

A
PROM to
REMEMBER

Sandy Hall

Swoon
READS

Swoon Reads

New York

A SWOON READS BOOK
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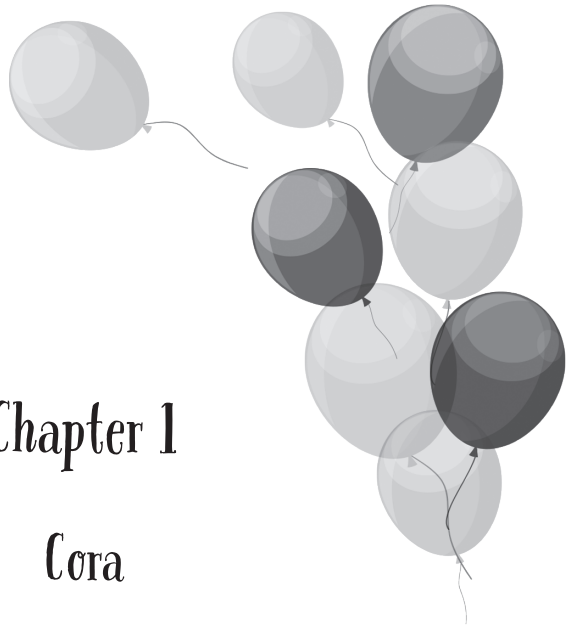
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*For Lauren Veleva, who reads every draft.
Even the bad ones.*

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Chapter 1

Cora

In general, prom committee meetings bred their own special kind of suffering.

The decision over where and when to hold the prom took a year. The menu planning nearly ended some friendships. The debate over the prom song brought the committee to a grinding halt for a full month. Each time there were tears, storm outs, and once even some bloodshed.

To be fair, the bloodshed was technically a paper cut.

So maybe it wasn't all that dramatic. But it felt that dramatic to Cora Wilson. Being in charge was not all it was cracked up to be.

As she sat at the front of the classroom and called the meeting to order, she held back a yawn until her eyes started to water. She just didn't have the energy today. It was bad enough coming back to school after April break, but it was even worse

to have a prom committee meeting first thing in the morning before school even started.

Rows of exhausted faces stared back at Cora, until Luke Martinez yawned and she couldn't hold hers back even one more minute.

"Are we boring you?" Amelia Vaughn asked from her spot in the third row. "I thought we had something serious to discuss."

Cora shook her head and got back to the task at hand. "The biggest thing we need to do today is decide how we want to deal with prom king and queen."

There was a groan from the group, and Cora couldn't be sure, but she thought their advisor, Ms. Huang, perhaps groaned the loudest.

Amelia stood, blond hair gleaming even in the unforgiving fluorescent lights, and her sycophants grinned up at her. "I think we need to keep the tradition of king and queen alive. I think it would be ridiculous to throw away this long-held practice simply because, well, you know."

She looked around the room hopefully, as if someone would read her mind and fill in the rest of the sentence.

"Fine. I'll say it, because I know everyone is thinking it." She paused dramatically. "Our class just doesn't have an obvious prom king."

Cora massaged her temples. "I don't think anyone wants to throw away the tradition completely, but it's sort of old-fashioned, don't you think? Since the beginning of the year we've discussed the possibility of not doing a king and queen vote but changing it to a merit-based prom court honoring the students who have helped so much this year and in previous years with class projects."

Amelia rolled her eyes and sat down. Cora counted it as a win.

Kelsey Anderson raised her hand. “I think there are plenty of guys who would make a great king, and I think maybe we should consider a new way of doing things without completely getting rid of the old idea.”

“Okay,” Cora said. Kelsey always had an opinion, but they weren’t always particularly helpful.

“Like who would make a good king?” Amelia asked. “Our whole class is a bunch of beta males.”

The room fell silent.

“Like maybe, um, Henry Lai,” Paisley said, chiming in from the back of the room, surprising everyone. By the look on her face, she had even surprised herself. Paisley made no secret of the fact that she was only on prom committee to fill a void in her extracurricular activities.

“Just because you’re dating him or whatever,” Amelia started.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Paisley interrupted with an eye roll.

“That’s why I said ‘whatever.’ I’m sure it’s some hippie-dippie, undefined thing.”

“It’s really not,” Paisley said with a sigh.

Cora jotted the name down, wanting to keep track of any possibilities. Even though in Cora’s eyes it was a weird and antiquated concept, especially for young, progressive teens, there might be a point to be made that Cora hadn’t considered. She liked to keep an open mind for her classmates.

It might be nicer and easier if the class could unite behind tradition and elect a king and queen. But a small voice in the

back of her head told her it was not a good idea to always take the nice-and-easy way out.

At least everyone had finally stopped complaining about the theme. “A Prom to Remember” had been the prom theme at Roosevelt High for the past twenty years. The prom advisor to the class of 1998 had gotten an incredible deal on five thousand plastic champagne flutes with the phrase “A Prom to Remember” etched into them. Since then the administration had insisted that be the theme so the keepsake flutes didn’t go to waste.

Amelia had tried hard to argue the theme, along with several others on the prom committees, but there was no way of changing it at this point. Cora was a little jealous of future seniors who would get to pick their own theme. Not that she would ever say it out loud.

“And what about Jamie,” Teagan said while Cora was busy flipping through her notes from past discussions about prom court.

“What about Jamie?” Cora asked, her ears perking up at the mention of her boyfriend’s name.

“Well, he’d make a great prom king. He’s a great boyfriend, you know it, I know it, the freaking custodial staff knows that Jamie Fitzpatrick is the perfect boyfriend and he would make a perfect prom king,” Josie said.

Cora hesitated before jotting his name down, too.

“What about queens?” Cora asked. She glanced around the room. Luke Martinez jumped up.

“Okay,” Luke said. “This is why the idea of a court is so much better. A queen and a king are totally unnecessary in the scheme of things. Like Otis and I should be able to participate in this stuff as a couple.”

“And I get that,” Amelia said. “But, ugh. You guys are going to make me say it out loud.” Amelia’s use of the dramatic pause was off the charts that morning. “I want to be prom queen! Is that such a bad thing?”

Cora caught Teagan’s eye. They were definitely both internally cringing. This was such an Amelia thing, but before Cora could say a word, Luke continued.

“I mean, I’m sorry if it ruins your chances of living out your dream of prom queen, but it’s so heteronormative,” Luke said.

Amelia opened her mouth, but before she could argue, Teagan stood up and said, “I agree with Luke, and I think it’s time to move on to something less traditional and keeping more in the spirit of our changing world.”

Luke, who had remained standing the whole time, high-fived Teagan. “Down with heteronormative bullshit!” Luke cried.

“Hey, hey,” Ms. Huang said, finally interjecting. “I understand that this is something we’re all passionate about, but let’s watch the language.”

Luke grinned and cast his eyes down sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I get swear-y when I’m passionate.”

“Makes sense to me,” Ms. Huang said, looking at the clock. “How about we table this decision for now and get back to it next week?”

Everyone nodded.

“In the meantime,” Cora said. “Prom tickets go on sale today.”

“It’s about time,” Amelia said.

“This is perfectly on schedule. You know prom tickets

never go on sale until after April vacation. Once the whole promposal trend caught on, the school wanted a way to keep those disruptions to a minimum.”

Amelia huffed out a breath. “And what are we supposed to say when people ask us about prom king and queen nominations?”

“Just tell them the truth. We’re still figuring it out.”

Amelia flounced out of the room flanked by her two lackeys.

Cora collected her things and waved as Teagan and her other best friend, Josie, left the room.

“Do you have a second to discuss prom court?” Ms. Huang asked Cora.

Cora glanced at the clock, calculating how long she had.

“I know, you’re a busy girl,” Ms. Huang said. “But maybe you could come to class a minute early today and we could talk quickly?”

“Yeah, sure,” Cora said over her shoulder as she trailed her friends out of the room. “I would stay now, but I just have to go make copies of the agenda for the student council meeting.”

“A million things to do, huh? Just another day in the life of Cora Wilson,” Ms. Huang said with a knowing smile.

Cora made it out into the hallway where Jamie was waiting for her.

“Hey, babe,” Jamie said, threading his arm around her waist.

“Please don’t call me babe,” she said offhandedly. Sometimes she felt more like an exasperated sibling than his girlfriend.

“Where are you off to?” he asked. “You gonna walk me to homeroom today? Carry my books?”

She grinned. She couldn’t help herself. He was adorable in his own Jamie way. “Sadly I cannot. I need to make some photocopies.”

“I’ll walk with you, then, and hold your books.”

“Fine, but we have to keep moving,” she said as the warning bell rang, tugging on his hand as he walked past a couple of baseball dudes and high-fived or fist-bumped each of them. “Or you could just go hang out with your friends.”

“I think I’m just gonna hang out with them, babe,” he said, kissing the side of her head and spinning backward toward his friends.

Cora kept on moving down the hallway without further comment. She had bigger things to deal with.

Paisley

Paisley Turner followed Cora Wilson down the hall like a jungle cat stalking her prey.

She didn’t want to interrupt whatever conversational foreplay Cora and her boyfriend were engaged in, but didn’t they realize that Paisley had to get Henry’s name off that prom king list? She had only put his name out there hypothetically. Panic set in when she saw Cora jot it down. The conversation had taken off after that, and Paisley couldn’t get a word in edgewise, so it seemed like a better idea to wait until after the meeting. But Cora was basically

ignoring her. Or maybe she didn't even realize Paisley was there.

The fact of the matter was that Henry was Paisley's best friend. She was way too aware of his neuroses, and he would disown her if he got nominated for prom king. It was the opposite of anything he wanted in this world. And she knew that. She could already imagine the face he would make, staring at her with his dark-brown-eye death glare. Angry Henry was a rarity, and Paisley was not prepared to deal with him. She shouldn't have opened her mouth.

However, there was little that annoyed Paisley quite so much as the sanctimony of Amelia Vaughn. And in the face of sanctimony, Paisley had put her best friend in a situation he would hate. But Amelia needed a talking-to, and while in her head Paisley was always giving Amelia talking-tos, she didn't quite have the balls to do it in person. Quite frankly, Amelia scared her.

However, she was happy to passive-aggressively nominate her best friend for prom king if it meant shutting Amelia up.

All the boys in their class might have been "beta males," to use Amelia's term, but that didn't make them terrible guys. *Sorry they don't live up to your high standards, Amelia.*

What annoyed Paisley the most was that she had somehow ended up arguing to keep the whole prom-king-and-queen dumpster fire even though she didn't care about it at *all*. She would have totally fought against the ridiculous tradition, except that she wanted desperately to prove Amelia wrong. The guys in their class were great! Just because they weren't the usual variety of jockish Sasquatches that Amelia had dated all

through high school didn't mean they were second-class citizens.

And yet Paisley was definitely disappointed in herself. She was supposed to be fighting the patriarchy. "Nevertheless, she persisted," and all that good stuff. But there she was, supporting a victory for heteronormative bullshit, as Luke had so eloquently put it.

If she wanted to get to the heart of the matter, what really annoyed Paisley was that she was on prom committee in the first place. Unfortunately her advisor had insisted at the beginning of the year that Paisley put something else on her résumé besides "Mall-food-court potato technician," and prom committee just happened to fit in her schedule.

Also she heard there'd be free food at every meeting.

She had been lied to.

She could have, and probably should have, quit. But at this point in the school year it was easier just to ride it out and avoid confrontation. Especially since sometimes the drama within the committee was entertaining. Being involved in the drama was less entertaining.

The warning bell rang, and Paisley had no choice but to stop following the happy couple and head for her locker. She promised herself that she would track Cora down later and ask her to take Henry's name off the list. Henry would never be the wiser.

As Paisley made her way down the hall, passing through a sea of students and long rows of lockers, there was a certain buzz in the air.

Ah yes, the buzz of prom tickets being on sale and the flood of promposals happening everywhere she turned.

Given that tickets had only gone on sale like fourteen seconds ago, these weren't the elaborate sort of proposals that you see on the local news (barf) but the kind of spontaneous proposals that you might find in a teen rom com. You know, the kind where a boy was literally kneeling down in the middle of the hallway to ask a girl to the prom.

Barf, barf, barf.

Paisley huffed out an irritated breath as she spun her combination lock and started digging through the detritus that lived in the bottom of her locker.

Finding what she needed by touch, she slammed the door shut at the same moment there was a shriek at the end of the hallway where some girl was a little too excited about getting invited to the prom. To each his or her or their own, but this whole situation was definitely not for Paisley.

Paisley fished her phone out of her pocket and shot a quick text to Henry.

Paisley:

I will kill you if you ask me to prom.

Henry:

I will cancel the fourteen dozen roses that I sent to your house.

She slid into her seat in homeroom.

Paisley:

Leave the roses. I'll burn them in my backyard. I'm sure I could find some kind of cleansing ritual on Pinterest.

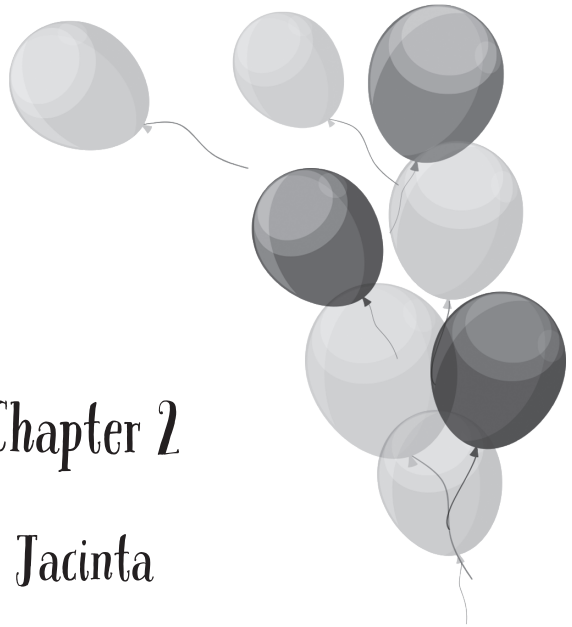
Henry:

I thought we weren't allowed to text each other while we were in the same room.

She turned around and gave Henry the finger.

He put his hands up in defense. “Hey, it’s your rule.”

“Rules were meant to be broken,” Paisley said in a threatening-action-hero voice as their homeroom teacher wandered in and got their attention. Paisley turned back around and did her best to hide her grin.



Chapter 2

Jacinta

Homeroom was probably the number-one thing on “Jacinta Ramos’s List of Things She Would Not Miss About High School.”

It went like this:

1. Homeroom.
2. That certain smell in the cafeteria.
3. That certain smell in the girls’ locker room. (She assumed the boys’ locker room was likely even worse but having no personal experience with it decided to limit it to a smell she knew all too well.)
4. How long it took to get out of the parking lot after school while everyone else on earth was trying to leave at the same exact moment.
5. Feeling like a background character in her own life.

Number five was something that haunted her on a daily basis. But she wasn't going to let it get the better of her.

Jacinta wanted desperately to be seen as more than just a background character; she wanted to have one iconic high school moment.

And The Prom would be her moment.

The Prom was the hill she was going to die on. She had even made it her New Year's resolution. At the stroke of midnight, she whispered, "I will go to The Prom, and I will not be a background character for one whole night."

With prom tickets having gone on sale yesterday, it was finally time to make good on her promise to herself. She needed a date, she needed a dress, and she needed a huge dose of courage.

As she jogged toward her locker after homeroom to grab her sociology textbook, she found a couple standing in front of it with a bouquet of at least ten helium-filled balloons. When the girl said yes, a hasty celebratory make-out session started and Jacinta could not find a way in to her locker through the balloons.

How was it that Jacinta had gone through four years of high school without having even one boy hang around her locker? Isn't that what was supposed to happen in high school? Locker lingering? Wasn't that supposed to be how high school students found love?

At least that's what every teen romantic comedy movie that Jacinta had ever watched made her believe.

But Jacinta wasn't even lucky enough to be the romantic b-plot in the movie of her own life. She was shoved deep down in the credits and would be billed as "Unnamed Nerd Girl #3"

somewhere near the bottom of the list. Her best friend, Kelsey, would at least be “Head Nerd Girl in Charge,” and Kelsey’s ex-boyfriend, Landon, who inexplicably still hung around them all the time would of course be “Head Nerd Boy in Charge.”

Even if they were unnamed characters, at least Kelsey and Landon were in charge.

Jacinta had almost nothing to show for her four years of high school except for being Kelsey’s sidekick.

She had about a million things she’d wanted to say in the prom committee meeting yesterday. First of all, she had wanted to tell Cora Wilson that she was doing an awesome job and not to listen to anything Amelia Vaughn had to say. Amelia was a total butt. Not even a butthead, just a butt.

But Jacinta had to agree with Luke Martinez on his point. The concept of having a prom king and queen was an outdated tradition and one she didn’t want any part of. It was as good a year as any to get rid of it.

And maybe future senior classes would want to elect kings and queens and dukes and duchesses and whatever the hell else. But it didn’t mean they had to. Maybe it was about time the class of 2018 put an end to things they weren’t interested in.

Onward and upward as they say.

The post-promposal make-out session came to an end, so Jacinta slipped in and got what she needed from her locker before setting off in the direction of her sociology class.

On her way there it was hard not to notice all the flowers and balloons and signs spelling out the word *Prom*? It had been like this every spring in high school. She wasn’t sure when promposals became such a trend, but she couldn’t deny that she kind of wished someone would prompose to her.

She sleepwalked through the rest of her morning, daydreaming about a faceless boy asking her to prom and trying not to feel too pathetic about this self-insert fan fiction she was writing in her head.

When she finally got to lunch later that day, Kelsey was sitting at their usual table holding court with Landon.

“I hate to say it, but I think I agree with Amelia. I think the class as a whole could do with some regular old, traditional prom stuff. I think it would be fun to do the whole king-and-queen thing,” Kelsey said as Jacinta slid into a seat.

“I have to agree,” Landon said.

He always had to agree with Kelsey. It was probably the only way they continued to get along after breaking up junior year.

“I don’t,” Jacinta said, setting her lunch on the table and taking a seat.

They both looked at her like she had desecrated some expensive piece of art.

“I don’t think it’s that big of a deal, but I definitely don’t think we need to have a king and a queen. I think it’s sort of ridiculous.”

Kelsey audibly gasped.

“What do you think we should do?” Landon asked.

“I agree with Luke and them. We could do a court and recognize lots of other people. Don’t you guys want to get recognized for all the work you’ve done? Neither one of you is going to be king or queen, no offense.” Where this bold moment had come from was anyone’s guess, but Jacinta felt a warm rush of pride for saying what she was thinking for once.

Kelsey and Landon blinked at each other and then blinked

at Jacinta. It was like they hadn't even considered their part in all of this.

"We have done a lot for the class," Kelsey said.

"We have," Landon agreed.

"Maybe it is time that we as a collective move away from weird old traditions like king and queen," Kelsey said.

Jacinta smiled. They were listening to her. They were *actually* listening to her. Maybe this was the first step toward a starring role, to not just being a side character.

"Well, I know how I'm voting next week," Landon said.

"Me too," Kelsey said. "I'm glad Cora gave us some time to think about this stuff. I would have hated to make a snap judgment."

Jacinta barely contained an eye roll at Landon's brown-nosing head nod.

Cameron

Cameron Wyatt was totally and completely over high school, and he couldn't help assuming everyone else was, too.

But then prom tickets went on sale, and it was like everyone started clawing out their own eyes to get a date.

Even if Cameron had been in the mood for prom, he didn't have anyone he wanted to invite. Well, he sort of did, but they had never met and had only spoken through messages sent via a shared laptop in English class. And the mere thought of inviting her made his face blush approximately the same color as his hair. It wasn't a good look and should be avoided at all costs.

Whenever there was computer work to be done, Ms. Huang would haul in the laptop cart and Cameron would make a grab for laptop 19. He would open it up and wait for the ancient machine to load the desktop where he would dig through the “secret” file that Laptop Girl had set up for them.

Though they had exchanged messages on nearly a daily basis for the past couple of months, they never exchanged names. Cameron didn’t really want her to know who he was, and the only time she had asked, she seemed cool with keeping their messages anonymous.

The only reason he even knew she was a girl was because she made a comment about being her “mother’s daughter.”

It had all started in the beginning of the year when he grabbed a laptop off the cart and someone had changed the background to a picture of dancing cats with the caption “But consider this: the Great CATS-by.” It wasn’t the best joke ever, but it made him laugh.

He made the background a picture of cats marching and changed the caption to “What About Brave New Cats?” He put an asterisk next to the question mark with a note that said, “Please check for my disclaimer in the document called ‘Bad Jokes.’”

The document when opened contained only the word *SORRY* written in 72-point bold font.

But apparently his bad jokes didn’t stop her from continuing to engage with him. In that same document, she deleted his 72-point *SORRY* and started writing in normal-size font. She left a note on the desktop telling him to check the doc. (He wondered more than once if someone else was following their messages, but no one ever spoke up. Maybe they were the only two people who habitually used laptop 19.)

The first message had started with:

So I'm bored. I'm going to ask you a million questions (or maybe just five) on the off chance you'll answer them and then I'll have something fun to read. Please respond in complete sentences. The five questions are as follows:

- What's your favorite color?
- Can you use chopsticks?
- What's your first memory?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?
- Do you have a name?

He happily responded to all her questions.

My favorite color is green. But like LIME GREEN. A green that can be seen from outer space. A green so green you can practically taste it.

I cannot use chopsticks.

Number three is a difficult question. Because memory is a weird thing, isn't it? Do I really remember a certain moment, or is it because I've seen pictures of it and heard the story a million times? I would say that probably my first memory is being in a minor car accident with my mom when I was four or five. I know there are no photographs of this moment slipped into family scrapbooks. No one was hurt, it was only a small fender bender, but it's a pretty traumatic event for a kid. Also I was really into police cars, so I remember when they arrived on the scene very distinctly.

Oh man. I have no clue what I want to be when I grow up. I had no idea that I'd be quizzed on this today, and I have no answer. "Something that's not terrible" is about as specific as I can get.

As for your last query, yes, I do have a name. But if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer not to share it. It's kind of fun being anonymous.

And I ask you the same million (or five) questions.

When he got the laptop the next time, Laptop Girl had answered and he had to work pretty hard not to laugh too much at her responses.

My favorite color is now lime green. You've convinced me. A green so green that you can almost taste it.

I am surprisingly good at chopsticks. I got a little obsessed with them after my aunt took me out to hibachi for my sixth birthday. I wanted desperately to be able to use them, so she took her time to show me, and after dropping several pieces of chicken on the floor, I managed to get one in my mouth.

Funny enough, I'm pretty sure that my birthday hibachi dinner is also my first real memory. There are other moments, but they're more like images than memories, like a trip to the zoo and getting a new couch. I really REMEMBER the restaurant and the onion volcano.

I don't know what I want to be when I grow up. I was hoping that you'd have an idea and I could steal it, much like your favorite color.

I, too, have a name, but I won't be sharing because you're right, anonymity is fun.

Every time the laptop cart was in the room, Cameron knew he had a treat waiting for him. It made English, and everything else about his senior year, a lot more bearable.

Cameron and Laptop Girl somehow remained anonymous even while sharing personal details. It worked for them. They

both agreed several times that it was nice to have someone to spill secrets to and to talk to without having to worry about anyone finding out.

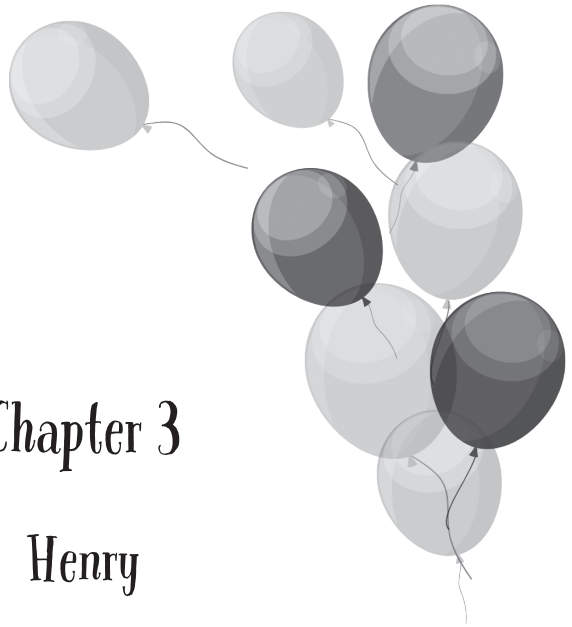
Unless you decide to print this out and start plastering it around the school.

she joked in one message. Then followed it up with:

Please don't do that.

He reread their most recent exchange and grinned.

For a second, he wished that they could meet in real life. But that opened a whole kettle of fish that he wasn't prepared to deal with. Instead he started a new message.



Chapter 3

Henry

Henry Lai liked to play a game in the long crowded hallways at school. It was called “How far can I go without touching anyone AND without anyone touching me.”

The good news was that it was a pretty challenging game, good for his reflexes.

The bad news was that he never got very far. Henry felt like his classmates had little interest in personal boundaries. It was a shame to say the least.

The even worse news was that since prom tickets had gone on sale earlier in the week the traffic in the hallways had grown to a near standstill. Henry was at his wit’s end just trying to get through the day.

He made it to his locker relatively unscathed Wednesday afternoon and checked his phone. He had a text from his best friend, Paisley.

Paisley:

Remind me that I have something to tell you later that I keep forgetting to tell you.

Why couldn't she tell him now? He hated waiting for stuff like that. All it was going to do to him was make him think and worry and wonder what she could be talking about.

Henry:

Why can't you tell me now?

Paisley:

I would, but I feel like I can explain things better to you in person.

Henry:

Oh well, that's not ominous or terrible in any way. I'm sure I'll have a lovely afternoon wondering about this. I won't be anxious at all. I won't be slowly driven mad by this thought.

Paisley:

Stop being so dramatic and go to baseball practice.

Henry:

Guess I'll stop being so dramatic and go to baseball practice.

He took a screenshot of these texts. Sometimes he did that with Paisley. Not because he wanted to preserve these conversations forever, but because if someone were to ever challenge him on his friendship with Paisley, these were the kind of things he liked to keep as proof. Also it was never a bad idea to keep receipts.

There was something about the way she talked to him, so no-nonsense, that no one else in his life had quite figured out.

Henry walked out of school with his backpack over his shoulder and his baseball glove in hand. He'd turned in the direction of the baseball field when he saw it.

The most terrible thing.

A promposal of epic proportions. This was no little moment in the hall that could be skirted around. This was happening in the front of the school at the end of the day.

He burned with the shame of secondhand embarrassment as a girl asked a boy to the prom right there in the middle of the school lawn. In front of God and parents picking up freshmen and students exiting the building and EVERYONE.

He was never sure if what he experienced in these moments was an overload of empathy or an overload of sympathy. Whatever it was, it was nearly crushing him. He couldn't move as he watched Margie Showalter hold up her hand-lettered and glittered sign that read STEWART SMITH—WILL YOU GO TO PROM WITH ME?

She was smiling broadly and obviously trying to hold the sign steady in the breeze.

Henry could see little flecks of glitter fluttering off into the air and blowing around. He imagined where those pieces of glitter might end up. A bird's nest, someone's unsuspecting ice cream cone, the sewer.

And then the worst thing happened. The absolutely worst thing imaginable.

Stewart Smith said no.

Henry saw him shake his head. His smile was apologetic.

He said a few things, but the words were obscured by the wind that was now kicking up even more glitter.

Things were falling apart in slow motion in the middle of the school parking lot. Henry didn't know how to deal with this horrible tableau that was happening in front of him. He had the distinct urge to run away and never, ever look back.

That's exactly what Margie was doing.

She wasn't running, though, just walking away dejectedly, and dragging her poster along behind her.

Henry accidentally made eye contact with her for a split second. His regret was swift and immense. She looked like someone had run over her dog.

"I thought he liked me," Margie said to no one in particular.

Henry's eyes went wide, and he knew he did not have the bandwidth for her sad state of rejection. He backed away from her, going off the path down to the field instead and winding his way across the lawn, trying to avoid the goose crap that was everywhere. For some reason, geese from a nearby pond liked to come up to the grass in front of the school and basically shit everywhere. It was an issue that the administration hadn't figured out a way to deal with yet, even though it'd been literally happening for years. Something about the new dam that had been built by the brook. It was a serious environmental issue.

Jamie Fitzpatrick materialized next to him, his long legs falling into rhythm next to Henry, barely managing to miss what could only be described as goose diarrhea.

"Oh gross," is all Jamie said as he sidestepped around it.

"Hey," Henry said, keeping his eyes on the ground.

"Why are you walking through this field of sorrow and goose shit?"

“Oh man, I just watched this really terrible promposal go down. Margie Showalter asked Stewart Smith, and the dude said no.”

“That’s awful. Why would you make such a big show if you weren’t guaranteed a yes, you know?”

“I have no idea,” Henry said. “I was just so embarrassed for Margie. I mean, I’d be embarrassed for anyone getting rejected, but there was something about this moment. I wished the ground would swallow me up on her behalf.”

“How could the ground swallowing you up even help her?” Jamie asked.

Jamie was not the brightest bulb in the box. “It wouldn’t. I’m just explaining to you that it was that embarrassing.”

“Oh, I get you.” Jamie bobbed his head. Henry had a feeling that Jamie did not get him but that he mostly wanted to stop talking about this. They were at the field house now where all the guys changed for practice. “I’m so freaking relieved that I have a girlfriend and don’t have to deal with shit like that. You know, like rejection. When I ask Cora I know she’ll say yes.”

“You haven’t asked her yet?” Henry asked.

“Nah, I’m waiting a couple days, until she’ll be surprised and I know she’d kill me if I made a big deal about it.”

Henry chewed his lip.

“What about you?” Jamie asked. “You gonna ask someone?”

Henry wrinkled his nose. “I’m not really interested in prom.”

“Oh, come on, man. It’s one of those things.” Jamie paused and snapped his fingers, searching for the words. “You know. Like a thing.”

“Tradition?”

“Well that, too, but like. Oh man, I’m so annoyed I can’t think of this.”

Henry shrugged.

“A rite of passage!” Jamie said, smacking Henry hard on the shoulder.

“I’m sure I’ll live,” Henry muttered, rubbing the point of impact. He wasn’t in the mood to explain to Jamie Fitzpatrick that the anxiety of even considering the prom wasn’t worth Henry’s time.

He had a feeling Jamie wouldn’t understand that sentiment, so he kept it to himself.

Lizzie

It was Friday night and the mall was hopping.

The parking lot was full, the stores were packed, and there were lines at every eatery in the food court. Except for Hot Potato. No one ever lined up for Hot Potato. It was always a last resort.

But the unpopularity of their workplace left Paisley and Lizzie with plenty of time to talk.

Lizzie leaned her hip on the counter by the register, looking alert in case a customer came up, while Paisley picked pieces of chive out of the adjacent container of shredded cheddar using the world’s smallest tongs. They might actually have qualified as tweezers, and Lizzie had to wonder where Paisley even found them.

“So are you super psyched about prom?” Lizzie asked in a voice dripping with fake enthusiasm.

“Totally!” Paisley said with an eye roll of her green eyes and a rock-and-roll hand gesture. Her brown hair was cut into a floppy, growing-out pixie cut that really helped sell her whole vibe, Lizzie thought.

Lizzie attempted the same gesture back.

“I’m pretty sure you said ‘I love you’ in sign language,” Paisley said.

“Oh, oops,” Lizzie said.

Paisley could always pull off stuff like that. Lizzie just wasn’t cool enough, particularly in comparison to Paisley. Lizzie was chubby to Paisley’s waifishness, and her hair was frizzy instead of straight. Lizzie told herself over and over that it did no good to compare herself to other people, especially other girls, but there was something about Paisley she wished she could emulate.

“Anyway, I’ve been trying to figure out what exactly is so thrilling about going to prom,” Lizzie said, changing the topic and attempting to cover her embarrassment. “Is it all the money you spend? Or stressing out over having the same dress as someone else?”

Paisley stood up, having finished her chive scavenger hunt, and brushed any errant chives she left behind off the work area. “If I had to guess, I would say it’s the cummerbunds.”

“Or the, you know, the sex thing,” Lizzie mumbled.

Paisley thought about that for a second. “What?”

“You know. Our classmates are horndogs, in general, and there’s an inherent sex vibe surrounding the whole thing, you know? Like all those prom movies about having sex for the first

time, feeding the teenagers of America big dreams for loss of virginity.”

“I don’t have the proper sexy radar,” Paisley said with a shrug.

A customer came up then, interrupting their conversation. As Paisley walked him through selecting his toppings and explained for the millionth time that yes, they only have potatoes, and no, they don’t have any burgers, Lizzie thought about the prom. She definitely never wanted to go before. There was nothing about it that enticed her; she hadn’t been lying to Paisley a few minutes ago.

But there was one thing that had been nagging at the back of her mind.

She rang up the customer, and he walked off in search of a burger to go with his chili cheese potato. It seemed like overkill to Lizzie, but she tried not to think too hard about it.

She turned to Paisley. “Do you think you’ll ever regret not going?”

“Um, no,” Paisley said, checking herself out in the reflective paper towel dispenser and fixing her visor. She turned to Lizzie.

“Aren’t you on the prom committee? Isn’t it your duty to go?”

“I’m only there for something to put on my résumé. Do you think you’ll go?”

Lizzie’s shoulders fell. “Never in my life have I ever wanted to go to prom. I didn’t understand the romance of it, or what the point was in general. But now, it’s like something has changed.”

Paisley gave her a knowing look. “I’m going to assume this is about Mystery Boy.”

Lizzie buried her face in her hands. “Yes,” she said, her voice muffled.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Paisley said.

“It’s not?” Lizzie asked, peeking out from behind her hands.

“Of course not. Just because I’m dead inside doesn’t mean that everyone has to be.”

“You’re not dead inside.”

“Fine, I’m not dead inside, but sometimes I feel dead inside. Like I never have the *feelings* that other people do,” Paisley said.

Lizzie stood up straight, preparing to defend her friend from herself, which was a confusing situation but one Lizzie felt quite strongly about.

“You are totally awesome,” Lizzie said.

“Oh, I am. But I’m pretty sure that’s what my problem is with all of this. I don’t get it, you know?” Paisley said.

Lizzie shrugged. “I don’t get it, either. I’m sure we don’t *get* it in different ways, but that doesn’t make you an emotionless robot.”

“I mean, I might be an emotionless robot. I don’t even feel anything about graduating from high school. Like, nothing.”

At that moment, someone cleared their throat from the other side of the cash register.

Lizzie turned around, plastering her best Hot Potato smile on.

“Oh, it’s you,” Lizzie said when she saw her friend Madison standing there.

“Damn, I can’t believe how fast your customer service smile faded when you saw me,” Madison said.

“It didn’t fade, it was overtaken with relief that I didn’t have to stop being lazy and actually help a customer.”

Madison looked over to Paisley, who nodded. "It's true. We've had a quiet evening, so it would suck to have to, you know, do our jobs."

"What if I actually wanted a potato?" Madison asked.

"Do you want a potato?"

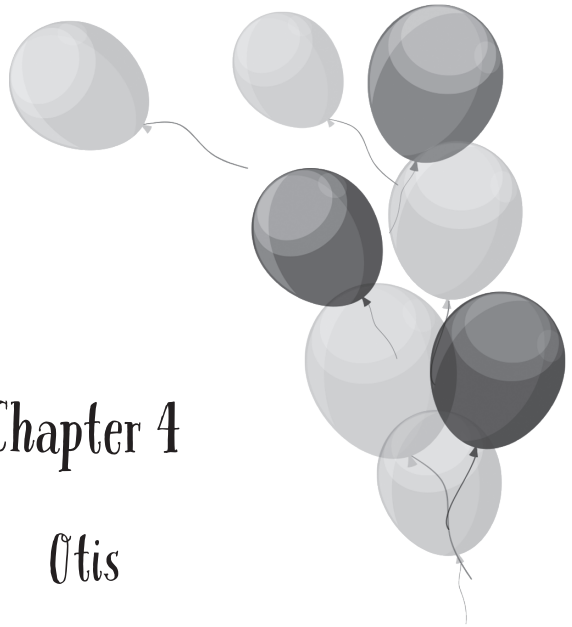
"Nah, I had dinner," Madison said as she slid across the counter. "So what did I miss with you two?" She sat on the little stool in the corner out of the line of vision of anyone passing. Someday Paisley and Lizzie would get in trouble for letting their friend go behind the counter, but hopefully tonight was not that night.

"Lizzie's in love with Mystery Boy," Paisley said.

"Paisley's an emotionless robot," Lizzie answered as Paisley threw a piece of bacon at her and missed.

"Don't waste that!" Madison said. "Bacon is delicious and shouldn't be wasted. Also Paisley's not an emotionless robot. But Lizzie is totally in love with Mystery Boy."

"Aw, thanks, Madison," Paisley said as Lizzie hit her square in the face with a limp piece of broccoli.



Chapter 4

Otis

Otis Sorenson was doing his calc homework Sunday afternoon. At least, his calc homework was open on his desk in front of him. If you wanted to get technical about it, he was paying far more attention to the conversation he was having via text with his friend Tag.

Tag was having girl trouble. Or “women problems” as Tag liked to say.

Tag:

So I thought everything was fine. We definitely hooked up in the back seat of my car.

Otis:

What does “hooking up” even entail? It’s such a vague concept. Like, I don’t need the play-by-play. But I never know what people mean when they use that phrase. Sex? Everything but sex? Heavy petting?

Tag:

Heavy petting? What is this, the '50s?

Otis:

Fine, I meant necking. Did you neck with her in the back seat of your '57 Chevy at the drive-in after the sock hop?

Before Tag's answer came through, Otis heard a few strains of music. He checked the volume on his computer, but it seemed like the noise was actually coming from outside.

Otis might not have even bothered to check, but it was a really familiar song. A song he couldn't quite put his finger on. At least not until he looked outside.

Otis's bedroom window faced onto the street, and standing outside, leaning against his car, was his boyfriend, Luke, holding up his iPhone that was hooked to his car's speakers and blasting Peter Gabriel's seminal classic, "In Your Eyes."

Otis couldn't help but laugh as he opened his window, stuck his head out, and looked down at his dark-eyed, smooth-skinned, awesome-haired boyfriend. "Like a young Ricky Martin," Otis's mom once said in passing. So Otis then googled young Ricky Martin and was not disappointed.

Luke had used what Otis hoped was masking tape to spell out the word *PROM* on the roof of his car. If it was not masking tape and it took the paint off, then Luke was definitely going to be in trouble. His parents were sticklers about that car. They were better than Otis's parents, though, because Otis didn't even have a car and instead was forced to share with his older sister whenever she deigned to come home from college for the weekend.

Otis leaned his elbows on the windowsill and smiled down at Luke, who grinned up at him.

“Have you ever even seen *Say Anything?*” Otis asked, knowing full well that the answer was no.

“No, but I know an iconic romantic scene when I see it, even if it’s only a GIF on Tumblr. And I know you love this no matter how much you want to pretend that you don’t.”

Otis’s smile only grew, like he couldn’t even contain it on his face. He’d had braces for a ridiculously long time, and his teeth were incredibly straight thanks to that, but when he smiled, he still had a tendency to keep his lips pressed firmly together. But right now, even after seven years of braces and being embarrassed about how terrible they looked, he smiled so wide, he had no choice but to open his mouth.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” he called out to Luke while waving at a neighbor walking his dog. “It’s completely awesome.”

“Good, I’m glad you think so,” Luke said. They’d been together for about six months now but had been friends much longer. Back in middle school they were on the same baseball team and they hung out sometimes. But in high school Otis got super into baseball and Luke drifted toward the theater kids. They didn’t spend much time together in high school. At least not until they were at a party junior year and Luke drunkenly told Otis that he was gay.

Otis, at that point, had no idea he himself was gay. But when he realized he was into guys last fall, the first person he wanted to tell was Luke. They’ve been together ever since. Sort of.

It took Luke a few tries to crack Otis. Not so much because Otis didn’t like him but because even though Otis was out, he wasn’t sure how out he wanted to be. It took him a little while to

find a balance. And once Otis went looking for the balance, he found a lot of support.

It helped that there was some other major high school drama going on around the time Otis and Luke started dating publicly. (The vice principal resigned out of nowhere, and there were tons of rumors swirling around about the cause.) By the time everyone got around to noticing Luke and Otis, it didn't feel like a big deal.

All of Otis's worries were for nothing. There wasn't any hate or homophobia to be found. Not within the senior class, at least. There were some underclassmen who seemed intent on making Luke's life a bit of a nightmare, but a few well-placed words and some intimidation from the guys on the baseball team fixed it right up. Otis wasn't sure how he got so lucky.

Luke and Otis were, for all intents and purposes, a happy couple. Both content to go on dates and hold hands at school, to text for hours or just watch TV together. It was a low-maintenance relationship.

What Otis worried about in the dark corners of the night when he woke up suddenly and couldn't fall back to sleep was what if all they had in common was an appreciation for cheesy movies and, you know, being gay. Because while Otis knew he liked Luke a lot, he had a feeling Luke might be in love with him. And Otis wasn't sure if he was there yet.

He worried a lot about the day that Luke would tell Otis he loved him and Otis would say something terrible like "Thank you" or "I'm quite fond of you, also." It would be embarrassing and so disappointing for Luke.

But it was easy to forget worries like that when Luke

showed up on a sunny spring evening to make a grand romantic gesture.

And pretty much all of Luke's gestures were grand and romantic. Otis tried to keep up, but he often felt like he fell a little short. Though he would make up for that on Monday morning when Luke opened his locker for his own promposal.

Otis was still smiling when he said, "Come on. My mom owns *Say Anything* on DVD. You should get indoctrinated."

"I'm going to assume that's a yes to prom, then?" Luke asked.

Otis picked up his notebook and scrawled the word YES across one of the pages in big bold letters, and showed it to Luke, before he closed his window and raced down the stairs.

Otis met Luke on the front porch, kissing him long and slow, before pausing to smile at him, just because he felt like smiling.

"I don't think I've ever seen so many teeth in your mouth. I had no idea you had this many teeth," Luke said, threading his arms around his waist and kissing him some more.

Jacinta

Sometimes being the youngest of five meant that Jacinta's life was a circus. People coming in and out at all hours, loud noises, booming voices, other people's agendas. She learned at a very young age that she was definitely not the center of the universe.

Other times being the youngest was strangely quiet. Because

of all those people having their own agendas, it often meant that Jacinta was left in the dust.

For example, one Sunday night in mid-April it was only Jacinta and her mom eating dinner together since the rest of the family was off living their lives. Technically, they were all running late for dinner.

“I thought they’d be home by now,” Jacinta’s mom said as she took the chicken out of the oven. “We’re going to eat without them because I don’t want the food to get cold.”

When they sat down at the table, it was no shock to Jacinta that she was in her mother’s crosshairs. There were no other children to pester.

“What’s going on at school lately?” her mom asked.

“Pretty much the usual,” Jacinta said. “The other day in prom committee we decided to have a prom court along with electing a prom king and queen.” It had been a pretty good discussion for once. No arguments, or tears, or bloodshed. Everyone, even Amelia Vaughn, seemed happy with the compromise.

“Oh, prom,” her mom said with a big grin.

“Yes, prom,” Jacinta said.

“Is there anyone you want to go with?”

Jacinta glanced up from her plate where she had been concentrating on chasing a piece of corn around with her fork. It did not want to be eaten. She almost admired its will to survive, and then remembered that it was literally just a piece of corn.

“There is not,” Jacinta said.

“Oh, there must be someone. I know you have lots of eligible boys in your class.”

Why her mother knew anything about the boys in her class

was a mystery to Jacinta, considering *she* didn't even know about the eligible boys in her class.

"So when is it exactly?" her mom asked, unperturbed by Jacinta's reticence on the subject. This was not her first trip to the rodeo with children who didn't want to talk about something. And while Jacinta was in fact quite excited about the prom, there was something leading about her mom's questions that made her hesitate to give too much information.

"It's June first."

"And where is it?"

Jacinta put her fork down and took a sip of her water. "Mom, I told you all about this months ago. I've been working on the prom since sophomore year. I helped them pick out the venue and the date and all of that right from the start."

"I can't always keep track of everything!" her mom insisted.

"I know, but this is old news. It's at the Sheraton, the first Friday in June."

"Oh, that's a beautiful venue. Your cousin Elena got married there. Remember?"

"Yes. I remember."

"Why didn't you tell me when tickets went on sale?"

Jacinta blinked at her mother. "I had no idea you were this interested in the prom." She decided to turn the tables on her. "Why are you so interested in prom all of a sudden?"

"I guess I was worried that you weren't talking about things because you felt neglected in the face of Flora's wedding. She's kind of taking over. I know she is, and I don't mean for you to get lost in the middle of everything."

"Oh. I appreciate that," Jacinta said, going back to her food.

“Do you need money? For anything? A dress or a limo with your friends? Did you buy a ticket?”

This was far more attention than Jacinta had received in years, or at least that’s how it felt.

“I don’t need money. I didn’t buy a ticket. I’ll let you know when and if I do. I don’t really have anyone to go with at the moment.”

“I was thinking,” her mom said, placing her fork down on her plate. “I bet Henry Lai doesn’t have a date. He flies under the radar like you do. You could go with him. I could talk to his mom about it at work tomorrow.”

“Oh my god, Mother,” Jacinta said. But before she could argue the point further, the front and back doors opened simultaneously and most of her immediate family poured in, including her dad, her sister, her sister’s fiancé, and two of her brothers.

Her conversation with her mother was definitely over.

Her family was loud, and Jacinta had never learned to be loud enough to be heard over everyone else’s din. She never minded getting talked over, but she hated trying to compete for her mother’s attention. She’d rather not even try than to lose out to her older siblings, which was pretty much what always happened.

Jacinta took the opportunity to slip out of her mother’s focus and let the rest of her family take over the spotlight. It was in fact one of her greatest talents.

The next morning in school she approached Henry at his locker.

Henry Lai was an interesting person in Jacinta’s mind, made less interesting by the fact that their moms seemed to constantly want to push them together. When they were kids

their moms wanted them to be friends and as teenagers it had been implied on more than one occasion that they should date.

It left things between Jacinta and Henry awkward and weird.

Not to mention that he'd had a surge in popularity during their senior year that made Jacinta feel like he was out of her league.

"Hey," Jacinta said as she got close to him.

Henry looked up and smiled when he saw her. "Morning," he said.

"Um, so I think you need to be aware that my mother is likely going to talk to your mother about the prom today at work."

"Oh god, it's so embarrassing when this happens," he said, squeezing the bridge of his nose like this whole concept gave him an instant ice-cream headache.

"This is completely my fault. I take full responsibility this time," Jacinta said.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "You really don't have to. It's our meddling moms' fault."

"All I did was say the word *prom*, and she was offering to set us up." Jacinta bit her lip and looked down. "But listen, just in case this, you know, keeps going on with our moms, I was thinking I should have your number. I could have texted you last night to warn you."

"Good idea," Henry said, pulling his phone out of his backpack.

They exchanged numbers and set off in the direction of homeroom

"It's actually so weird that I don't have your number,"

Henry said. “We could have been presenting a more united front against our moms for all these years.”

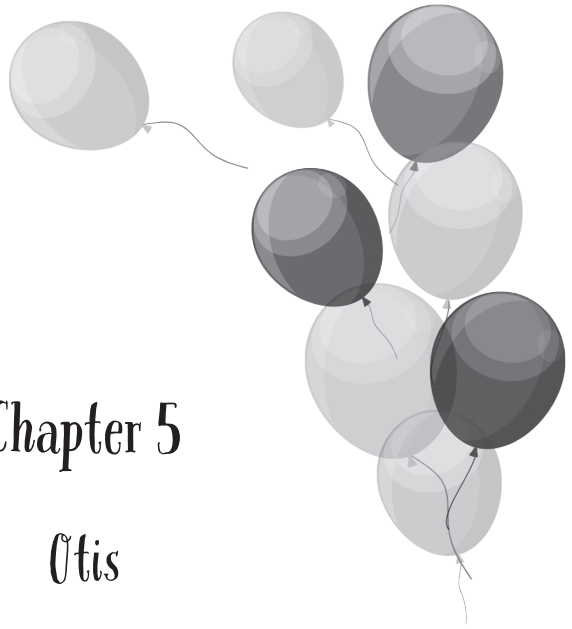
“At least we finally came to our senses,” Jacinta said as she turned to go into her homeroom.

“Yeah, it was about time. See you later,” Henry said with a grin as he continued on down the hall.

“See you,” Jacinta said.

Maybe Henry wouldn't be a terrible prom date, Jacinta thought as she walked away. But if she ended up at the prom with him, she would do it on her own terms and not her mother's.

It was definitely worth considering.



Chapter 5

Otis

Otis bounced on his toes as he and Luke walked into school Monday morning, that's how excited he was for Luke to get to his locker.

He could barely speak for fear that he'd give away the surprise he'd left for his boyfriend on Friday. He'd worried that after Luke's promposal that all the fun would have gone out of Otis's gesture, but now he couldn't wait for Luke to see it.

"I'll meet you back here after homeroom," Luke said, pausing to give Otis a quick kiss on the cheek, but he came up with nothing but air because Otis had continued on in the direction of Luke's locker.

"Nah," Otis said casually as he kept going.

"Are you being weird?" Luke asked, catching up with him. "I feel like you're being weird."

Otis shrugged and did a little shoulder shimmy when they got to Luke's locker.

“Okay, I’ve never seen you do anything like that before. You’re being totally weird, and I am totally weirded out by your weird,” Luke said with a hand on his hip.

Otis gestured toward Luke’s locker.

“What?”

He gestured more emphatically.

“I guess I should open my locker?” Luke asked.

Luke took his time going through his combination as if he knew every second Otis had to wait was pure torture. When he finally popped it open, several containers of orange Tic Tacs popped out and an avalanche of them waited inside Luke’s locker.

Luke picked one of the containers up off the ground. It said on the side, “You + Me = Prom?”

Luke laughed so loud he shocked the freshman girl who was passing at that moment.

“Oh my god,” Luke said. “Did you *Juno* me?”

Otis smiled.

“Ugh, I’m so mad at you for doing this.”

“I put them in on Friday after baseball, but then you scooped me with the invite yesterday. I figured there was no reason to come get them all out of your locker early this morning, though. It would have been such a waste. Also because Madison would have killed me since she’s the one who helped me write on all of them.” Otis knew he was babbling, but Luke wasn’t saying enough so he needed to fill the void.

Luke stared at one of the containers and grinned. “This is really so fantastic.”

“Thanks,” Otis said, feeling a little shy. “I figured I owed you since up until now my grandest gesture was surprising you with your favorite Slurpee.”

“A Slurpee I cherished,” Luke said, putting his hand on Otis’s arm. “And mango isn’t always available in this area of New Jersey, so it was extra thoughtful.”

Otis shrugged, still sheepish.

“Although you realize I’m going to have to eat all of these myself, right? Because if I give them to people they’re going to think I’m asking them to prom.”

“You definitely have to eat every single one yourself,” Otis said. “It’s like a demonstration of your commitment to us.”

Luke studied his locker, counting the containers with his eyes. “My god, how much did you spend on these? I mean really, except I don’t mean that at all and please don’t tell me.”

“You can buy them in bulk on the Internet. It wasn’t too much, I promise.”

“But still! There’s like a hundred boxes.”

“A hundred and twenty, technically.”

It was Otis’s turn to laugh loudly. “I’m glad we’re going to prom.”

“Me too,” Luke said.

“I just really appreciate you.”

“Aw, I love it when you’re sincere.” Luke closed his locker. “We should probably go get your stuff now.”

Otis nodded as they turned to walk down the hall. He made quick work of grabbing what he needed for his morning classes, and soon they were off to homeroom. “We should go on a date soon. Like a good date,” he said.

“I am always up for a good date,” Luke said, waving at someone as he passed. “Or a bad date, even. Let’s go to McDonald’s.”

“That sounds like the perfect plan,” Otis said, threading his arm through Luke’s as they continued on their way.

“Or, you know, I was going to surprise you, but I talked to

my cousin and he works at the Holiday Inn Express. And he said he could get us a room for prom night.” Luke raised his eyebrows and grinned.

“Wow,” was all Otis managed to say as the shock of the statement settled in.

A hotel room.

With Luke.

On prom night.

He had to think about each of these concepts individually before he could handle considering them together.

“Should be awesome,” Luke said, squeezing his arm in a wordless goodbye as Luke entered his homeroom.

Should be awesome, Otis thought to himself, standing in the hallway stunned. But there was also something vaguely terrifying about the idea.

He continued on to homeroom by himself, thinking about what a hotel room, one with Luke, on prom night entailed.

He should be totally psyched, right?

Someone would need to tell that to the pit of anxiety that was growing in his stomach.

Cora

Tuesday night and Cora was doing her best to avoid her homework. At this point in her senior year, was there really any reason to do it?

The answer was of course yes, but that didn’t exactly motivate her to get her work done. When her phone chimed from

her bed she leaped for it, as gracefully as one can leap from sitting cross-legged on the floor up and onto a bed.

Jamie:

You busy? Come over.

Cora:

I think I can manage it, as long as I'm not gone too long.

Jamie:

Cool, see you in a few. 😊 😊 😊 😊

Technically Cora wasn't allowed out after dinner on school nights unless it was for a school-related event or responsibility. But maybe if she spun a quick little lie and breezed out the door before her parents caught on she might be able to make a run for her car. She grabbed her keys and shoved her wallet in her backpack along with a random book that she could use as a cover story.

Her mom and dad were in the living room watching the news.

"I need to run over to Jamie's for a second. We accidentally switched textbooks at lunch," she said, patting her backpack for extra emphasis.

Her dad's eyebrows knitted together, and Cora could tell he was about to say no, but her mom pressed a hand to his chest.

"You have an hour on the dot, and you better be careful driving my car," she said.

Cora grinned and raced out of the house before her dad could start lining up his arguments. As Cora had recently pointed out to them, sooner than later they were going to have to get used to the idea that she was an autonomous person. That

she certainly wasn't going to be calling them from college to ask about going out.

She dropped into the driver's seat of her mom's sedan, and put on her seat belt before carefully pulling out of the driveway. She couldn't see her parents watching, but she could feel them, so it was worth it to be on her best behavior behind the wheel.

She pulled onto the main street and realized that this was kind of an odd request from Jamie. There was a spontaneity to the situation that should excite her.

But it didn't.

And she couldn't put her finger on why.

They weren't exactly a booty call couple, and definitely not on a Tuesday night. Normally she would have just said no, she wasn't allowed out, but that was how bored she was with her AP Spanish homework. He probably needed help with his trig and was trying to be coy about it. That had to be why she wasn't excited. He was so predictable.

For a long minute at a stoplight, Cora considered blowing Jamie off and texting Teagan and Josie to meet her at Starbucks. It was a feeling she was experiencing more and more lately. Unfortunately, she rarely had time to examine feelings like that.

Cora pulled up in front of Jamie's house and sent out a quick "I'm here" text. She was surprised when she got an immediate response telling her to go around to the backyard, only making her more curious. Homework alfresco? That didn't sound like Jamie.

When she walked around back, Jamie was standing on the edge of the deck. The sun was starting to set, and he had lit what

looked like at least twenty or thirty votive candles and lined the ledge of the deck with them.

“Hey,” he said with a grin.

“Hey,” she replied. “What’s going on?”

“Come on up,” he said, gesturing with the grace of a game show host.

Cora slowly walked up the stairs, taking in the whole scene. The word *PROM* was spelled out in roses on the picnic table, and Cora couldn’t help shaking her head.

“You’re sort of ridiculous, you know that, right?” she said.

“Oh, totally. I have no qualms about my ridiculousness,” he agreed. “But I also knew you would yell at me if I dared to pull something like this at school.”

“Well, yes. And all these candles would definitely be frowned upon.”

He nodded, running a hand over his short dirty-blond hair. “So what do you say, Cora?”

“Oh,” she breathed out.

In that moment Cora saw the boy who she’d loved for almost as long as she could remember. Cute and perfect Jamie, who did everything so cutely and perfectly.

She and Jamie had been dating for over three years. It would have been longer than that if they started counting from when they first held hands at the planetarium on their seventh-grade field trip.

The two thirteen-year-olds would have definitely declared their undying love to each other then and there, like a contemporary Romeo and Juliet minus the suicide, but Cora’s parents were strict with their rule about not letting her date

until she was fifteen. So instead, they counted from Cora's fifteenth birthday.

"Will you go with me?" he asked, his expression uncertain due to the length of her silence and probably the look on her face.

"Of course I'll go with you, you big goof," she said. He pulled her close and kissed her. She cut the kiss off quickly, telling herself his mom was probably watching from the sliding door in the family room.

"You really didn't have to do all of this," Cora said. She looked down at their intertwined hands, his light fingers woven through her darker ones.

"I didn't?" he asked. "Oh snap. Then I take it back. I was going to ask Teagan to the prom, so I guess I'll do that."

"You're completely ridiculous, you know that, right?" Cora asked.

"I am, but you like that about me, right?" he asked. She threaded her arms around his waist, and he pulled her in close. He was a few inches taller than she was these days. It was pretty funny to think that back in seventh grade when she first kissed his cheek while standing in the gift shop at that same planetarium, mere minutes after they'd first held hands, she'd had a solid two inches on him. But he caught up, as boys tend to do.

"I do like that about you," she said.

"Good," he said, squeezing her close.

Cora closed her eyes and pretended she felt safe and happy instead of a little bit claustrophobic. If she ignored the feeling maybe it would go away, particularly since they'd made their college plans together. In the fall, they'd both be going to Boston

University. Jamie had decided to go there since it was Cora's dream school.

The future was set for them. She had to hope she'd get past whatever this feeling was in her gut.

"And did you notice I haven't called you babe once?" he asked.

She was thankful that her face was still pressed up against him so he couldn't see her expression.