

MEET ME IN ● OUTER SPACE

Melinda Grace

Swoon READS

SWOON READS
NEW YORK

A Swoon Reads Book

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To Elizabeth Zelda

1

A Constant State of Huh?


“**Y**ou never took a boring Cambridge in pie school?” Dr. Galloway, my academic adviser, asked. His head inclined to the left, his fingertips pressed into the oversized metal desk that separated us in his small, muggy, windowless office.

I stared at him. *Took a boring Cambridge in pie school.* That’s what I’d just heard.

The cell phone that sat faceup on his desk illuminated as it vibrated.

Think, Edie, think.

He looked down at it, swiping the call away.



I should have been watching him and not focusing on the fake gold buttons on his navy blazer.

“I’m—I’m sorry, what?” I stuttered. It wasn’t happening; I wasn’t going to figure that one out on my own, and I didn’t know him well enough to guess. Between the hum of the halogen lights, the fan in his ancient desktop computer, and the faint sound of music in the distance, I was doomed.

His cell vibrated again. “I said: You never took a foreign language in high school?” He swiped the call before running his fingers across his keyboard to wake up his computer.

Foreign language. Not boring Cambridge. Pie school? *God, Edie. Get it together.*

“No, I didn’t have to,” I said.

He flipped through my paper-thin file that sat among about a million others. “What do you mean you didn’t have to?” He stopped momentarily on a nearly blank page before looking up at me for an answer.

This time I watched his mouth as he spoke. He shifted in his seat, his fingers instinctively traveling to his face to scratch his nose. Wipe his mouth. This was what happened when I watched people’s faces while they spoke. They got unnerved. They fidgeted. They tried to wipe away a non-existent booger.

I looked down at my hands, knowing that this was it. “I was exempt.”

“As in, you didn’t have to take it?” he asked.

“Correct,” I breathed.

He squinted at my folder. “Then how did you get through French 101?”

“Pure luck, if I’m being honest,” I said, immediately regretting it. He was going to think I didn’t pay attention in class and that was why I was failing. He was going to think I was just like all the other millennials he advised, complaining about their classes being too hard. He was going to think I didn’t care enough to listen.

“I have a central auditory processing disorder . . .,” I said, trying to explain. I watched his squinty brown eyes search my burning face as he tried to process my words. I recognized that look. I was in a constant state of that look. “And I got through French 101 because I had to.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I *wanted* to get through French. I *needed* to. The thought of spending the next summer in Paris without having learned any French gave me undue anxiety.

“So, if you can’t hear the professor,” he said a little louder, “I’d suggest you try sitting in the front of the room.” His thin lips exaggerated each word as he nodded patronizingly, though probably not on purpose. Hopefully not on purpose.

When people heard the word *auditory* they immediately thought *hearing*. It was just the connection people made. So, people would start to talk really loud and really slow. The slow part was helpful, if I was being honest, but it made me

feel like an idiot. Also, if I had a nickel for every time someone told me to just move to the front of the room. Or study harder. Or pay closer attention.

He closed my folder and set it back onto the stack. He ran a hand down one side of his face, slumping in his chair as his eyes scanned his computer screen.

“No, I can hear just fine,” I said, keeping the volume of my voice the same in hopes that he would as well. “It’s just that the class is very difficult for me and—”

“I’m not sure I can help you, Edie. It’s too late in the semester to drop the course.” He leaned back in his chair. “You finished your freshman year with a three point seven GPA. You passed French 101 with a—” He went for the folder again.

“C minus,” I said, closing my eyes briefly.

“Honestly, Edie, from where I’m sitting it doesn’t look like you’re in need of that much help.”

A knock on the door behind me pulled my attention briefly. Dr. Galloway put up a finger to the person whose whole face was shoved into the small rectangular window in the door.

“Can you please just point me in the right direction?” I said, my voice clipped. “Is there a . . . I don’t know, disabilities services office or something?”

A look I knew all too well spread across his face. “You have a disability?” he asked, reaching for a stack of papers

that sat in a hanging wall file. “We have a procedure for this, just . . . um . . .” He shuffled his papers.

He handed me a one-sided paper with the words *Students with Disabilities* at the top. “You should have just told me that from the start. Easy,” he said.

I scanned the paper. A bulleted list of how-tos when it came to advising students with disabilities. I looked between Dr. Galloway and the paper. A smile crept across his face as he folded his arms over his chest. Clearly, he thought he’d just solved all my problems. I hoped he wasn’t expecting a thank-you.

“With all due respect,” I said slowly, my eyes on his cell phone as it vibrated again. “I didn’t *have* to tell you any of this. I’m asking for assistance like any other student. This paper is not exactly what I was looking for.” I ran a hand through my long almond-colored hair, wishing I had put it up. Sweat brewed on my neck, the backs of my knees, my hands.

“Well,” he said, sitting up to lean his elbows onto the desk. “Like I said before, I’m not sure how I can help. I mean, if this isn’t what you’re looking for, then I don’t know, maybe you just need to study harder or get a tutor or something. Pay better attention in class.”

I forced a smile as I stood and hiked my tote onto my shoulder. He simply didn’t understand, and he wasn’t going to. “Okay—sure. Yes. A tutor. Pay attention. Front of the room.

I'll do that." This conversation was over, and I was leaving. I should have known better. I should have just emailed him, or gone to one of my other professors. I should—

"Miss Kits," he called.

I looked over my shoulder, one hand on the doorknob while the other clutched the paper he'd given me. I watched his mouth as I waited for him to speak. Now that I was standing I could add *talking in the hallway* to all the sounds looking to distract me.

"Maybe you could ask the professor if you could record his lectures?" He grimaced slightly. He may not have understood my disability, but he absolutely understood a fed-up female. "Not all professors will allow it, so don't be too surprised if he says no, but the least you can do is ask. Also, if you go to the academic services center in the back of the library, you can ask for what's called copied notes, which means that someone in your class or another section of the same course will take notes and you get a copy—but don't worry, it's completely anonymous."

I took a deep breath. That was all I was looking for. Direction and options.

It wasn't worth telling him that I already recorded most of my classes with a talk-to-text program and that Dr. Clément, the French professor in question, had expressly addressed his objections to students recording his lectures on the first day of 101.

I looked at my watch. “I’m going to head over to his office hours now.” I nodded as I opened the door. “Thank you.”

“I’ll shoot him an email and let him know we spoke,” he said, his fingers already typing away on the keyboard. “This way you don’t have to run through this whole conversation again.”

“Thanks,” I said, lightly kicking the toe of my shoe into the floor. “I really appreciate that.”

“You’re welcome.” He hit a button with a flourish. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be more helpful, I just—” His cell phone vibrated again.

I put my hand up, waving him on to answer the phone. I didn’t have time to wait around for any further conversation anyway, and it seemed like he didn’t have the time, either.

I turned back to the door, where the impatient student from before stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips. I huffed at him as he sidestepped, allowing me to pass.

“Oh, Miss Kits—” Dr. Galloway called, pulling the cell away from his face. “Don’t initiate the cat.”

Don’t initiate the cat? What in the world? You know what, forget it. Not even going to ask.

“Okay, thanks,” I called over my shoulder.


2

And the Award for The Cutest Blank Stare Goes to . . .

I hesitated outside Dr. Clément's office; the door was open and two voices floated into the hallway. There weren't supposed to be two voices. I wasn't prepared for two voices.

With a deep breath, I took three steps toward the door, but instead of turning into the office, I panicked, swiftly passing the office and dashing down the hall.

I stopped when I reached the end of the hallway, a door leading to the campus center in front of me and my back to Dr. Clément's office. What was I doing? I looked at my watch. I only had a few more minutes before his office hours were over.



I needed to get in there.

I turned back toward Dr. Clément's office, fingers pressed to my forehead as I mumbled words of encouragement to myself, except the hallway was no longer empty.

"Did you need something, Edie?" It was Dr. Clément's teaching assistant, Hudson. Voice number two. The one I wasn't prepared for.

"I . . . uh, yeah. Um, Dr. Galloway, my adviser, just emailed . . ." I motioned toward the doorway in which he stood. "I just need to talk to him."

Hudson smiled, small at first, and then it grew.

I looked at the floor, my face already heating up. He was wearing the maroon beanie that made my insides squirm. He was disheveled in all the best ways. Slightly wrinkled sweater, jeans with holes in the knees. Hands shoved into his pockets.

I'd noticed Hudson the first day of class. It would have been impossible not to notice him. He'd been in camo-printed cargo shorts and a black T-shirt with the words *I SPEAK FRENCH FRIES* written across the chest in white script. He'd been wearing flip-flops, too, and I remember thinking that he was a hopeless case, fashionwise. Hopeless, but somehow completely adorable. Beautifully disheveled, like the perfect messy bun.

"Well, come on. If you aren't in here in the next two minutes, he will leave without you."

Dr. Clément stared at Hudson and me as we shifted from

the hall into the office, shuffling around the piles of books on the floor to get to the two mismatched chairs that sat across from him.

“So,” I started, my eyes moving from Clément to Hudson and then back. “My adviser sent you an email; did you—”

“You cannot record my class,” Dr. Clément interrupted, his accent thick. “It is not up for debate.”

I hesitated, wondering exactly what Galloway had put in the email. “Is there any particular reason why I can’t?” I attempted to keep my voice even, avoiding eye contact with the TA. This was stressful enough on its own, but his dark-blue-and-pale-gray eyes, a Pantone-like combination any designer would kill to own, and the way he casually wore that maroon beanie weren’t helping me stay focused. The last thing I needed was to have to ask Dr. Clément to repeat himself.

English was my first language, and that was difficult enough, but throw an accent into the mix and I was lost. Watching Dr. Clément’s mouth wasn’t helping, and I didn’t know if the talk-to-text program would even work with French, but it was something and I had to at least try.

“Because I do not want you to.” He shrugged, looking to Hudson for backup.

I looked to Hudson, too, feeling like Clément and I were silently fighting over him. Battling for his allegiance. Hudson

looked from me to Clément and then back with a small shrug. His eyes lighting up as he scrunched his nose.

“Listen.” I ran a hand through my hair in frustration, wishing again that I had tied it back. Between the light snowfall and my constant touching, my hair would be a frizzy mess by the end of the day. Clément’s office may have been bigger than Galloway’s, but it wasn’t any less stuffy.

“I have a disability that makes it hard for me to process what I hear. Your accent makes that even harder for me,” I said as I wiggled my fingers near my left ear. “Either I don’t understand a word of what you’re saying or everything just comes out in a garbled mess, and that’s when you speak English. When you speak French, I’m so lost I just . . .” I shook my head; he didn’t need to know how helpless I felt. “My adviser thinks recording the class would help since learning a second language is especially hard for someone with what I have. Sometimes I just don’t understand you, and I don’t know how else to help myself.” I knew at some point there would come a time when I might have to let someone at the college know I had a disability, but I didn’t want it to be now and I didn’t want it to be like this.

“That is not my concern,” he said with a one-shoulder shrug. “If you cannot handle college, then you should not be in college. You made it through my 101 course; I have no doubt you will make it through my 102 course.”

My eyes darted to Hudson’s, and his were already on me,

wide in disbelief. How did we go from *you shouldn't be in college if you can't handle it* to *don't worry, you'll make it through*? It wasn't about just *making it through* for me. There was more at stake.

"I can handle college. Not everyone is good at everything. This is what I'm not good at—" I squeezed my eyes closed tightly as I pressed my fingers into my forehead. "All I'm asking is that you let me help myself. You don't have to do anything differently. I just want to record your lessons, that's all. I spent more time and effort on French 101 than I did on any of my other courses, and that was just studying the vocab and putting all my energy into paying attention in class."

There was always a fine line with things like this for me: caught between getting what I needed and getting an unfair advantage over the other students, even if 99 percent of the time it was only a perceived advantage.

"Yes, but the things I say—" Dr. Clément waved his hand around airily, as if holding a cigarette between two fingers. I waited for him to continue, but he didn't. Apparently, the hand gesture was the rest of the sentence.

"Well, forgive me if I have to take this to your department head." I pushed out of my chair, crossing my arms in hopes that the small threat would change his mind. Also, hoping he couldn't see my hands shaking.

“Do as you must, *mademoiselle*. Perhaps while you are there you should consider another language. Spanish maybe?”

I let out a noise somewhere between a growl of frustration and a sigh of hopelessness. I needed French. I was a fashion merchandise major, dammit, I *needed* French! Haute couture. Christian Dior. A.P.C. Longchamp. Louis Vuitton! If I stood any chance of having a productive time in Paris before my Global Trades course, I needed to learn at least *something* from this class.

I wasn’t foolish enough to believe I would learn the entirety of the French language, but I also knew myself, and I knew that if I wasn’t at least exposed to the language—the sounds, the vocab, the cadence of speech—I wouldn’t stand a chance conversing in English with a French *accent*, let alone piecing together actual French.

“You come up with another plan, and then we will talk,” he said.

“What *other* plan? This is a perfectly good plan!” I threw my hands into the air. I wanted to stomp my foot, but that wouldn’t go over too well unless I wanted to prove that I couldn’t handle college.

Dr. Clément assessed me for a moment; his eyebrows knitted together as he scanned me from top to bottom. I tugged at my navy and floral-print skirt. Adjusted my pink leather bomber jacket as I watched him watch me. My attention

catching on the silver and blue fleurs-de-lis tie clip askew on his eggplant-and-taupe-checkered tie.

“Pensez-y, mademoiselle, et revenez quand vous aurez trouvé une autre idée,” Dr. Clément said, his eyes trained on my face, watching my reaction. And of course, I wasn’t ready. Of course, he caught me off guard.

I shook my head as I looked between Dr. Clément and Hudson. I could not believe this was happening. How could a professor be so unwilling to help a student? I wasn’t asking for too much, was I?

Hudson looked like he wanted to say something. His eyes had softened, and more than once I’d seen him open his mouth to speak.

I searched his eyes, hoping for something, anything to help me stay afloat. But he said nothing, and I had no words, either, so I turned on my heels and walked out. I needed to be as far away from Clément, Hudson, and that conversation as possible.

This was the story of my life. Always having to beg for what I needed. I hated needing extra help and time and resources, hated being put on the defense all the time. I tried so hard to give people the benefit of the doubt, give them a chance to do the right thing. I wanted to believe that Clément would understand once I explained myself. That the email from Dr. Galloway would have meant something.

“Edie!”

I stiffened at the sound of my name.

“Edie, just hang on a sec.” I turned toward Hudson as he jogged my way.

I was shaking my head before he could even start. What could he possibly say that would make this situation any less embarrassing or disheartening?

“Listen, go to the tutoring center. It’s in the back of the library.” He raised his hands in surrender, his voice soft.

I watched his mouth as he spoke; I had to. There was too much going on in the lobby of the languages building. There were so many damn people in there. Was a rally about to start or something? A flash mob? I couldn’t process the words I needed to hear while so many others zoomed around. I glanced over my shoulder, giving everyone in a ten-foot radius some serious side-eye.

I turned back to Hudson. He was the same height as me, maybe a hair taller if I was barefoot. He was kind of chubby with broad shoulders and hair the color of hot cocoa. Short on the sides and a little longer on top, which I only knew because of the one time he didn’t wear that maroon beanie to class. He was attractive, if you liked the puppy-dog-eyed look on a guy, which I did. And if you liked red lips and rosy cheeks and the way he shoved his hands into his pockets. Which I did. I wondered if he was chubby soft or chubby firm, not caring either way because I was chubby soft in places, too. His ill-fitting clothes didn’t

help, but I would be willing to bet he cleaned up well. Better than well.

“Get a tutor?” I said, pulling my mind out of the world in which everyone in my life was a paper doll, like the ones I played with when I was a kid, easily dressed and re-dressed in the latest one-dimensional fashions.

“Yeah. They have those here. At college. In the tutoring center.” His eyes were on mine, and mine on his lips. Just the left side of his mouth quirked into a hint of a smile as he let out a breathy laugh.

“Yeah . . . okay. Thank you?” I said, bringing my finger to my lips, but banishing it away just as quickly. I’d quit biting my nails in high school, but as of recently, the urge to start up again was growing stronger.

“That was a joke,” he said slowly, licking his lips. “No good?”

“What was a joke?” I asked, my eyes on his mouth for more than one reason.

“The whole *they have those here, at college, in the tutoring center*. I was just teasing you.”

I nodded. I knew he was teasing me, and I wanted to smile, but I resisted.

“Is there something on my face?” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I had, like, ten tacos for lunch.”

“Uhh, no,” I said, surprised by the question. People didn’t usually ask outright; typically, they just felt self-conscious.

Apparently, Hudson was the ask-outright type. Apparently, he was also the blurt-whatever-comes-to-mind type.

“Oh, okay.” He swiped his mouth once more and then shoved his hand back into his pocket. “Listen, you can always come to office hours if you need extra help. I’m always here; he isn’t.”

“Thanks.” I nodded. I pulled at the hem of my camisole. Played with the zipper of my jacket. Kicked at the tiled floor.

“No one ever comes for office hours so it’s mostly just me so we would be alone.” His words rushed out carelessly as he bounced on his toes. “You know, to study or whatever.”

He was being a little weird, right? Not that I wasn’t being weird by picturing him in J.Crew every Tuesday/Thursday from nine thirty to ten forty-five for the past three weeks, but his fidgeting and bouncing and telling me we’d be alone was weird.

Or was this his awkward way of flirting with me? Neither seemed ideal.

“Um, okay. Thanks,” I said, squinting at him. If this were any other time, I would be flattered and swoony over his long eyelashes and pinchable cheeks and the way it felt like he was really looking at me, but I couldn’t. Not right now. Not after that exchange with Dr. Clément. “I’ll, uh, remember that.”

He listed his head with a smile. “You’re not going to come to office hours, are you?” he asked, scrunching his nose.

I scrunched my nose in response. “No, probably not.”

He nodded with a laugh. “Okay, fair enough.”

“Sorry.” I shrugged, though I wasn’t sorry. I just didn’t know what to say as I threw a glance over my shoulder toward the exit.

“And just so you know, Clément doesn’t want people recording his lectures because he’s writing a textbook and doesn’t want anything he says to end up on the internet.” He rolled his eyes dramatically. “A lot of people have told him that he can’t copyright every word he speaks, but”—he shrugged apathetically—“you know, he’s not really the type that listens.”

“Clearly.”

“Hey, maybe we should exchange numbers. You know, if you have any questions or need help or, I don’t know, need anything,” he said, switching gears quickly.

“Sure,” I said slowly, extending my hand to him palm up to receive his cell. I typed my number, pressing send to call myself. “There.”

I could use all the help I could get, and so far, he’d been the most helpful person all day.

He slipped his cell into his back pocket. “Maybe you could explain how this works to me sometime? You know, fill me in.” He tapped his temple as a frown crept onto his face.

Was he feeling sorry for me right now?

Strike everything I'd just thought about him. He was no longer easy on the eyes, or nice, or smart, or funny. His kissable cheeks were a thing of the past; his maroon beanie no longer my favorite part of French class. This was not going to work out.

"Yeah, um, maybe." I took another step back as he kicked at the ground, his eyes on his browning white sneakers.

Except, nope.

Except, maybe I wanted to see if he watched me walk away, but I didn't look back as I moved through the crowd.

3

I'm Cheering for Pizza

Sneakers screeched against the gym floor as a grunt came from Miranda, the girl standing closest to where I was seated.

I had my own spot. A seat on the bleachers reserved for only me. Terrance had his own spot as well, and it was next to mine. There were fewer than twenty people at this game, a pretty good turnout for a Tuesday night.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I yelled through my cupped hands.

Serena, my roommate, shot me a look as she repositioned herself on the court. I didn’t play sports. I would probably



never play sports, but one thing I did do was cheer on my roommate as she played club volleyball. And after the day I'd had, I was about to *cheer* the hell out of this game.

The team was six people, three guys, three girls. Serena, Miranda, and Catherine Joan. Yes, she preferred to go by both names, but we didn't abide by it. *CJ* was much easier to cheer. The guys were Michael with the Ass, aka Serena's boyfriend; Cody with the Cheekbones, aka the one with a crush on me; and Just Tony. Just Tony was cute, but he was just so . . . Tony. Serena didn't dub him a physical attribute nickname.

"Seriously?" Terrance asked, looking at me over the teal Wayfarer sunglasses he chose to wear indoors.

"The same could be said to you," I said, pursing my lips as I eyed his glasses.

He clicked his tongue as he turned away from me, mouthing the word *whatever* as he refocused his attention on the game.

Terrance and I met in an Intro to Theater class last fall. Me as a prerequisite to Basic Costuming and him for Stage Electronics.

The ball soared over the net and toward Serena. She dived for it, catching just a piece of it with her cupped hands. The ball skimmed the net as it fell into the opponents' court.

The referee blew his whistle, calling the point for the other team.

“Oh, come on!” I said, pushing to my feet, gesturing wildly. “That was clearly over the net!”

The referee looked my way with the same face he always gave me.

I put both hands up in surrender, though it definitely wouldn’t be the last time I objected to one of his calls.

“Get your head in the game, Carroll!” I yelled, using Michael’s last name for emphasis.

He pointed a finger my way as a warning; I raised my eyebrows in response. “I think your frat brother wants to fight me,” I said to Terrance with a laugh, my eyes never leaving the court.

“He does not love when you yell at him,” Terrance said, his eyes on his cell phone.

“And I don’t love when he misses an easy bump.”

Terrance laughed. “You take this way too seriously.”

I rolled my eyes.

“You do!” he said, shoving me lightly with his shoulder.

The ball volleyed twice before Cody spiked it.

“Pay attention,” I said with a quick elbow to his side.

“Suck it, Unblockables!” I yelled to the other team as Terrance and I jumped up, arms raised. “Stupid team name anyway,” I whispered to Terrance.

“Because I’d Hit That is so much better?” he teased.

“But you would and do hit that,” I said, motioning with my chin toward CJ. “You would probably hit literally every-

one on this team . . . and I probably would, too—look at them.”

“Except you actually wouldn’t, because you could be with Cody but you aren’t,” he said.

“Paris,” I said, my eyes following the ball as it volleyed. “Plus, dudes . . . you know?” I shrugged, going for indifferent. I didn’t need a guy in my life. I didn’t need anything to distract me from going to Paris.

“But you know that kid likes you,” he added. “And as his friend—and yours, I feel like I need to say something. Once upon a time you two were good together.”

“Once upon a time . . . um, Paris,” I teased.

It was the only reply I needed. I was going to Paris for a summer, longer if I opted in to the abroad program, which I was planning to do—I just hadn’t told my friends yet. I had very little motivation to be in a relationship that would end come June first.

Terrance sighed. “Paris,” he repeated.

My eyes moved to Catherine Joan, who was about to, hopefully, serve the game-ending ball. The score was 20–24, us. “All right, CJ, let’s do this!” I yelled, clapping.

“Yeah, CJ, I’m starving; let’s finish this!” Terrance yelled as he clapped as well, wincing when he received my elbow to his ribs. “But I am starving,” he whimpered.

“Oh my God, shut up,” I said, laughing as I watched the ball volley once, twice . . . spike.

Terrance and I shot to our feet, cheering.

"I'm cheering because it's pizza time!" Terrance yelled.
"Yay, pizza!"

"Can we not go back to *our* room?" I pleaded as we walked toward our dorm.

"Why not?" Serena asked, hooking her arm around my neck and bringing my head in to her. "I smell bad or something?"

I broke free, shoving her lightly. "You're so gross," I whined, pulling the hair band out of my hair, then fixing it back into a bun.

"We could go to the house," Michael offered with a smirk, pulling Serena in to him the same way she'd just pulled me in.

"Literally no one wants to go to your frat house," Catherine Joan said, her eyes on Terrance.

Serena sneaked a quick pinch to the back of my arm. Everyone knew Terrance and CJ had a thing going on, but neither of them would openly admit it.

"Then we'll go to your room," Serena offered.

Catherine Joan shook her head. "Not gonna happen. The Terror of Room Two-Two-Four is there with her boyfriend."

The group released a simultaneous cringing groan.

"Okay, well, that's out," I said, not wanting to be any-

where near CJ's room if the two of them were there. God only knows what we would walk in on.

"Cody, options?" Serena asked, knowing I wouldn't.

"Dog allergies, remember?" CJ said, pointing to her face, answering before Cody could. Cody's dog and CJ didn't get along, in the sense that Roger could kill CJ without even trying.

"Looks like that just leaves our room." Serena smiled sweetly.

I groaned. Miranda had to meet her Western Civ. group at the library, so her place was out, and Just Tony had a shift in the engineering lab. Our options were severely limited.

"I hate you all," I said as I held the lobby door for the group.

My phone vibrated against the table in the lounge. I'd convinced the group that the lounge on our floor was a much better eating place than the floor of our bedroom.

HUDSON: Hey

"Who's that?" Serena asked, reading over my shoulder.

"French TA," I said, flipping my phone facedown as I took a bite of pizza.

Terrance wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “How’d that go today?” He wiped his hand against his jeans.

I shrugged as I tossed a paper towel his way. I knew they would all want to know, but I wasn’t in the mood to get into the whole thing, so I gave them the abridged version.

“So now what?” Serena asked.

I shook my head, chewing. “Get a tutor, I guess.” I covered my mouth as I spoke. My phone vibrated again.

HUDSON: I can tutor you if you
want

“Are you seriously going to ignore his texts?” Serena asked.

I flipped my phone facedown again. I nodded with a shrug. “Yeah, probably.”

“Who is this kid?” Cody balled up his paper towel and shot it into the pizza box.

“If only your aim was that good on the court,” I said.

Serena laughed. “Seriously, though,” she said, smirking at Cody.

My phone vibrated again, but I didn’t bother to check it.

“What is going on with you?” Terrance asked. “You’re all—” He waved his hand in my direction.

“I know, right?” Serena added. “Your hair is all”—she motioned around her head—“and you’re in sneakers. I mean, come on.”

I sighed. “I’m not in the mood, guys. I had two professors be completely unhelpful and a TA who wants to pick my brain apart because he thinks it’s interesting, or fun, or—who knows.”

“Again, who is this kid?” Cody asked.

“Wes Hudson,” I said. “He wasn’t unhelpful, just completely insulting.”

“Hudson?” Catherine Joan asked. “Like, brown-hair-blue-eyes-always-wears-a-red-hat Hudson?”

“Maroon hat,” I said.

Cue the simultaneous eye roll.

“Fine, maroon hat,” she sighed.

“Yes, that’s him.”

“The French TA with the Eyes?” Serena asked, pointing to me with her rainbow-patterned water bottle before twisting off the cap. “You’ve mentioned him.”

I’d mentioned Hudson to Serena before, for several reasons. The first was about all the ways I would have dressed him if I had the opportunity. The second was his blue-gray eyes. The third was also his blue-gray eyes. The fourth was the time he tripped going down the stairs to the front of the room.

“So, tell me what the TA was wearing today. Was it awful?” Serena asked with a smirk. “Edie loves talking about this kid’s clothes.”

I buried my face into my hands. “I’ve seen worse,” I said,

muffled. “And I don’t *love* talking about his clothes. He literally gives me no choice.”

“Were his eyes all Pantone-y?” Serena teased.

“What the hell is Pantone-y?” Cody asked, his own Pantone-like sage-and-amber-colored eyes searching mine.

“Pantone—you seriously don’t know what that is?” I asked as my eyes roamed the faces of my friends. “Guys.”

“Dude, not everyone cares about the *world of fashion* like you, Edie,” Michael said, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs under the table.

“They’re only, like, the world authority on color. They literally invent a new color every year. . . .” I looked around. “Nothing?”

I rolled my eyes at all the head shakes.

“His eyes are kind of Pantone-y, though,” CJ said as she nodded. “Like, they’re all blue-y and gray-y and, like—” She cleared her throat before taking a bite of her crust. We stared at her, waiting for her to continue.

“And . . . ,” Serena prompted.

CJ shrugged, her eyes on her plate.

“Oh my God, what?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s just that he’s, like, the nicest person on campus.”

“I am not sold on that,” I said, watching her avoid eye contact. “And besides, I’m pretty sure he just feels sorry for me, so”

“I’m sure he doesn’t feel sorry for you, Edie,” Serena said, her hand on my shoulder and catching my gaze. “Seriously.”

I nodded. She was probably right, but she didn’t see the look on his face, or the tone of his voice. Serena wasn’t someone who was accustomed to people feeling bad for her.

CJ took a sip of her water. “He’s really nice, Edie. Like, really.”

“Yeah, you’re acting a little sketchy,” Michael replied to CJ, his brow furrowing dramatically. “I feel like you’re selling this kid a little hard right now.”

CJ picked up her phone, her eyes on me and then Serena. Both our phones vibrated.

“Are you serious?” Cody asked as Serena and I checked our phones.

CJ: Really nice = hot as hell

Serena let out a big laugh. “You couldn’t say this out loud?” she asked.

CJ glanced toward Serena. “Just give him a chance, Edie,” CJ said through gritted teeth, her eyes on Serena. “That’s all I wanted you to know.”

“Yeah.” I nodded as I set my phone down. “That’s exactly what you wanted us to know. And you’re not wrong, he is *really nice*.”

“Anyway,” Cody said, his eyes on me as he leaned back in his chair, mirroring Michael.

“Why French anyway? Spanish is a hundred times more practical,” Terrance said through a mouthful of food.

“Coco Chanel. Hermès. *Minaudière*. *Chic*. *Boutique*.” I counted off on my fingers as I said each word. “I mean, come on. I need this if I’m going to survive in Paris for the summer . . . and beyond.” I glanced toward Cody. Our eyes met and then his went to his lap.

Crap.

“That’s right, you have that class—” CJ snapped her fingers as she tried to think of the name.

“Global Trade Dynamics.” I sighed, the undue anxiety from Galloway’s office creeping back into the pit of my stomach, overpowering the urge to crawl under the table to avoid talking about Paris in front of Cody.

Serena pointed at me. “That’s the one.”

“Yeah. I mean, Paris aside, I feel like I should know at least a little French if I’m going to stand a chance in the fashion industry.”

“What did you say you had, like, three meet and greets with some major people, right?” Terrance asked.

“Three for everyone, but we’ll all be attending a convention where we can go off on our own and there will be wholesalers, garment manufacturers, and a bunch of retailers.” I sighed. “I want to work somewhere in between the

manufacturer and the retailer. I need to be able to communicate with both.” I struggled to maintain a conversation when the dining hall was crowded; how was I supposed to pay attention in an entire convention center full of people speaking in all sorts of accents and languages?

“Okay, so let us help you. What should we do? Help you study? Yell at the professor? Enlist the help of the TA with the Eyes?” Serena said, looking to our friends.

“Seriously, Edie,” Cody said, glancing toward Serena, clearly unamused with her nickname for Hudson. “If you need the help, just say so.”

“Thank you, but no. I’ll just—I don’t know. I’ll figure it out,” I said, the thought of being alone with Cody again tightening my stomach. The last time we’d been alone there was yelling and storming out and a slew of unfriendly text messages. The fact that we were both sitting at the same table was progress.

“Let me help you figure it out,” Serena said, popping the last bite of pizza into her mouth. “We can tight tea forever.”

Tight tea forever. I gave it a second to settle in. *Fight this together*, maybe? That was something Serena would say.

“I appreciate you jumping in to help—all of you—but just let me try this on my own first, okay? If I don’t get anywhere, then I’ll enlist your help,” I said. “I’ll let you yell at whoever you want.”

4

How About the 5th of Never?

“Can I help you?” asked the woman not much older than me seated at the front desk of the tutoring center.

“Yeah, um,” I stumbled over my words as I played with the bottom button of my chambray oxford. “I’m looking for a tutor . . . I mean . . . I am in need of a tutor.” I rested my arms on the counter that separated us.

“What subject?” she asked, her eyes going from me to her desktop computer; her fingers rested lightly on the keyboard. She had great nails. A fresh manicure for sure. The blush color was perfect for her skin tone.

“French,” I said. “Also, if I could have access to copied



notes, that would be awesome,” I added as I looked around the tutoring center nervously. There were two students huddled over a textbook to the left, whispering animatedly. A guy playing online Scrabble, the only person at a bank of five computers. A person reading the paper, face obscured by the pages, but legs crossed ankle to knee. Another guy seated with his back to us, alone at a large circular table, his head bowed.

“And your name, please?” she asked.

“Edie, Edie Kits,” I said, stumbling over my own name, caught off guard because my mind had wandered.

“Which French?” she asked.

“Um, 102,” I stumbled again. “Please.” I lifted my index finger to my mouth, my nail touching my teeth before I scolded myself.

The woman tapped on the keyboard, then looked over her shoulder and into the large room behind her. “You’re in luck,” she said, swiveling her chair away from me and toward the room. Her words and smile said I was lucky, but her tone said otherwise. “Usually I’m the languages tutor, but I’ve been promoted to secretary.” She rolled her eyes, using air quotes around *promoted*, trying to make a joke. I was too nervous for jokes. “We happen to have a French tutor available right now.” She pointed to the person with his back to us as she bit at her bottom lip.

“That’s great,” I said with zero confidence. “Thank you.”

I watched as she walked toward him. I guess shouting

across the tutoring center was a no-no. I would have to remember that since shouting was one of my calling cards.

She had a great style. Charcoal ankle boots, black-patterned tights under ripped jeans, and an off-the-shoulder buttermilk-colored loose-knit sweater. She tapped the guy on the shoulder, a broad smile on her face as her fingers lingered on him. He lifted his head in response. A head I recognized. A head with a maroon beanie and short brown hair peeking out at the nape of his neck.

“This is—”

“Yeah, we’ve met,” I interrupted as I brought my index finger to my mouth again, but pulled it away just as quickly.

“Makenna, would it be possible for Edie and me to use the testing room?” he asked. “Edie has a hearing thing that hinders her concentration.”

What. The. Hell. Would I forever be the girl with the *hearing thing*? Why would Hudson describe me like that to her? Makenna. A person I didn’t even know. And why was he doing it in the middle of the tutoring center, where anyone and everyone could hear? And *hinders*? Who even uses that word?

“I don’t think that’s necessary, Makenna,” I said, holding my hand up to her, my eyes on Hudson. “I don’t have a hearing problem. This is plenty quiet for me.” I knew I was starting to get loud and I needed to check myself. Dial down the defensive tone in my voice, too.

The entire vibe had changed, and not for the better.

Makenna hesitated. “Of course you can use the testing room.” She looked as though she’d stepped into a puddle of mud. If she could have tiptoed away, she might have.

I probably should have thanked her for her help, but instead I stood there dumbfounded as she made her way back to her desk to assist a student who had been waiting.

“So, when do you want to start?” Hudson asked. He took a step away from me and toward the table at which he’d been seated.

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He had said he would tutor me, but seeing him in the room didn’t compute. I never told him I wanted him as a tutor.

“We can compare schedules,” he said, walking backward. “Have my people call your people.” He scrunched his nose in what would have normally been an absolutely adorable way.

“I don’t think this is going to work,” I blurted, gaining the attention of pretty much everyone. I was absolutely the loudest thing in the room.

“What? Compare schedules?” he asked in a forced whisper as he picked up his planner.

I closed my eyes and ran both hands down my face with complete disregard for my makeup and hair. When I opened my eyes, Hudson was standing in front of me.

“Can you just walk over to the table, please? Literally everyone is staring right now,” he said. His eyes were on

mine, but then shifted quickly to the left and the right. Not embarrassed, just observational.

I didn't have the courage to look around the room to verify that *literally everyone was staring* at me. I nodded as I followed him to the table.

"I can do next week." He flipped a page in his planner. "Wednesday at seven?" he asked as he looked at the book.

"Sure," I muttered.

"Aren't you going to check your schedule?"

"No," I said as I looked him in the eyes, finally regaining my emotional balance. This wasn't going to work. There had to be some sort of conflict of interest in here somewhere. Between him telling the secretary that I had a hearing problem and the fact that I still felt like he was only doing this because he felt sorry for me, there didn't seem to be a place for us to meet in the middle.

CJ had urged me to give him a chance, and in all honesty, I wanted to, but we weren't off to a great start.

"No because you know you're free and don't need to check it, or no because you aren't going to schedule a time with me?" A small smile started at the corner of his mouth. I knew he said that last part to be funny, but the real funny part was that it wasn't actually funny at all.

"Both."


5

Roger That, Over and Out

“**S**o then I said no because it wasn’t going to work, and he just stood there like *okay*,” I said as my mom cleared the dinner table after our bimonthly dinner.

“What does that mean?” she asked, her tone as clipped as mine.

“It means that there is no way this kid is going to tutor me. First impressions mean a lot, Mom, and this was not a great one,” I said, recalling my real first impression of Hudson, which had taken place on the first day of French 102, when I couldn’t keep my eyes off him the entire class period.



“I’m not sure I understand what you’re going for here, Edie. Of all people, you should be the last person to judge someone based on a first impression. You hate it when people judge you because of the way you dress and the way you do your hair and all that.”

She looked frazzled, her dress pants and silk blouse wrinkled from a day of sitting behind a desk. Her almond-colored hair was frizzy, like mine, from the drizzle that had been falling all day. My mother’s face was longer than mine, oval with high cheekbones. I looked more like my father, who had a heart-shaped face, round cheeks, and a subtle chin.

She wasn’t wrong. First impressions were what always got me teased. I hated it, and now I was doing it to someone else.

“But I didn’t even tell you the worst part,” I said, resting my arms on the table and then my chin on my arm. “He told the secretary that I have a hearing problem and that I need a special room to study in.”

“Maybe he wanted to give her a heads-up that you weren’t a typical student. Who knows?” she said, defending someone she didn’t even know.

That was so my mother. She was always defending someone or something. It was what she was born to do. She was a stay-at-home mom as my brother and I grew up, and when the school discovered I was having a hard time learning, she became a parent advocate, too. Not only did she sit

in on every single one of my meetings to ensure I got everything I needed, but she also volunteered to sit in on other people's meetings to make sure their child got everything they needed. She was perceived as a bit of a beast by my teachers, but she didn't care how the school viewed her.

"Mom, you don't even know him. And plus, shouldn't he be tutoring me like I'm a typical student? Why can't I just be a student who needs help? I didn't have to tell anyone any of this last year, and now all of a sudden everyone and their brother needs to know."

"Because you aren't just a student who needs help. What you need is different from what other people need, and the only way to get that help is to let the person helping you know. Just let him try to help you in a different way. It sounds like he was just trying to be conscientious." She pointed the mashed potato spoon at me with a smile. "And besides, even if you hadn't told him about your CAPD, he would still have to try to tutor you in a way that worked for you. So, in essence, you've saved yourself and him a lot of time trying to figure out what works and what doesn't."

"But that's not fair," I whined, sinking my head into the crook of my arm, the tip of my nose touching the table. "I just want to be like everyone else."

"But you're not and you don't, not really. We're not having this conversation again, Edie."

She was right; I didn't really want to be like everyone

else. I truly wanted to be me and that me was not ashamed of my disability. That me was going to fight for what I needed to be successful. That me might end up punching Wesley Hudson, though.

“You need to pass this French course, and you need help to do it. Be thankful you did okay last year and didn’t need to go through all this trouble. But you need the help now, and you’re going to get it. Accept that and move forward.” She walked out of the dining room and into the kitchen. She banged around a few pots for emphasis before coming back into the dining room.

“Every time you get frustrated with this tutor, just remind yourself that it’s all for Paris.”

I sighed. She was right; it was all for Paris. It was also for a general education requirement, but there was a bigger picture. There was more at stake than checking a box.

Paris. Paris. Paris. My new mantra.

“What about the spy kit?” she asked. I pulled my head out of my arms. “It could work. The professor did tell you to come back with a better plan.”

“I don’t know. I mean, would it even still fit my ear? I haven’t touched it in years.” I wasn’t entirely against the idea, but memories of middle school filled my head quickly and I didn’t think I could go through that again.

The spy kit was an FM transmitter I used to wear in school, from first grade through seventh grade. It was two

pieces. A microphone that hung on a lanyard around the teacher's neck and an earpiece that went into my ear. It allowed the teacher to talk directly to me, minimizing as many distractors as possible. I'd stopped wearing it because the other kids relentlessly teased me. Because wearing it made me different, and at the time there was nothing more I wanted than to be the same as everyone else. Even though nowadays there was nothing more I wanted than to be exactly who I am, I couldn't help but worry about history repeating itself.

"It's worth trying," she said as she headed toward the designated junk drawer in the oversized mahogany credenza we never used. "I imagine we could buy a different earpiece if we needed to."

I watched her rummage through the drawer. The transmitter was a good idea, but I wasn't feeling overly confident about it. Dr. Clément had already denied my request to record his lectures, despite having explained my situation to him. What if he said no to this, too?

"Aha!" My mom turned around, holding the earpiece in one hand and dangling the transmitter in the other.

"Oh my God," I said, laughing at the look on her face and the state in which she'd found the device's lanyard. "I'm pretty sure that thing had a fancy case to it. Where the heck is it?"

"Hell if I know." She dropped the pieces on the table and turned back to the drawer, rummaging again.

“You never should have let me get the microphone and earpiece in pink. No wonder I got picked on so much.” I smiled as I attempted to untangle the microphone strap.

My mom sighed as she lowered herself into the chair next to me. She opened her hand, dropping two AAA batteries and a watch battery onto the table. The small battery rolled on its side before falling close to my pinkie.

“What?” I asked, catching her eyes as she bit at the dry skin on her bottom lip. I scooped up the batteries and began clicking them into place.

“Nothing.” She waved at me dismissively with one hand while the other traced the orange and white paisley pattern on the tablecloth.

“Yeah, okay.” I knew she was lying. I laid my hand on hers, stopping the tracing.

My mom was a busy-hands kind of person. If she was feeling even the slightest bit uncomfortable, her fingers would pick at nonexistent lint or trace designs on tablecloths or run through her hair. Or fiddle with my hair.

“I just don’t like to talk about how you used to get bullied,” she said, swatting my hand away from hers.

“First of all, I wasn’t bullied, I was teased—there’s a difference—and second of all, it made me a stronger person, so whatever. What doesn’t kill you and all that . . .”

“Oh, is that why you almost failed the eighth grade?” She narrowed her eyes.

Eighth grade, the worst year of my life. The year I stopped growing up and started growing out. The year I grew a butt and boobs. The year I decided to take back control over my life by putting my foot down about the FM transmitter.

“I didn’t almost fail eighth grade. And besides, I needed to learn how to learn without this.” I dismissed her words, holding up the pieces. I’d spent most of the first two marking periods of eighth grade staying up half the night trying to memorize the Hebrew of the haftarah for my bat mitzvah.

I pushed aside my other work to concentrate on that. At the time, I was more concerned about letting Mrs. Leventhal down than I was about letting down my teachers at school. My teachers in eighth grade saw me as a hassle; Mrs. Leventhal was kind and caring and patient. She raised the bar, knowing it would be hard for me, and her. She challenged me, and that had made me want to put in the work to accomplish something the school district told me I’d never be able to do—hence the language exemption.

So yes, I had almost failed eighth grade. I’d barely made it through, but I didn’t sink. I swam. It may have been a doggie paddle, but I didn’t drown. My mom didn’t know that the pressure of getting my haftarah perfect for my bat mitzvah was almost too much for me to handle, and she never would. But the truth was I focused so much on that, on learning to read Hebrew, because part of me wanted to prove I

could. After years of feeling like I couldn't, all I wanted to do was achieve.

"No, you didn't need to learn how to learn without this. That was the whole point of having this stuff. Because you needed it. Because it helped you."

She ran her hand down my arm, smoothing the fuzz of my ivory cardigan.

"I know, I know. It leveled the playing field. I understood it then and I still get it now," I reassured her as I moved my hair to one side and fumbled with the earpiece to fit it against my now adult-sized ear.

"Does it fit?" she asked.

I placed the device snugly around my ear, adjusting it before letting go.

"Yup," I said, revealing it game-show-host style. I flipped my hair back into place, covering the earpiece behind a curtain of waves.

"Hand me that." She pointed at the microphone.

I handed her the untangled transmitter and watched as she walked out of the kitchen and into the foyer.

I listened for that familiar click the earpiece picked up when the transmitter was turned on. No click yet, but I could hear the heat blowing from the floor register. The hum of the refrigerator. The ice falling into the tray. A car driving by. The dog barking two houses down.

Click. Static.

“Testing one, two, three.” My mother’s soft voice came through.

It still worked. I sighed as I slid down the chair, my legs splayed out under the table. Now if I could get the professor to wear this gaudy thing, then I wouldn’t need Hudson as a tutor.