
**THE
FIRST
MONDAY**

Mountain High, Valley Low

7:04 a.m.

Bloop-dee-dee-bloop-bloop-bing!

When my phone chimes with a text message on Monday morning, I'm still in that dreamy state between sleep and awake where you can pretty much convince yourself of anything. Like that a teen Mick Jagger is waiting in your driveway to take you to school. Or that your favorite book series ended with an actual satisfying conclusion, instead of what the author tried to pass off as a satisfying conclusion.

Or that last night, you and your boyfriend *didn't* have the worst fight of your relationship—correction: the *only* fight of your relationship.

Or that it wasn't completely your fault.

Bloop-dee-dee-bloop-bloop-bing!

But it *was* my fault.

I blink out of my trance and scramble for the phone, knocking over the cup of water on my nightstand. It splashes onto

the stack of textbooks and papers next to my bed, soaking the extra-credit AP English paper on *King Lear* that I spent the entire weekend working on. This was my only hope of turning my borderline A to a solid A before first quarter grades are finalized.

I hastily swipe at the lock screen of my phone.

Please be from him. PLEASE be from him.

We didn't talk at all after I stormed off from his house last night. Some hopeful part of me thought he might call, not wanting to leave things the way we did. While some slightly delusional part of me thought he might have taken some unknown back roads and alleyways, driven twice the speed limit to beat me to my house, and would be standing in the front yard with his guitar, ready to play me an apologetic "I'm a jerk, please forgive me" love ballad that he just happened to write on the way over.

(Okay, a *really* delusional part of me.)

Regardless, neither had happened.

My fingers fumble to open the text message app and I nearly collapse in relief when I see Tristan's name. *Twice*.

He sent me *two* text messages.

The first says:

Tristan: I can't stop thinking about last night.

Oh, thank God. He's a mess, too.

This makes me so happy I want to cry.

Wait, that didn't come out right. It's not like Tristan's misery makes me happy. But you know what I mean.

I want to grab Hippo (the stuffed hippopotamus on my

bed that I've had since I was six) and waltz around the room with him while "At Last" by Etta James plays soulfully on my life soundtrack. (The sixties really were the best decade for music.)

But then I see the second text message and Etta screeches to a halt in my head.

Tristan: Let's talk today.

Okay, deep breaths.

Don't jump to conclusions. This could be a good thing. This could be like "Let's talk today so I can apologize profusely for everything I said last night and confess my undying love for you while I run my fingers through your hair and a four-piece band serenades us. Or maybe a six-piece band. You know how much I love the sound of the trombone."

Ugh. That sounded crazy even to *me*.

Honestly, since when does "let's talk" ever foreshadow good things? It's like the universal sign for impending doom.

This is it. He's going to break up with me. I said all the wrong things last night. I overreacted. I've turned into the very thing that Tristan hates.

A drama queen.

And really what happened last night wasn't that big of a deal. I don't know what got into me. I just, kinda . . . flipped. I chalk it up to stress. Severe stress. And hunger. It was a moment of stressful hangry weakness. And now the whole relationship is probably over. The best thing to ever happen to me (okay, pretty much the *only* thing to ever happen to me) and I screwed it all up.

I suppose it was only a matter of time, really. I mean, Tristan is Tristan. Gorgeous. Funny. Charming. And I'm . . . me.

No. Stop. Self pity party *over*.

I can still turn this around. He hasn't broken up with me yet. I can still save this. I *have* to save this. Tristan is everything to me. I love him. I've loved him since our second date, when he took me to his band's show and I saw him singing up on that stage. He just oozed sexytime and poetry.

Can one ooze poetry?

Or sexytime, for that matter?

Whatever. One fight does not a breakup make.

We will persevere. Our hearts will go on!

I send Tristan a quick text back. I infuse it with nonchalance and free-spiritedness. I am Ellison Sparks, Drama Free since 2003!

(Okay, so technically I was born before that, but the first few years of anyone's life are, by nature, dramatic.)

Me: Morning! Can't wait to see you today!

I press Send with a flourish. Then I find "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" in my "Psych Me Up Buttercup" playlist and set the volume to Blast!

It's almost impossible to feel down when Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell are cheering you on from the sidelines. It's like this song was written specifically for impeding a breakup. It's the Relationship Saver's Anthem.

I prance into the bathroom, place the phone down on the counter, and sing along at the top of my lungs while I shower.

"Ain't no mountain high enough . . . To keep me from getting to you, babe."

On second thought, this song might also be the Stalker's Anthem.

But it doesn't matter. It works. As I step out of the shower and grab a towel, I actually have the nerve to think:

Today is going to be a good day. I can feel it.

Talking 'bout My Generation

7:35 a.m.

Why do we have to pick out clothes every day? Why can't we just live in one of those cheesy futuristic sci-fi movies where everyone wears the same neon space suit and no one really seems to care that they all look like clones?

Argh.

I stare hopelessly into my closet. It's school picture day and I also have to give a speech to the entire student body for class elections. Rhiannon, my running mate, texted me last night, reminding me to "Look vice presidential!"

Now I have to find an outfit that not only reminds Tristan that he's madly in love with me, but *also* makes every member of the junior class—or at least a deciding majority—want to vote for me, *and* it has to be something that won't totally embarrass me in front of my grandchildren in fifty years when I show them my junior class picture.

So basically, no pressure.

I pull my pair of lucky skinny jeans from a hanger in the

denim section of my closet and move over to the pinks. My wardrobe is coordinated by fabric, color, and season. It's supposed to make clothing selection more efficient, according to an article I read in *Getting Organized* magazine two years ago. (I've been a subscriber since I was ten.) But today, I don't think even a personal stylist could help me pick out the right thing to wear.

I settle on a conservative-but-not-totally-puritan baby pink button-down shirt with a navy cardigan from the autumn section. Then I brave the mirror.

Hub. Not bad.

Maybe I don't need the neon space suit after all.

I blow-dry and flat-iron my hair until it's (relatively) tamed, reprint my extra-credit English paper, and pack up my school-bag.

7:45 a.m.

Downstairs, the Sparks Family Circus is in full swing. My father is trying to eat oatmeal while playing Words With Friends on his iPad, which usually just ends up with him *wearing* most of the oatmeal.

My mother, the hotshot real estate agent, is her own side-show this morning. She bangs cabinets and drawers closed as she searches for God knows what.

And in the center ring is my thirteen-year-old sister, Hadley, noisily shoveling spoonfuls of cereal into her mouth between page turns of whatever contemporary young adult novel is at the top of the bestseller list. She has this obsession with reading about people in high school. I've tried to tell her that

four years of high school is bad enough. Why on earth would she want to submerge herself early?

She eagerly looks up from her book when I walk into the kitchen and asks, “Did he call?”

I roll my eyes. Why oh why did I tell her about the fight? It was a momentary lapse of judgment. I was a weepy sack of emotions and she was . . . well, she was there. Popping her head out of her bedroom as I climbed the stairs. She asked me what was wrong and I told her the whole story. Even the part where I threw a garden gnome at Tristan’s head.

In my defense, it was the only thing within reach.

Then she proceeded to summarize the entire plot of *10 Things I Hate About You* in an effort to make me feel better, which, incidentally, only made me feel like she was comparing me to a shrew.

“No,” I say dismissively, reaching into the fridge for the bread. “He texted this morning.”

My dad looks up from his iPad and I cringe, waiting for him to ask me what happened. I really don’t want to hash out my domestic issues with my parents. But instead he says, “I need a word that starts with T and has an X, an A, and preferably an N in it.”

No one responds. No one ever does.

My mom bangs another cabinet closed. This time, miraculously, my dad takes notice. “What are you looking for?” he asks.

“Nothing!” she snaps. “I’m not looking for anything at all. Why would I possibly be looking for something I have no hope of ever finding? At least not under this roof!”

I wince.

Talk about a drama queen.

Oh God. Is this where I get it from? Are meltdowns genetic?

I pop two pieces of bread into the toaster and return the package to the fridge.

“What did the text say?” Hadley asks.

“Nothing,” I mumble. “It was just a misunderstanding.”

Hadley nods knowingly. “Lost in textation.”

I lean against the counter and glare at her. “What?”

“Lost in textation. It’s that awkward part of texting where the context of a conversation is lost without being able to see the person’s face or hear their inflection.”

I sigh. “Will you stop looking at Urban Dictionary? Mom, tell her to get off Urban Dictionary. It’s completely inappropriate. Do you know what kind of things are on there? Words you and Dad don’t even know.”

My mom doesn’t respond. She pulls a frying pan from the cupboard and sets it down on the stove top with a boisterous *clank*.

“Textation!” my dad shouts excitedly, tapping at his screen. “Good one, Hads!” But a moment later his face falls. “Not a real word? WTF?”

I groan. How is this my life?

My toast is only half done, but I push up on the lever and force the bread to eject. I smother it with peanut butter, wrap it in a paper towel, and grab my schoolbag. I’m not exactly running late, but staying around here another second will make me want to stick my own head in the toaster.

“Ellie,” my dad says.

I stop just short of the door. I almost got out alive. *So close*.

“Yeah?”

At first I think he’s going to ask me for another word for his game, but instead he says, “Are you ready?”

I pat my bag. “Yup. Got my speech notes right here.”

He looks genuinely confused. “No, I mean, about softball tryouts.”

Oh, and I have softball tryouts today. On top of everything else.

“Making varsity your junior year would be huge. The state schools would definitely take notice of that.”

I’m itching to get out of this house. And my dad reminding me of yet *another* thing that’s looming over this day is not helping. “Yeah,” I agree.

He sets his iPad down and stares wistfully into space. “I remember when my varsity baseball team made it to the state championships.”

Aaaand he’s off.

“Standing on that pitching mound, I’d never been so nervous in my life. Your mom was in the stands. I just didn’t know it yet. It probably would have made me even more nervous. Remember that, Libby?”

My mom takes the butter tray from the fridge and slams it down on the counter so hard I think she might have cracked the plastic.

“Is something wrong?” my dad asks.

Quite the observer, he is.

“No,” my mom answers sharply, not even looking at him, as she cuts a piece of butter and drops it into the frying pan. “Why would anything be wrong?” It’s one of her snakebite questions. I call them that because she coils up, lunges at you, and before you can even answer, you’re dead from the venom.

“Are you sure?” my dad asks.

“She’s gone mom-zerk,” Hadley remarks.

My dad glances down at his iPad. “Ooh. I wish I had a Z!”

That appears to be the last straw. My mom storms out of the kitchen, leaving the burner on and the butter melting in the pan.

I am *so* not getting into the middle of this. I don't need to add "mediate parental dispute" to my to-do list today.

I shove my shoulder against the garage door. "Great story, Dad. Okay, bye!"

Dropping my bag into the backseat of the car, I get behind the wheel and start the engine. It isn't until the garage door opens and I back out onto the driveway that I notice it's raining and I don't have an umbrella.

But there's no way I'm going back inside that house.

The Magic's in the Music

7:55 a.m.

I sing along at the top of my lungs to “Good Vibrations” by the Beach Boys as I take a left at the end of my street, then the first right, and pull into Owen’s driveway, putting the car into park. I’m about to lean on the horn when I notice the front door of his house is open, and he strolls casually to the car, not even caring that he’s getting totally soaked by the rain.

“Wow. It’s really chucking it down out here,” he says, opening the door. He stops when he hears the song playing. “Uh-oh. What happened?”

I give him a questioning look.

He plops his backpack on the floor and climbs into the passenger seat. “You only put the Beach Boys on after something bad happens.”

I scoff at this. “My life doesn’t have to be in shambles to listen to the Beach Boys.”

He closes the door. “Yes it does.”

“What if I just felt like listening to something beachy?”

But Owen knows me too well. We've been best friends since the summer between third and fourth grade when he talked me into jumping off the ropes course telephone pole at Camp Awahili. "The Beach Boys are in your 'Psych Me Up Buttercup' playlist. And I happen to know that playlist is reserved for emergencies only."

He gives his head a doglike shake, flinging drops of rain from his dark, shaggy hair onto my dashboard. I grab the small cleaning cloth I keep in my glove box and wipe it off. Then I slump in my seat. "Fine. Tristan and I had a fight."

His green eyes open wide and he turns down the music. "You and him?"

"Uh-huh."

"A fight?"

"Uh-huh."

"As in, the two of you actually disagreed about something?"

"Do you not understand what a fight is?"

Owen lets out a low belly laugh.

"Owen," I whine. "What's so funny?"

He stops laughing. "It's just that it's about bloody time."

"You're not British," I remind him. "You can't keep using the word 'bloody.'"

"The Brits don't *own* the word 'bloody.'"

"Yeah, they kinda do. In America—where *we* live—it means 'covered in blood.'"

"It's a good word. It's like the loophole of swearwords."

I scowl. "What did you mean when you said it's about time?"

"I said it's about *bloody* time," he reminds me.

"Owen!"

He sighs. “Fine. I just meant you two never disagree. About anything.” He holds up a finger. “No, wait. I wish to strike that from the record.”

“So stricken,” I say automatically.

Talking like we live in a television legal drama is kind of our thing.

“*You* never disagree with anything,” he says, amending his statement.

“I do, too.”

“Well, yeah, with *me*. But not with *him*.”

“Objection.”

“On what grounds?”

“I—” I begin to argue but then realize I can’t come up with a single example to prove him wrong. “Well, but that’s just because I don’t want to be like all the other girls he’s dated.”

“Superficial and obnoxious?”

I slug his arm. “*Dramatic*.”

“Having a differing opinion is not being dramatic. It’s being, you know, a person. What was your fight about?”

I groan. I don’t really want to rehash it, but I know Owen won’t leave me alone until I spill. “His phone.”

“You had a fight about his *phone*?” Comprehension flashes on his face. “Oh. Let me guess. He has an Android operating system and you have Apple. It’s a compatibility issue. You’ll never get along. You may as well just end it now.”

I give him another slug. “No. It was what was *on* his phone.”

He cocks a scandalized eyebrow. “Now I’m really interested.”

“Not that, you perv. Snapchats. From girls. While we were trying to watch a movie.”

He shrugs. “So?”

“So?!”

“He’s a musician. In a semipopular local band.”

I exhale loudly. “Yeah, that’s what he said. Well, you know, minus the ‘semipopular’ part. And I know. I *know*. It was something I told myself I’d have to deal with when we started going out. And normally, I’m able to suppress it. But last night, I kind of just snapped.”

“You Snapchat Snapped?”

Owen finds this incredibly amusing. I do not. He wipes the smile from his face. “Sorry. Good joke. Bad timing. Withdrawn.”

“Anyway,” I go on, “we got into a huge fight. I told him I didn’t like the attention he gets from girls. He accused me of overreacting. It went on and on and then I threw a garden gnome at his head.”

Owen’s jaw drops. “You did what?”

“It wasn’t a heavy one,” I say, defending myself. “It was mostly full of air. It didn’t even hit him. I missed. It hit the paved walkway and broke.”

“That doesn’t bode well for your softball tryouts today.”

I feel myself deflate. “Now he wants to *talk*.”

Owen sucks in air through his teeth. The sound puts me on edge.

“I’m doomed, aren’t I?” I ask. “He’s going to break up with me, isn’t he?”

He takes a beat too long to answer. “No.” Then after seeing my doubtful face, he repeats the word with more conviction. “No! It’ll be fine. He probably just wants to talk about . . . you know . . . replacing his garden gnome. His mother is undoubtedly pissed that you broke it.”

This makes me laugh. It feels good. I’m suddenly glad I confided in Owen.

“Good Vibrations” by the Beach Boys fades away and “Do You Believe in Magic” by the Lovin’ Spoonful comes on. Owen turns up the volume.

“Do you really think it’ll be okay?” I ask. Despite how much I love this song, my voice still breaks with uncertainty.

“Do you believe in magic?” Owen asks me in return, half speaking, half singing the question.

“Thanks, that’s reassuring.”

His eyes light up. “Oh! Speaking of!” He digs into his backpack by his feet and produces two plastic-wrapped fortune cookies. “I was so distracted by your shambled life I almost forgot about our Monday morning ritual.”

Owen buses tables at the Tasty House Chinese restaurant on Sundays for extra cash. And he makes a lot of it. I think it’s his irresistible baby face and the boyish charm he turns on when he refills water glasses. Customers set aside additional tips just for him. He’s been bringing us fortune cookies on Monday mornings ever since he started working there.

“Choose your tasty fortune,” he trills.

I admit, the familiarity of the gesture does wonders for my frayed nerves. I hover my hand over the two cookies, wiggling my fingers majestically, before finally opting for the one on the left. Owen unwraps the remaining one and cracks open the crisp shell.

“If your desires are not extravagant,” he reads aloud from the tiny piece of paper tucked inside, “they will be granted.”

He snorts and crumples up the fortune, tossing it into my backseat. “My desires are always extravagant.” He pops the pieces of cookie in his mouth and chomps down. “Your turn.”

I unwrap mine and bust it open. The small strip of paper reads:

Today you will get everything your true heart desires.

Owen leans in to read over my shoulder. “That sounds promising.”

I fold up the paper and slip it into the side pocket of my door. Then I throw the car into drive and pull onto the street. “I sure hope so,” I mumble.

But Owen is barely listening. He’s too busy singing along—completely off-key—to the song. *“I’ll tell you about the magic. It’ll free your soul.”*

You Better Slow Your Mustang Down

8:10 a.m.

As I pull to a stop at the corner of Owen's street and Providence Boulevard, I lean forward and scowl up at the gray sky. "I really hope it stops raining before the carnival tonight. Tristan and I are supposed to have this big romantic date and the rain will totally ruin it."

Owen ignores my lamenting. He usually does when Tristan is the subject line. "Did you ever get around to watching the season premiere of *Assumed Guilty*?" he asks.

I avert my eyes in shame. "I have it DVR'd," I offer as if this redeems me, even though I know it doesn't.

Assumed Guilty is our favorite legal drama. We usually watch it live and text each other during the commercials, but last night I missed our weekly screening party because I was busy throwing fairy-tale creatures at my boyfriend's head.

Owen bangs his fist on the dashboard. "Bollocks! You need to get on that."

“And you need to stop saying things like ‘bollocks!’”

“You missed the *best* episode.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll watch it tonight,” I promise.

“You just said you’re going to the carnival tonight.”

“I’ll watch it after.”

Owen looks out the rain-splattered window. “No you won’t,” he mumbles.

I don’t think he meant for me to hear but I do. And the guilt punches me in the stomach. Just another thing on my overly crowded plate that I can’t keep up with. The truth is, ever since I started dating Tristan at the end of last year, I haven’t had a ton of extra time to do much of anything, including keep up with Owen’s and my busy television schedule. Tristan’s band had almost nonstop gigs this summer and I volunteered to help with promotion. It only made sense. I’m more organized than any of the band members. When I found out they didn’t even have a mailing list, and Jackson, the drummer, asked me how to “tweet the Instagram,” well, it was just easier to do it myself than try to explain the art of Internet marketing to a group of musicians who call themselves Whack-a-Mole.

But hanging out with Tristan and his band meant I had to pass up my usual summer job as a counselor at Camp Awahili with Owen.

“Sorry,” I tell him again because I don’t know what else to say. And I really do mean it. I hate letting Owen down. “Wanna give me a hint about what happened?” I ask, trying to appeal to one of his biggest weaknesses: dishing out spoilers. Owen loves being the one who spoils surprises. I think it makes him feel omniscient or something. But don’t ever try to do it back

to him. He'll rugby-style tackle you to the ground before you can even utter a single syllable. I made this mistake a while back when his copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* got lost in the mail and I was able to read it first.

"Did Olivia finally get it on with that death row inmate?"

Owen crosses his arms. "Nope. You're not getting any spoilers from me."

"C'mon. Just a little sneak peek. How about I say something and you blink twice if it's—"

"Yellow light," Owen interrupts, nodding to the stoplight ahead of us.

I look up, quickly gauging the distance to the intersection of Providence Boulevard and Avenue de Liberation. My foot hesitates between the gas and the brake pedal. "I can make it."

Owen shakes his head. "You'll never make it."

In a split decision, my foot plunges down on the accelerator. "Totally going to make it."

We sail through the intersection just as the signal turns red and I'm momentarily blinded by the flashes of light that surround the car like paparazzi stalking a celebrity.

"Told you," Owen says smugly.

"What was that?"

"Red light cameras."

My chest hiccups. "You mean I'm going to get a ticket in the mail now?"

"Yup."

"But I was already more than halfway through the intersection!"

"Apparently not." His voice is light. Almost singsongy.

“Great,” I mumble. “Just what I need today.”

He nods toward the door where I stashed my fortune.

“Maybe that’s what your true heart desires.”

“Yeah, my true heart desires to be grounded.”

He cringes. “Your true heart is kind of a masochist.”

They Call Me Mellow Yellow (Quite Rightly)

8:24 a.m.

Five minutes later, we pull into the school parking lot. I must have spent too long idling in Owen's driveway griping about my fight with Tristan, because the only spots left are in the farthest row. It's not until I open the car door and see a splotch of rain hit my cardigan that I remember I don't have an umbrella.

"You don't happen to have an umbrella, do you?" I call to Owen. He's already out of the car, tilting his head back to catch rainwater in his mouth.

"I thought you'd bring one," he says without looking at me. I groan. "I didn't."

"Ouch. And with school pictures today?"

Dang it. I'd already forgotten about that. To be honest, I'm more worried about seeing Tristan than I am about my picture. Drowned Rat is not exactly the look I was going for when I give my big apology speech.

Speech.

Crap! I have to give my election speech today, too. This day

is *so* not turning out the way I'd hoped. So much for good vibrations.

I grab my schoolbag from the backseat and hold it up as a shield above my head. "You don't seem too worried about *your* school picture."

He shrugs. "I'm a dude. My hair always looks good."

I hate to admit it, but it's true. Owen could go through a car wash in a convertible and still come out the other end looking like he spent an hour in front of the mirror. Guys have it so much easier.

I lock the car and walk around to his side. Owen laughs at my makeshift umbrella. "Run for it?" he suggests.

I nod, and we take off into the rain.

8:42 a.m.

"Say 'Two more years!'" the overly cheerful photographer chirps.

I give a weak smile and she takes the picture.

Why do people tell you to say stupid things when they're taking your photo? I mean, beyond the age of three when you're required to say "cheese" to ensure you're not scowling or sticking out your tongue.

Does this woman seriously think I'm going to say "two more years" for my school photo? Does she not realize what the word "years" would do to my lips? It would make me look like I was sucking face with an octopus.

"Lovely," she lies, and then calls, "Next!"

I scoot off the stool and walk to the other end of the cafeteria where the rest of Mr. Briggs's chemistry class is waiting.

Of course we would be the first group called in for photos. I didn't have a single spare moment to go to the bathroom to fix my hair. By the time Owen and I made it in from the rain, the first-period warning bell was already ringing and I had to head straight to class.

I manage to catch a peek at the photographer's viewfinder as I pass, and oh my God, it's more horrifying than I thought. My eyes are totally bloodshot from the rain. My makeup has smeared. My hair looks stringy and limp, like a kindergartner attached it to my head with Elmer's glue.

Fortunately I won't see Tristan until next period, and I should have time to duck into the bathroom and touch up before then. I need to look perfect when I see him. Or, at the very least, presentable.

9:50 a.m.

As soon as the bell rings, I jam my earbuds into my ears and scroll through my playlists until I find the one I want. "Mood Altering Substances."

The soothing sound of Donovan crooning "Mellow Yellow" floods into my ears and I feel myself relax somewhat. I keep my head down as I navigate through the crowd toward the girls' bathroom, but a tap on my shoulder makes me jump. I spin around to find—

Oh, please no.

This is not happening. It was not supposed to go down like this. I was supposed to look breezy and happy-go-lucky and, above all else, *nonfrightening* when I first saw him today. Not like I just walked out of the House of Horrors.

I rip my earbuds out and do my best to sound cheerful. “Tristan!”

God, he looks gorgeous today. His dark blond hair is all tousled and oh-so-touchable. He’s wearing the faded loose-fit jeans and black leather jacket combo that I love. Although to be fair, he pretty much wears that every day.

He’s staring at my face like he’s trying to decipher an ancient Egyptian scroll. “Are you trying out for the play?”

Ouch.

I dab uselessly at the skin under my eyes. “No. I was just . . . it was the rain. I didn’t bring an umbrella. I was on my way to the bathroom to clean up.”

Remember. You are drama free. You are the embodiment of chill.

“I mean, not that I *care*,” I add quickly. “What’s a little rain, right?”

“Right,” he agrees, hitching the strap of his guitar case up his shoulder.

“I just hope it clears up before tonight.”

Confusion is back on his face. “What’s tonight?”

I wince inwardly. Did he forget?

“The town carnival?” I remind him. “Tonight’s the last night.”

I’ve only been looking forward to it since I was ten years old. Okay, so I didn’t actually *know* Tristan when I was ten. He moved to our town freshman year. The carnival comes to town every year for two weeks. I’ve been going to it since I was a kid, and when I was ten I saw this couple there who looked so head-over-heels in love with each other, I kind of became obsessed with them. I followed them around all night, tracking their date like a private investigator.

I looked on whimsically as they held hands in line for the

rides. I smiled a goofy smile as he won her the biggest stuffed animal at the ring toss game. I swooned when they sat down to share a milk shake and he reached across the table to cup her face in his hands, like he was trying to hold her together. I got a crick in my neck following their progress on the Ferris wheel (a ride I've still never gone on due to my paralyzing fear of heights). Then, when their car paused at the top and they shared a moonlight kiss, all I could think was *I want that*.

I want to be in love like that.

To this day, it's the most romantic thing I've ever witnessed.

But until five months ago, I'd never actually had a boyfriend to go to the carnival with.

"We're still going, right?" I ask, cringing at how whiny my voice sounds. Maybe I really *am* turning into a drama queen.

He nods, but I can tell his mind is elsewhere. "Sure. Sounds fun." He clears his throat. "So, that thing. Last night. I thought we could talk about it."

Oh God, he wants to do this now? Here? While I'm looking like this?

I take a deep breath. Time to defuse a bomb. "Yeah, I wanted to talk about it, too. Look, I'm so sorry about that. I completely overreacted. It's all my fault. And I'll totally buy your mom a new garden gnome."

This makes him smile and I feel my throat loosening.

Am I doing it? Am I smoothing things over?

I charge on, talking so fast I barely even know what I'm saying anymore.

"I was hungry. And tired. And stressed about the election today. I really think that's what it was. You know, I'm not usually like that. I'm usually totally fine with all the girls. I mean, I *am* fine with all the girls. I mean, not like for you to *make out*

with them or anything. But you know, talking to them and doing your . . . rock star thing.” I raise my hands in the air and wiggle my fingers to illustrate my point.

Wait. Did I just do jazz hands?

Moving on.

“I wish we could forget the whole thing and pretend like it didn’t happen. And—”

“Oh, yeah,” he interrupts, his expression shifting to something unreadable. “I forgot about that.”

“What?”

“The election. That’s today, isn’t it?”

Is he still hung up on that part? How fast was I talking?

“Yes. There’s a school assembly during homeroom. I have to give my speech.”

He taps his fingers against the strap of his case. “Huh.”

Huh?

What does “huh” mean?

“So do you think we can do that?” I ask, pressing on. “Forget this whole thing ever happened and start fresh? I’m really, really sorry.”

The bell rings.

“We better get to class,” Tristan says.

Was that a yes?

He grabs my hand and interlaces his fingers with mine. The warmth of his flesh does more to calm me than any song in any of my stupid playlists. I want to live inside those beautiful strong hands of his. Sometimes when I watch him strum his guitar on stage, or when he’s practicing with the band, I get lost in the movement of his fingers. Like I’m in a trance.

And don’t get me started on his wrists.

As we walk hand in hand toward Spanish class, I almost

manage to forget the atrocity that is my face. That is, until we step inside the classroom and Señora Mendoza does a double take in my direction. Then she shakes her head, as if to say, “Kids these days! Who can understand them?”

We take our usual seats in the back row as Señora Mendoza starts conjugating the future tense of the verb *ver* on the whiteboard. I pull a piece of notebook paper from my binder, scribble “Are we good?” and slide it onto Tristan’s desk.

He glances down, then winks at me, causing my heart to puddle on the floor. “Yeah,” he whispers.

But there’s something about the way he turns his attention back to the front of the class—the speed at which he breaks eye contact—that makes me doubt the sincerity of the word. Am I being paranoid or has he suddenly taken a very unusual interest in Spanish verb conjugations?

Then just as Señora Mendoza is in the middle of saying “*Nosotros veremos*”—we will see—a loud *thunk* startles me out of my thoughts.

The entire class turns toward the window as a giant black bird slides down the glass and drops to the ground outside.

“*¡Dios mío!*” Señora Mendoza cries, holding her hand to her chest.

“Is it dead?” someone asks, racing to the window along with a handful of other students.

“It’s totally dead,” Sadie Haskins replies.

And that’s all it takes for me to burst into tears.