

LET'S TALK ABOUT LOVE

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Swoon READS

Swoon Reads | New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

An imprint of Feiwel and Friends and Macmillan Publishing Group LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2017944696

ISBN 978-1-250-13612-1 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-13882-8 (ebook)

Book design by Liz Dresner

First Edition—2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CHAPTER

1

Everything was perfect before Alice unlocked her dorm room door.

“I want to break up,” Margot said.

Alice stood, stopping and starting whatever she had planned to say. Her mouth moved, forming shapes of words, but only tiny ticks of noise echoed in the back of her throat. A sharp, bruising ache crept upward from the pit of her stomach.

“I know this seems kind of sudden,” Margot had begun to wring her hands. One of the things she and Alice had in common was their aversion to direct conflict. “I wanted to wait until I moved out but I’ve really been thinking about things and it’s better to just get it out of the way now so I can focus on my finals. Instead of this.”

“Why?” Alice asked. Unable to meet Margot’s eyes, she stared at her arms crossed over her chest.

“Because you won’t have sex with me,” Margot answered.

Alice knew it before the words even left her mouth. Of course this was about sex—what else could it have possibly been about? She held

her back straight, refusing to hunch her shoulders to hold the pain in. She allowed it to fill her, allowed that raging, anxious monster to spread. The tension in her legs kept telling her to *RUN*, but where would she go? They shared a room and still had a week to go before the semester ended. Eventually, she'd have to come back. Eventually, they'd have to have this conversation.

Couldn't Margot just send her a breakup text like a decent human being?

"We had sex this morning," Alice replied. Dread pumped through her veins, making her voice sound as skinned as she felt. "Twice."

"That's not the kind of sex I want to have," Margot said. She tucked one of her wild blond curls behind her ear.

That monster flared white-hot inside Alice. The only reason why Alice bothered to have sex was to make her girlfriend happy. If Margot didn't want it, what in the hell was the point?

"Sure fooled me. If I recall, which I do, there was a lot of happy screaming involved."

"Because you're good at it!" Margot stood, walking toward Alice, hands outstretched. "You know exactly what I like. I can't say the same about you." Margot sighed. "I want to touch you, Alice."

"You touch me all the time." Alice's limp hands dangled while Margot held her wrists. "You're touching me now."

"I want to lie in bed and kiss you everywhere for hours. I want to be able to show you how happy you make me."

"We do that, too. You *know* me: I need cuddles or I will die."

"And that's something I love about you, but when it's time to get serious, it's like you turn into a different person. I want to have passionate sex with you. It's weird that I can't reciprocate anything."

"It is not *weird*," Alice snatched herself away.

"It makes me feel weird," Margot clarified, her voice pleading. "It's like you don't like me as much as you say you do. When we have sex,

it's because *I* want to. You never initiate it. I'm not allowed to do anything to you. On the rare times we do make out, I swear to God I can feel your mind wandering."

"But I like kissing you!"

"And the worst part is you don't trust me enough to tell me why."

Why, why, why? Why did Margot need to know about the *why*? As if she were a problem to be fixed, as if Margot's magic fingers could make it all better. She realized, before the concept of *Them* was even a blip in the universe, that Margot would never understand. Before they decided to be together, Margot had brought other girls to their room so often they had to create a Scarf on the Doorknob system so Alice could stop walking in on her frequent sexcapades.

Sex mattered to Margot.

And it didn't matter to Alice.

"I trust you," Alice said. Not a lie, but not the truth either. "It's just hard to talk about."

"I'm asking you to try. If you care about me, you will."

The words *I'm asexual* knocked around inside Alice's head. She knew she was, had known it for some time. She had also hoped she could wiggle her life around that truth like it didn't matter or would never come up. High school had been hell, but college was a whole new beast dimension. Everyone seemed to be trying to have sex with everyone else.

And Alice was caught dead in the center of bloodied, shark-infested waters. It had gotten so bad, she had begun to give the disasters names: *The Great Freshman Letdown: Robert Almanac Edition*, followed closely by its sequel, *Turns Out She Was Pansexual (And Totally Coming Onto Me)*, which then turned into an unexpected trilogy, *Boys Like Girls Who Like Girls*, and now it had become a quartet, *The Hazards of Sex and Other Unwanted Lessons*.

When it came to accepting that she was asexual, it was about an

eighty-twenty split. That twenty part encompassed the fact that Alice could not call herself asexual in front of another person. So instead of telling the whole, hard truth, she danced with the definition.

Alice sat on her bed, finally allowing her body to fold in on itself. The time had come to hold that in, to feel that pain and keep it close to her heart. Brand it, press it down deep, right next to her old nickname, *The Corpse*. She stared at Margot's baby-pink ballet flats with the tiny rhinestones near the toes. Alice had bought those for her.

"I don't see the point," Alice said. "I don't need it. I don't think about it."

"Sex?" Margot laughed—a tiny giggle, as if Alice had told a mildly funny joke. "But you're Black."

"Oh Jesus, save me." Alice covered her mouth with her hands and stared at Margot.

"What? I can tell jokes, too." She looked confused for a moment before shame made her face turn red. "That was racist wasn't it? I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound like that. I swear it was a joke."

(The perks of having a soon-to-be ex-girlfriend from middle-of-nowhere Iowa were endless.)

"But I'm not joking. I meant exactly what I said. I don't care about sex. You're right. I did it because you wanted to do it."

Margot lowered herself down next to Alice, slowly, as if she were dealing with a scared animal. "Have you gone to a doctor?" she asked. She traced her delicate fingers over Alice's shoulder, curving toward her spine. It tickled, but Alice didn't show it.

"I don't need to." *Number one*, she thought.

"Were you abused? Is that it?"

"No." *Number two*.

"Are you saving yourself for marriage?"

"I hope that's a joke."

"It was," Margot admitted. Her sad smile burned in the corner of

Alice's eyes. "Then what? Tell me. People don't just not like sex without a reason. It's kind of not natural, don't you think?"

To that, she had *absolutely* nothing to say.

After a few minutes (Margot had never been into begging), she left Alice's side.

"I can't be with someone who can't talk to me," she said.

The finality of the moment punched her in her stomach. "Margot—"

"And I can't be with someone who doesn't desire me. You could never love me as much as I would love you. You understand that, don't you?"

CHAPTER

2

Margot had been gone exactly seventeen hours. After five days of awkwardly inching around each other in their room, she had told Alice she wanted a “clean break” right before she finished moving out. Didn’t even want to be friends anymore because asexuality was *unnatural*.

(Okay, so maybe Margot didn’t *say* that exactly, but that’s how it felt.)

(Like her identity was contagious and had the ability to make Margot’s above-average libido disappear.)

“Here you go,” Moschoula said, setting down Alice’s third cup of coffee on the table. Moschoula had tanned skin, the kind of color that implied she was most likely mixed rather than white, with kinky, natural burnt-orange hair pulled up into a bun on the top of her head.

Cutie Code: Yellow, no question about it.

An intense obsession with aesthetics had taken Alice by surprise in high school and she had begun to code her reactions. She had created Alice’s Cutie Code™, complete with a color wheel for easy categorizations—from Green to Red, with all the colors in between.

“And a bear claw on the house,” Moschoula said. “Try to have a better day?”

Even nestled in the back of Salty Sea Coffee & Co with its chalkboard walls, glorious wood paneling, and dimly lit ambience to spare during peak morning hours where no one should have been paying attention to her, sorrow radiated around Alice like a mushroom cloud. She had gone there to discourage herself from wallowing alone in her now half-empty dorm room. And also from crying.

(But *God*, did she feel like giving her tear ducts a solid workout.)

“I’m not having a bad day. I’m fine. Really.”

“You’ve been watching baby animal videos since you got here and I have yet to hear a single giggle float out of this corner. You forget I know you. Something is definitely up.”

“I’ve dubbed this the Misery Corner. I’m infected.”

A girl who looked stressed to death sat two tables over from Alice. She stared at nothing, eyes open, watery, and bloodshot. Her fists pulled the sleeves on her jacket taut. The cuffs stretched across the back of her trembling hands.

Gloom flowed out of the girl in waves, dimming her shine. Goodness, did she look like she needed a hug. Several hugs and probably an hour of silent cuddling. Alice (a steadfast believer in the power of hugs) loved affection but knew it wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea.

Moschoula peeked at Alice’s screen. “I mean, look at that! That at least deserves half a smile.”

Presently, a baby badger rolled around in a pile of blankets, and the sight did make Alice’s heart *squeeeeeee* with mounting intensity.

Instead, she sighed. *Sighed* before biting on her lower lip. “I’m fine.”

Moschoula smiled, kind and concerned. Alice loved that they were friends—and not just because Moschoula started making her to-go order as soon as she spotted her walking down the street and gave her free pastries. She had met Moschoula and her friends during a Pride

rally at school. She was the only girl in that group who didn't snub Alice for being bi.

(And the only person she met who had an undying love for watching gymnastics.)

Glancing over her shoulder, Moschoula said, "I have to get back. Holler if you need anything." She grinned as she backed away. "Anything at all."

Alice nodded before sliding her headphones on. She switched from videos to a music playlist aptly titled *Nobody Knows* after a song by one of her favorite one-hit wonders and laid her head on the cool wood of the table.

If she was being honest, she wasn't in love with Margot, but they had had potential! She had even planned to tell her dad she had a girlfriend (with hopes he would break it very *gently* to her mom). Even her best friend, Feenie, had approved of Margot, which was rare as hell.

(Excluding her boyfriend, Ryan, and Alice, Feenie hated everyone, including her own biological family.)

A pool of tears collected in the space between Alice's eyes and the bridge of her nose. When she blinked, the first drop crested over and rolled down, splashing on the table. She wiped it away before anyone who cared enough to look would see.

It had all been Margot's idea. She had kissed Alice first. She had convinced her to date. She had wanted this, wanted her. And Alice had fallen for it and Margot and everything they were and could be. She had believed in Margot and their relationship. Had thought herself to death about it, and each night it resurrected itself in her dreams. Margot made her want this specific brand of happiness. Made her believe she could have it.

Feeling stupid didn't even cover it.

How could Margot say something like that?

What made sex so integral that people couldn't separate the emotional love they felt from one physical act?

Love shouldn't hinge solely on exposing your physical body to another person. Love was intangible. Universal. It was whatever someone wanted it to be and should be respected as such. For Alice, it was staying up late and talking about nothing and everything and anything because you didn't want to sleep—you'd miss them too much. It was catching yourself smiling at them because *wow, how does this person exist??* before they caught you. It was the intimacy of shared secrets. The comfort of unconditional acceptance. It was a confidence in knowing no matter what happened that person would always be there for you.

If Alice couldn't even tell Margot she was asexual, then no, she hadn't been in love. This moment, this unexpected ripple in her timeline, wouldn't kill her. But, universe help her, did she want to press that Fast-Forward button anyway.

(This shit hurt like a bitch.)

(A very persistent bitch that seemed to be trying to claw its way out of Alice's chest.)

A package of Kleenex landed on the table near her head. Startled, she sat up and uncovered one ear.

Moschoula slid into the seat across from her with her apron slung over her shoulder.

"I'm on break," she said. "You're crying. We should talk."

"Margot broke up with me," Alice blurted.

"That sucks. I'm sorry." She nudged the Kleenex toward her.

Alice nodded in acknowledgment of her sympathy while trying to blow her nose without honking like a goose.

"I thought things were good between you. Did she say why?"

By the grace of all things floofy, she managed not to start grinding her teeth.

“That bad, huh?” Moschoula asked, eyebrows raised. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. But thank you.”

Moschoula was more of a *Hey, let's watch the first three seasons of American Horror Story in one weekend* than a *Hey, my heart hurts. Please listen to me and make me feel better* kind of friend.

“Are we still on for Friday morning?” They had lived two rooms apart in the same dorm, two semesters in a row. Moschoula had volunteered to help Alice load up her rented moving truck, but couldn't help unload. She had a plane to catch for a summer vacation on some wondrous island paradise.

“Yeah. Those boxes aren't going to move themselves. I appreciate you, your time, and your manpower in advance.”

“You can appreciate me by ordering anchovies on the pizza you bribed me with.”

Alice's face pinched in disgust. “But they're so salty and taste like ocean. Why?”

“It's what I want.”

“Well, I want you to fit me into your suitcase, but you're not even willing to try.”

Moschoula tapped the back of Alice's hand. “It's good to see you smile.”

“Only for you.”

“You know my girlfriend hates it when you say things like that to me.”

“Adoration and continuous compliments are how I express my affections.” Alice rolled her eyes. “And it's not like I say it in front of her. There's literally nothing to be jealous of.”

Moschoula sighed. “I think she just wants you to, uh, compliment her, too.”

“Oh.” Alice pursed her lips. “I thought she didn't like me, but

I think I can arrange that.” The alarm on her phone beeped: her ten-minute warning before her final class started. She lived (and thrived) by the constant alarms she set for herself throughout the day. If it weren’t on her calendar to remind her, she would most likely forget to do the thing. “I feel like throwing up, to be honest. On top of everything else, I’m about to fail this math test. Finals are absolute murder on my digestive system,” Alice said, packing up.

“You got this. I have full faith in your mathematical abilities. Walk you out?”

“No need. Hug me, please?”

“Always.” Moschoula gave great hugs. Just the right amount of pressure, none of that awkward back patting, and she always smelled like lemons. “I’m going to miss you when I leave.” She pulled back. “Cheer up, Charlie.”

“Great. Now I want chocolate. And Fizzy Lifting Drink.”

“Good luck on that last one.”

“All those juice bars sell edible grass now, so it should be on the way. Some scientists somewhere will figure it out soon.” Alice laughed for the first time in seventeen hours and twenty-nine minutes. It was small, barely more than an amused chuckle, but it was there all the same. Thank God for her friends. What would she ever do without them?

(God willing, she would never, ever have to find out.)

CHAPTER

3

I don't understand how you have so much stuff. You had half a room. Half!" Feenie complained, pulling her long blond hair into a ponytail. "You knew how small it was in here."

Alice had met Serafina (Feenie if you knew what was good for you) on the first day of kindergarten. She had walked right on up to Alice, offered half of her cherry Fruit Roll-Up, and kindly and without preamble declared herself Alice's best friend.

(Obviously, the title stuck.)

"It'll all fit," Alice said. "My dad got me these cool floating shelves and stackable storage bins."

Her new room wasn't so much a bedroom as it was a small den—the curious 0.5 in Feenie and Ryan's 1.5-bedroom apartment that they may have not-so-legally agreed to sublet to her. Truth be told, if she stood in the middle of the room and stretched her arms out, she could almost touch the walls. And the ceiling. But a tiny windowless hole in the wall wouldn't deter her from artfully designing this room within an inch of its life. There were pictures on Pinterest of

rooms the same size, or smaller, where people had worked sheer decor magic.

Personally, Alice was obsessed with color and clutter, but she could separate herself from what the room needed. It spoke to her instantly—one single word: minimalist.

A monochromatic theme with the tiniest swaths of soft colors. Her twin mattress would line up nicely in the corner along the far wall with her easily paintable nightstand next to it. She could loan her TV to the living room, since it was bigger than Feenie and Ryan's, to reduce the overcrowded feel. Washed-out black-and-white posters and fan art from her favorite TV shows and movies would function as wallpaper. She would hang soft white Christmas lights and lanterns. And buy a pale, lilac-colored comforter.

(As much as it pained her, there wasn't much she could do about the ugly brown carpet.)

"It'll take some doing," she said, still semi-lost in her vision. The final result would be a soft Cutie Code: Pale Yellow—comforting as sunshine. "But I'll make it work."

"I'm sure." Feenie rolled her eyes. "I'm going back to the truck."

"Aye, aye, Captain, my Captain." An old joke of theirs that would never die. She eyed Feenie's bare shoulders. "Are you wearing sunscreen? You know your skin goes from snowy owl to boiled lobster in a matter of minutes."

"I love you." She laughed, heading for the door. "But you still have too much shit."

Feenie didn't walk—she stomped everywhere she went. Alice could never figure out if she genuinely walked hard or if she did it on purpose to make her seem more intimidating. The semipermanent scowl on her face certainly took care of that.

(Not to mention the few scars on her face she'd earned from fighting whenever she felt disrespected—which Alice learned meant just

about any reason. Feenie's pride and joy was the one that cut straight through her top lip on the left.)

Alice began unpacking the first box, wincing at the contents. Instead of sorting through her desk, it seemed far more efficient to pull out the entire drawer and upend the contents. *Way to go, Past Alice*, she thought, sorting through the wreckage. Near the bottom, a photo of her and Margot stuck to a ticket for a concert they had attended during her first semester.

Freshman move-in day last year had been eventful to say the least.

She noticed Margo's giant mound of hair before anything else about her—it was that natural sunlit blond tempered with streaks of light and dark brown that sent customers in droves to hair salons. It complemented her beautiful olive skin, soft gray eyes, and that wickedly easy smile always up for a challenge.

She was Cutie Code: Orange-Red and then she was just Margot before becoming Alice's Margot, but now she wasn't anything.

Because Alice was a Corpse.

Because she was *unnatural* and *incapable* of loving someone.

(God, when in the hell was this going to stop hurting?)

Alice's shoulders began to shake as silent tears flowed out of her.

"Oh, Buttons," Ryan said. He set down a box in the last free cubic inch of space on the floor.

Alice and Feenie had met Ryan at the same time—sixth-grade social studies class. The majority of Ryan's baby fat had melted away in tenth grade when he joined the swim team, but she still saw him as the tan, chubby-checked boy with giant glasses, dark brown hair in a bowl cut, who didn't like talking because of his thick Tagalog accent (which had also seemed to melt away during high school). The thing she remembered most, though, was when she used to make him laugh so hard, he'd have a wheezing fit.

"It's fine." She swiped underneath her eyes. "I'm fine."

He plucked the picture from her fingers. “It’s for your own good,” he said when she protested. “I just can’t believe she said that to you. I mean, I know you’re not lying, but she seemed so nice.”

“It’s the nice ones you have to watch out for.” She crossed her arms. “Or whatever that stupid saying is. Why can’t I find someone who loves being with me, as is, as much as I love being with them? Romantically. Am I asking for too much?”

“I say this cautiously because it’s not the only answer, but maybe try dating someone who’s ace, too.”

She scoffed. “Long-distance relationships are not my jam, and that’s probably all I’d find. The Internet is great, a lot of my friends live there, but I want a partner who’s here with me.” She flicked a white speck off a black stuffed bear before setting it down on her sliver of a desk. The thing was barely three feet wide. “I’m tired of putting myself out there,” she mumbled.

“You can’t keep letting this get to you.” Ryan sighed, a deep and doleful sound that made Alice’s face pucker. “It’s not healthy.”

She side-eyed him, matching his pity with irritation. “Because you have *so* much experience with breakups.”

“We’ve broken up before.”

“For like a week two years ago. And I won’t name names, but I distinctly remember reading *someone’s* terrible poetry blog in the name of friendship when that *someone* pissed Feenie off.” She looked him dead in the eye. “*Someone.*”

“That was different. I was young and emotional.” He laughed. “My poetry wasn’t *terrible.*”

“It was. Still is. The Internet is forever and you never deleted that blog.” She giggled as his eyes widened.

“Well.” He cleared his throat. “This isn’t about me. If you need to cry, then cry, but just promise me you won’t do it in front of Feenie, please.” He glanced at the doorway before lowering his voice. “I’ve

already had to talk her out of driving to Margot's house this week. Twice."

"But she lives in Iowa."

"Twice," he repeated. "You know how she gets."

Feenie had always been (lovingly) overprotective of Alice. If she had told Feenie what Margot had actually said, Feenie would probably disappear into the night and her mug shot would be everywhere in the morning.

Technically, if it weren't for Feenie, Alice would have never met Margot.

The apartment complex ran specials for college students, waiving the need for a cosigner as long as they had proof of enrollment and paid three months up front instead of two. They had even allowed pets. (Their cat, Glorificus, was most likely snoring under the couch.)

Apparently Ryan's application for the apartment got accepted at the last minute and *apparently* it was too good of a deal to pass up. Instead of all three of them living on campus at Bowen State University, they had both ditched her in favor of shacking up together.

Angry wasn't the word, but Alice's hurt settled in with a nice bitter aftertaste. She loved them, so she got over it. Before she even had time to mentally prepare herself for living with a stranger, Margot had breezed into her life. . . .

"Again with the waterworks," Ryan said with affection. He pulled her into a hug, resting his chin on the top of her head. "There's a few more boxes. We'll take the truck back to the rental place so you don't have to worry about it."

He walked away, pausing at the door. "I know it sucks, but breaking up isn't the end of the world."

She loved Ryan, truly did with her whole heart, and wouldn't wish a breakup on anyone, but that boy needed some perspective. He was delusional if he expected her to believe that he wouldn't fall apart if

Feenie left. She was the only girlfriend he had ever had. Once, when they were ever so slightly high, he crowed on and on about how lucky he had been to find Feenie so early and how he wouldn't have to spend the rest of his life searching for The One.

"You believe in that?" Alice had asked.

"Yeah. Soulmates are real. God says so. Watch, one day you'll find yours and you're going to remember this moment and finally begin to respect and revere me for the prophet that I am. He has a plan for us all."

(Being high tended to turn Ryan's brain into sentimental and religious mush.)

Back then, Alice had shaken her head at him. She didn't even know if she had wanted to date yet, but she also didn't have any doubts about her asexuality. She had spent countless hours thinking and coming to terms with what that meant, the kind of future she wanted to have, and if that could possibly include another person.

The bottom line was her body had never shown so much as a flicker of sexual interest in anyone. But that didn't mean she liked being alone. That didn't mean she wasn't lonely. That didn't mean she didn't want romance and didn't want to fall in love. It didn't mean she couldn't love someone just as fiercely as they loved her.

THE AFTERNOON BECAME a blur of movement. Ryan followed her unpacking lead; his extra inches of height came in handy, and he was good with a hammer. Feenie mostly complained. They had stopped for lunch, sitting on the floor and using upturned boxes as tables, and decided to watch a show about an out-of-control police precinct with a hilarious cast of characters when Alice's phone rang.

(A large pizza—half extra cheese, half pineapple, and real bacon. Not that Canadian stuff.)

(It's ham. Canadian bacon is literally ham.)

"It's my parents," Alice explained, getting up and stepping out of the room. "Hi, Mom."

"How are you? What are you doing?" Her mom had a remarkably high speaking voice and her singing voice was the star of their church's choir. No one expected her to sound the way she did—like a Disney Princess in action.

"Good. I'm unpacking now." She braced herself during the extra beat of silence.

"I'm happy that you're happy, but I really don't understand why you couldn't move home for the summer. It's not too late, sweetie. Your room is still set up."

She leaned against the wall, suppressing a sigh. "I'm not moving back, Mom. How's Christy?"

"Tired, worried, but coping. Nothing unusual."

"And Adam?"

"He's strong for Christy. I know he wishes you were here right now."

"Mom, please stop. I feel bad enough."

Her brother, Adam, and his wife, Christy, were having a difficult first pregnancy. They had planned to move in with their parents for extra support and to save money on rent and child care for a little bit. The baby wasn't due until October. Alice had already written her speeches to plead, beg, and offer to donate her right foot to have the excused time off from school. It was imperative for her to be there when the baby first opened their eyes. And for their first smile. And first laugh. However long that took.

(Jesus, she couldn't wait to meet that kid.)

"You can be in charge of decorating the baby's nursery. I'm sure Christy would love for you to take over to help reduce her stress levels."

"I can't. Summer school, remember? Besides, I love California. California loves me."

"Online classes can be done from anywhere. Your school won't know you're ten hours away from campus. I checked your student account this morning—"

"Mom, you promised you wouldn't do that." She tried not to whine, but she was BUSTED. She had zero intention of attending the summer intersession.

"I wanted to pay for your class. Why haven't you signed up yet?" she said. "And it still says 'undeclared.' What did we talk about?"

They didn't talk about anything. Her mom had lectured her for an hour about how the foundations of a good law degree were rooted in political science. Alice came from a family of lawyers (her mom, her dad, and her brother) and local politicians (her newly elected sister, Mayor Aisha R. Johnson). The expectation was clear: Alice would attend law school.

(Or be disowned.)

(Probably.)

(Okay, maybe not, but the penalty would be steep.)

"I'm going to. I've been busy. I'm busy now." Alice sighed. "I have to go. Okay, I'm hanging up, I love you, kiss Daddy for me, bye."

Ryan had paused the episode while they waited for her to return.

(Her absence didn't stop them from devouring half the pizza, though. And she thought *she* ate fast.)

"I am having a terrible week," Alice announced as her phone chimed.

I am going to pretend like you didn't
just hang up on me, young lady.
Call your sister.

"Damn it. Margot hates me or something, my mom is practically breathing fire at me, and now she wants me to call Aisha, who is really

going to roast me. What's next? Am I going to fall and break both my ankles?"

"I wouldn't say that," Ryan warned. "Don't put that out there."

"All I'm saying is everything happens in threes. Something else is going to happen. I can feel it." She stretched out on the floor next to Feenie and rolled onto her back, groaning at the ceiling. "I love my mom. My parents take good care of me. I love my mom. My parents take good care of me."

"Is that some kind of mantra?" Feenie tapped Alice's nose. "Say it enough and you'll believe it?"

"No, I believe it. It can be *really* hard to remember that sometimes." She sat up. "She went into my student account to pay for my summer intercession class even though we agreed that I would do it myself."

Ryan gave her a funny look. "So what?"

"It's my responsibility. And now she's irritated because I didn't sign up yet or declare my major when neither of those things are any of her business."

"But you don't get financial aid?" He reached for another slice. "I'm failing to see the problem, Buttons."

Her parents paid almost all her tuition. The only reason why they made her pay anything at all was to encourage her to get a job instead of lazing about. She had found a quiet job at the county library, and for the first time in her life she had been able to tell them that she didn't need a spending allowance. She hated trying to explain why her sense of pride shot through the damn roof during that conversation. Most people didn't understand.

She wasn't rich—her parents were. They made that distinction quite clear to her anytime she stepped out of line. She had lived under their roof, in their house, and had to follow their rules. They expected courtesy and good grades and for her chores to be done. In return, they gave her the childhood they never got to have.

But she wasn't a kid anymore.

"She just told you," Feenie said. "It was Alice's responsibility. Momma J overstepped. I'd be mad, too. Intentions don't change impact."

"True, but it was a positive intention. You can still be grateful," said Ryan.

Alice puffed up her cheeks. "I *am* grateful. I just—I don't think wanting the tiniest bit of autonomy is a bad thing."

How else was she supposed to learn? Wait for the magical Adulting Fairy to show up and give her private lessons?

"If my mom did that, I wouldn't be complaining," Ryan said.

"Well, it's not your mom. So . . .," Alice muttered. "And you're not the one she's forcing into law school. Free education or not, I'm not trying to be there, no way."

"Hear, hear!" Feenie raised her can. "Fuck parental expectations."

Ryan laughed. "What do you want to do instead?"

"Can I major in TV? I'll get my bachelor's in Netflix-ities and my master's in Hulu-ology." Alice grabbed the remote and pressed Play.

CHAPTER

4

Being on time pleased Alice past the point of reason. It put an extra bounce in her step, a song in her heart, as she entered the library.

Unlike the fancy college library that aimed for a sterilized, industrious, *all studying all the time* sort of feel, this one was run by the county and made its patrons feel at home. The automatic sliding glass doors opened to a large space with multiple high-arched windows that almost eliminated the need for artificial lighting. Books were housed on row after row of black metal bookcases and the carpet, originally installed long before she'd been born, had slowly transformed from its initial deep red to a dark purple, but managed to appear as if the color had been purposely selected.

To the left, the children's section was filled with bright colors and characters from books painted on the walls by local artists. All the furniture had recently been reorganized (by none other than Alice) to maximize the floor space for groups and create quiet nooks for solitary readers. The media center began on the right side. Row upon row

of computers bordered the beginning of the massive fiction section and digital media available for checkout.

She waved at Cara Sanchez, the head librarian. At five feet even, she took home the award for World's Most Adorable Boss. Round and cheerful with a pixie haircut, she topped off her look with flawless makeup and a bold red lip. She made you want to pick her up, put her in your pocket, and then run because abduction was illegal.

Cara waved back before pointing toward the table closest to the elevator.

Alice looked—her Cutie Code™ immediately shot up to Red.

(That hadn't happened at first sight since the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show last year and never in the wild.)

She stopped in front of the elevator, facing forward, and pressed the button. A curious, nervous sensation wriggled and rooted itself down inside her chest. Alice looked over her shoulder again, blinking rapidly at the person reading on his phone, completely oblivious.

Only his profile was visible. Tanned skin. Dark eyebrows. Strong chin. And a tiny curl of hair brushing against his forehead. He held his thumbnail in between his teeth, his index finger curving over his top lip, the rest of his hand curled into a loose fist. Most likely to hide his smile—whatever he was reading was making him adorably happy.

Her Cutie Code™ ticked upward until it strained against the top.

The elevator pinged. Alice shrugged off the sensation and walked inside. Turning around, she pressed the button for the fifth floor.

Just as the doors began to close, the Cutie Code: Red person in question lifted his head, looking right at Alice. She staggered backward, clutching the banister as the elevator began to ascend.

Kill Bill sirens blared in Alice's head.

The elevator hummed and whirled, the floors illuminated and darkened as they were passed, and the air inside wrapped her in its warm, fake-pine smelling embrace. Same as always. Nothing had changed,

magically making today the day she became moments away from suffering a massive heart attack.

Sure, she hadn't worked out for a while (see: ever) and her diet primarily consisted of ramen noodles during lean times (see: all the time), but this was a bit overkill. Her body had, at least, a minimum of fifteen years before she had to worry about that kind of thing.

Out of the elevator and in the hall, she took a moment to catch her breath. It was a hop, skip, and a jump to the break room and she wasn't sure if it was empty. The library didn't have many employees, but the last thing she needed was someone to spot her and ask if she was okay.

(In her mind, she was sure she had that whole *deer about to die in the headlights* look going on.)

Luckily, it was empty, giving her a few more moments to calm all the way down.

The designated break room also held all the employee badges and the time clock. It wasn't much to look at, nor could anything be done about it (Alice had already tried). A rectangular room with three tables in the center, lined on either side with chairs. The walls were covered with cliché inspirational wall art, government-required labor posters, and employee notices. It had built-in lights, but Alice turned them off, opting to use the natural bit of light that came in through the tinted window.

Essie had taped a Post-it to Alice's badge. Alice blew out a huff of breath. Right, then. Time for work. The continued cute analysis would have to wait.

(Maybe he would still be downstairs. . . .)

(FOCUS, WOMAN!)

(Right!)

She peeled the note off her badge, clocking in as she read it:

I had to step out—be right back! Please show Takumi how to clock in and make a copy of the handbook. THANK YOU!

“Who the hell is Takumi?” She folded the Post-it note in half before tossing it in the trash. Takumi Shibue had a temporary badge on the wall already, but it didn’t have a picture yet.

Back downstairs, she stood behind the information desk waiting for the handbook to finish printing when she felt that *itch* between her shoulder blades when someone stared too long. She tried to take a sly peek to see who it was and . . . *Jesus*.

(Sweet God in heaven, have mercy on her soul.)

Her Cutie Code™ blasted straight past the Red zone. If it were a pressure gauge, the glass would have cracked right down the middle.

He was gorgeous—and that was not a word Alice threw around lightly. Not just “*Hi, I’m the new boy next door*” gorgeous, but the kind of gorgeous that would make you slap your mama. The kind of gorgeous you’d stab your best friend of twenty years in the back, set her house on fire, and drive off into the sunset with her husband for. *Have sex in the break room at work even though you know there are security cameras in there* gorgeous.

As if she’d actually do any of those things.

She always laughed at characters who lost every last drop of their common sense on TV and in movies when someone too attractive for words crossed their path. If this guy was on a show, he’d be considered the kind of gorgeous that would cause midseason plot twists and act-two spinouts, leaving the viewer on the edge of their seat because their beloved characters were goners after looking into those dark brown eyes.

And he stared at her.

(Too much cute.)

(A veritable cutie-induced overload.)

There was a place for cute and every cute in its place. Whoever he was hadn't just exceeded her scale. He had broken it.

Cutie Code: Black—the Next Generation.

It had to either be him or the heart attack had been replaced by a disorienting fever virus. This was how it happened in the movies: some poor soul (Alice) was doing great, having a perfectly normal (and punctual!) day. And then, in some innocuous way, they'd have contact with Patient Zero (*him*) and boom—uncontrollable sweating, fever, chills, hemorrhaging, and then . . . death.

This wouldn't kill her (possibly), but she had an idea what it was.

Attraction: The Final Frontier.

The Fatal-est Attraction.

Death Becomes Attraction.

"Do you really need all those copies?" Cara asked.

Alice snapped out of her internal loop. "What?" She looked down. "Crap!" Her finger must have slipped. Instead of one copy she had set it to eleven. She pushed the Cancel button over and over, as if that would make the machine get the message faster.

Cara chuckled. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Peachy." Alice rubbed a hand over her face. "Hey, is that guy over there waiting for someone to help him or something?"

"Yeah. You. That's the new employee, Takumi."

"*That's Takumi?*" she hush-whispered.

"Yes," Cara said slowly. "He's the one Essie wants you to intro."

"Him?" She cleared her throat. "You're sure?"

"He's the only new hire. You're the only assistant. I'm sure," she deadpanned. "Do you know him?"

"Nope. Never seen him before in my life."

"Right." She laughed. "Here he comes. If you need help, you know where to find me."

Oh no. Not yet. If she could just—

“You’re Alice, right? Essie described what you looked like. I figured I should probably ask instead of staring at you,” Takumi said.

He was tall enough to make her look up.

“Yes. I am. Alice. That is me,” she said, shaking his hand. She prayed he didn’t notice her clammy hands. That he didn’t wipe his hands on his pants because she was pretty sure she’d die of embarrassment.

“I’m Takumi.”

He smiled.

Her eye twitched.

Everything was going *fabulously*.

“This way.” She held out her hand toward the elevator. Takumi had broad shoulders and strong hands and dark brown eyes, and THAT SMILE should have been criminal.

The elevator pinged as soon as she pressed the button.

“After you,” he offered.

She felt like she was having an out-of-body experience. She didn’t have the capacity to think about that other *thing*, so she focused on the cute. She had dreams about this level of cute. They were never supposed to manifest into reality.

He had such a nice jaw. And shiny, shiny hair that had been dyed darkest dark blue. And, and he smelled amazing.

When his gaze turned to her, her eyes zipped to her feet.

“Have you worked here long?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah.”

He hesitated then said, “What’s your favorite thing about it?”

The answer formed itself in Alice’s mind. A beautiful sentence full of wit that would impress the hell out of him. But somehow, during

the near-instantaneous route from her brain to her mouth, the words decided to have a sudden-death match. The sole victor? “Things.”

He waited for her to continue and when she didn’t, he chuckled. “You’re not very talkative, are you?”

She shook her head.

“That’s okay.” He smiled, laughing a little.

The elevator pinged and opened. Takumi held out his hand (again!!!) for her to go first. Alice marched out of that elevator like she was in a band on a football field in the middle of the summer, complete with sweat trickling down her back. After she had opened the first door on her left, she stood in front of it to let him pass.

“This is the break room,” she said, steeping in a nice cup of self-loathing.

He walked by her and she took a deep breath to calm herself—nope. That was a lie. Alice had had her first creepy moment, crowning herself the creepiest Creepy McCreeperton in existence.

“Badges.” She pointed to the wall.

“Do I clock in?”

“Yes.”

“And my badge should be on the wall?” he asked, already looking.

“Alphabetical. Last name.”

“I noticed that.”

“Right. Of course.”

He grinned, making eye contact with Alice. She stood up straighter, holding her breath, counting to ten, and releasing it slowly.

Takumi twirled his badge between his fingers. “So what do I do?”

Alice pointed to the red box. “Just swipe it and you’re set. Clock in and out for lunch. Breaks are paid time.”

“Now what?”

“I’m not sure exactly. Essie only wanted me to show you how to

clock in. I guess you can wait here for her to come back. I have to get to work.”

“Is that for me?”

Alice handed him the forgotten handbook she’d been holding the entire time.

“Okay. Bye.”

CHAPTER

5

Why are you crying? What happened?” Feenie’s concerned face filled the screen on Alice’s phone.

She had been curled under her blankets for the past hour trying to get it together. Gasping hiccups kept ripping out of her throat, her nose wasn’t so much a nose anymore, rather a snot-filled mess, and her eyes were oh so swollen. She was so distraught she had even skipped dinner.

(Alice did not skip meals, ever.)

(That was tantamount to treason in Alice-Land.)

“H-he l-looked at m-me a-and I—” She hadn’t cried this hard since she had watched the *Fringe* series finale.

“I can’t understand you. Take a breath, woman.”

She breathed in and it came out as a sob. “And h-he probably th-thinks I’m really stupid n-now.”

“Oh, good God. I take an emergency break to talk to you and you’re incoherent,” Feenie mumbled. “Who is *he*?”

That made Alice cry even harder, because guilt was an abusive bastard.

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what happened.” Feenie sighed. She pinched the bridge of her nose, shaking her head. “Would you rather talk to Ryan? He’s better than me with the emotional crying thing.”

“No.” Feenie was the only person she wanted to talk to about *him*.

“Then suck it up and talk.”

In elementary school, while all of Alice’s friends had talked about boys they liked, she had kept quiet.

In middle school, she had pretended to have a crush on Patrick Furlong so she would have someone to talk about, too.

(This was where she had begun to perfect the art of playing along.)

In high school, Alice had gone all out, pretending to be hopelessly in love with Sam Oliphant. She had damn near snatched the *this love is our destiny* crown right off Theresa Lopez-Fitzgerald Crane Winthrop’s head.

(*Passions* remained the only soap opera Alice had ever watched.)

But this had been where Alice messed up. Turned out, Sam had a thing for Alice, too. A different kind of thing, but a thing nonetheless.

He had asked her out. She *had* to say yes.

Alice had been trying to sort out the difference between romantic attraction (which she felt) and sexual attraction (which she didn’t). By the end of their first week together, she knew for a fact that she didn’t even want to be Sam’s friend anymore. He was an awful human being. A human-shaped garbage fire. A waste of space and genetic material.

But finally, *finally*, she fit in perfectly with her friends.

(Peer pressure was a helluva drug.)

They all had someone and now she did, too. Normal felt like a constant state of despair, but they had stopped teasing her. Had stopped

giving her pitying looks, calling her “innocent” and excluding her from sleepovers because she had nothing romantic to gossip about.

Fast-forward six months, she’s dumped with a new nickname. The Corpse. Because kissing him had been an ordeal to overcome. Because she never seemed interested in touching him (see: jacking him off). Because she had just lay there while Sam had sex with her, and he had told everyone.

Whenever Alice thought about that time, two things stuck out:

One—Francine Loren’s mock whisper in the locker room: “I heard she didn’t moan. Not even when he went down on her.”

Two—the curiously soft sound of Feenie’s fist connecting with Francine’s face layered with the instantaneous crunch of bone cracking.

Alice had stood there covering her mouth like all the other girls, except not in shock. She had tried to hide her smile. Cute girls were not supposed to be violent. Seeing Feenie, fists clenched at her sides silently daring Francine to get up, fierce and seething with unchecked rage, was kind of . . . liberating. Even if it was in a secondhand sort of way.

As harsh as it seemed, Feenie’s confrontation had felt like a gift to Alice.

Feenie standing up for her gave Alice the courage to tell her friend the truth. She had confessed she thought something might be wrong, so one day, after health class, they had talked to their teacher, who then said the word: *asexual*.

Everything had finally made sense. And had given Alice a whole new set of challenges.

Through it all, whenever Alice entered crisis mode about anything ever, she turned to Feenie (or Ryan by proxy). So she told her about Takumi and their botched introduction. As she babbled, Alice’s tears began to recede, her tone returned to normal.

(The sniffles didn't quite go anywhere.)

Feenie eyed her, keeping her face neutral. "And you think you're attracted to him?"

"What else could it be? It's not just me appreciating how cute something is like I usually do. He's *beautiful*, Feenie. I almost melted into primordial soup of Alice."

"And he's so beautiful, you think you want to have sex with him?"

Alice fidgeted in her seat. "I'm not sure."

Feenie gave her a withering look. "Okay, well, how did he make you feel?"

"Like I was stupid. I'm serious! Don't look at me like that. My mind went completely blank and filled up with white noise."

"That still sounds less like you were turned on and more like you thought he was exceptionally hot. He probably just exceeded the Cutie Code."

The Cutie Code™ was a fun game, but it was also a system used for critical analysis—Alice's way of processing the different kinds of attraction everyone else seemed to experience. She only shared her system/game with those whose opinions she trusted, to see how her coding compared to theirs.

It was about *feeling*—the level of emotions it could evoke from her, how likely it would be to make her *squee*, and most important, how did her body physically respond to it.

A naked, muscular male chest was Code: Red for Feenie. Meanwhile, it was Uncodable for Alice. Over time, it expanded to include *everything*, and Alice had become obsessed with it. She clamped her bottom lip between her teeth. A new wave of tears began to coat her eyes.

"Oh," Feenie said. "*Oh*. You checked?"

"After he left, I went to the bathroom. The *plumbing* was on."

Feenie softened, and said, "Oh, sweetie," which made Alice start crying again because Feenie was never *soft* for anyone.

“How could this happen?” Alice wailed. “He didn’t even touch me.”

“Sometimes it just happens,” Feenie said, tone still *soft*. “For me, I just have to be in the mood. Ryan will look at me and it’s go time.”

A deep voice yelled Feenie’s full name in the background. She turned in response, face wrinkled in undiluted aggravation and not so politely told him where he *and* his mother could go if he yelled her name like that again.

“I have to go,” she said to Alice. “I swear to God this place would fall apart without me.”

“Okay. I’ll see you at home.”

“That’s right. You live with us now.” Feenie beamed, a question forming in her eyes. “Fuck, I love you. I think sometimes my mind blocks out how much, so every time I remember feels like the first time I’m realizing it.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“Take it and don’t complain.” Feenie rolled her eyes. “Wipe your face and push what happened to the back of your mind for now. Go do something, like start studying a second language so you can get a fabulous job once you’re fluent. My future sister-wife can’t be poor. Someone has to support my ass.”

Feenie had always joked that she planned to marry both Alice and Ryan. And they would both spoil her rotten.

“Isn’t that Ryan’s job?” She wiped her eyes.

“Well, yeah.” Feenie shrugged. “I figured he’d do all the house stuff and you could support my makeup habit.”

“Sounds like a plan.” She sighed. Only Feenie could have calmed her like this.

“But I’m really glad you called me about this. Everything is going to be okay. Try not to think about it for now.”

“Okay. I won’t.”

“Love you.”

Alice adored the way Feenie said *good-bye*. It was always some variation of “I love you.” And if she forgot, Alice would get a text within thirty seconds letting her know.

Feenie was right. She needed to push it to the back of her mind, get some perspective. Tomorrow, when she got to work, everything would be the way it was before she ever laid eyes on Takumi. She’d call it a fluke, yes, a one-off event, due to her body short-circuiting from stress. It would *not* happen again.