



# The Ugly Stepsister Strikes Back

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Everyone knows how those fairy tales go. The princess gets beautiful, nabs her prince and leaves her evil stepsisters in the dust.

But what happens when you're the ugly stepsister and your obnoxiously perfect—pretty, smart, and, worst of all, nice—stepsister is dating the charming, devastatingly handsome guy you've had a thing for since you were nine?

Quirky, artistic and snarky Mattie Lowe does not lead a charmed life. Her mother is constantly belittling her online. The school mean girl has made it her mission to torment Mattie. But worst of all? Her stepsister is the most popular girl in school and is dating Mattie's secret crush, Jake Kingston.

Tired of being left out and done with waiting for her own fairy godmother to show up, Mattie decides to change her life. She'll start by running for senior class president against Jake.

Ella can keep her Prince Annoying. Mattie's going to rule the school.

And no one, not even a cute and suddenly flirty Jake, is going to stop her.

**Total Pages (Source):** 60

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

My stepsister Ella was ruining my life. She was blonde, petite, beautiful, talented, popular, and worst of all, she was nice.

My dad married Ella's mom, Rose, when we were both two. It was the year after my mother left me. After Ella's mom divorced my dad, Ella still came and lived with us every summer, and every other Christmas.

We never went to the same school until Ella's mom died from breast cancer at the end of our sophomore year. Ella moved in immediately. Nobody knew where her biological dad was (he bailed before Ella was even born). She belonged with us.

At first I was glad to have her. It was fun having a stepsister. Or, it was fun up until the beginning of our junior year. Over that summer, Ella changed everything. Her hairstyle, her makeup, and her clothes. She exercised every day. Ate carrots and crap like that. She got unbelievably gorgeous (and it probably didn't hurt that her mom had been an actual Swedish Bikini Team model).

And she was new. The boys went crazy.

That was the first thing in my List of Grievances where Ella was concerned.

My List of Grievances was something I started right after the end of junior year. It was all the ways Ella had wronged me. And as I just mentioned:

Wrong the First: Guys fell all over themselves for her. There was nothing worse than

just standing there pretending like it didn't bother you while guys drooled all over her and didn't even say hi to you. And the whole time, I secretly wanted to scream, "Hey, see me? I'm a girl too!" Even my guy best friend since junior high seemed to be falling under Ella's spell.

Wrong the Second: Ella made Angelina Jolie look selfish. Ella lived to volunteer. While everyone else was easing into the school year, Ella was already planning a masquerade ball for some save the orphan/whale/environment cause. She had so many charities she supported I honestly couldn't keep track. There was no competing with someone who spent most of her free time thinking about other people.

Wrong the Third: Her name. Ella Christensen. So pretty. Roll right off your tongue beautiful. My name? Mattie Lowe. Actually, it's worse than that. My real name? Matilda. I blamed my mother (and sometimes my dad, for not running any interference when my mother picked out the name). During one of our forced online chats, she said she named me after some old queen, that Matilda's a strong name and meant "mighty in battle." I was pretty sure it meant "my mom hates me." Fortunately, when I was little, my dad called me Tilly. That worked fine until the first day of kindergarten. Even at the tender age of five I understood that I couldn't be Silly Tilly for the rest of my life. I came home and demanded my dad change my name. He refused. Instead he came up with a new nickname for me, and I started going by Mattie at school, Tilly at home. Ella's just Ella. She didn't have to have a dozen nicknames just to get through her day.

Wrong the Fourth: She spent hours cleaning up around the house. Bathrooms, her bedroom, the living room, you name it and Ella had probably cleaned it recently. The other day I caught her in the kitchen actually scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees! Every time my father stumbled across her cleaning something, it made him ask me why I was so lazy. He assigned me chores that I had to pretend to do until he forgot and I could go back to doing nothing. As far as I was concerned, she was putting our housekeeper's job in jeopardy, which I refused to do, because I was not

selfish like that.

Wrong the Fifth: Ella had this ability to make everything look amazing. Dance floors, people's faces, clothes; anything she touched magically looked better. She even liked to sew her own stuff like she was getting ready to try out for "Project Runway" or something. I acknowledged my lack of fashion sense many years ago, and had stuck to basic black ever since. I was only adventurous with my hair color, which was a sort of fuchsia-y shade. But not so adventurous that I'd ever used a permanent hair dye. Just semi-permanent or temporary. (And I should probably mention that Ella was a natural blonde. Yes, it made me want to puke, too.)

Wrong the Sixth: Ella was a cheerleader. Enough said.

Wrong the Worst: Ella was dating her perfect counterpart—he was handsome, athletic, funny, nice, tall (so tall it made me crazy – at 6'2" he was one of the tallest guys at school. Being 5'11" made me sort of a tall guy connoisseur and it always aggravated me to see all that height being wasted on teeny-tiny girls like Ella). He even drove a sports car. His name was Jake Kingston.

And I was completely, totally, head-over-heels in love with him.

## Chapter 2

I sat in front of the headmistress's office thinking, not surprisingly, about Jake.

I spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about Jake. It was like a sickness, really. People were always saying things like teenagers don't know what love is, and we mistook lust for the real thing, blah, blah, blah. I wished I only lusted after Jake. Life would be much easier then. I could get over him if lust was the only factor.

Don't get me wrong—he was definitely lustalicious. Dark hair, dark eyes, a jawline

that looked like Michelangelo himself chiseled it out of stone. Totally gorgeous. But there was this emotional component there. I cared about him.

Since I spent a lot of time observing him, I saw all the little things he did every day. Like the time he helped the girl from the Special Ed. class pick up her books that she dropped, and then walked with her to her next class. Everyone else just walked by. Not Jake.

He routinely stopped his stupid friends from picking on other kids. His friend, Scott Martin, was the worst. But Jake managed to rein him in.

Jake was always smiling this thousand-watt, movie star/model smile and saying hi to everyone that said hi to him. He was so nice. He never tried to make people feel like they were worthless losers. Unlike Scott and his girlfriend, Mercedes. Their only goal in life seemed to consist of insulting and belittling everyone around them.

He did these things quietly. Not like he was ashamed of his good tendencies, but more in a he didn't need to show off sort of way. Or like people seeing him doing it would take away from the specialness of it.

It felt like something we shared, even though he wasn't aware that I knew what an awesome guy he was.

He was smart and good at everything. I was so in love with him.

And I wasn't sure if he even knew that I existed.

I sighed, because that was what unrequited love made you do. Sigh with self-pity.

I needed a distraction. Besides thinking about Jake, I'd been sitting out here for a while worrying and wondering when the headmistress would call me in. I was pretty

sure that Ms. Rathbone made us sit outside and wait this long on purpose. To give us time to work ourselves up into a frenzy about possible punishments. She'd probably learned that in one of her doctorate programs. Like everything else at Malibu Prep, she was the best. She had all these framed degree certificate things behind her desk. I suspected that that some of them were fake.

I stood up and started reading the bulletin board that hung outside the main office. It had the usual announcements, the sign-up sheets for marching band (blank), an after hours cooking course with that famous chef on TV who swore at everyone (halfway full) and one for student government candidates. For a second I thought my Jake obsession was now making me see things, but no, there was Jake's name. As the only candidate for senior class president. Of course. I let out a little snort of amusement. Who would be dumb enough to run against him?

## Page 2

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I saw that Scott Martin planned to run for the vice-president position. I gave him the dirty look I wished I could give him. Loud, obnoxious and crude, he was like the anti-Jake. I couldn't figure out why they were friends. Most kids got their giggles out on the first day of school when the teachers called me Matilda as they took roll, but then they got over it. Not Scott Martin. He'd called me Matilda since the eighth grade graduation dance. He had asked me to dance during a slow song and I stammered out a no. Scott was cute, but not quite tall enough and I didn't know how to dance. We would have looked ridiculous. His face had flushed red and ever since then he'd hated me. I think it was because I publicly embarrassed him (although that hadn't been my intent), but Ella claimed it was because he liked me and I'd turned him down. I'd tried to explain to her that she needed to stop seeing the world through pretty-girl glasses. It skewed her perceptions.

I flicked my gaze up and saw the advertisements for upcoming charity events. Other schools had dances and proms. We had galas, masquerade balls and black-tie affairs.

I should probably mention that Malibu Prep was a really nice (read: expensive and exclusive) school. My dad even taught a semester here as a guest instructor for the advanced art class.

Wait. I forgot to tell you about my dad. He was only the world-renowned artist, William Lowe. Most artists weren't famous until they died (mostly because once they'd died they couldn't create any more art, so it would make it more valuable). Wikipedia said Dad was a child prodigy (a fact he would neither confirm nor deny), and his fame had only increased since then. I didn't really get his art. It looked like big blobs of color to me, but critics called it "amazing," "masterful," "bold," and "worth more than your house."

So, like everyone else here, we had plenty of money. But other than my manga addiction, I wasn't really the shopping type. Ella was the shopaholic of the family, but she would use her own money that she'd earned from her part-time job instead of the credit card my dad had given us as our allowances. (That should probably go on my List of Grievances as I'd been lectured about how Ella was such a hardworking go-getter and I was a lazy sack).

"Ms. Lowe?"

I jumped at the sound of my last name. I get startled frequently, because I spent most of my time in my own head. With Jake. Reality was not nearly as much fun.

"Please join me."

Honestly, Ms. Rathbone scared me a little. She was like a cross between a drill sergeant and a Southern debutante.

"Sit."

For a second I contemplated asking her whether she wanted me to roll over and beg too, but didn't dare. I immediately dropped into one of the chairs in front of her desk. She didn't have one of those stereotypical offices with stuffed, worn couches or bookshelves that overflowed with books. Instead it looked like something out of the IKEA catalog. All the furniture in the room was sleek and modern and, like the chairs outside of her office, highly uncomfortable.

She opened a file on her desk and started to read it. It was probably my English teacher's List of Grievances against me. I would own up to my misbehavior today. I had started out already annoyed because my best friend, Trent, had to park halfway across the parking lot and I ended up being late for calculus. That was not technically my fault. Seniors should've had priority parking next to the school. After suffering



through four years of high school I thought the very least they could do was let us park closer. Neither Trent nor Ella would care that they were late. Trent because he was all antiestablishment and Ella because the teachers probably found it adorable when she showed up after class started.

This, of course, could've all been fixed if my dad would've just gotten us a car of our own so Ella and I could get there on time, but he'd mumbled something about "character building" and had refused.

So, I was already in a mood when Ms. Aprils started in on me. Well, not on me, but how great Mark Twain was. I should have just let it go. But I didn't.

Ms. Rathbone continued to read in silence, her forehead furrowing as much as it could despite the Botox injections. She had this very cool shade of silver hair, and big brown eyes obscured by her glasses. My fingers itched to draw her as a manga character. I'd make her eyes even bigger, give her a long silver Mohawk and some kind of warrior get-up. Black with silver buckles, I decided. I saw a long ruler propped in the corner and pictured altering it as her own personal samurai sword. I stuck my hands under my legs to keep from reaching for the blank paper and pencils sitting on the edge of Ms. Rathbone's desk. I figured she wouldn't appreciate my imagination.

Instead of drawing, I started running my tongue over my teeth. It was my new favorite pastime. I couldn't help it. Only a few days ago I had been freed from the prison of my braces and it was a revelation to feel these nice, smooth teeth. I had worn braces for so long that it was like I had to relearn my mouth.

"You said that Mark Twain was a, wait, let me make sure I'm reading this right." Ms. Rathbone put her finger under the writing and read each word slowly. "A racist, sexist pig."

True. I had also said that I didn't think he was witty at all, but as that wasn't in her report, I wasn't about to admit to it.

It probably didn't help matters that Ms. Aprils had done her master's thesis on the works of Twain and that half the English room was decorated like some sort of Mark Twain shrine.

Ms. Rathbone peered at me over her reading glasses, waiting for my response. Her eyes bored into me, and I recognized that look. She was trying to shake me; to read my face to see if I had left things out.

Unfortunately for her, she was unaware of my secret superpower. I had a killer poker face. My dad said he would have been a professional poker player if the artist thing hadn't worked out, and thanks to all his training, I was sort of a card shark and in total control of my outward reactions. I didn't have a tell.

I held my features steady. She wouldn't get anything out of me that I didn't want to admit to.

"Yes, I said that."

Ms. Rathbone took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. She looked tired. "Mattie, it's only the second day of school."

It all felt unfair. It wasn't my fault that Ms. Aprils was singularly obsessed with the idea that Mark Twain was some sort of literary superhero who could do no wrong. She couldn't fathom that other people didn't worship him. I disliked him just for what he'd said about digging Jane Austen up and beating her to death with her own shinbone. Because Jane Austen was all sorts of awesome.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Rathbone." I started to say it wouldn't happen again, but I just

couldn't. Sometimes stuff just came out of my mouth even when I didn't want it to. I had a low threshold for stupidity.

"You will be serving detention today for your belligerence in class, and I expect you to apologize to Ms. Aprils."

I grimaced at the idea of apologizing to Ms. Aprils. Malibu Prep had zero tolerance for disrespect to the staff. I had more leeway than some of the other students thanks to my quasi-minority status, but I knew there would still be an apology to my teacher in my immediate future. As far as sentences went, so far mine was pretty light.

I wanted to say I wouldn't do it again, but we both knew it would be a lie.

"You will try to refrain next time?"

## Page 3

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"I will do my best," I promised. There, that was honest. "So, if we're done..." I grabbed my backpack.

Ms. Rathbone held up her left hand, her eyes still trained on my file. "Not yet."

What now? I hadn't done anything else. As she'd so helpfully pointed out, it was only the second day of school. I hadn't had time to mess up.

"I see that you failed to fulfill your volunteer requirements from last semester." I wanted to groan. We were required by the school to do four hours of community service per month each semester. Last semester I'd been a tad depressed. That was when Ella and Jake had become a couple. How could I have concentrated on doing things for other people when my heart was breaking?

Not to mention that I had never really understood this concept. How was I "volunteering" when they were forcing me to do it? It was more like involunteering at that point. Or unpaid child labor. If they were going to make us volunteer, they could've at least given us school credit for it.

"Because from your file I see that you want to go to Wellesley." I didn't correct her. There was no point in trying to explain the whole complicated family mess in the space of a few minutes.

I didn't want to go to Wellesley. My mother wanted me to go to Wellesley. That was where she had gone.

My dad wanted me to go to UCLA. That was where he had gone.

My mother wanted me to study sculpting. My father wanted me to study painting.

I was not interested in any of the above.

Ms. Rathbone was still talking. I forced myself to pay attention. "These schools look at the whole person, not just your grades. You have no extracurriculars. What about hobbies?"

I couldn't tell her about the manga. I could already hear myself explaining it. "Well, Ms. Rathbone, manga is the word for Japanese comics. Anime is the animated version of manga..." It would have been a long conversation. Plus, I would run the risk of not only potentially boring her to death (I'd never met anyone else who liked manga as much as I did and I could get a little excited about it), but she might tell my dad. I knew my dad loved me and would tell me my work was good (even if it wasn't), but he was such a serious artist that I would feel embarrassed if he found out. Plus, he might feel obligated to tell my mother, and then things would get very bad very quickly.

So instead I just shook my head no.

"Then it would be my recommendation that you get more involved here at the school. Not only will it look good on your applications, but you need to make certain you're current on your volunteering hours. Do you have any immediate plans for becoming more involved both here at school and in the community? "

I knew she was right, unfortunately. I didn't intend to attend an Ivy League school, but the school I wanted to go to, UC Santa Ana, would want more than good SAT scores, decent grades and an awesome portfolio. I had to show them that I could make the ultimate sacrifice and find some club at school that would deign to have me.

She stared at me, unblinking, and I wondered how long she could go without

blinking. Oh, she wanted me to say something. Immediate plans for volunteering. Right. "I'm, um, helping Ella out with her charity ball." Total white lie, of course, but I knew I only had to ask Ella what I could do to pitch in and she would immediately include me.

"Ah. Ella." Ms. Rathbone said her name the way all adults did—with this mixture of admiration and approval. So irksome. "That will help with your volunteering hours, but I think you should still find a way to be even more involved here at school."

She grabbed a bunch of fliers from the table behind her chair and handed them to me. "These are some clubs and groups you might consider joining."

As I took the fliers, she added, "This might also be a chance for you to make some new friends."

She said it lightly, but I got the implication. My cheeks flushed. It was really embarrassing that even the headmistress knew that I was a social misfit.

I started to flip through them. Chess club. Um, no. I wasn't up for social suicide, thanks.

Football boosters? Again, no. Bunch of wannabes that couldn't make the cheer squad.

Student government. Hmm. I'd never been much of a joiner, but this one had actual merit. Jake was running for president. I was suddenly struck by the amazing idea of running for a lesser office. Treasurer or secretary or something throwaway like that. Then we'd have another class together and he wouldhaveto talk to me and spend time with me because we'd be running the student government together.

Brilliant.

All I had to do was get elected.

### Chapter 3

We had an unscheduled fire drill during third period that bled into fourth, and they finally dismissed us to go have lunch.

Trent had saved me a place in line. He wasn't hard to spot. He looked a little like a cross between a zombie and an Abercrombie model. Over the summer the school board had decided to make some changes. The first was the introduction of the horrendously awful polyester-blend uniforms we now had to wear. So Trent wore his piercings and guyliner and his hair spiked up in thirty different directions in true emo fashion, but from the neck down he looked pure preppy with a blue polo shirt and tan Dockers.

I couldn't even tease him about it, because I knew I looked no better.

"Hey," I said when I got in line. He had his earbuds in and couldn't hear me. I grabbed a tray and tried to figure out which of the things in front of me was the least disgusting. I adjusted my black horn-rimmed glasses, as if they would help me in my selection. They weren't prescription or anything; I just liked the way they looked.

## Page 4

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Malibu Prep may have been a great school, but they had run of the mill cafeteria food.

Normally you'd never catch me buying my lunch. But in addition to the uniforms, the board had decided to ban lunches from home. We were now required to buy all of our lunches at school.

They claimed this was to ensure that all the students would eat healthier. I thought it was a way to boost revenue, because nothing in front of me looked edible, let alone healthy.

The school board had wisely made all of these decisions during the summer when everyone from school had been on vacation. Not our family, because my dad's idea of a vacation was to spend twelve hours in the studio instead of sixteen. But everyone else had left, so there had been no one here to protest.

Trent finally noticed me, and raised his eyebrows in greeting. I followed him to a table in Outer Siberia. The A-list kids sat in the middle of the cafeteria, and the fringe groups settled in around them. We sat about as far away from Jake Kingston and his friends as possible.

And just like I had done every day since I was nine years old, I watched for Jake. There. He was laughing at something Scott said to him, and I sighed. So pretty.

The worst thing about Jake was not just that the likelihood that he would ever speak to me was incredibly low, but that he was totally off limits. And I didn't just mean in our social statuses at school, but as I had to keep reminding myself, he was Ella's



boyfriend. Not that you'd know it. I almost never saw them together. Even now Ella rode to school with Trent and me, and ate lunch every day with us instead of Jake and his entourage. I couldn't blame her, because Jake's friends did royally suck.

But even if the heavens parted, trumpets sounded and a great miracle occurred with Jake asking me out on a date, I would have to say no. The Girl Code said that I was not allowed to date my stepsister's boyfriend. And I was absolutely forbidden to try and steal him away from her.

Not that I could, but the thought had crossed my mind (although in that particular scenario I was half a foot shorter and blonder and thinner and brimming with self-confidence).

Speaking of stepsisters, I saw Ella out of the corner of my eye. She was one of the few girls at school who could actually carry off the uniform look. I couldn't figure out why it looked so amazing on her and so awful on me. She saw me, waved and then came over to sit with us.

Which meant she wouldn't be sitting with Jake. Again. I didn't get it. Shouldn't one of the perks of dating the hottest guy in school be spending every waking moment with him, basking in his beauty?

They were the weirdest couple I'd ever seen.

"Hey guys!" Did I fail to mention how cheerful Ella was? I mean, I knew it was implied with her being a cheerleader, but she was easily the happiest person I knew.

It made me grouchy.

"Nice salad," I pointed to Ella's tray. The wilted lettuce looked particularly unappetizing.

"I have to eat some food," Ella replied, but she looked as grossed out as I felt.

"Salad isn't food. Salad is what food eats."

I was the only carnivore of the group. Both Trent and Ella were vegetarians. This severely limited our options when we all went out to eat together. They also took different tactics in trying to convert me to the dark side. Trent kept trying to show me pictures of slaughterhouses on his phone. Ella attempted to give me tofu, claiming it tasted just like meat. Only a vegetarian would think tofu and meat tasted even remotely the same. At least it gave Ella and Trent something to bond over—what a savage barbarian I was.

But today they could probably make headway with me given how disgusting the meatloaf looked. I pushed my tray away.

"I forgot to get some milk," Ella said. "Do you guys want anything?"

"I want some processed sugar." Ella gave me a sympathetic smile and then turned to Trent, who was still engrossed with his phone. "Trent?" He looked up and then shook his head no.

"Okay, be back in a second." That was another thing I'd been noticing lately—the way that Trent's eyes followed Ella everywhere. Trent and I had this weird kind of friendship. We sort of fell into it in junior high, as two fellow outcasts. We hung out, we had fun, I made him watch my collection of '80s movies, but to be honest, I didn't know that we had all that much in common other than snarking at each other.

He wasn't someone I could see myself ever interested in, so I wasn't jealous that he had a thing for Ella, but slightly annoyed that she had taken yet another boy I cared about.

I knew I wasn't being fair. Ella wouldn't date Trent and she wasn't trying to make him like her.

But still.

"I know it's only been two days, but can I say how sick I am of living in this fascist state? If I want to have a lunch that consists of a chocolate cupcake and a Diet Coke followed by a Pixy Stix chaser, that's my constitutional right."

"So do something about it."

"What?" Had Trent Holden actually just told me to "do something about it?" He was the original laid-back, mellow, do-nothing sort of guy.

He pulled out one earbud and shrugged his shoulder. "I don't know. Maybe it's time to start doing something. We're both guilty of complaining or wanting something and then we don't do anything to make it better. You want to bring your own lunch again? Then do something." His voice had a tinge of anger in it, which surprised me even more. I'd never heard him mad before.

"Like what?"

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He shrugged again.

My next thought was that now two people in one day had suggested I get more involved. Maybe it was a sign from heaven. Or an omen of doom. I didn't know which. My dad had seriously neglected my religious education.

Before I could ask him why he was upset, I noticed Mercedes Bentley hovering near our table having a conversation with one of her minions. She was our resident token evil girl whose personal credo is "Random Acts of Meanness." I had always flown under her radar until last year when Ella came to Malibu Prep. I was guessing that because she couldn't afford to be vicious to Ella, whom everybody loved, I was fair game. Hurt me to hurt Ella or something.

She stepped closer to our table to be sure I heard what she said next. "The likelihood of that happening is about the same as Mattie getting a ride in Jake Kingston's car." Several of her little friends laughed in response.

I didn't know if that was supposed to be a euphemism, or if she was being literal. I decided she wasn't smart enough to talk with subtext.

Ever since Jake turned sixteen and got his two-seater car (I didn't know what brand it was. It was one of those red kinds), it was every girl's ambition to be the person in that second seat. The thing was, Jake hardly ever gave anyone a ride. The few girls who had been carted around by him had major bragging rights. You'd think Ella would be riding shotgun every single day. I would. But I didn't think she'd ever been in his car. I didn't know if he was just weird about it and didn't offer, or if Ella refused. Ella and I did NOT talk about Jake, for obvious reasons. Well, obvious to

me, anyway.

The point was that girls had been devious and underhanded in their attempts. One girl faked an injury; another punctured her own tire. Riding with him was a Malibu Prep status symbol.

So it wasn't like Jake specifically excluded me from his precious ride. Still, my stomach tightened and my brain turned to mush every time Mercedes made one of her little digs at me.

I, uncharacteristically, found myself floundering whenever she did this. Later on I would think of a thousand perfect retorts, but never any when it mattered.

The best I could do was, "There's a better 'likelihood' of me getting a ride from Jake than you."

Mercedes whipped her long, blonde extensions behind one shoulder with her perfectly manicured hand. "You think so? Really?"

She shouldn't care. She was Scott's girlfriend. Although, if I were Scott's girlfriend I'd upgrade to Jake faster than you could say, "See ya!" I think she was just mad because I dared to talk back.

"Well," she said in a low voice, "I'll have to run that one past Jake and see what he thinks."

I didn't know how she had figured out that I liked Jake. But a lot of her catty remarks centered around him and how he didn't like me. She gave me a fake, smug smile and walked away with her little ducklings in tow.

Round 457 to Mercedes. She had the ability to go to Jake and make me look like

some sort of crazy nutjob whose one ambition in life was to get a ride in his car. I watched uneasily as she sidled up to Scott, putting her arms around him and whispering something in his ear. He laughed, and then turned to look at me.

I had to look down at the table. I couldn't be a witness to the expression on Jake's face when she made me seem insane.

"I can't stand that girl," I muttered.

"Someone who was named unironically after two cars is not worth listening to. You can't take anything she says seriously."

I knew Trent was right. My brain knew it. I knew Mercedes Bentley was a vacuous, spray-tanned, silicon-injected, nose-altered waste of space. I logically also knew that Jake didn't like me and never would.

So why did it hurt so much when someone as stupid as Mercedes pointed it out?

## Chapter 4

I watched Trent and Ella walk down the front steps toward his car. She said something to him, and he turned to her and smiled. He actually smiled. He hardly ever smiled. Then he pulled out one of his earbuds and offered it to her. He'd never shared his music with me. She didn't even have to try and this happened.

I stomped down the hallway and took the northwest stairs. Ms. Rathbone had said detention would be in Room 203. It was the third door on the right on the second floor.

"Hello, Mattie." My art teacher, Mrs. Putnam, sat at the desk, giving me a look that was a cross between disappointment and a smile. The word I thought of when I saw

her was "soft" --like she was blurred around the edges. I noticed that she had pulled her light brown hair into a messy bun held together with a pencil and had several multi-colored streaks of chalk on her face, clothes and fingertips. She was one of the few teachers I actually liked, and it was embarrassing to have her find out that I misbehaved outside of her classroom.

A laptop was propped open next to the door. It asked for my student ID and password. I entered the number and used my current go-to password that consisted of my birthday and my favorite anime artist,tezuka827. I hit the enter key.

The screen flashed, "THANK YOU MATILDA LOWE. DETENTION CHECK-IN TIME 2:37 P.M."

I told you it was an expensive school. (That, and Ms. Rathbone was obsessed with computerized record keeping.)

Room 203 was bright and airy. The windows on the outer wall started halfway up, curved at the corner where the ceiling began, and made up part of the roof. This wing had the art studios because of the excellent light. Beyond the classroom I could see the landscaping crew tending to the bright green grounds (not fields, thank you, but grounds).

Realizing that Mrs. Putnam was giving me a strange expression while I stared out the window, I quickly picked a desk in the middle of the room, sat down and dropped my bookbag on the floor next to me. I leaned over and pulled out my sketchpad and a pencil from my bag. I knew I should probably do my homework, but if I was going to sit in silence for the next hour, I was at least going to enjoy myself.

I had just started sketching a rough outline for my Ms. Rathbone-inspired warrior when suddenly every ion in the room became electrically charged.

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Jake.

I was so aware of him that it was actually lame. I knew when he walked in a room even if I didn't see him. I felt it. The air was different when he was breathing it.

I heard the keys clicking on the laptop and watched as he entered his information into the computer. Jake had detention? Here? With me?

Then I wondered why Jake would have detention. Jake was not the kind of person who ended up here. He didn't have a problem with authority figures like I did. What had he done?

He looked up and I looked down at my sketchpad. I didn't know if Mercedes had already talked to him, and I didn't want to see pity or disgust or confusion or any of the expressions I imagined him having.

"Hi, Mrs. Putnam," he said in that deep, rumbling, smooth voice. It had the tendency to melt my insides into a pile of goo.

"Hello, Jake," she responded with an ever-so-slight flirtatious lilt at the edge of her voice. No woman was immune to the powers of Jake Kingston's charm.

I kept my eyes trained on my sketchpad, still not wanting to look up. It wasn't an easy battle because I loved looking at him.

So it shocked me when, out of the twenty-nine other seats in the classroom he could have picked, he sat down right in front of me. I would know the back of his head



anywhere. Given our last names, Kingston and Lowe, I had been seated behind him in every class we'd shared for most of our lives.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and started typing. Electronic devices weren't allowed in detention, but rules didn't typically apply to Jake. I leaned to one side to see if Mrs. Putnam would say anything. But she looked distracted and a little anxious. She kept checking the clock. I again noticed the colored chalk on her fingers and blouse. She had the look of an artist who had been working on a piece and wanted to get back to it. Trust me, I knew this look very, very well.

I wasn't the only one who noticed her fidgeting. "Mrs. Putnam, if you need to go, I think Mattie and I are responsible enough to watch ourselves."

He knew my name! Well, obviously, he knew my name. He was dating my stepsister. But I didn't think I'd ever heard him say it out loud before. My heartbeat sped up.

After I got over that initial shock of hearing my name pass across Jake's lips, I realized the brilliance of his plan. If Mrs. Putnam left, I'd be alone with Jake. For an entire hour.

"The art studio is right down the hall," I pointed out helpfully. "You could come back and check on us and we would just log out when our hour is up. We promise to be quiet and stay put." I was trustworthy. She knew me well. And Jake was the center of Malibu Prep's universe. It wasn't like we were hardened criminals or something.

"I shouldn't..." She had an expressive face, and I could see her desire to go fighting with her duty to stay. She looked at the clock again.

"We'll be fine," Jake reassured her.

Several seconds passed before she stood up. "I will be in my studio if you need

anything and I will come back to check on you."

I smirked. No she wouldn't. If she was anything at all like my dad, she'd get so caught up in whatever she was doing that a couple of hours would pass before she'd remember us.

Her high heels made aclickety-clacksound as they walked across the laminate floor. She paused at the door, giving us a stern look. "Right down the hall," she reminded us one last time and then she left.

I was alone with Jake.

And I had no idea what to do with him.

I had imagined this moment so often and now that I was here my throat closed in on itself. I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

That was a lie. I could think of a lot of things to say, but I was pretty sure if I told Jake I wanted to bear his firstborn child, he might freak out a little.

Since he was dating my stepsister, you'd think we would've had some kind of interaction in the past, but we hadn't. He never spent time at my house. Especially after the Bathroom Incident.

So, the story was that I was taking a shower and singing Justin Bieber tunes. When I got out I put on this flimsy, thigh-high, blue silk kimono my mother got for me. (She didn't know that I wore it, and I would never admit to her that I did.) Anyway, it was much tighter than it used to be because, in the words of my Aunt Sarah, I "exploded." She said it happened to the Lowe women just before their eighteenth birthdays. Grandma called it blossoming, but Aunt Sarah disagreed. She said there was nothing slow or gradual about it.

Aunt Sarah was right. One day I was me, the next my bra didn't fit. I hated it. I knew probably most girls would be thrilled, but it was like I wasn't myself. I was used to the way I looked and suddenly I looked like...well, not me.

Anyway, I came out of the bathroom, toweling my wet hair, and Jake was standing there. We were like two deer caught in the headlights, staring at each other. I could have darted back into the bathroom. He could have turned around and walked away. We didn't. Instead we stood and stared for what felt like an actual eternity. He cleared his throat and said three words to me. "Nice, uh, singing." Then he finally left, shaking his head and letting out a deep breath. It was then that I realized I had been holding my breath too.

He never came to the house again.

As if he could sense my crazy, Jake turned around slowly and laid his left forearm across my desk. My hand was flat on the desk right next to his arm and I could feel the warmth and energy that he seemed to give off. I scolded my twitchy hand to stay put and to not reach out and touch him.

"So, Aprils sent you to detention?"

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All the saliva in my mouth dried up, but I managed a, "Yeah."

He gave me one of those high wattage grins and said, "You shouldn't have attacked Twain." He sounded like he was teasing me.

"I know." I wanted to fan myself, but refrained. I could feel the flush creeping into my cheeks, and I willed them to stay their normal color.

The words we're having a conversation! We're having a conversation! ran on an endless loop in my brain. Only, the reality was that Jake was trying to have a conversation with me and I was ruining it. Ruining it!

I needed to fix this, and fast before he thought I was a total idiot. "Why are you here?" My voice sounded only a little shaky. I hoped he didn't notice.

"You mean here on the planet or in detention?" Another smile, more teasing. I liked the way his eyes crinkled up at the corners.

I smiled back. "I meant detention."

"I was leaning against the wall and my backpack caught on the fire alarm and set it off." Have I mentioned how much I love his dark brown eyes? It wasn't just that they were beautiful (which they so were) but that with him looking at me, it was like I was the most important person in the entire world. Like there was nowhere else he'd rather be than talking to me.

"That was you?"

"Yeah."

"Ms. Rathbone must have been in a mood to send you to detention for an accident." I had probably aggravated her more than I realized. I should feel bad, but if it led to this, I couldn't feel too sorry.

He shrugged. "Yeah, they ended up calling my dad." He said the words tightly, and it was obvious things had not gone well.

Subject change! I wanted more smiles.

"On the bright side, you got me out of social studies. So on behalf of myself and my class, I thank you."

He laughed and my loop changed from we're having a conversation! to oh my Buddha, I just made Jake Kingston laugh! Then I imagined that it could be like this every day if we were both in the student government class. We'd work on projects and spend lots and lots of time together. He would see that we were perfect for each other and we'd ride off into the sunset.

And what about Ella? my guilty subconscious asked me. I told it to shut up.

"So, what you're saying is that you sort of owe me."

Huh? "Owe you?" I wondered if he'd let me pay him back in kisses.

"I have some stuff I need to do. Would you mind covering for me?"

He was leaving? Now? When we were finally having an actual conversation?

Jake pulled a notebook and pen out of his backpack. He wrote something down and

then tore the page off, handing it to me.

"That's my ID number and my password. If you'd just log me out when the hour's up, that'd be great."

I took the paper and saw the number 257893318 and ella is hot. Ella I shot? What? That didn't even make any...oh, wait. Not Ella I shot. Ella is hot.

Of course.

Not only that, but what he was asking me to do made me feel sick to my stomach. Part of me wanted so badly to say sure, go ahead, I'll take care of it for you. I was really, really tempted. It would be so easy to lie to Mrs. Putnam because she trusted me. My fingers gripped the piece of paper tightly, as if they wanted to prevent me from returning it. I imagined he would smile at me and thank me and he'd have warm fuzzy feelings about that great girl who helped him out.

But even I, in my highly deluded state, knew that wasn't how things would happen. He wasn't talking to me to be nice or because he was interested in what I had to say. He had buttered me up just so that he could leave without getting in trouble.

He was using me.

And while I was not above telling a white lie here and there, I was a pretty honest person. My dad might have neglected a lot of things, but he did teach me the difference between right and wrong.

This was wrong.

I had promised Mrs. Putnam we'd stay here. I didn't break promises. I didn't want to betray her trust.

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Not even Jake Kingston was worth my integrity.

"If Mrs. Putnam comes to check on us, just tell her I had to run to the bathroom or something." He picked up his backpack and slid it over one shoulder.

"Thanks for this, Mattie. I really appre—"

"No." I cut him off. This time both my voice and hand shook hard. I held out the torn piece of paper. "I won't lie for you."

### Chapter 5

Jake looked at me like I had suddenly sprouted another head. "What?"

I didn't say anything because of the thick, hard lump that had formed in my throat. I continued to hold the paper out to him, willing my hand to stop shaking. He didn't take it.

"Are you serious?" He sounded gobsmacked. I was sure in his entire life no girl had ever told him no. Jake gave me an assessing look, like he was trying to figure me out. He suddenly smiled. He had apparently decided to go back to what had been working for him earlier, and switched gears from disbelief to teasing. "You're my girlfriend's sister. Isn't it like the law or something that you have to cover for me?"

Wrong move. Bringing up Ella made me less likely to help him, not more. But none of this was about Ella. It was about me and what I would think of myself when I looked in a mirror.

I dropped the paper on his desk as my reply. He stood there staring at it, and then shifted his dark eyes back to me. I held in a gasp. He looked furious.

"What's your problem, Matilda?" He made my name sound ugly and twisted.

Just a few seconds ago I'd been like a timid bunny, too scared to stand up for myself, too afraid of disappointing him. But that one word, my name, said in such a hateful way, was all it took for me to get my self-respect back.

"Don't call me that," I hissed between clenched teeth and stood up to face him. He had a few inches on me, but it was better than sitting down while he towered over me. "You've barely spoken two words to me since we were nine and suddenly I'm supposed to lie for you?"

He let out a short bark of cruel laughter. "What, are you like keeping track or something?"

I was. I was keeping track. "No."

Before today, the most he'd said to me were four words in third grade. I was on the swings and he kicked a ball that hit me in the face. It knocked me off the swing and square on my back. I vividly remembered how I couldn't quite breathe, like all the air had been sucked out of my lungs. He immediately came over and said, "Jeez, are you okay?" (I realized that I was probably being generous in counting "jeez" as a word, but since I counted the "uh" from the Bathroom Incident, I decided to allow it.)

He had helped me to my feet and brushed the dirt off of me. He patted me on the shoulder, gave me a Jake smile, which he had perfected even in the third grade, and went back to playing.

I'm pretty sure the wind wasn't the only thing knocked out of me that day. I seemed to



have lost all my common sense and ability to control my heart where Jake was concerned. That was way back before he got absorbed into the popular kids' hive collective where everyone thought, acted, talked, and dressed the same.

Back before he thought he could use people and get away with it.

"Do you think you're the only one who wants to get out of detention?" I asked him, my voice shaking again. But this time it wasn't nervousness, it was anger.

"Oh, yeah, what do you have going on that's so important you have to leave? Some busy study date with your little Goth friend?"

Now was not the time to mention that yes, in fact, Trent and I did have plans to hang out later on.

"At least I have an actual friend that's not a complete waste of space."

This was what I had been reduced to? Theneener-neenerschool of arguments?

Another angry look flashed across his perfect face. A detached analytical piece of me realized that probably no girl had ever treated him this way. He didn't seem to be enjoying the novelty of it.

Then my emotional side threatened to take over. What are you doing? she hysterically sobbed. What is wrong with you? This is Jake Kingston! You are so blowing it!

But I shook off those feelings in part because I'd never seen Jake act this way. I imagined he would only use his powers of charm for good, not for evil. And that made me angry. It got my dander up, as my dad would say.

His face settled with a look of indifference. "Whatever." He turned to walk away. I

heard him mumble something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "goody two-shoes."

I didn't like being dismissed so easily. He didn't know me or why I'd made the decision I had. "You know, you signed the same honor code that I did."

I didn't know why I said that. We had to sign an honor code every year, and I hadn't even read through it. After I signed it, I didn't ever give it a second thought. Which meant I shouldn't have brought it up.

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"The honor code? Really?" He let out a short bark of laughter. "You suddenly have some hidden allegiance to this school? Got some secret school pride I don't know about? You just drift through here without belonging or caring."

That stung. I didn't know it was possible to feel that much hurt and anger all at the same time.

"Whatever," I echoed back at him. "Why don't you just go back to ignoring my existence? You never noticed me before, and you don't have any reason to acknowledge me now."

Jake took two steps forward, close enough to kiss me. "Oh, please. You so obviously want to be noticed. If you didn't, you'd be like every other girl in this school and blend in. You do your hair like that and dress the way you do because you want to stand out. You are dying for me to notice you."

It was like being hit out of the swing all over again, lying flat on my back trying to catch my breath.

He stood there for a moment, staring at me with that angry intensity. I could feel his warm breath on my face and decided I was seriously demented because I couldn't decide what I wanted more in that moment—to slap him or kiss him. Then he stalked off to the desk furthest away from me. He pulled out his phone and began furiously texting.

I sank slowly into my seat. I was pretty sure Jake had been speaking rhetorically, but it pierced me all the same. I did want Jake to notice me.

Just not like this.

\* \* \*

Jake did as I asked and proceeded to ignore me for the rest of detention. As soon as it ended, he practically jumped out of his seat. He logged out on the laptop without even looking in my direction and left. I sat there for a while and finally forced myself to get up.

I didn't call anyone for a ride. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to make it through the call without crying.

I wasn't exactly the crying type, and I didn't want any questions or awkward conversations. Walking home felt like slogging through knee-high mud. All physical activity—walking, holding my bag, breathing—seemed slower and harder.

I told myself I wouldn't think about him. So, obviously, I thought about him the whole way home.

When I finally got to my house, I did have a moment where I worried about what my dad would say. The school would have called him to let him know that I had detention. But he's one of those clueless, daydreaming, in their own little world type artists. Like the type that sat down to eat dinner until his eyes glazed over. Without taking a single bite, he'd get up from the table and be back in his studio all night. He was a good dad, but he was easily distracted.

I could see that he was in his studio so I knew I had nothing to worry about. I wouldn't be getting in trouble. Although it might be nice to get yelled at and/or lectured just so that I could blame my tears on my dad's attempt at discipline.

My dad's studio faced the beach on the east side of the house. The bedrooms were on

the opposite side. I didn't even have to walk past him. He wouldn't know that I had come home or that I was late. I watched him paint for a minute and then went through our living room that had floor to ceiling windows that skirted around the outdoor infinity pool. I nudged my bedroom door open, dropped my bag on the floor, and then collapsed on my bed.

Stepmom Number Six had been an interior decorator and had done my entire room in shades of puke pink with white, girly furniture. Then she'd apparently liked it so much she'd decorated Ella's in exactly the same colors. My dad had given her what he called "carte blanche," which meant she could do whatever she wanted and he wouldn't let me change it no matter how much I whined and complained because it would "hurt her feelings." The same feelings which, I might add, he didn't much mind hurting when he'd divorced her four months later.

Next to my closet I had attempted to put up some of that chalkboard paint, but it was way too much work and I was way too lazy to finish. Instead I just covered every square inch with posters and cutouts from magazines, divided by category. I put my manga on the left wall, hot guys on the right, and my framed retro '80s movie posters behind my bed. They were mostly John Hughes's films.

Ella had left her room alone, so it still looked like a Pepto-Bismol bottle had gone nuclear in there. She'd only added a whiteboard to keep track of her schedule and to write down inspirational sayings.

I had once wondered whether she'd left it that way in case Stepmom Number Six ever returned. I tried to explain to her that they never came back. She didn't listen. I think she still hoped for some kind of stable maternal figure in our lives before we graduated, that we'd get some woman in here who cared about us. But none of the ex-wives ever liked me. They all pretended to at first, but they didn't really.

To give them some credit, even though they didn't like me, they were never mean to

me. Just indifferent. Like how Jake used to treat me before today.

I sighed. I'd been trying hard to think of something, anything, besides him. I wanted to understand why he had been so angry. How could something so small and stupid set him off like that? Why had he reacted that way to me?

I sat and thought about our interaction, and one of the things I hated most was that he tried to use me. That he thought he just had to talk sweetly to me and I'd be putty in his hands. That I was actual putty in his hands was beside the point. I felt dirty. I didn't like it.

Then his words about how I secretly wanted to be noticed burned through me. It felt like he had cracked my brain open and looked inside for awhile. I mean, who expects that kind of depth and understanding from a football player?

If I was being honest with myself, I had to admit that I didn't know what bothered me more—that he was so mean to me or that he had been right.

And the cherry on top of all the hurt and confusion was the fact that I loved him, and he'd treated me like dirt under his feet.

I clamped my eyelids shut. I would not cry. I wouldnot.

So, of course I cried. Hot, angry tears escaped from my eyes, running down the side of my face. I threw an arm over my eyes, but I couldn't stop the tears. Just like I couldn't stop the sobbing sound that tore out of my chest.

I was crying over a boy. I was a total and complete cliché.

Then the worst possible thing happened—I heard a soft knock at my door that could only belong to Ella.

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Why had I left my door opened? I turned over on my side, so that she faced my back. I held my breath, telling myself I absolutely could not cry in front of Ella.

I opened my mouth to tell her to go away, but another sob threatened to erupt, so I stayed silent, willing myself to be calm.

"I got this new eye shadow today that would go so well with your..."

"No." I cut her off. I could manage one syllable.

"Come on Tilly, let me just..."

"No."

Ella had had so much fun with her own makeover that it became her goal in life to make me over too. I kept telling her no, but she kept trying.

I hoped she would just go away, but she must have heard something in my voice because she came in my room, something she rarely ever did.

"Tilly? Are you okay?" Her voice sounded timid, and she tentatively sat on the bed. She probably expected me to snap at her.

She put a hand on my upper arm and tried to turn me over. I resisted.

"Are you crying?" She sounded shocked as she peered over my shoulder. "I've never seen you cry."

I didn't respond, squeezing my eyelids together. I was finished crying. I decided there would be no more tears for Jake Kingston.

"Do you want me to get your dad?"

For a second I actually wanted to laugh. "No." I started wiping old tears away with the back of my hands. He would be totally useless. He'd say there were plenty of other fish in the sea or time heals all wounds or any of those other meaningless things parents say when they have no idea how to help you.

"Then tell me. What happened?"

A short bark of laughter came out. "I can't tell you. You're like the one person I can't tell."

"I'm your sister. You can tell me anything."

Stepsister, I mentally corrected. "Not this."

"Tilly." Ella sounded determined. "Look at me." This time her hand wasn't gentle and she forced me to turn over. "Tell me."

Suddenly I wanted to tell her. It probably wasn't fair to unburden it on her, to let her know how I'd betrayed her, but I so wanted to tell someone what I felt, all the things I'd been dealing with on my own. I'd never told a single soul and I thought maybe if I told Ella, it might not be so hard to cope with.

I explained how I had had detention, and gave her all the gory details of how Jake came in and what he said and what I'd said.

"Wow." Ella sat thoughtfully for a moment. "He was out of line, but I don't



understand why it would make you this upset. It sounds like you held your own."

The moment had come. The one I'd been avoiding for so very long. I never thought I would have to tell Ella how I felt about Jake. I quickly sat straight up and looked down at my hands.

This was it.

I was going to just say it.

It couldn't be that hard, right?

Finally, I let out a long breath. "I was so upset because... because...I'm in love with Jake Kingston." The words came out as fast as I could force them out.

Ella blinked several times. Then she said, "What?" Only she managed to take that one word and stretch it out to like six syllables.

I nodded to let her know she'd heard me right. It had been easier than I thought. And it helped that her hands weren't wrapped around my neck choking the life out of me, which is most likely what I would have done had our situations been reversed.

"You're in love with Jake?" she clarified. I nodded again. "For how long?"

"Since I was nine."

She looked thoughtful. "And you've never been interested in any other guy?"

"I've never even kissed..." Suddenly realizing what I was admitting to, I looked down and could feel my cheeks turning hotter.

"I mean, Spin the Bottle yes, but not for real." I risked glancing at her face. She seemed stunned.

"How could I with a mouth full of metal?" I said in my defense. That made Ella smile. I had certainly needed those braces. My dad once said that we have the Austin Powers gene when it comes to teeth, which I didn't get and had to go to YouTube to understand. "But now that those suckers are off, I make no promises about retaining the virtue of my lips."

Ella giggled, and the awkward moment was over. Until she said, "I can't believe that you and Trent have never kissed."

"Me and Trent? Seriously? Ugh. It would be like kissing a brother." I mean, I can sort of see the appeal. I know there had been girls who have liked him, but he never seemed to notice anyone in return. It was sort of what made us friends. We both hated everyone.

We sat in silence for a little while. I started to sniff and Ella got up to grab me some tissues. She handed me the box and said, "I don't think I've ever seen Jake mad about anything before."

"Apparently, I'm the only one who gets to see that delightful side of him."

She watched me with a weird expression on her face. "No, it just reminds me of that saying about there being a fine line between love and hate."

I couldn't help it. I snorted. She was so very delusional. It was just like Ella to take a bad situation and try to spin it into a fairy tale.

"It makes sense. Boys like girls like me in high school. They like girls like you once they grow up. The good ones do, anyway."

I didn't feel like again explaining to Ella about how the real world works for those of us who don't look like supermodels. Prince Charmings were only interested in Cinderellas.

"This must have been really hard on you." She gave me a little hug and then said, "So now all I have to do is break up with him."

Of all the responses I'd imagined Ella having to my confession I can honestly say that was the only one I hadn't ever considered.

Now it was my turn to say, "What?" in disbelief.

She just smiled at me.

"Girl slash Stepsister Code says that even if you break up with Jake I can't date him," I said. A tiny flutter of hope started up in my stomach, and I knew from past experience it was best to squash it as soon as possible.

Her smile got bigger. "I absolutely promise you I won't be jealous or care if you two date. It won't hurt me to let him go."

"How can you say that?" I couldn't fathom how such a thing was possible. It was actually beyond my comprehension. "You're acting like you don't even like him all that much."

Ella shrugged, as if she agreed with what I said. "Don't get me wrong—he's a nice guy. But we never had much in common or anything to talk about. I mean, it was fun to be seen with him the few times we went out. And I guess he's cute and everything."

Cute?Cute?I was insulted even though I was still mad at him. Jake Kingston was insanely hot. Like, God's gift to women hot. And fun to be seen with? There was so much more to him than that, but I realized in that moment that Ella didn't see him the way that I did.

Then it occurred to me that Ella never really had a chance to get to know Jake very well. I didn't like to ever think about the two of them as a couple, but what Ella said made me think about everything in a new light. He had traveled the entire summer with his family at some chateau in France. Since he had returned, with her volunteering, schoolwork and job, and with his extracurriculars, they never spent much time together. Jake had started his pursuit of her last fall, and I thought Ella was just playing hard to get, but now it sounded like she had never been interested in him. He finally got her to agree to go out with him at the end of the year, where they were oh-so-predictably and nauseatingly crowned Queen and King at Malibu Prep's version of the prom. They were not the PDA type. You would never have even guessed they were dating if you didn't know better. Everyone at school always speculated and gossiped about it. I had been approached a few times for intel, but I honestly knew nothing. Ella and I never talked about Jake. She had tried once or twice, but I'd always shut her down. I couldn't bear it. Now I wondered what she would have told me had I ever let her talk. If she would have admitted to how things actually were between them.

If she would have explained why their relationship had been even weirder since he

got back. Since around the time of the Bathroom Incident.

Even if it gave me some hope and made my long-standing guilt melt away, I couldn't do it. "I don't want you to break up with Jake for me."

"It would have happened anyway. You just gave me the excuse I've been looking for. And I'm not breaking up with him for you. I'm doing it for me." Ella turned her head to study my manga wall. She suddenly sounded unhappy. "There's a boy I've been sort of interested in, and I've wanted to go for it and I realized I didn't know how so I just stayed in something that felt comfortable which was dumb." She turned back to face me, and took both of my hands in hers. "If I'd known it would hurt you, I never would have even dated him in the first place."

I realized that I might have to reassess the Ella situation. I might even have to cross off some numbers on my List of Grievances. No wonder everyone loved Ella. She was pretty awesome, even if I had been blindly jealous over something that I apparently didn't need to even worry about.

"Why did you date him?" I know I had my no-Jake rule with Ella, but I wanted to understand.

She shrugged again. "I guess because everyone expected me to date the quarterback."

"It's very high school cliché of you."

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"I know," she said.

I guess since I was being such a miserable cliché by crying over a boy, Ella might as well be one too. "And if I'm being honest, it was in part because he wanted me to."

Of course Jake Kingston got everything he wanted whenever he wanted it.

"So what do we do now?" Ella asked.

It royally irritated me that Jake always won. He wanted Ella as a girlfriend, and he apparently wore her down until she finally said yes. He was the star of the football team, probably on track to become valedictorian, and had everything in his life handed to him on a silver platter.

Well, maybe I could take something away from him. Ms. Rathbone and Trent had been right. I needed to take some action in my life. It was time for the ugly stepsister to strike back.

"What are we going to do now?" I repeated with a small, sly smile as I squeezed her hands tightly. "I'll tell you what we're going to do now. I'm going to run for senior class president."

### Chapter 6

Ella enthusiastically agreed with my crazy plan, and assigned herself the role of campaign manager. I didn't know how she planned on doing this in addition to the 3,467 other things she had to get done every day, but she insisted. I had often

wondered how Ella accomplished everything that she needed to. I suspected that Ella got by on four hours of sleep. I needed like twelve.

She grabbed her laptop and started brainstorming campaign ideas with me when the doorbell rang. Trent. I had forgotten he was coming over to hang out. After promising to talk with Ella about the campaign later, I went to answer the door.

I realized that I hadn't washed my tearstained face given Trent's alarmed expression. "Uh, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said.

He looked relieved. I realized the extreme disadvantage of only having guy friends. They weren't all that interested in your emotional well-being.

I excused myself to splash water on my face and saw that things were worse than I had imagined. Dark black circles from my mascara ringed my eyes. I looked like the bedraggled love child of a sad clown and a raccoon. Loud music exploded from another room and I knew what Trent had decided to do today.

When I came back to what my dad calls the "entertainment room," I saw that Trent had already settled in on the couch in front of the enormous flat screen TV my dad insisted was necessary even though, other than Dodgers games, I'd never actually seen him watch television. My dad had also insisted on buying a set of Alexandria speakers that had cost him about a couple hundred thousand dollars. My dad took his music very seriously, as did Trent. Trent and I typically either watched my movies or he listened to his emo music on those speakers. He kept talking about stuff like the tonal quality, but all I could hear was the loud.

I also noticed that he wasn't alone. Ella sat on the couch with him, with her eyes closed. She leaned her head back and forth as it bobbed to the beat. They were what

my dad would call a study in contradictions. Blonde, tiny Ella with her hair knotted on top of her head, wearing her glasses, dressed in a pink hoodie and matching sweats, looked like the total opposite of Trent with his black spiky hair, piercings and his black T-shirt and ripped jeans.

The song ended and Trent got up to retrieve his iPhone from the docking station attached to the speakers.

"I really like this live version," she said.

"Me too," Trent agreed as he sat back down next to Ella. I noticed he sat much closer to her than where he had started out.

"You'll have to text me what other songs you recommend from the new album."

"I don't have your number," he said.

"Here." Ella pulled out her phone and handed it to Trent so he could put himself in her address book.

A loud crashing sound came from the kitchen. Carlotta had the night off, which meant my dad was attempting to make dinner. Attempting being the operative word. Ella saw me standing behind the couch. We exchanged looks, and she said, "I'd better go check on him." Ella handled my dad better than I did.

I flopped down on the couch next to Trent. He had entered his details into the phone, and then called himself to get her number. He glanced toward the kitchen and then returned to the main screen on Ella's phone. He found her music folder and opened it. He started scrolling.

"What are you doing?"



He gave me a withering look, like I should have known better than to ask. "I'm looking at her playlist."

Trent had this theory that you could tell everything you needed to know about a person just by looking at the music they have downloaded.

"Nice," he muttered more to himself than to me. I attempted to take the phone back but he jerked it out of my reach. "Just a second. Let me finish."

I folded my arms and glared. He shouldn't be going through Ella's phone, but I couldn't get worked up enough over it to stop him.

"Look at this," he said with more excitement in his voice than I'd heard in years. "She has Saves The Day, The Smiths, and Sunny Day Real Estate on here. She's the only girl I've met whose playlist doesn't include at least ten crappy songs. Do you know how rare that is?"

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He was talking about me. "Your theory is deeply flawed."

"Says the girl with ten Justin Bieber songs on her phone."

"There is no need to take the name of The Biebs in vain. You leave him out of this."

This time when I grabbed for Ella's phone I got it away from him. I put it on the coffee table. I didn't need yet another reminder of how inadequate I was.

"So, I was planning on going to this poetry reading next week over at Pepperdine. Interested?"

"Blech," I said. "Listening to a bunch of pretentious wannabe college beatniks reading what they think is great literature? Pass."

"I just thought, maybe you and me and Ella could..."

So he had invited me solely to get access to my stepsister. He was supposed to be my best friend. A burst of anger flared up.

And then, weirdly enough, it went away as quickly as it had come. Would it really matter if Trent tried to pursue Ella? Despite what she said, Ella had just given Jake up in order to give me a shot with him. The least I could do was share some of Trent's attention. Obviously, nothing would come of it. He'd realize it was pointless soon enough. It might take him longer to catch on though, because Ella was so nice to everyone.

Not to mention that I knew how much Ella would actually enjoy the reading. "You should ask Ella to go. She loves all that crap."

He looked surprised. "Seriously?"

"You've never noticed those books she carries around by that guy who didn't believe in capitalization?"

"Are you talking about e.e. cummings?"

I had no idea. "Sure."

Ella came back into the room. "Crisis averted." She sat down on the overstuffed armchair right next to the couch.

"Trent's going to a poetry reading next week at Pepperdine. You want to go?"

"I'd love to," Ella said excitedly. "I'd heard about the reading and wanted to go but Jake would never...Anyway, it'll be fun. I'll just have to change my work schedule."

"Cool. Do you want to meet me there at 7:00?"

I smacked his shoulder. "Way to be a jerk. The least you could do is give her a ride." I leaned to the side to look at Ella. "He'll come over here at 6:30 to pick you up."

Ella's phone rang. She looked at it with a funny expression and said, "I need to take this. Be right back."

As soon as she left the room, I hit Trent again. "What's wrong with you?"

"Stop doing that." He pulled his shoulder out of hitting range. "What are you talking

about?"

"You'll meet her there?"

Trent shrugged and looked in the direction Ella had gone. "I didn't want her to think I was asking her on a date or something. She has a boyfriend."

"Not for long," I said, ignoring his bewildered expression. "Besides, Ella's so far out of your league you're not even playing the same sport. And you're acting like you're ready to propose or something."

"Whatever," he scowled at me.

My dad called my name and I yelled back, "What?"

A few moments later he came in the room, drying his hands on a dishtowel. "Dinner's done. Where's your sister?"

Stepsister. "Phone call."

"Trent! You joining us tonight?" my dad asked. Trent's father was a workaholic doctor, and his mother was one of those never home socialite types, so he rarely had dinner with them. If he was over, he always ate with us.

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Except tonight, apparently. "Thanks for the invite Mr. Lowe, but I have to get home." He picked up his backpack, threw it over his shoulder and without even looking at me said, "See you tomorrow."

After the front door shut, my dad said, "I've never known Trent to turn down food before."

"Me either." This was turning out to be one weird day. I got up and followed Dad back into the kitchen where he handed me plates and silverware to set the table.

"Ella!" my dad yelled. And instead of yelling back like I had, she replied, "Coming!"

"So much for you slaving away in the kitchen," I pointed to the opened Chinese food containers as I sat down in my spot.

"It's hot, and it's much more edible than anything I could make." To give him some credit, he was chopping up some lettuce and tomatoes. I think he was going for a salad, and I decided not to tell him that salad didn't really go with wontons.

"Where's Trent?" Ella asked when she reached the kitchen and slid into her chair next to me. "Went home," I replied.

She looked a little put out. "I wanted to tell him I got someone to cover my shift."

"Why don't you quit your job?" I asked as I dumped a bunch of cashew chicken on my plate. "My dad's got plenty of money. You don't need to work."

"Your dad's done enough for me." Ella glanced up at my father, who hummed while he chopped. "I'm grateful to him for taking me in, but I have to make my own way. I need to get in to UCLA, and I need to get a scholarship."

"Is that why you work so hard?" I thought of all her volunteering and studying and working.

She nodded as she offered me a pair of chopsticks, which I refused. I never, ever used chopsticks on principle. My fork worked perfectly fine, thanks.

"Then I'll have to go to college and keep my grades up and work. It won't be easy." She sounded tired.

"You should just ask Dad for the money," I told her again.

She started piling lo mein on top of the rice. "So, that was Jake on the phone. And I broke up with him."

Whoa. Way to change the subject. My mouth hung open, until I realized nobody wanted to see chewed up cashew chicken.

"I know I probably should have done it in person, but I just wanted to get it over without having to face him." Ella hated confrontations of any kind. It's why I had to take care of Melanie Robbins at summer camp when we were twelve. Ella wouldn't. She kind of let people walk all over her.

"How did he take it?"

"Fine. He seemed more surprised than anything else."

"And you're okay?"

She smiled at me. "Totally fine."

That dangerous spark of hope had leapt back to life in my stomach. I reminded it that 1) I was still really mad at Jake and 2) I had zero chance of ever dating him.

It didn't listen.

I heard my dad singing as he came over to the table and sat down. I made out the words "girl" and "poison." Both my father and I had no singing skills, but you put up a karaoke machine and we would be the first ones in line. Yeah, we were those people.

"Wait. Why are you singing?" A new, anxious and uncomfortable feeling commandeered my stomach. My dad only sang for one reason.

"I'm not." I noticed he didn't look me in the eye.

"You are. You're singing one of those 1990s hip-hop songs."

"So?" he asked defensively.

It only meant one thing. "You're dating someone." I saw the gleam in his eye, the corners of his mouth tugging up. Then a worse possibility occurred to me. "Is it someone I know?"

He sat silent for a few moments, like he was deciding whether or not to tell me anything. "An art teacher at your school. I met her at the open house the other evening. Delightful woman."

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"Not Mrs. Putnam." His satisfied expression indicated that it was indeed Mrs. Putnam. "Dad! She's married!"

"Was," he corrected as he handed me his salad. I passed it on to Ella. I couldn't think about rabbit food right now. "Her divorce was finalized three months ago."

"So you're her rebound guy?" Rebound I could handle. That meant it wouldn't last long and she might not end up hating me too much when she started hating my dad.

"We'll see."

"But Dad, I like her."

He gave me a wolfish grin. "I like her too." My dad was pretty good looking as far as fathers go. He had the same mouse brown hair that I did (I mean, I thought it was still that color. I'd been dying it for so long I didn't really remember). We both had the same green eyes, the same fair skin, and were both tall. But for some reason it looked good on him and it made me look like a troll.

"Speaking of women I've dated, you have a Skype appointment with your mother tonight."

Now I really couldn't eat. "What?"

"She was upset that you didn't call her on your birthday."

"Um, it was my birthday. Shouldn't she have called me?" My dad just shrugged and I



knew exactly how Pearl would have felt about it. She would have thought that because she gave me life, I should call her on that day and praise her for it. "I don't even want to talk to her."

"At least you have your mom to talk to," Ella said in a small voice that made me feel like total crap. What could I say to that? Technically, she was correct. My mother was alive, hers wasn't. But at least she had a mom. Someone who had loved her and taken care of her and raised her. Bill might not be the best dad in the world, but he was there every day. Pearl had never even been there.

"You're supposed to be on the computer with her in," Dad looked at his watch, "five minutes. Afterwards, there's a Dodgers game on. You want to watch it with me?"

Dodgers baseball was one of the few things that got my dad out of his studio. I grew up watching games with him. It was our daddy-daughter time. But I didn't know if I'd be up for it after having to talk to my mother. "We'll see," I told him.

I knew better than to be late, especially when I'd been told she was already mad. I got up and went to my room to get my laptop and make sure the web camera worked.

I thought I had lucked out when she missed my birthday, but apparently this was my penance. I hated that I had to talk to her at all, but I was pretty sure my dad had threatened to stop alimony if she didn't contact me several times a year. Unfortunately, all of our conversations basically consisted of what a disappointment I was and how much I sucked in general.

My parents met at some artist retreat/hippie commune. I didn't know the details, because I had a don't ask, don't tell policy when it came to Dad and his ex-wives. I did know that they got married two weeks after meeting each other. Dad's excuse about their quickie marriage was, "What can I say? I'm a romantic." I'm pretty sure that's code for "I'm an idiot."

They divorced ten months later (surprise, surprise) and she left me with him because she needed to find herself in New York. Personally, I thought she should go back and check again and see if she could find a nicer version of herself there.

Most of my dad's divorces came down to one thing—the time he spent in his art studio. No one could handle it. They all wanted more attention, time and love. None of them could accept him as he was. He'd even married other artists like my mother, who you would think would understand, but then he had to deal with the competition angle. It wasn't his fault he was so successful, but my mother in particular couldn't deal.

A request came in from my mother and I let out a deep sigh before I clicked the accept button. An image of Pearl Li Mitani appeared on screen. My mother is one-half Japanese. She has smooth creamy skin, long black hair, and cat eyes that tilt slightly upwards at the end. Like I mentioned, I look exactly like my dad. I apparently didn't inherit anything physical from her. Dad once said that if I hadn't looked so much like him he definitely would have had a paternity test done. The day you found out your mother was a skank was a very sad one.

She was also the opposite of every stereotype you might have of Asian women. Instead of being sweet, polite, or submissive, she's loud, rude, judgmental, and in-your-face. I blamed her for all of my negative personality traits. Plus, she was a really crappy mother. She made those Tiger Mothers look like kittens.

"Your hair is ridiculous."

No hi, how are you, I miss you. Nope. We started with the insults.

I dealt with her the only way I knew how. "Why, thank you Pearl. Your hair looks lovely as well. It's always nice to get a compliment from your mother."

It frustrated her, as it always did when I ignored her attempts to get a rise out of me. You basically had to ignore ninety-nine percent of what my mother said or else you'd get so mad you'd come up with increasingly creative and inappropriate ways to make her be quiet. Do not ask me how I knew this.

"Are you padding your bra?"

"Oh my Buddha, Pearl. No, I'm not." I folded my arms across my chest. That lets you know how long it had been since she last saw me. And I enjoyed sneaking in an "oh my Buddha" reference. She found it offensive. Hence, my use of it.

"How are your grades?"

"My grades are fine. It's only the second day of school."

Ella crept in my room behind me and I could see her from my camera. Which meant my mother could see her too. "Forgot my laptop, sorry," she whispered as she hurried out.

"Ella's still there, I see." Pearl never liked Ella. It reminded me of how sunlight repelled darkness. The two couldn't coexist.

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"She lives here." Unlike you, I refrained from adding.

I wondered what way the conversation would go now. Odds were she would either yell at me about not honoring my Japanese heritage or interrogate me about applying to Wellesley.

To my surprise she asked, "Is anything new happening at school?"

I felt a pang of regret that we didn't have anything approaching a relationship because even if I never admitted it to anyone else, I would have loved having a mother I could talk to about Jake Kingston. I wanted advice. I wanted to know that I was normal. I wanted to know that things would get better, that I wouldn't always feel so helpless and hopeless where he was concerned. I wanted to talk about how Jake made me feel earlier today.

But I couldn't.

I had to tell her something. "Um, I decided to run for senior class president."

"You're running for senior class president?" Only she said it the same way someone else might say, "You're going to eat dog food?"

"Yep."

"Be sure to emphasize that you are Japanese-American."

And there we had it. We took a slight detour to get there, but we had arrived.

"I'm just American, Pearl." Her eyes narrowed and I knew it was time to move in for the kill. "I mean, I don't know what good it does me to be one-quarter Japanese. I didn't get any of the good traits. I suck at math. I'm uncoordinated so there's no way I could ever be a ninja, and I think Harajuku fashion is weird. On the flip side though, I am a very bad driver." To be honest, I was proud of my heritage. But I would never let Pearl know that. It's why I refused to tell her about my anime/manga obsession. She'd take too much satisfaction in my loving something Japanese, and then lecture me about wasting my time on such a meaningless art form. Because the sculptures she made out of actual trash were so much more meaningful and important.

So instead I gave backhanded stereotyping insults, hoping it would tick her off enough that she wouldn't speak to me for another six months.

"Mother," she corrected. She wanted me to call her "Mother" as a sign of respect, so I basically called her Pearl every chance I got. I guess I'd called her Pearl one too many times.

I knew what she was doing and why, but I chose to play dumb. "Mother? Is Grandma there with you?"

"No, I'm reminding you to call me Mother."

"Sure thing, Pearl." I knew this made me sound like a total brat, but you had to know her.

She glared at me and then said, "We will resume this discussion when you stop being so deliberately obtuse." She disconnected from our video chat.

I let out a squawk of indignation. Had my own mother just called me fat?

Chapter 7

The next morning at school the rumor mill was spiraling out of control. I heard whispers and snatches of conversation saying that Jake had tired of Ella and dumped her. "Hey! She broke up with him!" I told a group of juniors, but I could tell none of them believed me.

I ran into Ella right before English and expressed my total outrage over the gossip.

She just shrugged. "People will believe what they want to believe."

"What if Jake started the rumors?" It would be one more thing to hold against him.

"He wouldn't do that. But even if he did, if it makes it easier for him to let people think he dumped me, I'm okay with that."

See? She was too good to be true.

I stood there staring at her. "How are you not mad?" I'd want his head on a pike. Okay, not really because it's Jake, but a little maiming might be in order.

She spun the dial on her locker and pulled the door open. While putting her books away, she said, "I try not to sweat the small stuff. But like I said, Jake just wouldn't do something like this. His friends, maybe, but not Jake." She got what she needed for her next class and shut her locker.

"Everything will be fine. Go to class." Ella said as she pushed me in the direction of my classroom.

She walked away from me and I saw several sets of eyes follow her, and heard the dramatic "whispers" and giggles as she passed. It wouldn't do me any good to go to each of those people and tell them the truth. Jake Kingston was always the dumper, not the dumpee, and he had the trail of broken hearts to prove it.

Including mine.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:55 am*

My English class was only a few doors down from the headmistress's office. Angry all over again, I stalked over to the bulletin board outside Ms. Rathbone's office, grabbed the pencil hanging down, and wrote my name in big block letters right under Jake's.

"So, you're running for president too?" I could hear the amusement in his voice.

I turned to see Jake smiling down at me, as if he found me funny. "Apparently." I dropped the pencil and went to class. He followed slowly behind me. I threw my bag on the floor and took out my notebook, determined to ignore him. I didn't watch as he slid into his seat and made a point to not study the back of his head.

The bell rang, and Ms. Aprils stood up from behind her desk. She was an extremely tiny woman, and reminded me of a small, brown mouse with her bland brown hair and the beige wraparound sweater she always wore. She took an upside-down hat off of her desk and shook it a few times. I heard rustling paper.

"For your first project of the year, you will be assigned a classic work that you will retell in a new medium. You will select your work by pulling it out of this hat." She held it slightly higher so that everyone could see it.

She walked through the aisles, stopping every so often to allow one of the students to pull a paper out. "Last year we had a puppet show. Another group did an online blog of the character's internal thoughts," she said as she shook the hat up again. "Someone else told the story through a series of tweets. I want you to use your world to tell this tale."



Ms. Aprils walked right up to me and gave me the evil eye as she held the hat out in front of me.

Please not Twain, please not Twain. She'd fail me for sure no matter what I did if I got him. I reached in and took a folded strip of paper. I opened it and read the words *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. I tried really hard not to smile. I couldn't have picked a better book. I loved Jane Austen, and *Pride and Prejudice* was my favorite.

She walked past Jake and stopped at the girl in front of him so she could draw out a title. "The project will be due next Friday." As soon as I picked my paper, I had been thinking I could do a manga retelling, turn it into more of an adventure story by making the Bennet sisters warriors. But I didn't know if two weeks would be enough time.

"And we're going to be working in pairs."

A small groan rumbled through the class, while some girls started whispering and planning to be paired up together. That should be somewhat better. Maybe I'd get paired with someone exceptionally smart and hard-working and we could get the project done quickly.

"I thought the easiest way to select partners was to simply have you turn around. The person behind you is your partner."

I made a strangled noise. I was last in the row. No one sat behind me. Which meant...

Jake turned around slowly and my heart actually stopped. Literally stopped. Like, I worried they'd have to take me to the emergency room to jump-start it back up again.

"You have the next ten minutes to confer briefly with your partner."

"What did we get?" Jake asked. I handed him the strip of paper. He looked at it and then back at me. "I don't really know this story, sorry."

He gave me the movie star smile, and a marching band started a beat in my stomach. Right then I didn't know who I was more mad at—me for still responding like that to him, or Jake for being a total douchebag yesterday and pretending like we were best buddies today. Jerk.

"I think that's sort of the point. That we read the book first and then decide how to retell it." To my disgust, my voice cracked while I was talking to him. I could feel my face starting to flush.

The paper fell from between his long, lean fingers on to my desk. "I'm not sure I'll have time to read a book and do the project. Isn't there like a movie version or something?"

"A couple," I nodded, looking down at the paper on my desk instead of his dark brown eyes. "I actually own the most recent one. We could watch it at my house."

"So, you know the story."

I nodded again.

"That's good."

Jake leaned toward me so that I could smell his yummy boy cologne smell. It was confusing my senses and scrambling my brain. "Any ideas?"

He was all smiles, brown twinkling eyes and shiny dark hair. I had lots and lots of ideas when it came to Jake. Unfortunately, he was talking about the project.

"I...I was thinking we could do a manga retelling. You know, like anime but in a graphic novel."

He looked slightly insulted. "I know what manga is." Then he leaned in closer. What was that cologne? I didn't know what it was, but it made me feel like one of those girls in the Axe commercials who throw the guys on the floor and start kissing them. I had to lean back in order to control myself. I also tried to single-handedly suck all of the oxygen in the room into my lungs and hold it there. If I didn't breathe, I couldn't smell him.

"And that sounds like a good idea," he said. Then he did something so unexpected I was amazed that I didn't spontaneously combust.

He reached out and took my right hand in both of his. My first thought was that my hands which had always seemed too large actually looked small next to his. My second through fiftieth thought was Jake Kingston is touching me! Jake Kingston is touching me! Actual tingles started everywhere that he touched and raced up my arm. His hands felt warm and strong. I didn't need to worry about holding my breath, because I had forgotten how to breathe.

Jake turned my hand this way and that way and smiled lazily as if he knew exactly the effect he had on me. "Since it sounds like you already know the story so well, maybe you could just draw everything up and put my name on it. No need for both of us to be tortured. Once you finish, we could grab some dinner and you could tell me what to say in our presentation. What do you think?"

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:55 am*

My mind seized on the "grab some dinner" line and realized that Jake had just asked me out! To dinner! I had imagined this moment so many times that it didn't feel real. But it was real! Jake had just asked me to "grab some dinner" with him! Everything inside me started to melt until I realized what he had actually said.

Wait.

My Jake blinders fell off and instead of everything being soft and hazy it was painfully sharp and bright.

I realized he was messing with me, and I was gullible enough to be falling for it. Again. Flirting was as normal and natural for Jake as being a slob was for me. I felt so incredibly stupid to be taken in by it. He was trying to charm me into doing the work for him. I was so, so dumb.

"You want me to do the entire project?" I asked. I wanted so much to have misunderstood, to have been so Jake-crazy that I hadn't heard him clearly.

He nodded and rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand. Yesterday he had asked me to lie for him. Today he was asking for the same thing. I thought I'd made my position on lying for Jake Kingston pretty clear. Obviously, I hadn't. I pulled my hand free of his.

Was this really how he was going to play this? Was he actually going to sit there and pretend like he hadn't been a jerk to me yesterday and that it was okay for him to try and use me now? What had I done that made him think I would lie for him?

It made me sad to think that even a few days ago I would have been ecstatic about this assignment, and now all I wanted was to stay as far away from Jake Kingston and his slimy ways as I possibly could.

"I don't think so."

"What?" he asked, that smile frozen on his face. I realized it didn't reach his eyes. He had been trying to play me. Double jerk.

"Oh, does that usually work for you? You bat your eyelashes and girls just do whatever you want?"

I could see from his surprised expression that yes, that was exactly what normally happened. I couldn't believe he thought he could just flirt and be charming and I'd do the whole project for him.

"Even if that is what normally happens, I am not doing all the work for you. You will do your fair share or my name will be the only one on it."

"I wasn't trying to be like that," he protested, even though that was exactly how he was trying to be. "I'm just really busy with school and football practice and running for president and you..."

"Yes, as you've already pointed out I'm the pathetic loser who doesn't care about this school and doesn't have anything going on in her life."

"Hold on, I never said anything like that to you."

He hadn't. I was definitely putting words in his mouth because I was mad. "It doesn't matter. You still have to do your half of the assignment." I looked up at the clock on the wall. Our ten-minute planning session was nearly done. I felt sick to my stomach,

and I wanted to get away from Jake. It might have been the cowardly move, but I didn't want to sit behind him for the next forty minutes.

And if he was trying to get me to do the entire assignment by myself, odds were good that he had no intention of actually reading the book. Or downloading the movie. I'd have to take one for the team here if I wanted him to do his half of the project. "Look, I'll be watching the movie at my house today at 3:30. You can come over and watch it with me." I thought that was very big of me, especially considering the stunt he had just pulled.

"Won't that be a little weird with..."

And, as always, it all came back to my stepsister. I shoved my notebook into my bag. "Ella won't be home until later on. She took someone's shift at work."

I stood up and looked down at him. "Come, don't come. I don't care. But if I do all the work, I'm taking all the credit."

"Did you need something, Ms. Lowe?" Ms. Aprils asked me once she looked up from the Mark Twain autobiography that I was sure she had already read a million times.

"Yes," I looked back down at Jake. "I need a note to go to the nurse's office. I suddenly feel like I'm going to puke."

## Chapter 8

My father had been asked to make an appearance at a local art gallery opening as a favor to a friend and Ella was at work. Which left me home alone.

And I felt completely torn between desperately wanting Jake to come over and desperately wanting him to stay away.

I should have done something to occupy myself, but I couldn't manage to concentrate on anything. I just sat there pathetically on the couch and waited. Watched the small hand on the clock tick by one second at a time.

I would give him until 3:30 and then I would watch the movie alone. Not that I needed to. I could practically quote most of the dialogue verbatim. And yes, it was just as annoying as it sounded.

Five minutes left. I started thumping the remote against my leg. Maybe it would be better if he didn't show. If he did come over, what would I say? How could I sit next to him without punching him in the face?

3:26. It was definitely better this way. He obviously wasn't coming. I would just do this project alone and Jake could flunk English for all I cared.

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3:27. But I really, really wanted him to come over. Although I forced myself to acknowledge that even if he did show up the reality wouldn't compare to the fantasy sequence I currently had running through my head. The fantasy where based on our being alone together he would suddenly realize that I was The One.

3:28. He was such a complete jerk. Such a total and complete jerk!

3:29. But still so, so pretty.

3:30. What had I ever seen in him? He couldn't even make this tiny effort and contribute?

3:31. Didn't he know that I was his destiny and he was passing up the chance to have our first epic quasi-date? (Although, would it technically count as a date if he didn't know he was on one?)

3:32. That was it. I was done with him. I didn't care how cute he was.

At 3:33 I started the movie. Screw Jake Kingston.

Four and a half minutes later, the doorbell rang. My heart leapt in my throat, and I hit pause on the DVD. Had I hallucinated the sound? It was entirely possible. I held completely still.

No, I hadn't imagined it. The doorbell rang again.

I jumped over the back of the couch, running for the front door. When I got there, I



made myself stop and calm down. The bell rang for the third time just as I threw the door open.

"Hey," he said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. I didn't trust myself to say anything, so I stepped back and held the door open.

But instead of coming inside, Jake stood on the porch, hovering.

"Are you like a vampire that I have to invite in first?" I snapped.

Jake looked at the ground and cleared his throat. "Before I come in, I need to apologize for yesterday. I had a....conversation with my dad that..." He left the words hanging in the air. "Well, it ended up with him threatening to not pay for college."

"So, not a good day."

His glance flicked back up to me and I sort of wanted to fall over given the intensity in his eyes and the way he looked at me. "No. Not a good day. And I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I know I was a jerk. And I shouldn't have tried to get you to do the project by yourself today. I've never done anything like that before. I don't know what came over me."

Jake meant it. I could see the sincerity in his eyes, hear it in his voice. And just like that, all the anger whooshed out of my body in one great tidal wave. It amazed me how quickly I could go from being mad to loving Jake again. I had thought I was better at holding grudges than that.

I knew I should make him suffer for it a little longer. But instead I said, "Apology

accepted."

"Just like that?" A hint of a smile lingered around the corners of his mouth.

"I'm not going to make you grovel for forgiveness or anything. I talked to my mother last night and she spent most of the time telling me how much I disappoint her, so I sort of get it." There had to be lots of leeway and forgiveness as far as parents were concerned.

"Cool."

"So, I'll invite you in as long as you promise not to bite me and turn me into a vampire."

"If I was a vampire, there's no way I'd still be in high school," he said as he came in and brushed past me. I suddenly felt all giggly and girly, which was a completely foreign feeling. If I started twirling my hair, I was going to have Trent shoot me.

"Um, the movie's in here." He followed me into our entertainment room and sat down on the couch. I picked up the remote and started the DVD back up. I suddenly felt an overwhelming anxiety that made it almost impossible to speak. Jake Kingston was lounging on my couch, his feet up on my coffee table.

And we were totally and completely alone.

I needed an excuse to leave the room so that I could try and compose myself. "Do you want anything? Soda or popcorn?"

"That'd be great," Jake smiled that toe-curling smile at me and I again wanted to swoon.

Instead I threw an Orville Redenbacher in the microwave and grabbed some drinks from the fridge. Deep breaths, deep breaths. In and out, I reminded myself. I could do this. I could talk to Jake and be normal and find out if we could have a civil conversation where he was not trying to take advantage of me. Like the flake that I was apparently turning out to be, my nerves jumped from frantic anxiety to frantic excitement. Suddenly, more than anything, I wanted to get back to Jake. I willed the popcorn to pop faster. Every minute I was in the kitchen was a minute I was away from him.

The microwave beeped and I nearly broke the door by flinging it open so hard. I ripped the bag open, practically burning off my face. I emptied the popcorn into a bowl and took a deep breath. Here goes nothing, I thought.

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While the popcorn had been popping, my stomach had been growling with hunger. But as soon as I sat down on the couch next to Jake, probably much closer than was necessary if he had any personal space issues, I didn't feel hungry. Or thirsty.

Jake didn't have the same problem. He thanked me and ate most of the popcorn in the first five minutes. Which was good, because the awkwardness between us was so tangible it was like we had another person hanging out with us. Maybe I should ask Awkward if it wanted to go to the masquerade ball with me since lately we seemed to be spending so much time together.

But as the movie went on, it started feeling normal. Not awkward. Comfortable, almost. I mean, I was still totally aware of him, of the heat that seemed to emanate from his arm and leg and how it made my leg and arm feel all tingly in response, how every time he shifted I held my breath for a second and had to will my heart to slow down.

Then, as always, I got totally caught up in *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr. Darcy was walking across the field toward Elizabeth Bennet. So romantic. It was one of my favorite scenes.

Jake started laughing. "He's not coming for you, you know."

I realized that I had moved forward so that I was sitting on the edge of the couch, and I was leaning toward the television. Embarrassed, I replied. "Obviously." I scooted back and crossed my arms.

"Stuff like that never happens in real life," he informed me.

I didn't know what to say in response that wouldn't make me sound like a total sentimental sap. I have this huge thing for romantic movies and their heroes. I would never admit that I couldn't help but get caught up in scenes like that one. I mean, there was Darcy all masculine and hot, striding toward her, coming to claim her. It made my heart all twittery.

The movie finished with the requisite happy ending and I caught myself before I finished sighing. Jake raised a single eyebrow at me and I said, "What? I can't help it. I like romantic movies."

"So, if I'm getting this right, you can basically sum this movie up in," he paused to count in his head, "Nine words."

"Nine words?" I scoffed as I turned the TV off.

"Yeah." He held up his fingers and started counting off the words. "He likes her. She likes him. They find out."

Hearing one of my favorite stories broken down like that made it seem silly. "You just missed the point completely," I felt totally defensive. "There is so much more to it than that."

"Like what?" he asked.

I was going to tell him exactly what, but he chose that moment to stand up and stretch. His muscles strained against his shirt and my mind turned to mush. He looked at me and I realized he was waiting for an answer to his question, but in that moment I couldn't have even told him my name.

"I don't know, but it hasn't been around for two hundred years without there being more stuff to it." I picked up some popcorn that had fallen on the floor and put it back

in the bowl while Jake wandered over to our movie collection (my dad loved collecting DVDs and Blu-Rays even though he never, ever watched them).

"I know you think it's lame, but isn't that kind of the basis of all romantic stories? They like each other and then they find out?"

"That's why action movies are better," Jake said as I put the empty soda cans into the bowl.

"Yes, I suppose romantic movies aren't as subtly nuanced a plot as say, things blowing up and bad guys getting killed."

"You just described fine art," he said with a teasing glint in his eye. His fingers trailed through across the DVD cases and he said, "You weren't kidding about the romantic movie thing. Somebody likes John Hughes."

Not many people could name John Hughes as the director of movies like *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink*. I was impressed. "Um, yeah. That would be me. Although that man totally ruined high school for me."

"Not like the movies, huh?"

"Not in the slightest, unfortunately."

He held up a copy of one of my favorite movies, *Sixteen Candles*, and said, "My mom's a huge fan of John Hughes too. She actually named me after the guy in this movie."

"Jake Ryan?"

"That's literally my name. Don't wear it out."

I thought my throat might close in. "Your middle name is Ryan?" My voice came out strangled sounding. He nodded.

How did I not know this? Jake Ryan of Sixteen Candles was like the perfect man. And my Jake was named after him. Oh my Buddha, I loved him even more now. I knew it was a stupid reason to love him more. I was constantly amazed by the depths of my own shallowness. Wait. Could a shallow person have depths? Whatever. He was named for Jake Ryan. Loved him!

"My dad was mad when he found out, but by then it was too late. I tried to watch it once but..." he shrugged and put the DVD back on the shelf.

I found my voice. "Are you serious? That has like only the most romantic ending of a movie ever."

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He looked at me like I had grown another head.

"That scene at the end where they're sitting on his table and he has that cake for her because everyone forgot her birthday and he tells her make a wish and she said it already came true and they kiss," I said that entire thing in one breath and was starting to feel a little lightheaded. I took in a very deep, very needed breath. "Most. Romantic. Thing. Ever." I emphasized the last word so that he would know to not further malign the most perfect teen romance movie in the world.

"Whatever you say," he smiled and he looked around the room. "Hey, is that a poker table?"

I turned and saw that my dad had set up his table in the den for game night with his buddies. Sometimes I played, too. "Yeah, it's my dad's." Poker was another one of the rare things that could lure him out of his studio.

"You play?"

"A little."

"Want to?" Jake asked as he started walking backward toward the table. "We could play strip poker," he teased.

## Chapter 9

I gave him A Look to let him know just what I thought of his little proposition. He laughed. I didn't know it was possible to be both simultaneously disgusted by his



suggestion and a little thrilled by the prospect of a shirtless Jake.

"You any good?" he asked, interrupting my visual.

"I'm all right, I guess."

I was actually a lot better than okay. I had been playing since I could hold the cards myself. But like good old Dad taught me, never tip your hand.

"We could play and talk about the project," Jake offered. He sat down in one of the chairs and picked up the deck. "Tell me about the idea you had. You said you wanted to draw manga?"

"Yeah," I said. "You shuffle and I'll get my sketchbook to show you what I'm talking about."

I ran to my room and grabbed the book off of my bed before I came to a complete stop. This was my sketchbook that had all my recent manga, but the entire first section was dedicated to pictures of Jake. Not manga pictures, but actual sketches of him. This could be mortifying. But I couldn't come back empty handed. I opened a desk drawer and pulled out some Scotch tape. I ran a piece of tape from the cover to the last Jake picture. He might ask questions, but hopefully I could play it off.

When I got back to the den, he was counting out poker chips evenly between us. He stopped what he was doing when I put my book on the table. I opened it for him. I stepped back with my hands balled up into fists, my knuckles turning white. This was easily one of the scariest things that I had ever done. I didn't know why this didn't occur to me before I went skipping off to grab my sketchbook. It was like I wanted to share this part of myself with him, but it scared me to death to think that he might laugh at me.

He flipped through several pages before glancing up at me. "You okay?"

"I've never showed this to anyone before." I hoped he didn't hear how my voice trembled.

An expression I couldn't describe crossed Jake's face. "These are really good. Is this Ms. Rathbone?"

I nodded, and he chuckled. I needed to explain. "That was sort of my idea—to turn the Bennet sisters into these samurai warriors in feudal Japan."

"Like those crazy nuns out for revenge in that one series?"

"You mean Y+M?" I asked in total shock.

"Yeah," he nodded. The entire universe shifted on its axis. Jake knew about manga. How did he know about manga? I couldn't process.

"So, you really like my drawings?" It was just this side of ridiculous how invested I was in his answer. I so badly wanted him to like them.

He closed my sketchbook. "I mean, you're no Masashi Kishimoto, but they're still really good."

"You like Kishimoto?"

He smiled at my shock. "Yeah, Naruto is one of my favorites."

My mouth dropped open. I loved Naruto too. He wasn't just blowing smoke like that time in eighth grade at Julie Hansen's party where I pretended to know about NASCAR so Mike Reed would talk to me. My mind reeled at the reality that Jake

Freaking Kingston liked manga.

"Your parents must be really excited to have their daughter following in their footsteps."

Since my world had gone totally off kilter at the idea that Jake knew and liked manga, I wasn't in any position to try and explain my parents to him. "Not quite. My parents would probably be greatly disappointed that I drew manga. So, I haven't exactly shown them any of my pictures. And I don't plan to, ever."

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"Understandable. What's this?" Jake fingered the piece of tape and started to pull on it. I came out of my shocked haze and practically leapt on top of the sketchbook.

"N-nothing," I stuttered. We had things in common. We could possibly get along very well. He could fall in love with me, even. The absolute last thing I needed was for him to get a look at the depth of my craziness.

I put the book under my chair and sat down, careful to keep my feet on top of it. No way could I ever let him see those pictures of him. Jake shrugged it off, shuffled the deck and started dealing. "Just basic poker then, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sure."

"So is it just a hobby or do you want to do something more with it?"

I picked up my five cards and looked them over quickly. I had two tens. I gave back the other three cards, and he handed me three new ones. "You mean poker?"

He laughed. "No, I meant your manga."

I picked up three more junk cards. It didn't matter. I wasn't playing to win yet.

"Oh. Well, to my parents' dismay, I want to go to UC Santa Ana. They have an amazing animation program and I can focus on manga. They have these great internships, the opportunity to work with actual studios, it's awesome. I mean, if I wanted to major in drawing manga specifically I'd probably have to go to school in Japan. And I'm not about to make my mother that happy."

Jake had another funny look on his face but didn't ask me to explain about Pearl, for which I felt grateful. Not exactly an appropriate first fake-date conversation topic. Instead he said, "I got offered a full-ride baseball scholarship to UC Santa Ana."

"Small world," I managed. I never, ever imagined that Jake and I might end up at the same college.

"Yeah, but a UC school's not good enough for my dad. Has to be Yale for undergrad and then Harvard Law like my dad and my grandpa and my great-grandpa." He tossed a chip into the pile and I anted up.

That one sentence dashed my newly created daydreams of us attending the same college. It might be harder for me to ever date him if we were on different coasts. But this wasn't about me. It was about the tone in his voice. The one that said this did not make him happy. I wondered why. "You don't want to go to Yale?"

"Let's not talk about that," he said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Let's talk about...the election."

"What about it? I'll raise you fifty."

He put his chips in. "Why are you running?"

"Why not? Maybe you could stand a little competition"

"Maybe. I call."

Jake won that hand and he smiled a real smile at me as he pulled the pot over to his side of the table. I could see how much he liked to win. I was sure he thought he would win the election for senior class president because he was good-looking and popular and rich and good-looking and an athlete and good-looking. Well, obviously,

that was why everyone in school would vote for him. At least, that was why the other good-looking, rich and popular types would vote for him. The wannabes too.

But as he sat there grinning at me, I wondered, what about everyone else? The other ninety-nine percent of the school? They weren't like Jake.

They were like me.

I could even see my future campaign: Mattie Lowe: She's not popular and she's not beautiful, so she has time for student government.

I wondered if Ella could fit that on a pink, glittery campaign poster.

The thought of my stepsister made me feel guilty all over again. No, I reminded myself, she said she didn't mind if I liked Jake. I wondered if Jake had thought about Ella while at our house. But he hadn't asked about her and I hadn't noticed that he seemed too heartbroken over the break-up. I thought he should be at least a little upset. But to be fair, Ella didn't seem all that put out by it either.

I decided not to think about Ella. I needed to focus on Jake and our friendly game. I watched for his tells. I had to lose several hands to build up his confidence and to read him. Not that this was a burden; as I'd mentioned earlier, Jake-watching was one of my favorite things. I noticed that he would put his hand near his mouth when he was bluffing. His eyebrows would go up slightly when he had a good hand.

"Really aren't that good, are you?"

I gave him my best crocodile smile. Time to move in for the kill. "Again?"

He shuffled the deck. "Why don't we make it interesting?"

An image of a shirtless Jake flashed in front of my eyes. Stop it, I told my brain. I blinked. "What did you have in mind?"

"If I win this next hand, you do seventy-five percent of the project." At my expression he held his hands out in front of him. "Not trying to be a jerk again—I really am super busy. I had to tell coach that I was really sick to miss practice so that I could come over here."

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He missed practice for me? My heart sped up just a little. "Okay."

"And if you win..." he trailed off, letting me name my prize.

I would definitely win. There was no question of that. He was essentially handing me a blank check. I could have anything Jake-related that I wanted.

A kiss? My cheeks flushed and I bit the inside of my mouth to keep myself from blurting it out. A girl could only handle so much pathetic in one day. And to be honest, I didn't want a kiss that I basically had to blackmail or trick out of him.

Huh. Turned out I did have some pride where Jake was concerned. Who knew?

But what could I ask for...my mind flashed on stupid Mercedes Bentley. I tried to keep from smiling. It would be like getting to kill two birds with one bet. I couldn't quite look him in the eye.

"If I win, you drive me to school every morning for two weeks."

"Won't that be a little awkward after elections?"

"We'll see." The idea of spending time alone with him in a confined space really appealed to me. And the look on Mercedes Bentley's face when she saw me with him would make it even better.

"You got it." Jake held his hand out to shake on it. His hand felt big and strong, enclosing mine. A sudden jolt of energy exploded inside my hand and shot down my



arm. I quickly pulled my hand away.

He had a knowing smile, like he knew exactly the effect he had on me. I used the bottom of my shirt to clean my black-rimmed glasses so that I wouldn't have to look at him while he dealt the cards.

I ended up with three queens. I doubted he would have a better hand. Despite his cockiness, he wasn't all that great of a player.

I watched while he pushed all his chips to the middle. "I am all in."

He put his right hand near his mouth. He was bluffing, and trying to scare me into folding. No chance.

I made sure my super poker face was intact so that I wouldn't reveal my glee. I put my cards down and pushed my remaining chips toward the middle too. "I am all in, too."

I lay my cards out for him to see. His expression went from cocky to shock to disbelief. He revealed his own hand; he had a pair of threes.

"I lost."

"Yup," I confirmed as I used both arms to sweep all the chips to me.

"I never lose. Ever."

"Maybe you should get used to it. For when I trounce you as senior class president."

"You were playing me. You're like some card shark."

I shrugged in reply and started putting the chips back into place.

His eyes bored into mine, like he was trying to figure me out. "You didn't mention that."

"You didn't ask."

"So, you knew you would win," he said.

I shrugged again and avoided eye contact. The rumbling of my father's car pulling into the garage startled me. When it came to my dad, you never knew what you were going to get. He might come in, say hello, and wander off to his studio. Or he might decide today was a good day to be interested in my life and totally humiliate me in front of Jake by telling stupid stories about me and asking him inappropriate and personal questions.

I didn't know whether my father would come in through the garage or if he'd get the mail and come in the front door. Taking Jake out back seemed like the safest bet. "Um, the sun's about to set and it's really beautiful out back on the beach. You want to see it?"

He got up and started to follow me until we got to the doorway. Then he took me gently by my upper arm and that same jolt of electricity fired up again everywhere that he touched me. I turned around and he stood so close to me that my breath caught.

"You sure a ride to school is all you wanted?"

He leaned against the doorframe, towering over me, trapping me. He sounded like...a cat or something. His voice was low, seductive, practically purring.

Tingles, tingles, everywhere.

We stood there for a minute, staring at each other, before I remembered where I was and what I had been doing and that I might be potentially busted by my dad at any moment. "The back door is this way," I whispered.

His grip loosened. I walked to the back of the house, hoping we were quick enough. I cursed myself for my inability to be in control for longer than two minutes where he was concerned. I couldn't even keep my voice normal when all he was doing was looking at me.

I heard the front door open a second before I closed the back door. I let out a sigh of relief. More likely than not, Dad would head for his studio and would be there the rest of the night. I kicked off my shoes. I loved the feel of the sand against my bare feet. We needed to put some distance between us and the house. Distracted, I didn't look where I was going, and practically tripped over several enormous water guns that our next-door neighbor's kids had left outside. The Johnsons had four unruly boys, all under the age of nine, and they were forever leaving stuff on our part of the beach. I flailed my arms for a second before righting myself. My face felt hot and flushed. I didn't need my dad to embarrass me. I was perfectly capable of making my own spectacle.

Skirting around the toys, I went to the water's edge and stared out at the horizon. Please don't let him say anything about me nearly falling, I begged whatever higher power might be listening. I felt Jake come up behind me, standing at my shoulder.

I couldn't calm down when he was near me. I couldn't be in control or normal. I was a complete and total spaz. He must have thought I was the biggest loser he'd ever been forced to be around. I closed my eyes for a second. I loved the sounds of seagulls, the soft crash of waves as they came to shore, the salt in the air.

But all of it paled in comparison to the boy standing next to me.

Thankfully, he didn't say anything. We just watched as the sky turned from blue to a faint pink, purple and orange mix.

"Why do you never lose?" I asked him as the sun kissed the water.

"I have to be the best. My dad's always pushing me. There is no room for failure in the Kingston household."

"Do you ever get to just have fun?" I asked as I turned around to look at him.

He put his hands in his pockets. "Not so much."

An idea popped into my head. "Well, in the Lowe household, we believe in work and play." I walked back to the super soakers lying on the beach. I tossed one to him. "Let's see what you're made of, Kingston."

He caught it easily. "Are you serious?"

I sprayed him in the face as my answer.

He laughed and then started deliberately pumping up the barrel on his gun. "Oh, it is so on."

I ran off, laughing and shooting at him, kicking up sand as I went. He was a much

better shot than me, and I was quickly soaked. I couldn't help but let out a yelp and a giggle every time he got me. I missed him most of the time. But he was laughing along with me, chasing me. I knew he could have caught me, but he let me get away.

Then I saw him pump his gun several times, but nothing happened. He had run out of water. I pointed my gun squarely at him. "Do you admit defeat?"

"Never!" He grinned. He tossed his gun aside. Before I knew what was happening, he ran up and grabbed me by the waist, pulling my gun out of my hands. I lost my footing and we landed in a heap on the ground, laughing and out of breath.

We lay in the sand, tangled up together. Our laughter faded away. Jake reached over and pushed a flyaway piece of fuchsia hair from my face. My lungs nearly collapsed as I struggled to catch my breath. This was better than anything I had ever imagined. He looked at me strangely with this expression that I'd never seen before, but it made my stomach twist and turn.

He pulled his hand back and suddenly stood up. He accidentally showered sand all over me. "Uh, I have to go. See you tomorrow."

And he walked away, without looking back. He didn't even go back in the house; he just went around the side and within a minute, was out of view.

I turned over onto my back, looking up at the darkening sky. There was a small sense of relief at him being gone since I'd been this close to throwing my arms around his neck and begging to be his love slave or something equally horrific.

But most of me just wanted him to stay right where he had been. I thought we'd had, I don't know, a moment.

Unfortunately, it was obviously one-sided. I needed to remember who I was—an ugly

stepsister, not a princess. Why would he ever be interested in me? I was far too good at mistaking his politeness for something more. We were just friends. Actually, that wasn't correct. We weren't even really friends. We were two students assigned to work on a project together.

I knew I wasn't his type. It didn't stop me from wanting him. Or wanting him to want me.

He had no reason to want me though. Not when he could have any girl just by snapping his fingers. Well, not me, I decided. If he wanted me, he'd have to work for it. I wouldn't be like those other skanks.

Okay, that was a total lie. If he had tried to kiss me they'd probably have to pry me off of his lips with one of those Jaws of Life.

But if Jake ever knew that, if he even suspected how much I liked him, he would totally own me.

I shuddered.

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Jake could never, ever know the power he had over me. If he knew, he could destroy me.

### Chapter 10

I changed my outfit four times. Which is lame given that we wear uniforms to school. I settled on a black, pleated skirt and the red polo shirt. Despite looking at it in the mirror multiple times, it never magically altered itself into something cute and capable of catching a boy's eye.

Okay, Jake Kingston's eye.

When I'd told Ella about the bet, she'd laughed (for like a really long time—it was starting to hurt my feelings) and then told me to have fun with my Jake rides. I halfheartedly invited her to join us, but to my sheer delight, she refused. She said she'd keep getting a ride with Trent.

I didn't know when exactly Jake would show up, which left me plenty of time to freak out about him driving me to school. In his cute red car. While pacing the hallway, I found Ella in the bathroom.

Scrubbing the toilet. (I told you she didn't care about Carlotta's job the way I do.)

"Hey," she said without looking up at me. "We need to work on your campaign today. You're way behind." She was right. Jake already had posters up all over the school. I suspected Mercedes Bentley was probably behind them—because they were a candid picture of a shirtless Jake laughing. Underneath it said, "Jake Kingston...does a

student body good." Yes, I drooled, but as a feminist, I was highly offended. Highly.

Fine. I would admit to stealing one of the posters. In my defense, so did practically every other girl in school.

Fortunately, we weren't able to pass out any swag—no pencils, no candy, no buttons, no cookies, no hundred dollar bills. Campaigning bribery had gotten really out of hand, so the school only allowed posters and fliers. It would hopefully even out the playing field just a little. Maybe instead of winning by an avalanche, Jake would have to settle for just a landslide.

"I had an early meeting for the masquerade ball committee this morning and after I finished, I hung up some of those posters we worked on last night. Plus a couple others you haven't seen yet."

Oh my Buddha. "Are they sparkly?"

Ella stopped her scrubbing gave me a withering look. "It's your campaign, not mine. I'm not a total idiot."

"Could you, like, stop doing that for a minute? It's feeling like some sort of weird symbol. Like my campaign's about to go down that toilet."

"Or you're full of crap." She was teasing, but it was a real possibility. I had to be full of something to think I could dethrone Malibu Prep's reigning monarch.

"Anyway, let me know what you think when you get there." She stood up and took off her yellow rubber gloves, dropping them in her cleaning caddy (it's pink and she bedazzled it). She gave me a knowing smirk. "That is, if you're not too distracted by You-Know-Who."



I was still not in a place where I could talk with Ella about Jake, joking or otherwise. "I haven't even officially declared my candidacy yet."

Before she could respond, there was a knock at the door. My heart went into my throat. Trent would never knock. He practically lived at our house. It had to be Jake, and it was so unexpected. I thought he would honk or something. But he was knocking at the front door. Like, an actual gentleman.

It made me love him more.

But I stood there, frozen. I wanted to move. I wanted to answer the door before he got sick of waiting and drove off.

"That's Jake, isn't it?" Ella asked in a distracted tone as she brushed her hair. I couldn't respond. She stopped brushing to look at me in the mirror. "Tilly? Isn't that Jake? Don't you think you should answer the door?"

Answer the door? She might as well have asked me to perform open-heart surgery. The result would have been the same.

"Tilly?"

Still, I just stood there, not able to respond. Deciding to take matters into her own hands, Ella literally pushed me all the way to the front door. We stopped in the front entryway and she went around me to put her hand on the knob.

"Wait," I whispered. "I don't think I can..."

But she wasn't taking any of my excuses. She just smiled at me and said, "Your prince and carriage await, my lady."

Ella threw the door open, standing behind it so Jake wouldn't see her.

"Hey. You ready?"

I think I nodded, because he turned around to go back to his car. I know I didn't talk, because despite having mastered the fine art of speaking at the age of two, I had apparently forgotten everything I knew. Which was entirely stupid given that I had just spent a whole afternoon with him and had talked nonstop. But it was sort of unreal, as if the whole thing had just been some kind of dream and this was the reality. Like at the end of *The Breakfast Club* when Anthony Michael Hall's character tells Molly Ringwald that it was okay if she ignored him at school despite their day of bonding in detention and she said she didn't ignore friends but you know that it was a total lie and that on Monday most of those people never spoke to one another again. Seeing him was like that—we'd had this bonding-type afternoon and now it was weird.

Jake got in the driver's side and closed his door. Somehow I had managed to follow him and now stood on the opposite side of the car. I could do this. I would just pretend that everything was fine, and soon it would be. Fake it 'til you make it, right?

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His car smelled new and leathery and Jake-like. I got in, sat down, and my knees folded up into my chest. The seat was way too far forward, as if the last person who sat there had been tiny and delicate, like Ella. I fumbled around for the release in the front to scoot it back, trying not to think about who had sat there last. I snapped my seatbelt into place and looked over at Jake. He put his arm behind my seat and turned toward me. Every sense snapped to attention and I held my breath.

He gave me a small smile and then looked over his shoulder. Oh. He was just backing up. Not making a move.

I was so stupid.

I usually only felt that dumb when I was doing calculus.

Oh my Buddha, calculus!

The events of the last twenty-four hours had totally distracted me. I had calculus homework due first period and I had totally forgotten about it.

I started mentally cursing as I dug through my backpack, looking for my math folder.

"You okay?"

"Fine, just forgetful." I'm pretty sure I started saying some unkind things about calculus's mother under my breath because Jake raised one eyebrow and looked over at me. "Jeez, what did calculus ever do to you?"

"Here's the thing. Math and I broke up two years ago, and now whenever we get together it's just weird and awkward for both of us."

He laughed. Laughed and laughed and I couldn't believe that I'd made him laugh like that. It made me feel all bubbly and warm inside and suddenly I didn't want anything but to make Jake Kingston laugh over and over again. His laughter was contagious and I started laughing along with him.

Calculus, shmaculus. How could I ever need math when Jake's laugh existed?

When his laughter finally died down, he glanced over at me for probably a tad bit longer than was safe considering he was driving, and said, "You have a nice smile, Mattie. I never noticed before."

Probably because it had been obscured by a sea of metal, but I wasn't about to remind him. What was that thing Ella always said about compliments that I ignored because I knew no guy would ever compliment me? Oh yeah. I was supposed to just say thank you instead of trying to talk him out of it by convincing him that my appearance was in fact heinous and he was obviously delusional. "Thanks," I croaked out. I couldn't believe it. Jake Kingston had just given me a compliment. He thought I had a nice smile! We would have such beautiful babies with his eyes and my smile.

No, I had to focus. Had to finish this up. I couldn't be that girl. Even though I totally already was that girl.

I managed to concentrate just enough, but I won't lie, it was really hard. I didn't realize just how distracting he could be in close quarters.

All too soon the ride was over. Jake turned his car off, undid his seatbelt and looked at me. I saw a lot of kids in the parking lot, but not the one I most wanted to see me at that moment. I stayed put.

"Are you, uh, getting out of the car?" I could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Can we just wait one minute?"

"For what?"

How do you explain the delicate and crazy intricacies of teenage mean girls?

"For...Mercedes Bentley to get here."

I kept scanning the parking lot, refusing to look him in the face. When he looked at me, I sort of wanted to spend the rest of the day just staring into his eyes. Which was both weird and time-consuming. I couldn't afford the distraction. I had a mission.

"Again I say, why?"

Did he honestly not know about the Riding in Jake Kingston's Car Award? He had to know. Or maybe he wasn't full of himself like another guy would be and it wouldn't even occur to him.

I sighed. He was so amazing. Focus! We were talking about Mercedes. I had to explain myself.

"Let's just say it'll wipe that perpetual smirk off her face."

"Okay." He sounded like he thought I was crazy. I realized that this was, for lack of a better word, his friend. But I was sure Mercedes was very careful not to show Jake her true self. I tried to think of a diplomatic way of telling him how awful she really was.

"She's not always so nice."

Jake let out a chuckle. "You don't have to tell me. She can be kind of a witch sometimes."

"I'm pretty sure if you look up the word witch on Wikipedia, Mercedes's picture will be there." I did not tell him that I was the one who posted it.

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Off to my right I saw Scott's silver sedan pulling up. He and Mercedes got out of their car and started walking toward school.

"There she is. We have to get out. Hurry!" I struggled with my seatbelt, too anxious to exact some well-deserved payback. "What is wrong with this stupid thing?" Jake calmly leaned over and pushed the button, instantly releasing it. I had no time to be embarrassed. Mercedes had to see us together.

I shoved the door open and jumped out, slamming it shut behind me. I'd hoped the noise would get her attention. It didn't. "She doesn't see me. Oh no. I'm missing my chance!"

Jake called out, "Scott! Mercedes!" and waved.

A bag of chips and a two-liter soda while playing poker yesterday with Jake: \$6.98.

One deck of cards to play poker with: \$1.99.

Winning the poker bet and seeing the look on Mercedes Bentley's face as I stood with Jake Kingston next to his car? Abso-freaking-lutely priceless. Mercedes had her arm through Scott's, but now she dropped her arm slowly and just stared at us. She looked totally shocked.

This was where I admit to being greedy and a tad manipulative and just a little ruthless, but it was Jake Kingston! I had to be forgiven for what I was about to do.

I don't know where this insane courage came from, but I actually said, "Can I ask you

for a weird favor? You can totally say no and don't have to, but would you mind hugging me for a second?"

By now I think Jake found the whole thing hilarious. "Sure."

He enveloped me in a mixture of strong arms, warmth, and that insanely awesome Jake smell. I could have died. A little part of me wanted to turn and see Mercedes's face now, but all the rest of me wanted to cling to him like this was the Titanic and he was my life preserver.

Then the most amazing, incredible, unbelievable, fantastic thing happened.

Jake kissed me on the cheek. Actually put his lips against my cheek. My skin flamed up where he touched me and my knees threatened to buckle. I felt his warm breath against my ear and shivered. "How's that for icing on the cake?" he whispered.

He pulled back with a huge amused smile and I worried about my ability to stay vertical.

"Same time tomorrow, right?" he asked, throwing his bag over his shoulder. He smiled again and walked over to join his friends.

I wished I could have made some clever comment over my shoulder, tossed my hair saucily and sauntered off. Instead I made a sound like, "Gagrsnarf," and for the second time that morning, stood frozen in complete shock with my hand over my cheek and my heart racing.

I continued to stand there long after the parking lot had emptied, reliving the moment over and over again.

I told myself that if I didn't move soon, I was going to be late to first period.



## Chapter 11

I was late to first period.

After calculus I went and officially declared my candidacy. The advisor already knew that I planned to run thanks to Ella's hard work. She hadn't been kidding when she said she had already started. In the main hallway, she managed to charm a janitor into hanging up signs from the rafters. The first one in each series would say "Vote," the second one "for" and the third "Mattie Lowe." I noticed people pointing at them.

She had also gone out into the courtyard and covered the entire ground in different colored chalk with "Mattie Lowe for President."

Then she had put up posters we had worked on together that had this picture of me that is one of the few that I actually liked where I sort of resembled Jennifer Garner in that show she used to be on where she was the spy and had the fuchsia hair (admittedly, where I got my current hair color inspiration from). We kept it simple. No clever little catch phrases (which I always found annoying)—just vote for Mattie.

Ella was amazing.

Then I would think again about that morning and the feel of Jake's lips on my cheek and get all fluttery and flustered.

Jake was amazing.

Everything just seemed so right, so perfect.

Life was amazing.

I couldn't remember the last time I had felt this happy.

Unfortunately, the universe had no intention of letting things stay that way.

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At my locker I felt Mercedes Bentley staring at me. Usually she looked at me in this condescending, sneering way. But today she looked royally confused, like I was some alien who had just landed and she couldn't figure me out. I grabbed a pile of fliers I'd made up and smiled as I closed my locker.

I walked down the hallway, passing out fliers to everyone who would take them. Jake's kiss had given me a confidence I'd never felt before. I even managed to tell people, "Vote for Mattie." I couldn't stop myself from smiling at everyone, and lots of people smiled back.

I stopped short when a freshman that looked like a Mercedes Bentley-in-training stood directly in front of me. She was pulling along a mousy, quiet-looking girl who stood two steps back with her head ducked down. The quiet one didn't even make eye contact with me. The other one just stared at me.

I found myself wanting to say something snide to this girl as she stared at me, but I couldn't let all my hard work go to waste. I was running for president. I needed to behave. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Mercedes's Mini-Me said, "Are you, like, dating Jake Kingston?"

I could feel my face flush. I knew my cheeks were bright, cherry red. Curse my stupid ghost-colored skin! "What?"

"We heard about what happened in the parking lot. Did you, like, steal him from your sister?"

"Stepsister," I absentmindedly corrected as I tried to take in this new information. People thought Jake and I were an actual couple? I had noticed people looking at me earlier, but I figured it was because of the campaign posters and the fliers. What if they were talking about Jake and me? My heart thrilled at the idea that people believed it was possible. That Jake could like me. I wondered what it would be like to have the satisfaction of telling this little twit that yes, Jake was my boyfriend and we were dating.

Wait, what if he thought I was the one telling people that we were together? After all, I had asked him to hug me. Maybe he would think I was trying to take advantage of the situation. He would think I was so pathetic. I had to set the record straight so it wouldn't fall back on me.

"Um, no, we're not dating."

The first girl looked smug, the second crestfallen. The mini-Mercedes turned to her friend and said, "See, I told you he'd, like, never date someone like her. He only goes out with girls like Ella. Come on."

My good mood totally evaporated. I wanted to protest, to call her back and tell her she was wrong. But I had the uncomfortable, sinking feeling that she was right.

Jake did date girls like Ella. He never dated girls like me.

\* \* \*

Jake continued to drive me to school, and we spent the time working on our manga *Pride & Prejudice* project. He would give me dialogue for the story, and I would edit it and insert it into the scenes I had already drawn. We worked well together, and his words went perfectly with my pictures. We would sit in the parking lot until we absolutely had to leave for class.

We talked mostly about the project, but we did talk about other stuff too. There was the day I discovered he was a Dodgers fan too. But when he told me he didn't like Clayton Kershaw, I gasped and said, "Inconceivable."

"I do not think that word means what you think it means," he shot back.

"You like *The Princess Bride* too?" He nodded. Other than John Hughes's films, it was one of my favorite movies ever. "Very quotable."

"Agreed," he said.

Over the next few days I also found out that, like me, he was not a vegetarian, had a dog named Scooby due to his childhood love of cartoons, and we even argued back and forth about the best manga and anime series.

I couldn't believe how much I looked forward to the time we spent together. I tried not to read too much into it, because my imagination could very quickly go to an unreal place.

Although I never imagined a weekend could be so freaking long. Every minute felt excruciating. I wondered what Jake was doing, wondered if he wondered what I was doing, if he thought about me at all. I had never been so excited for Monday morning before.

Ella asked how things were going, and while I felt a bit more comfortable talking to her about it, I explained that there was honestly nothing to tell. Jake just saw me as a project partner. He hadn't asked me out or acted like he wanted to spend more time with me. My head knew this, but my heart overanalyzed the tiniest inflections in his voice and every little expression hoping that I was just misunderstanding and that by some great miracle, he felt about me the way I felt about him.

"It's not going to happen," I told her for the millionth time.

She gave me that Ella shrug and said, "You never know."

Oh, to be blonde and beautiful and totally delusional.

I sat in study hall and drew some pictures of Ella as a mellower version of Sailor Moon in my sketchbook. I heard a noise and glanced up. Mrs. Putnam was looking at me and quickly turned her gaze toward the window. I put my head back down and resumed my drawing. I used to like having Mrs. Putnam as both my art teacher and study hall supervisor, but now it was awkward. I did my best to not make eye contact or ask any questions. My dad had been gone frequently in the evenings and Mrs. Putnam seemed to be avoiding me just as much I was avoiding her, which pretty much confirmed my theory that they were still seeing one another.

Halfway through class the phone from the office rang. After she answered it, Ms. Putnam raised her eyebrows and looked at me. "Mattie, they want you to go to the office."

I could feel the eyes of every kid in study hall on me. "Oh, busted," Mercedes said and then whispered something to one of her minions that made them both giggle.

The silvery, bitter taste of fear filled my senses. I racked my brain trying to think of what I could have done to warrant being in trouble yet again. I had been so well behaved! "Should I take my things with me?"

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"They said it would only take a few minutes. Just leave them there."

Having dismissed the possibility that I had done anything to get myself in trouble, I started worrying that something had happened to my dad or to Ella. Why else would they want me to come down?

I did a running/walking mixture trying to get there as quickly as I could without being caught running in the hallways.

I yanked the door open and found Ella standing next to the secretary's desk. "What's going on? Is Dad okay?"

"What? He's fine. Everybody's fine. Angie Ferber had to go home early and she was supposed to record you and Jake today and I told her I would take care of it. I would have just texted you, but they wouldn't let me."

Malibu Prep had recently instituted a strict no electronics policy during school hours. Another thing that annoyed me and I wanted to change if elected. "Record us? For what?"

Ella looked pensive. "Maybe I forgot to tell you. You guys were supposed to make a video announcement reminding the school about the upcoming speeches and to get them to vote in the elections."

She handed me a one-page script and I read it through quickly. It was kind of lame, but I thought I could muddle through it.

"When and where?"

"In the recording studio after school today. But you have to meet me so I can let you in and record it."

Oh, that would be cozy. Just Jake, Ella and me in a tiny little soundproof room. But I didn't really have a choice. "Okay."

"I have cheerleading practice, so come out to the field and find me."

She must have noticed that I looked worried, because she added, "Just be yourself in the video and everything will be fine."

I don't know why she thought that. So far being me hadn't worked out all that well.

The bell rang just as I got back to study hall. I had to stand aside for the tidal wave of people exiting the room. I entered the class and went to my seat. I grabbed my bag off the floor, and started to leave until I noticed my pencil on my desk.

Right next to where I had left my sketchbook.

I put my bag down on my desk and opened it up to make sure I had the sketchbook inside.

I rifled through my folders and didn't see it. I looked again, slower this time, thinking I must have missed it. Not there.

I picked the bag up and looked at the floor, under my chair and on the desks around me. It was gone.

"Is something wrong, Mattie?" Mrs. Putnam asked.



I could hear my heartbeat thundering in my chest. "Did someone turn in my sketchbook? I left it right here on the desk." My sketchbook could not be gone. Especially since it had all my pictures of Jake, with my signature at the bottom of each and every one. I blamed my parents for instilling that sense of vanity when it came to my art.

"No one turned anything in. You may want to try the lost and found box. If someone brings it to me, I'll be sure to let you know. Okay?"

I nodded and for the second time in the last fifteen minutes, tasted actual fear and panic. If someone showed those pictures to Jake, what would I do? My entire life would be over.

The rest of the day passed by in a blur. I checked the lost and found so many times that Ms. Rathbone told me not to come back and that she would personally call me if it was turned in.

I never got a call.

As much as the Jake drawings freaked me out, the loss of all that work I'd accumulated over the last few months depressed me more. I texted both Trent and Ella to tell them what had happened, and they both promised to keep an eye out as well.

While Ella had cheer practice, I searched the school for my sketchbook. I checked study hall again. I pulled everything out of my locker. I asked the janitors to keep an eye out for it. I sneaked in and checked lost and found for the fortieth time. I walked up and down the hallways, sticking my head in classrooms along the way.

Nothing.

I looked at my watch and realized it was time to meet Ella. I headed out to the field, heart heavy. When I got outside, I held my hand up, letting my eyes adjust to the sunlight. I saw Ella and her fellow blondes practicing their cheers and throwing the little ones up in the air.

Then I saw something that stopped me cold.

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Football practice seemed to be winding down and Jake saw me. He waved and in that moment I realized that he had been completely wrong about that Mr. Darcy thing not happening in real life.

I watched as he took off his football helmet and suddenly the world lapsed into slow motion. He shook his head and droplets of sweat went flying, glistening against the sunlight. He wore those football legging things, his shoulder pads and a half-mesh shirt that left his six-pack abs completely visible. He came toward me slowly, all sexiness and swagger just like Mr. Darcy, and I thought I might actually pass out. He ran one hand through his dark hair, pushing it off his forehead and I wondered whether I should signal his coach to bring over that defibrillator thing and start my heart back up.

"Hey, you doing that video thing now?"

I had another "gagrsnarf" moment. I hoped I wouldn't drool all over him. "Uh-huh."

"Cool. I'm going to go get changed and I'll meet you guys there."

He smiled again and this time he walked at a regular speed. Which was fine, because I got to admire the back view, which was nearly as nice as the front.

If only I had been Elizabeth Bennet and he had been coming over to ask me to marry him. Instead, I got a confirmation that we were going to shoot some stupid promo.

I guess beggars couldn't be choosers.

\* \* \*

I made one more pass at the lost and found before heading to the recording studio. Did I mention that our school had everything? One of the parents had been a pop star in a former life and had gifted the studio for the kids to do music. The school also used it for the morning video announcements because it was the only completely silent place on campus.

When I arrived Jake was there, holding the door open. "Hey."

"Hey." Darn it, completely clothed. But his hair was still damp and he smelled so good—he must have taken a shower.

"Ella got a janitor to open the door because the key Angie left doesn't work. She's going to find another one."

He went inside and I came in behind him, letting the door close.

"No, wait! Grab that!"

As I explained to my mother, my reflexes were bad. I missed it and the door shut.

And locked us in.

I tried to push down on the handle. Definitely locked.

"Why would it lock on both sides like that?"

Jake grabbed the handle and twisted it, but it didn't budge. "To keep people from barging in while they're recording and ruining the sound."

"Oh." It apparently never failed—Jake showed up and I did something stupid.

I called Ella and she answered on the first ring. I explained the situation and she told me not to worry—that even though Mr. Otterson, the janitor who had opened the door in the first place, had gone home, she would find somebody else to come let us out.

I told Jake what Ella said and he sat down on the floor. "If Ella says she'll take care of it, she'll take care of it."

"That's true." There was nothing good old perfect Ella couldn't do.

We were locked together in a sound booth. Oh my Buddha, this was just like that time on *Degrassi* when Declan trapped Holly J. in the recording studio so he could tell her that he had fallen in love with her.

Reality, reality, I reminded myself. We were not characters on a television show. Jake didn't have some undying love for me.

But how awesome would that have been?

"What will we do to pass the time?" Jake asked in a teasing tone as I sat down next to him. "Truth or dare?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Let's Play Strip Poker."

He laughed. "Come on, we'll keep it tame. No stripping. So, truth or dare?"

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What if I chose dare? What would he dare me to do? I would probably do whatever it was, especially if it involved kissing him, and would embarrass myself in the process. I liked to pretend I was brave and fearless, but right then I felt like a scared little bird. I hoped my cheeks stayed their normal color.

"Um, truth, I guess."

I felt unbalanced when he looked at me like that, with his eyes all full of intensity and interest. "You never gave me a straight answer the other day about why you're running for president."

I couldn't tell him the actual truth. That I mostly wanted to be president just to knock him off of his pedestal. To make it so he didn't always get everything he wanted. As a bit of payback for not noticing that I was alive.

So instead I told him the other part of my motivation. "To be more involved at school. But mostly so I can bring Hershey bars and Red Bull for lunch if I want to. You?"

"My dad wants me to 'take advantage of every opportunity' that will help me get into Yale."

I recalled our conversation at my house. "Yale and then Harvard Law School, right?"

He looked surprised. "Right. But I'm not interested."

"Then where do you want to go?"

"Not Yale or Harvard. I'm supposed to be a lawyer, a partner in my dad's firm by the time I'm thirty. He's planned out my whole life for me and I don't want it."

I knew exactly how that felt. "So, why don't you tell him?"

He raised a single eyebrow. "Have you told your parents about your manga?"

What could I say? Nothing. He was right. So I sat there in silence.

"Didn't think so."

I sighed and wrapped my arms around my legs, pulling them closer to my chest. "Why can't we just tell them?"

"I don't think we're the first teenagers to ask that."

He smiled, I smiled. We were having another actual moment. It gave me goosebumps, sending tingly shivers up and down my whole body. I rubbed my hands over my arms, hoping he didn't notice my trembling.

Of course, he did. "Hey, are you cold?"

"I'm fine," I started to say, but before I could finish my sentence, he was shrugging off his letterman's jacket and handing it to me. I held it in my hands for a moment, thinking I should return it to him and not be this pathetic. It felt heavy, and the leather sleeves felt smooth against my fingers.

I might have been stupid whenever I got around Jake, but not even I was that stupid.

So instead I said, "Thanks," and put the jacket on. If I felt a little foolish at first, now I was chastising myself for not thinking to play the cold card before if this would

have been the result. It was too big for me; the sleeves covered up my hands. I'd never worn something that made me feel small. The jacket smelled just like him, and his body warmth still lingered inside. It was like hugging him again. I pulled the coat closed and snuggled into it.

Maybe John Hughes wasn't a total liar.

"Do you think your parents wouldn't like your art?"

I held in a very unladylike snort. "I doubt they would think it was art."

"So you don't even give them a chance to judge for themselves?"

I knew he meant well, but he didn't know what he was talking about. They had been my parents for the last eighteen years, and I had a pretty good idea of what their reactions would be. "They would think it was garbage."

"You don't know that. They might even like it. I think you're afraid of rejection. So you reject everybody else first."

I so didnotdo that. "Thanks for the psychoanalysis, Dr. Phil," I retorted. I looked away from him, willing myself not to cry. My throat felt tight, and an uncomfortable and unfamiliar feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to argue with him, tell him he was wrong. But part of me knew that he was right. Otherwise, I wouldn't have felt the way I was feeling. It was probably some psychological thing because my mom had left me, but in my heart I believed that everyone was out to get me, screw me over and then leave me. I stayed mostly detached from everything and practically everyone. Like Jake said, I rejected them before they could reject me.

But sitting there on the floor with him, I realized how badly I needed that connection. How much I wanted it. I wanted to matter to someone like him.



I didn't know if I could handle Jake's rejection.

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And I didn't want to dwell on it. I ordered myself to calm down and gave him a tight smile. The very last thing I needed to do was cry in front of him. "My turn. Truth or dare."

"I'll take a truth, too."

Maybe it was because I already felt so awkward and figured things couldn't get much worse, maybe I was part masochist, maybe I wanted to unsettle him for a minute. "Are you sad that you and Ella broke up?"

He took in a deep breath, brow furrowed, as if I'd confused or surprised him. "There's not really a good answer to that question."

"I didn't ask for a good answer. I asked for the truth."

Jake let that deep breath back out. "You never give a guy a break, do you? Fine, truth. It will make me sound like a jerk, but not really."

I opened my mouth to reply, but he held his hand up. "Let me explain. We never really clicked, you know? We hardly spent any time together. I mean, it was cool to date the hottest girl in school. And my parents loved her. My dad keeps talking about what an 'asset' she is. Like he forgets that I'm only eighteen." He fixed me with his disconcerting gaze. "And if I'm being really honest, I'm glad she broke up with me."

"Oh," was my eloquent response. Jake didn't love Ella. He didn't miss her. He was glad they broke up. GLAD. My heart skipped several beats.

He thumped his fingers against his leg, looking around the room before his eyes settled back on me. "So, does Ella ever say anything about me?"

Fury and indignation flared up inside of me. "I am not talking about my stepsister with you."

"No, I just, uh, is she okay?"

He was concerned about her. He just told me that he hadn't really ever even liked her, and now he was worried about her feelings. I was both touched by his empathy and sort of repulsed by the reminder that he had dated Ella. "She's fine. And you?"

"What? I'm cool. All good."

I needed the ability to sort through and understand my emotions faster. I went from raging mad to helplessly in love to totally confused to completely embarrassed in the range of a few seconds when I was with him. I'd never really had this happen before and I wasn't sure how to deal and make sense of the insanity.

I realized that he was looking at me. And not just in the way he normally looked at me, but like he was really seeing me for the first time. It kind of took my breath away.

"You're easy to talk to, you know that?"

My heart started beating fast and his expression made my stomach do funny things. "Aren't most people?"

One corner of his mouth tugged up. "No. Just you."

I knew that he was going to kiss me. I was as sure of it as I was of my own name,

which was...um...was...okay, so I couldn't remember my own name when he looked at me that way. My heart pounded furiously.

I don't know how I knew he was going to kiss me, having never actually been kissed before. Some female instinct, I guessed. But I knew it.

"Truth or dare, Mattie?" His voice was soft, and unbelievably appealing.

I looked into his dark eyes, and forced myself to speak. I understood what he was asking me. And I only had one answer for him. It came out as a whisper.

"Dare."

Jake moved closer to me and leaned in so slowly that it seemed like all time had stopped just for that moment. He lifted one hand to the side of my face, and my skin burned so hotly that I briefly wondered whether there would be a permanent imprint of his hand on my cheek.

He edged even closer.

I closed my eyes.

## Chapter 12

Nothing happened.

I think it almost did. I had my eyes closed, so I didn't see anything, and I was breathing hard and that sort of blocked out all the sound, but everything else intensified. I could sense his lips hovering over mine, feel his warm breath against my face, the heat from his body encircling me, his thumb lightly rubbing my cheek.

And that was when Ella unlocked the recording studio door.

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"Oh!" she said. I pulled back so fast I worried I might get whiplash. "Oh!" she said again, looking totally confused and embarrassed. "I came to let you out."

"Thanks," Jake said smoothly, getting to his feet. I stood up too, worried about my ability to stay upright. I leaned against the counter behind me for stability. I tried to catch my breath, and gulped several times just to get enough fresh air. I noticed my hands were shaking, and so I hid them inside the sleeves of Jake's jacket.

"The staff in the front office said we have to go. We were supposed to be done half an hour ago," Ella explained. "Maybe we can do it tomorrow morning before school?"

"Sure," Jake replied. He didn't seem weird or awkward or anything. I knew I'd never be able to contribute to this conversation because all I kept thinking was oh my Buddha, Jake Kingston almost kissed me! Kissed me!

"I'll see you guys tomorrow then," Jake said as he picked his backpack up off the floor, slinging it over one shoulder.

Ella said goodbye. I stood there like a French mime.

"Hey, before I forget, Mercedes gave this to me." Jake opened his bag and pulled out my sketchbook.

My freaking sketchbook.

"I thought you'd probably like to have it back."

The earlier panic attack had absolutely nothing on the full-fledged hysteria I now felt. My head started to spin and I saw little stars in my peripheral vision. I couldn't catch my breath.

My sketchbook full of Jake Kingston pictures. Jake had my sketchbook! I had never felt so completely humiliated and mortified in my entire life.

He was holding it out to me and I finally realized how much time had passed and that I was making everything worse, so I took it from him. I held it against my chest, wrapping my arms around it, using it like a shield. As if it could protect me from what had just happened.

Maybe he hadn't looked inside, I thought frantically. Maybe he recognized it from our poker game and was just being kind and wanted to return it to me.

"Your pictures are really good. I still think you should show them to your parents."

Okay, so he had possibly already looked at the pictures. But maybe he wouldn't say anything to me even if he had looked inside. Maybe we could just go on like none of this had happened and pretend like I wasn't a completely psycho stalker. Maybe, maybe, maybe...

All the maybes went poof when he said, "I don't think you got my nose right, though." He was teasing me. I could hear it in his voice. I closed my eyes the way I did when I was a kid and I imagined that if I couldn't see anyone else, they couldn't see me either. I wanted to disappear.

Utter, total, shattering humiliation.

My stomach churned with anxiety. I could only imagine what he thought of me. Too many horrifying scenarios ran through my mind. He just stood there, like he expected

me to say something. Maybe he wanted me to explain myself. But in what reality could I say, "The thing is, Jake, that I'm in love with you and have been since we were nine years old and all this time I've spent with you has made me fall even more madly in love with you and so I draw lots of pictures of you because you're beautiful and fun to draw and now I hope you'll be cool about all this and that I didn't scare you off or freak you out by drawing my secret pictures of you and we can go to the masquerade ball together and live happily ever after. What do you say?"

"So, we have to get going. Mattie's dad is expecting us at home." I had never loved Ella more than I did in that moment. She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me out into the hallway.

I heard Jake say, "Later."

I kept my head down and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Ella steered me into the nearest girl's bathroom.

"What just happened? Why was Jake talking about getting his nose right?"

"The pictures," was all I could say. Ella looked at my sketchbook and quickly figured out that her answers would be there. She tried to pull it out of my hands, but I had a full-on death grip.

"Tilly, let it go. Let me see."

I shook my head. Ella started prying my fingers off, one at a time, and got the sketchbook free.

She opened it and gasped. She quickly flipped through the pictures until she got to the end of the Jake section.



"Oh, Tilly." The sympathy in her eyes and voice was almost more than I could handle. I leaned against the bathroom wall, and slid against it until I landed with a loud thump on the dirty floor. I didn't even care. I put my head in my hands. I was getting a killer stress headache. My throat ached with unshed tears.

I thought of all the embarrassing things that had happened to me over the years. Freshman year my shoes slipped in the courtyard and I landed flat on my butt in front of a hundred people. In eighth grade I really had to pee and didn't quite make it to the bathroom. In sixth grade I accidentally and loudly passed gas in the middle of a test, when the room was dead silent. I had a long history of humiliating experiences, but every single one of them paled in comparison to the way I felt now.

"You have to see the bright side of this. I don't think he cared."

I looked up at her, but my eyes were so watery that I couldn't see her. I had to blink several times to clear them up.

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"He must think I'm a total nutjob."

Ella sat down on the floor next to me, which was impressive given her strong aversion to germs and general dirtiness, and put her arm around my shoulder. My shoulders stiffened in response. I didn't normally like being touched. Ella didn't seem to notice. "If he thought you were a nutjob he wouldn't have almost kissed you."

"He didn't almost..."

"Yes, he did." Ella cut me off firmly. "I thought something like that might happen if you two could spend some time alone. That's why I pretended to not have a working key."

My mouth dropped open in shock. "You had a key the whole time? You did this on purpose?"

"Not the sketchbook part, but the rest of it, yes."

Ella rested her head on my shoulder and it felt nice to be comforted. I thought about what Jake had said; how I rejected people before they could reject me. Ella wouldn't reject me. She was here with me, caring about me. Even when I had resented her or felt jealous of her, she hadn't changed. She still loved me and wanted a relationship with me. I let myself relax into her hug.

I had also started to doubt my own instincts because while it seemed like Jake would kiss me, and despite what Ella thought, he hadn't and then my world exploded with a nuclear mortification bomb.

"So, any ideas about what we're going to do with Mercedes?"

Jake had told me that Mercedes had given him the book. I had been so focused on the fact that he had the sketchbook that I completely blanked the part where that horrible wench had given it to him. She must have stolen it in study hall. Such a foul and heinous thing to do, that I couldn't even think of something that would make Mercedes understand how badly she had made me feel.

"I'm guessing breaking into her house and burning all of her clothes on the lawn is out of the question?"

Ella nodded and said, "Personally, I think you don't have to worry about this. Mercedes has always wanted Jake. She's only with Scott to be close to Jake."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Of course not. But I could tell. So the absolute best revenge you could have on her is to be with Jake. But in order for that to happen, you have to put this behind you. Pretend like it's no big deal. Don't bring it up, and if he does, just act like it's nothing."

She made sense. It was logical, even. But logic and I were not currently on speaking terms. I wasn't sure I could do it. "I don't think I can ever face him again. How can I get into a car with him tomorrow morning and not obsess about this?"

"That's easy enough." She pulled out her phone and typed something quickly before putting it back in her purse. "There. I texted Jake to tell him I'm borrowing your dad's car and driving you tomorrow and we'd see him at school."

"I'm going to see him eventually. I will have to talk to him. We're not done with our project for English yet." I held my arms straight out. "I'm still wearing his letterman's

jacket!"

She put both of her hands on my shoulders and turned me toward her. "You listen to me, Tilly Lowe. You are one of the strongest people I know. You will be fine. You will act like this is all just silly. And above all, you will never, ever let stupid Mercedes Bentley know how much this affected you. Got it?"

Wow, so much for the meek and demure Ella. "Got it."

"Now you're going to get up off this disgusting bathroom floor and come home with me and help me decide what to wear tonight because I have a kind-of-date with Trent."

I had totally forgotten about her Pepperdine wannabe poet reading with Trent. I was so focused on my drama that I wasn't being a very good sister to her despite all the things she kept doing for me.

And she was right. I was stronger than this. I would get up off that floor, and I would pretend like none of this bothered me. I definitely didn't want to give Mercedes the satisfaction of knowing she'd hurt me.

And things had been going so well with Jake. I couldn't freak out and ignore him and give in to my girl drama. I would be confident and fine, no matter how I felt inside.

Starting now.

I gave Ella a smile. "Sounds good. Let's go home and get you ready for that date."

I figured at least one of us should be happy.

\* \* \*

I lay on Ella's bed, and it looked like her closet had thrown up all over her room. Or like the local Forever 21 and Charlotte Russe stores had brought over their entire inventory and tossed it on Ella's floor. Normally I would have been doodling in my sketchbook, but I couldn't imagine doing that again in the foreseeable future. Instead I had my phone out while I played Angry Birds.

I didn't know why she wanted my opinion. Everything, and I mean everything, she put on her looked amazing. Like she was about to walk the runway for Ralph Lauren. I told her that, but she didn't believe me.

"Not this one either. Why is everything I own so hideous?"

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I realized that Ella was nervous. I didn't think I'd ever seen her nervous about anything before and it was kind of ridiculous. I mean, it was just Trent.

I shook my head at her irrational behavior. Until the proverbial light bulb went off in my head and I saw what I had missed.

Ella liked Trent. Really liked him. I remembered our conversation from last week when she'd told me that she liked someone that was not Jake.

"Is Trent the guy you were interested in?"

She had been holding a dress up against her in the mirror and she froze, her reflection staring at me. Suddenly everything felt serious and ominous.

Finally she said, "Yes."

"Why didn't you just tell me that?"

Ella let the dress fall to the floor with the others and came over to sit on the foot of her bed. She looked down at her hands while she fiddled with her charm bracelet. "I never said anything because I thought you guys were together and I didn't want to be that girl." She sounded so earnest, and so apologetic.

"The girl who's interested in her stepsister's boyfriend?" I asked her sarcastically before she started giggling about the irony of the entire thing.

Well, if nothing else, I guess it gave us something in common. "Even if Trent had

been my boyfriend, I'm pretty sure I would have traded him for Jake in a New York minute."

That made Ella laugh more, and broke the uneasy tension. She jumped off the bed to go back to finding something to wear.

I started up a new game and said, "You know, Trent's not going to care what you're wearing. He's not like that."

Ella emerged from her closet with another potential outfit. "You're right. That's one of the things I think I like best about him. I always feel comfortable with him. I get to just be me and not have to worry about how I look or what I say. I am being so dumb."

Without even looking in the mirror, Ella put on the pink pleated skirt she had in her hands and looked around for a matching top. I remembered that day in the family room when I saw them together on the couch, how Ella had her hair up in a bun with her glasses on and her purple Juicy sweats. I'd never seen her look that way when she spent time with Jake.

I had put a ban on all internal thoughts about Jake, but that one just slid in. Which, predictably, led me to more thoughts of Jake. And how I'd never honestly worried about how I looked around Jake. I accepted the fact that I looked the way I looked and while I may have stressed a little over my outfit that first car ride, I'd never given it a second thought since. Jake had the same effect on me that Trent had on Ella.

I wanted it to mean something, even if it didn't.

My dad called for Ella. She yelled back that she was coming.

"Did you hear the doorbell?" she asked in a panicked voice.

"Relax, you'll be fine. He's not here yet."

Ella leaned against her closet doorframe, staying there for a minute before she picked out her shoes. "I just really like him, you know?"

Yeah, I did know.

"I'd go with the glass slippers," I said before heading off to the kitchen to find something to eat. My dad sat at the kitchen table, holding an envelope in his hands.

"Where's Ella?"

Before I could reply, Ella said in an out-of-breath voice, "I'm here. What's up?" She went over to the fridge to pull out a bottled water.

"I have something for you." I saw the twinkle in my dad's eye, heard the pride in his voice. Whatever it was, this was big. He held the envelope up in the air. "It's from UCLA."

That was Ella's dream school. She grabbed the refrigerator door handle so hard, her knuckles went white. "It's a small envelope. That means no," she said in a voice barely louder than a whisper.

My dad pushed his chair back and walked over to her. "That's just a myth. Open it."

She kept staring at the envelope like he was offering her an eel or something (have I ever mentioned how much I hate eels? Slippery, slimy scary looking things).

She shook her head. "I can't."

"I'll open it for you then." My dad had like no boundaries. "Dear Ms. Christensen..."



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I held my breath. Ella looked like she might faint. He just stood there, scanning the rest of the letter.

"Read it out loud!" I protested.

A big grin broke out on his face. "Congratulations! It is our pleasure to offer you admission to UCLA for the fall quarter."

He didn't get to finish the rest of the letter because Ella started shrieking and jumping up and down, and then I was screaming and jumping up and down while holding her hands, and for that moment, everything was right in the world.

Then we hugged my dad, who neither jumped nor screamed.

"I am so proud of you," he said as he hugged both of us. "So how much?"

Ella let go. "What?"

Dad tossed the letter and envelope on the table and went to get himself a celebratory drink. Which, because he was on some Hollywood juice cleanse, was some disgusting concoction of grass, carrots, bark and a fruit I couldn't even identify. "The tuition. I set up an account in your name for tuition, books, dorms and whatever other incidentals you need. I just need to make certain we've got enough in there. It's been a few years since I was at UCLA."

"You don't have to pay for my college, Bill. I am so grateful to you for taking me in and I've tried my best to contribute, but you're not responsible for me."

"Of course I am," he said with a tone that made it sound like she'd just said something insane. "You're my daughter."

"Stepdaughter," she quietly responded.

He stopped putting the ingredients into the blender and turned to look at her. "Does that matter to you?"

Ella said nothing, but I could see the way she trembled, saw her blinking quickly. I knew what that meant. I went over and held her hand. She gripped me tightly. Dad walked over and took her other hand.

"Because it never mattered to me. You're my daughter just as much as Tilly is. I've been your dad since you were two years old. That's never going to change. I probably don't tell you enough, but I love you. Because no matter how grown up you get, you're always going to be my little girl."

A flood of tears streamed down Ella's face as he pulled her into a hug. He rocked her gently, trying to shush her crying. She said something, but was crying so hard I couldn't tell what it was. Feeling like an intruder, I tried to tiptoe out of the kitchen.

I felt guilty that I hadn't said anything earlier to my dad about Ella's crazy ideas involving cleaning the house and having a job and paying her own way, but in my defense, I was my father's daughter and was sometimes easily distracted.

"I don't think so," my dad said as he tugged on my arm and pulled me to him. "I love you too, you know."

Gah, he was such a sentimental sap.

But I let him hug me anyway.

The emotional lovefest came to an end when the doorbell rang.

Ella snapped her head back. "That's Trent! I must look like a mess!"

"I'll answer the door and keep him company while you finish getting ready," I told her.

She hugged me again and I decided I was tired of getting hugged that day. My grouchiness lifted though when Ella whispered into my ear, "This is like the best day ever."

And for once, I didn't envy her.

I let Trent in and we hung out in the living room. He seemed nervous and distracted just like Ella had been. He obviously liked her back. He was having a hard time paying attention to what I said. I decided to mess with him.

"So once the aliens let me go, I decided to make a documentary about my abduction."

"That's great," he said. "Wait, what?"

Before I could mock him, Ella entered the room. Trent jumped to his feet and grinned at her. "You look, uh, nice."

She looked like a freaking model. Nice was kind of an understatement.

A small pang of jealousy crept up on me. They both looked so happy. They weren't playing any games or pretending like anything else was going on. They just liked each other and they were going to go out and probably have a fantastic time with those whiny college brats.

"Well, you two have fun."

But Ella being Ella, she stopped me before I left the room. "Are you going to be okay?"

So selfless. "Tonight is about you. Don't worry about me."

Trent had gone out to the hallway and opened the front door. "Promise me you won't obsess about stupid Mercedes. I think the worst is over."

I should have told her to knock on wood.

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### Chapter 13

I don't know what time she got home, but the next morning on our way to school, Ella bubbled over with excitement as she described her date with Trent in excruciating detail. It made me feel like I had actually been there. Which was kind of creeping me out.

We pulled into the mostly empty parking lot. Ella wanted to record the announcement spot and for us to put up some more posters. I wasn't sure that there was any blank wall space left, but she was determined.

Dad had lent us his car, and Ella had put our posters in the back. She picked them up and started looking around.

"What's going on?"

"I swear I put a bag in the car that had a bunch of sticky-tack in it. I don't see it."

I looked in the backseat and on the floor and didn't see it either.

She sighed. "I need that. I'll have to go home and get it."

"Wait, so you just want me to go to the recording studio by myself to wait for Jake?"

"You can face him. But if you're being a coward, you can go hide in a bathroom. I'll text you when I get back."

The cowardly way sounded very appealing. I went through the school's front doors and noted the absolute silence before stopping short.

Every single wall was covered with copies of all of my Jake pictures. The breeze I caused by opening the doors made the ones in the hallway ruffle before settling back down. They were in every color imaginable; every picture I had ever drawn of him up there on the walls for every kid in school to see.

I grabbed one off the wall. Someone had circled my signature in the bottom right corner. At the top of the pictures it said, "Even Mattie Lowe wants you to vote for Jake Kingston."

The breath in my throat solidified and I felt like I was choking. I started ripping the posters off as fast as I could. My heart pounded in my chest, and a million cold, slithering snakes wound themselves into knots inside of my stomach.

Who did this?

How would I get them all down before school started and everyone saw my pictures? I mean, it was bad enough Jake had already seen them. It was like someone had posted pages of my diary up. Like they'd ripped my heart out of my chest and tacked it on the wall.

I would never get these off the wall in time. With fumbling hands I pulled out my cell phone. It took me forever to send a text to Ella explaining what had happened because I kept pressing the wrong keys. I told her to get Trent and come to school as soon as possible, that we had an emergency on our hands.

I continued yanking the pictures off the wall until I heard someone say, "What do you think you're doing? I spent a lot of time putting those up."

Whirling around, I found myself face to face with Mercedes Bentley. "You did this?"

She looked at me smugly, and her expression reminded me of the snake we'd had as a class pet in second grade. Cold, vicious and predatory.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Wrong with me? I'm not the one everybody makes fun of. You're so pathetic with your little crush. Jake knows how you feel about him. Do you think he's your friend? Do you think he actually likes you?" With every word she said, she took a step closer to me. She let out a little laugh. "So, so sad. I'll be honest with you since nobody else will be. Jake is using you. He's not over Ella."

"He said he was over her."

She laughed again. "Aw, did he tell you that he was? That he never really liked her? That's what he told us he'd say. He laid out his whole plan for us. All he cares about is getting back together with her, and he's using you to do it. And by the time he's

finished with you, you'll be so heartbroken that running for president will be the last thing on your sad little mind."

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A hot, burning sensation filled my entire body with rage. "Jake would never..."

"How do you know what Jake would do? I've spent every day with him and Scott for years. You've talked to him how many times? I am telling you that he is using you and we're all having a good laugh about how badly you've fallen for it. You should try and have some self-respect. Stay away from Jake."

She stomped off, and I had the strongest urge to curl up in a ball on the floor and stay that way. It hurt to breathe.

But I wasn't going to let her beat me. I wouldn't lie down and die. She wouldn't win. I wouldn't start thinking about what she said and let her mess with my mind. I sent Ella an updated text to tell her what had happened.

She immediately responded with:

Evil wench! Three will be he'll to pay.

That made no sense.

What?

Her reply came quickly.

Stupid auto-correct! Hang on, we're almost there.

I kept tearing down posters, keeping them in a large stack. I didn't want to put them



down for fear they'd blow all over the floor. A few minutes later Ella and Trent burst through the door and surveyed the situation. They quickly got to work without saying a word. Not only had Mercedes put them all over the hallway, but on every locker on the first floor. Trent ran upstairs to check things out there; but it was clean.

I had just pulled down the last picture when I heard a voice in the hallway. Jake. Ella ran over to me and grabbed the pictures out of my hand. "Give them to me. I know just what to do with them."

She ran off in the opposite direction and Trent went over to intercept Jake. I heard him say the announcement video was off. My first instinct was to follow after Ella and put as much distance between Jake and me as I possibly could.

I even started walking away when I made myself stop. A big part of me doubted Mercedes had just told me the truth. But why bother lying to me? Why would she go to all this trouble? I looked back at Jake and wondered if all of this had been one big con. If Jake had used my feelings for him to manipulate me. If he wanted to get back together with Ella. If he wanted to distract me to keep me from trying my hardest to win the election. I thought back to our first conversations—when he had wanted me to lie for him. When he'd wanted me to cheat for him. Who was to say anything had changed? Had I been taken in?

There was really only one way to find out.

I came up to them just as Trent said to Jake, "You'd better keep your stupid little friend Mercedes away from Mattie, understand?" Trent poked Jake in the chest with his index finger, as if to emphasize his point.

Jake looked confused. "What are you talking about? Mattie?"

I put on my poker face. "Nothing. Trent's just playing around."

"I'm not kidding, Mattie. If that girl comes after you again, I'm taking it out on him." I was pretty sure Jake could pound Trent into the ground, but I was touched by Trent standing up for me.

"I've got this," I told Trent. He gave Jake one last glare, and went to find Ella.

"Okay, I'm more than a little confused."

I wasn't about to explain to him what had just happened. Because either he was in on it with Mercedes, and I had no intention of crying on his shoulder while he enjoyed my pain, or he had no idea what Mercedes had done and if I told him, it would bring up the awkwardness of me having drawn the pictures, and I wasn't about to go there either.

"Don't worry about it. Um, I've finally finished that *Pride & Prejudice* project. Do you want to go to the library during lunch so I can show it to you?" The sooner I finished things between us, the better. I would never be able to objectively figure out if Jake was using me with him looking all hot and smelling so good and standing so close.

"Actually, I thought I might take you out for dinner to celebrate. I know this great place called Zooma Sushi over on the Pacific Coast Highway. Interested?"

Two days ago I would have thrown my arms around his neck and jumped up and down like I had in the kitchen with Ella. I would have told him a thousand times yes. Because for all intents and purposes, it definitely sounded like Jake Kingston was finally asking me, Mattie Lowe, out on a date.

Half an hour ago I would have been happy but reserved. I would have wondered whether he would bring up the pictures. I would have spent most of the night worrying and wondering when he would say something.

But now Mercedes had tainted it for me. I didn't know why he was asking me. If she had been lying and Jake really did just want to take me out because he liked me, or if this was part of some nefarious plan to use me to get what he wanted. But maybe meeting in a neutral place would make it easier to read him.

"Sure, I can meet you there. What time?"

"Oh," he looked surprised. "You don't want me to pick you up?"

Surprisingly enough, I think I finally had my fill of rides in Jake's car. "The speeches are tomorrow and I have a lot to work on, so it'd probably be better for me to just drive myself."

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"Uh, okay. How is six o'clock?"

"Six is fine. See you then."

I turned to go, wanting to find out what Ella had done with all the posters and to figure out how I could stop Mercedes from papering the entire school with them again.

I ignored the temptation to turn around and sneak a look at Jake.

From now on I planned on moving forward and to stop looking back.

\* \* \*

Fortunately for me, Ms. Rathbone and Malibu Prep had a zero tolerance policy when it came to bullying. Ella took the stack of posters to the headmistress, and Mercedes sat in the office for most of the morning until her parents arrived. Apparently Mr. Bentley was an attorney and tried to make an argument about Mercedes's actual intent (that she had meant to compliment me on my artistic ability, if you can believe it), but Ms. Rathbone didn't back down.

The headmistress's secretary adored Ella, and gave her the inside scoop. Mercedes had been suspended for three days, and she wouldn't be allowed to attend the masquerade ball. Which I knew probably just killed her, considering I'd overheard her a few days ago bragging about her new Vera Wang dress.

And to top it all off, Ms. Rathbone let Mr. Bentley know that if Mercedes did

anything like this again, they would send a letter to her college admissions office outlining her behavioral issues.

That was what made me feel safe—not even torturing me was worth Mercedes's future.

I still spent most of the day on edge, ready to flip the switch to full on freak-out if anyone even so much as mentioned my drawings of Jake.

But no one said a word. The situation had apparently been contained.

One less thing to worry about; only about a million more remained.

Including my "date" with Jake that night.

I didn't want to obsess over it. I told myself that under no circumstances would I spend one minute thinking about having dinner with Jake. This was just about going over our project.

Do you think my head listened?

When I got home I told Ella about meeting Jake and she, predictably, flipped out with excitement. She wanted to dress me up, but I refused. As far as I was concerned, this was not a date. Jake didn't ask me out because he liked me. He asked me to look over our project and to possibly weasel information out of me. She kept trying to talk to me about it, but I shut her down. She looked so sad and disappointed. I couldn't tell her what Mercedes had said. I didn't want to see that look of pity in her eyes again. Plus, I needed to think about how to handle him.

I planned to turn the tables on Jake. If he wanted to hear about Ella or wanted to manipulate me with his charm and good looks and smile and good looks (did I

mention his good looks?) he would be out of luck. I would use this time to watch him like I did when we played poker.

If he lied to me, I would know it.

Dad barely noticed when I said I was taking the car, and I turned on the GPS app on my phone. The slightly demented British lady gave me perfect instructions, until she suddenly ordered me to do a U-turn on PCH. I nearly crashed into someone else following the directions but spotted the restaurant on my right.

Zooma Sushi was a small, square looking building sitting on a hillside that overlooked the ocean. Giant oak and maple trees surrounded the entire area. I rolled down the window, and felt the ocean breeze blowing inside the car. Several outdoor tables were set up on the patio. I scanned the area for Jake—I didn't see him or his car. I was ready to deduct points for lateness when I saw him pull up.

My resolve melted a little at the sight of him. He looked so good, and had obviously dressed up. He wore a dark blue button-up shirt and faded blue jeans. He took two stairs at a time until he got to the restaurant door. I saw him stand aside to let an older couple go through the door first. The couple smiled up at him.

Was this the real Jake? The nice guy who thought about other people? The Jake that I had fallen in love with?

Or was the real Jake the one Mercedes had told me about?

Only one way to find out.

I gathered up my courage and picked up my bag and his letterman's jacket from the passenger seat. I headed for the restaurant and let myself in. It was really adorable and romantic. It had a long sushi bar where several people sat, eating and laughing. It

also had floor to ceiling windows with the most beautiful views. This was probably his little seduction spot, where he took all his girls. Jake sat next to one of the windows, looking outside.

He saw me and stood up. Buddha help me, he looked even better up close. He seemed nervous. He could be nervous because he was lying to me. Or because he was using me. It could potentially make him feel bad if he had some shady purpose where I was concerned.

I didn't allow myself to consider the possibility that he was nervous for the same reason that I felt nervous.

He smiled. "Hey, you found it."

"I had GPS help," I said as I approached the table. He came around to the other side and held out my chair for me. Half of me didn't want him to be a gentleman. I could pull out my own chair. I didn't need his help. But the other part of me wanted to melt into a pile of goo. I needed to stay suspicious, my mind clear and sharp. I didn't want the world to go hazy and fuzzy like it tended to when I was with him. I handed him his jacket, and he put it on the back of his seat.

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I sat down and picked up a menu.

"Anything look good to you?" he asked.

I held the menu up to cover my face so he wouldn't see me blushing. Because he looked good to me. Jake's not on the menu, I told my hormones.

"What would you recommend? I've never had sushi before."

He pushed the menu away from my face, and he had an expression of absolute shock. "How is that even possible?"

"Because my mom's half Japanese."

He looked completely confused. So I gave him the CliffNotes version of her drama. He seemed to get it. "Totally understand. It is pretty cool that you have this whole other heritage in your life."

"Well, unfortunately it comes with my mother attached."

That made him smile. "Okay, so the lobster roll is amazing, the toro is killer and I've always loved the yellowtail."

"None of that has eel in it, does it?"

"They have eel here, but no, none of the ones I just mentioned have eel."



"Then it sounds good."

Jake took my menu, went to the bar to place our order, where the chefs greeted him by name. He chatted with them for a few minutes before coming back to the table. Just how many dates had he brought here?

"Come here often?"

He at least had the decency to look a little embarrassed. "I used to come here every week with my grandfather before he passed away. It was his favorite restaurant. This is the first time I've been here since he died. I hadn't wanted to come back here again until now."

My breath caught as he reached across the table and took my hand in his, squeezing gently. I wanted so badly to believe the lie. I wanted to squeeze his hand back and revel in the idea that Jake had brought me some place special because he liked me and wanted to be with me. But all I could hear was Mercedes's voice when she told me how sad and pathetic I was.

"Did you want to see the final product?" Thankfully, my voice didn't tremble or break. I reached over into my bag and pulled our manga out. I handed it to him.

He put it on the table and slowly turned the pages. I had colored everything in, and it looked pretty awesome, if I did say so myself. It turned out really well.

Jake closed it and looked up at me. "This is amazing. You are really talented. We're getting an A for sure."

The thought crossed my mind that we were, once again, discussing my drawings. I didn't dwell on it though. If he brought up those portraits of him, I would change the subject. Easy enough.

"You may not want to count your chickens on that one. You know how Ms. Aprils feels about me."

"It's cool. Aprils loves me."

He said it in that cocky, offhand way that only the truly popular and confident could. A pretty blonde walked past our table and Jake's eyes flickered briefly to look at her before returning his full attention to me. She had a passing resemblance to Ella.

Mercedes's venomous words rolled around inside my head. Of course anyone would choose Ella over me. Miss early admissions to UCLA. Boys falling at her feet. All gorgeous and perfect.

I stopped myself. In the past I would have kept going, comparing myself to her. I would have blamed Ella for Jake using me and added it to my List of Grievances. But I could finally see that none of this was Ella's fault. She had stepped aside and practically gift wrapped Jake for me. She had even schemed to try and get us together. She had done nothing but support and love me and I was not about to pay that back by blaming her.

Even if Jake still wanted Ella, Ella didn't want Jake.

The chef, a man named Toshi, brought our plates over personally. He told us to enjoy, and Jake handed me a pair of chopsticks. I refused them on principle and used a fork.

"I hope you don't mind, but I went ahead and ordered their green tea ice cream. Sometimes it's fun to have dessert before dinner."

I didn't know what to try first, but I generally liked lobster. Jake pointed out the right one, and I had a piece.

"Ugh," I said.

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He looked worried. "What, you don't like it?"

"No, I love it." If my mother ever found out, I'd never hear the end of it. The lobster was sweet and crisp and had a spicy mayo which seemed to make it even sweeter. I tried the toro next, and it was fresh and delicious and practically disintegrated in my mouth. I had never tasted anything so good. I dug into the ice cream next, and a mixture of green tea tempura, cinnamon and orange exploded inside my mouth.

I would have to leave this restaurant soon or I would blow up like Violet Beauregarde in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Jake would have to roll me out the door.

"I'm glad."

Jake tried to initiate conversation for the next few minutes, but I stuck to one-syllable answers. Partly because I just wanted to eat, but mostly because I didn't want to get sucked in. I tried to read him. Was he lying to me and I had missed all the signs? Or was he just that good? Maybe he was some kind of relationship card shark. I waited for him to touch his face, especially his mouth. This felt like the poker game all over again. Only instead of playing poker, he was playing with my heart.

But he never touched his face.

I hate to admit, but it softened me. How could it not? How could I not want to pretend this was real? Even if I knew, in the back of my mind, that fairytales didn't come true for girls like me. Prince Charming never ended up with the ugly stepsister. I was just fooling myself because I so desperately wanted it.

"So, any hints on what you plan on saying in your speech tomorrow?"

It was like he had thrown a bucket of ice water over my head. Suddenly the lobster tasted rubbery in my mouth. I took a drink to force it down. It hadn't taken long for him to bring the election up. I wondered how much longer I had until he started talking about Ella.

"I think talking about the election should be off-limits, don't you?"

"Uh, sure." I had made him uncomfortable, but he quickly rebounded. "I guess we have to have some surprises for tomorrow, right?"

I gave him a tight smile in return.

Was this a real date? A distraction? Was he trying to throw me off my game? Or had Mercedes made the whole thing up to mess with my head and I was ruining an actual date? Unfortunately, it was too easy to believe her. Why would Jake like me? What was so special about me that he would give me any attention?

We learned in science about this theory called Occam's razor that basically said that when there's more than one explanation, the simplest one is usually right.

And the simplest explanation here was that Mercedes had told the truth and I was an idiot to have ever believed that Jake might like me.

"You know, I don't think the sushi's really agreeing with me. I'm going to head home."

I stood up, and Jake sat there for a second, looking surprised. Finally he asked, "Are you okay? Do you need me to drive you?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm just going to go."

He reached out and grabbed my hand, and I forced myself to ignore the electricity that passed between us. "Listen, whatever happens tomorrow, I still want us to be friends."

I immediately pulled my hand away. I couldn't risk it. "Sure, whatever. See you."

I left him sitting in his chair. Once I got outside, I practically ran to my car. I didn't care if he could see me or not.

My tires squealed as I left the parking lot and got back onto the PCH. I let all my frustration out on the pavement, pushing the accelerator down. I realized that I should have left some cash to help pay for dinner, until I decided that if he did plan to use me for information, the least he could do was pay.

It wasn't until I nearly got home that I remembered what he had said as I left the restaurant.

What had he meant? What would happen tomorrow?

## Chapter 14

Needless to say, sleep was pretty much out of the question. I tossed and turned the entire night. If he had been lying, he had nearly convinced me.

My head throbbed the next morning and my head felt stuffy. Stress completely wrecked my immune system and I started to feel sick.

Ella took one look at me and came back with a glass of orange juice and a cup of green tea. "You cannot get sick. Not today."

"I know, I know," I said before I blew my nose into a tissue. I took some Dayquil and put the box into my bag. Today I would stand in front of the entire school and tell them why they should elect me as their senior class president.

I had been so caught up in my Jake obsession that I hadn't spent much time working on my speech. At about three in the morning, I finally got up and finished it.

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I was not a great public speaker, but I would just have to do the best I could. Cold or no cold.

Jake would be at the house soon for school. I sent him a text saying that I wasn't feeling too well and that I would just see him later at school. It took a few minutes, but he finally responded with an "okay." I wished I could stay home and crawl under my covers, but I had to turn in our English project, and I had to be there for the speeches. It would be my one chance to talk to the student body before they voted.

At school, Scott had put up new campaign posters for Jake, but Ella had convinced Trent to help us stick a note on every locker in the school telling them to vote for me.

After calculus, I saw Jake. He waved at me, but I turned around and walked in the opposite direction. I could not let him inside my head right now. I wasn't prepared to talk to him yet.

I couldn't keep away from him in English, though. He sat down in front of me. "Hey, are you avoiding me?"

"What? No. Of course not. Why would you think that?" Duh, I was obviously avoiding him. I just couldn't have this conversation with him here. I couldn't keep it together for the speech if I had some emotional blowout with him. I gave him the manga assignment, and he turned it into Ms. Aprils at her desk. She flipped through it and smiled at him. Maybe he was right. Aprils did love him and we probably would get an A.

With the project finally out of the way, I could focus all my attention on the speech.



The assembly was scheduled for right after lunch. And lunchtime came all too quickly. My throat started to feel sore. Ella made me drink more orange juice, and I took some more medication.

The bell rang, and my heart beat ridiculously fast. I wasn't one of those people who would rather be in the casket at a funeral than the guy giving the eulogy, but public speaking wasn't exactly high on my fun things to do list.

Ella walked on one side of me, Trent on the other, as we headed down the hallway. We went into the auditorium and nearly knocked over the school's mascot, Edgar the Eagle. He made some obscene gestures with his arms/wings despite Ella apologizing. Trent grabbed a couple of seats in the front row, and Ella walked all the way to the front with me. Ms. Rathbone showed me where to sit.

"You are going to do so great," Ella said.

"What if I'm terrible?"

"Then I'm sending Trent up here and he's going to Napoleon Dynamite his way into winning this election for you." That did get a smile out of me. She left the stage to sit with Trent.

I watched them for a little while, but they were watching me and whispering, and it felt weird. The only thing left for me to look at was all the seats in the auditorium filling up with people. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, and the sound was deafening.

Jake finally arrived, and sat down in the empty seat next to me. He said hi, I said hi back. Before he could say anything else, Scott sat down on the other side of Jake, and handed Jake some big index cards. I ignored them both as I read over my speech again. I hoped it was good enough. My stomach twisted and turned in anticipation.

Ms. Rathbone stepped to the microphone and ordered the audience to quiet down. They settled down pretty quickly and she rambled off a list of announcements that I completely tuned out. All I could think about was not humiliating myself, and how I was absolutely not allowed to sneak a look at Jake.

The headmistress outlined who would be speaking. Several student council positions only had one person running. They were Jake's friends. Football players, cheerleaders. People no one would dare run against. They mostly got up to the microphone, introduced themselves and the office they were running for, and sat back down. I was going to have to speak sooner than I had anticipated.

The people running for treasurer and secretary had to give speeches since those offices were contested. I looked at them and pretended to listen, but I couldn't. I had to stay focused on my speech. I started to worry that it wasn't sophisticated enough or clever enough.

Scott got up to say that he was running for vice-president and got a huge round of applause. It sickened me—how could people be taken in by that slimeball? It was amazing what being somewhat attractive and athletic would get you.

Then it was my turn. I had thought Jake might go first, thinking it might be an alphabetical thing, but Ms. Rathbone called my name and I had to go. I walked up to the podium, and laid my papers down.

It was disconcerting to have every person in the room staring at me. I had never done anything like this before. I tried to speak, but my throat froze shut.

I widened my eyes and looked over at Ella and Trent. Trent smiled at me. Ella gave me the thumbs up, and mouthed, "You can do this!"

I could do this. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. "My name is Mattie Lowe

and I'm running for senior class president."

I didn't get any applause like the popular kids had. So I kept going. "A lot of things have changed recently at Malibu Prep. Things that were done behind our backs and without our input. I think since those changes affect us directly, we should have had some say in what goes on at this school. I think these uniforms are hideous. I think that seniors should have priority parking. I think we should be able to use our phones and text during school hours. Maybe not in class, but in between classes or during lunch. And speaking of lunch, I think it is crazy that we're so close to so many amazing restaurants, and we're not allowed to go off campus at lunchtime. It's also ridiculous that we can't bring our lunch from home and that all the vending machines were taken away. These rules have taken away our choices. What to wear, what we can eat. Who we can talk to. I think that's wrong. All the adults in our lives, our teachers, our parents, they're always telling us to be more responsible. They want us to hurry and grow up. Well, part of maturing is making your own decisions. How are we supposed to prove that we're responsible or grown up if we're never given the chance to make any decisions of our own? So if I'm elected president, I plan on changing all of that. I want us to get our choices back. A vote for Mattie Lowe is a vote for your voice to be heard. Thank you."

I had done it. Everyone clapped for me. I returned to my chair and saw that Ella was standing up and applauding. She pulled Trent up and they gave me my own personal standing ovation. I smiled at them. As I sat down, I noticed that my legs felt shaky and my hands trembled.

Jake leaned over to whisper, "Good job," before Ms. Rathbone called him up. I was curious about what he would say, but it was just the typical things jocks always said. I thought Jake was different. That his speech would be different. Nope. He wanted more dances, more parties, and more money for sports.

"And in conclusion, I just want to remind you to think of Edgar, our school mascot,

and vote for me. Because eagles soar high, not..."

Lowe. He was going to say that eagles soar high, not Lowe. I knew it, he knew it, every person in the room knew it. I could feel my face turning a scarlet red and berated myself for my own stupidity. Mercedes had been right. Look at what he was doing. About to humiliate me in front of the entire school.

I've never felt such an oppressive silence. Everyone seemed stunned, until somebody yelled, "Burn!" That got a couple of laughs and some low moans. I could feel a thousand sets of eyes staring at me. It's just like that dream where you're at school naked, only it was really happening.

How could Jake do this?

Jake stood at the podium, looking as mortified as I felt. He could easily do it. Finish the sentence. Everyone would be impressed with his wit and cleverness.

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I wanted to leave, but my feet felt glued to the floor. I waited for him to finish me off.

But he didn't do it. Jake crumpled up his index card and sat back in the seat next to me. Everyone still seemed shocked. Not a single person clapped for him. Ms. Rathbone practically sprinted to the podium to dismiss the assembly and to remind them to head out now and vote.

"Mattie, I didn't..."

I had no desire to listen to him. My feet finally started working and I walked backstage, away from prying eyes.

I hadn't gotten far when Jake reached out to take me by the arm, turning me to face him. "Leave me alone," I hissed at him.

"You need to let me explain. I did not write this speech. Scott did. I know that's no excuse. I should have gone through it before I read it out loud."

I yanked my arm away from his grasp. I couldn't think straight when he touched me. I was so angry, but I had to consider the facts. I thought of the speech and how little it had sounded like Jake to me. I had seen Scott hand him those cards. "Why should I believe anything you say?"

"I have never lied to you. I may have made a couple of bad choices recently, but I've never lied to you."

Everything inside me wanted to believe him. The words, "I believe you," came to the

tip of my tongue. I clenched my teeth together to keep them from escaping.

"Why didn't you just write it yourself?"

He must have sensed that I was softening. "Because last night I had to choose between writing the speech and seeing you. I chose you."

How could I not melt? I knew how busy he was. After he said that, I probably would have accepted any explanation to excuse his behavior. Somebody had drugged him. He had an evil twin. He had a time machine and would go back and undo it. Anything.

I wished I felt nothing for him. Instead I was angry and hurt, but underneath it all? I definitely still loved him. I couldn't believe that I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.

If he was playing me, he was amazingly good at it.

I wanted to test him. "Ella's dating Trent. They're serious."

Jake looked really confused. "Um, okay. Good for Ella?"

"You're not upset? You're not jealous?"

"Why would I be? I told you that things with me and Ella were over." He sounded so sincere and so bewildered.

Maybe Mercedes didn't have the simplest explanation. Maybe the simplest explanation was the one that my heart believed. That Jake liked me. That Scott had set me up to be embarrassed and Jake really didn't know anything about it.

Jake took a step toward me, and I took a step back. That made him stop. He looked and sounded hurt. "I'm so sorry that happened. I told Scott I was thinking about dropping out because I didn't have time for it, and he said he would take care of it and help me because he wanted us all to do student council together."

What did I say to that? "Okay." His problems with his idiot friends were not really my problem.

He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "Look, if I win, I'm going to decline."

"I don't need your pity."

"It's not my pity. What happened today was wrong. Listening to you up there, you really believe in something. You want this school to be a better place. I was just doing this to make my friends and my dad happy. You should be president. And I won't have to decline because now I probably won't even win."

Jake and Ella. King and Queen of the Land of Delusion. In what universe would Jake Kingston not win the election? "That's nice and everything, but you sort of just humiliated me in front of the whole school, so I'm going to go now."

But before I could leave, the curtains got thrown aside, and a fire-breathing Ms. Rathbone stood there. "Mr. Kingston, in my officenow."

"Can I just..."

"Now!" She stormed off and Jake looked at me apologetically.

"I have to go. I know I don't deserve to ask you this, but will you come to the masquerade ball tonight? I think we need to talk more about this."

No, my head screamed. Tell him no! What is wrong with you?



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What was wrong with me is that I was in love with him and wanted to believe him.  
"Fine. I'll think about it."

He gave me a grin and started to say something else, but Ms. Rathbone shrieked at him from the back of the auditorium and he ran out onto the stage and down the steps.

I didn't need to think about it for long. The answer would be no.

\* \* \*

Ella called Bill and explained the whole situation to him, and he actually left his studio to come and pull me out of school early. I stopped by the cafeteria to vote for myself (and took great satisfaction in crossing out Scott and Mercedes's names and writing in Trent and Ella's names instead) before I went home.

Once we got there, Dad asked me if I was all right. I told him I would live, and that apparently was good enough for him to head straight back to his painting.

Ella rushed me into her room and closed the door. "Just so you know, that speech totally backfired. People didn't think it was cool," she informed me. She said the general consensus seemed to be that he was a jerk and I handled it well. He had the higher ground and he basically kicked me in the face. "People felt bad for you."

"So I'm getting the pity vote?"

"A vote's a vote," she declared.

"Jake says that one line wasn't his fault."

"Oh, obviously," Ella said as she went into her closet. "Scott was totally bragging about having written it to anyone who would listen."

Jake had been telling me the truth.

It was like the sun coming out after a thunderstorm. Suddenly everything seemed brighter and warmer. I felt all glowy and happy inside.

"Ella? I think I need your help with something."

She stuck her head out through the closet door. "What's that?"

"I need you to take me shopping. I'm going to the masquerade ball tonight."

## Chapter 15

I didn't know human beings were capable of making the sound that Ella made. I covered my ears.

"I am so excited! Let's go!" she squealed as she grabbed her purse.

"Go where?"

"To the mall! We have so many things to do to get ready for tonight!"

I don't know what Ella had in mind, but I wasn't interested. "This isn't an excuse to shop. You know I hate shopping."

She looked like I had just insulted her favorite deity. "This isn't an excuse. Trust me

when I say you don't have anything you could wear tonight. And it isn't possible for you to hate shopping. You just haven't been with me. And we can use our credit cards!" She grabbed her purse and then grabbed me.

"Dad! We're taking the car!" she called out as she dragged me outside.

He said something back, but we couldn't hear him. As I got in the passenger seat I realized that it was the first time I'd ever heard her call my dad that. She had always called him Bill. I guess things really had changed between them. Especially since she now seemed so eager to use our Dad-issued credit cards.

"Okay, so we have to get a dress obviously." She started ticking things off on her fingers. "And shoes. And accessories. And depending on the dress, possibly a new bra and underwear. Jewelry, maybe."

I already felt overwhelmed. Walking into the mall didn't help. I avoided this place like I avoided Mercedes and Scott. Ella took in a big breath and looked calmer. It was like she had come home to the mother ship.

"Let's go get a dress first." Everything swirled past in a haze of color and sound. She walked into a shop and started expertly pulling dresses in every color and piled them on top of my open arms. After she had pulled nearly every dress off the rack, she told me it was time to try them on.

The saleswoman had to help me get the mountain of clothes into the dressing room. Resigned to my fate, I tried on the black one first.

"Nope. No black tonight. No khaki or red or blue like our uniforms. Let's try something pretty and bright. With your skin tone, you would look amazing in jewel shades. Try a purple or a green or dark blue."

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Per her dictatorial instructions, I put on a purple one next. I pushed the curtain aside and Ella clapped her hands together. "You look amazing! Try on some more!"

I didn't know it was possible to hate clothes this much. The grumpier I got, the more excited Ella got. She loved every dress and every dress looked "so awesome" on me.

Finally I tried on the last one. It was an emerald green color with skinny straps and a low back. The fabric was silky and soft, and it made a whispering sound when I put it on. The dress came in tight at the waist, and the skirt flounced out around me. It was so girly looking. I hurried up to get it on so Ella could tell me which one I should buy and I could be done.

But when I walked out, Ella fell silent. She got up and walked around me in a circle. "Oh Tilly, that is the one." I had stopped looking at my reflection about eleven dresses ago. Ella stepped aside and I could see myself in the three-way mirror. And I looked...wow. I didn't look fat. Or Goth. It even went with my fuchsia hair. It tucked me in at all the right places and the twirly skirt hid everything else.

She was right. This was the one. I actually felt sort of pretty in it. And I had never felt that way before.

So, I burst into tears.

Ella put her arms around me, and sat me down on the bench in the dressing room. She turned my head so that my tears wouldn't fall on my dress. "What's wrong?"

I ignored my policy on not discussing Jake with Ella, but in between sobs I told her

everything Mercedes had told me.

"That evil, little....oh, I don't even know anything bad enough to call her! She's so obviously lying just to upset you. You can't believe anything she said. Jake asked you out on a date. He asked you to meet him at the ball tonight! And where will Mercedes Bentley be? At home. Feeling jealous of you and sorry for herself."

"But what if she was right? What if he is using me to get to you?" I just couldn't let it go.

Ella sat quietly for a minute before saying, "I know exactly how to prove that she was wrong. I can prove to you that Jake wants you and not anybody else."

"How in Buddha's name are you going to do that?"

She flashed her credit card. "I am going to do a total makeover on you." I started to protest but she held a hand up. "I know how you feel about it, but listen. I am going to make you unrecognizable. Best of all, it's a masquerade ball. You'll be this gorgeous mystery girl, but he will blow you off because he will still want Mattie."

Despite what I always told Ella, secretly I wanted a makeover. What '80s movie heroine would be complete without a fantastic makeover? Andie making a prom dress out of her mom's old dress in *Pretty in Pink*. Clair making over Allison in *The Breakfast Club*.

Truth be told, I was a little afraid I'd look the same. That there would be no difference between "before" and "after." It was easier on my ego to just say no.

But if my life could be like the movies, the makeover would let the hot guy realize how awesome I am inside and out, and he would fall for me (although he had already secretly fallen for me and just couldn't admit it yet).

"Okay, fine, you win" I finally mumbled, while Ella squealed. She ripped the tag off of my dress. "I promise you, you will not regret this!" Holy Buddha, now she was Cinderella and the Fairy Godmother all rolled into one.

Ella had her credit card out and had already paid for the dress before I even changed back. I sort of didn't want to take the dress off, which felt strange.

Then something even stranger happened. I got a message notification on my phone. Jake had posted to my Facebook page. All he said was, "Looking forward to tonight." It made my heart do little flips. Jake Kingston wrote on my Facebook wall! It was out there for anyone to see. Not that I had many friends, but it felt...so...public. It made the heartache and hurt that I had just been feeling slip away.

Before I could tell Ella about what happened, she dragged me to an accessories type store, because they had specially ordered masks for our ball. Ella picked out a green one that matched my dress, with black and silver feathers on the edges. The mask itself covered not only my forehead and nose, but most of my face. Only my mouth and eyes were visible. "So he won't recognize you," Ella said.

"Isn't this fun?" she asked as the clerk handed her the bag. It was the opposite of fun, actually. I felt so totally stressed out. My head throbbed. This had become a very bad idea. Maybe I should skip the dance. Even if Jake was looking forward to it.

At the shoe store, I tried to stop her. "I'm pretty sure they don't make high heels in a size ten."

"Sure they do. They make heels big enough for Paris Hilton's huge feet." Her eyes got big. "Not that I'm saying you have big feet!"

Of course I had big feet. It was part of the ugly stepsister/way too tall thing. But Ella couldn't be convinced that high heels were a Bad Idea. I'd spent my whole life trying

to be shorter, and now she wanted me to add a good three inches?

"Here," she handed me a pair of black shoes. We didn't have much color or style selection, but they seemed okay. I slipped them on, and the pounding in my head got worse.

"Stand up."

"I can't. I can't walk in these. I'm going to permanently maim myself."

"You will be fine."

"I'm going to break both of my ankles." I tried to take a few tentative steps and had to grab onto Ella to stay upright. "No way."

"We'll practice when you get home. It's not that hard."

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Ella grabbed me some dark, sheer stockings and took me to a salon. I tried to tell her we would never get an appointment, but she steered me inside. Apparently, once I'd said yes, she'd texted her favorite stylist, Andre, and he had moved his schedule around to accommodate her.

I sat down hard in his chair, daring him to say something.

He picked up several chunks of my hair. "Oh my, it's very, uh, pink."

"I was thinking we'd do a deep red," Ella said. "I've always thought Mattie would look amazing as a redhead."

"And you wanted some extensions too?" Andre asked while he looked at my reflection in the mirror.

"Yes, and waxing, of course."

"Oh, of course," he nodded, as if it were perfectly normal to use hot freaking wax to tear things off of your body.

"Wait a second," I said, but no one was listening to me. Next thing I knew, they were washing my hair and it took five shampooing sessions to get all the fuchsia out. That stupid sink nearly broke my neck. Andre took a paintbrush to my head while someone else showed him extension colors. He picked the one he wanted and they rushed off.

Once my head was a dark, gooey mess, they took me to this quiet little room with a



bed. A machine played the sounds of waves crashing. It felt amazing to lie down, and I was so glad that part of this makeover involved me getting to sleep. I had just closed my eyes when the door opened. A woman who looked like she could fit in my pocket walked in. She had a cheery smile, and it made me instantly wary.

"Hi, I'm Raven and I'm here to do your waxing. We only have time for the face today."

The face? What were they going to do to my face? I started to ask her what was wrong with my face, but she started smearing hot wax on my eyebrow. She put some kind of cloth on top of it, patted it down and then ripped it off.

I let out a string of curse words that would have impressed Eminem. I had never felt anything so painful in my entire life. She immediately put a cold compress on my left eyebrow. "So sorry, some people are a little more sensitive than others. Be glad it's not a bikini wax."

I couldn't believe that people did this to their nether regions. On purpose.

Before I could tell her that she could stop, that I would be just fine with mismatched eyebrows, she already had the wax on my right eyebrow. I braced my entire body, waiting for her to yank it. The tension was nearly as bad as the actual event. I yelped again when she tore the cloth off.

Fortunately, she was finished with the melting wax torture and turned to the tweezers torture instead. It felt like she was pulling every single hair out of my brow bone. "There," she thankfully, finally, said.

"Can I see?"

"Sorry, your sister said not to give you a mirror. She wants you to be surprised."

That certainly sounded like Ella. I was escorted back to that painful sink to rinse the color out of my hair. Fortunately, I only had to endure one wash that time. Andre's assistant brought me back to his chair, and he turned me away from the mirror. I caught a fleeting glimpse of bright red marks above my eyes before he started combing out my hair. He blew all my hair dry. Then like an entire army of stylists surrounded me and everyone pulled and poked at my hair at once.

"I'm going to be using micro-cylinder extensions." Andre continued to explain something about not using glues or heat or chemicals and something about little tubes, but my head hurt too much to listen. My throat was starting to burn, and I felt lightheaded.

We were going through so much trouble for me to "pull an Ella," and I worried it would all backfire.

Ella smiled at me encouragingly.

I couldn't take it. "What if Jake knows it's me?"

She laughed. "There's no way he'll know it's you."

"But what if he doesn't like me? I mean Mattie me, not mystery girl me."

"Just trust me." Ella pulled out her phone and started typing.

"So, what if you're right and he does like me and we start dating and then we just break up?"

She stopped typing. "What if you don't?"

"Please. Be realistic."

She dropped her arms to her side. "Okay, even if you do eventually break up, wouldn't it have been worth it to be Jake's girlfriend?"

Jake Kingston's girlfriend. My heart sped up at the thought. Oh my Buddha, it really, really, really would have been worth it. I would gladly sign up for any future heartache to have that small chance at bliss.

"But what if..."

Ella let out a loud sigh. "What if, what if, what if? You know, no amount of preventative worrying is going to help you out here. It's not like you can get the right dose of angst and protect yourself. Just calm down and go with it. See where fate takes you."

I nodded meekly, which had Andre telling me to keep my head still. So many hands on my head all at once. I was being tugged in a hundred different directions. Everything today had been painful and boring and long.

"I know I'm new to getting ready for a date and all, but surely it's supposed to be less painful and stupid than this."

"No, this is about right," Andre informed me.

Finally, all the extensions had been put in, and the other stylists left. Andre used a big curling iron on my hair, and I could feel him pulling the hair around my face back and keeping it in place with pins. He misted over everything with hair spray.

He stepped back and looked at me. "Sometimes, I even amaze myself."

"You look awesome," Ella breathed.

"Do you want me to get someone to do her makeup?"

"Do you have time for that?"

He smiled at Ella, in that way that all adults did. "For you, anything."

I was in another chair, turned away from the mirrors again while Ella described my outfit and mask to the makeup artist. "Something dramatic on the eye," she said.

"What about my glasses?" I asked.

"They're not prescription so you don't need them, and they're a dead giveaway. Give them to me." I took them off and handed them over. Ella stuck them in her purse.

I looked down at my watch. The dance was supposed to start in an hour. "We're running out of time. You still have to get home and get ready too."

"We'll be fine," Ella said. "Stop worrying."

But I couldn't stop. What if this all blew up in my face? What if everyone made fun of me for trying to be pretty when I was still just plain old Mattie Lowe? What if Jake laughed at me? That thought made my stomach hurt.

The makeup part was over faster than I had imagined it would be. When I said as much, Ella just shrugged and said, "It's because you're already naturally beautiful."

I didn't have time to argue with her, because she started walking really fast. As we made our way through the mall, I could feel people staring at us. I crossed my arms across my chest. "Why are they looking at us?"

Ella smiled again. "They're not looking at me. They're looking at you. Jake's not going to know what hit him."

She talked the whole way home, which was good because I felt worse and worse. In addition to my head hurting and my throat burning, I had become completely

congested. I had to get tissues from Ella's purse and blew my nose several times.

I had totally forgotten about my cold, and had forgotten to take medicine to keep these stupid symptoms at bay. My stress seemed to exacerbate everything.

Which was good, because now I had my excuse for staying home. "I can't go," I croaked.

"What happened to your voice?" Ella asked. "You sound terrible."

"I'm sick. I can't go to the ball. I'm probably contagious."

"They're all rich. They can afford doctors. You're going." She had that new determined sound in her voice.

I knew there would be no arguing with her. She'd roll me there on a hospital bed if she had to.

"You don't understand," I said as her phone rang.

"Can you answer that for me?"

I picked up the phone and looked at the display. Trent. "Hey."

"Ella?" he sounded confused.

"No, it's Mattie."

He paused for a long time. "You sound weird."

"I'm getting a cold."

"You sound like that chick in that one old movie you made me watch with the jewel."

This is how well I knew him. "You mean *Romancing the Stone*?"

"I have to get off the phone now because you are weirding me out. Tell Ella I got her text and I'll see her at the dance."

He hung up before I could say anything back. I turned toward Ella. "How did you get Trent to go to a dance?" In our four years of high school, he had never once gone to a dance.

She gave a secretive half-smile. "I have my ways."

We got home, and she hustled me into my room, making sure to whisk me past the mirrors. She made me put my dress and everything on, except for the mask. She had bought the lipstick they used at the salon and was using a little brush to put it on my lips.

She stepped back to look at her work. "Great. Now I have one more thing to be

jealous of you for."

"Jealous of me? Why?"

"I never see you doing your homework and you still ace all your classes. I have to work so hard for everything and you're just smart. You stand up for yourself and you go after things even when you're scared to. You're so talented and gifted with your art. And now, you're definitely prettier than me."

In no known universe was that even possible. "But I've always been jealous of you," I confessed. No need to list the reasons why I was jealous—they were pretty obvious.

She smiled at me before giving me a hug. My hair was so long, it tugged at my head when she hugged me.

"No more jealousy. I know it's normal for sisters, but I love you and I'm excited for you and for tonight. So come here, Cinderella. You need to see this."

"I think you're confused which one of us is which girl in that story."

"I don't think I am," she said as she pushed me in front of the mirror.

I knew it was me. Because I could see Ella standing there in the reflection. I knew it, but my brain couldn't accept it.

Because the girl looking back at me was not Matilda Lowe.

She was some tall, fiery haired goddess. With my makeup I looked soft and fierce at the same time. I didn't know I could look like that. I leaned in. My skin looked flawless and my eyes were bright and green. It was amazing what makeup could do. I always wore my hair down, but Andre had put half of it up and left the back down,



and had filled all of it with tousled waves.

It was like the after had taken the before out into the back alley and beat the crap out of her.

It was a Masquerade Ball Miracle.

Maybe I was the one who had been confused about what character I was supposed to be. Maybe instead of the ugly stepsister, I had actually been the ugly duckling all along.

I gave in to the urge to twirl around, like a little girl trying on her first party dress.

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it," Ella said. "Now the outside just matches the inside." She smiled at my stunned reflection. "No more hiding, Tilly. Just be you. And now I have to go get ready."

She was nearly out the door when I called out, "Ella?" She stopped to look at me. "I love you too."

She grinned at me then. "I know. Don't mess anything up before we leave."

I decided to sit on my bed and wait. My dad was going to drive us there and meet Mrs. Putnam. He apparently had volunteered as a chaperone. Which was, of course, totally embarrassing. Thank heavens I'd be wearing a mask.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:56 am*

I looked over at the mirror again, toying with the mask in my hands. I thought of what Ella had said, and how even now, I was still hiding. Not letting people see me. I didn't even let my dad see who I really was.

My sketchbook lay on the nightstand next to my bed. Without thinking about what I was doing, I walked across the house to my dad's art studio, and only stumbled about three times in my new shoes.

I was tired of hiding. Hiding what I loved, hiding who I was, hiding what I wanted to become. It was time to stop.

My dad glanced up from his easel and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "Tilly, you look..."

"Dad, I draw manga." I dropped my sketchbook down on the table in front of him and opened it to the middle. "That's my stuff. I needed you to see it."

He blinked at me a few times, looking bewildered. He picked up the sketchbook and thumbed through it, carefully evaluating each picture before turning to the next.

"How long have you been doing this?"

"Years."

He looked up at me. "Why haven't you ever shown this to me before?"

"I thought you wouldn't like it."

"Why?"

"I thought you would want me to do more serious stuff, like you or Pearl."

He carefully put the sketchbook down, and turned to face me. "Tilly, the only person I want you to be is you. The only art I want you to draw is your art. I don't want you to become me or your mother. I want you to follow your own path and be happy. That is all I've ever wanted for you."

"Okay," I replied. My eyes filled with tears, and I wondered why I had spent most of my life not crying and now was ready to cry at any given moment. It was like being with Jake had unlocked my hardened heart and I had all these emotions wanting to burst out all the time. But I couldn't cry because I'd ruin my expensive makeup and then Ella would kill me.

"I'm so proud of you. Look at these. You are an amazingly gifted artist. You obviously get that from me."

That made me laugh through my unshed tears. "If you're interested, you and I can sit down and work on some techniques together. Your innate style is right on, but maybe your old man could teach you something that might help you improve."

"I'd like that."

He kissed me on my forehead and said he needed to get ready for his "hot date." I only gagged a little.

I took my sketchbook back to my room, throwing it on the bed. I felt lighter, freer. It had been such a relief to finally tell my dad about my drawing. It was so good to get it all out.

Unfortunately, he wasn't my only parent. I glanced over at my laptop. I needed to tell Pearl. Then all the hiding would be done.

I plugged my scanner into my computer and started scanning pictures. I sent them as attachments to Pearl in an email. She didn't seem to spend much time online, so I would probably have a few days before I had to deal with her screaming.

You can imagine my surprise when the Skype tones started playing, letting me know I had an incoming chat request. I didn't even know the program had been running.

The request was from my mother.

## Chapter 16

I sat there for a minute, wondering whether to click the answer or decline button. I wanted so badly to click the red one and make her go away. But she obviously knew I was online since I had just sent her an email.

I accepted the call. And my mother immediately said, "Is this some sort of joke?"

I wanted to play dumb, but couldn't. "No, it isn't a joke. I draw manga. Just wanted to let you know so your disappointment in me can reach new depths."

For the first time in forever, I rendered my mother speechless. She just stared at me, her mouth opening and closing over and over again like a fish gasping for water.

I watched the expressions flit across her face. I had seen her quiet, motionless manner before. It was the beginning of a tsunami-level of rage. I could almost see the waves of anger starting to gather and swell inside her. I didn't look forward to the explosion.

"Since you're already mad, I may as well tell you that I haven't submitted a portfolio

to Wellesley and that I have no intention of going to school there. Ever."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:56 am*

"What?" she gasped in a deadly whisper. I could barely hear her. "Why not?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to go to Wellesley."

"Is it your father? Is he making you go to UCLA?"

I had to head that one off at the pass. "No, I'm not going to UCLA."

Her eyes narrowed at me. "Is this because of some stupid boy?"

"He's not...." I immediately stopped, but it was too late. Pearl had trapped me. Her face lit up with an angry smirk.

"Who is he?"

"No one. I don't have a boyfriend."

She turned away from me and started tapping on her keyboard. My stomach dropped. Whatever she was up to, it wouldn't be good.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking your Facebook page."

I didn't want to have her as a Facebook friend, but my dad had insisted. He thought it might give us a chance to interact more. Which up to this point, it clearly hadn't. I felt very grateful that there was no way for her to check my history to see whose pages I

had visited. I didn't need her to know that I went to Jake's page several times a day. I wasn't cyberstalking him. I was just very, very interested in what he was doing online.

And as I thought of Jake, I remembered too late the post he had put on my wall.

"Jake Kingston?" It felt so surreal to hear my mother say his name. Like I had these two different worlds that suddenly collided and blew up into a million pieces. She looked at my face and apparently my new resolution to stop hiding worked a little too well.

I think she clicked on his profile and went to his page. She stayed silent for several minutes, and I contemplated hanging up on her and running out the door. But she would call my dad and make this into a bigger deal than it was.

"Is he why you look that way?"

"What way?" I asked defensively.

"Like a prostitute."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I had never even kissed a guy, and my mom thought I looked like a hooker.

Weren't moms supposed to lie to you? To tell you how pretty you were even if you looked like garbage? Weren't they supposed to build you up and think everything you did was wonderful?

"I'm going to a dance, Pearl."

Apparently, tonight the part of evil girl trying to wreck my life would not be played

by Mercedes Bentley, but by her understudy. My mother.

She made a clicking noise. The one that signaled that I had reached a new level of shaming her. "This is not a boy who would want a girl like you. He would want only one thing from you. Don't waste your future on him."

My choices for my college and future literally had nothing to do with Jake. And as I sat there, I realized that I would never convince her of that fact. That I would never be good enough for her. That I would never, ever make her happy.

That made me sadder than I had been in a very long time.

"How much is my father paying you to talk to me?" It was a question I had always wanted to ask, and now there didn't seem to be any reason not to.

"What?" Pearl said.

"You heard me. How much?"

She confirmed my suspicions when she didn't deny it. She sat in front of me not because of concern, but for cash. Not only would I never be enough for her, she would never change. Despite all my hoping and wishing she was never going to magically turn into someone who loved or cared about me. I think all she felt for me was resentment. That she was forced to spend time with me. That I wasn't someone she could brag about to her snobby friends.

I couldn't ask her what I wanted to ask her. I wanted to ask if she'd ever loved me. I didn't ask because I already knew the answer. She might lie. She might not. Either way, I didn't want to hear what she had to say.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:56 am*

No wonder I was so messed up. I was pretty sure my mother didn't love me at all.

Ella stuck her head in my room long enough to say, "Time to go!" I heard her go down the hallway into the living room where my father told her how beautiful she looked.

"Was this her idea? Did she make you dress this way and tell you to go after this boy? She always was a stupid little thing, full of herself and her infantile ideas."

Red-hot fury exploded inside of me. "Do not talk about my sister that way."

Pearl looked shocked for just a second before she corrected me. "Stepsister."

"No, mysister. She's more family to me than you will ever be," I fumed back and slammed my laptop shut.

Let her call my dad or try to wreak whatever havoc she could.

I was done.Done.

\* \* \*

I refused to cry and I refused to tell anyone what had just happened. I put on my happy face and my cold meds finally kicked in. My head didn't hurt and I wasn't congested, but my throat was still scratchy.

Ella directed my dad away from the valet parking. As we pulled into the hotel's

parking lot, Ella handed me a ticket and told me to put my mask on. I held it in my hands for a moment before putting it over my eyes and tying it in back.

My conscience seemed to finally kick in. I had decided to be honest and stop hiding, and my first action where Jake was concerned? Pretending to be someone else.

"Isn't this like lying?"

"No. It's sort of like the truth, only better.

Then she told me to stay in the car for three minutes after they left. She didn't want people to see us together. Probably because, mask or no mask, there was no mistaking Ella for anyone else. She had put her hair up in a way that should have looked messy, but was instead elegant and perfect on her. Her bright blonde hair seemed to shimmer thanks to the silver sequin dress she wore. I watched as every guy in the parking lot turned to stare at her.

I waited five minutes to be safe. I so wanted Ella to be right and for Mercedes to be wrong. To find out that Jake wanted me and not Ella.

I got out of the car, closing the door quietly. Ella and her committee had chosen the Four Seasons Westlake Village Hotel. They'd had the event at a hotel in Beverly Hills last year, but some real desperate housewives from a television show tried to crash it, so this year they kept it closer to home. I could hear music and voices and in the distance, the sound of a waterfall. I worked hard to keep my ankles straight as I walked to the front entrance where a red carpet had been laid out under the archway. Large crowds of people had gathered outside, and I had to push my way through to get into the hotel.

The hotel had decorated the two-story lobby in neutral colors with dark, gleaming wood. A giant white rock sculpture stood in a rectangular pool filled with blue and

gray pebbles. It felt a little intimidating. A lot of people stood around here as well, drinking and laughing. A clerk must have noticed my apprehension, because he hurried over to tell me that my party was in the Grand Ballroom. I wondered how he knew until I remembered my mask.

I didn't need the directions, though. I could have just followed the music.

I saw several Malibu Prep alumni in masks entering a different room. I thought I spotted my dad, and so went in after him. I needed something familiar in that moment. The lounge was far more impressive than the lobby had been. A giant skylight with an enormous chandelier filled the ceiling. I saw the same dark wood, expensive furniture and a grand piano in the corner. Music played as the adults shuffled around a series of tables. I saw Ella and she gestured to me to keep quiet. I made my way over to her and pretended to look at the table while keeping my back to her.

"What is going on?"

"This is the silent auction. It's how we make most of our fundraising money."

I had been right about seeing my father. He had his arm around Mrs. Putnam. They looked unnaturally happy. "Ugh. Isn't six ex-wives enough?"

Ella followed my gaze. "Maybe this one will stick."

"It's pretty sad when your dad is giving Henry the Eighth a run for his money."

"I think it's different this time. He married my mom to give you a sister and a stepmom."

"I'm sure the fact that she was a bikini model had absolutely nothing to do with it."

Ella ignored what I said. "Every woman he's married since then has been to give you and me a stepmother. He was trying to take care of us. But I think Mrs. Putnam is just for him. He doesn't have to worry about us anymore. We're both leaving in a year and he'll be alone. I think it would be nice for him to have someone."

How had I missed that? I had always blamed my father for his revolving marriage door. I'd told him many times how selfish he had been. I had defended women I didn't even like as some kind of retribution for his inability to stay married. But now I realized that he had sacrificed a lot for my and Ella's happiness.

Even with Pearl my dad had just been trying to do the right thing. He'd wanted us to have a relationship, no matter what it cost him. He adored me and probably couldn't imagine that she didn't feel the same way. He put up with her and paid her for me.

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He noticed us and gave us a small smile. Ella had filled him in on the situation, so he made a point of looking everywhere else in the room except at us. He came over to a piece of paper near me and signed his name.

"What's that?" I couldn't help but ask under my breath.

"Jennifer's auctioning off one of her pieces." He put the pen down as he quietly answered. "She thought no one would buy it. And she doesn't care whether or not it sells. She creates just to create."

I could hear the amazement in his voice. He'd had too many competitive relationships. But my dad never cared about the money or the fame, even though everybody else did. He wouldn't care if he never sold another piece, either. He also created just to create.

He looked over at Mrs. Putnam and I recognized the look on my dad's face. He felt about her the way I felt about Jake. Only it looked like he didn't have all the drama and what-ifs.

I glanced down at the paper and nearly choked when I saw he had personally driven the price up to twenty thousand dollars.

I realized that Ella was right. He must really care about her. I made a silent promise to back off and to stop giving him a hard time. He could sing all the boy band songs he wanted. If he had another wedding, I would be a bridesmaid again and smile in the pictures and do my best to welcome her into our family. Maybe the seventh time really would be the charm.

Dad went back to Mrs. Putnam and I discovered that Ella had slipped away.

I wandered around the tables, looking at the prizes being offered, glancing at the names of the people bidding. But I didn't care about the sailboat or dream vacations to Europe or the luxury spa packages for Ella's save-the-whatevers cause. I was just trying to delay the inevitable.

I decided to woman up and head over to the ball. I turned in my ticket to the students working the door. They stamped my hand and waved me inside.

A rush of hot air and music slammed into me as I opened the double doors. The dance was in an enormous room, filled with ornate crystal chandeliers and red and gold carpeting. The wall had gold and dark wood paneling, and the red chairs with gold print matched the tables. A large place had been cleared for a dance floor, which was full of my classmates. The thumping bassline from an Usher and Justin Bieber song shook the walls. It felt like a sign, like Justin was cosmically telling me to go for it; to find somebody to love. Yes, I was grasping at straws, but give me a break. This was hard.

The theme of the dance apparently was, "We have a lot of money." The centerpieces and decorations made the room look like the inside of a French castle.

Ella and her committee had outdone themselves.

I scanned the room for Jake. I wanted to find him while I still felt courageous. Jake was the only one who could make me feel so off kilter. In most of the other areas of my life I said what I thought and did what I wanted and didn't worry about the consequences. But it was different with him. Because now I had something major to lose. It was different when he didn't know I was alive. I could live in my little fantasy world and never worry about losing him because I didn't have him. But now I could possibly have him and it made all the stakes seem so very high.

I reminded myself of what Ella had said. I couldn't preventatively worry about losing Jake.

Out on the dance floor, most of the boys had taken off their jackets to dance and everyone moved in a giant, pulsating group. I saw Ella and Trent on the dance floor and did a double take. Not only had she got him to come to a dance, she had him dancing to pop music. Oh, the mocking would be merciless and endless. I found it lifted my spirits. If Trent could dance to The Biebs, I could talk to Jake.

The lights were low and every guy looked alike. Black masks with tuxes or suits. Having failed to spot him among the dancers, I opted to check out the tables. I tried to stay in the shadows as I looked over each one.

I kept expecting someone to recognize me. To point me out so that I could be mocked. People looked at me, but no one said anything.

I walked toward the back, near the bar. They always had bars at these fundraising events. The alumni and parents seemed to give more money the more liquored up they got. They always carefully monitored the students to make certain that no one drank at the dance. Which never seemed to work given that most of them would just leave and go get smashed somewhere else.

Then I saw him.

Actually, I saw the back of his head. Which, as I have mentioned, I would know anywhere.

I willed him to turn around.

He did and my ankles wobbled dangerously.

He leaned against the bar in a very expensive tuxedo. He had on a plain black mask, like Zorro or the Lone Ranger. He looked like a younger and better-looking James Bond. My lungs constricted and my pulse pounded and the fan girl in me wanted to hold a poster above my head screaming how much I loved him. This would be so much easier if he were uglier.

I had been so caught up in Ella's scheme that I never really stopped to question its validity. In what universe would this plan actually work? It was like a bad sitcom or a cartoon. People didn't do things like this in real life. I mean, Bugs Bunny did things like this. But, to his credit, it always worked out for Bugs when he dressed up as a woman because he managed to trick everyone. Unfortunately for me though, Jake was no Elmer Fudd.

A hysterical panic welled up inside me. I couldn't do this! Jake would see right through this mask. Ella had forgotten to plan out for me what I should say when I found him. Probably because she only had to wiggle her little finger and boys came running. She didn't understand that I needed something to say or do. Some sort of game plan. My heels shook underneath me again. I needed to regroup. I just needed a chance to collect myself before I went over there and possibly made a total fool of myself.

I left the ballroom and found the girls' bathroom. There were several girls in there gossiping and putting on more makeup. Another girl sat in a stall sobbing while two of her friends comforted her, saying, "He's not even good enough for you." I sat down on the large couch and lay my head along the back. I closed my eyes. I took a couple of breaths. I could do this. I could.

One by one, the girls filed out, including the one with the crappy boyfriend. I was alone.

I stood up and went over to the sink. I untied my mask and used some tissue paper to



dab underneath my eyes. Some of my eye makeup had started to run. I pulled out my clutch to put on more lipstick. Hopefully I wouldn't get it on my face or teeth.

A toilet flushed behind me and before I could react, Mercedes Bentley walked out of the stall. She came over to the sink next to me and started washing her hands.

"Well, well, well. Mattie Lowe. I barely recognized you."

Crap, crap, crap, crap! I had to forget the whole plan. Mercedes would see me at the dance trying to talk to Jake and she would sabotage it somehow. I knew it. I gripped the sides of the sink.

"Did Ella do that to you?"

I ignored her question. "What are you doing here? Ms. Rathbone banned you from the dance."

"Sorry, I wasn't about to let my three thousand dollar couture dress go to waste."

She ran her hands under the water, looking me up and down. "Aw, look at you. Did you get all dressed up for Jake? You think he'll take one look at your little outfit and that'll be it? So sad." She rinsed her hands off and reached for a paper towel. "I saw Ella dancing. She looks really pretty tonight. It must be so hard for you to live with someone so beautiful when you look, well, like you. It's easy to see why Jake likes her and not you."

She threw the towel into the trash and smoothed out invisible wrinkles in her formfitting Vera Wang.

She seemed so calm and evil, but there was a look in her eye, something I totally recognized. I gasped.

"Ella was right. You are jealous. You like Jake, and you're jealous that he'd rather

spend time with me than with you."

"Oh please," she sniped back and patted her hair into place. "If I wanted Jake, I'd have him. You'd certainly never be competition. And as for why he spends time with you...I don't know, charity work? Instead of reading to the blind he's dating the clueless? I just figured he lost a bet or something."

My mind guiltily flashed to our poker game. This time she saw something in my expression that I hadn't meant to give away.

"Are you serious? I was totally kidding. He lost a bet?" She laughed. "You are so pathetic. You had to force him to spend time with you?"

This sensation in my stomach felt just like walking into the school's hallways and seeing my pictures of Jake up on the wall. Like Mercedes had seen something she shouldn't have and would use it to destroy me.

But I was tired of rolling over and playing nice while she went on her rampage. "I didn't have to force Jake to do anything. And you want to talk about pathetic? I'm not the one dating his best friend just to be near him."

Mercedes let out a small shriek of indignation.

"You lose, Mercedes. And you will never win. Maybe you're right. Maybe he does like Ella and not me. But he will never, ever like you."

She started toward me, and I wondered whether she planned on physically attacking me. I thought I could probably take her given that I had a good six inches on her (nine, if you counted the shoes).

"He'll never like you either. Just watch. See who he leaves with tonight. I guarantee it

will be your stepsister, and not you."

The bathroom door swung open and I smiled. I didn't need to fight Mercedes. Someone was about to take care of her for me.

"Hello, Ms. Rathbone."

"Oh, like I'm stupid enough to fall for that. Oh look, Ms. Rathbone's behind me," she mimicked in a stupid voice.

"I am standing behind you Ms. Bentley, and I'm wondering why it is that you are at this dance. As I recall, you and your father agreed that you would not be attending tonight."

What could she say? Mercedes stood there; her face had gone completely white.

Ms. Rathbone reopened the bathroom door. "Come with me, young lady. I am going to personally escort you off the premises and I'll be phoning your father to pick you up. And we'll be having another meeting on Monday morning to discuss your inability to follow simple directions."

Mercedes meekly obeyed, keeping her head down as she left. Ms. Rathbone looked over at me. "You look very lovely this evening, Ms. Lowe."

"Thank you," I said. The door swung shut behind her. I felt grateful not only for the compliment, but for the reprieve Ms. Rathbone just gave me. Mercedes wouldn't be ruining anything for me. I looked at my reflection and tried to shake off Mercedes's words. I told myself to remember what I had seen and felt earlier that evening when I saw the made over me. I had to have confidence. I tied my mask back on, determined to give this thing a shot.

It was now or never.

## Chapter 17

Jake hadn't moved, and still leaned against the bar. I walked up to the bar, a few people away from him. I took in several deep breaths, trying to psych myself up. I stood between two parents talking loudly about winning a trip to a palazzo in Italy. I watched as Steve Rojas tried to order a cocktail and the bartender carded him. The two men stopped talking about the Italian palace and started complaining about punk kids. I moved further away from them.

"What can I get for you?" the bartender had to yell at me. The music was really loud.

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"Oh, uh, I'll just have a ginger ale."

I tapped my fingers in time to the beat against the bar. I tried to sneak a look at Jake out of the corner of my eye, but my mask got in the way. I turned my head slightly to the right to see him.

He scanned the room. He was definitely looking for someone.

Could it be me?

I felt lightheaded, a little queasy and my palms were sweaty. But it wasn't from my cold.

The bartender offered me my drink, and I took it gratefully. Having something in my hand made me feel better. The ginger ale soothed my throat as the bubbles fizzed and popped.

My phone vibrated and I pulled it out of my black clutch. Ella had sent me a text message that said, "Good luck!" I looked around, but didn't see her. She could obviously see me though. Which wouldn't be too hard considering that in these heels I was ten feet tall.

I put the phone down on the bar just as someone came up on my right and stood way too close to me. The person encroaching on my personal space? Scott Martin. I tried to move as far away from him as I could without drawing attention to myself.

"Hey. How you doing?"

Was he actually talking to me? I looked behind me and didn't see anyone else looking at him.

"Excuse me? Are you talking to me?"

He looked me up and down, which was just as repulsive as it sounds. Then he leaned in close so that I could hear him better. "Yeah. You want to get out of here?"

"With you?" I clarified.

He nodded and gave me a leering grin.

I wished Mercedes could see him now. "Don't you have a girlfriend?" I shouted.

"I don't see a girlfriend here, do you?" He moved even closer to me and I tried not to shudder. He ran a finger down my bare arm. "I have a room upstairs."

Ugh. I jerked my arm away. "Not even if you were the last man on Earth and had Robert Pattinson's face."

His expression turned ugly and he loudly called me a choice name before walking away.

I should have been angry. Scott was the one who put that horrible line in Jake's speech. He was a disgusting jerk. But I wasn't angry. Instead, I felt a giddy hope. It made me believe that this could actually work. Scott hadn't recognized me and had even hit on me, which admittedly made me feel like I needed to shower for a week, but it might mean that Jake wouldn't recognize me either.

The music turned off, and there was a spotlight on the makeshift stage at the top of the room. Ms. Rathbone stepped up to the DJ's microphone. "Attention, everyone. If

everyone will please sit, it is time to announce the winners of our student government election, and then we will crown our Masquerade Ball king and queen."

A dull roar broke out as the dancing couples made their way back to their tables. This was my chance. I wanted to talk to Jake before the announcement was made. Either way, I had to know the truth.

He had his arm propped up on the bar and was still looking around the room. I stood next to him, playing with the straw in my ginger ale. I waited for him to notice me. To say something. He turned back my direction, and I could feel his gaze lingering on me. I smiled at him and he smiled back. I took that as my invitation to break the ice.

I'd never tried to get a boy to notice me this way before. I didn't know what to say. "Wanna make out?" seemed just a tad forward and desperate. I wished the earlier Scott method of just standing there and getting hit on would work again.

Ms. Rathbone started rattling off the winners' names from some of the "lesser" offices. I had to speak a little louder than normal to make myself heard. "Can I buy you a drink?"

His head turned slowly toward me. "It's an open bar, I'm underage, and I don't drink."

He had said it so dismissively. I don't even know why I said it. Obviously it was an open bar. I was holding a free drink in my hand. And I knew he didn't drink. It was part of his whole "I'm an athlete and my body is a temple" thing he had going on (a temple I would really enjoy worshipping at, I might add). I had thought it would sound sophisticated and seductive. Instead, it was just stupid. Especially since I didn't ever drink either.

But maybe that would work in my favor. Mattie knew Jake didn't drink. Exotic me didn't. It might throw him off track.



I tried again. "I'm, um..." My mind seriously went blank. I couldn't even think of a fake name. So I said the first thing that popped into my head. "I'm Tilly. What's your name?" I had to hope that Ella had never called me Tilly in front of Jake. She was usually pretty careful ever since I'd made an enormous deal out of her slipping up when we were eleven.

"Jake." He turned to look at me, and it was disconcerting. He had just sort of glanced at me before, but now he looked at me like he knew me. "Have we met before?"

"I don't think so," I said. I still felt bad about the lying thing. But I had to know. He turned his gaze away from me again.

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"Do you want to dance?" Another stupid question, considering there was no music playing. I wanted to kick myself.

"I'm sorry," he said, not bothering to even look at me. "I'm looking for someone. She should have been here by now."

My heart leapt in anticipation. Ella was right. Jake was looking for me.

"There she is. Excuse me."

My mouth dropped open as I watched him make his way through the crowd. He had blown cute, hot me off for old me. Ella was right! But wait. How could that be if I was standing right next to him? Did he think he had spotted me? Could there actually be someone else here that would somewhat resemble how I ordinarily looked? People stepped aside and with a sinking heart, I saw where he was heading.

Straight to Ella in her shiny dress.

Of course. Mercedes was right. My mom was right. I was so used to disappointment where Jake was concerned that I didn't feel nearly as devastated as I expected to. I mean, I still wanted a blackhole to spontaneously form and swallow me whole. I never wanted to go back to school again. I would probably go home, lie on the bathroom floor and cry for hours. But it hadn't quite hit me yet. I felt numb.

I hated that Mercedes was right. I hated that Jake had played me and that he was in love with Ella. I hated that I had fallen for his act like a completely clueless moron.

"And I am pleased to announce the winner of the race for student council president. It was extremely close, but our winner is...Mattie Lowe!"

A cheer went up from the audience, but all I could see was Jake towering over Ella, and her smiling up at him. My heart hurt.

"Where is Mattie? Ms. Lowe? Give us a wave!"

I couldn't stand there all night staring at both of them.

I found the closest exit and let myself through the doors. Fortunately, it led straight outside, and I gulped in the cold night air. I ripped off my stupid heels and walked to the parking lot.

I couldn't even be happy that I won.

Because while I had won the presidency, I had lost the boy.

\* \* \*

I had the valet call me a cab. Once I got home, I threw my shoes on the floor and unzipped my dress. I realized that I still had my mask on. I ripped it off, and heard the little beads bouncing on the floor. In the kitchen I found my dad's secret Ben & Jerry stash and took a pint of chocolate chip cookie dough back to my room.

I sat in the middle of my bed and wiped my tearstained cheeks with the back of my hand.

I wondered how anyone could be so pathetic. I didn't even want to eat my ice cream. I looked over at my sketchbook and picked it up. I put it back down. I didn't even want to draw, and I had never been that depressed before. I just wanted to cry more.

So I did.

I didn't know how many hours passed before I heard the front door slam. I hadn't bothered to turn on the lights and was lying in the dark, crying and berating myself for having been such an idiot.

"Tilly!" Ella sounded furious.

I didn't answer. She stormed into my room, throwing on the light switch. "What happened?"

Like she didn't know. Like she hadn't flirted with Jake and smiled at him like he was the only guy in the room. Not that I could really blame her. He had been her boyfriend. I wondered what had happened with Trent. Wondered if he was hurting as much as I was. I should call him. But I hoped if I just stayed still that maybe she'd think I was asleep and leave me alone.

No chance of that. She came around to the opposite side of the bed so she could see my face. "I'm waiting."

"Jake didn't want me." I said dully.

"Duh, that was the entire point."

I sat up. "No, I mean he didn't want Mattie. He told me that he was looking for someone. And then he saw you and the crowd parted like he was Moses and they were the Red Sea and you had your little perfect moment there in the middle of the dance floor."

She looked incredulous. "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

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She picked up one of my pillows and started smacking me with it. "For someone so smart, you can be so dumb."

Yes, I knew this. It was what I had been crying about for the last few hours.

She dropped the pillow on the ground. "He came up to me because he was looking for you, you big idiot. We were both looking for you and couldn't find you. I called you and called you to tell you."

"What?" I was so tired of my emotional Jake rollercoaster. I didn't have any desire to get back on. But Ella made me hope.

"Why didn't you answer your phone?"

I realized that I didn't have my purse or my phone. "I think I left it on the bar at the dance."

She sat down sadly on my bed. "Why can't you believe in yourself, Tilly? Why can't you see what an awesome person you are? Because everyone else can."

My tears welled up again at the defeated tone in her voice. I was not awesome or amazing. Deep down, I knew that I was basically unlikable and unlovable. It made sense that I would feel that way—my own mom didn't even love me. How could that not affect me? How could I ever see myself as anything other than a rejected loser?

"Because it's easier to believe the bad stuff."

"Jake likes you. He told me. He was going to tell you. And you ran away. Why?"

"I just couldn't believe that he would ever like me. Even all dressed up I still felt like a fraud. Like nothing with me is real."

"It is very real." She let out a long sigh. "I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed."

I wanted to stop her, call her back and have her convince me that she was right and I was wrong.

But I didn't say anything.

Because it was time for me to make up my own mind. I had let myself be caught up in everyone else's opinions. Who cared what my mom thought? What Mercedes Bentley thought? I realized all the power I had given them over me. I'd let them control me. Ella was always saying how strong I was—but I was weak enough to let mean people push me around and alter my perceptions. I'd let them interfere with the one thing I had wanted more than anything else since I was nine years old. I had let them take it away from me without a fight.

What if I could conquer all my stupid insecurities? What if I could shut out every other voice, including my own scared one, and could just let things be?

I thought of the past couple of weeks. Of all the times I'd talked to Jake.

Without all the other sounds in my head, I could see what had really been.

Jake hadn't lied to me. He was interested in me. He had tried to kiss me. He had taken me on a date. He had wanted to be with me at the dance tonight.

And I had been horrible and confusing and mean to him. What must he think of me? I

knew how awful it made me feel when he was mean and angry to me.

What was wrong with me?

I'd had my one shot with him, and I had totally destroyed it.

I lay back down and stared up at my ceiling, too sad and tired to even get up and turn off the light.

Ella came back in my room a little while later, dressed in her pajamas. "I just got a text from you."

"From me?"

"From your phone. It's from Jake."

My hand shook as I took her phone. "How does he have my phone?"

"I told him what you looked like at the dance. He must have gone back to the bar and found it."

So despite his cool act, he had noticed me. I must have caught his eye. But he didn't make a move on me like Scott did. Because he wanted Mattie.

I clicked on the message.



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Ella told me everything. Please come over and let me explain.

"You told him everything?" My voice got high-pitched.

"Yeah, I did." Her eyes flashed at me. "I know how stubborn you are and Jake doesn't deserve to miss out on the chance to really know you. Because you are incredible, Tilly Lowe. You deserve to be happy too. I really think you and Jake could work out. You guys need to talk. Let him tell you himself how he feels. And this time, believe what he says."

She turned to go, but turned around, her arms crossed. "You can be as mad at me as you want, because I would do it all over again."

She left her phone with me. Probably so I could answer him.

What did I say? Sorry for tricking you? Sorry for not listening to you? For not believing in you? For letting stupid people control me? I texted him back.

It's too late.

After I'd pushed send, I realized how that sounded. I meant it was too late time-wise, not that it was too late for us to have a possible relationship. So I sent a follow up.

Tomorrow, maybe?

A few seconds later I had my answer.

I will see you tomorrow.

## Chapter 18

I slept better than I had in a long time. It was eleven o'clock when I finally woke up. I also felt about a thousand times better. I think I had cried my cold away. I pulled my dress off and stumbled to the bathroom. I stood in front of the sink and studied my reflection. I looked like a melted clown. I scrubbed the makeup off my face.

I heard the dinging noise of Ella's phone. I ran back to my room. There was another text from Jake.

Told my dad last night about the election and college.

He was not happy. When are you coming?

Having just told my own parents about my secret life and future plans, I could perfectly imagine how he was feeling.

Will be there soon.

I threw on jeans and grabbed a black t-shirt from my closet. I went back to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I pulled all the hairpins out and brushed my hair up into a ponytail.

"Good morning, Madam President."

I jumped. Ella startled me. "Hey."

"Sorry for being so hard on you last night."

I turned around to face her. "No, I needed that swift kick in the butt. I'm going to see Jake."

She struggled to hide her smile. "Want me to help you get ready?"

"No. I just want to go as me." I turned back and put on some mascara and then lip-gloss. "How do I look?"

"Gorgeous."

She was full of it, but I loved her for it. I put the mascara and gloss back in the drawer. "Did Jake seem upset last night about losing the election?"

"Not really. But speaking of the election, I have to confess something."

For a minute I wondered whether she had stuffed the ballot box. It would certainly explain how I had managed to get elected. But then she said, "One of the reasons I wanted you to win so much was because I knew Jake could never respect a girl who couldn't beat him at something."

I felt relieved and impressed again at the lengths my sister was willing to go to for me. "You are nefarious."

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"I know. Okay, I need my phone back. Trent and I have plans today."

"Of the smooching kind?"

She giggled. "Like you're one to talk."

Oh my Buddha, I could have smooching plans today. Stop it, I told myself. One thing at a time. I got Ella's phone for her.

"You're not going to wear your glasses?"

Out of instinct, I reached up to touch my face and was surprised to see that I wasn't wearing my favorite accessory. I hadn't even thought about putting them back on. I hadn't missed them. I didn't need them anymore. "No more masks."

I got the car keys from my father, who had the decency to not ask me what had happened last night, and the British GPS lady helped me drive over to Jake's house.

It wasn't actually a house. A house would have fit into one small corner of the castle Jake apparently called home. I was not exaggerating. He had actual turrets on his house with gray stone all over the walls. It had huge windows and the biggest front door I had ever seen in my life. I wondered if he'd ever had a peasants with pitchforks problem. It surprised me that they had failed to install a moat. I pulled up into the semi-circle driveway and parked.

I stood at the enormous door for an embarrassing amount of time before I summoned up the courage to ring the bell.

I heard Jake saying something. I think he was telling me to hold on. I could hear his dog barking in the backyard, but he stopped after a few seconds.

Jake finally opened the door, and seemed a little out of breath. He was wearing a long sleeved button up shirt, with the arms rolled up to his elbows. He had on a sweater vest and jeans. It reminded me of something, but he was too pretty for me to think clearly.

"I'm glad you're here. Come in."

I stayed put. "Are your parents home?" I was worried that they might blame me for Jake's plans the way that Pearl had blamed him. I wasn't in the mood to be drawn and quartered.

"My dad took the jet out to Mexico this morning with my mom. He decided he needed a weekend vacation away from me and my 'poor decisions.'"

I heard music coming from somewhere as I stepped into the foyer. "I know what you're going through. I told my parents about my manga and college."

"Oh yeah? How did that go?"

"My mother reacted pretty much how I expected. I don't think she and I will be talking anytime soon. My father was sort of amazing about it. He knows a guy who knows a guy who used to work for Tokyopop and might be able to use his connections to help me get an internship."

"So, maybe I was right and you should have told him sooner?"

I rolled my eyes while he laughed. "Yes, you were right. I should have."

Jake's hands were in his pockets. "Want to go sit down?" I nodded and he led me into a small formal room with a couch and two chairs. I sat in one chair; he sat across from me.

"Do you need anything to drink?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks." What I needed was for him to get on with it before my heart exploded in anticipation. He had said he wanted to talk.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you last night, but I like your hair that color. It looks nice. Not that I didn't like it before. I did. I just like it now, too." He sounded very un-Jake-like. He sounded nervous.

"Thanks."

"I can't believe I didn't recognize you. I wish I had known it was you."

Well, that would have defeated the entire purpose. "Why?"

"Because we would have had fun." His perfect smile nearly blinded me. I looked out the window for a second before looking back at him. Part of me had expected him to be angry. He had every right to be mad. I had basically set out to trick him. I didn't know exactly what Ella said to him, but whatever it was, it worked. If he was willing to forgive and forget, I should be willing to do the same.

"Hey, I have something for you." He got up and walked out of sight, returning a minute later. He had my phone. Right as he got to me, the phone slipped out of his hands and landed near my feet. I reached forward to get it, but Jake knelt down and picked the phone up. He handed it to me, and the sight of him took my breath away. I thanked him and took it with shaking hands. He wasn't having me try on a glass slipper, but for some strange reason, I finally understood exactly why Cinderella ran

off with the prince after having only known him for one night. Having a hot guy kneeling in front of you is sort of intoxicating.

He got up and returned to his chair. He exhaled loudly while he rubbed his hands over his pants legs. He smiled again. "Okay. I asked you over here because I, uh, wanted to talk to you. So, first off, you know I didn't write that speech yesterday, right?"

I did know it. "Yes."

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He let out a small laugh. "Sorry, I'm a little nervous. I've never really done anything like this before. I feel like all I keep doing is trying to explain myself to you. So I'm just going to put all my cards on the table. Good enough?"

So he was nervous. I nodded, not daring to breathe.

"Do you remember when I ran into you coming out of the bathroom at your house?"

Vividly. In Technicolor detail. Of all the things I had expected him to say, that was definitely not it. "Vaguely."

"You were taking a shower and we ran into each other in the hallway?" He looked a little embarrassed. Oh my Buddha, could he be any cuter? I wanted to melt.

"Anyway, I realized you were this like, hot chick, and it wasn't cool to lust after you when I was dating your sister."

"There was lusting?" my voice squeaked.

He had a cocky smirk. "There was definite lusting. Which is why I was a jerk to you. I had to keep you at arm's length. Especially since I also thought you were dating that Trent guy. It's not okay to move in on another guy's girl."

Jake thought I had been dating Trent? What? Before I had time to process that information, he kept going.

"But then you just, I don't know, got under my skin. I kept thinking about you, even



when I didn't want to. You are the only girl who didn't do everything I wanted her to. At first I hated it, but then I kind of liked it."

His eyes were so, so intense. I hung on to his every word. "You make me push myself and you don't take my BS. You're smart and funny and pretty and into the same things as me. I really like you."

I was so flustered and excited I didn't know what to focus on. He liked me? He thought I was pretty? And smart? And funny? He was attracted to me? He wanted to be with me?

"Come here. I have something else for you." I only had one phone. What was he talking about? He stood up and held out his hand to me. I put my hand in his and got up. Electricity and warmth sparked between us where we touched. The tingles threatened to consume me.

I would have followed him to the ends of the earth. But he only walked me into another room, standing in front of two large sliding wooden doors.

"I wanted to do something to show you that I am all in."

He slid open the doors. There, in the middle of a long, wooden dining room table big enough to seat twenty, was a round birthday cake with candles. It took me a minute to realize what he had done. He had recreated the scene from the end of *Sixteen Candles*.

To say I was stunned and overwhelmed and amazed would have been selling the experience short. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Just get up here with me."

The music I heard was coming from his iPod. It was a loop of "If You Were Here,"

the same song playing at the end of the movie. He helped me climb on a chair and then up on to the table. I sat down cross-legged and he sat across from me with the cake in between us.

I sat there, staring at his beautiful face, touched beyond words by what he had done. He really, really did like me to go through all this effort. I wanted to say something but couldn't think of anything.

"It was the best I could do on short notice." He looked boyish, like he hoped he had made me happy.

"Shut up. It's perfect. I can't believe you did this for me." I squeezed his hand, and he held it tightly. "But it's not my birthday."

"I know. But I'm doing something here." He let go of me to pick up a lighter. He started lighting the candles.

He was doing something all right. He was making sure that I would never possibly ever love anyone the way I loved him. This was beyond anything I could have imagined. I couldn't believe that I had almost missed out on this. I made a silent promise to myself to never let anyone else get inside my head. To keep my own insecurities at bay. To always believe in love and magic.

With all the candles lit, he looked back up at me. "Well?"

I smiled at him. "I'm all in, too."

He grinned back at me. "Make a wish."

I knew my line.

"It already came true."

"I'm glad you came over, Tilly."

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I thought he might be teasing me about the name I'd used at the dance the night before. "Oh, that's just a nickname my family uses for me. Only people who love me get to call me Tilly."

He reached across the cake to cup the side of my face with his hand. "Then I guess I'll be calling you Tilly."

And then, just like the movie, he leaned across the cake and kissed me. An actual, real kiss, and not the weird lip-mashing thing I'd done at a party once.

A curl your toes, steal your breath, heart-pounding, stomach-dropping, lose track of time, perfect kind of kiss.

\* \* \*

I let go of my List of Grievances given my current circumstances. I made a List of Rights instead.

Right the First: Jake Ryan Kingston was my boyfriend. MY BOYFRIEND!!! Sorry, it just never got old saying it. He made me feel beautiful and smart and like I could conquer the entire world. It was amazing. And I got to ride in his car every single day.

Right the Second: Scott declined his win for vice-president since Ms. Rathbone banned Mercedes from being on student council given her inappropriate behavior by showing up at the dance. So I got to appoint my own cabinet. Jake, Ella and Trent joined me and helped me get hearings with the board on the lunch, parking and

uniform issues. Nothing had happened yet, but we were all hopeful. It also changed my standing at school. Where I had been mostly invisible before, people I hadn't spoken to in years came up to tell me that they had voted for me and hoped that I could change all the things I wanted to change. It made me more determined to get the board to listen to us.

Right the Third: Ella and I became closer than ever. This was helped by the fact that she finally saw the wisdom of my philosophy in not threatening Carlotta's job. In addition to spending less time cleaning, she dropped half of her volunteer work and gave up her job. I felt sad that I'd spent so much time being envious of her when all she wanted was to have a relationship with me. I was sorry for the time we wasted, but glad that we were in a better spot now. We didn't double date or anything though. That would be way too weird. She also convinced me to add some color to my wardrobe and to give Andre a second chance. I was actually digging the red hair.

Right the Fourth: Things with my dad had improved too. Mrs. Putnam, I mean, Jennifer, made him spend more time with us as a family. She got him eating right and exercising and leaving his studio. I told him what happened with Pearl, and he was not forcing either one of us to spend any more time Skyping. I think things got better because I finally understood what it meant to be really in love and I would never want to take that away from him. Because, as we could all tell, what he had with Jennifer was the real thing. We also came to an understanding about Pearl. He understood that I was better off without her in my life, and I understood that I would not be responsible for my actions if he ever tried to make me talk to her again.

Right the Fifth: Ella had been right about Mercedes wanting Jake. If living well was the best revenge, I had revenged all over Mercedes stupid Bentley. I could see how insane it made her that Jake and I were together, despite all her fake smiles.

Right the Best: Jake's dad made good on his threat to cut Jake off financially if he didn't go to Yale. So Jake took the full-ride baseball scholarship to UC Santa Ana. (Although after several weeks his father, despite still wanting him to go to Yale, had

come around to respecting Jake's "personal drive.") I also received my acceptance letter to UC Santa Ana. The head of the art department wrote me a personal note to tell me that he was looking forward to working with me as he had enjoyed my portfolio. I suspected my father had something to do with that. But I was going to study what I loved and for the next four years, I'd be doing it alongside the guy I loved. There were no words to describe what that level of hope and excitement feels like.

Which made me finally understand why they lived happily ever after in those fairytales. Because there was a lot of happy to be had with a boy who loved you and kissed you like nothing else in the world mattered.

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