

THE BOYFRIEND BRACKET

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BRACKET**

KATE EVANGELISTA

Swoon READS
New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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To the Grade 11 girls of my
Creative Writing Fiction class of SY 2016–2017.
Your talent and enthusiasm brought new life into my
writing. All of you will run the world one day.

PROLOGUE

GRADUATION DAY

B*ig brothers suck*, Stella thought as she pouted, scowled, and crossed her arms all throughout the ceremony. Not even the California sun and the scent of fresh-cut grass made a difference to her current mood. She should have been ecstatic that Camron James Patterson, spawn of Satan sent to make her life a living hell, was graduating high school that day. Instead the seat reserved for her boyfriend of officially one week remained empty. The guy was a total no-show.

Stella had been extra careful too. She made sure Darryl liked her enough before introducing him to her mom. They had

been dating a few weeks prior to the meet. But when Cam found out, he went all guard dog on Darryl's ass. First, it was the probing questions like "What are your plans for my sister?" and "Are you sure you're good enough for her?" and Stella's personal favorite, "What kind of future do you think you have with her?"

No one wanted to think about those things at freaking seventeen! She didn't even think about those things. Ugh! She hated her brother with the passion of a thousand suns.

As if the questions weren't enough, Cam laid the intimidation on thick. How he made sure Darryl knew he slept with his favorite Louisville Slugger close by. How he wasn't afraid to teach Darryl a lesson on manners. And worst of all, the line "Whatever you do to my sister, I will happily do to you," said with a straight face and capped off with a smile. It did the trick, judging from the unanswered texts, tweets, DMs, even a Snapchat SOS. Darryl was officially ghosting her.

"I can't wait until you're gone," she mumbled to herself as her brother climbed the stage and received the rolled-up piece of paper that stood in for the actual diploma. She winced immediately after speaking. The elastics her orthodontist had put in the other day did their job. At least Dr. Africa hadn't run out of the pink ones this time. Stella loved that his last name was a continent.

Rubbing her cheek to ease some of the tightness in her jaw—from the constant gritting of her teeth—Stella consoled herself with the thought that, like her brother, the braces would be gone soon. There would be more boyfriends in her future. With what

she had planned over the summer break, there would definitely be more boyfriends. Stella practically rubbed her hands together at the prospect of her impending freedom.

After the ceremony, Stella raised her mom's phone. Watching her fuss over Cam through the screen while she waited for them to pose for the traditional graduate-between-parents photo—minus her dad—she saw pieces of herself. In her mother were her straight, black hair, complexion, and full lips. What her father—may his soul rest in peace—had blessed her with were high cheekbones and a lanky figure. Oh, what she would give for her mother's curves.

Cam was the total opposite. He got their father's light skin, only now it was tanned from all those hours spent under the sun playing baseball. He also got Dad's curly mop and the smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. From Mom, he'd received his hazel eyes. Stella wanted those eyes. Luck of the draw in the genetics pool! She was convinced, had she been born first, those eyes would have been hers instead of the plain brown she walked around with. Alas.

"Say cheese," Stella said once they finally posed, and Cam hammed it up, puffing his chest out. She had already suffered through the family group shots. She estimated about ten more photos and her mom would be satisfied.

"Now one with you and your *kuya*," her mom said, using the Filipino term for brother. She waved her hands enthusiastically for the phone while pulling her heels out of the grass every time they sank into the ground as she approached Stella.

"Ugh!" Stella rolled her eyes. "Do I have to?"

“Come on, little sis,” Cam said, a big smile on his face, waving her over. “One for the road.”

Stella weighed the pros and cons of refusing. She was still so mad at him for driving another one away. Darryl could have been The One, for all she knew. Yet Cam was still her brother. He had his good points. Like the time he’d helped her save a kitten stuck in a tree. Almost broke his arm in the process. Like the time he’d stayed up all night sewing sequins on a dress she wanted to wear for spring fling. Dateless, but still. And that time he’d driven all night before her birthday just to pick up a part for her sewing machine after it had broken down. She was never going to admit it to anyone, but she was going to miss him.

“Stella Marie Patterson,” her mom said. Using her full name always meant she had been or was about to be in some sort of trouble.

“All right!” She added a pinch of indignation to her tone.

Her mother nudged her forward.

Stella dropped her hands to her sides and trudged the rest of the way to her still-smiling brother. Once she was at his side, he swung his arm over her shoulders and pulled her closer. Grudgingly, Stella didn’t resist.

“Take off your glasses, Stella,” her mother said from behind the phone.

Unwilling to prolong the agony, Stella removed her thick, black frames, folding the sides carefully and dropping them into her purse. Then she pushed her braids over her shoulders and smiled—braces and all.

“Happy?” Stella asked through her teeth.

“I’m always happy,” Cam replied through the side of his mouth as their mom fidgeted with the camera settings.

Stella lost her smile. “When are you leaving again?”

“Another one bites the dust,” Cam sang smugly.

“You’re ruining my life!”

“He wasn’t good for you.”

“In your eyes, no one is.” Stella’s fingers curled into fists at her sides.

“Trust me.”

“How do you even know?” she challenged, glaring up at him.

Cam gave her a sidelong glance. “You hid him. That’s all the proof I need.”

“I only did that because I knew you’d drive him away. Which is exactly what happened after I finally had the guts to tell Mom. And news flash, *she* was cool with it!”

“Say cheese,” their mother said.

Cam smiled. Stella did not.

“Oh, Stella,” her mom said with a cluck of disappointment.

Stella didn’t care. She was too angry. She pushed away from Cam and faced him.

“I’m tired of you policing my life!” she said, not bothering to use her inside voice. The new elastics be damned. “You hover over me more than Mom does. You’re such a jerk!”

“Stella, don’t talk like that to your brother,” their mother interjected. Her fiery temper was another thing Stella had inherited.

“Stella, I’m only—”

“I’m sick of it,” she snapped, cutting Cam off. “Congratulations on graduating. I’m going home!” She turned on her heel, the skirt of the dress she had made swishing with the movement, and stomped away.

“But we’re having lunch—”

“Just let her cool off,” she heard Cam telling their mother.

Stella kept walking, her kitten heels digging into the grass. She mashed her lips together to keep from crying out of sheer frustration. She didn’t even care that everything ahead of her was a blur. All she wanted was to keep moving. Only one thing would make everything better.

“Slappy?” said a rich male voice she would have recognized in a crowded airport.

Flutters woke in her stomach. Even if she hated the nickname he had given her, hearing it never failed to make her knees turn to jelly. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she pulled her glasses from her purse and pushed them up the bridge of her nose. Only then did she allow herself to face him.

Her cheeks grew hot. Of course she needed to wear her glasses. Why would she want to miss seeing every detail of the perfection in front of her? She liked to think there was a shine of mischief just for her in those brilliant eyes—gray as a sleet sky. The sunlight played in his spun-silk chestnut hair. The strands were tamed for the occasion. The bump on his nose was from a time he fell face-first while skateboarding. The scar on his chin, running parallel to his lower lip, was from the back of Cam’s head making contact while they were wrestling as kids. The imperfections gave his looks character. She loved him all

the more for them. But his best feature was his smile. All her insides went gooey when he smiled.

“Oh, hi, Will,” she said. William Montgomery. Even his name was perfect. The only thing she hated about him was he happened to be her brother’s best friend. “Congratulations on graduating.”

“Thanks.” He bent his considerable height and stared straight into her eyes. She loved that his height made her feel petite even though she was all of five ten. “What’s wrong?”

She was torn. On the one hand, she was happy to see him. On the other, she was annoyed. He wasn’t innocent in all this. She reminded herself not to be distracted by his perfection. And just like that, her annoyance took over her happiness. She could actually feel it in the coming together of her eyebrows.

“Ugh! *You*.” She stabbed a finger at him. “You’re just as bad as he is.”

“Whoa!” He raised his hands as if her finger were loaded. “What’d I do?”

“More like what you and your ‘bro’ did.” She sandwiched the word *bro* with air quotes.

“Hey! Don’t knock the bro code. What’d Cam do now?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t deny you had anything to do with it. You’re Robin to his Batman when it comes to scaring my boyfriends away.”

He shrugged one shoulder and muttered, “More like Sam to his Dean, but whatever. To-may-to, to-mah-to.”

“Ugh!” Stella’s fists trembled at her sides. “I’m so glad to be rid of both of you!”

Yet where had she heard that boys pretended to be mean to

the girls they liked? Did Will's helping her brother scare away boyfriends mean he secretly liked her? Her stomach flipped. No. She ran a hand down one braid. Will couldn't like her. She knew his type. Tall. Leggy. Usually with straight, blond hair. Stella was none of those things. Stella was braces and glasses and braids.

"That Darryl guy is a huge jerk anyway," Will said matter-of-factly.

Stella whipped her head up, her jaw dropping. Then she pressed her lips together before she said, "Of course you'd say that. For all I know, Cam's brainwashed you into thinking that."

"You know he's only protecting you, right?" He tugged at one of her braids. The gesture never failed to make Stella self-conscious. "And my brain is my own, thank you very much."

"It's killing my social life." It wasn't like she could have the guy she really wanted. That part she left out.

Once, she'd had this crazy notion that she was the Barbie to Will's Ken. Of course, loving Will was just a pipe dream. He was totally off-limits. Cam would blow a gasket. Plus Will didn't see her that way. She was forever in the baby-sister zone. But still . . . being with him would be so worth it.

"Hey, will you do me a favor?"

Will's voice shocked her out of a potentially dangerous day-dream involving finding out just how soft his lips were.

"Um . . ." Stella nudged her glasses farther up her nose. "Sure."

What else was she supposed to say? Seriously. Anything for Will.

"I know it's asking a lot. . . ." He paused.

“What is it?” She leaned closer and batted her eyelashes.

“With me moving out, Nana is going to be all alone,” he finally said. “Will you check on her from time to time over the summer? Just to see if she’s okay? I’ve got that workshop to attend so I’m leaving earlier than anticipated.”

Nana was what Will called his grandmother. With his parents in Doctors Without Borders, he’d grown up with her. Actually, they all had—playing in her huge backyard. She always had a fresh batch of cookies and lemonade waiting for them afterward.

“Of course,” Stella said, her heart warming. “You don’t even need to ask twice.”

Will breathed like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He pulled Stella into a tight hug. The shock of the contact was short. She slipped her arms into his graduation gown and wrapped them around his lean waist. Of its own accord, her head rested against his strong shoulder. She inhaled the pre-summer air mixed with his aftershave. Sharp. Spicy. She could smell him all day. For as long as he held her, she would let herself imagine the possibility of them. She could almost taste it. Feel it at her fingertips.

The moment was broken by the bane of her existence because that was just her luck. This was her life. Great. So not.

Cam said, “Yo, bro! We got to go!”

As if her body were a live wire, Will jumped back. Like, literally, jumped away from her. All the elation caused by the hug drained away. She was a bucket with a hole. It was back to admiring Will from afar. Her normal.

Will chuckled nervously when he said, “Yeah. Lots to do.”

“We were just about to head out for lunch,” her mother said.
“Want to join us, William?”

Stella wished he’d say yes, but she knew better.

Will gave her mom the sweetest grin. It made Stella’s heart dance. “Lunch with Nana. But I’ll catch you at the party later?” he asked Cam.

“See ya,” Cam said.

Her brother and his best friend shook hands, and that turned into a back-slapping hug. And there she was blushing as if she weren’t seventeen and ready to take over Oak Hills High the second her brother was gone. She blamed it on the power of the Will factor. Get her within a meter of him, and her mind went kaput.

Even as her mother steered her toward the car, with Cam leading the way, Stella’s eyes followed Will until the crowd swallowed him up as if he were Poseidon returning to the sea. She really needed to move on from her childhood crush. Especially when it was pretty obvious it was going nowhere.

She sighed long and hard. Then she pulled out the elastics holding her braids in place. She ran her fingers through the soft strands, allowing them to lie flat on her shoulders. With Cam leaving for baseball camp in a week, it was time for a makeover. When her senior year started, Stella would walk the halls of Oak Hills High a brand-new person. Free to date whomever she wanted without Meatwad and Master Shake getting in the way.

ONE

INKY FINGERS

Will stared at the panel for his online comic until his vision blurred. The dorm room he lived in smelled of old sweaty socks, distracting him. No. That wasn't the whole truth. He just couldn't capture the image in his head, and it was frustrating the shit out of him. His summer hiatus was over. It was time for a new chapter. And, yet, nada. Zilch. His brain was empty.

Two hundred e-mails in his in-box impatiently asked for the next installment of *The Adventures of Morla the Witch Hunter*. And that was just in the last twenty-four hours. More came in daily. He was dropping the ball. Big-time.

Emotions moving from frustrated to pissed, Will closed his ink-stained hand over the sheet filled with half-hearted scribbles. He crumpled the subpar panel, obliterating the story line in one go. Then he rubbed his tired eyes. The fatigue from being up all night clung to his shoulders. His mind was stuck like a mammoth in tar.

He glanced up at the clock. His first class wasn't until two in the afternoon. He had four hours to bang out a page, ink it, scan, and post before he had to go. Getting a shower in there might be stretching it. At least he'd change his shirt. That would hide most of the funk. He hoped.

Sitting back in his chair and tilting his head to face the ceiling, he envisioned his MC. Morla was a badass witch hunter. She had long, black hair that trailed behind her when she ran from the Nosferatu Coven. She was tall and long-limbed, possessing an agility that helped her kill the Ifrit sent to eliminate her by the Mother Supreme. The skintight leather suit she wore emphasized the richness of her brown skin, which glistened in the sun when she had to strip down to her underwear to swim away from the vicious water sprites. Her full lips were always smirking, like she knew more than she let on, enabling her to defeat the rogue warlock terrorizing the southern village of Lapsa. But her best feature was her intensely brown eyes, as rich as the earth she walked upon. They could stare into someone's soul and determine if that person was a witch.

In the last panel he had posted before he participated in a graphic design workshop hosted by the Design Media Arts department at UCLA, Will left Morla in quite a pickle. A bind.

The most precarious situation. Basically, he was screwed. She had been poisoned by a dark witch and left for dead after she had fallen down a gully. It was the best scene he had written so far. His readers gobbled it up. The e-mails had been crazy. Readers wanted more.

Will cursed his insidious brain for abusing Morla in this way. She lay on her back at the bottom of the gully in pain. The poison slowly worked its way through her system, eating every cell in her body. How the hell was she getting out of this one?

In defeat, Will threw down his pen and pushed away from his desk. His ergonomic chair's wheels let out a *grr* of protest beneath his weight. Being a little over six feet with broad shoulders meant he carried around weight that punished furniture if he wasn't careful. He shoved his fingers through his hair. He couldn't think straight. His eyelids were so heavy. It was a Friday. He was feeling a classic case of weekenditis. He tabled updating the comic for now rather than come up with crap. What was the point, anyway? His brain was mush. His readers would just have to be patient and wait another week.

STELLA WALKED OUT of class feeling like a million bucks. She had aced her history quiz. She'd finally put in her contacts without poking an eye out. Her chin-length hair bounced like she had Beyoncé's magic fan blowing air up toward her face. And the maxi dress she had finished sewing the night before flowed like water when she moved.

All summer she had been busy with her makeover. Come the

first day of school in mid-August, she had been more than ready to unveil the new her. The Stella free from her hovering helicopter big brother and his henchman.

Shoulders squared, she approached her locker like a model walking the runway at New York Fashion Week. She punched in her combination with newly manicured nails and curled her moisturized fingers around the handle. A slide up and a tug later, the door swung open.

All Stella's confidence tumbled to the floor as fast as a trash can's worth of crumbled paper and a single banana peel spilled out from the bowels of her locker.

Laughter and the words "Trash for trash" followed the spectacle, spoken by the leader of the three girls that the school referred to as the Salads: Lemon. Romaine. And Parsley.

"This is getting old, ladies," Stella said in complete and utter exasperation. "It's getting *really* old." The last part, she muttered to herself. She didn't bother with the sigh and the eye roll that usually accompanied finding her locker stuffed with trash. Again. She didn't even feel tears prick the corners of her eyes. Patience, she reminded herself. Soon she would be a student in one of the best fashion schools, living the life she was meant for.

"Tell me," Lemon said. "Where did you get that dress?"

"Saved it from a dumpster, maybe," Romaine, her second-in-command, chimed in most helpfully.

"I see Parsley's the one in charge of locker stuffing today," said a lovely, confident, slightly sassy male voice. "Why don't you ladies go find someone else to bore with your conformity? Shoo!"

Stella smiled at her best friend over her shoulder. His hair was parted to one side and held in place by a dragonfly clip showing off the neon streak. Franklin Park wore his soul on the outside. That was what Stella loved about him. And the blue suede shoes on his feet. They were to die for.

“Would it kill you for some originality?” he continued, aiming his question at the Salads as Stella swapped out her morning books for her afternoon books. The studded-leather bag she had made just couldn’t hold them all at once.

“You’re one to speak, Park,” Lemon said. Clipped. Like a verbal slap. “That hair is so last year.”

“The Salads? Original?” Stella asked, speaking to Franklin as if the Bitches of Eastwick didn’t exist. “Does not compute. I guess I should be happy that Lemon’s group is as typical as it gets. Can you imagine if they were more creative with their bullying?” She shuddered.

“Don’t think that just because you got rid of the braces and put in contacts that you’re more than you are,” Lemon said, venom dripping from her tinted lips.

Her words were quickly followed by laughs and catcalls from the horde, which reeked of expensive perfume and was clad in Rodeo Drive couture. Then, as if hearing the silent command of their queen, the hive mind continued down the hallway.

Unable to contain herself, Stella shouted after them, “You’re going to beg me to make you clothes one day!”

The Salads kept sashaying like her words meant nothing to them. A part of Stella was stung, but another part became twice as determined to succeed. It was the best revenge, after all.

“Speaking of clothes.” Franklin drew her attention back to him. “Are you channeling *Project Runway*’s season nine winner? That’s certainly an Anya dress.”

A huge, braces-less smile spread across Stella’s face. “This is challenge one from the new season. The designers were asked to put their best foot forward.” She twirled to show off the lighter-than-air chiffon she had used for the dress. “I went for Cali-beach girl. It’s a call back to my roots. I think Tim Gunn would be proud.”

Franklin clapped. “Even if we’re four hours away from the beach on a good-traffic day.”

Stella pouted. “I go where inspiration takes me. That’s what Christian Siriano did, and he went on to become the youngest winner of *Project Runway*. I totally plan on breaking that record.”

“I can’t say this enough, but I really like this new confidence of yours. And from what I hear, so do half the boys in school.”

“Only half?”

“The other half are head over heels for me.”

She blew him a raspberry before she said, “It’s definitely easier without Cam around.”

“Tell me you already have a date for homecoming.” Franklin’s eagerness was catching as they walked arm in arm toward the cafeteria.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Stella confessed.

“You can’t procrastinate on this. What happened to Operation Boyfriend Hunt?”

“I have several promising prospects. In fact, I already have a date lined up for tonight.”

“Pray tell, just how many are these prospects of yours? I will not settle for less than five.”

“As a matter of fact, there are eight of them.”

“Well done!” He patted her arm. “Now, how do you propose you narrow the eight down to one?”

“That’s what I need you for,” she said when they grabbed trays and got in line. “You’re going to help me choose.”

“Oh!” Franklin perked up. “Can I make a bracket like they do in sports? I’m going to call it the Boyfriend Bracket.”

“What do you know about sports?” Stella sent him a disbelieving sidelong glance.

“Enough to know there are a lot of hot athletes.”

This time, Stella allowed the eye roll. The situation called for it. She didn’t doubt that between her and Franklin, they’d come up with the suitable candidate for her senior-year boyfriend. And she wouldn’t even have to hide him anymore. Ah, freedom. Oh, how sweet.

They picked a table in the middle of the cafeteria. The second they put their trays down, Franklin leaned forward and said, “Who are the guys? I need names.”

Stella licked her lips, then looked around. “There’s Tommy Larrabee, Kevin Marquez, Joey Esposito, Daniel Connors, Mike Cortez, Eric Richards, Aaron Anderson, and Hector Villegas.”

“I can work with that” was all he said as he grabbed his tray and stood.

“Aren’t we having lunch?” she asked, pushing away from the table, then standing.

“You eat.” He waved her back down to her seat. “I have work to do. Meeting at your room after school.”

“I’m visiting Nana this afternoon,” she called after him.

“It won’t take long” was the last thing she heard before the crowd’s buzzing swallowed the rest of Franklin’s words. The gleam in his eyes made tumbleweeds jump around in Stella’s stomach. Suddenly she wasn’t very hungry. She had a feeling what should have been a simple way of finding a boyfriend had become a tiny bit complicated.

TWO

LAUNDRY DAY

After school, Stella and Franklin sat in her room staring at the bracket of potential boyfriends. They had it propped up on an easel. Beside each candidate's name was a headshot with numbers in glitter indicating when the first date would take place. Lines extended from the names that met into one rectangle at the center, which declared the winner in sparkling letters above it. If it shined, gleamed, or sparkled, Franklin had used it. The piece of cardboard was so colorful, Stella feared it could be seen from several houses away.

“As you can see”—Franklin indicated the brackets with a ruler—“I’ve grouped guys that best match each individual’s

qualifications for a fairer assessment. There are eight in all, so that's two dates per weekend for a month then we move on to one date per week for the semifinals. And for the finals, you get to choose from the last two contenders. I predict you'll have a boyfriend by the holidays."

Stella nodded, her lower lip sticking out. "I have to say, I'm impressed. What are the stars and hearts for?"

"I'm glad you asked." Franklin beamed. "I've ranked the guys based on looks and charm. One to five stars for looks, five being smoldering. Same with hearts. One to five hearts for charm, five being charming to the max."

"What about things like attitude?"

"That falls under charm. Plus I hate anything that isn't a star or a heart. Deal with it."

Stella pursed her lips, considering. "Makes things simple. I like it."

"Good, you see it my way."

"At least now I can focus on the dresses I have to sew for the dances and making sure my college applications are on point. But don't you think this is going a little too extreme?"

He slapped the ruler on the board, hitting poor Kevin Marquez's smiling face in the process. "Extreme is my middle name. And you said it yourself. This bracket takes the pressure off."

"It certainly lowers the percentage of choosing the wrong guy. How did you get them to agree on when the dates will happen?"

"I have my ways." He arched an eyebrow at her, then he

regarded the board once more. “Since Tommy is tonight, I went from there with the other guys. Actually, you have a pretty diverse group here.”

“I’m not going to like where this is going, am I?” She squinted at him.

“Hear me out.” Franklin brought the ruler to each guy as he spoke. “Tommy is president of the student council. Kevin is captain of the chess club. Joey plays football. Daniel swims. Mike is point guard for the basketball team. Eric plays the clarinet. Aaron, well, he’s the wild card, but he does have a band, so the artists are accounted for. And Hector is the glee club’s Bruno Mars. You can actually win prom queen with this group if you wanted to.”

A protracted sigh left Stella’s lungs. “I don’t have time to campaign for prom queen. I need to focus on my college apps, especially the one for Parsons. Plus, going toe to toe with Lemon? Who has the time? Give her prom queen. I just need to get through this bracket and find a boyfriend before all the craziness starts.”

“I’m just saying. You already have the ingredients right here.”

“In neon and everything that glitters from the office-supply store.”

A huge smile brightened Franklin’s face. “If you think this is over the top . . .” He pulled out a travel-size booklet from his messenger bag and handed it to Stella.

“What’s this?” The front was as colorful as the board. She started leafing through and found the answer as he spoke.

“It’s a miniature version of the bracket. Each page contains a picture of your date with all his interests and what clubs he belongs to in school. As you can see, the back of each page is blank. That is where you will put all your notes after each date so we can better assess who makes it to the next round.”

“Jaw-dropping effort,” she said, eyes wide.

He lifted his chin. “Thorough is my second middle name.”

“I don’t know anyone with a second middle name.”

“Well, I do. Remember, prom photos are forever. We will find you the right guy to fit that space in the picture.”

“Are you sure being a fashion designer is your goal? Because the CIA is always open to new recruits.”

Franklin executed a few karate chops and said, “I can be a fashion spy. Ruling the runways by day, collecting important information for my country by night.”

“All right, Agent K-Pop.” She slapped the booklet against her palm. “Let’s focus on finding me a boyfriend before you go and save the world from crimes against fashion.”

STELLA WAS THANKFUL for three things. First, Franklin’s bracketing idea was actually helpful. Now they had a clearer picture of which of the eight guys she had dates with might eventually become her boyfriend. She smirked at the idea of Cam losing his cool if he ever found out. But, to save her the drama, she and Franklin were keeping things on the down low from her brother. He was way too busy with college and baseball, so there was quite a bit of breathing room.

Second, it was a Friday, which meant no homework. Oak Hills High valued giving students rest on the weekends. For Stella, it meant more time for sewing and sketching. She needed to start conceptualizing her dress for homecoming. Not to mention the two dates she had lined up. One for that night. One for Saturday. Sundays were family days.

And third, her favorite part of Fridays were her weekly visits with Will's nana. Despite the blush that still colored her cheeks when she thought of him, she had set aside her childhood crush. Stella understood that while she had feelings for him, it was nothing more than a fantasy. Regardless of her enlightenment about William Montgomery, she loved Nana. She'd stuck to checking in, even if summer vacation was over. Not that Nana needed a babysitter—Nana's word. She was capable. Even so, Stella stopped at the store and grabbed a few necessities Nana might need.

Armed with two eco-bags worth of groceries, Stella left her modest Honda hatchback at the curb and walked up to the mint-green Victorian the Montgomerys called home. A mix of fuchsia and orange bougainvillea lined the walkway. Box flowers bloomed in a riot of color beneath the windowsill. And a swing dominated one side of the front porch.

She was so at home that, instead of ringing the doorbell, she tipped the potted azalea for the spare key. She and Nana had a great routine going where Stella entered and put the groceries away while Nana prepared afternoon tea. Then they'd gossip or talk clothes. Nana had a great sense of style, which Stella admired.

After unlocking the front door, she returned the key to its hiding place, picked up the groceries, and pushed into the house. She called out, “Nana, I’m here. I got those tangerines you like.”

She pushed the door closed with her hip, then went straight to the kitchen. Its cheerful yellow tiles never failed to make her smile. More flowers and potted herbs sat above the porcelain sink on the windowsill. Setting the bags on the table, she began unpacking.

“Nana, you won’t believe what happened—”

A crash startled her into dropping the canned peaches. It fell to the floor with a thick *thunk* before rolling away.

“Nana?” Stella called again. Her shoulders were up to her ears.

Usually, Will’s grandmother would have responded by now. Then Stella’s gaze flicked to the stove. The kettle was there, but no flames were beneath it.

Another crash made Stella jump. She grabbed the closest weapon. A rolling pin. It would have to do. A knife seemed more menacing, but really? What was she planning to do? Hack the intruder to death? She wasn’t that brutal.

So, rolling pin in hand, she held it like a bat, the way Cam had taught her. At the back of her mind, a small voice told her to call 911. And run. But what if Nana was hurt? Stella wouldn’t be able to forgive herself if she didn’t somehow help.

She inched her way toward the laundry room, which also doubled as a storage area. It was located to the left of the kitchen, close to the back door that led into the yard. She swal-

lowed. The door was ajar. She debated whether to call to Nana again or just charge in.

Eventually, she saw no point in delaying. Maybe it was an animal of some sort. Yeah. It could be a raccoon. Or a bear. Did they have raccoons in Oak Hills? And a bear would be worse, right? She had seen *The Revenant*.

She pushed away the grisly possibilities. Pun intended. Counting to three, Stella let out a fierce battle cry as she charged into the laundry room. A figure taller than her and less hairy than a bear yelled and slammed backward into one of the stainless steel shelves. Baking pans clattered to the floor. The crash was deafening.

In the racket, Stella raised the rolling pin.

“Slappy!” the figure yelled, arms stretched out.

Stella’s pulse rocketed more than it already had, for an entirely different reason. She blinked twice, making sure she wasn’t hallucinating the man standing in the cramped space. He was in nothing but his boxers. Blue boxers. Blue boxers with white stripes. Or was it white boxers with blue stripes? Her throat closed, allowing only a keening sound to escape. All the blood rushed to her head as her eyes roamed greedily over bare shoulders, abs made for superhero movies, and . . . and . . . Brain.exe ceased functioning.

Her fingers went slack, dropping the rolling pin. The tip of which landed on her big toe. The pain brought everything back online. She stifled a scream as she turned around, sure her face was strawberry red.

“Slappy?” Will asked, concerned. “You okay?”

Stella didn't know what to do. Half her brain was happy. It finally had a picture of Will in only boxers. Blue with white stripes, definitely. The other half was mortified. She was sure he had caught her ogling him. Thank goodness for her throbbing foot. The nail might have died, but it was for a good cause—regaining clarity.

“Will, what are you doing here?” she asked. “In your boxers,” she added, without thinking it through. Adrenaline flooded her veins. She was practically vibrating.

“No one was home. I put all my clothes in the wash” came his response.

“Shouldn't you be at school?” She closed her eyes only to be met by the image of Will's perfection again. Her eyelids flew up. Oh, gosh. That image would definitely haunt her. For a long, long, *long* time.

“It's the weekend.”

“I know that. Where's Nana?” she asked, steering the conversation toward safer avenues.

Shuffling happened behind her while Will spoke. “She had a couple of errands to run. I think she plans on making a huge dinner since I'm spending the weekend. You can turn around now.”

Slowly, Stella turned and then winced. A fully dressed Will in sweats and a UCLA T-shirt rushed toward her.

“Where does it hurt?” he asked.

“My big toe,” she said with a hiss. The rolling pin was heavier than it looked.

“Sit.” He ushered her back into the kitchen toward the closest chair and eased her down. “Take off your shoe.”

As Stella slipped the sandal off her prickling foot, Will moved to the fridge and pulled out an ice tray from the freezer. He upended the cubes onto a towel by the sink, then brought the wrapped bundle to her. He took a knee, guided Stella’s foot to rest on his thigh, and placed the bunched-up towel over her big toe—already in the process of swelling. She hissed again from the shock of the cold on the pulsing heat.

“Too cold?” Will looked into her eyes.

A new wave of awareness flooded Stella’s cheeks. She shook her head.

As if he saw through her bravado, he said, “Just bear with me for a few minutes. It will feel better soon.” His free hand moved up to her calf and began massaging it.

Stella’s lungs stopped working. Oh, it was feeling better, all right. The discomfort moved to more inappropriate places. She shouldn’t even be thinking along those lines. Will was just helping her. Doing a nice thing. His concern for her well-being was pretty obvious. Nothing more.

So caught up in her thoughts was Stella that she failed to notice that Will was talking until he looked up at her again. He was so handsome. Her chest ached. She had missed him.

“Thanks for checking on Nana,” he said, his gratefulness all over his expression.

“I love Nana,” she replied, swallowing the sudden lump in her throat. “It’s no biggie.”

“Well, I owe you one. Seriously, anything you need.”

Asking him to homecoming was at the tip of her tongue. It was a crazy thought. Never in a million years would Will say yes. Again Stella’s fantasies were overtaking her common sense. She blamed the lapse on the toe. The pain was making her delusional.

Forcing the thought to the deepest reaches of her clearly confused mind, she said instead, “Don’t worry about it.”

“You cut your hair,” he mumbled. He seemed to be concentrating too hard on icing her toe.

Her hand flew up to her head. “Ye-yeah. I thought a change was good.” Nerves invaded her stomach. She didn’t know how to feel about the possibility of Will hating her bob. It prompted her to say, “You like it longer?”

He whipped his head up so fast that Stella thought he might lose his balance. “No! Um . . . I mean . . . it’s nice.”

“Nice?”

And the blushes kept coming. Stella was afraid she might pass out. It had been months since she’d last seen Will. If she was being honest with her traitor of a heart, her feelings for Will were as real now as they had been then.

“What happened?”

The exclamation came from the kitchen entrance.

Will and Stella turned their heads toward Nana. She had arrived without their noticing. Ribbons were tangled in her waist-length hair. Bangles jingled on her wrist. The boho skirt she paired with a sleeveless ribbed shirt highlighted her thin

frame. Pushing seventy and she looked good. Stella could only wish she would look as good when she was Nana's age.

"Rolling pin met with toe," Will said, answering her question. He lifted the makeshift ice pack and set Stella's foot back on the floor. Then he stood and dumped the ice into the sink.

Despite feeling the void Will left behind, Stella put together a bright smile. "I'm fine, Nana. I was clumsy. My toe is nice and numb." She left out the fact that her heart and mind might not be.

"It completely slipped my mind that you were dropping by today." Nana deposited her own groceries beside Stella's on the table. Will busied himself putting away what Stella had left out, then started on the contents of his grandmother's eco-bags. "You will stay for dinner. I'm making lasagna and garlic bread."

Stella's mouth watered. Nana's lasagnas were legendary. No one said no to the creamy, layered pasta. She was about to say yes when she remembered the date she was supposed to go on in a couple of hours.

"Nana, I want to, I really do," she said, already hating the idea of leaving.

"I hear a *but* coming." Nana eyed her.

"It's Friday," Will chimed in. "She probably has plans or something."

Will's words did unexpected things to Stella's heart. How did he know? And more important, would he tell Cam? Then the craziness of her thoughts caught up with her. Of course he'd think she had plans. What teen didn't on a Friday night?

STELLA SAT AT her favorite booth in her favorite diner with Tommy talking a mile a minute about how more people should be conscious of their civil rights. It was the debate team captain in him. And his passion for the Black Lives Matter movement.

She admired all those things about him. How he stood up for what was right. How he had aspirations to study law and eventually enter politics to make a difference. She should have really been paying more attention. She had ideas too. Thoughts. Opinions.

But that was kind of hard when every two sentences the image of Will's abs kept popping up in her mind. They resembled dinner rolls, he was so ripped. Shame wrapped Stella like a blanket on a chilly night. Will wasn't her date tonight. Tommy was. He was a great guy. And that smile? Who wouldn't like that smile? It was what won him the student council presidency.

What would Franklin say?

The second her best friend's disapproving expression replaced Will's abs, Stella mentally slapped herself and forced her brain to focus on the most important things: Tommy and the marginalized youth of today.

WILL PUSHED AROUND pieces of lasagna on his plate. Normally, he would be halfway through the pan of creamy, meaty goodness by now. But . . . but . . . his taste buds didn't

seem to be working properly. The buttery garlic bread should have been soaking up the meat sauce and making sweet, sweet love in his mouth, but . . .

“William, where’s your head at tonight?” Nana asked, finally fed up, it seemed, with his lack of an appetite.

He sighed, setting his fork aside. “When did she cut her hair?”

“You mean Stella?”

The twinkle in her eye said she knew exactly whom he meant. He nodded.

“Oh . . .” Nana rubbed her chin as if deep in thought. “About a month before school started. Right about the same time her braces came off.”

That was right. When she smiled, there wasn’t any metal in her teeth anymore. How could Will have missed that? He had been too distracted by the way the edge of her hair kissed her jaw. It suited her. Too damn well.

“You know she’s on a date tonight,” Nana said, reeling Will back from his daydream of running his fingers through her hair.

“She can do whatever she wants,” he replied, biting back what he really wanted to say. He had been on dates too. None of them lasted more than the night. Hookups, really. But what could he do? The one he wanted, he didn’t deserve.

“Is that so?”

He dropped his gaze to his half-empty plate. The raise of Nana’s eyebrow was too honest. Too telling.

“You know, when your pappy was younger, it took him a really long time before he got up the courage to ask me out.”

The mention of his grandfather was enough to lift Will's bowed head. The man had died when Will was only seven years old. He had few memories of him. So any story was welcome.

"That doesn't sound like Pappy," he said, remembering his grandfather as a confident man.

"Oh, he was a shy guy, my Andrew." A look came over Nana's face that spoke of how much she missed him. "But the important thing is, he finally got up the courage to ask me out. He needed to be honest with his feelings to get what he wanted."

Leaning forward, Will picked up his fork and started shoveling the remaining lasagna into his mouth. No matter that he didn't taste the food. It was to keep him from answering. His tongue had grown too big for his mouth, anyway.

Will knew the story was for his benefit. Being honest with his feelings? Seriously? Nana was laying it on thick. But what she didn't know was that Pappy was a far braver, far greater man. Because Will? He was taking everything to the grave. His tombstone would eventually read: *Here lies the poor shmuck who kept it to himself.*

THREE

BRACKET PARTY

The next Friday, Stella strode into her room to find Franklin waiting for her. He was hovering around the bracket board, studying the guys. They had made plans to meet and go over her date for that evening. He turned when he heard her come in.

“You’re back early,” he said, then frowned. “That’s not good.”

It definitely wasn’t. It was only eight p.m. Her date had started at seven. She removed her light jacket and threw it onto her bed before she sat on the edge, crossing her legs.

“Daniel’s definitely out,” she said, even if she hadn’t gone on her date with Joey yet. He was Saturday night. She didn’t need

to compare the two to make her decision of who was moving forward. “The swimming shoulders and fantastic abs are not worth it.”

Franklin gave her a once-over, then looked at Daniel’s photo. “What happened? I rated him four stars for looks and three hearts for charm.”

“First of all, the movie sucked. I can’t trust a guy with no movie-selection skills. It’s going to be a long year of duds at the cinema, and you know how much I love watching movies.”

“That can’t be all of it. You can’t disqualify someone for having bad taste.”

“Says the guy who broke up with someone for wearing kigurumi onesies to bed.”

He glared at her in outrage. “Don’t you bring Hayden into this! He was definitely five stars, five hearts in my book. But the onesies thing? Just no! But, seriously, what happened with Daniel?”

She felt a blush coming on, but it was for the worst reason. “He kept running his hand up my thigh while we were in the cinema, so I walked out on him twenty minutes into the movie.”

“What!” Franklin’s eyes were so wide, Stella could see the whites. “That asshole!”

“Where are you going?” Stella grabbed his wrist as he passed her bed on the way to the door.

“I’m going to shove my shoe up his ass so far that even his future grandchildren will feel it. No one sexually harasses my Stella. No stars, no hearts for him!”

Stella smiled and squeezed his wrist. “And for that I love

you. We were bound to run into a creep in this process. Let's just hope he's the only one."

He regarded her with intense scrutiny. "Should I start chaperoning you on these dates? Because you know I can."

"And be the third wheel?" Stella's heart melted when he nodded. "You hate being the third wheel."

"I hate seeing you taken advantage of more."

She got up and hugged him. Then she said, "You don't have to do that. Just take him off the list of potentials."

"I'm also drafting an anonymous tip about him for the wall of the Shame Bathroom. Girls will want nothing to do with him after I'm done."

"Do what you must." She gestured to the board.

With chin held high, Franklin produced a red marker, drew a circle around Daniel's head, and slashed a line across it. The finality in his strokes made Stella feel infinitely better. She breathed easier as she sat back down and looked through the bracket once again as Franklin wrote Joey Esposito's name into the rectangle for the next round, right under Tommy's.

"Shame about Kevin, though," Franklin said, referring to her date after Tommy. "He had potential. That dimple. Four stars, four hearts."

"They all have potential. Why do you think we had to put them in a bracket? Although, I got the feeling that Kevin was more interested in taking selfies. Of himself. Of us. Of our food. His eyes were on his phone more than they were on my face or my cleavage."

"Makes sense. He's the official photographer of the *Oak Hills*

High Herald, or OHHH, for short.” He breathed out a sigh, then looked at Kevin’s picture longingly. “A shame, though. Guys seem to be running out of proper social skills in this day and age.”

Stella waved at the board. “Either way, I owe Tommy another date. I wasn’t entirely in the right headspace when we had dinner.”

“You were thinking about Will the entire time, weren’t you?” Franklin wiggled his finger at her, a suspicious gleam in his black-coffee eyes. The eyeliner he had around them gave his look a sharpness that made people pay attention.

“Not the *entire* time.” She sighed. She had told him all about the laundry-room incident. “You should have seen him. Just in boxers. It was art, I tell you. Plus we have to give him credit for not telling Cam.”

“How are you so sure?”

“I’m still going on dates, aren’t I?”

“Don’t even think of going over to the dark side again.” Franklin gasped, pointing a warning finger in her direction. “We’re doing this because you’re moving on from this silly crush of yours. He’s a no-go.”

“I wouldn’t call it silly. But you’re right,” Stella said with a lot less enthusiasm. She really shouldn’t be thinking of Will. He was in her rearview. Needing a break from Boyfriend Bracket talk, she steered the conversation toward the future. “How far are you in your applications?”

“Just finishing up the essay portion. Mine’s about Coco Chanel. Yours?”

“Diane von Furstenberg.”

“How feminine transformative of you.”

“Shut it! She revolutionized the way women dress.” She tweaked his arm playfully. “I just can’t believe it’s finally here.” She pushed off the bed and approached her desk, where all the applications were stacked. “We’ve been preparing for this since eighth grade. And now it’s here.”

Franklin came up beside her, arms crossed. “You’re not actually entertaining the possibility of not getting in, are you?”

“Of course not! Because it’s not going to happen. You and I are brilliant. In a year we’ll be sharing a crappy apartment in one of the boroughs and studying at one of the best fashion-design schools in the country. Maybe even the world.”

“You really have your heart set on Parsons, huh?”

“Why not Parsons?” A dreamy look came over her as she stared at the application. “It’s in NYC, which is one of the seats of fashion. The city of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week. Plus, their teachers are fantastic. They shot *Project Runway* there. And let’s not forget the alums who have gone on to create global fashion brands. Parsons is *the* ‘it’ school.”

“FIDM is just as good. If not better.”

“You just don’t want to trade California weather for blizzards and humid summers.”

“My hair will not forgive me.” He faced the full-length oval mirror standing in one corner of her room and checked his makeup.

Stella smiled. She and Franklin had shared the same dream since they’d met in sewing class. She was pretending to go to soccer practice while he was pretending to go to ballet class. It

was New York or bust. Mecca of fashion in the country. The only reason they'd applied to other schools was because their guidance counselor made them. Something about having safety schools being a smart idea.

A *ping* pulled Stella out of her thoughts. Franklin fished out his phone from his back pocket and checked his messages. A grin formed on his lips afterward.

"I know that look," she said, barely having to glance at him.

Franklin made a sound that was akin to taking the first bite out of a decadent slice of chocolate cake. "Speaking of five stars . . ."

"Oh! Is that the guy you were telling me about? The one with the extensive vinyl collection? How many hearts was he?"

"Three hearts." His lips quirked. "I can always work with that."

She rolled her eyes. "All looks and hardly any charm. I'm surprised you aren't in a committed relationship yet."

"Commitment is for my thirties. I'm here to party. And speaking of which, my prospect just invited us to a frat one." He showed her the message.

"That's three hours away!"

"All the best parties are."

Stella wondered if she could say no. She had so much to do. Finishing her essay, for one thing. Completing her Parsons portfolio, for another. Tim Gunn would want her to stay home.

Franklin read her mind before she opened her mouth to refuse. He stood by the bracket and pointed at the fourth name on the left side. "He's going to be there."

Joey Esposito, running back for the Oak Hills Otters. Five stars, four hearts. Stella considered her options. She had a new dress to finish, but she also liked the jock enough to drive three hours. If she went to the party, she wouldn't have to go on a date with him the next day. It meant more sewing time. She moved to her closet and threw open the doors.

"Then help," she said over her shoulder. "I'm not showing up at a frat party wearing clothes from a previous date. It's bad luck."

Her sewing soulmate eagerly came to her aid. "It's a frat party, so we need something eye-catching."

"Nothing too revealing. I want to feel sexy, not like bait." She sent him a pointed glare. "Remember what Tim Gunn says about showing skin."

"We'll go with your midriff, then. Got to show off those abs while you still have them."

"Hey!"

He pulled out a light cropped sweater and a flared jean that Stella had found at a thrift store and updated. "Pair with those leather wedges."

She nodded. She might joke, but Franklin had never styled her wrong. His taste was impeccable. And his eye for fashion was always on point. If Stella ever considered anyone her competition, it was him.

"I'll accessorize with hoop earrings and multiple rings."

Franklin pursed his lips into a smile. "Perfect."

WILL TRAILED CAM into the noisy frat house. Every square foot brimmed with partying coeds. He was too preoccupied with the Morla predicament that he had yet to solve to fully appreciate the “fun”—Cam’s word—surrounding him. Angry e-mails were already flooding his in-box. Fans wanted the next chapter ASAP. There were even quite a few death threats. Talk about pressure. Cam slapped him on the shoulder hard enough to wake him from his think-haze.

“What did I tell you?” he said, smug satisfaction in his tone. “Is this just what you need or what?”

“I have a paper due Monday—”

“Paper, shmaper.” Cam cut his excuse off. “You’ve been in our dorm for a week. That’s not what being in college is about, bro.”

“I went to classes and—”

Cam cut him off again with, “You smell like moldy socks. You need this party. *I* need this party. Let the player out. I know he’s still in there somewhere.”

Will resisted the urge to smell himself. Cam didn’t know what he was talking about. He had remembered to shower. He buried himself in school work and the comic because his mind kept wandering into dangerous territory.

His annoying friend gripped the back of his neck and pulled him close. “When was the last time you got laid?”

Will shoved him away. “What? You volunteer as tribute?”

“You’re pretty and all, but you’re not my type.” Cam scanned the crowd. “Seriously, though. We need to find you a girl. Clear the pipes. You’re all tense.”

Will scanned the crowd once more. Maybe Cam was right. He had been tense all week. Maybe hooking up with someone was exactly what he needed. To bring him clarity. Not only to the Morla situation, but as a way to forget more complicated thoughts. Erasing images of a girl with chin-length hair and a great smile. And how hot she had become in the span of a summer.

“You know what,” he said, grinning, “you’re right. This party is exactly what I needed.”

“That’s what I want to hear! Let’s go grab a drink. Then we’ll scope out the selections tonight,” Cam said over his shoulder as he led the way to the kitchen past the living room, where a twerking mass of people gathered.

Will followed along, already in search of some fun.

Cam pulled two cups from the stack on top of the keg and stuck the nozzle into the first one. “Foam or no foam?”

Someone else answered “Foam” as Will shrugged. He didn’t care. Beer was beer. He eyed the bowls of chips on the table. No way was he reaching in. Way too many hands had done so already. He took the cup that Cam handed him and tilted his head toward the back door.

“I’ll drink this outside,” he said.

The pool was the best place to scope out potentials anyway. He was several yards away from the house when a touch on his arm stopped his progress. He turned to come face-to-face with a petite brunette with a sweet smile.

“You’re Will, right?” she asked. “I think we have Intro to Graphic Design together.”

Will considered her. “Tanya, right?”

She shook her head, never losing her smile. “Lisa.”

“Lisa.” He was about to smile back when all the blood in his body froze. His eyes landed on the one person he could pick out of any lineup. Will couldn’t believe his eyes at first. Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him. Had he been thinking about her that much, that she’d actually materialized? But it was impossible. They were three hours away from Oak Hills. And this was a frat party. His blood boiled soon afterward.

Will was already pissed at the idea of Stella being in a place with booze and God knew what else, but now he could see she was standing by the tiki bar talking to a guy, all up close and personal. One soon to be dead meat. Their heads were so close together that Will thought their foreheads would touch. The fingers of his free hand curled into a tight fist. Then Stella did the worst possible thing: she threw her head back and laughed.

The caveman in Will didn’t approve, especially when the guy put his hand on Stella’s lower back. With her sweater missing that section, there were definitely no barriers between Dead Meat’s palm and Stella’s smooth, soft skin. He thought of Cam and how he would not approve. Yeah. The bro code. He was going to stop this nonsense for Cam’s sake.

“Hey, Lisa, can you hold this for me?” He handed her his cup of beer. “I’ll be right back.”

He left without waiting for her reply. Nana would have killed him for being so rude, but he was on a mission. Stella had her face tilted upward with a flirty look that sent chills down his spine. The guy she was with had one hand against the bar, and

the other was still on her waist. There was no doubt what was about to happen.

Lips in a tight line, Will strode toward them. Stella was unaware of him until he wrapped his hand around her arm. He tugged her away from the guy without saying a word. Stella's protest died when she recognized him. Her eyes grew wide. The guy stepped forward, but Will shut him down with a menacing glare.

"You're coming with me," Will said, after he was sure the guy wasn't going to be a hero.

"What are you doing here?" Stella asked, finally getting her words back.

"That's my question." Will leveled a heavy gaze her way. Stella had the sense to look guilty. "You're coming with me."

"No, I'm not."

But before Stella could yank her arm out of his grasp, Will hit her with the truth. "If I'm here, then you know who else is here."

She went pale. So pale that Will was afraid she was going to pass out. "But Franklin."

"Who?" Will scratched his head in confusion.

"My best friend. We drove here together." Stella licked her lips. "He's inside. I'm not leaving here without him."

The determination in her eyes did things to Will that he wanted to forget. When she licked those lips? It was impossible not to follow the tip of her tongue with his gaze. He mentally smacked himself. He was here on behalf of the bro code, nothing else.

With a clearer head, or as clear as he could get it to be without actually physically punching himself, Will ushered Stella toward the side of the house. “You stay here. What does Franklin look like?”

“Dark hair with a neon streak. Korean.” Then something like aggravation came over Stella’s face. “I can’t believe you don’t remember him. He’s only been my best friend since grade school.”

“Yeah, well, I bet he didn’t have neon hair back then.” He gritted his teeth. They were running out of time. The longer Stella stayed at the party, the more likely Cam would run into her. And Will didn’t want to stay for that shit show. “Just stay here.”

He left her in the shadow of the house and plunged back into the party. But about a yard from the house, he ran into Lisa again.

“Hey, where did you run off to?” she asked, still holding his cup.

Breathing in, he rubbed his lips. “Lisa, I’m sorry but I have to go. I’ll see you in class?”

Her smile finally vanished as he sidestepped her.

Then remembering his task, he turned and said, “You haven’t seen a guy with neon hair walking around here, have you?”

Will barely managed to dodge the beer flung at him as he ran back into the house. Well, that could have gone better. Plans of hooking up that night were officially off the table. If he knew Stella, she wouldn’t stay hidden for long. He had to find Franklin before her patience ran out and she decided two people looking was better than one.