

## PROLOGUE

### **When I was seven, I thought I moved a pencil with my mind.**

I heard this story about a man who taught himself how to see through objects so that he could cheat at card games. The idea was that if he reached a state of complete concentration and focus, he could do things with his mind that normal humans were incapable of, like levitate, walk on coals, and move objects. All of which he learned to do. The very first thing he tried, however, was staring at an object for hours to make it move.

So, late one afternoon, I cleared off my desk and placed a rabbit-patterned pink mechanical pencil on the pristine, flat surface.

I shut my bedroom door and closed all my curtains, shrouding the room in darkness as the sun started to set. I sat at my desk and stared at the pencil. Willing it to move.

I stared and stared. For what felt like hours. When my dad knocked on my door I shrieked, "*I need privacy!*" and kept my

eyes on the pencil. He grumbled from the other side but eventually shuffled away.

When it was dinnertime, he pounded on the door and said that I needed to eat. “Privacy pause!” he hollered.

My mouth was parched and I was starving, but I kept my eyes fixed on the rabbit patterns on that pencil and told my dad to leave the food outside my door.

Instead, he opened the door and popped his head in. “Desi?” he called out.

“Appa, I am trying to do something very important here,” I said.

A normal dad would probably have demanded an explanation from his seven-year-old daughter. Showed some mild curiosity as to why she was holed up in her bedroom staring at a pencil for hours.

But this was *my* dad. And his daughter happened to be *me*. So he shrugged and went to make me a tray of fish, rice, and beef radish soup, which he carried to my desk. Careful not to disturb the pencil.

I smelled the food and felt faint. But I wouldn’t let myself move my eyes from the pencil.

“Um, Appa . . . ?”

Without a word, my dad scooped up some rice, dipped it into the soup, and brought the spoon to my mouth. I ate it in one big bite. Next, he took the chopsticks and fed me some of the

fish. I nibbled it. He brought a glass of water to my lips and I gulped it gratefully.

When I had finished most of the food, my dad patted my back and made his way out with tray in hand. Before closing the door behind him he said, “Don’t stay up too late.”

Refueled, and my brain feeling stronger than ever, I continued to stare at that pencil.

So what then? Well, I swear on my life, to this very day, that this thing happened: That pencil moved. It was the slightest of movements—probably not discernible to anyone except me, but the second I saw that pink pencil roll *ever so slightly* toward me and then come to a stop, I shrieked. I jumped out of my seat and pulled at my hair in disbelief. I ran around in circles and did a little dance. And then I face-planted into my bed and fell asleep.

I tried the trick with a few other objects—an eraser that smelled like a strawberry, a ballerina cake topper, a single pine nut. But no dice. Despite that, for years after, I believed I could move things with my mind. I secretly knew that I existed in this very special little sphere where magical things happened. Stuff that doesn’t happen to normal humans, but rather to a select group of exceptional people.

This childhood belief in my powerful brain faded over time. I wasn’t necessarily shaken out of it, or doused with the frigidity of the cold, hard truth of how unmagical real life was. I just eased out of that stage of my life.

But I never lost the belief that you could *will* something just by sticking to it, by being unwavering. By keeping your eyes on the prize. And by doing that, there was nothing you couldn't control about your own life.

This was a crazy-powerful tool to have at your disposal when you were seven years old and had just lost your mother. My memories of the time right after my mom's death have grown hazy, but they always involve a version of my dad that only existed in those months. A shadow of himself—someone who put me to bed, made dinner, and gave me the same amount of attention. But when he thought I wasn't looking, he was someone who sat in a chair for hours in the dark. Someone who watered my mom's geraniums at three a.m., who kept her alarm set at six a.m. even though he didn't have to be awake until an hour later. Someone who stared at an empty bowl for five minutes every morning—waiting for my mom's patented simultaneous-cereal-and-milk pouring. She always timed it exactly right so that the cornflakes and milk finished filling up the bowl at exactly the same time.

Then one day I overheard my aunt speaking in hushed tones to my uncle in our kitchen. "Time will heal all wounds."

And so I decided to speed up the process.

I broke my dad's alarm clock and tearfully showed him the pieces. It took him weeks to replace it, and when he did, he had it only set to seven a.m. Every morning I made sure his cereal was ready for him before he could sit and just stare at an empty bowl. And while he ate, I watered the geraniums.

Then my old dad returned. He put my mom's wedding band in a small porcelain dish and lovingly dusted all the photos of her around the house—and we moved on. The shadows under my dad's eyes faded and the geraniums flourished, climbing across our garage door.

*Time, schmime.* Desi Lee heals all wounds.

You just needed a plan, to take action. It's how I convinced my dad to let me raise geese in our backyard, how I saved our underfunded middle school library from closure, how I overcame a fear of heights by bungee jumping on my sixteenth birthday (with only a little pee escaping me), and how I became number one in my class year after year. I believed, and still believe, that you can build your dreams brick by brick. That you can accomplish anything with persistence.

Even falling in love.

# CHAPTER 1

**If you thought of life as a series of nostalgic images arranged** in a slo-mo montage, you'd miss a lot of the tedious bits. In between the fuzzy images of blowing out birthday candles and first kisses would be a whole lot of sitting on your sofa watching TV. Or doing homework. Or learning how to create the perfect beach wave for your hair with a flatiron.

Or in my case, overseeing yet another school event. Like the fall carnival.

Add to that, some vomit.

I gingerly tapped Andy Mason's back as he hurled into a recycling bin. This was definitely one of those poignant scenes that would *not* make it into my life montage.

"All good?" I asked the six-feet-four tennis team captain as he straightened up. He wiped his mouth gingerly and nodded.

"Thanks, Des," he said sheepishly.

“No problem, but maybe don’t go on the Brain Melter three times in a row?”

It was a Saturday night in late November and the Monte Vista High School fall carnival was in full swing on our campus—a sprawling state-of-the-art modern architectural wonder built on an Orange County seaside bluff.

Andy staggered off, passing by my best friend, Fiona Mendoza. She steered clear of him, wrinkling her nose. “A barfer?” she asked, wearing slouchy sweatpants, a crisp men’s shirt, hiking sandals, and a lightning-bolt-patterned scarf. Her heavily lined amber eyes were staring at me, blinking slowly and deliberately. She would have looked like a Mexican American Disney princess if it weren’t for the fact that she dressed like a hobo with a mean makeup collection.

“It’s always the *huge* guys that have delicate little stomachs,” I said.

“Lucky you.” She winked.

I snorted. “Yeah, you *love* huge guys.” Fiona, in fact, loved tiny girls.

My snort morphed into a hacking cough, and I bent over from the sheer force of it. When I straightened up Fiona was holding a thermos. “Your dad asked me to bring this to you,” she said.

There were two cold-and-flu pills taped to the lid and I smiled when I saw the Post-it attached. My dad’s scrawled handwriting read: *Eat a lot even if you feel like shitty!* There were black smudges on everything, the signature of a car mechanic.

I opened the thermos and the aroma of salty seaweed soup wafted out. “Mm, thanks Fi.”

“You’re welcome but why the hell are you here? Don’t you have, like, the black lung?” she asked as we walked over to a bench and sat down.

“Because, hello, I’m in charge of it. Also, black lung is now commonly known as pneumonia. So no, I don’t have that.”

“You’re in charge of *everything*. No offense, Desi, but this is just the lame-ass school carnival.” Fiona draped herself across the bench. “Couldn’t some underling in the student government have handled this?”

“Who? My hapless veep, Jordan?” Jordan was my vice president and was voted in primarily because of his hair. “He would have shown up tomorrow. No way. I didn’t spend weeks planning this so that someone could mess up the Monte Vista carnival rep.”

Fiona stared at me, letting the dorkiness of that statement settle between us. When I had been duly punished, she spoke. “Des, you need to chill. It’s senior year, calm down already.” Fiona’s entire body punctuated that point—sitting cross-legged on the bench, one arm propped up on the armrest, her chin resting on it.

I took a sip of my soup before responding. “Have I been accepted into Stanford yet?”

Fiona straightened up then, pointing a long, glittery fingernail at me. “No! *No*. Once you turn that application in, I don’t



want to hear that word for the rest of the year.” She paused dramatically. “Actually, never again for my entire life.”

“Well, too bad!” I popped the pills into my mouth and downed some water.

She stared at me again, her gaze unnerving and a little scary. “Des, you’re like a sure thing. If a nerd-Mother-Teresa-Miss-Teen-America like you doesn’t get into that school, who will?”

I coughed again, a phlegmy rattle that harkened the end of days. Fiona visibly recoiled from me.

I pounded my chest before speaking. “Do you know how many kids look just like me on paper? A 4.25 GPA, student body president, varsity sports, perfect SAT score, one billion hours of community service?”

Fiona’s expression slackened at this familiar refrain. “Well, isn’t that why you requested an interview?” Her voice was on the edge of boredom as she eyed a group of girls walking by us. My best friend since second grade, Fiona had had the Desi Lee Stanford dream ballad memorized since I started belting it at the age of ten.

“Yeah, but the interview’s in February, a month after I turn in my application. It’s making me nervous now that the early action application deadline’s actually passed,” I muttered.

“Des, we’ve talked about this a million times. You *wanted* to do regular decision, better odds and all that?”

I poked at my soup. “Yeah, I know.”

“So don’t sweat it, okay?” Fiona patted my arm.

After I finished my soup Fiona bailed to go find our friend Wes Mansour. I roamed the carnival again—making sure the boys’ junior varsity baseball team wasn’t giving away all the plushie prizes to cute girls and keeping people from rioting while in the never-ending line for the soft-serve ice cream truck. I was headed toward the restrooms when I ran into a few juniors whom I recognized—a well-groomed boyish bunch with impeccable T-shirts and expensive kicks.

“Hey, boss. How’s it going?” one of them asked me, all sparkly eyes and charm. The kind of guy *born* with a fedora jauntily perched on his head.

I felt their eyes on me and my cheeks flushed. “Um, good. Have fun!” I waved at them with awkward jazz hands before walking away. For God’s sake. *Have fun!* Who was I—their *mom*? I was mentally kicking myself when someone grabbed me from behind.

“Yeah, what’s up, *boss*?” The teasing voice was inches from my ear. Wes. Thick black hair set back into a kind of modern, perfectly mussed pompadour, the most immaculately smooth brown skin, and sleepy eyes always weighed down by his outrageous eyelashes. Girls loved him. Yes, my two best friends were these sexy people who reminded me of my own unsexiness on a daily basis.

I spun around and smacked his arm.

Wes clutched it and winced. “Use your words!” he barked. Fiona was behind him, holding a giant plastic bag full of pink

cotton candy. I scowled at both of them but before I could respond, another coughing fit struck.

“Ew, Des,” Wes said, covering his nose with his T-shirt collar. “I’ve got a huge game next week and if I get sick, I’ll kill you.” Like me, Wes was also a nerd jock. His sport of choice was basketball, his science of choice physics, his geekery of choice comics and Settlers of Catan. He once held the number one ranking online for three months until he got beaten by an eight-year-old girl from Brazil.

“It’s good to get exposed to germs, you know,” I said, and cleared my throat violently. Both Wes and Fiona made faces.

“Spare us, Dr. Desi,” Wes grumbled.

“Oh, I’m just getting started. Shall I start my lecture on the future of fecal transplants?”

Wes closed his eyes dramatically. “I’d like to go one week without having to hear about the merits of freaking gut bacteria.”

I shrugged. “Fine. But you guys will all be thanking me later when I’m a doctor curing seasonal allergies with fecal transplants.”

“God!” Fiona tossed the rest of her cotton candy into a trash can.

I waited for more complaints but instead I got silence. And strange expressions. Fiona and Wes were looking behind me. I turned around and stared into a very large chest.

“What are fecal transplants?” a low voice asked.

I looked up. Oh, Lord.

Max Peralta. Six feet two inches of hot, hot . . . freshman. Then I heard snickering behind me. When Fi and Wes had found out that my first-week-of-school crush had turned out to be a ninth grader—well, it was the best day *ever*.

“Oh, uh nothing. Hey, hi!” I said, my voice already at a weird level of dog-hearing-only pitch. *Desi, do NOT speak until you can freaking control your voice.*

He smiled, teeth white against tan, sun-kissed skin. Howww in God’s name was *this* a freshman?

“Hey, so good job with the carnival, Desi.”

I blushed, deeply. “Thanks, Max.” *All right, you’ve got this. Just keep your expression cool, relax your shoulders, keep your natural eager-beaver instinct in check!*

He looked down at his feet for a second, then cocked his head up with a smile. *Dang.*

“Um, I was wondering . . . Are you busy after this?” he asked.

My voice caught in my throat. I cleared it. *NO squeaky voice!* “After . . . the carnival?”

“Yeah, do you have to, I don’t know, clean up or something?”

My ears started to burn, and I could feel the friend eyeballs on me. “Nope, no cleaning. I’m free.” Wait, was I encouraging this? He was cute, no doubt . . . but still a freshman.

It was like he read my mind. Keeping his eyes on mine, he asked, “I know you probably don’t date freshmen . . . ?”

Ha-ha-ha: “date.”

But he was right. He was a freshman. I was a senior. So I tried

to muster a kind rejection. But instead, I felt a cough coming on. I put my hand to my chest and shut my mouth tight—*no, this was NOT the time.*

But there are just some things that have a force of their own.

So I coughed. Really hard.

And that phlegm that had been rattling in my chest all day?

Landed right on the front of his crisp, striped shirt.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Wanting to kill myself was too mild a description.**

I felt a familiar paralysis set in and covered my mouth with my hands, staring at the glob on the navy and red stripes. Those stripes would be forever burned into my memory. Thick blue stripes with thin red ones in between. A pretty nice shirt, really.

“Ugh . . . is that?” I heard Max, but I still couldn’t bring myself to look at his face. Only saw him stretch his shirt out and make a disgusted sound.

Finally, I let out a feeble, “Sorry, I’m sick.”

“It’s . . . okay. Um, okay I’m just going to . . .” And then he scurried off into the crowd.

I threw the hood of my jacket over my head and turned to Fiona, screaming into her shoulder.

She petted my head awkwardly. “Wow, that was an epic failure, even for you. I mean, wow,” she said. Wes was too busy laugh-crying to say anything.

*Flailure*. The clever word Wes had come up with for when I failed at flirting. Get it? Flirt + failure = *flailure*. Birthed during freshman year, when the shy and sweet Harry Chen, whom I had tutored in English exhaustively for a year because I was in love with him, confessed that he had a crush on our English teacher. Our male English teacher.

But even before that incident, I had always flailed. Every time I tried talking to a guy. Every time a guy talked to me or showed any inkling of interest. *It always went wrong*. It didn't make sense; in all other parts of my life I was the Together Girl. Stanford-Bound Girl. It was the one thing that I couldn't ever seem to get a handle on.

How utterly clichéd—excelling at all parts of life but love. *Wah-wah*.

I looked up at Fiona with bleary eyes. “Thanks. Always a beacon of comfort. Bosom buddy. Buddy ol’ pal. Pal gal. Gal . . . pal.”

Fiona shook her head grimly. If one was seeking comfort and a cozy embrace from a friend, Fiona Mendoza was not open for business. She was more of the slap-you-silly, back-to-reality type.

She shrugged. “At least he’s just a freshman.” The word *freshman* made me wail harder into her shoulder. I had let my crush on Max die a swift death when I found out he was in ninth grade, but he was still hot. A hot guy who had been about to ask me out.

My two best friends, for all their good intentions, could never

understand why being in a relationship was almost mythical to me. These two came out of the womb with built-in fan clubs.

Wes held up his phone and took a photo of me.

*"Give me that!"* I screeched, snatching it out of his hands and swiftly deleting the picture.

He whined, "Come on, I'm just adding it to my Famous Desi Flail moments."

*"Do you want to die?"* I threatened Wes with death on a daily basis.

My failures had become so expected, so reliable, that I was even making a joke about them in my college application essay to Stanford. You know, to show actual human flaws. Because even flaws could be spun into something positive. I hoped that my winning combination of humility and humiliation would get me in. That, or my SAT score.

And for the most part, I could laugh about it. I had so much on my plate that it was probably for the best that boys didn't take up my time, in addition to everything else. There were so many other things that I needed to focus my attention on.

Plus the idea of letting another human see your pores that up close was frightening to me.

The next week at school, I was on the soccer field battling it out against Eastridge Academy.

I loved soccer; it was like chess and a hundred-yard dash all



mixed into one. On a good day, it was like I could see into the future: each pass part of a master plan that ended with a ball in the back of the net.

And today was one of those good days.

It was deep into injury time and we were tied 1–1. *Now or never, Des.* My teammate Leah Hill and I made split-second eye contact before she passed the ball to me. I leaped above the matching gleaming braids of Eastridge’s defense and powered the ball down into the corner of the net.

The whistle blew and I wheeled away to celebrate our win as the Eastridge players collapsed in a heap of tears and instant recriminations.

After a round of high fives, I said bye to my teammates and headed toward the parking lot.

“Rest up, Lee!” Coach Singh called to me as I reached my dad’s car. I waved limply in the direction of her voice because I was still battling that stupid cold. Now that the adrenaline rush of the game had subsided, I was exhausted.

A lumbering baby-blue American-auto masterpiece was waiting for me. Even though my dad was a mechanic who could fix up any classic car to perfection, he drove a very unsexy 1980 Buick LeSabre the size of a houseboat. I swore my dad’s eccentricities grew exponentially every year.

And yes, my *father* was picking me up from school. Last year, I had crashed my birthday present from my dad—a restored hunter-green Saab convertible which I’d had all of twenty

minutes—into a street lamp ten feet away from our house. A rabbit had jumped out in front of me and instead of braking, my immediate reaction was to steer the car wildly away from it.

After that, my dad was convinced that I couldn't be trusted to have my own car, but he did let me drive his uncrushable boat short distances and I never asked him to replace the Saab. At the top of my life goals was to never worry my dad.

He was reading a newspaper in the driver's seat when I walked up and heaved the car door open.

"Oh! There she is!" he said with a wide smile, folding the newspaper and tossing it on the dash. His smile lit up his broad, round face. Laugh lines crinkled the corners of his eyes and his tan skin. He still had a shock of thick black hair, his only vanity. My dad spent every morning carefully combing and fluffing that head of hair, only to pull on a grease-stained shirt and cargo shorts afterward.

"Hi, Appa." I tossed my backpack and duffel into the backseat and then dropped into the passenger seat with a relieved groan, every part of me aching.

My dad's rough palm was immediately on my forehead and he tsked disapprovingly. "Oh my gah. You have a fever!" *Oh my gah* killed me every time.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. "I'm fine, I just need some *juk* and a superhot shower." *Juk* was Korean porridge, and my dad made a mean one, with mushrooms and shredded bits of salty seaweed.

“*Ch*, who you think you’re kidding? You shouldn’t go to school tomorrow. No homework tonight, only fun things,” my dad said as we drove home.

“No, no fun things!” I said with a laugh, only half kidding. I had to drop off some of the senior class’s donated canned goods at a nearby church and finish up an AP English lit paper.

“Hey! If Appa says fun things, then only fun things!”

My dad always referred to himself in the third person, and it was always Appa, the Korean word for Dad. It would be embarrassing if it wasn’t, you know, endearing. My dad’s kinda bad English had the most perfect comedic touch, and sometimes I wondered if he wasn’t just faking it to crack me up. We spoke both Korean and English at home, more often than not a wonky fusion of my bad Korean and his bad English.

When we got home I took a quick shower, slathered lotion onto my tan face (*Country skin, like me!* my dad proudly claimed all the time), then ran downstairs to the pantry. I was counting the canned goods in the pile when I heard the familiar sound of Korean people yelling from the next room.

“*APPA!* In the name of all that is holy, turn the volume down!” I hollered. The volume went down a minuscule notch, and I dragged the box of cans into the living room, where my dad was sitting in his favorite recliner watching his beloved Korean dramas. Only the top of his head was visible above the worn-out forest-green upholstery.

He paused the show on a classic Korean drama moment: a

hotheaded stud carrying a very drunk mousy girl home on his back.

“Haven’t you watched this one already?” I teased. Wait for it . . .

My dad straightened up and bellowed, “*This is different one.* They’re not all the same!”

I cackled. I loved making fun of my dad’s obsession with K dramas. He spent every single evening watching them, come rain or shine. (The only other TV love of his life was *I Love Lucy*. Yup, I was named after Desi Arnaz. Don’t ask.) Nothing got between my dad and his dramas.

One time I had called them Korean soap operas and my face almost melted off from his fury—“They are *not* the same as that junk!” I had to give him that much. For one thing, they were in a miniseries format, so they had a predetermined number of episodes rather than endless decades of the same couples dealing with evil twins and such. Also, unlike soaps, they were wildly varied in genre, like movies—romantic comedy, fantasy, suspense, or your classic romantic melodrama. And my dad loved every single one of them. I watched bits and pieces with him on occasion, but they were never really my thing.

I pointed at the screen. “Let me guess. That drunk girl is an orphan.”

My dad paused the TV and turned his nose up haughtily. “Not orphan. But very poor.”

“And that guy is the son of a department store CEO.”

“*Ya!*”

“*Ya* yourself. Have fun. Can I borrow your car to drop off these cans?”

He looked at me with concern. “Are you sure you don’t want Appa to drive you? You’re sick.”

“I’m fine, the church is only five minutes away. Thank you, though.”

He got up and walked me to the door, handing me his keys. “Okay, but come right back. The *juk* will be ready and you need to rest.”

“Okay, Appa, see you in a bit.”

I pulled on my shoes and was loading the box of cans into the car when I heard my dad yell from the doorway, “*Ya! Desi! Put on socks! You always get sick because you don’t wear socks!*”

Oh my God, my dad and socks. Seriously. I hollered back, “It’s a common misconception that people get sick from being cold! *Go back to your dramas!*”

But I still ran inside and pulled on a pair before leaving the house again.

## CHAPTER 3

**“Discuss why Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* was social criticism for its time. And lay off the fart jokes! We all know how bawdy the wanker was.”**

Ah, Ms. Lyman, an actual *English* English teacher being forced to teach Chaucer to a bunch of California brats. It was Friday and I was sitting in AP English when we started shifting desks around to get into our discussion groups. Mine was made up of the usual brainiacs—Shelly Wang, Michael Diaz, and Wes.

“Okay, so maybe we could start by discussing what problems ailed society during Chaucer’s time?” Michael said, already writing furiously in his notebook. He always had to be first.

Not to be outdone, Shelly piped up, “Well, the oppressive Catholic Church for starters?”

Wes nodded in agreement. “Yeah, dude was ahead of his time with that observation.”

I furrowed my brow and racked my brain for other fourteenth-century societal ills in England. While deep in thought, I doodled absentmindedly in the margins of my notebook. I was sketching out a dress I'd been Internet-creeping on for the past few weeks—short, strapless, dove gray with a sweetheart neckline and floral embroidery on the bottom. Maybe for prom, which felt like a million years away.

“Holy shit.”

I looked up at Shelly, aghast. Miss Cardigans and Glitter Pens never cursed. Then I followed her gaze. Half the classroom's gaze, actually.

Standing in the doorway was some guy. Scratch that—some insanely perfect specimen of a guy.

Tall but not lanky, he had messy black hair partially tucked into a gray beanie, and was wearing dark jeans and a long-sleeved shirt under a puffy navy-blue vest. And good gracious, his face. Olive skin, angular jaw that could cut through glass, dark eyes framed by a pair of serious eyebrows, and a wide mouth that was smiling tentatively as he peered into the classroom.

My pencil fell out of my hand, clattering onto the floor.

“And you are?” Ms. Lyman asked.

“Luca Drakos. I'm new.”

Luca. Who the hell was *actually* named Luca? At the sound of his low, quiet voice there was audible twittering from the female portion of the class.

“Well, Luca, we're in the middle of discussion groups about

*The Canterbury Tales*. Why don't you go join that group over there," she said, pointing to us. "Guys? Fill him in, please."

I scrambled to pick my pencil off the ground and when I looked up, everything moved in slow-motion as Luca made his way over to us. I swear a breeze whipped through the classroom just to lift the thick mop of hair away from his eyes so that he stared directly into mine. *Hoooooly cub-rap*.

"Hey," he said when he finally reached us.

I felt Shelly flutter next to me. She squeaked out, "Hi!" then got up quickly to pull an empty desk over. "Have a seat!"

He smiled at her. "Thanks." Luca sat down a mere three feet away from me. I lost the ability to speak while everyone else politely introduced themselves. He finally looked at me expectantly.

"I'm Desi," I said, but it came out raspy and quiet. I cleared my throat. "Desi," I repeated stupidly. Why oh why did I choose today of all days to wear my "fashion" sweatpants.

"Hey," he said, his voice all handsome. He had a handsome voice.

"Where are you from?" Shelly asked him.

"Ojai," he answered. "It's about an hour east of Santa Barbara."

Shelly nodded vigorously. "Oh yeah, I know where that is, my mom goes there on yoga retreats. So, um, we're discussing social criticism in *The Canterbury Tales*," Shelly said, holding up the book. "Have you read it?"



Luca shook his head. “Nope.” His disinterest was palpable.

I frowned. *Way to make an impression, new kid.* Shelly, however, didn’t seem deterred, batting her eyelashes and staring openly at him. I rolled my eyes. Good luck there, Shells. I continued to doodle, knowing to stay far, far away from anyone this ridiculous looking. I didn’t feel like repeating Phlegmgate. The pain was still fresh.

But I snuck a glance at him anyway.

Someone kicked my chair and I looked up to see Wes shaking his head. I glared at him and mouthed, *Die.* He laughed and waggled his eyebrows suggestively at Luca. I kicked his chair back, and he lowered his head, hiding his laughter.

Then, suddenly, as everyone else was mired in some discussion about Chaucer’s disdain for chivalry, Luca was scooting his desk closer to me. I froze. Why was he getting closer?! Noooooo.

A mental checklist of everything that could be gross about me popped up like a Tom Cruise–movie hologram: Dry, chapped lips. Check. That one weird long eyebrow hair I kept forgetting to trim. Check. Potential eye crust leftover from this morning. Check. Joyous new upper-lip hair growth. Check. Smattering of small yet offensive zits on my forehead. Check. Not to mention my *sweatpants*. No, this was not the day to talk to a new cute boy.

I looked at Wes in panic, and he pressed his lips together regretfully, knowing that I was headed to Flailureville.

Mere inches away, Luca gave my notebook a sidelong glance.

“Nice drawing.” He kept his eyes straight ahead, his voice so low that I wondered if he had actually said what I thought he said.

My eyes flew down to the bad doodle of my dress. “Um, thanks, it’s just . . . a doodle.” I casually moved my arm over it.

“Do you take AP art?”

I let out a snort of laughter and immediately flushed. *Gather thyself*. “Um, no,” I finally managed to respond. “Are you taking it?”

He nodded, then whispered, “So, hey. Tell me the truth. Somehow I’ve landed in a subgroup of nerds where you guys are the alpha-nerds. Am I right?”

I resisted the urge to laugh lest another snort be released. Instead I bit back a smile. “What gave it away? Our zeal for Middle English?”

*He* laughed then. Whoa, I just made a cute guy laugh. Okay, I needed to stop while I was ahead. Yet . . .

“We, like, *thrive* on fourteenth-century fart jokes,” I said before I could even stop myself. O-M-G whyyyy.

But again, Luca laughed. And it made me laugh—a snortless one.

I could feel the heat of Wes’s eyeballs on me. He was now sending me dire telepathic messages to stop talking.

I was about to lean over and make a crack about Chaucer’s proclivity for lusty milkmaids when I noticed that Luca’s hand was casually trailing over to my desk. Inching closer to mine. What the—?

All signals in my body were going berserk—red lights, honking horns, wailing sirens. I thought maybe I was dying. My heart flew out of my chest with a final, triumphant *Adios, Muchachos!*

But I didn't die. Instead I watched as Luca gently took my pencil from me. I was so startled that my hand just stayed in that awkward pencil-holding position, empty and curled around nothing. Then, ever-so-slightly, Luca tilted my notebook toward himself and slid it down my desk so that it was within his reach.

Without ever looking at me, he started to trace over my drawing. With swift, assured strokes. His lines moved on top, over, around my own. Until the dress was transformed from a childish shape into layers and layers of dark lace. Fit snugly over a slim yet curved body. The front of the dress was short but there was a long bustled skirt covered with feathers cascading down the back, puddled at the bottom. Then he made the imaginary girl a pair of truly killer heels, strappy and towering. She wore black lace gloves that ended at her wrists, and her hair was a long tangled mass pulled to one side. The other side exposed a delicate ear pierced to oblivion with geometric studs and long chains and jewels that reached past her shoulders.

Discussions of Chaucer turned into white noise in the background as I watched the drawing come to life. Luca paused for a moment and I glanced up at him, impatient, wanting to see what was next. His face was bent close to the paper, brow furrowed in concentration, but I could have sworn he was smiling.

He filled in her face. Thick, straight eyebrows. Dark, wide-set

eyes with long lashes. Broad cheekbones and a small mouth with a bigger upper lip than bottom. The hint of an overbite.

Me.

I stared at it, physically unable to look at Luca. My cheeks were hot and my heart was pounding in my ears—so loud that I couldn't believe it wasn't being heard by everyone on planet Earth. When I finally looked up, I stared directly into his eyes and a zap of electricity shot between us.

Before I could react, before I could say one thing, the bell rang.

Everyone moved their desks back to their original positions, metal scraping across the floor. Luca left my notebook and pencil on my desk before moving his desk back, too, grabbing his things without a word to me.

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I picked up my pencil gingerly. I swear it was still warm from his touch.

“If you need help finding your classes and stuff, I can walk with you,” I heard Shelly purr to Luca.

A small smile hovered over Luca's lips. “Uh, thanks, but I've got it.” He swung his backpack around to his chest, and it looked like he was *pretending* to fish something out.

Wes thumped my arm with his bag. “Hey, you ready?”

I blinked. “Oh yeah, uh-huh.” We headed out of class together, and I glanced backward at Luca one last time. Was he going to say *anything*? Apparently not, he was so engrossed in the thrills of backpack rummaging.

“So what were you giggling about with John Stamos over there?” Wes asked as we stepped outside.

“Ha-ha. I wasn’t *giggling*.” I started giggling as I said it.

Wes raised his eyebrows at me. “Shiiiiit.”

“Shut up,” I said with another involuntary giggle. But when I turned around, Luca was walking toward me, backpack on correctly now. I froze. And apparently, whenever Luca walked toward me, the world moved in slow-motion. He pushed the beanie out of his eyes with glacial speed. By the time he finally reached me, we had already dated, married, and sent our two daughters off to college tearfully. Giggles immediately dissipated.

“So I know you said you’re not in AP art, but are you in Art Club?” he asked. The flirty vibe from earlier was gone, and I couldn’t tell if that was because Wes was with me. But he was being friendly enough, so . . .

I tried to remain composed. “Ha, no way.”

He laughed—a honking laugh that made me break out in a huge grin. What an undignified laugh for such a hot specimen. *Oh my God, stop being excited. You know where excitement leads, Desi. Stop!* But I never made guys laugh. At this point in any of my interactions with guys, I had already done something spectacularly stupid. For the first time in forever, I felt a flicker of hope.

Wes subtly walked up ahead of us.

“Too bad,” Luca said, with an inscrutable expression. My heart thumped.

Then. I felt it—a familiar loss of control, all competence taken over by nervous insecurity. *No, no, no.* “Too bad I’m not in Art Club?” I asked, my voice already reaching a strange pitch.

“Yeah.”

I shook my head. “I would never waste my time pursuing something at which I’m only mediocre.” Oh sweet Jesus, I was doing the know-it-all, strangely colonial-era talking. *Stop, stop now and just be aloof and cool. ALOOF AND COOL. Check your posture.*

I watched his smile fade. The gleam in his eyes dulled. *Okay, aloof-and-cool moment is officially gone.* I knew I should stop now, but maybe I could save this. A surge of ballsiness coursed through me. Just *explain* yourself. *Communication is key.* “It’s just that I’m really busy.” His face froze—paralyzed, if you will. I powered through. “I have a lot riding on my shoulders. I’m school president, on varsity soccer and tennis, in five different clubs, and am pretty much slated to be valedictorian.”

An all-too-familiar expression of politeness-disguising-panic took over Luca’s face. “Wow. Busy bee. All right, see you around then.”

I blinked and shook my head, feeling my wits return to me as he walked off.

“Wait, Luca!”

He turned around, reluctantly, if one were to judge reluctance on the literal dragging of feet.

*Now what? Why the hell did I just do that?!*

I nervously pulled at the drawstrings on my sweats. “Um, when does Art Club meet?” *All is not lost. Just try to flirt. Be cute. PLAY UP CUTE.* I bit my lower lip for added effect.

Luca’s eyes darted around, as if looking for a way to escape this. “Um, I’m not sure yet, but I think it’s on the website . . .” His voice trailed off.

And then.

My fashion sweatpants fell off. In a puddle at my feet.

I looked down. Luca looked down. I looked up. Luca was still looking down.

And I heard Wes yelp, “Are you *kidding?*”

I pulled them up and ran. Like the wind.

## CHAPTER 4

**My phone was buzzing all that evening—Wes and Fiona were** trying to cheer me up about the sweatpants incident but I ignored them. My last text to them had been: **Consider me dead. Bye.**

When my dad came home from work, he found me in full-on pity-party mode: wearing my pajamas, I was watching a reality show about young women competing for their very own cupcake shop and was inhaling my binge-eating snack of choice—pickle spears. My dad stood in the entryway and tsked. “That many pickles?! Right now? Appa won’t make dinner for you.”

He grumbled all the way into the kitchen, where he unloaded groceries. Normally, that was my job, but today I let myself luxuriate in my terrible mood. With my long history of flailures, you’d think the latest would just be a drop in the bucket. And in the past, after a couple of hours, the inevitable next urgent Desi Lee thing had distracted me—science fair, soccer game, etc.



But I just couldn't shake it off today. And something about the Luca flailure was sending me spiraling into some seriously embarrassing flashbacks.

*Jefferson Mahoney. First grade. I kicked my first crush, Jefferson, in the nuts during tae kwon do class, and he had to be taken to the ER.*

I stuck my hand into the jar for another pickle. My dad walked into the living room and shook his head at me. "Okay, whatchu going on?"

Normally, *whatchu going on* got a giggle from me. I smiled halfheartedly. "Nothing."

*Diego Valdez. Fourth grade. He asked me if I wanted to look at his "special" books and I told him I wasn't allowed to look at pornography. Turned out to be comic books and he didn't even know how babies were made yet. I was a fourth-grade perv.*

"Those are the special pickles I get from Persian market. Give to me, they're Appa's favorites."

I hugged the jar close to me and turned my back to him. "No!"

*Oliver Sprague. Seventh grade. We were at the Halloween dance and he leaned in to give me my first kiss but I started laughing until I cried.*

My dad pursed his lips. "Okay, stop. This isn't funny anymore. Appa has to watch the show and you are being very annoying."

"Rude."

He plopped down next to me so forcefully that I bounced and some pickle juice splattered on me. Then he wrestled the jar from me. “No dinner for both of us, then.” He took a bite before picking up the remote.

“Let’s watch something else.” I had never been able to sit through an entire K drama and I was in the mood for something way more sinister and miserable.

My dad ignored me as he deftly navigated the smart-TV options to the Internet and launched his K drama streaming site. He could barely e-mail but he could launch that website in his sleep. I tried to grab the remote from him and he bonked me over the head with it.

“What’s the matter with you? I work all day, what did you do, pickle monster? No, you watch what Appa watches.”

I rubbed my head and glared at him. “I don’t *wanna*.”

*Nyma Amiri. Sophomore year. I sent Nyma secret-admirer notes for a few weeks, only to discover that he knew it was me from the beginning. Because I accidentally signed the first one.*

Another bonk. “*Yah*, stop complaining. Also, we *are* watching because this is the *last* episode of the show and Appa been *soooo* excited to see this one.”

As the title credits rolled over the theme music I had heard in the background all week, I felt something snap. “How are you even remotely excited about this? *They all end the same*. These people”—I pointed to the screen, at the wide-eyed nymph and the Bieber-coiffed cad—“there’s no way in hell they should be

together. But miracle of miracles, they end up happily ever after. It's complete bullshit."

*Max Peralta: Phlegm rocket.*

*Luca Drakos: Pantsed myself.*

My dad shoved my head. "Watch your mouth, Miss Complaining USA. Don't you know that if it's true love, even bad beginnings end happy?"

True love. I wanted to scoff at that, but the lurch in my chest when I saw Luca's drawing was something I had never felt before. The light-headed buzz in his proximity was new. I had crushed hard in the past, but I had the nagging feeling that this was something different.

I sat back out of sheer laziness and watched the start of the episode. My dad helpfully turned on the English subtitles so I could follow along with my remedial Korean skills.

The scene opened on a busy city intersection—the two main characters standing on opposite sides of the street, staring at each other in the rain. Music was swelling as the cars sped by them.

My dad gleefully clapped. "Oh, *finally!*" he said. "*Finally* they see each other after so many bad things! This is where they'll kiss!" He glanced at me. "Maybe this is adult stuff."

I scoffed. "Appa, seriously? We watched *Brokeback Mountain* together."

Just as the light was about to turn green for the two lovers to meet, there was a flashback: The girl is sitting in a supply closet at work, her skirt hiked up, mending her torn stocking with clear

nail polish. The guy accidentally walks in on her, and she startles and throws her arms up in the air—tossing the nail polish bottle at his eye. He howls and when the girl scrambles up to help him, he yells at her and shoves her aside. The girl’s mood changes instantly and she kicks him and he falls face-forward into a bucket.

I snorted. “Yeah, so super-believable that they go from this to kissing passionately in the rain.”

My dad shoved me again. “Be quiet, Desi. Just watch, they show *everything* that happened in all the other episodes.”

In the next flashback, the girl stumbles into a cabin from a snowstorm. The guy rushes over to her, yelling; he’s furious that she put herself in danger. Then he notices she’s limping and injured. He sits her down on a stool and wraps her ankle gently in a bandage, and as his eyes skim from her bare ankle up to her face, they lock eyes awkwardly. He shoves her away and she falls off the stool.

I smiled. Okay, admittedly that was pretty cute despite the slight violent element.

The next flashback: The girl’s at dinner with some other bland-looking dude, and the guy rushes in angrily, taking long strides across the fancy restaurant to grab her wrist and pull her away. She shouts at him and starts pounding his chest with her little fists, furious, but he kisses her roughly and she melts against him.

Hmm . . . that was kind of . . . hot. I straightened up and

leaned forward. The last flashback: The two are at work, and the girl is getting yelled at by her boss. He throws a folder at her, papers flying everywhere. The guy is watching her, his face contorted with emotion. She makes meaningful eye contact with him and walks out of the room with her head held up high.

My dad elbowed me. “That was when she took blame for something he did wrong.”

We flashed back to present day, the couple staring longingly at each other after so much misunderstanding and suffering. The light turns green and the two walk toward each other in slow motion. Just as they were about to meet in the middle of the street, I grabbed the remote and paused it.

“*Desi!*” my dad yelled.

I looked at him, and even though you don’t usually *feel* your eyes gleaming, I felt my eyes gleaming. I had always assumed that when relationships went bad, that was the end. But the entire premise of K dramas was that *they always ended happily*. And that if you looked closely, there was a *formula* for making a guy fall in love with you. One that often began with a heavy dose of humiliation for the girl. And why had all my failures, my humiliations come to nothing? It was because I never had a *plan*. There had never been any *steps* to follow.

But the steps were right in front of my eyes all along. Just slightly blocked by my dad’s big head. I sprang up from the sofa. “It’s like a freaking equation! Why didn’t I ever see it?” I yelled. “We’re starting from the first episode!”

My dad's jaw dropped and he threw his arms up helplessly at the screen, where the two were about to kiss, eyes closed, leaning in. There would be about thirty more excruciating seconds of them squinting their eyes to lean in for this kiss, moving a millimeter per second.

Like *everything else*, Luca could be won over with some good old-fashioned planning. This renewed sense of order propelled me up the stairs to grab a notebook. I might be a flailure in love, but I was the motherf-ing *boss* of studying. And until Luca, the motivation to study and plan my way out of humiliation had just never come to me.

Two days later, on Monday morning, it was done.

I turned off the TV and leaned back into the crinkly leather sofa. My mouth was parched. My contacts were stickers on my eyeballs. I glanced over at my dad, who, when he wasn't working, had joined me for the marathon on and off during the weekend. Then, last night, he had conked out next to me on the couch while I stayed up all night. He was sleeping with his mouth open, white-sock-clad feet tangled up in the plaid comforter I had brought for him.

I looked down at my notebook. I had done it—I had watched three entire K drama series over the course of the weekend, including the one that we had started on Friday night. When my

dad had asked why I was on this sudden K drama kick, I said it was for a school research project. Part of that wasn't a lie.

The dramas I watched were all of the romantic comedy variety, because that was clearly the genre that best fit my current life scenario. I hadn't left my house, showered, or seen another human aside from my dad in that entire time. I had ignored texts from Fiona and Wes.

It was funny, K dramas have been the white noise of my life. They were always on in the background as I washed the dishes, did homework, or hung out with friends upstairs in my room. But I had never sat there with my dad and fully given myself up to the K drama drug.

Over the course of an entire weekend, I had become a convert. I had graduated from K Drama Rom-Com School.

I had laughed, cried, felt the entire spectrum of K drama emotions. When I started the first episode, it took me a while to take the general aesthetic of the show seriously. First of all, the hairstyles on the male actors—OMG, so distracting and outrageous. Then, somehow, they evolved from ridonk to cute and dreamy! And while the posh sets of “rich people” made my eyes roll violently, they were offset by the cozy and romantic snapshots of Seoul—midnight drinks and hot snacks in *pojangmacheas* (pop-up tents), adorable coffee shops playing American Top 40 music, city avenues lined with cherry trees in bloom, the iconic Han River at night. Seoul just seemed so *pleasant* and *alive*.

And although I'm Korean American, there was a bit of culture shock. Like, how a hug was a momentous relationship marker (in American shows the leads would barely blink twice before jumping into bed). Or how *huge* obstacles were brought on by class differences, and how it was considered kind of okay for a rich mom to start hitting a *grown* woman for daring to date her son despite being poor. And the grown woman would just sit there and take it because the rich mom was her elder!

Then there were the *emotions*. My God, I have never witnessed this level of emotion from human beings, on-screen or off. So. Many. Tears. So much *yelling*. I now understood why my dad spoke in all-caps, why everything was laced with incredulity. Not to mention all the fierce hugs, sweeping across rooms and grabbing girls, and close-ups of quivering mouths and clenched jaws. Hello, Hollywood casting directors who think there aren't any Asians with star power? You need to go to Korea.

Yeah, the stories could be formulaic, downright clichéd at times, but with the strong characters, it all worked. Characters that you rooted for, that you hated with the heat of a thousand suns, that you crushed on hard-core, that you envied, that you *cared* about. They were more real than anything the Oscars served up.

K dramas bottled up swoony true love in addictive ten-to-twenty-hour packages. My reactions to chaste first kisses were akin to heart attacks. I bawled with abandon when couples had to break up, when one of them was suffering. I sighed happily



with glazed eyes when my characters finally got their happy endings.

And now I had to go to boring school. In America. But I was armed with something that I truly believed would work.

*“Appa . . . Appa! Wake up!”* I nudged him until he finally stirred. It was like waking up a giant four-year-old, but I managed to get him upstairs to shower. When he closed his bathroom door, I glanced down at my phone. I had a good twenty minutes before Fiona showed up.

## CHAPTER STEP 5: Have a Secret Dream That Brings You Closer to the Guy

**Fiona was late and it was cold. Waiting for her in my driveway,** I hugged my thermos of coffee, which was barely saving me on zero hours of sleep. A quick glance at my phone's weather app showed that it was fifty-two degrees. Freaking glacial for Orange County, even if it *was* December. I was about to rage-text Fiona when I heard a loud clattering noise just before her copper-colored death-on-wheels, lovingly called Penny, turned the corner. I could sense all my uptight neighbors flicking their venetian blinds aside to stare out at the loud hooligan car.

Fiona's music was blasting, too, but I couldn't hear *that* over the clattering until she was pulled up right in front me. I hopped in and immediately turned the volume down on the Swedish reggae. "God, you're going to go deaf. Either from terrible music or your trash-can car. You do realize Penny has an exhaust leak?" Always the mechanic's daughter, I could identify a car by the sound of its exhaust in my sleep.

“I ran over a neighbor’s skateboard the other day, maybe it was that.” Fiona pondered for a second before glaring at me. “Were you in hibernation because of the sweatpants flailure?”

“In part.”

She tapped her long lavender nails on the steering wheel. “Well, I’m glad to see you’re not dead. If it wasn’t for your cryptic post on Instagram last night I would have sent the cops over.”

“I know, sorry. I was just super-caught up in something this weekend.”

She glanced over at me again. “Look at you today. All sharp.”

I was wearing dark jeans, black flats, and a gray peacoat over a heart-patterned sweater. “Fi. I’m just wearing normal clothes.”

Fiona, on the other hand, was wearing shorts overalls over tights, a long-sleeved thermal, and a giant tweed men’s coat over the entire ensemble. Her lips crimson, her faux-red hair tied in a high, messy knot. Bow down.

I nervously snuck a peek at myself in the visor mirror. I had managed to execute my favorite hairstyle—worn down with soft waves framing my face. I saw a flash of Luca’s drawing of me, the long hair swept to one side.

“I have something to tell you.”

A beat of silence. “Okaaaay, I’m listening.”

“Well, it’s always been kind of lame that despite how well I do in so many things, I can’t seem to get a boyfriend because of my flailures, right? Clearly, there’s that magic something I’m missing, that all you overdeveloped lovers seem to have.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. So . . . you know how my dad’s always watching those Korean dramas?”

“Yes, adorable.” My dad melted even the coolest of hearts.

I went on. “Well, so after a hot guy saw my green-striped underwear on Friday, I actually watched a bunch of K dramas. Like, three of them.”

“Three episodes?”

“No, shows. Like entire series!”

Fiona turned onto the main road, then looked over at me incredulously. “You watched *three series* of shows in *one weekend*?! Aren’t they, like, one hundred episodes each?”

“No! They’re all different, running from, like, ten to twenty.”

“*What!* Are you on *speed*?”

“I was propelled by epic flailure, Fi. And call me crazy but I think Luca and I had a serious moment.”

“You mean before your pants fell off?”

“*Fi!*”

We got to school and she turned off the ignition and stared at me. “Okay, in all seriousness. A *moment*? Didn’t you know him for a total of thirty minutes before . . . you know?”

*A mental flash of Luca staring down at the gray puddle of sweats at my feet.* I shook my head to erase it like an Etch A Sketch.

“Yeah, but . . . I can’t explain it.”

“I can. He’s hot.” Fiona shook her head.

“It’s not just that! I mean, yes, my God. He’s hot. But he also . . .” I looked away from her and into my lap where I was nervously wringing my hands, embarrassed to go into details. “He did this thing—he took my pencil from me and freaking *drew a picture of me*. It was . . . so. *Romantic*. It was the most special thing any guy has ever done for me.”

Fiona was silent for a second. “You are such a dork.”

I swatted Fiona’s arm. “Don’t make fun of me, I’m serious! Sorry I’m not an experienced seductress who like, has men drinking champagne from her high heels.”

“*What!* That alone, Des, makes me really worry about you. What you know about romance is, like, weird clichéd crap. From 1980s champagne commercials.”

We sat in the car, the air growing chilly with the heater turned off. “Well, that’s the whole point, right? Something is clearly wrong with *me*. I’m stunted or just . . . lacking something when it comes to relationship stuff. It’s not natural for me. But. When do I excel at stuff?”














Fiona threw up her hands. “I dunno, you excel at most things.”


“Yes! And do you know why? Most things have *rules*, steps, and methods for getting better.”


Fiona looked at me, hard. “What are you getting at?”


I pulled out my notebook and held it up with a grin. “I discovered the steps to conquering flailure.” I handed the notebook to Fiona. Her face remained impassive while she read.


# THE K DRAMA STEPS TO TRUE LOVE


1. You Are the Living Embodiment of All That Is Pure and Good 
2. Have a Sad-Sack Family Story 
3. Meet the World's Most Unattainable Guy 
4. Get the Guy to Get to You Whether It's from Annoyance or Obsession 
5. Have a Secret Dream That Brings You Closer to the Guy  
//////////
6. Doggedly Pursue Your Dream, No Matter the Cost to Your Well-Being 
7.  Mystery Surrounds the Guy but Find Out More
8. Be Caught in an Obviously Lopsided Love Triangle 
9. Get into a Predicament That Forces Both the Guy and You into an Intimate Bonding Moment 
10. Find Out the Guy's Big Secret, Preferably Through Excruciatingly Repetitive Flashbacks   
11. Prove That You Are Different from All Other Women - IN THE ENTIRE WORLD 
12. Life-Threatening Event Makes Him/you Realize How Real Your Love Is  
//////////
13. Reveal Your Vulnerabilities in a Heartbreaking Manner 

14. Lock That Baby In With a Kiss! Finally. 

15. Fall Deeply into Cringe-Inducing Mushy Love 

16. Pick Your Very Own Love Ballad to Blast  
Fervently Over and Over Again! 


17. Worlds Have to Collide for Some Comic Relief 

18. Meet His Family and Win Them Over 


19. You Must Make the Ultimate Sacrifice to Prove Your Love

20. You Are Not Allowed to Be Happy Until the Very  
Last Possible Minute

21. Betrayal Time—One of You Kinda-Not-Really Betrays the Other 

22. At Your Lowest Point, Your Life Is Only Made Up of  
Σ Flashback Montages of Good Times 

23. Take Drastic Measures for Your Happy Ending' 

24. Get Your Happy Ending' 

When her eyeballs finally stilled I waited expectantly for her response.

Her electric-blue-lined eyes shifted over to mine.

“Are you . . . out of your damn mind?”

I released a tortured breath. “Hear me out—”

“No way, Des. This is the most deranged thing I have ever seen, even for *you*. Some of these things . . . I mean . . . who the hell . . .”

“Fi, I’m not going to take it all *literally*. Some of the real wacko stuff you’re reading is part of these formulas but not necessarily things I need to do. It’s a rough . . . inspirational blueprint if you will. But it essentially lays out, step-by-step, all the ways to get into predicaments that will endear me to Luca and then ultimately get us closer together.”

“Oh God, you’re getting that annoying look on your face.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that look that always gets stuff *done*.” I flipped to the blank pages after the list. “So here I’ll be writing little notes on my progress and my actual tactics.”

While her expression was still dubious, the deep creases in her forehead unfurrowed slightly. “Okay, so what was step 1 again?” Fiona reached for the notebook and flipped to the list. “*You Are the Living Embodiment of All That Is Pure and Good*.” She looked at me, then cracked up.

I crossed my arms. “That one . . . well, some I’ll have to kind of gloss over.”