowed.

This time I don't stop myself. I reach out and lay my hand on his forearm. I squeeze gently.

When he opens them, he straightens his back as if fortifying himself. I pull my hand away.

"So if ever anyone questions my Gen Z status, here I am, living off my internet earnings, estranged from my family, studying to be a broke and tortured writer one day." He turns to look at me. "And that is why I'm gonna beat you in this competition." The words are ominous, but he says them with such levity.

But if I win, if I fall in love first, he has to give up his online presence, the source of his income. My face must give away the horror of this realization.

"Oh no, no you don't. You don't get to feel sorry for me or worry about what it means if you beat me." He laughs. "Plus, I have no intention of losing and every intention of falling in love first. Look, I've got enough financial aid from the government to cover this year, so don't worry. That's who I was talking to earlier. My financial aid advisor. She was going over the forms for me to already start applying for next year's funds."

"Wait, the girl who was basically embracing you earlier is your financial aid advisor?" I scrunch my nose. That doesn't seem very appropriate.

"Embracing me? What? I think maybe she put her hand on my arm to tell me to relax

when I was getting frustrated. I have trouble reading some kinds of things, like long forms and odd formatting, so I was getting riled up. She just wanted me to slow down and work my way through it.”

I recall Aiden mentioning that he had struggled with reading my reaction emoji in our texts. It starts to make sense. My brother, Eugene, has a similar struggle. After having a hard time in his early years of school, and being branded as a troubled kid, he was finally diagnosed with dyslexia. He was able to start getting the help and support he needed, and everything changed for him. I wonder if Aiden was able to get the same kind of help. It would be cool if I could get Aiden to talk to Eugene so my little brother can see that someone can succeed despite having some challenges with reading.

But I don’t want to make assumptions. And since Aiden hasn’t actually shared any of the details with me, I don’t think it’s right to ask right now.

I feel a physical pull in myself, a stretching, like I’m making room for all this information Aiden is sharing with me about himself.

Aiden, the writer, going against his parents’ expectations and wishes.

Aiden, the self-made man, trying to finance his education and his future.

Aiden, the reader, whose brilliant mind struggles with forms and formatting but can plow through the density of Austen like it’s nothing.

“Aiden, I think we should forget the competition altogether. I was basically just saying I might want to step back from my book review stuff anyways. I’m struggling to keep my head afloat...” I stop myself from sharing too much. It’s probably already obvious—we’re partners in a class together. But I barely admit my struggles to myself. It’s nearly impossible to share them with other people.

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“No,” he says. That one word feels like it echoes through the entire library and down into my bones. “We have to see this through to the end. We have to fall in love.”

I’ve never seen or heard Aiden this serious, this adamant. The angles of his face even seem to shift. I don’t point out that there’s a very good chance at least one of us is not finding love from this competition, and I’m pretty sure that’s going to be me.

I nod and make a mental note for us to have this conversation later.

“Okay, okay, fine,” I say. For now.

“Anyways”—I reach over to pick up *Pride and Prejudice*—“back to the book. You know how people love to see themselves in a novel? I have a feeling that reading about poor, unremarkable Charlotte Lucas, who marries an awfully dull man for money and not love, despite not even being his first choice whatsoever, will be like looking in a mirror,” I joke.

“Hey, that’s the second time today you’ve referred to yourself as ‘unremarkable,’ and I’m calling bullshit.”

I shake my head and shrug. “Middle-child syndrome, impostor syndrome, only-at-Brighton-to-make-my-parents-happy syndrome. That’s all. Anyways... back to the book...”

I jump a little as Aiden’s hand covers mine. I try to pull mine away. I don’t do sympathy comfort well. But he wraps his fingers around my hand.

I swallow.

The heat creeping up my neck is not attraction. It's humiliation. Aiden may have opened up and shared with me. But I did not intend to do the same with him.

Aiden gives my hand a squeeze and smiles. "Look at you finally reading Austen," he whispers, dimples finally making an appearance, letting me off the hook.

I lean in and whisper back, "I saw the movie, the 1995 version."

He shakes his head and laughs. "You're missing all the best parts if you don't read the book. Promise me you'll do it. If for nothing else than the fact that our grade in lit depends on it." I know he's joking, but I hear the tinge of concern in his voice.

I'm letting him down. I'm letting myself down. Worst of all, I'm letting my parents down. I swear to myself that I'll try harder.

"I promise," I say.

"You know what's funny?" Aiden asks. "Me being here at Brighton is basically a 'fuck you' to my parents. And you being here at Brighton is the best thing that could ever happen to yours. We're pretty much complete opposites."

It's true. Aiden and I couldn't be further apart, opposites in so many ways.

So why, then, is he starting to feel like someone I'm growing closer to and can relate to more and more each day?

Epigraph

It's the combination of "marriage of convenience" and "he falls first" in this book

that really stole my heart. The way that Miles insisted on marrying Emma, making it seem like it was to get them both out of their sticky situations, when really Emma was the one who had everything to lose... ughhhh and sigh. Miles Miller, you are a saint. And I love you.

—@irene.loves.love.books

I want to be Miles Miller when I grow up.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Ten

marriage of convenience

“Okay, remember, it’s all hands on deck.”

We’re in the common room of Charles and Aiden’s dorm. Jeannette has the three of us lined up, standing at attention. I don’t know whose idea it was to get us matching coveralls for this situation, but we’ve all got them on. Mine are rolled at the hem a few times since no one thought to get them tailored for me.

“Jackson and Jeremiah will be here at”—Jeannette looks down at her watch—“thirteen hundred hours, which gives us exactly two hours and ten minutes to finish preparations,” she barks at us.

“We need to fill the fridges in each of our rooms with the necessary refreshments. Which are?” Jeannette turns to me, puts her face directly in front of mine, and bores her gorgeous green eyes into me.

I hold back a “meep.”

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“Mountain Dew, Celsius energy drinks, and...” My mind goes blank. The last drink is on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t remember.

“Gatorade,” Charles answers, saving me.

“Good,” Jeannette says.

“Kiss-ass,” I say under my breath.

Aiden snorts.

“And what other preparations do we have remaining?” Jeannette demands, getting in his face.

“Make the beds in Charles’s dorm room for the J’s, ensure Charles’s roommate is staying with his girlfriend this weekend, set up the spare air mattress in my room for Charles, and place the necessary travel-size toiletries on each bed,” Aiden responds.

Impressive attention to detail with that one.

Jeannette steps back and looks us over.

And bursts into tears.

“You guys... my little brothers are gonna love it here,” she says.

I’ve never seen anyone go to these lengths for a family visit, especially not a sibling

visit. But that's Jeannette for you. She'd do anything for her brothers. Having lost their mom early in their lives, she's inevitably stepped into a maternal role for them. Yet she's such a good big sister, too.

I think about Cybil and how I'd never think to go to her for any help, except maybe skincare advice. It makes me grateful Jeannette is in my life now, too. But I need to be more aware of not adding to the load of people she carries on her shoulders.

Charles rushes up to her and wraps an arm around her shoulders. "We can't wait for them to get here, baby. We're gonna make their visit so amazing, and Jackson is for sure gonna want to come to Brighton next year."

"Jeremiah," I correct him. "Jackson is the younger one, the junior."

I walk up to Jeannette and, since Charles occupies her shoulders, bend a little and wrap myself around her waist. "They're going to have the best time. They're so so lucky to have you as a big sister to show them the way."

Aiden, standing awkwardly beside us, reaches out an arm to pat Jeannette stiffly on the back. The move makes me laugh.

"Thank you so much for putting up with me, you guys. And for helping me get everything ready," she says through her sniffles.

"Like we had a choice, drill sergeant?" Aiden jokes.

I elbow him in the side.

"I can't wait to meet them," I say.

"They're gonna love you," Jeannette says, looking down at me. "And Aiden will

charm the socks off of them like he does everyone.” She smiles at Aiden.

“What about me? They’ll love me, too, right?” Charles asks, his puppy dog tongue flapping, tail wagging.

Jeannette gives him a pained smile. “Sorry, honey. They’re going to hate you no matter what. They’re just really protective of their big sister.”

Charles’s face drops, sad pup.

Aiden reaches over and gives his head a reassuring pat.

A couple hours later, two tall, gorgeous, redheaded teen boys arrive, bringing with them the noise and energy of kids being unleashed into freedom for the weekend.

After a long day of campus tours, cafeteria dining, off-campus dining, and answering five thousand questions about college life and the “chicks” here at Brighton, the six of us are sprawled out on a fortress of blankets and pillows in the boys’ dorm common area watching a movie.

I have my laptop open, earbuds in, trying to edit a monthly reading recap video. I look over my screen at the scene in front of me and realize two things: One, in the two short months I’ve been at Brighton, I’ve changed from when I was in high school. The things that I thought mattered, I’m thinking maybe don’t matter so much anymore. I might have been a bit of a social outcast back then, but I didn’t stay that way.

And that’s the second thing, the one that brings tears right up behind my eyes, threatening to break through and fall. The people here—Jeannette, Charles, and Aiden—they’re my friends. I’ve never felt a part of something where other people were involved as well. And even though we’re still technically on opposite sides of a

competition, we're all in this college thing together.

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“If you were all able to hook up so soon after getting here, I wonder if the same will happen for me. I saw a lot of pretty girls when we were walking around campus.”

In my mind, he seems so young. So naive. Impressionable. Horny. But this desire to be in a relationship with someone in college, I had the same thoughts and hopes when I was a senior. Get me out of the hellhole of high school and set me free in college. Maybe I didn’t have it as rough as I made it out to be in my head, a socially awkward loner with no friends. Maybe that’s just how stuff feels for everyone at that age.

Jeannette punches him lightly on the arm. “Charles and I didn’t meet right away. And even then, we were friends first before dating.”

“What about the two of you?” Jeremiah turns to where Aiden and I are sitting next to each other on the well-worn dorm couch.

“Who? Us two?” I ask, pointing between myself and Aiden. “Oh, we’re not dating.”

“Really? No way. You totally seem like a couple. So you’re just hooking up, then?”

“I wish,” Aiden says.

“Not even,” I say at the same time.

I whip my head around, jaw on the ground at Aiden’s response. He just shrugs and smiles at me.

Typical, always trying to throw me off guard.

“Well, college seems pretty cool. As long as you give me space and aren’t overbearing,” Jeremiah says, pointing to Jeannette, “I could totally see myself coming to Brighton.”

“Dude, me too,” the younger Jackson adds.

High-fives are exchanged around the room, and I realize that I agree with Jeremiah. College is pretty cool.

My laptop blinks with a new email notification. I look down and see the name of the online marketing director from SKCupid.

“Can I use your room really quick?” I ask Aiden. His focus is back on the TV screen, hand moving on autopilot between the big bowl of kettle corn in his lap and his mouth. He turns his head and quickly gives me a once-over, as if making sure everything is okay. “Yeah, sure. Door’s open,” he says.

I rush to Aiden’s room and place my laptop on his desk. I take a seat and open the email.

Irene, thank you so much for your patience while we work through all the details about the brand partnership with SKCupid. I’m pleased to share that we’ve made a decision and will be putting together contracts for review. We’d like to discuss them with each of our candidates face-to-face on video to let them know who our choice will be and why. Would you be available in the next couple weeks for a call? Please let me know.

I swallow back my anxiety. Did that seem like a positive email? Or a let-me-down-easy email? If they’ve chosen me, wouldn’t they just say so and leave the cryptic requests for a Zoom call for those they’ve passed on?

Aiden walks into the room, head down, looking at his phone. His brow is furrowed and his lips are moving along with whatever he's reading. He looks up from his screen and meets my eyes. "Did you get an email?" he asks.

"Yeah. Was yours also 'we've made a decision but we're not telling you yet'?"

He nods, holding up his phone.

"What do you think it means?" I ask.

"I have no idea. It could mean anything. It could mean they chose you, me, or someone from a slew of other people in the mix."

"That wasn't even a possibility I've ever considered." And it's true. Who else would they choose outside of Aiden or myself?? No other Korean book content creators come close to our reach. At least none that I've come across.

I look back at my laptop and open up my social apps. Maybe there's a clue to who else might have been in consideration.

"Honestly, I hope they did choose you. You deserve it," he says, coming up behind me and leaning over me to look at my screen.

I'm stunned into silence for once. Aiden Jeon, my former enemy, once rival, and now... friend? Saying nice things to me? And smelling this good doing it?

It soothes the sting of this whole situation a tiny bit. But I can't deny that I'm still kinda bitter that Aiden's followers trolling me seems to have contributed to my downward trajectory online.

"Thanks, but I'm fairly certain it wasn't me. I might have been the first person they

considered, but I lost momentum. You know, I hope SKCupid picked you. Then it would make all your followers' hard work worth it."

I force a laugh, but it sounds tinny and almost manic. I hate being passive-aggressive, and yet I do it so well.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, how your followers come on to my reviews and try and drag me every time. They’d do anything for you. And since you’ve made it clear we disagree on pretty much everything, it’s like permission for them to do so, too.”

Aiden’s brows stitch together and he looks genuinely confused.

Frustration builds inside me, because I can’t keep the Aiden who is honest, sometimes vulnerable, and often surprisingly kind straight from the one who plays dumb when the evidence is right there for anyone to see.

So I pull up my review from last week about the secret baby romance and scroll down to some of the comments.

@aidentheguyreadsromance: I do think that there are valid reasons for keeping secrets in a relationship. As long as the truth eventually comes out, and the author handles it with care, I could be convinced.

@darkromanceorbust: @aidentheguyreadsromance Right? Here Irene goes again with her pearl clutching. They had a baby, it’s not that serious.

@HEAandcoffeeinthatorder: @darkromanceorbust What do you mean it’s not that serious. Irene is right, it sets the entire relationship on a foundation of dishonesty.

@tamlinismisunderstood: If you’re that bothered, just go read YA. Or MG for that matter...

“See? Brutal,” I say.

“It’s just some online banter. People love to argue when their faces aren’t attached to it. You know the first rule of being online is to not take comments too seriously. But I’m sorry that it’s upsetting. I had no idea.” He reaches around me to get his hands on my laptop and pulls up his latest review. “If it helps at all, mine aren’t any kinder, to be honest,” he admits.

I take a look.

There are a few followers that comment on his review. But then...

... some comment on how fun it is that he’s reading romance...

... some comment on how cute he is...

... some comment on what they “want to do to him.”

“What the fuck is that?” I cry out, pointing at the screen.

“That, Irene, is my normal.”

I lean in, pushing his hand away from the keyboard and placing mine on the track pad, scrolling and reading a few more. “They just... objectify you like that?” My stomach feels sour as I read a comment from a reader offering to have Aiden’s “secret baby.”

He drops his eyes and shrugs. I can’t imagine navigating the land mine of his comments section. A thought hits me. “Wait, do you get DMs, too?”

He tucks his lips between his teeth and nods slowly, clearly not wanting to share

further. He straightens, takes a seat on his bed, and rakes his fingers through his hair, letting out a loud sigh.

I collapse back into his chair, pushing away the laptop like it's something I'm allergic to. All the times I complained about snarky comments on my feed and believed that Aiden had it way easier weigh heavy on my shoulders.

"Online can be a scary place," he says.

"Shit, I thought I had it rough. Do you report these people? That's harassment. It has to go against user policy. Jesus, I'm so sorry, Aiden. I'm sorry this happens to you. And I'm sorry that I even thought to blame you for the assholes in my comments. Clearly..."

"...I wouldn't wish that on anyone." He turns to me and the natural sparkle is back in his eye as he smiles. "It is what it is. I'm not that bothered. Now that the shock has worn off, I know how to navigate my feed, and I block liberally."

"You block people and you still have that follower count. Damn," I say. But I don't say it with envy like I might have in the past.

"Irene, don't let those people get to you. The same goes for SKCupid. They don't have the right to care about your personal experience and weaponize that against you. Don't give this company that power."

"How can you be so unaffected?" I ask. "You're always so even-keeled about stuff. I don't get it."

Aiden lays back flat on his bed, looking up at the ceiling. "Real-life shit is hard enough to deal with. I don't need to give online drama my energy."

“I wish it was that easy for me,” I say to myself.

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“Hey,” Aiden calls to me. He jackknifes up from the bed and leans himself against his desk to face me. “If you’re worried about the trolls and how that impacts your brand, well, then let’s shut them down.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve got the joint Live coming up. Let’s approach it as a team. You and me against any haters, boundary crossers, and corporate marketing people who pay too close attention to shit that doesn’t matter,” he says.

I laugh as his face gets more animated. But I still don’t get what he’s suggesting.

“Um, what do you have going on up there in that very scary head of yours?” I ask.

“Irene, you always think the worst of me, and all I’ve tried to do is prove you wrong.”

Ouch. That’s not true, is it? I wonder if maybe I’ve been just a wee bit too hard on Aiden. I cut off this thought, because I already know the answer.

He reaches out and puts his hands on my shoulders, looking me straight in the eye. “I have a plan, a pretty good one, if I do say so myself. A plan that will get us control of our narratives back from those who have been trying to take it. A plan to shut everyone up and let us have fun in our online space again. A plan that requires the both of us to do what we do best.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, trying to sound more encouraging than skeptical.

Aiden slowly lifts one eyebrow as his cocky grin makes an appearance. “Be experts on romance, on tropes specifically.”

Well, now he’s got my attention. This I can do.

“You with me?” he asks.

I have no idea what it is we’re doing, but the thought of jumping off this deep end with Aiden doesn’t scare me one bit.

Go figure.

“Most definitely,” I say, and I lift my hand to meet his in a high-five, sealing the deal, sealing our fate.

Epigraph

I will never say no to fake dating. Give me every fake-dating book ever written and I will grabby hands it and say thank you and be happy. Because when the two catch feelings and finally realize that it’s happened? Oof, *chef’s kiss*.

—@irene.loves.love.books

Here’s my theory: Though the author never explicitly says it, I really believe Jamison always knew he wanted Summer. The fake dating was just a ploy to get her to realize she wanted him back. And my hot take is that every fake-dating story ever told runs on this unspoken premise: Someone has already fallen before the fake dating even starts.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Eleven

fake dating

Okay, so maybe I should have gotten some more details on Aiden's plan before blindly agreeing to jump into it with him last night.

Because when he shows up outside my dorm today to walk me to our 8 a.m. class, I'm flustered.

When he offers to carry my backpack, I'm caught off guard.

When he takes my hand and tucks it into the crook of his elbow as we walk, I'm taken aback.

And when he leans down and whispers in my ear that I look pretty today, I come this close to passing out.

I stop just outside the English building, stepping back and pulling my arm out of Aiden's. I need space.

"C'mon, we don't wanna be late," he says.

"I think maybe I very much am willing to be late in order to find out what the heck it is you're up to."

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“What do you mean?” He takes a step forward toward me.

I hold my hand out to stop him from coming any closer. I briefly wonder if his internal temperature runs warm, because any time I come in contact with his body, I seem to heat up. And right now, my hand, currently touching his chest, is on fire.

“What’s with all of this?” I ask, flailing my other hand around in his general vicinity.

“I mean, if we’re gonna do it, we should try and at least be convincing, don’t you think?”

“Do what?” I ask.

“Fake date,” he says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

I try to quickly rewind the events and conversations of the night before to make sure there isn’t something I missed that would enlighten me on what he’s talking about.

Nothing.

I stare at him.

He stares back, but his eyes are dancing.

“Wait, this is your big plan that will get everyone off our backs?” I ask.

Like clockwork, those damn dimples appear. I know he uses them whenever he

thinks he's about to get his way. Or needs to convince me to let him.

“Yup. Look, you had this plan to find a boyfriend so you could get the haters off your back and convince SKCupid that you're the romance expert, right? Well, why go through all the trouble of dating a bunch of randoms when you can just date me? It's quicker, and you like me.”

I guffaw. As if.

“One, fake dating is not the same as dating. And two, the plan is to fall in love. Period. Everything else is just icing on the cake.”

Aiden stares at me as if he doesn't see the problem.

Why doesn't he see the problem?

“You said you trusted me,” he says. “We'll go on our Live, show everyone we're dating, and get them off our backs. You get your online peace of mind back and SKCupid makes a decision based on who's best suited for the role, not based on assumptions from random comments.”

“Okay, I can see what you're saying, but then explain to me what we're doing here, now, not in front of our computer on a live stream.”

“This is practice.” He rubs his hands together, the cocky smirk lifting the right side of his mouth.

“I didn't agree to practice,” I say.

“You want to be convincing, don't you? We can't just go online and wing it,” he says.

I mean, I guess it makes sense. But this all feels like a lot. Over the top.

“Look, it’s only a week until our Live. Might as well spend it preparing, getting used to being around each other a lot, practicing now so we can really put on a good show later.”

He looks suspiciously like he’s enjoying this.

“Okay, fine,” I cave. “But don’t be annoying about it.”

He slings his arm around my shoulders and directs me toward the door to class. “Now, when have I ever been annoying?”

And as we make our way down the center aisle to our seats, Aiden says, loudly, “Thank god we made it to class on time, baby. Almost missed it being distracted by you.”

My jaw is on the ground.

I’m going to kill him.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:12 am

Later that night, Aiden talks me into meeting him across campus. “What are we doing over here?” I ask.

He grabs my hand, and before I can fully and convincingly object, he pulls me into a place I’ve avoided since orientation: the campus coffee house. I tug, trying to pull him back, but he’s freaking strong!

We get to the counter and I suspect to see my face taped to the wall as someone unwelcome here. I anticipate the barista’s eyes to widen and whisper, “it’s you!” I wait for whispers and snickers to flood my ears from those sitting at various tables.

But none of that happens.

“I’ll have a large iced Americano, and a large iced caramel macchiato for her.”

“How did you know my order?” I ask.

He looks at me like I’ve grown five horns.

“I have coffee with you at least three times a week, sometimes more, depending on how cranky you are. You think I don’t know your order by now?”

“When have I ever been cranky?” I mumble under my breath.

“Plus, boyfriends should always know their girlfriend’s coffee order,” he says over his shoulder as he whips out his dining card to pay.

We grab a table by the window and sip our coffees while discussing the latest discourse about mandatory HEAs in romance.

“It’s such a tired argument at this point. Those who get it get it...” he says.

“And those who don’t don’t,” I say back.

“And those who don’t should just go read a thriller,” he adds.

The barista comes by and gives us an apple fritter from their display case since it’s an hour before closing. “On the house,” she says.

It’s still soft and fresh and the apples melt in my mouth.

I look around and remember how much I liked this place the one time I was here. I can barely remember why I never came back.

The next night, I get a text from Aiden.

Aiden: I’m hungry. Let’s eat.

He meets me just outside my dorm and we grab an Uber to Lupa Trattoria. I haven’t been here since my date with... what was his name? The good-looking one? Oh yeah, Garrett.

“What did you eat here last time?” Aiden asks.

“I had the truffle gnocchi. It was good, but very rich,” I recall.

“Wanna pick a couple things and split them?” Aiden suggests.

“Sure, that’s a good idea,” I say. I order the puttanesca and Aiden picks the ragù. When the dishes come, Aiden helps scoop some of each onto my plate.

“Have you had much luck with the Creator Fund?” he asks me as we’re finishing up dessert, a tiramisu and an affogato, both of which we again agree to split.

“Some. It’s hit or miss, to be honest. So much is dependent on the algorithm, and there’s not always a rhyme or reason to it,” I admit.

It’s nice being able to talk about these things with someone. I’m surprised I’m not more protective of my information like I have been in the past. I guess since we’re (fake) dating now, I shouldn’t think the worst of him every time we discuss our online stuff.

When the waitress comes, I quickly grab for the check. “This is on me,” I say.

He reaches over and tries to take it from me. “No, no, I invited you so it’s on me.”

The waitress looks from me to Aiden and back to me like she’s at a tennis match.

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“Let me get it this time, okay?” I switch tactics by asking nicely.

“No, I invited you out. It’s on me,” he says.

I go for the big guns. “But I’m older,” I say.

“No, you’re not,” he argues.

“Yes, I am. My birthday is March and yours is May,” I remind him.

He stares at me, eyes wide. “How do you know that?”

“You told me that one time we were filling out waiver forms for broom hockey,” I remind him.

“You remembered,” he says. His smile is small, almost shy. I feel especially thankful and proud that I listened and remembered this piece of information just to get this reaction from Aiden.

“Well, since you’re older, you can pay this time. But only if I can get it next time,” he says.

I agree. And since I feel especially good about winning the who’s-gonna-pay battle, I let Aiden hold my hand as we walk home without any resistance.

We want to be convincing, after all.

Over the course of the next three days, it becomes clear to me exactly what Aiden is doing. He's taking me back to places where I've had all my failed dates and giving me new experiences at each of them.

On each of our dates, Aiden is attentive and kind, funny and a great listener. We talk about romance books and we discuss TV shows we like, and, in what probably comes as a surprise to no one, our fake dating is feeling all too real to me at this point.

I was beginning to think I was doomed to never really know romance. But with Aiden, I don't feel the icks when he holds my hand or when he always stands super close or places his hand on my lower back as he's letting me walk through a doorway before he does. I don't get bored with our conversations or feel like I have to fill awkward silences. I can look at him and find all kinds of new and fascinating things about his facial expressions. He even winked at me when we shared an inside joke, and I found it charming.

I like him. I think about him a lot. I feel safe with him. I enjoy his company. But he's only ever asked me to be his fakegirlfriend. And I'm too terrified of rejection to broach the subject of how he's feeling about it all now that we've spent some time together.

"Hey, I have to stop by the health center to pick up my meds. Wanna come with me, or I can just text you later," Aiden asks.

"I'll come with you," I say.

We walk in comfortable silence. I glance down at our feet to find that, yet again, our strides are matching.

"Hey, I like your new shoes," I comment.

“Thanks, they’re comfortable,” he says.

“What size are you?” I don’t know why this question comes up, but it’s easy to ask and I like knowing random things about Aiden.

“I’m an eleven. You know what they say about big feet, right?”

“Don’t do that,” I say.

“Okay,” he says back.

We both crack up.

See? Easy.

We turn the corner to the health center and a bike comes barreling down the sidewalk at breakneck speed. Aiden turns and shields me with his body, getting thrown off-balance by the runaway biker. We both tumble to the ground, but Aiden wraps his hand around the back of my head, trying to turn our bodies so he takes the brunt of the landing.

We’re sprawled out on the grass, half of my body covering his. There’s a slight twinge in my ankle, but otherwise, I’m unhurt.

“Are you okay?” he quickly asks, looking me over. I notice his elbow is scraped.

“Aiden, you’re bleeding,” I say, panicked.

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“I’m okay, I’m okay. Don’t worry,” he comforts me.

The rider of the bike rushes over. “Shit, I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you guys. Everyone okay? Let me take a look.” I know who it is before he even removes his helmet. “I’m pre-med,” he says.

“Motherfucker! Are you serious, Taejin? Watch where the fuck you’re going. Why are you riding your bike on the sidewalk, anyways?” Aiden is fired up. I’ve never seen him this angry.

Taejin’s face is as red as a tomato. “I... I... I’m sorry, but I was rushing to...”

“Forget it. Just, please, get out of the way. And be more careful next time.” Aiden looks me over one more time before standing up and offering me his hand.

“Wait, wait, I should make sure you both are okay. That no one got a concussion from the fall,” Taejin says.

“Neither of us hit our heads, genius. What are you learning over there in pre-med?” Aiden asks.

I almost feel sorry for Taejin at this point.

I squeeze Aiden’s hand to calm him down. “Fuck, I’m sorry. I just was scared shitless that you were hurt,” he says.

“I’m okay. I thought my ankle was twisted, but it doesn’t hurt. See? I can put my

weight on it.”

Taejin’s immediate reaction is to bend down to inspect my foot.

“Don’t even think about it,” Aiden stops him.

“I’m fine, Taejin, thanks,” I say.

I place my hand on Aiden’s chest and step in closer so he can see and feel for himself that I’m okay. His heartbeat is racing. “Hey,” I whisper. He looks down at me, brow furrowed. I take my finger and press it to the spot, softening the worry. “I’m okay, I swear.”

He looks at me one second longer and then nods.

“Let’s go,” I say. I look back over my shoulder. “See you around, Taejin.”

“Yeah, um, okay, uh, I’m glad you guys are okay. Sorry, again. I’ll be more careful, I swear,” he says.

I smile and wave and grab Aiden’s hand.

We walk a few steps, but then Aiden pulls me aside, off the sidewalk and back toward a line of bushes and trees.

“I saw that bike coming and I freaked out. I thought for sure you were gonna get hit. I’m going to kick his ass...”

“Hey, I’m okay. Don’t think about it anymore,” I say. My voice is calm, soft, and my one focus is to ease Aiden’s mind of what he thought was going to happen but, thankfully, didn’t.

He takes a step closer and leans into me as my back hits up against a tree. He bends until his forehead rests against mine and for a few seconds we remain there until his breath evens out.

“Thanks for saving me,” I whisper.

“We were lucky,” he whispers back. Our lips are so close that I think I feel the movement from his words against my own.

“I don’t ever want you getting hurt,” he says. “Not here...” He raises my hand and kisses it. I feel a slight sting and realize my palm is scraped. I hadn’t even noticed earlier. “Not in here,” he says as he kisses my temple. “Not in here,” he says as he bends a little to kiss right over my heart.

I gasp. The intensity of the moment, of his words, of the tenderness of his kisses is almost too much for me to bear.

He pulls back just a fraction and looks into my eyes. When I look back into his, I find layers of emotion to explore, volumes of stories I want to read and know all about.

“Aiden,” I say, almost no sound coming from my mouth. I’m too afraid to say anything more.

“Irene,” he says back, just before he leans in and puts his lips to mine.

A small moan escapes me, and Aiden reads the invitation for more. He opens my lips with his tongue, and I invite him in. His arm moves to wrap around my waist as he pulls me closer to him. My hands grip both his shoulders and I hang on tight, not wanting any space to separate us.

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“You smell so good,” I say, not letting myself overthink the things I share in this moment.

“And you fucking taste amazing,” he says just before he goes in for more.

I’m swimming in a lust-filled haze and I don’t want to think about anything except Aiden’s mouth, his tongue, his body all invading my space. And how much I love it.

I pull back just a bit to get some air.

Aiden’s forehead comes back to meet mine. Like it’s his safe place.

Our breaths even out and we’re in sync, just like we were with our footsteps.

“You’re not as bad as I thought, Aiden Jeon,” I tease.

He smiles against my mouth.

“And you’re ten times better than I ever let myself dream, Irene Park.”

Now those are words I’m going to play over and over in my head for a very long time.

Epigraph

Dramione and Reylo fans, don’t come for me, but I’m a Merthur girl for life. They’re my ult OTP. And if *SwordInStone* has no fans, it means I’m dead. Thank you for the

journey and finally giving us the last chapter. This fic was EVERYTHING. My heart has exploded. Please collect the pieces of me off the ground.

—@irene.loves.love.books

I've never read fan fiction before. I know, I know, what's wrong with me? But since @irene.loves.love.books raved about this one, I had to check it out. Merlin and Arthur? Never even saw it coming. It hit me like a Mack truck. Where can I find more of this stuff? I NEED MORE.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Twelve

otp—one true pairing

I stand frozen in front of my roommate as I watch her wriggle and writhe back and forth, stomping her feet in some kind of marching-band procession on her bed all while singsonging “It’s about time, it’s about time.” This has been going for the past, oh, four minutes, ever since I spilled the beans that Aiden and I kissed. I’m sure it’ll end eventually, right? She can’t go on like this forever, can she?

“And now Charles owes me twenty bucks because I told him it would happen before Parents Day. Hey—” She sits up and stares at me as if only just now realizing I’m standing in the room with her. “Do you think you can have your dad tousle Aiden’s hair and pat him on the back a few times and say ‘good man, good man’ to him? That’s our side bet, and Charles will have to cough up fifty more.”

“Great, my roommate and her boyfriend are making betson my love life,” I groan. I collapse onto my own bed.

“Well, the initial bet was to see who would win the trope competition. But when it became clear to both me and Charles that you two were on a collision course to falling in love with each other and the competition would obviously end in a tie, we had to come up with other things to bet on,” she admits.

“You two have an odd relationship,” I tease.

“No kidding. But it works for us.” Jeannette shrugs.

“I’d love to win you some extra cash, but I’m not sure if I’m ready to introduce Aiden to my parents, to be honest.”

“Why not? He’s great. They’ll love him.”

Will they? Yeah, I’m pretty sure they will. My mom would be gaga over his dimples and how cute he is. And the fact that he’s a readeranda writer? Done deal. My dad would be impressed by his height and stature. And that he’s a “Brighton man.” Win-win. But I’m not sure how Aiden would feel about meeting them, what with his strained relationship with his own parents. Maybe it would be too raw.

And what if he doesn’t think we’re that serious? Are we serious enough? We’ve shared one kiss. And absolutely have not defined the relationship. Without a DTR discussion, I don’t want to make any assumptions.

He could still think this is all fake.

While I’m here under the assumption that it’s turned very real.

“Isn’t it too soon?” I ask. “What if I try and introduce them and he thinks I’m totally overstepping and says, ‘It’s not like we’re getting married,’ and storms off??”

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“Wow, you really just let yourself go to the ends of the spectrum of despair, don’t you? What other panicked thoughts are going through that head of yours?” Jeannette throws her pillow in my direction, but I dodge it easily, then pick it up and hug it to my chest.

“I don’t have experience with these kinds of things,” I admit, as if that weren’t obvious. “And I don’t trust it, for some reason.”

“Why don’t you trust it? Do you not trust Aiden? Or do you not trust yourself??”

Why does she always ask the questions I don’t have answers for?

“You’re worthy to be loved, you know. You don’t have to impress anyone or worry that Aiden is gonna see the real you and not want you anymore. He seems to like you for exactly who you are. He’s seen you with the biggest zit on your nose, doesn’t that count for something?”

I try to laugh at that reminder of the most embarrassing moment of my life to date. But my head is still swirling with so many thoughts and doubts.

“When you think about it, it’s weird, right? Aiden and I?” I ask.

“You want to know what I think?” Jeannette asks. “I think it couldn’t be any less weird, to be honest. It’s kind of a romance novel come to life. And isn’t that exactly what you wanted for yourself??”

“I don’t know. Now that I’m faced with the possibility and I actually have feelings

involved, I'm not sure what I'm doing. And what trope are we, even? I should figure that out so I can really make a plan on how to move forward. Are we enemies-to-lovers? You know how much I hate that trope."

I've always believed that anything I needed to know about life, I could find in a romance novel. And now, when the one thing I really want to know about is a real romance itself, I can't seem to find the answers at all.

Jeannette walks over to her desk, opens the top drawer, and pulls out one of her notebooks. She flips a couple pages and brings it over to show me. She takes a seat next to me and wraps her arm around my shoulder.

Written in her perfect handwriting is a list. Of tropes. But not the tropes I chose for my challenge with Aiden.

Rivals-to-lovers.

Mutual pining.

Fated mates.

Friends-to-lovers.

The list has at least twenty different tropes.

"What is this list?" I ask her.

Her smile is wide, her entire body buzzing with an energy I don't understand. I'm missing something.

"I've been keeping a list of tropes that you and Aiden fall under. It keeps getting

longer and longer, just so you know. I guess when you start experiencing real love, the entire thing opens up to lots of possibilities. But you know what I was thinking, Irene? Even if you two didn't fit any tropes, you fit each other. And that's what's most important. Don't overthink it. Forget the plan. Forget the romance rule book. Just... go for it."

I think about Aiden and how he makes me laugh, makes me see things and think about them differently, makes me feel things I've never felt for anyone before. I'm someone in his eyes. I've got main-character energy when I'm around him.

I pat my adorable fae queen roommate on the top of her glorious red hair.

"You know what, bestie? You're right. I might not have seen this coming, but I'm not gonna let it pass me by," I say. "I'm allowing myself to see where this leads with Aiden."

I let out an errant squeal, unable to hold in my excitement laced with confusing emotions and a tiny sprinkle of abject horror.

Jeannette wraps her arms around me and squeezes tight. "It's really happening. It's what you've always wanted. You're falling in love," she says.

It's really happening, I tell myself. It's what I've always wanted. I guess I'm finally falling in love.

And everything about it scares me shitless.

My phone buzzes on my desk and I run to pick it up. On the screen, half of two faces pop up, my mom's on the left side and my dad's on the right side.

"Irene, can you see us? Irene?"

“Yes, I’m here. Hi, I can see you. Can you see me? Can you hear me?”

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Jeannette giggles from her side of the room. “I’m gonna go down to the deli to get some snacks. Be back in a few,” she whispers. I appreciate her giving me some privacy to FaceTime with my folks. But knowing my parents, they’ll be screaming so loud into the phone, she’ll still be able to hear us from two floors down.

“You look tired, honey. Are you not sleeping enough?” my mom asks. “I’ll bring you some eye cream when I come. You need to wear eye cream, even when you’re young.”

“Yeobo, it’s college. She’s probably up late studying. That’s a good thing,” my dad says. He looks back into the screen at me. “Yes, Irene, you stay up as long as you need to for studying. But use your mom’s eye cream, too.”

I appreciate that he suspects I’d be up studying instead of partying. Sadly, I haven’t been doing much of either. In fact, I was going to spend the night trying to finish the new book I’ve been reading so I’ll have a quick video to post tomorrow. Once that’s off my plate, I can focus on getting some much needed studying in.

“Don’t worry. Everything’s going well over here. How are you guys? How’s Cyb and Eug?”

“Good, good, everyone is the same here. Eugene won a big tournament in Ojai last weekend so he should be ranked in the top two by end of year. If he wins in Sedona, he’ll be number one for sure,” Dad tells me.

“That’s amazing. I’ll send him a text later to congratulate him.”

“Don’t forget. He loves getting your messages,” Mom says.

My heartstrings tug a bit thinking of my little brother at home without me. He’s a good kid. I need to remember to reach out more just to check in.

“And we also got some great news for Cybil, too. She landed a new campaign for the Innisfree green tea sunscreen. It’s supposed to be a virus, so you’ll probably see her when you’re on the internet,” Mom says.

“Viral, Mom. The campaign will be viral, not a virus. Those are two different things,” I explain. Though the thought of Cybil with a virus is hilarious.

She waves her hand, shooing off the details. She thinks everything that happens behind my computer screen is all one thing called “The Internet” and that I am the one who dabbles in it. It’s good news hearing wins for my siblings. My parents beam with pride.

And now they wait. Wait for something, anything, from my end.

But I don’t have anything, not yet, and possibly not at all. At least not from SKCupid like I’d hoped. And whenever I try to explain to them the things that occupy my time, they just don’t get it.

“Are your classes going well? Tell us everything. Are you enjoying the college experience?” Dad waits for me to pepper in as much Brighton lore as I can so he can jump in and add his own memories to the mix.

“Are you cold at night?” Mom asks. “Should I bring you an extra blanket, an electric one, maybe, when we come up this weekend for Parents Day?”

“Mom, it’s next weekend. Please make sure you have it right on the calendar. Next

weekend. And no need for an extra blanket. I'm fine, I promise."

They wait. They smile. They worry behind their eyes.

"Well." I take the plunge off the deep end. No going back. "My Intro to Lit class is incredible. You were right, Mom. Once I got into the mindset of editing, reading books really changed for me. And Dad, I can hardly believe how talented the staff is here at Brighton. I feel like my professors make it so easy to learn and expand my mind." Okay, so I'm laying it on a little thick, but I panicked.

I also feel a bit nauseous from the lies. Because if anything, my classes are possibly the worst part about this whole experience to date. But I'm their first and only kid in college. I'm certainly smart enough to master it all, right?

I had one job, in their minds, one role to play in this family, and I'm blowing it.

"So, I should get back to studying. Thanks for calling. I'll see you next weekend. Remember, next weekend! I can't wait."

"Irene, wait, there's one more thing we want to talk to you about."

I freeze in place, my goodbye smile already plastered on my face.

"Mrs. Kim from the H Mart told us at church last week that her daughter has been watching your videos on the internet. She said some very nice things. But I was confused because her daughter mentioned how it's fun seeing you filming now from your college dorm room," Mom says. No accusation yet, but the facts have been laid out there.

I swallow and try to think of how to respond.

“I thought we agreed that you’d stop spending so much time posting videos and book stuff once you got to school and had more important responsibilities and pressure for your time.” Dad, coming in with the knockout punch.

I want to tell them thatwedid not agree to that. I want to remind them that this was something they said to me and not something I said back to them. They still don’t get it. They still don’t see what I do as something valuable or worth prioritizing. As something to celebrate and brag about to others. And it’s not only frustrating, it also hurts.

But I don’t say any of that. Because they won’t understand. And I don’t want to disappoint them.

“You guys don’t need to worry. I know what’s important and how to prioritize my time and efforts. I’m your first kid in college, remember? No way I’m gonna mess up this opportunity to study and become an editor.” It’s like I’m reciting words I’ve memorized for occasions such as this. In fact, I’m certain I’ve used those exact lines in some form before.

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“We’re not worried, honey. We know you’ll be responsible and do well,” my mom says. Her voice is kind and assured. My insides turn.

“Good, good. Well, Irene, we are so excited for Parents Day and coming up to see you, to meet your professors, to interact with other parents. We’ll leave extra early to avoid traffic. And don’t forget that we want to buy Brighton hoodies for everyone in the family,” Dad says.

“I won’t. Call me when you guys get close next weekend. I’ll see you then.” I wave at the screen and cut off my parents who are both trying to figure out which button to press to end the call. Their faces disappear, just the afterimage left in my brain. Happy. Proud. Totally deceived.

I fall back on my bed, playing back all the life choices that have led me to this impossible situation. Why can’t I just talk to my parents and be honest with them?

Just thinking it silently in my brain makes me shiver. If I can’t handle trying to imagine it, how will I ever really do it?

I jump as my phone buzzes with a new message.

Aiden:wanna make out??

I didn’t know it, but he’s exactly who I need right now. Someone to bring me back to my happy place. Someone who I don’t even need to discuss this with, but who understands how important what I do online is to me. His message just saved me from the rabbit hole of despair I was about to go down.

I hug my phone and let out a squeal before typing my reply. Because, duh, I absolutely want to make out.

Irene:sorry, I'm currently busy playing hard to get with my biology textbook. But who are we kidding, I have it bad for digestive systems.

Aiden:Ooh... talk dirty to me. Can I watch?

I laugh, and my insides tingle at our easy banter.

Irene:I love an audience.

I don't get an immediate response. I don't even see three dots. I wait. My mind does not like this. I was too forward. Too flirty. I turned him off. He's disgusted. He changed his mind.

I pull my pillow over my head and scream.

Do I keep waiting? Or can I send him another text? Maybe I just message him but remove the innuendo. I start. I stop. I backspace. I start again.

Irene:Jeannette and I are both studying. She's getting snacks. Wanna come by?

It's a tiny lie, but I could and should be studying. Maybe Aiden will be just the inspiration I need to start.

Aiden:On my way... do I need to put on pants? j/k.

Aiden:I was actually overeager. I'm already downstairs.

I hold my phone to my heart, smiling wide. A memory of soft but firm lips, harsh

breaths, tongues clashing crosses my mind.

Inspiration? More like a very fun distraction.

And I don't let myself think about how another distraction is the last thing I need right now.

Epigraph

Why do I put myself through this when I know how much it's going to hurt? I know why... because I'm a masochist. (Umm... a book masochist, okay?) Two hundred fifty pages of Sebastian loving Annabelle with all his heart while she stomps on it, his feelings unrequited. And only fifty pages of her finally coming to her senses and loving him to healing. And yet... it hurts so freaking good. I am a sucker for the angst, apparently.

—@irene.loves.love.books

Real life beats me down enough. I don't need to read this kind of emotional torture in my books.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Thirteen

unrequited love

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:12 am

My mental checklist is all over the place.

It's Parents Day and my mom and dad should be here any minute, but I still feel like I have a shit ton to do to make it perfect for when my folks get here. They have to see how great life is for me at Brighton. I am a Successful College Student. Something to define me in their eyes. Which means I've had to get a lot of smoke and mirrors in place.

There's also the very huge distraction of Aiden Jeon taking up much of the space in my brain right now. I've replayed the kiss in my head over and over, as well as rewind the bits leading up to it again and again. The conclusion? Ask me again in ten minutes, and my answer will likely be different. But for now, he's no longer in the Enemies category. He's still got one foot in the Rivals camp. And as far as Lovers go? My entire body shivers.

I shake my head to try to jostle all these thoughts free and push them to the back—I have more important things to do right now.

I tug at the sheet at the corner of my mattress once more, tucking it under to make sure that it's just perfect. I stand up and examine my work and decide to give it one last tug.

"Are you sure you don't come from a military family?" my adorable roommate asks me.

"I just need the room to look perfect." I look over at her bed, yet to be made, and frown. "Don't you have to use the restroom or something?" I ask.

“You’re thinking of making my bed while I’m gone, aren’t you?” Jeannette looks at me with an expression akin to horror at just how meticulous I’m being. “But your parents don’t care about my bed. I don’t even think they care about your bed. So what’s the big deal?”

I’ve already been a nervous ball of energy for weeks leading up to today. But after my FaceTime with them last week, I’m almost afraid to see my parents. Like they’ll be able to read on my face every untruth I’ve told them.

It’s the first time my parents are coming to visit me since the day I moved in, filled with hope and expectations of what my experience in college would be. And now, a couple months later, here I am, struggling with my classes. I’m not in any clubs—I’ve been so busy with the plan that I haven’t even been back to book club. And I’m still, technically, without a boyfriend, at least officially. More like in a situationship. I’ve got one new best friend, more than I’ve had since high school. At least there’s that. “I just don’t wanna be a disappointment,” I whisper.

“That’s impossible. Your parents love you,” Jeannette reminds me. Things are so simple for her. Her family is filled with joy and laughter. Her dad and her brothers call her all the time. She works her ass off so that she can accomplish what they as a group have determined. I, however, am the middle child who hasn’t really done anything and has continued to try to impress my parents by doing all the things they want from me... and failing.

“Oh shit, I forgot to go and get the sparkling water to fill the fridge. My mom really likes that stuff.” I change the subject in my own head.

“Irene, we can all go down to the cafeteria together and get it. Your dad will love going to visit the cafeteria. Just relax, sit down. They’ll be here any minute...”

And right on time comes a knock at the door.

“Hello?” My mom’s smiling face peeks in with my dad standing right behind her.

“Irene, it’s so good to see you. Look at you, honey. Did you gain a little weight?” my mom asks. She loves me. She does this. It’s a Korean thing.

“Mom, at least I haven’t gained the freshman fifteen. There’s that,” I say.

She laughs and throws her arms around me. “Oh, we’ve missed you so much.”

“How’s my Brighton girl?” my dad asks as he walks into the room, stiffly wrapping an arm around my shoulders and doing the requisite three pats. He’s never been a very good hugger. Part of his charm. “And Jeannette, it’s good to see you again.”

“Hello, Mr. Park. So good to see you, too.”

“Your dad isn’t here yet?”

“No, he’s gonna be a little bit late. There was traffic on the way,” she explains.

“Yes, we did a roundabout. I know this area like the back of my hand, so I know all the shortcuts.” There’s Dad again. Livin’ those glory days of when he was at Brighton.

“So what’s the first thing on the agenda here for Parents Day?” Mom asks.

“Uh, we’re gonna have to all go into the lecture hall and do a mock orientation for you guys, and then you’ll be separated into some groups without us kids to take a tour,” I explain.

“Mr. Park, you could probably give the tour yourself,” Jeannette says.

“Hell yeah, I could, Jeannette. Good call. Should I ask them if I can replace the tour guide?” he says eagerly.

“Dad, just relax and enjoy yourself with the other parents, please,” I beg. I do not want my parents drawing attention to me this weekend. I don’t need anyone coming over and slipping truths about my life here to them.

Mom grabs my hand and pulls me over to my desk, pretending to be very interested in the pencil collection. She leans in and whispers, “So, are there any special someones we should be meeting? And maybe other parents of special someones?”

I stiffen and immediately remind myself to relax. Mom is like a hawk, catching every clue if she’s on alert that I’m hiding something. Last thing I need is for her to pick at a loose strand and have my entire facade of college life unfurl.

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“Mom, it’s been two months.” I see her hopeful expression falter. My heart drops along with all her hopes and dreams for me, her “other” daughter. It feels premature to mention Aiden at all, despite the fact that he’s all I’ve been thinking about recently. But if I throw her a bone and hint at some romantic entanglement, maybe she’ll be too distracted to look at all the other things. “Not hardly enough time to whittle down all my choices. But there might be someone pulling ahead of the pack.” I nudge her shoulder, putting on the well-practiced expression I use when a book I’ve read doesn’t quite work for me but I want my followers to believe otherwise.

The sparkle returns to my mom’s eyes, and she clasps her hands together toward her chest. She opens her mouth to respond, but I put my finger to my lips and wink, as if it’s our little secret instead of just my not-so-little lie.

But we’re all standing in a one-hundred-square-foot room where whispers are essentially shouts and nobody’s business remains a secret.

“What’s this I hear?” Dad’s voice breaks through my lie-induced haze. “My baby girl has a college boyfriend?” He uses an I’m-gonna-kill-that-boy voice, but the excitement at being included in the gossip betrays him.

I sneak a peek at Jeannette, whose eyes are big as saucers. She tucks her lips between her teeth and shrugs her shoulders. I’m on my own. Traitor.

“Boyfriend is a bit of an overstatement, let’s get real. I mean, I didn’t have a boyfriend for four years in high school and you think it’s suddenly gonna happen in two months?”

“I told you, Brighton makes a boy into a man. A man can step in and woo a young lady with just a wink and a smile,” Dad says.

I hold back my response. No reason to get my dad worried that the type of guys he’s describing could be serial heartbreakers or likely incarcerated soon.

“Well, I’m sure that Irene has been focusing on her studies. She finally gets to be taking literature classes and taking those steps to becoming an editor. This is all so very exciting,” Mom says.

It’s like we haven’t moved forward in two months. These are the same conversations we had before I even started college. Their hopes and dreams, their plans, all squarely on my shoulders.

But it also feels like I’m a totally different person, that I’ve completely changed. I don’t know how to explain that to my parents. I wonder: As we spend some time together today, will they notice? Or maybe I haven’t actually changed at all.

“Jeannette, we’re gonna go and take off and get some seats in the lecture hall. Do you want us to save some for you and your dad?” I ask.

“That’d be great,” she says. “We’ll see you there.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

And I lead my parents along the way.

“That’s where I sometimes sit to have lunch,” I say, pointing to a spot in the quad where I’ve never once sat to eat lunch.

“Yes, I used to spend time out here in the quad myself,” Dad says, clearly pleased

I've followed in his enjoy-the-quad lifestyle.

"And this is my favorite of the three libraries on campus," I say as we pass Central Library. Still not my favorite, but the one Aiden loves to meet at.

"I love libraries! All those books! Tell me, do you just walk up and down the aisles and touch the spines? It sounds like the most wonderful way to spend the afternoon," Mom says dreamily.

I don't mention how the library reminds me so much of Aiden and the deep and vulnerable conversations we've had there together. It feels special, like our hideaway. "Yes, gotta love all those spines," I say.

The lecture hall is pretty packed when we arrive and finding five seats together is an impossible task. I point to four seats in a row and tell my parents to sit down and save the other two for Jeannette and her dad. I can stand off to the side during the presentation. But as they make their way down, I notice who else is seated in that row... Dr. Kingston, the one person I was hoping to avoid today. I scan the room for any escape route. I see the red fire alarm and wonder if there really is a fine associated with pulling it falsely. I look at the stairs running the length of the lecture hall seating and wonder how much damage would be done to my young and quick-to-heal body if I purposely rolled down them to distract everyone. I clock the microphone sitting in its stand at the front of the room and consider belting out the latest TWICE song to drown out any conversation that could be had between my parents and the professor of the class I should not be failing... and yet, tragically, most definitely am.

Time seems to slow as I watch my mom turn her head to the person next to her, huge smile on her face, ready to meet a "new friend," as she calls anyone who she's first introduced herself to.

Tap tap tap. My mom's head turns quickly to face forward for the announcement. "Welcome, everyone, to this year's Brighton College Parents Day," a cheerful voice comes through the speakers. Saved by the overeager, and ever-punctual, freshman class president... for now.

Jeannette sneaks in and stands next to me as her dad crouches and excuses himself down the row and sits next to my parents. He is a very big man, so it's difficult for him to squeeze through. Jeannette's eyes widen when she sees my face. "What? Something terrible happened already?" she whispers.

I cock my head in the direction of our parents and her eyes scan the row. They grow comically large when they land on Dr. Kingston sitting next to my mother. "I'll block everyone as soon as we're excused so you can have a straight shot down there and grab your parents. Maybe you can distract them before any introductions have to be made."

I give her a sad smile, appreciative of her efforts. If only the Brighton gods were so kind.

"Um, Dr. Kingston, these are my parents," I say, unable to hide my complete dread at making the introduction. Despite Jeannette's valiant effort, I was unable to reach my parents before they made contact with my professor. As soon as the information session was over, it was as if my mother couldn't help herself. She immediately turned and reached out her hand to the man sitting next to her, making it impossible for me to ignore them all now as they make their way up to where I'm standing by the exit.

"Mom, Dad, this is Dr. Kingston, my, um, Intro to Lit professor," I mumble.

"Hello, John Park. I'm a Brighton alum, and father to this brilliant young lady right here. Nice to meet you." Bury me now.

“Oh, Dr. Kingston, it is such a pleasure to meet you. My name is Jennifer Park. I’m Irene’s mother. I’m a fervent and prolific reader, much like Irene, and thank you so much.” She hasn’t let go of his hand in minutes, hours maybe. “You are helping make all of her dreams come true. Being at a top-ranked school like Brighton, studying literature, becoming a future editor one day, moving toward her goal, this is all so wonderful.” My mom finally lets go of his hand in order to clasp both of hers in front of her chest once again, like she’s about to explode with pride. My face turns as red as a tomato, but my discomfort is unmatched compared to the plastered-on smile and sympathetic eyes of Dr. Kingston.

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“Irene as an editor...” He looks to me and back to my mom and back to me. My eyes are pleading with him to play along, to tell them I’m the best student he’s ever had, to basically lie for me.

“Why, yes, it’s her lifelong dream. Has she told you how passionate she is about literature? She also managed to turn her love for books into a wonderful hobby on the internet. Even some of the young people from our church have seen her videos. She’s so humble. I know she’s likely the best student in your class, but doesn’t make herself stand out,” my mom responds.

“Oh, well, she is definitely a pleasure to have in class.” Nice, Dr. Kingston. Keep it simple. No need to overshare.

“She just loves, has always loved, to read. So it is a natural progression that she’d become an editor one day. The best use of her talent. Don’t you agree?”

Dr. Kingston looks my way and gives me a pitying smile. He sees her delusion and, in turn, my impossible situation.

“Okay, Mom. Now that you’ve been introduced, we should let Dr. Kingston be on his way. He’s very busy. I don’t wanna bother him. I’m so glad you all got a chance to meet.” I push my parents out the door. “Dr. Kingston, see you in class.” I give him an apologetic look and turn to leave.

Great. I’m gonna be called into his office, again, to explain myself. Because from what he can tell by my poor effort in class, number one, I do not love studying literature. Once I’m told I have to do something, it takes away from the joy of doing

it. And number two, with my grades, there is no way I'm gonna make it through this entire program to one day be hired as an editor.

And all of that has been made clear in just two months.

I grab my phone and type a quick message to Aiden.

Me: Kill me now. My parents just met Prof King. It was brutal.

The urge to tell him something else, right now, something to help me forget this awkward Parents Day and focus on something good, hits me. My fingers start moving of their own accord.

Me: Also, hi, I miss you.

I quickly backspace and delete. Too much, too soon. Oh god, what if I'd accidentally pressed send instead? THINK before you type, Irene.

Me: Also, hi, when can I see you.

My face immediately reddens. Are you kidding me? Don't be such a dork. Delete, delete, delete.

I look down at the blinking cursor, waiting for my words. Also, I think about you all the time. Also, are we dating? Also, am I your girlfriend? Also, are you feeling everything I'm feeling? Also, am I delusional? All the things I want to say, to ask him, to tell him, but just... can't. I need to stop overthinking it.

I quickly type the same text he sent me the other night. Lighthearted. Make it into an inside joke. Easy. Nothing that will put me in over my head. And press send.

Me:Also... wanna make out??

He might not get it. He might not think it's funny. But it's the most I can give him. I want to be more honest, both with Aiden and with my parents. And in every area of my life. Fornow, I'm just too exhausted and raw from juggling all the untruths I've wound together to make the false narrative of my life.

For now, I just want to laugh and be with Aiden.

I wait one second to see if he responds. But the messages do not show as read. So I pocket my phone and get back to my parents.

The day is jam-packed, filled with activities for my folks. In the brief moments that I have to myself, I check my messages again. My finger hovers over the keyboard. I wanna ask Aiden if he's doing okay. I want to ask him how he's spending his day.

I think twice and put my phone away without sending another message. He's probably keeping busy and hasn't had the chance to read my texts. I don't want to flood his inbox with more and be irritating.

Who knew I'd end up being so needy and codependent the moment I started having feelings for someone. Maybe it's a good thing I waited this long to date.

"You okay?" Jeannette asks me. Our parents are on their campus tour, so we're at the ice cream shop killing time with about one hundred other freshmen, all waiting on their folks.

"Just thinking..." I say.

She raises her eyebrow at me, letting me know she's listening if I want to share.

“When Aiden mentioned that I was not genuine online, that I was acting a part, I felt offended. But I realized he’s right. I have been doing that my entire life, being the dutiful middle daughter to my parents, trying to do the things that would make them happy so that I would have a position in our family. Being just the right kind of romance reviewer online, having a persona that is not distasteful to anybody. Looking to find a perfect guy so I can be the perfect girlfriend and fall in love... and all of that is just exhausting.”

“Maybe you don’t have to try so hard,” she says. “Maybe you can just let yourself believe that your parents and your friends and your online community will love you for who you are. And so will the right guy. You need to be honest with yourself, and honest with those around you.”

I know Jeannette is right. I just don’t know if I can be.

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“I wasn’t honest with my parents today about how hard college has been for me. I haven’t been honest with my professor, who now believes I have aspirations for something I have no talent for, and probably thinks this is going to become his burden. I haven’t been honest with my followers about how I’ve been in a bit of a book funk. Nothing really has been interesting me. And I haven’t been honest with Aiden about how I’m scared to death to move forward in whatever it is we’re doing without some clarity.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve just been honest with me and yourself. Now you just have to tell them.” She nods in the direction of outside and I see that our parents have all arrived, finished with their tour. My mom and dad wave at me through the window with embarrassingly huge grins on their faces.

God, I love them.

College was supposed to be a time for me to start over and find myself. To leave behind the person that I was as a kid and decide who I want to be moving forward. I thought that was gonna be a girl with a boyfriend. I thought that was gonna be a girl studying to be an editor and excelling, and now with my parents here, it’s clear I’m the same person behind the same mask.

I always thought making them happy was the way to show them my love. But maybe it’s figuring out what actually makes me happy, figuring out what I truly want and following my own dreams, that will show them how much they mean to me.

But what if being honest with my parents ends up disappointing them?

And what if being honest with Aiden ends up pushing him away?

I look back down at my phone like it's a drug I can't stay away from. Still no response.

Maybe honesty is just... overrated.

Epigraph

I giggle every time we get “just one bed.” I know, I've got the maturity of a twelve-year-old. But it's just so squeal-worthy. “Oh no... only one bed, and it's obviously a TWIN size and we both have to fit on it, despite the fact that you're a massively huge guy... where will all the limbs go?” :) LOVE. LOVE. LOVE.

—@irene.loves.love.books

It's the accidental touches that get me. “I didn't mean to rub against you, the space is just TOO small.” To all the authors out there: I invite you to always include a “just one bed” scene. Thank you.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Fourteen

just one bed

I stand at Aiden's dorm room, waiting before I knock.

I've got to get myself in the right headspace. We have a Live tonight where all of our followers will be there watching, listening, wanting to see what's happening between us. Or maybe I'm just giving us too much credit. Maybe we're not that interesting.

Maybe no one will show up. Maybe it will be a train wreck.

This is exactly why I didn't want to do this Live. And now that Aiden and I have entered into the murky waters of fake-dating-that-feels-suspiciously-real, I don't have my bearings.

And yet, because everyone else seemed to think it was such a great idea, here I am.

I'm not sure if I'm angry that he hasn't texted me in two days and didn't respond when I was struggling and flailing during Parents Day. Or if I'm worried—worried that he hasn't texted me in two days, worried that Aiden, who can't seem to help but come to the rescue, wasn't there.

I'm actually feeling both those things but am reluctant to admit to either.

In any case, I won't know until I talk to him, so I knock. Aiden answers right away, as if waiting at the door for me to get here. I narrow my gaze, shamelessly examining every inch of him, looking for clues as to how he's feeling, what's going on.

I don't know what I'm looking for, but, god, he looks so good. His hair a little disheveled, his eyes red-rimmed and slightly haunted, dark circles rest on the top of his cheeks. But still, my heart picks up its pace and my stomach rolls a tiny bit as if in anticipation of the first drop of a roller coaster.

I'm here. He's here.

"Hey," he says, a small smile crossing his face. He reaches out and pulls me inside, closing the door and then gently crowding me against it. He leans into me and presses his forehead to mine. Like he's drawing strength or comfort from this connection. I wonder if he realizes that every time he's done this, I'm the one who ends up feeling like I can fly.

He pulls away slightly, but before I can say hello in return, his lips are on mine. He catches me just as I'm mid-gasp, and with my mouth parted, his tongue finds its way in. His kiss is needy, hungry, and I fist my hands into the back of his shirt, holding on, pulling him even closer to me, if that's possible. I forget all the questions I had in my head. Whatever it is he's going through, whatever is on his mind, I want to be there for him and give him this.

It feels so good to be this close to Aiden.

A deep groan rumbles through him. It reverberates all over my body. I lean my head to the side so his mouth can get better purchase. I'm amazed at how well we just fit together. The feeling of accomplishment when an elusive puzzle piece is found and snaps into place.

My hands move up to his head and my fingers explore the softness of his thick hair. I lean back against the door, letting my hips push forward a bit as they meet his hardness and obvious interest. Something about the power I feel making him this excited and turned-on emboldens me, and I press against him again.

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“Irene,” he says. His tone teasing me in warning. “This is gonna get really messy pretty quick if you don’t stop that.”

I smile against his mouth, feeling his lips stretch as well.

Wow. Scenes like this, my favorite scenes in the books I read, really do happen.

And maybe more surprising... I don’t hate experiencing it in the flesh. In fact, I am loving this.

He pulls his face away, arm braced against the door, and in a surprising move, lays his head on my shoulder. The tenderness of the move steals my breath. I wrap my hand around the back of his head and tuck him in, holding him against me. I kiss him on the top of his hair and wrap my other arm around his back, waiting as his breathing evens out.

After a moment, he straightens up but won’t look me in the eyes.

When he finally does, the mask is back on and the moment is gone.

“Well, now that that’s out of the way,” he says, brushing it off, “come on in.”

Okay, Aiden, I won’t push you to talk, I think. Not yet.

I look around his dorm room.

It’s a single. Basically the same size as my double, but with half the furniture. That

hardly seems fair, this much space for one person. His desk houses a huge computer monitor with Post-it notes stuck all around it. It's the only sign of anything messy in the entire room. The place is unnaturally clean for a college dorm. I wonder if he's organized it all for me, knowing I was coming, or if he's usually this tidy.

I scan the other side of the room. "Just one bed," I say under my breath as I take in the extra-long twin against the far wall.

He lets out a little laugh. "Yeah, it's technically a double. But the guy who was supposed to be my roommate dropped out of school before the semester even started. I wouldn't mind having a roommate, especially someone like Charles, but this gives me a lot of space and privacy, if I need it. But the seven of us in these four rooms usually just keep our doors open and pretty much all live in the common area, anyways." He reaches back and grabs his neck, then lifts his hand and scratches the back of his head. He's fidgeting. Is he nervous?

I nod, noticing that the door is actually closed right now.

"Hey, so, I'm sorry I didn't text you back the last couple days. I've just had a lot on my mind."

"No problem," I say with a shrug. My voice betrays me, though, trying too hard to be light and cheery. It very clearly was a problem.

"Look, to be honest, my head was kind of fucked up during Parents Day. I don't know, I guess I actually thought maybe they'd show up."

It takes me a second, but then I realize he's talking about his parents. "Oh, I didn't realize that you'd invited them."

"Yeah, it was kind of a last-minute thing. I told my brother about it. I asked him to

tell them. And then I just waited, I guess. I knew they would likely not show up. I didn't know it would be as disappointing as it was when they didn't, though."

He goes and sits down on his bed, puts his elbows on his knees, and locks his hands, looking down at them.

I'd never seen the confident and ever-capable Aiden Jeon look this defeated. And it hurts to witness it. Of all the times I've worried about disappointing my parents, I don't think there was ever once I didn't know they would love me anyways. And maybe Aiden's parents do love him in their own way. It's just a very shitty way of showing it, if you ask me.

I walk over and stand between his legs, forcing him to straighten and look up at me from his seated position.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and draw him to me, holding him, willing him not to pull away. He doesn't. I'm sorry. I'm sorry they didn't show up. I'm sorry that your parents are being assholes. That they're not supporting you. You deserve better than this. I think all the words in my head but don't say them aloud. I don't know how he'd feel about hearing them.

He looks up at me. His eyes are soft... but questioning. I wonder what he sees when he looks at me. What is it that he's wondering about at this exact moment? He shakes his head almost imperceptibly, and when his gaze returns, the sparkle is back, the smile slowly spreading until his dimples are on full display. Every butterfly in my stomach decides now is the time to flutter.

He pulls me a little, tugging at me until we both fall back, me on top of him.

A loud squeak escapes my mouth at the surprise tumble. Attractive.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” I ask. What if I crack one of his ribs or something?

But he just laughs and spins us both until we’ve traded positions, him on top of me now. It feels like the cocoon of a weighted blanket, a human blanket, and I never want to pull it off me.

He puts weight on his elbows on either side of my head, looking down into my eyes. My body thrums with the need and want for him to kiss me again, but I also want more. I want to explore him and I want to... be explored.

“Please,” I say, as an invitation. What I’m asking for, I’m not sure. Maybe I’m asking for everything. I want everything with Aiden.

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He presses his entire body down onto mine and kisses me. I'm suddenly very aware of the wetness between my legs and try to squeeze them closed, embarrassed he might notice, too. But he pushes his knee a little bit in between them, our legs alternating between each other. He deepens the kiss, and this time he grinds his lower half into mine. His hardness meeting my wetness, mere pieces of fabric the only thing separating us. Can he feel it through my jeans, I wonder.

One of his hands makes its way to my waist, where the side of my shirt has lifted to expose the skin at my stomach. Without taking his eyes off mine, Aiden drags his hand across, and it disappears up under my shirt. He pushes his thumb under the band of my bra, and suddenly the sensation from my nipple bolts through me. I gasp. Or maybe it was a scream. I'm not sure at this point. My heart pounds in my ears, and between that and the moans coming from my mouth, I can't hear anything else.

His lips kiss my mouth relentlessly as his hand explores my breast and his denim-clad lower body pushes and scrapes against mine.

I think in this moment I very much understand the superiority of the "just one bed" trope. I don't want any more space. In fact, I'd be okay with less space, and less clothing, between us.

I wonder how Aiden will handle the question of consent. Will he ask me with words? Will he read my body movements? Am I being clear enough with my willingness, or does he sense hesitation? Will that stop him? Will he...

"Do I even want to know what's going through your head right now?" His voice brings me back from the freak-out happening in my thoughts.

“I’m sorry. I was just... thinking. Um, but still very much enjoying all of this, obviously. I mean, my body is fully capable of responding even though my head is a little preoccupied.”

He starts shaking as the laughter rolls through him. “Not holding your interest, am I?” he asks through his last chuckles.

“Oh my god, you totally are. It’s just, well, this is kinda the first time I’ve ever gotten this far with anyone.”

Aiden pulls back a tiny bit, just enough so he can look into my eyes and I can look into his. It’s almost physically painful how warm his gaze makes me feel. His voice is soft and gentle and kind. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Oh no, not at all. I just wanted to make sure you know that I’m, um, very much consenting to it,” I say.

He nods his head. “Thank you for making it clear. I appreciate that.”

“You know me, all roads lead back to romance novels. And I like books where consent is handled in an honest and direct way.”

He smiles and kisses the tip of my nose. “You’re amazing, you know that? How did I get so fucking lucky?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m the lucky one,” I say.

Aiden continues to kiss me, on my eyes, my cheeks, my ears. I turn my head to give him access to kiss my neck. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror on his closet door. My hair is all over the place. The hem of my shirt is partially tucked into my bra. The button of my jeans is open and, oh god, there’s a wet spot. I’m a mess.

I cover my eyes with one of my hands and groan.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

“Uh, I just saw myself in the mirror and I look deranged,” I say.

He pulls my hand away. “You’re beautiful,” he says. He brings my hand to his mouth and kisses it.

His mouth meets mine again and I hungrily greet his tongue as it enters. I feel like I could do this, right here, with Aiden forever.

But a blaring sound from his desk shocks me out of my lust-filled haze.

“Shit. It’s my alarm. We have our Live.”

“Oh my god! Already? I can’t do a Live looking like this! I very clearly look almost-sexed-up. Everyone will know.” I’m in full panic mode. I pull all my body parts away from his body parts and sit up, patting down both sides of my hair, trying to put myself back together. I go to button up my jeans and look down. “What do I do aboutthis?” I ask, pointing to the wet spot.

Aiden tucks his lips between his teeth, trying to hold back a laugh.

“You did this!” I accuse him.

“I’m sorry,” he says, clearly not sorry. “But no one can see that. We’ll be sitting at the desk. They’ll only see shoulders up.” His eyes scan me and as they home in on my neck, they grow huge as saucers.

I jump up and stand in front of his closet mirror where an unmistakable, angry red

spot decorates my neck. “Oh god, I have a hickey!”

“Here, wear this,” he says, throwing me a hoodie from the back of his desk chair. I pull it over my head, tug at both the strings, cocooning my head until only my face shows, and bunch the rest of the hood’s fabric as best I can around my neck area as a secondary defense.

“Okay, c’mon, c’mon, we’ve gotta log on,” he says, rushing me.

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“This is such a bad idea. I can’t believe you’re making me do this. Oh god, I look a wreck. Everyone’s gonna...”

The red light comes on.

“Hello, everyone! And welcome to our very first combined Live event. I’m Irene from irene.loves.love.books and this is Aiden from aidentheguyreadsromance,” I say energetically to the screen, practiced smile perfectly in place, voice modulated to sound comfortable and approachable.

I sense Aiden’s eyes on me, so I turn a few degrees with a smile, give him a piece of mind with my eyes, and kick him under the desk for good measure, encouraging him to get it together.

He laughs at me. The nerve. He laughs like we’re not about to embark on an hour-long Live where anything can happen.

The questions and comments start pouring in so quickly I can barely read them. My eyes scan the words.

What are you reading?

What do you think of the new dragon book?

What do you recommend for a new historical romance reader?

I knew I could count on my followers to bring some good questions.

It's so weird you two are doing a Live together.

Are you guys dating?

Do you live together?

You look like you just got out of bed.

Those must be Aiden's followers.

I start answering some of the easier questions, focusing on books and keeping the conversation flowing. To Aiden's credit, he also jumps in with opinions and recommendations. Unsurprisingly, we disagree on most everything, and Aiden laughs like it's the funniest thing ever. I come across like an exasperated kindergarten teacher.

"Okay, so to answer the most-asked question tonight..." Aiden says.

I immediately straighten my back and clench my jaw. What is he up to?

"What are we doing here, together, on this Live? Well, Irene and I attend the same university, if you can believe it. We didn't even know we'd both end up here. And not only that, but we're in the same class, and to make it even juicier, we're now dating," he says with an exaggerated wink to the camera, "to spice up our freshman year. Thoughts?"

My nostrils could fit quarters the way they've expanded with my rage.

"Now, now, let's not just jump right in with all our personal business, Aiden." I say his name through gritted teeth. I look back into the camera, putting on my most earnest expression. "It's all very new."

“New, yes, but when it’s inevitable like we are, it gets serious quick,” he says again, with another over-the-top wink.

The comments are flying by so quickly I can’t read them all.

I knew it!

Awww, you two are cute!

Is this for real or are you guys fake dating (which no shade... it’s my favorite trope)

Get it, Aiden. Yeah

Technically, I knew what we were agreeing to and why. But I wasn’t quite prepared for the frenzied reaction online.

It’s at this point I know I have to come clean so as not to be misunderstood. I don’t want people assuming things about me and Aiden, despite the fact that we were making out on his bed just a little while ago and I’m trying desperately to hide the hickey he’s left me with.

“Well, let me explain. Aiden and I are engaged in a little friendly competition. A dating challenge, if you will. We’ve each selected a list of tropes that we will use to guide us on our dating journey. And the first one of us to fall in love wins. Isn’t that fun?” Even I can feel my facade slipping. My expression is much more panicked than fun. So not fun.

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“And—surprise, surprise—in the midst of trying to beat one another to love, we ended up falling for each other,” Aiden says. “Tell me a romance novel better than this.” He rests his chin on his hand propped up by his elbow and looks at me like a lovestruck kid. He even lets out an exaggerated sigh.

The comments go wild.

I narrow my eyes at him. What are you up to? I say to him without words.

Just having some fun, he says back via twinkle in his eye.

You’re so dead, I threaten with a flare of my nostrils.

“Well, look at that, time’s up and we’ve got to get going,” I say to the camera.

“Expect more joint Lives from the two of us to talk about all things romance,” Aiden says. Not something we agreed to, but I’d be willing to discuss as long as we set some boundaries.

“Bye,” I say with the last amount of energy I have left.

“Later,” Aiden says, reaching over and shutting off the Live.

I lean back in my chair and collapse, all the nervous energy leaving my body.

“Well, I guess that went better than I expected. Seriously, though, over the top, much?” I am ready to give Aiden a whooping for his exaggerated winks and

oversharing, but he grabs my face in his hands and kisses me, hard.

“Bet you’re gonna get more views than you have on any of your posts in the past six months,” he says. “You’re welcome.” He stands up from his seat, raises his arms into the air in a stretch, and then reaches for the hem of his shirt, pulling it off over his head. Aiden Jeon is standing shirtless in front of me. The smooth planes of his chest and abs are right in my line of sight.

He offers me his hand and I stare at it, unsure what I’m supposed to do. He patiently waits until I figure it out.

Oh, we’re gonna continue what we started earlier. Yay!

I lay my hand in his as he pulls me up to standing. He then grabs the hem of the sweatshirt along with my T-shirt and pulls it off over my head. Now I’m facing him with just my bra on.

“I’m done talking about the Live, Irene.” He takes my hand back in his and directs me to his bed.

“Fine... for now,” I agree.

“Let’s talk about consent some more instead,” he says, pushing me down onto my back and crawling his way over me.

I nod.

“Is it okay if I kiss you here?” he asks, hovering over my stomach, waiting for my response.

“Yes,” I say.

“How about here?” he asks just below my bra.

“Yes,” I answer, this time breathier.

He pulls the fabric of my bra to the side.

I gasp in anticipation.

“Irene, would you be okay if I kissed you here?” His breath breezes over my nipple. I’m struggling to find words. He’s so close. I want it.

“Irene?”

I look down at his face, waiting for my answer.

“Yes,” I say as his lips kiss my breast.

He scoots up and settles his entire body over mine.

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It was all a game up until now. But his expression is no longer playful. It's serious and gentle and asking permission as he looks down into my eyes.

And for once, I don't worry about anything else except for what I want.

And before he even opens his mouth to ask, I give my consent. "Yes, Aiden, yes."

Epigraph

I've seen the discourse and the growing trend to hate on miscommunication as a way to increase tension. But I'm all about it. Real life is full of miscommunication. Real relationships always face it. As long as the author leads us to getting it settled to reach our HEA, I'm good.

—@irene.loves.love.books

The amount of times I screamed at the book, "JUST TALK TO EACH OTHER!!!" I'm lucky I have any hair left.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Fifteen

miscommunication trope

"So..."

Jeannette and Charles share a glance before Charles continues whatever it is he wants to say.

The four of us are huddled around a small table in a very crowded new matcha café just off campus. Without planning or agreement, we somehow made it a weekly thing to meet up on Thursday afternoons as a group and try out some place new. Just like our lunches together on Mondays.

And today is a bit of a celebration. Last night's Live was more successful than I could have imagined. I was shocked to see the number of people online with us. It was the first meaningful jump in my follower count I've had in a long time. And though we had Jeannette and Charles online to help moderate the comments, we really didn't need it. People were genuinely happy that Aiden and I were "dating," and the topics quickly switched over from our personal life to exactly where we wanted them to... books.

Aiden was right.

And I guess I was right to trust him.

"So?" Aiden raises a brow and looks first at Charles, then at Jeannette, and then at me.

I hold up my hands and lean back, not taking any of the responsibility. "Don't look at me, I have no idea what unspoken message is happening right now."

I pull my head to the side, trying to stretch out my neck. Aiden takes the opportunity to gently knead and massage the kink. "You're carrying a lot of stress here," he says.

"School," I say without any additional explanation. My friends don't know all the details about how poorly I'm doing, and I prefer to keep it that way. I still have a few

weeks left to get all my work done and then cram for finals. I can pull this off. I've been told that freshmen all handle the newness of college differently. I, apparently, handle it by putting off all studying until the very last minute.

I won't fail. I have a lot of people believing in me. I don't want to disappoint them.

"Well, Charles and I were just wondering if we're laying the contest to rest," Jeannette says.

I furrow my brow. I haven't actually thought about the contest in days. My big college plan to fall in love that consumed my every thought early on has now been replaced with thoughts of the guy next to me. Aiden's leg is touching mine from hip to knee as we sit. It feels warm and settling. Almost as warm as the way the arm laid across the back of my chair, hand resting on my shoulder, still massaging, makes me feel.

"You know, now that things have"—Charles waves his hand between Aiden and me—"progressed."

I straighten my back. "What do you mean, 'progressed'?" I don't know who I'm trying to fool. Do I have feelings of the warm and gooey variety for Aiden? Yes. Am I still terrified to broach this topic with him for fear he might not be feeling these same things as deeply as I am? Absolutely.

It could be that he's still thinking we're fake dating and is just enjoying reaping all the benefits of that. I know he's told me otherwise. He's advised me to believe his words. He's borderline begged me to trust him.

Nothing about last night felt fake. It was all incredibly real. Maybe it's time for me to stop second-guessing everyone. Like Jeannette said, just believe that I'm worthy of affection and love from people, too.

“I mean, progressed in the sneaking-out-of-Aiden’s-room-with-bedhead sort of way,” Charles says.

“Or the using-up-all-your-concealer-to-hide-that-hickey type of escalation,” Jeannette adds.

My jaw drops. I sputter. “I wasn’t, I didn’t, I haven’t...”

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“The competition is on hold until Irene and I can have a real conversation of the she-finally-realizes-how-she-feels-about-me variety,” Aiden says, dimples all out and proud.

“First, why are you all talking like that? About me? When I’m right here? And second, I think I’m in the lead in this competition, so maybe I get a say in if it’s on hold or not. And THIRD”—I put extra stress on this one as I turn and look at Aiden—“maybe we need to discuss how YOU feel about ME first!” I close my mouth with a satisfied grunt.

“You’re supposed to do the hyphenated-description thing that the rest of us were doing, Irene,” Aiden says with a sparkle in his eyes. His free hand boops my nose like I’m the cutest thing he’s ever seen.

Whatever. None of this should be a conversation for public consumption, anyways. I narrow my eyes at him, making it clear that we will be having words privately later.

The side of his mouth raises in that cocky, knowing half smile of his, and my face heats immediately.

He looks as if he has other plans for us privately later.

Gulp.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I reach to see the new message just as I notice Aiden doing the same. Awww, even our phones have synced. Romantic. Nope, I’m really starting to lose it. Get a grip.

There's a new text from Dr. Kingston. Odd. I've never received a text from any teacher or professor before. Shouldn't my phone be a safe space, free from worry about school shit? Rude.

I lift my head, about to complain about this to my friends, but I notice Aiden, head down reading his phone message, brow furrowed, looking... irritated. His head slowly rises and his face turns to meet mine. He nods toward my phone and dread wraps its hands around my lungs, making it suddenly hard to get air. The last thing I want to do is read whatever message is waiting for me.

"What is it?" Jeannette asks, noticing the tension.

I open the text.

Dr. Kingston: I'd like to see the two of you in my office, today if possible. It's important. Let me know if 3pm works.

I try to swallow at the same time bile wants to release itself from my throat, making me cough instead. Aiden hands me one of the small paper cups of water we have on the table and I nod appreciatively as I down its meager contents, then reach for another and do the same.

"Our lit professor wants to see us in his office today," Aiden says, voice steady.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Charles asks.

Aiden shrugs a shoulder but I can feel the tension radiating off his body. He most certainly thinks this is not good.

And I can't think of one reason to disagree with him.

“Well, good luck, you guys. I hope it’s nothing,” Charles says.

Aiden nods.

Jeannette reaches under the table and squeezes my knee. I look up with worried eyes and meet her own. She gives me a reassuring smile, but it does little to calm my panic. I got away with faking it, skating by, not doing the work, flailing, all semester. And now I have to face the music.

Aiden barely said a word to me on the walk over to our professor’s office. Which made the ride up in the tiny, cursed elevator very awkward.

I grab his wrist before we turn the corner and head in to our doom. I should do a big confession of how deep my love runs for him. I should promise to wait for him on the other side. I should announce that no matter what life throws our way, I WILL FIND YOU.

He looks over his shoulder and down where my hand holds his wrist, but he doesn’t turn around. He raises a brow in question.

I clear my throat.

“I’m sorry,” is the only thing I can think to say.

“Don’t worry,” he says back. But it lacks the confidence usually attached to those words when they come from his mouth.

My shoulders deflate. But before I fall and give up all hope, he takes my limp, vacant hand and fills it with his, interlacing our fingers, rubbing his thumb over mine. His hand engulfs mine, and the feeling of warmth and safety radiates throughout my entire body.

“Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out, okay?” he says. Still no smile, but I want so badly to believe his words. I have to.

He gives my hand one last squeeze and then lets go. I immediately miss the steadying effect his contact gives me.

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Dr. Kingston's door is open, but he's not at his desk. He's instead sitting on the couch, book in hand. I recognize the cover immediately.

When I recorded and sent him the short video he requested at our last meeting, I tried to include a list of very "safe" forced-proximity books he might like to try. Books I thought he would enjoy and not be too shocked by. I did, however, totally by accident, slip in a mention of a much-beloved vampire book as well. I was going to rerecord it, but figured there was no way he'd even pick up on it.

The thought of my L I T E R A T U R E professor reading about a vampire named Zsadi and all that comes along with this story has me shifting in my sneakers. I have no words.

He looks up and sees Aiden's easy smile and my clearly stricken expression standing in his doorway.

"Irene, Aiden, come in, come in..."

He points to the two chairs across from his desk and moves to sit in his own on the other side, setting *Lover Awakened* down in front of him. My eyes track the movement.

A smile spreads across his face and heat consumes my own.

"Most excellent recommendation, Irene. I am, however, curious why this one in particular is your favorite of the series. But maybe I'll understand better as I make my way through them all. I'm quite consumed at this point."

Aiden chuckles beside me.

I do the fish-out-of-water mouth thing that has become my go-to expression, apparently, when I don't know what to say.

"But this is not why I've asked you both here so suddenly," Dr. Kingston continues, saving me from having to say anything at all.

He lets out a heavy sigh and pulls off his wire-framed glasses, rubbing his eyes.

"I've been looking through the journal assignments and participation points in class, and well, though your outline and pitch for your team project is quite impressive, I'm concerned it won't be enough to get you passing scores. Possibly for you, Aiden. But likely not for Irene. And truthfully, I'm flummoxed by this. You both are so talented and clearly have a passion for books. But even in the few I have received from you, specifically, Irene, it feels like you're struggling with writing and editing that passion into the assignments."

Silence hangs in the air, and I'm uncertain who will be the first to break it. I knew I was fucking up, but I didn't realize it was this bad. And I definitely didn't know that I was putting Aiden at risk as well. I just figured we'd pull it out in the end.

"Professor Kingston, I don't understand," Aiden says.

Professor Kingston looks directly to me and gives me a sad smile.

"I've..." I start, but the words don't all come out. I clear my throat. "Well, I've been struggling a little in my classes and managing the workload with school. So I've missed a lot of the due dates for the assignments." I muster the courage to turn to look at Aiden, whose eyes are squarely on me, willing me to continue. "I didn't realize that it would impact you negatively. And I fully intend to catch up and bring my scores

up.”

“It’s a team assignment, Irene,” Aiden says. He tucks his lips between his teeth, likely trying to hold back anything else he might say that he could regret.

I want to plead my case, beg for forgiveness, make him and Dr. Kingston certain that I can make up for it. But my lips don’t move. I’m frozen in silence.

“I wanted to make sure you both understood where you’re at. It will take a perfect score to bring you up to passing, Irene. And Aiden, I think you will want to make note of this, considering your own situation,” Dr. Kingston adds, eyes squarely on Aiden.

Aiden’s jaw is tight, and he responds with a small nod.

His situation? Meaning the one where he’s been saddled with a partner who’s dragging his grade down? It seems unfair to put that on him. It’s my fault.

“But be advised, I have never once in my entire career in education given out a perfect score. This is very unlikely.”

My throat has dropped down to the black pit of despair in my gut, along with all hope and happiness. The reality, coming straight from someone else’s mouth and not just my own thoughts and assumptions, is confirmed. I’ve failed.

“Now, what I do want to do is offer a way out of this predicament.”

Both Aiden and I lift our heads, my back straightening as Aiden leans in, grabbing the arms of his chair, waiting for the news.

“But before I do, may I ask a possibly difficult question to which I need an honest

answer?”

We both nod.

“Did one of you do the bulk of the work for the outline and pitch for the group project?”

I curl into myself. I had been stressed about Parents Day coming up and had had two book videos to edit before posting. Aiden, in fact, did all the work for our submission. I— I don’t even think I thanked him for doing so. Shit.

“No,” Aiden says.

“Yes,” I say at the same time.

Aiden’s foot gently presses against mine. He doesn’t want to take the credit and get me into further trouble. But I can’t let him lie.

“Aiden did all the work,” I admit, eyes down. I make a mental note to apologize to Aiden later. Where has my head been? Why have I been such a slacker? What is wrong with me? I can’t look up to see the disappointment in Dr. Kingston’s or Aiden’s faces.

“Thank you, Irene. And truthfully, it wouldn’t be such an issue if, well, it still felt like an equal distribution of the work for the project. So here’s what I have to offer. I’d like you two to select a new piece of fiction you have not read yet. And before you ask, yes, it can be a romance novel.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“This is still a team project, but Irene, I’d like you to be the one to write up the edit letter. Here’s the catch: This is not a book review. I’d like you to research what you can find about the author as well. Tell me, from the information about the author’s life, motivations, inspirations, etc., what you find in this book that reflects these pieces of research. How has the author put themselves into this book? And were they successful, in the eyes of you, the reader, in creating a work that resonates with you in an intimate way? It’s a comparison, of sorts, between the creator and their art. My hope is that through this project, you’ll find books to be more than just stories on a

page, but reflections of humanity.”

My heart starts to race. I can do this. I love doing this. I love finding the humanity in the books I read. I love seeing the nuggets of themselves that authors leave in stories. So why does this feel like punishment? Why, the moment it becomes an expectation, does something I love doing turn into something I dread?

“Yes, I can do it. I’ll work with Aiden on the research, but I’ll do the write-up,” I say. There is no excitement in my voice.

“It shouldn’t be too hard,” Aiden says to me. “We do this all the time. It’s what you’re great at.”

“I’m sorry we have to do it at all,” I whisper.

“This is not meant to be punishment or a death sentence,” Dr. Kingston says, voice lighter than before. “If I didn’t fully believe you could do this, and completely want for you both to excel in this class, I wouldn’t have given you this opportunity. And Irene, we should discuss at some point your path, both here at Brighton and beyond, to becoming an editor. I’ll admit, I found it surprising when your mother told me how passionately you felt about this career choice. But now that I know, maybe we can help you in the areas you’re struggling with to start. However”—he draws out the word, ensuring I’m paying attention—“if that passion is more your mother’s than your own, I’d love to discuss how to channel your love for books into other options for your future.”

I want to crawl under my chair. Or better yet, hightail it out of the office and never look back. Maybe it’s not too late to change my mind and start all over, with something new, somewhere new. My mom’s and dad’s faces cross my mind, the disappointment painted all over them.

“Sure, sounds great.” It sounds anything but great.

“And Aiden, I don’t have to tell you how particular the scholarship committee can be when reviewing the progress and academic achievement of their students. As we discussed in our previous meeting, they’ve shown keen interest in you and your talent. So, as your sponsor, I made sure to report back the massive amount of potential you’ve displayed up to this point. Let’s meet again after Thanksgiving to discuss what work of writing you’ll submit for review.”

Aiden’s on a scholarship? And Dr. Kingston is his sponsor?

My lack of contribution not only impacts his grade, but also his scholarship?

He didn’t tell me any of this. He carried this burden around himself and didn’t let me know.

We excuse ourselves from the office and head to the elevator.

“You okay?” Aiden asks as we wait for the doors to open. We both face forward, as if doing so will make the elevator move faster to us and lead us to our escape.

“I fucked up. I’m fucking up.” I can’t look at him.

“You’re not. You haven’t. Not yet. We have a chance to make it right. He’s not asking for anything too hard from us.” Aiden, ever the hero, making it clear we’re in this together. But it’s not fair for him to take on more work, more burden.

Something’s shifted. Whether it’s me or him. The deep, burning embarrassment and guilt fester inside me, and all I want to do is escape Aiden, his kindness and understanding masking all the things he’s not saying. His disappointment in me.

Bile rises in my throat and I double over, turning to the trash can by the elevator, certain I'm going to lose the matcha latte I had earlier and anything else in my stomach.

Aiden's warm touch rubs my back in gentle circles. The contact burns through my clothes, my skin, adding agony to my shame.

I step away from his touch. "I'm fine," I say.

"C'mon, let's forget the elevator and take the stairs. I need to get you outside to some fresh air." Aiden grabs my hands and leads me toward the stairwell, then down the stairs, outside, and around the corner, to a private bench under a tree.

I sit there and take in a few deep breaths.

Aiden remains standing, watching me warily like I'm an animal about to bolt.

"I'm sorry," I say again. I don't know what else to say.

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“Why didn’t you tell me you were failing? I could’ve helped.” His voice has a slight panic to it and it’s the first sign Aiden’s given that he might be worried.

“I didn’t actually know it was that dire,” I say. And maybe I did suspect, but I had tried to stay blind to the truth. “Like Isaid upstairs, I’ve been having a hard time keeping my head afloat with everything.”

“Are you failing all your classes?” he asks. His face is stricken like he can’t believe he’s looking at such a loser.

“I don’t think so.” I don’t actually know.

“Irene, look, if we put in some extra hours and focus, we can easily do this extra credit assignment and pass lit. But are you going to be able to pass your other classes? What’s going on? I had no idea you were struggling this much. What can I do?” He kneels down in front of me, looking up into my face. But I can’t meet his gaze. My cheeks heat and I feel tears beginning to build.

Too many questions. He’s asking too much of me.

“I don’t need you to come to my rescue.” I’m on my feet, almost pushing Aiden to the ground as I jump up from the bench. I don’t know why I’m so angry, so frustrated, so helpless. I don’t know why Aiden’s offer to help offends me. “I’m not a charity case, Aiden.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do. I’m just trying to figure out what it is you need.”

“I don’t know!” I shout. And it’s the most honest thing I’ve said this whole time.

He stares at me but doesn’t say a word. He won’t let me off that easily. I hate him for cornering me.

“Look, I’ll figure it out, okay? Just... let me go so I can figure it out on my own,” I say. I turn to leave, to walk away.

“Sure, Irene, run away.”

I turn and point a finger in Aiden’s face. “You’re not my parents. You’re not even my boyfriend. I don’t owe you any explanation.”

“I’m well aware what I’m not to you. You’re so terrified of failing, of disappointing others. But you don’t seem to worry at all that how you do in lit directly impacts me. I can’t afford to fail lit. There’s a lot riding on this class for me. So I just need to know where your head’s at and what I can do to help you, to help us.”

It’s not just about his grade in the class.

“You didn’t tell me you were on scholarship. That Dr. Kingston, of all people, is your sponsor.”

“Yeah, well, obviously there are a lot of things we haven’t told each other,” he says.

“But if I had known...”

“You would have tried harder?”

I wince at the direct hit. The words pierce through all my excuses and reach their target: my ego. I couldn’t admit to anyone that I was struggling. I didn’t know how to

ask for help. And now I can't just apologize my way out of it. My actions have real consequences that aren't just about my parents being disappointed or me being unhappy with my course of study.

I can't lift my eyes to meet his.

"Look, I'm sorry, I just..." He reaches for my hand, but I pull away.

"I'm gonna email SKCupid and tell them I want out of consideration. I'll let them know you're the right choice. You need the money for school," I say. It's a first step, and the least I can do.

"I don't. I told you that already."

"But you're on financial aid and a scholarship."

"Yes, and that's how a lot of students pay for college. I'm not unique there. The brand deals are good for extra cash, for some savings, an emergency fund. But I'm not reliant on them. I just want to be taken seriously by people, seen as someone who's good at this stuff. Just like you do."

The problem is, because I cared too much about being taken seriously, I let every other part of my life suffer.

I look back over my shoulder at him and my heart hurts. I wonder what other things we've kept from each other. A part of me doesn't want to know.

As he watches me, I don't think I'll ever forget the look in his eyes, the one that terrifies me the most. I've let him down. And there's likely nothing attractive about that to someone like Aiden.

I shake my head, no words left to say. So I don't say anything at all...

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... and I walk away.

Epigraph

You all know I can accept just about anything in a book as “romance reasons” as long as it serves the relationship arc. But I hate to say it—secret baby might just be my one no-go. I think it’s actually dethroned enemies-to-lovers as my least favorite trope. Some secrets you just can’t be forgiven for keeping.

—@irene.loves.love.books

Wow. The author did something really special here. She made me sympathetic to Stacia, even after keeping their son from Arick, and helped me understand why she did it. Sometimes secrets serve a purpose for the time the truth remains covered. And when revealed, the truth is more powerful than it ever could have been before. This love story is going to haunt me for a long time to come.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Sixteen

secret baby

I sit with my head down, forehead pressed against the pages of my statistics book, begging for the concepts to sink in. I’ve been studying for hours, trying to distract myself from overthinking, overanalyzing everything that happened with Aiden today.

Thing is, he's right. Together, we can knock out the lit extra credit easily. I have to get over the hurdle of making it so hard on myself for no reason at all. I have to take accountability for fucking up and letting Aiden and my professor down. And I have to take the help offered me to do the work.

But where does all of this leave me and Aiden? He must be so sick of having to help me, having to save me. All I wanted was to be the main character of my life. But the role I seem to be settling into is the damsel in distress. Maybe that's what Aiden finds attractive in me. Maybe that's the reason he's interested.

I don't want to be the girl who needs saving. I want to be the one who can save herself.

For now, I face the next item on my List of Woes—statistics. Aka, a foreign concept told in gibberish that will never make sense to me. Which leads me back to being unmotivated. Which makes me not take the time necessary to learn it so that it does make sense to me. And the cycle goes on and on.

I lift my head and drop it back down on the book.

“Not today, Satan,” I say, lifting and dropping.

“I will overcome your attempt to bring me down, Mr. Statistics.” Lift. Drop.

“By the power of Grayskull.” Lift. Drop. Onto a soft pillow of a hand. I look up and Jeannette is standing there, hand on my book, cushioning my self-punishment.

“It's gonna leave a mark,” she says.

I sigh, deeply.

“I don’t want to do this...” I whine.

“Here’s something that helps me: Whatdoyou want to do right now?” she asks.

I pucker my lips, pushing them out as far from my face as I can as I think about what I want to do in this moment. “WHAT do I want to do? What do I WANT to do? What do I want to DO?”

“I fear you might be a lost cause.”

“I know what I want to do! I want to log in online and check my accounts and reply to comments,” I say.

“You have a twisted view of fun. But okay, now that you know what you want to do, use it as your motivator. A carrot. Study a little statistics, and then you get to read a comment. Ten minutes of studying, ten minutes of reading. Back and forth. The reward system.”

“Huh.” I think it over. “That could work. I’m gonna give it a try.”

Jeannette gives a satisfied nod and goes back to her own desk to study. I wonder what her carrot is.

I open up my laptop and log into the account where I posted my most recent review. Two hundred and twenty notifications? I wonder if some of these are comments people wanted to leave about the Live Aiden and I did the other night. I’m itching to read them all. But this is my reward. First...

I pull my open Stats book closer.

I read the book to my left. The normal curve... aka bell curve, aka normal

distribution... data near the mean is more frequent than data far from the mean...

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I read the screen on my right.

@bodiceripper96: Fake dating? Ha, someone's gonna need to tell Aiden it's not real. He's whooped.

Yummy carrot.

To my left. Regression... analyzing which of two variables is of interest...

To my right.

@givemeallthechilipeppers: I am LIVING for this dating-by-trope contest. My money's on Irene. She's got this. No one knows tropes better than she does.

I love carrots.

Left. Confidence intervals... range around a measurement that conveys how precise that measurement is...

Right.

@maddylovesbooksandbeer: OMG, I wonder if Aiden is using all of this stuff with Irene as research for the book he told us he was writing in his Live last month. I can't wait to read whatever he writes. I know it's gonna be so good.

Wait. What?

I go back and read the comment again. Aiden is writing a book? I knew he wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know he was actually working on something now. How does he find the time with school and dating and... me?

I don't look back to my left at my statistics book, but stay right where I am, eyes moving on down the list of comments.

I go to the next one.

@omegaverselover999: Art imitating life or the other way around? Either way, sounds like he's getting all the inspiration he needs. I hope he finishes his book soon. I'm so freaking excited.

I move on to the next one after that.

@giareadsalldayallnight: Enemies-to-lovers is his favorite trope. It's actually perfect he's fake dating Irene for research.

And the next one.

@tamlinisabitch463: Yeah, it's obvious it's not real. They don't even like each other. Aiden's just doing this for the writing. But it's hilarious to watch anyways.

I freeze. A blackness starts to creep into my thoughts and emotions, covering everything until I'm narrowed down to one tiny point—it's not real.

What is his book about? I wonder. Is it a romance? Is it enemies to lovers? Does it feature a rivalry, a challenge, a pathetic girl who's never known love and a guy who swoops in to rescue her?

Has Aiden been using me, us, this contest, our relationship this whole time to get

content for the book he's writing?

He wouldn't do that.

Would he?

I think back to the moment we first met in person. How he came to introduce himself and partner up.

When I told him about my plan, he was the one to suggest we make it into a challenge, a competition.

He was the one to suggest fake dating.

He kissed me first.

He was in control of every single step of our relationship. So it would be easy for him to direct exactly what he wanted to explore, to research for his novel.

It never made sense to me why someone like Aiden would fall for someone like me. I never felt completely certain that he actually felt the same way I did. There was always something making me wonder.

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He always said just the right words. Did just the right thing. Played the part of the romance hero perfectly.

Played me so easily.

It's not real.

I grab my sweatshirt off my bed because I can't get my body temperature up to where I'm not freezing. I grab a coat from the closet and put that on as well. And then I stuff my feet into my Uggs and rush out the door, barely registering Jeannette's voice calling out to me asking if I'm okay.

No, I'm not okay. Not at all.

I run down the lit pathway that connects all the dorm buildings to the brick facade two doors down from mine. I take the stairs to the second floor and pound on the door to Aiden's room. The whiteboard on his door reads Aiden is: IN and Currently Reading: Lover Awakened by J. R. Ward.

It's not real. Even these small, seemingly sweet things are fake. No one is that attentive, that supportive, that perfect.

Aiden opens the door, his sleepy eyes registering who is behind the pounding. When he sees me, his entire disposition changes. Relaxed. Happy.

Fake.

“Hi,” he says, his voice like butter. Like he’s relieved to see me.

Fake.

He reaches out to take hold of me, but I push past him into the room. I stare at his bed for a brief second, remembering what happened there.

Fake.

“What’s wrong?” he asks me. “Irene? What happened? C’mere.” He reaches out for me again. And I’m so so tempted to just let him pull me in. To forget everything and let him hold me, even if it’s not real on his side. The emotions are true on mine. I can just pretend, too, right?

But I don’t move.

“Is it true? You’re...” I struggle to even get the words out. “...writing a book?”

He stares at me, brow furrowed, trying to figure me out. “Yeah, I told you that the first day we met. Remember?” Slick. Playing it off like it’s no big deal. Like it’s not a betrayal. “Wait, what happened?”

“I saw the comments. Your followers.” I try to pull up in my head exactly what I read, though much of it is a ribbon swirl with the conclusions I made because of them. “Our competition, our fake dating, everything about us sounds just like the book that you’re writing, doesn’t it. You’re using us, me, as research.” I cringe just saying the words. I’m the fool who has to speak the truth with her own lips. They feel like poison.

“Okay, I think you’re misunderstanding what’s happening here.” He holds his hands up as if to calm a petulant child. “Yes, I’m writing a book. I shared this with you

from the beginning.”

I take a step back. He slowly takes a step forward, not allowing me to make space between us.

“And yes, our relationship, the things happening between us, what I’m feeling inspires my writing. I’ve never felt like this about anyone before. Experiencing it now, with you, has made my writing more real, more detailed, more alive...”

I step back. Aiden steps forward.

He says all the “right” things.

Fake.

“You’re... writing about me without my permission. You’re using me. You kept this huge thing about me, from me. In fact, you seem to keep a lot of things from me. I trusted you.”

I step back. I’m not even sure why I’m so angry and so hurt. But the feelings overwhelm me like a tornado whirling inside me, circling back again and again to remind me that Aiden’s deception confirms what I’ve been too afraid to admit... that there’s no way he’d be with someone as unremarkable as me without a reason. And now I know.

But this time Aiden doesn’t move forward. His feet are rooted, eyes narrowed, lips tightened.

“How about how you kept the fact that you were failing it from me? Trust is earned and it needs to go both ways. You’re not exactly an open book, Irene. Getting anything honest out of you is like pulling teeth. And don’t get me wrong, I am in it. I

know this and still keep trying to make my way in even though you don't make it easy. Because you're worth it."

"Stop saying all the right things. Stop talking like you're reciting a romance novel. This is real life. I'm not fodder for your fiction."

Aiden lets out a frustrated sigh as he runs his fingers through his hair, pulling at the ends. "Explain to me what you think is so wrong here. I'm not using you, I'm not pretending to have feelings for you so I can turn around and put it into my book. I know it's hard for you to believe something is real when it's actually something you want..."

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“Don’t act like you know me. Is this how you’ve written your main character?”

“My main character is a badass. Who cares so much about everyone around her that she often overlooks her own needs, her own desires. But it’s exactly this quality that makes the hero fall in love with her.”

“Sounds like a nice fairy tale,” I say.

“I thought this is what you were going for here in college. This plan of yours. To find your Happily Ever After. To use tropes written in books to direct you to your true love. How is this any different? I’m using my very real feelings about a very real person to inspire what I’m writing.”

I shake my head. I don’t know what to believe. It’s not so much that he’s writing about me, though that does sting. It’s that I can’t believe his feelings were ever real, not when there’s another motivation attached to it.

“You’re so determined to sabotage this thing between us because you’ve decided for some reason that you’re not good enough for me. Or that you’re too afraid to disappoint me for one reason or another. You know this. You’re the romance expert. You know how this works—the main character’s wound is as clear as day to every single person except herself.”

“That’s not true,” I protest. “That’s not what I’m doing. I just don’t think it’s a good time for us right now. I’ve got stuff to focus on. It’s why I couldn’t match with any of the other guys either. It’s not you...”

“Oh no, you don’t get to pull the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ card. It didn’t work out with any of the other guys you dated because you weren’t invested, you weren’t interested. They were part of a plan, but you never believed the endgame was to fall in love. You know it’s different between us.”

He throws around words like “endgame” and “love” so easily when there’s nothing easy about this at all. I shake my head, denying what he’s saying but unable to formulate words that will convince him he’s wrong.

He closes his eyes, gathering his composure, going for one more attack. But when he opens them, he looks at me with a sadness I’ve never seen from him. He’s giving up. “Irene, if I’m willing to put everything on the line, my entire online presence, because I believed from the very beginning that you were the one, my HEA, why can’t you meet me even a fraction of the way there? I know you care about me. But you’re too afraid.

“I don’t know how to make you believe me when I say my feelings for you are real.” Aiden speaks as if reading my mind, as if sensing exactly my hesitation. “I don’t know what lies you’re telling yourself in your head. I think you’re so engrossed in trying not to disappoint others, you often forget what the truth is. And this has spread to your own self. You don’t want to be disappointed, so you lie to yourself. And I’m sorry if this hurts to hear. But I need you to work through those untruths you’re telling yourself and hear me. I need you to hear me and believe. I love you, Irene.”

My eyes fill with tears, and I can no longer see Aiden clearly. I always believed the first time someone said those words to me, it would feel like heaven. So why does the reality of them actually hurt so badly? I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve to be loved by Aiden. He’s wrong.

“No,” I say. “I’m not good enough. I can’t pass lit. I can’t be the best online. I can’t be anyone’s girlfriend. I’m lost. I’m stuck. I’m broken. I’m not good enough. I’m a

fraud. I'm unable to love or be loved."

"You're wrong. You're not just good enough, you're better than you've ever imagined. But if I have to be certain of this enough for the both of us, I will. Until I show you exactly who you are, until you see and realize exactly how incredible you are."

He reaches out and grabs my arms, giving me a gentle shake. "Stop lying to yourself," he pleads.

"I don't deserve your love," I say.

"Hurt/comfort," he responds.

"What?"

"I'm trying to make you understand by putting it into the tropes you know better than anyone. You think you're not good enough for me? Too broken? Then we can be hurt/comfort."

I shake my head. "I don't want to play this game with you," I say.

"He falls first, he falls harder," he says.

"Stop it, Aiden." I turn toward the door, ready to make my escape, to get out of here and not have to face this right now.

"Runaway bride," he says.

I close my eyes, squeezing them shut, willing him to leave me alone.

“Ugly duckling turns into a swan,” he says. “Though you have got to know you haven’t been ugly a day in your life.”

“You haven’t seen pictures of me on my tenth birthday after I cut my own hair,” I say.

He chuckles, and the sound tries to soothe me, tries to be a balm to my tender heart. “I wish you’d show me.”

I drop my shoulders, lay down my shields, put down my armor. I’m so tired. “Got any more of those tropes at the ready to attack me with?”

He purses his lips, looking up at the ceiling in thought. “Love triangle?”

I raise an eyebrow.

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“Me, you, and the impostor you think you are.”

“Har har.”

It’s quiet. It’s quiet in my head, too.

My fight-or-flight response has always been to run. I hate confrontation. But somehow, when it comes to Aiden, I never leave. I always put my dukes up ready to be challenged. And he’s stepped up and taken me on every time.

“I appreciate you fighting for me. But I don’t know if that makes a healthy foundation for a relationship. I think I just need to step back for now. I have a lot to figure out. You’re right, you know? I have been so absorbed with pleasing others, I’ve lost my grip on the truth, even for myself. I need to work through that. Before I ruin every bit of what’s good in my life. Including you.”

He nods, but he can’t hide the hurt in his eyes. “Okay,” he says. “But, Irene?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll be here when you need me.”

“You always have been Aiden. But for once, I don’t want to be someone who needs saving. I want... to be able to save myself.”

I step close to him and give him a kiss on the cheek.

“I want to be worthy of you,” I whisper into his ear. “And I want to be worthy of me, too.”

Epigraph

Rant incoming: Marketing this book as star-crossed lovers is fine. But putting it in the romance section means it must end with an HFN or HEA. Sorry for being spoiler-adjacent, but I think it’s important I clarify this for everyone—THIS BOOK IS NOT A ROMANCE.

—@irene.loves.love.books

Seventeen

star-crossed lovers

Six months ago, I thought all I wanted to do was fall in love.

Maybe that was an overstatement then.

I realize now I’d only bought into finding a boyfriend. The love part was more than I bargained for.

Turns out falling in love isn’t that difficult. Aiden made that way too easy, with those dimples, that humor, that heart. It’s being in love when your world feels so overwhelming, when expectations keep piling up, when you’re failing everything and everyone, that’s the hard part.

I take out two of the sweaters I packed and sit back down on my suitcase to see if I can get it zipped this time. I’m taking the train home for Thanksgiving and as much as I love my parents, I’m grateful there’s another option for me rather than them

coming up to get me. I'll be spending the next week with my family as it is. Getting a couple hours alone is a gift. Well, I won't be alone. I'll be stuck with my thoughts, and that might end up being its own kind of torture.

"I'm gonna miss you," Jeannette says to me, sitting on her own suitcase and struggling to zip it closed.

"I'm gonna miss you, too." The truth surprises me. We're only gonna be apart for a week. But Jeannette has become a staple in my daily life. I'll miss her laugh and her jokes and her penchant for holding my hand and hugging me when I least expect it. WHO have I become?

It's interesting how much I've changed in just the first few months of school. And yet I'm still the chronic people pleaser, stuck in an impossible situation.

"Promise me we'll FaceTime every single day," she says.

I laugh, namely because I'm not sure if she's serious or not. Sounds excessive, but this is Jeannette, after all.

"Do you guys have any big plans other than turkey?" I ask.

"Oh, we do the whole Black Friday thing. Awake by three, in line at Best Buy by four to get those coveted tickets for the big items we don't need but can't possibly pass up at this price. When you're a family of six kids, money can sometimes be tight and capitalism gaslights you into believing a markdown is a gift that you can't refuse. I drive a twenty-year-old hand-me-down car with over two hundred thousand miles on it back home. But somehow I get a new TV or computer or music system every year for Christmas. It's a trip."

It makes me wonder what beliefs I've held on to that make no sense, that are society

or culture or family history's way of gaslighting me. The need to be the best, to be number one at something is a big one in Korean culture. I guess the fact that I'm going to a college I wouldn't have chosen for myself in order to study for a career I'm not suited for and fake date a guy I actually really like to make me seem more competent to my family and my followers proves I've fallen prey to this belief. Good times.

Too bad I'm failing at all these things.

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“When does Charles leave for home?” I ask.

“I think he’s the first to go. His bus is at ten. He’s gonna stop by here on his way to the bus station. He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

I’m glad I’ll get to see him before we all part for the holidays. A hollow ache in my chest reminds me that I won’t get to see Aiden, though. I didn’t even get to ask him what he was doing for Thanksgiving. Would he be welcomed home? The dorms are closed over the holidays so there’s no way for him to stay here. Will he go with Charles?

“And do you know what Aiden’s doing?” I go about force-zipping my suitcase and don’t look up at Jeannette. Too afraid of judgment or pity in her eyes.

A hand touches my back and suddenly arms wrap around me from behind. I pat her hand, showing appreciation for her sign of comfort as best I can, and then writhe my body a bit to free myself from the hold. I’ve grown more used to Jeannette’s affectionate ways, but it’s still awkward sometimes. Well, more accurately, I’m awkward.

“Talk to him, Irene. You’re miserable. He’s miserable...”

“You’ve seen him?” I whip around to face her, hoping to get as much information as I can.

“I was over at their dorm yesterday after Charles and I had dinner,” she says. “Aiden misses you. He’s trying to give you the space you need.”

I swallow back the emotion threatening to release the waterworks.

“I was so awful to him, Jeannette. But I can’t help but believe that he did me dirty. I’ve struggled to grasp why he’s interested in me. And finding out about his book just gave me too easy of an answer. I know I was overreacting, but honestly, maybe it’s all for the best.”

“I love you, you know this, right? But I have to say... I think you’re being unfair to him. We both know he’s not the type of person who would use you in that way. There’s some stuff you need to work out in here”—she taps my temple—“and here”—she taps my heart—“first, but I sure hope that when you do, you give him another chance. What you guys have is too good, too right, too primed for your HEA.”

“Ya decent?” Charles peeks his head in through our door and smiles.

“Come on in,” I say. “We’re just finishing up having a moment.”

“Damn, I hate missing a moment. Was there awkward hugging involved? Tears?” he asks.

“Yup and yup,” I say. “But you know there will be plenty more where that came from before the year is done.”

“With you two? I’d guarantee it.” He’s always so freaking good-natured. No wonder he and Aiden get along so well. The four of us made a pretty great friend group. I hope I didn’t ruin it all with my failure to college correctly. “Oh hey, before I forget...” He reaches out and offers me a thick manila envelope. “For you.”

“Looks very official, what is it?” I ask.

“Open it, open it,” Jeannette clasps her hands as if Santa himself has delivered me a gift.

I take the envelope from Charles, turning it over, but nothing’s written on the front. I narrow my eyes at him, trying to figure out what the big secret is. But his face is a blank slate, other than the googly eyes he’s making at Jeannette right now. I need to get this over with so I can escape and give these two lovebirds some privacy to say their goodbyes.

I turn it back over and unwind the string from the two circles to open it. I pull out a fairly large stack of bound papers. A green Post-it note with familiar writing is stuck to the front page.

This story is as much for you as it is about you. —A

I close my eyes for a second, trying to push back the tears.

Aiden’s manuscript.

I let my free hand reverently stroke the front page, as if what lies within holds deeply held, valuable secrets. And maybe it does.

I quickly push the manuscript back into the envelope. This is not something I can look at and handle right now. Maybe on the train. Or maybe this weekend.

“Thanks, Charles, for delivering it. I appreciate it,” I say. “Now, I’ll let you two have some privacy. I’m gonna stock up on some snacks for the train so I can use up the rest of the points on my dining card.”

As I head out to the market, my phone buzzes with a new message.

Charles:package delivered. She looked... shocked.

Jeannette:she looked... touched.

Aiden:thanks... um... everyone. Happy reading, Irene. I hope you like it.

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Me: Thank you for trusting me with it. I'm looking forward to it.

Charles: wow, this is way more awkward than I imagined when I thought to take it to the group chat.

Jeannette: Yeah, that was a bust. See you all on the other side of Turkey Day everyone!

I want to ask Aiden if he has somewhere to go. In fact, my fingers hover over my phone ready to ask the question. But I figure Charles would have mentioned it if he didn't. Or Jeannette would have dragged him home with her. So I force my fingers to wrap around the handle of my shopping basket and start filling it with snacks for my trip home.

My mom's SUV waits for me at the train station. I throw my suitcase in the back next to Eugene and slide into the front passenger seat. "Thanks for coming to get me. I could've just gotten an Uber, no big deal," I say, reaching over and giving her a hug.

Eugene starts cackling in the back.

"What's so funny back there?" I ask.

My mom joins in on the laughing.

"Mom said you were going to get in the car and tell us you could've gotten an Uber. Just like you did. She was right," he says, still laughing.

God, sometimes a thirteen-year-old's laugh is freaking adorable. I want to tickle him all over.

"You always offer to do something that you think will make it easier on everyone else, Irene," Mom says. "But what you don't realize is that me and Eugene wanted very much to see you right away and be here when you arrived. Daddy and Cybil, too, but they both had to work late today. They'll meet us at home."

I'm... speechless. My first inclination is to deny. But she's right. I guess I do. Just like Aiden said, too.

I swallow back the emotions the truth seems to want to bring out of me. "Well, thanks. I'm happy to see you guys. I've missed you."

"The house is so boring without you, Noona. No one is as funny as you are," Eugene says.

"I was thinking the same thing about my school, Eug. No one makes me laugh like you do."

Eugene proceeds to tell me a bunch of really bad dad jokes and then catches me up on his school and golf and all things Minecraft. By the time we get home, I've managed to avoid any questions from my mom about college and I breathe a sigh of relief when I toe off my shoes entering our house.

"Is that Irene?" my dad calls out from the kitchen. He meets me halfway and gives me a stiff side hug, his go-to display of affection. "How was the train? Are you hungry?"

We all walk into the kitchen, where the table is covered in In-N-Out bags, the smell of the grilled onions blessing my senses. I feel like I must be PMSing because this

sight, these smells, the raucousness of my family all talking over each other makes me emotional. A tickle in my nose, followed by wetness in my eyes. I purse my lips trying to hold it all in.

I love being at school, despite all the stress. I love my new friends and the people who are helping me find myself. But that doesn't take away from the fact that I've missed home, too. I've missed my family.

"Here," Cybil says, dropping a bag in front of me on the table.

I look at it, fingering through the contents, and then back up at my sister. "What is all this?"

"Just some skincare stuff I got at work. Mostly sheet masks. I figured your skin was a wreck, eating all that shit food in the college cafeteria and not getting enough sleep. Don't be lazy with your skin. You look a mess, so use a mask every night for twenty minutes," Cybil explains.

I open my mouth, unable to come up with the words. She so rarely does anything nice for me. "I... I... yeah, okay, twenty minutes," I finally get out. "Thanks."

"Whatever," she replies.

As we sit around the table devouring our Animal Style burgers, the conversation quickly turns to questioning me about school. It catches me off guard, as I'm so rarely the center of attention at the dinner table. I think about Aiden's comment about the secrets we keep, things we fail to say or choose not to. It makes me consider the untruths I've been telling and where they fall in the spectrum of secrets.

"So, how does it feel to be home? Different? I mean, I know school is going so well for you. But we're really happy you're here," Mom says.

“I’m happy to be here, too,” I say. “And, well, it’s nice to be back. It feels familiar and... I needed the break.”

Dad looks up from his burger, brow furrowed with concern. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just, school’s hard. I know it’s only been a few months, but still, it’s a lot of transition. And I might have overplayed how great it’s going at Parents Day.” Wow, getting out even a watered-down version of the truth was more excruciating than I imagined. Each word took effort to release. But now that it’s out there, I let out a breath... relieved.

“Well, that’s to be expected, honey. It’s a new home, you’re on your own for the first time, and college courses are no joke. I remember my first semester at Brighton. I cried a lot,” Dad admits.

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“Really? But you loved it so much,” I say, surprised at his admission.

“True, I really did. But it took time to adjust to what was new.”

“Remember when I had to move up to a longer driver? That was so hard and I sucked for a while until I got used to it,” Eugene says. “I cried, too.”

“I’m working for a new brand right now and it’s different than before. The expectations just feel a lot higher now,” Cybil admits.

I whip my head around to face her. She’s never acknowledged any struggle before. “I didn’t realize. I’m sorry it’s been hard,” I say.

She doesn’t look up at me. She just shrugs it away. I won’t force her to say more. But I notice Mom’s eyes on her eldest. She’ll find a way to get through to Cybil.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Irene. Just do your best. Dad and I noticed how everyone we met at Parents Day held you in such high regard. Seems you’ve got a lot of good people around you who can support you. And, of course, you’ve got us. You can come home any time you need a break.” My mom’s smile is warm and understanding.

I grab a handful of french fries and stuff them in my mouth. We’re not a touchy-feely kind of family so I don’t want to freak anyone out by being emotional. I’m just so grateful for everyone’s small admissions that make me realize I’m not the only one.

“May I be excused to go play video games?” Eugene asks.

“Yeah, I gotta go, too. I have a date,” Cybil announces.

Dad starts clearing the table. “You two rest, I’ve got this,” he says to me and Mom.

“So, tell me more about this boy,” Mom says, turning to me.

I take a sip from my Coke and think about what I want to share. I’d usually just be very vague, and only share the best parts with my mom. But I want to start being more honest. For me and for them.

“He’s great. I’m just... not so great back. I don’t know how to be good to him, when I struggle being good to myself.”

“Well, that’s classic Irene, isn’t it?” She smiles. “Always thinking of everyone else, not wanting to burden, afraid to disappoint. I used to think it was because you were the middle child and didn’t want to stand out so you made all your efforts about everyone else. But I’ve come to realize it’s just how your heart is. Even with your internet book stuff. You put all that work into it so that other people can find books to love as much as you do. You’re quite amazing.”

She reaches over and lays her hand on top of mine.

I try to process her words. Is this how she sees me? My mother, who I think probably knows me best of all?

“I’m not feeling really amazing right now. I’m not doing well in my classes, Mom. I let a lot of stuff slide. I couldn’t focus on anything, so I just gave up on everything.” It feels good to admit this to someone, especially someone who I’d worried about disappointing the most.

She nods, taking it all in. “Well, let’s figure out how to help you get back on track.

And then we should consider if you are in the right classes in the first place.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I worry you went to Brighton just for Daddy. I worry you’re studying to be an editor just for me. Of course we get carried away and are excited selfishly. But above everything, we’re your parents, and we want you to be happy and successful. We don’t want to force you into our dreams—we want you to find your own.”

“I’m not sure what I want, Mom. I think that’s the problem,” I admit.

“Well, if you take away everything you think everyone wants from you, if you stop trying to please everyone else, what do you love to do?”

I don’t even hesitate.

“I love reading romance books. I love talking about them, recommending them to other people.”

“We could look into seeing if Brighton has a Library Sciences program. Or maybe you could consider finding a part-time job as a bookseller? There are so many options. College is for you to find yourself. Don’t drown under the expectations of others. And even if you figure out college itself isn’t what you want, we’ll try to find the best way to tell your dad that Brighton didn’t work out for you.” She smiles, and it makes me laugh.

I lay my head down on top of our hands. She runs her fingers through my hair with the other. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I can breathe. I don’t have the answers, but I know I want to look for them.

And here, at this dinner table where I’ve always felt unremarkable, like I didn’t quite

have a place, like I needed to prove myself to everyone else, I realize I've been wrong. I've had a place all along. And that's what makes me the most remarkable of all.

I go upstairs, change into my pj's and crawl into bed. Turns out admissions and emotions are all exhausting.

I itch to read something, something new.

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And then I remember it, burning a hole in my bag.

I reach down into my backpack and pull out the manila envelope with the precious pages inside. I pull the manuscript out slowly, almost reverently.

And so I begin.

Page 1.

Welcome to my happy place.

Epigraph

This is possibly one of the most romantic stories I've ever come across, and somehow I'm certain I will never be the same.

—Irene

Eighteen

fated mates

BORN TO RULE

By Aiden Jeon

Chapter One

Rion had no idea why he was back here again.

As a Sigma, a loner without a pack, it wasn't a good idea to be sniffing around where others were gathered. They might get the wrong idea. Rion had no interest in attacking them; he'd be a fool to do so this outnumbered. And neither had he any interest in joining them.

He was here for one reason alone: her.

He'd heard of female Alphas leading on their own, though they were rare. He wondered why she hadn't mated. If there was something wrong with her or if it was by choice. If the latter, she had chosen a difficult path. She wasn't safe alone, neither from outside dangers nor possibly even within.

He first stumbled upon her while she was caring for an injured hunter in her group. She spoke kind words, telling the wolf he'd lived a brave and full life as she stayed by his side until he passed. Her senses were probably distracted, as she hadn't even noticed Rion's approach. She'd need to be more careful. Rion stayed close enough to her to keep any and all dangers at bay that day.

Since that day, everything about her had fascinated Rion. He felt oddly drawn to her. Being a loner for most his life, this pull was new to him, and he wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

"We'll start plans to move north in the next few weeks," she said, standing in front of her pack. "Joriah, keep close track of the stars to help us decide the right time to begin the journey. Simna, you're assigned to help prepare the younger cubs for their first trek. Please advise the mothers if there are any special needs. Our scouts have sent word that it will be an especially dangerous road for us this year." Her voice grew louder, stronger. "I will take on anyone who dares attack our pack. But it's best if we stay on guard as much as possible and let nothing take us by surprise."

She sounded tired. And though her head was held high and her voice radiated authority, Rion had watched her enough times to notice the small signs. Her hind legs bent slightly, her coat not as radiant as he'd seen it before. She carried the weight of the entire pack on her shoulders. She did not want to let them down in any way. Even if it took everything out of her. It wasn't just that she had more to prove to others as a single female Alpha. It was to prove to herself and her pack that she could take care of them all. She wouldn't show them any weakness.

Rion felt a burst of pride within him.

He should leave before anyone noticed him. But he wanted just one more look at the stunning wolf, her jet-black fur taking on a blue undertone in the moonlight. She was a sight to behold. She took his breath away.

"You, what are you doing there?"

Shit, looks like Rion had overstayed his welcome.

He looked over his flank, and there stood three patrol wolves. They weren't small. But Rion was massive and could take down three fairly easily if attacked. But these were her wolves. Hurting them meant hurting her. He wouldn't, couldn't do that.

"I'm, I'm looking for a pack to join," he said. What the fuck just came out of his mouth? This had not been his plan when he arrived here tonight. Shit, even coming this way wasn't part of his plan. He just couldn't help himself. Damn her.

One of the wolves narrowed his yellow eyes, sniffing the air to sense any danger coming from Rion. He wouldn't smell any. Rion meant them no harm.

"Come with us. We're taking you to see the Alpha," the other said.

Rion's mouth was suddenly dry, his paws stuck to the ground where he stood. They were taking him to meet her. What should he say? Should he tell her that her fur was pretty and that he liked her smile? You idiot, she's not one to be wooed by lame compliments. Should he confess his kill count and try to impress her with his warrior skills? You don't want to be recruited to her army, you want to be recruited to her den. Rion felt a sensation where his knot would form and he needed to be careful to not totally embarrass himself with an audience.

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He followed the wolves as they led him through the pack meeting, past the curious and wary glances of the others. When they stopped in front of the fire, he leaned back on his haunches and bowed his head.

“Stand and reveal yourself and your intentions. Who are you and why have you come? Are you here to fight me, to try to overthrow me, to take my pack?” There was a slight shake to her voice, but he doubted anyone noticed.

He noticed, of course. He noticed everything about her.

They all revered her. Rion just wanted to be near her.

He thought about how she must constantly have to be on high alert, her nerves on edge. It made Rion wonder if she hadn't mated because she couldn't trust anyone. He would make sure she grew to trust him.

Rion stood, sticking out his chest maybe a little more than necessary. But he'd been told it was his best feature. That, and his smile. He could flash some fang and probably have her begging for more. He lifted his eyes and met hers. Her narrowed gaze widened briefly in surprise, but she quickly masked it.

She felt it too.

The pull.

Mine.

“My name is Rion. I am a Sigma. I was abandoned by my parents when I was young and lost from my pack. I’m a keen hunter, a strong fighter, and can be of great use,” he said. His résumé didn’t sound too bad, not bad at all.

“Sigmas usually only join a pack to find a mate and start their own,” she says. “Is that your intention?”

“I haven’t been part of a pack for as long as I can remember. So I’d need you to teach me how. But I’m willing. And as far as mating goes...” He took one unthreatening step forward and then another. This was his chance, maybe his only one. He wasn’t going to waste it. He lowered his voice so that only she could hear. “I’m here to mate... with you.”

To her credit, she didn’t flinch. She didn’t even blink. He waited.

And then she threw back her head... and laughed.

When she finally calmed herself down and let out one last lingering chuckle, she stepped right up into Rion’s space. “You? Mate with me?”

Okay, no lies, she was intimidating. Rion could see why she was the Alpha. But he found that sexy as hell. He swallowed. “Yes.”

She leaned back and looked him over, head to tail, assessing him.

“I’m not one to be mated with. But we have many others who would be suitable and attractive to you, I’m sure. Welcome to the pack, Sigma Rion. I am Aura, your Alpha.”

Aura.

Rion's heart fluttered at the mere mention of her name.

He hadn't intended to join a pack. He hadn't planned to profess feelings for Aura on this night. But what's done was done. Aura might not be willing to mate with him now. But he'd make her see that they were meant to be together. And soon enough... she would.

Epigraph

Sometimes I wonder what a celebrity sees in a normie, especially when it feels like they could have anybody. But that's the author's job, right? Make me, the reader, understand why someone like Ethan would choose someone like Amanda. Well, now I know. Because he can't live without her. There isn't, and never has been, anyone else for him. The heart wants what it wants.

—@irene.loves.love.books

I've been in the biggest book funk, not gonna lie. But I'm really glad I picked this one up. I found it fascinating how the author shows us that the person the world believes Ethan Rogers to be is nothing like who he truly is. And when Amanda tells him that she sees him broken, scarred, lost, and loves him for all of that, I had full-on fat tears streaming down my face. Fuck... to be loved that fully, that honestly...

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Nineteen

celebrity romance

There is something sadistic about having to go to an 8 a.m. class the Monday after a long holiday weekend.

I got back to my dorm late last night. My parents insisted on driving me and dragging my brother and sister along, too. We stopped for dinner at my dad's old favorite diner. And when I use the word "old," it could actually describe the building, the decor, our server, and the meatloaf I ordered. Which is still sitting in my stomach this morning like a rock.

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But it was worth it. Spending those last couple hours with my folks and siblings was worth it. Solidifying that I have a place in our family, worth it. And having that feeling of driving up to the dorm parking lot, climbing my stairs to my door, and letting myself in, greeting my roommate, already asleep on her bed, by collapsing on top of her and hearing her mumble “welcome home”... all worth it.

I escaped college a week ago by train, alone. And I return feeling fortified, more certain of what I have to do, and ready to get to work.

And though I’m exhausted, look a wreck, and have a nasty bout of heartburn, I run into the lecture hall first thing this morning and scan the room with equal parts anticipation and anxiety. Okay, that’s a lie. It’s like eighty-eight percent sheer terror I’m feeling. But there’s no denying I missed Aiden all week. A six-foot hole in my heart. So that other twelve percent is holding strong, excited to see him.

My eyes land on the back of a head I’ve become very familiar with. Long neck, strong jawline, hair newly cut in a tight fade in the back to longer strands in the front. Just as I clock him, as if he senses me, he turns and looks back, doing his own scan of the room. When his eyes meet mine, they look uncertain. But that’s okay.

I’m certain enough for the both of us now. It’s my turn to come to the rescue.

I hustle down the stairs to the row where Aiden’s sitting and drop myself into the seat next to him. The feeling of déjà vu, hearkening back to our first day in this class together, is undeniable. Good. I get to start over. I get to remove him from the enemies-to-lovers bucket, complete with all the insecurity and trauma and damage I’ve made up in my mind about what that trope means, and reclassify.

“Hi,” I croak out, the sound more hungry-monster-come-to-eat-you than carefree, flirty coed. His eyes widen in shock as I slap my hand over my mouth. I clear my throat and try again. “Hi,” I say. “Sorry, I was going for nonchalant, slightly breathy, kinda sexy. But I had some unresolved phlegm in my throat.”

His eyes dance as the sides of his mouth twitch, fighting the smile. “I see. Well, I’m glad you got that taken care of. Hi. Did you have a good Thanksgiving?”

“I did. I, I never got to ask you what you ended up doing. I thought about you, a lot.”

I may be imagining things, but I’ve done enough staring at Aiden Jeon to catch the slight release of tension in his shoulders. Relieved? Happy?

“I went to my brother’s apartment and we spent the weekend together. We tried to cook a turkey dinner but it went horribly wrong so we ended up eating KFC and playing video games most of the time. I think it was good for him to unplug from his med-school life.”

I nod, relieved Aiden had somewhere to go and someone to be with. Still... “And your parents?”

“They called and we did an awkward but nice family FaceTime. They both were working. Holidays are busy hospital times, apparently.”

My fingers itch to reach over and hold his hand, to offer some comfort, to let him know I’m here, I’m listening, but...

Oh, fuck it. Fuck all my insecurities and uncertainties. I grab for his hand anyways. But in the midst of my hoorah, grab-the-bull-by-the-horns moment, it’s my right hand that makes the move. Problem is, Aiden sits to my left, forcing me to reach across my body, and across his, to take the least convenient hand in mine, leaving my entire

body now twisted and leaning on him, face inches away from his. Well, this is uncomfortable. Public space and all.

This time he doesn't hold back. The full smile appears, complete with dimples, and I melt into him. "Well, hello there," he says.

"She-makes-the-first-move trope," I say.

He nods. "Exhibitionist trope," he laughs.

"She-whoops-his-ass trope," I add.

"I-sure-hope-so trope," he counters.

"Get a room," a guy a couple rows behind us says.

We look at each other, both sets of eyes dancing, and mouth "trope" at the same time.

I hold his gaze for just a second longer, drinking in the attention, and then I pull away, back into the more appropriate confines of my own chair. "Sorry," I say over my shoulder to the other students around us who I've subjected to our show. "It's been a few days since I've seen him, and..."

"Welcome back, class. Hope you all had a great holiday." Dr. Kingston arrives right on cue. Saved by the surly professor. "Not to be the bearer of bad news, but we only have a few short weeks left before team projects are due. I trust you all are well rested and ready to put in the work to get these in tip-top shape to turn in. A reminder that fifty percent of your grade relies on it."

The spike of my ever-present anxiety shows up like clockwork. But this time, it's not followed by panic. Nor is it followed by denial and the temptation to play ostrich,

bury my head in the sand. Nope, I'm ready. There's still a lot of work Aiden and I need to get done, but I'm motivated and determined to pass this class.

"Oh, and before I forget." The professor's eyes scan the room and land exactly on me. "Irene Park and Aiden Jeon, I'd like to speak to you both as soon as class is done. Hang around a minute or two, if you don't mind."

I feel Aiden's eyes turn to me, wondering what this might be about, maybe even worried that I fucked up, again. But I don't turn to him. Instead, I keep my eyes on Dr. Kingston. I nod and smile in understanding. The professor smiles back. Good. This is all good.

Aiden leans in and whispers, "What's going on?" God, he smells so good. I've missed this smell so much. I want to take one hundred deep breaths of it to calm my nerves. I want to bottle it and then bathe in it.

"It's all gonna be okay, I promise," I say. "Trust me?"

I've given him no reason to. In fact, I've given him many reasons not to.

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But he nods and turns his attention back to the front.

I let out a silent sigh of relief and do the same.

We wait, standing side by side, as a few people speak to Professor Kingston after class. If he wants to talk to us about what I think he does, I'm happy to be the last ones. Aiden's toe taps as he stands with his hands in his pockets. It betrays his cool demeanor, showing one sign of nervousness.

I nudge him with my elbow. "It's gonna be okay," I say. Funny how the roles have reversed. He hasn't even done anything wrong. In fact, the total opposite, by my guesstimation. And maybe I've done something right for once, too. If this works, I've saved our grades in the class, and hopefully made things a little easier for Aiden and his scholarship.

"Last time he wanted to see us, it didn't go so well," he says, sneaking a quick glance down at me.

The guilt threatens to take root and grow. The worry of disappointing someone, the temptation to hide and lie to smooth things over, both waiting for me to let down my guard and come back to the spots they've held within me, flanking me for so long about so many other things.

But I won't let them in. Aiden was not attacking me with that statement. And I can't control whatever it is that Dr. Kingston is going to talk to us about. I can only deal with it as it comes, bad news or, hopefully, if I'm right, good.

“Aiden, good holidays?” He reaches out to shake Aiden’s hand and pat him on the back. Good start.

“And Irene, I know you had a very busy holiday. I hope you were able to relax and enjoy some of it as well,” he says to me.

“I did, thank you,” I say.

“No, Irene, thankyou,” he says. He turns to Aiden. “And thank you, too.”

Aiden’s eyebrows shoot up his forehead. “Um... you’re welcome? I think?”

Dr. Kingston lets out a hearty laugh. “Let me guess, you kept this a secret?” he says to me with an exaggerated knowing wink.

“I’m the one who dragged us down in the first place. I wanted to take the responsibility of righting the wrong.” I turn to Aiden. “I didn’t want you to have to rescue me again.”

He furrows his brow, confused, waiting to be let in on the big secret.

“I... I completed the extra credit assignment.”

Aiden opens his mouth to protest, but I keep going.

“I know you said you’d help. But I honestly didn’t want you to have to take on additional work just because I’d been flailing all semester. You had already been leading the charge with the group project. And yes, I was a little flustered and uncertain how to proceed with this. But it all changed thispast week. I read something new... something so inspired and beautiful and funny and wise. I read it in one sitting, couldn’t put it down. And then I read it all over again, slowly, savoring it, annotations

and all. And because I wanted so badly to talk about it, to talk about the author and the talent there, I decided to use it for the extra credit assignment.”

“I have to admit, when I received the email with the write-up on Thanksgiving night, I was quite shocked,” Dr. Kingston says. “But there was such enthusiasm and passion in Irene’s words, I knew the book must have been quite special. In fact, I was so intrigued by her assessment and the analysis against what she researched about the author, I asked her for a copy of the book myself. I, too, read it quite quickly, unable to put it down. What a beautiful display of love, commitment, loyalty, and personal growth. And funny, too. With just a nice touch of spice as well. What would you say, Irene? Two chili peppers?” The twinkle in his eye makes me laugh. He loves being in on this joke, apparently.

“I’d agree. With all of it.”

“Um, wow, well, that’s amazing,” Aiden says. “I love when you find a book that you’re excited about, Irene. That’s always some of my favorite content of yours. I understand how you were curious, Dr. Kingston. Irene has an infectious way of making you want to read whatever she’s talking about when she dives deep into books she loves.”

Ahhh, Aiden, trying to be a part of the conversation while he still has no clue what’s really happening here. I want to kiss him so badly. I hope he lets me again real soon. But I have an apology, an explanation, and a promise to make to him before we get to that. Later.

“In any case, I wanted to thank you, Irene. And I wanted to tell you both the good news. With this excellent extra credit submission, barring any total misstep on your final project, I’m pretty confident you both will pass the class. Irene, it was close there for a while. And Aiden, well, you’ll do so with flying colors. And I have no doubt you’ll be in solid standing with the scholarship committee. I’m quite eager for

them to read your writing.”

“That’s amazing news,” I say, relieved and happy at the same time.

“Thank you. That is great news.” Aiden’s huge smile and so-cute-I-want-to-eat-them dimples are on full display. “That really must have been some book, and,” he looks down at me, “some really well-done assignment, to bring our scores up that much. Thank you,” he says, this time to me. “Now I want to read it, too!”

Dr. Kingston looks at Aiden, confusion tightening his eyes. He shifts his gaze to me. “Wait, Aiden doesn’t know which book you wrote about?”

I shake my head. “He doesn’t. He and I have a lot to talk about.”

“Ah, well, good luck with all of that. Aiden, I’m sendingyou an email in a little bit... with a proposition of sorts. Don’t open it until you and Irene have”—he looks back at me before continuing—“had your talk. It will all make a lot more sense then. I look forward to hearing back from you later.”

“Okay?”

“Thanks so much, Dr. Kingston. We’ll talk soon. And I promise our final project is gonna be a doozy!” I grab Aiden’s hand and start to pull him away. Maybe I don’t have the right to anymore. Maybe I never did. But I do it anyways—I grab on, interlace my fingers with his, and hold tight, leading the way.

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“Wanna tell me what all that was about?” he asks me as I pull him out into the quad.

The quad. My dad says some of his best memories are of times hanging out here. The weather is getting a little colder now, but we’re still in Southern California. It’s not so cold that we’d be uncomfortable. And I’ve decided I’d like to start hanging out more in this grassy quad, too. I want to take advantage of all the things this school has to offer, actually. But first...

I stop in front of the short stone wall separating the walkway from the grass and press down on Aiden’s shoulders to encourage him to sit. I remain standing. I want to be able to look directly into his eyes when I bare my soul.

“I’m sorry. For everything. Yes, for failing my classes, especially for not doing all the lit assignments, since that directly impacts you. But more so for not being honest with you. And for not having the guts to explain that I was struggling. And for lashing out at you when you confronted me about it. For not believing in you. For not accepting your words when you told me how you felt about me. For accusing you of using me. For pushing you away.” I go through my mental checklist to see if I’ve missed anything.

“Wow, that’s... a lot of ‘I’m sorries,’” he says.

“I know. And it still doesn’t feel like enough,” I admit. “But I want you to know, I’ve done a lot of thinking, assessing, planning. And I’m starting with the healing. I can’t fix it all and change everything over one holiday week. But I’ve had a talk with my parents. I told them everything and they kinda helped set me straight. And then, there’s you. You also helped set me straight. You helped me to see... myself. Through

your eyes. And through your words.”

“I did? But we didn’t even talk this week,” he says.

“Aiden.” I grab both his hands and hold them in front of us. “The book I did the extra credit assignment on was yours.”

“What?” He stands up quickly, looking down at me. I can’t tell exactly how he’s feeling about this bit of information. So I hold on tighter to his hands. If he’s mad and tries to pull away, I’ll wear him down with my superhuman strength and then tie him up and hold him captive until he caves.

“Born to Rule. I did the assignment on it. I loved it. I am so fucking impressed, Aiden. You’re incredibly talented. I maybe biased, but I swear, it’s one of the best things I’ve read in a long time. And, well, seems Dr. Kingston agrees with me.”

Aiden drops his jaw, moving his eyes side to side, thinking, considering all the implications of what I’ve just told him. “You liked it?”

“No, I loved it.”

“And Dr. Kingston liked it?”

“Apparently, he loved it, too. Two chili peppers and all.”

He finally comes back to me, all attention on the person in front of him. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, it all happened so fast. I was overflowing with thoughts and emotions by the time I finished it. I had to start writing. I couldn’t record a review because the book isn’t published... yet. Crying shame. But I thought if anyone might appreciate what

the author was trying to do and how he managed to do it in the story, it would be Dr. Kingston. So I started writing and couldn't stop until I'd had the assignment done. I wanted to send it to you to review. I'm sorry I took this all upon myself. But like I said before, it wasn't fair for you to have to take on more work because of my slacking. I wanted to do it on my own, for us both."

"I can't believe it," he says.

"Believe it. And believe this: I love you, Aiden. I still haven't quite gotten over the belief that I don't deserve you. But I'll admit to the world and beyond that I love you. And if you'll have me..."

He tugs me toward him until only inches separate us. He moves his hands to cup my face and leans forward until his forehead meets mine. He closes his eyes and kisses the side of my nose. I breathe him in and melt against him.

"I love you, Irene. I won't use flowery prose to describe it so you won't think I'm just trying to say the right things. I'll just be honest and clear. I love you. I have from the very beginning, and I will till our Happily Ever After."

"You wrote me a whole book, Aiden. I think I'll believe anything you say to me about love moving forward. You're the romance expert."

"Learned everything I know about romance from you, Irene."

Aiden moves even closer until no space exists between us. His lips find mine, his kiss filled with longing and love.

I move my hands up to grab hold of his shoulders. I lift myself slightly onto my tippy-toes, trying to get even closer to him. Aiden drops his arms to encircle me, and if I thought there wasn't space between us before, I was wrong.

“In case you didn’t hear me say it earlier and I get too distracted to say it later, I love you, too, Aiden.”

He smiles against my lips and kisses me again.

“Take me home,” I say.

Home. A small single dorm room. Brighton College. Aiden Jeon.

Epigraph

My next novel is going to be about Lindrina, first of her kind, wielder of the power to overcome the forces of both the dark world and of the heavens, chosen to bring peace to the land of Sagtarna. And Harlean, the man born to destroy her, who instead swears to protect her and to love her. C’mon! A trope mash-up of enemies-to-lovers and the Chosen One! I’m itching to start writing!

—Aiden

Twenty

the chosen one

Aiden

“Okay, okay, it’s the moment we’ve been waiting all semester for, get those score sheets out and let’s tally ’em up,” Charles says.

“How many additional side bets do the two of you have on this?” Irene asks.

“Only a few,” Jeannette says.

“...dozen,” Charles finishes.

I grab cans of Coke out of my fridge and hand them out to each of my friends, giving the one Coke Zero to my girl. I make sure to have some at all times just for her. It’s her new obsession. I ripped one of my dormmates a new one for snagging my last can a few days ago. I don’t care if he takes any other shit from my room. But the Coke Zero is for Irene, and Irene only. Just like the sign now taped on my fridge door says.

I sit down next to her on the floor of my single dorm room where we’re all gathered to finally put an end to the dating challenge we started months ago. Well, this whole thing started a lot earlier than that for me.

I don't need to see the final scores. I already know I won. Hell, I knew I was gonna win the moment I entered the race.

"Aren't the final scores a moot point by now? Aiden and I are together, what else matters?" Irene asks. Though I see her eyeing the calculator as Charles enters the numbers from all the dates we went on earlier in the year. My fiercely competitive, fucking adorable girlfriend.

But she's right, it is a moot point. Irene already gave up the brand sponsorship. She has to put a lot of extra time into her studies and catching up with her grades so she has no time to focus on anything additional on top of her regularly scheduled content.

And me? Well, I'd gladly take the extra cash. But I turned it down as well. I'm also planning to move away from my review accounts sometime soon, anyways. Turns out that email Dr. Kingston wanted me to read was a link to an entry form for a creative writing contest put on by the Literature Department Alumni Association. That comes not only with some pretty hefty prize money, it also includes meetings with a handful of literary agents. I don't know where all this will take me. I know publishing a book isn't easy by any means. But if not this one, then I'll write the next one.

I've got a source of inspiration, who also happens to be a wealth of information about the genre, by my side.

"Holy shit," Charles exclaims.

"No way," Jeannette yells, looking over his shoulder.

"What?" Irene and I ask at the same time. She grabs my hand and holds tight. It's the thing she does when she's nervous or afraid or... well... I guess she reaches for my hand all the time these days, no reason needed. I love these small changes in her. More affectionate, more open, more honest, asks for help if needed. She's incredible.

“It’s... a tie,” Charles and Jeannette say. The two of them are also going strong. It’s funny. Where Irene and I are really different and we come together and make something amazing, Charles and Jeannette are basically the same person and they come together and make something amazing, too. Funny how love works. There’s no set formula or recipe. Tropes and HEAs can be expected... but the truest thing I’m learning about romance is to expect the unexpected.

“No way, it can’t be,” Irene says, grabbing for the score sheets.

“Well, we added up all the scores from each date, and Aiden actually came out on top with that. But then we give ten points for each trope that was checked off your lists, and Irene came out on top there. So that gave you the same score,” Jeannette explains.

“And, funny, but you each only had one trope left unchecked on your lists. Irene’s was the abduction slash fall-in-love-with-your-kidnapper trope.”

I turn to stare at my girlfriend. Few things ever surprise me about her. I’ve learned not to ask questions about the things that do. She just shrugs and looks slightly disappointed she wasn’t able to check that box.

I see her scribble something down on a piece of paper and push it over toward Jeannette, trying to do it unnoticed. Jeannette opens it up and barks out a laugh. She turns the paper over for us all to see.

Help me. This guy has kidnapped me and wants me to act like I’m his girlfriend. Call the police.

This girl. Fucking nut.

“Now, honey, no need to tell our friends how much you like being tied up,” I say

casually.

She backhands me on the arm. “Private business stays private,” she says through clenched teeth.

As I said. Fucking nut.

I smile and her eyes home in, as they so often do, on my dimples. I have to thank my parents at some point for these, since I have a sneaking suspicion they’re Irene’s favorite part about me.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:12 am

“Well, hate to break it to you, Irene, but I win,” I say.

“What do you mean, you win? They just explained that it’s a tie. There is no winner in a tie. And we never settled on a tiebreaker. Anyways, I kinda like the thought of it ending in a tie. We’re both winners because we have each other,” she says in an adorable aegyo. She leans over and pecks me on the lips. I grab her before she pulls away and give her a harder and longer kiss before letting her go.

“Charles, tell the group what my supposed unchecked trope is.”

“Instalove,” Charles says.

“See? Now, unless there’s some other person you’re in love with that I don’t know about...” Irene holds out her arms like she’s proven her point.

“Check the box, Charles,” I say to my friend. He smiles wickedly back at me. He’s the only one who knows. Until now.

“That’s cheating. The challenge is over. You can’t tell me you’ve suddenly fallen in love with... who? Wait. WHO IS SHE?” Irene is up on her feet, her nostrils flaring. Ready to take down whoever this mystery person I’ve fallen instantly in love with is.

“Irene, I fell in love with you the moment I saw you,” I confess.

She falls to her knees in front of me and narrows her eyes. “Liar. I was there, remember? You harassed me in our lit class. You forced me to be your partner. You...”

“That wasn’t the first time I saw you,” I admit. “The first time was when I stumbled on your account and you were reviewing a book. Flowers from the Storm by Laura Kinsale.”

Her eyes widen in shock. “I love that book,” she whispers.

“I know. You said so in your review. You cried.” I swallow back my own emotion. I remember it so clearly. This beautiful girl, full of energy and spark, talking about a romance between a duke committed to an asylum and a Quaker who learns to communicate with him. I was mesmerized.

Her eyes begin to fill with tears now and I pull her to me, bringing her down into my lap. “Baby, don’t cry. It was a beautiful review. I’d never seen anyone be that free with her passion before. I was a goner. I knew I wanted more. I went to your profile and watched at least two hours of your reviews and posts. It inspired me to read more. You inspired me to start my own channel. I hoped... well, I hoped I would be able to get to know you.”

“What? Are you serious?” Her expression is so open, so amazed, so... “You stalked me?”

She scrambles off my lap.

“I didn’t stalk you,” I say. Although now that I think about it, I can see how it might sound a little creepy to her. “I just wanted to be around you. I wanted to get to know you. And the internet, and the college gods, apparently, helped make that happen.”

“That’s weird,” Jeannette says.

“It’s not weird,” I disagree.

“I mean, I didn’t think it was weird when you first told me at orientation. But now, not gonna lie, it sounds a little weird,” Charles admits.

I stare around at my friends, the people who supposedly like me the most, and can’t believe they’re accusing me of being weird. “It’s romantic,” I say.

“Um, is it, though?” Irene asks. But there’s a sparkle in her eye and she’s trying very hard not to let the smile free.

“You tell me, Irene. Is it romantic?” I ask her.

“Okay, fine. It’s kinda romantic. I’ll give you that.”

“Yes. Instalove, check. I win.” I say.

“Congratulations, baby,” Irene says as she kisses me on my eye, on my nose, on my cheek, and finally on my lips. “But I just gotta say... I’m feeling a lot like a winner myself these days.”

Looks like we all win... and Happily Ever After is a pretty sweet prize.

Epigraph

My favorite part of time-travel romances is when the past is sprinkled with all those Easter eggs that help make sense of the things going on in the present. Those aha moments between the author and the reader, the inside jokes where we point to each other’s eyes in an “I see you” way. Those are so fucking fun. But best of all, they help us realize that love starts somewhere... and sometimes even before our two MCs have ever met. So satisfying.

—@aidentheguyreadsromance

Epilogue

time travel

Aiden

Two years earlier...

I close the door to my bedroom behind me and lock it. I'm done with this conversation.

I place my bowl of ice cream on my desk, change into my worn-out gray sweatpants, throw a black hoodie over my Henley, and take a seat at my desk.

I knew the conversation with my family was going to be shitty. I just figured, if I told them early enough, before SATs and college applications started, how I was struggling in my science classes, how if I kept trying to force myself into this "future doctor" role it was going to blow back in my face, that maybe they'd see I wasn't cut out for this.

I couldn't even get past the "So, I'm having a hard time in AP Bio..." intro. My dad lost his shit. My mom gave me the lecture of how I'll never get into med school if I kept slacking. And I gave up trying to talk to them. At least for now. I'm sure that eventually they'll come around to understanding. As long as I'm honest and tell them my truth.

I don't want to be a doctor.

Will they be disappointed? Sure. But their first son is already going down that route.

What's the harm if their second takes a different direction?

I turn on my computer and open up the document I've been working on. I have no idea what I'm doing writing this story. I have little to no life experience with romance. But after reading *Pride and Prejudice* for my English class, I keep itching to read, and write, stuff like it.

This story is all over the place. I don't know enough about historical context to make it believable. Maybe I can change it up, take some creative liberties, maybe even an alternate reality. Do people do that in romance books?

I open the search engine and type in "historical romance." I'm initially overwhelmed by all the recommendations and options. I'm a slower reader; some things trip me up and hold me back. So I can't possibly tackle all these titles coming up in my search.

I go back and type in "historical romance reviews." Maybe someone much smarter than myself can point me in the direction of how to approach the story I'm writing. And give me just the top line of books to read and why.

A couple videos that pop up catch my interest.

I select the first one: From a newly appointed HistRom girlie: How Kinsale's "Flowers from the Storm" totally changed my wiring

The book reviewer is cute. Super cute. And I'm pretty sure she's Korean. Interesting. But it's the excitement with which she talks about the book that gets me hooked. She's fucking glowing. And the things she's saying make me want to—no, have to read it, too.

I write down the book title and make mental note to look it up at the library.

A few hours later, my list of books to read is a page long, though I've starred the ones

I want to prioritize first, and I've watched possibly everything I can find by @irene.loves.love.books. I trust her recommendations, and they make it less daunting, like I don't have to try to read everything out there. I'll just read whatever she reads.

It would be cool to be that excited about something, like she is about romance. That's how I feel about writing. Even though I'm new to it. If I could take a note from Irene's playbook, and talk that persuasively about writing to my parents, maybe they'd consider letting me try it instead of continuing to pressure me to become a doctor.

Watching Irene's videos makes me wonder what it's like to be that freely passionate about something, to discuss it so eloquently online, to know so certainly that you're doing exactly what you're supposed to be doing. Maybe I should give it a try, too.

I finally take the plunge and press the FOLLOW button. I open a new message. I don't know what I want to say to her, but I feel like I have to reach out. I hope she doesn't get creeped out by a guy sliding into her DMs.

I just wanted to say thanks for your videos. You've got me newly into the romance genre and I'm really excited about it. Keep up the good work.

Send.

"Keep up the good work"? What the fuck kind of ending is that?

I shake my head and convince myself this is why I'll never be a writer.

And yet... I know, in my heart of hearts, it's what I want to do.

So, . You'll never know it, but you've been an inspiration.

Keep up the good work.