

A young man and woman are shown in a close-up, smiling and looking at each other. The woman is on the left, with long dark hair, wearing a silver halter top. The man is on the right, wearing a grey t-shirt. They are both smiling broadly, showing their teeth. The background is a textured, patterned fabric.

EMILY LOWRY

THE ONLY
BOY OFF
LIMITS

A HALLISBURG PREP NOVEL

THE ONLY BOY OFF LIMITS

HALLISBURG PREP #3

EMILY LOWRY

Cover Photography by
JACOB LUND VIA CANVA PRO



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A THANK YOU FROM EMILY

I wanted to take a moment to say thank you to my readers — without you, none of this would be possible.

I truly appreciate every single review, Instagram post and blog shout-out that you have given me. Every email, message and kind word from you has brightened my day, every time. You are the true MVPs!

To my ARC team, thank you for your endless encouragement and incredibly helpful feedback. I value each and every one of you.

For any of you who'd like to connect with me on social media, you can find me on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [Tiktok](#) - I love nothing more than engaging with my reader community, so please stop by and say hi!

Now, to write my next love story. Stay tuned!

Lots of love always,

XO, Emily

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Want to read an extra scene featuring Mia, Sutton, and your other Hallisburg Prep favorites? Join my VIP Club to receive your FREE excerpt! The scene takes place at the end of Mia and Sutton's story.

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AVERY

Winter Break. It was never going to be as exciting as the infamous Spring Break parties you see on the social media accounts of chart-topping DJs, but it was surely still meant to be *fun*. Right?

Wrong.

I was a senior in high school, just five months away from graduation. And I was spending my New Year's Eve alone, sitting in my bedroom and counting down the days for vacation to be over so I could return to my boarding school, Hallisburg Prep.

Arie, my twin brother, flew to New York two days ago to visit his girlfriend, Quinn, for the remainder of the holidays. Mom had taken off to a "healing retreat" in Santa Barbara, and I hadn't heard from her. Dad was... well, who knew where my father was these days. Last time I checked in with him, he was in the Maldives with his latest girlfriend.

As for me?

Well, I usually didn't mind being alone. I liked the peace and quiet of my own company. But tonight, I'd wanted to be somewhere else. I really had.

Staying home was the selfless thing to do.

I peeked at the brand-new calendar for next year that I'd tacked to my wall, taking comfort in the sight of the red Sharpie heart drawn around January 4th. Just four more days until I was back at school—a place that felt way more like

home than the cavernous house I grew up in here in San Francisco. Back to my friends, my classes and cheerleading.

I pulled my bag of popcorn closer, then picked up the TV remote. Flipped my large flat-screen on for company. The house was eerily quiet now that the staff had gone home for the evening, and the echoey silence spooked me if I thought about it too much.

Buzz!

Beside me, my phone lit up with a notification from our school's messaging app, HP Chat. I opened a picture of my dorm mate, Mia, and her boyfriend, Sutton. They were standing outside a gorgeous log cabin, bundled up in huge winter coats and hats, and smiling maniacally.

EmDash: Happy New Year from the slopes of Breckenridge!

BrAvery: Happy New Year, Mia! Looks beautiful there :)

EmDash: What are you up to tonight?

I snapped a picture of my TV-and-popcorn setup and sent it back to my friend.

BrAvery: Wild night ahead of me.

EmDash: Wait, why aren't you at the party?

I bit my lip. Decided to feign ignorance.

BrAvery: What party?

EmDash: Sutton just spoke to Cruz. He's at a party with everyone from your old middle school. I just assumed you'd be there.

Busted.

I'd turned the invitation down a few days ago when Jasper asked me to be his date for the evening. Jasper and I had been on a couple of dates over the holiday season. He was a grade-A hottie. A college freshman. And he was a nice guy... a nice guy with great hair and an impressive knowledge of indie films. He could even speak French, for goodness' sakes! Why

wouldn't I want to spend New Year's at a party with a guy like that?!

It was a good freaking question.

I rolled my eyes at my phone screen, trying my best to swallow the stab of anxiety that hit me in the chest.

Deep down, I knew that I chose to be alone because, as perfect as Jasper was on paper, I couldn't conjure up a single drop of excitement at the thought of another date with him. Especially not on a holiday like New Year's, with the fancy clothes, the rooftop setting, the fireworks at midnight. It was all too darn... romantic. I wasn't feeling sparks with Jasper, and it wasn't fair to lead him on. I wasn't that person.

And I couldn't very well break things off with him on a holiday, could I? I wasn't a total monster.

I'd do it tomorrow, like a decent human being. And then, I'd be back at square one.

Sigh.

I'd been dreaming of my whirlwind first love since before freshman year. I wanted the Zac Efron and Vanessa Hudgens in *High School Musical* kinda love. Peter and Lara Jean from *To All The Boys I've Loved Before*. I wanted to have the ultimate romantic high school experience. I was seventeen—almost eighteen—years old, and time was running out.

Sure, guys flirted with me and texted me, and I'd flirt with and text them back. I'd even go on dates here and there. But I'd never had a hopeless crush, nor felt a single butterfly or stomach flip or skin tingle. The truth was, I was starting to think that maybe I would *never* have those kinds of feelings.

I couldn't talk to my friends about it. Mia had Sutton, Quinn had Arie, Rachel crushed on a new guy every week, and while Taylor and Grayson weren't together yet, everyone knew they were made for each other. I, on the other hand, found myself choosing popcorn and my bed over a hot guy.

But how on earth could I explain all that over text?

That question had a simple answer: I couldn't.

So I opted for sarcasm instead.

BrAvery: As if I'd voluntarily choose to be anywhere that Cruz was going to be!

My HP Chat screen name wasn't "BrAvery" for nothing. It was my motto in life. When in doubt, put on a brave face. And Mia clearly bought my sassy attitude, because she sent back a laughing emoji in response.

I clicked my phone screen off.

Cruz Delgado was my brother's best friend and, aside from Arie and me, the only kid from our neighborhood middle school to go to Hallisburg Prep. He was probably having a wonderful New Year's being the life and soul of the party, celebrating this big night with his long term girlfriend, Naomi.

I knew I *could* still go. Show up and try my best to convince myself that I was falling for Jasper.

Maybe some people would buy it.

But Cruz would know. Cruz always knew.

And I was sure he'd call B.S. in front of everyone, and do so with a smile.

He was annoying like that.

So the silver lining of being home alone tonight: at least I didn't have to see Cruz.

Another silver lining: I could eat all the junk food I wanted. And what I wanted right now was cereal. You know, that sweet, junk food cereal. It was my kryptonite.

Back at school, I had a system: Froot Loops on Mondays, Frosted Flakes on Tuesdays, followed by Lucky Charms, Cap'n Crunch and Nesquik to round out the week. Weekends were for pancake brunches at Disco Sal's Diner.

But unfortunately for me, I wasn't at school right now, and my mother only kept hideous, cardboard-textured, health-food cereal at our house. She disapproved of refined sugar and gluten and artificial flavorings. But she was gone this evening, and there was a CVS just a few blocks away.

I hopped out of bed, upending my empty popcorn bucket in the process, and pulled on my cheer hoodie over my shortie pajamas. Shoved my ankle-socked feet into a pair of Nike slider sandals and bounded down the stairs two at a time.

If I couldn't have a whirlwind romance on New Year's Eve, at least I could still have a date with good ol' Cap'n Crunch.

CRUZ

*D*on't get me wrong, I loved a party as much as the next guy.

More than the next guy. "Party" was my middle name.

Well, not actually. My real middle name was "Daniel", after my father. But it should have been "Party".

Until tonight. Because even though it was New Year's Eve, and this party was on a rooftop with ocean views and featured a well-known DJ and an endless supply of gourmet pizza, I was in zero mood to be here.

"Cruz!" Naomi tugged on the arm of my button-down shirt. "Are you even paying attention?"

I blinked down at my girlfriend. Her perfectly made-up face was pinched, and I shook my head sheepishly. I felt bad. She'd flown back from her family's cabin in Park City specially to spend New Year's with me. Or here at this party. I wasn't sure which, to be honest. Things had been weird between us for a while, but I knew my current inattention was doing nothing to help the situation. "Sorry, Nomes, I tuned out there for a sec."

My girlfriend of four years sighed heavily. Adjusted a sparkly strap on her dress. "I said, we should go and talk to Alexis and Phillip. He just got into Harvard early decision, you know. I want to pick his brains about his application."

It was my turn to sigh. Of all the people we'd gone to middle school with, Phillip and Alexis were not my favorites. Alexis loved gossiping, and never had anything nice to say

about anyone, and her boyfriend, Phillip, was a total snoozefest. Honestly. The guy would drone on and on about his West Hampton summer home and his stock market investments... none of which I cared about in the least.

But they were Naomi's friends, so I usually played nice. Pretended to be interested in designer polo shirts and whatnot. Tonight, though, I couldn't face it. I had a headache coming on, and the scene from my parents' kitchen earlier was still playing over and over in my mind. By now, their own New Year's party was probably in full swing, and they'd probably already forgotten our entire conversation.

"Oh, sure." I gave Naomi's hand a squeeze and forced my voice to sound pleasant and casual. "Why don't you head over and I'll grab us both a drink?"

She tapped her foot impatiently. "Don't be long, Cruz. You could do with talking to Phillip. If you have any hope of getting into an Ivy, you need to start getting serious about your future. Especially after that stunt you pulled before break."

Not only did I have no hope of going to an Ivy League school, I also had no intention of going to an Ivy League school. In any iteration of the metaverse, ever. I wanted to take a gap year. Travel the world. And then, I wanted to stay right here on the west coast for college. Naomi knew this, but she refused to acknowledge it. Insisted that I'd change my mind and apply to Yale for pre-law instead.

"It wasn't a stunt, Naomi. You know that."

"What I *know*, Cruz, is that you flunked your psychology class because you skipped your final exam. Like, who does that?" Naomi's mouth was pressed in a line, and for a moment, I barely recognized the girl in front of me.

She looked at me for a minute longer, and I looked back, unsure what she wanted me to say. Did she want an apology? A time machine so I could go back and do things differently?

But the truth was, I wouldn't have done things any differently. My little sister needed me, and I was there for her. No questions asked, no explanation needed. Even if Lucia was

in the wrong sometimes, I loved her and I would always try to protect her.

“I’ll retake it this semester.” I shrugged. “No big deal. It’s not like I’m not going to graduate.”

A stony silence stretched between us until she finally said, “Do you actually take anything seriously? Ever?”

A dull ache continued to throb behind my temples. One part of me wanted to spill my guts, tell her that Lucia was acting out lately. And while I, myself, had never been opposed to breaking a rule or two, my sister’s behavior was worrying me. She was constantly out past curfew and hanging out with kids way older than herself.

I’d chalked it up to a bit of standard light teenage rebellion... until the last week of classes last semester. Luce called me in a panic, saying that she’d skipped school with some friends and was now wandering Valencia Street alone and lost. I had to go get her. Of course I did.

Tonight, I’d finally broached what really happened that day with our parents—told them I was worried about her. But they brushed it off. Told me Lucia’s behavior was nothing to be concerned about, that I stop worrying about what my sister was doing and focus on my schoolwork instead. It was almost like they didn’t believe me. Thought I was making excuses for failing my class or something.

And while one part of me wanted to tell Naomi all of this, another, bigger part of me was convinced that she wouldn’t understand. Might even agree with my parents.

So I swallowed, forced a smile, and cheerily said, “Sure I do. I take hydration extremely seriously. A water a day keeps the doctor away, as they say. Which is why I should go get us those beverages. La Croix for you, right?”

There was a flicker in her eyes—disappointment, maybe?—before she nodded stiffly.

“To the hydration station I go.” I took off towards the food table, needing a moment to myself anyway.

As I grabbed a can of clementine La Croix and a Sprite, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I took it out to answer it, in case it was Lucia. She was downtown tonight for a concert, and I was half expecting another “pick me up” call.

“What’s up?” I was almost surprised at how steady, warm and carefree my voice sounded.

“Happy almost new year, bro!” my best friend, Arie, cheered into the phone.

My shoulders relaxed and I laughed. “Same to you and Quinn. You having fun in the Big Apple?”

“We’re gonna watch the ball drop at midnight. Quinn said it’s for tourists, but I am technically a tourist here, so she had no excuse not to humor me.”

“Well, happy touring.” I chuckled. Before he got together with Quinn, Arie used to have a new female interest on a weekly basis. The opposite of me, really—Naomi and I had been together through all of high school. Quinn made Arie turn over a new leaf. “Say hi to Quinnie from me.”

“Hi, Cruz!” I heard her yell. “What are you doing for New Year’s?”

“I’m at a party with the old crowd from home.” I couldn’t even try to make myself sound excited about it.

“Is Avery there?” Quinn asked.

I glanced around the crowded rooftop, looking for Arie’s twin sister’s telltale sweep of long, black hair. “Um, I don’t think so.”

Arie swore quietly. “I better call her, see what’s going on...” He trailed off, not needing to explain. I’d been best friends with Arie long enough to know that Mrs. Jensen did not handle the holidays well. He was probably worried that Avery was dealing with their mom’s latest festive meltdown.

I cleared my throat. “Want me to check on her?”

“No, don’t do that. Stay at the party.”

“Okay.” I knew Arie meant what he said; I could always take him at his word. “I’ll text you if she turns up, okay?”

“Thanks, dude. Happy New Year.”

“You too.”

The line went dead, and I felt a tap on my shoulder. Turned to see Naomi behind me. She crossed her arms and looked at me sternly. “Who was that?”

I blinked at her cold tone. “I thought you were talking to Phillip. I was about to come find you.”

“Cruz, you left to fetch me a drink ten minutes ago. I’ve been waiting.”

“Sorry, Nomes. That was Arie.”

“So the person you were offering to leave the party to check on just now was Avery Jensen?” Naomi’s voice darkened.

“Yes. Arie was worried about her. I was just being a good friend to him.”

“What about being a good boyfriend to me, Cruz?”

What was this? And where was it coming from? I thought I was a good boyfriend to Naomi... We’d maintained a long distance relationship through the good times and the bad, and we both put in the work to do so. I texted her good morning and goodnight every day. Flew out to see her any chance I got. Sent gifts and cards.

I shook my head, confused. “I’m not following.”

“You should be.”

I didn’t reply. I had the feeling that anything I said or did right now would be wrong in Naomi’s eyes. My phone buzzed again, and I looked down to see an HP Chat message from Arie. I opened the message.

BallerStatus: Avery’s fine and so is Mom. Apparently, she’s at a spa somewhere and Ave’s just being lame and staying home tonight.

I smiled at my screen, both because I was relieved to hear that Mrs. Jensen was okay, and also because if a social butterfly like Avery was at home on NYE, there had to be a story behind it.

CruzControl: Roger that.

I looked up to see Naomi watching me. When we made eye contact, she pinched the bridge of her nose, like she was in pain. “You can’t take your own future seriously, but you’ll drop what you’re doing in an instant just to do Arie and Avery a favor?”

I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands. I was exhausted. My dressy clothes were uncomfortable, and my hair was stiff with product. I just wanted to go home, put sweatpants on, watch TV, and forget about my family issues and my girlfriend being constantly disappointed in me.

I didn’t like serious discussions at the best of times—in the Delgado household, they never seemed to get you anywhere—and right now was a particularly bad time for one. But I owed it to Naomi to talk. To be there for her, whatever was wrong.

“I know you’re not upset about the Jensens, Nomes,” I started quietly, trying to catch her eye. “So why don’t you tell me what’s really going on?”

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “We need to talk.”

I took my own deep breath. The cool night air was tinged with salt and stung my nose. “That doesn’t sound good,” I joked with a forced smile.

“It’s not.”

EVERY

Mom would have a heart attack if she knew I was going out in public dressed like this. She was all about keeping up appearances. “Dress like you’re going to run into your worst enemy” was her motto.

Yup, more than slightly different to mine. I liked my way of looking at things better; it was more glass-half-full. I mean, this was California. There would always be someone who looked weirder and wackier than you did, no matter how hard you tried.

I slid into the driver’s seat of my SUV and put my seatbelt on, pausing for a moment to sync my Spotify playlist with the stereo. Some Ariana Grande at top volume was exactly what I needed right now.

I backed out of my driveway and turned onto the deserted street, driving slowly as I passed terracotta-roofed, Spanish-style mansions with matching manicured gardens and luxury vehicles parked out front. The houses looked eerie in the golden glow of my headlights. Too still, too quiet. Most of the residents were probably at their ski cabins or Caribbean condos for the holidays.

Not the Delgados, though. Their house—two streets away from ours—was all lit up, and there were tons of cars parked outside. Cruz’s parents were having a New Year’s party, it seemed.

I gazed at the house a moment longer before I noticed it—a dark figure, sitting hunched on the curb at the end of the

driveway. Tall, leanly muscular and dressed in basketball shorts, a hoodie and a backwards ball cap.

I blinked in surprise as the person came into focus. *Wait, was that...?*

I stepped on the brakes. Rolled my window down.

“Cruz?”

His head jerked up in surprise, dark eyes wide and wild. He hurriedly swiped at his face with his hoodie sleeve.

Was he *crying*?

No. No way. Cruz Delgado didn't cry. The guy woke up in the morning with a smile on his face, and he wore it all day, every day. I'd seen him cry precisely once in my life, and that was when we were five years old and he got attacked by a swarm of angry wasps.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“What's up, loser?” he replied without missing a beat, his big, signature grin suddenly back in place. “Loser” was our preferred moniker for each other. And he sounded almost normal saying it, but I didn't miss the way his eyes darted in my direction and then back to the curb again, like he was trying to figure out what I had or hadn't seen. “Creeping 'round the neighborhood a new hobby of yours? Cheerleading wasn't cutting it anymore for the cheap thrills?”

“Why aren't you at the party?” I asked, ignoring his stupid questions. Worry crept over my skin as I looked at him. Cruz and I bickered a lot, but we'd been in each others' lives since we were toddlers, and I knew him well enough to know something was off right now. Very off.

“Why aren't *you* at the party?” he shot back. He looked me up and down, took in my messy hair and cheer hoodie, and smiled a wicked smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. “Got better plans?” He arched a brow.

“I stayed home because I didn't want to be a terrible person and break up with someone on New Year's.” The words spewed out of my mouth before I could think them. It

was so unnatural to see Cruz like this that my subconscious apparently felt the need to offer him some fodder to tease me with.

Cruz paused for a breath, then his brow wrinkled. “That Jackson guy?”

“Jasper,” I corrected.

“I thought you really liked him.”

I winced in reply.

I expected him to give me a hard time. Call me a heartbreaker or make a joke about how I went through dates like he went through clean socks or something. But instead of doing any of that, Cruz lithely hopped to his feet, brushed off his shorts, and walked around my vehicle. Before I could register what was happening, he’d climbed into the passenger seat.

“What’re you doing?” I turned to look at him, and now, with him next to me, I could see that his eyes were puffy, his olive skin pale beneath his year-round tan.

“Getting in your car,” he replied with that teasing tone of his. If I couldn’t see him with my own two eyes right now, I’d think that he was the same happy-go-lucky Cruz as ever.

“Duh.” I shook my head so my ponytail swished from side to side. “I mean, why are you getting in my car?”

“It’s New Year’s Eve, I just got dumped, and I figure, wherever you’re going right now is better than sitting on the curb on my own like some loser.”

I coughed, my eyes growing so big, they were basically bulging out of my head. *Did he just say what I think he said?*

“You’ll catch flies if you keep your jaw hanging open like that.” Cruz sounded vaguely amused.

“I’m, um, going to CVS. For cereal,” I said lamely. I had no idea what else to say. There was nothing appropriate to say. Cruz and Naomi had been together since before high school even started. They were two sides of the same coin, peanut butter and jelly, two peas in a pod... you get the picture.

Cruz chuckled. “Well, cereal sounds better than sitting on the curb. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Cruz, I’m so... sorry,” I blurted, then cursed under my breath. Cruz loathed pity, but I had to say something!

Instead of getting annoyed, though, he reached out and put his hand on my arm. Gently, just for a moment. The gesture was soft and sweet in a way that surprised me. Cruz and I were more used to physical contact that involved throwing things or me whacking him. “Hey, Ave?”

“Yeah?” I glanced sideways at him. He retrieved his hand and folded it into his lap.

“Can we not talk about it tonight? Maybe just hang out and celebrate New Year’s together like the old days?” It was only then that I noticed how exhausted he looked. His tone was tinged with uncertainty—like he half expected me to laugh at him and tell him to get out of the car.

My mind instantly jerked back over the New Year’s celebrations of our childhood. Cruz would come to our place, and our nanny, Darla, would watch the three of us and Cruz’s little sister, Lucia, while our parents attended their parties and society events.

After Darla put us to bed at a respectable hour, I’d sneak into Arie’s room and we would all make a blanket fort together. We’d sit in a circle tucked inside, cross-legged and pajama-clad, telling scary stories, eating contraband Sour Patch Kids, and shining a flashlight to play shadow puppets. When midnight rolled around, we’d jump up and down on the air mattress meant for Cruz—more often than not deflating it entirely so the poor kid had to sleep on the floor.

The memory made a soft smile creep over my face.

We were still sitting in the middle of the street. The ball was totally in my court.

And I realized, I didn’t really want to be alone tonight.

“Sure,” I said, putting my SUV back into drive. “But you’re buying the candy.”

Cruz smiled again, and this time, his eyes sparkled with their usual wicked gleam. “Course I am. I’m a gentleman, aren’t I?”

CRUZ

If it was any other girl on planet Earth, this could have looked bad.

Real bad.

But this was Avery freaking Jensen. My best friend's twin sister—twenty-one minutes older and twenty-one times as sassy as her brother. Practically *my* honorary sister with the amount of time we'd spent bugging each other over the years.

So it was totally okay that I was spending time with her on the same night I'd been dumped from an almost four-year-long relationship. She was just subbing in as my Jensen family confidante in Arie's absence.

Plus, she'd also looked like she needed some cheering up when she screeched to a halt in the street outside my house. Heaven help her, Avery Jensen was good at a lot of things, but a good driver, she was not. We barely made it back from CVS in one piece, but at least now, we were armed with snacks.

I smirked up at the ceiling from where I lay on the air mattress Avery had found in a basement closet. "Coyote."

"What a weird guess," Avery replied. Her bed was a few feet away, and she was flopped down on her back, above the covers, shining her phone's flashlight at the ceiling. "Why not start with something normal?"

Because where's the fun in that?

"Umm... a jackal?" I acted confused. She was clearly making a wolf—even made it seem like it was howling at the

moon.

“A jackal?” She laughed. “What does a jackal even look like?”

“I dunno. Kinda like a coyote, I guess.”

“Idiot!”

“Fine, fine....” I smiled and reached for one of the many bags of candy laying on the ground. “A dingo, then?”

Thud!

My vision went black as a pillow hit me square in the face.

“Hey,” I yelled, candy scattering everywhere.

“Play properly!” she yelled back with a giggle, picking her phone back up and shining the flashlight at me. From this angle, outlined behind the beam of light, she looked like a ghoul.

I picked up the pillow and lobbed it in the direction of her darkened, shadowy form. “YOU play properly. Can’t just be throwing rogue pillows around mid-game.”

She dived sideways, and it missed her. “Terrible shot,” she crowed. “You call yourself a basketball player, Delgado.”

I threw another pillow at her while she was gloating.

Thwack! It hit her right in the chest.

She pretended to faint, flopping down on comforter, face-down.

We both laughed and the sound of my own laughter surprised me. I could have never guessed that I’d be here at the Jensens’ house, laughing with Avery just a few hours after an argument with my parents followed by the end of my relationship.

I was in shock. Clearly.

According to... some psychology dude, people dealt with their grief in different ways. And apparently, my way was to hang out with Avery tonight. Honestly, I couldn’t remember the last time we’d hung out alone. Had we ever hung out

alone? I'd known Avery pretty much all my life, but Arie had always been there, too.

“What do you think everyone would say if they knew you skipped on the party for shadow puppets and Milk Duds?” I asked Avery with a smirk.

Avery made a “pfft” sound and waved her hand. “They’d be jealous of how awesome my night was.”

“No,” I corrected teasingly. “They’d say you have terrible taste in candy and recommend you eat Reese’s Pieces instead.”

“You’re the one with no taste, Delgado.”

“Takes one to know one.” I reached over and tugged on her long, black ponytail, which was spewed over the side of her bed like a waterfall. “Is it almost midnight yet?”

Avery checked her phone. “Oooh, almost... we’ve got five minutes. Wanna see a trick I learned a few years back?”

“That very much depends. Does it involve grievous bodily harm? Caused to me?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I could hear the smile in her voice. “You willing to take a chance?”

“Always.” I scrambled to my feet and stood next to the bed, grinning down at her. “I ain’t scared of your tiny little self...” She folded her arms and glared, so I added, “Although maybe I should be.”

“Darn right you should be.” She gave me a sassy look. “Come on, then.”

Like lightning, she was on her feet, bouncing off the bed, and zipping out of the bedroom and down the hallway in her socks. She darted into the main bathroom and I hesitated before she yelled, “Keep up, Delgado!”

I ran in after her... to find her legs dangling in the air.

“What the?!” I yelped as her legs disappeared up and out of sight. A moment later, her head popped down through the velux window in the ceiling.

“Use the edge of the bathtub to climb up,” she instructed before disappearing again.

I blinked up at the open window for a moment, then shrugged and followed suit. I balanced on the edge of the bath so I could plant my hands on the edges of the window and awkwardly shimmy my way up and out. How had Avery done this so effortlessly? I had to be at least half a foot taller than her.

By the time I half-flopped, half-scrambled onto the roof, I was practically panting. Avery was laying on a sloped part of the roof, face tilted towards the blanket of glittering stars. The night was cool and breezy, carrying the salty scent of the ocean.

“Nice of you to join me,” she said lightly as I laid down next to her.

“Just happy to grace you with my dazzling company. You’re welcome.”

She punched my arm. “You inflate that head any more, it’ll blow away like a balloon.”

“Hey now, I wasn’t the one skulking around the neighborhood looking for you like a stalker.”

Avery shook her head mock-seriously. “What can I say? I was desperate.”

I snorted. It was comforting to have a familiar person to hang out with, even if it was only Ave being her usual uncharming self.

Honestly, I was pretty grateful that she’d stopped when she saw me earlier. I must’ve been a sight for sore eyes. Even after showering and changing, I felt itchy, like being in my own house was giving me hives. I couldn’t muster up the energy or enthusiasm to be at my parents’ party after what happened with Naomi. Not to mention having to pretend everything was okay with my family.

It had been an all-together horrible, miserable night until Avery picked me up. And I didn’t do horrible or miserable. Those were both totally off-brand for me.

I exhaled a deep breath, suddenly feeling awkward. “Hey, Ave?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for, um... this.” Serious talk didn’t come naturally to me. It was a skill I was trying to work on; had been since things with Naomi got really rocky last summer. So I was expecting Avery’s surprised expression, her mouth twisted like she was deciding whether to respond.

Eventually, she simply shrugged. “We make a pretty pathetic pair, don’t we?”

“Speak for yourself.”

She rolled her eyes, falling back into our usual banter with ease. “Says the boy who ate half a can of Cheez Wiz as a night-time snack.”

“Cheez Wiz is totally a main food group, Cereal Killer.”

“Cereal Killer?!” Avery snorted loudly and clapped a hand over her mouth, coughing as she wheeze-laughed.

“First time breathing?” I asked.

She smacked me on the arm.

I flicked her shoulder in return.

She scowled at me.

I scowled back, making my face into a mock-exaggeration of her irritated expression. Avery Jensen may be one of those objectively pretty girls, but she looked like an angry raccoon when she scowled.

I put my hands behind my head and crossed my legs at the ankle. Avery’s annoyed rodent face always made me feel relaxed for some reason. “So why did we come up to the roof? You planning to push me off?”

Avery tapped a finger to her chin, like she was thinking. “It must be your lucky night, because no, that wasn’t the original plan... But you asked that question just in time.”

“In time for what?”

She didn't reply. Just pointed.

The first firework exploded in the distance. Followed by another, and another, until the entire midnight sky was awash in a riot of orange and green and blue light. It was like we were watching our very own private fireworks display over the bay.

My jaw popped open. "This is awesome!"

"You're welcome," she said pointedly, echoing my earlier words.

"Hey, Jensen?"

"Don't you dare tell me I'm lucky to be graced with your company for a second time."

"I won't. Even though we both know it's true."

"Debatable."

I grinned. "Instead, I'll just say Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year." She turned to me, dark blue eyes glittering. "And I'd say we should do this more often, but that would be pushing it."

"So no sneaking out to meet on rooftops after curfew when we're back at H-burg?" I joked, and I felt a small sense of relief at the thought. Nobody would believe me if I said it, but the truth was, I was always excited to go back to school after the Holidays. Escape to a place that made me happy, where I could be myself.

Avery coughed out a laugh. Hallisburg Prep was renowned for late night sneak-outs, but they were mostly for parties or for couples meeting up in private. The thought of the two of us sneaking out to meet each other was pretty laughable.

"If we *do* meet on a rooftop after curfew, Delgado, I can't promise that it won't be so I can push you off."

AVERY

“E eeeeeek!!!”

Rachel’s scream was almost deafening. So loud, I would’ve found it easier to believe that she’d come across a dead body on her way to the dining hall rather than that she was simply excited to see us all.

She raced across the huge, crowded room, dodging fellow students and wooden tables at top speed before she flung herself into my lap. Wrapped her pale, freckled arms around my neck.

“Hi.” I laughed and pushed my empty cereal bowl out of the path of destruction as Hurricane Rach leaped off my lap and onto Taylor, who was sitting next to me.

“Get off me, you fool!” Taylor’s squawk was decidedly more annoyed. Nobody got between Taylor and her food and lived to tell the tale.

“I’m just so happy to see you guys,” Rachel sang as she scrambled off Tay, who muttered to herself and shoved another piece of bacon in her mouth. Rachel ran around the table to hug Quinn next, and finally, Mia. “Christmas break is just too gosh darn long without my dormies.”

Now that she’d done the rounds, she flopped into the spare chair on my left and snagged a piece of Mia’s peanut butter toast. It was Monday morning and the atmosphere in the dining hall buzzed with leftover holiday energy as students mingled and caught up before classes started.

“So, what did I miss last night?” Rach asked through a mouthful of toast. “And what did everyone get up to for New Year’s?”

All of us dorm mates—or “dormies”, as we called ourselves—rolled back into Hallisburg Prep yesterday evening. Or we were supposed to. Four of us spent the evening catching up and swapping stories about our breaks, but Rachel’s flight from DC was delayed and she’d arrived so late, the rest of us were already in bed. Except Mia, who had snuck out to meet Sutton in the woods at midnight.

Those two snuck out so much, it would be a miracle if they both made it to graduation.

“Sutton and Mia hung out in Colorado, Quinn and Arie hung out in New York, and Gray flew up to Connecticut to hang out with me,” Taylor supplied helpfully. “And Avery...” Taylor paused to look at me. “What *did* you do? You didn’t tell us.”

Four pairs of eyes rounded on me and I shrugged casually. “Not a lot.”

“No Jasper?” Quinn asked before taking a sip of tea.

I shook my head, trying to ignore the gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach. *Back to square one we go.* “Nah. Jasper and I ended things before I came back to school.”

Quinn gave a little shake of her head. “Sorry, Ave.”

“Sucks,” Taylor added.

But Mia’s pretty golden eyes widened. “Oh my gosh, speaking of breakups... Sutton told me the news about Cruz last night.”

“What news?” Rachel was practically salivating. The girl loved gossip like I loved cereal.

I fiddled with the spoon in my bowl, swirling it around the leftover puddle of Froot Loop flavored milk. The light pink color almost matched my nail polish.

Mia looked around, then leaned forward, dropping her voice conspiratorially. “Cruz and Naomi broke up. She ended

it with him on New Year's."

"What!" Taylor and Rachel gasped in unison.

"It's true." Quinn nodded. "Arie told me."

"I was shocked. I thought those two were on their way down the aisle judging by how committed to her he was." Mia's lips pulled down at the corners, then she looked at me. Raised an eyebrow. "You don't seem surprised, Ave. I guess Arie told you?"

"No." I swallowed. "I actually ran into Cruz right after it happened. On New Year's."

The girls looked at me with piqued interest.

I looked back at them.

"So?" Rachel prompted. "What happened?"

My mind flashed back to Cruz, hunched on the curb in the dark with tears staining his face. Somehow, it didn't seem right to share that with my friends, like I'd be violating his confidence. So I shook my head. "I don't know," I said honestly. "He didn't want to talk about it. So we didn't."

My friends looked underwhelmed.

"I wonder who he's going to ask to the Valentine's dance?" Rachel mused. "He's been totally off-limits since his first day here. There's going to be a frenzy of girls asking him out."

She was right—a newly-single basketball star would be a hot commodity around school. But I also didn't particularly care who Cruz asked to the dance—I just hoped they wouldn't hurt him like Naomi had. We weren't the best of friends, but I didn't like seeing Cruz hurt and sad.

Plus, I had my own Valentine's dance date to worry about. I'd hoped things would get serious enough with Jasper that, after a romantic New Year's together, we'd go from strength to strength as a couple and I'd invite him to Hallisburg to be my date to the dance.

Yeah... It was dumb of me to fantasize like that.

As a proud feminist, I knew that my dream of having a high school romance seemed a bit trivial—there were bigger, more important things to worry about than chasing boys and butterflies. But I'd grown up having such bad associations with holidays, I just wanted just *one* to feel special. I wanted to dress up and dance the night away, totally carefree and in love. Valentine's Day was the last romantic holiday before graduation, and it felt like a deadline I wasn't going to make.

Which was a little depressing.

I checked my watch. My first class of the morning was Human Psychology. I'd chosen it as an elective now that all my grad requirements were fulfilled. I figured I might learn something about myself; maybe it could help me get in touch with my feelings.

I sure hoped so.

I rose to a stand. Grabbed my baby blue backpack. "Anyway, I'd better be off. Don't want to be late for my first class."

Quinn stood, too. "I'll walk with you, Ave."

"Sweet." I flashed a peace sign. "Later, dudettes."

CRUZ

*F*irst day back, and already off to a great start.

I cursed under my breath as I ran towards the dining hall, the winter air brushing cold fingers across my bare torso. I picked up speed, barely noticing the tightness in my thighs and hamstrings. I'd been hitting the gym hard since New Year's. I told myself I was just getting in better shape before the playoff tournament for the state championship, but really, working out was my favorite way to blow off steam and process big life events.

I had a *lot* of reasons to hit the gym these days.

I threw open the dining hall doors and checked my new Apple watch—the one that Avery had called me “trendy” for wearing when she spotted it on NYE (a word I would never use to describe myself)—while trying, and failing, to button up my uniform shirt. When I snoozed my alarm for the seventh time this morning, I didn't factor in how long it would take me to button one of these freaking things. Apparently, two weeks of vacation had me forgetting how to do basic tasks, like dress myself.

As expected, the dining hall was basically empty. Except for...

“Well, well, well. If it isn't my favorite couple!”

Taylor and Grayson were seated on the same bench seat near a window, sides glued together as they bent over a book. Their mostly-empty breakfast trays were piled in front of

them, and Grayson was picking at a slice of carrot cake on Taylor's tray.

"Hey, bro. Late much?" Grayson didn't even look up from his baseball playbook as I approached. "Also: Not a couple. Never have been, never will be."

"You're not funny, you know," Taylor added. She did look up, but instead of the glare I was expecting, she gave me a slightly pained smile. Which was weird.

"I beg to differ," I replied, plopping down on the seat across from them and reaching for the semi-annihilated cake.

"We can agree to disagree on that one. Welcome back, by the way!" Taylor then stood abruptly and came around the table.

She squeezed me in a short hug and skipped back to her seat like it was nothing.

What in the world?

Taylor was a nice girl, don't get me wrong. But we didn't exactly do *hugs*.

"Umh, thankshh..." I mumbled through a huge mouthful of cake. I shifted on my seat as Taylor continued to smile at me.

Then, I saw Grayson give her a *look*.

Ah. Of course. He'd told her about the breakup.

"How are you?" Taylor asked sweetly, tilting her head.

Decidedly not wanting the conversation to veer towards my breakup or how I felt about it— especially not when I was already late for my first class and my stomach was rumbling out the beat of a drum circle—I put on a smile and indicated the now-empty plate in front of me. "Still starving. Got anything else I can steal before I run to class?"

"I was beginning to wonder if you even knew that classes were on today." Taylor checked her watch. "You do know that first period began three minutes ago, right? Gray and I have a free."

“I overslept.” I rummaged on Grayson’s tray and came up with half a bagel smeared with herb-and-garlic cream cheese. It was more cream cheese than bagel. I stuffed it in my mouth anyway.

Grayson laughed. “This must be a new record—getting your first tardy before the semester officially starts.”

I smirked even as my heart twisted strangely. “That’s me. Always late.”

“And with shirt problems.” Taylor gestured vaguely. “Your buttons are haywire.”

“Wow, dude.” Grayson snorted. “You look like that chick from *Dirty Dancing*.”

“You mean Baby?” Taylor asked.

Grayson cocked an eyebrow at her teasingly. “Someone knows her romance movies.”

“It’s a classic, okay?”

I looked down to see that my shirt was, indeed, buttoned incorrectly so that a huge triangle of my midsection was showing. “Should be a good look for my grand return to Human Psych.”

Grayson tugged a wrapped slice of brownie that I’d taken from his tray back out of my hands. “Have fun talking about your feelings for an hour. We all know how much you love doing that.” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

I tilted my head. “Speak for yourselves.”

Tay and Gray both ignored that comment. Which made sense given that the two were clearly in heavy denial—a handy term I learned in last semester’s psych course. You’d have to be an idiot not to see it, and I was no idiot.

Grayson shrugged. “Just thought you might choose another class instead of repeating one you failed. Gutsy move to go back.”

“Figured I’d give it another shot. Give Mrs. Dunn the pleasure of my company for a whole year instead of just one

semester.” I winked. “And on that...” I swiped two granola bars and an apple from Taylor’s tray, then took the brownie from Grayson’s again. “Best be off. I think I’m fashionably late enough for Mrs. Dunn to appreciate my arrival.”

With a bravado I didn’t really feel, I gave my friends a salute and took off towards class.

I had a granola bar hanging out of my mouth and I was re-buttoning my shirt with one hand when I came zinging around the corner and right into Mrs. Dunn. She was standing in the hallway with her arms crossed, waiting for me.

I yanked the bar out of my mouth, cleared my throat and gave my biggest, brightest smile. “Hi, Mrs. Dunn. Beautiful morning, isn’t it?”

Her expression didn’t shift. She looked carved from stone with that frown on her face. “Mr. Delgado. Late on your first day back... This is not a great start to the new year.”

I looked down sheepishly. Attempted to pat my hair into place. I really didn’t mean to be late, especially since I had to practically beg Mrs. Dunn to let me retake her class. Her emails to me over the break had a very distinct subtext of *disappointment* shining through.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Dunn. I overslept. It won’t happen again.” My apology was sincere, though I wasn’t sure she’d believe it.

“It certainly better not.” Her voice was cold. “I expect better than this, Mr. Delgado. I won’t tolerate this kind of tardiness, especially after what happened last semester.” Her expression softened, just for a second. “You were a good student and that’s the only reason I allowed you to retake this course. But your behavior *must* improve. I will not accept this becoming a pattern, and would just as soon have you out of this class. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes, Mrs. Dunn. The truth is...”

I wanted to tell her why I overslept. Tell her that Lucia had called at 1am this morning because she’d snuck out to a friend’s house and wanted company for the walk home. And obviously, I was concerned about a sixteen-year-old girl

wandering the streets of San Francisco in the middle of the night, so I stayed on the phone with her for over an hour as she navigated her way home.

But telling the truth would mean telling Mrs. Dunn exactly *why* I missed her final exam last semester, resulting in my F grade in her class. And I didn't want to sound like I was making any more excuses—if my own parents didn't believe me, why would a teacher whose class I'd failed?

Mrs. Dunn waited silently, not pushing me for an explanation. I appreciated that. She was a great teacher, and all last semester, we'd been on pretty good terms. Surprising, given that I'd had ulterior motives for taking her class in the first place.

I knew I could do better. Pass her class with flying colors. I wasn't in the habit of accepting a fail.

I set my jaw. "It was a mistake."

Mrs. Dunn nodded once. She was silent for a long moment and I shifted, my eyes darting towards the open classroom door. "I'll be straight with you, Mr. Delgado," she said. "I was surprised when you asked me if you could re-enroll in my class. You're an intelligent young man, and you're incredibly driven and focused when you choose to apply yourself. You should know that I'll be holding you to a higher standard this semester. Much higher."

I swallowed thickly. "I understand."

"Good. Now, let's get inside. We're kicking off this semester with a partner project that's due at the end of February, and holds a significant portion of your grade. If you're lucky, there might be a topic and project partner left."

Mrs. Dunn gestured for me to enter the classroom first. I threw my shoulders back, and walked in with my best smile.

AVERY

“What makes a person fall in love?”

I ran my fingers along the edges of the index card. I wasn't the kind of person to believe in signs or astrology or soul mates, but if there *was* such a thing as a sign, this must be it.

Because what were the chances that the very question I'd been asking myself for months just happened to show up as a topic for a Human Psychology project?

As soon as I saw the small white index card—headlined “The Psychology of Attraction” with this question as the main research topic—I jumped on it. I liked school as much as the next person, but the eagerness with which I yanked the card from Mrs. Dunn's desk probably elevated me to “teacher's pet” status for the semester.

Whatever. I could be a teacher's pet. I was going to do this project, and do it well. My high school love story depended on it. After all, we were only five weeks away from my Valentine's Day deadline, and the project was due not long after. Which was ironic, given my chosen topic.

“What'd you pick, Ave?” my cheer friend, Tara, asked as she took a seat in the desk behind me.

I held up my card, feigning a casual half-smile. “Psychology of Attraction.”

“Ha, this project will be breeze for you. Heard you ended things with Jasper over the holidays; you're quite the

heartbreaker.” Tara giggled. “Maybe the next guy can be your guinea pig.”

My smile froze in place. From the outside, it looked like I’d dated—and fallen for—many different guys...

If only she knew the truth.

“What did you get?” I asked.

Tara held up her card proudly. “Child Psychology. Can’t wait.”

I smiled, happy for my friend. Tara was the mother hen of our cheer team, and it was no secret that she couldn’t wait to get married and be a mom herself. “That’s a great fit for you.”

She smiled back. “More excuses for me to hang out with my baby cousin. She’s going to be *my* guinea pig. I’m just hoping that whoever gets the other card is good with kids, too.”

Right... our partners. There were two index cards for every topic, and whoever picked the other card would be your project partner.

It wasn’t that I didn’t *want* a partner—I was a team player, ask anyone—but working on this huge, personal question of mine with another person felt weird. I could only hope that whoever got the other Psychology of Attraction card was someone I didn’t know too well, someone who wouldn’t give me a hard time.

As if the universe had picked up on my thoughts and decided to answer them with the person who gave me the hardest time of all, Cruz Delgado strolled into the room.

What?! Since when was Cruz in this class?

My jaw dropped as he walked to the front desk, all smirks and confidence even in his disheveled state. He literally looked like he’d rolled right out of bed and lounged into class.

There were still a few students standing at the desk, rifling through index cards. Cruz didn’t even check the topics; he just picked up a card, turned around, and gave the room a scan.

I sank down in my seat. After New Year's, things had gone back to normal for us... as in, we hadn't talked except in passing or when Arie was around. And when we did talk, it was all teasing and annoying each other.

Behind me, Tara let out a squeak. "Cruz Delgado is in our class?!"

I covered my face with my hand, pretending to read my index card intently. "Looks that way."

"I hope he picked Child Psych." Tara practically swooned. "I heard he's single now."

"Yeah, I heard that too," I muttered, hoping Tara would shut it already and stop drawing attention in our direction.

"What's up, Cereal Killer."

Dang it.

I looked up right into Cruz's eyes. I liked to describe them to him as "mud brown", but they were really more "coffee with a dash of cream." He smirked down at me, his brown hair askew and his blazer half-on.

"Hey," I said shortly. "Get lost on your way to class?"

"You know how important fashionably late arrivals are to me." As I dreaded, Cruz dropped his bag onto the empty desk next to mine. The button at the very bottom of his shirt was undone so I got an unwanted view of his tanned abs as he slid onto the chair. Tara squeaked again and I knew she'd seen them, too.

I quickly put my index card face-down on my desk, out of his eyeline. Cruz seeing the project topic I chose was pretty much the worst thing that could happen to me right now.

"I didn't know you were taking psych this semester," Tara said to him with a big smile.

Cruz bounced his index card on top of the desk, pressing his fingers into the edges. His hands were what you'd expect for one of our school's top basketball players—huge, strong, and calloused. The index card looked tiny and fragile in his

hands and I idly wondered if it was going to fall apart in his palms before he could even read his topic.

“Yeah,” he said simply. “I wanted to give it another go.”

I startled. Arie told me that Cruz had failed one of his classes last semester because he missed his final for some incomprehensible reason. “You flunked Human Psych?” I blurted before I could stop myself.

“Broadcast it around school, why don’t you.” Cruz raised a brow. “Yeah, I failed. But don’t worry, Killer, I won’t do anything to jeopardize your grades this semester. I won’t even throw balls of paper at your head to distract you or anything.”

“Your restraint is admirable.”

“I do what I can.”

At that moment, Mrs. Dunn clapped her hands, bringing the class to attention. “All right, everyone, let’s settle down. The project topics have all been assigned, and you can find your partner at the end of class. Let’s start by going through the class syllabus. As you can see...”

I whipped my notebook open and started taking notes, aware that Cruz had nothing on his desk aside from his hands still twirling his index card. He leaned towards me. “Hey, Jensen. What’s your topic?”

“Shh,” I said to him, annoyed. I pretended to take notes though Mrs. Dunn had stopped talking while she wrote something on the board.

“Come on,” he whispered. “Don’t hold out on me. What’d you get?”

“None of your business,” I hissed. “What did you just say about not distracting me?”

“Mrs. Dunn isn’t even saying anything. I want to know if you’re my partner.”

Oh, no.

I hadn’t even thought of that. Why hadn’t I thought of that?

I dropped my pencil and lunged towards his desk, grabbing his card.

Phew!

“Family Dynamics,” I said with a smile. “That should be fun. I have the Psychology of Attraction.”

Cruz’s eyebrows raised. “Psychology of Attraction, huh? That sounds *way* more interesting than Family Dynamics.”

I didn’t like the smile on his face. “No. Not at all. Should be boring.”

“Hmmm... I don’t know about boring.” He stroked his chin like a movie villain. “Learning why the ladies can’t resist me might be a very educational experience for me.”

“Pfft.” I shook my head adamantly. “More like having you discover how repellent you are to females everywhere. Besides, who knows if the person with the other Attraction card will want to switch? Not like—”

“I’ll do it!” Anita Wong whispered from two desks away. Her cheeks were little splotches of pink as she leaned towards us. “I have the other Psychology of Attraction card, but I’ll trade with you, Cruz.”

She blinked at him shyly and I gave her my craziest, wide-eyed “Don’t do it!” smile. Unfortunately, Anita did not catch on and instead grimaced at me like I was a living ghoul from a horror movie.

“Thanks, Anita,” Cruz pointed his bright, winning smile on her as he mimed giving her a high-five. Anita practically melted into a puddle on the floor. “You’re the best.”

This was getting out of hand.

“No.” My voice was a hoarse whisper. “I think—”

“Miss Jensen, Miss Wong and.... Of course you’re involved, Mr. Delgado.” Mrs. Dunn’s stern tone cut right through my protests. “Are you quite finished?”

“Yes, Mrs. Dunn,” Cruz said immediately with a serious tone I didn’t recognize. “Sorry.”

She gave a nod, then launched into the first point on the syllabus. I turned back to my paper, but I was frozen. Could barely hear what Mrs. Dunn was saying.

But I definitely heard Cruz's next few words when he leaned in close again, filling the air with the warm, spicy scent of his shampoo. "Buckle up, Partner."

CRUZ

I waited until the end of class to talk to Avery again. Because one, I didn't particularly want to tick Mrs. Dunn off again if I didn't have to. And two, it gave me some time to get my story straight while she ran through the syllabus—a syllabus I knew already.

The Psychology of Attraction sounded like a ridiculous topic, both in a general sense and also—especially—given the whole Naomi-dumping-me thing. But worse than that was the topic I'd chosen.

Family Dynamics? Please.

On the bright side though, I got a rise out of Avery. And she really wasn't the worst project partner a guy could get. She was pretty smart most of the time.

Actually, too much of the time.

“You ready to be dangerously attracted to me, Jensen?” I asked as we packed up our things at the end of class.

Avery gagged.

I chuckled at her, clocking her scrunched up little nose and her outraged blue eyes. The scowling raccoon was back. “It's okay, you don't need to hide your feelings anymore.”

Avery's raccoon look intensified, which made me even happier. I would never tease another girl like this, but Avery and I had the kind of relationship that was all friendly banter and annoying each other. Platonic as could be.

“I should’ve pushed you off that roof while I had the chance,” she said brightly, throwing a curtain of long, black hair over her shoulder as she turned away. “Don’t you have some Family Dynamics to study?”

She strode away fast, but I kept up, falling into step just behind her shoulder so I could show her my new and improved index card. “Not anymore. Anita traded with me, so it looks like you and I are officially partners.”

“Just my luck,” she muttered under her breath.

“What makes a person fall in love...” I read the question on the card for the first time. Tilted my head. “You chose this?”

“Yeah.” Avery threw out the clipped word and picked up her pace.

“Why?” I was genuinely curious. Avery had had her fair share of dates over the years, and she definitely wasn’t one of those lovey types who watched chick-flicks and Hallmark romances. Deny it as she might, the girl liked sports movies as much as any of us guys. She couldn’t possibly be interested in this topic. Then, it dawned on me. “You’re hoping for an easy A.”

Avery slowed just slightly, and cast a glance over her shoulder. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to know that what she said next was a lie. “Exactly.”

My frown deepened. The morning air was bitterly cold, and Avery shivered as she wrapped her blazer tighter. She was practically jogging across the quad towards her next class, and I caught up so I could walk beside her. Avery was quick, but her strides couldn’t compete with mine. “I don’t believe you,” I said simply.

“Well, you should,” she snapped. She kept her gaze straight ahead, brows drawn together. Her cheeks were flushed, though whether it was from the cold or from something else, I couldn’t tell.

But I *could* see that she didn’t want to talk about this, and I understood that feeling. I didn’t push it.

“I know why I’m doing it,” I said, flipping my index card through my fingers before slipping it into my blazer pocket. “All about attracting that ball at gametime.”

Avery’s gaze sliced my way and a smile cracked on her lips. “That’s dumb.”

I met her eyes, and she quickly looked away. I was happy I made her smile, though.

“Look, Delgado, I’ll level with you.” All of a sudden, she stopped walking and turned a hard gaze on me. “This project is important to me, and I want to do well. So if you’re planning on slacking off again this semester, I’d rather you leave the work to me.”

Her lips were a pink rose pouted against the cold. I stuck my hands deep in my pockets, and met her gaze. “I’ll level with you, too. I also want to pass this class.”

“Ha. Ha. I get it. Just leave it with me.”

“As if that would be any fun. Who would I annoy all day?” Avery bristled and I laughed. “Don’t sweat it, Jensen. We’ll do what we need to do to get you that A. Okay?”

Avery rolled her eyes. “Do I even have a choice?”

“Nope.”

EVERY

We had a beautiful athletic facility at Hallisburg Prep. Seriously, it looked like a professional sports arena. Newly-built, shiny, modern, and packed with everything you could ever need...

Yet somehow, the gym still managed to smell like old socks.

I wrinkled my nose as I walked down the hall and ducked into the girls' changing room. It was Monday afternoon and the first day of classes was officially over, but tired as I was, I was excited for cheer practice. I dropped my bag and shrugged off my hoodie.

"Hey, Ave!"

I turned to see Taylor sitting a couple of benches down, tying her sneakers in tight double knots. "Hey, Tay. Softball practice already?"

"Just some preseason team conditioning now that soccer season's over." Taylor grinned. "I love that outfit, is it new?"

I looked down at the lilac Alo two-piece workout set I'd received as a Christmas gift. I loved it so much, I wore it on a hiking date with Jasper that same week. He hadn't commented on my appearance that day, but he *had* kissed me when we were sitting atop a large rock at the viewpoint.

And the kiss felt like... lips. On my lips.

That was it. No butterflies or fireworks or romantic music swelling in my head.

When my friends spoke of these things, I nodded along, resigning myself to the fact that maybe I just didn't feel the same romantic emotions as everyone else. No matter how much I wanted to.

I knew then—during that first and only kiss with Jasper—that I needed to end things with him. He was a nice guy, and he deserved better. Deserved a girl who was crazy about him.

“Yup, my mom got it for me,” I answered my friend as I scooped my hair into a high ponytail. “How was your first day?”

“Good! Gray and I organized our schedules so that we have the same free periods. He's going to train me—help me get me in top form for softball.”

I faced the mirror, and smiled at my friend's reflection as I began to bobby-pin my bangs back. “I wish I was as dedicated an athlete as you are.”

Taylor flexed at me in the mirror and I laughed.

“Where were you at lunch?” she asked. “We missed you.”

“College advisor meeting. Had to eat a Clif Bar in fifth period, but I wasn't too mad about missing a Monday lunch.”

Taylor chuckled. At Hallisburg Prep, it was a known fact that the food in the dining hall always sucked on Mondays. “The hot dish was this, like, weird brown meat in a mystery yellow sauce.”

I gagged. “Sounds delicious.”

“Cruz was the only one brave enough to try it. He said it tasted like boiled rubber and feet, and he had no idea what animal it had originally been, but his best guess was squirrel.”

I had to laugh. He was ridiculous. “You had lunch with Cruz?”

“Yup, all the guys joined us at our usual table. The lovebirds among us couldn't bear to be apart for one meal, I guess.” Taylor sounded a tad impatient. “But Cruz did mention that you two are paired up for your psych project.”

I turned to face her. “Against my will.”

My friend patted my arm sympathetically. “The guy barely made it to class this morning.”

“Yeah, that’s kinda what I was expecting for him, but...” I frowned, recalling our conversation after class. “He did actually seem serious about doing well on our project. Even after showing up late.”

“Maybe he’s turning over a new leaf.”

“Maybe,” I said doubtfully.

“Or he’s trying to get his mind off his breakup,” Taylor guessed.

“Likely,” I agreed. “They were together forever.”

“Poor guy.”

“What else did I miss at lunch?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Not much else except...” Taylor wrinkled her nose in distaste. “There was *so* much talk about the Valentine’s dance. Everyone’s really excited.”

I bit my lip. Not quite the new topic I’d hoped for. “Are you going with Gray?”

“Yeah, right! Grayson asked Olive Burbank.”

“From jazz band? Cute red glasses?”

“Yup. I like her for him.”

I raised a skeptical brow. “And who are you going with?”

“My softball teammates. Group date.”

“I love that,” I said sincerely. If Taylor couldn’t go to the dance with Grayson, this sounded like a great second option. An option I kinda wished I had. I tried to picture the cheerleaders doing something like that and the thought was almost laughable. My teammates were all so boy-crazy that going as a group, just us girls, would never happen.

Which meant that I needed this random, last-ditch-effort psychology project to pay off. After all, if I knew what made a

person fall in love, I could surely secure the perfect romantic date to the Valentine's dance...

Right?



I SAT on the floor and began to stretch, starting with the butterfly pose, and then widening my legs and lowering my torso towards the ground to stretch my hips and hamstrings. Deep inhale in. Long exhale out.

Time to forget about my non-existent love-life and focus on cheer. The basketball state championships were right around the corner and our squad wanted to debut a new stunt at the tournament.

At that moment, our squad captain, Shelby, clapped her hands. "Okay, ladies. Today, we'll start with some cardio to get our butts into gear after the holidays. Ten laps, please."

I dutifully climbed to my feet. Started to jog around the perimeter of the gym. Kaitlyn, one of my fellow flyers, caught up with me quickly.

"Ave," she breathed. "Is it true?"

I threw her a sideways look, not breaking my stride.

"Is Cruz Delgado really single?" she clarified.

This again.

"That's what I hear." I shrugged.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Is he looking? Who's he got his eye on? Does he have a date to the Valentine's dance yet?"

I tried my best not to roll my eyes. I liked Kaitlyn. But just because Cruz was best friends with my twin brother didn't mean I was the automatic go-to for gossip. "I'm not sure," I answered honestly. "Maybe ask him?"

“Oh, I couldn’t.” She giggled. “But if you want to put in a good word for me...”

“Not sure I’m the best person for the job. I doubt Cruz would listen to anything I had to say.” I glanced towards the gym doors, where the basketball team were now filing in. Cruz and Arie were walking side by side, deep in what looked like an uncharacteristically serious conversation.

“You’re so lucky,” Kaitlyn said with a little sigh. “You’re the only girl who’s gotten anywhere close to him. You’re, like, his exception.”

I frowned. “Huh?”

“You’re the only girl he ever really talks to. Haven’t you noticed?”

I laughed uncomfortably. “He talks to me because he loves torturing me. He probably literally hasn’t even noticed that I’m female.”

“Well, I’m jealous.” Kaitlyn shrugged a shoulder in time with her steps. “But like I said, if you want to put in a word...”

I smiled as kindly as I could. Cruz had just been through a breakup. He didn’t need girls preying on him. “I don’t really think he’s looking right now.”

“Sucks.” Kaitlyn pouted.

Our laps soon came to an end and I leaned forward, hands on my thighs as I caught my breath. But Shelby, who was notorious for her grueling programming, clapped her hands again. “No time for a break, ladies. Let’s start with the pyramid. Quick!”

I moved towards the center of the gym, and the squad took their places around me. I placed my hands on the shoulders of the bases on either side of me, and we counted down as I placed my feet in their linked hands. I launched myself upwards, kicking one leg in the air and holding it above my head.

From my new and improved vantage point, up high above the other gym goers, I could clearly see through the doors

towards the changing rooms. The boys' basketball team were milling around, getting ready for their own practice.

My eyes fell on a signature mop of brown hair. Cruz, who I'd thought was still deep in conversation with my brother, looked up at that same moment and caught my eye. He winked, then mimed pushing me off the pyramid.

I snorted a sudden laugh...

And almost toppled over. I wobbled violently, grappling to find my balance and regain my center.

In the hallway, Cruz howled with laughter.

Jerk.

CRUZ

I was late. Again.

But it wasn't my fault. Again.

Well, it kind of was my fault... but I had a good reason for it.

Again.

After an intense basketball practice that involved endless drills and rounded off with enough sprints to make three guys on the team puke, the only thing I wanted to do was eat my bodyweight in food..

But when Frankie Morris—a freshman who'd just joined the team thanks to a recent five-inch growth spurt—wanted to hang back and practice his foul shot, I couldn't say no to helping him. If it wasn't for the older guys giving me tips back when I first arrived at Hallisburg Prep as a shrimp of a fourteen-year-old, I wouldn't be the player I was today. Pay it forward, and all that jazz.

Plus, I liked helping people. And spending time coaching Frankie through his hand placement and ball release made me feel better than I had in days.

The only drawback was that helping him left me with about thirty seconds to shower and change.

Ring!

I yanked my phone out of my pocket. It was the fifth time it had gone off in as many minutes.

“I’m coming!” I panted in answer as I ran out of the locker room wearing only sweatpants and flip-flops, shower steam still rising from my damp skin. My gym bag was slung over my shoulder, unzipped and overflowing with belongings.

“Where are you, bro?” Leo, one of my dorm mates, asked.

“Almost there. Promise.”

I heard a scuffle as someone grabbed the phone.

“If you’re not here in exactly one minute, we are leaving without you,” Sutton announced.

“Don’t mind him,” Arie called cheerfully in the background. “You know how mean and hangry he gets when he hasn’t ingested his daily 10,000 calories.”

There was another scuffle, and Leo popped back on the call. “But seriously, get over here before he eats me.”

I let out a laugh. “Tell him a burger will taste better.”

I slipped my phone back in my pocket, not breaking my stride. The guys wouldn’t leave without me—getting Disco Sal’s Cowboy Burgers for dinner on the first day of classes each semester was a sacred tradition that none of us would ever break. But that didn’t mean I wanted to keep my friends waiting.

I picked up my pace as I rounded the corner and—

“Oof!” a female voice yelped as a head bounced off my bare chest. “Watch where you’re... oh, of course. It’s you.”

“Hello, Avery. Nice to bump into you,” I deadpanned, rubbing the spot where her head had just been. “Is your face okay?”

She rolled her eyes and took a big step backward. “You’re not wearing a shirt.”

I looked down at my torso and blinked as if surprised. “Wow, you’re right. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Cruz, it’s like forty degrees outside. You’ll catch a cold.”

“Worried about my health, Ave?”

“Nope.” She smiled. “Worried about my A in psych. Can’t do a partner project with an invalid as my partner.”

“I’m sure I could find a willing participant to nurse me back to health.” I winked. “Anyhow, gotta jet. My health requires a very large serving of fried dead cow.”

“You’re disgusting.” Avery—who hated thinking about where meat came from but ate it anyway—wrinkled her nose in horror.

“Thank you.”

“Not a compliment, Delgado.”

“Disagree. Catch you later, Killer.”

I chuckled at the look on her face as I jogged off, and I was still chuckling when I climbed into the backseat of Grayson’s beat-up Tacoma next to Arie and Sutton. The latter of whom muttered “finally”. He was the nicest guy, but he did not do well when he was hungry.

Leo was up front in the passenger seat, and he craned around to look at me. He pushed his hair out of his eyes as he said, “Your body’s temperature gauge is broken. It’s freezing out there.”

“I guess.” I didn’t feel the cold much; I always ran hot. But I rummaged in my gym bag anyway and came up with a hoodie, which I slipped over my head. Breathed in the clean, fabric softener scent. To Avery’s point, I didn’t *actually* want to end up sick.

Gray smirked at me in the rearview as we began to drive. “Please. He just has his shirt off ‘cuz he knows it gets all the ladies looking. Especially now that he’s single and ready to mingle. Right, Cruzy?”

“Nah, I have a few other, more important things going on right now.”

“I call B.S., Delgado,” Sutton cut in wryly.

I laughed with my friends, but I meant what I said.

I'd just gotten out of a four-year relationship that had ended due to "irreconcilable differences" (Naomi's words, not mine. She was the child of two high-powered divorce lawyers and it showed). Though, as the days went on and time provided perspective, I was starting to feel lighter. More myself again. Like a weight of expectation had been shed.

The opposite, however, could be said when it came to my family. If anything, I felt heavier with the thought of Lucia and what was going on back home.

So between processing the breakup, dealing with my family, doing extra practices for the looming state championship tournament, and retaking a class, I had more than enough on my mind to even *think* about dating again.

Not that my friends knew any of this. Except Arie, who I'd filled in briefly at practice earlier. That was more than enough serious talking for one day.

"I have tons going on these days." I held up my hands and smiled big. "For one, the Senior Prank. Obviously, it's got to be the most successful H-burg prank of all time, even more so than the Great Frog Debacle of '88. And who needs girls when you have amphibians?"

My subject diversion was an immediate success. Everyone broke out into excited chatter and the atmosphere in the car rose swiftly as we plotted prank ideas.

"Hang a 'For Sale' sign from the roof of the school."

"Put bubble solution in the courtyard fountain."

"Fill the hallways with helium balloons."

"Release three chickens around campus, but label them 1, 2 and 4 so the faculty keep searching for the non-existent last chicken!"

We were all howling with laughter within minutes, and I relaxed into my seat, happy to be surrounded by great friends.

"Taylor's going to love the chicken idea," Gray said as we pulled into Disco Sal's parking lot. The flashy neon sign was blinking in front of the tacky, chrome-accented diner. I could

already smell the warm, savory scents of fried cheese, greasy onion rings, and barbecued meat. “She and Avery were thinking of a petting zoo in the quad for the prank.”

“Speaking of my sister,” Arie said. “Heard that you two were paired together in that psych class you’re retaking.”

“Yeah, we’re working on a project together.”

“Wait.” Grayson frowned at me in the rearview as he cut the engine. “Taylor told me you guys had a weird topic. Like, love or relationships or something.”

My lips pinched slightly. “The topic’s attraction.”

The entire group burst into laughter.

“You’re studying *attraction*?” Arie hooted. “Oh, that’s a good one.”

“Well, who knows. Maybe this is my chance to test out Gray’s theory about whether being shirtless attracts the ladies.”

“If my past is any indication, you’ll attract at least 50% of the cheer squad with that experiment,” Arie joked, waggling his eyebrows.

“Was Avery mad that she got you as a partner?” Leo asked.

“Livid,” I replied cheerily. “She did her raccoon face and everything.”

Sutton gave me a knowing smirk. “I dunno, Cruz. You seem awfully casual about this whole thing, but look what happened with Mia and me. One moment, she’s mad that we were forced to work together on the talent show. Next thing, she’s kissing me backstage like her life depends on it.”

Arie groaned. “Gross, dude. The last thing I want is to picture my sister *kissing* Delgado.”

I snorted. “We all know that would never happen. She’d literally kill me before she ever kissed me.”

“True.” Arie grinned.

I grinned back, remembering Avery's scornful expression when she ran into me earlier.

As if anything close to attraction could ever happen between us.

EVERY

“*H*ey, Cereal Killer.”

I heaved a sigh and closed the book I was skimming through, turning away from the bookshelf and towards the owner of that familiar voice. “You know people stare at *you* when you call me that, right?”

“People always stare at me,” Cruz replied matter-of-factly, like he’d simply casually observed this without putting two and two together that he was actually being ogled at daily by all the girls in school.

As he jogged up to me through the towering stacks of our school library, his cheeks flushed from the wind and his hair damp and shower-tousled, I had to admit that I understood, objectively, why this was the case. He had that tall, dark and handsome thing going for him. And he exuded casual confidence. Even now, with his blazer rumpled and the strap of his backpack hanging loose over his broad left shoulder. He placed his hand in his pocket as he approached, dark eyes sparking when they met mine.

I placed my hands on my hips. “Look at that, you’re wearing a shirt today.”

Cruz placed a hand on his chest as though he was going to start unbuttoning. “We can change that if you want.”

“No one in the library needs to see your bare hairless chest.”

“Speak for yourself.” He waggled his eyebrows.

I sighed tiredly. “You ready to get work?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” he chirped, keeping pace with me. The light, spicy scent of his shampoo wafted around me. That was one thing about Cruz I could actually appreciate—he wasn’t the type to bathe in cologne so that you could smell him coming from miles away. He just smelled warm and fresh. And sometimes sweaty after basketball practice.

“Amazing that you got me to actually come to the library on Library Day,” Cruz said with a note of wonder as he looked around the admittedly dazzling building.

“First time, huh?” I said angelically.

“There aren’t many firsts left for me, but the library is one of them,” Cruz shot back with a smirk.

I heaved another sigh. At Hallisburg Prep, we had a half-day of classes on Wednesdays that was meant to be used for homework and studying. To be honest, I didn’t often spend these free afternoons in the library either. I usually went to the gym with my team to stretch or do extra cheer practice, or I’d go shopping in town with my dormies. But I wasn’t about to let Cruz know that.

“Must be exhausting to just be *so funny* all the time,” I said as we turned the corner towards the Psychology section.

“Sometimes.” Cruz replied, and I was surprised to hear a note of sincerity in his voice. I shot him a glance but he didn’t look at me. “How was your first week and a half of classes?”

I shrugged. “Classes are good; can’t believe we’re almost at graduation. You?”

“Same. Miss Tramble appears to have finally reached her breaking point, though.”

“How so?”

“Bolton unexpectedly sat in on our World History class on Monday and Tramble practically fainted in a swoon. She started talking about French Revolution when we were meant to be covering the First World War. She’s trying to play it off

like it was intentional, but our homework's all over the map now."

I chuckled, shaking my head. Everyone at school knew about Miss Tramble's massive crush on Headmaster Bolton. Except the headmaster himself.

There was nobody in the Psychology section, so we claimed the biggest table, right by the window. It was a cold, gray day, and the baby oak tree in the garden outside swayed back and forth in the wind. I shivered instinctively as I set my backpack down.

"Cold?" Cruz asked, clocking my shiver.

"I'm fine," I said, though I was actually a little chilly. For being so state-of-the-art, the library lacked for heating. I tugged my blazer tight and crossed my arms.

Cruz reached into his backpack and pulled out his hoodie. He held it towards me. "Take it."

"I'm fine."

Cruz raised a dark eyebrow, his gaze dropping down my torso quickly. "You're clearly not. And I don't want your shivering interrupting my studying."

I rolled my eyes but didn't make a move to take the hoodie.

"Come on, Ave. Don't make me put this on you."

I snorted. "As if you could."

It was clearly the wrong thing to say, because Cruz's eyes lit up. "Challenge accepted."

He took a big step towards me and my mouth popped open. I stepped back, but I was pressed against the window with nowhere to go. I raised my eyebrows at him, amused. "Now what?"

"Arms up," he ordered.

For some reason, I obeyed. He put my arms through the arms of the hoodie and I was surprised how gentle he was with those gargantuan hands of his. He tugged the hoodie down

over my body and then stepped back, a satisfied smirk on his face.

“I feel like a child,” I said flatly. Not only because Cruz literally just dressed me, but also because, even over my school blazer, the sweatshirt was huge on me. The sleeves went way past my hands, and the bottom hem hit my mid-thigh like some weird, shapeless hoodie-dress. It *was* warm, though. I rolled up the sleeves and tucked my hair behind my ears. “Let’s get to work.”

“Right.” He took a seat. “So I’ve been thinking, and I have an idea I want to run past you.”

I blinked, honestly surprised that he’d done any thinking whatsoever. “What kind of idea?”

“What if we run our own experiments?” He rifled through his backpack and took out a notebook. It took me a minute to process this as I’d never seen Cruz with anything resembling a notebook in my entire life. “I have a feeling there’s tons of research being done on this topic, so what if we pick a handful of popular experiments and do them ourselves? We could report on the results for our final paper.”

My eyes were wide as I tried to keep up. I’d only done some preliminary googling, hadn’t even started thinking of what we could do for this project. But his suggestion was definitely compelling. “Wow, Cruz. That’s very... creative.”

“I can’t take all the credit.” He smirked. “Gray gave me the original idea.”

“Well, kudos to him,” I said with a wink. “I actually think it’s perfect.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Good thinking, Delgado.”

He smiled this wide, proud, beaming smile I’d only ever seen on the basketball court. “So I did some research last night, and I’ve written down the names of a couple journals we could look at.”

I read the names and my eyebrows raised even more. “I wanted to look at these journals, too.”

“At least there’s one thing we can agree on.” It was his turn to wink.

We walked to the shelves with the research journals, and as he skimmed the titles, I found my gaze lingering on him, taking in his concentrated expression like I was seeing it for the first time. I had to admit I was impressed that he’d done his own research and come up with an idea. It would be pretty fun to run our own experiments, and maybe it would give me a chance to try some of the theories for myself. Run *my* own experiments.

With guys who weren’t Cruz, obviously.

At that moment, he looked over and caught me mid-stare. “Whatcha looking at, Jensen?”

I shrugged, my cheeks weirdly warm and prickly. This hoodie was apparently *too* hot. “Nothing. Just surprised that you’re taking this project so seriously.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You’re never serious about anything,” I said lightly, because it was a fact. A truth that I’d known my entire life as sure as I knew water was wet. Cruz Delgado = class clown. The guy who couldn’t take anything seriously, even himself. Sometimes, I admired him for that.

But the flash on Cruz’s face then caught me completely by surprise. So brief that I thought I might’ve imagined it. His next words were said in a way that, to anyone else’s ears, might have sounded casual and breezy. “You know that’s not true, Ave.”

Cruz returned to scanning the journals and, unable to come up with any reasonable response to his remark, I started scanning again, too.

We carried a pile of journals back to our table, and I quickly got lost in the first one, hungrily reading through the abstracts of research projects. I was totally engrossed in an article on attachment styles when Cruz said, “I found

something.” He pushed a journal towards me. Tapped on a paragraph of text. “Check this out.”

I skimmed it quickly. “I’ve heard of this. This is good. *Really* good.”

He flashed another smile and turned back to the article. “It’s a starting point, at least. We just need to find a couple of willing participants. But who?”

He bit his lower lip, lost in thought. I found my gaze zeroing in on it. I’d never noticed before how nice Cruz’s lips were. Just, like, objectively nice. Full and soft-looking. As he released it, I noticed for the first time the little crease straight through the center. It disappeared as he smirked.

“I’ve got it,” he said and I sat back in my chair, my cheeks warm again. I quickly tugged off his hoodie—because that was clearly the issue.

“What’re you thinking?” I asked, swinging my hair over my shoulder to cool the back of my neck.

“Meet me in the common room after classes tomorrow. Bring Taylor.”



CruzControl: Killer, is this you?

BrAvery: I don't know anybody by that name. You must have the wrong person.

CruzControl: Snarky and sarcastic and not at all understanding of what constitutes a most excellent nickname? This could only be Avery Jensen.

BrAvery: Haven't you bothered me enough for one day?

CruzControl: Not even close.

BrAvery: What do you want, Cruz? I'm busy.

CruzControl: Painting your fingernails does not constitute 'busy'.

BrAvery: Goodnight, Cruz.

CruzControl: Sorry, sorry! Bad joke. I actually messaged for two reasons...

BrAvery: Lucky me.

CruzControl: Number one: I wanted to make sure you're bringing Taylor tomorrow.

BrAvery: Yup, she'll be there. She said she's excited to be our "little lab rat".

CruzControl: Excellent. Well, see you then. Night.

BrAvery: Wait, what was the second reason?

CruzControl: Oh! Glad you're paying attention. I needed to find your contact on here so we can coordinate on the project.

CruzControl: Can you believe that in four years at H-burg we've never once messaged on HP Chat?

BrAvery: I very much can.

CruzControl: Well, looks like your luck has finally changed, Jensen.

AVERY

*B*ringggg!!!

The final bell sounded and I stood from my desk, slung my backpack over my shoulders, and rushed towards the door.

I wasn't sure why, exactly, but I was excited for our first experiment this afternoon. Maybe because of what it might reveal about my own situation, what I might learn to help with Operation Valentine's Dance.

Plus, Cruz's messages last night made me laugh. It was a bit strange that we'd never messaged on HP Chat before, but really, what reason would we have had to talk to one another before now?

I darted across the courtyard, passing red-bricked buildings and various statues before looping around the central fountain and making a left. Of course, my last class of the day was Calculus, and the math building was all the way across campus from the dorms. I was wearing my massive, fluffy winter jacket—the one I'd bought specifically for our family trip to Aspen a couple years ago that was then hijacked by another of Mom's holiday moods. It was overkill in California, but it kept me toasty.

I thought of Cruz's hoodie, which was folded neatly in my backpack. He wouldn't let me give it back to him yesterday. I briefly considered putting it on as a joke for Cruz when I walked into the common room, but that might be a bit weird. Cruz and I didn't have inside jokes.

When I finally made it, slightly panting and out of breath, I found Taylor and Grayson on one of the couches with Cruz lying on the sofa across from them. Sutton and Mia were seated on a bean bag nearby, a textbook open on Sutton's lap, though they clearly weren't studying.

"Took you long enough," Taylor joked as I approached.

"Sorry, guys. You know... math." I took off my jacket and laid it across one of the tables.

"We do know math," Cruz retorted, rolling up to a sitting position. I raised a brow at his stupid joke, and he turned back to Taylor and Grayson. "Now that we're all here, you guys ready to help?"

"Depends what we're helping with," Taylor said warily. When I'd told Cruz that she was excited to be our lab rat, I really meant "grudgingly agreed to be" our lab rat.

"We want to try something called the Four-Minute Rule."

"What's that?" Grayson asked.

I took a seat on the sofa next to Cruz as he continued, "There's a psychological theory that you can form a love bond with someone if you stare into their eyes for four minutes. It creates intimacy. Increases trust."

"So you want me to trust someone more?" Taylor snorted. "Who? Cruz?"

"Grayson," Cruz said easily. "You guys are already so close, it should be easy to hold eye contact."

"With Gray?!" Taylor's cheeks started to turn the slightest bit pink. "Ew. No."

"We are *not* forming a love bond," Grayson said at the same time.

"We'll do it!" Sutton volunteered, raising Mia's hand with his.

Mia giggled, rolling her eyes at her boyfriend. "Happy to help. Sutton and I are pretty good at staring into each others' eyes by now."

The two gazed at each other lovingly for a minute and I shook my head. “Ugh, you guys are already as in love as anyone could possibly be. You don’t count.”

“That’s why Tay and Gray should give it a go.” Cruz smiled innocently. “The two of them are *clearly* just friends, so a love bond won’t be possible anyway, right?”

“Right,” Taylor said and Grayson nodded in agreement.

Then Taylor seemed to realize what she was getting herself into, and her mouth twisted into a little grimace. The two slowly, reluctantly, turned towards each other. Taylor picked at her nails, and Grayson ran his hands through his hair a couple times. They both looked everywhere but at each other.

Cruz fiddled with his trendy new Apple watch—I told him so on New Year’s, but I don’t think he believed it was a compliment—then cleared his throat. “Ready? Three, two, one... go!”

Taylor and Grayson locked eyes for about seven seconds before Taylor snorted and Grayson coughed out a laugh. “Sorry, sorry!” Taylor sang. “Let’s try again.”

Cruz restarted the timer on his watch. “Aaaand... go.”

They lasted five seconds this time. “This is ridiculous.” Grayson hiccuped with laughter. “I can’t take this seriously.”

I sighed. “I don’t think it’s going to work, Cruz. I mean, look at them.”

Taylor was doubled over laughing and clutching her stomach while Grayson had his head thrown back, one hand on her back as they both howled. You’d think they had some bizarre, telepathic, eye-contact conversation about something super hilarious. Anything was possible with those two.

“You’re right.” Cruz shook his head. He actually looked disappointed.

I felt the same. Though I was sure we felt that way for very different reasons.

So much for something so simple as eye contact being the way to fall in love with someone...

I grabbed my jacket and Cruz put his notebook back in his backpack. “Thanks anyway, guys,” I said. “It was worth a try.”

“Hang on,” Taylor said, gasping for air. “Why don’t you guys try it?”

I paused, half-standing. “Try what?”

“The four minute thing.”

I looked at Cruz right as he glanced at me. “I don’t think that’ll work,” he said.

Grayson shrugged. “Guess you’re back to square one, then.”

He and Taylor both stood, immediately segueing into a conversation about food. Mia looked up at them. “You guys headed to the dining hall? Sutton and I were just saying that we need an after-school snack.”

“Heck, yes!” Gray pumped a fist. “I’m in the mood for nachos.”

“With extra cheese and jalapenos,” Taylor added.

“You coming, bro?” Grayson asked Cruz.

“Delgado never turns down nachos,” Sutton stated, like it was a given that Cruz would join them.

Cruz paused. Looked at me for a moment, then at the ground, then back at his friends.

“Nah,” he said casually. “I’ll hang here.”

“Suit yourself.” Gray shrugged. The four of them grabbed their stuff and walked out of the common room, leaving Cruz and me alone.

“Not hungry?” I asked.

“I’m always hungry. But right now, our project kinda takes priority.”

I blinked in surprise. “Guess we could go back to the library.” I tossed out the idea.

Cruz had a little crease between his brows. He ran a hand through his already messy hair, then shrugged. “Or maybe

they're right. We could just try it."

I snorted.

"Not to create a 'love bond' or anything, obviously," he added quickly. "But you know, just to see if we feel anything. Trust-wise."

I screwed up my lips. It might be worth a shot. We'd probably do the same as Taylor and Grayson—start laughing within a few seconds. And even if we didn't, what was the harm in trying? It wasn't like I was going to fall for Cruz. It might just be a chance to try out this little experiment before testing it on someone else for real. "Can't hurt."

"Love that enthusiasm."

Cruz moved to sit at one end of the sofa, pivoting his body towards me. I sat on the other end, and tucked one of my legs up under me. Immediately untucked it. I felt fidgety and nervous all of a sudden. I shifted to get comfortable, pushed my hair behind my ears, picked a piece fluff off my blazer.

"Ready?" Cruz asked, playing with his watch again.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I repeated his sentence from yesterday.

"Three, two, one, go."

Cruz's eyes met mine and our gazes locked. At first, I felt the overwhelming urge to look away, avoid eye contact—it felt creepy and weird to stare at someone like this. Cruz's lips pressed together as if to hold back a laugh and I felt one coming, too. I could see why Grayson and Taylor cracked up. But Cruz's laugh didn't come. His gaze didn't waver from mine, so I held his. I wasn't going to be the reason this experiment failed.

The urge to laugh faded, and with every second that went by, I was more impressed that Cruz wasn't looking away. That he was committing to this.

He has nice eyes.

The thought came out of nowhere, but it was hard to deny. Cruz's coffee-dark eyes were speckled with flecks of bronze,

which gathered into a ring around his pupils. I could hear his breathing, low and steady. Could feel my own breathing sync with his. Everything seemed to slow down and speed up all at once, like we were communicating without a word, our eyes telling a story only we could hear.

Something weird started gathering in my abdomen. A sort of warm flutter in my belly.

Ding.

Cruz blinked and looked down at his watch to shut off the alarm. I took a big, deep, quiet breath, feeling altogether very strange. Like I'd been underwater and I was coming up for air.

"That was four minutes," Cruz said, his deep voice filling the quiet of the common room.

"It was?" My own voice sounded far away.

"Yup. We did it." Cruz looked at me then with a smirk on his face. For some reason, I had a hard time meeting his eyes. "What do you think, Jensen? In love with me yet?"

I exhaled quickly, ignoring the bizarre sensations rolling through my body. "You wish, Delgado."

CRUZ

Nobody knew who discovered Ghoultown, or how it got its name, but partying in the creepy clearing in the forest at the edge of campus was a legendary rite of passage for every Hallisburg Prep student worth their salt. I.e., anyone willing to break a rule or two to have some fun.

It was something I'd been doing gladly since the first week of my freshman year, when Arie and I snuck out of our bunk beds in our eight-person dorm and ran into the forest. There was no good reason... we were just looking for something to do. We were fourteen and bored.

We didn't know where we were going or where we'd end up, but as we jogged along the trails through the dense trees—me wearing only flannel pajama pants and my slides, and he in a basketball tee and shorts—it felt like we were the only two people on earth.

Until we heard noise in the distance. Music.

We looked at each other for a moment before we starting running towards the sound.

And that was how we became the first freshmen on campus to discover the school's secret party spot.

Of course. Like I said, "Party" was my middle name.

We stood at the edge of the clearing, peeping out from behind a tree in fascination. The upperclassmen were dancing, playing games, drinking from red cups, making out... Having the time of their lives. It was like an ad for the quintessential

high school experience. I couldn't wait to be one of those older kids, partying at midnight without a care in the world.

But fast forward almost four years, and I would have preferred to spend tonight in bed.

With everything going on, I wasn't in my usual party mood. I just wanted to call Lucia to check she was safe at home, then call it a night.

My friends thought I was kidding when I said that I wasn't coming. But when they saw that I was serious, they turned serious, too, and in the end, I decided it was easier to just go with them. I laughed, brushed it all off as a joke, and dutifully followed them out the window. Slid down the drainpipe outside our building, and snuck out alongside everyone else.

I meant just to show my face, down a can of Sprite and throw a frisbee around with the guys before heading back early. So how I instead ended up sandwiched in a conversation between two cheerleaders was beyond me.

"Gee, Cruz. I'm, like, so sorry to hear about your breakup. That must have been *so* rough." Katherine—or maybe Kaitlyn—batted her eyelashes at me, her voice low and sultry.

"If you ever need a shoulder to cry on..." Tara—or was it Sara?—added. It wasn't that I didn't know these girls' names because I couldn't care to remember them. I was just currently exceedingly overwhelmed by their attention. Being single was a whole new experience for me, and I didn't have the first clue how to act or what to say around girls.

Flirting was like a foreign language for me. Give me sarcastic, snappy banter any day—I was fluent in that.

Probably-Kaitlyn moved closer. Put her hand on my arm. I swallowed and looked around wildly. Sutton and Mia were making out at the edge of the clearing, Arie was slow-dancing with Quinn to a super fast, upbeat techno song, Grayson and Taylor were playing a rowdy game of Flip Cup, and Leo was... climbing a tree. On the edge of the crowd, I noticed Avery tossing her hair and laughing with Charlie McDiamond,

Sutton's football teammate. Clearly, Jasper was a distant memory.

"No shoulders for me, thanks." I clutched my soda can so hard, it almost crumpled. "I'm not really a crier. Except when I watch *The Notebook*, but that movie makes everyone cry. *Titanic*, too. Although I never really understood why Kate wouldn't let Leo float on that door with her, there was plenty of room..."

I blabbered on, my mouth moving faster than my brain. What on earth was I talking about? I didn't know, didn't care. I just wanted Probably-Kaitlyn to stop stroking my arm and looking at me like I was something to eat.

"That's what I admire about you, Cruz," Sara/Tara said. "You make everything funny. You joke and laugh about even the bad things, like breakups. When Devon dumped me last year, I cried for two weeks straight."

"No kidding," I said. Because what on earth was I supposed to say to that?

"Have you thought about who you're taking to the Valentine's dance?" Probably-Kaitlyn asked with a smile. She seemed like a lovely girl, and in any other universe, I would've been flattered. But right now, the last thing on my mind was getting a date for a school dance.

"Uhh..." I flailed.

"Hi Kait, hi Tara!" Avery popped up out of nowhere. She was wearing heathery-purple sweatpants and a black fleece jacket that looked incredibly soft. Her hair was pulled back in a complicated braid and her cheeks were pink from the cold. She slung an arm around Confirmed-to-be-Tara's shoulders then turned to me with a cheeky smile. "And look, it's Cruz. Didn't recognize you with a shirt on."

"Gotta stop flirting with me, Killer." I grinned at her. "I don't want to get a big head."

"I'm sure there's a nearby rooftop you could fall off if you need knocking down a few pegs." Avery bit her bottom lip and raised her eyebrows in a way that showed she was proud of

that little comeback of hers. Her blue eyes danced in the moonlight as we sparred. She had really pretty eyes, I realized.

“Touché, Jensen. Immaculate banter tonight.” I dragged my eyes away from hers and made a stupid chef’s kiss motion with my fingers.

“You two are funny.”

Kaitlyn’s voice surprised me. I’d almost forgotten she and Tara were here.

Avery turned to look at her squadmates, her expression vaguely surprised—like she, too, might’ve forgotten. “I’m funny. Cruz is just a joke.”

That actually did make me laugh. She *was* funny. And she’d just saved me from an awkward V-Day conversation.

“Anyhow, enough of that,” Avery continued, gesturing at me. “I came over because my brother wants to talk to you.”

I raised a brow. “I thought you didn’t realize I was here.”

Avery gave me a look that clearly said “*Dude, I’m trying to help you.*”

A smile crept over my face and I gave the girls a hasty wave. “Better be off. Duty calls. Nice chatting with you.”

“I’ll come, too,” Avery said. “I need to ask Arie something.”

Once we were out of earshot of Tara and Kaitlyn, I jerked my head in the direction of Arie, who was now sitting next to a fire pit with Quinn on his lap. They were kissing. Passionately. “Your brother needs me, huh?”

“Nah. But you looked like a deer caught in headlights, so I thought I’d be the stand-in twin. You know, help you out while Arie was preoccupied.”

“In that case, you’re an excellent honorary best friend.”

She giggled, and her cheeks flushed a little. “Consider yourself freed. Now you can go play frisbee with your bros or whatever.”

“I was gonna head home actually. Not feeling it tonight.”

Avery looked out over the party. “Me neither.”

“You thinking of leaving, too?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “Everyone I’d want to talk to here is otherwise occupied.”

“I’m gonna go ahead and assume I’m a part of that group.” I smirked and it turned into a real smile. “I can walk you home. Arie would kill me if I let you get eaten by a mountain lion or something.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t argue.

Avery lived in Emerson dorm, which was practically on my way home anyway. Plus, it was nice to have company in the forest at night. The pathways were full of twisted roots that were total tripping hazards. And the faculty often did rogue security patrols that I was a pro at avoiding. She’d be safer walking with me. From getting mauled and from getting in trouble.

“So, you strike out with Charlie McD?” I asked in the teasing tone I reserved specially for Avery as we left Ghoultown. She blinked at me and I added, “I saw you two chatting earlier. Figured there might be something brewing between you.”

She shook her head slowly, and I could smell her perfume in the night breeze. It was such a familiar scent, one I’d recognize anywhere but would have no idea how to put a name to. It was just Avery.

“Nope.” She looked sad all of a sudden and I couldn’t work out why. No way did Charlie reject her, that was impossible. She was, like, a million miles out of that guy’s league. Out of most guy’s leagues actually.

“Want to talk about it?” I offered, then blinked in surprise at my own words. Did I just offer to talk about feelings? Maybe psych class *was* starting to rub off on me. Finally.

“Nothing to talk about. There was just no spark between us.”

I frowned. That seemed like a weird reason to be sad. And Avery was usually so blasé about guys.

She muttered something else then, which sounded a lot like, “No spark with any of them.” But I wasn’t sure of what I heard and I didn’t want to pry. I respected people’s space to talk or not talk. Didn’t mean I wasn’t curious, though.

I glanced over at her. Even in the darkness, I could make out the small pout of her lower lip. She seemed lost in her thoughts, and I had a strange, primal urge to comfort her. Make her feel better.

Make her smile again.

“Ah, well.” I slung a friendly arm around her and pulled her close in a side bear-hug as we walked. “He’s boring, anyway. No sense of humor. I told him a hilarious joke last week and he didn’t even laugh.”

She chuckled and let out a breath, relaxing into my hug. Her body slumped against the side of mine and her shoulders shook with shivers, so I reflexively held tighter, adjusting so that I could wrap her closer. I breathed in, filling my lungs with that perfume of hers...

Woah. Since when did I do that when Avery was around?

I was suddenly very aware of everything about this moment. How small she was, tucked under my shoulder. How her long hair tickled my hand as her body vibrated with shivers. She nudged herself even closer and crossed her arms across her chest. The girl was always cold, and I was always hot. It was another way we were complete opposites, but I was happy to share the heat with her. It was what any nice guy would do.

Then, she stopped. Slipped out from under my arm and stepped sideways.

“Let’s talk about our project,” she said as she strode forward again. I fell into step beside her, making sure to respect the space she’d put between us. “Should one of us write up a report on the four-minute rule thing?”

Her teeth clacked together quietly and I raised a brow in her direction, though she couldn't see it. "Not sure it's worth it seeing as the whole thing was a bust."

"Right. A bust."

She let out a squeak as she stumbled over a root. She was literally walking on the opposite side of the trail than me now. Practically in the bushes. "Do I smell bad, Ave?" I joked.

She hesitated for a half-breath. Wait... did I actually smell bad?

I was about to sniff my shirt when Avery breathed out a sigh. "No worse than usual." She smiled. "And apparently not bad enough to deter Kait and Tara."

My lips pressed together. "Thanks for that, by the way. I... wasn't expecting it."

"Expecting what? A flood of girls asking you out as soon as they heard you're single?" Avery laughed but the sound was sharp.

"I wasn't. At all." I ran my fingers through my hair. "It's flattering, don't get me wrong. And they seem like nice girls, but—"

"You miss Naomi?" Avery guessed.

"Not exactly." I frowned. Of course Naomi had been an important part of my life, but we'd been growing apart for so long. And our lives were clearly going down different paths. I realized lately that there wasn't a single part of me that wanted to win her back, that wanted to be with her again.

Which told me everything I needed to know: the breakup, hard as it had been, was for the best.

"We're over," I said. "But grappling with being single for the first time in four years is kind of overwhelming, so I appreciated you coming by."

Avery's arm brushed against mine and I registered that she'd moved to walk in the center of the path again. Beside me. I smiled, feeling happier with this arrangement. With being able to see her expression again though the darkness.

An expression which was now sweetly unguarded. She didn't know I could see her.

“The things I do for you, Delgado,” she said.

EVERY

*A*nother Wednesday, another thrift shop treasure-hunting day. I'd been so good lately—spent the last two Wednesdays doing schoolwork on my free afternoons. I'd *earned* this.

And I needed it. Because something very uncomfortable and inconvenient had happened after Ghoultown the other night, and to process it, retail therapy with my best friends was very much in order. Luckily, Mia and Quinn were both free, and they were happy to spend the afternoon at Betty Lou's Consignment, plunging from one clothes rack to another.

"Anything in particular you guys are looking for today?" I asked as I checked out a dark blue minidress.

Quinn shrugged as she moved down a rack of skirts, her blond ponytail bobbing behind her. "Meh. Not really."

"Me neither," Mia agreed, though her features were scrunched around her pretty mouth, which was pressed into a concentrated line.

I raised an eyebrow at her, and she let out an awkward laugh. She threw Quinn a look, who turned away to examine a glaringly orange skirt.

"Maybe a leather jacket?" Mia ventured now. "I do like them vintage."

I kept my eyes on her as I pointed my thumb towards a tall rack at the end of the store that was almost keeling over with jackets. "You should probably look over there."

“Oh, yeah. That’s right...” she said faintly, but she didn’t move. Quinn had taken the orange billowy skirt and was staring at it intently like she was considering buying it. But I knew Quinn, and there was no way she’d be caught dead in that monstrosity. This was a diversion tactic if I ever saw one.

“What’s going on?” I asked. My gaze ping-ponged between the two of them as they shared another not-so-subtle glance.

Mia let out a sigh. “Okay, don’t hate me for saying the V word... but Quinnie and I are looking for cute dresses for the Valentine’s dance.”

Quinn gave me a small, guilty smile, and my eyebrows shot all the way up. “Oh, gosh! You should’ve told me. We’ve been wasting time not finding you two the perfect outfits!”

“Really?” Quinn said. “You hate when we bring up the dance.”

Mia nodded. “You get all tense and scrunchy whenever it comes up.”

“Do I?” I asked innocently. That sounded right, though—I wasn’t good at hiding stressed-out-Avery. According to Cruz, she looked like a raccoon. Rude.

I hated that my friends thought they had to lie to me. Loved them for loving me enough to want to protect my feelings. But I couldn’t believe that my stress about the dance had affected my friends. The very last thing I wanted was to ruin *their* magical high school experiences. “I’m so sorry, guys,” I said, guilt curling my stomach. “Finding the perfect dress for the dance is so important, and I want to help.”

“Really?” Mia smiled.

“Absolutely!” I reached out to drag my friends into a group hug.

After a moment, Quinn giggled. “Can you imagine how upset Taylor would be in this hug right now?”

We all laughed and stepped away. I refocused my mission from “looking for random thrift store gold” to “finding Mia

and Quinn their dream dresses.” I started grazing over a clothes rack, my new goal at the forefront of my mind.

Well, mostly forefront. Because the initial reason for my retail therapy was gnawing at me. *Cruz* was gnawing at me, and more specifically, what happened the night of the party at Ghoultown.

I was happy when Cruz said he wanted to leave the party, too—meant I wouldn’t have to walk home alone. So there we were, on our way back to our dorms, and it was cold out. Even with my warmest, fluffiest fleece jacket, I was frozen. So Cruz put his arm around me, held me close to keep me warm. It was a friendly, easygoing gesture of cause and effect: I was cold, so he hugged me.

But I *leaned in*. And not in a “oh, this is a move, so I should play along with it” kind of way, but in a natural, easy way. Reflexive. Like my body somehow found its place in the space under the crook of his shoulder. His spicy, comforting smell relaxed me while simultaneously making my heart speed up. And that’s when I noticed something.

Another warm flutter gathered in my belly. It traveled down my extremities and into my toes and fingers. I’d never experienced anything like it. Anything that felt so much like...

Butterflies.

It couldn’t be. It simply could not, would not, could never be. Not with *Cruz!*

But I couldn’t ignore it. Couldn’t get past what this meant.

Could there be a part of me that actually *liked* Cruz Delgado?!

“Earth to Ave.”

I became aware of a hand waving in front of my face. I was fingering a sequin dress, the pads of my fingers now raw from the rough texture. “Huh?”

Quinn placed her hands on her hips. “You floated off in your own world there. What were you thinking about?”

I cleared my throat and released my grip on the dress. Mia was standing on the other side of the rack, staring at me with an eyebrow raised and an odd smile on her face.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. Too quickly. Was it suddenly super hot in here? I fanned at my face, even as heat rose up from my chest, into my neck and across my cheeks. “Wow, did someone turn up the heat?”

I looked around wildly, hoping the college-age cashier with the wild red hair would be able to help. Instead, she was typing away on her phone, her pointy gel nails tapping loudly on the screen.

“I’m fine,” Quinn said with a shrug. Mia nodded her agreement.

I undid my jacket and slung it over my arm, grappling for a subject change. Any subject change would do. I grabbed the first piece of fabric I could find and took the hanger from the rack. “Look, Quinnie! This is perfect for you, so great for...”

I trailed off. I was currently holding one of the most beautiful two-piece dresses I’d ever seen. Both the corset top and the sheer, floaty skirt were the most vibrant shade of turquoise. The top was cropped, and had a sweetheart neckline and off-the-shoulder straps embroidered in gold, and the skirt featured the same gold accents, all of which shimmered when they caught the light.

The ensemble gave off major Princess Jasmine vibes—striking and stylish without going overboard. I wasn’t a huge fan of Disney Princesses, but I did appreciate Jasmine’s desire to find true love at any cost, rather than settle for a man she didn’t care about.

Quinn’s eyes went wide for a brief moment and a smile touched her lips. “Ave, that’s gorgeous. I think you should keep it for yourself.”

“Ha. I don’t need a dress for the dance.” I hurriedly tried to put the hanger back on the rack, but it was overstuffed and I fumbled with the gorgeous set. “I doubt I’ll be going anyway.”

“Haven’t a ton of guys asked you?” Mia tilted her head. “Sutton was saying half the football team tried to shoot their shot.”

I couldn’t get the hanger on the rack so I just held the Jasmine dress in front of me awkwardly. “Yeah... but I didn’t want to say yes to just anyone.”

Mia and Quinn exchanged a quick glance. Just a flash of a look, but I got the unmistakable sense that I was missing something. Quinn chewed her lower lip as she turned back to me. “Really, Ave? You can’t think of a *single person* you might want to go with?”

“Nope.” I gave my head a shake, even as a cool shiver tickled the back of my neck. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost say that these two knew about the things I was feeling for a certain tall, perma-shirtless, *totally off-limits* basketball player.

“Hmm. Funny,” Mia said pensively. “Because I have a feeling that what you’re looking for might be right in front of you. Maybe with a boy you went home with after Ghoultown the other night—”

I barely let Mia finish her sentence before I burst into laughter. The sound was harsh and loud and the cashier dropped her phone in a wide-eyed panic. “You can’t mean Cruz,” I hiccuped.

“Maybe we do,” Quinn said with a shrug. “Is that so ridiculous?”

I wanted to say yes. Yes, it was ridiculous. But I couldn’t find the breath.

“Ave?” Quinn asked, waving a hand in front of my face again.

“It’s simply not possible.”

Mia grinned. “Believe me, girl, even the most seemingly impossible things can be very much possible. Sutton and I were once the most unlikely of pairings.”

“Same with Arie and me,” Quinn added with a wink.

“Something to think about,” Mia said lightly and the two of them returned to their search, leaving me with a highly uncomfortable feeling soaring through my bloodstream.

It *really* was impossible. It was impossible that I felt something stirring in my stomach when Cruz and I were staring at each other during the four-minute challenge. It was impossible that the feeling came back again the other night—stronger, that time—when he walked me home.

Cruz was totally, utterly and completely impossible. He was my brother’s closest friend, my project partner, Naomi’s very recent ex-boyfriend, and the boy I’d sparred and bickered with my entire life. Everything about us was wrong.

So why, oh why, did it feel *so right* to have him walk me home? To have his arm around me when I was cold? To hear and feel his laugh right next to me?

Clearly, this whole attraction project was messing with me. I needed to screw my head back on and focus on the task at hand: find a date to the Valentine’s dance who gave me butterflies.

One whose name wasn’t Cruz Delgado.



CruzControl: Okay Jensen. We're T-minus one month from Project Attraction being due. It's crunch time.

BrAvery: Don't say crunch. Now all I can think about is Cap'n Crunch.

CruzControl: Stop thinking about cereal for once.

BrAvery: Never.

CruzControl: If I was a cereal what would I be?

BrAvery: What?

CruzControl: I'm thinking I'd be a Frosted Flake.

CruzControl: Or a Cheerio.

BrAvery: You'd be a Froot Loop, is what you'd be.

CruzControl: And you, my friend, would be a Mini Wheat.

BrAvery: Are we really texting about cereal at 11pm?

CruzControl: You started it. I was merely inquiring about our next experiment.

BrAvery: So you have an idea?

CruzControl: Not yet. But we should figure something out soon. I don't think Mrs. Dunn would be too impressed with our Tay and Gray eye contact results.

BrAvery: Right. I'll go to the library tomorrow to do some research.

CruzControl: I dunno if that's necessary. I'm sure I'll think of something brilliant before then.

BrAvery: ...I'll be waiting with bated breath.

CruzControl: Have some faith, little Mini Wheat.

CRUZ

The Penguin Plunge was my idea.

When we first started at Hallisburg Prep, Arie, Sutton, Grayson and I invented a game we called “Hallway Ball”. It was a simple but brilliant concept involving a bouncy ball, a stack of cups and, of course, a dorm hallway. Over the years, the rulebook had been tweaked, added to, edited and refined until we had a game that was pure perfection.

It was a great way to blow off steam given our schedules that were jam-packed with classes and sports. It still kept us entertained for hours every week.

And best of all, our newest rule allowed us to serve up fantastic punishments to the losers.

Tonight, I was one of the losers. And so, I was being subjected to a fate of my own crafting: I’d dared the losing team to take a midnight jump into Hallisburg Lake, which was insanely cold at this time of year.

Hence, Penguin Plunge.

“Wooohoooo! Have fun, losers!” Arie bellowed as Gray and I climbed down the drainpipe. I dropped to the ground with ease and looked up towards Arie and Sutton, who were leaning out of his fourth-floor bedroom window to jeer at us.

“Sure will!” I called back, bouncing on my toes.

Grayson, who was much more upset about losing than I was, looked between us and loudly hissed, “Shh, are you trying to get us caught?”

“Should’ve thought of that before losing tonight.” Sutton was practically comatose with laughter, delighting in his win.

Gray gave the guys a rude hand gesture in lieu of a response and we broke into a jog. “This is the worst. I don’t know why I still play this game with you guys,” he grumbled as he pulled his hood up.

“Because you love and adore us,” I replied.

He rolled his eyes but didn’t deny it. “It’s gotta be almost freezing.”

It had been a colder than usual January at Hallisburg, there was no denying it. A plunge in the lake was going to suck, even for me. But I was nice enough not to point out that he’d missed the shot that had lost us the game.

We slunk around the edge of the courtyard and past the Science block, turned left at the Auditorium, then sprinted down the cobbled path that led to the lake. It was pitch dark, and I stumbled multiple times as I ran, but when the lake finally came into view, I had to admit that moon-soaked surface was pretty awesome.

“Woah,” I muttered appreciatively when Gray and I stopped to catch our breath, panting against the frigid night air.

“I’ve never been here at night,” Gray said.

“Me neither.”

With the stars twinkling overhead and the misty haze rising from the water, the whole scene looked like something out of a romantic movie. You know, if you were into that sort of thing.

“Shall we just get this over with?” Gray asked, his voice grave.

“Guess so.” I took a huge gulp of air, then kicked off my shoes. Removed my socks, hoodie and sweatpants and walked to the edge of the lake in just my boxers. The wind was cold, but the adrenaline coursing through my body kept me from feeling it. The water would be colder and I mentally prepared myself, like Coach taught us to do before big games.

“Coming or what?” I huffed out.

With a dejected sigh, Grayson began to remove his own clothes. “Run across the dock and dive in on three?” he grumbled.

“You betcha.”

“One,” he said.

Anticipation rose in my chest. “Two.”

“Three!”

We took off at full speed. The dock shook with the pounding of our feet and my skin burned against the cold air. I didn’t hesitate before I threw myself off the end of the dock, Grayson following a millisecond later.

SPLASH!!!

The water stung like a thousand slaps leveled to my entire body. I could’ve yelped aloud, it was so cold. My muscles seized but I pushed through and kicked frantically, swimming up and up until I surfaced. A breeze blew against my cheeks and my skin was consumed by fiery ice, my blood pounding at record speed.

I felt full of energy, full of life. Before I could think about what I was doing, I threw my head back.

“WOOOOO!!!!” I shouted, relishing in the sound echoing over the water.

“Are you crazy?!” Grayson was at my side. “Keep it down! We’re going to get freaking suspended if we’re caught swimming out here in the middle of the night.”

Suspension was the furthest thing from my mind right now. All of my worries were.

Blissfully, wonderfully far away.

I flipped over and floated on my back, blowing water out of my mouth like a whale.

Grayson broke into laughter. “Delgado, you are a breed all your own.”

But he lay on his back, too, and floated next to me. Now that we were past the initial shock, the water actually wasn't so bad. We floated on the lake in a companionable silence, bathing in the light of the moon. I relished every second of the cool water needling my skin, of the silence when my ears were underwater.

When we got back to shore, Grayson was smiling. We hoisted ourselves out of the water and darted for our clothes, pulling them back on in a hurry. But instead of running back to our dorm, we walked.

"I can't believe I'm saying this but I'm kinda glad we lost tonight," Grayson said, running his hands through his damp hair. "That was actually a pretty cool experience."

I grinned at my friend. "Glad to be of service."

"It might be the quietest I've ever seen you."

I looked up at the night sky through the canopy of trees above our heads. "I guess lying under the stars and feeling like the rest of the world is a million miles away will do that to you."

"Never seen that side of you, bro." Grayson punched my arm.

I punched him back, but my mind was on Avery. She'd seen that side of me, on New Year's. Just me and her, lying under the stars and listening to the silence after the fireworks. "I have a sensitive side, you know," I joked.

"And would Avery have anything to do with its sudden appearance, by chance?"

"Avery Jensen?" I blinked.

"Do we know another Avery?"

We did not.

"What would Avery have to do with it?" I asked.

"You're spending all this time together doing this project, you're both recently single, and I saw you leave Ghoultown with her the other night. Is anything... happening there?"

“Yeah, right.” I snorted. Shoved my hands deep in my pockets. “Like I said to Arie, I think that girl would rather kill me than kiss me.”

But as I said the words, I realized that Avery and I were hardly at each other’s throats these days. Something was... different. Something had changed. It was like our little New Year’s spent together made me realize that she wasn’t simply Arie’s twin, wasn’t just the pretty-but-annoying, cheer-obsessed kid I’d grown up with.

Avery was kind of a cool person. Sometimes.

“I guess,” Grayson said slowly. His words brought me back to the moment with a shock. “You guys are kinda like Taylor and me in that way.”

I blinked at my friend, resisting the urge to cuff him on the side of the head to knock some sense into him. “Tell me again... Why, exactly, would it never happen between you and Taylor?”

“Because we’re friends. Best friends. That’s all.”

“Sweet.” I smiled angelically. “So you’re cool with me asking her out, then?”

Gray’s eyebrows almost shot off his face.

“W-what?” He choked out.

“Taylor’s a total catch. Funny, smart, silly. Pretty, too.”

Gray went as pale as his name. “Hm.”

“What? You don’t think she’s a catch?”

“No, I do. I just...”

“You don’t want to date her but you don’t want anyone else to date her?” I offered as I stepped on a pile of stray twigs. There was a loud *crunch* and Gray and I slunk closer to the shadows. We were close to our dorm now.

“Yes. No. I mean, no. Well. I mean—” Gray’s whispered dithering came to an abrupt halt and he clapped his mouth shut. I watched as he swallowed thickly, the cogs in his brain

clearly turning at a million miles per minute. “I don’t know how I’d feel about you dating her,” he admitted.

He seemed so uncomfortable, I immediately felt bad. My friends and I all ragged on each other, but I didn’t want to upset Gray for real. “For the record,” I backtracked. “I would never ask Taylor out; I was just messing with you.”

Gray shot me a sideways glance and I could make out a tiny smirk.

For some reason, that egged me on to say the next thing: “But I do think she’d say yes if you asked her out. Actually, scratch that. I freaking *know* she would.”

“You think?” Gray looked and sounded completely skeptical.

I kicked a rock and watched it skitter and hop across the pathway. How could Gray be so blind to what he and Taylor might have? “Just something to think about,” I said with a shrug.

Grayson gave a sudden laugh. “That water must’ve had some kinda weird voodoo magic or something.”

“What do you mean?”

“Delgado, you’re one of my closest friends; have been for years. But I don’t think we’ve ever had a serious heart-to-heart conversation until now.”

“Ha. You’re right.” I smiled. “Maybe Tramble drugged the lake with truth serum so all of us wayward students would confess to sneaking out.”

“Or all that adrenaline from the cold shocked us into getting into our feelings.”

I stopped dead in my tracks as his words reminded me of something I’d read recently. If we were in a cartoon, a lightbulb would’ve just gone on over my head.

Bing! Brilliant idea unlocked.

“What?” Gray came to a stop next to me. We were standing in the shadows of our dorm building, his face almost

perfectly hidden from the moonlight. His next words were a low and urgent hiss. “Did you see someone?”

“Grayson Alan Richard Pemberton, you are a certified genius.” I grabbed his shoulders and shook him in delight. “A gentleman and a scholar and a champion among men.”

“Come again?” He peered at me with concern. “Dude, I think you might’ve actually been drugged.”

“Quite the opposite.” I glanced around, then down at my watch. It was 12:45am, but what did it matter how late it was when there was no time like the present? “I’ve gotta go.”

I didn’t need the moonlight to see Gray’s perplexed expression. “Go where?!”

“Share your genius idea with my favorite Cereal Killer.” I turned away and started to jog towards the Emerson dorms.

“I love you and all, but you are literally the weirdest person I’ve ever met,” Gray hissed after me.

I looked at him over my shoulder and crossed my eyes. “Thank you, good sir.”

EVERY

I was standing on a deserted rooftop, dressed in the gorgeous turquoise two-piece dress from Betty Lou's. Weird, I couldn't remember buying the dress, or even trying it on, but it fit perfectly. The light, soft fabric skated over my skin, hugging tight in areas, and billowing in others.

The sky above me was inky black, glittering with stars that lit up the valley below. It was silent. Peaceful. Close, yet it seemed so far away. For some reason, I felt a sharp, desperate ache to explore it. Discover everything laid out in front of me.

If I could only find a way off this darn rooftop.

"Avery!" My name sounded far away, a whisper on the breeze. And what was that tapping sound?

"Cruz?" I looked for the figure that belonged to the familiar voice.

"I've had the most brilliant idea..."

Yes! My heart leapt in my chest. *Cruz is here to invite me to the dance!*

I spun around, searching for him.

"Look up!"

And there he was. Above me. On a mat.

A mat that was... flying?

Cruz, shirtless as usual, was lounging on the mat, casually hovering in midair. He was grinning away, like he had a secret. What kind of witchcraft was this?

“Want to take a ride?” he asked, brow raised.

Stunned speechless, I nodded. He held out his hand.

The tapping was getting louder, faster. Beating steadily in time with my racing heart...

“Mini Wheat,” Cruz said in a low, sultry voice, dark eyes intent on mine as he took my hand. “Wake up, it’s freezing out here.”

Huh?

My eyes flew open and I blinked into the darkness of my room.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Phew. It was a dream. Just a silly little dream that meant absolutely nothing...

Tap tap tap!!

The noise was real. And it was coming from the window.

Fear crept over me, its hands cold and clammy. Who was at my window at this time of night?

“Ave!” The familiar, low hiss cut through the darkness. I jolted up, relief mingling with confusion.

I jumped out of bed, flicked on my lamp, and opened my curtains. On the other side of the glass stood Cruz, bathed golden in the low light. My cheeks burned fiery red as I remembered my dream... how happy I’d been to see him. How much I’d wanted to go with him—wherever he was going—on that magic Aladdin carpet. How my eyes had lingered on his fit, shirtless physique.

What a dumb dream that had been.

I forced open the window and it rose with a *thunk*. I stuck my head outside. “What on earth are you doing here?!”

Cruz didn’t bother to dignify my (perfectly reasonable) question with a response. Instead, he put his hands on my

windowsill and pushed himself up in one seamless motion, pivoting into my room, and dropping to his feet with surprising agility.

He glanced around, taking in the framed boho desert prints on the wall, the sage-green velvet armchair in the corner, the rumple of warm-toned throw pillows scattered over the bed. On the dresser was a mess of nail polishes and lipglosses. Strings of unlit fairy lights looped across the ceiling. “Nice room. I like this one better than your room at home.”

It was an off-hand comment, but it caught me off guard. Cruz had been in my bedroom back home a bunch of times over the years, but with my newfound butterfly revelation, it suddenly felt extremely weird that he had. And that he had an opinion on which room he liked better. In truth, I also preferred my room here. My mother had gotten my bedroom at home professionally decorated by a semi-famous designer, and they’d created something modern, stark, cold and utterly lifeless.

I took a better look at Cruz, assessing this new, unusually observant side of him. My mouth dropped open. “Why are you all wet?!”

Cruz shook his head like a dog, spraying me with droplets of water. “Midnight swim. Great to get the brain working.” He sniffed and shivered slightly. “Although maybe not great for the core body temperature.”

With that, Cruz grabbed the bottom hem of his damp hoodie and pulled it over his head. It had been sticking to his wet skin, which I now learned was completely bare under the hoodie.

“Excuse me! What do you think you’re doing?” I squawked, my cheeks on fire because Cruz Delgado was standing shirtless in my bedroom at 1am. I’d seen Cruz shirtless a million times, but now, I averted my eyes. That familiar light brown skin, which was taut over his wide shoulders, defined abs, and narrow waist, was making me dizzy.

“I’m cold,” he said simply. “And I never feel cold. So I must be really, really cold.”

In the dim light, I could see that his lips were blue around the edges and the hair on his arms was standing up. “Um, let me get you a towel...” I offered, looking purposefully towards a corner of the room.

“No need,” he replied cheerfully and then proceeded to pull back the covers of my bed and climb in.

I watched with my mouth open as he snuggled up under my duvet like a hamster.

“Mmm, so warm.”

“Cruz.” I crossed my arms and tapped my foot, trying to look tough and stern. Inside, I felt like a jiggly, uneasy bowl of pudding. “I’m going to need an explanation.”

“All right, all right. As promised, I have a brilliant idea for our next experiment. Remember that study we looked at in the library, the one with the bridge crossing?”

“Yeah.”

Cruz’s eyes were sparkling with excitement. My heart did a strange jump to see him so happy. Almost like... skipping. “Well, we should do an experiment with a dangerous activity!”

I raised a brow. “What kind of dangerous activity?”

“Well, it doesn’t need to be dangerous... It just needs to get your adrenaline pumping.”

I leveled a gaze at the boy who’d just woken me up by banging on my window in the middle of the night. The boy who’d begun to frequent my dreams, unwelcome, and was now lying shirtless in my freaking bed. My adrenaline was definitely spiked right now—my heart was racing and my stomach was filled with more flutters than ever.

“I know it sounds crazy but...” Cruz took a breath, clearly misinterpreting my silence. “Look. Gray and I just jumped in the lake. It was freezing, and afterwards, we had, like, a legit heart to heart.” Cruz looked at me, wide-eyed. “About *feelings*.”

I stared at him for a beat. “And this was a big deal?”

“Huge. And get this—he even admitted that Taylor was a catch. That he didn’t really like the thought of anyone else dating her.”

Now, my interest was piqued. “So, you’re proposing that we find two people—two *other* people—then put them in a situation that creates adrenaline and monitor their reactions to each other?”

“You catch on quick, Mini Wheat.”

I took a moment to consider the idea. It was actually pretty good. Better than any of the ideas I’d come up with recently. Once again, Cruz was surprising me with his dedication. “I like it,” I admitted. “It’s worth a shot.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Cruz replied. “Now we just need to find more test subjects, given that Taylor and Grayson couldn’t hold it together. And we’ll need to think of a good activity to get the adrenaline going. Not sure we could convince anyone else to have a midnight swim in the dead of winter.”

“How about climbing? I get freaked out at the mere *thought* of going up a climbing wall. And even if you’re not afraid of heights, it’s sure to get the adrenaline going.”

Cruz smiled his huge, beaming smile. “Brilliant idea, Ave.”

I smiled back, feeling warm and fuzzy inside. Realized what was happening and abruptly made myself stop. How was it that all those textbook romance feelings I’d been hoping for were *finally* happening, and they were happening with freaking Cruz?!

This visit of his had clearly gone on long enough. I was about to lightly, helpfully suggest that Cruz leave my room when he spoke.

“What are you most afraid of?” His question was quiet and pensive. He was laying on his back in my bed, staring up at the ceiling. I had a flashback to New Year’s, when we were, once again, alone together playing shadow puppets. The thought

relaxed me a little, reminded me that this was just Cruz. But why was he asking me this?

A humorless smirk touched my lips as I remembered what he'd said about talking to Grayson. "Feelings," I said quietly, adding "*or lack thereof*" in my head.

Cruz's half-hearted smirk matched my own. "I definitely get that."

"What about you?"

"Getting pushed off a rooftop by an angry cheerleader."

I sighed tiredly, and Cruz gave me a small, almost apologetic smile. Like he'd answered without thinking and knew it was a dumb response. I watched him carefully, silent and waiting. I had a feeling there was something he needed to say.

"I guess I'm... afraid of turning into my parents. Which means that I need to learn to communicate better and talk more openly about my feelings. The way I never can at home." His tone was so casual, so flippant and matter-of-fact, that it took me a few seconds to process his words. The vulnerability in what he had just admitted.

He looked at me in the soft glow of my lamp and our eyes met for a long, loaded moment. Then, he pushed his hair back off his face and gave me a lopsided half-smile.

"My parents don't do the whole 'talking about feelings' thing. They're more about putting on a brave face, keeping up appearances, rather than digging into the core of the issue."

I knew Mr. and Mrs. Delgado as a powerful-looking couple who wouldn't tolerate a hair out of place. They were totally put-together, completely perfect on the surface. Not unlike my own mother, in some ways. So I understood how things weren't always as they appeared on the surface.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

"I want to talk to them, but they don't listen to me. I'm worried about Luce. She's been making some stupid decisions lately, and I wish my parents would just talk to her about it

instead of pretending nothing is wrong and she can do no wrong.”

Cruz hunched a little, bunching my blankets around him.

“It’s why I failed psych last semester. Luce called me for help and so I went. Missed the exam.” he admitted. “But it was my choice, and if I had to help her again, I would. Stupid decisions or not, she’s my sister. I just wish she’d listen when I try to talk to her. Obviously, I’ve hardly been the model child over the years, but I never did anything reckless or dangerous. I’m scared she’s gonna get hurt.”

I sat for a moment, processing his words. Growing up, Cruz had been the joker of his family, while Lucia got straight A’s and participated in every extracurricular out there. She was now sixteen and a sophomore at a San Francisco day school for gifted students. It was strange to think of her rebelling, of Cruz stepping up to be the responsible sibling.

“I had no idea,” I said.

“Why would you?” His mouth pressed in a line before he rearranged his expression into an impassive mask. “I don’t know why I told you all that.”

He looked so downtrodden; I wished there was something I could say to make it better. But sometimes, there were no words. I thought back to when my parents were splitting up, when my childhood home was full of fighting and constant clashing. Arie and I would hide at the top of the stairs and listen to their fighting. There was nothing either of us could say to help each other, but what Arie always did when I cried was simple: he hugged me tight until I felt safe. And I hugged him back until I knew he felt safe, too. We protected each other.

I could see that Cruz had been a rock for Lucia, but had anyone been around to take care of *his* feelings? Make him feel better?

Before I could question what I was doing, I sat on the bed and wrapped my arms around Cruz, hugging him close.

Despite being burrowed in my blankets, his skin was icy cold and clammy to the touch.

He flinched, and for a moment, I thought he was going to pull away. Shrug me off. Instead, he wrapped his arms around me, too. Pulled me down gently towards him and hugged me tight. Cruz's cold skin made contact with mine and I tugged the blankets back over us, not thinking anything of it except to warm him up.

We lay like that for a long time, holding onto each other until he finally felt warm and his signature smile returned to his face. "Thanks Ave," he murmured into my hair, giving my shoulder a little squeeze. "I think I needed that."

I nodded dumbly, my breath catching in my chest as I rolled back up to a seated position.

I was glad Cruz felt better. But I, on the other hand, was starting to think I had no idea what I needed anymore.

CRUZ

The next few days were a blur of early morning gym sessions, classes, piles of homework, and extra basketball practice. Literally, all I did was eat, sleep, study and play ball. The playoff tournament for the state championship—which was taking place in Redding and therefore meant a whole weekend away from H-Burg—was right around the corner, and the Sharks were determined to take the victory home.

So it took awhile for Avery and me to set up our climbing experiment. Between trying to keep up with everything and coordinating our busy schedules, it was tricky. By the time we set a date and time to meet at the climbing gym, we thought the worst was behind us.

We were wrong.

“Get me down, I’m serious!” Rachel howled from her position roughly five feet above the ground, clutching onto the multi-colored climbing wall for dear life.

My buddy, Leo, sighed the deep sigh of a man who was very, very tired. They were supposed to be a match made in heaven—Leo was single and also an excellent climber, and Rachel was Avery’s supposedly “boy-crazy” friend who was terrified of heights.

But surely there was no screaming in heaven like Rachel was doing right now.

Leo looked up at her from under his faded denim baseball cap and tightened his hands on the rope. “Rachel,” he said

pointedly. “For the fourth time... to get down, you need to let go.”

“I CAN’T!” she shrieked. Leo sighed again.

Avery and I exchanged a glance. She gave me an apologetic smile before turning back to her friend. “It’s okay, Rach. Leo’s got you. If you let go of the wall, he can belay you down safely.”

Leo rolled his eyes and muttered, “She could literally jump from there.”

I ignored my grumpy friend and nudged Avery. “Nice climbing lingo, nerd.”

The touch was deliberately casual, a lean down to bump my shoulder against hers. I was almost uncomfortably aware of her proximity. How sweetly pink her cheeks were against the smooth, white canvas of her skin.

“I watched a ton of YouTube videos last night,” Avery confessed.

I smiled at her, amused. “You mentioned the other night that the mere thought of climbing freaked you out. Have you ever actually tried it?”

She shook her head, eyes intent on the wall.

I thought about how she’d pulled herself through that skylight on New Year’s. How she stood strong atop the cheerleaders’ pyramid every basketball game, not even flinching. “You’d be good at it.”

“You think so?”

I looked at the scene ahead of us—Rachel was still squealing for dear life while clinging onto the wall, and Leo was grumbling under his breath. Our second attraction experiment was clearly dead in the water, so we may as well make the most of our time at the climbing gym.

Besides, I really believed that Avery would enjoy climbing if she gave it a chance.

“You should try it.” I nodded at the wall.

Avery frowned. Scuffed the toe of her sneaker on the mat. “Aren’t we meant to be monitoring Rach and Leo?”

“I think it’s safe to say this test is another bust.” I actually felt pretty bummed that this idea had also flopped. “Adrenaline clearly does not enhance attraction in every case.”

Avery looked at Rachel and Leo bickering, then made her raccoon face. Only this time, it was less angry raccoon, more pensive. If raccoons could even be pensive. “Guess not.” She glanced at me sideways, her dark blue eyes loaded with something I couldn’t place. “Maybe the whole adrenaline thing only works for Grayson.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, the taste of what I knew to be a lie sharp on my tongue.

Because I was still reeling from what happened last week. I climbed in through Avery’s window late at night with an idea for our project, not thinking anything of it except that I was wet, freezing, and wanting to see her. When I climbed back out an hour later, though, I had some very confusing feelings.

Mostly about how I ended up cuddling with her on her bed, and it made me feel a certain way.

I pushed away the lingering thoughts. “What do you think? Ready to scale a wall?”

“The wall isn’t the issue. I’m not sure I trust putting my life in your hands.”

“Don’t worry. They’re very capable hands.”

Her nose crinkled. “Gross.”

I grinned back. Our usual bickery banter was my equilibrium right now, and I craved it like oxygen. Because Avery Jensen and I didn’t *cuddle*. It was absurd. And sure, I was surprised at how natural it felt to hold her in my arms, how well she seemed to fit with her head on my chest.

But the most surprising thing was that I’d blurted out what was happening with Lucia. I immediately wanted to take the words back, kicked myself for saying them out loud. But Avery hadn’t offered any words of wisdom, hadn’t told me I’d

done the wrong thing or tried work out a way to patch over the “problem”.

She'd just *been there*.

It felt... good talking to Avery. I was amazed how much better I felt, how much lighter, when I climbed out of her window later that night.

But I'd been totally on edge ever since. Because the weird feelings bubbling up in my chest that felt definitely-not-friendly towards my best friend's sister were feelings that I definitely couldn't have. I had to chalk it up to the adrenaline of the lake swim rendering me temporarily emotionally unstable.

I also had to pretend that I hadn't noticed how good Avery's hair smelled today. How cute she looked in her leggings and loose sweatshirt.

“You really think I could do it?” she asked now, her dark hair falling down her back as she looked up at the wall.

“With all your experience on rooftops? No question. And if it'll help ease your mind, I've actually been climbing a bunch of times with Leo. It's as much about trusting yourself and your instincts, making good decisions about your route, as it is about skill. Kinda like basketball.” I paused. “Or cheerleading, I'd imagine.”

Avery's eyes were bright and sharp as she bit her bottom lip. The girl loved a challenge—a feeling I understood.

“So what do you say?” I held up my hands. “Ready to trust these babies?”

“Absolutely not.” She gathered her hair up with both hands and removed an elastic from her wrist with her teeth to tie it back into a ponytail. “But I'm bored, so let's do it.”

Fifteen minutes later, Avery was wearing climbing shoes and was trying to wiggle into her harness. She pulled at the straps, looking a bit lost, so I stepped forward to help her tighten it. I was aware of everything about the moment—the way she swallowed when my hand brushed her stomach as I

adjusted the clips, how small her hands were compared to mine as we pulled the straps on her waist.

The back of my neck was strangely warm when I stepped away, the harness secure and the rope forming a tight figure-eight through the tie-in loop.

“Okay.” She nodded once and I could almost picture her gritting her teeth. “Let’s do this.”

“Not scared are you, Jensen?”

She turned her head, her teeth worrying her bottom lip again. “Not really. I’m not usually afraid of heights, I just...”

She trailed off. My eyes met hers and I gave her a nod. “I get like that before big games. I’m usually so confident when I play ball, but the pressure makes me feel like I’m going to fail. I just tell myself over and over that I’ve got it. I can do it. So: you’ve got this, Ave. And I’ve got you. Just take it slow, and remember not to pull up with your arms. Use your legs.”

She breathed out slowly. “Okay.”

“I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Don’t drop me.”

“I’ve got you. Promise.” We were still locked in a stare, and at my words, I could see the worry fade from her eyes. Confidence and trust replaced concern and nerves.

My heart skipped a little beat.

She blinked, and the intensity of the moment was extinguished. “Thanks, Cruz.”

And she was off. Like I thought she’d be, she was a natural. Within ten seconds, she had passed Rachel, and was pushing herself up the wall at impressive speed.

“Nicely done, Ave,” Leo called from next to me. “You could give Alex Honnold a run for his money.”

“Yeah, great job,” I shouted. “You’re killing it, Killer.”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t stop with that stupid nickname!”

A big, goofy grin spread across my face. Spending time with Avery was quickly becoming one of my favorite things.

“Great. I guess I’ll just die here,” Rachel said flatly. I snorted as Leo let out the tenth heaving sigh of the past five minutes.

I kept my eyes on Avery as she climbed. For safety purposes of course, not because I was impressed by her bravery and willingness to do something that scared her. She moved with speed and agility, sometimes pausing to survey her options for her next hand or foot hold. My hands were tight on the rope tethering her to me, making sure there was zero slack.

Within no time, she was at the top.

“I did it!” she shrieked.

“YESSSSSS MINI WHEAT!” I cheered. “Way to go.”

“Seriously, Delgado, we have got to talk about these nicknames.”

“Never!”

“I can’t believe I made it.” Avery looked down at me with a beautiful grin.

Pride bloomed in my chest for her. “I can.”

AVERY

Downtown Hallisburg was one of my favorite places to hang out. I loved the narrow streets and the multicolored storefronts. The town was always buzzing with excited tourists and friendly locals, and the entire place held an infectious, low-key energy I loved. I thought I'd visited every single small business the town had to offer.

But I'd never been to The Yellow Yeti before.

It was tucked down a quiet alley at the other end of the main walking street from Betty Lou's, Groovy Juice and Disco Sal's. The alley was totally non-descript, and I could see why I'd missed it in the past.

"Ta-da!" Cruz said, holding open the door for me.

"Wow, what a gentleman," I muttered as I stepped into the shop. After I'd made it to the top of the climbing wall without plummeting to my death, Cruz had suggested that we go and celebrate my success and also debrief on our experiment.

He'd also insisted on being the one to drive into Hallisburg, even though my car was parked by the dorms and his vehicle was over in the far lot at the edge of campus. Something about "valuing his life".

Whatever that meant.

On the drive here, he bet me five bucks that he could take me somewhere I'd never been before that would fully satisfy my sweet tooth.

I laughed and shook on it, confident I'd win.

But one look at The Yellow Yeti, and my confidence was shaken.

The ice cream parlor had cozy booths and butter yellow walls with hand-painted murals of cartoon yetis in winter coats skiing down tree-lined, snow covered mountains, twirling on frozen lakes, and barreling down slopes on sleds. Behind the counter was a glass case of what looked like a million flavors.

It was pretty much perfect.

I surveyed the choices: Peanut Butter Brittle, Churro Crunch, S'Mores... the list was endless.

Cruz caught my expression and grinned.

“Best of all, they got Cereal Milk flavor.” Cruz opened his hand in a “mic drop” motion.

“Have to try it before you claim victory,” I insisted stubbornly, but I was smiling.

I greeted the server and ordered a double scoop of Cereal Milk on a dipped waffle cone, topped with Lucky Charm marshmallows and chocolate sauce. Cruz watched me intently as I gingerly took a lick.

“Mmm,” I groaned, closing my eyes as the cold sweetness hit my lips.

He laughed.

“Okay, you win,” I muttered.

“Of course I win.” Cruz’s reply was swift and teasing.

He accepted his overflowing cup of ice cream from the server: Oreo and Tiger mix with nuts and hot caramel on top. Because of course Cruz would choose the wackiest ice cream on the planet. He spoke to the server with a lopsided smirk on his lips, eyes dancing, and I let my gaze linger on the curl of brown hair above his ear, on the sharp 90-degree angle of his jawline, on the hint of stubble he’d missed shaving.

I stepped up to the counter to pay, and I dug a crumpled five out of my wallet. “Here’s your winnings. Don’t gloat too much.”

“Victory is sweet, Killer.” He plucked the bill from my fingers... and threw it in the tip jar. Then, at lightning speed, he produced his credit card and paid for both of our ice creams before I could even process what was happening.

“You didn’t have to do that!”

“I wanted to.” He smiled briefly, then dug his spoon in his ice cream. My heart was racing, skipping and twisting a similar rhythm to when I climbed the wall. When I reached the top, it was nothing but pure exhilaration and excitement. I was proud of myself, but it was the evident pride on Cruz’s face that made the experience especially memorable.

“Where do you want to sit, Jensen?” Cruz turned to look at me and caught me staring. But whether he was too preoccupied with his ice cream, or whether he was being uncharacteristically polite by not calling me out on it, I didn’t know. He motioned around the store. “Pick a booth, any booth,” he said in a deep, stupid showman voice.

“Umm...” I said, grateful for the opportunity to turn away and hide my expression. “Over there.”

Cruz gestured for me to go first. I skipped through the tables and collapsed in a nice, big booth by the window. I took a couple more licks of my ice cream and when I looked up, Cruz was looking at me with a smirk.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to stare?”

The smirk widened. “I’m just trying to figure out how to tell you...”

My stomach leaped into my throat—an action I didn’t think was possible until this very moment. He had the most curious expression on his face. Had he always looked at me like that?

“Tell me what?” I managed.

He raised a thumb to his mouth. “You have chocolate on your chin.”

I shot back in my seat. “What?”

“When you took that last bite of ice cream, some of the chocolate got on your chin.”

I rubbed at my face with one hand, holding my traitor ice cream cone in the other. “Gone?”

Cruz shook his head, looking thoroughly amused. “Somehow worse. You look good with a goatee, Ave.”

I glowered at him.

But before I could say anything, Cruz was right in front of me, his body aligned with mine, pressing that same thumb to my face. He slowly, gently dragged it across my chin. Smiled. “Much better.”

I rolled my eyes as my heart returned to thumping a million miles a minute. “My hero.”

Cruz returned to his seat and finished his ice cream with one final *slurp*, then wiped his hands on his napkin. My heart showed no signs of calming down as I watched him. My skin was still tingling from his touch and I felt strange.

It was *scary*, this whole “having a crush” thing. How did anyone do it?

I needed to focus on something—anything—else.

“Back to square one on the project. Again,” I said, taking another delicate lick of my ice cream because I didn’t devour mine in five minutes straight.

He chuckled. “Maybe using our friends as lab rats wasn’t the best call.”

I took a bite of my waffle cone, which was perfectly crunchy and sugary. Cruz didn’t say anything else and, when I looked up, he was staring at me intently again.

“More chocolate on my face?” I asked with a laugh that came out almost nervous.

“No. I was just wondering again why you chose this topic.”

“I told you why.”

He shook his head. “I’d remember.”

I finished the cone and rubbed my hands down my leggings. After Cruz made a little late-night invasion of my room last week, I reminded myself of my focus, my singular goal: to find a suitable date to the Valentine’s dance. Because this was real life, and my Aladdin dream could and would never come true. Hello, flying carpets were not a thing.

But maybe if I told Cruz the truth about why I chose the Psychology of Attraction, it would bring me back to reality. Erase some of these confusing feelings I was having for him. “You were straight with me the other night, so I’ll be honest with you. But you have to promise you won’t laugh.”

Cruz raised a brow, then raised his pinky. “Promise.”

I hesitated before I wrapped my pinky around his. He held on tight for a brief moment, and I felt the fire in our connection. A fire that I wished wasn’t possible but was undeniable.

I wondered if he felt it, too.

Shook away the thought.

“Okay.” I took a breath. Cruz leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. I had his full, undivided attention. “I chose the project because I wanted to check something. Wanted to see if something was... off.”

“Off?” He tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, like, something was different. *I* was different.” I paused. He waited. The next few words came out in a rush. “I’ve always wanted to have a high school love story, to fall head over heels for the first time. You know, like what you see in movies or books. Like the love stories our friends have, or what you and Naomi had.” I cleared my throat, hurrying past that last statement. “I wanted to have that, too.”

Cruz looked genuinely confused. “But you’ve dated plenty of guys.”

I shifted in my seat. “I didn’t really feel anything for any of them—well, not what I wanted to feel. Talking to Mia and

Quinn last semester, when they were falling for Sutton and Arie... it made me realize that I was missing out. I wanted to experience those feelings.”

I looked down at my clenched hands. What was making me uncomfortable was putting light to these words. But knowing Cruz was hearing them? That felt weirdly okay.

“So when you told me you were scared of feelings the other night...”

“I meant that I was scared I wasn’t capable of having them,” I finished. “It sounds super lame, but I put a deadline on myself. Promised myself that by the time the Valentine’s dance rolled around, I’d have fallen for someone. That I’d have a romantic high school experience to remember forever, and that I’d finally have a holiday with happy memories.”

He was silent for a long time. So long that I had to look at him. He was staring out the window, lips pursed in thought.

I wondered if something I said bothered him. “You all right?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Huh? What doesn’t?”

“I mean, everything you just said, it doesn’t sound lame. Not at all.”

“You don’t have to say that to be nice.” I ran my teeth along my bottom lip.

“I’m not.” Cruz said the words simply, with a shrug. “But, can I tell you something, Ave?”

“Sure.”

“You’re totally capable of feelings. You’re a great friend, and I know your dormies think the world of you. You stand up for and support your friends constantly. You’re the most important person on earth to Arie—although Quinn might give you a run for your money these days.” He smirked and I chuckled. “And I know you love your brother, too. The common thread here is that the people you have deep feelings

for in your life are the people who push you, and challenge you, and help you be better. The same way you do for them.”

“I never thought about it like that,” I said softly. “But that makes sense.”

“I always make sense, Killer. And I’m one thousand percent sure that you are entirely capable of having romantic feelings for someone—you just haven’t found that special someone who challenges you and pushes you in a relationship sense. But they’re out there, Avery Jensen. I know they are. You don’t need to rush it or settle for something you don’t fully want. Because you’re freaking special. One of a kind. And it’ll take a special person to make you fall in love.”

I stared at Cruz for a long moment, a hot blush rushing over my entire body. His gaze was dark and sincere as it traveled over my face intently.

“Thank you, Cruz,” I whispered.

Another shrug. “Don’t thank me. It’s just the truth.”

“Well, I dunno about that. I still think it’s pretty lame. Like, who signs up for a psych class to help them fall in love?”

I chuckled, and Cruz sat back in the booth. “It’s kinda funny.”

He said the words, but his tone was anything but humorous. “What’s funny?”

“I signed up for the class last semester for a similar reason.”

“What do you mean?”

Cruz took a deep breath and opened his mouth. Closed it again. Then tried again. “What you’re saying about wanting a love story like mine and Naomi’s... well, you don’t. I loved her, of course, but that special something that Quinn and Arie have? That Mia and Sutton have? That’s built on a foundation of trust. Honesty. Communication. Baring your soul for the other person to see, and loving them through it all. That’s why I signed up for Human Psych last semester.”

I nodded, silently letting him know that he could continue if he wanted.

He nodded back. "I guess I was hoping that the class might help me open up. Lay out my feelings." He smiled wryly and cocked an eyebrow. "Does that make me the super lame one?"

Normally, I'd be tempted to insert a joke here, a teasing comment, but nothing about this conversation felt funny. It felt... vulnerable and open and precious in its own way. Cruz and I were divulging secrets. And I was honored that he was trusting me with this.

Cruz was nothing like the boy I assumed him to be. I'd misjudged him. For years, I'd misjudged him.

"Not at all," I said quietly, and I meant it. "And, if it makes you feel better. I think it's working because you're communicating how you're feeling pretty well right now."

Cruz shot me a look through his thick, dark eyelashes that made him look so young and sweet, I had to restrain myself from running over and giving him a hug. "I don't know if that's because of the class, Ave."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's easier with you," he said this slowly. "It's easy to talk to you. Even if we did grow up annoying each other. And you're a certified Cereal Killer."

I laughed with the release of the heavy moment. "Back atcha, loser."

Cruz smiled that beaming smile of his and I smiled back. The flutters were back in my stomach in full force and I just felt... happy. Happy to be here with Cruz. Happy he was my partner on the project. Happy that he was in my life and I was getting to know him. For real, this time.

"Shall we head out?" I said.

We stood and Cruz fell into step behind me as we left the ice cream shop. But as soon as we stepped outside, he grabbed my arm, his big palm warm through the fabric of my

sweatshirt. “Wait, Ave, I just realized something. You were speaking in the past tense.”

“What?”

“When you said that you never felt what you wanted to feel.” He was standing in front of me now, so close that his comforting, familiar scent wrapped around me like a warm blanket on a snowy winter night. His eyes bore into mine, deep and dark and serious. “You spoke about it in the past tense.”

My breath caught. He was right.

I cleared my throat, trying to play it off. “So?”

“Why was it in the past tense?” His voice was light and casual, but the way he was staring at me was anything but.

I managed a shrug. “Something changed, I guess.”

Cruz didn’t blink. He held my stare and everything else disappeared from my peripheral vision. It was just him and me on the sidewalk in front of The Yellow Yeti. I was barely aware of the winter sun warming my cheeks, the breeze twisting through my hair.

And suddenly, I knew... Cruz felt something, too. But how potent or lasting that feeling was, I had no idea.

“What changed?” he asked, but it barely felt like a question.

My next words were a whisper. “I’m not sure I can answer that.”



BrAvery: Hey.

CruzControl: What's poppin'?

BrAvery: Never say that again.

CruzControl: Okay, fine. How about how's it hanging? Or what's crack-a-lackin'?

BrAvery: Lol nope.

CruzControl: Or I could say g'day mate, if you're in the mood for a bit of koala talk?

BrAvery: You're ridiculous.

BrAvery: But FYI I am always in the mood for koala talk. They are the cutest.

CruzControl: No, they're evil and have tons of diseases. Look it up.

BrAvery: Don't tell me such terrible lies! Anyhow, was just messaging 'cuz I was cleaning my room and I found your hoodie. Guess you left it in my room the other night after your midnight swim.

CruzControl: You sure you have the right person?

BrAvery: Ha. ha. I threw it in the wash. Along with that other hoodie of yours you lent me in the library I never gave back.

CruzControl: Wow, you're turning into quite the collector. You after some toenail clippings too, weirdo?

BrAvery: On the contrary, I cannot wait to get rid of these hideous, outsize garments cluttering my room. I can bring them to the basketball tournament for you this weekend?

CruzControl: Ughhhh don't remind me about the playoffs. I won't be able to sleep.

BrAvery: You know the Sharks are going to win.

CruzControl: Of course they are. They have me on the team.

BrAvery: How do you even fit your head through the door?

CruzControl: With great difficulty.

BrAvery: I think the cheer squad is sharing a bus with the team, so I guess I'll see you on the ride up there.

CruzControl: Not if I see you first.

CRUZ

*Y*ou know those epic sports games where the teams are constantly neck-and-neck and every single person is playing their heart out, their win almost within reach? And then it all comes down to the last second, the final buzzer, resulting in momentous celebration for one team and heartbreak for the other?

Yeah. The final was not one of those games.

Over the last two days, we played back-to-back games, and after an intense schedule of matchups matchups, we were down to two teams. It was all culminating in this moment... and the end was finally in our sights.

“Jensen, Delgado. Take a seat,” Coach Golding yelled gruffly, waving his clipboard. He still had his fierce, unsmiling “game face” on, but his eyes were twinkling. He smacked us both on the back as we dutifully made our way to the bench. “Way to go, gentlemen.”

From the moment the Hallisburg Sharks walked onto the court—to the cheers of every H-burg student, parent or alumni who’d made the trip to Redding for the big weekend—and the starting whistle blew, it had been clear who tonight’s winner would be.

We were on our game, running practically every play flawlessly. I put up 24 points and made a couple of solid blocks, and Arie added another triple double to his collection. But, even without either of us on the court, it would have been a runaway for Hallisburg.

As the clock ran down and the State victory slipped further out of the Redding Rhinos reach, their fans drooped like wilting flowers. And the Hallisburg supporters got louder, the band perkier, and the cheerleaders bouncier.

I couldn't help sneaking multiple glances at the sidelines as I played. Usually, my head was so focused on the game, I hardly noticed the cheerleaders. Which, I now realized, was pretty rude. Because they were awesome—their routines were complicated, and the sheer athleticism of their moves was impressive. Good as they were as a squad, though, Avery stood out among them. She practically glowed under the gym lights, smiling wide as her black ponytail whipped behind her.

How was it possible that I'd gone all these years without realizing just how incredible she was? I'd always known she was funny, smart, and pretty in that way that made any guy's head turn... but now, I was spilling my darkest secrets to her over bowls of ice cream and talking to her like I'd never talked to anyone.

I could barely tear my eyes away from her.

“Yassssssss!” Arie hissed under his breath as we shared a subtle fist bump. It was unsportsmanlike to celebrate this early, but with three minutes to go in the fourth quarter, Coach Golding had made a statement by pulling Arie and me off the court and replacing us with two freshmen from the bench: it was over.

“Dude. We're state champs.” My heart beat hard and heavy in my chest as I wiped a towel over my face and drained a bottle of water in three gulps. I was exhausted, sweaty, and insanely happy. All of our hard work and training had paid off, and I was exiting an unreal high school basketball career on a huge high.

“I can't believe it.” Arie took a sip of Gatorade and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes were gleaming, but I could tell he was underplaying his excitement. If the win meant this much to me, it meant that much more to Arie, who lived and breathed basketball.

Though since he'd been dating Quinn, ball had a run for its money.

It was the best culmination of our time at Hallisburg, our time on the team. A celebration of everything we'd weathered over the years, sometimes together, sometimes apart. I had a strong urge to wrap an arm around my lifelong friend's shoulders, and I pulled him roughly into a side hug. "Proud of you, bro."

Arie looked at me in shock—I was not in the habit of hugging either Jensen twin, but apparently I was breaking all my usual rules these days. I'd even been early to catch the bus to the game.

"Proud of you too. Feels pretty special to celebrate this with... my best friend." Arie's voice sounded a bit choked.

"And you're mine." We smiled at each other for a moment, then looked away awkwardly. I dropped my arm from his shoulder. Punched him in the bicep. He punched me back.

We were both still grinning when the clock ran into the final minute of play.

"Tonight is going to go off." Arie whistled through his teeth. The basketball team, the cheer squad and the school band had all been put up in a chain hotel off the highway for the weekend, but a bunch of other students who'd come up for the tournament had booked rooms at the same hotel—Sutton, Gray and Leo included.

"I can't wait." I said, and I meant it. For the first time this semester, "Party" felt like my middle name again. I wanted to let loose and have fun with my friends. Banter back and forth with Avery.

I looked for her again, my eyes pulled straight to her face in the midst of the twenty girls on the squad. The cheerleaders were forming a victory pyramid as the shot clock reset for the last time. I recognized it as the same pyramid I'd mimed pushing her off of a few weeks back.

As if she could sense my eyes, Avery looked at me from her position high on the pyramid.

This time, she didn't wobble. Instead, she smiled.

"You did it," she mouthed, eyes bright and sparkly.

I shook my head at her. Nodded in her direction. "We did it."

Her smile grew bigger.

I *really* couldn't wait for tonight.

AVERY

*W*e won.

After months of practice, years of hard work and a grueling weekend of games, the Sharks were State champs.

By the time the final game came around, I was beside myself with excitement, my breath catching whenever Cruz dribbled the ball down the court for a layup, or when Arie made another three. The Rhinos were strong players with a solid defense, but they didn't stand a chance.

I was almost disappointed when I had to take my eyes off the game to do our routines. Until I felt, rather than saw, Cruz's eyes on me. Noticed his smile after every stunt we performed.

As soon as the final buzzer sounded, the gym exploded into cheers. Sharks fans flooded the court and we were caught up in a sea of excitement while the Sharks and Rhinos congratulated each other and shared handshakes. Cruz, of course, was the first player to whip off his jersey and swap it with a member of the opposing team.

The air crackled with energy as we all made our way back to the hotel. Tons of people, including my dormies, had driven up for the night to catch the final game and had booked into the same hotel.

So, of course, we were going to celebrate the win in classic Hallisburg Prep style.

Coach Golding and our cheer coach, Emilia, turned a blind eye and disappeared to their respective rooms while the students took over the pool. Someone hooked up a bluetooth speaker. Someone else ordered pizza. And soon, we had a huge party on our hands.

“Arie, stop!” Quinn squealed as he picked her up and jokingly held her above the pool. She squirmed and laughed so much that she wiggled right out of his arms and into the water. Arie followed a second later, laughing as he swam over to her and grabbed her waist.

The pool was a mess of splashes and laughs and cheers. In the midst of it all, Grayson and Taylor were engaged in a loud, screamy volleyball match, pitted against each other so their teammates looked completely overwhelmed by their competitiveness. Mia and Sutton were in a corner of the pool, talking quietly with their heads bent close together, lost in their own world. Sadly, our last dormie, Rachel, couldn’t make it because of a paper she had due. We missed her sorely. And she was sorely missing the hot, shirtless basketball players.

I watched all of this unfold from the hot tub, where I was sitting with some of my squadmates.

“That was such a rush!” Kaitlyn practically shrieked. She patted her hair. “Do you think the boys noticed?”

I had a feeling she was talking about one boy, in particular.

“Who cares,” Shelby piped up. “The important thing is we did it. All that extra practice paid off.”

They were talking about our performance at half-time—when we effortlessly pulled off the lengthy, challenging routine we’d been working on for weeks. It was a thrill, but even more thrilling was catching Cruz looking at us at the end of it. Looking at *me*.

The smile on his face reminded me of the day at the climbing wall when I made it to the top. And I felt those same warm, proud flutters.

My eyes reflexively drifted around the pool area until they located Cruz again, this time sitting on a lounge by himself.

He'd been talking to his teammates and friends all evening and we hadn't said two words to each other. But I caught him looking at me more than a few times, and now, our eyes locked and he smiled a cheeky smirk that made my insides fuzzy.

He pointed at me and bent a finger as if to say "*get over here.*"

"I'll be right back," I said before scrambling out of the hot tub. I walked around the pool, adjusting my navy one-piece with white polka dots and bows on the shoulders. Walking around in a swimsuit usually made me feel self-conscious, but tonight, I had other things on my mind.

Cruz stood and wrapped me in a hug as soon as I got close, and any words I might have said dried in my throat as his bare skin came into direct contact with mine. His strong arms wrapped around me, tightly yet tenderly, and my skin was on fire where we touched, every nerve ending alight. His spicy shampoo was tinged with a faint chlorine smell from the pool.

The hug went on for a long moment, almost like he was lingering. And yet, when he stepped away, it wasn't long enough.

"Way to not fall off the pyramid this time, Killer." He looked at me seriously. "I'm very proud."

I laughed but he didn't. Just kept this curious smile on his face.

"No, but actually," he said. "That routine looked way harder than anything I was doing on the court. You were awesome up there."

I could feel the blush rise to my cheeks this time. "Me? What about you? You were incredible."

"I know, I'm great." Cruz brushed his shoulders as if to say that it was no big deal.

I sighed and rolled my eyes, and Cruz's eyes sparked to see my reaction.

“Good game tonight, Cruz,” a slightly woozy voice said. I tore my eyes away from Cruz to see a guy I barely recognized standing right next to us. He looked young; couldn’t be more than a sophomore.

“You too, man.” Cruz clenched the guy’s outstretched hand, bringing him close for a chest bump. When they stepped back, Cruz’s eyes briefly dropped to the guy’s hand, where he was holding a beer. “You a beer fan, Frankie?”

Frankie looked a tad uncertain as he held up the drink. “I got it from one of the seniors.”

Cruz’s mouth quirked down at one corner. “Probably shouldn’t be drinking that.”

“Why not?” Frankie’s eyes went wide. “Everyone else is.”

“Not everyone,” Cruz corrected. He nudged me with his elbow. “Avery’s not. And I’m not.” He held up his can of Sprite with a shrug. “It’s bad for my game. And the ladies hate beer breath.”

“Do they?” Frankie glanced at me with wide eyes.

“Oh, yeah.” Cruz looked so earnest, it was almost comical. He dropped his voice so his next words were quiet, conspiratorial. “And I know Jenn Barnett was asking about you...”

“Woah.” Frankie blinked. “From the dance team?”

Cruz scratched the back of his head. “Um, sure.”

Frankie paused. Then, he set the beer down on the table next to us. “Tastes bad anyway.”

With that, he wandered off. Cruz took the beer, downed the contents in a trash bin, and threw the can in recycling.

“That was responsible of you.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Just looking out for the kids. Although Jenn Barnett might be a little surprised by the news.”

I spluttered with laughter as Cruz pulled a guilty face. He took a long chug of his Sprite and gazed out over the pool. When he looked at me, I didn’t look away. Instead, I smiled.

Cruz Delgado was somehow the opposite of the person I always thought he'd been while still being the exact same person I'd always known. It was like magic.

“Hey, you two!” A wave of cold water splashed down my back, making me yelp and jump forward straight into Cruz. He wrapped his arms around me, keeping me close. I turned in his arms to see Arie laughing, with Quinn shaking her head next to him. “You guys coming? We’re about to play chicken!”

I looked at Cruz. His damp hair hung over his eyes, which danced playfully. He smiled, and the crease in his bottom lip disappeared again. “You game, Jensen?”

I tilted my chin up. “Definitely.”

CRUZ

“*P*hew, made it!” I leapt into the bus, my bag almost falling off my shoulder.

“Barely.” Coach Golding raised his bushy brows in amusement as he registered the brown paper bag in my arms. “I’m not even going to ask.”

I gave Coach my most charming grin. “Don’t worry, I brought you extra fries.”

This drew a laugh from him, and a sigh from Emilia, the cheerleading coach who insisted on everyone calling her by her first name. “You’re the last one, Cruz,” she tutted. “Take a seat. And Brian doesn’t need fries, he’s watching his cholesterol.”

Now, it was Coach’s turn to sigh. I gave him a sympathetic glance as he looked longingly at my greasy bag, then I made my way down the aisle of the bus, still catching my breath.

This time, it really *had* been my fault that I was late. But the goodies I was hoarding from Damburger would be worth it. Can’t visit a city and not check out its most famous burger joint, right?

On the way up to the tournament, the guys from the team had crowded together at the back of the bus while the cheer squad sat up front. Today, everyone was piled together sleepily throughout the vehicle. I even spied Shelby napping on my boy Frankie’s shoulder, her blond hair fanning over his chest while he looked on in amazement, like he couldn’t believe what was happening.

I grinned as I passed them, then paused to high-five Arie. He was sitting next to Kane Watson and texting in a furiously fast way that told me he had to be messaging Quinn. He smiled as he slapped my hand. “Where were you, dude? I banged on your door, like, a million times. Oversleep again?”

“Nope.” I reached into the brown bag and tossed him a burger. His eyes lit up like he’d found a winning lottery ticket.

“I always knew I loved you.” Arie sank his teeth into the huge cheeseburger, and I looked around the bus. The seats were crammed full with my teammates and friends.

And then, at the very back of the bus, a group of cheerleaders. In the midst of them was a head of familiar black hair, and a laugh I’d recognize anywhere. There was a free spot next to her.

“Wanna sit back here?” Arie’s voice brought me back to the moment as he gestured to the seat behind him.

I shrugged oh-so-casually. “I dunno... Ave’s looking awfully lonely back there. Might go bug her.”

Arie glanced back at the cheerleaders and I thought he might say something. After all, Ave was surrounded by her friends; she looked the opposite of lonely. But when he looked back at me, he just lifted a shoulder. “Suit yourself. Make sure to be extra annoying for me, k?”

“Done.” I chuckled, and clapped him on the shoulder as I made my way to the back of the bus. As I approached, she looked up at me steadily, like she’d been expecting me.

“This seat taken?” I asked, vaguely aware that the rest of the girls had gone silent.

Avery smirked at my food bag. “Depends if you’re going to be eating that bag of grease the entire bus ride.”

I slid into the seat. Smiled. “Course I am. But don’t worry, ladies, I’m sharing.”

The girls all giggled, except Avery, who rolled her eyes. She grudgingly took the bag out of my outstretched hand and

peeked inside. “Dude, you bought enough food to feed a small army.”

“If you look hard enough, you might find the veggie burger that somehow made its way into my order.”

Avery’s expression lit up in a frighteningly similar way to her brother’s.

“I always knew I loved you,” she said with a light, playful tone. Then, she froze, like she realized the connotations of the joke she just made.

“Funny, your brother just said the exact same thing.” I waved my hand breezily. “Seems I’m irresistible to all Jensen family members.”

“Hardly,” Avery sniffed as she rummaged for the veggie burger. But I didn’t miss the way her cheeks went pink.

It egged me on and I leaned in close, bumping her shoulder with mine. “So... should I call your mom, or should I wait for her to call me?”

She stopped her raccoon-like rummaging and shoved me. Hard.

I laughed and flicked her arm.

“You guys should, like, get a room or something,” Kaitlyn cut in, and I looked at her in surprise. I’d been having so much fun joking with Avery again that I almost forgot anyone else was around.

Ave shifted on her seat, the pink of her cheeks deepening with discomfort. So, I turned to the rest of the squad with a smile. “I very much doubt that Avery would even consider getting a room of any kind with myself. So, I am afraid to say that I’m here merely to share my fries and talk about our psych project.”

Like magic, Avery’s cheer friends immediately turned back to their conversations. They seemed almost disappointed with the lack of gossip fodder we’d conjured up for them.

“We actually should talk about the project, though,” Avery said with a sigh.

“What do you think we should do next?” I asked as I busied myself opening ketchup packets.

Avery smiled ruefully. “I’m out of ideas right now.”

“I’m sure something will come to us.”

“Maybe you have to jump in a freezing cold lake again.” She winked.

I dragged a fry through my ketchup puddle. “Or, maybe you can push me off a rooftop. See if that’ll inspire anything.”

We both shared a laugh. Heat grew in my stomach and I couldn’t get past what I was feeling. It was like every time I looked at Avery these days, I was seeing her in a new light. Learning something new about her that I liked. And I couldn’t get enough of it. Couldn’t get enough of her.

Right at that moment, Ave’s gaze dropped to my lips. Just for a second. Just long enough for my gaze to drop to hers, too.

My heart slammed as her words from the other night echoed in my mind: *I’m not sure I can answer that.*

If there was a chance—any chance—that her changing feelings had something to do with me, then it was time I took a chance, too. “I did have one thought actually...” I said, closing the bag and stashing it away. I could’ve kept eating but I needed something to do with my hands. “What if we set up a date? Forget the gimmicks, forget the formal experiments. Just go back to basics and have a couple people go out on a date.”

“A date... Isn’t that pretty obvious for an attraction project?” Ave asked as she pulled the top of her veggie burger off, picked off the onions. “Or are you just trying to score a hot date with someone?”

“Obviously.”

She screwed up her face in thought, then shrugged, ignoring my stupid comment. “I think it’s fine. Especially seeing as our other two experiments didn’t go so well, it might be worth going back to square one.”

“And with new research participants,” I added. My heart was beating really fast.

Avery took a bite of her burger. Licked some ketchup from the tip of her pinky finger. “What do you mean?”

“What if *we* are the ‘lab rats’ for this next experiment? We’ve kinda been taking part in the experiments already, anyway.”

Avery froze, pinky aloft. She was silent for a long moment, staring at me with a scrutinizing expression. I suddenly wondered if I’d stepped out of line. Far out of line.

“So you want *us* to go on a date,” she finally said, her tone emotionless. Her expression didn’t shift the slightest bit as she took a bite of her burger. It wasn’t that she looked ready to say yes (or no). She just seemed completely unaffected by the question. Like she couldn’t care less.

The blood cooled in my veins and I felt my confidence teeter-totter dramatically. Had I completely misread everything I thought was happening between us? Everything I thought she might be feeling, too?

“You and me?” I heard myself say before I realized my mouth was moving. “No. No way.”

Avery’s eyebrows raised for a brief moment.

“It wouldn’t be us. Nope.” I forced out a laugh that almost choked me as I backtracked heavily.

“Okay, so what did you mean?”

“I meant that one of us goes out... ah, with someone else,” I grappled.

“So... like, you with one of your many female admirers?”

I shook my head in horror.

“Oh, I forgot. You’re still grappling with being newly single.” Avery nodded once, looked down and away from me.

I wanted to tell her no. Wanted to say that there was no grappling. That my mind was steadily focused on a certain someone. Constantly.

“So it’s gotta be me, then.” Avery said this cheerfully, scoping out the bus with a smile. “One of the basketball players, maybe?”

She sounded almost excited. Jeez. “Yup,” I said crisply, my voice tinged with sarcasm. “And I’d do what? Just sit there and measure the results?”

Her eyes flashed. “This was *your* suggestion, Cruz. Is there a problem?”

She had a point, of course. But I still wanted to say yes, there very much *was* a problem.

“No.”

“So, who? Who would *you* set me up with?”

Avery looked around again, but when her eyes met mine, I could swear there was a wickedness, a challenge, within them. The sight of that competitive spark made my heart slam, and a smile threatened to break across my lips.

When it came to a challenge set forth by Avery Jensen, I was always ready to play.

I looked around the bus, thinking hard about who I’d choose. Then, my eyes settled on a perfect target. Bingo.

I smiled at Avery placidly. “Brad.”

Her expression didn’t shift. “Yeah? Brad’s who you’re selecting for me?”

“Sure looks like it.”

Avery held my gaze for a moment, then sat up in her seat. “Hey, Brad!” she called. He looked over at us, blew his overgrown blond hair out of his eyes. “Want to go out?”

He grinned this huge, boastful smile. The smile of a guy who knew it was just a matter of time before he got asked out by one of the prettiest girls in school. “Sure thing, Ave. How’s Thursday?”

“Perfect,” Avery sang, sitting back in her seat.

She looked at me with such a triumphant smile that I had to laugh. I shook my head. "I can't believe you just did that."

Her eyes sparkled cryptically. "Your move, Delgado."

AVERY

Why did I say yes to this?

Seriously, what was I thinking?

There was “wanting to do well in class,” and then, there was “going *way* too far on a class project in an effort to keep your forbidden crush from knowing you have feelings for him.”

Right now, I was firmly in the second camp. And my mind was reeling with alternative experiments I could’ve suggested to Cruz on the bus. All while Brad went on and *on* about his love of birding.

“When I was on that trip along the coast I was telling you about, I saw a blue-footed booby. Which you probably don’t know is *super* rare, especially in this part of California.” He held out his phone proudly so I could see a photo he took. It was a blurred, overexposed shot of what looked like a duck with bright blue feet.

“Hm,” I mustered up as an answer. I’d gone through multiple “cool”s and “wow”s and “amazing”s by now and I didn’t think Brad was listening anyway.

“Hilarious name, I know.” He chuckled, staring at his phone screen. “I think my favorite bird name is the Snowy Plover. Adorable. What’s your favorite bird name?”

“Huh? Oh, same.”

“Great taste.” Brad’s eyes sparkled as he stashed his phone away and placed his big hands on the table. Brad Hennesy was

your standard large, long-limbed basketball jock who wore backwards ball caps and sleeveless jerseys. In all my imaginings of how tonight might go, discovering his secret love of birds had never occurred to me. “Enough about birds for now. Let’s talk about you. You’re Arie’s sister, so you’ve known him and Cruz a long time, huh?”

“Practically my whole life,” I quipped. Brad stared at me blankly. “Yes. I’ve known Arie since he was born twenty-one minutes after me, and Cruz not too long after, actually.”

“I had that feeling. You seem like pretty good friends. When Cruz was with Naomi, he didn’t really speak to any of the girls past, like, small talk. Except you. Even now, you’re the only girl he jokes around with.”

I nodded once, not having any sort of response to that.

“Funny.” Brad laughed. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say the guy was into you.”

I joined in laughing with him even as my stomach twisted into a tight knot. Oh, Brad. If only he knew just how impossible that was.

The very fact that I was here tonight, on this date with him, was proof that Cruz only saw me as a friend. Would only ever see me as a friend. But at least it was more than just “Arie’s annoying twin sister.” So clearly our little psych project had done *something* for our relationship.

The project was the other reason I was here with Brad tonight. I still didn’t totally understand what Cruz expected, using me as a guinea pig on this date. How was he supposed to “measure our results” if he wasn’t here, observing?

Brad and I conversed pretty easily for the rest of the meal, with Brad mostly talking about basketball, birding and his pet dog named Bingo that lived with his parents in Arizona.

We didn’t get dessert.

And when he dropped me off, he leaned across the car with his lips puckered. I simply gave him an awkward wave, thanked him for the date, and ducked out of the car door. I might’ve been willing to break my rule and go on a date with

someone I felt nothing for, but I certainly wasn't going to be kissing him at the end of it. No matter that the Valentine's dance was in just over a week, and I still didn't have a date.

I opened the door to my dorm with a huge sigh, and was disappointed to see that all the lights were out except for the hallway light. My dormies were still out for the evening—Mia and Sutton celebrating their six month anniversary at a nice restaurant in town, Quinn and Arie at some party for the drama club, and Rachel on a date with a cute guy from her Physics class. Taylor was undoubtedly with Grayson, playing video games or something.

I kicked off my strappy black heels and looped them through my fingers before going to my room. I turned on the light, dropped my shoes and bag by the door, and went to my closet to pull out my pajamas. It was a popcorn and movie night for me.

I was reaching back to unzip my favorite little black dress when it heard it.

Tap tap.

I whirled towards the window. My curtains were shut so I couldn't see outside, but as I got closer, the hairs on the back of my neck stood. I threw open the curtain and saw...

“Cruz! You ghoul!”

He was standing just outside, and he stood to his full height as I pushed open the window. “Hey, Jensen.”

“What're you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?” He checked his watch. “Awfully early to be finishing a date, wouldn't you say?”

I placed my hands on my hips. “And how is that your business?”

“It's our project, so it's my business,” Cruz replied cheerfully. “Can I come in? I might run hot but it's going to get cold out here eventually.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line, seriously considering his question. But I could physically feel the walls of my resolve

crumbling with every moment we looked at each other. Cracking, falling to dust all around me. I sighed heavily. “Okay, come in.”

Cruz smiled as he stepped over the sill and into my room. The memory of him pushing me to date Brad on the bus still stung, but I kept my chin up, bravely meeting his eyes.

Then, I noticed that his lips were tinged blue.

“Woah. You really *are* cold.”

“Told you,” he said. “It’s a chilly one.”

“Not *that* chilly...” I blinked in realization. “Unless you were out there for a long time.”

Cruz’s expression remained impassive as he gestured to the bed. “Mind if I sit?”

I nodded jerkily, reeling a little. Had he been... waiting for me? Outside? Was he wanting to see when I’d come back from my date with Brad?

No, surely he didn’t care. Why would he care?

He sat on the edge of my bed, hunching his shoulders up and down to warm up. He removed his hands from the center pocket of his hoodie, cupped them together and blew warm air, then rubbed them together. Despite the heat in my room, he looked frozen.

Without thinking, I sat next to him and placed both my hands around his. It was a ridiculous move given that my entire hand barely covered his knuckles, but I felt better trying to help him.

After a while, he disentangled our hands and interlaced his fingers with mine so we were holding hands. We were silent as we stared at our locked palms, and when I finally ventured a glance up, Cruz was looking at me curiously again. His gaze traveled over my face in a way that made me feel warm all over.

“So, you never did answer me—why are you here, Cruz?” I managed to ask.

“How was your date?” he said instead of giving me an answer.

“Fine,” I said shortly. “Not much to report.”

“So it was good?”

“It was...” I looked down at our clasped hands again. “It was meh. Another bust.”

Cruz surprised me by letting out a deep chuckle. “I would’ve done so much better.”

His tone was light, but his eyes were intense, and I felt them again: those pesky butterflies. Flitting around my stomach at top speed. I snorted. Made a show of rolling my eyes, then dropped his hands so I could sit back on the bed. “You think so, Delgado? How?”

“For one thing, I wouldn’t have talked about birds.”

My eyes widened and I punched him in the arm. “You knew!”

Cruz let out a laugh, the sound rich and melodic. “Do you hate me?”

“No more than usual.”

By now, we’d shifted so we were sitting close, his muscled, sweatpants-clad thigh pressed against mine. He seemed tense, wasn’t fully relaxing next to me.

“Did he kiss you?” he asked, his voice low.

I couldn’t bring myself to look at him. Just breathed in, breathed out. “He tried.”

“Did he succeed?”

I shifted slightly on the bed so I was facing him, and I subtly rubbed my clammy hands on my dress. I summoned all my bravery and looked at him, needing to know one thing. “For a third time, why are you here, Cruz?”

He was silent, still turned away, but I could see the movement of his breaths, his chest rising and falling beneath

his hoodie. My heartbeat was raging in my ears so loud, I wasn't sure I'd hear his answer.

Finally, he squared his jaw and looked at me. His eyes were dark and swirling with something I'd never seen in him before.

"I'm not sure I can answer that," he said quietly. His echo of my own words from the other night made my stomach clench.

His eyes dropped to my lips. And then, I was moving towards him.

His breathing was jagged as he reached for me and—

"Honey, I'm HOMEEEE!"

Cruz and I leapt apart so fast, I almost toppled off the bed. My heartbeat was raging in my ears as I looked up at him.

His eyes were wide. "Who is that?" he mouthed.

His question was answered by Taylor's characteristic drawl. "You're ridiculous, Gray."

Cruz's lips tilted slightly and he cocked his head to the side. "I think it might be Taylor and Grayson," he mouthed again, sarcastic as ever.

"Wow, so observant," I mouthed back.

"So why are we still mouthing?" he mouthed.

Good question.

"I dunno," I whispered with a snicker, "but you should go. Who knows what Gray and Tay will think if they walk in."

"They'll think they've never seen anyone quite so beautiful in their entire lives. And they'll also think 'Oh, Avery's here, too.'"

I couldn't help but laugh at that one.

"But, kidding aside—as you are obviously the beautiful one—yes, I should go."

Cruz's face gave nothing away as he followed me towards the window. He opened it with ease. Hopped out gracefully.

“Talk to you tomorrow?” he asked.

I gave a nod. “Tomorrow.”

He started to walk away. Stopped. Looked back over his shoulder with supreme confidence, like he knew I was there, watching. “Oh, and Avery?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad this experiment was another bust.”



CruzControl: Good morning, Killer.

BrAvery: Wow. Early morning for you, Delgado. Thought you'd be taking advantage of the end of the season and sleeping in 'til class starts

CruzControl: I live to surprise you, Jensen.

CruzControl: But really, I was thinking of our psych project and I have an idea. If you're open to it.

BrAvery: Another brilliant Cruz idea?

CruzControl: Gonna pretend that wasn't sarcasm

CruzControl: I was thinking we should just reframe our project... Instead of having it be an overview of different experiments we've tried, what if we presented them more as, like, individual stories?

BrAvery: Like case studies?

CruzControl: Sure, if that's the word for them. We could present our tests with Gray and Tay, and Rachel and Leo, and talk about we did right and wrong. It would take all the pressure off us to have the same results that the actual scientific experiments did

BrAvery: That's...

BrAvery: Actually brilliant.

CruzControl: Told ya. Want to meet at the library tomorrow and we can go over it?

BrAvery: Tomorrow as in Saturday?

CruzControl: I know. Are libraries even open on Saturdays? Unclear.

BrAvery: Ha ha. But yeah, let's meet there. And I know just where we can go to work.

CruzControl: So it's settled. See you at the library, bright and early.

BrAvery: Can't wait.

CruzControl: Me neither.

CRUZ

I already knew that I liked Avery a lot. That much was clear.

But today's activity was cementing just how much I liked her. Because I couldn't think of any other reason I'd even consider entering the library on a Saturday.

And here I was, making my way through the stacks, sneakers squeaking on the cold stone floor as I headed for the supposed "cozy couches" at the back of the second floor.

I was skeptical of their existence, but as I rounded a corner, Avery had clearly pulled through. True to her word, there was a cluster of overstuffed, worn couches in the corner. According to her, it was "the place to be" in the library. The building had to be empty today, though, because there was only Avery, curled up on the biggest one, shoes off and feet tucked under her. She wore sweatpants and a long-sleeved white shirt that looked so soft, I wanted to run my fingers along the sleeves and feel the material.

Not that I was thinking about touching her. (Spoiler: I definitely was. Had been since the night in her room.)

I still had no idea what came over me. One minute, I was stalking around my room like a caged tiger while she was on her date. The next, I was waiting for her outside her window. Like some creep from a freaky Halloween movie. Only I wasn't a murderer, obviously.

When she finally returned, she opened her window and called me a ghoul. But her eyes had sparkled as she spoke, and

she'd readily moved aside to let me in. And when I saw her standing there, in that dress, looking like something out of a dream, I couldn't take it anymore. It was like my brain had fallen out of my head and all I knew was my insane instinct to just... kiss her. And by the way she was looking back at me, I was sure she wanted to kiss me, too.

But of course, we'd been interrupted. I still couldn't tell if I was relieved or upset about that.

"Hey, Mini Wheat." I ignored all the other couches and flopped down right next to her on the big couch. "Sorry I'm late."

She turned to me with raised brows. "Like that's a surprise."

I laughed. "But I don't think you were expecting my reason for said lateness to be the line to get coffee." I paused dramatically, then extended one towards her. "Specifically, coffee of the Nutella latte sort. With whipped cream."

"From The Roasterie?" Her eyes lit up like sparklers as she plucked the cup out of my hand. "How did you know I loved their Nutella lattes?"

"Easy. I picked the drink with the most sugar."

She raised the cup to her lips and took a long sip with her eyes closed. "Mmmm. Well, thanks. I guess. For giving me diabetes and all."

"Anytime, Killer," I murmured, a warm, happy feeling spreading through me.

Then, my eyes flickered to her mouth, where she was licking a tiny speck of cream off her lower lip, and the feeling was replaced with fire. I could hardly believe that I'd almost kissed her the other night. That she'd leaned in to kiss me, too.

She caught me looking, and I hurriedly averted my gaze while she wiped her mouth with her hand. Blushed. "So, um. Should we get started?"

"Sure," I responded, though my mind was very much otherwise occupied. "So what dumpster fire shall we start with

for a case study? The eye contact thingy?”

“Yeah, what are we going to do about that? Tay and Gray couldn’t hold a stare long enough to complete the experiment, so we can’t really use them as test subjects.”

“But we did,” I reminded her. The back of my neck prickled as I remembered her eyes darkening as we held the stare, communicating without words in a way that made my stomach feel like it was defying gravity.

“So what would we write?” Avery scrunched her forehead. “That you and I did the experiment ourselves but it didn’t work?”

“I don’t know about that,” I said with a forced lightness in my voice. “We did the full four minutes, didn’t we?”

Avery looked at me curiously, her lips pouted slightly. Was it just me or was a blush rising up her neck? She looked away. “Yeah. We did finish it... And it didn’t suck.”

I had to smile at that, absentmindedly shifted a little closer to her. “It didn’t suck for me either.”

Our eyes met again and that same, strange surge of electricity moved through me. I couldn’t look away.

“And what about the climbing wall?” I asked, my voice now a little gravelly. My blood was racing through my veins. “We thought it was a bust, too... But that was when we were observing Leo and Rachel.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it didn’t work for them. But you and me? We made it to the top.”

“We did,” she agreed. Paused. “So what are you saying?”

I took a breath. And then, I went for it. “Maybe we’re thinking about this all wrong. Maybe the experiments weren’t busts, we were just reporting on the wrong people.”

Avery was still holding my gaze. She untucked her leg—a movement that brought her closer towards me. Close enough that I could breathe in her smell. “And the date experiment?”

Her question came across light and casual, but it felt riddled with something more serious. My heartbeat spiked. “Maybe we need a redo of that one...”

“With the right people on said date?” Avery’s cheeks flushed red, her own breaths becoming shallower and matching mine. Our faces were inches away, and her lips parted as she glanced down at mine. Just like she did the other night.

All I could think was how beautiful she was. How right this felt, to be in this moment with her.

“And those people would be?” I asked softly.

“I’m not sure I can answer that,” she whispered. Her breath was sweet on my lips.

“I think I can.”

The words barely left my mouth before I did the very thing I couldn’t stop thinking about doing. I closed the gap between us, cupped her face in my hands, lowered my lips to hers...

And I kissed Avery Jensen.

AVERY

Cruz Delgado was kissing me.

And it did *not* just feel like lips on my lips.

It felt like... sparks. Fireworks. All across my skin and crackling in the air around us. I was a flame gathering heat with every second our lips met. My hands were tangled in his hair, his arms were locked tight around me. Strong yet tender, fierce yet protective. We were a clash of paradoxes in every sense, and yet, our edges fit perfectly together.

We fit perfectly together.

In a way I never thought possible. In a way I'd only ever heard or read or watched, but never thought could actually be real. This kiss was better than anything I could've imagined, and as Cruz pulled me closer, I was almost grateful that my imagination never stretched this far. Never showed me the incredible extent of what I was missing.

When Cruz and I finally pulled apart, my lips were tender and his hair was a mess. I probably looked as starry-eyed as he did.

"Wow," I muttered, my voice raw.

"That was..." Cruz's tone matched mine. His eyes traveled over my face as though he was seeing me for the first time. As though he was just as blown away as I was. "Wow," he agreed.

I giggled lightly, shaking my head. I slowly extracted my hands from his hair, sat back in my seat. I was still trying to

process the entirely new feelings I was having, what had just happened.

It was everything I'd ever wanted. All the things my friends had told me about, the things I'd read and heard about. But even better than any of it.

And it had all happened with Cruz Delgado.

When I looked at him again, he was gazing at me unabashedly. He had the smallest smile on his face, like he was trying to work something out.

“What?” I asked with a smile to match his.

“Nothin’.”

“I’ve never known you not to have a snappy comeback to that question.”

He bumped my shoulder with his, then wrapped his arm around me. I snuggled against his side instinctively. “Maybe sometimes it’s worth being a little serious.”

“At least with the people that matter,” I added, still smiling as I relaxed next to him, feeling completely, weirdly, inexplicably at home.

Suddenly, Cruz stiffened a little. Retracted his arm. “Uh, I should go.”

“Oh?” I sat up straight on the couch as he stood. “Now?”

“Yeah.” He pushed his hair out of his face, busied himself zipping up his bag. Was it just me or was he avoiding my eyes? “Got something I gotta do.”

“Oh. Okay.” The wave of disappointment I felt was sharp and new, and it surprised me. I fixed my hair, rubbed my palms down my sweatpants. “I guess I’ll see you later?”

Cruz threw his backpack over his shoulder and, finally, looked at me. And the second his eyes met mine he smiled the sweetest, most tender smile. “Yeah. Definitely.”

And with that, he was gone. Striding between the towering shelves at a rapid pace and leaving me alone to collapse back

into the couch, with every single thing I thought I'd never feel swirling through my body like a tornado.

CRUZ

“Okay, you know I’m not one to exaggerate, but I could literally eat an entire horse right now,” Arie announced as we stomped across the frosty courtyard. The cold snap had continued, and I was all too aware that slippers were the wrong choice of footwear for the weather tonight.

“I know you wouldn’t exaggerate about something as important as food. And I’ll see your entire horse and raise a whole freaking water buffalo,” I replied, hoping the note of apprehension in my voice wasn’t too obvious. “With a side of onion rings, of course.”

“Of course,” Arie agreed solemnly. “Because what’s a water buffalo without its onion rings?”

We both cracked up laughing and Gray gave us the side-eye. “You guys are being extra weird tonight.”

“Hunger brings it out in me.” I patted my stomach over my t-shirt—which had also been a bad choice of clothing for tonight’s weather.

We were on our way to Hallisburg Prep’s famed Midnight Feast, which took place the first Saturday of every month. It was the only time students were officially allowed out of bed after curfew, all so we could gather in the common rooms for a huge spread of incredible food.

It was always a blast, but I was feeling more than a little preoccupied tonight.

I had to find a chance to talk to Arie. Alone.

The sooner the better. I'd left the library earlier in search of him, only to find out that he was off-campus with Quinn. This was the first time I'd seen him since this morning, and he was in a great mood after spending the day at Six Flags with his girlfriend.

I just hoped that good mood would continue after I told him that—

“Delgado. Do you know what's up with my sister?”

Arie's question stunned me. That was one way to get into this conversation. “Huh?”

I could hear the shock in my own voice and Arie gave me a suitably concerned look. “Avery. She was in a super weird mood when I dropped Quinn off at her dorm. What was that about?”

“A weird mood?” I asked. My voice cracked on the question. I was playing it *so* not cool right now. Then again, this wasn't playing. Not at all. This was one of the most serious things I'd ever done.

“Yeah. I thought it might be because of the date she went on with Brad on Thursday. For your project.” Arie narrowed his eyes at me as I pushed open the doors of the common room. Gestured for him and Grayson to go ahead. “Why do you look like I just asked you where babies come from?”

Gray smirked at me. I could tell he was thinking about our conversation after the Penguin Plunge—the one where he'd asked if I was into Avery. “Yeah, Cruz, what's up with that?”

I gave Grayson a rude hand gesture before looking at Arie again.

It was time. I couldn't keep this from my best friend. Couldn't hold this back.

Because I had kissed Avery Jensen. And it had totally and completely shifted my world.

Somehow, Avery had become the first person I thought about when I woke up each morning. The last person I thought about before I fell asleep at night. And she was in most of the

thoughts I had in between, too. My brainwaves were tuned into her frequency, and I had no idea how to tune back out. I didn't want to.

We shared a common room with Emerson, so she'd be at Feast tonight. And I had no idea what I might do when I saw her. Which meant that I needed to be open and upfront with Arie right away.

It was worth it. Worth being honest about my feelings for Ave.

"Can I talk to you?" I said to Arie in a low voice. Gray took the hint and loped away with a knowing smile. The jerk.

"Sure." His dark blue eyes—so like his sister's—were trained on me. He knew something big was coming. Arie knew me better than anybody.

"You know how bad I am with this stuff..." I started. The common room was already packed with pajama-clad students and the inviting smells of tacos and burritos, cheese fries and mozzarella sticks, Vietnamese spring rolls and drunken noodles. Delicious as it all looked, for once, I wasn't thinking about my stomach.

Arie and I walked to a quiet corner near the bean bags. "What's going on, Cruz?"

"This is the worst time and place to bring this up." I glanced around. In the corner of my eye, I spotted Avery sitting with some cheer friends and picking at a plate of fries. She looked up, and when our eyes met, a little thrill ran through me.

"It's fine," Arie said. "Spit it out."

I dragged my eyes away from Avery and focused back on him. Took a deep breath.

"You know how Ave and I were paired up for this project?" I said quietly, glad of the loud background chatter that would prevent any rogue eavesdroppers from listening in. "Well, I've enjoyed spending time with her. More than I thought I would."

“You? Enjoying a school project?” Arie scoffed. “Never thought I’d hear those words come from your mouth.”

“It’s happening. And it’s because of Ave. She makes me... happy.”

My heart stumbled as I said the words, the realization so sharp and clear. Avery Jensen had always made me happy. Before I ever had a single confusing feeling for her, she’d made me smile, met my dumb banter with quick retorts and my silly jokes with sharp wit. She’d always been there, right in front of me, and I’d never noticed how she made me feel.

Arie, on the other hand, looked anything but surprised. He crossed his arms. “Is this your way of trying to tell me you’re into my sister?”

“Would it be so terrible if it was?”

“Well, aside from the awful job you’re doing telling me... I guess not.” Arie’s lips lifted in half a smirk. “Avery’s gone out with a lot of guys. And, obviously, I like you better than any of them.”

“That’s a good start,” I joked weakly.

But Arie didn’t laugh. Instead, he scrubbed a hand down his face and looked at me seriously. “Look, bro. As your best friend, I think you two would be great together. You know that I wasn’t Naomi’s biggest fan, and I can see how different you are when you’re with her. You’re, like, lit up or something when she’s around. And that’s awesome. I want you to be happy.”

“Thanks.” I smiled at him tentatively. Then, I swallowed. “Now hit me with the ‘but.’ Because I know there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

“But,” Arie said, not returning my smile. “As Avery’s brother, I need to say this. You just got out of a long-term relationship with a girl who was your first love. That crap takes time to get over. And I need you to promise me that, if anything *does* happen between you guys, you make sure you’re in the right place for that. And you won’t use Ave as

your rebound, won't let her down. She deserves way better than that."

"She does," I agreed. "And I won't."

Arie shook his head again. "Dude. I can't believe we're even having this conversation."

"Me neither," I said honestly. "And I genuinely have no idea where this might go, or what she wants with me. But I'm all in for her, and I promise you, I will not hurt her."

"Good." Arie clapped me on the back. Hard. "Because if you do, I'd have to kill you. And you know how much I'd hate to kill you."

"It would be a travesty." I nodded. The joke was enough to break the mood, and we both laughed as the tension in the air between us fizzled out. It wasn't a blessing, exactly, but it certainly wasn't a "stay the heck away from my sister."

I'd take it.

Feeling the thrill of knowing that I was in the clear with Arie, I snuck another look in Avery's direction. She'd moved away from the cheerleaders and was now sitting next to Taylor.

She was still looking at me.

I smiled.



CruzControl: Looking good tonight, Killer.

BrAvery: Don't knock the sweats.

CruzControl: I was in no way knocking. Just thinking they'd look good with my hoodie.

BrAvery: Oh, yeah. I never gave either of those back in the end, did I?

CruzControl: Consider yourself forgiven. You might even score another one later for your creep collection.

BrAvery: What's happening later?

CruzControl: Depends if you want to see a trick I learned a few years back.

BrAvery: Does it involve grievous bodily harm? Caused to you?

CruzControl: Hopefully not, but it'll be your call.

BrAvery: Okay...

CruzControl: Meet me at the art studio after Feast.

AVERY

I bit my lip and stashed my phone away. Cruz was looking at me from across the common room with this sneaky, knowing little smile that made me feel all kinds of ways.

Honestly, it was a relief after what I saw earlier. The conversation he and Arie were having looked intense, serious... almost a little heated? But then, Arie smacked him on the back and they laughed and everything was back to normal.

I wondered what they'd been talking about. Why Cruz was suddenly, unabashedly, smiling at me and inviting me to the art studio? Was he also unable to stop thinking about what happened earlier?

“What do you think, Ave?”

Taylor's question pulled me back to present space and time. I blinked. “Sorry, what?”

“About Benji. Should I tell Gray?”

Right. Benji. The lacrosse player who'd asked her to the Valentine's dance. He was clearly into her, but Taylor was avoiding him and any acknowledgement of his affections. The girl's capacity for denial was something else. “Why wouldn't you?” I asked.

“I don't know...” Taylor shifted on her seat. It was a rare moment when she and Grayson weren't attached at the hip. “He might feel a bit weird about it.”

“Because he’s head over heels for you,” I said matter-of-factly, licking sour cream from the tips of my fingers where it had dripped off my pulled chicken taco.

“How many times do I have to say it?” Taylor’s tone was sharp and serious, and I looked at her in surprise. “Gray and I are not and will never be together. As we’ve both made clear. Many, many times.”

Taylor’s jaw was set and her expression was fiery, but I could swear there was a note of pain in her voice. I set down my taco. “Sorry, Tay. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Tay and Gray, Graylor, Tayson. Blah blah. I’ve heard it all. Can you leave it be? Just for a second?”

I was taken aback by the passion in my friend’s voice. I genuinely hadn’t realized how much this type of talk upset her. I pulled her into a hug, felt her shoulders release as she leaned into me. “Of course. I’m really sorry. Let’s talk about Benji instead.”

“I think I like him, but for some reason, I don’t know what to do. Don’t know if I want to say yes or just go with my teammates, like I originally planned.”

I nodded in sympathy, my gaze darting to Cruz, who was now at the food table, overloading his plate to the point that it was bending down the middle. “I get it.”

Taylor blew out a long breath. “Liking someone is complicated.”

Boy, was I learning *that* lesson all too well.

Because one thing was very clear to me. Judging by the volume and intensity of the butterflies in my stomach whenever he smiled at me—and the kiss in the library that literally made me want to “pop” my foot like in those movies—I could no longer deny that I was into him. Hook, line and sinker.

I had a full-fledged, romantic-movie-style crush on Cruz freaking Delgado.

“Ave? You okay?” Taylor asked.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you’re putting peanut butter on your chicken taco.”

I blinked. Looked down at my peanut butter crested taco. I thought I’d picked up salsa at the food table, but my lovely peanut-butter-chicken-sour-cream concoction told me otherwise. “Crap,” I muttered.

Taylor looked at me with an eyebrow raised. “Distracted much? What’s going on?”

I couldn’t stop it. The words were coming up. I had to talk to someone about this.

“We kissed,” I whispered.

Taylor’s eyes went wide. “Who?!”

“Cruz and me. He kissed me. Or I kissed him.” I blew out a breath. “In any case, there was touching. Of lips.”

“Romantic,” Taylor said with a giggle, keeping her voice low. “Here I was belly-aching about Benji and you had this huge news! How was it?”

“It was... amazing,” I replied in a whoosh. “Best kiss of my life.”

My friend arched a brow. “Your tone suggests otherwise.”

I grimaced. I forgot how perceptive Taylor could be at times. “It *was* good. Too good,” I admitted.

“What does that mean?”

“I mean, like, there were butterflies, and fireworks, and music was crescendoing in my head, and I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Taylor whistled through her teeth. “Cruz Delgado, huh? I always said he was a hottie.”

She had; all of my dormies had. And I’d always vehemently insisted that he was nothing of the sort. Or, he was the sort who knew just how hot he was, which reduced his

overall hotness by a factor of a million. But I'd clearly been lying to myself.

"It's not just that. It's... I like him," I said quietly. I felt way too vulnerable right now. "Like, *really* like him."

"Wow." Her expression turned serious. "You're never like this about guys, Ave."

"I know. It's weird."

"It's *great*." She smiled. "This is what you've been looking for, and it's with the guy who was right in front of you the whole time!"

"Yeah, that's all well and good in movies or books." I waved a hand. "But I guess I never realized what was at stake."

"Like?"

"Well." I frowned. "When you like someone, you have something to lose."

Taylor was silent for a long beat. Then her lips quirked up. "You're only *just* realizing this?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed, and a couple girls next to us half-turned in surprise. I lowered my voice again. "Tay, I've never properly liked someone. Never actually wanted to be with them past the present moment. And now, I'm experiencing all these happy, wonderful things, and that's all great. But I'm terrified of losing it all over again."

"You won't."

"Won't what?"

"Lose it." A smile touched Taylor's lips. "You *can't* lose it. And I have a feeling Cruz won't let you lose him."

I thought of his text—the one asking me to meet him later at the art studio. "I guess we'll see," I said, abandoning my peanut butter taco and grabbing a curly fry instead. "But you know, the same could be said with you and Benji."

Taylor raised a brow. "What do you mean?"

“With the dance.” I scanned the crowd for him and found him standing in the corner, laughing with some of his friends. At the same moment, he looked over at us—at Taylor—and she averted her eyes quickly. “If you wanted to say yes, there’s nothing for you to lose. I mean, the guy’s cute.”

“That’s true.” She nodded. “He is cute. And nice.”

“Fantastic qualities in any crush.”

Taylor was still nodding. “I’ll think about it. Maybe I should say yes.”

“Great idea.” I slung my arm around my friend’s shoulders. “Thanks for listening, Tay.”

“Anytime, Ave.” She briefly hugged me back. “Now get off me. Have to grab one of those chocolate lava cakes before Gray eats them all.”

She jogged back to the food table and I watched her go with a smile. And it was at that moment that I realized Cruz was nowhere to be seen.

The middle of Feast was one of the best times to sneak out. With everyone clamoring to get food and mingling with friends, it was hard to keep track of who was there and who wasn’t.

My curiosity got the best of me, and I stood from the table, not wanting to wait another minute.

Left the common room without looking back.



I SORELY MISSED Cruz’s hoodie as I jogged across the quad towards the art studio. I tugged my sweater tight around my body, clenching my jaw to hold back shivers.

I scurried through the darkness, sticking to the shadows—Feast may have been a prime time to sneak out but there were still security patrols in place. Luckily, whether it was the adrenaline of sneaking out, or because I was practically jogging, I noticed the cold less with every step.

I didn't know the actual reason until I saw him.

Cruz was leaning against the art building, half hidden in the shadows. When his eyes met mine and he smiled, I realized that my heart had been racing at the thought of meeting him. The prospect of sneaking out with him heated me from the inside out.

“Hey, Mini Wheat,” he murmured as I got close, standing from the wall to meet me.

“Hi,” I said almost shyly. My heart was doing a weird topsy-turvy thing.

He took my hand gently in his and tugged me close to him. Then wrapped an arm around me, and I released an exhale as his body heat surrounded me. “Cold?”

“We aren't all functioning radiators.”

“Gonna take that as a compliment.” He chuckled.

I smiled against his chest, unable to ignore how perfectly my body fit against his. He was able to rest his chin on my head.

“Great. And because I know you oh-so-well...” He stepped back and held out his other hand, which had been behind his back. He was carrying a ball of dark fabric.

I blinked. “What is this?”

“Take it.”

I did, and the fabric unfolded to reveal another hoodie of Cruz's—his Hallisburg Sharks hoodie, the one with his name and number on the back. And rolled up in the midst of it was a box of Milk Duds. I looked at him in surprise. “For me?”

“Of course.” Cruz laughed. “I wouldn't lower myself to Milk Dud buying standards for anyone but you, Ave.”

I rolled my eyes and punched his arm, but I was completely blown away. “And the hoodie?”

“To keep you warm.” Cruz smiled. “You'll need it where we're going.”

I handed Cruz the Milk Duds and he stashed them in the back pocket of his jeans, then I slipped into the hoodie. It was like bathing in Cruz's comforting, warm scent. I wrapped my arms around myself.

"So, you ready?" he asked with that same sneaky smirk he had in the common room.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

To my surprise, Cruz turned back towards the art studio and ducked around the side of the building towards a dense thicket of trees. I followed him along the building with only his hand and the wall to guide me through the darkness. I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face.

My stomach was clenched in anticipation when Cruz came to a stop.

"One sec," he whispered.

There was quick *screech* followed by a thud. Cruz grabbed my hand again. "Okay. Remember the climbing wall? How brave you were?"

"Yeah..." I said slowly.

"This is like that. And remember that I'm here for you the whole time."

Cruz dropped my hand and I was suddenly aware of him standing behind me. He skated his hands down my arms to take my hands again, and we felt forward in the darkness. My palms met cold metal and I let out a squeak.

"It's a ladder." His breath on the back of my neck sent a whirlwind of shivers across my skin. "Start climbing. I'm right behind you."

I grabbed hold of the ladder and placed one foot on the bottom rung, followed by the other foot. Up I went, picking up speed as I understood the spacing between the rungs. Soon enough, I broke out of the tree cover and could see the ladder with the help of the moonlight. Just as he promised, Cruz was behind me the whole time.

When I made it to the top, I gingerly stepped onto the roof of the building. Cruz followed a second later, landing lightly next to me. “Turns out you’re not the only one with a secret rooftop.”

“What on earth?” I asked. “How did you find this?”

“Your brother and I stumbled upon this ladder one night a few years back.” Cruz smirked. “Been coming here ever since. Usually on my own, though. I think Arie forgot about it.”

I shook my head, completely awe-struck. Or so I thought until I turned around.

The sky was lit with a bright moon and a million stars twinkling and dancing above us. It reminded me of NYE, when Cruz and I watched the fireworks. “This is beautiful,” I said in a whisper.

“It is.” Cruz came up next to me and wrapped an arm comfortably around my waist, bringing me to his side. The butterflies exploded in my stomach once again. “Thought it was the perfect setting.”

I shot him a side glance. “To push you off the roof?”

Cruz let out a loud laugh. “Exactly. How’d you know, Jensen?”

“Call it a sixth sense.”

“Well.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “Before you do any pushing, I have something important to ask you.”

“What kinda something?”

“A dance kinda something.”

My mouth popped open. “Wha...?”

“Avery.” Cruz’s voice was gentle but serious. He stepped away so he could face me, took my hands in his. “I know you wanted the dance to be special, something you’ll remember forever... and I want to be the one to make it special and memorable for you. If you’ll let me. So will you be my date to the Valentine’s dance next Friday?”

My mouth dropped wider than ever. Here was Cruz, standing on a rooftop in the moonlight, looking better than any daydream. Better than any movie. And he was asking me to the dance in a way only Cruz Delgado ever could.

All I could manage was a nod. A big, huge YES of a nod.

Cruz's smile was brighter than any star in the night sky as he enveloped me in his arms again and kissed me softly, sweetly, making my entire body shudder.

"I do have one condition," I managed to say as we broke apart.

"What's that?"

"That you wear a shirt."

"For you?" I heard the smile in his voice. "Anything."

AVERY

“Cruz took you to a secret rooftop to ask you to the dance and I’m only hearing about this *now?!?*” Quinn squealed and I leaned away from her and the eyeliner pencil she was holding dangerously close to my left eye.

“Quinnie, please, that thing’s dangerous!”

Quinn and I were in my room together, getting ready for the dance tonight. Taylor, Mia and Rachel were in our tiny living area, singing at the top of their lungs to our Taylor Swift playlist. We’d just finished watching *Valentine’s Day*, another V-Day tradition that also featured our second favorite Taylor.

But while our friends were dancing around in sweats with their makeup and hair half-done, Quinn and I had snuck off to my room so she could help me with my eyeliner. And so I could tell her about Cruz’s dance invite.

“Oh, my gosh. When you said that Cruz had asked you to the dance, I couldn’t believe it.” Quinn clapped her hands with excitement. “I mean, I *could* believe it, but the whole thing is so unbelievable. I’m so happy for you, Ave. You got your fairytale dance invite.”

“Thank you, Quinnie.” I smiled wide, then looked away to grab my lip pencil.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. Definitely.” I nodded. Quinn leveled me with a stare that said she wasn’t falling for it. I gave a sigh. “Just feels a little too good to be true sometimes. You know?”

“I get that. It felt like that with your brother, too. Sometimes, I still feel like that.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised that Quinn had felt anything remotely close to fear when it came to her relationship with Arie. The two seemed totally solid.

“Absolutely! When we got together, I was nervous that he was going to change his mind or something. But that’s part of falling for someone. It’s being vulnerable and open. Putting yourself out there. It’s a scary process.”

“It is.” I exhaled slowly. “I wasn’t expecting this. I keep feeling like something’s going to go wrong.”

“It won’t.” Quinn shook her head. Then, she smiled ruefully. “Or maybe it will. But it’s worth taking a chance to find someone special. Plus, you two are some of the strongest, bravest people I know. You can weather anything.”

I looked at Quinn’s reflection in the mirror. “You think?”

“I *know*. I can’t speak to how Cruz is feeling, obviously, but I can tell you what Arie’s told me. He said that Cruz has seemed different lately. He’s taking things more seriously, is making more of an effort with the things he cares about. And he thinks Cruz might be that way because of the time he’s spending with you.”

Her words were like a huge hug. Warm, and comforting. I scrambled to my feet and pulled my friend into an actual hug.

“HEY NOW! Hugging without us?” Rachel said from the doorway among a flurry of red hair and giggles.

I made a “come here” motion with one hand, and three more pairs of arms circled around Quinn and me as our dormies spilled into my room. I closed my eyes, feeling so grateful at this very moment.

Only a few seconds had passed when Taylor grunted, “Okay. We good?”

We all stepped away, and I looked around my friends—Mia with half her hair up in curlers and wearing a onesie, Quinn with her makeup done and her sweatpants rolled up to

the knees, Rachel with one false eyelash hanging from her right eye, Taylor with her hair in a slicked ponytail and kitten heels beneath her athletic shorts.

We were a chaotic mess, and I loved it. I was surrounded by the best friends I could've asked for, and I was going to the dance with the guy of my literal dreams. I was finally getting my perfect holiday, my perfect Valentine's Day.

Maybe I *could* hope that everything would go right in the end.

CRUZ

“Turtles are a definite look,” Sutton said, his eyes wide.

“Very aquatic.” Gray nodded in agreement.

“The green is a bold choice,” Arie threw out.

“I freaking love them!” I told Leo, clapping him on the shoulder. We were all crowded around the mirror in our dorm bathroom, which was a definite first for us.

“Really?” Leo looked down at his tie and smoothed it with one hand. The bright green, silky material was adorned with a million swimming little turtles.

“Absolutely. Plus, the ladies go crazy for turtles, I hear,” I said brightly. I’d heard no such thing, but the guy looked like he needed the confidence boost. And his smile told me I’d achieved my goal.

“Well, cool. Thanks, guys.” Leo pointed at the mirror. “We all look extra sharp tonight.”

He wasn’t wrong. Sutton wore a charcoal-gray suit, Arie had on a dark blazer and chinos, while Gray had donned a full three-piece suit with a gentle plaid pattern for the occasion. Even though I’d made many allusions to Avery that I would be attending the dance dressed in either a full denim tuxedo or a suit jacket over my bare torso (“technically not shirtless,” I teased), I hadn’t made good on my threats.

Instead, I’d chosen the slim-cut navy blazer and suit pants I’d worn to my cousin’s wedding last year, along with a crisp

white button-down shirt and brown dress shoes.

I'd even brushed my hair. Put a bit of product in it. Sprayed a little cologne.

Was I trying to impress Avery? Yes, absolutely.

I knew how much tonight meant to her, and I wanted to live up to her expectations. Make everything she'd wished for a reality.

"Are we ready, boys?" I asked the mirror.

"Yup. I can't wait to see Quinn." Arie was positively starry-eyed.

Grayson mimed throwing up.

"Aren't you excited to see Tay... uh, Olive?" I asked, catching myself at the last minute.

"Olive?" Gray blinked. "Oh, yeah. Sure. She's super cool."

"And what about you, Cruzy?" Arie teased. "Can't believe you got up the nerve to ask my sister to the dance. Should be a big night for you two."

"I hope it is. I know how much this dance means to her." I barely recognized my own expression in the mirror. I looked weirdly blissed out. Like Avery's effect on me was tangible, visible on my face.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Sutton grinned. "Let's do this Valentine's dancey thing."

We filed out of our dorm and out into the courtyard, where the evening air was crisp and cool, but lacking the bite it had days ago. The end of winter was on its way.

We stepped around groups of students posing and taking pictures, laughing and chatting as we went.

I stuck my hands in my pants pockets as I walked. I almost felt like whistling, like I was in some weird musical or something. I was... happy. Happy and relaxed and exactly where I was meant to be, with who I was meant to be with. And in a few minutes' time, I'd be dancing with Avery on a crowded dance floor, holding her close.

As we approached the gym, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I grabbed it, sure that it was a barb from Avery, teasing me about how I was going to be late.

She was going to be so surprised when I walked in the door to the dance, right on time.

I opened my screen and my heart sagged.

I stopped walking. Swore under my breath.

“Okay?” Arie asked, stopping at my side.

“Yeah, just need to make a quick call. I’ll be there in a minute.” The last thing my friends needed tonight was for my family drama to drag them down.

“Don’t be long, You know Ave wouldn’t let you live it down,” my friend said with a laugh.

“I won’t be,” I said, hoping with all my heart that this was the truth.

EVERY

If Hallisburg Prep's campus was something out of a movie, its Montgomery event hall was a Hollywood dream.

The refurbished cathedral featured high, vaulted ceilings and large white columns that rose from the ground up through a mid-level mezzanine. There was a large stage at one end, usually used for speeches, famed guest lecturers, or performance events. Tall windows, with hand-painted glass at the tops, allowed light to flow into the room during the day, or spill onto the gardens outside after nightfall.

Vague, colorful shapes and movements could be seen through the windows as my dormies and I rushed towards the heavy wooden doors—which were propped open tonight, despite the cool air. A lively band was playing a popular rock song, and several students were already on the dance floor, lending their voices to the chorus.

I had to smile as we stepped through the doors. The grand hall might be modern and jaw-dropping, but the faint smell of cold stone and incense would always linger.

“Wow! This is unreal!” Mia said in awe, eyes wide. As the newbie in our group, she hadn't been to many parties in the event hall yet. And tonight, our school's decorating committee had pulled off all the stops to show it off in all its glory—strings of paper hearts and fairy lights were hung gracefully from the ceiling, while pink and white floral and helium balloon arrangements were placed around the hall strategically.

“Cleans up nice, huh?” Taylor chuckled.

“Talking about me?” Arie appeared out of nowhere, circling an arm around Quinn’s waist as he pressed a kiss to her neck. “Mmm, you smell good.”

Quinn giggled.

I gagged.

“No, seriously,” he defended himself, eyes wide. “She smells like cinnamon cookies.”

“You like it?” Quinn asked, wrapping her arms around his neck. “It’s this new hair spray stuff I got. Thought tonight was the perfect occasion to wear it.”

They kissed and I had to roll my eyes, but really, I was happy to see how happy they were.

“Get a room, you two,” Sutton called, and we all turned to where he was approaching our group with Grayson, Olive and Leo in tow. He strode right over and took Mia’s hand, placing a kiss on top of it.

I laughed when I saw the two of them next to each other. “You planned this, didn’t you?”

Mia was wearing a long, black satin dress and combat boots, complete with a bright yellow rose in her hair. The same type of rose was pinned to the lapel of Sutton’s suit jacket. Mia shrugged as Sutton held her close. “How’d you know?”

Arie, meanwhile, looked me up and down. “That’s a weird dress thingy, Ave.”

Quinn smacked my brother in the arm for me. “It’s not a dress, it’s a co-ord set. And she looks great in it.”

“I *told* you that you had to get it, Ave,” Mia added.

“Looks like it was made for you.” Tay bobbed her head in agreement.

A blush rose to my cheeks as I brushed my fingers along the soft fabric of the turquoise set I’d found at the thrift shop. I couldn’t let it go, in the end—not after it featured in the best dream I’d had all year.

“We all look awesome tonight,” Rachel said with a bright smile. Then she zeroed in on Leo’s torso and raised a brow. “Love the tie.”

Leo looked down at his—totally unique and hilarious—turtle tie. He shrugged a shoulder in response, and his floppy hair flopped to the other side of his forehead. “Thanks,” he said with a lazy smile. He nodded in the direction of a group of girls gathered near the band. Smiled and smoothed the tie. “Gonna say hi to Melissa Sykes. I heard she applied to UW to study Oceanography.”

With a peace sign, he wandered off, and Rachel turned to me. “How’s my mascara?” she asked, opening her eyes comically wide. “Has anyone seen Mark? He said he’d meet me by the door.”

“I’ll walk with you to find him,” Taylor piped up immediately, grabbing Rachel’s arm and dragging her into the rapidly-growing crowd. I noticed that she hadn’t said hi to Gray or Olive. I didn’t blame her. The two of them were talking to each other in low voices like they didn’t even realize any of us were here.

Poor Taylor...

I quickly retracted the thought. *Good* for Taylor. She’d made the decision to come to the dance with Benji in the end, and I thought it was a stellar choice. So long as she was happy.

With Rachel, Tay and Leo gone, it was glaringly obvious that I was seventh wheeling three couples. It was also glaringly obvious that one person—the person I’d been looking forward to seeing all day—was not present.

“Where’s Cruz?” I asked.

My brother looked up from where he and Quinn were speaking in sweet, quiet voices. “He was right behind us. Said he had to take a call.”

I chuckled. “Of course. Late again.”

“But don’t worry, Ave, he’s wearing a shirt this time,” Sutton added cheerily.

Mia linked her arm through mine. “Shall we grab some drinks?”

Our little group made our way around the dance floor and over to the drinks table. The laughs came easily as Sutton, Arie and Gray told us about their latest game of Hallway Ball—Cruz and Arie won, and Sutton and Gray were made to eat an entire Costco-sized jar of Cheez Wiz in one sitting. My ears perked up every time Cruz’s name came up, and I found myself glancing at the wooden doors often.

Too often.

Where is he?

By the time we’d grabbed our drinks—a mix of fruit punches, Cokes and Shirley Temples—Gray and Olive had split off to chat with some of her jazz band friends and Sutton and Mia had gone to the dance floor for a slow song. It was just Quinn, Arie and me.

And no Cruz.

Arie’s face tensed as he studied mine. “Wait here a moment?”

Before Quinn or I could answer, he headed for the door. I watched him stick his head outside. Look around.

His expression was tight when he walked back towards us. “I don’t know where that idiot went, but I’m sure he’s coming.”

“I’m sure he is, too,” I replied. I trusted Cruz. He’d be here.

A few minutes soon turned into fifteen. Fifteen turned into thirty...

Quinn shifted awkwardly next to me as Arie’s face grew more and more perplexed.

Something felt weird about this, felt very off. There had to be a good reason Cruz wasn’t here yet.

“Be right back,” I muttered distractedly.

I made my way through the crowd back towards the doors, headed for coat check. I'd forgotten my phone in my purse, which I'd checked in with my coat.

As soon as I got hold of my bag, I clicked on my phone.

One unread HP Chat message.

I opened the message.

Then, I threw on my coat and ran out the door.



CruzControl: Ave, I was on my way to the dance when my mom messaged me to call her. Lucia's disappeared again and I'm trying to track her down. I'll be there asap. I'm so sorry, Avery.

CruzControl: I found her. She's in Oakland with some older kids at a party she's not meant to be at. I'm going to drive there now to get her and bring her home. I'm sorry, Ave. I'll text you the second I know anything else. I hope you have the best time tonight.

CruzControl: I'm so sorry I let you down.

CRUZ

“*L*uce. We’re here.” I gently shook my little sister’s shoulder.

She awoke with a snort and looked around groggily. “Huh?”

“We’re home.”

Lucia pressed her palms to her eyes and scrubbed back and forth. She uttered a loud, labored sigh. “Ugh. Already? How long was I out?”

Despite my sister’s struggles, my lips twitched a little. “You passed out as soon as we hit the highway.”

Lucia sighed again, shifted in the passenger seat. Her eyes were smudged with dark makeup, and her hair, stiff with hairspray, was standing on one side. She caught my smirk and narrowed her eyes. “What?”

“Nothing. You just look great tonight.”

Her nostrils flared and she rolled her eyes as she opened the car door. “Ha. Ha. Very funny. Make fun of your little sister in her time of need.”

Lucia stepped out of the car and slammed the door before I could respond. I bristled, and stepped out right after her. “I came and got you, didn’t I? Rescued you from that stupid party.”

“How many times do I have to tell you?” she demanded. “I wasn’t doing anything wrong! I was just... hanging out.”

“With a bunch of waste cases who were all drunk.”

“Doesn’t mean *I* was,” she fumed.

“Try telling that to the cops when they break up an underage party.”

She pursed her lips. “So what? It’s not like Mom and Dad care.”

“I care.” My voice was steely, and I was surprised at the words coming out my own mouth, though they were true, of course. Understandably, Lucia looked totally taken aback. I kept going. “I care what you do, Luce. And whether you’re safe or hurt.”

It was a rare moment of Lucia looking totally surprised. For a second, she looked just like the sweet, innocent kid she was a few years back.

Until she set her jaw. “Whatever,” she breathed on an exhale. But it lacked the punch and anger of a few moments ago.

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m going inside,” she said quietly. “Hopefully Mom and Dad are dead asleep so I won’t have to talk to them.”

Lucia walked into our house but I stayed put for a second, checking my phone for the first time since I picked my sister up in Oakland. My thoughts were on one person, and one person only.

When I checked my screen, there were messages, missed calls and voicemails from my friends.

But not a single text from Avery.

I stared at our HP Chat log—at the unanswered message I’d sent her—and hot regret soared through me. She must be furious with me. I’d missed the Valentine’s dance—the one event of the semester that she was looking forward to. The event at which I’d asked her to be my date.

All I’d wanted was to dance the night away with our friends, laugh and talk and have a great time. And I wanted to

do it all with her by my side.

But now, I'd let her down. Taken the most important high school experience she'd been longing for, and messed the whole thing up for her.

My heart hurt at the thought of her being hurt. Especially by me.

How on earth was I going to make this up to her?

I felt heavy as I walked into the house. Lucia was waiting in the entryway, and I could see why. There was a light on in the living room. Someone was awake.

After a beat, Lucia gave me a short hug and a hurried "thank you"—which meant more to me than I could explain—and she strode down the hall, past the living room and up the stairs without a word. I hesitated for a long moment, debating whether I should pull the same move and take off back to campus. But I removed my dress shoes—I was still wearing them after leaving the dance in a hurry—and padded down the hallway in my socks. "Hey, Mo—"

I stopped in my tracks.

"Ave?"

And there she was.

Or so it appeared. The actual scene in front of me made no sense to me.

Because Avery Jensen was sitting on my living room couch, both hands wrapped around a mug. Her hair was gathered back in an intricate braid with tendrils that framed her face, and she was wearing a turquoise dress that brought out the blue in her eyes even from across the room.

"Hey, Delgado," she said quietly.

I finally got over my shock enough to rush forward and reach for her.

She stood from the couch and threw her arms around me and I didn't realize how much I needed this until she was pressed against me. How much I needed *her*.

“You’re here,” I said, perplexed.

“I am.”

“But why?” I stepped back to look at her. “What about the dance?”

She shrugged and a smile spread across her lips. She placed a palm on my cheek. “You’re more important than any stupid dance,” she said simply.

A rush of emotions swept through my body, and I placed my hand on hers on my cheek.

“I got your message and drove straight here,” she explained. “I wanted to be here for you. If you needed me.”

I opened my mouth, but for once, I was speechless. Blown away by what she had done. She’d left the dance—the big event she’d been looking forward to—just to be here for me. She’d sacrificed her hopes for a perfect holiday to come all the way back to San Francisco.

No one had ever done anything like that for me before. I was about to say something—anything—when I heard a noise behind me.

“Cruz, is that you?”

Mom walked into the living room holding a plate of those dry cookies that no one ever ate and I swore were purely for decoration. Her hair was gathered in a bun and she was wearing her dressing gown. She’d clearly been waiting up. Her dark eyes—so like mine, I’d often heard—flitted between Avery and me.

“I thought so,” she said, her lips now pressed into a prim smile. “I’ve been catching up with Avery over tea and cookies. Not every day we get a beautiful girl in a beautiful dress on our doorstep, looking for our wayward son.”

My eyes shot towards the girl at my side. “Avery is one of a kind.”

Avery gave me a look that was filled with something weighty, in a good way, then turned to my mother. “It was

lovely to see you, Mrs. Delgado, and thank you for the tea. I'm going to run upstairs quickly and say hi to Luce."

I nodded and Avery dropped my hand as she left the living room. Mom put down the plate of cookies and faced me. It felt like there was a ton of space between us. But just knowing Avery was here, knowing she'd come through for me, gave me strength. Gave me bravery.

Mom's eyes dropped down my body, and her brows raised a touch as she registered my crumpled suit. I'd long removed my tie and the top button of my shirt was undone. "Avery was telling me there was a dance at school tonight. Was it fun?"

"Dunno. Didn't make it inside."

"Oh." Her mouth froze in the shape of the word. "I'm sorry you had to miss your party."

"It's not about the party, Mom." I took a deep breath. Finally let it out. "I'm glad you called me to help and I'm glad I found her safe."

Mom's expression shifted. Showed surprise, followed by regret, followed by discomfort. She opened her mouth, but I held up a hand. I needed to get this out.

"Whatever she's going through right now, she needs her family," I continued quietly. "She needs to know that we're all here for her and that we all care. That we can help her through this. I think she's desperate to talk to you but she doesn't know how." My voice cracked a little on the next sentence. "It can be... hard for our family to talk sometimes."

My words seemed to echo in the silence of our living room. The silence of our big, huge house full of a million things unsaid. But finally, I saw the twitch in Mom's cheek, the small downturn of her mouth.

She hung her head. "You're right." Her voice was uneven. "And I owe you two things, Cruz. First, a thank you for tracking Lucia down tonight. I was beside myself when I realized she was gone and I couldn't get hold of her. And second, I owe you an apology."

I swallowed thickly, but I stayed silent. Mom had something to say, and it was my turn to listen.

“I’m sorry,” she said on an exhale. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you when you told us how serious this was getting. You’ve done nothing but look out for her. And while that’s admirable, it isn’t a burden you should be carrying alone. This might sound like an excuse, but your dad and I... well, it’s been our way to sweep things under the rug. But we’re a family, and we *should* be in this together, for better or for worse.”

She looked at me then, took the smallest step forward. I gave her a nod, and she rushed over and wrapped her arms around me. I softened a little into her embrace.

“I’ll talk to your father and do better, I promise,” she said into my shoulder. “And I promise that, in the future, when you come to me with anything, I will take you at your word.”

I nodded, clenching my eyes shut as the weight I’d been carrying finally felt to release a little. Soon, Mom pulled back and scanned my features. Her mouth quirked a little.

“What?” I asked.

“You seem... different. Something’s changed. You’ve never been so open with me before.” Her eyes flitted to the staircase, but she didn’t say anything more.

I bit my bottom lip, thinking of that very same person who inspired that change. The person I let down tonight who had, unbelievably, come through to be there for me. “Yeah. Guess I’m growing up.”

“It suits you.” A faint smile crossed Mom’s lips, then she checked the watch dangling on her wrist. “It’s still early. You and Avery might be able to make it back to Hallisburg and catch some of the dance after all.”

I shook my head as my heart sank. “It’ll be over by the time we get back.”

Pain showed on Mom’s face again, and she placed a gentle palm on my cheek. “I’m sorry we had any part in ruining your

evening. I can tell you were looking forward to it. Your dad and I will talk to Lucia. Will try to be better with you both.”

“Good,” I said with a nod. Mom smiled this rare, unguarded smile of hers and my shoulders relaxed. Like maybe I really wouldn’t have to do this alone anymore. “I should get Ave. I’m sure she’s ready to head back.”

“Okay. Drive safe. And I hope you do manage to catch the tail end of the party.”

I gave my mom a hug goodbye right as Ave came down the stairs. She smiled at me reassuringly, and I got the message that she’d talked to Lucia and all was well. I waited until we were in the entryway to take her hand, and we walked outside together.

It wasn’t until then that I finally took a good look at her.

The turquoise dress was actually some fancy two-piece thing that made her look like a freaking princess or something. Like she’d stepped right out of a dream. She skipped ahead of me towards the cars, but I had to stop.

“What?” she asked when she registered that I wasn’t next to her.

“You look beautiful.”

Avery came back towards me. Kissed me on the cheek. “Thanks, Delgado.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist, bringing her close. “Thank *you*, Jensen. Thank you for coming here.”

A light pink blush spread across her cheeks. She shrugged in the sweetest way. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. It’s everything. Means the world to me.” My voice was choked and passionate, but it was nothing compared to how I was feeling inside right now. “I let you down—”

She barely let me finish the sentence. “You did *not* let me down.”

I pushed forward. “I know how excited you were for the dance, Ave. I was excited, too. I wanted us to be there together. And I don’t know how I could ever make this up to you, what I could possibly do...” I trailed off, the beginnings of an idea suddenly forming in my mind.

“You don’t have to make anything up to me. Don’t have to do anything.”

“But what if there’s something I *want* to do?”

She tilted her head, took in my expression, and smiled. “Dare I even ask what’s going on in that head of yours right now?”

I smirked. “Can you trust me?”

“If you don’t know the answer to that already, you have a screw loose.”

I laughed. Gently tucked her hair behind her ear. “You really do look beautiful.”

Ave giggled. “I’ll just wear this to the next dance, then.”

“Hopefully that’s not the case.”

She gave me a questioning look, but I just shook my head. I knew what I had to do now. It was the most brilliant idea I’d had all semester.

And there was no time like the present to pull it off.

“Meet you back at school?” I asked.

She pushed the button on her keys to unlock her car. “Sure. Bet I get there first.”

I reached out and grabbed her arm, spun her round to face me. “Please drive carefully. And slowly. Like, the speed limit. Or slower if you like. And you do know that Stop signs aren’t optional, right?”

She blinked at me then pursed her lips. “Cruz Delgado, do you have a problem with my driving or something?”

“Let’s just say I’m much happier when you’re alive and well.”

AVERY

*H*e never came.

Cruz didn't make it to the Valentine's dance.

At first, it stung. Sharp and acute. My dream of one perfect, romantic high school moment—of one holiday full of love and happy memories—was dissipating in front of me. My deadline had come and gone.

But when I saw his text message about Lucia, I quickly realized that none of that mattered. It was then that I knew my priorities had changed. *I* had changed. My previous wants seemed trivial; I no longer wanted a picture-perfect, high school movie love.

I wanted *Cruz*. And what I felt for Cruz was bigger than just a dance.

So I did the only thing I could do: I followed him.

As in, I got in my car, and drove to San Francisco. In my Jasmine dress.

Being there for him wasn't even a question in my mind.

And as I pulled off the highway and back onto the Hallisburg Prep campus, way, way past curfew, I understood exactly what Cruz meant earlier in the semester when he was speaking about Lucia.

I would do it again. Skip any dance to be there for him when he needed it.

And I knew, without question, that he would do the same for me.

I stifled a yawn as I swung my SUV into the parking lot near Emerson. Cut the engine. My dress was wrinkled, my hair was coming out of its braid, and I was sure my mascara was running, but the curiosity in me was keeping me alert. When we parted ways at Cruz's house, he said that he'd meet me back at school in a smirky, secretive way that suggested he had something up his sleeve, but I had no idea what.

The guy was constantly surprising me.

As soon as I stepped out my door, I was surprised to see Arie walking towards me.

"Hey, little bro," I said with a slight frown. "What're you doing here?"

He didn't answer. Just held out an arm with a cryptic little smile. I took it.

Arie and I walked across the lot and through the campus grounds. He didn't seem particularly concerned that we were breaking curfew, so I didn't let it affect me either.

Until we turned in the direction of the event hall.

My breath caught as I saw that lights still spilled onto the garden. School events never ran this late. "Is the dance still going?"

Arie finally spoke, "In a manner of speaking."

We approached the event hall and I noticed the change in atmosphere. There weren't hordes of shouting students, no laughter or cheers. The mood was now quiet, intimate, romantic.

Gray was standing outside the wooden doors, and he opened one for me to enter. Inside, the hall looked just as it did earlier in the evening—with the same decorations, the same cheesy photobooth in the corner, and all of my friends and their dates gathered around. Even the band was still playing softly on the stage.

But there was one very important change.

Cruz was in the middle of it all. Waiting for me.

A huge smile spread across my face and I ran towards him. The music swelled as the band started up a slow song.

“What is this?” I asked in a whisper because I was completely breathless.

“It’s the Valentine’s dance,” Cruz said with a smile. “It’s just happening a little later than expected.”

My head spun as I took it all in. This was so perfectly, bafflingly Cruz. Surprising, yet somehow, I’d come to expect the unexpected with this boy. “How?”

“Called in some favors on the drive home. Got special permission from Headmaster Bolton. I think he was a little drunk on love when I called him up.” He held out a hand and I took it, and he led me to the dance floor. We fell into the slow dance easily, my arms wrapping behind his neck as his went around my back. “Think he and Tramble might’ve shared a slow dance or two earlier.”

I laughed as I shook my head. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“I wanted to, Ave. You deserve to have the perfect Valentine’s evening, and I’m so sorry it didn’t pan out that way. I hope this helps make it up, just a little bit.”

“It more than makes it up,” I said. “This is... everything I could’ve wanted.”

And I meant it. Even though Cruz’s suit was ruffled, and his hair was sticking up, and my own hair was a mess, and my mascara was probably giving me actual raccoon eyes, and the official dance was long over.

“Actually, scratch that.” I smiled. “This is better than anything I could have wanted.”

Cruz’s smile made my legs weak. “*You’re* everything I want. I’ve fallen for you, Ave. I’m totally into you.” He said this so simply, so plainly, like the words were just a fact.

I felt it all again in that moment—the good, but also the bad, the fear of losing him. But this time, I realized that feeling

like this, feeling so much love and emotion for another person, was worth the risks that came with it. Worth feeling the fear and doing it anyway.

Cruz Delgado wasn't too good to be true: he was real and right in front of me. And that made me the luckiest girl alive.

"I've fallen for you, too," I whispered.

Cruz smiled as he ducked his head and his lips met mine. Just like our first kiss, there were fireworks and sparks and my body was buzzing in ways I'd never felt before. But this kiss was gentle and tender. Communicating more than words ever could.

Which was perfect, as I was totally and completely out of words.

So I kissed Cruz until my head was spinning, and he kept his arms around my waist, leading me along to the song. Our friends fell into their own dances next to us, but all I could see was Cruz. Gazing at me with an expression full of raw affection, and I was sure I was mirroring it.

This was everything I'd wanted, and it was better than I could've imagined. Better than any movie, or book, or story I'd heard. It was the perfect love story because it was *our* love story.

Just me, the only boy I ever considered off-limits, and a million butterflies filling my stomach.



CruzControl: February 28th.

BrAvery: Are we just naming random dates?

BrAvery: If so, April 12th.

CruzControl: Riveting as that sounds, nope, we are not. We are naming a brand new holiday.

BrAvery: That sounds like something you would do. What are you up to now, Delgado?

CruzControl: February 28th is now officially Cruz and Avery day.

CruzControl: “Cravery” day, if you will. Which sounds weird. But it won’t be weird.

CruzControl: Well, maybe a little weird.

BrAvery: What on earth are you talking about?

CruzControl: You don’t like holidays because they remind you of sad things. So I’m hereby officially creating a brand new holiday for you. And taking you on a wonderful date on that day.

BrAvery: Cruz, that’s incredible. So thoughtful.

BrAvery: But, just so you know, as excited and touched as I am, I don’t need perfect romantic dates. Not anymore... I have you. That’s all I need.

CruzControl: And *I* need to take this pretty awesome girl I know on a perfect date.

BrAvery: *blushing emoji*

CruzControl: Not sure you know her, but I think you’d like her.

BrAvery: Oh haha, so funny.

CruzControl: So it’s settled. I’ll pick you up at 9.

BrAvery: 9pm?!

CruzControl: No, silly. 9am. Cravery is an all day event.

AVERY

“Cruz? Seriously. Where are we going?”

“I told you,” the boy I couldn’t stop thinking about replied, his voice light and teasing. “I’m kidnapping you for the day.”

I laughed. “I don’t think actual kidnappers announce that they’re kidnapping people.”

“Oh yeah, been kidnapped a lot?”

“Cruz!” I whacked his arm. “Tell me.”

He wrapped the same arm around me and pulled me close. “But where’s the fun in that?”

“Fine.” I sighed jokily as I leaned my head on his chest, breathing in his spicy scent, relishing in his warmth. Relishing everything about the boy by my side as the chauffeured car continued down the highway to an unknown destination. Cruz had clearly pulled out all the stops for this holiday—turning up at my door this morning with flowers and candy and a selection pack of mini cereal boxes for the drive.

Since our impromptu Valentine’s dance two weeks ago, we’d been spending a lot of time together. Even more than before.

First and foremost, we spent time on our project. Which, to be honest, became a whole lot more about making out in the library than getting any actual work done.

Not that I was complaining. Every single kiss from Cruz had made my head spin and my pulse race and my stomach

flutter—I couldn't get enough of how I felt about him.

But, we'd eventually buckled down long enough to co-write a report entitled "The Psychology of Attraction: Expect the Unexpected." We'd focused on the psychological theory of "Slow Love"—where perception of another person can change over time as two people learn more about each other's interests, humor and qualities they share.

Which was Cruz and me to a T.

We'd always been in each other's lives, but we'd never really *seen* each other.

Until now.

We'd turned in the report a few days ago, and Mrs. Dunn had pulled us aside after class on Friday to congratulate us on an excellent, A-worthy project.

The smile on Cruz's face at that moment had been everything.

Aside from kissing and project work, we'd also spent a lot of time hanging out with our friends, and working on other homework together in the library. Cruz had also been talking to his family, and Lucia and the Delgados had taken steps to speak honestly—Luce was doing much better now, and Cruz hadn't had a midnight phone call in weeks. But he and I had had a midnight meet up on a rooftop or two.

I was glad, in the end, that he didn't tell me where we were going. The day rolled by in series of beautiful surprises and romantic gestures that were entirely off the charts. He'd taken the "perfect romantic" memo super seriously. We had brunch at a tiny, cozy French bistro, followed by horseback riding through a vineyard, a candy-making demonstration at a local chocolate shop, and a walk downtown followed by ice cream at The Yellow Yeti.

We slid back into the backseat of the town car with huge grins on our faces, our hands intertwined as the driver tipped his hat to us. Like we were in an old movie or something.

Cruz smiled at me sleepily, lolling his head back on the headrest. "Good day, Killer?"

“The best.” I was filled to the brim with gratitude. Cruz had made me so much happier than I could have ever imagined being with anyone. “Thank you so much for everything.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” He chuckled and the lazy, affectionate way he was smiling at me turned wicked.

“What do you mean?” I flicked him in the arm, my tone laced with suspicion.

“I mean, the day isn’t over yet.”

“Cruz, what did you do?”

He just tapped his nose, eyes dancing.

And then, the car came to a stop.

“Where are we?” I blinked out of the window. We were outside a big, industrial-looking steel building with nothing but rolling hills in every direction.

“Let’s go find out, shall we?” Cruz was out of the car in an instant, holding the door open for me with a big, dashing smile.

I shimmied out of the backseat. Looked around me.

Read the sign on the building. Blinked.

“Oh no....” I breathed.

“Oh, yes,” he corrected.

We were standing outside a place called Soda Springs Skydive.

“I took you here because I know you, Jensen. And I know that a perfect date for you had to be more than romantic. It had to include something that pushed you, challenged you, and gave you something unique to remember forever.”

I stared at him, openmouthed. Because I was starting to get the feeling that Cruz Delgado knew me even better than I knew myself.

I thought back to my favorite times with him—about climbing on rooftops and midnight wake-up calls at my

window. Thought about the day I spent suspended on a climbing wall, following Cruz's calm, helpful instructions and basking in his enthusiastic praise. Blossoming with pride for facing my fears with nothing but *bravery*.

Because with Cruz, I always felt brave. Like I knew I'd be okay, no matter what. As long as he was by my side.

He grinned at me. "We don't have to go, but I'm game if you are... and you can even push me out of the plane for taking you here."

"That, I will definitely be doing," I joked, adrenaline mingled with excitement flowing through my veins.

"So we're doing this thing?" He pumped a fist.

"I guess I'll just have to trust you," I sighed. A happy sigh.

He quirked a brow. Smirked. "That sounds like a bad idea."

Same old Cruz.

Then, he leaned over and kissed me breathless.

Definitely not the same old Cruz.



THANK you so much for reading!

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IT HAD TO BE MASON: CHAPTER
ONE

ZOE

If a boy was hot, I admired him from afar.

Under no circumstances would I ever, EVER, walk over and strike up a conversation. What would I even say? Hi, I'm that totally-not-creepy girl who's been accidentally following you through the grocery aisles, and sure, we've never met, but I know every social media account you have? And I follow them all?

No.

You did not do that with hot boys.

You especially did not do that on days where you were sweaty and gross — which was a frequent occurrence for me this summer.

Late August, the heat wave hit California. It was so hot that if you stood still for too long, the soles of your shoes melted. It was humid, too, so as soon as you stepped outside, you started to sweat, and your clothes stuck to you. That wasn't a huge problem for most of the girls in my dance class. They all wore skin tight yoga gear anyway, and sweat just made them look even more athletic and toned.

It was a problem for girls like me, who favored shapeless t-shirts over crop tops and whose already unruly hair became an out of control frizzy mess when exposed to damp heat.

The t-shirt that I was wearing — a baggy old Cal Tech hand-me-down — was plastered unflatteringly to my body. Worse, it smelled... probably because I forgot to put on deodorant before dance class. I dug through my gym bag, hoping a little white stick of floral powers was hiding beneath my sweat pants or buried in my towel. No such luck.

I looked around the locker room. The rest of the girls had left before me, probably headed to the beach. I poked through a few of the open lockers, hoping someone had forgotten a can of spray deodorant. I didn't like the smell, but it was better than smelling like, well, me.

Foiled again.

Oh well, I'd just have to make sure I didn't run into anybody I knew.

Outside, blistering heat replaced the air-conditioning of the dance studio.

My shoulders sagged, my body melting into the pavement. It was only a fifteen-minute walk from the studio to my house, but I suspected I'd be a human puddle before I made it halfway. A smelly human puddle. Gross.

I thought about walking straight home, not taking my usual detour. I really did.

But even as the thought was crossing my mind, my legs were guiding me towards High Street. Towards Him. And yes, he gets a capital H.

On Saturday mornings, High Street was the place to go in Beachbreak if you wanted fancy coffee and a toasted bagel with smeared avocado and sun-dried tomato. It was also the place to go if you wanted to do some shopping. Vibrant, colorful stores practically popped up from between palm trees and park benches. There were bakeries and antique shops, cafés and music venues, restaurants and old school lounges. The stores were on one side of the street. On the other side?

Highline Beach. A long expanse of golden sand, crashing surf, and more people than I could count. Families built sand

castles, seniors roasted like Thanksgiving turkeys, and surfers rode waves.

As awesome as High Street was, there was only one shop I was interested in this morning. Sand and Sun Board Games was nestled between a pair of palm trees. It had a blue awning that showed two chess pieces — a knight and the castle thing — having a sword fight. The expansive bay windows were open today, letting the fresh ocean air flow inside.

I slowed my pace. A nervous energy swam in my stomach, the same kind of nervous you feel when you're going up the first hill on a rollercoaster. I stopped by a park bench. I didn't want to be too close — I wanted to see Him, but I didn't want to risk Him seeing me. Today, I would admire from afar.

As I mentioned: girls like me didn't talk to guys who were hot.

Kevin Gibbons walked between the aisles of board games, his hands folded neatly behind his back. He was tall and skinny, his hair a mess of wild curls. His general body shape reminded me of a palm tree. But like, a hot palm tree. He bent over, plucked a board game off a shelf, then held it up to examine the back.

My heart skipped like it was doing jump rope. I'd had a crush on Kevin since forever. Nina, my best friend, had never understood it. She thought Kevin was — and I quote — boring and pretentious. I disagreed. Kevin was smart. Not that I'd ever talked to him.

Kevin put the board game back on the shelf.

While he was doing his job, I was imagining what would happen if he noticed me. We'd make eye contact from across the street. His eyes would do that cartoon thing where they literally transform into hearts and his jaw would drop. Then he'd wave me over. I'd look behind myself, thinking he must be waving at someone else. But no. He'd be waving to me. So I'd go over. And he'd be the perfect gentleman. And he'd—

Wait, what was that smell?

I scrunched my nose and looked around for the source. Hmm... no garbage cans nearby. It couldn't be... it wasn't me, was it? As casually as I could, I took a slight whiff of myself.

Oh.

Oh no.

I was the smell. The morning heat had done me no favors. It was good that Kevin hadn't spotted me.

He hadn't, right?

I checked.

A girl approached Sand and Sun Board Games. She was taller than me — but then again, wasn't everyone? — and her hair was so perfect I assumed she was immune to heat. She opened the door. Kevin greeted her, smiling. The sound of their words didn't carry across the street, but the tone of their voices did. Happy. Light-hearted. Joyful.

My eye twitched. She was just a customer. It wasn't a big deal, he was just helping a customer. That was all.

The girl said something. Kevin laughed, then guided her towards one shelf. He pointed to several board games. She nodded excitedly, said something else, and Kevin laughed again.

But she probably wasn't actually funny, I decided. Kevin was just being a good salesman and laughing at her lame jokes so he could up his commission. Because he was smart. I nodded to myself. That was definitely all that was happening.

Ms. Not Actually Funny carried her board game to the cashier's desk and Kevin rang it through. He put the receipt in a bag, then grabbed one of the business cards and scribbled something on the back.

My jaw dropped. Was he giving her his number? "What the—"

Kevin and Ms. Not Actually Funny both turned in my direction.

Oh no. My voice was at it again, speaking out loud when I didn't mean to. Deft ninja that I was, I quickly stumble-dove behind the park bench, hoping that they didn't see me. I crossed my fingers. They would have to be idiots to have not seen me. Especially considering you could see under the park bench. So now I was probably the crazy girl who spoke out loud to herself then hid behind park benches.

Please, please don't have seen me. I leaned over to peak around the bench.

“Mommy, why is that lady weird?”

I whipped my head around.

The high-pitched voice belonged to a boy who was maybe four. His face was scrunched up like he was struggling his way through a puzzle. The boy's mom, who was carrying a Starbucks cup, glared at me.

I shrugged and laughed awkwardly, like it was a totally normal thing to hide behind park benches while spying at the store across the street.

The boy's lip quivered.

He wasn't seriously about to cry, was he?

“I don't like her,” he said, clutching his mother's hand tightly.

His mom shot me another look of disgust and pulled him along.

The boy craned his head to stare at me as he walked away.

I opted to do the mature thing and stick my tongue out.

The boy's eyes went wide.

I scurried out from behind the park bench before I could get in more trouble. I risked a glance across the street.

The girl was walking away from the shop, her bag comfortably in her hand. She waved at Kevin. He waved back, then retreated inside the store. It was a completely natural, completely normal, interaction.

The exact opposite of sweating to death while you cowered across the street. I wanted to chase the girl down and ask her how she made everything look so natural?

Why was talking to Kevin so easy for everyone who wasn't me?

CHAPTER TWO

MASON

Late summer football? You couldn't beat it. It was the time of year where everyone was optimistic about the upcoming season. Walk into any high school, ask any player, and they would tell you that this was the year they were going to state.

For Beachbreak High, things were shaping up nicely. I was confident in my skills as quarterback. We had a great defensive line. No one was injured yet, either. Plus, practicing under the California sun gave you a great tan. Girls loved dudes with a great tan.

And I loved girls. Which is why I had one waiting for me in the stands.

Meredith sat in the bleachers. Her hair was long, blonde, and wavy — like the ripples in beach sand. She wore a polka dot sundress, and currently, one of her hands was holding her hair, scrunching it up, and the other was holding her cell, taking a selfie. She pursed her lips and winked at the camera, then studied the picture before sending it off. I'd dated my fair share of Beachbreak girls, but Meredith had only ever shown an interest in college boys.

I was determined to change that.

Coach blew his whistle, signaling the end of the practice. While the rest of the boys headed to the locker room, I took off my helmet, sprayed my face with the water bottle, then casually messed my hair and strolled over.

I winked. “Is it hot out here, or is it just you?”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “How many girls have you used that line on?”

“You mean today?” I held out my fingers, pretending to count. “I think just you. Feel special?”

Meredith rolled her eyes again.

I had a habit of making girls roll their eyes.

“I got your text,” she said. “So, I’m here. I assume this is important?”

Important? The reason I asked Meredith to meet me here couldn’t be more important. I looked away and curled my fingers on the neck of my shoulder pads, letting water drip down the side of my face. I felt nervous.

“Homecoming,” I said. “You and me. What do you say?”

Meredith blinked. “Are you... you’re asking me?”

Was I missing something? She was single, I was single. She was the captain of the dance team, I was the captain of the football team. We’d been texting lately. And because of that, I’d thought she’d changed her stance on dating high school guys. I thought I was in.

“Are you not going?”

Meredith cleared her throat. She eyed me up and down.

I smirked. “Want me to give you a twirl?”

“Yes, but not in the way you think,” Meredith said. She wasn’t checking me out so much as she was studying me. Like she was looking for weaknesses.

I suddenly felt self-conscious.

“Homecoming is a big deal,” Meredith said. “Especially for me. I’m the captain of the dance team. The Homecoming dance competition is important to me. I need to win. The captain of the dance team always does.”

Where was she going with this?

She raised her eyebrows. “So? Can you?”

“Can I what?”

“Dance.”

I scoffed. “I can dance.”

Meredith crossed her arms. “Prove it. Dance right here.”

Right here, right now? Most of the guys had gone into the locker room, but a few of the sophomore receivers were still throwing balls with the backup quarterback. “There’s no music,” I said.

“Just show me the steps,” Meredith said. “Do a two-step.”

I would’ve rather gotten sacked by a three-hundred-pound defensive tackle than danced in the middle of a field, by myself, to no music. Especially because I didn’t know how to dance. But how hard could it be to do a two-step? If you believed the name, there were only two steps involved. I could fake my way through two steps.

I stuck my hands out, pretending they were on my invisible partner’s hips. Then I stepped forward with my right foot twice, then my left foot twice.

Meredith covered her mouth to hide a laugh. “Not even close.”

I laughed nervously. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

“To you,” Meredith said. “But to anyone on the dance team, it is. I wanted to say yes, Mason. But I can’t sacrifice winning the competition. I won’t go to Homecoming with someone that can’t dance.”

I was getting rejected. My cheeks burned, my eyes stung. This was a completely new experience. But, if dance was important to her, then it had to be important to me. “I can learn.”

Meredith checked her phone, then stood. “Good. And when you learn, and you can prove it, let me know. Then maybe I’ll say yes. If you’re worth my time.”

Baffled, I watched her walk away. Rejection did not happen much in my life, especially not from girls. But this was

fine — Meredith was worth it. I could learn to dance.

I mean, how hard could it be?

CHAPTER THREE

ZOE

*M*y inflatable unicorn rose and fell with the waves of the Pacific. Sparkles — named for his freckles which shimmered in the sunlight — had a long, golden horn, and two rainbow-colored wings. His eyes were blue, and he had a smile on his face that made him look a bit dumb, but I loved him anyway. When he was fully inflated, there was room for two: me and Nina.

I sprawled across Sparkles, dipping my toes in the water to keep my feet cool. Beside me, Nina adjusted her bathing suit, then squirted another handful of sunscreen on her darkly tanned stomach and rubbed it in. It smelled like coconut and summer.

This was the best part of summer vacation, as far as I was concerned. Floating on the waves, getting a tan — or a burn, in my case — and hanging out with your best friend. We were living our best lives. Aside from my whole “not being able to talk to the boy I liked” problem.

As we bobbed, I eyed the beach.

Highline Hideaway was tucked away from everything. The nearest parking lot was over a mile away, so if you wanted to visit, you had to park at the main lot for Highline Beach and carry your stuff along a hiking trail that wound through a forest of trees. The path wasn't smooth, either. Gnarled roots crawled across, and tripping and twisting an ankle was a common occurrence.

But Hideaway itself was so beautiful that it made the tough hike worth it. The little, crescent-shaped private beach was all blue ocean, golden sand, and green palm trees. The smell of onion and sausage roasting over fire pits. When the sun set, most of the campfires were snuffed in favor of one giant bonfire. A local craft soda company supplied the wood and paid extra to keep an off-duty police officer on site. They let us party, but they let nothing get out of control.

Naturally, Hideaway was always busy. Mostly Beachbreak High students. And right now, there was one Beachbreaker in particular I was interested in.

Kevin and his friends were on the far end of the beach, hunched over something I couldn't see.

What was it? A board game? A cooler of drinks? Food? I wasn't sure. But now that I was wearing a bathing suit — which was much more flattering than my ratty dance shirt — and deodorant, it was safe to get closer. It was safe to let Kevin see me. I leaned to the side and dipped my hand in the ocean. “Nina. Paddle with me.”

Nina groaned. “Can't we just float?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I thought for a moment. “Because we need the exercise?”

“Well now you're just lying. Where do you want to go, even?”

“To the south side.”

“But our stuff's on the north side.”

“We can go back and get it after.” Now I was whining.

Nina took off her sunglasses and looked at me “After what?”

“After I see something.”

“See what?” Nina sat up and scanned the south side of the beach. She rolled her eyes so hard the rest of her head moved with them. “Oh. You want to see Mr. Boring.”

My lips twitched. Kevin was not boring. He was smart. Polished. “Just because you don’t understand what he says, doesn’t mean he’s boring. It means he’s an intellectual.”

Nina laughed. “He’s not boring because he’s smart, he’s boring because he’s boring. Did you know—”

“No,” I said quickly. “We’re not playing—”

“Did you know,” Nina repeated, grinning, “that Kevin’s favorite food is white rice because he thinks brown rice has too much flavor?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

Not getting the reaction she hoped for, Nina continued. “Did you know that Kevin’s favorite part of the movie is the end credits?”

“You’re not funny,” I sang, looking away so she couldn’t see the traitorous smile on my face.

“Did you know that Kevin’s favorite childhood pastime was doing his taxes?”

I snorted and splashed Nina.

She shrieked. “Watch the hair!”

Nina’s head of bouncing black curls was her crowning glory. A crowning glory she did not like to get wet.

I grinned. “We’re going over there.”

Nina cleaned the droplets of water off her sunglasses. “All right. I’ll paddle with you, if for no other reason than to make it less obvious that you’re spying on him.”

“I’m not spying on him,” I said. “I’m pining. From a distance. I’m like Romeo with Rosaline.”

“Because that’s who you want to be compared to: an idiot who fell in lust with a girl, tore his family apart, then offed himself over a different girl a few days later,” Nina said. She shook her head. “Strong romantic role model, that one.”

“You’re so dramatic.”

CHAPTER FOUR

MASON

The sand burned my feet. I sprinted, skipped, and hopped across the beach, trying to keep my feet in the air as much as possible. When I reached the surf, I dove in headfirst.

Warm ocean water surrounded me.

It was sweet, sweet, relief. There was nothing better than diving into the water on a summer day. I came up for air and floated on my back, fiddling with my plastic sunglasses. They were cheap; I picked them up at Beachbreak's annual music festival for five bucks. Now they were my beach glasses — you never wanted to bring anything expensive to the beach because you were guaranteed to lose it.

Tyler popped out of the water beside me. If I was Mr. All-American, he was the ultimate surf bum. His hair was long now, curling around the nape of his neck, and completely out of control. The boys and I teased him about it. But the girls? They LOVED it.

“There's nothing better than this, my man,” I said, floating on my back.

Tyler was standing, scanning the beach.

“Any sign of Parker?” Parker Vanderpost was Tyler's current obsession.

He grinned. “No, but I got something.”

“What's that?”

He pointed to an inflatable unicorn that was floating towards the south side of the beach. There were two girls lying on it, and it only took one guess to know who they were. Tyler's little sister, Zoe, and her friend Nina.

Now it was my turn to grin. "Looks like a unicorn got separated from the herd."

"Dangerous for that to happen," Ty said.

I felt for the ground with my feet, then ducked so the water was just at my chin. "Let's have ourselves a unicorn hunt."

CHAPTER FIVE

ZOE

I crouched on Sparkles. I was trying to be casual, trying to make it look like I was sunning my back. But truthfully, all I was doing was trying to position myself so I could see Kevin — and see what he and his friends were doing.

Kevin stood, the other boys circled around him like students looking up at their teacher. He had one hand behind his back and was gesturing with the other. Explaining something, or maybe giving a lecture. The boys he was talking to looked bored. They probably just didn't understand what he was saying.

Kevin was too smart for a lot of people. In my darkest nightmares, he was also too smart for me. I imagined going on a date with him — in this fantasy, I could actually talk to him — and listening to him as he explained topics that went way over my head. I hoped that didn't happen. It definitely wouldn't happen if I never talked to him, but I did plan to talk to him.

Eventually.

Some day.

When I figured out the perfect thing to say.

“ZOE.” Nina's voice made me jump.

“What?”

“I asked you a question.”

I shifted uncomfortably, the unicorn squeaking beneath me. “Which was?”

“How did you not hear me? You literally nodded when I asked if you were listening.”

I did?

Nina rested her head on her arms. “Out of everyone I’ve ever met — and I mean everyone — you have the worst one-track mind. If there was a cloud that looked like a cute boy, you would walk off a cliff while trying to follow it.”

“I would not.”

“You absolutely would. Otherwise, you would remember what I just said.” Nina yawned. “But it’s fine. I can be the second most important person in your life. Behind whoever your crush of the day is.”

“Pfft. Like some boy could ever replace you.” The unicorn squeaked again as I adjusted my position to get a better look at Kevin.

“Seriously, when you have a crush, it’s all you can think about.”

“You’re exaggerating.” I dipped my arm in the water and paddled, spinning our unicorn slightly so we — I — could get a better view. “I do not have a one-track mind. In fact, I’ll have you know that I have a perfect awareness of everything going on at all times. As a dancer, you need to be aware of your surroundings— wait what was—”

Sparkles wobbled. Then, while I was mid-sentence, Sparkles lifted onto his side as if he’d been caught in a hurricane-force gale. Or as if someone had snuck up on us.

We shrieked.

Nina rolled into me.

And then we both fell into the water.



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