

*Fake It*  
**TILL**  
**YOU**  
*Break It*

*JENN P. NGUYEN*

*Swoon* READS  
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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*To my dad, my number one biggest fan.*

*I miss you every single day.*

*Con thương bố' nhiều lắm.*

IF THERE'S ONE THING I'm grateful for in my life, it's that arranged marriages aren't common anymore. At least not in Hempstead, Texas.

I mean, yeah, I'm also glad that I'm alive and that my mom is happy and healthy and all that stuff. Oh, and my hair has finally stopped doing that frizzy thing in the morning that usually takes at least twenty minutes to straighten.

And for the absence of Meatloaf Mondays at school. Or rather Mystery Mondays because I'm not sure what they did to make the meat harden like a can of Play-Doh that had been left out in the sun for a week. One of life's biggest mysteries. Whatever it was, it finally got taken off the menu for good. Sometimes it sucks that I can't leave school grounds until I'm a senior next year.

But today, I was definitely most grateful about the whole

arranged-marriage thing. Especially as my mom tugged on my shirt for the tenth time while I tried to usher her out the door.

“Seriously, Mom, if we don’t leave right this second, I’m going to miss first period, which will result in me failing calculus. Then I’ll have to drop out of school and end up living here with you forever.” Clasp ing my fingers around her wrist, I dragged her across the porch. Well, attempted to. It was like trying to move a boulder. Or me out of bed on a Sunday morning. “Just you, me, and a dozen dogs I’m going to adopt. Big, drooling, fluffy ones.”

My threats did nothing to faze her. “We have time. Why are you wearing *this* shirt again?” Her fingers rubbed on my left sleeve as though she were trying to make the violet color fade. “I swear, Mia, I always buy you such pretty outfits, and you never wear any of them.”

“You mean you always buy me pretty *blue* outfits. You know I hate the color blue.”

“Nonsense. No one could hate the color blue. It’s the color of the sky. Do you hate the sky?”

Rolling my eyes, I let go of her and crossed my arms. “Yes, I hate the sky. It’s on the list of top five things I hate along with ice cream, freshly cut grass, and puppies. Especially cute round corgis that like to roll around and frolic in grassy green meadows. So. Annoying.”

Her left eyebrow rose. “You shouldn’t be so sarcastic this early in the morning. It’s bad for your indigestion.”

“It’s okay. Walmart has a two-for-one sale for Tums this week. I’ll pick them up along with some Red Bull and batteries to give you some energy.”

Instead of responding, she just let out a heavy sigh as if the weight of the world’s problems was on her shoulders. Or maybe it was. It certainly wasn’t easy having me for a daughter. Something she told me weekly.

Basking in my triumph of getting the last word in, I reached out and grabbed the keys from her hand. “If you’re not in the car in two minutes, I’m leaving without you.”

She gaped at me, both hands on her hips. “Excuse me, who exactly is the parent around here?”

“Something I wonder all the time,” I muttered under my breath.

To be honest, I didn’t hate the sky. Or ice cream and corgis. You’d have to be some sort of psycho to hate corgis. Although freshly cut grass did stir up my allergies like crazy, so I wasn’t exactly fond of that. But I especially didn’t hate the color blue. In fact, I loved it, but I could never wear it. The problem was the *reason* my mom insisted on me wearing blue *all the time*—from scrunchies and earrings to socks and underwear. And that was because blue was *Jake’s* favorite color.

Damn Jake Adler. Number one on my hate list. He’s the real reason I would rather wear a dress of fresh grass than wear blue. Ever.

Speaking of Mr. Number One . . .

Across the street, Mrs. Adler dragged him toward us with a determined look on her face. Suddenly Mom's reluctance to leave made sense. I quickened my pace.

The pain of having to go to school was only shadowed when our moms made us go *together*. Always together. No matter what. Family vacations, Sunday brunches, heck, even dentist appointments with Jake weren't enough. No, they schemed for us to go to school together every chance they got.

Last week, we avoided this by waking up at different times, but Jake's mom and my mom caught on pretty quickly. Now they were our own personal alarm clocks. And sometimes Mom's way of waking me up included cold water that she flicked on my face until I woke up. Harsh but effective. I'm glad she didn't just dump it on me. Probably didn't want the extra laundry.

Jake's feet shuffled against the asphalt so hard that I expected the rubber to be scraped off his navy sneakers by the time he reached our house.

As soon as Mom spotted them, she let out a little squeal that she immediately tried to cover up with a cough. "Oh my God, I completely forgot that I had plans with Jake's mom today. I don't think I could drive you to school after all."

I gave her a blank stare and leaned against the hood of my car. "Gee, isn't that funny how things worked out? And on the day that your car is in the shop."

"It's not *my* fault that my car needed to have the brakes

replaced.” Her hand fluttered dramatically against her chest as she gasped. “You think I *wanted* my brakes to be faulty and be recalled at the factory? We’re just lucky we didn’t get into an accident beforehand. You could be at my *funeral* right now.”

It’s easy to see where I got my flair for theatrics. And I wasn’t buying any of it. Still, I surrendered my car keys to her. “Yeah . . . and when did you say you were going to get your car back again?”

She brushed a strand of hair off of her face. Slowly. Delicately. “Oh, it may take all day. They’re probably going to check the car for other stuff. Just in case. It’s better to be thorough.”

“If you need a ride, Mia, Jake would be happy to drive you,” Mrs. Adler announced as she strolled up our sidewalk with Jake in tow. Both his hands were shoved into his jeans pockets. His dark hair was still damp and curled slightly around the nape of his neck and forehead. She must have dragged him out of the shower or something to get over here so quickly. “And he could drive you home, too.”

Jake sighed. “Happy isn’t exactly the word I would choose.”

“Plus, if that was the case, I’d rather walk,” I muttered under my breath.

But Mom’s superhuman ears heard me. “If that’s what you want. You could use the exercise after lying around the house all weekend.”



*Ouch.* That was low. Especially because I'm pretty sure my extra baby fat and slightly round cheeks came from her side of the family. Everyone always said we were spitting images of each other. Something that delighted her to no end.

"By the way, Mia, you look soo pretty today." Mrs. Adler elbowed Jake's side. Her other hand played with the strap of the large tan tote bag slung over her shoulder. The metal tassels of the SeaWorld key chain from our Orlando trip four years ago swung back and forth. "Doesn't she look pretty?"

He shrugged, and she elbowed him even harder until he grimaced. "She looks the same as usual."

Mom clasped her hands together. "That's soo sweet of you." She stressed the soo the same way Mrs. Adler did, like it was a two-syllable word. "Wasn't that a nice compliment, Mia?"

"I don't know if that counts as a com—ouch!" Now it was Mom's turn to shove her elbow into my side. "I mean, yeah, thanks."

I met Jake's gaze, and we both rolled our eyes in unison. Could they *be* more obvious?

I'm not sure when or who came up with the crazy idea that Jake and I were destined to be together in the first place. Although I'll bet my savings that it was Mom's idea. Ever since she became a wedding planner, she had romance etched in her brain.

Whoever it was, this was something that Mom and Mrs. Adler had pursued with a passion since we were two.

Scorching, melt-your-ice-cream-in-two-seconds type of passion. Despite the fact that Jake and I could barely stand being in the same room together now. But our disdain for each other was just a minor blip in their dreams of being future in-laws. After all, according to Mom, someone had to take one for the team.

Still rubbing my aching waist, I straightened up. "Let's just go. I still have to meet with my chem group before homeroom."

With a bright smile, Mrs. Adler wrapped an arm around Mom's shoulders. "Of course. You don't want to be late. Jake, honey, you should carry Mia's bag out to the car for her."

"Huh?"

"Her. Bag."

"She has arms. Why should I—ouch! Mom!" With one hand rubbing his knee, Jake half walked, half wobbled away from her outstretched leg. The toe of her left black pump was still pointed at him. "I'll hold that for you."

I kept a tight grip on the strap and yanked back. "No, I'm fine."

"Just hand it over, will you?" he muttered under his breath. "Before I have to waste my health insurance on a broken leg."

Reluctantly, I surrendered my bag and walked toward his car across the street. "Fine. Whatever."

Jake and I didn't say anything else to each other until we were safely in his car and out of earshot of our moms. He

turned on the ignition and grasped the side of my headrest as he slowly pulled out of the driveway. “Is it just me, or are they soo annoying?”

Snorting, I slouched down in the seat and pulled my knees up to prop them against the leather dashboard. No need to adjust the seat because it was already set perfectly to my almost five-foot, three-inch height. I’ve been in this seat more than I’ve been in my own car. The cushions were probably molded to my butt by now, flat as it was. “Well, subtlety was never their strong point. That’s probably why they’re such good friends.”

“Right. That and their love for green tea lattes.” Jake turned on the radio, and our moment of peaceful truce ended.

Seriously, sometimes I think Mom needed a new hobby. Knitting. Gardening. Collecting rare minted coins. Anything was better than throwing her only daughter into an arranged relationship with an annoying Know-It-All Ass.

He glanced over at me like he knew I was thinking about him. “By the way, you have purple jam on your left cheek.”

It was probably raspberry jam left over from breakfast. I had toast and peanut butter with jam. Peach jam would have been better, but we were out.

“I’m leaving it to snack on during second period,” I said blankly without moving.

Grimacing, he turned away. His hand rubbed the back of his neck until it turned pink.

It took everything I had not to laugh—although my lips couldn't help quirking up into a grin. I had to turn my face toward the window so he wouldn't notice and realize I was screwing with him on purpose.

His crazy obsession with being neat was something I had loved to mess with him about since we were eight. I couldn't help it. Jake was such a weird kid. He'd line up all his toy trucks according to size and color and not let anyone touch them. So, of course, I deliberately mixed them up, annoying the hell out of him. Finally, he ended up hiding all his cars in his room and locking his door.

That was also the year that our nicknames for each other—Ass and Brat—were born. Although my name for him always got me grounded whenever anyone heard me.

Such an unjust world we live in.

Jake rolled down the window an inch or two, and the wind ruffled his dark hair. The curls were cut close to the top of his ears. His fingertips drummed an erratic beat on the peeling steering wheel. "What time will you be done later?"

I crossed my arms. "You seriously don't need to pick me up. I'll just catch a ride home with someone else."

"It's fine. I need to watch the store for a few hours while Mr. MacArthur goes to his dentist appointment anyway, so I can stop by afterward. Besides I can't go home without you. Not in one piece anyway."

"Fine, do whatever you want."

He snorted. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure what I want doesn't matter. It never does." Before I could respond, he pulled into our school's parking lot. "So, what? Six? Seven?"

Snatching my bag from the back seat, I jumped out of the car. "Make it seven thirty."

"Damn, that's late." Letting out a long-suffering sigh, Jake climbed out of the car and came over to my side. Without saying anything else, he leaned over until he was right in my face.

Surprised, I backed up a bit, but he just took another step forward until he reached out . . . to brush against the corner of my mouth. Before I could say or do anything, he wiped the little smear of jam onto my sleeve.

"God, that had been annoying me the whole car ride," he said, shaking his head.

The hell . . . ?

I jerked away from him. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"Yeah, well, what do you expect when I'm forced to put up with you my entire life? I'm lucky you didn't put me in an insane asylum by now." He waved at Aly, who was waiting on our bench by the parking lot, before walking away. "See you at seven thirty."

I was still sputtering when Aly came up to me. "What was that about?"

My fingers rubbed at the corner of my mouth, and I scowled. "Nothing. Just Jake being an ass as usual."

MY EYES GAZED LONGINGLY at the stage. Lyndon Whitmore, the lead actress, sang about her family's journey across the river as she danced across the stage, light as a gazelle. Her voice rang out loud and clear across the partially empty auditorium. I made a note of her posture and how she lifted her head. I even attempted to purse my lips the same way she did, but I knew I could never sound the same. Not unless I could steal her voice like in *The Little Mermaid*.

Talented people sure are easy to hate sometimes.

I mean, I wasn't horrible—despite the fact that Jake said roosters crowing sounded better than my singing.

When I was seven, I took voice lessons that cost Mom way too much money, but all they did was make me enunciate my words more. Something I probably could have learned from *Sesame Street*.

But, *how* did Lyndon do that? It seemed so effortless for

her. Like drinking water. Or riding a bike. Although that was a pretty bad example because I never actually learned how to ride a bike. Apparently, I had no sense of balance along with being tone-deaf. Jake tried to teach me when we were ten, but he got so frustrated that he ended up just paying me to give up.

Easiest fifty bucks I ever made.

Someone tapped the back of my head, knocking me out of my daydream. Aly plopped down on the seat beside me. “Your eyes are going to fall out if you keep glaring at Lyndon like that.”

“I wasn’t glaring. I was . . . examining her technique.”

“Uh-huh. And does your examination include scowling, too?” Without waiting for my answer, she handed over her cup of coffee—extra cream and two sugars.

Holding the cup up to my nose, I breathed in the lovely aroma a few times before letting out a happy sigh. I didn’t actually like the taste of coffee, but the smell was enough to perk me up. “Thanks, I needed that. It’s been a really long day. But any day I’m forced to see Jake is a long day.”

Aly snorted. “That’s every day then. Maybe we should all carpool sometime. Save gas and the environment and all that. Or you could take my car, and I’ll carpool with him.”

“Urgh, why would you do that?”

She swept her honey-brown locks into a low ponytail. “Uh, ‘cause he’s cute?”

Wait, what? My left eyebrow rose, and I reached out to touch her forehead. Cool as a cucumber. So, she's not delirious from being sick. "Are you *crazy*?"

She batted my hand away. "Are you *blind*? He's adorable. Like, hot boy next door who doesn't even realize that he's hot. Which makes him even hotter. And he's so nice, too. Well, maybe not to *you*, but he's nice to me. And to everyone else. He's Mr. Good Guy."

Gagging, I handed back her cup of coffee. "Take this before I puke in it and make you waste three bucks."

"Four. I added an extra shot of espresso and soy milk. And come on. I know you hate the guy, but even you have to admit that he's pretty easy on the eyes."

Easy on the eyes?

I scratched my head, but I just couldn't see what she was talking about. I mean, yeah, I guess his hazel eyes were nice. Especially since he finally got rid of those Coke-bottle glasses and wore contacts. Without them, he was practically blind. When we were kids, all I had to do to win at hide-and-seek with him was steal his glasses. Sixty-seven wins. Once just by sitting on the couch with a matching blanket.

And he was . . . tall?

"Hot and adorable aren't exactly words I'd ever use to describe Jake. Those words are reserved for someone like . . . like . . ."

"Ben Grayson?" Even though Aly meant to whisper, her



naturally loud voice echoed across the auditorium. And just our luck, this was also when everyone onstage was taking a break so it was deadly silent.

Ben was sitting at the corner of the stage talking to Daniel, the theater director, but he jumped to his feet when he heard his name. I had to wave both hands away 'cause God knows I didn't know what I would say to him if he did come over.

Confused, he sat back down, but not before giving me an endearing half smile that made my knees weak like they were made of floppy lime Jell-O. Good thing I was sitting on a chair or I'm pretty sure I would have face-planted right on the floor.

My cheeks exploded, but I grinned back as I stapled the second act scene's script together for the next rehearsal. Thankfully, my hands automatically moved through the routine motions because I couldn't really concentrate on anything else.

I knew I was acting like a complete idiot, but this was BEN GRAYSON. I didn't know his middle name, but it was probably "Perfect." My crush bloomed the moment my eyes met his clear chocolate eyes across the auditorium, and it had only grown in the past few months.

Ben was a senior. In fact, the *only* senior to receive an early admission to UC San Diego. He could have ditched this town to start college in August. But to everyone's surprise, he turned them down. Instead he chose to ride out the rest of

his senior year by being the understudy for Leon MacDonald, the main lead in the musical.

To be honest, he could have easily been the lead, but he wanted to learn all parts of the theater. Including being an understudy. But that was who Ben was. Dedicated. And funny. Handsome. Almost on the verge of a pretty boy, but a little more boyish. Mischievous. Like he was thinking of a joke but would never tell you the punch line.

Sigh. Basically the man of my dreams.

Aly snapped her fingers in front of my face to get my attention. “If you could stop drooling over Ben for a minute, your idol is about to pass. If you want to talk to Lyndon, now’s your chance.”

Straightening in my seat, I let out a slow deep breath like Mom’s yoga instructors taught us. In and out. In and out. “Hey, Lyndon?”

She stopped a few feet away and cocked her head in our direction. Her fingers twisted around the strap of her bag on her skinny shoulder. “Yeah?”

“I was wondering . . . if you think you could . . . if you’re free . . .” My sentences kept fading off the longer she stood there in front of us. “If you—you wanted to take a look at the script for tomorrow’s rehearsal.”

Lyndon patted her bag. “Daniel already gave it to me.”

“Oh, okay then. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

Aly waited until she left before letting out a low whistle. “What the heck was *that*? I thought you were going to ask her for pointers and stuff?”

I banged my forehead against the top of the table. “I wanted to. But I just . . . couldn’t.”

“But why?”

Because the longer Lyndon stood there—the more I stared at her—the more it became apparent how different we were. And that I could never be like her. Even the attempt would be too much for me.

Two years ago, I volunteered to usher for a show on a whim to get out of yet another family dinner with the Adlers. But as soon as the curtains opened and the show started, I fell in love. To this day, I don’t even remember what the show was about. But it didn’t matter. Nothing else did except for the emotions that swept over me as I sat there. Even long after everyone else left and the ushers were sweeping the trash from the aisles. The amazement of the actors’ confidence onstage. The thrill of everyone watching, enwrapped in their every word. Every movement. Although I’d never been here before, it felt exactly like home.

*This* was where I belonged. This was *my* place. And my dream was to be onstage one day. Although if I were dreaming, then might as well wish to be on Broadway, but to be honest, I’d be satisfied with any stage at this point.

Sometimes a tiny part of me—the ugly, realist, annoying part that I named Cecily after my fourth-grade torturer, I mean, teacher—kept mocking me. That I needed to stop kidding myself. I wasn't good enough to perform. Probably never would be. And doing theater grunt work was probably going to be the highlight of my sad, pathetic life. And I should be satisfied with just watching the show or putting stamps on flyers.

Thankfully, Ol' Cece would only butt in every once in a while. But she would get louder and louder every time. And she was becoming much harder to ignore. Especially as senior year and graduation came closer and closer. To the real world where I'd have to face reality and give up this dream. And realize that some things were just out of my reach.

But I couldn't explain all of this to Aly. All I could do was bang my head harder on the table.

# JAKE

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INSTEAD OF ORDERING, the guy stood in front of the toppings station and pointed a stubby finger at me. His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. “You look familiar. Are you on YouTube or something?”

“No, not at all.” I ducked my head down so the guy couldn’t look that closely at my face.

“Are you sure? ’Cause you really look like one of those dudes—”

*Jeez, just order already.* “Definitely sure. Now, how would you like this dressed?” My hand automatically reached for the lettuce because that was what people usually wanted on their sandwiches.

“Hmm.” He stared at me for another minute or two before shrugging. “Just mayo. And make sure it’s the fat-free kind. Do you know if it’s gluten-free?”

Freezing, I eyed the guy in front of me a little more closely. The huge sumo-wrestler-looking dude in front of me. His brown hair was slicked back off of his forehead with a navy headband. And his shirt looked like it was a size or two too small. Maybe I heard him wrong. “Uh, sorry, I just know that it’s low fat. So just the mayo?”

“Yeah, and make it a thin line.” He held up his beefy thumb and index finger that were pressed together like I didn’t know what the word *thin* meant.

“... okay.” I grabbed the mayo bottle and squeezed.

“Thinner.”

My hand slowed, and I released the pressure on the bottle.

Thin Mayo Dude scowled. “No, less—shit, don’t you know how to make a decent sandwich?”

Decent sandwich? This was barely worth standing in line for. And definitely not worth \$8.95. God damn it, I hated working here sometimes. Correction. Most of the time.

Whatever. It’s his money he’s wasting.

Suppressing my sigh, I forced a smile on my face instead. “Sorry.” This time I spread a line so thin that you couldn’t even see the mayo.

“Finally.” He looked at the watch on his wrist. “And can you make it quick? I have to go. Just a Coke with very few ice cubes.”

“Sure thing, she’ll ring you up.” I wrapped up the sad excuse

for a sandwich and thankfully passed it along to Rose. He was her problem now. I wouldn't be surprised if the dude wanted to count the ice cubes in his drink.

She smiled brightly at him before turning to get his drink. Instantly, the dude's grumpy frown made a complete 180 as he watched her. There were practically hearts shooting out of his eyes. Rose had that effect on a lot of people. Too bad they didn't know that she was most likely thinking snarky thoughts about everyone. Her angelic face was the perfect cover-up. The only person who got to see her real side was her brother, Greg, and me. Benefits of being her best friend, I guess.

When Thin Mayo Dude finally left, Rose reached around me and pulled the piping hot trays of cookies out of the oven to cool. We were instantly surrounded with sweet sugary smells of chocolate and oatmeal. She popped in the new trays of wheat bread and set the timer.

Practically drooling since I hadn't eaten dinner yet, I grabbed a double chocolate cookie for myself. It burned my hand a bit but was totally worth it as my teeth sank into the soft chocolate. The free fresh cookies made the low pay and irritating customers sting a little less.

Rose propped herself up to sit on the metal counter. The tip of her left green sneaker kicked at the wooden stool between us. "So I got the tickets and backstage passes for the Lakeshore music festival next month for Greg and me. And

it's still not too late to sign up. I could talk to the coordinator on your behalf. It's all new up-and-coming artists, so I'm sure we could get you a spot. We could even carpool."

This was the fourth time she had brought up the festival this week. I swallowed the scalding hot cookie and shook my head. "Nah, Mom's landscaping the backyard, and I promised I'd help her out. You know, with the rocks and trees and heavy-lifting stuff."

Rose nodded and pulled out her phone. "Fine, I'll let Greg convince you."

I groaned. "Seriously? I thought we were friends."

"We are. Best friends. I love you even more than my own brother. And that's why I'm doing this for your own good." She typed something on the screen before slipping the phone back into her pocket with a grin. "Done."

Immediately, my phone started buzzing with messages. I didn't need to look at the screen to know that it was probably being flooded with texts from Greg. He was like a hound dog. Never let anything go. And Rose knew it.

Just like she knew me. Helping Mom was a lame excuse. Hell, I was kind of embarrassed that I couldn't think of something better.

I tossed my napkin at her and grabbed another cookie. "I'm going to cut some more veggies. We're low on tomatoes. Watch the front for a bit."

Rounding the corner, I went into the cooler in the back of



the store. But instead of grabbing the box of tomatoes on the bottom shelf, I leaned back against the cold metal wall and sighed.

To be honest, the festival sounded like it could be fun. Rose had been planning on doing a webcast on the festival for ages. She made a bunch of them to bulk up her resume. Her dream was to travel and let everyone experience the world through her videos. Greg, on the other hand, probably just wanted to go to hook up with girls. Both plans sounded pretty awesome, though.

Either way, it would be a blast to hang out with them. Chill and relax. Listen to some new musicians and take advantage of the weather before it got too hot. In another time, that would have exactly been my scene. Before Finn left. Now I had sworn off all of that.

My phone went off again. But a different ringtone this time. Reserved to warn me of calls and texts from Finn.

Even if it weren't for the ringtone, I'd still know it was him. Finn always texted me around this time from the cruise ship. Like clockwork. It didn't matter if I never responded. Which I never did. Why should I? He was the one who left us right after graduation years ago. And barely a glance back or a wave goodbye to Mom and me. No phone calls. No emails. Nothing for practically two years.

And now, out of the blue, he suddenly wants to talk to us again? Mom talked to him every time, but I didn't. Why

should I? He had a family, and he ditched us. Simple as that. Just because he suddenly remembered *now* that he had a brother didn't mean I had to accept it.

I crammed the last of the chocolate cookie in my mouth and dusted my hands on my black apron. Whatever. Time to get back to work before I picked up Mia. Those tomatoes weren't going to cut themselves.

TWO HOURS LATER, I almost ran a red light racing to the theater. Crap, I was late. REALLY late.

There was a cherry soda explosion just as Mr. MacArthur came back, so by the time I actually left the store, it was already almost eight. The theater's parking lot was nearly empty by then, but I could see Mia pacing around Carly's car. Carly was this older chick who was the assistant director for the play Mia was helping out in. Something about . . . families? I think. She told me what it was about, but to be honest, I didn't really remember. Mia talked a lot.

Judging by the way Mia was stomping her feet, I could tell she was pissed. I could practically see waves of irritation radiating off her body.

Great. First I had to deal with Thin Mayo Dude, then the soda explosion, and now this. Plus, my shirt was damp and sticky with soda. And I was pretty sure some of it was still in my hair. I had rushed out to pick up Mia and didn't get to

clean up. I could still feel it on my scalp. And it wasn't a good feeling.

I pulled up next to the silver Accord. "Sorry I'm late. Let's go home."

Mia crossed her scrawny arms and didn't budge. "You said you were only going to be a *little* late. If I had known it would take this long, I would have taken the bus or something."

"Yeah, well, I could have been a lot later, so just be thankful for that. Now, can you move your ass?"

Still grumbling, she finally pulled open the car door and hopped in. "I swear I'm too nice. I should have just let you go home and deal with your mom on your own. Don't know why I even bothered."

I rolled my eyes at her martyr act. "Uh, you bothered because you knew that *your* mom would have been on your back all night if you didn't come home with me."

She wrinkled her nose but didn't deny it.

Satisfied that I got the last word for once, I leaned over Mia's lap and waved at Carly. "Thanks for keeping her company."

She crossed her arms and smirked at us like we were a couple of kids she was babysitting. "No problem. Anything for Mia's boyfriend."

Mia shoved at my shoulder in front of her, but I deliberately didn't move to piss her off. If anything, I leaned into her even more, practically lying on top of her. At least until she elbowed me in the ribs. Hard. With a grunt, I sat back in my seat.

“You know we’re not dating. I have better taste than that,” Mia complained as she pulled the rearview mirror down and combed her dark hair with her fingertips.

Carly just laughed as she walked back to her car. Her black boots clicked against the pavement. “Sure, you’re not. Not now anyway.”

“Not ever,” I called out as we pulled away. We sat in silence for a few minutes while Mia continued to fix her hair. “So she’s nice. A little crazy, but nice.”

She rolled her eyes and finally sat back. Her pink lips pursed together. “I think you mean a lot crazy. I mean, come on, us together?”

“True. That would be like if owls and hawks mated.”

“Exactly. Although I’m assuming that you’re the owl since you’re a nerd.”

I snorted. “Says the girl with a Harry Potter phone case.”

“Hey, you were the one who got it for me!”

“Only because my mom made me.” I switched on the left turn signal and merged into the lane. “Hold on, I need to grab some coffee to study tonight. Want anything?”

“Like I said, nerd.” Her fingertips tapped against the car door in a steady rhythm as I pulled into the drive-through line. “And no, I’m good.”

Sure she was.

There was static on the other end of the intercom. “Hi. Can I . . . your order?”

“Can you hold on for a minute?” I chewed on my thumbnail and studied the menu. What did I want? Something sweet, but I needed some major caffeine. There was a world-history report due in a few days and I barely had a topic and I was exhausted today. It was going to be a long night.

Mia undid her seat belt and leaned over me. Her left hand braced against my arm as she balanced herself over my lap. Her dark hair practically touched my crotch. Our faces were barely inches apart. I could count her lashes if I wanted to. I should shove her away like she did to me, but I didn’t move. “Yeah, could I have a grande caffe mocha with an extra shot of espresso? And two blueberry scones? Thanks.”

“...’kay. Come to the ...”

The hell? My brow rose as I pulled up to the next window. “What was that?”

Mia widened her eyes and tried to look innocent. And failed miserably. “Come on, you were taking forever like you always do. And you know you were going to order that anyway.”

I wanted to argue with her, but her order did sound like it would hit the spot. Right down to the two blueberry scones. And as much as I hated to admit it, she was right. Didn’t mean she needed to know that. She was already annoying enough as it is. I don’t know how she knew what I wanted before I did, though.

With a sigh, I absentmindedly rubbed my arm where she had held it before. For some reason, it was all hot and felt weird. In fact, the whole car was really hot all of a sudden. I cranked up the air conditioner to full blast and adjusted both sides to point at me.

Mia continued chatting like she didn't feel the temp change. "I don't know why you always order two of everything. You never finish it."

My mouth twisted into a wry half grin. "Maybe I like wasting money."

"You're so weird."

Snorting to myself, I just shook my head. Funny how she noticed that I always ordered two of everything, but not the reason why. 'Cause the truth was if I didn't, I'd never get to eat anything at all. Fifteen years' experience taught me how to survive with Mia around.

Within ten minutes, I was proved right as half of a blueberry scone was gone. Mia kept bobbing her head to the song on the radio as she picked at the scone with her left hand. I had no idea how she ate without thinking all the time.

There were a couple of crumbs around the left corner of her mouth. I would have told her, but I didn't want her to realize she was eating the scone. Or worse, that I always bought an extra one for her. She might think I actually cared about her or something. Then I'd never hear the end of it.

Instead, I took a deep sip of my drink. Just the right amount of bitterness to cut through the sweet frothy drink. Kind of like Mia herself.

Sometimes she wasn't so bad. If it weren't for our moms shoving us together all the time, we might even be friends.

Maybe.

# JAKE

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MY FINGERS TAPPED an erratic rhythm against my laptop cover, and I let out a heavy sigh. “For the last time, Greg, I’m not going. And if you ask me again, I’m going to block your number from my phone.”

He snorted on the other end of the line. “Okay, okay, don’t get your panties in a bunch. I was just making sure because if you change your mind, there won’t be any openings left. You know, maybe you need to think about it overnight and get back to me—”

“That’s it, I’m hanging up on you.”

“Come on, Jake, just—”

*Click.*

I shut off my phone in case he called again. If he weren’t Rose’s brother, I would have decked him through the phone. Although I’m sure she wouldn’t have minded.

Rose and I became friends in elementary school. We were



both in the same honors class and usually partnered together. I guess it had been only a matter of time until I'd meet Greg, since they were twins after all.

But he wasn't all bad. As crazy as he was, Greg was like a brother to me, too. An annoying, irritating little brother whom no one would buy no matter how much you tried to sell him for. No wonder he got along awesome with Mia.

Luckily, nobody knew that the coordinator had already contacted me. Apparently, she stumbled on our YouTube channel a few weeks ago. She seemed super disappointed that the Adler Brothers no longer existed, but she was still keen to have me perform. I haven't given her an answer yet. I should. But then I should do a lot of things.

Like now.

My mouse hovered over the delete button on our YouTube account to get rid of it once and for all. I'd been meaning to do it for ages, but my finger never seemed to want to pull the trigger. Or rather click the button. Today was no exception. I half hoped that if I avoided the site long enough, the account would delete itself.

This was stupid. I was stupid. Keeping a couple of videos we made when we were kids wasn't going to bring Finn back. Not that I even wanted him to come back. It wasn't going to change anything.

Just then Mom poked her head in. "Could I come in?"

I slammed the laptop shut and twisted around in my chair.  
“Sure.”

She settled onto the edge of my bed and crossed her ankles. “So, Greg called the house a couple of times. Said your cell phone was turned off or something?”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about him.”

“Who said I was worried?” Mom smiled and leaned back against the mattress on her hands. It squeaked a bit at her movement. “I figured you must be avoiding his calls for a good reason, so I told him you were showering. Pretty sure he didn’t believe me, but he was too scared to argue.”

“You’re the best. I’ll deal with him on Monday.”

“Good luck with that. So, want to tell me what that’s all about?”

Shaking my head, I kicked at a book on the carpet. “Just some dumb music festival he wants me to go to with him and Rose. Probably just to drive because he’s a lazy ass.”

“Takes one to know one,” Mom joked. “So, do you have your suit ready for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow . . . ?”

“The wedding?” At the continued blank look on my face, she let out a sigh and crossed her arms. “Don’t tell me that you forgot.”

“No, I didn’t forget. I just didn’t remember.” I scratched my head. “Whose wedding is this again?”

“It’s Mrs. Le’s second cousin on her mom’s side.” She stopped and bit the tip of her thumb. “Or is it her first cousin?”

“Now look who doesn’t remember.” I tried not to sound too smug, but it didn’t work.

It wasn’t Mom’s fault, though. Mia was related to practically the entire town. Everyone was a cousin or aunt or something. My tiny family seemed sad and lonely. Mom loved the Les’ giant family, though. The noise and chaos. Sometimes I wondered why she and Uncle Bran never had kids of their own. Although that was probably a blessing in disguise, since he disappeared soon after Mom—at the time, Aunt Lily—took us in after our real parents died.

“So, if you don’t even know who’s getting married, then why are we invited?”

“Well, technically, we’re not. We’re . . . going as Mrs. Le’s and Mia’s plus ones.”

Ah, and there it was.

I didn’t even bother to fight her about it. Since Mom loved these weddings so much, I tried not to put up too much of a fuss whenever Mom wrangled me into going with her. Even though I knew that it was partly a ploy to get me to hang out with Mia more.

Plus, the cake was always pretty good. The seven-course meal never hurt, either.

Still looking guilty, Mom cleared her throat. “What were

you looking at before closing your laptop? College applications? Porn?”

I grimaced and pretended to gag. Well, half pretended. Just hearing Mom say the word *porn* was enough to send chills down my spine. “Please don’t ever say that to me again. Ever.”

Her eyes widened with fake innocence. “Jeez, I didn’t know you were so sensitive about college applications.”

“Ha ha, very funny.”

“I try.” She tapped against my green bedsheets, scratching at the surface a bit with her nails. “But seriously, have you looked at college stuff yet? I know you still have over a year to think about it, but I’d kind of like a heads-up. Like whether I should be renting out your room or something.”

I snorted. “Like you would let a stranger in here. Hell, Finn’s room is still a shrine, and it’s bigger than mine.”

Mom’s face fell a bit. “That’s true.”

The room got quiet, and I was instantly sorry I brought him up. He was a sore point between us. Hell, he was a sore point, period.

After our parents died nearly fifteen years ago, Mom was the one who brought us home. Who kept us together and quit her job as marketing director at a tutoring center just so she could stay at home with us. To take us to school and daycare, nurse us when we were sick, make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (crustless for Finn), and come to all of our soccer

practices. She even went back to her maiden name, Adler, so we wouldn't feel left out. And although she swears it wasn't our fault, I know we were the real reason Uncle Bran left.

It didn't take a genius to figure that out. They were a blissfully happy married couple one minute and then we moved in and they weren't. He didn't want to be saddled with two kids who weren't even his. Mia and I overheard her and Mrs. Le talking about it a few weeks after he left.

That was also the first time I ever saw Mom cry.

And yet, after everything she did—everything she gave up—how did Finn repay her? By ditching town to work at some cruise line the instant he graduated. That was the second time she ever cried.

Ungrateful ass.

I forced a smile onto my face for her benefit. "I haven't really thought about college yet, but I'll probably go to Houston for college, Mom. It's not too far. I mean, I don't even know what I'm majoring in yet. Going out of state would just be a waste of money."

Mom let out a sigh of relief that she tried to cover up with a laugh. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes. "Oh, okay. I mean, I don't want you to think I'm forcing you to stay here with me. You're free to do whatever you want. Spread your wings and leave the nest. All that poetic stuff."

"I don't need all that poetic stuff." I stacked my hands behind my neck. "I'm fine right here."

Her smile turned suspiciously sweet. "Right here with Mia?"

I rolled my eyes. "We're not having this conversation again."

"I swear, there's so much chemistry radiating between you two every time you're together, I practically need sunglasses. If only you could just TRY dating her. Just once. For me?"

"Mom, that's hatred between us. Not chemistry." With a snort, I leaned back against my chair. It squeaked every time I pushed backward. "Seriously, we haven't gotten along since we were kids. I don't think playing house when you're five means Cupid's going to come running with his bow."

She pursed her lips for a few seconds before letting out a long sigh. "Fine, I can see that you're not ready to accept the truth yet. I'm willing to wait a bit longer."

"Like forever?"

I was surprised that she was giving up so soon. Usually she could ramble on and on about Mia until morning. About how sweet she was. How the sunlight glinted off her shiny dark hair and lit up her eyes. How contagious her laugh was. If it were up to Mom, we'd be getting married after high school and alternate weeks living here and at the Les' house.

"Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about something else," Mom continued. "Mrs. Le and I have been talking about where to go for vacation this summer, and we decided that a cruise would be fun. Maybe to the Bahamas . . ."

A cruise? My eyes narrowed at the direction this conversation was going. Especially when she looked away, suddenly

really interested in the books on my shelf. “And did you decide on which cruise line?”

“Actually, we did. The Emerald cruises sounded nice. Clean, delicious food, affordable, great on-board entertainment. It has three water slides and a rooftop miniature-golf course. It even has a huge arcade and bowling alley on the third floor!”

I crossed my arms. “Wait, let’s go back to the on-board entertainment. How do you know that it’s great?”

Finally, she looked over at me. Guilt etched across her entire face like a banner. “It’s the cruise ship your brother works on.”

Even though I suspected this was what she was getting at, it still hit me like a ton of bricks. How could she even think about seeing *him*? That she could make *me* see him? My vision got a bit blurry, and I blinked furiously to gape at her. “Are you serious? Why the hell would you want to go there? And see *him*?”

“Now, Jake, I know you’re upset—”

I scoffed. “I’m not upset. That jackass doesn’t deserve me caring enough about him to be upset.”

Now it was her turn to scowl. “He’s still your brother. Your *older* brother. I won’t have you talking about him like that.”

“Even if he deserves it,” I muttered under my breath before shutting up for good when she shot me a fierce glare. My stomach still twisted uncomfortably at the thought of going on this trip.

I've always known that Mom would welcome Finn back with open arms the second he came back someday, but this was even worse than anything I imagined. He wasn't coming back to see us. We were going to *him*. Like we were begging him to come back to us. To be in our lives. Like we *needed* him.

My hands curled into tight fists against my side.

Mom lightly touched my arm. "I know this is pretty sudden to you, but I've been thinking about this for a while. It's time to let everything go and be a family again. Before it's too late. And we've been apart long enough."

"But we *are* a family. You and me. Isn't that enough?"

She gave me a sad smile but didn't answer. Instead, she just got up and headed toward the door. "I'll give you time to let things sink in before we talk about it again. Good night."

Frustrated, I shoved myself away from my desk so hard that my folder slid off and my English report flew everywhere. Even my Little League trophy toppled over and landed facedown in my trash can.

Instead of cleaning up, I gave my trash can a good kick and flopped onto the bed with an arm over my face.

Did she think we would just go on this cruise and suddenly become one big happy family again? She had to be crazy. I mean, I loved Mom and everything. And I would do almost anything for her. Anything except for this. Even I had a limit to what I was willing to do. And seeing Finn's stupid face wasn't one of those things.



She could give me all the time in the world, but I wasn't going to change my mind. Nothing was going to make me want to see Finn again no matter what she said. The dude left us. Left our family. End of story.

But shit, how the hell was I going to get out of this one?

IT WAS NEARLY SIX when we finally made it to the reception hall. Half an hour late. Mom couldn't find her wedge nude heels. And she tore the entire house apart to find them. Seriously, my room looked like a freaking category-five hurricane hit. Which is just a tad worse than what it usually looked like.

The reception hall was already packed by the time we got there. Luckily, Mrs. Adler and Jake came early to save us seats. And they weren't hard to find, because they were two of the few guests who weren't Asian.

The bride, Ngoc, and the groom's family were just starting to line up by the stage, so we snuck in to sit at our table in the far-left corner. I tried to grab the seat on the other side of Mrs. Adler, but Mom plopped herself down and prodded me toward the empty seat beside Jake.

With a sigh, I waved at the family with three kids sitting

across the table. The youngest daughter, who looked about three, waved chocolate-stained fingers back at me. Looked like someone got to the chocolate fountain early.

Moving the lazy Susan in his direction, Jake grabbed some red sticky rice from the plate with the chopsticks like a pro. Then again, he spent enough meals at my house to maneuver the two sticks like they were an extension of his own hand. He offered the plate to Mom and Mrs. Adler, but ignored me. Instead, he swirled it around until the plate was on the opposite end of the table.

What. A. Dick. Even though I was starving, I leaned back into my seat and watched the bridal party shimmy across the room as the DJ shouted out their names. Concentrated on anything but my rumbling stomach. Thank goodness the booming dance music drowned me out.

Or at least I thought it did.

With dark wide eyes, the little girl gasped and rubbed her chocolate fingers all over her cheeks. Jake snorted under his breath and moved the lazy Susan until the plate of sticky rice was right in front of me. Not wanting to admit that I was starving, it took every ounce of willpower I had to move it away. Instead, I searched my purse until I found a mint and popped it into my mouth. It tasted a tad bit stale, but now wasn't the time to be picky.

Luckily, the couple was just starting their first dance. I straightened up in my seat and turned my head to watch them.

No matter how many weddings I've been to—and believe me, there have been a LOT because I occasionally help Mom with her weddings in the summer—this was always my favorite part. The bride grinned so widely that my own cheeks would hurt just looking at her. And the groom couldn't help staring at her with such joy as he whispered something in her ear. Sometimes their dances would be choreographed and be stiff, or they would just hold each other and sway before twirling a few times. Maybe there would be a dip or two. Sometimes it would be kind of cheesy. But it didn't matter. It was always beautiful.

According to Google, the average length of a marriage is eight years, and more than half ended in divorce. Tons of brides come back to my mom to plan their second or even third wedding.

But still . . . in that exact moment of every couple's first dance, all those numbers and facts didn't matter. Nothing did. This moment was so sweet that even the most cynical person couldn't help melting as they watched. Even if the statistics turned into 100 percent divorce, you just believed that *they* would be the ones who would make it.

As if on cue, my eyes started to well up. I fumbled for the napkin on the table before anyone else noticed. Just then, a pack of tissues landed on my lap.

I glanced over, but Jake just straightened his jacket and continued eating without looking over at me. I dabbed my

eyes with a tissue, careful not to smear my makeup and lashes that took nearly forty-five minutes to apply. I had nearly poked my eyes out with the mascara wand, too. Not sure how those YouTube people could do it in five minutes.

After all the dances were done, the food finally came out. I almost cheered out loud at the sight of the crab and asparagus soup. Then swooned at the cute waiter who brought the bowl. Who only made things more awesome.

As we ate, Mom and Mrs. Adler pointed at us and giggled behind their hands, not very subtly. These weddings spurred them on the Jakia ship—their words, not mine—even more than usual. I mean, usually they were already pretty bad, but at weddings, they were crazy.

Jake and I did our best to ignore them and each other. It wasn't hard. Jake didn't say anything most of the night. All he did was scowl like a grumpy old man every time the DJ played a new song. So I concentrated on everyone else around us. There was a drunk uncle who kept coming up and dedicating songs to the couple, but he wasn't too bad. I've heard worse.

Our hottie waiter, Dan, would stop by our table every ten minutes to see how we were doing. And each time he did, I'd inch a little closer to him. He'd bend down a little farther to "hear" me. I could tell by his flirtatious grin that he was interested. Plus, he brought me a new Coke every time I ran out.

Now I just needed to somehow slip him my number without Mom seeing. It's been ages since I had a decent date. Not

after the last time, when Mom ran Jimmy Sutton off. Seriously, you would have thought she was interrogating someone in a courtroom for murder. 'Course she did that to every guy who came by to see me whose name wasn't Jake. News of my crazy mom spread through the school like wildfire. Only a few guys dared to suffer her wrath.

Dylan Saunders. The freckly part-time server who occasionally worked the weddings Mom did.

Kirk Tran. The cute senior band captain with the amazingly craterlike dimples.

And Mike Le (no relation). The guy who accidentally got my smoothie order because the barista mixed up our orders.

The only thing these three guys had in common were our brief summer romances. All less than three weeks. It took me longer to watch the entire series of *Game of Thrones*. But Mom was busier in the summertime, so it was easier to date these guys behind her back. For a short time at least.

And my last date was Dylan in July. Nearly ten months ago. But hopefully my luck was about to change tonight. That is, if I could somehow sneak Dan my phone number before the night was over.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. I jumped up from my seat. "I'm going to get some dessert before they run out."

"Do you need Jake to go with you?" Mrs. Adler asked, poking Jake's arm.

“No!” I let out a short laugh and flexed. “I’ve been working out so I’m pretty sure I can hold a plate of cupcakes by myself. Be right back.”

My heels clacked against the tile floor as I quickly ran away before my mom or Mrs. Adler could say anything else. I had seen Dan disappear toward the kitchen about five minutes ago, so I probably only had a minute or two before he came back out. A minute or two to position myself exactly by the doorway but still look casual and nonchalant so he wouldn’t know that I’d been waiting for him.

With a plump strawberry in one hand, I lingered by the dessert table for what felt like ages when Dan finally came out with a tray of cake. This was it!

I pretended to almost walk into him and grasped his forearm to balance myself. Hello, muscles. “Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

He laughed. “It’s okay. Do you want a piece of cake?”

“Hmm, it does look good, but I don’t know if I should. I don’t know if I could handle any more food.”

His eyes slid down my dress and he grinned. “You still look good to me.”

Cheeks flushing a bit, I smoothed out the invisible wrinkles on my green dress. “I guess I could handle a slice and go to the gym tomorrow to make up for it.”

“If you want to work out, I know this really nice jogging path in the park if you’re interested.”

I . . . was not. I mean, I was fine with working out as long as

I had air-conditioning and didn't sweat too much, but I wasn't going to tell Dan that. "I'd love to. But I don't like to run by myself. It gets lonely."

Moving the cake tray to one arm, Dan reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. "Why don't you give me your number, and I'll call you the next time I go? You know, so you could have some company."

Victory! With a wide grin, I reached for his phone when Mom suddenly appeared out of nowhere and tugged on my elbow. "Mia! Why don't you and Jake go dance before we leave? Don't you owe him one?"

I pulled my arm away. "Uh, no. Why would I owe him one?"

"Because you two always dance together. Ever since you were kids." Mom wrapped her arm around my shoulders and laughed. "You two make such a cute couple."

"But we're not—"

Dan shoved a cake plate into my hand and backed up. "Uh, I should get back to the kitchen. They're starting to pack the leftover food for the couple to take home."

"Dan, I didn't—" Watching him sprint back into the kitchen, I groaned. "Seriously, Mom? Did you really have to do that?"

She waved her hand like she didn't just embarrass the hell out of me. "It's fine. They're about to do the bouquet toss anyway. You need to get a good spot in the front before all those bridesmaids crowd in."

Oh. My. God. If we were a cartoon, there would literally



be steam coming out of my ears right now. I let out a frustrated groan. “I don’t *need* to get a good spot for the bouquet toss just like I don’t *need* to dance with Jake. Or talk to him. Or do *anything* with him. You’re the one who’s forcing me to.”

“I just thought—”

“Forget it. You never listen to me anyway.” With a scowl, I stalked back to our table and grabbed the opened bottle of cognac in the middle and poured myself a shot. Tossing it back, I gasped a bit as it burned down my throat and then I shoved nearly half of the cake slice into my mouth as a chaser. It was cool and sweet but didn’t do anything to cheer me up.