

## chapter 1

### I SLEEP WITH ALL MY BEDROOM WINDOWS

open as habit, so I'm roused from my sleep by the repetitive shrieking of a great blue heron that must be nesting near the man-made lake in the center of the apartment complex. *Where are my soft-spoken finches and friendly bluebirds?* I wonder with a dreamy smile. Not in Tallahassee, apparently.

The heron is loud and insistent, refusing to be ignored. I need to get out of bed, anyway—a long, busy day awaits. I picture Jake's face—that bemused close-lipped smile, those gentle blue eyes—and memories of last summer flood my mind and my heart. I throw back my covers in a burst of anticipation. A long, busy, *fabulous* day awaits.

My feet hit the ground and I pause, as it crosses my mind that no matter how I arrange my schedule, there's no way to squeeze in my daily workout. I run through the computations automatically—how many workouts I've completed this week to date, how long each one was, approximately how many calories were burned, and if the number's enough to make up for the

special dinner I have planned. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to power down the invisible calculator. I'll fixate on it if I let myself, and I have too many other things to accomplish today.

I need energy. Protein. Protein is a must.

Eating a carton of Greek yogurt at my kitchen counter, I wait for the frying pan to heat so I can whip up an egg white omelet with spinach and tomato. The loaf of fresh-baked bread calls to me from the bread box, but I turn my back and ignore it. *No bread*. Look-overs are in two hours.

Then, carrying my plate and mug to the table when the omelet's finished, I eat facing the window, drinking my coffee through a straw. It's a practice Jake ridicules mercilessly, and I get it, but I don't think *he* fully gets my commitment to my job. When you make your living off your smile, when your smile might be the highlight of a little girl's vacation, you take good care of your smile. You buy whitening strips in bulk at Costco, you favor lipstick with blue-based undertones for maximum pearliness, and sometimes you drink your damn coffee through a straw. Playing princess isn't nearly as easy as I'm sure some people like to believe. It's a dream job, but it's still a job. There's work involved.

I linger over breakfast, enjoying the feel of the sun's rays on my skin as they make their first appearance over the horizon and through the window, listening to the familiar sounds of a community coming to life around me. I like the company of the neighbors I don't know. It wasn't my plan to live alone, but when hunting those coveted three-month sublets, you take what you can get. Me, I prefer the company of others, and a single costs more than I'd like to spend on rent. I tried to talk Jake into being roomies, but right away I'd sensed his hesitation. So I'd laughed the idea off, dropped the subject at once.

It doesn't matter that his name's not on the lease agreement. He'll be spending enough time here, anyway. Just like last year.

I shower after breakfast, then walk through the apartment in my robe, guy-proofing it the best I can. I put the tampons back under the sink. Hide the little notebook beside the scale that I use as a log. Unload the snacks I picked up at the twenty-four-hour convenient mart late last night after work. I wrinkle my nose at the bag of Funyuns I deigned to purchase. They're probably the most disgusting excuse for food on the planet. But he loves them. And I love him.

Then I end up back in my room, grimacing at its decor. It's a girl's room, and there's not much that can be done about that. A wooden plaque over my vanity reads, SHE LEAVES A LITTLE SPARKLE WHEREVER SHE GOES in iridescent paint. The walls are covered in turquoise and gray ZTA memorabilia, much of it bearing the sorority's symbol, the crown. Next to my door is the poster of Audrey Hepburn that I look at before leaving every single day. I BELIEVE IN PINK. I BELIEVE LAUGHTER IS THE BEST CALORIE BURNER. I BELIEVE IN KISSING, KISSING A LOT. I BELIEVE IN BEING STRONG WHEN EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE GOING WRONG. I BELIEVE THAT HAPPY GIRLS ARE THE PRETTIEST GIRLS. I BELIEVE THAT TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY AND I BELIEVE IN MIRACLES. I've had that poster since forever. It's ripped and curling up at the sides. But it reminds me to smile, and it makes me smile.

Taking one final, futile sweep of my room, I gasp in horror when I notice It still sitting atop my bookshelf. My wedding binder.

For the record? I know the binder concept is antiquated (Hello? Pinterest.). I have a Pinterest account I use almost daily, teeming boards titled "Outfit Ideas," "Cinderella," "Princess

Love,” “Zeta Life,” and “Fashion Nexts.” But there is something about my wedding binder . . . and I want it to be tangible. I like to hold it in my hands. It’s pink and sparkly and even involves some floral lace.

I have no idea how Jake would feel about its existence, which actually predates him, but I sense he wouldn’t feel particularly thrilled about it.

A pang of loss and longing pierces my chest. Last summer, a future together had seemed so certain. A ring from Jake . . . someday . . . hadn’t seemed so out of the question. Now . . .

I shake my head, stuffing the binder, along with my negative thoughts, under a pile of romance novels. *“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity,”* I coach myself. *“An optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”*

This summer is about growth. Reconnecting. Not trying to get back to where we were, but getting someplace even better. We’ll figure out the road map as we go.

I nod decidedly, hang my robe inside my closet, and peruse its offerings. It’s time to get dressed. My summer wardrobe consists of gauzy white pieces with gold accents—scarves and belts and shiny thong sandals. But for look-overs, black, with its slimming properties, is the only color that makes sense. I root around until I find a clean pair of cropped black yoga pants and a matching workout tank.

I lean forward toward the full-length mirror, assessing myself, biting my lip. *You have nothing to worry about.* My log assures me this, daily, in black and white. The numbers on the scale are unchanging. I work out religiously, and I haven’t put on weight. My last period was two weeks ago, so no blemishes are on the horizon, either.

As confident as I can be, I grab my tote bag with the glass slipper decal and head toward the door. I notice Kallie and Luke's wedding invitation on the counter from when I opened the mail yesterday, and I fight the urge to squeal. I love me a good wedding, and this one's just around the corner. Better yet, it's an *Enchanted Dominion* wedding, the marriage of two people who met while in character, at the park. Kallie's living the dream.

So many fabulous events to look forward to this summer . . . the wedding . . . the Character Ball in August . . . I've been waiting for summer forever!

When I step out, Rose, one of my neighbors, is locking up down the hall. I do a quick double take, making sure it's not her twin sister before greeting her, but the girl's dress—short and black, with a pleated skirt and wild fuchsia rose pattern, confirms my initial assumption. It must be Rose.

"Hey, lady," she calls over her shoulder. "Off to the gym, per ush?"

"I wish. Look-overs."

She lets out a low growl, which basically sums up how we all feel about look-overs. "That practice should be outlawed. But at least you know you have nothing to worry about."

I smile in appreciation of her reassurance.

"Are you working today?"

Rose is a fellow park princess. She's Rose Red. And she more or less loves the coincidence of it all. I love that she loves the coincidence of it all.

"Yeah." She grimaces. "Over at the Enchanted Beyond, though. Chrissi's off, my sister's at ED, and the new roommate's at training."

"New roommate?"

“Yeah.” Rose nods, gesturing over her shoulder with her thumb. “Katie’s out.”

“What happened? She was only here for, like, three weeks.”

“Naked Rapunzel is what happened.”

I almost drop my keys. “What?”

“Yeah, so Katie wasn’t the brightest bulb,” Rose tells me, leaning against her door and folding her arms. “She let her boyfriend take pictures of her wearing nothing but the wig. Strategically placed, of course. Then she cheated on him. Real smart move. The pictures were up on social media in less than an hour after he found out.”

“Don’t post unsavory princess images on social media,” I recite. “Don’t post *any* princess images on social media.’ That’s basically rule number one!”

“Yup. So she’s out, and Harper’s in.”

“Harper?” I cock my head. “Do we know her?”

A lot of us have worked at the park for a while, and there are few strangers in the cast.

“No, she’s a newbie,” Rose tells me. “Last-minute casting call or something. A shortage of Beauties. I know nothing about her. Except that she’s flying in from somewhere up north today.”

“Well, it can’t be any worse?” I say, trying to be encouraging. “Than Naked Rapunzel?”

“Truuue story.” Rose grimaces. “I think everyone’s gonna be around later if you want to stop over. You could meet the latest member of the Princess Posse.”

I smile at the term. “I would love to, but . . .” My smile grows even bigger. “Jake’s getting in tonight, too.”

She raises an eyebrow. “The illustrious Jake finally shows his face!”

The two of them just missed each other last year. Jake left in August, and Rose and her sister, Camila, arrived in September.

“I’m so damn excited!” I admit.

“No worries, then,” Rose replies, pushing off the door. “Have fun with your lover.”

I push my tote up on my shoulder. “Thanks. I will.”

We exit the building in opposite directions, and I make my way toward the nearest shuttle station that will take me to the main park. I greet everyone along the way—the groundskeepers in identical brown uniforms who keep our fabricated downtown area pristine, fellow cast members whose faces I recognize even if I don’t know their names. The shuttle approaches just as I arrive, and I skip aboard and claim a seat near the front.

It’s a quick, ten-minute ride to the Enchanted Dominion, which is why so many cast members live in the Lakeside apartments. With so many young people on the scene, looking for hook-ups with convenience, it’s pretty much just like being at college.

I’ve barely finished humming the Enchanted Enterprises theme song when the glimmering spires and turrets of the Diamond Palace come into view over the palm trees. Here is the thing—It. Never. Gets. Old. I have seen the Palace, the central feature of the park, come into view over these same trees countless times, dating back to when I was four years old. And every single time, the sight steals my breath just a bit. Every single time, I have to bite back my urge to squee. I really believe this place is infused with magic.

There are some who wait their whole lives to take in this iconic sight, some who get to do so only once in a lifetime. The thought of these people makes me sad. I can’t imagine not getting

to lay eyes on the Palace almost every day. *That's* how much I love this park. *That's* how much I love my job. I feel like the luckiest girl on earth, and it makes the hard work all worth it.

It's why I make the two-hour trip from the southern part of the state a few times a month during the school year, just to pick up random shifts. And it's one of the reasons I can endure look-overs. My stomach flutters nervously. Not that they ever get easier. It's almost like they're waiting for you to fall off your game, become complacent the longer you've been on the throne.

I enter the park through the employee gate and take a detour from the park's main corridor to the hidden employee path, following its twists and turns by memory. I'm almost to the human resources office, still lost in my look-over worries. I'm pulled back to reality when I hear the rapid approach of running feet from behind me, and then . . . someone sort of *leaps* onto my back and almost tackles me with the force of their hug.

My body crumbles under the weight of my attacker, but they've freed me before I actually fall over. "What the . . ."

I whirl around and find a grinning Miller Austin behind me. Any sense of irritation dissipates at once.

Miller's arms are spread wide. "What up, Princess?" he asks, before pulling me into a huge hug.

Miller is exactly my height—five foot seven—and he's got this stocky build about him. He's incredibly active and physical, but hugging Miller is still like hugging a teddy bear. I take a step back and smile at him. "Miller! I didn't think you were back this summer! Aren't you . . ."

"Graduated? Yes, as a matter of fact I am. For two weeks and counting, a fact I'm committed to ignoring as long as possible. Real world, whaaat?"

I giggle. It's good to see Miller again. We didn't hit it off at first, but . . . we got there. We're friends now. It's practically impossible *not* to be friends with Miller.

"So you're honestly working the park again?"

"Yeah, I wasn't kidding." He rubs his short, scruffy beard with the palm of his hand. "I *do* have an agenda, a practical reason for being down here this summer. Otherwise, I'm delaying adulthood as long as I can get away with it. There's no shame in my game."

"Well, cheers to that. Best place on earth for it."

I mean, we basically work in a glamorous, oversize playground for children.

He studies me for a minute, then asks, "How's life been, Lys?"

"Life is good."

It's an automatic answer. Life is always good, isn't it?

"Jake's getting in tonight," I tell him. "He's back for the summer, too."

Miller pauses for a beat, then grins again. "Aww. Prince Charming's back in town. Good stuff."

I snort at the idea. Jake would never actually play a prince. He's an emergency responder in the park.

I nod toward Miller. "So are you moving up in the world this summer or what? You've paid your dues. They have to be willing to let you out of fur by now."

He shrugs. "Maybe if I'd asked them to. But I'm staying in fur by choice. That's my pedigree."

That's right. I'd forgotten that Miller was technically a part of the University of Delaware's cheerleading squad, embodying the school's mascot, the six-foot-tall fightin' blue hen.

"I'm not tall enough to play prince, anyway."

“I think you make the cut.”

Miller laughs. “You’re too nice, Alyssa. I know where I belong.” He pats his roundish belly. “Me and my incredibly impressive physique.”

I roll my eyes in response. “You’re probably onto something. I’m off to suffer look-overs.” I clutch my sides, feeling somewhat queasy.

Miller quickly assesses me, blond hair to flip-flops. Then he averts his eyes before saying, “Come on, now. You know you’ll nail it. I can’t believe they even have the nerve to call you in.”

“Sweet of you, Miller.” I smile, then shrug. “But whatever. It’s policy. Fair is fair.” I take a quick glance at my watch. “And I need to be there, like, now. But we should hang out sometime. Where are you staying this summer?”

“Lakeside.”

“Groovy. Me too.”

“I’m sharing a sublet with Yael. You know her?”

“Umm . . . vaguely?”

An image comes to mind, a hipster type with bright maroon hair and nerd glasses. She’s a fur character, too.

“Yeah, we’re buddies,” Miller says. “We kept up on e-mail during the year, so when I started asking around, she ended up having a spot in her place.”

“Cool.” I look at his friendly face, smile again, and bump my fist against his. “It’s supernice to have you back. Have someone to put me in my place, ya know?”

“That’s what I’m here for, Princess.” He turns to go but calls to me before leaving, “And say ‘hey’ to Jake for me, okay?”

“Will do.”

There’s a bounce in my step as I walk the rest of the way to

HR. I freakin' love the sense of community among cast members. I love being back with my people. The Enchanted Enterprises theme park complex is huge, comprised of three different parks and employing thousands upon thousands of workers. And still it feels like being home, surrounded by family. Running into Miller before look-overs . . . it was a welcome distraction and a nice little boost.

I push the door open, happy to see Diana is working today. She's one of my favorites in the HR department, and she's, well, female at least. It's always a little creepier when a man's doing the looking over.

"Let's get you on your way as quickly as possible, shall we?" she says as a means of greeting. She briefly glances up from her iPad. "No sweat for you, right?" I smile, refusing to let any self-doubt show, and she steps closer to confide in me. "Thank you for making my job easy. I had to send Alana home today. She could barely zip her gown. Twelve pounds in ten days, how does that even *happen*, as hot as it's been? We all should be sweating the pounds off."

Diana looks at me, but I don't have an answer for her.

She shrugs. "Who knows? Maybe a bad breakup she wouldn't cop to, or something." She grabs my shoulders and turns me to the side. "Let me get a shot of your silhouette first."

I turn dutifully, closing my eyes and reminding myself I've suffered much greater humiliations. The ladies on the Panhellenic Council at Coral State College would swear on their pearls that Zeta actives *never* forced pledges to strip down to their skivvies to circle in permanent marker areas on their bodies in need of liposuction.

That doesn't mean it never happened.

At least look-overs have a *purpose*, separate and apart from utter degradation. With so many different girls playing princess, someone has to keep an eye on character consistency and integrity. Park-goers pay a lot of money for us to get it right, to make dreams come true.

Once Diana is done inspecting my body from every angle and recording my weight after it flashes on the screen of the electric scale, she steps forward to inspect my face. She studies my complexion, commands me to smile so she can see my teeth. Then her shoulders collapse in relief and she gives me a hug. “You look great, Sweet Pea. You’re my all-star, Alyssa. Keep up the good work.” She laughs. “If this was an orchestra, you’d be my first chair Cinderella.”

I exhale a quick sigh of relief and smile back at her.

I’m proud of myself.

And I don’t have to do this again for almost two weeks. Thank you, sweet Jesus. I hightail it out of there.

I’m still in my street clothes, so instead of navigating the underground tunnel system that ensures no two Cinderellas are spotted at the same time, I walk through the park to one of the hidden changing areas, where I’ll get into costume, hair, and makeup for the morning and afternoon parade routes. I feel my black clothing absorbing the already-scorching heat of the sun as I walk, and I’m not entirely eager to change into my heavy, formal silk gown. But I’ll do it, and I’ll do it with conviction.

Just before I walk inside the changing area, I pause. I close my eyes, inhale a deep breath through my nose, and center myself. I envision the Alyssa part of me dropping into the soles of my feet, fading away. It’s time to become Cinderella.

It’s a long, arduous process, but when I’m done, I *am*

Cinderella, and I know I'm doing her proud. Riding in the golden coach as the finale to the parade route, my vehicle pulled by real white stallions, is an honor.

I do the parade route, a long loop around the entire park, twice with only a short break in between. It is only May, but it is crazy hot. My hair is limp and damp, itching my scalp and neck beneath the hairpiece. The armpits of my dress are soaked, chafing painfully every time I stand to wave to the masses. By the afternoon route, hunger pains are assaulting my stomach and making me weak in the knees.

But the crowds break out in applause when we come into view to end the show, people leap to their feet to take better pictures, and some little girls even burst into happy tears. I wave and smile like my life depends on it; I make eye contact with as many of those little girls as possible. I love every single minute of it.

By the time I'm done, the late afternoon sun is reflecting against the mirrored panels of the Diamond Palace, bursting into a million rainbow facets. Another beautiful day in the park.

Tonight is sure to be even more beautiful than today, and I can't wait for the sun to set.

## chapter 2

I'M SO NOT A COOK. MY MOM'S NOT A cook—for the better part of my life, dinner consisted of takeout from trendy Italian or Asian fusion restaurants as she attempted to shuttle my sisters and me to our various activities while my dad worked long hours—so no one had ever taught me.

But I can YouTube with the best of them, and I'd done a trial preparation after watching a professional make the recipe online. I'd shared the meal with Rose, Camila, and Chrissi, and they'd seemed to enjoy it.

Now, the chicken breasts are pounded to an even thickness and battered to perfection, the contents of a jar of gourmet roasted tomato sauce are simmering on the stove top, and a bowl of Parmesan cheese I'd grated myself sits beside it. The crème brûlée is chilling in the fridge, just waiting to be caramelized. I'm ready.

I glance at the clock, confirming that I'm still right on schedule. It's go-time for dinner in T-minus thirty minutes. I've checked

Jake's flight status, and I know it's still on time. I can guesstimate how long it will take Jake to collect his bags, get a cab, and travel to the complex. He promised he'd come directly here.

Since this afternoon was such a scorcher, I take my second shower of the day, then dress in a gauzy white calf-length peasant skirt and a subtly cropped white tank top. I let my hair dry naturally and fasten my diamond tiara studs—an end-of-summer present from Jake—onto my earlobes. Then, for sentiment's sake, I slide my feet into the jeweled flip-flops I'd been wearing the day we first met, at the beginning of last summer.

I WAS MORE excited than a kid going to bed on Christmas Eve the night before my new hire orientation at the Dominion. But that next day, I'd gotten stuck on campus later than expected thanks to the World's Longest Anthropology Lecture. There was a ridiculous amount of traffic for midafternoon on a Tuesday, the trip taking me nearly three hours instead of two, and I got there way later than intended. I pushed through the gates and took to running at full speed through the park toward the main HR office, where I'd had my final interview-slash-audition.

Sprinting in flip-flops simply doesn't work. As I made my way down a side corridor, I felt the rubber sole of my shoe catch on an uneven stone a second too late to do anything about it. The next thing I knew, I was splayed out on the walkway, problematic shoe no longer on my foot.

I sat up and twisted around, trying to get my bearings, and all of a sudden . . . there he was.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Backlit by the setting sun, Jake was tall and gorgeous. A serious, scholarly looking kind of gorgeous, with disheveled light brown hair, soft blue eyes, and these cute horn-rimmed glasses. He dropped to his knees at my side and immediately flipped open the lid of a large plastic case he carried.

Glancing at it, I noticed the red first aid emblem on its side.

“I’m okay,” I finally managed to answer. Then, in confusion, “Where did you come from, Mystery Medical Man?” It made him smile.

I hadn’t even heard anyone walking behind me.

“I had to double back to the medical center.” He patted the first aid kit. “Forgot I needed to bring this bad boy with me to orientation.” Then he glanced down at my knees—one was scuffed and white, the other was torn open and bleeding. He gestured toward the kit. “Is it okay if I . . . ?”

“Sure.” I nodded. “Thanks.”

He expertly tugged on a pair of blue latex gloves, and I found myself smiling as he examined my superficial wound with as much concern as I imagined he’d examine a broken bone.

“This is nice of you. I’m Alyssa.”

“Nice to meet you, Alyssa,” he answered, quickly tearing a piece of gauze from the roll. “I’m Jake.”

“You’re heading to orientation? Me too.”

Jake glanced over at me as he continued to work. “Another new hire?”

I nodded with so much emphatic excitement my entire body shook like a wriggly retriever pup and Jake had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. “I’m so excited. Guess I was literally trying to run faster than my legs could carry me.”

“I’ll have you back on your way in no time.” He smiled.

“I gather you’re going to be on the first-response team?”

“Yep. I’ve worked as an EMT since I was seventeen.”

“You a local boy, Jake?”

I’d perused every single website I could find about the ins and outs of working at the park, so I knew a lot of the medical staff hails from the area. I guess it’s less appealing than being character actors, who come from all over the country.

“Not a bit.” He shook his head. “I go to school in Philly. Drexel. Ended up down here this summer on a lark, because my aunt does PR for the park and promised me it would be fun. Said I needed to mix things up a bit, live a little, before I seriously consider med school.”

“I think I have to agree with her.” I winced in anticipation as Jake hovered over my bad knee, spray bottle of antiseptic in hand. But seconds later, I relaxed. “That didn’t hurt a bit.”

He smiled at my comment, that cute little close-lipped smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “These things don’t sting anymore. You must not have skinned your knees in a few years.” He blew a breath of cool air across the knee, aiding the spray in drying, and then placed a bandage over the wound.

The gesture gave me goose bumps. “Thanks. Again,” I told him.

He didn’t answer me. Instead, he reached over to retrieve my lost flip-flop. Jake positioned himself at my feet and slid the shoe back into place. Then, gently, he took one hand and helped me to stand. He smiled down at me. “You’re all fixed up, Cinderella,” he said quietly.

He took my breath away just like that. *How did he know?* I

couldn't get over the perfect irony of my *first* official day as an Enchanted Princess—I mean, the Palace was even in the backdrop—and I was convinced at once that Jake had shown up, right then, to be my personal Prince Charming. I mean, if the shoe fits . . .

We'd walked side by side to orientation, conversation coming easily, and sat next to each other, arms brushing, as seasoned employees gave a very genuine spiel about becoming "the heart of Enchanted Enterprises" and the importance of embodying the Enchanted spirit each and every day in the park. Then we'd separated, as I joined the group of character actors and he joined the medical staff. I'd felt his eyes on me throughout the session, though, and I could almost feel his warm skin still touching mine.

Jake had waited for me after, even though I noticed his group wrapping up fifteen minutes before mine did. When I approached him, he looked down toward the ground, hands clasped behind his back.

"Just wanted to check in on you. I mean, your knee. Make sure it feels okay, that you have full mobility."

I bit back my smile. What a terrible attempt at flirting. The cut was *maybe* an inch across, at most.

"I'm okay," I assured him, smiling coyly up at him. "I'm sure you provided top-notch care."

He was quiet for a minute. "You seemed like you were having a blast tonight." Jake flashed me a quick smile. "Lovin' every minute of it. Like you're really what this place is all about. Seems like it's more than just a job to you."

"It is."

Jake looked into my eyes. "You don't see dedication like that too often. It's nice."

Ten minutes later, he'd worked up the courage to ask for my number. We were inseparable the rest of the summer.

SO THESE STUPID shoes . . . the painful stubbed toe, the scar on my knee . . . it was all worth it. And of course I'm going to wear them tonight.

I fasten my watch around my wrist. If my timing is on point, Jake will be here in approximately fifteen minutes. Time to cook some chicken.

As I walk toward the kitchen, a rumble of thunder in the distance catches my attention and I look out the window. The sky has darkened since I went into my bedroom, and I frown at what has become of such a perfect day. Summer storms come out of nowhere in Florida. I'm glad his flight has already touched down.

I boil the water for the pasta and sauté the chicken, smooth a red-and-white-checkered tablecloth over my small kitchen table, and light the candles atop it. The chicken turns golden. The pasta is a perfect al dente. I put the entrée into the oven to keep warm and sit down to wait, smile already on my face.

Fifteen minutes passes.

*Fifteen minutes is nothing*, I remind myself. Fifteen minutes is a long taxi line, a patch of traffic on the freeway. Did I expect my estimation to be perfectly precise?

At thirty minutes, I call his cell phone. It rings through to voice mail. I start to worry that the chicken is going to dry out and that the pasta will clump together, even though I poured on a bit of olive oil. I mentally debate putting everything in the fridge and reheating it when he gets here.

Forty-five minutes. I start to worry about food poisoning and with a heavy sigh, go ahead and put everything in the fridge. I sit back down and stare worriedly out the window, stomach growling. The sky is nearly black; a downpour is imminent.

I dial his number again. This time I leave a voice mail.

*“Hey, baby, it’s me. Just checking in and making sure you’re okay. Hopefully you’re on your way here. It looks like it’s going to storm. Call me if you can.”*

An hour after I expected Jake to be on my doorstep, I open the bottle of wine I pestered one of the older princesses on staff to purchase with this evening in mind. It’s red, to go with the meal, and since I’m still alone in the apartment, I drink it through a straw.

It goes right to my head, and does nothing to calm my stomach, which is a mess of nerves, or quell the pounding of my heart against my chest. What if something happened? What if something is for-real wrong? How long will it take before I’m forced to consider that?

I stare sadly into his bowl of wilted salad. Where is he? He promised he’d come *right* here. . . .

For the next half hour, I’m paralyzed with indecision and helplessness. And I’m starving. If it hits two hours, I *will* eat, I tell myself.

Then, about an hour and fifty minutes after it was supposed to, my doorbell finally rings.

I literally hurl myself in the direction of the door and fling it open, smile about to split my cheeks, and find . . . a drowned rat.

I mean, I think it’s actually Jake, but it’s kind of hard to tell. His hair is soaking wet, still dripping onto his face, matted against his forehead. A few strands are covering his glasses, which

are muddled with raindrops and half fogged over. His button-down is more wet than dry, and his khaki shorts are the color of mud.

“Oh my God, Jake! What happened to you?”

The taxi surely dropped him off right outside the door. How did he end up like this?

Without waiting for an answer, I pull him inside, dart to the bathroom to grab a towel, and press it into his hands.

Then I pause, looking up at him. He’s here. Jake is really *here*. In person.

“Oh wait . . . first . . .,” I say. I push onto my tiptoes so I can brush my lips against his.

Jake pulls back.

Just for a millisecond, and he corrects the behavior right away, leaning down to kiss me back, but . . . it’s noticeable.

When our lips actually meet, I can feel his smiling against mine, but there is something artificial about it. I did some acting in high school, and I feel like we’re onstage before an invisible audience.

But, considering his appearance, there is clearly a story, and who knows how dramatic it is, so maybe I should let him tell it first before jumping to conclusions about his behavior.

“I was getting so worried! I knew your flight was on time, but then almost two hours passed, and I couldn’t get ahold of you . . .”

“I’m sorry, Alyssa.” When his eyes meet mine, his are pained, and I can tell his apology is real. I think I finally see Jake again. “It was crazy, honestly. There was this cab, and this . . . *criminal* cabbie, and a hit-and-run. The cabbie took off, and it was this old guy on a bike he’d hit, and we had to make sure he was okay, and

wait to report the story to the police and wait for the ambulance, and . . .”

“We?”

Jake freezes, his expression a mask, but then shakes it off. “Yeah, I mean, I shared a cab with someone headed in this direction . . . but anyway, the guy was okay, but at first it was fairly dramatic because he wasn’t making sense. I didn’t have any kind of kit with me, so I tried to run to the nearest pharmacy, and anyway . . .” He pauses to take a breath. “I didn’t even hear my cell in all that chaos. I’m sorry.” He quickly presses his lips against mine again.

I relax a bit. Of course Jake was just helping someone. This is a story that makes sense.

“It’s all right,” I tell him. “I’m just glad you’re okay. Okay and here.”

I squeeze his hand and press myself against his torso, not caring in the least that it’s still very damp.

Jake doesn’t relax into the hug. “It smells great in here,” he says instead. Then, eyeing my wineglass, he grins and asks, “You boozing alone, though?”

“Well, I was about to give up on you.” I glance toward the refrigerator, where my likely ruined dinner is hanging out. “I, umm, . . . wanted to surprise you with dinner.”

“Thanks, Lys.”

I frown. “I hope everything will still taste decent? I made your favorite, chicken Parm. A ton of it.”

He smiles, but it looks strained. “That’s awesome.”

“Go ahead, sit down.” I wave him over to the table. “Have a drink, relax, and I’ll get everything warmed back up.”

“Let me grab some dry clothes first.”

While he changes, I pour him a glass of wine, and then he sits down and drinks it. Quickly.

I boil the water, again, to cook a new batch of noodles. “Did you hear how your finals went?”

“I passed organic chem. Organic chem is over! Forever.”

I raise my glass in his direction. “Cheers to that. Congratulations.”

Jake is on a premed track, and organic chem is a rite of passage. He wants to go to med school after graduating next year, and he hopes to specialize in child psychiatry.

He’s quiet for a minute, twisting the stem of the wineglass between his fingers. “And in other good news . . . I got the CHOP internship for the fall.”

I set the slatted spoon down and stare at the stove top. Because he’s such an all-star scholar, Jake is ahead of schedule in terms of credits and has been looking for an internship for the fall. *Which* internship has been a source of contention. He was considering something in South Carolina, which would have been awesome and allowed for weekend visits. But his first choice is a rotation at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. Meaning when summer ends, he’s gone again.

“That’s . . . good.”

It’s all I can manage.

I hear him sigh. “I know you were hoping for it to work out differently, but this is such a great opportunity, Alyssa.”

I know it is. He’s explained to me the role of child life specialist before. It’s pretty much the noblest thing I can think of, being the person to coach children and parents through life-threatening surgeries, supporting their mental health during some of the most difficult times of their lives.

It's so wrong of me to begrudge him this success. His wanting to do it . . . it's one of the reasons I love him.

So I lift my face bravely and find a real smile. "I'm proud of you," I say honestly. "You'll do great."

"Thank you," he answers stiffly.

I dish up dinner, take two, and as I carry our plates over, I catch him staring pensively out the window. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Jake rubs at the back of his neck. "It's fine. I'm fine."

I sit down across from him, smoothing my skirt. Something is nagging at me. I've been waiting for this night for so long, and something about it . . . I don't know. I haven't seen Jake since Valentine's Day, when I'd insisted he fly down, and I feel all confused as to why it's not living up to the expectation.

I have this problem a lot, though. Where reality doesn't live up to the anticipation of something I've envisioned in my head.

Jake cuts his food and nods toward me. "How'd your finals go? Were they questions like, 'pleats—yay or no way?'"

I tilt my head and reach across the table to poke his hand with my fork. "Very funny. LOL."

Jake just *loves* to joke about my fashion merchandising major.

"There were actually a lot of business courses this semester. My finals were mostly math, Professor Genius."

His eyes sparkle. "Professor Genius?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm going to call you. If you keep mocking me."

"I'm not mocking you. Someone's got to pick out people's clothes. Lord knows it's a skill I don't have. I look much more together when I'm in your company."

Jake winks, and I'm smiling for real, and I think I'm finally relaxed and enjoying my food . . . until I look across the table a

moment later and realize it doesn't seem like he's enjoying his. I watch him, and he's pushing it around his plate more than anything else, taking tiny bites of chicken and ignoring the noodles altogether.

"I'm sorry," I say. "It probably tasted better before. I just wasn't sure if I should keep it hot or . . ."

"No, no, no!" he assures me quickly. "It's excellent, I swear. It's just . . . well . . ." Jake hangs his head. "Everything ended up taking so long, trying to get here, and I hadn't eaten lunch. After everything got sorted out with the accident, I . . . I ended up stopping and grabbing some pizza on my way here."

I set my fork down.

*Don't cry. You will not cry.*

But the damn YouTube videos, the grocery list, the money I'd spent on ingredients and supplies, the thought and the effort . . . how worried I'd been . . . and Jake had grabbed *pizza*.

*It's not his fault. He didn't know.*

*Of course he didn't know. Because nothing is in sync anymore.*

My throat convulses, and I feel the pressure in my chest, and . . . oh *no*.

Tears are *not* part of our perfect first evening together.

"Be right back," I whisper. I stand abruptly and turn my face so he can't see my glistening eyes. "Just running to the bathroom."

I'm quick, but I'm not quick enough, and before I can duck inside the small powder room, I feel Jake's hand closing around my wrist, stopping me in my tracks.

He turns me around, his eyes scanning mine. "Whoa. Hey. Hey. What's wrong?"

I shake my head, still trying to keep him from seeing my face, but I feel them, a couple of tears, spill onto my cheeks.

Jake takes my face in both hands and forces me to look at him. “I’m sorry, baby,” he apologizes quietly. “Really, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were cooking.”

“It was supposed to be a surprise.” My words are choked as I fight to keep more tears from falling. “I just . . . I worked so hard, and I have dessert ready, too . . . crème brûlée, and I bought that stupid little torch, ya know? And now it’s all ruined, and I just feel like . . .”

I feel sad.

I feel sad, and I’m pretty sure it’s not just about dinner, but dinner is something I can wrap my head around being sad about.

“I know you worked hard, and I really appreciate it, okay?” He taps my chin. “Look at me.”

I raise my watery eyes to his gentle baby blues. “It was so good of you. You are so good, and”—his eyes sweep over me—“you look gorgeous, Alyssa, and I’m . . . I’m happy to see you. I am, you know that, right?”

My head falls.

Suddenly I’m blurting out the truth. I only have the nerve to speak to the carpet, not Jake, as I say what’s on my mind. “I’m just not entirely sure you one hundred percent want to be here.”

In Florida. With me. Any of it.

When I make myself look back up, uncertainty is flickering in his eyes. I hate it. It’s not what I want to see there.

“Look. I know these past few months, we’ve had a rough patch.” Jake squeezes my hands. “But if I didn’t care to figure this out with you, if I wasn’t interested in fixing that, I wouldn’t be here, okay?”

I don’t answer him. I don’t want to acknowledge that this is *hard* now. I just want it to be fixed. Now.

Last summer had been effortless.

“Come here,” he whispers.

He tugs on my arm and draws my body against his for a real hug. It’s one I really need.

“Don’t be sad.” He squeezes my sides. “Where’s that torch? Let’s go set some sugar on fire, okay?”

I start laugh-crying against his chest. “Okay.”

“I always have room for my favorite dessert.” Jake kisses my temple.

He hugs me one more time, turning to lead me back toward the kitchen, and I decide maybe the night can still be salvaged. After all, dessert is the best part of any meal, and everything is better with a little sugar sprinkled on top.

## chapter 3

### ON MONDAY AFTERNOON, I LEAVE THE PARK

after a full day comprised of multiple appearances at the Princess Brunch and meet-and-greets at the Diamond Palace. I walk out with Chrissi, who's often at my side during meet-and-greets, embodying my fairy godmother. Enchanted Enterprises opted for a younger, more spritelike godmother in their movie rendering of the classic tale, and Chrissi more than fits the bill.

I'm not even sure if Chrissi's five foot; she's petite and somewhat unkempt, with this wild dark blond hair that is perpetually twisted up in a messy bun. She dances through life with the grace and stamina of a ballerina on speed, constantly surrounded by this fluttering energy field that sometimes causes me to stare at her back to see if actual pixie wings are sprouting there.

We talk as we walk—well, *Chrissi* talks, the way she often does without taking a breath. “And I mean, it's laughably ridiculous that the second Memorial Day rolls around and the princess summer squad is in town, Kellen's already organized a party to harass

the newbies, but on the other hand, it's a beautiful night and who doesn't love a good courtyard party, so I told Rose—"

She stops suddenly, midsentence, and stares at me. "Pause. What is that face?"

"What face?"

"*That face.*" Chrissi points at me. "This week . . . knowing the big countdown was almost over . . . you've been smiling so hard it was like you were going through auditions all over again, excited as you've been." She shakes her head. "So today I expected, I dunno"—she's still carrying her magic wand and waves it in the air as she makes her point—"mussed hair. Dreamy smiles. Swollen lips. But you seem down."

I realize I've automatically plastered a wide smile on my face in response to her mentioning its absence, something I do as a reflex. The Enchanted Princesses are *never* to be caught without a smile. So it's easy to protest. "What do you mean?" I touch an index finger to my lips. "Still smiling here."

But Chrissi keeps looking at me, and even though my mouth is cooperating, a worried little sigh escapes through my nose.

It makes her stop in her tracks. "Seriously. What's wrong?"

I pause, then slowly lower myself onto a nearby bench, making sure I choose my words carefully. No need to make any of this seem like a bigger deal than it is. After all, Jake himself had reassured me.

Hadn't he?

I shake my head to clear it, hair brushing back and forth over my shoulders. "It was tough, us being apart so long. Conversations just didn't flow the way they used to. Inside jokes weren't quite as funny anymore since we never had a chance to make new ones. I

guess I just thought the second we were back together, everything would gel right away. Just . . . naturally.”

“Just naturally?” Chrissi plops down next to me. “You surprise me, Alyssa.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You’re an Enchanted girl at heart. And relationships are like anything else.” With a giggle and a grin, she produces a tiny canister of glittery pixie dust from her bag, uncorks the top, and blows some in my direction. It coats my shoulders, and she nods with satisfaction. “You need a touch of magic to make them work. To make them really come to life.”

My eyes widen and I throw my hands up. “I brought the magic! Trust me!” I spend the next several minutes detailing my perfectly planned romantic meal, my efforts all the way from dredging the raw chicken to setting the sugar crystals on fire.

And when I’m done, Chrissi’s staring at me skeptically.

“What? It was amazing!” I assure her.

She cocks her head. “The concept that the way to a guy’s heart is through his stomach is super outdated.” Her eyebrows disappear beneath her bangs, and her tongue appears in the corner of her mouth. “There’s another type of magic they appreciate much, much more.”

I giggle. “Chrissi!”

She puts her hand on my knee. “No, I’m serious here.” She shrugs. “Us girls, we have this tendency to want all the emotional stuff to feel perfectly aligned in order for the physical to be good, right? But guys, they’re backward that way, most of them anyway, and sometimes, surprisingly, getting physical together can make the other stuff click. Help all involved parties relax a little bit and just have some fun together. Reconnect. Ya know?”

I stare at the lazy crowds passing us by, considering. I'm not sure I do.

"So maybe you should do something to really knock his socks off."

Hmm. Jake and I had had, like, four opportunities to be in the same place at the same time since last August. I had thought mere proximity would be sock-knockin' worthy. Yet . . . he hadn't even stayed over that first night. He said he was beat from the trip and needed to get settled in his apartment before he started working, but . . . maybe I could have stepped up my game a bit.

I chew on my lip as I glance at Chrissi from the corner of my eye. "You really think?"

"Yeah. I do. At the very least, a little effort on the sexy and seductive front can't hurt." A second later, her eyes widen and she sits up straight. "I know! We should go into downtown tonight. Go over to Bare with Flare."

"I just can't take that store seriously." I laugh. "I mean, that sign . . ."

"No, it's cool now," she assures me. "I heard they're carrying that new Enchanted Beneath It All line."

I sit up. "Really?" *Now* my interest is piqued. I'd seen some online samples of the new princess-inspired lingerie line, and they were supercute.

"Yup." Chrissi stands, pulls me up, and we resume our course toward the exit. "So let's go home and shower. Then we'll meet back at our place and go shopping. I'll tell the girls."

A moment later, she looks at me again. "And screw Kellen's party," she adds quietly. "We can just hang out and have some girl time if you'd rather."

I smile gratefully back at her. “That’s sweet of you. But I told Jake I’d grab a late dinner with him when he’s done tonight.”

She actually winks at me. “And after our trip, you’ll be the most appetizing thing on the menu.”

I fall over giggling, jabbing her with my elbow. “You’re ridiculous.” Then I throw my arm around her and plant a kiss on her cheek. Because I do feel much better after talking to her, like my head is clear and like I actually have a plan to make things better. “Thanks for trying to help.”

She’s waving her wand in the air again. “No need to thank me. What kind of fairy godmother would I be if I *didn’t* help you bring a little magic?”

I PICK UP Chrissi and Rose at their apartment. Rose and I have to remind Chrissi she needs shoes, because she starts walking out the door without them, but eventually we’re on our way.

I talk fashion with Rose as we clomp down the outside stairwell, pointing toward the green-and-black, palm-patterned dress she’s paired with shiny red sandals. “Your dress is supercute. ModCloth again?” She has a bit of an addiction. I think mostly because she’s obsessed with the catchy names they assign their items.

She nods. Then grins. “It’s called a girl’s best *frond*.”

“Cute,” I say again.

Rose runs her finger along the fabric of my dress. “This is really nice. Has to be Lilly, right?”

I nod in response. I don’t bother to say it’s from two years ago and that I snagged it off eBay for twenty bucks and had to bleach it twice to get rid of a makeup stain around the neckline.

The three of us talk park politics, share bits of gossip, and update one another on returning cast members as we walk, and ten minutes later we've made it to the downtown shopping and restaurant section of the complex. I see the sign for Bare with Flare, a cheesy neon creation that portrays a teddy bear wearing lingerie and doing some type of PG-13 striptease, at the end of the block. It does little to convince me that we're on the right track here.

However, the second we step inside, my eyes are immediately drawn to the front right corner of the store, where they've highlighted the new arrivals from the Enchanted Beneath It All collection. With a squeal, I make a beeline toward the familiar color combinations and the signature elements of the Enchanted Princesses.

There are undies comprised entirely of tiny satin red roses, silky aquamarine camisoles bearing the Little Mermaid's scales, and, be still my heart, a Cinderella bridal line that's all white, each item accented with countless tiny crystal hearts. There are sets in Rapunzel's signature emerald green and gold, sets in Beauty's signature royal blue and crimson. The pieces are individually, and collectively, delicate and beautiful, each bearing a tiny, hidden golden silhouette of the princess they're representative of.

Beside me, Chrissi flips impatiently through a rack, dislodging several hangers. "Surprise, surprise. No fairy gear. That's not right! Fairies are supersexy!"

Rose, who's inspecting a deep red low-cut chemise from the Rose Red collection, clucks in sympathy. "Poor Chrissi."

I'm too busy filling my arms with every last Cinderella signature item to comment.

Chrissi turns to me, and then frowns. "Um, no."

"No?" I hold up a pair of white silk panties, the back of which

is practically see-through thanks to a large mesh heart cutout. “These are so hot!”

She snatches them away and shakes the hanger. The tiny undies shimmy in the air. “These are white! And gold! And Cinderella! Everything you own is white and gold and Cinderella.”

I cross my loaded-down arms over my chest. “Not entirely true.”

“So entirely true,” Rose chimes in.

Chrissi reaches past Rose and grabs something from the red and black section and turns around to present her pick, a red lace bustier and coordinating boy shorts. A subtle rose pattern borders the top of the bustier and the bottom hem of the shorts. “I betcha next week’s paycheck that Jake has never seen you in red lace. This will make him sit up and pay attention. *This* is magic.”

I have to admit it’s a hot little combo, and in the spirit of doing something new and different, I agree to try it on. I’m kind of surprised when I turn around and look in the mirror, because I’m so unused to wearing bright colors. I look . . . okay, I look pretty sexy, but I can’t say that I look like myself.

I meet my own gaze in the mirror. *Why should not looking like myself have to be part of the plan?*

I turn around and redress before giving it any further consideration.

When I emerge from the dressing room, Chrissi raises her eyebrows and I begrudgingly admit, “It might be a good pick.”

“Knew it.” She nods in satisfaction, grasping a chocolate-colored teddy bear wearing a, you guessed it, teddy.

“What is that?”

“It’s the Bare with Flare bear.” She grins. “I’m totally buying it.”

I shake my head. “Where’s Rose?”

“She’s still trying on.” Then she actually shoves me toward the register. “You go and pay before you change your mind.”

When we leave the store fifteen minutes later, Rose glances at her watch. “What time is Jake done tonight?”

“He’s working till eight. Then he has to take the shuttle back and shower.”

Chrissi links her arm through mine. “So you’re gonna come back and watch *The Bachelorette* premiere with us, right? I know you can’t resist the notion of love at first sight.”

I chew on my lip. “I don’t know. If I watch the premiere, then I’ll watch next week, and the week after that, and then before I know it I’ll be trying to arrange my work schedule around being home on Mondays at eight o’clock.”

“That’s what DVR is for.”

“Come hang out,” Rose says. “I’m not even heading down to the party till at least ten.”

So I extend my arm and tell them, “All right. Twist my arm. Go ahead, twist it.”

The two make a big show out of actually twisting my arm until it feels like taffy, and we’re a giggly bunch as we make our way back through town and back to our building.

As we walk down the hall, it occurs to me that I still haven’t met Naked Rapunzel’s replacement, and I ask about her. “Hey, do you think your new roommate’s going to be home?”

“She has to be back from training sooner or later,” Chrissi says, “but we all know those are long days.”

“She’s working out all right, though?”

“Oh yes.” Chrissi nods. “Harper’s a dee-light. I really adore her.” She’s quiet for a minute. “She has some family stuff going on, but she’s a sweetheart.”

Chrissi doesn't elaborate. She's good at keeping secrets like that.

Camila is at home, however, and I greet her when we step inside. "Hey, Camila."

"Hi," she says distractedly, glancing down at her laptop. She has on her glasses, her hair is pulled back in a low ponytail, and I notice she's wearing a T-shirt that reads, HOME IS WHERE THE WIFI CONNECTS AUTOMATICALLY.

Seriously. It's hard to believe she and Rose are twins. It's hard to believe they're sisters. It's hard to believe they're related in any way.

Here's what Rose and Camila have in common. They are both stunningly beautiful—Vietnamese American, with long, silky black hair, delicate features, and slender figures.

Here's what else they have in common: nothing. Rose wants to be a makeup artist for television and theater and attends cosmetology school. Camila finished college in two and a half years and has an assistantship for grad school at MIT awaiting her. She's spending a year in between Yale and MIT playing princess somewhat against her will, at her sister's insistence that she have an adventure before she turns into "the most stereotypical smart Asian girl *ever*." Rose's words.

At this point, Camila has been here for nine months but still seems immune to the Enchanted magic. She continues to act like playing princess is some form of cruel and unusual punishment. Needless to say . . . I don't really *get* Camila.

But still I try. "Did you get your summer schedule yet?"

Schedules shift a bit around Memorial Day, when the daily crowds grow even huger during the summer season.

"Yes," she answers tersely. "But, shocker of shockers, Rose is

insisting on taking all the Rose Red shifts. I have protested vehemently that we are *identical twins* and it would be appropriate to switch things up from time to time. I don't know why I always have to be the meek, pea-brained sister of the two."

Rose throws her hands up. "Camila, work with me here. I *am* Rose. You are White. It makes sense, and it's easier to stay in character than to keep switching back and forth. Messes up my vibe. And Snow White's not pea brained! She's just . . . thoughtful and less . . . fiery."

"She's boring and inane."

"You think every princess is boring and inane."

"Fair enough." Camila shrugs. "I think I might have rather spent these last few months—thank you, *God*—as a fur character."

Rose groans for a solid twenty seconds, and I jump in to change the subject.

"You should have come shopping with us, Camila. It was fun."

Her mouth twists up wryly in response. "Lingerie shopping isn't my idea of a group event."

To be honest, I'm not sure what *is* Camila's idea of a group event. She's a textbook introvert.

"I think that's something you do in private," she says, making the mistake of continuing.

Rose can't help herself and pokes her sister in the side. "Guess what? I know what you look like naked. I don't know . . . I think it's that whole *identical twin* thing."

Camila inches away from her sister and straightens her T-shirt, and Rose rolls her eyes in my direction at her stiffness before heading to their room to put her purchases away.

While Chrissi grabs some snacks and turns to the channel for

*The Bachelorette*, I text Jake to let him know he should head to the girls' apartment rather than mine. Then we settle in on the couches, and within ten minutes of meeting the new bachelorette and this round of crazy-as-ever contestants, I know I'm in for the season.

I'm totally engrossed in the latest contestant introducing himself to this season's star of the show, because I swear I recognize him as an older sorority sister's ex, and I don't even hear the door to the apartment open.

Then Chrissi squeals. "Oh yay, you're back! Now we can introduce you to Alyssa." Chrissi grabs my arm so that I turn around, and my eyes follow hers to the doorway. "This is Harper!" she exclaims, looking at me. "Isn't she a perfect Beauty?"

Harper stands in the doorway, looking exhausted and sweaty, still clutching her huge purple-and-gold princess training manual.

I quickly assess the new girl. I know my Enchanted Princesses, from the shapes of their faces to their hairlines to their hidden birthmarks. Harper's complexion isn't spot on and her hair's too straight for her to be considered a *perfect* Beauty, but she's pretty enough and definitely has this . . . bookish air to her. And when she smiles over at me in greeting, I have to admit her smile is dazzling. She'll do well in the park.

I get up and walk over to shake her hand. I wish it was a commercial break, but princesses remember their manners. "Hi, Harper. I'm Alyssa. Welcome to the Princess Posse."

She shifts her binder to her left arm. "Thanks. It's nice to meet you."

"We're rivals, did you know that?" I fold my arms and wink at her.

Her face wrinkles in confusion. “What? I don’t . . .”

“Enchanted Dominion factoid: pictures with Cinderella and Beauty are the most highly sought.” I shrug. “Some girls actually compare their numbers at the end of the day.” I put my hand to my chest. “Not me, though. So silly.”

Her shoulders relax. “I had no idea. I can’t imagine doing something like that.” Harper looks me over. “You’re a perfect Cinderella. You’re seriously stunning.”

I like the new girl.

“You’re sweet, Harper.”

Chrissi rearranges herself on the couch and points to a bowl of sour watermelons on the coffee table. “Harper, get yourself some candy, pronto. You’ve survived your first week in princess training, girlie!” Then she rolls her eyes toward me and Rose. “We all know what a painful process that is, all those quizzes and rehearsals and fittings. And that’s *after* she had this totally dramatic trip down here! Alyssa, you would not believe this story; her trip down was insane! And there was this guy—”

“Chrissi!” Harper interrupts her new roommate with a hiss. “We are *not* talking about him, okay? I’ve decided to pretend the whole *trip* never happened. Officially deleted from memory, as quickly as he disappeared.”

I helpfully change the subject. “Well, congrats on making it through the first week. It’s the most grueling; trust me. Except for the requisite stint in fur.” I head back to the couch, leaning down to pick up a piece of candy. “Are you an actress, Harper? Or studying acting, at least?”

Harper’s face becomes guarded. “Umm, no.” She doesn’t come over to the couches, and fiddles with the long chain around her neck instead. “I was actually prelaw. I just . . . I just . . . needed to

do something different. This summer . . .” She inhales a deep breath. “. . . I just needed to get away.”

An endless moment of awkward silence follows.

Harper stares down at the ground, and when she eventually raises her head, I think there’s a trace of tears in her eyes.

But she smiles until they recede, in true princess style, and says, “Let’s talk about something else.” Now she does make her way over to us and extends her hand. “And where’s that candy? Give me, like, ten handfuls.”

The clouds break, and Harper perches on the arm of the couch, joining us to watch the next segment of the show before announcing she’s in desperate need of a shower after a hot day in one of the park’s employee auditoriums.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opens again, and this time I most certainly do notice.

“Jaaaake!” Chrissi screams when he comes walking in, gently knocking on the door at the same time. She spreads her arms wide in greeting. “Welcome back!”

I smile up at my boyfriend, studying him. He looks happy and relaxed, wearing a tight gray T-shirt, loose jeans, and gray New Balances. I can tell his hair is damp and he’s just showered. I hop up and walk over to give him a hug. Plus he smells yummy.

I kiss him and ask, “How was your day?”

He raises his eyebrows uncertainly. “How was my day? There was a considerable amount of vomit involved in my day. Comes with the territory when you’re stationed at the base of Marauders’ Mountain.”

I wrap my arm around his middle and turn toward Rose and Camila. “Hey, girls. So this is Jake. Jake, this is Rose and Camila. Camila wears glasses; that’s the easiest way to keep it straight.”

He does a double take. “Oh wow! Yeah, you’re twins.”

It is easy to miss it.

“Good to finally meet you, Jake,” Rose says. She narrows her eyes and squints up at him. “Hey, your favorite color doesn’t happen to be red, by any chance?”

He looks thoroughly confused. “Uh, not really. Why?”

Her face is innocently blank. “Oh, I just have a feeling it’s going to be.”

She and Chrissi collapse into each other in a fit of immature giggles, and I just shake my head at Jake. “Just ignore them. Talk to Camila instead. She actually knows how to act her age.”

Camila looks sort of irritated about the proposal, having to talk to a guy. Having to *talk*.

Once Rose gets herself together, she makes more of an effort to be appropriate. She clears her throat. “Are you staying here at Lakeside, too?”

“Yeah, a few complexes over. Next to the grocery store.” Jake turns his face and plants a quick kiss atop my head.

I smile against his torso. Between the shopping trip, the girl time, and his PDA, I’m definitely feeling much better about things.

Suddenly I hear Harper’s voice from down the hallway. “Chrissi, I hope you don’t mind I used your conditioner. They didn’t have my brand at the store and I haven’t—”

We don’t have a chance to warn her that there’s a boy on the scene and she appears before us, wet hair dripping over her face and back, wearing nothing but a short purple towel that barely covers all the parts it needs to. She stops at once when Jake comes into view, a surprised little gasp escaping her throat, and she struggles to wrap the towel even more securely around her torso.

My body is still pressed against Jake's, so I feel his stiffen at once. At first his expression is that of a deer caught in headlights, and then his eyes dart wildly, as if looking for an escape.

It's an uncomfortable run-in, for sure, but certainly he's seen girls wearing much less. Any given day at the complex pool, as a matter of fact. We should just be adults, offer a quick introduction, and allow Harper to get some clothing ASAP.

"Sorry for the lack of notice about the guy," I apologize, wincing. "This is my boyfriend, Jake."

The look of shock on Harper's face changes to something else, something I can't quite read. Even though you'd think she'd be darting out of there as fast as she could, she seems frozen in place, and it takes her a minute to find her voice. She swallows hard. Smooths her wet hair. Lifts her chin and once more tucks the end of her towel inside the other end. "Alyssa's boyfriend. Jake. Okay." Harper smiles widely, but it's not the natural one that I thought was so pretty earlier. She manages a quick, stiff wave. "So nice to meet you, Jake."

He hadn't relaxed a smidgen. It takes him a minute to remember social norms, but eventually he does respond. "Hey." He glances down. "Nice to meet you, Harper."

Moving robotically, Harper twists toward the others. "Get dressed. Right. I should do that." She backpedals into the room she shares with Chrissi, eyes still on Jake, and then we hear the door slam.

I look up at him. "Do you know her or something? You both . . . look like you saw a ghost."

He's staring after her closed door. "Yeah, I did sort of do a double take. She looks like someone I went to high school with.

Thought it was her for a minute.” He takes a deep breath, then finally looks back at me, expression still distant, but his smile in place. “So. Dinner? I’m starving.”

“Sure, just let me get my stuff.” I walk back to the couch to pick up my shopping bag, still trying to shake the unsettling feeling that lingers in the room even after Harper has departed. What *was* that?

Jake lifts his hand in greeting to the girls. “Chrissi, good to see you again. Rose, Camila, really nice to meet you finally.”

As soon as I return to his side, he has his hand on the small of my back, turning me, pushing me toward the door with slightly more force than is needed.

And once we’re in the hallway, even though he claimed to be starving just a moment ago, he takes my hand and gestures in the direction of my apartment instead. “You know what, hon? Actually I don’t know if I feel like going out to eat tonight. Maybe I’ll just scrounge something up or order something. I think I’d just rather stay in and . . . hang out.”

His words warm me and dispel the odd feeling from inside the apartment. Now this feels like last year, when we had the best times doing absolutely nothing at my apartment, just hanging out.

“Sure. Sounds better to me, too,” I answer at once.

“Yeah. Let’s just . . . stay in.”

The rest of our night is about as perfect as I could imagine. He merely rolls his eyes and smiles when I find *The Princess Diaries* on television and doesn’t protest when I leave it on. He makes us popcorn. He holds me in his arms. He accepts my invitation to stay over.

And as it turns out, I don't even need to open my shopping bag to get him to say yes.

I'm all smiles as I crawl into bed beside him in a loose T-shirt instead. This is more like it. Seems like my Prince Charming is back in the building.

## chapter 4

### THE FITNESS CENTER IN THE MIDDLE OF

Lakeside's downtown area is a four-story, gleaming, angular monstrosity that doesn't quite fit amid the narrow boutiques, coffee shops, and chain restaurants surrounding it. It takes up nearly an entire block, and I'm guessing it's considered an eyesore by the few non-health conscious residents of the complex. But the fitness center was built to meet a demand, a fervent, fanatical type of demand, as the complex slowly but steadily came to house such a large number of Enchanted Enterprises cast members.

I make my way inside, jog-climb the three flights of stairs to the main fitness studio, and survey the scene as I stuff my tote bag in the last empty cubby in the wall. If there was a phrase to describe the fitness studio, I'm pretty sure it would be "you can tell just by looking." Cast members self-segregate themselves in the various areas of the gym.

Those who portray villains, males and females alike, camp out around the free weights or wait impatiently for GRIT classes

to start. They maintain fierce expressions even when working out, interested in bulk, muscles, and strength.

The show performers, who do elaborate stilt work, tumbling, and complicated fusion dances, are here for flexibility and endurance. Their muscles are lean, their bodies wiry, as they pound the belts of the treadmills or contort themselves in advanced yoga classes.

The princes? Linger by machines postworkout, logging stats into their Apple watches and posting them to Instagram.

And then there are us princesses. Typically we have a monopoly on the elliptical or step machines. A lot of the princesses favor the barre classes that focus on posture, balance, and toning one's core.

I'm totally comfortable at the fitness center; it pretty much parallels the rec center at Coral State. It's just here I work out next to fellow princesses instead of sorority sisters. The show performers replace the scholarship athletes. And narcissistic guys? They're the same everywhere you go. I'm so glad Jake's not a gym rat!

I scan the cluster of elliptical machines, making a beeline for the last one in the row when I see that a girl is stepping off and wiping it down with a cloth. I'm an elliptical girl. On the elliptical, I can listen to Taylor Swift, Meghan Trainor, old-school Britney Spears, zone out, and almost pretend I'm dancing instead of exercising. I don't actually *like* to work out, and I really hate running. I work out because I have to. I do so out of habit, because I'm terrified if I don't do it ritually I'll stop altogether. Really, the only thing that makes me happy about going to the gym is crossing it off my mental to-do list when I leave.

Climbing on, I put my water bottle in the cup holder and

stuff my earbuds into my ears. I select my favorite bubblegum pop playlist and get moving. It makes my head hurt when I try to read or watch TV at the gym, so I distract myself by people watching instead. Well, princess watching, to be more specific. I'm in the second row of machines, so I find myself staring at the backs of my fellow cast members.

I stare at Tara's legs as they rotate furiously in my line of vision. *That's what I wish my legs looked like, those stick-skinny legs I'll never have no matter how many calories I burn. I know Jake tells me no guys really like legs that skinny. But I do.*

Gracie is working out two machines down from her. *She really does have the perfect boob-to-waist ratio.* I'd heard some of the girls say as much in a show rehearsal last week. *You'd think they're fake, but they're not. They're just naturally perfect.*

Alexis, who plays Rose Red on some of Rose's off days, walks past. She's tiny and looks like an Olympic gymnast. *It's an unnatural advantage, I swear, being that tiny and lithe. Does she even need to work out? She looks perfect as she is, and I bet she never gains weight, no matter what she eats.* I pump my legs faster.

I pretty much spend the entire first part of my workout assessing my coworkers, comparing myself without meaning to. It's impossible not to. We're in Florida, it's hot and sticky most of the time and even worse here in the gym, and the princesses work out in colorful sports bras and yoga pants that fit tighter than a second layer of skin. Despite the humidity, most of us work out in full makeup, even though we're all well aware how bad it is for one's pores. We're forced to acknowledge the perfection of others; we're forced to face reminders of how easy it would be to fall off our game if we *didn't* come every day. There are so many other girls who are just as pretty.

But this is a job. And it's all part of the job. If you care, anyway.

I turn my head, noticing that the girl working out beside me is staring down at her machine's screen in concentration, lips moving as she performs some type of mental computation.

I'm sure I know every last formula that she may be applying. I know exactly how many calories you have to burn to rid your body of an extra pound. I know how many calories are in most beers and mixed drinks, a chart I was required to memorize while pledging, and exactly how many extra minutes of cardio are required for each extra drink. An image of the BMI chart has been committed to memory.

I'm sure not a math whiz, and thinking about it, I have absolutely no idea when I started running the numbers. I guess it dates back to high school cheerleading days, when girls first started throwing these terms around and measuring their self-satisfaction in comparison to other girls rather than themselves. Then in the sorority, with its rules about not being seen eating fast food in public and scheduled gym outings, it's just more of the same. All the girls I have always associated with routinely run the numbers, too. It's part of our culture, part of our lexicon.

I don't really know girls whose minds *don't* work this way anymore.

With my music pumping and a gym full of distractions, time passes quickly, and the next thing I know, my workout is already half over. Internally, I relax, which I can't really do until my daily workout is out of the way. It's why I prefer to get it over with early; otherwise I'll just keep thinking about it.

*Good for you, I tell myself, drinking some water. Way to get it done. It's all downhill from here.*