

CHAPTER 1

Jenny

The classroom door swung open.

Every head in the class turned to see a boy with messy blond hair walk in. He gave a nod to his classmates before handing Mrs. Tanner, the slender Oral Communications teacher, a slip of paper.

“Late on the first day, Mister”—she looked closer at the slip in her hand—“Masters?”

“Car trouble, ma’am,” he assured her.

She shook her head disapprovingly. “Don’t make a habit of this.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He winked before heading to the only open seat in the room.

He collapsed into the seat next to Jenny Wessler. Jenny glanced at him out of the corner of her eye as she chewed the end of her pen. She knew who the boy was, of course. He was the one and only Chance Masters. He’d spent his high school career carving out the most scandalous reputation he could.

"Anyway," Mrs. Tanner called the class to order. "As I was about to say, for your first assignment you will each interview the person next to you, and then perform a dialogue together about your summer vacations for the class. Any questions?"

"Um, yeah." Kelsey Molar, a perky blond, raised her hand. "Can we switch partners?" She looked at her partner, Danny Jennings, with disdain while Danny just continued to slumber in his seat.

"No, sorry, Kelsey, but I pick partners in my class. It's the first day of your junior year. It's one of your last chances to meet new classmates," Mrs. Tanner explained. "Could you wake Danny, please?"

Kelsey prodded Danny awake with her pencil, then glanced over at Jenny.

Jenny met her eyes, shrugged, and mouthed, "I wanted to be your partner."

Jenny watched as Kelsey gave a weak smile and turned to start the project. *I better start, too*, she thought as she looked to Chance. He sat slouched in his desk, his blond hair tousled just so and his brown eyes shining wickedly. He flashed what could only be called a smirk and said, "Ready to go, partner?" in a voice that could convince even the most grounded girl to run away with him.

Luckily, Jenny had no time for him. "Look," she began in her nonsense voice, "I really, really like having all A's, so no playing around. You have to take this seriously. I want to start the semester off right."

"Well, you're no fun. I bet you're the type who excitedly packs her backpack the night before the first day because you just can't wait for school to start." He sat up and produced a notebook. "Let's get this over with, then, Little Miss Really-Likes-Having-A's."

"I am not . . ." she hedged, blushing slightly. The truth was, of course, that she was exactly that type of person. She tried to hide her blush by looking over at Margaret Lester, who—with every perfect hair in place—was interviewing the brainless Max Gregs.

"Ah." Chance followed her line of sight. "Margaret Lester. She's not quite the perfect angel everyone seems to think," he said matter-of-factly.

"How would you know?" Jenny turned back to him. "She only moved here at the end of last year."

"Because we went out," he said with a shrug. "We met at a party, and one thing led to another. . . ." He trailed off. "You might want to write this down, since the interview is over something we did during the summer."

"I can't get up there and tell the class how you hooked up with Margaret."

"Why not?"

"Seriously?" She looked skeptical. He was a gross pig, just like everyone said.

"Okay, I see your point." He scratched his chin. "Well, I also broke into an abandoned gas station with my cousins, and then we went skinny-dipping with some girls they knew, but I'm betting you won't say that, either."

"No." Jenny set down her pen. "Did you do anything school appropriate?"

"Um, let's see." He pretended to look thoughtful for a moment. "Nope."

"Of course not." Jenny was feeling a little uncomfortable with him. She'd heard that he got around, but she didn't expect it to be true. She

also couldn't help but think of her own pathetic summer; she'd locked herself in her room and read the entire time.

"Let me guess: You did nothing fun?" He raised one eyebrow.

"I've always wanted to do that," she blurted out.

"What?" He looked taken aback by her bluntness. "Have fun?"

"No, raise one eyebrow," she explained, feeling lame.

He just nodded and went to sketching on a blank page in his notebook. Jenny bit her bottom lip and looked around the room; everyone else was well under way with their interviews. Mrs. Tanner sat at her computer, playing solitaire. Jenny glanced back to Chance as he absentmindedly doodled. "Chance?" she asked.

"Yeah?" He looked up, his eyes surprisingly sweet.

"How many girls have you slept with?" The question sprang from her lips before she could contain it. She quickly looked away from him and blushed. *How could I be so stupid?* she thought. *You can't go around asking people those things!*

He let out an amused chuckle and said, "That's none of your business, Little Miss Really-Likes-Having-As."

"Sorry." She fidgeted with her pen.

"Do you always wear your hair in a ponytail?" he asked. He gestured to the tangled mess of brown hair she had shoved back in an elastic band.

"Yeah, it's a bitch to straighten," she admitted.

His eyes lit up. "Aha, so you're not perfect. Now we're getting somewhere."

"I never said that I was perfect," she mumbled, feeling insecure. "I just try to be."

“Yeah, you do seem like the type who is desperate for approval.” He returned to his doodle.

Anger flared as Jenny snapped: “Hey, you don’t know anything about me. Don’t pretend to.”

A lazy smile formed at Chance’s lips as he looked up at her through his blond bangs. “Relax, Little Miss Really-Likes-Having-As. I know nothing of your life and I’m okay with that.” He flipped to a clean page in his notebook and started writing frantically. “You did give me an idea, though, so maybe you’re good for something.”

Jenny stared at him in confusion. “What idea? What are you writing? We don’t have time—”

“Relax,” he said again. “I’ve got this covered, seriously. When she calls on us, just work off of me and we’re golden.”

Jenny glanced around the room at all the other partners huddled close together, writing out scripts for their dialogues—and then back to Chance. Was Chance Masters really asking her to trust him? Doubt clouded her mind as she tried to sneak a peek at his chicken scratch.

“You look like you’re having an episode,” Chance informed her. He reached out and pushed at the corners of her mouth, forcing them up. “At least look like you enjoy my company. I kind of have a reputation to uphold. Girls love me.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m aware.” She jerked away, trying not to let it show how much his touch affected her. Her heart pounded in her throat as she watched Mrs. Tanner work her way back to the front of the classroom. “Chance, she’s going to call time, and we’re not ready.”

“Yes, we are,” he informed her, closing his notebook. “We’re ready and we’re going to have the best dialogue.”

"We don't have a script," she reminded him in a frantic whisper.

"Yes, we do." He smirked.

A nervous sweat began to form on her neck and back. "Then would you kindly fill me in?"

"It'll work better this way," he assured her as Mrs. Tanner called the class to order. "Besides, it was your idea."

"What was?" Jenny asked again, frantic.

"Pretending to know you," he whispered back.

Before Jenny could reply, Mrs. Tanner called up the first group: Kelsey and Danny. They had a snooze-worthy discussion about Kelsey's trip to Colorado and Danny's quest to sleep for seventy-five hours straight. All through it, Jenny kept throwing worried glances at Chance, but he seemed as calm and collected as ever. Finally, after five more groups, Mrs. Tanner called on them.

Chance sauntered to the front of the classroom, causing all the girls to pay attention. Jenny meekly followed him, cold sweat drenching her hands. She glanced from Chance to Mrs. Tanner and back again, waiting for this whole thing to blow up in his face. Chance shot her a wicked grin, cleared his throat, and began.

"Well, it was actually pretty fortunate that Jenny was picked as my partner," he told the class. "We spent most of summer break together, since our families are pretty close."

Jenny tried to control her expression, but she was sure the confusion in her eyes gave them away. She didn't know where he was going with this. Mrs. Tanner was nodding approvingly, while the rest of the class looked between Chance and Jenny, trying to figure out how such a friendship was possible.

"You see, Jenny came over the second day of vacation and helped

my brother and me decorate for our annual summer cookout, like she does every year." The class nodded, as if this was old information. They were actually buying it.

"Yeah," Jenny jumped in, trying to go with the flow. "I got there at, like, eight in the morning and no one was up. I had to bang on the door for at least ten minutes."

"Well, we like to sleep." Chance grinned, happy that she was playing along.

"You told me to get there at eight," Jenny tossed back, surprised at how easy it was.

"By 'eight' I mean, like, 'twelve.' You should know this already." He turned back to face the class. "Anyway, after barging into our home at an ungodly time, Jenny and I spent the next few hours attempting to put up those tiki-torch lantern things."

"Which is not the easiest task when Chance's brother keeps blowing them out." Jenny sighed, enjoying herself. "We eventually gave up and just went with tiny American flags. It's more traditional anyway."

"After that, we fought over who would light the grill. It's usually me—"

"Actually, we're supposed to take turns," she reminded him.

"I did it the last two years in a row." He crossed his arms, a playful spark in his brown eyes. "Obviously you just don't remember it right."

"Oh please." She tilted her head and smirked. "I got sick two years ago, remember? Your mother accidentally put expired eggs in the cookies and I spent the whole day throwing up. You stole the grill from me my year."

"Whatever, it's my house and my grill." He turned back to the class. "We were fighting over who got to do it, and suddenly—"

"The lighter broke when Chance tried to tug it out of my hands," Jenny finished. "He tends to break a lot of things."

"I broke your Barbie sunglasses when we were seven. Get over it, Wessler."

"You ran them over with your bike, Masters."

"Well, you shouldn't have left them in my driveway," he said, as if that solved everything.

"Anyway, back to the story," Jenny continued, loving the way the class seemed intrigued. She couldn't believe they were actually buying it. "We ended up getting banned from the house while decorating continued."

"We went to Jenny's house instead." Chance took it from her. "We ended up just spending most of our time there, honestly."

"Well, I was kind of trying to cook things for the party." Jenny sighed again. "You just came with me to annoy me and eat my food."

"Not to annoy," Chance corrected. "To relieve you from boredom."

"Either way you word it, a distraction is still a distraction."

Before Jenny could pick the story back up, Mrs. Tanner called time. The class clapped as they had to after every dialogue, and the two made it back to their desks. The rest of the partners went up and spoke, but Jenny didn't pay them any mind. Her thoughts were all on Chance and how easy it was to get up there and play make-believe with him. Hell, she half believed their lie herself.

She looked over to find Chance looking back at her. He smiled his boyish grin and gave a thumbs-up. She returned the gesture and the grin before giving her attention back to the speakers. After everyone

was done and Mrs. Tanner congratulated the class for their hard work, the bell rang, signaling lunch.

Kelsey came up as Jenny was shoving her books into her backpack. With a cautious look at Chance, Kelsey whispered, "I didn't know you and Chance knew each other."

"Oh, yeah." Jenny smiled, keeping up the charade. "We used to live next to each other when we were little."

"Now that you mention it, I think I used to see him around once or twice." Kelsey nodded eagerly, her blond curls bouncing around her face. "You must've mentioned him at some point."

From the corner of her eye, Jenny saw Chance looking at them. She smiled and continued packing. "Totally."

"Well, I'm going," Kelsey said, sensing that Jenny didn't want her there. As soon as the bubbly blond left, Jenny turned to look at Chance. A smirk formed at her lips.

"Well, I apologize for freaking out," she said. The boy leaned against the edge of his desk and smiled, encouraging her to continue. "Obviously, you were able to handle things. I should've just relaxed."

He shook some hair out of his face and laughed. "Thanks, Little Miss Really-Likes-Having-As. Coming from a model student like you, that means something."

"Don't push it, Masters," she threatened, pointing a finger.

He reached out, grabbed her accusing hand, and shook it, smiling what she was beginning to think was his signature smile. "Jenny Wessler, this is clearly the start to a beautiful friendship."

"And that is an overused line." But she smiled back anyway.

Chance slung his backpack over his shoulder before offering her his arm. "Wessler?"

Is this still part of the game? she wondered. After a moment's hesitation, she laced her elbow through his arm, blushing slightly. "I'm going to regret this one day, aren't I?"

"Fat chance," he scoffed. "Apparently, you've had years to get away from me."

A knot twisted in the pit of her stomach, excitement welling up in her. "I guess I haven't learned my lesson yet."

THE WALK TO lunch was awkward. Jenny very seldom walked down the hallway with anybody, let alone arm-in-arm with Chance-freaking-Masters. People, it serves to say, were taking notice. Jenny could feel the eyes on her and Chance and hear the whispers. "So . . ." she began. "This is new."

"You're terrible at conversation," Chance said as they turned into the cafeteria. It was a big room, with rows and rows of round gray tables and gray folding chairs around them. Two long lines wrapped around the walls, people in line for either choice A or B for their lunch. Chance and Jenny sidestepped through the throngs of people, seeking out a table. Jenny typically preferred to sit in the back, by the stage area. It was quieter there and people generally left her alone. She knew from observation, however, that Chance liked to be in the middle of things. He usually sat in the center of the caf, at the same table as all the other outgoing kids. Sure enough, he was leading her there now. Jenny could already make out Leslie Vandercamp, a petite redhead who could barely sit straight under the weight of the twenty or so statement necklaces she had piled on. Leslie was sitting by her best friend, Emelia Vargas, a nice and stunningly beautiful blond. They were both talking vehemently to Drake Sellers.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Chance asked, gesturing to his table. He must’ve sensed her unease.

Jenny thought about it for a moment. How many chances did a girl get to sit at the so-called popular table, escorted arm-in-arm by a hot guy? Not many. At least, not as many times as teen movies had led her to believe. If life were a teen movie, then this would’ve been just another Tuesday.

Jenny often ran into these moments in her life. She called them Robert Frost moments. Two choices were presented to her: one that would change everything and one that would keep everything the same. Obviously, her gut instinct was to keep everything the same—to never step outside her comfort zone. As soon as she figured out which choice that was, she knew she had to take the other one. Always take the road less traveled.

Chance was the road less traveled.

So she put on a smile, tightened her grip, and said “Not at all,” before dragging Chance to his own table.

Lunch had just begun, so the table wasn’t full yet. There were still a few scattered empty seats, and Jenny chose the only two that were side by side. She plopped herself down, unafraid, pulling Chance down next to her.

A sharp voice brought her back to her senses. “Is this your new girlfriend, Chance?”

She whipped her head around, realizing it was Leslie who had asked the question. “Oh, it’s not like that.”

Everyone at the table burst out laughing, causing Jenny to bristle. “It’s not,” she asserted. She turned to the blond boy next to her, looking for affirmation. “Right, Chance?”

Chance, looking annoyed at the laughter, nodded vigorously. "That's right. Jenny here is my oldest friend, *not* my girlfriend. I'm sure I've mentioned it."

"I've never seen Chance be friends with a girl before, not that I remember," Leslie continued. She tucked her hair behind her ears, flashing her ring-adorned fingers. "Nothing against you, Jenny. I'm just saying that this is news to me."

Jenny knew what Leslie was delicately trying to say. Jenny wasn't a loser, per se. She had the splash of notoriety that came with being top of the class, but that was about it. She didn't really make time for anything outside of studying, which, honestly, suited her just fine. She got invited to the parties, but she never went. Everybody knew that.

Chance, on the other hand, didn't just *go* to the parties; he typically *threw* them as well. She and Chance were two stars that orbited around each other but were never supposed to intersect.

"I don't know, I think I've seen them walking at the park together a few times when I've taken my niece to the playground," Emelia chimed in with a shrug. Her long blond hair was piled on her head in a messy bun, a few strands escaping and hanging in her eyes. "They like to hang on the swings and stuff."

Jenny and Chance looked at each other, wondering what the hell Emelia was talking about. It was true that Jenny liked to hang out at the park swings a lot after school, but she had never seen Chance there. It was clear from his expression that he'd never seen her there, either.

Drake piped up, startling Jenny. He looked between her and Chance. "So, how did you guys first meet?"

Everyone knew Drake Sellers: He was the tallest guy in school

and was in a band called The Bleeding Axe Wounds. He played the guitar and sang and could cause a girl to melt with only a smile. His blue eyes caught Jenny's green ones, and she couldn't help but blush a bit as he smiled and said a quiet "Hey."

She also couldn't stop her eyes from traveling down his throat to the sparrow tattoos that decorated his collarbone, peeking out from under his lavender V-neck.

"Hey," she replied. One conversation with Chance Masters and suddenly she was on Drake Sellers's radar.

Oh God. There was no getting out of this.

"Ah, well . . ." Jenny trailed off, cursing her Robert Frost moment. Screw Robert Frost anyway, what did he know about the road less traveled? Because the road less traveled now led straight to public humiliation. The next time she had to make a choice that might affect her life forever, she was just going straight home. She looked at Chance, pleading for help. He was the one who had gotten them started back in class, after all.

"It's such a story. . . ." Chance passed it to her. It was obvious, to her at least, that he didn't know what to say, either.

"But Chance tells it better. . . ." She threw it back. There was no way she was doing this alone.

"All right, all right, I'll tell," he began, flashing her the same smile he had during their presentation. "My family moved here when I was seven, and I got all depressed because I was new. But it turned out that I had this neighbor who had a kid around my age. I decided to journey out to meet her and, of course, she was a brat."

"Hey!" Jenny interrupted crossly. "She was a freaking genius; she was an adorably precocious child. We ended up becoming best friends."

"That's it?" Leslie asked, sounding disappointed and a little disbelieving.

"Well." Jenny picked up the story then, feeling a little more confident than before. She finally had an idea forming in her head—a story taking shape. "Not at first. Like he said, I was better than him—"

"Hey!"

"But one day I happened to climb the tree in my backyard to get a Frisbee I'd thrown up there."

"She ended up getting stuck—"

"And I started screaming for help—"

"So I came running from my backyard—"

"And he climbed up the tree, too—"

"And I ended up getting stuck right along with her." Chance sighed, laughing to himself.

Making up this story was filling Jenny with adrenaline. Her nerves disappeared as she looked around at the enraptured faces of the people seated around her. They were listening to her—actually listening. Their hungry eyes flashed between her and Chance, trying to picture them as children stuck in a tree. Suddenly, Jenny wanted the story to be true.

"He started screaming like a little girl," Jenny told their audience, a smile on her face. She looked over to see that Chance was smiling, too.

"I don't like heights," he admitted.

"We were stuck for thirty minutes before anyone heard us."

"She still doesn't like to go outside."

"Why would I go outside and get all hot and sweaty when I could just curl up inside with a good book?"

“Ugh,” Chance groaned dramatically, rolling his eyes. “You and your books. Remember the summer the last Harry Potter novel came out? You dragged me to that midnight release party and forced me to drink that God-awful, lukewarm butterscotch-and-root-beer monstrosity that Barnes and Noble tried to pass off as butterbeer.”

“I thought it tasted nice!” Jenny defended, her heart hammering with excitement. She could see the strands of their fake past weaving together right in front of her, forming a cohesive timeline now. “Besides, I wasn’t the only one who wanted to be there.”

Chance held up his hands innocently. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I wasn’t the one who begged my mother to draw a lightning-bolt scar on my forehead in eyeliner before we left.”

“That totally did not happen, and if it did, it was a very manly eyeliner lightning-bolt scar.” Chance laughed, and Jenny found that she quite liked the sound of it. “Also, I wasn’t the one who won the last book for free by defeating everyone in the store at Harry Potter trivia.”

“You say that like it’s something I should be ashamed of, but it’s not.”

“Do you remember how mad all those people who preordered it were when you got to cut in front of them in line?”

“Oh my God, I can still see their faces.” And she could, in her mind’s eye, imagine what those fictional people’s faces might’ve looked like. Kids in round Harry Potter glasses would’ve narrowed their eyes as she was led in front of them, clutching their cardboard-and-hot-glue wands in anger and jealousy. One or two Hermione cosplayers would’ve whispered, “That’s so not fair.” Most important,

though, she could picture Chance, a little younger than he was now, watching her with pride as she won.

“Wow,” Drake interrupted them. “You guys bicker like a married couple.” Just like that, the spell was broken.

“We get that a lot.” Chance shrugged, leaning back. Jenny leaned back, too, realizing that they’d both been unconsciously leaning toward each other during their exchange.

She wondered how Chance felt about this. He seemed comfortable next to her, his eyes bright and his smile easy. He seemed to instinctively turn toward her as he talked, even when he was addressing other people. Then again, so did Drake. Maybe it was a boy thing.

“**THIS HAS BEEN** an eventful day, huh?” Kelsey said as they climbed into her Toyota Camry.

“Yes, it has.” The first day back from summer was always a super-stressful one for Jenny, even without the sudden friendship with Chance. Kelsey knew that Jenny always stressed over where her new classes were and what the teachers would be like.

Kelsey complained about it every year, too. Jenny loved the routine of it.

Jenny had first met Kelsey in sixth grade. The town was so big that they had four elementary schools that ran from kindergarten to fifth grade. Sixth grade was the start of middle school, when all the students started going to the same school. Jenny had been alone and anxious, separated from her elementary friends. Luckily, she’d met Kelsey when they’d both joined the Future Problem Solvers of America team. After that they kept meeting up in extracurricular activities—Quiz Bowl, Writing Circle, Art Club. Anything they could sign up for, they

did. It wasn't until halfway through the school year that they both realized they were only joining so many clubs as an excuse to be friends.

"So . . ." Kelsey began, a more serious note in her tone. "Which clubs are you joining this year?"

"I don't know," Jenny said, not wanting to shoot down her friend. She knew Kelsey was only trying to help her, but she didn't feel like joining clubs anymore. The enjoyment was gone from it. She'd much rather stay at home. "I'm thinking about it."

"I suggest Writer's Circle; it's usually fun. There's always an open spot for an alternate on the Quiz Bowl team, too," she said, glancing back to the road. "I'm going for head of the Student Advisory Board this year. Can I keep you in mind when I'm eventually elected and have to assign people to fund-raisers?"

There was no doubt in either of their minds that Kelsey would win. Kelsey was the most organized person that Jenny had ever met. "I promise to work at least one fund-raiser with you," Jenny conceded. One event wouldn't be too much, right? She hung out with Kelsey all the time at one club or another, but they'd never extended too much beyond that.

Jenny always kept to herself, but she was trying to be better. That was why she'd sat at Chance's table, after all. It was another Robert Frost moment, and agreeing to help was the road less traveled.

Chance. She'd briefly forgotten about him and their newfound friendship. Would it continue? Was it real or was it just a fluke—a stunt pulled to pass a dumb assignment and nothing more? It had been so easy. Jenny had never clicked with someone with such ease. *It's the fake past,* she decided. *It's easy to talk to someone when I don't have to be myself.*

She had a feeling the magical evening was over and it was time for Cinderella to return from the ball.

She knew what would be waiting for her when she walked through her front door: the same thing that had been waiting for her every day for the past four years. Her mother would be in the kitchen, on the phone with one of her work friends. Jack, Jenny's twelve-year-old brother, would be in his room playing Xbox, and Jessa—only four years old—would be in the living room watching TV. That's the way it always was. Her house had been unchanging since the divorce. Jenny suspected her mother was bending over backward to provide the kids with a stable routine.

"All right," Kelsey said as they pulled up in front of Jenny's house. "I'll pick you up tomorrow."

THE LIGHTS WERE on in the living room when Jenny let herself in the door. Sure enough, she could see her mother sitting at the island in the kitchen. The only thing out of place was the absence of a phone in her mom's hand.

The divorce had aged Jenny's mom. Her long brown hair now looked a little thinner, and her green eyes were surrounded by crow's feet that hadn't been there before. She seemed ultimately smaller than she did in all of Jenny's childhood memories, but maybe that was what happened when you grew up. Maybe your parents just deflated.

"Mom?" Jenny called, dropping her backpack onto a maroon armchair by the door. Jenny's mom turned around, startled, holding Jessa.

"Oh, Jennifer, you scared me," she said as she continued to rock Jessa. "Why don't you come in here for a second?" Now Jenny could see her little brother, Jack, his brown hair messy as always, sitting

across from their mother. "I have something I need to discuss with you and your brother."

Oh . . . oh no. Family discussions are never good.

Jenny reluctantly trudged into the kitchen. She took a seat by her brother, who—thanks to his recent growth spurt—was almost as tall as she was.

"So . . ." their mother began a little awkwardly. "I'm not sure how to explain this, so I'm just going to jump right in. I met someone. His name is Phillip and he's a gym teacher. We met at Jack's last parent-teacher conference and seemed to hit it off. He asked me out, actually, but I wanted to talk to you two before I made any decisions."

Wait, what?

For the first time in years, time seemed to move forward in their house. Jenny could see the change that came over her mother as she said Phillip's name. She seemed alive for the first time since the divorce.

Did Jenny mind if her mother dated? Of course she didn't. It had been years, and her mother deserved some happiness in her life. Was Jenny weirded out by the thought of her mom going on dates? Of course she was. Jenny herself didn't even go on dates, and she was seventeen.

It was Jack who spoke up first, however.

"Of course it's all right, Mom," he said, sounding much older than he actually was. "You're an adult. You can date whoever you want."

"Jackie's right," Jenny piped up, placing an arm around her brother's slim shoulders. "As long as he's nice, then it's fine."

Jack bristled under her touch. "Don't call me Jackie. I'm not a little kid."

"But Jackie's such a cute name." Jenny reached out, pinching his cheek. He'd lost the baby fat over the summer, playing baseball and jumping on the trampoline, making it harder to condescendingly pinch his cheeks than it used to be.

"Mom, she's patronizing me again," Jack complained, but stopped short at the sight of their mom. Jenny turned to see what he was looking at and slowly let her arms drop from her brother.

Their mom was sitting there, holding Jessa, with tears in her eyes as she watched her children. "Thank you" was all she said.

"**WHAT DO YOU** really think about Mom dating again?" Jenny asked her brother thirty minutes later as they sat in her room. She sat on her bed, geometry homework in hand, as he lounged in her computer chair, absentmindedly browsing reddit on her PC.

"I hate it, of course," Jack said simply, not even turning around to face his sister. "I don't want my parents seeing other people. And what if he hurts her like Dad did? There are too many variables here, and I hate it."

"You told her you were fine with it, though."

Jack shrugged. "We can't hold her back from living her life."

"Are you sure you're only twelve?"

"I'll be thirteen in a few months, you know that."

"I was being sarcastic, Jackie."

Her brother grimaced, stepping away from the computer dramatically. "Just for that, I'm going back to my room."

"Fine, go. See if I care." But she was teasing and he knew it. He left, leaving her to her homework.

Things were different now, definitely. Her mother was dating and

time was moving forward and her life was changing and Chance—oh God, Chance. What the hell was Chance? She pushed her schoolbooks to the floor and sprawled out on her bed, looking up at the ceiling. What was she going to do about Chance—if anything? Would this all blow over tomorrow?

She had felt so *alive* carving out a fake past with him at lunch. She had felt like a different, unpredictable person. She *liked* that feeling, and she wasn't sure if she was ready to let it go yet.

Things could be changing right now, she thought. *This could be the start of something different*—something good. Do I really want to give it up just yet?

Lying there, in her same old room looking at the same old ceiling, she could easily imagine a different life, where Chance had always been there supporting her and arguing with her at the same time. She could imagine him sitting at the computer chair like her brother had done, talking out her problems with him for years on end. She could easily insert him into her entire life and not even blink. It was almost seamless.

To her, at least. She had no idea how he felt. She figured she was probably a minor annoyance or a momentary source of entertainment that he'd toss aside come tomorrow morning.

After all, it wasn't like she even knew him.

CHAPTER 2

Chance

Chance woke up to the smell of burned eggs. And to yelling. Lots of yelling.

That was normal, though. The yelling, not the eggs. He was beginning to wonder if he could even sleep without the dulcet tones of his mother screaming at his father. It had become his regular lullaby lately. He could hear them, muffled through the walls, their voices straining.

Chance couldn't take it anymore. Not even wrapping his pillow around his head could drown them out. He had to get up. Their yelling had already given him a headache.

He tried to think of a time when yelling wasn't his alarm clock, but he honestly couldn't remember that far back. They always yelled—it was their thing. Some parents did karaoke. Some parents played bridge. Some did drugs. Chance's parents yelled. About everything.

Buying groceries? They fought about it.

What to have for dinner? They fought about it.

Money? Religion? Politics? What to watch on TV? They fought about all those, too. The worst fight had been three years ago, when his brother, Levi, up and left for college without a word. It was no wonder that he hadn't been back home since then.

Chance finally pried the pillow away from his ears and sat up. He could always drown them out with a shower.

When he slipped into the hallway he saw that his brother's door was wide open. Levi had hardly ever been home when he had lived there, always trying to be out of the house as much as possible. Of course, when he was out, their parents would argue about where he was and how he was bringing them some type of shame. Levi couldn't make a move without drawing their parents' ire.

Chance and Levi weren't the closest of brothers. They never had been. Levi had always been so much older and taller and cooler. He didn't have time for Chance once he got to high school. Chance still looked up to him, though. Levi always seemed, above all else, undeniably *cool*.

Chance made sure to close the bathroom door loudly, interrupting his father mid-sentence. They quieted down a bit after that, not that it mattered. Chance couldn't hear them over the roar of the hot shower anyway.

Levi is the lucky one, he thought as he washed his hair. *He got out*—just left without a second thought. I would give anything to be able to do that.

THE BEST DAY of Chance's life was the day he got his car. It was a lovely black 1999 Dodge Charger, and it was his pride and joy. Sure, it was secondhand (more like fourth-hand, to be honest), the

passenger-side window didn't work, and the upholstery was seriously ripped up, but it was his escape.

It also meant he could drive himself to school. He didn't have to rely on Levi or his parents.

He was embarrassed to admit it, but he felt like he was in a music video whenever he drove it. One of those indie music videos with girls in knit caps and boys with ukuleles. The type that accompanies movies about manic pixie dream girls saving the boring male protagonist from himself. It was dumb, but he loved it.

He thought about Jenny Wessler suddenly, her face flashing behind his eyes. The way she had looked seated next to him at lunch, lightly blushing. The way her brown hair curled in its ponytail, the ends just brushing her shoulders. She had seemed so *nice*.

Chance could use some nice in his life.

He knew their minor interlude was finished, however. It had burned bright for one hour, and then it had burned out. That was the way it was. It was the way it *had* to be. He couldn't complicate his life any more than it already was. Besides, she seemed like the type who didn't live in a constant state of yelling. He couldn't drag her into his mess.

Although he had to admit: Nothing had ever come as easily as their game of make-believe.

He saw her the moment he pulled into the parking lot. He would've liked to swear that she wasn't the reason he parked by the library, instead of behind the science building like he always did, but he knew the truth.

She was walking from a maroon car, her messenger bag bulging at her side. *What does she have in there, the whole damn library?* Her

hair was down today, and she wore a light-blue polo shirt. The color looked good on her; it went well with her pale complexion.

He was out of his car and catching up to her before he even realized what he was doing. "Jenny!" he called, causing her to turn around. "Hey. I think we should continue to be friends."

She looked up at him. "We're friends?"

"Damn, Wessler, that's cold. I thought we hit it off yesterday."

She blushed, turning away. "I only meant that I didn't realize everything yesterday was real."

He hadn't, either, not until he'd said it. "Of course it was real. You're my oldest friend, Jenny."

She laughed, "Oh sure, the tree and Harry Potter and all that."

"You couldn't have made me sound a little manlier in our origin story?"

"You can't rewrite the past, Chance."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "Oh, of course. I forgot that the past is set in stone." They had reached the side entrance to the cafeteria now. That was where everyone hung out before the first bell rang.

A few people looked at them curiously as they made their way across the room. Chance even caught a few people wearing *what the hell?* expressions. Which was odd. It wasn't like it was unusual to see Chance with a girl. Most of his friends were girls, really, and it wasn't like he didn't date.

"People are staring," Jenny whispered to him, drawing herself closer.

"We don't have to walk together if it bothers you," he told her.

"Are you kidding? This is exciting." But she didn't sound wholly convincing.

Kelsey came out of nowhere. One moment it was Chance and Jenny, the next they were almost on top of the blond. She was taller than Jenny—at least five-eleven—and her blond hair was in orderly curls. “Jens! I was wondering where you went. . . .” Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of Chance. “Oh, Masters, it’s you. I should’ve known.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Kelsey shrugged.

She doesn’t like me. It was as if she was nearly trying to shield Jenny from him.

“Sorry about that.” Jenny shrugged. “We got to talking.”

“I see,” Kelsey said. “You left me at the mercy of Danny Jennings.”

“Still?” Jenny asked in disbelief. “He hasn’t taken the hint?”

“We were partners on one assignment. I mean, Lord, it doesn’t mean we’re freaking soul mates.”

“Yeah,” Chance spoke up. “Letting an icebreaker assignment rule your relationships is just stupid.”

“Exactly!” Kelsey exclaimed, blind to the sarcasm in his voice.

He felt Jenny shake beside him and looked over to find her suppressing her laughter.

“The boy shaves his head!” Kelsey went on. “Like I could ever date someone with a buzz cut. I mean, my gosh, I have standards!”

Jenny snickered.

Note to self: Stay away from buzz cuts.

The bell rang then, cutting Kelsey off mid-rant. “If he waits outside my first block class, I am telling the counselor,” she muttered as she walked away. “Oh, and Jenny?” she called over her shoulder. “The Student Advisory Board is voting on their president this afternoon. See you there!”

Then there were two.

“So . . .” Jenny said, tugging on the strap of her messenger bag. “I have American Lit.”

“Oh, I have Geometry A. I guess we should”—he opened the door in a sweeping gesture—“go to class?”

She gave him a small wave good-bye and pushed past him, making her way out the door. She paused, turning to look at him. “It’ll be fun,” she told him.

He quirked an eyebrow. “What will be fun?”

She smiled, big and wide. “Being your friend.” Then she was gone. Chance watched her leave, unsure of the feeling building in his chest. She was right; of course, this was going to be fun. Now that he was sure this was what he wanted, he was dedicated.

Jenny Wessler was going to be his new best friend.

CHAPTER 3

Jenny

I don't understand why we're reading *Hamlet* in American Lit. I mean, I just do not get it," Jenny said to Kelsey as they made their way down the English hall. "*Huck Finn* I get. *Walden* I get. But *Hamlet*?"

"Mrs. Princeton says it's because she believes that every English novel can be linked back to Shakespeare," Kelsey told her. "That's not it, though. They require the English department to teach a Shakespeare play every year."

Jenny snorted. "They do not. I would've noticed if we read one every year."

"Really, think about it. Which have you read and when?"

Jenny thought about it. "Freshman year was *Romeo and Juliet*, then we read *Julius Caesar* and that was sophomore year . . . now *Hamlet* . . . everyone knows the seniors read *Macbeth* . . . and crap, you're right!"

Kelsey shrugged. "I know the inner workings of the school like the back of my hand."

Jenny moved over just in time to dodge a couple barreling through the crowded hallway, their hands clasped. She looked over her shoulder, watching the two until they disappeared around a corner.

"Don't you just hate hallway PDA?" Kelsey asked, glaring after the couple.

The only boy Jenny had ever held hands with was her brother, back when he was too young to walk alone in a store. What would it be like to hold hands with a boy she liked? To want to be together so badly they'd hold on to each other in a crowd just because they didn't want to lose a second of contact? She finally turned away, only to spot another couple up ahead, leaning against the lockers, talking so closely their noses were practically touching. *When did everyone pair off?* she wondered as she looked away.

"It's not too bad," she told Kelsey as she spotted two girls holding hands by the water fountain. "I like PDA. The idea that they like each other so much that they . . ." She trailed off as Kelsey's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What?"

"This doesn't sound like you," Kelsey said. "What gives?"

To be honest, Jenny had been thinking about dating ever since she found out her mother was doing it. It was like a wake-up call, and now suddenly she was so *aware* that everyone seemed to be dating except her. "It's nothing," she told Kelsey. She didn't want to bother her friend with her family drama. Jenny hated being a burden.

"Ah," Kelsey said knowingly. "I know what this is about. Or, rather, *who* it's about."

“What?” *Kelsey knows my mom is dating?*

“It’s Masters, right?” Kelsey ignored her protests, continuing on. “Look, you’ve known him for a long time, so I don’t have to tell you about his reputation. It’s bad, Jens. I wouldn’t do it if I were you. That isn’t a frontier worth exploring.”

“This isn’t about him.”

“Suuuure,” Kelsey laughed. “It’s okay, we’ve all been there at least once in our lives. He’s attractive, but he’s not boyfriend material. I don’t want him to hurt you.”

Jenny stopped walking, causing the person behind her to mutter angrily as they stepped around her. “I’m not talking about Chance,” she insisted. She *hated* when people told her what she was thinking or feeling. “I wasn’t even talking about myself.”

This brought Kelsey up short. “Oh. Um, I’m sorry, I just assumed . . . Who were you talking about, then?”

“Never mind,” Jenny said, looking at one of the digital clocks posted in the hall. “We’re going to be late for class. C’mon.”

Jenny marched into Oral Comm just as the bell rang, Kelsey trailing behind her. She wasn’t in the mood to deal with class right now. Kelsey’s warning still rang in her head.

Sure, she knew that Chance was dangerous. A person doesn’t earn a rep like his without being a little wild, but Kelsey’s warning was ridiculous. From what Jenny could tell, Chance was a good person, and he was definitely fun to be around. It wasn’t like Jenny was going to marry him; they were just hanging out. Besides, they weren’t like that.

Okay, true, the thought of hanging out with him after school sent her nerves into overdrive, but that was because he was still new. It wasn’t because of his reputation—though now that Kelsey

had brought it up, Jenny couldn't help but think about it. She tried her best to calm her frazzled nerves as she thought of a hundred and fifty ways in which being Chance Masters's friend could go wrong, but she must not have been as composed as she thought, because not even five minutes into class she found a note fluttering onto her desk.

What's wrong with you? the note read in unfamiliar scrawl. It took her a moment to realize it must be from Chance.

Nothing, she wrote back.

The note was back in seconds. *Bullshit*.

I was talking to Kelsey. She stared down at the words, afraid to pass it back. She didn't want him to think something was wrong with her. Finally she marked it out, the lead of her pencil making indents on the paper. *It's seriously nothing*.

She surreptitiously watched him as he opened the note, taking stock of his reaction. He didn't believe her, it was obvious. He sat there, pencil poised over the paper, but he didn't write anything. He eventually wadded up the note and shoved it in his bag. That was the end of that.

She half expected him to get up and leave without a word when the bell rang, but he didn't. He loaded up his backpack and waited by her desk for her to do the same. "Ready for lunch?" he asked.

"Um, yeah." She trailed him as he left the classroom. She couldn't help but notice the way his shoulders filled out his faded green T-shirt or the way his blond hair slightly curled at his collar. "I'm sorry about that with the note—"

He turned back to look at her, confused. "What? Oh, you don't have to be sorry about that. You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

“Oh.” She felt relief wash through her. After Kelsey speaking for her, she found it refreshing that Chance let her speak for herself.

He didn’t ask her again what was bothering her. They went through lunch at his table, and they talked energetically, but he never brought it up. It was like . . . like he didn’t expect anything from her, and as a result she didn’t have to try. Like the day before, talking to him came easily. Her words flowed off her tongue and her smiles were easy and frequent. Chance made her feel relaxed and, well, she rather liked that.

“Earth to Jenny,” Chance said, waving his hand in front of her face. She had paused, halfway through the cafeteria door. People behind her were making impatient noises. “C’mon, Little Miss Really-Likes-Having-As.”

Then Chance grabbed her hand and dragged her through.

CHAPTER 4

Chance

We should have a secret handshake. Everyone who has been friends since elementary school has a secret handshake.” Jenny rolled her eyes. “That’s ridiculous. We don’t need a secret handshake. That’s too much trouble. I thought the point of this was to make up things on the fly.”

“It is, but say that someone came up to us and was like, ‘Do you guys have a secret handshake?’ And we tell them yes and try to make it up on the fly, then we’ll only embarrass ourselves.”

“No one is going to ask us if we have a secret handshake.”

He looked at her seriously. “You don’t know that.”

“And if anyone ever asks our secret handshake, then making it up on the fly will be fun.” She led Chance to his table now, not even pausing to contemplate going to her old one. Jenny had assimilated so fast, Chance was impressed. She took her seat between him and Drake with ease.

Honestly, she looked like she belonged there.

"So, Drake," Jenny began, turning to the tall boy to her right. "How's your band doing?"

Kelsey, who had just approached the table, groaned as she set her tray down. She had slipped into their lunch group as easily as Jenny had, but seemed to hate Drake's band. Chance liked that about her.

"Oh God, don't ask about his band," Kelsey complained. "I'm sure you're trying your best, Drake, but you sound like every other pseudo-intellectual rich boy with a guitar."

Drake brought his hand to his chest in mock pain. "You wound me." She shrugged. "It's true."

It was true. Chance had been to enough of their shows to know.

"I'm sure that's not true," Jenny defended. "Everyone's always talking about how great your shows are."

"That's because you haven't heard them yet," Chance assured her.

Drake glared at him. "Don't listen to Jackass over there. You should come to practice sometime and check us out."

Chance didn't like the way Drake was looking at Jenny, his eyes skimming over her hungrily.

Jenny thought about it, biting her lip. "That would be fun," she told him, before turning to Chance. "What do you think, wanna go to band practice sometime?"

That's my girl, Chance thought as Drake's face fell.

Leslie plopped down at the table then, her chair dangerously close to Chance's. He nearly choked on her perfume as she reached past him to steal a few fries from Drake's tray. "Don't worry, Jenny. You'll have a chance to see them live. Drake is playing my Halloween party."

"No, I'm not," Drake said. His eyes slid from Leslie to Jenny, lingering on her as she took a sip of her water.

Leslie sank back into her seat. "You've gotta do it," she said before popping a fry into her mouth.

"Are you gonna pay me?" Drake asked.

From there the conversation switched to The Deplorable State of Modern Music and The Act of Doing It for the Art. Chance tuned most of it out. He had very few opinions on music. If it was catchy, he liked it. If it was annoying, he hated it.

The bell rang suddenly, loud and shrill, making him jump. It was time for third block already. The day was going by too damn fast. Soon, he knew, he'd have no choice but to head home, where things were only getting worse.

He didn't want to go home.

"Hey, Jenny?" he said, stopping her before she could leave the table.

"Yes?"

"Wanna go to the park after school?"

She didn't even hesitate. "Sure, if you'll give me a ride home afterward." And just like that, he had plans with Jenny.

"CHANCE!" JENNY'S VOICE rang out, breaking him from his thoughts. She half jogged across the parking lot to meet him. "Sorry I'm late. I had to catch up with Kelsey and tell her to head home without me."

His face lit up at the sight of her—he couldn't help it. "No problem. You ready?"

The two crossed the street, chatting idly about their last two classes. Chance barely even noticed his feet carrying him to the rusted red swing set that sat to the right of the amphitheater. Back when he

was a child, the swings used to sit in a pit of rocks, but over time the rocks had been replaced with chunks of rubber. He guessed that was safer. He took the right swing, the one that some high schoolers had repeatedly tossed over the top to make the chains shorter. Jenny took the one next to him.

It was a beautiful, if small, park. It had a giant walking track that wrapped around it, and it was cut in half by a small creek that was running low from lack of rain. It only had a few bits of playground equipment: a jungle gym, the swing set, and a giant fake climbing rock. It was simple, but Chance enjoyed it.

"These swings used to seem a whole lot bigger when I was younger," Jenny remarked, kicking off with her feet.

"I remember I used to come here after school sometimes back in fourth grade because my parents were always late picking me up," Chance told her, slightly pushing himself forward with the toes of his shoes. "I would section the place up and pretend it was Neverland."

He wasn't sure why he was telling her this. He had never told anyone about this before, but somehow within minutes of being near Jenny it was all pouring out.

Jenny stopped swinging to look at him curiously. "Neverland?"

"Yeah." Chance nodded. He pointed straight ahead of them, to the awning-covered picnic tables used for children's birthday parties. "That over there was Pirate's Cove because that's where the birthdays happen, and—"

"—and birthdays mean growing older, which is akin to piracy in Neverland," Jenny finished for him.

He smiled ruefully. "Yeah, that's right. See that big fake rock that

kids climb on over there?" He pointed toward the parking lot. "That was Skull Rock."

Jenny laughed. "Naturally."

"Hey, nobody said I was original. The other awning all the way at the bottom of the hill there was Blind Man's Bluff, the creek that runs at the bottom of the hill over there was Mermaid Lagoon, and the water fountains over there were the Indian Camp."

"What about the swings?" Jenny asked, setting off again, kicking up some bits of rubber as she did so.

"Hangman's Tree, of course, the hideout of the Lost Boys," Chance answered as if it were obvious.

"You sound like you were quite the imaginative little boy."

"You should know—you were there." At least, he wanted her to have been. Maybe his games wouldn't have been so sad if he'd had Jenny to share them with. Instead of a lonely little boy running around, playing Peter Pan to ignore that his parents had forgotten him, he could've just been playing. Peter Pan needed a Wendy. Chance needed Jenny.

"Was I?" Jenny asked, playing along. "What was my role in all of this?"

"You were a Lost Girl, of course." He thought about that for a moment, before adding: "Not in the Alan Moore way, either."

"Was I bossy?" she asked.

"The bossiest."

"What did we do on these adventures?"

He pushed up, swinging a little higher. "We rescued princesses, of course."

"Oh, naturally." She sped up, her swing matching his. He looked

over just in time to catch her brown hair trailing behind her as she rose.

“Did I participate in the rescuing?”

“You were the best at it,” he told her. “I always got distracted by the pirates. You were the one who came up with the rescuing plans.”

“I like this story,” she replied. “I can picture it all so clearly.”

Good, he thought, so can I.

They swung for another thirty minutes or so, talking of whatever popped into their minds. Eventually Chance’s legs grew tired and he decided to stand up and push Jenny’s swing instead.

“You don’t have to do this,” she told him as he pushed her forward.

“It’s fine. My legs needed a rest, anyway.”

“I didn’t play any games like that as a kid,” she told him. “Like Neverland, I mean.”

“What did you do?”

“I didn’t like to go outside much. I mostly followed my mom around, pretending to do all the big-girl chores.”

He let out a bark of laughter. “Why does that not surprise me?”

“I liked it. It made me feel like I was doing something productive.”

It must’ve been nice, growing up in a home where she could do stuff like that, Chance thought. If he had tried that, his mother would’ve yelled at him for always being in the way and doing everything wrong.

Her phone went off then, startling them both. She stomped her feet frantically, trying to stop her swing. Chance reached out to grab the chains, steadying her as she pried her phone from her pocket.

“Hello?” she said. “Oh, hi, Mom. No, I’m at the park across from

the school. I thought you'd still be at work. I can be home soon." She looked over her shoulder at Chance, her expression apologetic. "It's no problem. See you soon. Love you."

Chance let go of the chains, already turning to pick his backpack up off the ground. "I take it that we have to go?"

"Yeah," Jenny said, getting to her feet and grabbing her backpack. "My little sister, Jessa, was running a bit of a fever so Mom came home from work early. She wants me to come watch Jessa so she can cook dinner."

So Jenny wasn't an only child? *Interesting.*

Chance's Charger was still parked by the library, where he'd left it that morning. The black paint shone in the afternoon sun. Unfortunately, so did all the dirt clinging to it. *I should really get that washed.*

"I guess you've never been in my car before, huh?" Chance said as Jenny eyed it skeptically. He was wary of people judging his baby.

She circled it, scrutinizing it as she did so. "Of course I have," she said after she reached the passenger's side again. "I helped you pick it out."

Now it was her turn to make up a story. Chance unlocked the door, slipping into the driver's seat. "You did?" he asked after she climbed in.

"Mm-hm." She nodded. "You were unsure about it, you see, because it's so run-down with its ripped seats and messy floorboards. I was the one who convinced you it had character." She reached into her front pocket, producing a small tube of lip gloss. She flipped down the front visor so she could use the mirror. Chance watched as she applied the gloss—some cherry-red flavor, by the strong smell of it.

She pursed her lips once before leaning up and pressing her lips to the mirror. She pulled back, revealing a single perfect kiss mark. "I marked my territory, see?"

Damn. Jenny definitely knew how to play the game.

Chance's eyes lingered on the kiss mark. "As my oldest friend, you always get shotgun."

She nodded, slipping the lip gloss back into her pocket. "Now everybody knows that."

He had to admit, the sight of her kissing that mirror made his heart hammer. He wasn't even sure *why*. For one, he had done a lot more than kiss other girls in that car. And yet none of them had gotten his heart going like Jenny and that mirror had.

Maybe it was because, in the back of his mind, he knew that this was the start of something bigger than those other things. That kiss mark wasn't a hasty hookup in the backseat of a car; it was precise—it was *planned*. It was, well, kinda permanent. Many people would pass in and out of that car, but that lip print would stay.

Jenny would stay.