

Natasha West

INDECENT PROMPOSAL



From the internationally bestselling author of
The Missus and *Just Married?*

Indecent Promposal

By

Natasha West

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One

Cody Foster was sitting in the hall of Harewood Academy, attending an assembly conducted by the assistant head, Mr Parsons. He was blathering about things Cody didn't care about, so she was in the place she spent most of her time, her own head.

She was plotting her escape route in case of an emergency. As she was in her final year, she was in the back row, which was nearest the door, advantageous to a speedy exit. She reckoned she could be out in two seconds, conservatively.

But the emergency she envisaged was not a fire or a sudden outbreak of disease. The crisis she pictured had more to do with her patience finally breaking, making this the day she ran out of Harewood screaming. But what could cause such a reaction? The continued existence of her classmates, that was what. Year after year of watching their idiosyncrasies and shortcomings and general dumbassery had taken a toll on Cody. She felt like a rubber band, stretched to the limit, ready to snap.

Today's maddening sights included Ben Cutler trying to woo Shannon McGrath across ten feet via the medium of scrunched-up paper balls lobbed at her head. And Noah Wojcik sticking his hand into the back of his pants, farting discreetly, and then bringing the hand back out for an olfactory inspection. Or Tara Phelps endlessly caressing her bone straight balayage'd locks like her head was her safety blanket.

There were plenty of candidates for most annoying person at Harewood Academy. Oh wait, here was a new contender!

As Mr Parsons was winding up (something about not using the bins to sledge down the hill at the back of the school because the streak of rubbish they left was attracting rats in a sort of vermin parade), Ava Gale stuck up her hand and said, 'Mr Parsons?'

'Yes, Ava?'

'Could I just have a quick word before you let everyone go?'

Mr Parsons permitted it, and Ava stood up, smoothing her perky little polka dot dress. Her bum-length caramel shampoo-advert hair hung loosely waved to perfection, and her cat-like green eyes were darkly lined with the precision of a professional. It tired Cody out just to imagine the time and effort that went into it all.

Everyone sat up a bit straighter to hear what she had to say, already fascinated. Cody? Not so much. She just wanted to go. Ava was delaying her release, and in Cody's eyes, there was no greater crime.

'Hi, everyone. Just wanted to let you all know that there are still some prom details to nail down. I'd love to get a broad spectrum of voices in from sixth formers, so please come to the drama studio at five tonight if you'd like to contribute your ideas. It's *your* prom, after all.'

Cody translated her little speech. ‘Can someone other than me give their opinion about my vanity project so I can pretend I give a shit what anyone else thinks? Then I can keep making out that I’m doing this for the school. Not just so I can officially be crowned queen of this dump and finally disappear completely up my own arse.’

But Cody was alone in her assessment because people were nodding away, and the response was positive. People loved Ava—sheep. They bought her nice-girl act.

‘OK, thanks. Hope to see you there,’ she finished.

Mr Parsons released them at long last, and Cody was first out of her seat. A close second was Ava’s boyfriend, Leo Wicks, displaying surprising speed, beating Cody to the door. He stopped and turned, blocking the exit with his huge, muscly frame.

‘Come on, babe!’ he called, and Ava dutifully sped to him through the throng.

Cody tried to get around them, but they were blocking her, the oblivious arseholes.

‘Babe, you look so hot when you give speeches,’ Leo said, grabbing her by the waist.

Ava laughed and shoved him playfully. ‘Not really a speech. Just a public service announcement.’

Cody rolled her eyes. She tried to get around, determined to be first out of the room, and beat everyone out

of the building. She hated to get caught in hallway traffic. That was more minutes of sweet freedom taken.

But in the doorway, she got jammed—with Ava.

‘Excuse me,’ Ava said politely.

Cody tutted and stepped back to let her out. Ava walked out without a thanks, followed by her boy toy.

‘It’s your world, Prom Queen,’ Cody muttered. ‘I just live in it.’

Ava cast a quick, nervous look over her shoulder at the comment. Cody was vaguely shocked she’d been heard. She was used to being invisible to Ava and her ilk.

As Cody managed to overtake Ava in the corridor, Cody heard her laughing, carefree and happy. Cody didn’t buy it. She could smell a fake a mile away.

And all this prom business she was so obsessed with? Harewood Academy hadn’t even had one last year, just the normal Leavers’ Ball. But they were rebranding it because Ava had campaigned for it.

She had written the school board and provided signatures squeezed out of a few hundred idiots, explaining that the school needed to go more, ‘Iconic.’ What did that even mean?

What it meant, of course, was that Ava Gale was a cutthroat snake who would step over her grandmother's corpse for the chance to be crowned prom queen. But the joke was on her, ultimately. For Christ's sake, *prom queen*? Imagine wanting something as pathetic as that?

But Ava wasn't the worst thing about being at this school. Just a symptom. Pretty much everyone at Harewood sucked in one way or another.

All Cody wanted was to escape. And she was mere months away. When that time came, she would leave this school and every last person in it behind her and never look back.

Two

Ava Gale frowned as she watched that Cody girl stomping down the hall. What the hell was *her* problem? Ava had said thank you. She'd said it quietly, but what more was she supposed to do? Get down and curtsy?

Ava shook off the awkward moment. Nobody cared what Cody thought anyway. That was her own fault. She had always thought she was too cool for the planet, so she could blame herself for her total lack of friends.

People had tried. Ava had personally watched Joe Jempson, Garret Lloyd, Amit Sharma and Rian Ip all have a go at sitting next to her at lunch. Every time, she'd turned from whatever book she was reading, pushed her thick-framed glasses up her nose and told them to fuck directly off. Ava didn't blame her because they were all just trying to get her clothes off. Because it had to be said, Cody was a looker.

Irritatingly, she didn't even try. She never wore a stitch of makeup, but she had the kind of clear olive skin that Ava would have, if not given her right arm for, possibly sacrificed a toe. Hoodies and jeans in dark colours were her uniform no matter the time of the year or the temperature. But they hung on her lean frame like nobody's business. Her black hair was cut low-maintenance short, which only made her absurd cheekbones pop further. Her dark eyes screamed, 'I don't give a shit.' Ava found her a contrived rebel, but boys loved it.

However, Cody didn't care even slightly about the attention, even with *Rian*, who, it had to be said, was probably the most beautiful male in the school. If Cody had to play the

mysterious loner, she should have at *least* spent the sexual currency she was accruing. But she was determined to be outside of life.

It was kind of sad. Ava felt almost sorry for her. People said she was messed up because of something that happened at some sleepover years ago. Ava never got the full details of it, nor would she press for them. It wasn't good to be gossipy. She wanted to be better than that.

She knew she had a lot of power, socially speaking, even if she didn't always understand it. She wasn't anything terribly special. It wasn't like she was the smartest or the prettiest.

But her mother was able to explain it indirectly because her mother loved movies. Particularly the movies of her youth. Teen movies of the nineties and the early noughties played on repeat in Ava's house, and they told Ava that some girls just had to lead. The other thing they told her was that you had to have a prom. Something called a Leavers' Ball didn't cut it. You had to call it prom and have the crowning at the end, or why bother?

But it was crucial to Ava that it be *fair*. That everyone had their vote. She wanted to rule over a democracy. She was not a dictator. Hence, the call for ideas. It could not seem like a fix. She was *not* Regina George. She was a good person, and she wanted everyone to know that.

But yeah, she wanted the crown. She wanted it pretty badly. Her mother's movies showed that prom was supposed to be a special night, and if you were coronated, all the better. Ava wanted her movie moment. If someone could just say to her, 'Yeah, it's you. You're special,' then she would know she

had mattered, at least once. No matter what the future brought.

Luckily, Leo was a good fit for her king. He was square-jawed, athletic, and charming. People liked him. He was exactly the right person to have by her side. He would help her get to the only place she'd ever wanted to be. Under a spotlight, wearing a crown, a queen. If only for a moment.

Three

It was Monday morning. Cody had been in her bedroom at her mum's place, cocooned the entire weekend, reading, streaming, content, and unbothered by adult interference. Her mother was a lawyer, so she worked constantly and didn't show up all that much, which suited Cody fine. Everything was supplied, the house well stocked with food and high-end consumer goods, but other than that? She was satisfied to be an emotional orphan at the weekend.

During the week, she was with her dad, who was the opposite. He had less money than Ava's mother because he was a middle manager in an insurance office, but what he offered in a little too much abundance was emotional involvement. She supposed they balanced each other out. But it never felt that way.

But the solitude her mother's place offered had to come to an end sometime, so it was back to the factory to grind her way to her final grades. Cody wasn't exactly academically focused, but she had a thing she wanted to do.

She was going to be a writer. She was going to go to Medford to learn how to do it well. If they could just hurry up and send her acceptance letter. It was making her nervous how long it was taking.

Cody showered, her one concession to being out in public. 'Mum, you here? I don't have any knickers,' she yelled, coming out of the shower.

No one answered, of course. But her mum had a laundry service that kept her in fresh duds. It was just a question of finding the bag.

Cody wrapped herself in a towel and went down to the utility room, which held a bells-and-whistles washer dryer that had probably never been used. There were a couple of laundry bags dumped near it, her mother's suits hanging nearby. Cody dug around until she found her pants. She slipped them on and glanced into the bag on the off chance of a fresh bra (her current one was on day three), but it didn't deliver. Oh well. Her black standard would go another day.

As she turned to leave, she noticed something on top of the washing machine. A large pile of mail cascaded over the side. Cody checked the pile, all circulars. Her mother must have grabbed the mail on the way in here for clean clothes and chucked the insignificant stuff on top of the washing machine to be sorted at some other time.

Only there was one letter that had fallen to the floor that did seem significant. It had Cody's name on it. The logo in the corner said Medford. How long had it been sat here?

Cody's heart thumped loudly as she ripped open the letter.

Thank you for sending your application for admission. The University has given it careful consideration. I am sorry to inform you we are unable to offer you a place at this time.

The University receives thousands of applications, all from very able prospective graduate students, and the competition for the limited number of places is intense. This means that we are not able to offer admission to many good candidates.

I am sorry to bring you this disappointing news.

Cody let the letter fall where she'd found it in the first place. She went upstairs and put her knickers and the rest of her clothes on. She sat on the bed, allowed herself a one-minute cry, and then grabbed her schoolbag before heading off.

Four

Ava was listening to Leo, sitting on the wall that bordered the school courtyard. Or rather, she was pointing her face at him and making the appropriate expression for the act. She heard words pop through occasionally, like ‘squat’ and ‘superset’ and ‘deltoid,’ but she didn’t think she was required to be anything more than a place for him to talk at while she thought about all the stuff she’d promised to arrange for the prom.

The big job was figuring out what they were going to need for the theme, which the couple of dozen people that had shown up for her meeting agreed would be ‘Fire and Ice.’ She also had to get quotes for the DJ and design the menu. It was a lot. She wasn’t at all sure she hadn’t overloaded herself.

‘So, shall we pick out your suit this week?’ Ava asked Leo, breaking into his monologue.

He didn’t mind the interruption. ‘No worries. I already got it. It’s so hot, I’m gonna look hench as fuck in it.’

‘When did you get it?’ Ava asked, surprised.

‘Sunday. Rian helped me pick it.’

‘He did?’ Ava said, pleased. One less job for her to do. ‘Did you take any pics?’

Leo got his phone out and sent her a shot. She checked her messages to find him in a very beautiful forest-green suit. She made a note to thank Rian. He did have good taste.

But the white shirt Leo was wearing with his lovely suit looked two sizes too small. He was practically bursting out of it. ‘Do you think you ought to go a size up on that shirt?’ she asked carefully.

Leo shook his head like he’d been prepared to defend this issue. ‘No way. I’d lose definition. The point is to have the guns pushing up against it.’

‘The buttons are going to pop off,’ Ava told him.

Leo shrugged. ‘Then I’ll just go shirtless with the suit.’

‘What?’ Ava cried, aghast.

‘Rian’s doing that, and *he* looks good,’ Leo said quickly.

Ava sighed. It was nice to have an athletic boyfriend, but he was obsessed with showing off his hard work, which Ava could understand were it not for the fact that it usually equalled him having his tits out, no matter the formality of the occasion.

‘I’m not going with Rian, though, am I?’ Ava argued. ‘I mean, how would *you* like it if I went topless?’

Leo thought it over. ‘Your body, your choice, babe,’ he eventually shrugged.

Ava took a deep breath. ‘Look. We might end up looking at these pictures for the rest of our lives...’

Leo let out a faint sigh that Ava chose to ignore.

‘...And if we do, do you really want to explain to your grandkids why grandad has got his nips out?’ Ava finished.

Leo frowned. ‘We’re not having this talk again, are we? I can’t do this whole *what-if* game. I gotta live now. You only YOLO once, yeah?’ Leo argued.

Truth be told, Ava didn’t know if she was going the distance with Leo, so these theoretical grandchildren felt very unlikely. But Ava liked to plan for any eventuality.

‘OK, fine. Here’s a compromise. Wear the shirt. But could you please get the buttons *reinforced*?’

Leo chewed it over and nodded. ‘I can do that.’ He didn’t look happy about it, though.

Ava could live with that. Leo was a sweetie, but he didn’t know classy. And whether Ava knew Leo in twenty years or not, she would have these pictures of herself at eighteen at her prom, probably wearing a small plastic tiara. It would prove she’d been a success, and so would the boy wearing the crown on her arm. He might not care about that future version of himself, but Ava cared very much about Future-Ava. She had to have the pictures.

‘Right, now that’s sorted, can we eat? I need meat,’ Leo said, getting up.

‘Sure,’ Ava said, standing. They began to walk toward the cafeteria. ‘Oh, by the way, did I hear Rian’s having a thing on Friday?’

Leo looked caught out. ‘Oh, umm....’

‘Am I not invited?’ Ava asked, mildly shocked.

‘Well, it’s meant to be more like a boys’ thing,’ Leo said, rubbing the back of his neck.

‘Oh, OK,’ Ava said easily.

If it was that sort of thing, then she wasn’t on the outs, which would have upset her. But as it stood, she could just make plans with her non-male friends. No big deal.

Five

Cody was slumped in the back of English Literature, lower than usual. She was grinding her teeth, looking around at everyone, all of them so content.

These idiots didn't have any problems. They were all so stupid and happy. They would all get what they wanted out of life— especially Ava.

Cody could see her sitting at the front of the class, scribbling in a notebook next to Leo, who was absentmindedly rubbing her shoulders. The smugness of them made Cody want to scream. They wanted such mid shit out of life. And it would always deliver.

She looked away from them, disgusted. Right in front of her was the back of Rian Ip's head. He was tapping at his phone furiously. She could see over his shoulder, but not well enough to read what he was writing, if she had the inclination, which she did not.

Across the room, a phone in someone's pocket kept buzzing. But the sound was not paid heed. Rian kept banging away at his phone, but he got a little too invested because he was spotted by Mrs Garte.

'Rian! Is that your phone in your hand?'

Rian jumped. 'Ummm...'

‘It’s not a trick question, Mr Ip.’

Rian’s shoulders fell. ‘Yes, it’s my phone.’

Mrs Garte looked at a large organiser with pockets hanging on the wall. Everyone was supposed to put their phones in their labelled pocket at the start of the lesson. ‘Your pocket has a phone in it.’

‘Ummm...’

‘Is it a decoy, Rian?’ Mrs Garte asked without surprise.

‘Ummm...’

While Rian sweated, everyone turned to look at him, amused, except for Leo, who was frowning. Leo was Rian’s bestie, so he was probably readying himself to jump in front of a flying detention for Rian.

Mrs Garte stood and went over to Rian. ‘Hand it over.’

Rian gave her the phone with sorrow.

‘I’m gonna talk to your parents about this,’ Mrs Garte warned him. ‘Like I don’t have enough to do.’

‘Sorry,’ Rian mumbled.

Cody was the only one in the room in a position to see the sweat on the back of his neck. Cody was surprised he was so panicked. It was just a phone.

Mrs Garte looked at the screen of Rian's phone, and her brow deepened. And then she looked back up at Rian.

She tutted. 'Well, *that's* none of my business. But quite disappointing, Rian.'

The entire room broke into murmurs.

Sally Withers, his neighbour to the left, a noted disrespector of boundaries, leaned across the divide to nudge him in the ribs. 'What have *you* been up to?' she asked.

Rian turned to her. 'Nothing. Shut up.'

Sally turned to Mrs Garte. 'What was it, Mrs Garte?'

'Nothing, Sally,' Mrs Garte replied tiredly.

'Was it illegal? Was it weird porn?'

'Shut up, Sally,' Mrs Garte scolded.

Sally was quite used to being told to shut up, even by teachers, but it didn't break her stride. 'Is he a gambling addict?'

‘Shut the hell *up*, Sally,’ someone said, someone who wasn’t even in the conversation.

Everyone turned in surprise to the speaker, Leo. He looked pretty miffed. A thick silence fell over the room. Leo was Mr Laid-Back. Cody didn’t think she’d ever seen him look annoyed before.

But if Cody was surprised, it was nothing next to how Ava looked. She appeared bewildered.

Cody wondered if their little world was all it seemed. It would have been nice to think the pair of them weren’t as happy as they appeared. Comforting.

But it was probably nothing. Leo was just standing up for his bestie—no mystery there. Barbie and Ken’s world would roll on.

The bell rang a few minutes later, and Cody was up quickly. She had a gap in her schedule, which she was going to fill in the library. There was a very sunken beanbag in the back corner that Cody was rather fond of, even though it took her a whole minute to climb back out. She was halfway through *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and she wanted to sink and read.

She ran out of the room and straight into Miss Campbell, the careers advisor. The moment she saw her, she knew it wasn’t a casual encounter.

‘Oh, Cody, great. Do you have a moment?’

Cody was sitting in a comfy chair in Miss Campbell's office, though she was far from cosy. She was a fish on the end of a hook, waiting to be reeled in.

Miss Campbell, who seemed about ten minutes older than Cody but hated anyone to comment on it, was behind her desk, fixing Cody with a serious stare. She was only in one day a week, but she was choosing to spend part of that day on Cody, which made her think this was serious.

'Now, Cody,' Miss Campbell said with horrible sympathy, 'I've been informed that you might have had some bad news.'

Cody frowned. 'Jesus. I only found out this morning. How the hell do *you* know already?'

Miss Campbell frowned. 'It went out weeks ago. You only just received it?'

'If we're talking about my rejection letter from Medford, I only just found it in a pile of crap at my mum's.'

'Oh no,' Miss Campbell moaned. 'So, it's pretty fresh then?'

Cody wasn't naturally a violent person, but this meeting made her feel like it wasn't too late to change. 'Look, Campbell...' she began.

‘Miss,’ the woman corrected tersely.

‘*Miss Campbell,*’ Cody said through gritted teeth. ‘What is this? What do you want? Because I don’t need hand holding through this. It’s no big deal.’

‘And I wouldn’t dream of it, Cody,’ Miss Campbell assured her. ‘I thought you might need some help with deciding what to do next. I understand you *only* applied to Medford?’

‘That’s right,’ Cody said. ‘So I guess that’s that. Maccy D’s, here we come.’

‘You’re going to apply to McDonald’s?’

‘Actually, I might try KFC first. Fucking love the Boneless Banquet.’

Miss Campbell ignored Cody’s joke. ‘There are plenty of writing courses.’

‘Not like that one,’ Cody said flatly.

‘What’s so special about that one?’

Cody rolled her eyes, annoyed and bored, but she decided to answer anyway. ‘Roxie Raymond went there.’

‘She’s a writer?’

‘Can’t slip one past you, can I?’ Cody said.

Miss Campbell once again ignored the sarcasm. ‘So, you want to follow in your hero’s footsteps, is that it?’

Cody gave Miss Campbell a sharp look. ‘I never said *hero*, did I?’

‘You’re basing your future around her educational choices. Sounds like she’s pretty important to you.’

Cody decided she was not stepping further into the trap. She closed her mouth.

Miss Campbell took a fortifying breath. ‘I’m sorry if this makes you uncomfortable, but there are other choices. And it’s not too late.’

‘For what?’

‘You can get a place somewhere else through clearing in a few months.’

‘That sounds great. I’ll just Hoover up the sloppy seconds, shall I?’ Cody asked with a sarcastic smile.

‘You don’t have to look at it like that,’ Miss Campbell said quickly. ‘But you did put all your eggs in one basket. So now, we need to adjust our thinking about this...’

‘*We* aren’t doing anything, Campbell,’ Cody said provocatively.

Miss Campbell’s jaw tightened. ‘I’m going to help you, Cody. I’m quite determined.’

Cody was ready to walk out, but not before she’d settled a small amount of curiosity. ‘Why?’

‘Because you’re very bright. But you’re also angry. I’d hate to see you miss out on things that could be good for you because of pride.’

Cody was angered. ‘*Pride*? Have you met me? No one thinks shit about me. What have I got to be proud of?’ Miss Campbell looked abruptly nervous, and Cody felt like she’d said too much. ‘I’m happy that way,’ she added quickly. ‘I like to do my own thing.’

‘Which I think is a blessing and a curse,’ Miss Campbell said quickly. She paused and then said something that Cody had seen coming a mile away. ‘You know, I used to be like you.’

‘What, two years ago?’ Cody smirked.

Miss Campbell raised an eyebrow. ‘You know, I’m twenty-nine if you’re so stuck on my age.’

Cody laughed. ‘You might want to switch to a worse moisturiser, then. I heard Stephen Miller tried to get your number in the cafeteria.’

Miss Campbell tutted. ‘That’s irrelevant. The point is, I get it.’

‘What do you think you get?’ Cody asked pissily.

‘You decided on something, and it didn’t work out. So you might be tempted to chuck away any other opportunities out of defiance.’

‘There aren’t any other opportunities,’ Cody told her, seriously done. This was going around in circles.

‘There are many, actually,’ Miss Campbell refuted.

‘I don’t agree.’

‘I know what this is. You got a rejection, so *you* want to reject everything,’ Miss Campbell asserted.

Cody had had enough. She wasn’t doing this. It was pointless. ‘Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about. So I’m going now.’

She left the office quickly before Miss Campbell could say anything else.

Six

Ava was sitting in Tara's kitchen, leaning on the large centre island with a few of the girls. They were sipping on a cocktail of whatever the hell Tara could find in her parents' cupboard that she thought they wouldn't miss.

'Tara, what's in this one?' she asked her friend.

'Mmm? Oh. It's, err, Kahlua, crème de Violette, and Fanta. I think I might call it a Sweet Smack?' she mused, caressing her hair thoughtfully.

'Perfect name,' Ava said, taking another sip with unfelt enthusiasm.

'Funny to see *you* at Friday drinks,' noted Becky Saxton.

Becky was Ava's friend, but more out of proximity than anything. She was in the circle, but they never really hung out alone. Ava liked to think of her as a social co-worker.

'Is it?' Ava asked.

'Yeah, you never come to Fridays,' Becky said.

'I don't?' Ava said, surprised. 'I come *sometimes*, don't I?'

‘Not in months,’ Becky explained. ‘So what’s going on? You and Leo split?’

Ava was agape. ‘What? No. He’s just busy tonight.’

‘Doing what?’ Becky asked with a raised eyebrow.

‘A boys’ thing, I don’t know,’ Ava said, starting to get annoyed.

She didn’t like Becky’s tone. It had an accusatory nature that was climbing with every word.

Tara, a middle child and natural diplomat, interjected. ‘She’s a busy lady. You don’t win prom queen sitting on your bum.’

Ava laughed. ‘The nominations aren’t even out yet.’

‘You’re gonna win,’ Tara smiled affectionately. ‘I mean, you’re basically putting the whole thing together by herself. You deserve it.’

‘I’m not doing *everything*. I had a meeting,’ Ava said quickly.

‘Yeah, but it was just a check-in. You’re the one making it happen. Everyone knows that,’ pointed out Mia Garry, the academic of their outfit. She’d gotten an A-minus once, and her eyebrows had fallen out from the shock.

‘Oh, sure. She’ll win,’ Becky added, that odd sour tone still there.

‘*You* might,’ Ava said.

She meant it. Becky could win, all things considered. She was probably better looking than Ava, if not quite as liked.

‘I don’t want it,’ Becky said quickly. ‘I’ve got other stuff going on. You can have that.’

Now, *that* was a clear shot, but Ava didn’t react angrily. ‘Thanks, Becky. That’s kind of you.’ Ava was delighted to see that Becky couldn’t bat anything back at her weaponised pleasantries.

Instead, Becky took a sip of her drink, tried not to gag, and then looked at her phone. ‘Hey, did you say it was a boys’ thing? At Rian’s?’

Ava nodded, already exhausted by the line of questioning.

‘Because all the boys are rock climbing tonight,’ Becky said, holding up her phone so that everyone could see the Instagram post.

Half the crew, male classification, was indeed up a multicoloured fibreglass wall.

Ava was trying hard not to engage. ‘I guess they moved the party.’

‘I can’t actually see Leo up there,’ Becky said as though it were the most offhanded comment in the world.

Ava was struggling now. ‘No?’ she asked.

‘Maybe he took the pic?’ Tara suggested, slightly anxious.

Tara wasn’t the brightest bulb, but she wasn’t dim either. She knew what Becky was getting at.

‘Probably,’ Becky said, putting her phone away and smiling.

Ava wasn’t sure whether to call her out on what she was trying to imply. But Becky was a master gas lighter. If you put it out there, she’d act like she didn’t know what you meant, and you’d be the one left looking crazy. Ava wasn’t up for that.

But she couldn’t afford even the whiff of a scandal, not this close to her prom bid. There was only one thing for it. She had to put this thing to bed definitively. Tuck it in tight, kiss it goodnight, and send it off to a deep and dreamless sleep.

‘What time was that posted?’ Ava questioned.

‘Couple of hours ago,’ Becky responded.

‘They’ll all be back at Leo’s now, right? Why don’t we drop by?’ Ava suggested. ‘We can find out who took the pic and set Becky’s mind at ease.’

Becky smiled with every last one of her teeth. ‘Why not?’

Later, after everything, Ava would replay her own words. Around and around her head, they whirled. The words of a woman who didn’t know she was about to blow up her own life.

Outside Leo’s, it was disconcertingly dark.

‘They’re probably not back yet,’ Tara said, though she didn’t sound very convinced.

‘Yeah. I think we should probably go back,’ Ava said, feeling chilly and a little stupid standing outside Leo’s empty home.

‘Hey, wait a sec,’ Becky said. She went over to the front of the house and pushed aside climbing ivy to reveal a small metal key safe.

‘Becky, what the hell are you doing?’ asked Mia.

‘Hang on, let me just see if they’ve changed it...’ Becky said, fiddling with the combination for a moment. ‘Ha!’ she declared, triumphant, opening the safe.

‘How did you know the code?’ Ava asked. She didn’t even know it.

There was a slightly awkward silence during which Ava remembered Becky had dated Leo for a couple of months before he had ghosted her. Which was no mean feat considering they were in the same friend group. Becky probably didn’t care about that anymore. Years had passed, as well as numerous other boyfriends. But it was interesting how she still remembered Leo’s key safe code.

‘Right, so here’s what we’re gonna do,’ Becky announced, giggly and high on wrongdoing. ‘We’re gonna wait in Leo’s living room, in the dark. And then when everyone comes back, we’ll scare the shit out of them.’

That was the moment Ava started to feel truly nervous. ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ she said.

‘Why not?’ Becky asked, offended.

‘It’s a crime, for a start,’ Mia interjected. Ava appreciated her support.

‘I’ve got the key. We’re not breaking in,’ Becky tutted.

‘I don’t know,’ Mia frowned.

Becky tutted. ‘Mia, for fuck’s sake. Take a risk for once.’

Mia’s mouth tightened. Ava knew she was swayed by the call out. And Tara, God love her, would go with what everyone else decided. It would now be up to Ava to stop this happening.

She inhaled deeply and tried to sound commanding. ‘Look, I don’t...’

But Becky already had the key in the door, and she opened it quickly before hopping over the threshold. ‘It’s done now. So get in,’ she said, her tone less light-hearted.

Tara followed her in, with Mia right behind. Ava was the only one left to hold the line. But she was only human, and her friends were doing it already, so she stepped into the darkness of the Wicks’ hall.

The Wicks were well-off people, and it was a big place. The kind of place Ava might have dreamt of herself living in if her mother suddenly discovered a rich dead uncle in her lineage. But it felt weird to stand here in the dark, uninvited.

There was a sound coming from upstairs—a distant rhythm.

Becky grinned in the dimness of the moonlight as she closed the door behind them. ‘You hear that? They’re upstairs.’

Mia and Tara looked relieved that they hadn't broken into an empty house, though Ava couldn't think why because the crime was the same.

'Look, let's just go. This is weird,' Ava tried.

Becky turned before she could finish the sentence, heading softly up the stairs. 'Come on.' Mia and Becky followed her.

Ava almost decided to leave without them, but peer pressure won out.

They reached the first-floor landing and crept in the direction of Leo's room, light leaking underneath the door, the music spilling out, much louder now. Duff, duff, duff. They reached the door.

'They'll all be in here, off their tits,' Tara whispered, laughing, now pretty into the whole scheme.

'Yeah,' Mia agreed, fully on board. 'They're gonna shit themselves,' she snickered.

'OK, let's burst in on the count of three,' Becky said. 'One, two...'

Ava turned to Becky, her heart in her mouth. 'Becky,' she hissed. 'Wait—'

'Three.' Becky grabbed the handle and twisted it, throwing the door open with force.

It flew inward, and Ava looked into the room.

Leo and Rian, who'd both been facing the other way, turned in horror. Rian screamed. Leo made a wail like some kind of dying bird.

'Oh,' Ava said wearily. She was shocked by how unshocked she felt at what she was seeing.

Rian jumped back and grabbed a pillow to hide his junk while Leo simply cupped his in his hands.

Now, Ava had always cultivated a very nice-girl persona. Because she felt that was what she truly was, and she wanted to put her money where her mouth was. Whatever happened, she held that in her mind, always. She didn't talk shit behind others' backs, she always had a sincere compliment for anyone, and she never yelled.

But when she walked in on her boyfriend bending his bestie over the bedframe, a lot of complicated feelings came up that Ava hadn't realised were there.

Something broke.

'You stupid fucking himbo bitch!' she screamed. 'You muscle-brained cock! You 'roided up little twat! You lying bastard shitty, shitty *dick-weasel!*'

Leo just stood there, cupping his junk uselessly.

Ava took a deep breath, and out came more. ‘You *pathetic*, wormy little dick-faced bitch-bastard!’ she screamed at him, aware she was making less and less sense with every insult. But sense wasn’t the point anymore.

‘Umm, Ava?’ Tara said.

‘Tara, shut the fuck up a second!’ she screamed at her friend, never taking her eyes off Leo. ‘You fucking, *fucking*, fucking little bitch-boy! You stupid pricking, cocking, bastard, fucking...’

‘AVA!’ Tara shouted.

Her friend’s remarkably loud yelling finally grabbed Ava’s attention. Tara was looking at something, and Ava followed her gaze to Becky. Specifically, to the phone in her hand, pointing at the action.

When Becky realised the room was looking at her, she looked at the phone as though she’d forgotten it was there. ‘I thought it would be funny to film the prank.’

‘Turn it the fuck off!’ Ava commanded. ‘And then delete this, Becky. Right the fuck *now*!’ she yelled, kind of amazed at how she was talking to everyone. She couldn’t say she loved it.

‘Sorry, guys. It’s live on TikTok,’ Becky said with an apologetic flash of her teeth. ‘But I’ll shut it down now.’ She tapped her phone and put it back in her pocket.

'That was live?' Ava, Leo, and Rian all asked in perfect unison.

Seven

People were being weird at school.

It was a week after Cody's world had been shattered, so she was still very much in her own sadness, but even she couldn't miss it.

As she entered the front gates, people were in these funny little clumps. Groups standing around phones together like cave-dwellers around a fire. Some of them were snickering about the thing they watched, some of them were in furtive silence, and some of them seemed in mourning about it. Cody was curious, but not enough to ask anyone what was up.

But then Sally Withers blew the whole thing open. They weren't friends, as such, but there was a symbiosis to the relationship. Cody didn't talk, and Sally never shut up. And even though Cody didn't enjoy her verbose company, she could never quite bring herself to tell Sally to piss off.

She came at Cody like a demon that morning, overstimulated already. 'Cody!' she yelled down the hall as Cody went into the lavs to take a quick pee before English Lit.

'Sally, Christ, what?!' Cody asked.

Sally followed her into the bathroom. 'It's unbelievable,' she declared.

Cody went into a stall, but Sally kept following. Cody was practically nose-to-nose with her.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Cody asked without any real annoyance.

Sally looked around her and realised what she’d done. ‘Oh, no. Not again,’ she moaned. She stepped back out, and Cody closed the door.

Sally kept trying. ‘I just wanted to talk to you about—’

‘Not now. I can’t wee with someone talking,’ Cody told her.

She heard Sally sigh in frustration, but she zipped it. Cody dropped her jeans and let it flow. She could hear Sally practically tap-dancing outside the stall with excitement. Since Cody’s bladder had now opened, she decided to let Sally off the lead.

‘Go on then, what is it?’ she called out.

A phone popped under the door seconds later. ‘Have you seen this?’ Sally demanded.

Cody saw a flash of naked men on the screen, and she looked away quickly. ‘Jesus! Is that porn?!’ she asked, shocked.

Sally laughed. ‘No! It’s Leo Wicks and Rian Ip. Though come to think of it, the first second of the video probably *does* count as porn because I think they’re actually, ya know...’ Sally trailed off.

Cody finished her wee and left the stall. ‘What are you talking about?’ she asked, squirting soap into her palm and running a tap.

Trying to sum the whole thing up, Sally became so excited that she lost the ability to put a full sentence together. ‘It’s... Rian... And Ava was... God and Becky got the whole thing!’

The mention of Becky grabbed Cody’s ear. ‘Becky Saxton? What about her?’ she asked sharply.

Sally handed her the phone. ‘I think you’d better just watch it.’

Cody took the phone and watched the video. She was slightly shocked, but only for a moment. When she thought about it even briefly, Leo and Rian *were* always squeezing each other’s muscles and complimenting the size. Cody had always assumed it was meathead mutual support. But looking at the evidence on the screen, there’d been a bit more to it.

Way more shocking was Ava. She’d gone *off*. Cody had always known that the sweetest-girl-in-the-school persona was not the end of the story. But she had a surprisingly inventive way of expressing anger. It didn’t make a ton of sense, but it sure got the point across.

And fucking Becky. She was behind the camera, acting like it was all just a mistake that she'd broadcasted this humiliation. But Cody knew better.

'So I guess everyone's seen this? That's what they were watching today?' Cody asked Sally.

'*Everyone,*' Sally exclaimed. 'How the hell haven't *you* seen it?'

'I'm not on any socials,' Cody told her.

'None?' Sally asked, surprised.

There was a very good reason for that, but Cody would rather have licked one of the toilet bowls than explain it to Sally. 'Nope. None.'

'Well, you missed out! It broke Friday night, and I've been watching it all unfold. Everyone's losing their minds. It's been huge! Like the nine-eleven of Harewood.'

Cody pursed her lips and gave Sally a rare piece of advice. 'Sally, it's your call, but if I were you, I maybe *wouldn't* make that joke to anyone else, OK?'

Sally nodded. 'Is it what my mum calls a line crosser? Fair enough. But it was a *bit* funny, right?'

Cody nodded. 'A bit, yes.'

Sally smiled, pleased. 'Thanks, Cody.' And she skipped out of the bathroom happily.

Cody went to the hand dryers, thinking about what she'd just seen as the machine roared. It didn't have anything to do with her, so she didn't feel that much about it.

But she felt one surprising thing about the video. The utter dislike that she'd always directed at Ava was weakened. It wasn't gone, exactly, but it had lost a little of its edge because Barbie's dream bubble had popped. She was out in the real world now, and Cody knew very well that it was about to get rough for Ava in the eye of a scandalous storm.

Eight

‘OK, I’m coming in!’ Ava’s mother, Sarah, suddenly cried, barging into Ava’s room with a sandwich and a Coke Zero.

‘Mum! I said I wasn’t hungry!’ Ava declared from under her duvet, where she was looking at her phone.

‘I know, but heartbreak is better on a full stomach,’ her mother said, ripping the duvet back to see her face.

‘I can’t eat bread right now. You know that,’ Ava said, taking the sandwich.

‘You break up with someone, you put on a few pounds, then you set your sights on someone else, and it’s a great reason to lose them again. It’s the circle of life.’ Her mother went to Ava’s full-length mirror and looked at herself critically, pulling her cheekbones in and holding the skin under her eyes back to reveal a younger woman. She let everything fall back in place and frowned at her reflection. ‘I knew that boy was too pretty to be faithful,’ Sarah said to herself.

Ava took a bite of a cheese and pickle sandwich, but her eyes never left the phone in her hand.

Sarah turned. ‘What are you doing on that thing? I told you to turn it off. You don’t need to see that video again.’

Ava ignored her.

‘What are they saying, though?’ Sarah asked.

‘The usual,’ Ava said, no idea how to explain to her mother what she was reading. The trajectory of the last few days was rather hard for Ava to track.

It had started moments after the debacle at Leo’s. She’d run from the room and down the stairs, nearly tripping in the darkness. All the while, she could hear something. Above her, people were yelling (Rian yelling at Leo, Leo yelling at Becky, and Becky yelling at both of them), but another noise was coming from her pocket. Her phone was buzzing like an overcaffeinated bee.

It had happened that quickly. The fiasco was over, and everyone was offering their opinion, tagging her, not even giving her a moment to process. But she didn’t look until she got home.

The reactions went from the shocked:

“Oh, babes! No! Not Leo and Ava!”

To the self-centred:

“If this can happen to Ava and Leo, I don’t believe in love anymore. I’m literally joining a nunnery tomorrow.”

To the stupid:

“This is just like when I found out my dad had broken my iPad.”

To the horny:

Under a grabbed frame of Leo naked, holding his junk:
“I would let him run me over in a car if it so pleased him.”

To the inevitable meme-ification:

Under a grabbed frame of Leo naked, holding his junk:
“What I think I look like when I do paleo for one day.”

It was all the kind of thing Ava might have expected if she could have predicted going viral in the middle of discovering she'd been betrayed. In general, people were supportive. It didn't make her feel any less stupid, but it was something.

And then, sometime around Saturday lunchtime, the tide of public opinion turned. And it came off one comment from a girl in the year below that Ava didn't know, a wannabee influencer who did makeup tutorials, Angel Mayhew.

“I feel kind of bad for Leo. He was obviously stuck in the closet. Kind of sad everyone's so mad at him when you consider that.”

That pissed Ava off, mainly because it was inaccurate. Leo was never in any kind of closet at all.

Before they'd gotten together, when they were just friends, he'd been a known fuck boy. He'd shag anyone. Sometimes, that had been boys. He'd never put a label on himself, and no one forced one on him. He wasn't any sexuality except slutty.

Ava hadn't given it any thought until he locked his sights on her. It was a quick and easy no from her. He worked hard to change her mind, texting her constantly, laying on the charm, asking for just one date. She still said no.

But then he stepped it up, writing her an actual song and putting it on TikTok. It wasn't good, and it was out of key, but everyone around Ava told her she was a fool to turn him down when he was madly in love with her.

She began to weaken. When she expressed concern about his *vast* sexual history, he declared she was special and only wanted her. She was cynical about his ability to be monogamous, but he swore up and down she was it for him. He could never want for more. Oh, and he'd just gotten tested, and all was green for go.

Ava had worried that he only wanted her because she wasn't interested, but she had gone against her better instincts and given it a go with him. A year later, she knew she should have trusted her gut. He was never going to be faithful. He just loved the challenge.

So Angel Whoever was talking out of her arse. Only once she'd planted that seed, it opened up a conversation. One that didn't include any of the people being discussed, but no one minded that.

And slowly, yet surely, a small but vocal sympathetic faction flourished, talking about how sad it was that Leo had felt the need to hide his sexuality by dating the prettiest girl in the school. How they'd always suspected he was overcompensating and how his actions made sense.

That Angel girl had more to say around Sunday lunchtime.

“When you think about it like that, it’s a bit shocking how Ava reacted. I always thought she was so sweet. But wow, the mouth on that girl. Makes you wonder if she’s really that nice.”

Plenty of people defended her. But plenty jumped in to say they'd always known she was a fake.

Still, Ava, for maybe the first time, worried about what Monday morning at school was going to hold. As upset as she was, she'd thought all she'd get was sympathy. Now? She wasn't so sure.

‘Hey,’ her mother said. ‘I’m not letting you stay in this room anymore. Come and watch movies with me. We’ll do a nineties festival.’

‘OK, but I can’t watch *Clueless* again,’ mumbled Ava through her sandwich.

‘How about *She’s All That*, paired with *Never Been Kissed*?’

‘OK, but can we add *Heathers* in?’ she asked. She was quite up for watching Winona Ryder blow her boyfriend up at the end.

‘That’s the eighties,’ Sarah reminded her.

‘Fine. *Scream*?’ Ava suggested.

The same itch could be scratched—dead boyfriend at the end.

Sarah was pleased. ‘You’re on. Love me some Skeet Ulrich.’

Ava frowned. ‘Really? Those greasy curtains?’

‘That was the style then,’ her mother explained defensively as Ava climbed off the bed and followed her mother downstairs, sandwich in hand. It might do her some good to get away from her phone for a bit. It was just an echo chamber, after all. It wasn’t reflective of what people thought.

But maybe she’d take Monday off, come down with a sudden cold. People would understand that, surely.

Nine

The day after the Leo/Ryan scandal broke, Cody was back in Miss Campbell's office again. She didn't like how pleased the woman looked with herself.

'Cody, how was your weekend?'

'Great. I filled in an application for Burger King. KFC Is the dream, but you need a safety net,' she snarked.

It was all a lie. She wasn't quite there yet. She was more in the lying-face-down-on-her-bed-listening-to-maudlin-songs-by-dead-people place. Elliot Smith, Amy Winehouse, and Kurt Cobain knew what was up. Miss Campbell did not.

But Cody's sarcasm couldn't beat the woman down today. She was clearly on cloud nine, which Cody found disturbing. 'Look, I want to get right to it,' she grinned. 'I spoke to Medford this morning.'

'What? Why?' Cody asked in alarm.

'I wanted to get some more information.'

'About why they rejected me? Why the hell would you do that?' Cody asked angrily.

Forget nine-eleven jokes. This was the line crosser.

‘Look, just let me tell you what they said.’

‘I don’t want to know what they said,’ Cody told her firmly as she stood to leave.

‘Cody, take a breath!’ Miss Campbell said quickly. ‘This is honestly a good thing. You’ll see.’

Cody didn’t sit down. But she didn’t walk out either.

‘I spoke to the teacher who reviewed your application, Mara French. She liked your sample work.’

Cody slowly lowered herself back into the chair. ‘She did?’

‘Yes, she did. She thought you displayed a lot of promise.’

‘Not enough, clearly,’ Cody snarked.

‘No, well, that’s the thing. Mara’s criticism wasn’t about the writing. It was about what you might have to write about in the future.’

‘Fuck are you talking about?’ Cody demanded.

Miss Campbell ignored the swear word. ‘She noticed you don’t seem to have anything on your application which indicated that you had, well, much of a social life.’

A sour laugh fell out of Cody. ‘I’m sorry, what?’

‘Let me start again. You sent in a story, right? About an eleven-year-old who goes to a sleepover, and she gets—’

‘I know the story,’ Cody said quickly.

‘Well, she thought it was a strong story. But what worried her was that you have no extracurriculars, no hobbies, no interests. And she worried you might not... have many varied experiences. She thought you might not be living enough to keep having things to say.’

Cody gave Mrs Campbell a look. ‘So, being a hermit is a *drawback* for writers now?’

‘No, don’t get... Just listen. She said it might not be too late. She’d been on the borderline of allowing you in. She suggested submitting an addendum to your application, that you could rewrite your personal statement to indicate that you’re more than just a kid who never leaves their bedroom. Then she’d consider putting you at the top of the wait list. And odds are not everyone will take up the offered places. Even kids saying yes now will drop out nearer the time. You could very well still get in.’

Cody was still smarting about the things this Mara person had said. They cut deep. Mainly because there was truth in it. She had checked out of things a while back, but she’d never thought it would hurt her writing. Literary history was jam-packed full of loners. She’d thought she was in good company. She almost wanted to ring the woman to tell her she was wrong.

But Cody had also heard the rest. It wasn't too late. She might still get to go. Only... 'How the hell am I going to write something that's gonna convince this woman that I'm social? Am I supposed to lie?'

Mrs Campbell shook her head vehemently. 'Do *not* do that. What I want you to do is... Do something.'

'Do something? What the hell does that mean?'

'I want you to get out there and be amongst people again. Take part in some school activities, maybe find a hobby, do *anything* that involves the society of this school. And then write about it.'

Cody stared at Miss Campbell in abject horror. 'What?! I can't do that. I mean, I *literally* cannot. The people at this school... They're the worst. They won't *let* me do it.'

'I don't agree,' Miss Campbell said plainly.

'You don't understand what you're asking.'

'I *do*, as a matter of fact,' Miss Campbell said with confidence. 'I know full well you think this sounds completely impossible. But you've got some time. So think it over and decide how much you really want this.'

Cody shook her head. 'You're asking me to do the one thing I *can't* do so that I can be allowed to do the one thing I *want* to do. Can you not see how cruel this is?'

‘If you didn’t have it in you, I’d agree,’ Miss Campbell said self-righteously. ‘But I think you’re going to surprise yourself.’

Cody was right back to thinking this was hopeless. She got up and began to storm out. Mid-storm, she turned. ‘No, but seriously. Why can’t I lie?’

Miss Campbell sighed. ‘She’s a writing teacher. She’d smell inauthenticity a mile away. Particularly if...’ She paused to think about what she wanted to say. And it was this. ‘The trouble is, Cody, people make up life. If you’re not among them, it limits you if this is what you want to do. I’m sorry if that’s hard to hear.’

Hard wasn’t the word. Cody continued her storming. And ran smack into Ava Gale in the hall.

‘Shit, sorry,’ she mumbled before she looked up and realised who it was.

When she did, she was slightly shocked. Ava had tried to cover it up, but her green eyes were puffy, sleep-deprived. They were also missing that psychotically cheery glint. Her long caramel hair lacked its usual bounciness. All in all, she looked tired.

Ava stared at her, surprised. ‘My bad.’ She drifted off down the hall.

It was clear to Cody that Ava was really in it right now. Once again, sympathy rose in Cody. But she had to remind

herself that she didn't have time for it. She had her own problems.

Ten

Tuesday morning, Ava walked into school, and practically the whole building went silent. No well-meaning fools coming to tell her it sucked. No boys pretending to be sympathetic in the hopes of catching her on the rebound. No one said anything at all before the first bell went.

Ava sloped into English Lit to see that all the players from Friday night were present and seated. Tara, Becky, and Mia were clumped on one side. Leo and Rian were sitting in their usual seats, which were not together, so there was nothing to be gleaned from that.

Everyone else was chatty and vibrant and ignored her totally. She hadn't expected to be presented with flowers or anything, but a few sad-eyed looks would have been nice. But no one even glanced her way.

She sat down near Mia. Mia gave her a quick smile and then looked away. Weird.

Ava turned to Tara. 'Hi.'

'Hi, babes,' Tara said with normal friendliness, which was a relief. 'How are you doing?' she asked with a head tilt.

'Oh, you know,' Ava said. 'It's all kind of...'

Becky suddenly pushed herself into the scope of Ava's vision. 'God, Ava! How are you doing?'

'Err—'

'Your head must be a wreck!' she whispered quite loudly.

Ava could see out of her peripheral vision a few people pretending not to listen.

'Yeah, well...'

'God, and now with the news...'

Ava paused. 'What do you mean, news?'

Becky opened her mouth... and then the teacher started taking attendance. If Ava's head had not, in Becky's words, been 'A wreck,' it *was* now. What bloody news?

Tara laid it out over lattes during their lunch break in the courtyard. 'Leo and Rian are official,' she explained warily.

Ava's heart was in her mouth. 'What?'

‘They were out Sunday night at Bella Italia. Deena Blake saw them.’

Ava’s jaw clenched. ‘Right.’ She stood, latte in hand. ‘I’m gonna give him both barrels.’

‘Babes, no!’ Tara said. ‘Don’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because people are talking shit about you, and I don’t want you to make it worse!’ Tara said reticently.

Ava looked at Tara in puzzled horror. ‘Talking shit about *me*?’

‘Yeah. Leo’s kind of been telling people he wanted to split up with you ages ago. He says you forced him to stay.’

Ava felt faint. ‘How did I do that?’

‘He said you were fragile. You kept having meltdowns. He said he was worried about you, so he had to stay until he thought you were stronger, that kind of thing.’

Ava was horrified. ‘Fragile?! I’ve never been fragile!’ she declared.

Which wasn’t exactly true. Ava had her moments. But *public* fragility? Never.

Tara shook her head and grabbed Ava's hand. 'I know it's rubbish. I *know*. OK? But you have to know that he's also telling people he started to think that maybe it wasn't all that real, these meltdowns. And that's when he...' She took a disgusted breath. 'Gave in to his real feelings for Rian.'

Ava didn't understand how this was happening. She'd been cheated on. Yet, somehow, now she was the *villain* who faked mental collapses to manipulate boys? She wanted to throw up.

'What else has he been saying?' Ava asked tiredly.

Tara chewed the inside of her mouth. 'Umm...'

'What, Tara?'

'Well, he... You haven't seen it on his Insta?'

'I blocked him, obviously.'

Tara sighed and went into her phone, holding up a post labelled #promposal. Leo was holding up a sign saying, 'Rian, will you go to prom with me?'

Ava gaped. A real promposal? He hadn't even done that for her. She'd told him they were going, and he'd said, 'Yeah, OK.' That was it. What was he playing at with all the public gestures? Bella Italia, and now this? It had been three days, for God's sake!

It didn't take a genius to work it out. Leo was running a campaign for his reputation. And somehow, he was winning.

She got called to see the assistant head later that day, yanked right out of psychology while everyone watched.

'I've heard about a video,' Mr Parsons said stiffly, hands folded across his desk.

Ava sighed and folded her arms but said nothing.

'So I've got to talk to you about it,' Mr Parsons added.

'OK,' Ava prompted him.

'Are you OK?' he asked weakly.

Ava understood what she was supposed to do next. Convince him she was fine so he could tick a box. 'Yes, I'm OK,' she told him, happy to play along so this could be over.

'Because obviously, things like this can be a mental health, er, trigger.'

Ava didn't want to talk about her mental health right now. Not after hearing how fragile and manipulative she was.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Because I think we could maybe get someone in.’

‘No, I don’t want that.’

‘So how can we help?’ he asked.

Ava shrugged. ‘You can’t. I’ll get over it.’

Mr Parsons caressed his moustache and then said, ‘You know, I’ve never liked Leo.’

Ava was surprised to find a smile. ‘No?’

‘I think his heart is the one muscle he forgot to work out.’

Ava burst out laughing. ‘That’s a good one, Mr Parsons. I’ll have to remember that.’

Mr Parsons looked pleased. ‘Well. Good. He doesn’t deserve to get prom king.’

Ava’s face fell. ‘What? Prom king?’

Mr Parsons looked nervous again. ‘I just heard... Maybe I misunderstood.’

Ava had pushed thoughts of the prom to the back of her mind. She simply didn't know what effect all this business might have on her future sovereignty. Because you were crowned as a couple, not as an individual. Which she now was. There had been nebulous thoughts of finding another date, though she had no one in mind.

But it was worse than she could have thought. If Mr Parsons, of all people, had gotten wind of it, it was real. Leo had taken her dignity, and now he was going for her crown—with Rian.

Ava felt something take hold of her. Something dark. She'd been angry, upset, hurt, confused. But now? Cold, calculating rage filled her soul. She didn't just want to win anymore. She wanted to step over Leo's body to do it.

'Well, I'm fine, Mr Parsons, so can I go?' she asked.

Mr Parsons nodded. 'Of course.'

She stood and went to the door.

'Best of luck, Ava,' Mr Parsons called.

'Luck?' she said, turning to face him. She shook her head slowly. 'Oh no, Mr Parsons. I don't need that. I make my own,' she told him.

He looked slightly frightened. And Ava found that she didn't mind that one bit.

She walked out of the office, things feeling beautifully clear again. She was going to fight back, and she was going to win prom queen, and Leo was going to cry, and everyone would laugh at him.

As she walked past the career's office, Cody Foster came out, and they had yet another collision.

'My bad,' Ava said quickly, and she'd readied herself to get her head bitten off.

But Cody just looked at her and shrugged. 'Don't sweat it.' She walked off.

Ava watched her go for a moment, slightly baffled. That was the nicest Cody had ever been to her.

But there was no time to think about that. She had plans to devise and a campaign to run. Her vibe had been called into question and lies had won. And that meant one thing. If Ava had a chance of beating Leo, she was going to have to take the low road for the first time in her life. Because the only thing that mattered to Ava now was making every person in this school look at her and see strength once again.

She didn't quite know what she was going to do, but maybe her mother had the answer. Or at least her movies. Ava had watched them all her life and learned exactly how to be the right kind of person from them.

But there were other things you could learn, like how to enact the perfect revenge. Teen movies knew a lot about that, too.

Eleven

Cody was swearing under her breath at a corkboard.

‘Buddy Club? Not with a gun to my head,’ she muttered, looking at the ad. She moved to the next poster. ‘Photography club. Jesus, selfie club more like,’ Another poster. ‘Yoga club. Obviously not. Why are there so many clubs, and why are they all stupid?’

She sighed to herself. Was she really going to do this? Try and get involved? How could she? But how could she *not*?

This was the problem. Hope had been dangled, and Cody didn’t know if she was being a sucker to even think about grabbing for it. But she kept picturing herself in a few years, doing a job she hated, wondering, ‘What if I’d just *tried*?’

Cody swore one more time, closed her eyes, put out her finger, and stepped forward to play a game of pin the tail on the hermit.

A haughty dork with a bad moustache pushed Cody’s queen off to the side of the board. ‘Checkmate.’

Cody looked down. ‘Are you serious?’

He grinned. ‘Yeah.’

‘You only played two moves.’

‘It’s called the Fool’s Mate,’ he explained. ‘I’ve always dreamed of using it, but I never thought I’d get the chance. Even a bad player wouldn’t make the mistake you did.’

‘Too smug,’ Cody said, sliding her chair back and walking out of Chess Club.

The words, ‘Directed by David Lynch’ rolled up on the screen, and Cody stood. ‘Too pretentious.’ She left Film Club to a crowd of boos.

A tennis ball smacked Cody in the face. It was the third one in as many minutes.

‘You only get one nose!’ she declared. She chucked the racket and walked off the court and out of Tennis Club.

In school band, Cody was beating the shit out of a drum kit with very little rhythm but enough enthusiasm to get by while horns blared, and guitars strummed. It was going alright until Cody overreached and fell into the drum kit with an epic crash. She looked up from the cymbals and snares to see everyone looking down at her with distaste.

‘I’m going, don’t worry,’ she told them.

After Cody had walked out of sewing class (‘I’ve sown myself into the machine!’ she was forced to yell publicly one too many times), she was pretty much done.

Miss Campbell was talking out of her arse. Cody couldn’t do this. She wasn’t put together for it. She’d accepted a long time ago. She was better alone. Happy, even. Why the hell couldn’t that be enough? Why were people always acting like she was some kind of freak because they couldn’t be alone, and she could? She liked her own company! Where was the crime?

She was heading straight to Miss Campbell to lay that out for her right now. Because she’d tried, and no one could say she hadn’t.

She stomped down the emptying hall as the day was coming to a close. She went to Miss Campbell's door and tried the handle. It was locked. But the light was on.

'Hey, Campbell! I know you're in there! I don't care if your office hours are over. I want to talk to you! It didn't work! I knew it wouldn't. Everyone at this school is a dickhead, so I can't go to Medford. It's over. And fuck you for making me do this! And before you say I didn't try, I've been to almost every club this horrible school has, and they're all bullshit, OK? You lost. I can't write the statement about being a well-rounded person with something to say about anything that takes place outside of my bedroom or whatever the fuck it was. So I won. Sort of.' She stepped back from the door. 'Campbell? You in there?'

'She's gone home,' someone said behind Cody, causing her to jump and spin a full one-eighty to face the speaker.

'Didn't mean to make you jump,' Ava smiled. 'But she left an hour ago.'

Cody frowned. 'What are you doing here?'

'I've got calls to make, and Mr Parsons lets me use his office for the privacy.'

'Calls?' Cody asked despite herself.

'I've got to find someone to cater the prom for five quid a head,' she said, irritation creeping into her tone. 'It's not going well.'

‘You’re still doing that prom shit?’ Cody asked, turning away, kind of meaning to leave on that question.

She didn’t even know why she’d asked. It wasn’t her business.

But then Ava said, ‘Why? Because my boyfriend was caught on camera cheating on me and then told everyone it was my fault, and they believed him?’

Cody turned back to Ava, slightly shocked. ‘Pretty much.’

Ava laughed. ‘Yeah, well. Can’t let it get you down, can you?’

Cody almost left again. But this was a weird and rare situation, and it was slightly too intriguing. ‘I would have.’

Ava smiled. ‘Would you?’

‘I’d have laid down and died, for sure,’ Cody told her casually.

Ava blinked at her, and her friendly smile turned up a couple of wags, entering a zone that Cody felt slightly chilled by. ‘Really?’

Cody felt a need to get out of the office. This was going on too long, and she was getting uncomfortable.

‘Well, later.’ She walked off down the hall and headed for the exit.

She wanted to go home, get under the duvet and eat an amount of crisps that would come back to haunt her when she was tossing and turning in the crumbs later.

Her hand was on the door when Ava came running down the hall. ‘Hold on a sec,’ she called.

Cody turned with real alarm. ‘What do you want?’ she asked.

Ava stopped. ‘I just want to talk.’

Cody looked around in case there was someone who mattered standing behind her, but she was alone in the hall. ‘To *me*?’

‘Yeah. To you.’

‘What for?’ Cody asked.

‘Well... I wanted to ask you...’

Cody awaited with bated breath. What the hell could it be?

‘...Have you ever seen a movie called *She’s All That*?’ Ava asked.

Cody stared at her. ‘Huh?!’

Twelve

‘Let me start again,’ Ava said. ‘What I meant to say is that I’ve got a proposition.’

‘Related to the question you’ve just asked?’ Cody replied, looking baffled.

Ava couldn’t blame her. She was flying blind. The idea had only come to her a minute ago. But when it came, it was powerful and crazy and *right*.

‘Look, stop me if I got it wrong, but did I hear you yelling something about not being able to go to Medford? Because...’

Cody folded her arms. ‘Go on. Because...’

Ava had thought she’d just fill in the blanks. Damn, Cody was a tough nut. ‘Something about being social? And how you...’

Cody raised an eyebrow. ‘Yes?’

‘...Can’t do it,’ Ava said with a grimace. It had come out harsher than she’d intended.

‘I *don’t* do it,’ Cody snapped.

‘OK, yeah. That’s what I meant. I mean, we all know that.’

Ava had thought that might defuse Cody’s temper somewhat, but then she asked in a low, dangerous tone, ‘What exactly is it that we *all know*?’

Ava was genuinely sweating. ‘Umm... You know.’

‘I don’t.’

‘You’re just like, a bit, err... mean. And stuff.’

‘Mean? That’s the rep?’ Cody said. She snorted. ‘Better than I thought.’

Ava did not allow herself to look relieved. She couldn’t let Cody smell fear. ‘But, so, err, I might be able to help with the Medford thing.’

‘What do *you* know about it?’ Cody asked, annoyed.

‘Not much. But you know about *me*, don’t you? The video.’

Cody nodded, her face blank.

Ava could in no way read how this was going so far. ‘I’m in a bind. I was on track to win prom queen, and now I don’t think I’m gonna do it. And I *have* to do it.’

‘Why?’ Cody asked.

‘I just have to,’ Ava said. She wasn’t going to explain more than that.

Cody sighed, long and bored. ‘OK, well, I don’t know what this has got to do with me, but I’m kind of tired. I’ve had a long day. I just sewed my top into a scarf, and I’m done.’ She turned to the door, stepping through it, almost gone.

Whatever Ava said next, she knew it had to be to the point. ‘CODY FOSTER, WILL YOU GO TO PROM WITH ME!?’ she screamed, and for a moment, nothing happened.

Then Cody’s head popped back in, wearing a look of amused confusion. ‘Sorry, I just need to check I haven’t lost my marbles. Because I could swear you just said...’

‘You heard me,’ Ava said boldly. ‘I want you to go to the prom with me. If you do, I think we can *both* get what we want.’

For the first time, Cody had no comeback.

They were sitting in a coffee shop. It was miles from school. No one could see them together. Yet.

‘So, here’s how I see it,’ Ava began. ‘Leo told a story, and it played. The story was that he was in the closet, and I was a manipulative girlfriend he couldn’t get free of until he fell in love with his closest friend. Of course, people liked it. Overcoming obstacles to find love? They ate it up.’

Cody sipped her iced latte. ‘Were you always like this?’ she asked.

‘What?’

‘This cynical. Because I always kind of thought your whole girl-next-door thing was an act. Seems like I was right.’

Ava tutted. ‘This is *exactly* what I mean. You made me into a story.’

Cody baulked. ‘What? No, I didn’t. I just thought...’

‘What did I ever do to you? Really. Name one thing I did to make you hate me. Which, by the way, I *know* you do,’ Ava said boldly.

Cody blinked, staring off into space, and Ava let her sit with the question. Eventually, Cody reached an answer. ‘Nothing. As such.’

Ava smiled. ‘But you went ahead and made me a villain because you *could*. That’s what Leo did, too,’ she breathed. ‘And *no*. I wasn’t like this before. I tried my best to be a good person. Until the entire school turned on me.’

Cody mulled it over. ‘This is all kind of interesting. But get to the point.’

‘Fine. I want you to fake being...’

‘What?’

‘My girlfriend.’

Cody choked on her drink. ‘Are you even *into* girls?’ she managed to sputter eventually.

Ava wasn’t, but that seemed like a side issue. ‘That’s got nothing to do with it. The point of this is that I’m changing the narrative.’

‘To what?’

‘That this whole video thing was a wake-up call. And it made me work on myself and realise I needed to do better, that I wanted more than Leo anyway. And during all that growth, I fell for the school misfit.’

‘Hey!’ Cody said defensively.

Ava kept going. She was on a roll. ‘We’re going to be an unlikely couple. It’s going to make everyone root for us. By prom time? We’re going to be a love story they won’t be able to get enough of. Just in time to get crowned queens. And it will work because everyone loves a comeback. Mine *and* yours.’

Cody was sceptical. ‘I don’t know. Sounds sketchy. And I still don’t get what’s in it for me.’

‘You need to, what was it... write a statement so that the writing teacher at Medford can, how did you put it...?’

Cody rolled her eyes. ‘It’s so fucking stupid. She thinks I’m too isolated or some shit. Thinks that I can’t talk about life because I’m gonna run out of thoughts. Explain how that makes sense. I mean, Emily Dickinson never left her house, and she’s considered one of the greatest poets of like, *ever*, so...’

‘Didn’t she live during the civil war?’ Ava asked. ‘That’s quite a lot of tragedy, isn’t it? Even if you stay at home.’

That gave Cody pause. ‘Well, yeah, but... *Look*, the point is, I’m supposed to mingle with the gen pop. I don’t know how this helps me do that.’

‘Because you’re going to be in my world,’ Ava told her. ‘Full access to my people, parties, hangs, all that. And I will mentor you through it. Like a social sponsor.’

For the first time, Cody looked slightly interested. ‘But aren’t you an outcast now?’

‘Not really. I mean, I could be if I let it happen. But no one’s gonna say to my face, “Nobody likes you anymore.” It’s not how it works. They’ll just be slightly weird and inwardly judgy until they forget what the hell I was supposed to have done, and things will be normal. But I need to do more than that to *win*. I’m damaged forever if I don’t act now.’

Cody sat with that for a moment. And then she got her phone out.

‘What are you doing?’ Ava asked.

‘What was that movie you mentioned? *She’s All That?*’ She looked at her screen for a moment. Then she looked up angrily. ‘OK. Fuck you.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘A high school jock makes a bet he can turn an unattractive girl into prom queen,’ Cody read irritably.

Ava understood the offence. ‘That’s not quite what *we’re* doing. It was only a jumping-off point for inspiration. And anyway, if you watch the movie, it’s a load of crap. The main girl is stunning. They just put glasses on her.’

Cody pushed her glasses up her nose pointedly.

‘She’s not remotely unattractive,’ Ava went on. ‘And neither are you.’

Cody glared. ‘Don’t try and butter me up.’

‘I’m serious. That’s half the reason I picked you for this. You’ve got potential.’

Cody tapped the top of her latte cup, thinking. ‘Are you sure this isn’t more of a *Carrie* situation? Because that’s how it feels.’

‘Who’s Carrie?’ Ava asked, confused.

‘The movie. *Carrie*. Seventies?’

Ava shook her head.

Cody was wide-eyed with astonishment. ‘Are you fucking serious right now? You’re obsessed with proms, and you’ve NEVER seen the movie *Carrie*?’

‘Is it a rom-com?’ Ava asked.

Cody was slack-jawed. ‘So I guess I don’t need to worry about a pig’s blood shower, then.’

Ava didn’t understand what that meant, but she tried to find the positive in it. ‘Does that mean you’ll do it?’ Ava asked.

‘No. It does not. This is bonkers.’ Cody picked up her latte. ‘Good luck with your plan. Hopefully, there’s some other bespectacled sucker desperate to help you out.’ And with that, Cody Foster stood and swept out, taking all hope with her.

Ava had to admit it was a pretty good exit. But she was beyond disappointed. There was no one else out there who was as perfect for this as Cody.

She was the right girl for the job. A good-looking misfit with a need that matched Ava's. But it didn't matter if she couldn't get Cody on board.

Ava was annoyed at the entirety of Hollywood for making her think this was ever going to work.

Thirteen

Cody's laptop was playing *She's All That* from the edge of her bed while she scrolled through her phone, reading an article about how writers didn't need uni to succeed.

The movie was fucking stupid. She was going to turn it off any minute now. Just as soon as the lead girl got this haircut they kept mentioning. Cody vaguely wanted to know how she would look post-makeover. She was only human.

Her dad knocked and came in with a basket full of laundry. 'There's about thirty pairs of socks in here,' he said by way of a greeting. 'You're out, right?'

'Thanks, Dad,' Cody said, not looking up from her phone.

He started putting them away in her sock drawer, glancing at her laptop. 'What are you watching?'

'Nothing,' she told him. 'I'm turning it off in a minute.'

He started laughing. 'I know this one. Why are you watching *this*? Not really your thing, is it?'

'I'm about to turn it *off*,' she repeated, annoyed.

‘I took your mum to see this,’ he noted.

Cody finally looked up from her phone. ‘What?’

‘Yeah. First date, actually.’

Cody snickered. ‘*Wow.*’

‘I thought it would get her in the mood. But she hated it.’

‘I bet,’ Cody said.

‘She’s never been one for romance. I should have realised that,’ her dad said, giving up on putting the socks in neatly and messily tipping the basket. Half the socks fell on the floor. ‘Fuck’s sake,’ he muttered. ‘You can take it from here.’

Cody got up and started putting the socks away, hoping her dad would leave. But he was lingering in the doorway. After the last sock was away and the drawer was slammed shut, she turned to him. ‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ he shrugged.

‘OK,’ she said and stood, arms folded, staring at him until he’d worked up the nerve to say whatever the fuck was spinning around his grey matter.

‘I guess I was just wondering...’ he began carefully.

‘Yes?’

‘About the next step.’

Oh, Christ. It was one of *those* chats. Cody loved her dad, but watching him self-consciously parenting was a bit cringe at times. ‘I’m still figuring it out,’ Cody said.

‘It’s just... I know, I know, I *know*, OK? It’s Medford or bust. But, err, now that you know you’re not going there, I thought it might be time to consider...’

‘Clearing?’ Cody asked, trying not to get pissed off. But that word had become a real trigger for her lately.

He stopped short. ‘Ummm... Well...’

‘I’m not doing it.’

‘So, what next? I’m not trying to be pushy, but...’

‘Dad, I don’t know, OK? Can you just let me not know?’ she asked. He was the one person she tried to tamp down her temper with, but he was pushing his luck.

‘Yes. Totally. Definitely. I’m not one of those parents who thinks uni is the only way. Get a degree or don’t. Volunteer in Kuala Lumpur. Take up kickboxing. I just need to know that you’ll have some answers eventually.’

Cody shrugged. 'I can always live with mum.'

There was a split-second pause before they both started laughing. 'Yeah. Good luck with that,' her dad said, chuckling his way out of the room.

Cody was glad to get him out on a light note. She was tired from too much social interaction. Her battery had been drained even before the surreal coffee with Ava. Imagine trying to base your life on crappy romantic comedies from the nineties? Madness.

But her dad's words rang in her ears. He wanted her to do something, and she didn't know what to do. She had no plan at all.

But Ava did.

Cody had seen her, time after time, making things happen. Charity events, social occasions, etc. It was nothing Cody cared about, so she hadn't paid much attention. But in retrospect, was there a possibility she could do as promised? Shove Cody into the centre of the school and make her a bloody prom queen? Cody wanted that about as much as she wanted a smack in the face.

But imagine how much fodder she could get out of it? That course head at Medford would just about fall out of her chair if Cody could explain how that had come to pass. She might find some really interesting observations. Kind of like a nature documentarian. In it and apart from it. Seeing how the apes behaved, what drove them.

But no. It was ridiculous. Preposterous. Absurd.

Only Cody didn't have a better idea, did she? She'd tried alone and failed. Those clubs were bullshit. They were not the way in. Because they were as cliquey as anywhere else. It was a society she was not a part of and did not know how to penetrate.

She needed a guide. And if there was anyone who could lead her through the jungle, it was probably Ava. Scandal or no scandal.

As the main girl in the movie debuted a successful make-over, and the lead boy's eyes fell out of his head at the sight of her because he couldn't tell someone was attractive unless it was spelt out for him, Cody groaned. She had to accept Ava's offer.

But she was damned if she was going to wear a dress to prom. That was a hard line.

Thirteen

Ava was in the library, hiding. She wasn't ready to hang out with everyone right now. She couldn't bear to be around anyone who might give her that terrible look she kept receiving. A sort of pitying disgust.

Ava felt she might go mad if she saw it again. She needed to come up with some other idea, and fast. Something simpler than asking someone who despised her for help.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, Cody appeared around a bookshelf. 'There you are!'

Ava jumped. 'Yes. Here I am.'

'I watched *She's All That*.'

Ava wasn't sure where this was going. 'OK...'

'It's terrible. And then I watched *He's All That*, which is somehow worse. And there's one thing I want you to understand.'

Ava was still playing catch-up. 'What?'

'There will be no makeovers. No Queer-Eyeing of any kind. I mean it. Not so much as a fringe trim.'

Ava blinked. 'Wait, is this your way of telling me you're gonna do it?'

Cody nodded. 'I guess.'

Ava didn't care. She was flying. Cody was in. 'You won't regret this!'

Cody sighed. 'I will. But that's fine.'

'You have to trust me,' Ava said. 'We're both gonna win.'

'I don't trust anyone,' Cody told her plainly.

Ava wasn't knocked by that. 'I guess I'm not in a very trusting position myself these days now you come to mention it. So maybe we should just refer to it more like an alliance. We're allied.'

'Allied,' Cody tried out. 'I guess that works.'

'OK, so first things first. We need to plan this a little.'

'Can't you just post about it or whatever? Isn't that what basics do?' Cody asked.

Ava took a long, deep sigh. 'Cody. Do you think things just happen?'

Cody shrugged. ‘Yeah.’

‘OK, *some* things just happen. Like sixty million years ago, the dinosaurs were standing around, and then a big meteor crashed into the earth. That just happened. But when I do something, it does not just *happen*. Did you go to my Onesie Run for Young Minds charity?’

‘No.’

Ava didn’t even know why she’d bothered to ask. ‘Well, it didn’t just happen.’

‘Why not?’ Cody asked. ‘Didn’t people just put on onesies and run a few miles?’

Ava stared at her. ‘Are you joking? I had to plan the route, organise hydration, have an ambulance standing by, get a balloon arch made for the finish line, get certificates of completion done, and T-shirts made. And that was before I even took any money.’

Cody blew out a tired breath. ‘That sounds exhausting. You couldn’t just set up a Facebook page for the charity and ask people to donate?’

‘I’d make about fifty quid from that. Events make money because people come together to do something. They get to feel good. They don’t get that from a Facebook page. I think about that every time I need to organise something. How are people going to feel? And by the way, the run mad seven grand for mental health.’

Cody tried to look like she wasn't impressed. 'Not bad.'

'It was a *success*, Cody. Because I know what I'm doing. And you and I are going to make this a success, too. It's going to take forethought and planning. It will roll out at the *right* speed.'

Cody's shoulders fell. 'You remember a minute ago when I said I'd regret this?'

'Yeah?'

'It's already happened.'

Ava had no time to deal with Cody's can't-do attitude. 'Just come to my house after school. Seven, Oakdale Drive.'

'Fine.' Cody turned and left. Though Ava had no intent to do any makeovers, she was going to have to provide a little bit of work on her manners. This habit she had of Irish goodbye-ing out of conversations needed work for a start.

But hard work had never scared Ava. Because now, she had a partner in this endeavour. And there was no stopping her now.

Ava got waylaid trying to convince a DJ to knock about thirty percent off his fee. It took some serious negotiation, but she got him there.

But she was late home and arrived to find Cody sitting in her kitchen looking slightly shell-shocked while Ava's mother talked at her.

'...So when she was fifteen, I told her, no one owes you a living. You're getting a real job. I wanted to make sure she didn't get the idea that every girl her age has to be a bloody *content creator*. The world is drowning in makeup tutorials as it is. So she works under me at Top to Bottom.'

'The clothes chain?' Cody asked.

'I'm the *manager*,' her mother announced, pleased with herself. 'So Ava's on better than minimum wage, and she gets a fifteen percent employee discount. And if she finds something with a busted zip, she can take it home for free.'

'Mum!' Ava exclaimed, embarrassed.

Her mother turned with a tut. 'What did I say wrong? Your friend won't judge. I mean, look how she's dressed.'

'MOTHER!' Ava hollered. If she said one more thing, Ava was prepared to induce a faint to shut her up.

But her mother rolled her eyes. 'Well, fine. If you're so embarrassed your mother pulled strings to get you a Saturday job.'

‘That’s not what’s embarrassing me,’ Ava told her.

Her mother gave Cody a what’s-up-her-arse look and left the kitchen, calling, ‘There’s coke in the fridge and some cheese strings.’

Ava loved cheese strings, but it made her feel about eight years old to eat them in front of someone else. She wasn’t going to consume one in front of Cody, of all people.

‘I could murder a cheese string,’ Cody said.

Ava fetched them, relieved. Her mother had a point. Cody wasn’t judgy. At least not about things like snacks, anyway.

They sat at the kitchen table, and Ava said, ‘Sorry about her.’

‘I like hoodies. Some people find that oddly challenging,’ Cody said with a half-smile.

‘It’s a nice hoodie,’ Ava said quickly. ‘She’s not usually so rude.’

‘If you think that’s rude, don’t meet *my* mum,’ Cody said, ripping open the packaging of her snack.

‘What’s she like?’ Ava asked, very interested to hear about the woman who had birthed Cody Foster.

Cody ripped some cheese off her string. ‘Good question. If I see her, I’ll ask.’ She shoved the string in her mouth and chewed.

Ava raised an eyebrow. ‘She’s not around?’

‘Technically, she has weekend custody, and I visit her house. She’s just never in it. Always working,’ Cody mumbled through stringy mozzarella.

‘She’s got custody, but she doesn’t show up for it?’

‘She was there more when I was younger. But when I could take care of myself, she checked out. I keep going because I need a break from my dad. He can be a bit much.’

‘What does your mother do?’ Ava asked.

Cody swallowed. ‘Criminal lawyer for rich people. So, you know, a dirtbag.’

Cody might well have thought her mother was morally bankrupt, but from the sounds of it, she had money.

Ava suddenly felt quite self-conscious about her little kitchen in her little house. But she shook it off. ‘Right, to business. I think we need to start by arranging some kind of public, ya know... Basically, we have to engineer a meet-cute.’

Cody looked at her like she’d lost her marbles. ‘We’ve already met. Like, a lot.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘No, I don’t.’

Ava ignored Cody’s obtuseness. ‘So, how would this have happened? You and me? What’s the narrative here? Like, where could we have gotten to know each other outside of school?’

‘I don’t go anywhere outside of school.’

‘Nowhere?’

‘No.’

‘No, but I mean, you go to *some* places,’ Ava tried.

Cody frowned. ‘Does the word recluse mean anything to you?’

‘You don’t go *anywhere*?’ Ava asked, amazed.

‘Is that going to be a problem?’

‘No. It’s just going to require some creative thinking...’
The solution hit Ava. ‘Oh Christ, of course!’ she exclaimed.

‘What?’

‘It’s so easy. How was this not the very first thing I thought of?’

‘Yes?’ Cody asked.

Ava was delighted with herself. ‘We need to get paired in class.’

Cody was less than impressed. ‘In what? And how? The teacher decides that kind of thing.’

‘I’m sure we can work something out. What classes are we in together?’ Ava asked her.

Cody raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you serious? You don’t know.’

Ava froze. ‘Uhhh...’

‘English Literature. *And* psychology. *And* Media Studies. We’re doing the same A-levels.’

Ava was shocked. ‘We are?’

‘Yes. But of course, *you* didn’t notice. Why would you?’ Cody asked.

Ava felt like she’d lost some of the progress she’d made with Cody. And she kind of deserved it.

‘Sorry,’ Ava said weakly.

Cody brushed it off. ‘Doesn’t matter.’

Ava felt like she suddenly understood why Cody hadn’t liked her all these years. Sure, Ava had never wronged her. Not directly. But she hadn’t noticed her either. As far as Ava was concerned, Cody Foster hadn’t existed as a person in any meaningful way. She was just background colour to her life. Ava wondered how many other people existed in that same way to her.

But that kind of introspection would have to wait. Mainly because Ava didn’t have a clue how to make up for her failings. And also, she had an idea.

‘I know what we can do.’

Fourteen

Cody was embarrassed just thinking about what she was going to have to do. Why had she agreed to this?

She was in Media Studies. The class was waiting for Miss Huang to crank things up, but she was having a slow start. Hiding behind shades, she poured water from a two-litre bottle into a cup that read, 'We'll Fix it in Post'.

She cracked open a tube of Berocca, dropped a tablet in with a fizz, and swilled it around. 'Here we go...' she said quietly.

Everyone waited patiently as she took a sip of her drink that somehow turned into her necking the entire thing. A little bit dribbled out of the side and down her neck, but she didn't notice. She plonked the empty cup down with a sigh.

'Guys. Never do tequila. It's evil.'

No one said anything.

'Alright then!' Miss Huang said, somewhat revived. 'It's time for us to get cracking on our practical assignments. It's worth forty percent of the grade, so I hope you've given it thought. I'll assign groups based on whatever medium you choose.'

She poured more water from her ridiculously large bottle into her cup and added Berocca number two. She sipped her second therapeutic beverage with a little less desperation. 'So, let's go round the room.'

She took a survey, noting the answers. Several people wanted to make short films, and Miss Huang muttered, 'Might as well give it a go while you're young.'

There were a few podcasters. One guy wanted to make a music video, which just so happened to feature his band, and some people wanted to create an advertisement, which Cody thought sounded horrendous. Most people wanted to design websites on various topics.

It came to Cody. She already knew what she was doing. She wanted to create a magazine.

'Oh? What kind?' Miss Huang asked.

'Literary,' Cody said. 'I want to put together a few different stories into a magazine format.'

Miss Huang paused. 'I know this school doesn't offer a creative writing A level, Cody, but I don't think...'

'As long as it looks like a magazine, does it matter what's in it?' Cody asked.

'Yes,' Miss Huang said. 'The syllabus says...'

'I'm doing a literary magazine,' Cody told her firmly.

‘Maybe we can talk this through later?’ Miss Huang said, sounding exhausted at the very thought.

Cody shrugged.

Miss Huang turned to Ava with hope. ‘Ava?’

‘I want to do a magazine, too. Fashion.’

Miss Huang smiled. And then she turned to Cody. ‘Why don’t we combine those?’

Now, Cody knew this was what was going to happen. They’d designed it to happen. Cody was supposed to be annoyed. It wasn’t hard to get there.

‘How would you combine those two things?’ Cody demanded.

‘Yeah,’ Ava said with a bit less vitriol. ‘How?’

‘I want you two to pair up and figure that out.’

‘No,’ Cody said. ‘It doesn’t make sense. Those are two completely different subjects.’

‘It sounds like a *frustrating* and *difficult* task,’ Ava agreed loudly. ‘I can’t imagine how this could *ever* work out.’

Cody resisted the urge to roll her eyes at Ava's performance. Cody was lucky, however, because the only reason she wasn't having a tough time selling this was that she was genuinely getting annoyed. Did she want to do this? She'd planned to do a literary magazine the moment practicals were on the horizon. And now Ava was going to hijack it and probably make it suck.

Cody had to remind herself what she was going to get out of it. Ava was going to guide her through the social side of this school and give her proof she was a real human person who could do real human person interactions. And it started now. If Cody could get out of her own way.

But Cody had never been great at that. 'Miss Huang, this is bullshit.'

The room went deathly quiet.

Miss Huang slipped her sunnies down her nose and gave Cody a look. 'Cody... I don't have this in me today.'

'That's kind of my point,' Cody said. 'You're phoning in my education.'

Ava gave a small but audible gasp.

'Right,' Miss Huang said, her ire rising palpably. 'That's enough out of you. If you're going to behave like this... Well, let's think. How can we solve it?'

Cody realised she'd gone too far. Had she fucked the plan?

‘I don’t wish to *phone it in*, but I think the best way I can educate you today is to teach you the value of compromise,’ Miss Huang said. ‘You’re *going* to work with Ava. That’s the end of the conversation as far as I’m concerned.’

Cody gritted her teeth and said nothing else. She didn’t know if she was happy or not. She’d gotten what she wanted, but also not.

Miss Huang moved on to the next person.

Cody was in her beanbag in the library at lunch when she got a text.

What the hell was that?

I just did what you said, Cody replied.

You went too hard. She could have gone the other way and given you what you wanted to shut you up.

I knew she wouldn’t, Cody tapped back.

NO YOU DIDN’T, screamed the reply.

That was true. Cody hadn't felt very in charge of how things were going. Even her own behaviour had started to get away from her.

What does it matter? It turned out how you wanted it to.

There was an extremely long pause while the three dots did their thing. And then they vanished and did not reappear, nor did a message. Cody had pissed Ava off. That felt weird. It wasn't hard to figure out why. There had been a shift in their power dynamic.

This whole time, Cody felt like she had the power in the situation simply because Ava was doing all the convincing, and it was up to Cody to say yes or no. The trouble was, Cody had said yes now. She'd agreed, so her power was gone. And now Ava was acting like her boss.

That didn't sit well with Cody. But what could she do? She was stuck in this situation if she wanted to get what she needed from Ava.

Only Cody was unsure as to whether she could do her part. She'd almost fallen at the first bloody hurdle. But would Ava have patience while Cody figured out what she was doing? Cody wasn't sure.

Ava had always been frighteningly motivated. She would move heaven and earth to get that fucking crown. That kind of scared Cody. She would get what she wanted, and she would drag Cody kicking and screaming to the finish line. Unless Cody fucked up catastrophically, which didn't seem beyond the realm of possibility.

But for now, Cody was realising she had made herself Ava's bitch. Unless it went off the rails completely, Cody was going to have to suck it up and go along. In fact, she was going to have to do what Miss Huang, that lazy cow, had told her to do. She was going to have to learn how to compromise.

Fifteen

Now that Ava had a workable plan, she was heading back out into the world. It started with lunch.

There were two tables that Ava's people inhabited for lunch. Table one was square in the centre of the room, and table two was off to the left. Table one used to be Ava, Becky, Tara, and Mia. Table two was Leo, Rian, Ben Cutler, who was nice but a bit competitive, and Noah Wojcik, their resident funny guy.

But something was different today. The tables were pushed together. That wasn't completely without precedent. But the timing was weird.

Everyone was there, including Leo and Rian, sitting side by side. Ava didn't quite know what to do. But she knew she couldn't go elsewhere. That would be a concession. It would be like saying, yeah, you win our friends. Ava wouldn't do that. So she sat down at the opposite side of the bustling table from Leo, hoping that would be that.

But then the tosser looked her right in the eye and said, 'Ava, I'm glad you're here.'

A hush fell across the table. Ava looked at Tara for some kind of information about what this was. Tara shrugged.

'I know this has all been a bit... Look, I don't want to wreck everything,' said Mr Magnanimous. 'I don't want either

of us to lose friends over this. You know I've always... I haven't stopped caring about you.'

Ava let out a snort. 'How would I know that? We haven't spoken since you two had your little GNOC.'

Leo swapped a look with Rian, who looked mortified. 'I've been trying to give you some space.'

'Yeah, I saw. On Instagram.'

Leo sighed. 'I'm sorry you had to see that. And just so you know, I'm not *trying* to campaign for prom king, you know? I never said I even wanted it. It's everyone else that's saying it.'

'Everyone else? Who exactly is everyone else?' Ava asked.

Leo shrugged and licked his lips. 'You know. People. Everyone.'

'Right.'

'It's the people's choice. I guess they can see that I'm not a bad guy. Things happen, right?'

Ava sat back in her chair and folded her arms. She was aware that everyone at the table, not to mention any table within earshot, was waiting to see her reaction. She needed to be very careful. Anything said would be taken, shared, discussed, dissected.

So she would give almost nothing. ‘OK, Fine.’

Leo paused like he thought there would be more. But Ava began to eat her salad.

No one said anything for a few minutes, and then Tara, never great with silence, said, ‘Yay! Just in time for my party. You can all come now.’

Ava turned to her and tried to psychically ask, ‘What the hell is wrong with you? Can you not see what just happened? That dick is trying to make himself look like the good guy.’ It was a lot to express with a look, but Ava had known Tara for a long time. At least some of it should have landed.

Tara’s face fell. ‘Oh shit, you know what?’

Ava waited, hoping Tara would somehow let people know that she, for one, didn’t buy any of this. But what Tara said was, ‘I don’t think I’ve got enough mixers. Does Coke mix with Mezcal?’

Ava internalised a sigh. She knew Tara didn’t mean to be so dense, but apparently, she had taken this exchange at total face value. She believed Ava and Leo had made peace.

Ava had never felt so alone.

The only thing she had now was a lone wolf with a short fuse who didn’t like her and couldn’t be relied upon not to go off-piste from a perfectly good plan.

But that was what she had. And now she'd have to go to this fucking party. So it was time to crank it up.

She discretely DM'd Cody.

There's a party on Saturday night. We're going.

It's way too soon for that. We only just got assigned to work together.

I'm accelerating things.

What's the rush?

The rush was that Leo was going to parade his new boyfriend around Tara's party while Ava sat in a corner in social exile, a clear loser in this breakup. Ava couldn't have that. But she wasn't going to pitch it quite like that.

It's an opportunity we're not going to miss.

Silence.

Can I rely on you this time? She messaged.

It was a pointed comment. Cody needed to get her shit together in a hurry if she was going to be of the slightest use to Ava. Today had not been an encouraging start.

Eventually, she got a response.

That depends. What do I have to do?

Ava glanced at Leo, smiling to himself, happy. She began to type.

Sixteen

Cody was standing outside Tara Phelps's house, feeling stupid. She didn't belong here.

The house was loud, the sounds of drunkenness and bad music spilling out. It was nine, and they were already in her dad's phrasing, 'Three sheets to pissed.'

Cody didn't drink. There had never seemed much point. It was something people did in groups, and when it wasn't, from what she understood, it was usually not a good sign.

She didn't need it anyway. She knew booze was something people used to loosen up and behave the way they secretly wanted to. But Cody already knew how to do that. She didn't need to wreck her liver to be herself.

That was part of the reason she was stood outside this house like a muppet. She didn't know how she would pretend. She was a shitty liar; she always had been. How was she going to do what she had to do?

She knocked on the door, and Tara answered. She seemed about as shocked as Cody could say she'd ever seen a person look. It wasn't rude, as such. She just seemed so confused that her higher functions had stopped working.

Cody eventually took pity on her and said, 'I'm not trying to come to your party or anything, so chill. I just need a word with Ava.'

‘Okaaayyyy...’ Tara said, fighting through her bafflement. ‘Ava *Gale*?’

‘Do you have any other Avas in there?’ Cody asked.

‘No.’

‘Do you *know* any other Avas?’ Cody pressed.

Tara thought. ‘Umm, I did once meet a friend of my aunt’s called Ava.’

‘Do you think it’ll be her that I’m asking for?’ Cody questioned, tired. It was such slow progress.

‘No?’ Tara answered, still struggling.

‘OK. So...’ Cody said and left it at that.

Tara was going to have to get the rest of the way herself.

Tara eventually turned away from the door and came back with Ava. ‘Is *this* who you meant?’

Cody sighed. ‘Yes.’

‘It’s alright, she just wants... Actually, what do you want? And how did you find me?’ Ava asked, folding her arms.

It was a bit more dialled back than the one-woman pantomime she'd performed in Media Studies, and for that, Cody was moderately grateful.

'We need to talk about the practical. I can't let you screw forty percent of my grade,' Cody said honestly.

That was when she realised that maybe she could get through this by not lying at all. She could just try to find the truth in it.

'It can't wait?' Ava asked.

It couldn't because Ava had told her it couldn't, so again, no lie needed. 'No. It can't wait.'

'If we have to talk about this, I need a drink.' Ava turned to Tara. 'She's OK to come in for a bit, isn't she?'

Cody was amazed when Tara smiled and said, 'The more, the merrier.'

Weirdly, Cody thought she meant it.

Cody walked in, and a wall of sound smashed her in the face. The music wasn't the problem. It was the human noises that were a shock to her system. About forty people were being loud without Cody being able to determine a single word being said. It was like people were just making vague noises at one another, like Sims characters.

A few people noticed her come in, and looks were tossed. But it seemed like there would be no actual stink raised by her presence, which was slightly surprising. Cody had been more worried about walking in and getting kicked straight out than she'd realised. But the villagers had yet to light the torches.

She followed Ava and Tara into a bustling kitchen. People Cody had seen around and knew the names of but had never spoken to were doing shots and acting like it was the most exciting thing that anyone had ever done.

Tara poured something mysterious into a glass and topped it off with lemonade. She handed it to Cody. 'There you go.' She walked off.

Cody looked at the glass. 'Hell is this supposed to be?'

'Hard to say,' Ava said. 'But Tara tries, so sip it for politeness's sake and then tip the rest.'

Cody took a sip and gagged immediately, but for lack of a place to spit, she was forced to swallow.

'You kept it down,' Ava said, impressed.

'Be honest. Is this a prank? Like a hazing ritual?' Cody asked, smacking her lips, trying to figure out what horrible flavours her mouth was dealing with.

Ava sighed. 'If Tara's pranking you, she's doing it to everyone. And she's playing the long game. Maybe one day she's gonna upload a massive compilation of spit-takes to

TikTok, and then we'll finally see her for the master troll she is.' She sipped her own drink. 'Or maybe her taste buds are just broken.'

'Why did she even give me a drink? I wasn't invited.'

'She invited you in. You're invited. That's the end of it, as far as Tara's concerned.'

'Oh,' Cody said, stumped.

'What did you think was going to happen to you tonight, out of interest?'

'I'm not sure. Something a bit more... More.'

'I told you. This is how it is,' Ava said. 'No one's gonna be that obvious about putting you in your place.'

'I'm beginning to see that.' Cody had to admit, she was right.

People wouldn't tell you that you couldn't be places. They were subtler about social rankings. Cody had forgotten that. She was already starting to think about how she'd put it in her personal statement.

In my journey into the heart of social darkness, I realised quickly that people are as mean and judgemental as I'd always suspected. But what I have learnt is that they're too scared to be upfront about it in case they get punched in the face.

Hmm, needed work.

Leo suddenly appeared in the kitchen. ‘Oh, hi,’ he said to Ava awkwardly. He didn’t notice Cody.

‘Hello,’ Ava said evenly.

‘So glad you came tonight,’ he said.

‘It’s my best friend’s party. Why wouldn’t I?’ Ava said, her tone taking on the slightest edge.

Leo grabbed a beer from the side, popped it open, and then he stood awkwardly silent. ‘Well, anyway, it’s *great* that you’re here. Really.’ He left the kitchen.

‘I don’t believe he meant that,’ Cody observed.

Ava’s jaw tightened. ‘I agree. He *is* a lying shitbag.’

‘Not quite what I said.’ Cody paused before asking what she really wanted to know. ‘What did you see in that dork, anyway?’

Ava looked surprised. ‘Oh. Well... He was persistent.’

‘And what?’ Cody waited.

Ava looked thrown. ‘Umm, he was quite nice to me. Until the end, obviously.’

‘But him. Personally. I don’t get it.’

Ava looked confused. ‘You don’t? You don’t see it at all?’

‘No.’

‘I mean, he’s *attractive*.’

‘No, he *isn’t*,’ Cody said emphatically.

‘What? Of course, he is. I mean, I know he’s a dirtbag, but you can’t argue that he’s hot.’

Cody tutted. ‘He’s just a collection of physical attributes that people like.’

Ava was foxed. ‘I think that’s the definition of attractive.’

‘Don’t agree.’

Ava chewed the inside of her mouth for a moment before asking. ‘But... is that because you’re... asexual?’

Cody burst out laughing. ‘What? I’m not asexual.’

Ava's lips parted in surprise. 'You're not? I thought I had it nailed.'

'Why?'

'I guess I thought you just don't need, like, human contact or something, and that's why... You're the way you are.'

Cody took a long look at Ava, slotting some pieces together. 'Are you saying that the end goal for all human interaction is getting laid?'

Ava shook her head. 'No. No. I don't... No, of course I don't. I've never wanted to shag Tara. So I don't, I don't... No, it's not like that—'

'I get it,' Cody said, reassessing Ava. 'You're *that* girl.'

'What girl?' Ava said, stiffening.

'A guy-girl. You need that kind of attention from boys to think you have any value,' Cody said.

The moment the words were out of her mouth, she knew she'd fucked up.

Ava's eyes widened. 'What? I'm not like that. I have a *lot* of worth.'

Cody needed to rephrase, stat. ‘I’m sure you do. That’s not what I said. I just mean... It’s not your fault. You’re trained to think like that. That’s all I meant. The patriarchy and shit—’

‘You were saying I don’t care about anything as long as some boy wants to sleep with me, right?’ Ava asked, clearly angry.

Cody wanted to delete the last minute. She was honest to a fault, and she was happy to be that. But there were some things you were not supposed to say out loud to people, and she knew that. She wasn’t Sally.

Maybe she was a bit rattled by what Ava had said. ‘The way you are,’ she’d put it, trying to figure out the issue. All the while implying that she was missing something that Ava thought she ought to have. Cody didn’t like that.

Maybe because there was a grain of truth in it. Cody liked to think she’d been making a conscious choice not to engage with the human race. But if Cody’s people muscle had truly atrophied, then she was like this forever, not just for her teenage years. She could never reverse it. The rest of her life, outside. Cody thought she’d made peace with that.

But she was annoyed, and she was being cunt. So perhaps not.

‘OK, so, can we get on with things?’ Ava asked snippily.

Cody remembered why she was there in the first place. ‘Now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Right now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I go to the toilet first?’ Cody asked.

Ava rolled her eyes. ‘There’s a small toilet near the front door.’

Cody trundled off, back the way she came. She walked through the living room, heading back to the hall. At the front door, Tara was letting someone in. And, of course, it was Becky Saxton.

Cody had known this moment would come. That she would have to be in Becky’s presence if she was going to do this. Becky was a member of Ava’s circle. It was only logical they’d come face-to-face.

Cody had decided how to be in that moment. She wanted to look her right in the eye and say, ‘Hi, Becky,’ with utter indifference. Like Becky was no one. Which she was.

Becky took her coat off, nattering to Tara. She hadn’t spotted Cody yet. Cody braced herself. But just as she turned, Cody felt an urgent need to pee, so she ran into the toilet and locked the door.

She heard Becky pass by, seemingly unaware, wittering away about whatever bullshit.

Cody sat down on the lav toilet, hot shame in her chest. She had run from Becky. How could she still be so scared of her after all this time? Cody was scared of no one anymore. So how did that horrid little asshole still have the power to make her run and hide?

Seventeen

Ava was seething. A *guy-girl*? Really? That's what Cody thought? Was that what *everyone* thought?

It fitted with what had happened recently. Leo had told everyone she'd have basically done *anything* to hang onto him, and they'd thought, 'Yeah, that tracks.'

That had shocked Ava, their willingness to buy it. But was this the reason it had been so successful? Because it was rather easy to believe it of Ava? Because she was known as the type of girl who lived or died on the approval of bloody *boys*?

It wasn't true. Ava had plenty going for her before Leo had come along. She'd been single for ages. It was at least... Actually, she'd only been single for a few weeks because she'd split up with Dylan Fry when he'd moved to Scotland. Though it wasn't the worst thing that could have happened, considering what a jealous dick he could be.

But before *that*, there had been Freddie Khan, and they'd broken up because... No, wait, he'd *dumped* her because he'd said he'd always been in love with his second cousin. And after much soul-searching, he'd decided he had to be with her despite the taboo. It stung Ava a bit in the moment, but after some time had passed, she had to admit she had only ever been lukewarm on him anyway. And anyway, his cousin? *Ick*. And before that...

Ava spent the next few minutes doing some very uncomfortable math. And she concluded that not only had she

never been on her own for more than a few weeks since puberty, but she'd been the one to get dumped every time. She'd never walked away.

Whatever she thought of the boy in question, whether he bored her or annoyed her, or there was a lack of connection, she'd never finished things. The ending was sometimes a relief and sometimes a surprise. But it was never Ava's decision.

Ava felt like her head was going to explode. But she didn't have time for head explosions. She had too much to do to even begin to examine herself right now. She had a plan.

Cody walked back into the kitchen, looking a little odd. She was touching the back of her head in a nervous gesture, rubbing her cropped hair as though soothing herself. Ava didn't think she'd ever seen her look like that.

'You OK?' Ava asked.

'Hmm? Oh. Yeah.'

'You look...' Ava couldn't finish the sentence because the look on Cody's face was not something she recognised on the girl. If it was anyone else, she would have said it was awkwardness.

'What?' Cody asked, a little heat in her voice.

That was enough for Ava to decide to leave it alone. 'Nothing. You ready?' she muttered.

Even though people were banging around the kitchen drunkenly, she couldn't risk being overheard.

Cody looked away. 'No. I'm going home.'

Ava was aghast. 'What? No! You can't!'

'Why not?' Cody asked.

'You know why?' Ava hissed. 'The *plan*.'

'We'll do it another time,' Cody said dismissively, and she turned to leave.

Ava had had enough. 'No, I don't think so.'

Cody turned back. 'What do you mean?'

'This isn't working. I'm calling it.'

Cody looked alarmed. 'But I don't have enough yet for my statement! Nothing's happened!'

'Well, it's a two-way street,' Ava said. 'And nothing's coming from *your* direction, so...'

'I just said I wanted to do this another night,' Cody defended.

‘You keep agreeing to things and then backing out. The thing with Miss Huang, now this? This is a two-person team, and I can’t rely on my teammate to do the things she says she’ll do,’ Ava said quietly, keeping an eye out for earwiggers. ‘So it can’t work.’

Cody looked torn. Eventually, she sighed and shot Ava a look of blazing rage. ‘God fucking *dammit*.’ And she stormed out of the kitchen.

Well, that’s that, Ava thought. She poured herself a drink and took a sip. She never really hit the booze particularly hard, but tonight could be the night she started. It was all down the crapper. She felt stupid. Of course, this couldn’t work...

But Ava never got to her second sip because she heard a commotion from the living room. She ran in to find Cody still there, in the middle of a row with a red-faced Leo.

Ava smiled.

Eighteen

‘God fucking *dammit*,’ Cody muttered, enraged. Ava had her in a headlock. Mostly because she had a point. Cody wasn’t pulling her weight.

She’d been going to, probably. Until she saw Becky, and she’d felt so shamed at how Becky had cowed her without even trying. Cody needed to not be in this house with that person right now. She needed to be in her bedroom, her headphones on, in the dark, resetting herself from this weird night.

But then Ava threw a shit fit, and she had no choice. Cody wasn’t getting another chance. And this was an alliance. It wasn’t about trust or like. It was about need. It was about quid pro quo. And Cody had to admit that she wasn’t quoling for her quid.

She went into the living room without another word to Ava. There was nothing more to be said. Cody had to do the thing she’d planned, or that was that.

Most of the room was a heaving dancefloor. She examined the throng, looking for the man in question. Leo. He was dancing with Rian, for the most part. But there were a lot of people he was bumping bodies with, and it looked like Rian had noticed that. Interesting. But that wasn’t the point right now.

She walked right up to Leo, snaking around some dancers (dancers who were not Becky, she was thrilled to see) and stamped on his foot.

‘Ahh!’ he screamed, but no one heard it. The music was still wall vibrantly loud. Leo looked around him for his foot’s assailant. ‘The fuck?’ he said. ‘Who did that?’

People were starting to realise something was happening and were turning to Leo. Cody took a couple of steps back. Someone cut the music.

‘Who the hell stamped on my foot?’ Leo yelled, a bit too loud now that he didn’t need to compete with ear-splitting pop.

Cody felt the entire room tense.

Rian turned to his beloved with concern. ‘You OK?’

‘No! Someone fucking... There’s a footprint on my Nikes!’ Leo exclaimed.

The room went quiet, and Cody didn’t think a better moment would come. ‘My bad,’ she said.

Leo turned to her. ‘You?’

Cody nodded. ‘I was just passing through, trying to leave. I guess I caught you.’

Leo looked at her as if he didn't understand what the hell was happening. 'You're... Cody Whatever? What the hell are you even doing here?'

Cody didn't have a good response to that. She hadn't thought this far ahead. Ava was supposed to show up at some point and quietly take her side. That was the deal. Show Leo up as the dick he was while doing a soft reveal of Cody and Ava's begrudging pairing.

People were going to get used to the sight of them together starting tonight. If Ava could get her skates on and show up to do her bit. Cody felt very exposed without her.

Cody found her voice again. 'It's Cody Foster, actually...' she began.

Suddenly, Tara appeared. 'Leo! Don't be rude to my guests!'

Cody turned to Tara in pure astonishment. Tara Phelps, whom Cody had always thought of as not much more than a wig that had learnt to walk, was coming to her rescue.

Leo baulked. 'She *attacked* me.'

'She stood on your foot. I'm surprised no one else did. It's heaving in here,' Tara said.

'Well... It was *really* hard,' Leo said, his tone going down a few notches.

The kitchen door burst open, and she was finally here, Ava. ‘What’s going on?’ she said, trying to catch up.

‘I stood on... Wait, what’s your name again?’ Cody asked Leo.

Leo looked like he’d never been asked that question in all his life. ‘It’s *Leo!*’ he said, too loud.

‘Leo, yeah.’ She turned to Ava. ‘I was trying to get by, and I guess I stood on his little piggies?’

A ripple of laughter went through the room. Cody tried not to enjoy it and failed.

‘Sorry, anyway,’ Cody shrugged. She turned to Ava. ‘We’re done, aren’t we? I’ll go.’

Ava tutted. ‘Leo, don’t be so nasty.’

Leo looked confused. ‘Nasty? She’s not even supposed to be here.’

Ava put her hands on her hips in consternation. ‘What, do you think she crashed just to come and stamp on your foot?’

Leo looked like he thought that was very much what Cody had done. But he zipped it.

Ava rolled her eyes. ‘She just came to... We’re paired up in media, and it’s worth forty percent, so... There were a few things to nail down, and she dropped by because it was easier to talk it through.’ Ava paused. ‘If your shoes are so important...’

‘They’re not important,’ Leo said quickly.

Ava looked at Cody. ‘Sorry about this. He’s not *usually* like this.’

Cody shrugged.

Tara tutted. ‘Right, is this all over now? Can we all go back to the party?’

Leo walked to the sound system—with a pronounced limp—and put the music back on, red creeping into his cheeks. Everyone stopped staring, going back to whatever they’d been doing before, be it drinking, dancing, or the early stages of foreplay.

Ava put a light hand on Cody’s shoulder and steered her back to the kitchen. Tara was hot on their heels.

Mia Garry appeared from somewhere. ‘Dickhead!’ she declared. Cody thought for a split second the insult was aimed at her. But then Mia followed on with, ‘Who does he think he is? King Leo of the party?’

Tara poured another of her dreadful concoctions and handed it to Cody. ‘Here. Ignore him. It’s *my* party, and you’re welcome.’

Cody was so taken aback she couldn't speak. People had taken her side against Leo Wicks. Cody felt a positive feeling she couldn't name rise in her.

And then Becky walked in.

Cody froze. Becky Saxton was the source of all evil in Cody's world. Her first hard lesson, a tone-setter for life as it currently stood. And she was here, looking Cody in the eye.

'That was a bit much, wasn't it? You'd think he lost a leg, the drama queen,' Becky sneered.

OK. So this was a sympathetic thing? Cody didn't care. She wasn't accepting support from Becky. So she just shut her mouth.

'Well, anyway, I think that's me done,' Ava said. 'You're on my way, right?' she said to Cody.

Cody was delighted to take the hint. She was more than ready to fuck off.

'Oh, so soon?' Becky said, with what no one could think was a genuine sad face.

'Yeah, you just got here,' Tara complained.

'Well, I'm tired,' Ava said. Then she seemed to realise that Cody was her own person and said, 'Oh, but of course, it's up to you. If you want to...'

‘I’m good,’ Cody said vehemently.

‘You’re not going because of Leo, are you?’ Tara asked.

Cody snorted a bitter laugh. ‘Oh, no. Not at all,’ she said. She didn’t look at Becky. But she thought about her very hard. ‘Just been a long week.’

‘Oh, well, I’ll see you at school then,’ Tara said brightly.

Weirdly, she seemed to mean it. Like they were buddies now.

Cody nodded, confused. ‘That’s where you’ll generally find me.’

Ava led her out, past Becky, who thankfully gave no further contribution to the scene.

Outside, Cody blew out a breath of relief. ‘Fucking hell, that was all a bit...’ Her sentence broke off abruptly as she realised something strange was happening. The most bizarre occurrence of the night—Ava was hugging her.

Cody froze, and eventually, Ava released her. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘That was good. He looked stupid and mean, and just for a second, everyone saw him. And you did that...’ She looked a bit overcome and then closed off with, ‘Well, anyway. Thank you.’

Cody didn't know what to say back. 'Yeah, well, like you said. Just doing my part.'

'Everybody laughed,' Ava said. 'When you said that thing about the piggies. You heard that, right?'

Cody sniffed. 'Didn't notice.'

Ava smiled, and Cody wasn't sure the lie had landed. But Ava didn't call her out. 'Well, they did. People like you.'

'They don't know me.'

'They will,' Ava said. Something was compelling about her tone.

'Is this going to work, you think?' Cody asked. 'People are going to accept me?'

'Why wouldn't they?' Ava asked.

Cody suddenly felt bad about what she'd said earlier. 'Sorry, by the way. The guy-girl stuff. I don't know why I said that. I don't know you like that.'

Ava's face darkened. 'Let's forget it.'

Cody didn't feel like it was a great note to end on, but she didn't know what else to say. 'See you Monday, then?'

The shadow fell from Ava's face. 'Yep,' she said perkily and headed off.

But Cody knew she was still pissed. Even if she couldn't admit it to herself.

Cody took out her phone to check the time and found seventeen missed calls and thirty-two texts from her dad. She rang him. 'What's up?'

Her dad sighed with the deepest relief. 'Oh fuck me, thank God. I thought you were dead!'

'Why?'

'You're not in the house!' he exclaimed.

'I went to a party.'

There was a pause, and then her dad said, 'If someone's got you, I want you to say, "Yes, Dad," like I asked you a normal question.'

Cody groaned. 'I haven't been abducted. I went out. Calm down.'

'You're *serious*. You went to a *party party*? Wait, does that mean something different now? Is it slang for... God, you haven't gotten into *ketamine*, have you? I read this article that said kids your age...'

Cody spent her entire fifteen-minute walk home trying to calm her dad down. But he refused to relax until she walked into the house with a lack of track marks and normal-sized pupils.

Twenty

Ava went in Monday morning with a game plan. Before class, she headed to the courtyard, coffee in hand. Everyone was there, perched on the low courtyard wall, including Leo. Ava sat near Tara and Mia, putting plenty of space between her and Leo.

‘Uggh,’ she said, putting her stuff down.

Tara took the bait. ‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing,’ Ava said before she spilled it. ‘I just... It’s just this media thing. I don’t know how the hell it’s gonna work. I could kill Miss Huang!’

‘Oh, the thing with, err, Cody?’ Tara asked.

‘Yeah, it’s just... She’s... Like, I’m not saying she hasn’t got good ideas. I just think this isn’t going to work.’

‘Why not? She seems OK,’ Tara said.

‘She wants to go one way, and I want to go another, and we can’t seem to find a middle ground on anything. All we do is argue about everything.’

‘Sounds like a nightmare,’ Mia said distantly.

She wasn't paying attention; she was reading a book about the irrigation methods of the Romans.

'Yeah,' Ava said. 'But... I don't know....' She drifted off. 'I mean, she's kind of alright. Once you get to know her.'

That was actually true. Cody wasn't as scary as people thought. Not that she didn't have her edges. But she had done exactly what Ava had asked. She'd trusted the plan. And she'd pulled it off beautifully.

Ava hadn't known how Leo would react to Cody stepping on his foot. But what she did know was that he was obsessed with keeping his trainers ice white at all times. Ava had dropped some Coke on his foot once, and the look he'd given her... He'd tried to dial it back, pretending it was nothing. But she'd seen something that now, she was more than happy to exploit.

He was obsessed with his image, and any attack on it made him angry. And now everyone had seen a sliver of it.

Cody suddenly walked through the courtyard, and Ava took full advantage of her unexpected appearance. 'Oh Christ, here she is. I can't have another argument, Tara. I just can't.'

'You guys need to relax,' Tara said. 'Just hang out or something. Stop talking about this project if it's driving you nuts.'

'What do you mean?'

‘I don’t know, be friends? Maybe you’ll find it easier to work together then,’ Tara suggested.

Ava feigned astonishment at the very idea. ‘How?’

‘That thing tonight.’

‘What, rock climbing?’ Ava asked.

‘Yeah. Bring her.’

It was amazing. As much as she’d been able to rely on Leo to act like a dick, she could also rely on Tara to be little Miss Sunshine. It was disturbing to Ava how easily everyone was just doing exactly what she wanted.

‘Alright then,’ Ava said. ‘I’ll invite her. I’m sure she’ll say no, though.’

‘OK, I’ll ask.’ Tara stood. ‘Hey! Cody!’

Cody jumped like she’d been threatened with a knife. ‘What?!’ she screamed across the courtyard.

Everyone in the courtyard turned to the sound, which was good, in a way. All eyes were on Cody and the interaction. But Jesus, that had been loud.

Tara waved her over, and she came slowly. ‘Hey, babes!’ Tara greeted.

Cody looked behind her. ‘Oh, me? I’m babes?’

‘Course! So, we’re all going to Rock Faced tonight. You wanna come?’

Cody looked around her at the rest of the crew. They were all watching with interest. But no one looked disturbed by it.

Mia, Shannon, Ben, Tyler, and Rian all looked nonplussed. Becky was painting her nails with an inscrutable expression. Leo was looking away as though he didn’t want anyone to see his reaction to this offer of kinship to Cody. Ava liked that very much.

‘Depends. Is it hard?’ Cody asked.

‘Not the way we do it. Half of us fall off a wall in the first ten minutes, and then we all just drink.’

Cody thought it over. ‘I guess I can handle falling off a wall.’ She turned to Ava. ‘If you don’t mind, of course.’

Ava shrugged. ‘Why would I mind?’

Cody cleared her throat. ‘What time?’

‘Eight?’ Tara said.

‘Eight.’ Cody walked off. Ava watched her go, trying not to laugh. When Cody was done, she was done.

Tara turned. 'See? It'll be great.'

'If you think so,' Ava said agreeably.

'She's in, then, is she?' asked Becky suddenly, and then blew on her nails.

Ava wasn't going to answer that. It wasn't her place. Tara was the instigator, if not the mastermind behind the invitation.

'She's nice, I think,' Tara said. Ava wanted to kiss Tara on top of her head.

Becky nodded. 'Oh, yeah. I'm sure.'

Mia suddenly piped up. 'Hey, Becky. Didn't you kind of... Wasn't there something with Cody...' She frowned, struggling to recall.

Ava was very interested to know what that thing would be, but Becky shook her head quickly. 'That was ages ago.'

'What was ages ago?' Ava asked.

'It was nothing,' Becky said, starting on her other hand.

Ava would have liked to press. But if Becky didn't want you to know something, you didn't know it. Ava decided to ask Cody later if the moment arose.

Twenty-One

Cody was up a wall, and she didn't know how to get back down. Getting up was one thing. You were able to see what you were reaching for. But going the other way was a whole different issue. She didn't have eyes in her arse.

Ben appeared next to her. 'You OK?' he asked.

Cody was in a quandary. She didn't want to admit to Ben that she was a damsel in distress, but she *was* stuck. 'Umm, I just need to know where... I mean...'

'Left foot to the right and down. It's not far to a foothold.'

Cody followed his advice. Her foot found purchase. As long as Ben wasn't going to throw her over his shoulder and climb down like a heroic firefighter, she supposed it was fine to take a tip or two.

'What now?' she questioned.

'Right foot to the right.'

Cody kept following his advice, and eventually, she was back on terra firma. Behind her, a round of applause broke out. She turned to it, on the defensive. But Ava and her crew were all cheering her, and it didn't look ironic.

Mia walked over and held out her hand for a high-five. Despite her confusion, muscle memory kicked in, and Cody slapped it. ‘Nice one!’ Mia said.

‘Yeah?’ Cody asked.

‘That was your first time, right?’ Mia said.

‘Yes. I mean, I’ve climbed things before. But not in an official capacity.’

Mia laughed. ‘Yeah, well, you did better than me. I froze up. A staff member had to fetch me.’

‘Why isn’t anyone using the ropes and everything?’ Cody asked.

Everyone looked around at each other. ‘Umm...’ Tara mumbled.

‘It’s embarrassing,’ Leo said suddenly.

It was the first time they’d spoken since the foot incident.

‘Embarrassing?’ Cody repeated.

‘Yeah. No one else is using them. So we don’t.’

‘I think I’d probably be OK being embarrassed next time,’ Cody said.

Noah Wojcik scratched his head. ‘She’s got a point. What the fuck are we all doing?’

Leo looked at him. ‘Go ahead and strap yourself up like a toddler if you want.’ He laughed, but no one joined him.

‘Yeah, I might. I’ve been wanting to climb that fifty-footer for ages, and I never quite had the balls. If I had some backup, I might actually be able to go for it.’ Noah walked off.

‘Where are you going?’ Leo asked.

‘Find a staff member,’ he called over his shoulder.

‘If *he’s* climbing the fifty-footer, I’m fucked if I’m not,’ muttered Ben, following him. Mia and Tara went next.

Leo sighed, shot Cody the briefest of looks, and followed everyone.

Cody was shocked that one little comment had caused such a weird ripple of descent. Perhaps Leo wasn’t used to having his authority challenged.

Cody was left with Ava. ‘I don’t know what I just did,’ Cody said.

‘Me either, but I like it,’ Ava said. ‘You want to try the fifty-footer?’

‘Not especially. I think I’ll stick to the snack bar.’

‘Yeah, I could do with a drink,’ Ava agreed, and they headed over together.

They both got Cokes and turned back to see absolutely everyone on the massive wall, all in pulleys.

‘It’s funny how easily they crumbled once you spoke up,’ Ava noted.

‘Crumbled?’

‘You gave them permission to do what they all wanted to do anyway.’

‘I don’t understand why anyone needed to give them permission in the first place,’ Cody said.

‘You wouldn’t,’ Ava noted.

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ Cody asked.

‘Because you do what you like, no matter what anyone says.’

‘I don’t know. I’m kind of *your* bitch right now,’ Cody commented.

Ava laughed despite herself. 'But it's mutual. We're co-bitches, if anything.'

Cody snorted and then felt anxiety. 'Is Becky not here?'

Ava gave Cody a long, examining look that she didn't like. 'She's with her dad tonight. Some dinner thing, I don't know. Her parents are divorced, and she's a bit obsessed with her dad since he left the house,' Ava explained.

Cody nodded, and the relief was palpable.

'What's that about?' Ava questioned.

'What?'

'You. And Becky. There's something there,' Ava noted.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Cody lied.

'Mia said something.'

'What did she say?' Cody asked, her blood pressure shooting up.

'Nothing, really. But she implied some kind of, I don't know... A history with you and Becky.'

Cody sighed. 'I don't want to talk about it.'

Ava looked surprised. ‘Oh. So, there *is* something?’

‘Yes,’ Cody admitted. ‘And I’m not talking about it.’

‘OK, yeah, fine. Cool. Mouth shut.’

Cody sat quietly, thinking about the Becky thing. She found herself getting angrier and angrier. How *dare* that girl have the power to make Cody feel like she had to stuff this down? She wasn’t Freddie Fucking Kruger. She was just a perfectly quaffed asshole.

Who was *she* to scare Cody? Nobody scared Cody. Except sometimes her mum, and she’d grown Cody in her body, which lent her a vague dominion over Cody’s existence.

But Becky? She was a bitch, and not much more. Well, so was Cody when you got down to it. So, point for point, they were even. Becky shouldn’t win.

‘You’ve never heard about what happened in junior school between me and Becky, then?’ Cody asked.

Ava responded eagerly. ‘I moved into the area to go to Harewood. I didn’t go to the juniors here.’

‘But no one ever mentioned it?’ Cody checked.

‘No,’ Ava said, and it was easy to see that was true because she looked desperate to hear the story.

So Cody told it to her.

Seven Years Ago

Cody wasn't too sure about this.

She was going to the sleepover of a casual acquaintance, Becky. The reason she was going was that her mother was making her. She worked with Becky's mum, so this was how it was. They kept getting shoved together. And it was fine, even though she and Becky had nothing in common. But Cody sometimes struggled with Becky. But what could you do? Mum-friends were gonna mum-friend.

She rang the doorbell, and Becky's mum, Jen, answered. 'Cody!' she said with too much enthusiasm.

Cody, though only eleven, knew full well that she was trying to counter what would no doubt be a very lukewarm greeting from Becky's friends. They were all of a type that Cody wasn't.

They liked things that someone, at some point, had decided girls were supposed to like. Boys, makeup, clothes, all that crap. Cody couldn't have cared less for those things. Boys especially bored her.

Jen led Cody through to the living room, where everyone was watching some crappy Disney movie.

‘It’s Cody, everyone!’ Jen announced like she was Rhianna, which she decidedly was not.

‘Hi,’ everyone said tepidly.

Becky’s BFFs consisted of Hannah Klein, Hannah Green, and Sophie Lane. The fact that two of them were called Hannah was not the only reason that Cody found it difficult to tell them apart. Becky gave her a wave that seemed a bit more enthused, but overall, it was as expected.

Cody dumped herself in the corner of a sofa and fixed her eyes on the screen. In due course, pizza came, and Cody ate. Another movie was put on.

‘We can watch better stuff after my mum’s gone to bed,’ Becky told the room at around ten. ‘Any suggestions?’

‘*Stranger Things* is good,’ Cody told her.

‘You’ve seen it?’ Becky asked, awed. ‘My mum says it’s sixteen plus.’

‘My dad thought it looked OK because all the kids were my age,’ Cody smirked. ‘By the time people were bleeding from the eyes, he’d left me to it. Saw all of it. But I wouldn’t mind watching it again. The whole thing is seven hours, so we could watch it all if everyone wants to stay up.’

Becky laughed, delighted, before she decided she'd better get the temperature of the toom. She looked around. 'Stranger Things?'

Everyone nodded, intrigued by the violence, and Cody hoped, slightly impressed by her worldliness. For that minute, Cody thought maybe it might be OK.

After Jen had gone to bed, telling Becky to be good and not stay up too late, on went the more adult fare.

Three episodes in, and everyone was loving it. The show was pretty good, but the forbidden element really added spice. And the fact they'd never been up so late was the cherry on the cake.

But come about three, people were nodding off, despite the amount of Coke consumed. By three-thirty, Cody and Becky were the last two conscious.

Becky nodded at the other three and tutted. 'Look at them. Rubbish.'

Cody laughed quietly.

'Shall we sit on the floor? Hannah and Hannah are snoring too loud.'

They both got on their fronts on the carpet, one cushion apiece under their abdomens, watching Eleven kick the crap out of a load of adult men in army suits.

‘She’s cool, isn’t she?’ Becky said.

‘Yeah,’ Cody agreed wholeheartedly.

Cody thought she was a bit more than that. She’d googled the actress, and she was British. That had led Cody to have fantasies where they bumped into each other and became friends. Then, eventually, she would kiss Cody on the mouth and tell her she loved her. But she wasn’t about to admit that to Becky.

But then something perhaps even slightly crazier than meeting Millie Bobby Brown on the fifty-two bus to Monkton occurred. Becky reached over and placed her hand on Cody’s wrist.

Now Cody liked girls, and she knew that. But she’d never thought about Becky like that. So when she felt the contact, she didn’t know how to react.

‘Umm, is this OK?’ Becky whispered.

Cody still didn’t know how to handle this, so she said, ‘Sure.’ She kept her eyes on the screen.

Then Becky’s hand moved up her arm and was positioned awkwardly around her shoulder. Cody realised she was being tugged bodily. She turned around to face Becky because she didn’t yet understand what it was she was trying to do, and before she knew it, Becky’s mouth was on hers.

Cody was surprised but decided to let it happen. It was fine, anyway. Not as exciting as her fantasies, but it was kind

of nice to have a girl want to kiss you. Even one you didn't see like that. It was a bit cool that she was having her first kiss, too. Her diary was finally going to have something in it.

After a few minutes of kissing, she heard a noise, and they broke apart. Both of them turned to see Hannah Green had woken and was looking at them in shock.

'God, Cody! Get off!' Becky suddenly said, and Cody felt herself shoved.

She fell sideways, and then everyone was waking up, roused by Becky's yell. Becky was quick to get on her feet, and she was suddenly a full foot away from her.

Meanwhile, Hannah Green was yelling, 'Oh my God! Cody was trying to kiss Becky!'

Though Hannah Klein and Sophie Green were barely awake, they were making noises of disgust.

But Becky? She was more disgusted than anyone. 'We were just watching TV, and she, like, attacked me!'

Cody was horrified. 'Becky, that's not what—'

'She's a *lesbian*, you guys!' Becky screamed as though a Demogorgon had broken into the room.

'Oh my God, Cody, you can't just *do* things like that!' Sophie said.

‘I didn’t,’ Cody said, her voice too quiet to fight the volume of four girls yelling at her about touching normal girls who were just trying to have a normal sleepover at three o’clock on a normal night.

Cody was shocked. She stopped trying to tell them what had happened. Becky wasn’t looking at her now and was crying in the corner. What the hell *she* had to cry about, Cody didn’t know.

Jen came in, and Cody was relieved. An adult would get to the bottom of it. The truth had to come out.

But Jen was half-asleep and in no mood to preside fairly over the situation. ‘What’s going on? Why is everyone screaming?’ She looked at the TV. ‘What the hell are you watching?’ she demanded. She turned to Becky. ‘What did you see? Was it graphic violence? Who put this on?’

‘She did,’ the Hannahs cried in unison.

‘And she touched up Becky,’ Sophie added.

‘What?’ Jen asked, turning on Cody. ‘Is this true?’

Cody was confused. Two accusations were being levelled at her, and technically, she had committed the first crime, so she began, ‘Yeah, I did—’

‘Becky, did she touch you?’ Jen asked her daughter.

Becky wiped her eyes, eyes that only Cody could tell were dry as a bone. ‘Yeah. I was just watching telly, and she was putting her hands on me and everything.’

‘Becky!’ Cody exploded, finally finding her voice. ‘What the hell? *You* started it.’

But as she looked around the room, she knew that not one person believed her except Becky. And she wasn’t about to confess.

‘I’m calling your mother,’ Jen said, exhausted. ‘She can sort you out.’

Her mother pulled up twenty minutes later and bundled Cody into the back of the car without a word. As the car drove away, Cody hoped that at least her mother would believe her.

‘It’s a lie. I didn’t do it,’ she said to her mother’s eyes in the rearview mirror.

She brought her gaze back to the road and drove on. ‘OK,’ her mother said.

Cody waited for her to say more, but time passed, and nothing more came. ‘So? What are you going to do about it?’ Cody demanded.

‘Do?’

‘Yeah.’

‘There’s nothing *to* do, Cody.’

‘But Becky lied. You’ve got to... I don’t know, tell Jen and those girls that I didn’t do it.’

‘Why?’

Cody didn’t understand why her mother needed this explained, but that was something she would do. ‘Because it’s not *fair*.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’ Cody asked. ‘Of course, it matters.’

‘I’m gonna tell you what I tell every client I have to go and bail out at four in the morning. It doesn’t matter if you did it or not. Because if the evidence points at you and there are no other suspects, in terms of what happens next, it might as well have happened. So plead out.’

‘Mum, what the fuck are you talking about?’ Cody asked.

It was the first time she’d sworn in front of her mother, but it was as good a time as any to break out the eff word for the first time.

Her mother didn’t notice. ‘I’m trying to tell you something. Something important. Jen is sure you did what you’re being accused of because all those girls said you did.’

So don't try to fight it. No point. Go along with it and say sorry. If you deny it, you'll make it worse.'

Cody couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'But everyone's gonna think I'm some kind of pervert that touches people who don't want to be touched. And Becky was the one who started it. I didn't even really want to do it.'

Her mother's eyes were cold. 'Do the time, Cody. That's all I can say.'

'What do you mean? I'm not a criminal.'

'As far as kids go, you're as close as it gets. And there's gonna be a punishment. The social kind. So get ready for that. You're about to become a pariah. Do you know that word?'

'No.'

'It means someone cast out of society,' her mother explained. 'In your world, in real terms, people are not gonna want to talk to you for a while.'

Cody began to cry. Big, bubbly, snotty tears. She just wanted some comfort, but her mother had never been good at that. Cody should have known tonight would be no different.

'You're horrible, Mum.'

Her mother didn't say anything else the whole journey home.

Her mother was right. Cody fought her corner and told everyone what happened. But people didn't want to hear it. They believed Becky and the other girls, who by this point were telling people they woke up and found Cody sitting atop Becky, holding her by the wrists while the poor girl screamed for help.

So Cody was shunned. She stayed shunned for the rest of the school year. When it came time for big school, Cody didn't try to change things. She let it be what it was. There was a dignity to making being an outcast your decision, and since that was about the only thing Cody could control, it stuck fast.

Cody took a sip of her drink. Her mouth was a little dry from her story. She never talked this long. She wondered how Ava was taking this story. Her eyes were as big as saucers.

Twenty-Two

Ava believed Cody's story without question.

It was a simple enough equation. Ava had always found Becky a bit dodgy, even before she'd played a part in Ava's downfall. And for Cody's faults, Ava didn't find her to be dishonest. If anything, she was a bit too honest.

'Fucking Becky!' she exclaimed. 'I always knew that girl was wrong.'

Cody, who had just taken a sip of her drink, spluttered. Ava wasn't sure what to do. She was choking on a liquid, which meant she wouldn't need the Heimlich or anything. But it seemed rude to watch someone choke and just sit there. So she gave Cody a small pat on the back.

'Thank you,' Cody said, getting her breath back.

'I realise the pat doesn't help or anything. It's more of a gesture—'

'No,' Cody said seriously. 'Thank you for believing me.'

Ava blinked. 'Oh.'

They looked at each other for a moment, and Ava realised something that hadn't hit her properly when Cody had been telling her story. Her fake girlfriend was gay?

The sound of a distant scream broke the moment. They both turned to see Noah hanging from a rope, swinging up high from the wall he'd been attempting to conquer.

'Oh fuck me,' he gasped. 'Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me...'

'Calm down, you dickhead. You're on a safety rope!' Mia called to him from two-thirds of the way up the wall.

'It's still fucking scary, alright?' Noah said, on the verge of tears.

'Noah, did you take a drink up?' Tara called to him from the ground, baffled. 'Something's spilling. Is it apple juice...'

Noah, still swinging, went quiet.

Leo was the first to put into words what everyone was starting to realise. 'Have you pissed yourself, bud?'

Noah sighed. 'Yeah.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake!' Rian screamed from a few feet below him on the wall. 'It's on me!'

Chaos ensued as the staff lowered Noah's urine-soaked body. Half of the group assured him that these things happened, while others took the position that Noah needed adult nappies if he was going to be out in polite society.

Ava watched her friend's drama, shaking her head. And then she looked at Cody, expecting to see disgust. But she was smiling. She thought it was funny.

Ava had never seen Cody look as relaxed as she did right then. She looked almost... light.

Ava was shocked at how different it made her look. She suddenly understood why people were always hitting on Cody. Ava knew she was technically good-looking, but she'd never seen what was attractive about her until that very moment.

Later, most of the gang were up a lower wall, including Cody. She seemed eager to get up unaided. Ava wasn't so keen, and she decided to watch, along with Tara.

For some reason, Ava remembered Cody's comment from the other night. She decided she needed another opinion. 'Tara, can I ask you a question?'

Tara turned to her. 'What's up?'

Ava took a deep breath. ‘I need your opinion on something.’

Tara raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows. ‘What?’

Ava tried to think of the best way to ask. ‘It’s... Am I a guy-girl?’

‘What does that mean?’ Tara asked.

‘A girl who only cares about the opinion of boys,’ Ava explained, embarrassed.

Tara frowned. ‘Well, you just asked *me* what I thought about you, so how can you be?’

That confused Ava for a second. ‘Well, yes, I take your point. But before today? Am I all about boys?’

Tara thought it over. ‘Well, kind of. But also, no?’

Ava was foxed. ‘What?’

‘You always have boyfriends, that’s true. But I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone with a lower opinion of men.’

Ava was shocked afresh. ‘How do you mean?’

‘Leo. You rolled your eyes at him constantly.’

‘I did?’ Ava asked.

‘You did that with the others, too. Dylan, Freddie...’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. I kind of just thought that you saw boys as, like, you know... pets. So, it’s like, you do hang out with them. But like how you might always have your pug around.’ Tara frowned. ‘Is that a bit harsh?’

Ava thought it over. ‘No, it’s... Thanks. I appreciate that.’

Ava didn’t know what to think. Was this better than what Cody had said? Or worse? Was she a guy-girl? Or was she the exact opposite? She simply didn’t know.

Twenty-Three

The sun was shining when Cody woke up the next morning, and she thought it was probably going to be a nice day. As she sat in the kitchen, buttering her toast, a tune popped into her head, and she began to hum it.

She suddenly realised her dad was staring at her across the kitchen. ‘That’s it. I’m getting you tested.’

Cody frowned. ‘For what?’

‘Drugs. You’ve had a total personality change recently, and I think it’s irresponsible not to get you checked out.’

‘What kind of change?’ Cody asked, amazed.

‘Going out? Now you’re humming? It’s not you.’

‘Then who is it, might I ask?’ Cody snarked.

‘You just seem... happier.’

Cody wasn’t sure about that definition, but she had to admit, she felt pretty good today. She’d told Ava her tale of woe, half thinking Ava would say something like, ‘Well, there’s two sides to every story.’ But Ava believed her instantly.

So her blessings this morning were two-fold. She'd talked about the incident, which she never did. And it was taken for granted that she was telling the truth. She couldn't help it, she was feeling... Good? But now her dad thought she was a drug addict, so it was business as usual.

'So you think that me being in a slightly better mood and socialising is a cause for concern?' Cody asked her dad.

Her dad paused for a moment and then said, 'Yeah, honestly.'

'*Jesus, Dad.*'

'People don't just change their personalities overnight,' he clarified.

Cody was incensed. 'I *didn't*.'

'You *did*.'

Her dad had something stuck in his arse about this. She would have to give him half the story if she had any hope of getting him to drop it. 'For fuck's sake, fine. I was paired with a girl at school on a project, and I guess we... I was gonna say hit it off, but that's not quite accurate. I guess I've sort of been... She's got all these friends, and... I've hung out with them a bit. That's all.'

Her dad squinted at her. 'I don't want to piss test you, Cody. But mark my words, if I think it's necessary, I'll do it.'

‘Dad, you’re not listening.’

‘I *am* listening,’ he told her. ‘And you’re not telling me everything. Kids think parents... I get it, alright. I thought my parents didn’t know shit. But they know more than you think if they pay attention. And I pay attention. Maybe a bit too much, an overcorrect of... Well. You know.’

He cleared his throat nervously. ‘But the point is, I notice things, and I notice you. You don’t just hang out with people. God knows I’d love it if you did. I mean, I don’t want to say it’s wrong the way you are. But I’ve always wondered how happy you are.’

‘So then, what’s the actual issue here? That I changed into what you wanted me to be?’

Her dad groaned. ‘This is coming out wrong.’

Cody took pity on her father. ‘Get the test. I’ll take it if it will shut you up, OK?’

Her dad nodded. ‘Alright, then. If you’re OK with it.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. But what do I care if you want me to pee on something to realise how dumb you’re being?’

Her dad smiled. ‘Cody, that puts my mind at ease. You don’t even know.’ He picked up his phone. ‘Let’s see... Do you think I can get a test from Boots?’

‘I’ll do the peeing, but I draw the line helping you source the thing I pee on. I’m going to school now.’ She put her half-eaten toast in her mouth to eat on her journey. She wouldn’t be allowed to eat in peace at home.

Her dad didn’t want her to become a crack addict, and that was fine, but did he need to have all these bloody talks about everything? Why couldn’t he just search Cody’s stuff when she wasn’t there like a normal person?

‘It’s time,’ Ava said.

‘Christ, I don’t even have coffee yet,’ Cody complained, sitting down in the coffee shop. Her morning was being bookended by pushy nutcases.

‘You’re in it now,’ Ava went on, unbothered by Cody’s need for caffeine.

‘I’ve been to two things. One and a half, as a matter of fact. I was at that party for about ten minutes. I don’t think I’m *in* anything.’

‘Tara likes you. And Mia. And Noah. As well as Ben and Tyler. Rian seemed good with you, too, not that I care what he thinks.’

‘When did you take this survey?’ Cody asked, peering over Ava’s shoulder at a glass case of pastries.

‘Last night in the group chat,’ Ava said. She followed Cody’s line of sight. ‘For God’s *sake*.’ She stood, went to the counter, bought Cody a coffee and croissant and delivered them back to the table. ‘There. Can you concentrate now?’

Cody smiled. ‘Thanks. Yeah, fine. Hit me.’

‘Leo and Becky have kept a lid on their feelings for you, but who gives a shit about either of them?’ Ava continued. ‘You’ve got a majority vote.’

‘Majority vote?’ Cody asked, muffled by croissant. ‘I’ve never felt so valued.’

Ava ignored the disdain. ‘So now it’s stage two. The you-and-me of it.’

Cody swallowed quickly. ‘How is that part even going to work?’

‘When I found out Leo and Rian were official, it was because they were spotted at Bella Italia,’ Ava said.

Cody gave Ava a hard look. ‘If you think I’m going to Bella Italia, you’ve got another thing coming.’

‘I wasn’t necessarily thinking of ripping a page out of his playbook so directly,’ Ava said with a tut. ‘It could be anywhere.’

‘Just so you know, Frankie and Benny’s is also off the list.’ Cody stared off, remembering a dark day. ‘There was an incident on my fourteenth birthday when I went too hard on the fully loaded potato skins. Staff said they didn’t have enough bleach in the whole building. I’m not allowed back.’

Ava raised an eyebrow. ‘Good to know. Look, what I want to do is go somewhere that people I know go, but not people I *know* know. And then we’ll get seen. It will make its way back. And I’ll be like, “Oh no, we’re just friends.” But, like, not really.’

‘When you say seen... Seen doing *what* exactly?’

‘Nothing too much,’ Ava said quickly. ‘Just sitting close. Maybe a hand hold if you’re open to it.’

Cody didn’t quite know how to ask the next thing, but it would need to be broached eventually. ‘Look, since we’re talking about it, how far is this going to need to go? In the long term? I mean, how far were you expecting we’d... I guess what I’m asking is, how *convincing* is this going to need to be?’

Ava seemed to click at last. A coy expression developed. ‘Oh, right. Ummm... I really don’t... I hadn’t quite...’

‘OK, let’s nut it out now, then,’ Cody said quickly.

‘Yes, let’s.’

There was a very long silence while Cody waited for Ava to lead, which was the norm. But she seemed to be waiting for Cody to say something, and they ended up sitting in a thick silence.

Ava was the first to crack. 'I don't expect you to kiss me. If you don't want.'

Cody's mouth felt suddenly dry. 'It's not just up to me, though, is it? I mean, what do you think... How far were you imagining you could go?'

'I mean, I guess it might look a little funny if we *never* kissed,' Ava noted.

Cody considered. 'I guess I can see that,' she said evenly.

'Right?'

'Right.'

'So we'd do that. Sometimes. A few times. A couple, a few... Sometimes.' Ava stuck her hand out. 'Agreed?'

Cody wanted to laugh but shook the hand instead. It was warm and firm. And Cody suddenly thought, *Ava never does anything by halves. And I bet that includes kissing.*

Cody suddenly understood why Noah had peed himself when he fell off the high wall. It was scary up high. And Ava towered. She was resourceful and determined, a force of

nature. And Cody was going to kiss her. Fake or not, Cody felt real fear at the thought.

Twenty-Four

Ava was waiting outside Flicks, a tiny indie cinema.

She'd picked this place, rather than going to the multiplex, because it seemed to fit with the idea of a clandestine meeting out of the public eye. She was trying to look like she was hiding something, which was a rather odd position to be in, but it was what she was doing, and she would do it correctly.

Only Cody was late. Now, people were walking past her, and it was becoming embarrassing. If anything, she looked like she'd been stood up.

Oh, and look, there was Melissa Dooley with Kalee Jackson. They nodded at Ava, and she nodded back as they went in.

Ava could have killed Cody. Melissa was exactly the right person to have seen her. A peripheral acquaintance with a big mouth. And now what she'd report was that Ava was a Billy-No-Mates.

'Sorry!' Cody suddenly yelled, rounding the corner.

'Where the bloody hell have you been?' Ava hissed at her.

‘You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.’

Ava raised an eyebrow. ‘Let’s test that theory, shall we?’

Cody sighed. ‘My dad wanted me to do a urine test for drugs.’

Ava laughed. ‘It’s original, I’ll give you that.’

‘I told you,’ Cody shrugged. ‘Anyway, come on.’

Ava looked at her. ‘Too late, we’ve missed it.’

‘What do you mean? It’s about to start. We just need to get in and get the tickets...’

‘We’re not here for the *movie*, Cody. We were here to stand outside and get seen going in.’

‘So... We’re not actually going to see the movie?’ Cody said, her shoulders dropping.

‘No.’

Cody looked at the floor ground. ‘It’ll come to Netflix eventually, I guess.’

Ava was surprised at how disappointed she looked. She chewed it over. ‘I guess we could go and see it. I mean, people have to walk back out, don’t they?’

Cody brightened. 'If you think so.'

So they went in and bought tickets for what turned out to be a terrifying horror movie. Ava didn't do horror. It made her stomach hurt. She watched half of it through her hands, embarrassed to be so cowardly in front of Cody. But she only laughed.

'Have some popcorn,' Cody said, proffering her giant bucket. 'It's sweet.'

Ava wasn't doing sugar currently, so she refused. Then a character in the movie got his leg caught in a bear trap while running from a serial killer, and Ava tensed. She had a thing about bear traps.

Cody offered her the bucket again. 'Sugar is good for shock,' she grinned.

It did smell quite good, and wasn't popcorn a pretty low-calorie snack?

'Alright,' Ava conceded and grabbed a handful.

Another tense moment came up, and Ava automatically reached for the popcorn, meeting Cody's hand in the bucket. They both snatched back quickly.

'Sorry,' Ava muttered, but Cody kept her eyes on the screen.

‘That was pretty good,’ Cody said as they left the screen.

Ava liked how happy she looked, and she wanted to say something positive about the movie, despite how much it had scared the shit out of her. ‘Certainly better than a Marvel.’

‘I don’t watch them,’ Cody said sniffily.

Ava was quick to correct. ‘I didn’t watch them from choice, believe me. Leo loves them. And he has to see *everything*. He didn’t even let me off the Ant-Mans.’

Cody snorted. ‘Sounds like you two weren’t a great match. If you don’t mind me saying.’

Ava smiled sadly. ‘I don’t mind. I don’t think I even liked him that much now that I’ve had time to think it over.’

‘So why did you go out with him? And don’t say it was his muscles because I don’t buy it,’ Cody said.

Ava wanted to explain it the best way she knew how. But ultimately, all she could say was, ‘I think I thought... I was supposed to be with him.’ She thought Cody would laugh at her.

But she just sighed. ‘Oh, man. That’s *sad*.’

‘For who?’

Cody was surprised. ‘Who? *You*, obviously.’

‘It was my choice to go out with him.’

‘It doesn’t sound like it.’

‘Well, anyway. It’s worked itself out, hasn’t it?’ Ava said quickly. They were outside the cinema now, and they stood waiting for the place to empty.

‘Why did you think that, anyway?’ Cody asked after a moment.

‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean, who or what made you think you had to be with that dickhead?’

Ava was feeling uncomfortable continuing this topic, so she tried to make a joke of it. ‘You know what? He looked like the boys from my mum’s movies. And maybe that made me think that if I wanted to be the central character, then that’s the kind of guy I was supposed to be interested in.’ The moment the words left Ava’s lips, she knew she’d accidentally said something horribly true.

‘The central character?’ Cody said.

Ava wanted to die. ‘I was just kidding.’

But Cody’s trademark smirk did not make an appearance. ‘We’re all the stars of our own little head movies. Maybe the movies we grow up with make us pick a genre to fit our lives into. You got rom-com. I got horror.’

Ava was so relieved that she burst out laughing. ‘That’s exactly right.’ She looked at Cody anew. ‘I can see it now.’

‘See what?’ Cody asked.

‘The writer thing. I bet you’re alright.’

Cody looked amazed, and then embarrassed, and then annoyed. ‘Oh, well, I don’t...’

Ava noticed over Cody’s shoulder that Melissa was coming out with Kalee. She saw her spot them. Only Cody had her back to Melissa.

‘Look over your shoulder,’ Ava said without moving her lips.

Cody, confused, turned. ‘What? What am I looking at?’

Ava watched Melissa’s eyes widen at the sight of Cody, and then she moved off rather quickly, dragging Kalee.

‘Nailed it,’ Ava smiled.

‘Oh, I see. We were spotted. Who by?’ Cody asked.

‘Melissa Dooley.’

‘Jesus, I *hate* her,’ Cody said mildly.

‘You hate everyone,’ Ava retorted.

Cody took a strange pause and then said, ‘Yeah. I guess.’

‘OK, well, mission accomplished. Good job, partner.’

Cody smiled thinly. ‘You’re the organ grinder. I’m just the monkey.’

Ava could tell she wasn’t being serious. ‘Yeah, but one of the smart ones. Like a capuchin. They can use tools and stuff.’

That made Cody laugh a bit. Ava realised then that Cody wasn’t nearly as mean to her now. She seemed so much easier. Ava wondered what the difference was.

Twenty-Five

Spaghetti was dumped onto Cody's plate, along with some sauce. 'Do you want cheese?' Cody's dad asked.

'What I want is to stop talking about me,' Cody said.

'But do you want *cheese*?' her dad insisted.

'Well, obviously,' Cody conceded.

Her dad fetched the cheese from the fridge and began to grate it over the plate. 'So, anyway, back to you.'

'The test was negative, wasn't it? So can you leave me alone now?' Cody said.

Her dad looked surprised. He laughed. 'Not a chance. My responsibility doesn't begin and end with a urine strip.'

'What else could you want from me?'

'I want to meet your new friends.'

Cody was bug-eyed. 'What? Why?'

‘That’s a pretty normal request, kiddo,’ her dad said, ladling sauce on his spaghetti and sitting down.

‘I’m not a kid anymore,’ Cody said. ‘I’m a legal adult. You can’t vet my friends or whatever.’

He picked up the cheese and the grater. ‘I can’t, you’re right.’ He began to grate onto his plate, saying, ‘I guess I was just hoping you’d go along with it because I’ve never asked you for anything in your entire life while I worked my arse off to take care of you and provide for you. That’s all.’ He tapped the grater out, getting the last few dustings of parmesan.

Cody sat back, amazed. ‘So we’re doing emotional manipulation now, are we?’

Her dad shrugged and smiled, twirling spaghetti around his fork. ‘When we lost the ability to smack your arses, this is what we were given in its place. Be grateful. I got the belt sometimes.’ He ate his forkful.

‘I’m sorry about that, but is it either/or?’ Cody asked.

Her father swallowed. ‘Are you going to introduce me or not?’

Cody considered. She had to see Ava tonight anyway because they needed to address the whole Media Studies project element of this partnership. She was supposed to be going to Ava’s. But she wanted her dad to relax. He was going to give himself a heart attack if he kept doing this worried parent routine.

Cody took a mouthful of food and got out her phone.

‘No phones at the table,’ her dad reminded her.

She held up a finger. ‘I’ll only be quick.’ She began texting Ava.

Could we do mine tonight instead?

The reply came quickly. *Yeah sure.*

And could you meet my dad and act like I’m a normal person who made a friend? He’s spooked because I started leaving the house.

No problem. See you at 8.

She texted her address and turned back to him. ‘Right, pops. Wish granted. Ava’s coming over in an hour.’

He looked horrified that his dreams were coming true quite so hastily. ‘Ava?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Tonight? But the place is... I haven’t hoovered!’ He dropped his fork and ran out of the kitchen. Cody ate her spaghetti to a soundtrack of manic vacuuming.

Her dad was plumping pillows in the living room. Cody was watching him, trying not to laugh. She wasn't being entirely successful.

'Stop it and help me, will you? She'll be here any minute!' her dad said desperately.

'You know she's not *your* guest, don't you?' Cody smirked.

'She's both our guest, technically. I just want to make sure we make a good impression.'

'We?'

Her dad was now running a microfibre cloth over the TV. 'You.' He stopped what he was doing and turned to her. 'Sorry, I didn't mean it like that.'

Cody wasn't laughing now. 'You're desperate for me to make a friend, aren't you?'

'No, of course not. But if this isn't a crack dealer, I want you to have the best... shot.' He groaned. 'This is coming out so wrong.'

'No, I don't think it is,' Cody said. 'You're starting to get your hopes up that I'm normal, is that it?'

‘I love you as you are, you know that,’ her dad said quickly.

‘Why does that always sound like a compromise, though?’ Cody asked.

‘It’s *not*,’ her father said emotionally.

The doorbell went, and Cody gave her dad a look. ‘OK, let’s play normal, shall we?’

Her dad sighed. ‘You *are* normal.’

‘I meant you,’ Cody told him flatly.

She went to the door, and Ava was peppy as ever. ‘So, I’ve been looking into magazines that might be a good example of the kind of thing we could—’

‘My dad is fucking on one tonight,’ Cody warned her.

‘How do you mean? Is he, like, angry?’ Ava asked, worried.

‘Worse,’ Cody said as she led Ava into the living room, where her dad was wearing a frightening large smile.

‘Ava!’ he proclaimed, and Cody noted that Ava flinched. ‘It’s so lovely to meet you,’ he said, walking over to her and sticking out his hand.

Cody wanted to die. She'd been worried before that Ava would give the game away about the hollow nature of their relationship, but now she was more worried that her dad was acting like a full-on freak.

But Ava shook his hand without hesitation.

'Firm grip,' her dad noted, impressed.

Ava laughed. 'Nice to meet you, Mr...'

'Toby,' her dad said quickly.

'Toby.'

'Can I get you a drink? We've got Coke, water... Are you eighteen? If so, I could even offer you a light beer?'

Ava smiled. 'I'm good with a Coke, thanks.'

Her dad scurried out.

Cody was incensed. 'He's never offered *me* a beer, and I turned eighteen months ago.'

'I'm a guest,' Ava said with a dry smile.

Her dad came back in a moment later with a tray, Cokes on it, along with Doritos and dip.

‘Where the hell were you hiding *those*?’ Cody exclaimed. She kept a pretty good track of what the snack cupboard held. And it was currently bare.

‘Private stash,’ her dad said. He placed it on the coffee table and said, ‘Well, enjoy.’

‘Thanks very much,’ Ava said.

‘Let’s take it up to my room,’ Cody said quickly.

‘Oh no, please. Take the living room,’ her dad said. ‘I’m just gonna get an early night anyway, so I won’t bother you.’

‘It’s five past eight,’ Cody said.

Her dad laughed awkwardly. ‘I’m getting up early to, er... jog.’

Cody gaped at her dad trying to pretend he was an early-morning jogger. He wouldn’t even run for a bus. But she didn’t want to call it out. She just wanted him to go before he did anything else bizarre.

‘Well, g’night.’ He dashed out.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ Cody said. ‘If this had been a Saturday, we could have had my mum’s place to ourselves.’

‘Don’t be silly. Your dad’s nice,’ Ava said. She sat down and cracked open a Coke. ‘So, anyway. I want to talk to you about *Vogue*.’

Cody soon forgot about her dad. ‘About *what*?’

Twenty-Six

Ava was exhausted. They were going around in circles.

‘But it’s a serious magazine with proper journalism in it!’ she said, trying to restate the point in a way that would click.

‘It’s a rag filled with adverts for people who are dumb enough to pay for the privilege of being sold to,’ Cody countered.

Ava collapsed back onto the sofa, spent. ‘Oh my God. I can’t believe I told Tara this was happening, and now it actually is.’

‘What?’

‘That we can’t agree on how to proceed with this bloody project.’

‘What else have you been saying about me?’ Cody asked, interested.

‘Very little. I’m being subtle,’ Ava assured her.

‘Oh,’ Cody said, sounding oddly deflated.

‘Is there something you want me to say?’ Ava asked, confused.

‘No, of course not,’ Cody said. ‘Anyway... We have to agree on something, and we have to agree on it now. Because I’m not pissing this grade away. I want to do something proper.’

‘Me too,’ Ava said.

‘Good. I mean, we both need the grade for uni,’ Cody observed.

Ava shrugged. ‘Mmm hmm.’

‘Where are you going, anyway?’ Cody asked.

‘Don’t know yet,’ Ava said quickly.

‘But you’d have to have heard back by now, right?’ Cody pressed. ‘You haven’t picked yet?’

This was a tricky topic, and Ava didn’t want to get into it, particularly with Cody.

She told her the lie she was telling everyone. ‘Yeah, I’m err, still waiting for responses.’

‘What, from *all* of them? Where did you apply?’ Cody asked.

This was pissing Ava off. Why couldn't Cody accept that she was deflecting and just allow it like a normal person?

'Look, I'm not going *anywhere*, OK?'

Cody was aghast. 'What? You!?'

'That's right, me,' Ava said, opening her laptop as though she had some notes she simply *had* to make that very moment.

She stared at the screen for a moment, hoping when she looked back up, Cody would have gotten over her shock.

But she was staring at Ava like she had two heads.

'What?' Ava snapped.

'You're the most driven person in our school. Possibly the world. How in the hell are you not going to uni?' Cody asked, literally scratching her head in confusion.

'I just know my limits. That's all.' She looked back to her laptop. But she could feel the stare continuing. '*What?*'

'This makes no sense. What limits?'

'You know. Life limits.'

'Life limits?'

‘Is there an echo in here?’ Ava snapped.

Cody put her hands up in surrender. ‘Jeez, OK. Sorry.’

Ava thought that was an end to it and was in the process of segueing back to their argument about *Vogue* when Cody said, ‘I guess I just didn’t realise we had that in common.’

It was Ava’s turn to be surprised. ‘We don’t. You know what you’re doing.’

‘I had one plan, and I got rejected. Yeah, I’m trying to fix it, but God knows if *that’s* gonna work. And if it doesn’t...’ Cody shrugged.

‘Oh,’ Ava exclaimed. She paused. ‘So, you don’t have a plan B?’

‘Of course I don’t.’

‘But you wanna write, don’t you? Like... That’s it for you, isn’t it?’ Ava asked.

Cody looked surprised. ‘I guess.’ She took a pause and then said with a lot more certainty, ‘I don’t know why I’m downplaying it. It’s everything to me, if I’m honest.’

Ava was surprised and touched by Cody’s sudden sincerity. ‘That sounds kind of nice. To have something you care about like that.’

‘You don’t have that? That’s the problem?’ Cody said.

‘That’s part of it.’

‘But then, how the hell do you do things the way you do them?’

‘How *do* I do things?’ Ava asked, interested.

Cody considered her words. ‘All the way,’ she said eventually.

‘It’s easy when it’s easy,’ Ava said.

‘Nothing you’ve ever done looks easy to me,’ Cody said.

‘I guess what I mean is that it’s... It’s like flirting.’

Cody raised an eyebrow. ‘Ah, yes. I know a lot about that. Tons and tons. Legendary flirt, me.’

Ava rolled her eyes. ‘When you don’t fancy someone, it’s easy to flirt with them. That’s kind of how I approach things. I pick a thing, and I focus on it. It’s not hard because there’s nothing at stake. And then everyone claps and says how great I am, and that’s the only bit that I like.’ As Ava finished speaking, she was shocked at herself. Yet again, too much came out in front of Cody.

Cody suddenly handed Ava a tissue. 'What's that for?' Ava asked.

'The tears,' Cody said.

Ava touched her face and found that, yes, she was lightly crying. 'What the hell?' she demanded of her tear ducts, annoyed.

Cody smiled, and Ava was rather irritated to see sympathy in it. 'Don't you dare start feeling sorry for me,' Ava told her, trying to play it off as a joke.

'I don't,' Cody told her, sounding serious.

'Good,' Ava said. 'Right, so can we finish arguing about *Vogue* now?'

Cody sighed. 'You know what? Gimme that copy in your bag, and I'll give it a read. And if it sucks, it sucks, OK?'

Ava nodded. 'If it sucks, it sucks.' She got the magazine out and dropped it on the coffee table.

She took a Dorito afterwards and dipped it into the salsa. She never usually ate salty stuff. It puffed you up, but it tasted too good. She had another.

'Oh, by the way... Wait, are we done with this now? Am I OK to update you on Operation Prom Queens?'

‘That’s a terrible name,’ Cody told her.

‘Is that a yes?’

‘Go on, then,’ Cody said, taking a chip and eating it crunchily.

‘Well, Tara texted me that Shannon McGrath texted *her*; and she was like, “Did you go to a movie with Cody.”’

‘And you said...’

‘That it was a coincidence. That I bumped into you there.’

‘Who the hell would buy that?’

‘No one,’ Ava smiled, eating another Dorito.

Twenty-Seven

Cody was flicking through *Vogue* the next morning when she walked smack into a lamppost. She looked around, glad no one had seen it. But there was still bad news.

‘I walked into a lamppost,’ Cody declared to Ava as she sat down in Media Studies, the next seat along.

‘Shit, are you OK?’ Ava asked.

‘No, you don’t get it. It was *Vogue*’s fault. I was reading it when it happened.’

Ava was baffled. ‘Are you saying you want to sue them?’

‘No, I’m *saying*... If you’re so absorbed you walk into lampposts, then I guess it can’t be a terrible read, can it?’

Ava clapped her hands together. ‘Yay!’

‘Cool it, alright? We’ve still got a problem.’

‘Of course we have,’ Ava said.

‘So, some of the articles are boring shit about fashion trends, and then some of them are opinion pieces, interviews, all that, but there’s no fiction,’ Cody explained. ‘I do fiction.’

‘You never write non-fiction?’ Ava asked.

‘Never. Bores me.’

Ava thought about it, and Cody readied herself for Ava to try and talk her into some journalism. ‘What if you wrote an article like it *was* fiction?’

‘Huh?’

‘You never read fiction that was pretending to be something else?’

Cody considered. ‘I guess.’

‘So do that. Write fiction that pretends to be an article.’

Cody wanted to hate the idea. But she couldn’t. It might actually work. It was kind of an exciting premise.

She could write a kind of found-fiction story from the point of view of a journalist. This had potential.

‘You love it, don’t you?’ Ava said, delighted.

‘Don’t be smug,’ Cody warned her, trying not to look happy herself.

This could be kind of cool, and she could start tonight.

Tara turned around. ‘Wow, seems like you guys are getting along.’

Cody didn’t know what to say to that. But Ava looked quietly happy, so that was something. Cody was glad she felt like this was going well. Cody still had enormous doubts about the validity of the scheme. But the thing was, when Ava did something, she hardly ever failed. Cody was starting to wonder if she was actually going to end up wearing some stupid tiara at the end of the year.

Mia turned. Cody hadn’t spoken to her much. ‘Hey, Cody.’

Cody raised an eyebrow. ‘Yup?’

‘Noah told me he blames you for him peeing himself,’ Mia said with a smirk.

For a second, Cody thought the comment was critical. And it was. But then Cody realised that Mia was laughing at Noah—*with* Cody.

‘Well, he can blame his mother for not potty training him correctly,’ Cody retorted.

Mia snorted. ‘You coming to sit with us at lunch today?’ she asked.

‘Sure,’ said Cody.

So far, only Tara had extended invitations. But now other members of the group were noting her as an addition. It was only then she knew what Ava had been telling her was true. She was in.

She glanced at Ava, who was smiling smugly. Cody flipped her off.

Ava’s smile didn’t slip. ‘Told you,’ she mouthed.

Cody sat down at the table at the table (as far as she could get from Becky, who was looking at her phone) and got out her lunch box. Everyone was already there, including Ava.

‘Hi,’ Ava greeted her. ‘What you got in there?’ She gestured at the box.

‘My dad puts it together, so it’s always a mystery.’ She opened it. ‘Lunchables. That means he was running out of time and tossed something in.’

‘You wanna swap for my couscous salad?’ Mia said, tilting her Tupperware up to display a rather miserable-looking meal. ‘I made it when I felt stronger.’

Cody had a quick look. ‘I think I’m gonna stick with the Lunchables.’

‘Can’t blame you,’ Noah said, laughing. ‘Couscous. What’s wrong with a sandwich?’

‘Carbs,’ Mia and Ava said in unison.

‘Carbs good. Make big strong boy,’ Noah grunted, flexing his lean arm.

Mia laughed and poked his bicep. ‘I’ve seen bigger noodles.’

Noah joined in. ‘I’m compact but strong. I could lift you over my head.’

Mia snorted. ‘Sure you could. If I was holding a hundred helium balloons.’

But then, of course, the muscle boy at the table had to get involved.

Leo smirked. ‘You gotta start lifting, mate. I could help you.’

‘He’s fine as he is,’ Mia said quickly, her joke dropping quickly away.

Noah laughed. ‘Yeah, I’m fine as I am. I’m going for that little boy look, like a ten-year-old who’s lost his mum at the supermarket. Girls love that, right?’ he joked.

Everyone laughed, including Leo. But Cody felt he wasn’t really in on the joke.

The dynamics at the table were fascinating to Cody. The way the joke about skinny Noah changed in Leo’s hands was bizarre. It was simply meaner. From the outside, when Cody had thought of Leo as Ken to Ava’s Barbie, he’d seemed lighter, fun.

But inside the group, the dynamics were a little different. You could see that he struggled a little more to know his place. He acted like top dog, but he really didn’t have as much going for him as he liked to pretend. He wasn’t funny like Noah, book smart like Mia, kind like Tara. He was a pretty boy with muscles. It didn’t buy as much respect as Cody had always thought.

It all looked so easy from the outside. Cody thought maybe she’d believed that they were wired differently from her. But looking at them now, she could see more insecurity than she’d have ever expected. The way Mia clearly liked Noah and could only express it with affectionate insults. And Noah seemed happy to make himself the butt of the joke if it meant he was getting attention, even if it wasn’t exactly the kind he wanted. But maybe his joke about looking like a little boy wasn’t really a joke. Maybe that’s exactly how he felt, how they all felt.

They were all a little lost inside. Just the way Cody felt.

That was not the observation that Cody expected to have when all this started. The empathy of it kind of pissed her off. It was so much simpler to hate them. And what she felt now was pity. Gross.

‘Hey, how’s the project going?’ Tara asked, busting up Cody’s fall into the rabbit hole of empathy.

‘It’s fine,’ Cody said. ‘I think we’re almost... We’re finding a compromise.’

‘Did you find it at the cinema,’ Becky suddenly piped up.

The whole table went quiet. Cody didn’t know how to react.

Thank God Ava jumped in. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m just hearing things,’ Becky said.

‘We both just kind of went to the same movie,’ Ava said.

Cody knew it was supposed to go like this, but Ava looked quite nervous to be questioned.

‘But did you plan to?’ Becky asked. ‘Or did you bump into each other? Because I’ve heard it both ways.’

‘What’s the difference?’ Noah asked, genuinely baffled.

‘You went to see *Deep in the Forest*, right? I might like to have seen that movie,’ Becky said. ‘In fact, we *all* would have, right?’

‘Fuck no,’ Mia said. ‘I hate that kind of thing.’

Leo frowned. ‘Is it a comedy?’ Rian put a hand on his arm and shook his head at Leo.

Becky leaned forward. ‘I just mean... You didn’t invite us. Bit weird.’

Cody was starting to feel a bit attacked herself. ‘It was a last-minute thing,’ Cody said, her first words to Becky in seven years. She felt a bit wobbly but kept going. ‘We were around the corner working on this bloody project, and then we walked past, and we both wanted to see it, so we headed in.’

‘Right,’ Becky said. But she still looked a bit pleased with herself.

Even though this was supposed to happen, Cody couldn’t have that. ‘Actually, you’d probably like it.’

Becky raised a dangerous eyebrow. ‘Why’s that?’

‘It’s very twisty and turny. You like that kind of thing, right? People not turning out to be who you think they are?’

If the table was quiet before, it was deathly silent now. 'What's that supposed to mean?' Becky asked.

'Whoa, guys, what's going on?' Leo asked. 'Am I missing something?'

'Many things, Leo. Many, many things,' Ava snapped at him.

Noah started to laugh, and Tara turned to him. 'What are you laughing about?'

'I don't know,' Noah admitted. 'I think I'm just uncomfortable.'

Tara gave him a pat on the head. 'It's OK, we're all friends. Aren't we?'

'Some newer than others,' Becky replied.

Cody couldn't take any more. 'Yeah, that's right. Maybe I'll just go back from whence I came.'

She got up and left the table, her Lunchable untouched.

She was halfway to the library when Ava caught up with her. 'Where are you going?'

'Away,' Cody said.

‘But we’re getting somewhere.’

‘I can’t look at that asshole’s face anymore.’

‘Which asshole?’ Ava asked.

‘Great friend group you’ve got when you don’t even know who I mean,’ Cody said.

Ava rolled her eyes. ‘Look...’

Cody decided she couldn’t take any more. She walked away from Ava, pushing her way into the library. She went around the shelves until she found her favourite seat, the beanbag, free.

She looked at it and felt beautiful clarity. She was safe here. All was calm. She moved toward it, readying herself to fling her body into it.

‘Cody, I was talking to you,’ Ava said, appearing in front of the beanbag.

Cody gave a little yell of shock. ‘You followed me in?’

‘We’re not done,’ Ava said.

The librarian, Carol, appeared. ‘Excuse me, but this is a quiet space. If you’re going to argue, take it outside.’

‘We’re not arguing,’ Cody said.

‘Yes, we are,’ Ava told the woman.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Cody muttered.

Carol looked at Cody. ‘I’m a bit surprised at you.’ She walked away.

Cody huffed, took one last yearning look at the beanbag and walked back out into the hall, Ava at her heels.

She spun to Ava, livid. ‘You just got me kicked out of the library. I’ve never even been *shushed* before!’

Ava sighed. ‘Look, you can’t just keep leaving when you feel like it.’

‘Why not?’ Cody demanded.

‘Because, because...’ Ava stuttered.

‘Because *you* wouldn’t?’ Cody asked.

‘Because it’s rude.’

‘I think I’m fine with that,’ Cody told her.

‘You’re fucking insufferable!’ Ava yelled.

‘As are you!’ Cody said, matching her volume.

They were both wide-eyed, angry. Cody felt... What was this? Excitement. Cody felt flush and alive. Her blood was pumping like she’d run a mile, and she was only standing in front of Ava.

‘You know what?’ Ava yelled. ‘I can’t anymore.’ She stormed off.

Cody watched her go, feeling like she’d made a mistake. A mistake she didn’t understand. Although Cody had walked away from Ava, she realised that it kind of hurt when it went the other way. She didn’t want Ava to walk away from her. Though she was now free to go and sit in her beanbag and read.

Cody looked into the library, comforted by the shelves of books. And she turned away.

Twenty-Eight

Ava wanted to wring Cody's neck. She was so bloody maddening. It was the unpredictability that was the issue. You simply never knew what she'd do next.

Anything could happen. She might tell you to fuck off. She might disappear, or she might even be kind to you. You simply never knew.

She walked home in an absolute blaze. Should she call this off? Was it ridiculous?

She banged into the house to find her mother on the phone. 'Fucking electric company. I swear, Ava. Start saving now because the utility companies practically want your blood!'

'Do you want me to call them again?' Ava asked.

Her mother looked relieved. 'Only if you've got time. I know you're busy with everything.'

Ava nodded. 'I'll find the time.'

Her mother smiled. 'I hate to ask you. But you're just so good at that sort of thing. You must get that from your dad because it's not me.'

The subject of Ava's patriarch rarely came up, and when it did, Ava had nothing to say about it. Because if she did, her mother would get on a rant about him that Ava couldn't hear again. How he'd left her pregnant at twenty, making it clear he wanted nothing to do with her or foetus

Ava. Ava needed to change the subject, stat. 'Yeah, well, I'd better utilise my skills because I've somehow got to get Cody in line for this group project.'

'Cody, yes. She's very Kat from *Ten Things I Hate About You*, isn't she?' her mother observed.

Ava laughed. 'Yeah, I guess.'

'Well, she needs to get her act together. Because girls like that can't just hope Heath Ledger falls in love with them. They end up alone.'

'She's not that bad,' Ava found herself defending.

'She's fine, of course. She's just not our cup of tea, that's all I mean,' her mother said quickly.

Ava went up to her bedroom and sat down on the bed, furious still. She didn't like to act from emotions. She knew that was a bad idea. But she wanted to call Cody and tell her it was off. They could do the project separately and Ava would combine it. They could communicate solely through email. How easy life could be.

She was mulling that over when she heard something. A click. She went over to her bedroom window. Cody was

outside.

Ava was shocked but opened the window. ‘Cody?’

Cody looked up at her. ‘Yep. Me.’

‘What the hell are you doing?’

She looked like she didn’t quite know herself. ‘Well...’

Ava was still furious with her, but it was tempered with a curiosity to know what was happening. Cody was standing underneath her window, throwing stones and looking nervous. Once again, Ava could never have seen this coming.

‘Well?’ she repeated.

‘Sorry,’ Cody mumbled.

Ava heard her perfectly well, but she was damned if Cody was getting off that easy. ‘Did you say something? Didn’t quite catch it.’

Cody gave her a cynical look. She knew Ava was making it hard on purpose. But she didn’t walk off.

‘I said I’m *sorry*,’ Cody enunciated.

‘For what?’ Ava asked.

‘Being rude.’

‘That’s not why I’m mad at you,’ Ava said.

Cody stared at her. ‘Oh. Then...’

‘You’re not treating this like... We’re supposed to be a team. But you don’t respect me. And you’re unpredictable.’

‘I *do* respect you,’ Cody said angrily.

Ava hadn’t expected to have that yelled at her, and it gave her pause. ‘Do you?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry, I’m just... This is tough for me. I’m used to doing what I want. All this stuff... I never know what I’m supposed to be doing.’ She sighed. ‘It’s exhausting being this confused all the time.’

Ava couldn’t help but smile. ‘Cody, maybe we shouldn’t be yelling this at each other.’

‘Oh, sorry.’ Cody turned to go.

‘No, I mean come up,’ Ava called after her.

Cody turned, surprised. ‘Oh. Alright.’

Ava and Cody were sitting across from each other on opposite ends of Ava's bed.

'Becky sucks,' Cody said.

'On that, we can agree.'

'I feel like she's always baiting me,' Cody complained.

'She probably is,' Ava agreed. 'It's what she does. You have to learn how to rise above it.'

'Like you rise above your feelings for Leo?'

'Feelings *about* him.' Ava sighed. 'But you're right. I was being fucking salty, too. I guess we're both flying blind in this.' She looked at Cody. 'Maybe you need to take the wheel. Maybe that's the solution.'

'What are you talking about?'

'What happens next.'

'Yeah, what happens next?' Cody asked.

'No, I'm asking *you*. What happens next?'

Cody was bewildered. ‘Wait, what? I don’t know. *You’re Machiavelli.*’

‘I know. But I can’t keep yanking your chain. You gotta be in this.’

Cody sighed. ‘Christ, really?’

‘Yeah. Take some control here. I think... I think it would be a good thing. For both of us.’

Cody frowned. ‘I don’t know. I guess...’ She stopped.

‘What?’

‘Well, it seems like everyone’s kind of... Everybody knows something’s up. Just like you said they would. We acted like there was something to hide, so everyone thinks there is.’

‘True. So?’

‘So I guess... We give them more.’

‘More?’ Ava repeated.

‘Yeah. *More.*’

Ava felt a little nervous. ‘Are you talking about...’

‘Yes. I think it’s time we get caught.’

Ava knew exactly what Cody meant, and she nodded. 'Caught. That makes sense.'

'It's gonna need to be very public,' Cody said. 'When's the next thing?'

'You're not going to like it,' Ava told her. 'It's Becky's birthday coming up. We decided a while back to rent an Airbnb on the coast. Core group.'

Cody groaned. 'That won't work. I'm not invited. And Becky sure as shit isn't going to invite me.'

'We can make her,' Ava said.

'How?'

'Same as she does things. Sly.'

'I'm gonna leave that to you,' Cody said.

'Please do.'

'OK, so, that's that then.' Cody stood and took a step toward the door. Then she paused and turned back. 'Oh, wait, are we done?'

Ava had to laugh. 'Yeah. We're done.'

Cody left.

Ava was left feeling very different than she had ten minutes ago. Cody was really trying. Ava was pleased, and not just because of their scheme. She wouldn't have wanted it to end that way with Cody. Maddening as she was, Ava was getting used to having her around.

She was glad that Cody would be coming to the thing in a few weeks. Ava had been dreading it. Stuck with Leo and Rian? Horrid. But Cody wouldn't let it be so terrible. Somehow, Ava knew that.

Ava wondered at what point Cody had become a friend.

Ava wondered if it would interfere with getting to the finish line. Funny how she'd never factored in this possibility when she was scheming. Coming to like Cody was something she'd never seen coming for a single moment.

But first of all, she had to get Cody invited, so she called Tara. 'Hey.'

'Hey! Are you all right? You just ran off after Cody, and we couldn't find you!' Tara exclaimed.

'I just wanted to check on her, and then I decided to skip out. Sorry about that. Shoulda texted.'

'Is she with you now?' Tara asked carefully.

Ava smiled to herself. 'Why would she be with me?'

‘I don’t know,’ Tara said quickly. ‘Anyway, Becky’s not happy.’

Ava hoped to God that was true, though she couldn’t say it. ‘No?’

‘Yeah, she felt like Cody was hinting that she was some kind of two-face.’

Ava had to be careful here. ‘Well, she wasn’t being very nice, was she? She was being a bit mean about Cody and me catching a movie. I mean, can we not do things outside the group occasionally? What’s that about?’

‘I know. She was being a bit...’ Tara couldn’t quite bring herself to say something mean and left it at that.

‘I think Cody felt like an outsider when she said that thing about new friends,’ Ava went on.

‘Yeah, I didn’t think that was OK,’ Tara agreed.

‘Because I thought... I mean, we *all* like her, right? Or have I got that wrong?’ Ava asked.

‘No, no, we do!’ Tara exclaimed. ‘It’s been nice to see you make a new... friend.’

Ava couldn’t help but notice how nervous Tara sounded. She was treading lightly around something here. Perfect.

‘Then we need to sort it out,’ Ava declared.

‘How?’

‘Would Becky apologise?’ Ava asked.

Tara laughed for a very long time.

‘Alright, stop laughing. It was just a thought.’

‘Would Cody apologise?’ Tara tried.

‘I don’t think it would be a good idea to ask,’ Ava said honestly. ‘I mean, she’s normally such a lone wolf. If the price she had to pay was to beg Becky for forgiveness, I doubt she’d want to hang out with us again.’

‘Agreed. Can we fix it another way?’ Tara asked.

‘How?’ Ava asked her.

‘Not sure.’

‘Hey, what if she invited Cody to her birthday weekend? That would smooth it over, right?’ Ava said. ‘Like an apology without an apology.’

Tara didn’t say anything for a moment, and Ava thought she’d fudged it.

But she was apparently just mulling because she said after a moment, 'That's a great idea.'

'You think she'd invite her?' Ava asked.

'I'll sort it out,' Tara answered diplomatically.

'How are you going to do that?'

'I'm not sure yet. I guess I'll just tell her she went too far, and that's the way to fix it.'

Ava was kind of amazed she'd put herself in this position for Cody. 'You're the nicest person I know, Tara.'

'Am I?' Tara asked, pleased.

'Definitely,' Ava told her.

Twenty-Nine

Cody was reading in her bedroom when her phone went off. She looked at it to see an invite to the group chat by the name of IGotHarewood. She accepted the invitation.

Hey, here she is, said Mia.

Is the name an erection gag? Cody asked.

Don't judge us. It was Leo's disgusting joke, Mia replied.

Leo dropped a smiley emoji and then an aubergine as an afterthought. Cody shook her head.

She put the phone down and went back to her book. And then it started. Ping, ping, ping. Notification after notification. Cody checked to see that everyone was simply talking shit and put her phone on silent.

Then her phone did the particular vibration pattern of a phone call. It was Ava.

'Hey! Why are you ignoring us?!'

'What do you mean?' Cody said, folding down the corner of her page.

‘Everyone’s asking you to come to Becky’s thing as we speak!’ Ava announced.

‘Shit, that was quick work,’ Cody said admiringly.

‘Tara sorted it. Don’t make her feel silly. Message back.’

‘Fine. Hold on.’ Cody hung up the call and read through it.

Everyone was asking her to come, it was true. Becky was saying nothing specific about the invitation, though she did say simply ‘BYOB’, which Cody thought was her way of saying she was on board with it, however begrudgingly.

When is it? Cody asked.

Weekend after next, Ava replied. *Can you do it?*

As though she had any choice.

I’m in.

Everyone in the group chat began posting celebratory gifs, pics and memes. Even Leo and Rian. Cody didn’t want to feel pleased. But she had to admit, she did.

Cody had her overnight bag packed. She was waiting for her lift in the living room.

Her dad was wearing a hole in the carpet nearby. ‘So if I call this number for the host, I’d be able to get you?’

Cody was aghast. ‘Don’t do that. You can just call my phone.’

‘No, I mean... In an emergency. If I couldn’t get you.’

‘Why wouldn’t you be able to get me?’ Cody asked, baffled.

‘If you, I don’t know, fell off a cliff or something.’

‘I don’t think there are cliffs at Rocksea. It’s pretty flat, from what I understand.’

He nibbled at his nails. ‘You know what I mean. Things happen.’ He paused. ‘Maybe I could have Ava’s number?’

‘Dad, *no*.’

‘I wouldn’t text her for any other reason than if you were *totally* unreachable,’ her dad vowed.

‘How unreachable, though?’

‘An hour?’ her dad tried.

Cody laughed. ‘No way.’

‘Fine, two.’

‘Four,’ Cody countered.

They squinted at one another in a standoff. ‘Three,’ they agreed in unison.

Cody sent her dad Ava’s number, and he checked his phone. ‘Thank you,’ he said, relieved. ‘It’s just nice to know I’ve got more than one way to reach you if I need to.’

‘I’ll be gone less than twenty-four hours, you know.’

‘I know,’ her dad said, trying to smile, missing the mark slightly. ‘Have a great time. Try not to go too nuts.’

‘I’ll only do crack if we run out of ketamine,’ Cody told him.

‘Wow. Funny,’ her dad said as he looked out of the window. ‘Oh! There’s Ava!’

Cody grabbed her dad by the shoulders and pulled him to face her. ‘Dad, I am going to need you to take a few deep breaths, OK?’

‘Why?’

‘Because last time you met Ava, you were... Actually, it seemed like *you* were the one on drugs now that I come to think of it.’

‘I was just being friendly,’ her dad said, offended.

‘Yeah, I know. Just take it down a notch or five, OK?’

The doorbell rang. ‘I’ll get it!’ her dad said instantly, and Cody knew there was no reining him in.

‘No need. I’m just heading straight out.’

‘Then I’ll come and see you off,’ he said.

Cody rolled her eyes but didn’t try to argue. They went to the door together, and her dad opened it. ‘Ava!’ he said. ‘Lovely to see you again.’

‘Hi Toby,’ Ava said with a genuine smile.

Her dad stood there with his weird little grin, and eventually, Cody couldn’t take any more. ‘OK, let’s go.’

‘Oh, hang on.’ He ran off somewhere.

‘Sorry about him,’ Cody said.

‘Stop apologising for him. I like him,’ Ava said.

Her dad came back with a bottle of Absolute vodka in his hand. ‘For the party.’

‘Dad! I thought you told me not to go nuts or whatever,’ Cody said.

‘But you’re going to drink, aren’t you? You’re eighteen-year-olds off by yourself. So if you must, I don’t want you drinking the cheap stuff. It’s all poison, but if you must poison yourself, drink the *better* poisons.’

He handed Cody the bottle. ‘Thanks, Dad,’ Cody said, unable to recover from the shock.

‘Yeah, that’s really nice of you,’ Ava said.

‘Oh, and Ava?’ her dad said, and Cody knew he was about to embarrass her.

‘Yep?’ Ava asked brightly.

‘Take care of her. She’s the only thing I care about.’

It was worse than Cody had feared. She just about wanted to die, but Ava looked touched.

‘I will. I promise,’ she vowed with odd sincerity.

‘Oh my God, let’s just go,’ Cody said, stepping out and shoving Ava gently away from the door. ‘Bye, Dad! Don’t have a breakdown while I’m gone,’ she said, shooing Ava away from the door.

‘Can I just have a little existential crisis as a treat?’ her dad called.

‘Sounds good,’ Cody told him.

‘OK, have a great time.’ He closed the door at last.

They walked through the front gate, and Cody found herself in front of an old dark blue Mondeo. ‘Whose is this?’

‘It’s my uncle’s. He leant it to me,’ Ava explained.

‘Nice,’ Cody said. ‘I can’t even drive.’

‘I can only just about. I got my license three months ago, but I can’t afford my own car yet. My uncle lends me his whenever I ask because he’s usually not using it. He’s out in his work truck.’

‘Are we picking anyone else up?’

‘Nope. Leo’s driving the boys, and Mia’s taking the girls.’

‘How very gendered.’

Ava gave her a quick smile as she took her bag and threw it in the boot. ‘I thought this might be a good opportunity for strategising. Plus, everyone will talk about the fact I was trying to get you alone in my car.’

‘And here’s me thinking we were gonna sing along to my road trip mix,’ Cody said, climbing into the passenger side.

‘Speaking of which,’ Ava said. ‘I hope you know that ride music is the driver’s prerogative.’

Cody turned to Ava with concern. ‘If you put Taylor Swift on, we’re going to have a problem.’

Ava snorted. ‘If you want something a bit grouchier, we could split the difference and put on Billie Eilish?’

‘No sale,’ Cody said.

Ava tutted. ‘I’ll put my liked on random. That’s my best offer.’

‘How long’s the drive?’

‘Two hours.’

‘OK, you get the first hour, I get the second. How about that?’ Cody offered.

‘Alright. But I can’t drive to morose stuff. I reserve the right to skip if some boy with an acoustic guitar starts whining.’

‘What makes you think my music’s morose?’

Ava gave her a look as she put on her seatbelt.

Cody shrugged. ‘OK, fine. No morose stuff.’

They drove to a soundtrack of nineties pop. ‘What in the hell is this?’ Cody asked a few songs in.

Ava nearly drove the car off the road. ‘You’ve never heard of The Spice Girls?’

‘*This* is them?’ Cody exclaimed, appalled. ‘Jesus. It’s worse than I thought.’

‘You’re a philistine,’ Ava told her.

‘History will decide that. Actually, I think it already did.’

‘Then history is written by people who don’t know how to have a good time,’ Ava said saltily.

They had some quiet for a while and Cody enjoyed watching the world go by the window. Until Ava eventually

broke the silence, asking, ‘So, how are you thinking we do this?’

‘This?’

‘Yeah. Your plan.’

‘Plan’s a big word for it.’ Cody cleared her throat. ‘So I’m just thinking we wait until later in the evening. Then we go to an unoccupied room, but one that people will go into at some point, and we kind of position ourselves in a way that looks compromising. And we wait for someone to open a door.’

‘Looks compromising?’ Ava repeated. ‘How do you mean?’

Cody felt her face getting hot. ‘Well, when we hear the door go, we, you know...’

In the silence that followed, Cody’s heart rate seemed to triple.

‘You want me to kiss you?’ Ava eventually asked.

Cody felt immediately embarrassed. ‘You’re right. That’s stupid.’

‘I don’t have a better plan,’ Ava said.

‘OK. Well, it’s in pencil for now.’

They drove in silence for a bit. Cody didn't like how hot her face was growing in the quiet. She couldn't seem to get it to calm down. Thank God Ava was focusing on the road because if she turned, she'd wonder when the hell a plum tomato had gotten into the passenger seat.

But eventually, it began to feel less hot. That is, until Ava asked, out of the blue, 'How many people have you kissed?'

Cody blushed anew.

Ava chuckled nervously. 'Sorry, just wondering because... I don't know if this is... Like I know that a lot of people at our school have taken a run at you. But I don't want to be the one to... I mean, for all I know, you've never...'

Cody put two and two together. 'Oh, I get it. You don't want to take my mouth virginity, is that it?' Cody said.

Ava was silent for a second before exploding into laughter. 'I think that's the worst way you could *possibly* have phrased that. I mean...'

Cody smiled at herself. 'OK, I hear it now.'

Ava was still giggling. 'Mouth virginity. I mean, for the love of *God*, Cody.'

Cody couldn't help but start laughing herself. 'I take it back.'

They laughed together for a moment, and Cody decided she'd better answer the question. 'Don't worry, I'm not box fresh. And I'm not counting fucking Becky.'

'Oh no, you *mustn't* count fucking Becky.' Ava paused. 'I might change her name in my phone to Fucking Becky.'

'Could get some raised eyebrows if she rings you in mixed company,' Cody smiled.

'Hmm, I guess,' Ava said, disappointed. She threw a glance away from the road at Cody. 'Who?'

'Who what?'

Ava tutted. 'You know *what*. Someone from school?'

'Oh. That. I might have tried a little app dating at one time.'

Ava raised a shocked eyebrow. 'Cody Foster, you sly dog. And you met someone?'

'Yeah, I met someone. But I didn't Meet Someone with capital letters. if you know what I mean. A girl named Laura.'

'What school is she from?' Ava asked.

'She wasn't. She was a bit older,' Cody said, starting to feel uncomfortable.

This was a slightly embarrassing subject that was about to be broached.

‘How old?’ Ava asked her.

‘Twenty-three,’ Cody admitted.

‘How old were *you*?’ Ava asked, shocked.

‘Seventeen, just about.’

Ava made a face.

‘Don’t blame her,’ Cody said quickly. ‘It was my fault. I put myself in the twenty’s range.’

‘You lied?’ Ava asked, shocked.

‘I didn’t want to find anyone on the app from school,’ Cody explained.

‘And she bought it? That you were in your twenties, too?’ Ava asked.

‘Never questioned it.’

‘She didn’t wonder why you lived with your parents?’

‘She lived with *her* parents, so no,’ Cody said. ‘She went to uni, and when she graduated, she couldn’t find a job that would pay enough to cover rent, so she went back home. It’s not so weird for that age group.’

‘Right. What about what you do for a living, all that?’ Ava pressed.

‘I just said I was a student, which I am. I didn’t have to lie at all past what it said on my profile.’

‘How?’

‘We only dated for a few weeks. I might have been rumbled if it had gone on any longer.’

‘Why did it end?’ Ava asked.

‘I don’t know.’ Cody paused. ‘She was fine, I guess. Nothing wrong with her as such. I just didn’t feel... I decided that if she couldn’t compete with my own company, then what was the point?’

‘You didn’t date after that?’

‘Nope. I was sated.’

‘Sated,’ Ava repeated thoughtfully. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever used that word in my life.’

‘You’ve dated quite a lot, right?’ Cody asked. ‘I mean, that’s pretty much a matter of public record. I didn’t take note or anything.’

Ava snorted. ‘That’s me. Serial monogamist. Even though now I think every one of them probably fell into the Laura category. Ultimately, I probably would have had more fun alone.’

Cody wasn’t sure how to respond to that. ‘You probably know everyone too well. You could try dating outside the school. Try going out with someone who you can’t play six degrees of Harewood Academy about. Might find someone a bit more surprising.’

Ava nodded but didn’t say anything. Cody decided maybe she shouldn’t be the one to give Ava dating advice. It was a bit ridiculous to think she had anything to tell anyone. She was more than likely going to end up alone.

Thirty

They were still an hour out, but Ava needed to pee. Plus, her legs kind of hurt. She'd never driven this long a distance before. She spotted a service station.

'Toilet break?' she asked.

'Sure,' Cody said.

Ava pulled in, and they walked into the services.

'I'm gonna get a coffee. You want?' Cody asked.

'Yes please, I'll have a—'

'I know, skinny latte, no syrup,' Cody said, wandering off. 'I'll see you back at the car.'

Ava watched her walk away in a state of mild shock. Cody knew and had *memorised* her coffee order. Ava went to the toilet and emptied her bladder, her amazement never shrinking.

Ava got back to the car to see Cody leaning against it casually, sipping her coffee. 'I got Doritos.'

'You're a feeder,' Ava said.

Cody smiled and got into the car. 'Road snacks have to be done.'

Ava started the engine up and did a simple equation that she should have been able to do before but somehow hadn't. You didn't memorise the coffee orders of people you didn't like. You didn't try to stuff snacks down their necks either, not if it was strictly business. What Ava was realising was that Cody actually liked her, and that was pleasing to Ava.

But once again, it caused concern. Could friends pretend to be more than that without something getting messed up? One way or the other?

'Second hour. My music,' Cody declared.

'I'll disconnect my phone, then. You take it from here.'

Cody put on Nirvana.

'I said no whiny boys,' Ava said, five chords in.

'I know. But Kurt Cobain was a whiny boy from the *nineties*, and I know that's your thing.'

Ava sighed and listened. It was a compromise she could live with.

'So, what did your dad say about you refusing to go anywhere than Medford out of curiosity?' Ava asked.

‘Well, I don’t think he’s happy. But luckily, he’s too scared of me to make a thing of it,’ Cody explained plainly.

‘Your dad is scared of you?’ Ava asked, intrigued.

‘Sure.’

‘Yeah, I guess that makes sense. You’re pretty scary.’

‘I’m not *really*, though, right?’ Cody asked.

Ava glanced at her briefly. She shook her head. ‘Nah.’

Cody smiled like she didn’t want to. ‘So, wait, how about your mum? You’re not going anywhere, right? She make a fuss?’ she asked.

‘She thinks it’s good. She says I can rise up the ranks of Top to Bottom. Become a manager at another location.’

‘So she *wants* you to do that?’ Cody asked.

Ava didn’t turn, but she could hear the frown in her voice.

‘I mean, it’s my choice,’ Ava said quickly. ‘But like she always says, why waste time? Just get where you’re going anyway.’

‘But you could go anywhere,’ Cody said.

‘Yeah, sure, I could be an astronaut or a princess,’ Ava said mockingly.

‘I’m serious. You could tell me you want to be Prime Minister someday, and I wouldn’t even laugh,’ Cody said.

Ava sighed. ‘Girls like me don’t become Prime Minister.’

‘Girls like you fucking well *should*,’ Cody said, a little heat in her voice.

Ava glanced at Cody; sure this was mockery. But her dark eyes were sincere. Ava wasn’t sure what to do with the compliment. So she decided to reject it utterly.

‘Well, I’m sure my mother had big ambitions before she got knocked up with me. But that’s life, isn’t it? You have to be real.’

‘No one’s knocked *you* up, have they?’ Cody asked.

‘Christ, don’t even joke,’ Ava said, tightening her grip on the wheel.

‘Then why would you have to have the same life as your mum?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with my mum’s life,’ Ava said, hearing the defensiveness creep into her voice.

‘I wasn’t trying to... No, OK,’ Cody said.

Weird to hear her back down. But if *she* was gonna get into it, so would Ava. ‘What about you, anyway? You’ve limited *your* choices.’

‘I just know what I want,’ Cody told her.

‘You sure? Because you could write anywhere. And if it’s what you want, I’d think somewhere would be better than nowhere.’

‘OK, pushy, *shit*,’ Cody said. ‘Roxie Raymond went there, OK? So I kind of thought...’

‘Oh, her? She writes horror, right?’

‘You know her?’ Cody asked, stunned.

‘I’m not illiterate, Cody,’ Ava told her.

‘I know that,’ Cody answered quickly.

‘Do you? Because sometimes, I get the distinct impression you think I’m an uncultured bimbo,’ Ava said evenly.

Cody rubbed the back of her head, chuckling nervously. 'I guess I still revert to an old idea of you occasionally.'

Ava smiled. 'But now you know better?'

'For sure. Now I know you're *way* smarter than I am,' Cody told her breezily.

Ava was shocked. 'That might be taking it a *bit* far.'

'You're a full-on evil genius,' Cody told her. 'Own it.'

Ava chuckled, delighted. But she wouldn't allow herself to be diverted. 'So anyway, Roxie Raymond? You have to have her life?'

'You ever see her in an interview? She's fucking rude,' Cody said. 'And people just *let* her be because she's talented. So it just felt like maybe hers was a path I could follow.'

Ava cut in. 'But you're not. Rude, I mean. But talented, yes.'

'You don't know that,' Cody said automatically.

'Actually, I kind of read that thing you wrote for the school magazine,' Ava admitted. She'd dug it out of the school library recently, curious. 'That story about the little girl who accidentally murders the school bully and has to cover it up? It was pretty great. The way she got rid of the body was creative and *horrifying*.'

Cody went silent. Ava let her be. She was glad she wasn't the only one with no idea how to take a compliment.

They arrived about two. The other cars were already parked out the front of a big house, a five-minute walk from the beach. Becky's dad had stumped up for the place, but he didn't have beachfront money.

'Are there enough beds in this place?' Cody asked as they walked up the path.

'No. Some people are gonna be taking sofas, and someone's probably gonna end up on the floor.'

Cody looked alarmed. 'Oh.'

'We might be at the bottom of the list since we got here last. Just to warn you.'

'I'm gonna have to sleep on the floor?' Cody asked.

'It's a distinct possibility.'

'Christ. I'd have bought a blow-up bed or something if I'd known.'

‘I really didn’t think we’d be last here. Mia drives like an eighty-year-old,’ Ava apologised. ‘I guess no one else took a pee break.’

Cody said nothing else but looked disturbed.

They knocked on the door, and Tara answered. ‘Yay! They’re here!’ she screamed over her shoulder.

There was the sound of a distant yet enthusiastic group, ‘Whoo!’

Tara’s arms came out, and Ava thought she’d be the recipient of them, but she went straight for Cody, hugging the bejesus out of her. Cody submitted to the bear hug as though it were being conducted by a real-life bear.

Tara felt the physical response and released her. ‘God, sorry. Bit much, wasn’t it?’ Tara apologised, stepping back. ‘Just glad you came.’

Cody smiled. ‘I’m not huggy. But that was... nice. Thanks.’

Tara nodded, happy. ‘I won’t do it again.’

Cody thought it over. ‘Maybe just a bit of warning, so I can work myself up to it next time.’

Tara nodded. ‘Good idea.’

Ava had hugged Cody once and gotten a similar response. She had not tried to touch her since. But they'd be touching tonight.

Ava wasn't exactly sure how to feel about that. She was trying not to think about it too much. She didn't want to get in her head about it. It was an activity that she and Cody were going to do. That was all. Like anything else. Like going to a movie or rock climbing. But with lips.

Tara led them through the house. It was Ikea'd out the wazoo, bold colours everywhere. A huge sectional snaked around the entire perimeter of the living room. No end of places to crash if needed. As long as she didn't wake up face-to-face with Ben's feet (he was prone to athlete's foot), Ava didn't mind sofa surfing.

She wasn't so sure Cody would be happy with that arrangement. Of course, she wasn't used to this kind of thing. Though she was more adaptable than Ava might have expected. She was here, after all.

Out on the large back patio, a barbecue was being clumsily assembled by far too many cooks.

'No, no!' Mia said, looking at a pile of white goo that completely covered the coals. 'That's way too much barbecue gel. You'll blow the fucking thing up!'

Leo groaned. 'It'll just speed things up. I'm hungry!'

'Are you hungry for cooked eyebrows?' Mia demanded. 'Because whoever lights that sucker is probably gonna get their face blown off.'

Leo put the gel down on the table and sat on a patio chair with his arms crossed. 'Fine. You do it.'

'Excuse me, Incredible Sulk, but you don't get to park your arse because you've been taken off barbie duties. Go and make potato salad,' Mia told him.

'Yeah, go and get me a beer while you're at it,' Becky demanded from a sun lounger, looking relaxed.

Leo stood with a huff and went past Ava, Cody, and Tara. 'Alright?' he asked, and Ava gave him a perfunctory nod.

Mia was left to watch Ben, Rian and Noah discussing how to get the cloud of quickly settling goo out of the barbecue.

'Could we rinse off the coals?' Noah suggested.

Rian slapped him affectionately around the back of his head.

'There's no bad ideas,' Noah said, rubbing the back of his head.

'That's a misnomer. There's definitely bad ideas,' Ben told him. 'That was a perfect example.'

'I was brainstorming,' Noah said. 'Even a wrong idea can be the jumping-off point for the right idea. Teamwork

makes the dream work.’

Ava laughed, with absolutely zero intention of getting involved. She assumed that Cody would stay out of the clown show, too, but then she spoke up.

‘My dad made that mistake once with the gel. He did manage to light it without, you know, melting his face off. But it made the food taste like chemicals,’ Cody said.

Mia looked at her in horror and looked back at the white, sodden charcoal. ‘Christ, she’s right. He’s ruined it. And we don’t have another bag of charcoal.’

‘I saw a wood burner back in the living room, stocked with wood. That could work, too,’ Cody told her.

‘Shit, *yeah*. Good call, man,’ Rian said. He turned to Noah. ‘You empty this thing out and then give it a good wipe so we can start again. I’ll get wood.’

The entire garden laughed. Rian rolled his eyes and went inside to get the firewood.

As Ava watched him go, she realised something. She wasn’t nearly as angry with Rian anymore. She was shocked at how quickly that had happened. She supposed that was because, once the dust settled, she felt like Rian had probably done her a favour by getting Leo out of her hair.

That wasn’t to say Ava was letting it go. But it was only Leo she had in her crosshairs now. He’d damaged her rep, and that hurt much more than the infidelity.

‘Cody, thank fuck you were here,’ Mia said while Noah began digging the coals out and putting them back into the bag from whence they came.

‘Hero of the barbecue,’ Ben declared, cracking open a beer and handing it to her.

Cody took the beer and shrugged, clearly not used to the approbation. But Ava was glad her friends were being good to her. She deserved it. Maybe this party might be fun after all.

Cody groaned. ‘I think I went one hot dog too far.’

‘Me too,’ Mia said.

‘Me too,’ added Leo.

Becky rolled her eyes. ‘Greedy little pigs.’

Noah belched, and Tara tutted at him.

Ava wasn’t feeling too bad because she’d eaten her food without bread, a compromise. She’d put on a couple of pounds recently. She needed to make sure she was fighting fit for when she picked up her prom dress.

Speaking of which, she needed to talk to Cody about that. Cody was going to pick out whatever she wanted, but they'd need to coordinate at least somewhat. Ava fully expected that to be a tough conversation, but they were going to have it anyway, by God.

'Hey, are we doing proper booze yet?' Leo asked, holding up a light beer. 'These aren't touching the sides.'

Everyone murmured assent.

'OK, what have we got?' Leo asked.

'I might make this cocktail I've invented called a Banana Spli—' Tara began.

'No!' everyone yelled at once.

'Genius isn't appreciated in its own time,' Tara grumbled.

'Someone bring in the booze,' Ben said, meat-drunk and exhausted.

And in it came. Everyone had bought something, and most of them had bought a full bottle of hard liquor. The evening was about to get messy.

Thirty-One

Cody couldn't say at what point she'd decided to get drunk.

It had started when Ben gave her that beer. It had been a welcoming gesture, and she didn't want to refuse it. She decided she'd just drink that and then go to soft stuff.

But once she drank it, she kind of liked how mellow she felt. So she drank a second. She was eating with it, so it wasn't sitting on an empty stomach. She'd be OK, right?

Then people started getting out the big bottles of clear and brown liquids, which included her dad's gift of Absolute.

I bought that with me, Cody thought. I should probably have just a little, even if it's only to tell Dad I had some.

And now it was about nine, and she was kind of hammered. She thought there was a chance she might puke, which she most certainly did not want to do in the company of the group.

She needed to sober up. But that was rather difficult because she was smack bang in the middle of a drinking game. They were all sat in a circle playing something called Fuzzy Duck.

They all went around the circle repeating that phrase until someone said, 'Does he?' Then it went the other way back around the circle, everyone saying, 'Ducky Fuzz.' Unless your brain got confused into a spoonerism and you said, 'Fuck, he does,' or, 'Does he fuck.'

And then you had to have a drink. It was a stupid game, but every time someone said the expletive, everyone would explode with laughter. Cody was laughing, too.

About the time Cody uttered her third, 'Fuck, he does,' she realised that she'd done it. The thing she'd told Miss Campbell she couldn't do. She was here, with people. She didn't know how the hell that was going to make her a better writer. But she'd done this thing that had looked impossible.

Did that change things? Maybe. Just a bit. Maybe things felt more in her control. Her grasp on life was a little tighter than it had ever been.

'OK, guys, we gotta stop. I'm gonna chuck if we carry on,' Noah declared.

'Just because you keep losing,' Leo mocked.

'Of course I keep losing. I'm dyslexic, you bastard,' Noah said.

'Alright, well, seems like a good time to celebrate Miss Becky Saxton in the customary manner,' Ben announced.

'Guys, come on. I don't care,' Becky lied brazenly, grinning.

‘Let’s fetch the cake!’ Tara said.

Ava suddenly straightened up. ‘I’ll get it. Cody, can you help me? I think it’s a two-person job.’

Cody didn’t think so, but she was too drunk to argue. ‘Oh, er, yeah.’

She stood and followed Ava into the kitchen. ‘This is it. This is the moment,’ Ava told her.

Cody’s eyes widened. ‘What, now?’

‘Yeah. We’ll put the cake out in the kitchen, but we won’t take it out. Then someone’s eventually gonna come in to find out what happened.’

Cody was having trouble following due to her impairment. ‘And then?’

Ava nodded at a walk-in pantry. ‘We leave the door open. So it’s like, we went to get the cake, and we got, you know, carried away or whatever. And we didn’t realise how much time had passed.’

Cody thought that was a pretty solid plan. But she was very, very scared. The drink did not dull it. ‘Umm...’

‘What?’ Ava asked, sensing hesitation.

Cody really couldn't think of a good reason to delay any longer. 'Nothing, no.'

'So, you're ready?'

'Yes.'

'Because this was your idea,' Ava said, looking a bit stropy.

'I never said I wasn't doing it, did I? What's your problem?' Cody asked, pissed off.

'Nothing. You just seem... I can't do this alone.'

'You're not doing it alone. Jesus, get in the pantry, will you?' Cody commanded, irritated.

Ava looked like she might want to argue a bit more but instead headed into the small shelf-lined room. It was empty except for a gift basket.

'I don't think we found this before, did we?' Cody asked. She picked out a box. 'Shit, there's *Lindor* in here,' she said.

She looked up from the chocolate to see Ava had her hands on her hips. 'Can you focus, please?'

Cody put down the chocolate, vowing to go back to it later. 'Sorry.'

‘Right, so. Glasses. On or off?’ Ava asked.

Cody hadn’t thought about that, but Ava was detail-oriented. ‘Umm... Off, I guess.’

She was about to take them off when Ava suddenly reached up and gently slid them off, folding them up and handing them to Cody. Cody took them, shocked at her own reaction to the move. She found it a little bit sexy.

Cody heard the patio door bang open out in the kitchen and the noise from the back garden rising sharply. Ava looked at Cody. Cody looked at Ava.

‘Go time,’ Ava said, and before Cody knew what was what, Ava had leaned in, and her lips were on Cody’s.

Cody wasn’t quite ready, and she was slightly annoyed that it was happening so fast, with so little time to prepare herself. But Cody was also *very* turned on. Because Ava, as Cody had always suspected, was an excellent kisser. She was delicate but deliberate, and every nerve ending in Cody’s lips responded to Ava’s lips with deep pleasure.

Cody understood now why she’d been so scared for this to happen. Because somewhere deep down, she’d wanted this. She didn’t know when that had started because she’d been in that good old Egyptian river known as denial. But she wasn’t in it now. She’d climbed out. And man, was she wet.

Time passed. The door didn’t open.

Ava suddenly leant back and looked at Cody, and Cody stared back at her. 'No one came,' Ava said.

If we carry on like this, I wouldn't bet on it, Cody thought. Thank God she still had enough of a filter to simply reply, 'Nope.'

There was a pause that Cody thought the word awkward had been created to describe, and when she couldn't handle it anymore, she said, 'I guess it's not going to work. Let's regroup and circle back around.' She walked out of the pantry without further eye contact, wondering if she'd ever used the word regroup before in her life.

Outside the pantry, Becky was in the kitchen, and she turned to them. Two people coming out of a tiny room after going missing equalled only one thing to her, so she didn't need more to make her amore-detector fire off.

'Oh,' she said with a little shock.

Cody swapped a look with Ava.

'Well, well,' Becky said with a horrid grin.

Tara, who was also in the kitchen, appeared from around the corner, holding a packet of candles. 'Something wrong?'

'You know how we came in here to find out what happened to the cake? Well, it turns out these two found another source of sugar instead,' Becky sneered.

Tara looked at Becky, looked at Cody, and then Ava. 'Oh,' she said. She didn't look very surprised.

Becky ran out into the back garden. 'Guys!' she was already yelling.

Tara put down the candles. 'Perhaps we'll do cake later.'

Cody took a deep breath. Things were about to get a lot more complicated than just trying to remember how to say fuzzy duck.

Thirty-Two

Ava was in an absolute firestorm. Everyone was in the garden talking about this, talking over each other, too drunk, too excited, and too confused in poor Noah's case, whose dyslexia had put him at a distinct disadvantage in Fuzzy Duck and rendered the poor sod paralytic. Cody and Ava were taking questions as they popped up.

'How long?' Mia wanted to know.

'A few weeks,' Ava answered.

'Is it, like, serious?' Tara asked.

Cody and Ava looked at each other, and she took Cody's hand uncertainly, but Cody accepted it. 'I mean, we're still figuring that out.'

Unfortunately, Cody attempted to contribute and said, 'Yeah, totally,' at the same time.

'Which is it, then?' Ben asked.

While Ava tried to bumble an answer to that, she was stopped in her tracks when Leo asked, in a hurt tone, 'Were you *always* a lesbian?'

Ava rewarded his unmitigated gall with a hard look. But that wasn't the only reason she didn't answer. The other reason was that his question had already been asked in Ava's head.

Because kissing Cody had been amazing. She'd never felt so aroused and awake in all her life. Every kiss she'd ever had with a boy was now like kissing a poster on the wall when she was ten.

Ava wished to God she hadn't done it. She hadn't even needed to. All it took was coming out of the pantry together, and Becky put it together anyway. So now Ava was stuck in a crisis that she simply didn't have the energy to deal with. There was no *time* to discover she was gay. Not now. Please, God, not now.

She had too much to do. She was going to beat Leo and Rian to prom royalty and be the queen. Then everyone would know she was a success. But she couldn't do that if she had to deal with *this*.

'Look, everyone,' Rian, of all people, suddenly said. 'Let's give them some space, alright? This is too much. We should all just go to bed.'

'Seconded,' hiccuped a wobbly Noah.

'Come on, mate,' Ben said to him. 'Let's find you somewhere to sleep it off.'

'There's four beds,' Becky declared. 'Obviously, I get one. But...'

‘Those that can share get first dibs on the other three,’ Tara jumped in. ‘So, the two couples? They get two. And Mia, you’re in with me.’

‘No. Noah needs someone to watch him in case he pukes,’ Ben said. ‘So *I’ll* share with him, alright. You and Mia can bugger off to the sofa.’

Mia tutted. ‘I guess it beats vomit duty.’

Ava was barely listening at that point. She’d just been told that she and Cody, as a couple, were sharing a bed tonight.

Ava was under the covers in her PJs, at the bottom of the bed, in the dark. ‘Top and tail,’ she declared with as much cheeriness as she could fake.

Cody nodded and got into the top of the bed in a baggy band t-shirt. ‘I guess we got a bed tonight, which is something.’

‘Yep. The crown is next,’ Ava said, just for something to say.

She closed her eyes. And kept them closed. Nothing happened. She was too frightened. She was in bed with Cody, and she kept thinking about the kiss in the pantry, and it was all too much.

Ava turned over and her leg made contact with Cody's. Then Ava made a noise of shock and promptly fell out of bed.

'What the *hell* are you doing?' Cody asked, looking over at her lying on the floor, the duvet somehow clutched in her hands.

'Nothing!' Ava said, too defensively.

'Then can you come back up and bring the duvet?'

Ava stood and dragged it back onto the bed. 'Sorry. I think I got a cramp.'

Cody sat up in bed and switched the light on. She looked at Ava suspiciously. 'You're being weird.'

'No, I'm not,' Ava said.

'You are. It's that thing you do.'

'Thing?'

'When you're being too chipper, it means something is wrong,' Cody explained.

Ava was amazed. Nobody had ever clicked onto that before. Not even her mother. And Ava had learnt it from her.

‘I’m fine,’ she declared.

‘You got what you wanted,’ Cody said.

‘Yeah, I know I did,’ Ava replied.

‘So, what’s wrong?’ Cody asked.

‘Hey, it’s what *we* wanted, anyway. Less of the *you*,’
Ava deflected.

Cody sighed, long and deep, with the reflective air of someone about to say something historic. ‘You know what?’

Ava felt fear, but she really did want to know what Cody would say next. ‘What?’

Cody stood up. ‘I gotta vomit.’ She jumped up, running out of the room and down the hall. The sounds of distant chundering rang clear back.

Ava wondered if she should just go to bed and leave her to it. But instead, she headed down to the kitchen, collected a glass of water, and went back up to the bathroom. She found Cody sitting on the floor next to the splattered toilet.

‘Here,’ Ava said.

Cody took the water with both hands and necked the whole thing. When the glass was empty, she put it down with a light crack on the bathroom tile. ‘Thank you.’

‘No problem. You want more? I can refill it.’

‘I think I’m OK,’ Cody said. She blinked. ‘Oh no. Wait a sec.’ She spun to the toilet, got up on her knees, grabbed the bowl for dear life and out came the second round.

Ava wasn’t quite sure what Cody would want her to do in terms of support, but in the end, instinct won out, and she rubbed her back in the time-honoured tradition. She thought Cody might tell her to piss off, but she just kept heaving liquified hot dogs into the bowl.

Ava should have been revolted. But if anything, she was grateful. Nothing else was going to happen tonight between them. Not after this. They were safe for the time being.

Thank God for vomit.

Thirty-Three

It didn't take long for the news to spread. Cody knew that because the following Wednesday after the party, Sally Withers nabbed Cody in the toilets yet again.

'Is it true?' she nearly screamed.

Cody was pretty sure what she was talking about, but she wasn't narcissistic enough to assume it was the Cody/Ava breaking news. 'Is what true?'

Sally shoved her in the shoulder in what she probably imagined was playfulness, but kind of hurt. 'Don't mess about.'

Cody rubbed her shoulder. 'Ava, right?'

'Everyone is saying that YOU and AVA FREAKING GALE are like, in LOVE?' Sally screeched.

Even though Sally was practically yelling every other word, it was only the last word that jolted Cody. 'Whoa, whoa. Let's just take it back a notch. We're dating, OK? It's true.'

'This is like a miracle,' Sally sang. 'It's like frogs falling out of the sky. How did it even happen? Were you *always* in love with her?'

‘Sally, stop saying that,’ Cody said quickly. ‘If you must know, Miss Huang put us together on our media practical, and we got to be friends and then—’

‘It’s like *Beauty and the Beast*,’ Sally declared.

Cody raised an eyebrow. ‘Tread carefully, Sally.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean it like *that*. I just mean that you were this angry creature up in your castle, and then Belle comes along and finds the humanity in you.’

Cody’s offence evaporated as uproarious laughter took her. ‘Oh Christ, Sally,’ Cody sputtered. ‘That was just brilliant. Honestly, never stop doing you.’

Sally smiled. ‘See? You’re changed. I can feel it coursing through your veins, Cody. You’re loved up and happy.’

Cody gave up on getting Sally to stop using that disturbing word. ‘Sure, why not? The beast has found her humanity.’

Sally sighed dreamily and left the bathroom. Cody remembered that she’d come in to pee and went to do that. While she was in there, people came into the bathroom.

As soon as they started talking, she knew it was Shannon McGrath and Melissa Dooley. Cody was pissed off before they even started talking. What they said didn’t help dull that emotion.

‘I mean, it’s bonkers. Of all people, you know?’ Melissa said.

‘Yeah,’ Shannon said.

‘I knew ages ago, though. Did I tell you?’ Melissa said.

‘Yes. You told me,’ Shannon said wearily.

‘I totally spotted them. I didn’t tell anyone, though.’

‘Except me,’ Shannon reminded her.

‘Except you.’

‘And the gang.’

‘And the gang.’

‘And didn’t you text—’

‘I had to tell Tara. She *needed* to know,’ Melissa said defensively.

‘Why?’

‘Because Tara knows Ava. And I had to make sure it wasn’t some sort of hostage situation.’

‘At the cinema?’ Shannon clarified.

‘But that’s what I’m saying. That’s how bonkers this is. I was worried about Helsinki disease.’

There was a pause, and then Shannon said, ‘Do you mean Stockholm syndrome?’

Cody decided this was a good time for her to leave the cubicle. ‘Hi, guys,’ she said, bursting out of the toilet.

They froze. She went to the sink, washed her hands thoroughly, and then blasted them under the dryer. By the time she’d finished, Melissa had gathered herself.

‘I was just kidding.’

‘Sure,’ Cody said, walking past her and leaving the bathroom.

She had been ‘official’ with Ava for about four days, and already she missed her anonymity. People talking in the toilets to her and about her was not something Cody considered a good time.

At lunch, everyone was all smiles. It unsettled Cody a bit, but she supposed it was their way of showing support. She

could have lived without it.

Ava patted the seat next to her, and Cody dutifully sat down. They hadn't talked since the weekend, which was a bit odd. Cody would have expected Ava to ramp up after it all came out. But they'd driven home in an unnerving quiet from Becky's thing.

Cody's silence made sense; she was trying not to say anything stupid. Or, more aptly, revealing. Ava could never know about Cody's bodily reaction to their kiss. She couldn't know that Cody kept remembering the smell of Ava's long, luxurious caramel hair. She could never find out that her lips had tasted like vanilla and sex. All that had to be locked away in Cody's depths, placed in a vault, sunk to the bottom of the ocean, and guarded by a Kraken for good measure.

So she shut her trap. But Ava's silence made less sense. Cody wondered if she knew somehow. That she felt awkward about it. She had been pretty weird when they had to share that bed.

A tiny bit of contact had caused her to jump bodily out. That wasn't normal. Something had been up. But Cody wasn't airing it out, so how Ava felt would have to stay Ava's problem. If Cody didn't say anything, then nothing could be proven, and hopefully, the weirdness would pass.

But that day was not today.

'Hi,' Cody said as she slid into her seat.

'Hello,' Ava said too brightly.

‘Aww,’ Tara crooned.

Cody had come to like Tara, but she was not having that kind of bullshit. ‘Tara, we’re not puppies.’

Tara frowned. ‘Yeah, sorry.’

Becky, who was sipping an energy drink, said, ‘Jeez, Cody. She’s just being supportive.’

‘Yes,’ Ava said from between gritted teeth as she checked the time on her phone. ‘Let’s take it easy on Tara, shall we?’

Cody knew a warning when she got one. ‘Sorry,’ she sighed.

She’d said that word more in the past few weeks than she had in years. It was tiring being this bloody apologetic. But this was something that came with being around people constantly who weren’t her dad. Toes got stepped on. Hers and everyone else’s.

‘Anyway,’ Tara said, flinging off the unease, ‘So, err... How’s it going? Is that OK to ask?’

Cody was saying nothing more. Ava could take it from here. But, ‘Good,’ was all Ava said.

‘Hey, I was thinking, is that why you guys were arguing over your project before? Like it was passion?’ Tara asked.

‘Yes,’ Cody said flatly. ‘Passion.’

Ava tapped her foot under the table. Again, very readable. *Knock it off, smart arse.*

But with her mouth, Ava said, ‘I think that was it. One day, we were kind of going at it about the magazine, and then, well...’

‘You were going at it...’ Mia completed with a smirk.

The table laughed.

Ava smiled shyly. Cody didn’t quite know what she was supposed to do. Everything that came out of her mouth so far had been wrong. Easier to shut it, try to make her face natural, and leave it to the boss.

The boss who’d made her legs tremble.

Cody was furious with herself for the thought. There was no room for that type of thing to be spinning around her mind. But she couldn’t help comparing it to her other big physical experience with Laura. If Cody was honest with herself, kissing Ava had pissed all over it.

It was probably just a question of skill level. It wasn’t true magnetism. Even if it felt that way. Because it didn’t go both ways, which meant it wasn’t real chemistry. Cody’s vagina was simply misfiring.

Because what were they gonna do, date for real? Her and Ava? Melissa Dooley, the original stopped clock, had that right. In real life, it was too bonkers.

Ava was super straight for a kick-off. She'd only picked Cody for her machinations because she was the only reasonable candidate for the job. The only candidate, full stop, actually. That's how ABC this was for Ava. It hadn't mattered who, only how it played to the school. Cody could just as easily have been a rescue dog if that would help Ava get her crown.

Cody would have to get over this, and she'd have to get over it quick. She couldn't play this game with sweaty palms. She had her own plans. She was going to write an absolute banger of a personal statement about her rise up the social ranks from social misfit to co-queen of the school. Cody felt more and more that idea wasn't crazy anymore. Ava's will was iron. If she wanted it, it would be.

And what Cody wanted had to be kept simple. She was leaving this school and going to Medford to write. Nothing else mattered.

Cody noticed Ava check her phone again. She seemed to be obsessed with the time. Cody started to get a bad feeling.

Thirty-Four

The next stage of Ava's scheme needed proper organisation.

Ava hadn't said, texted, emailed, or DM'd a word to Cody about the plan. She would only get in the way of what Ava was going to do. Cody was going to fucking hate it, as a matter of fact. But there was simply no way around it. There were mere weeks to prom. The love story needed to go next level.

After a pretty difficult lunch where everyone was asking rather uncomfortable questions, Ava checked her time. They were due any second.

'What?' Cody asked her.

'Nothing,' Ava lied.

Cody looked cynical. But Ava couldn't let her get any warning about what was about to happen. She was apt to flee at the best of times.

And in they came. The school brass band marching in perfect synchronicity. Cody didn't notice immediately. She was eating a sandwich. But when the music started up, she couldn't miss it. They were thumping out the opening notes of 'Can't Take My Eyes Off You.'

Cody dropped her sandwich. ‘What the...’

Her mother had given Ava that idea when she’d mentioned how Cody reminded her of the main girl from *10 Things I Hate About You*, Kat. The bad boy who was trying to woo her had organised something just like this, surprising Kat in the middle of football practice with a serenade.

Ava wasn’t planning to sing. She wasn’t delusional about her vocal abilities. The band could do the heavy lifting in the music department. They were doing this because she’d told them a big promposal had a good shot of going viral, which they were into as much as Ava. They were hoping it would help with getting some better bookings. And if Ava was good at anything, it was finding mutually beneficial deals.

‘Cody Foster?’ Ava said, getting up as the band surrounded the table, the trumpets blasting out the chorus.

Cody was agape.

Right on cue, the triangle player handed her a large glittering board with helium-filled balloons attached to it. As he handed it over, the balloons almost stole the thing up to the ceiling, but she was quick to grab it. This needed to be perfect.

Ava held out the board in front of her, reading simply, ‘CODY! PLEASE GO TO PROM WITH ME?’ in glittery yet perfectly neat letters. One of the art kids had owed her a favour and created it for her. She’d have just made a mess, and this needed to look flawless.

By now, the entire school, about two hundred all told, had gathered around the sight, all of them laughing, smiling,

delighted to be a part of this romantic spectacle. Many phones were out, filming it. It was exactly as Ava had dreamed it would be. They were here for the Ava and Cody story.

Speaking of Cody, she'd yet to actually speak. She was still sitting in her chair, staring. She looked like a Zoom call where the Wi-Fi had dropped out. She needed a verbal prod.

'Cody? Will you do me the honour of going to prom with me?'

Cody seemed to reanimate, and she managed to utter. 'Uh, yeah. Yes. Yeah. Affirmative.'

It was a bit less than what Ava would have hoped for, but she knew that Cody would be thrown by this. The reaction would do. Anything else would have been so wildly out of character that it might have read as fake anyway.

But if Cody lacked enthusiasm, that wouldn't stop Ava from capping this thing off right. She was a natural show woman and knew how to get a crowd going.

She turned to the crowd. 'SHE SAID YES!' she yelled.

A delirious cheer went up, followed quickly by the smack of applause. Her friends joined in. Even Leo. But Ava could see that he didn't like this.

This wasn't supposed to happen. His was supposed to be the big love story, and Ava had stolen his thunder. She was so happy; she could have died.

Cody? Not so much.

‘OK, guys!’ Ava said to the band, cutting them off mid-song. ‘That ought to do it. Thanks so much.’ They dropped their instruments and left sharply.

People were starting to disperse. Going off to talk about it and, more importantly, post about it. Ava herself wouldn’t. It was better if others did. It made it seem less contrived.

‘How the hell did you do that?’ Cody asked, still looking very shell-shocked.

Ava grabbed her hand. ‘Come on, let’s talk about it elsewhere,’ she said quietly.

She was pretty sure she was about to get a telling-off, and she needed to relocate it. It might undercut the romance of the moment if Cody started chewing her out.

Out in the empty courtyard, Ava braced herself. ‘I’m sorry, but it’s nomination deadline tomorrow,’ she said immediately. ‘I couldn’t fuck about any longer.’

‘Why in the hell did you do it without warning me?’ Cody demanded. ‘I nearly had a heart attack. I mean, a brass band, for fuck’s sake?!’

‘If I’d asked your permission to do it like that, you’d never have given it.’

‘Correct!’ Cody said. ‘That was so embarrassing.’

‘I didn’t think you got embarrassed,’ Ava said, surprised.

‘Well, I do, and I just did. That was way too much!’ Cody sputtered.

‘Of course it was. It had to be.’ Ava got her phone out. The thing was lighting up like a Christmas tree. ‘See? Now this is the public record of me. Not the thing with Leo and Rian. This. A positive thing.’

‘A fake thing,’ Cody reminded her.

‘People *liked* it, Cody. They like *me* again.’ Ava hadn’t quite meant to say that. It had just come out. Now *she* was embarrassed. She had to keep talking to push it away. ‘You’re going to benefit from this, OK? Don’t forget that. Every time I push you, it works. Be grateful I’ve got the energy.’

Cody stared at her as though she were a stranger. ‘Whatever.’

‘Good, now. Did you say something about your mum’s house always being empty?’

Cody looked nervous. ‘I did.’

‘Excellent. You’re going to throw a party.’

Cody put her hands on her hips. ‘The *hell* I am!’

‘It’s not going to be a rager, I promise,’ Ava told her.
‘Just a few people.’

‘I said *no*.’ Cody folded her arms.

Thirty-Five

Cody was standing at the edge of her mum's living room, trying to squeeze around what felt like about a hundred thousand people milling about, laughing, dancing, drinking, snogging. She was looking for Ava.

This party was not a small thing by any means. Ava had misled her. This was even worse than Tara's shindig. At least double the people. Her entire year had turned up, plus a shit load of randos.

'Oh fuck,' someone said.

Cody turned to see someone had leaned against the wall without realising there was a picture right behind them, and the thing was on the floor. The glass cracked.

'No!' Cody exclaimed. Already, they were tearing the place apart.

'My bad,' someone said, and Cody realised the person who had done it was Noah. She felt less able to go off at him. '*Mate*,' she said simply.

'I swear to God, I'll get it fixed,' Noah vowed.

'You better. My mum is gonna go nuts if she finds out I had a party.'

‘Secret party? Shit, I wouldn’t dare,’ Noah said. He picked up the picture. ‘I’ll replace the glass, I swear.’

‘My mum is at a conference, and she gets back Sunday night,’ Cody warned him.

‘I won’t need that long,’ he said, sticking the frame under his arm and walking away.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked him.

‘Huge Tesco a few miles away opens late,’ he said, already halfway out the door. ‘I’ll zip over and find a matching-sized frame and swap out the glass.’

‘You didn’t drink, did you?’ Cody checked.

‘I’m just on my bike, and I only had three beers!’ he said.

‘That doesn’t sound safe.’

‘I’ve driven my bike drunk all the time,’ he promised as though it were a comfort, slamming the door.

Cody decided if he was gonna fix his mistake, she could live with it.

God, it was loud in here. And it smelled like a brewery. She was going to have to open every door in the house tomorrow to release the odour. It was a dead giveaway.

Speaking of which, Tara was headed her way, two highball glasses in her hands. She'd found cocktail umbrellas somewhere.

‘Cody! One of my specials for the host!’

Cody took the glass and sniffed it. ‘What’s this one called?’

‘Feeling Queer,’ Tara announced.

Cody’s eyes widened. ‘What?’

‘Oh no, it’s because... My grandad always says this thing about how wine before beer makes you feel queer. The meaning was different in his day, I think. But anyway, I put wine *and* beer in this, so I thought... Oh crap. Is it offensive?’

Cody snorted. ‘Actually, I think it’s great.’ She took a sip, preparing herself for an assault on her taste buds. But she didn’t need to. ‘Tara! That’s *good*.’

No one was more shocked than Tara. ‘It is?’

‘Yeah. You nailed it.’

Tara smiled ear to ear. ‘I think everyone’s going to be Feeling Queer tonight.’

‘God willing,’ Cody said.

Tara laughed. 'I gotta get back in the kitchen to make some more, get them circulating. My legacy has been born!' And off she went.

Cody took another sip of her drink and pushed on through the throng. Rian and Leo seemed to be having quite a heated discussion about something in the corner. The bloom was off the rose, then.

Once she'd gotten the entire bottom floor searched, she went upstairs. There was nowhere to hide. Cody was going to find Ava and tear her several new arseholes.

On the upstairs landing, she found a cue for the toilet. She checked its members, not finding Ava. She headed down the hall, still looking.

She heard a noise coming from her bedroom and slung the door open. Two guys and three girls Cody had never seen in her life were in there, bunched up on Cody's bed, starting up what looked to be an orgy. Luckily, they were still in the early stages.

'Get out,' Cody commanded.

'Where's your sense of hospitality?' one of the guys asked desperately.

'It's downstairs. Why don't you go and look for it?' Cody snarled at them.

She was pissed off beyond belief. Her bedroom had been about to see serious action, and she hadn't even been in it. Typical.

Everyone got the message and trooped out, buttoning up and zipping as they went.

'Jesus, what the hell did I just miss?' Ava asked, appearing just in time to see the dislocated sex party trundling off, grumbling.

Cody gave Ava a hard look. 'I need a word,' she said, gesturing into her room.

Ava's eyes widened; she knew she was in trouble. But she went into Cody's room without arguing.

Thirty-Six

Cody shut the door, and Ava prepared herself for a talking to. She'd known it was coming when she saw a guy with a funnel in his mouth twenty minutes ago. This party had gotten beyond what Ava had planned.

'You lied,' Cody said. 'This party is ridiculous. There's people trying to swing in my bedroom!'

Ava pursed her lips. 'Swing? Does anyone call it that?'

'I don't know, Ava, because I'm not trying to get involved in that sort of thing in my mother's house during what I was assured was a small soiree!'

'Soiree?' Ava said. 'What the hell have *you* been reading?'

Cody folded her arms. 'Stop dodging. I'm fucking pissed.'

Ava sighed. 'Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. It's gotten a bit out of hand. Probably because we're famous now. Well, viral, anyway.'

Cody was instantly horrified. 'What do you mean?'

‘People reposted the video, and it’s kind of a *little* bit viral.’

‘What?’ Cody screeched, horrified.

‘Be happy. It practically guarantees we win.’

Cody slumped onto her bed. ‘I would *never* have wanted that. And you knew that.’

Ava wasn’t ready to bow and scrape about this. If Cody could get over her annoyance, she’d see that Ava had done something awesome.

‘The virality is a gift. You should thank me. I’m giving you what you wanted, whether you realised it or not.’

Cody gave Ava a look she didn’t like at all. ‘I can’t believe I forgot about this side of you,’ Cody muttered.

‘What side?’ Ava asked.

Cody shook her head. ‘Nothing.’

‘Tell me,’ Ava demanded.

Cody frowned at her. ‘I started to think you were bigger than this. But this is all it comes down to with you. The love of the masses.’

That cut Ava deep. But she was damned if she'd show hurt. Better to be angry. 'You don't know how I feel. Don't pretend you do. Cody the Big, Bad Rebel doesn't give a shit what anyone thinks. Well, good for you!'

'I care what *you* think!' Cody yelled. Ava didn't even have time to process that before Cody added, 'And I thought you cared what *I* thought, too. I thought we were doing this together. But it's just the same old Ava Gale bullshit. It's just about you. You don't give a shit about me.'

Ava was so taken aback she didn't have time to formulate a response, much less say it. But she was saved a second later.

CRASH!

Cody looked at Ava and ran out of her room. Ava followed.

Downstairs, the music had been killed, and everyone was standing around looking at the fifty-two-inch TV mounted on the living room wall. The screen had an enormous crack in it.

Nearby, Noah was holding a large picture frame in his hand with a price sticker on the front. It was smashed, like its predecessor.

Noah looked beyond sheepish. 'Cody. I was carrying this in to replace the old one, and I... *Someone* left a drink on the floor, and I slipped on it. The frame went into the TV.'

Ava looked down to see a highball glass on its side corroborating the story.

‘Who puts a drink on the floor in the middle of a fucking party?’ Mia yelled.

‘Was it one of mine?’ Tara asked. The little umbrella spilling out confirmed it was indeed a Feeling Queer. ‘Did they finish it?’

‘Yes, and yes,’ Mia said.

‘Great!’ Tara said, adding quickly, ‘Because of spillage, obviously. Not because this drink is the only thing I’ve ever created that anyone wanted to drink, and an unfinished drink feels like a slap in the face or anything.’

But Cody shook her head. ‘It’s fine. I knew something like this would happen. It was inevitable. A big party equals destruction. The movies are right.’

‘OK, party over!’ Tara called. ‘Please leave in an orderly fashion.’

Everyone trooped out except the gang.

Ben looked at the TV as though he might have a solution. After saying, ‘Hmmm,’ and ‘I see,’ he stood. ‘Yeah. It’s fucked.’

Though Cody and Ava were in a bad place right now, it had to be put aside. There was a problem to solve.

‘OK, first things first,’ Ava said. ‘Google it. How much does it cost?’

Ben checked. ‘Seven hundred.’

‘Right,’ Ava said. ‘Can we pull that together?’

‘We?’ Cody asked.

‘We,’ Tara agreed.

‘How is this we? It’s my mum’s TV,’ Cody asked the room.

‘That I fell into,’ Noah said, still blushing.

‘And I organised the party where it happened,’ Ava said. ‘And Tara made the drink that tripped him.’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ Leo said. ‘Nor did Rian.’

‘We *all* played a part,’ Mia said, then added quickly, ‘Though I want to point out that technically, I’ve done nothing wrong. It’s not a *real* mea culpa. It’s magnanimity alone.’

‘But when we go out to eat, we split the bill evenly,’ Ben said. ‘This is just that, Cody. We split the bill.’

Cody looked moved. Ava had never quite seen her like that.

‘I’d like to point out at this point that I hate it when we split the bill,’ Noah said. ‘It’s not a fair system if you’re going to order steak when other people only have a burger.’

‘Noah, you’re fucking with my metaphor,’ Ben said tiredly.

‘Right, so first off, can we pull together seven hundred?’ Ava asked.

There was some muttering, and all told, they were able to come up with the total sum of two hundred and twelve quid.

‘Shit,’ Ava said.

Mia tutted. ‘Seriously? No one thought to check Marketplace?’ She held up her phone so everyone could see a picture of a TV. ‘Same brand, ten miles away, good condish. Three hundred. But we need to collect in the next hour.’

‘When did you arrange that?’ Ava asked.

‘As soon as I saw that crack.’

‘Why didn’t you say anything?’ Noah asked.

‘I was just waiting to see if I could talk the guy down. It’s a no. He won’t negotiate. He wants three hundred, cash

only.’

‘Jesus, you guys work fast,’ Cody muttered in awe.

‘This isn’t our first rodeo,’ Leo confessed.

‘Yeah. That silly bastard put his parents’ bedroom window through during a water fight,’ Ben said, pointing at Leo.

‘How?’ Cody asked.

‘I chucked a Bomblette at Noah, and he ducked,’ Leo said as though it were a perfectly logical thing to have said.

‘What’s the *hell* is a Bomblette?’ Cody asked.

‘It’s my own invention. You take a water balloon, and you put an egg in it,’ Leo explained. ‘The perfect weapon.’

‘It’s not perfect at all,’ Noah broke in. ‘The egg barely even breaks. Which is why it smashed the window instead of shattering itself.’

‘Its imperfections are not the point,’ Leo said.

‘What *is* the point?’ Noah asked.

‘Fucking innovation!’ Leo said.

‘Can we get back to the problem at hand?’ Ben asked.
‘We still have to make up the difference.’

‘OK, well, would he take my bike as part trade? It’s worth the cost of a brand-new TV on its own,’ Noah said.

‘No!’ Mia cried. ‘Noah, you can’t sell your bike. You love that fucking thing.’

‘We’re eighty-eighty quid down, and I was the tit that cracked the TV,’ Noah said. ‘I think it’s only fair.’

‘Forget it,’ Mia said. ‘I’m not gonna offer part trade. This guy’s twitchy, anyway. If I keep trying to barter, he’ll pull out. Just getting him to agree to a collection tonight was a tough enough sell.’

‘OK, so we need cash, and we need it tonight,’ Rian said.

Cody groaned. Everyone turned to her. ‘My dad would give it to me,’ she admitted.

‘You’d tell your dad about this? Doesn’t that make the whole thing pointless? Aren’t we trying to pull the wool over parental eyes?’ Mia said.

‘My dad’s not my mum. He’ll be OK with it. He won’t be thrilled, and I’ll probably get a talking to at some point, but he’d bail me out if I needed it.’

Ava nodded. ‘Toby will be cool.’

Cody gave her an irritated look, clearly unhappy with the familiarity with her father in the present emotional tumult. But she went into the kitchen and made the call in private.

She came back a minute later. 'He's got it. We can swing by on the way to the collection.'

Tara clutched her throat. 'No! Do I seem drunk? I can't do parents in this condition!'

'Relax, it's not tea and biscuits. It's a quick stop,' Ava told her. 'He's nice, anyway. He supplied vodka for the party, remember?'

'Oh, yeah,' Tara said. 'What a ledge.'

'I'll drive,' Leo said quickly. 'I'm the only sober one. You see, I read a thing last week—'

'Oh God, is he gonna start explaining about how alcohol disrupts the signal pathways to build muscle? I can't listen to that again, man,' Ben said.

Leo tutted. 'Get in the car and shut up.'

Everyone filed out and filled up Leo's car to an illegal capacity. Ava and Cody were on either side in the back, and Becky was squeezed in next to Tara in the middle. Ben was in the footwell.

'Are you alright down there?' Cody asked him.

‘Don’t worry, he always does this,’ Tara assured her.

‘Yeah, I’m good,’ Ben called up. ‘But watch it with those heels, Tara. I’m legit worried for my jugular.’

‘Wait, where’s Noah?’ Cody asked.

‘Boot,’ everyone replied in unison.

Cody was aghast. ‘What if we crash?’

‘He’s fine. I’ll go under the limit,’ Leo said.

Off they went. Cody looked out of the window, never once looking in Ava’s direction. Ava knew that because she had Cody in her peripherals the entire journey.

They pulled up in front of the house. But Cody, though free to jump out from her position next to the door, made no move to leave.

‘Could *you* go and talk to him?’ Cody said suddenly from the other side of the car.

‘Me?’ Ava asked.

‘Yeah.’

Ava wanted to ask why but decided against it. ‘Sure.’

Ava jumped out and headed up the path to the house, the door opening before she could reach it. 'Hi Toby,' Ava said sheepishly.

'Hi. What's going on?' he asked, confused and pyjama-clad.

'Cody didn't explain?'

'She did. But I didn't really understand. I was asleep. Long week.'

'We were having a... get together,' Ava said carefully. 'It got out of hand.'

'At Katherine's house? Cody's mother, I mean?'

'Yeah.'

'And I take it her mother wasn't there,' Toby said.

'That's right.'

'Whose idea was this party?' Toby asked.

'Mine,' Ava admitted.

Toby gave her an examining look that she recognised from Cody. It wasn't quite as unnerving, but coming from

someone who'd always been so happy to see her, it had a fair bit of power to make Ava feel pretty terrible.

'You pushed her to have a party?' Toby asked.

Ava looked at the ground. 'Yes.'

Toby sighed. 'I mean, look... It's what kids do, right? They have parties. I sure did. But Cody... She likes to think she doesn't care what anyone thinks. But she wouldn't have done this a few months ago. So that means she did this for *you*.'

'Does it?' Ava asked.

'Yeah. And you gotta take that seriously. It's a big deal when she lets you in.'

Ava didn't know what to say to that. But then Toby shoved a few notes into her hand. 'Go. Sort it.'

Ava looked at Toby. 'I will. I'm sorry.'

'Don't be sorry. I'm glad she met you.'

Ava was stunned. 'You are?'

'Of course.' He yawned. 'I'm going back to bed now.' He shut the door.

Ava walked back to the car. 'You get it?' Cody asked.

'Yeah.'

'Did he say anything?'

'Not really,' Ava lied.

But she'd been told twice tonight, in very different ways, that Cody cared about her. It was a lot to process. But Ava felt something in her stomach about it, something she didn't know what to do with. She was happy.

Thirty-Seven

It had been decided that the whole lot of them pitching up in the middle of the night might scare the guy, so Cody said she'd go get the TV. Noah insisted on accompanying, though.

Mr Marketplace (aka an old guy named Bill) answered the door before Cody had finished ringing. He looked annoyed. 'The telly?' he asked gruffly.

'Yep,' Cody answered.

'Got the money?'

'Yep.'

'Can I see it?'

Cody got out the cash, and the guy counted it out. 'OK.' He shut the door.

'What the fuck?' Cody said. She looked at Noah. 'Did he just...'

'That bastard just ripped us off!' Noah agreed. He slammed a fist on the door. 'Hey!'

The door opened. ‘What the hell are you doing?’ Bill asked.

‘You just stole our money, you old bastard!’ Cody said.

He looked offended. ‘I went to fetch the TV.’ He bent behind him and held it up, groaning. ‘Here.’

‘Oh. Sorry,’ Cody said, taking the TV awkwardly, and Noah grabbed one end quickly.

‘Fucking Facebook. This is the last time,’ Bill said and slammed the door.

Cody looked at Noah and they exchanged an embarrassed giggle.

They carried the TV to the car. ‘Now where the hell is this going to go?’ they said as they looked at the jammed-up car.

‘Some of us could jog back?’ Rian said, getting out of the car.

‘I can’t jog that far,’ Leo said quickly. ‘My quads cramp.’

Ben shook his head. ‘What the fuck is the point of those muscles if you can’t even run ten miles?’

Leo was quickly angry. ‘Cramp or no cramp, I’d still outrun you any day.’

Ben was incensed. ‘You would not!’

Mia rolled her eyes. ‘We all know where this is headed. Both of you get out of the car and get going. Ava can drive. We’ll see you at Cody’s.’

Ben and Leo got out of the car and took off at a clip before anyone could say anything further, disappearing into the night.

Rian sighed. ‘Unbelievable.’

‘Freed up some space, though,’ Tara said cheerily. ‘Let’s get this thing in the car and head back.’

Ava got out of the back and climbed into the driver’s seat, though she had to adjust the seat much closer to the wheel before she was comfortable.

‘No one needs to be that tall,’ she grumbled. ‘It’s just unnecessary.’

‘Do I get to go in the actual car now?’ Noah asked.

‘Just this once,’ Mia told him.

‘Score!’

Cody and Noah placed the TV into the boot. Almost. ‘It doesn’t fit!’ Cody said, exasperated.

Noah grinned and reached into his pocket, pulling out bungee cords.

‘You just *had* those?’

‘I use them like a belt when I’m riding in the boot, get all strapped in and cosy.’ He pulled the boot door closed as far as it would go over the TV and then set to work, strapping the boot closed, only a few centimetres of TV poking out now.

‘Is this legal?’ Cody asked.

‘Dunno. I don’t think we should Google it, though. That way, if we get pulled over, we’ve got plausible deniability,’ Noah stated.

Cody laughed. She suddenly realised just how much fun this was. She had broken her mother’s TV, and that terrified her. Her mother couldn’t do much in terms of punishment, but it wouldn’t feel that way if she was angry.

Yet here Cody was thinking that the guy who’d bugged the telly was a cool person. And feeling warmth toward several members of the group. In their own ways, they’d behaved like they cared about the mess Cody was in. One they’d kind of created, to be sure. But it hardly mattered now.

They were Cody’s friends.

‘OK, now put the bracket into that part,’ Mia was saying to Rian.

‘It doesn’t go there,’ Rian said.

‘It does. It says it right here,’ she said, showing him the phone.

‘Rian, let me take a look,’ Cody said.

‘I can do it!’ he said defensively. ‘Why does no one ever think I can do things?’

‘Maybe it’s because you’re too beautiful,’ Noah said. Everyone laughed except Rian.

‘There! I did it,’ Rian said, placing the newish TV back onto the wall.

‘Wait!’ Tara suddenly cried. ‘Did we check it even worked?’

Everyone looked around at each other, stricken.

Ava picked up the remote and hit the power button. The TV sprung to life, and there was a collective sigh of relief.

Ben suddenly exploded into the living room, carrying Leo on his back. 'Water! He's dangerously cramped!'

Cody fetched him a glass of water, and he gulped it down. 'My quads,' Leo moaned.

'Guys, we did it,' Becky declared, the first time she'd contributed anything to the whole disaster. 'Hooray for us!'

Cody still wanted to slap Becky good, but she couldn't help but smile. They had done it. Her mother would never know the difference.

But then it occurred to her. 'Oh shit! The picture frame!'

Noah smiled slyly. 'It's cool. I bought two, just in case. Left the second under the kitchen sink.' And he went to fetch the spare.

Cody watched him come back in, and he had it replaced and back up in a few minutes.

'Wow,' she breathed as the picture went up. 'How did you know to buy two?'

'He might be precognisant,' Mia theorised.

'When you're dumb, you get smart about how to counteract it,' Noah explained.

‘Now that’s all sorted, I need to pee,’ Cody said and went upstairs.

She let her long-held wee out and then opened the door. Becky was waiting on the other side. ‘Jesus!’ It was a jump scare she didn’t need.

‘Hey!’ Becky said cheerily.

‘Toilet’s all yours,’ Cody said evenly.

She tried to step around her, but Becky didn’t move. ‘Do you think we could have a little chat?’

As far as Cody was concerned, Becky might as well have asked for a kidney. ‘Nope,’ Cody said, stepping around Becky.

She felt a hand on her arm. She turned, thinking she was about to have a physical fight. But Becky looked pleading.

‘Please, Cody. I think it’s time, don’t you?’

‘I *don’t*, as it goes,’ Cody told her.

Becky looked undaunted. ‘Well, you’re part of my friend group now, and I don’t see you going anywhere. I know we’re all scattering soon, but those people have been my friends for years. That’s not ending, even if we’re at different places. So you and I could be seeing each other for years to come.’

Cody had never considered this. As fond as she'd become of some members of Ava's group (*her* group?), she'd never thought there'd be any kind of future in it. What if Becky was right?

She took a deep breath. 'OK, Becky. If we gotta do this, then let's make it quick.'

'Which one's your room?' Becky asked, nodding up the hall.

Cody didn't want to take Becky into her room, but she couldn't see any way around it. They weren't going into her mother's room, that was for damn sure.

She led her down the hall and opened the door.

Becky entered the room, having a good look around. 'That's a big bookshelf.'

Cody shut the door behind her. 'Out with it.'

Becky's smile slipped a bit. 'I think you know what I'm going to say.'

'I really don't,' Cody said, which was true.

'I think we need to process our... shared history,' Becky said.

Cody couldn't help but laugh. 'That's one way to put it.'

Becky fixed her eyes on the floor. ‘First off, I want you to know that what happened was... Look, I was young. And you remember those girls. They were *total* bullies. Be anything even slightly different, and you were screwed.’

‘I recall that, yes,’ Cody said dryly.

‘So, are we cool?’ Becky asked hopefully.

‘Fuck no,’ Cody said.

‘But I apologised.’

‘I don’t think you did.’

‘It was implied.’

‘You lied, Becky,’ Cody said plainly. ‘And pretty much fucked my life up.’

‘I *panicked*,’ Becky replied.

Cody had never thought this opportunity would present itself. But if it did, Cody would take the opportunity to get the pound of flesh she felt very much owed. ‘But I want to hear you say the words.’

‘You want me to...’

‘Apologise properly for what you did. That’s all I want to hear from you.’

Becky sighed. ‘Fine. I didn’t tell the total truth, and I guess that was kind of fucked up.’

‘So close,’ Cody said. ‘Let’s try again. I’m. Sorry. I. Lied.’

Becky chewed the inside of her mouth. ‘Look, I just want you to know... I liked you back then.’

‘Don’t care,’ Cody told her.

‘It was really scary for me. But, like, things are different now. You’re different.’

‘I’m not, actually,’ Cody told her, getting a bad feeling about where Becky was trying to take this. ‘I’m the same person, pretty much.’

‘Yeah, but... I guess it works now?’ Becky philosophised.

Cody raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m still waiting for you to say it.’

Becky took a step toward Cody. ‘I guess if it would make you happy.’

Cody didn't like the movement in her direction. What the hell was Becky doing?

'Look...' Cody started.

Becky suddenly pushed Cody up against the end of her bed. Cody was so surprised that she fell backwards over the frame. Becky practically leapt onto the bed with her, astride a shocked Cody, and pressed her mouth against Cody's neck, murmuring, 'I'd never do that to you again.'

Cody was about to say, 'You won't get the chance,' and then shove her off, but the door opened, and wouldn't you know it, Ava was there.

Her mouth fell open, and Cody stared at her.

Becky turned to Ava over her shoulder. 'Oh, Ava. I'm so sorry you had to find us like this,' she said without a shred of sincerity.

'Can you get off me now?!' Cody asked Becky, furious.

She wasn't sure why she felt so caught out. Ava wasn't actually her girlfriend. Nor was anything really going to happen with Becky.

But the look on Ava's face...

Becky clambered off Cody, and Cody jumped off the bed.

‘Seriously?’ Ava asked, shocked. And hurt?

‘Ava, Christ, it’s not—’ Cody said.

‘I think I should leave you guys to it,’ Becky said, snaking out and shutting the door behind her.

Thirty-Eight

Ava shook her head at Cody. ‘Wow.’

She couldn’t believe this was happening again. A different bedroom, the same result. Ava was a fool.

‘We *weren’t*,’ Cody told her.

Ava collected herself, folding her arms, shaking off her pain, trying to focus on the real problem. ‘I mean, I’m just kind of surprised that it would be *her*. It could really fuck things up. We’ve worked so hard to get to this point. The whole school came to your party for crying out loud.’

Cody gave her a hard look. ‘Bullshit. They came because of stupid social media.’

‘This was the biggest party of the year. Because everyone’s happy for you that you’re back among the living now,’ Ava said.

‘That’s so fucking patronising,’ Cody said coldly.

‘Yeah? I guess you’d have liked something a bit more intimate,’ Ava sneered. ‘Just you and Becky.’

Cody rolled her eyes. ‘Seriously, we *weren’t*—’

‘I get it now, actually. This whole time, hating each other? It was sexual chemistry, I guess.’

‘Ava, will you fucking listen to me?’ Cody was almost screaming now. ‘I wouldn’t. Ever. She was *trying*, for sure. But I was about to tell her to fuck off.’

Part of Ava wanted to believe her. But Becky had been on top of Cody. How could it not be true? This was just the way things were, Ava was learning. While Ava went merrily about her business, her head utterly up her own arse, behind closed doors, people did things and laughed at her.

And this was worse than last time. So much worse. Because hadn’t Ava thought Cody was different? Hadn’t she *hoped* she was?

Well, Cody and Becky were welcome to each other. It made things simpler, anyway. ‘I don’t know how long this was going on, but you better shut this down now. You’re putting my entire prom bid in jeopardy.’

‘There’s nothing to shut down. Why aren’t you listening to me?’ Cody moaned. ‘I was just—’

‘I don’t need to know. So shut up about it, OK?’ Ava said, trying not to cry. She stormed out of the room and went downstairs. ‘I need a ride,’ she called.

‘Is it kicking out time?’ Ben asked, surprised.

Cody walked in behind her but said nothing.

‘Nope. Just ready to go if anyone else is,’ Ava said.

‘I need time for my legs to work,’ Leo said, tenderly touching them. ‘Can’t drive for at least an hour.’

‘I’ll drive,’ Ava said.

‘But then I’d have to leave the car with you,’ Leo pointed out.

‘What’s the rush? Is something wrong?’ Becky asked innocently.

Ava looked at her and thought of every time she’d risen above her taunts. This was not going to be one of those moments.

‘Fuck off, Becky.’

The entire room was silent with shock for a second, which Mia broke. ‘Whoa, what’s *that* about?’

‘Nothing. I’m sorry. I’m tired.’ Ava walked out of the house.

If no one was coming with her, she’d have to walk the mile and a half home with her keys between her knuckles. She could imagine plunging them into Becky’s eye sockets, so she was good and revved for potential attackers.

Thirty-Nine

The next day, Sunday, Cody slammed into her dad's house. He was sitting in the living room, watching TV in his jammies.

'I thought you played golf on a Sunday?' she asked, surprised.

'I'm not up to it today,' her dad said. 'Why are *you* back? I don't usually see you till Monday night.'

'I just am,' Cody said. 'So why aren't you up to golf? Hungover or something?'

'You're asking me, Party Girl?' he smirked.

'I didn't drink last night. I was too busy with all that shit with the TV. What's your excuse?'

'Jesus, can I not even have a day off without the third degree?' he pled.

Cody almost went upstairs, but at the last second, she threw herself on the couch next to her dad. He looked surprised but said nothing.

They watched in silence. It was some Sunday morning chat show with cooking.

‘How the hell can you watch this?’ Cody asked.

‘What the hell is up with you today?’ her dad frowned. ‘Is this about your mother? Did she find out about the TV?’

‘No. I don’t think she’s even back yet.’

‘But you replaced it?’

‘Yes.’ Cody paused. ‘You’re not gonna tell her, are you?’

‘Why the bloody hell would I do that?’ her dad asked, appalled.

‘I don’t know. To punish me for lying?’

Her father tutted. ‘You didn’t lie. You made a mistake and corrected it.’

‘The lie is there, though. Attached to the wall.’

‘No one’s perfectly honest all the time, Cody. Not even you.’

Cody didn’t say anything to that. Just sat and stewed.

‘What’s wrong?’ her dad asked about ten minutes later.

‘Nothing, why?’

‘You keep sighing.’

Cody looked at him, bewildered. ‘No, I don’t.’

‘You must not realise you’re doing it, but seriously, it’s every few seconds. You’re upset about something.’

Cody made a note to monitor her breathing. ‘Dad, leave it.’

‘Alright, fine.’

Time passed, and then Cody asked casually, ‘Is Mum a sociopath, do you think? Or just a narcissist? Probably not a full-blown psychopath, right?’

‘*Jesus,*’ her dad breathed, shocked. But he collected himself and answered, ‘I don’t think about your mum all that much.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ Cody said.

‘It’s not healthy to dwell on the past,’ her dad muttered, turning back to the TV.

‘Come on, Dad. Just for once, don’t be so bloody diplomatic.’

‘I’m not being—’

Cody said something she’d been thinking for a while but had never cared to get into properly until today. ‘I think you think you’re being nice by never saying anything mean about her. But I need to know that I’m not alone with all this.’

Her dad looked at her anew. ‘Oh shit. I’m sorry. Of course, you do. I can’t believe I never realised that.’

Cody felt sympathy for him. She knew he tried. ‘It’s OK, dad. But just this once, talk shit about her. For me.’

Her dad sighed. ‘She’s cold. It’s true. I’m not going to diagnose it, but that woman doesn’t feel like other people do.’

Cody didn’t know if she could say the thing she wanted to say. But she needed to know. She’d always needed to know. ‘So, am *I* like that?’

‘What?’

‘I don’t have attachments, do I?’

‘That’s not true. You’re attached to *me*, aren’t you?’

‘I mean, obviously.’

‘Then...’

‘I just want you to tell me... I need to know if this is worth it. If I can even do this.’

‘Do what?’

‘Care. About people. Other than you. It’s just so fucking confusing and *hard* all the time.’

Her dad gave her a very long, examining look. ‘Oh no.’

Cody frowned. ‘What?’

Her dad shook his head. ‘I knew it would happen one day. It had to. But I thought I might have a bit more time before I had to deal with it.’

Cody tutted. ‘Dad, I got my period years ago.’

‘Not *that*.’ He sighed. ‘You’ve fallen in love, haven’t you?’

Cody span bodily to him. ‘What? No!’

He groaned. ‘I’ve been so blind. I thought your personality change was drugs. But it was bloody *love*.’

Cody wanted to throttle him. ‘Dad, stop. I’m telling you, I’m not...’ She couldn’t even complete the sentence; she

was so angry.

It was the second time that idiotic word had come up.
What was everyone's obsession with it?

'It's Ava, isn't it?' her dad said.

Cody jerked. 'Why would you say that?'

'Because I've seen you together. I don't know how the bloody hell I missed it. You're clearly nuts for each other.'

'Dad, shut the hell...' Cody broke off. 'Wait. For *each other*? You think *she*...'

Her dad started laughing. 'Oh, Cody. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. You're about to go through the best and worst time of your life. So good luck, kiddo. You're screwed.'

'Stop laughing!' Cody demanded.

Her dad managed to stop, collecting himself. 'Hey, look, at least your instincts are better than mine were at your age. You picked a good one.'

Cody glared at her father. 'First off? You're wrong.'

'Of course I am,' he said sarcastically.

‘Second, she’s *not* a good one,’ Cody continued. ‘She’s totally needy. She’s desperate for, like, the entire *world’s* approval.’

Her dad shrugged. ‘Pobody’s nerfect.’

Cody’s jaw tightened. ‘Say that again, and patricide is a possibility.’

‘I’m just *saying*. She sounds like your opposite. And you know what they say...’

‘Don’t say opposites attract, either. Patricide is still on the table.’

‘Do you know *why* opposites attract, though?’ her dad asked. ‘That’s not in the phrase, so let me lay it out. We’re *all* a bit wonky. We have holes, gaps, weaknesses. But if you can find the right one, you know what can happen? You can balance each other out.’

That almost sounded like good advice. But the source was suspect. ‘But Dad, you’ve only been with Mum, and there was no balancing there, was there? She was mean, you were....’

‘Weak?’

‘I wasn’t going to say that,’ Cody said quickly.

She never would. Her dad had taken care of her solo for most of her life, and Cody knew she wasn’t easy. Weak was

the last thing he was.

‘But I was weak. In the *proper* sense,’ her father amended. ‘I was exhausted from her. Because she didn’t balance me at all. She just drained me.’

‘So where do you even have all this bloody wisdom from?’ Ava asked him.

‘I know I’ve never bought a girlfriend home, but you can’t really have thought I haven’t dated in the last fifteen years, can you?’ her dad asked, amazed.

Cody *had* thought that. Totally and utterly. ‘Well...’

Her dad became abruptly nervous. ‘Look, I thought it was best to wait until you were out of the house. I didn’t want to shake the stability of your home. But since we’re talking... I guess you *are* an adult now. It’s time you met Beth.’

Cody’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Who the hell is *Beth*?’

‘We’ve been seeing each other for two years.’

‘TWO YEARS!’ Cody screeched.

‘She comes on the weekends when you’re not here,’ he admitted. ‘I think you’ll like her. Maybe she could come this week?’ he said, starting to get a little excited. ‘And hey, you could invite Ava.’

‘That sounds horrendous, but thanks for the invite.’
Cody stood. ‘I’m going upstairs now to bang my head against the wall for a bit, see if I can make any sense of this. I don’t want to talk to you until I’ve finished doing that, OK?’

‘Alright, honey. Try not to mark the paint.’ Her dad turned back to the TV.

Cody went upstairs, glad to be back in her sanctuary. She lay back on her bed and put her headphones on, making sure they were in noise-cancelling mode. No sound could penetrate the solitude she had to build.

She put on some of her favourite dead musicians. Jeff Buckley came on, but it was one of his gooey ones, so she skipped to Janice Joplin, who started singing about pieces of her heart, which was no good either. Marvin Gaye wanted sexual healing, which Cody did not need to hear right now. When the fuck had all this music been about relationships? Had it always been like this? Couldn’t anybody find anything else to say about life?

Ava was an insecure mess. She was pushy and controlling, and worse, she’d called Cody a liar. Cody’s honour was one of the few things she had. She thought Ava knew her enough to know she wouldn’t be sneaking around with Becky Saxton, of all people, and then lie about it.

But she didn’t. And if she didn’t know that, then Cody refused to want her. She didn’t care what her dad said.

But there was something she couldn’t stop picturing. It was the look on Ava’s face when she’d walked in on her and Becky. She’d looked hurt. Cody couldn’t deny that some part of her had been happy to see her jealous.

Cody was furious. Her dad had no business being right about anything, ever. Least of all this.

Forty

Ava had so much to do.

Her final coursework for psychology was in, but she still had her English essay to edit. She was in the process of designing a magazine that, as yet, had no content, and her exams were only two weeks away.

And once that was all done with, she had a prom dress to buy, as well as organising left to do. A lot had fallen into place, but the finer points of the event needed to be seen to.

It was a lot, and it should have crammed Ava's brain fit to burst. But what was her mind focused on? Cody. Just Cody.

Ava's stomach churned every time she thought about her. She and Becky, together. How long? How often? Was there any way that Cody could have been telling the truth, that it wasn't how it looked? Ava wanted answers badly. And also didn't.

It shouldn't have mattered. And it wouldn't have, if not for the terribly inconvenient fact that Ava had never really stopped thinking about the pantry. That kiss. It was ruining her life. Did it mean anything? Probably not to Cody, which was clear now. But how did Ava feel about it? How did she *want* to feel about it?

Ava didn't know what to think anymore. Her head was a stew of ingredients that didn't belong together.

Obviously, she *could* talk to Cody. 'Hey Cody, shall we talk about our feelings and process them together?' A great idea if you enjoyed walking into chainsaws face first.

She needed to investigate what had occurred in Cody's bedroom if she was going to find any kind of peace. And she already had Cody's side of the story.

There she was, Becky, alone in the courtyard. There would never be a better moment.

'Hi, Becky,' Ava said, sitting down next to her on the wall.

'Oh. Hi!' Becky said with enough temerity to look chipper. 'You must be thrilled.'

Ava raised an eyebrow. 'What?'

'The nominations are up. You and Cody are on the list.'

That threw Ava for a second. How had she missed it? She'd known it was today. She'd had the date in her diary. And it had slid right by.

‘Oh. Right. Who else?’

‘Only three other couples. Mikey and Sara D are on there, that girl, what’s her name, and that guy with the thing? And Rian and Leo, obviously.’

‘Obviously.’ She prepared herself. ‘But anyway, that’s not what I want to talk about,’ Ava told her flatly.

Becky nodded. ‘Yeah. I know. I realise how bad it looked, me and Cody.’

‘Looks? Or *is*?’

Becky gave her a patronising look like she was talking to a toddler. ‘You don’t understand. Me and Cody have a history.’

‘I know about that.’

‘She told you?’ Becky said, surprised.

‘Of course she did. She told me you kissed her and then pretended she’d as good as assaulted you when you were eleven.’

Becky rolled her eyes. ‘Look, I was young. But I see her now, and it’s like... *You* get it.’

‘And you didn’t care that she was taken?’

Becky gave her a searching look. ‘Is she, though?’

Ava felt fear in her chest. ‘Of course she is. What’s that supposed to mean?’

Becky shrugged, casualness itself. ‘I don’t know. You guys don’t really act like a couple. Like, you don’t touch much.’

‘I’m sorry we don’t meet your requirements for coupledness. But it doesn’t give you the right—’

‘It was amazing how you guys went viral, wasn’t it?’ Becky broke in. ‘I mean, *right* before nominations and everything. Couldn’t have planned it better. I’m sure you’ll win.’

Ava froze, unsure how to proceed. It was disturbing how close Becky was getting to the truth.

Becky smiled. ‘I know you wanna beat Leo. And after what happened, who could blame you? No one would be shocked if you’d taken steps to ensure it.’

‘Steps?’ Ava said, trying to sound amused.

Becky cocked her head and placed a hand on Ava’s wrist. ‘Cody told me. Everything.’

Ava blinked. ‘Uh... What exactly did she say?’

‘So it’s *true*. You admit it,’ Becky said eagerly.

Ava stood. ‘This is stupid.’

She walked off, fear in her chest. Becky knew? That was bad. But worse, Cody had told her? Cody would have had no reason to tell Becky anything unless there was a relationship of some sort.

Ava couldn’t believe she’d doubted her own eyes. Cody was a liar.

In Media Studies, Ava was very careful not to look at Cody. Though she could feel her looking at Ava.

‘Cody, Ava?’ Miss Huang said. ‘How are you getting on?’

A complex question. She and Cody, as far as anyone knew, were loved up and working like a dream.

‘Yeah, good. The magazine is coming together,’ Ava told the teacher.

‘It’s not at all. I’ve only written one thing for it,’ Cody said.

Ava could have killed her.

‘And why’s that?’ Miss Huang asked.

‘Honestly, too much partying,’ Cody said.

The entire class laughed.

‘At least you’re honest,’ Miss Huang said. ‘Pro tip? Don’t believe any rubbish about the hair of the dog. Fat, sugar, caffeine, those are your best friends when you’re hungover.’

‘Thanks, Miss Huang,’ Cody said.

Ava was livid. So the famous Cody Foster inability to lie had to kick in *now*, did it? And not when she was doing whatever the fuck with Becky?

She texted Cody. *Meet me at five. At my place.*

She watched Cody check her phone discretely and throw a worried glance at Ava. But Ava wouldn’t meet it. She was saving her ire for a private location.

Ava opened the door to Cody, who looked tired. Probably up all night doing God knew what.

‘Come in.’

Cody stepped over the threshold gingerly. ‘Ava—’

‘Let’s talk upstairs,’ Ava cut her off. Her mother was a known eavesdropper.

In Ava’s bedroom, Cody was the first to speak. ‘We haven’t talked since the party.’

‘No,’ Ava agreed.

‘I’m angry with you,’ Cody said.

Ava’s mouth fell open. ‘*You’re angry at me?*’

‘Yeah!’ Cody exclaimed.

‘Do tell,’ Ava said, amazed.

‘I don’t like being called a liar,’ Cody said.

‘A great way to avoid that is not to tell lies,’ Ava told her.

Cody looked like she was going to flip out. But she took a deep breath, three actually, and said, ‘That’s not fair.’

‘Oh, because you’re such a paragon of virtue?’ Ava said, folding her arms.

Cody blinked. ‘I didn’t say that. But I’d like to think you know that I don’t just—’

‘Lie?’ Ava broke in. ‘Because you *never* do that, right? Except when you lied to that Laura person about your age. She could have gotten in trouble, and she didn’t even know.’

Cody’s face dropped. ‘That’s what we’re doing now, is it? Throwing secrets in each other’s faces? That’s disappointing.’

‘You know what disappointed me? You going behind my back and getting with Becky, who, as far as I understood it, was *both* our mortal enemy.’

‘FOR FUCK’S SAKE. I DIDN’T!’ Cody yelled.

Trump card time. ‘Oh yeah? So how come she knows about all *this* then?’

‘All what?’

‘The plan!’

‘She *knows*?’ Cody said.

She did look pretty surprised. But Ava wasn't falling for that.

'Yes. Because you told her.'

'I didn't tell Becky shit. We've had one conversation this entire time. It lasted five minutes before she leapt on me.'

'I don't get why you're lying about this,' Ava said. 'She told me you told her. It's out. Frankly, it's your business what you do. I'm just pissed because you've jeopardised everything.'

Cody was still angry, but her voice level dropped. 'That's it, is it? That's the *only* reason you're mad?'

Ava didn't like where this was headed. 'So you admit it?' Ava said.

'*No*. I will go to my grave denying any of this. I never told Becky anything. I *certainly* never wanted to touch her, and frankly, I might *actually* hate her more than I already did.' She stopped and examined Ava closely, nervously. 'I just want to know...'

'What?' Ava demanded.

Cody didn't say anything for a long moment. She looked like she was wrestling with something. Eventually, she said, 'I just want to know... If...'

Ava was still murderously angry, but she couldn't help but want to know what the hell Cody wanted to ask. 'Spit it out.'

Cody swallowed. 'If you're jealous?' she asked quietly, her dark eyes unusually anxious.

Ava felt something like eight emotions take her at once. She didn't know what the hell to do with any of them. But she was saved from dealing with them—not to mention Cody's loaded question—by something that would usually drive her nuts.

Her mother walked in without knocking. 'You're not gonna *believe* what that insurance company thinks they can charge me just because I had one little prang...' her mother began, her mouth ahead of her eyes. 'Oh! Cody! I didn't realise you were here. Study session, I take it?'

Cody was ruffled. 'Oh, er, no. We were just...'

'Done,' Ava completed, folding her arms.

Cody looked at her, hurt in her eyes. 'Done?'

'Yeah. Nothing more to say. Let's finish our assignment and *everything* and call this a day. I mean, we're at the finish line, aren't we?'

Cody gave her one last look and left without another word.

Ava sat down on the bed. ‘Mother, can you go, please?’

Ava’s mother looked confused and uncomfortable. She hadn’t missed the vibes.

‘In a sec. Can I just ask... Do you want to watch *Cruel Intentions* tonight? Maybe followed by *Bring it On*?’

Ava looked at her mother, thankful she seemed to understand that Ava needed comfort and was providing it in the only way she knew how. ‘Yeah, OK. Thanks, Mum.’

‘Sure. We don’t need anyone else, do we? We’ve got each other.’

Ava nodded. ‘Sure.’

About two-thirds of the way through *Cruel Intentions*, Ava felt like she was going to cry. She felt so stupid. All this playing pretend, and who had she fooled? Herself.

Forty-One

The next few weeks were tricky.

Cody and Ava weren't talking. Well, they *were*. But only around other people. But outside of public situations, they didn't speak.

Luckily, everyone was busy in the last push of the academic year, so Cody didn't have to make up excuses not to hang out much. Not that she would have had to lie. She was working very hard, finishing up her articles for the magazine project and studying for her exams the following week.

When she was done with her stories, she sent them to Ava to put together with what she had. She received a one-word response. *Thanks*. Not that Cody was looking for praise. She didn't need that from Ava. She didn't need anything from Ava anymore.

Ava didn't believe her and would never believe her. And Cody hated Ava for not believing her. So that was that.

But after all the deadlines were met, all exams sat (Cody felt they'd not gone horribly, but who could really say) came the last challenge. Prom. Cody couldn't imagine anything she wanted to do less.

She was worn to the bone from all the work and the stress of the exams—not to mention the stress of the thing with Ava— but she'd made a promise, and she had to keep it. She had to see this through to the end.

In the run-up to the big event, there was a non-negotiable. Something Ava insisted they needed to take care of in person, together. Something Cody had been dreading from the start.

‘No!’ Cody said when Ava held up the yellow gown.

‘It would match the colour scheme of mine. I’m wearing purple. Yellow compliments purple. And you’d look... It would work on you,’ Ava said flatly.

‘I don’t buy that,’ Cody said. ‘And why are we in a shop, anyway? We could have just done this online.’

‘Not for formal. This is a go-into-the-shop situation,’ Ava told her. ‘And to address your colour concerns, you are olive-skinned,’ she added enviously. ‘Olive people can pop in light colours that pale people like me look awful in. I’ll never be able to wear yellow. It would wash me out. But you? You’ll kill this outfit.’

Cody kind of liked the compliment, not that she would admit it. Not at gunpoint. ‘Hey, you know what? Doesn’t matter if I could pull off that colour. I told you, no dresses,’ Cody said. ‘You agreed.’

Ava gave a long, loud sigh. ‘So what would you choose?’

Cody folded her arms. 'Suit.'

'You want to wear a suit?' Ava asked.

Cody braced herself for some kind of gender bullshit. But Ava only said, 'OK, go pick one out. But I get final approval.'

Cody went into the suit section of the shop. She'd never worn a suit before in her life. But she wanted to feel like herself at this thing, if a bit more formal. A big ask.

She looked at black first. It was certainly tempting. This whole thing felt like a funeral anyway. But she thought of the dress that Ava had shown her. It was a deep mustard yellow.

And there it was. A dark yellow suit, almost gold. If Ava wasn't going to kick up a fuss about not wearing a dress, then Cody would find a suit in the colour Ava wanted her in, her last concession to this madness. Cody grabbed it in her size, paired it with a black silk shirt and took it back to Ava. Ava raised an eyebrow, and Cody prepared herself for a bollocking.

'Go and try it on,' Ava said.

She was still talking in that pissy tone, but Cody could tell she was not totally displeased.

She went into the dressing room and put the suit on. It fit right. She was surprised at how good it looked.

She went out to Ava, who was looking down at her phone, scrolling absent-mindedly.

‘Hey!’ Cody said, annoyed.

Ava looked up, and her mouth fell open. Her green eyes flashed surprise and delight. But she was quick to wipe the look off her face. ‘Approved,’ she said quickly. ‘I’m gonna choose your shoes.’ She walked off briskly.

‘No heels,’ Cody called after her and went into the changing room to get back into her jeans.

When she came out, Ava was holding a pair of sparkly black flats. Once again, it was somewhere between what Cody could cope with and what Ava wanted. ‘You’re a five, right?’

Cody paid at the till using her father’s credit card. He’d insisted. He’d even told her to go nuts. ‘Up to a point,’ he added.

‘You’ve got yours picked out already?’ Cody asked as they walked out of the shop.

‘I’ve had it picked out for six months,’ Ava told her.

‘And *I* don’t get to check it first?’

‘But of course,’ Ava nodded. ‘Shall we arrange a time for me to model it for you?’

‘Bluff called,’ Cody smirked.

Ava gave her a look that was almost a smile, but it vanished rapidly. ‘Right,’ she said, businesslike. ‘The gangs always talked about doing a limo. But we don’t want to pick everyone up. It’ll take forever. We were thinking of meeting at someone’s for pre-drinks, but we’re still not sure whose—’

‘We can do mine if everyone wants,’ Cody said.

It was out before she’d even thought about it. But she realised that it was OK. She maybe even wanted it.

‘Your mum’s? After last time?’ Ava asked, surprised.

‘Why not?’ Cody said, unworried. She was less concerned about problems this time. The worst had happened before, and they’d gotten away with it. She trusted them. ‘And It’ll be free. No parents trying to take photos. I can’t deal with all that.’

Ava nodded. ‘Put it to the group chat. But I think everyone will be up for that.’ She paused. ‘That’s nice of you.’

‘No drama,’ Cody said, feeling oddly flustered.

She felt like she wanted to say more. But she’d tried that at Ava’s. She’d put something on the line asking Ava if she was jealous. But Ava hadn’t given a shit.

Ava had made it very clear what the deal was. What it had been at the start. An uneasy alliance. A more complex one now, to be sure. But still, just a deal. Whatever Cody thought she saw, she was wrong. She'd only seen what she wanted to.

'How's the statement coming?' Ava asked.

'It's mostly done. Needs an ending, though,' Cody said.

'It'll certainly get that,' Ava said.

'You think you'll win?' Cody asked.

'*We'll* win,' Ava replied.

Cody nodded. 'Yeah, well... You deserve it.'

Ava looked surprised. But Cody felt that it was true. Meaningless as the coronation was to Cody, Ava craved it hard. No one wanted it more. No one had worked harder for it. So that crown should be Ava's.

'Thanks.' She paused. 'Becky's having people at hers tonight. Presume you're going?'

Cody raised an eyebrow at the loaded question. It reminded her exactly why things were the way they were. Anger gained a foothold in her heart once again.

'Think I'll give that one a swerve, actually,' she said with a hard tone.

Ava shrugged, aloof. 'Everyone's gonna be disappointed.'

'I'm busy.'

'You've been saying that a lot lately,' Ava said.

'We've *all* had a lot to do, haven't we?' Cody asked. 'End of year and everything.'

'Yeah. End of year,' Ava repeated icily.

'Say hi to everyone for me,' Cody told her.

She strode off, disquieted, angry. She didn't need to feel like this. She hadn't done anything.

She would be thrilled when this fucking prom was done with. She didn't know how much more she could take of all this. This change in Ava, the coldness, the suspicion. It was killing Cody.

Once Ava had her crown, Cody thought she might have to be done with the group because she didn't think she could ever look at Ava again without it hurting. But that was OK. Alone was Cody's natural state, and she could find her way back to it.

Forty-Two

It was prom night, and Ava had been getting ready for roughly forty-eight hours. Yesterday, she'd gotten everything waxed and spray-tanned and gotten her nails done.

Today, she was doing the home stuff, including makeup and hair. And her mother had perfectly pressed the dress.

Every last penny of her savings had gone into her physical appearance. She needed to look perfect. Because inside, she felt anything but. She felt like she was broken. She felt like an idiot. She was no queen, regardless of what happened tonight.

'I'm going in a minute, Mum,' Ava called through.

Her mother came into the room at a pace. 'Wow!' she said, smiling broadly. 'You look just like me when I was your age. Lean on that chair with your arm crooked. Then I can do the photos of us side by side and put it above the mantel!'

Ava got into the pose, and her mother raised her phone and took the snap. She looked at her phone to check the image. 'I want to take another when you get home with the crown. Hey, maybe I could Photoshop one onto my old image so they match properly?'

'I might not get it,' she told her mother.

‘You will. And it will be the best night of your life, Leo or no Leo.’

‘I don’t know,’ Ava shrugged.

‘Really. It doesn’t get better than this,’ her mother said, her eyes glistening.

Ava suddenly felt so depressed she wanted to fuck the prom off and lie in the bath for three hours. It was only a passing thought. She wouldn’t, really. How could she? She was due to peak tonight. She couldn’t miss that.

‘Taxi is round the corner,’ her mother said. ‘And remember, no shame in going solo.’

Though she’d never said anything about her plan to her mother, she didn’t want her to think she was going stag. That was simply too pathetic.

‘I’m not. I’m going with Cody.’

Her mother’s eyebrows shot up. ‘What?’

‘Yeah. She’s my date.’

Her mother looked like she was balancing processing the news whilst also trying to figure out how to make her face look. What she landed on was badly performed fake nonchalance.

She abruptly turned to the sofa and began to fluff some pillows, asking over her shoulder, 'Does that mean you're, err...'

'I don't know. Possibly. I don't have time to figure that out right now,' Ava told her honestly.

'I see,' her mother said, turning back to her, gripping a pillow, wearing a fake smile. 'Well, she's a very nice girl.' She licked her lips anxiously. 'But umm, you *might* still be bisexual, right?'

'Would you prefer that?' Ava asked her, disappointed but not enormously surprised by this reaction.

She looked horrified at the very thought. 'Oh no, no no... It's just... It *might* be easier. That's all. If you still had the option, I mean. To have a boyfriend, a husband, all that.'

Ava frowned at her mother and thought a thought that she probably shouldn't say in a million years. And then she went ahead and said it. 'But you have the option of that and don't have any of those things.'

Her mother looked stumped. 'Well...'

Ava watched her mother doing mental gymnastics to answer Ava's comment, and she was struck by a thought. Ava wasn't sure why it had never occurred to her before, but when the idea landed, it was loud and unignorable.

'Why would you do this?'

‘Do what?’ her mother frowned.

‘Why would you spend my whole life trying to make me into you when you’re not even happy?’ Ava asked quietly.

Her mother looked shocked and hurt. ‘What? How dare you! I’m fine!’

Ava shook her head sadly. ‘You’re not. You never have been. That’s why you live through me, isn’t it?’

Her mother went from flustered to enraged in a second. ‘Where the hell have you come up with this crap? Is it Cody? It is, isn’t it? I knew I didn’t like her.’

Ava looked at her mother, feeling pity, some love, but not much else. Certainly not respect.

‘Doesn’t matter if you like her. Because I do,’ Ava said, steeped in sadness.

She really did like Cody, more than she’d ever liked anyone in all her silly little life. And she’d lost her to Becky.

Or so Becky said. And Ava had chosen to believe her above Cody. Cody, who never lied. Cody, who hated Becky.

She thought back to her conversation with Becky. What had Becky really offered as concrete proof? Not much. In retrospect, hadn’t she just been taking stabs in the dark, reading Ava’s reactions to pretend she knew what she didn’t know at all?

Funny how it seemed obvious now. Why the hell had she let herself be convinced so easily? Perhaps because it confirmed what Ava expected of life. She didn't expect to be happy. She didn't expect anyone to love her. She didn't expect to love anyone.

Ava had been letting the past decide her present, and it wasn't even her past. It had to stop.

'I'm sorry, Mum,' Ava said, feeling bad that she'd upset her mother. Even if she meant every word. 'But something's got to change. I think I need to leave, quit my job, too.'

'Just get out,' her mother said. 'And I hope you lose tonight, I really do. Because you don't deserve to win.'

'You know what, Mum? I kind of hope I lose, too.' Ava walked out.

In the cab, Ava was miserable but clearheaded. She felt like she'd just broken something with her mother. But she thought maybe it needed breaking.

The cab arrived at Cody's mother's place. Cody opened the door wearing the suit that had almost stolen Ava's breath in the shop. It did the same at the door. Cody looked unbelievably hot. Ava was glad she'd insisted on a suit. It was very her. Ava would have hated to dress her up as anyone else.

‘Hi,’ Cody said, adding shyly, ‘Nice dress. You were right. Purple works on you.’

‘Thanks,’ Ava replied, rattled.

Cody stepped back to give Ava entry. ‘Everyone’s already here,’ Cody told her, gesturing down the hall.

Ava wanted to say something, something real, something to start a conversation about what an idiot she’d been. But it wasn’t the right time. Everyone was here, and then they were going to a crowded venue to party. What would be the moment? Would there be one at all? Had this ship sailed anyway? If it had, Ava had been the one to set sail. She’d been the one to say it was done. She’d been cruel about it because she was hurting so badly. But Cody wouldn’t understand that, would she?

Maybe not. Because she’d tried to ask for an honest conversation, and Ava had refused it. For Ava to ask for one now was hypocritical. She didn’t deserve it.

‘You look great, by the way,’ Ava said.

Cody looked down at herself. ‘I compliment you OK?’ Cody asked.

‘Yes. But that’s not what I meant,’ Ava said. She took a deep breath and said, ‘You look beautiful.’

Cody looked uncertain about how to respond, but then Tara popped her head out of the living room. ‘Hey, guys!’

Ava's here!' The usual cheer went up.

They headed in. Everyone was already a few drinks in, suited, booted, and gowned. All of them looked great. Leo and Rian were shirtless under their suits, which was a little much, but what did Ava care? Let them get crowned with their boobs out. Ava wanted to remember them all like this. Happy and ready for the night.

'Wow, so here they are,' Becky announced. 'You look great together. Instagram is gonna love it.'

Ava, despite her growth in the past hour, wanted to knock Becky's teeth out. 'Thanks. You look great, too.'

Becky yanked Ben, wearing a black tuxedo suit and tie, to her. 'We look good, right?'

Ben shrugged and straightened his tie. 'I asked Jasmine Harper if she wanted to go with me, but she told me she just wanted to be friends. Such a weird response.' He shook his head. 'So me and Becky are paired off for the night. She's promised not to get fresh.'

Cody snorted quietly, but only Ava noticed.

'Yeah, we're going full incest tonight,' Noah said, sitting next to Mia.

Mia gave him a sharp eyebrow. 'Can that be the *last* time you make that joke tonight?'

Tara sighed. 'Well, I'm going stag, so everyone has to dance with me, OK?'

'Of course we will,' Ava said. 'But how come? Plenty of guys asked you to go.'

'Yeah, but my psychic said I need to fly solo tonight. She said something about being ready for something big. Apparently, I'll know when it's my moment.' She shrugged. 'She was right about my belly piercing going septic, so I didn't think I should go against her.'

Ava smiled. 'Well, sounds like you're going to hook up with a mysterious hottie at the prom.'

Tara brightened. 'Maybe!'

'Limo is due in ten,' Mia announced to the room. 'If you want to get any last selfies with everyone in attendance, do it now.'

Everyone shuffled in, and Noah whipped out a selfie stick.

Ben was horrified. 'You didn't.'

Noah grinned, quip ready. 'I knew you wouldn't be able to deal with my massive stick.'

Ben looked at him. 'Sure, buddy. Don't forget I've showered with you.'

‘You what?’ Becky asked.

‘After football,’ Ben said quickly.

‘Yeah, that clears it up,’ Mia muttered.

‘Squeeze in,’ Noah said, and everyone started arranging themselves around him. He got the phone in camera mode and propped in position on the stick before glancing behind him at the wall. ‘Everyone, look out for the TV.’

‘Yeah, *do*,’ Mia said. ‘I don’t want to spend my night haggling with pensioners on Facebook, if we can avoid it.’

Ava stepped into the huddle, Cody next to her. Ava gave her a glance, and Cody met it for a moment before they both looked away.

‘Say cheese,’ Tara said.

‘I’m lactose intolerant,’ Noah said, and everyone laughed. He took the pic. ‘I’ll post and tag, don’t worry.’ He got on it immediately.

Everyone’s phones pinged with the notification. Ava took her phone out to see the pic. Everyone was laughing at Noah’s daft joke, but that wasn’t what Ava focused on. Her eyes went straight to Cody. She looked happy.

Ava wondered if she was about to ruin that.

Forty-Three

The limo pulled into the school car park, and everyone staggered out, not drunk exactly, but no one would have passed a breathalyser except Cody. She hadn't drunk anything tonight. She wanted to stay sharp. She wasn't letting herself get into any more compromising positions with Becky. No one was jumping her tonight.

Cody watched Ava step out of the limo last, smoothing down her magenta gown and patting her hair. Though Ava was not one to have a hair out of place on a normal day, she looked something else tonight. A goddamn queen if ever Cody had seen one.

But Cody wouldn't get caught staring. Even if Ava was handing out compliments that made a small sweat break out on the nape of Cody's neck.

'Hey, sexy,' Becky muttered quietly to Cody. 'You're rocking that suit.'

Cody turned to her, angry. But tonight was not a night for public spats. It was Ava's night. Cody wasn't so petty that she'd let her feelings ruin that. So she simply said, 'Yeah, I do, don't I?'

Becky laughed. 'You've come a long way, you know that?'

‘How about you? Made any progress turning from a snake into a human?’ Cody asked.

Becky looked wonderfully stumped by that.

Cody stepped next to Ava and put out her arm. ‘Shall we?’

Ava looked surprised but delighted to take her arm. ‘Lets.’

They walked into the hall, and the DJ on the stage cranked up the music. Cody was gobsmacked as she took in what used to be the grubby old school hall. She knew the theme was fire and ice, but she hadn’t thought much about what that would entail. Other than what she’d occasionally heard Ava muttering on the phone to various events companies.

Half the hall was dripping in blue lights and glowing blue trees, like an icy forest right out of *Frozen*. The other half was ablaze with red lights and hellish crepe flames. It had no right to look anywhere near as good as it did.

‘Christ, Ava. How the hell did you get an ice sculpture on the budget?’ Cody asked.

‘You don’t want to know,’ Ava said, looking shyly pleased.

‘You really worked hard on this, didn’t you?’

Ava looked at her, pleased. ‘I wanted us all to have a memorable night.’

Cody nodded. ‘It looks amazing. Great job.’

Ava appeared touched. She gave her a meaningful look and then said, ‘Hey, Cody...’ But then the rest of the gang descended on Ava to congratulate her, and the moment was broken.

The hall was rapidly filling with the population of Harewood Academy, dressed to the nines and ready to tear the night a new asshole. There was a bit too much whooping for Cody’s liking, but other than that, she only wished what Ava did—that everyone would have a good night.

She couldn’t remember ever feeling quite so magnanimous to her classmates before. She also couldn’t remember ever viewing them as her classmates. They’d always seemed like fellow prisoners. Trapped with her in legally binding educational misery.

But everyone was leaving soon. This would be over. Cody was shocked to feel nostalgia take her. In some strange way, she’d miss all these arseholes.

Music was playing. Pop. Cody didn’t recognise it. She was pretty sure the whole night was going to be that way, playing stuff she’d refused to listen to under any normal circumstances. But she didn’t mind so much tonight.

Everyone was hitting the dancefloor. Mia started to drag Noah off. ‘Come on.’

‘I can’t dance, though,’ he wailed.

‘Just do it,’ Mia commanded.

Ava watched them go. Noah wasn’t lying. He was a shocking dancer, flailing his limbs like he was drowning. That’s when Cody realised that *she* was about to have to dance in public.

Cody did dance... Alone in her room. No one had ever seen it, though. Cody didn’t know if she had the slightest bit of rhythm. But she was about to find out.

‘I’m gonna go check out the food,’ she said to Ava.

‘Me too. I’m starving. I haven’t eaten all day,’ Ava responded, following her to an impressive snack table full of cake pops, skewered fruit, and a chocolate fountain. It had the goods.

‘Why haven’t you eaten?’ Cody said, loading up a plate.

The chocolate fountain looked tempting, but she decided to avoid it. Her suit would not hide chocolate smudges.

‘This dress is quite unforgiving,’ Ava admitted, grabbing some hors d’oeuvre. She glanced down at her gown. ‘You wanna know why I picked purple?’

‘Sure.’ Cody poured a drink from a punchbowl marked ‘mocktails.’

Tonight was a dry event despite the fact everyone was of legal age. The school was terrified of liability. Though they’d be stupid to think people wouldn’t have snuck stuff in.

‘It’s the colour of royalty.’ Ava laughed at herself. ‘How stupid is that?’

Cody wasn’t sure how to react. She stuffed food into her mouth, mumbling, ‘I don’t know about that.’

‘I do. I mean, what the hell was I thinking? That I would trick everyone into voting for me by unconsciously reminding them of royalty?’ Ava rolled her eyes.

‘You look gorgeous, so what difference does it make why you picked purple?’ Cody shrugged.

Ava blinked. ‘You think I look gorgeous?’

Cody realised her error and tried to wind it back sharpish. ‘You know... Perfect, I mean.’

Ava’s smile slipped. ‘Perfect. Yeah.’

‘Is there something wrong with that word?’ Cody asked.

‘No.’ But she looked kind of sad.

‘Isn’t that all you ever wanted to be?’ Cody asked her.

She wasn’t trying to be cruel. She meant it. Ava wanted to be perfect, and that’s exactly what she was. She should enjoy it.

Ava’s shoulders sagged visibly. ‘I did want that. For the longest time,’ she said gloomily, looking off into the distance at people dancing.

Cody didn’t know what to say. She felt out of her depth. She’d said something wrong, and she didn’t understand what.

‘Are you not happy with how this turned out?’ Cody questioned, gesturing at the hall.

‘It’s fine. I’m fine.’

Suddenly, Sally popped out seemingly from nowhere, phone in hand. ‘Cody!’

Cody nearly dropped her plate. ‘Hi, Sally. Didn’t know you were coming. You with anyone?’

Sally laughed like that was the best joke she’d heard in ages. ‘Good one. Can I get a shot of you two?’

‘Us?’ Cody said. ‘What for?’

‘Socials. I want to post your entry. I’d be first. And you know the world is waiting to see Hashtag Cova at the prom.’

Cody felt horror in her heart. ‘Cova? Seriously?’

‘You don’t like it?’ Sally asked. ‘Because the only alternative is Avody, which I don’t think works at *all*.’

‘I’d actually prefer my name completely unportmanteau’d, if anyone gives a shit,’ Cody said.

‘Too late,’ Sally shrugged. ‘You’re famous forever now. Like, in that everyone’s gonna forget about it in a few days type of way. But eternally googleable, for sure.’

None of this was much of a surprise to Cody, but she was still mad about it. She groaned. ‘Thanks, Sally. Really wrapped that one up in cotton wool for me.’

Sally squinted. ‘That’s sarcasm, isn’t it?’

‘That’s right,’ Cody confirmed.

‘I’m getting better at recognising it. I did an online course. The thing to look out for is the tone not matching the words.’

Cody smiled despite herself. ‘That sounds about right.’

‘But, does that mean you’re annoyed and I can’t have the pic?’ Sally asked anxiously.

Cody very nearly told her that was exactly the case. But it had always been impossible to be mean to Sally. Because despite how everyone talked to Sally, she didn't have a mean bone in her body. 'No, no, it's fine. Ava—for fuck's sake—you cool with Sally getting the scoop?'

Ava smiled. 'Yeah, sure.'

'What dumb-ass pose do couples do?' she asked Ava.

'Here,' Ava said. 'You stand still. I'll do all the work.'

Cody did as asked, and Ava slung an arm around her, pressing in. Cody's heart began to beat rather fast the moment contact occurred. If that wasn't bad enough, a lock of Ava's blonde hair draped down across Cody's neck, and it smelled very good. Cody tried to ignore it, waiting for the snap.

But then Sally asked. 'How about a cheek kiss?'

Cody felt panic, but it would look a bit odd if she refused at this point, right? She turned to kiss Ava on the cheek. But apparently, Ava had assumed she would *also* be the cheek kisser. So when they turned, they were both puckered up and guess what happened?

It was only quick lip contact, but it made Cody feel like someone had tased her in the face. Cody resisted the urge to jump back from it. It was supposed to look normal. But when they leant back from each other, she saw the look on Ava's face, and it matched her own. Flushed and embarrassed.

‘Got it!’ Sally practically screamed. She quickly walked off, already posting it.

‘Listen,’ Ava said. ‘I think... I think we ought to talk.’

‘Ought to?’ Cody asked nervously.

‘I *want* to, I mean,’ Ava said worriedly.

‘About what?’

‘What you tried to talk to me about before.’ Ava cleared her throat. ‘In my bedroom.’

Cody cringed. She knew what talk this was. The way Ava had reacted to the word jealous? Cody had gotten everything wrong. It had never been that. It was all one-sided. And now she was about to get a pat on the head and told that Ava liked her as a friend, but she’d gotten completely the wrong end of the stick.

Cody wanted to delay that awful conversation indefinitely if possible. ‘I thought you didn’t want to talk about that. *Done*, you said.’

Ava looked anxious and embarrassed. ‘I was... There was... I was going through...’

Cody saw Mia and Noah dancing rather awkwardly with Tara. ‘Looks like they need a hand.’

Ava looked over her shoulder. ‘They’re doing fine.’

‘Yeah, but... We all promised. To dance. With Tara.’

Ava paused and then nodded. ‘OK, then. Go ahead.’

‘You’re not coming?’

‘I’m gonna eat,’ Ava said, holding up her plate.

Cody realised she had a plate of food too, and she’d better make a dent in it just to show she wasn’t leaving out of the awkwardness she felt. She shoved an entire fruit skewer into her mouth and pulled its contents off, chucked the empty stick on the plate, and put her plate down.

Then she headed for the dance floor, chewing voraciously. She hoped to God that little chat Ava wanted had been dodged. Even if it meant swapping it for the embarrassing ordeal of dancing in public, it was a deal she took gladly.

Forty-Four

Ava was watching the dancefloor from the edge. Tara was dancing with Cody, holding hands, spinning, laughing, time-of-your-life style dancing. Cody was a surprisingly good dancer. All in all, she looked hot as hell. And completely beyond Ava's reach.

Ava looked around at the prom she'd put together. Everyone was having a great time. Dancing, eating, and posing for photos. The energy was high.

She didn't feel like dancing. She felt utterly miserable.

Rian suddenly sidled up to her. 'Hi,' he said sheepishly.

She tried not to look too surprised he was talking to her. 'Hello,' she said evenly.

There followed a silence that had about eighty whopping elephants running around in it.

He took a sip of his mocktail. 'I've been meaning to talk to you.'

'That right?'

‘You’re gonna make this hard, aren’t you? I guess that’s fair.’

Ava kept her eyes on the dancefloor. ‘What is it you want? Are you trying to get forgiveness? Because we weren’t close friends or anything. It’s not like it was a real betrayal. Not from you. You got what you wanted, and that’s fine with me now. Seriously. Feel free to run through a field of daisies with him. I really couldn’t give a shit anymore.’

‘I didn’t, though. Get what I want, I mean,’ Rian said. ‘I think he’s already... I think he’s cheating on me.’

Ava spun, amazed. ‘Yeah? So... You want some advice on how to handle it?’ She laughed. ‘Wow.’

Rian’s handsome face creased. ‘No, I just... I get how you felt now. And it sucks. And I wanted you to know that I know the stuff he said about you was a lie. I know you weren’t manipulative or controlling or any of that crap.’

Ava gave him a hard look. ‘You let him say it, though.’

‘Because I thought he loved me, and I guess I wanted to *think* that stuff about you was true, that I’d rescued him, rather than...’

‘Stolen him?’ Ava supplied.

He nodded. ‘But *I’m* the idiot now, right? Wonder what he’ll say about me?’

Ava was furious to find that she felt sympathy for Rian. ‘He’s not all that, OK? And everyone in this school thinks you’re gorgeous,’ she told him reluctantly. ‘So if *he’s* moved on, *you* move on. Christ, throw a stick in here, and whoever it hits would have you in a heartbeat.’

Rian frowned. ‘I can’t.’

‘I didn’t literally mean throw a stick,’ she clarified.

‘No, I mean, I *love* him,’ Rian said desperately. ‘Don’t you?’

Ava shook her head. ‘No. I *never* did, actually.’

Rian was floored. ‘What?’

‘He’s a good-looking guy, and he knows how to be charming. He can make you feel like the centre of the world. That’s his skill. But it’s a lie. He can’t hold another person in him, I don’t think.’ She laughed. ‘What a match we were. Both of us pretending.’

‘What do you mean? Because you turned out to be queer, too?’

Ava didn’t say anything for a while, mulling the question. She looked at Rian, wondering how to answer. What was great was that she didn’t care what he thought, and that was freeing. She could say what needed to be said.

‘Yep. That’s me.’ She took a deep breath. ‘I’m a lesbian,’ she smiled. It felt so good to say it and to really *know* it.

‘Not bi?’ Rian asked.

Ava shook her head. ‘No.’

‘She helped you figure it out?’ Rian said, nodding at Cody, still dancing away.

Ava nodded. ‘She did.’

‘Must be nice to fall for someone like that.’

‘How do you mean?’ Ava asked him, interested.

‘She’s like... No bullshit. Real or whatever.’ He sighed. ‘Must be nice,’ he repeated wistfully.

It would have been, Ava thought. If she could have just remembered that when it counted. And now it was too late, and Cody didn’t want to talk about it, didn’t want to hear what Ava had to say. Whatever chance they might have had, it was gone.

Ava turned to Rian with nothing but pity. ‘Just try to find one of those types next time, eh?’

‘You don’t think there’s any chance that he’s *not* cheating, do you?’ Rian asked anxiously.

‘Well, obviously, I wouldn’t know what the hell he’s up to. But if you think he is, you should *probably* trust your gut,’ Ava told him.

It was the kindest thing she could tell him. Because Leo might well be capable of falling in love, but only for about two minutes. Long term, Rian was better off knowing that.

‘Hey, good job, by the way,’ he said, touching her arm. ‘This place looks amazing.’ He walked away, vanishing into the crowd.

Ava looked around one more time. Fire and ice. It looked pretty good. But so what? This thing she’d spent her life waiting for was finally here, and she couldn’t have given less of a shit.

Mia flew up to her. ‘Look, I’m not trying to be your political advisor or anything, but I’ve been taking the temperature of the room, electorally speaking, and it’s looking pretty good for you and Cody.’

‘Yeah?’ Ave breathed, taking a sip of her drink and watching Cody.

Mia frowned. ‘That’s not the reaction I expected.’

‘I can imagine it isn’t.’

‘What’s going on with you?’

‘I fucked it up, that’s what.’

‘What are you talking about? The place looks awesome.’

Ava gestured with her glass at Cody. ‘No, I mean, I *really* fucked it up.’

Mia followed her gaze. ‘What did you do?’

‘I guess I got scared, and then I got paranoid,’ Ava explained briefly.

‘Is this about how Becky keeps trying to put her hands all over her?’ Mia asked.

Ava looked at her, shocked. ‘You noticed that?’

Mia watched Becky dancing stiffly with Ben. ‘She’s just... She sees someone happy, and she tries to take some of it. Fucking weird way to go about it. But she’s got issues. I think it’s about her dad having that affair with that woman he worked with.’

Ava’s eyes widened. ‘I didn’t know about that.’

‘Yep. And like, I’m guessing you know the whole thing with Leo now, right?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘So, that’s a no?’

‘What *thing*, Mia?’

‘I’m pretty sure they knocked boots a couple of times.’

Ava quickly lost interest. ‘Yeah, I know. They dated for a few weeks, years ago. Everyone knows.’

‘No, *after* you got together,’ Mia clarified.

Ava tutted, annoyed more than anything. ‘Jesus Christ, for real?’ She turned to the dancefloor, and there he was, Pound Shop Casanova himself.

He was slow dancing with Rian with his eyes closed, even though the beat was fast. Rian was leaning into it, but he looked less dreamy. He looked like he was having a little peek into the void right now.

Ava should have been laughing her arse off. But she pitied him because he was actually in love with that emotional puddle. And he’d be stuck there until something pulled him out.

‘How do you know all this?’ Ava questioned.

‘I just see things.’ Mia shrugged.

Ava snorted. ‘I’ve never said this before, but you really should gossip a bit more. It would save everyone a *lot* of

hassle.’

Mia half smiled. ‘And get pulled into the drama? I’m good, thanks.’

Ava looked at her friend. ‘What, even for me?’

Mia looked a little frightened. ‘I never thought he was telling the truth about you.’

‘Nice if you’d have told me that,’ Ava admonished.

Mia was utterly contrite. ‘I’m sorry. I just got this idea that if I let myself get pulled into stuff... I *have* to get A’s, you know? I’ve got my future planned, and sometimes... I get locked on. I don’t know how to deal with anything outside that.’

Ava could have dragged Mia over the coals, but she was in no mood tonight. Not when Mia was singing from Ava’s former songbook. ‘I know, Mia,’ she said forgivingly.

She looked back out, the stage pulling her eye. She could see the crowns sitting on the silk pillows she’d found for a bargain price from a homeware shop that had been going out of business. They were glinting in the dancing lights, and they almost looked like precious metal. But Ava knew better.

Right then, looking at those plastic crowns, Ava was struck by another one of those mad ideas. A plan popped into her head, almost completely formed. There was something she could do to fix a few big problems in one move.

‘Hey, as our resident smarty-pants, how would you fix the result of a prom election if you had to?’ she asked Mia.

Mia looked shocked. ‘First off, you’re winning, so I don’t know why you’d want to even do that in the first place.’

Ava smiled at her. ‘Humour me.’

Forty-Five

Cody and Tara were dancing away, and Cody was shocked at how good of a time she was having at this stupid prom. She could almost forget why tonight sucked.

Oh, and what was coming later. She was gonna have to stand on that stage and wave and smile and stand next to Ava for her big moment. It hadn't felt fully real until tonight. But it was about an hour away now. Her stomach roiled at the prospect.

'Hey, where's your date,' Tara yelled over the music.

'Umm, she's over there,' Cody said, gesturing at where she'd stood a moment ago, talking to Mia, but they were both gone.

'You maybe want to dance with her tonight?' Tara asked.

'We will. Of course we will,' Cody answered.

'Something up with you two?' Tara asked, never breaking her stride, her feet moving rapidly to the rhythm.

'No,' Cody said instantly.

‘OK, then,’ Tara yelled. ‘God, I’m thirsty. Let’s get a drink.’

They walked back over to the snack table. Tara looked at the mocktail bowl.

‘You know what this could do with?’

Cody shook her head. ‘Don’t, Tara.’

‘God, like I’d spike it? I was just *saying*,’ she said, rolling her eyes.

Cody smiled at her. And then, in the distance, she saw something rather eye-catching happening. Ava was walking around the edge of the room, looking both furtive and purposeful. Mia was hot on her heels. They were headed to the door that led into the school. Where the hell were they going?

‘Where the hell are *they* going?’ Tara asked.

‘Dunno,’ Cody said.

Tara drained her cup and put it down. ‘I’m gonna go see.’

‘Leave it,’ Cody said. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘What do you mean? We need to know, don’t we?’

‘It’s not my business,’ Cody said sadly.

‘OK, what the hell is up with you and her? And don’t say *nothing*. I’m not as stupid as everyone thinks,’ Tara said.

Cody felt awful. She *had* always thought that. And now she knew that she might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but she was a kind and generous person. She had never deserved Cody’s judgement.

‘I know you’re not stupid. I just don’t want to talk about it.’

‘So something’s up?’ Tara pressed.

Cody was torn. She actually did want to talk about this. But she was hampered by her confidentiality clause. ‘Look, whatever this was, with me and Ava, I think it’s over. That’s all.’

‘What?! No way!’ Tara said. ‘That’s crazy. You two are perfect together.’

Cody snorted. ‘I don’t know about *that*.’

‘I do. It was one of those crazy, opposites attract things. Like mixing two things together that shouldn’t work, and somehow it does. Like my cocktails!’

Cody chewed the inside of her mouth. ‘But you know that... I mean, with your cocktails...’

‘They didn’t work most of the time, I know that. But I kept going until I made the Feeling Queer, didn’t I? And that one worked.’

‘Tara, that *was* a good drink. But the theory doesn’t necessarily apply to humans.’

Tara tutted. ‘You know, the whole time I’ve known her, she was always smiling. But it never reached her eyes. Being with you was the first time she had a *real* smile. And you...’

‘Me what?’

‘I saw you around, and *you* never smiled. And now you do. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what that means.’

Cody couldn’t think of a good retort to that.

‘You *both* let yourself be happy. I loved seeing that. So please, whatever’s up with you two, can you just work it out?’ Tara begged.

Cody was moved by Tara’s words. She would have loved to believe them. But it didn’t track. Cody had thought for a moment... But Ava had made it clear that whatever feelings were occurring, they were Cody’s alone. She didn’t care about her and couldn’t even see who she was.

‘I don’t think we’re going to work it out,’ Cody said.

‘You’re wrong,’ Tara said stubbornly.

She seemed so certain that, for a moment, Cody very nearly believed it. But whatever nice qualities Tara had, she'd turned down dates tonight based on a psychic's advice. Cody had to bear that in mind.

'Anyway, I want to know what those two are up to,' Tara announced and was off, following their route.

Cody rolled her eyes and followed anyway. They ended up out in the hall, going in the direction of the offices.

'Did they go this way?' Tara said, heading for Mr Parsons's office.

'I don't know. Let's just go back.'

Tara dropped her voice to a whisper. 'This way?'

'Why are we whispering?' Cody whispered back.

'I don't know,' Tara whispered back.

They were now outside Mr Parsons's office. They could hear Ava and Mia inside, muttering to one another.

And then Mia said quite distinctly, 'How many votes do we need?'

Cody looked at Tara with mild horror. She crept quickly back down the hallway. Tara was hot on her heels.

‘They’re not necessarily...’

‘They are. You know they are,’ Cody said.

‘But—’

‘This is what I meant,’ Cody said. ‘This is still the *only* thing she cares about.’

Tara sighed, unable to find words. Because what could she say? How could she defend this? It was just a prom queen vote. That Ava would go so far as to try and rig it shocked the hell out of Cody. What would her win even mean if she had to fix it? Whatever schemes and plans Ava had pulled these last months, this was a line Cody wouldn’t have thought she’d cross.

But she had. Cody was truly horrified. And glad. This was good. Ava was a fake and a narcissist. Which meant Cody could be free of how she felt about her. And that would happen any second now.

Forty-Six

Ava had put Khadijia Hassan in charge of running the voting table. Khadijia was a very serious person who didn't like parties but loved to be in charge wherever possible. She had ambitions to join the police after school.

'No tampering on my watch,' she'd declared.

Ava had felt she was a good appointment for the job a week ago. But now, Khadijia was a pain in Ava's arse. She was the only obstacle to her plan. Eagle eyes would not be easily tricked. But Ava had to try.

'Khadijia, why don't you take a break?'

'Thanks, but I can't. Voting is closing soon, and then I have to tally. No time for breaks.'

'I could take over if you wanted a drink or something to eat before you get cracking?'

Khadijia laughed in her face. 'No offence, but I can't leave a nominee in charge of the votes. That would be totally unethical.'

Ava nodded. 'Of course.' She turned and gave Mia a 'What now?' look.

Luckily, Mia's sharp brain snapped into action, and she picked up a nearby cup and wandered over. She sniffed the cup and then said to Ava, 'Hey, smell that would you?'

Ava didn't get it immediately, but she smelled the cup. 'Errr...'

'It's vodka, right?' Mia said, taking another sniff.

'What?' Khadijia squawked. 'Did you say vodka?'

Mia sniffed again. 'I might just be imagining it. Forget it.'

'Where did you get that!?' Khadijia demanded.

'Mocktail bowl.'

Khadijia legged it at speed, heading for the punch bowl.

Ava whistled admiringly at Mia. 'You are a genius.'

Mia didn't have time for compliments. She was pulling a wad of ballot slips out of her purse stealthily. 'I can't just put them in,' she hissed. 'Someone will see.'

Mia was right. And Ava wouldn't have long before Khadijia discovered a booze-free punchbowl.

Ava took a deep breath and threw herself into the voting table. Everyone in range of it heard it and turned. Ava was on her arse, embarrassed to be seen doing something clumsy. But it was all she could think of.

People flew to her side to help her up, asking her fifteen times in a row if she was OK. She stood, hoping Mia had taken the opportunity.

‘I’m fine, guys,’ she said, dusting herself down while several people helped Mia put the table upright and placed the locked collection box back on top.

Khadijia rounded the corner not seconds later. ‘I couldn’t smell alcohol. Are you sure?’

Mia frowned. ‘You know what? I got COVID a couple of years ago, and my nose *has* been a bit screwy since.’ She shrugged.

Khadijia tutted and turned back to the table. ‘What happened here? Everything’s moved.’

‘Someone knocked into the table,’ Ava said.

‘People are bloody animals,’ Khadijia declared. ‘Oh, by the way, Ava, I’ve been needing to ask, how many people bought tickets? Just to make sure I have the correct amount of ballot slips.’

Ava had the figure ready. ‘Hundred and twelve.’

That was the number of people in the year who could have been in attendance if everyone had bought tickets, which they had not. Only Ava knew that number, and there was no one else to ask. Unless Khadijia was some kind of savant who could tally a room of people with her eyes alone, she'd have to take Ava's word for it.

'OK, I'll make sure to get a count, just to be on the safe side,' Khadijia said, self-importantly. She checked her watch. 'Well, that's that.' she picked up the box and walked off with it.

Ava watched her go, relieved. 'You do it?' she asked Mia out of the side of her mouth.

'Yeah. It actually wasn't all that hard,' Mia said. 'I might do more vote rigging if this turns out well.'

'I've created a monster.'

'Was forty enough?' Mia asked doubtfully.

'If the vote was split enough, hopefully.'

Mia laughed. 'I can't believe you threw yourself into the table.'

Ava snorted. 'I know.'

Mia stopped laughing as she glanced down at Ava. 'Oh no, you ripped your dress!'

Ava looked down and found the rip in her hem. She examined it, wondering how she could fix it. The answer was that she couldn't. So she made the decision not to care. It wasn't so hard.

'You should dance with Noah,' Ava told Mia. 'Enjoy the rest of your night.'

'I guess,' Mia breathed. 'You know, I kinda always had a crush on him before tonight?'

Ava pretended to be surprised. 'Really?'

Mia nodded. 'But the way he dances? I'm pretty sure I could never see him in any kind of sexual context now.' She went off to find him.

Ava spotted Cody standing at the edge of the dancefloor, watching, drinking, alone. Ava's successes at vote-rigging had given her something of a confidence boost, and she decided to do something she'd wanted to do all evening.

She approached Cody. 'You owe me a dance,' she told her, trying to sound confident, but she was practically shaking.

Cody looked at her miserably. 'I guess so.'

They stepped onto the dance floor, and a spot cleared immediately. People threw them approving looks.

The song faded before they could get going, but then the DJ said, 'And for the lovers, let's have a slow one.'

‘I don’t know how slow dancing works,’ Cody worried.

Ava stepped toward Cody and placed her hands gently on her waist. ‘Now you put your hands on my shoulders,’ she guided her, and Cody did as she was told.

‘Now we just sway,’ Ava told her.

‘That doesn’t sound like dancing at all,’ Cody observed.

‘It’s not,’ Ava agreed. ‘It’s just an excuse for people to touch each other.’

‘Oh,’ Cody said with a light frown, but she swayed anyway.

After a moment of swaying like a couple of trees in the breeze, Ava said, ‘Sometimes people lean on each other’s shoulders, too.’

Cody raised an eyebrow. ‘This isn’t enough for you?’

Ava was hurt, but she pushed it aside. ‘Your call.’

Cody looked conflicted. To Ava’s surprise, she leaned in and rested her head on Ava’s shoulder. Ava put her chin on Cody’s shoulder, and they continued swaying.

Ava held onto Cody and closed her eyes. As she’d explained, the dancing was just an excuse to touch her. If it

was going to be the last opportunity, Ava would take it.

She could have sworn Cody's hold tightened, too. But she was probably just following Ava's lead.

Forty-Seven

Cody didn't know what the hell she was doing. She was holding onto Ava's body for dear life. Even knowing what Ava had done, she couldn't help herself. Feelings were flooding through her body that she couldn't identify. It was kind of like lust, but not totally. It was something like a sugar rush, but not quite. It was a bit like the high of finishing a satisfying book, but that didn't explain it fully either.

Oh Jesus, it was true, wasn't it? This was really it. Love. She was holding onto someone she was in love with. She'd wanted the vote rigging to kill it. But it hadn't worked. She wanted Ava anyway.

At one time, it would have been as simple as just seeing what was wrong with Ava and judging her as unworthy of Cody's time and attention. But that ability had been lost because Ava, the insecure mess that she was, was in Cody's system. She loved the mess that was Ava.

But it would be over when this shitty song ended. Cody was about as happy as she'd ever felt in her life and wanted to die simultaneously. To feel this and know it would be over soon? It was everything Cody had been frightened of the moment she had accepted she wanted Ava.

The song faded out. It wasn't replaced by another. The DJ was talking. 'And now, the moment you've all been waiting for.'

Cody reluctantly released Ava and stepped back from her.

‘The votes are tallied, and it’s time to crown prom royalty!’ the DJ announced.

‘This is your moment. Enjoy it,’ Cody said, meaning it.

‘It’s *our* moment,’ Ava told her.

‘It’s not, but that’s fine.’

‘No. It really *is*,’ Ava said, smiling. But there was something a bit strange about her smile. Mysterious, almost.

‘First of all, let’s crown the king...’ The DJ pressed a button, and a drumroll sound effect played. ‘...Leo Wicks!’

Cody spun around to look at Ava, devastated for her. But Ava was grinning ear to ear. Was she having a breakdown? Had she thought she’d heard her own name?

‘Yeeeessss!’ Leo screamed from somewhere else in the hall.

The DJ played his drum roll again. ‘And our queen is... OK, so, apparently, we had a lot of write-in votes for... Sally Withers!’

The entire hall broke into utterly puzzled applause. ‘Sally?’ Cody exclaimed.

Ava sighed and pressed her palms together. ‘Sally,’ she breathed, delighted.

The crowd parted as Leo went to get his crown, but his stride was somewhat broken. He’d have expected to be crowned with Rian. Because you didn’t vote for individuals, you voted for couples. Everyone knew that.

Sally rushed up to Cody, shocked yet excited. ‘What’s happening?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Cody said honestly. ‘Go get crowned!’ she urged.

Sally, thrilled, went up. She stood next to Leo, who gave her a confused look. The DJ approached and crowned them with plastic gender-neutral crowns while some song Cody thought was probably Taylor Swift started singing some shit about Romeo and Juliet.

Cody looked at Ava, her green eyes dancing with delight. Her happiness made no sense.

‘Did you do this?’ Cody asked her.

Ava grinned. ‘Gotta maintain plausible deniability.’

Ava watched as Sally stood there with her plastic crown, looking happy. The crowd decided to get into it, clapping harder now, cheering for something that made no sense. The school hunk and Sally were another bizarre pairing. But they’d

had a taste of unlikely animal friendships recently, and they were getting used to it.

‘It’s time for our king and queen to dance!’ the DJ informed them, and the crowd swept back to clear the dance floor.

Leo walked down to the floor with Sally hot on his heels. They stood in the middle of the floor. Leo looked a bit bewildered until Sally grabbed ahold of his hands.

‘Dance, then!’ she instructed him, and he looked a bit shocked but got in line.

They were slow dancing for about ten seconds when the floor was rushed by Rian. ‘Her?’ he was yelling. ‘You’ll shag anyone, won’t you?’

Leo stepped away from Sally, appalled. ‘What?’

Sally Withers didn’t notice that she’d lost her king. She was twirling on the dancefloor solo, elated, arms outstretched.

‘Did everyone know?’ Rian said, looking around him as though expecting everyone to laugh at him. ‘That’s why they voted you together? That’s so fucking sick!’

A second person was suddenly on the floor, screaming. ‘You bastard!’ It was Becky. ‘I would have waited till you finished with this bloody himbo, but I will *not* be third string to Sally fucking Withers!’

Leo looked at Rian and Becky and shrivelled. They looked at each other. ‘You?!’ Rian said.

‘*Always*,’ Becky said with rage in her eyes. ‘I outlasted Ava, and I’ll outlast you too! We’re endgame!’

Rian turned to look at Leo for confirmation.

‘She always picks up,’ Leo said pathetically.

‘Really feel silly I didn’t see *that* one coming,’ Ava muttered beside Cody.

Cody looked at her. ‘What the hell is happening?’

Ava didn’t get a chance to answer because Leo turned, and his eyes fell on Ava at the edge of the dancefloor.

He stormed towards her. ‘You did this, didn’t you?’

Ava smiled at him. ‘Me?’

‘You’re a fucking *psycho*, you are!’ Leo screamed.

Ava shrugged, bored. ‘Whatever you say.’

Cody stepped forward, finding herself in front of Ava. ‘Don’t talk to her like that.’

Leo looked at Cody. ‘She set this up! That doesn’t bother you?’

‘I don’t know what she did, but that’s the *last* time you’ll call her a name, OK?’ Cody yelled.

Leo’s eyes were ablaze. ‘You don’t know what she’s like yet. But you *will*.’

‘I bloody well hope so!’ Cody shouted at him.

Leo looked like he had more to say, but then he heard shouting and looked around, along with the rest of the school. Rian and Becky were nearly nose to nose in an argument while Sally carried on dancing, oblivious.

Leo ran over. ‘Guys, stop.’

‘Oh, you want us to stop, do you?’ Rian said, turning to him. ‘I loved you, you twat!’

Leo clutched his bare chest, shocked. ‘I love you as well. I just have... a lot of love to give.’

The entire prom assemblage broke into a gigantic boo. Leo looked around him, shocked and saddened by the turn of his night. The romantic hero had just become a villain.

Cody turned to Ava, meaning to give her a get-a-load-of-this-craziness look. But Ava was staring at her with a funny expression.

‘You stood up for me.’

Cody wasn’t sure what to say. So she just shrugged and mumbled, ‘Of course.’

Ava grabbed Cody by the hand. ‘Come on. I’ll tell you everything.’

Cody let herself be dragged out of the hall, away from quite a growing fracas. Out in the dark car park, the doors swung shut on the noise of the hall, and it was quiet.

‘So? What the hell have you done?’ Cody demanded.

‘I threw the race,’ Ava explained.

Cody was bug-eyed. ‘*Why?*’

Ava smiled. ‘Because all this was stupid! Being the queen of a school? It’s not real, is it?’

‘It’s real to you,’ Cody said.

‘Not anymore.’

‘What?’ Cody asked again. ‘It’s all you ever wanted. This whole time!’

Ava was suddenly aghast. ‘Oh no, you’re not *disappointed*, are you? I know you would have been crowned

with me, and that would have been a great way to cap off your statement for Medford, but I kind of thought maybe this would work as an ending, too. And you wouldn't have to get up there and have a big fuss made because you'd have hated that, right? I didn't get that wrong, did I?

'I'm *thrilled* not to be crowned,' Cody half laughed. 'And my statement might even be better with this mad ending. That's not why you did this, is it? I mean, you wouldn't have done this for me?'

'I'd do anything for you,' Ava said shyly.

Cody felt like her chest was about to explode.

'But I actually did this *specific* thing for both of us,' Ava added. 'Really hoping it worked. Did it?'

Cody was still deep in bafflement. 'What do you mean?'

'You were right.' Ava shrugged. 'I was obsessed with everybody's approval. And it was your feelings I should have thought about. I think maybe that was the problem. I *did* think about you. A bit too much,' she said shyly. 'I think maybe I was scared that I felt so... But it feels OK now. I'm ready to stop trying to be what I think people want. I wanna try to figure out, you know, *me*. Whoever the hell that turns out to be. So I needed to free myself. I wanted to be able to see the important stuff. Like you.' Ava took a deep breath. 'And even if you don't feel the same, I'm glad I did it.' She rolled her eyes. 'I'm rambling. But I guess what I want to say is... I love you, Cody.'

Cody looked at Ava, and time seemed to stand still. But then a feeling came. It was pure, unfettered rage.

‘Oh, you *do*, do you? You *love* me? That’s great, just brilliant. I was this close, you know? If you could have just not loved me, I could have gotten over you, probably. Eventually, I had a *shot* at it, at least. But now we’re going to *kiss*. We’re going to *date* and *the whole bloody thing*, and you’ll make me fall in love with you even *worse*. And just when I think everything’s going to be great forever, you’re going to break my bloody heart, aren’t you? That’s just great, Ava. Seriously. Thanks a *bunch*.’ Cody stopped there, feeling like she’d lost her mind.

But Ava was smiling at her, her eyes soft and happy. ‘In amidst that angry rant, I *did* hear you say you love me, didn’t I?’

Cody felt exhausted. ‘Yes. I do. I love you. And I could just about *kill* you.’

‘And you want to kiss me? That was in there, too, right?’ Ava asked her.

Cody groaned. ‘Please stop understanding me. You’re making it worse.’

‘You know, you could just as likely break my heart as I could yours,’ Ava pointed out.

‘I don’t think that’s true.’

‘Why not?’ Ava asked.

Cody had to admit she didn't have a great answer for that. 'I don't know.'

'I'm frightened, too,' Ava said, and she looked at it. 'Do you understand that? I came *out* tonight.'

Cody's jaw dropped. 'You did?'

'Yeah. To Rian, of all people.'

Cody was taken aback. 'That's big.'

'I know,' Ava agreed. 'And now I'm going to try and date the most walled-up person in the world. So be scared all you want, but don't think you've got a patent on it.'

Cody realised that was true. Ava had torn her world down tonight, and Cody was only worried about her own heart. But they were both terrified. Did that make it better? Kind of, actually.

'So, shall we stop being scared and try to be something else? Just for a minute?' Ava asked.

'How would we do that?' Cody asked.

'I think you know,' Ava said, her green eyes flashing.

Cody did. Her heart rattled as she moved toward Ava and pressed her lips to hers. Ava's hands closed around her

body quickly, holding her close, and she moaned softly. Cody sank deeper into the kiss, running her hands through Ava's long hair. She was in heaven.

It would have been the perfect moment if not for the doors of the hall being thrown open and the worst possible person dashing out to find them kissing in the courtyard.

'Oh, great. The bloody love story of the century! Fucking *fakes!*' Becky yelled.

Cody turned to Becky, her shoulders tightening. She was officially done letting Becky ruin things.

'That's *it.*' She took a step towards Becky.

Forty-Eight

Ava had to grab Cody's hand quickly to stop her. She wasn't going to let an actual fight start. She wasn't sure who'd win for a start. They both looked primed for bloodshed.

'Whoa, no. Cody, *don't*.'

Cody turned. 'She's been fucking with both of us for too long. She's *asking* for it.'

Ava nodded at Becky. 'Yeah. But look at her. She already got it.'

Becky didn't like that. 'Don't you *pity* me! I'm about to get everything I wanted. Leo and I will end up together. He's gonna see it now.'

'He can't see anything except himself. And neither can you,' Ava said. 'You're not getting anything. Grow *up*, Becky.'

'*Me* grow up?' Becky said, starting to enjoy herself, madness lighting up her eyes, her smile angry and frightening. Little Miss Passive Aggressive's guardrails were off, and what had been sitting under every mean comment was rising messily to the surface. 'Coming from you? The prom queen wannabee? You couldn't even achieve that stupid ambition!'

‘It *was* stupid, yes,’ Ava agreed. ‘But no more stupid than being Leo’s eternal side piece.’

Becky’s angry grin wobbled. ‘You don’t know what we have.’

Ava wasn’t sure if she should say what she was about to say, but it was a night for truth. Becky wasn’t exempt. ‘I know about your dad. He had an affair, right? It ended the marriage? The family?’

Becky’s terrifying smile died quickly. ‘Don’t talk about my family!’ she said in a quiet, dangerous tone.

Ava was a little scared, but not enough to stop. ‘Maybe all this was just you trying to understand how an affair could be so important he’d risk his family over it?’ she hypothesised. ‘Maybe you thought you’d be chosen at last?’

‘Don’t you dare analyse me,’ Becky growled. ‘As if *you* get anything about my life, the way you sail through things.’

Ava wasn’t really surprised that Becky thought that. She was clearly very miserable. Her pain was so big it blocked out anyone else’s.

‘I don’t sail through anything, Becky.’

‘You could never understand *me*,’ Becky snarled.

‘Maybe not. But one thing I do understand is that we’re not *them*,’ Ava told her. ‘Look at me. We can be *anything*, and

I was ready to settle for being my mother. I was gonna have her life, even though I *know* it's fucking depressing. And yours will be, too, if you carry on like this.'

Ava felt Cody's hand tighten on hers. 'She's right,' Cody said with a sigh, letting something go. 'Fuck 'em. They don't write our stories.'

Becky looked at them, and to her horror, a tear escaped. 'You don't know me!' she screamed pathetically, wiping it away. She ran past them, out of the car park, and she was gone.

'I hate to say this, but I'm kinda worried about her,' Cody said.

'Me too,' Ava said. 'But I'm not gonna be able to offer much comfort, I don't think.'

On that note, Tara exploded out of the main doors on the phone. 'Police? People are fighting at my prom.'

'Who?' Ava asked, appalled.

Tara put her hand over the phone. 'Dunno. Everyone? It feels like the shit show with Leo and Sally has snowballed into some kind of mass airing of grievances? I mean, it's not exactly *The Hunger Games*, just a lot of, like, shoving and yelling. But it should probably be stopped.' She went back to the call, and someone on the other end assured her that help was coming. She hung up. 'Hey, anyone see...'

‘Becky just ran off; she looked in a bad way,’ Ava told her. She pointed in the direction Becky had fled.

Tara nodded, already running. ‘I’ll find her,’ she called over her shoulder.

‘I think that fucking psychic was *right*,’ Cody said, staggered. ‘It’s her moment.’

The sirens began to wail in the distance. Ava and Cody looked at each other as the police screeched up and ran past them into the hall to break up the fight.

‘Weird night,’ Cody breathed.

‘Yeah,’ Ava agreed.

‘What shall we do now?’ Cody asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Ava smiled. ‘But do you think you could help me with the clearing process?’

Cody’s eyes widened. ‘What?’

‘I think I’m gonna quit my job. Do something other than get old and run a fast fashion shop.’

‘Like what?’ Cody asked, thrilled.

Now, the seed of this had been growing in Ava for a little while. Planted by Cody, as a matter of fact. But until now, Ava wouldn't have dared to dream. But tonight? Everything and anything seemed possible.

'I want to get a politics degree. Is that mad?'

She wondered if Cody might break her promise and laugh. But that wasn't Cody. 'Holy shit. You're gonna run the world one day.'

Ava laughed shyly. 'What about you?' she diverted, embarrassed. 'Is it still all about Medford?'

Cody sighed. 'I've been mulling that, as it happens. I'll still try. But if I get a no, it's not the only course in the world. Like you said, we can do *anything*.'

Ava was happy to hear that. 'I can't wait to read that statement.'

The doors of the prom exploded open once again.

'Jesus. Me neither,' Cody said as the police came spilling back out amid the crowds.

Ava spotted one of them dragging Noah out in actual cuffs. 'You'll never take me alive!' he screamed dramatically.

'Noah?!' Ava exclaimed.

‘They *already* took you alive, doofus,’ Mia said, following him. ‘Don’t say anything. Ask for your lawyer straight away.’

‘A lawyer? Can your mum do it?’ Noah asked Cody.

‘I don’t think you could afford her,’ Cody said apologetically.

Noah groaned. ‘It’s the clink for me, then.’

‘They’ll give you one, idiot,’ Ben told him.

Rian was right behind them, trying to pull together a torn jacket. ‘Besides, you only knocked that copper’s hat off. If you hadn’t mouthed off afterwards...’

‘Jesus!’ cried Leo, and he staggered out, holding back his head, blood pouring from his nose and spilling down his bare chest. ‘Where’s the ambulance?’

‘Fuck me? Did someone belt him?’ Ava asked.

‘Sally accidentally elbowed him when she was twirling,’ Ben assured her.

‘No ambulance,’ a copper told them. ‘I’ve seen worse fights at the bingo.’ He walked off, laughing to himself.

‘My nose is broken,’ Leo mumbled.

‘You don’t need an ambulance for that,’ Cody said.
‘We’ll drop you off at the hospital on the way.’

‘The way to where?’ Leo asked.

‘We’re going to the police station to wait for Noah to be released, right?’ Cody asked.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

‘Definitely,’ Rian said. ‘*He* hasn’t done anything wrong,’ he added pointedly.

A few glares were tossed at Leo. Leo suddenly flung his head back even further, presumably to stop the blood flow while conveniently avoiding eye contact with anyone.

Ben rolled his eyes at Leo. ‘I guess *someone* should be with you while you get your schnozz reset.’

Leo looked grateful for the kindness. Everyone else was still clearly furious at him. ‘Cheers, mate. But how are we gonna get there? I don’t have my car.’

‘Limo’s due any second,’ Ava pointed out. Like magic, it pulled around the corner.

The driver looked at them, dishevelled, clothes ripped, and bloody. He rolled his window down. ‘What the hell happened to you lot?’

‘The best night of our lives,’ Ava told him sardonically.

They all piled in, Cody first. She discreetly patted the seat next to her. Ava slid in, and they exchanged a brief but meaningful look. Ava was angry their kiss had been interrupted, but as she looked into Cody’s dark, bewitching eyes, she knew there would be many more.

The car pulled out of the school parking lot but didn’t get very far. Around the corner, they saw Tara holding onto a weeping Becky.

‘Pull up,’ Mia said to the driver.

‘What for?’ he asked.

‘We’re not all here,’ Cody told him.

He did as he was told, and Ava opened the door.

‘What are you doing?’ Becky asked through tears, angry and confused.

‘Just get in,’ Ava said.

‘We’re splitting the bill,’ Cody added.

‘What?’ Becky asked, confused and teary.

‘I don’t know. Just get in the fucking car, OK?’ Cody said, rolling her eyes.

Becky hesitated for a moment but then climbed in. She didn’t look at anyone at first. But then she threw the smallest glance at Rian and muttered very quietly, ‘Sorry.’ She looked at Ava and said, ‘You as well.’ Lastly, she looked at Cody. ‘And you.’

Rian wiped a tear away and said, ‘I had it coming.’

Ava gave Becky an understanding nod, and Cody added, ‘I’m done being mad at you. You’re too sad.’

Leo, still holding his head back and unable to see anyone, said, ‘What was that? Did someone say something?’

‘Becky was apologising to Rian, Ava, and Cody. It should be *you* doing that,’ Ben said to him.

‘I didn’t do anything to Cody,’ Leo said, confused.

‘You owe *everyone* a fucking apology, you fucking rat!’ Tara yelled.

Everyone turned in shock. Tara was sweet, but even she had a limit. ‘Once was bad enough, but you had to keep waving it about, didn’t you?’

‘Give me a break, Tara! I’m still bleeding!’ Leo pled.

‘GOOD!’ Tara said.

It didn’t take long for the limo to descend into a kangaroo court with Leo on the dock, facing trial about his utter inability to holster it.

But Ava barely heard them. She wasn’t interested in what had happened before, only what came next.

Forty-Nine

Cody was annoyed. ‘Don’t be *ridiculous*.’

‘I’m not being ridiculous. This is porn,’ Ava said.

Cody tutted. ‘It’s *not*.’

‘A naked girl is soaping herself in the shower to slow, romantic music. It doesn’t take a genius to see where this is going.’

‘You think so? Just keep watching, will you?’ Cody said, trying not to laugh.

Ava frowned and kept watching the TV. ‘Oh my God,’ she wailed a moment later. ‘They’re hitting that girl with *tampons*! What the hell?’

‘They can’t handle her freak out,’ Cody clarified.

‘Wait, why *is* she freaking out?’ Ava asked.

‘Her religious extremist control freak mother didn’t tell her about periods,’ Cody explained quickly. ‘Just *watch*, for Christ’s sake.’

An hour and a half later, Ava was in tears. ‘Poor Carrie. She just wanted to be accepted!’ she wailed.

Cody shuffled down the sofa and put a comforting arm around her girlfriend. ‘I know.’

‘No wonder my mother didn’t show me that one,’ Ava said, sniffing and wiping away a tear. ‘That was the worst prom ever.’

Cody smiled sardonically. ‘Ours was worse.’

Ava was offended. ‘What?’

‘Just the *ending*,’ Cody said quickly. ‘What with the cops being called and everything. But the décor was second to none. The snacks and drinks, the music?’ Cody did a chef’s kiss. ‘Tre bon!’

Ava raised an eyebrow. ‘What a save.’

‘Like *you* care. You practically nuked the event,’ Cody pointed out.

Ava grinned. ‘That’s what made it *epic*, though.’

‘How so?’

‘Everyone had a great night before it ended in chaos. People will have something to talk about for years,’ Ava concluded. ‘You couldn’t ask for more.’

Cody chewed that over. ‘You are a Machiavellian genius. Promise me that when you get elected, you’ll only use your powers for good.’

‘You can use a degree in politics for anything,’ Ava said quickly. ‘I’m not necessarily going to be an elected official. I might be an advisor or maybe just a civil servant.’

‘You’re going to run this country one day. I’d put money on it,’ Cody told her confidently.

Ava immediately changed the subject. ‘Speaking of rulers, you know, Sally is *still* posting about her grand coronation. She didn’t even care that a fight broke out right after she was crowned.’

‘That’s Sally. Nothing can get her down. We should all aspire to be Sally,’ Cody said.

‘Funny you should say that. She keeps doing TikToks in her crown as the “The People’s Queen”. People have started DM’ing her their problems.’

‘That might be stretching her singular take on life a *bit* far,’ Cody said.

‘She gets a lot of things spot on,’ Ava told her.

Cody laughed. ‘Yeah? Maybe I should be on TikTok after all.’

Ava's jaw dropped. 'Well. Good day to buy a lottery ticket.'

'I only said *maybe*.' Cody checked her watch. 'Shit! We're gonna be late!'

Ava jumped up. 'Oh, crap! You're right!'

They ran out of the flat they shared. It was kind of a shit hole, but it was within walking distance of Stanton, the uni they both attended.

That's right, Cody Foster was *not* at Medford.

Once the dust had settled and the grades were in, Cody had done a little better than expected. Her and Ava's Media Studies project got top marks, which brought her average up markedly. The only thing left to do was see her things through with her dream course, however it turned out. So she sat down and banged out her statement, describing her year and all the events of it. Ava had called it a 'barnstormer.'

But it *still* couldn't crack the walls of Medford. But as it turned out, Cody was very OK with that. The course leader called her story about the events up to and including the prom, 'Totally unbelievable.' Cody was happy she'd put it like that. It conclusively proved that she didn't know shit. It was just one place, anyway. The world was bigger than that for Cody now.

She'd gone through clearing with her good enough grades, getting into Stanton easily along with Ava, whose grades were not to be sniffed at either. The uni was second tier, but they were happy to be there.

Cody was writing, and Ava was learning, but what was great was that Cody felt she was exactly where she should be. Together, they were becoming Cody and Ava, 2.0.

They spent most of the first year in individual halls before deciding it was silly to pretend that they weren't gonna spend every spare second in each other's wonderful, occasionally infuriating but satisfying company. Cody was worried about taking the plunge, but she did it anyway.

They'd moved into a flat together two weeks ago. They kept arguing about what day the bin went out, how to stack the dishwasher correctly, and whose turn it was to Hoover, but other than that, Cody was happy. She was where she wanted to be.

Ava and Cody stood in front of the doorbell. 'You ring it. I don't want to get chlamydia on my finger,' Cody grinned.

Ava rolled her eyes and pressed the doorbell. They were at the house where Ava's life had begun to unravel a year ago. Leo's. He was throwing a summer barbecue. It had taken a while to get everyone to agree. Considering how things had ended for key members of the gang at the prom, he was lucky anyone had come at all.

The door opened. Leo smiled gratefully when he saw them. 'Guys, you came. Thank you.'

‘I didn’t want to, but Cody insisted,’ Ava told him.

Leo looked stunned. ‘You did?’

Cody shrugged. ‘Our friends happened to be at your house, so we’re here, too. Don’t read too much into it.’

Leo didn’t seem to mind the reasoning. ‘Come in. Everybody’s out the back.’

They walked through the house and straight out to the big backyard to find the whole crew there, a barbecue warming up on the patio. Though Ava had seen many of them throughout the year, they hadn’t been in full assemblage since prom night. Tara, Mia, Noah, and Ben were all there, along with Rian and Becky. How the hell Leo had talked them into coming, Ava didn’t want to know. Neither of them looked enormously happy.

Leo handed out beers to everyone, and they all clinked. ‘I’ve Got Harewood! Together again!’

Everyone looked at him, and his shoulders dropped. ‘I know, guys. I’m a fucking dickhead. I screwed it all. But I want to make it right. I don’t want us to lose each other.’

‘As a matter of fact, many of us managed to keep our friendships going despite your behind-the-scenes *activities*,’ Mia said snarkily.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Ben. ‘This group didn’t turn on *you*, mate.’

Leo nodded. 'No, yeah, sorry. I can totally see that this is a very good example of my self-centredness. I want you all to know that you should all feel free to speak your truths. Don't feel pressured to enable my toxic behaviour or protect my ego. I will listen actively.'

'You're in therapy, aren't you?' Noah said.

'How did you know?' Leo gasped.

'Just a hunch.'

Becky, quiet until now, glared at Leo. 'Well, I hope you know I'm over you now.'

'Good,' Leo said with a magnanimous smile.

'Me too,' Rian added.

'Great,' Leo said. His smile wobbled a bit. 'I'm really glad.'

'And I was never really under you in the first place,' Ava added.

'Babes, maybe don't pile on?' Tara said.

'I'm speaking my truth,' Ava said. 'He gave me permission.'

Leo pressed his palms together in front of his mouth.
'Ava. Ava, Ava, Ava. I hurt you worst of all, didn't I?'

Ava scrunched her face up. 'Not sure about *that*.'

'I was a total gas lighter. I know that now. I benefited from patriarchal power, and I used that to damage you because I was insecure about my position in society despite my advantages. I see that, I really do.'

Ava was getting rather bored of this. 'That's about the size of it, yeah. But it's cool now.'

'It is?' Leo said, excited, leaping forward to hug a stiff Ava.

She flung an eye roll to Cody, who just grinned.

Leo began to sob into Ava's shoulder. The entire group started to look a bit uncomfortable but stayed quiet. After a moment, Leo gathered himself and released Ava, looking around and wiping his face.

'This is what healing looks like, guys. Strong men cry.'

'Yeah, we know,' Ben said irritably. 'But not usually at barbecues.'

'I'm making it about me, aren't I?' Leo said, wiping his tears away. 'Classic Leo. Please, let's just have a normal one, shall we?'

‘Thank fuck for that,’ Mia said. ‘Right. I’m gonna get the meat going. Leo, you’re not allowed anywhere near it.’

Leo laughed, his face drying. ‘Of course. You have control. I can let it go.’

The sun was setting on the gathering. Everyone was buzzed. Some more than others.

Ava and Cody, sitting near the fire pit that Mia kept stoking, were sharing one of the final beers from the case.

‘Do you think he’s really changed?’ Ava asked quietly, throwing a look at Leo, who was flexing a muscle for Rian and talking about how he’d added half a millimetre’s diameter to his whole arm since they’d last seen each other. Rian was nodding but didn’t look massively interested.

‘Why? Think you might wanna get back with him?’ Cody asked, grinning.

‘What a great idea!’ Ava exclaimed. ‘I can have his kids and listen to him talk about how he shed his toxic masculinity while I change nappies.’

Cody laughed. ‘You know what? I’m joking, but he’s starting something. Maybe we should watch and see. You

never know. It might actually take.'

'Aren't *you* an optimist these days?' Ava said.

'Don't get me wrong,' Cody added quickly. 'He's still a self-centred pillock, but we all have to start somewhere.'

Ava nodded. 'You're absolutely right.'

They shared a secret little smile. Cody leaned forward and kissed her. Ava suddenly wished they weren't in public. Especially when Noah started going, 'Awwwww.'

However, not everyone appreciated the PDA. '*Shit*, guys,' Becky said with an eye roll. 'You don't have to rub it in. We get it. You're happy.'

Ava looked at Becky. 'Have you considered getting the number for Leo's therapist?' she asked her.

Becky snorted.

'She's great,' Leo enthused. 'I could give you her contact info.'

'I'd literally rather die,' Becky said.

'Growth is hard, Becks. I get it,' Leo said with empathy.

'Don't call me Becks,' Becky replied with true venom.

Cody snorted. 'I kinda feel bad for her,' she said quietly.

'Don't. She ruined your life,' Ava reminded her.

'She didn't *ruin* it. It's not the worst thing to be on your own,' Cody told her.

'I didn't mean to put it like that,' Ava apologised. 'But she took choices away from you.'

'I guess. Feels like forever ago, though.'

'So you've really forgiven her?' Ava asked.

Cody mulled. 'You can afford to be the bigger person when you have everything.'

'You feel like you have everything?' Ava said, her smile growing, her eyes happy.

Cody smiled back. 'For right now, yeah.' Her smile dropped. 'Oh God, I totally forgot to tell you, The Invisible Woman texted me.'

'Your mum? What does she want?' Ava replied, shocked.

'She wants to meet you.'

Ava looked terrified. ‘What?’

‘She probably won’t see it through,’ Cody assured her. ‘But she said she thinks we should try to have more of a relationship.’

‘And what do *you* think?’ Ava asked.

Cody took a sip of beer. ‘God, I don’t know. How do you have a relationship with a robot?’

Ava shook her head and started chuckling. ‘Maybe I should bring my mum?’

Cody laughed hard. ‘Wow. Our mothers, together. What the hell would that look like?’

‘We could throw in your dad and Beth to cap it off,’ Ava said.

‘I would never do that to Beth,’ Cody said. ‘She wouldn’t cope. She’s too bloody nice.’

‘*You’re* nice,’ Ava said, taking her hand and rubbing her palm with her thumb gently.

‘I’m not *nice*,’ Cody was quick to reply, enjoying the compliment despite herself.

‘You’re nice to me,’ Ava said.

‘I really must have had a personality transplant if that’s the word you’d use to describe me these days,’ Cody said.

‘It’s not the *top* adjective I’d use,’ Ava assured her. ‘I wouldn’t want you to change too much, anyway. I like you as you are.’

‘A grumpy, hermit writer with very few personal skills?’ Cody asked.

Ava thought it over and offered her own take. ‘A talented writer with a strong personality and a heart of gold.’

Cody smiled despite herself, feeling a little overwhelmed. ‘That’s a very generous assessment.’

‘You don’t believe it?’ Ava asked.

‘If you say it, I guess I have to,’ Cody shrugged. She paused and then added softly, ‘Your opinion means a lot to me.’

Ava’s smile lit up her entire face. ‘And yours is the only opinion I worry about anymore. Funny when you remember how we were just a year ago.’ She shook her head and sipped her drink. ‘Me, the prom queen wannabee. Crazy.’

Cody regarded Ava’s beautiful profile, warm in the fire of the pit. ‘Ava, to me, you’ll *always* be a queen.’ She took Ava’s hand and kissed it.

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