

the new *girl*

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter One

Monday, September 05

“Call me Steph.”

He glanced down to the transcript, and I watched him closer, studying the way perplexity darkened his expression.

“Steph?”

He didn’t get it. I understood that. That transcript in his hand didn’t really help matters much. It would’ve been much easier for both of us if the paper had read *Steph*, but nothing in my life ever came so easily. It said *Abcdef*, my legal name. And with a first name like that, wouldn’t you figure that my last name was *Ghijk*? Yup! I had the honor of answering to the first eleven letters of the English alphabet, and I had no one but my erratic, impulsive mother to thank.

“Nice to have you aboard, Miss Ghi...?”

“Ghijk.”

“Gih-jik?”

“Yes, sir.”

He cleared his throat, and with a simple shake of his head, he managed a small smile.

“Come on in. I’m Mr. Rivera.” I nodded and decided to skip another awkward introduction. *Steph* would suffice. Hopefully he’d remember that. “This is first period English.” He turned to the large desk in front of the classroom, pulled a black binder from the top drawer, and flipped through the pages. “Let’s see,” he said, looking between the binder and spread of empty desks in front of him. “You can take the second chair in row three.”

I nodded in thanks and turned to the assigned desk. Mr. Rivera marked the change in his seating chart.

Along my short walk, I glanced from the clock to the chalkboard, and then my eyes trailed over to the set of large windows overlooking the small town of Webster Grove. So this was it—the latest school, and the newest town. And honestly, I had no preconceived notions about my probable short-lived time here. It was the fifth high school I’d attended in the last four years, eleventh total counting elementary school—yet something else to credit to my mother’s impulsive behavior.

I slid in the chair and stared at the desk. The first and only thing I noticed there were the carved initials in the upper right corner—BW+NB. Surrounded by a heart etched in the wood, those four letters were carved deep enough to reason that someone had really taken their time to make that statement of love. Cute.

Mr. Rivera caught my attention as he moved from his desk to the chalkboard. He turned—a paper in one hand and a piece of chalk in the other—and began writing out the day’s classroom agenda in small strokes.

With nothing but his backside to stare at, I continued watching him. He was young—no older than twenty-four, I guessed—and obviously a new teacher. And he was gorgeous. He had just the perfect combination of assets working wonders for him—tanned skin, brown eyes, black hair. Hispanic, maybe? Or maybe not. I tried to recall the few words he’d said to me. There wasn’t an accent, so maybe it was his parents who were—

“Is something wrong Miss Ghijk?”

“Um...” I don’t know what happened. How long had I sat there staring at him, and how long had it taken before he’d noticed? I was so distracted by thoughts of him that I’d somehow failed to notice that sometime during that daydream my teacher had turned from the board and was staring directly at me.

I snapped out of the fog, but found myself blinking excessively.

Crap. He’d caught me looking—staring, actually—and I had to come up with *something* that wouldn’t make me look like a blubbing idiot. Surely I couldn’t admit that I was watching him, wondering how on God’s green Earth he’d won the genetic lottery. So I stammered for a minute and then finally managed to say, “Makeup assignments?”

“No worries,” he said, grinning, and my heart lurched in my throat at the sound of the half-laugh that followed his grin. Wonderful. He knew why I was flustered. He knew *he* was the reason I was flustered. He’d caught me admiring him, and that left him with a smile. It was sweet. It wasn’t cocky or boastful, so what was it? Was it flattery?

Maybe ...

In spite of the fact that we both knew why I’d really been staring in the first place, he placated me ... and for that I was eternally grateful.

“You’re only coming into the course a week late. Given your grades,” he said, seeming to recall my transcript. “I think you’ll be fine.”

I humbly agreed with that much. Like Mr. Rivera, I didn’t foresee any problems catching up. I’d worked hard over the past twelve years to maintain a perfect GPA, and hopping schools mid-year since kindergarten hadn’t made it easy to stay on top of my studies. Still, I strived to be an award-winning designer someday and that meant getting into the best college possible. And in order to do that, I couldn’t stop working. I *never* stopped working. In the years when I should’ve been socializing and molding my relationship skills, I was always focused on academics. The sacrifice would pay off in the long run.

“You do have an impressive transcript,” Mr. Rivera said, now back at his desk. He held the paper for a few seconds before tossing it down on a stack of folders. He took a few steps across the room and leaned on the edge of the desk in front of mine. “Where did you come from?”

“Small town in Kentucky,” I said, twisting my lips. “Before that ... Tennessee.”

“You’re no stranger to new schools, then?”

“That’s one way to put it,” I elaborated for his benefit. “Before Tennessee, we moved from West Virginia. Then ... New York. But that didn’t work out, so we had to give North Carolina a shot.”

“You’re serious?”

“You can’t make this stuff up.”

“That’s a lot of moving.”

“You really have no idea,” I promised, pushing a pencil around my desk to keep from staring. “Webster Grove brings house number eighteen and school eleven.”

His expression darkened again, almost like it had when he first read my name on the transcript. He was confused, perplexed by what I was saying to him. There wasn’t a normal person in the world that could understand the reasons behind all of our moves, and Mr. Rivera certainly wasn’t an exception. He crossed his arms at his chest, seeming as though he wanted to pry, to dig a little deeper, to ask a lot of questions, but he didn’t know how without coming on too strong. Or too nosy.

I saved him the trouble of asking with nothing more than a shrug and the quickest explanation possible, “You’d have to know my mother.”

There was a brief nod on his part, like he might’ve understood, but there was no way he ever could. He was only humoring me. I’m sure he thought—based on my brief explanation—that Mom was some kind of psycho-serial killer on the run, teenage daughter in tow. Truthfully, though, Caroline Ghijk was a lot of things, but a serial killer wasn’t one of them.

Her life—*our* lives, actually—had been pretty rocky straight from the start. She found out she was pregnant with me at fifteen and gave birth right after her sixteenth birthday. From what I know, which really isn’t much, my biological father was a much older man. Mom dropped out of high school to live with him shortly after I was born, but as it often does, time changed a lot of things for everyone involved. After two years of the worst physical and emotional abuse at the hands of my father, Mom packed our bags and fled to an abandoned house across town. He found us there, so we bolted again; thus, starting a cycle.

One that never seemed to end ...

I don’t remember anything about the man. I wouldn’t know him if I saw him. Pictures? Forget about it. Mom was so hell-bent on ridding him from our lives that she destroyed every last reminder she had—everything except for me, of course. And though there’d been no sign of my biological father in over a decade, Mom was certain he was always looking. When people asked about our bizarre moving situation, she engaged in elaborate stories of a short-lived affair (and me, her secret love child) with an A-list Hollywood celebrity. She thrived off of the reaction she got to the fabricated tales of paparazzi chases and her need for seclusion. Mom had a knack for twisting the truth. She could make *anyone* believe her stories, and unfortunately for everyone who knew her, you could never trust a word that came out of the woman’s mouth.

“A-b-c-d-e-f—”

“Good for you, Mr. Rivera,” I teased, ignoring the pencil and finally looking back up at him. “You know your ABC’s.”

"I'm curious about your name."

"A lot of people are," I smiled. "It's different, right? Mom somehow thought it would be the least suspecting name if ... someone wanted to find me."

Again, he nodded, but didn't press.

"And you pronounce it...?"

"Ahb-steph."

"Hence, Steph."

"Correct." I smirked. "I get mistaken for a *Stephanie* a lot, so if it's easier for you to call me that, it's really no big deal."

"You're okay with that?"

"I've found it's just easier that way, yeah," I answered as honestly as I could. "It's not worth the time and effort it takes to explain. Of course, *without* an explanation, one look at the name *Abcdef* and a person automatically assumes my parents were high when they named me or I'm of a foreign nationality."

"And foreign nationalities are a bad thing?"

"No!" I closed my eyes and silently cursed myself. I opened my eyes to find him smiling, and even though my teacher wore that grin so well, I still couldn't help but feel like I'd just inadvertently insulted one of the very few people I'd encountered since moving to Webster Grove. But of course I'd made an idiot of myself already. It wouldn't have been a day in the life of Steph Ghijk if I hadn't found a way to put my foot in my mouth. "*I'm so sorry*, Mr. Rivera. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean to—"

"No sweat," he said, standing tall and walking back to his desk. With a discreet wink, he took his seat. "I'm only teasing."

I breathed a sigh of relief, but only for a moment. The bell rang overhead, and a group of students filed into the classroom, talking and shuffling around as they settled into their desks. One of the loudest—a tall, skinny, rusty-haired boy—slid into the seat next to mine. He turned in his chair and fixed his eyes on me, but I chose to ignore his gaze. I looked forward; he looked at me. And when the awkward, one-way staring war went on for far too long, I finally turned to look at him.

"New meat," he said, his brown eyes moving quickly as he studied every inch of my face. "What's your name?"

"Steph." I observed him just as he'd done to me. His hair was messy and shaded his dark eyes. His nose was just a little too big for his face, which was covered with freckles, and his smile hung a little crooked. Strangely enough, though, he was cute. He just wasn't *nearly* as cute as he thought he was.

"Steph," he repeated. "Nice to meet ya, Steph."

"And you are?"

"Oh, I'm gonna remain a mystery," he said, flipping his overgrown bangs and slumping lower in his chair.

“Oh, you *poor, poor* girl,” a voice said behind me. I turned to find a short, petite redhead in the desk directly behind mine. “Steph, right?”

“Yeah,” my voice shook a little under pressure. I should’ve been used to it by now, but I was never really great at the whole introduction thing.

“Bridget,” she said, granting me a dimpled smile. “And the mystery man is Nate.”

“The ladies call me Nathaniel.”

“The ladies call you *revolting*,” she spat at him.

I stared between the two of them. They carried on their argument, but I only watched and observed, admittedly frightened to be stuck in the middle.

Nate was laid back in his argument, and he possessed a certain, cocky charm—charm that I could only imagine was quite effective on his so-called *ladies*.

Bridget’s energy, though, screamed bubbly and eccentric—the polar opposite of my introverted ways. She and I were really different in most every way, so it seemed. Standing, I would tower her small stature. Her tight red curls bounced freely as she talked, reminding me that my brunette hair seldom left the bun on the back of my head. Her brown eyes were big and round, and mine were almost always hidden behind glasses. Bridget was adorable. She had spunk and pizzazz, and that was definitely giving her a leg-up in her current dispute with her classmate.

“All right, guys, quiet down,” Mr. Rivera said as a second bell faded into the background. The once empty desks were now filled with students, most who hadn’t even noticed my presence. With our teacher’s command, the room silenced and every eye stared straight forward. “As some of you have already noticed, we have a new student joining us today.”

Nate was no longer looking in my direction, but the rest of the class turned to stare. Whispers filled the small room. A blonde two rows over raised her fingers and waved with a perky smile.

A boy in the back of the room let out a low chuckle. “What’s your name, sweet cheeks?”

I sank a little lower in the desk, embarrassed by the sudden and unwanted attention. After a moment of silence on my behalf, Mr. Rivera raised his hand to quiet the other students. The talking ceased altogether.

“Steph,” he said, cupping his hands together. “Welcome to class. Feel free to speak up if you have any questions. I’m sure your peers will be more than willing to help you out. Furthermore,” he said, now directing his attention to Bridget and Nate. “I’m glad Miss Wright has already taken the liberty to warn you about Mr. Bryan. You’ll want to watch out for that one. He’s a handful.”

“Ah, come on, Rivera,” Nate said, clutching his chest. “You know you love me, dude. Don’t hate.”

With a quick wink and another warm welcome, Mr. Rivera turned to the board and jumped straight into the lesson.

English moved quickly. The following class—American Government—was just as fast. Like first period, I sat next to Nate in this course, but only because there were no assigned seats, and he insisted I

stick to familiarity. A block of Spanish—no familiar faces there—followed second period and ended with the start of the lunch bell.

Without a friendly ally by my side, I walked aimlessly through the hallway trying to remember my way to the cafeteria. I followed the current of students, hoping I was on the right track.

“Stephanie!” A loud yell echoed through the hallway. I, like the rest of the crowd, stopped to watch Bridget run down the corridor with her arms flailing in the air. “Stephanie! *Steph, wait up!*” She stopped next to me and leaned over to catch her breath. With her hands planted on her knees, she looked up at me with wide eyes. “I’ve been trying to find you since the bell rang. Didn’t you hear me yelling?”

“You were yelling for me?”

“You *are* Stephanie, right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Sure.”

“Good,” she said, standing straight. “Well, you can sit with me.” She linked our arms together and pulled me into the cafeteria. “So?”

“So?”

“Where are you from?”

“Oh,” I hoped I’d only have to give her the short version. “We—”

“Out of state?” she asked. “What about siblings? Are you an only child? Ooo,” she said, suddenly distracted by the short lunch line. Pulling me along, we stood behind a group of boys as she continued her line of questioning. “What are your parents like—mean, laid back, somewhere in between? Mine are pretty strict, but it’s totally cool. I know they mean well.” Her eyes widened further and she grabbed my arm. “Oh my God, I have to ask! What did you think of Mr. Rivera? *Isn’t he hot?*”

“I—I don’t know. I guess.”

We kept weaving through the line, and Bridget never stopped talking. She settled for nothing more than an apple and a bottle of water. I followed suit, not in much of a mood to eat. I knew I should’ve mastered it by that point, but first days always made me nervous.

“We sit here,” Bridget said, directing me to a large table in the far corner of the cafeteria. We sat across from one another and she leaned forward. “Well?”

“Huh?”

“Where did you come from?”

“Kentucky—”

“Kentucky!”

And before she had time to fire off another question, Nate slid in next to her.

“Ladies,” he said, nodding. He then took no time at all to devour the steaming pile of spaghetti on his

tray.

I looked between Bridget and Nate, fully expecting to see another spat, but she just rolled her eyes and took a chunk out of the apple.

“Don forgesh yous gotta audition for the play thish evening,” she said to Nate.

“I’m not doing that.”

“*You most certainly are,*” she said, swallowing the mouthful of fruit.

“Forget it, Bridge.”

“Nathaniel Bryan,” she said sternly, now pointing a finger in his face. “You lost, you pay.”

“Lost what?” I asked, fully aware that I was sticking my nose where it didn’t belong. But I couldn’t figure these two out. Were they friends or enemies? Frenemies?

“The bet,” Nate mumbled.

“The bet?” I asked, looking to a smug Bridget.

“Oh, Nate bet me that Mr. Rivera would be engaged to Miss Holt by the beginning of the school year. He was *so* sure. But he was wrong, so I got to choose the terms of his loss.”

“Big mistake,” he added. “Never let her choose the terms, especially if there’s any chance you’ll lose.”

“Who’s Miss Holt?” I asked, remembering that I’d seen her name on my schedule earlier that morning, but I hadn’t had her class yet.

“Math teacher,” Nate said. “And I was positive she’d have a ring on her finger.”

“But she doesn’t,” Bridget continued. “Nate lost the bet.”

“So he’s auditioning for...?”

“*Romeo and Juliet.*”

He groaned before she finished spouting off the title. “You know, just because you’re into all that drama crap doesn’t mean *I’m* gonna like it.”

“For one, *Nathaniel*, it’s not crap. And two, I don’t care if you like it. I need a Romeo. You bet. You lost. I won. Deal with it.”

“So you’re Juliet?” I asked, somehow not surprised in the least. Bridget seemed like the theatrical type.

“Not yet,” Nate answered. “But she’s practically a shoo-in. There’s nobody better for the part.” Bridget smiled and flipped her hair behind her shoulder. “No one except for—”

“Don’t you dare say her name,” Bridget threatened, but Nate didn’t listen. He’d already spouted off

Rachel Canter, and my interest was piqued.

“And who’s Rachel?”

“I’m Rachel,” a voice behind me said. I turned to see the perky blonde from Mr. Rivera’s class—the one who’d waved her fingers at me like she was a candidate for Miss America. She was just as beautiful as I’d remembered her from hours before. Her pin-straight hair graced her shoulders as she dropped her head to the side and looked down at our group. I noticed a tiny beauty mark above her lip, one that would make her easily identifiable in a line-up. She stood at the side of the table, looking at me with vague interest. “And you’re Steph? *Abcdef Ghijk*. Am I saying that right?”

“How do you—”

“I make it my business to know everything about my peers,” she said slyly as she stood a little taller. “Welcome to Webster Grove.”

She was gone as quickly as she’d appeared, and I was a little rattled by her not-so-warm welcome. Bridget and Nate turned to me with their mouths gaped.

“Abcdef Ghijk,” Nate said, completely butchering the pronunciation. “What language was that?”

“Forget it,” I said, waving it off. “What’s her deal?”

“Inflated ego,” Bridget said. “Just sizing up the competition.”

“I’m sorry, competition?”

“She’s a homecoming queen candidate,” Bridget explained. “And the Student Body President ... and most likely the Valedictorian. God,” she said, puffing her cheeks. “I can’t believe she’s going out for the show; as if she doesn’t already have *everything*.”

I nodded. I knew the type. I’d met more than a handful of the Rachel-Canter-types over the past few years. Having it all wasn’t enough ... they had to take everything they could get their hands on, whether they really wanted it or not.

“Try not to sweat it,” I said, giving her an encouraging nod. “I’m sure you’ll get the role.” I took a drink of my water and secured the lid back on the bottle. “Let me know how it goes, okay?”

“You’re not coming?”

“Huh?”

“To the auditions! *You’re not coming?*”

“I’m sure she’s coming,” Nate said, rubbing her back. He looked at me with wide eyes. “You *are* coming, Steph?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, determined not to let her down. It hadn’t taken long to make friends; I didn’t want to lose them just as fast. “I’ll come ... to watch, right?”

“Oh, thank God!” she said, clapping. “You’re an angel! *I love you. I love, love, love you!*”

“You're not gonna make *her* audition?” Nate asked, disgusted that he was the only one getting the raw end of the deal.

“Of course not!” she said. “Steph has *stage fright* written all over her. She's more of a backstage kinda gal, right?”

“Well, no,” I said, shaking my head a little too hard. “I'm just going for moral support. I don't want to be on either side of the stage.”

“Oh, you *have* to sign up,” she begged. “It's the best way to get to know new people. I'm sure you could assist the stage manager or something. Or, if you don't wanna do that, there's a set to build, props to gather, make-up, costumes—”

“Costumes?” I asked, suddenly eager to put my creativity to work. It'd been weeks since I'd put pencil to paper, thread to cloth. “I could sign up for that?”

“Yup,” she said. “So, whaddaya say?”

“It actually sounds like an awesome idea.”

“Great!” she said, clapping again. “Meet us outside the school at five. Oh, and dress nice. I know you're only going out for crew, but rumor has it Mr. Rivera's directing and ... well, you'll wanna look your best. God knows *he'll* be dressed to impress.”

Bridget and I shared a childlike giggle and Nate rolled his eyes.

“You girls,” he said, shaking his head. “What is it about that guy?”

Chapter Two

Monday, September 05

“Nervous?” I asked as we walked into the auditorium at five o'clock.

“Of course not.”

“Speak for yourself,” Nate interrupted Bridget. “I'm gonna barf.”

The theater was large; there were aisles among aisles of red, plush folding seats already filling with hopeful cast and crewmembers. The students faced a stage that expanded from one wall to the next; some were excitedly socializing while others remained silent, seemingly on the verge of throwing up at any given moment. Nate wasn't alone in his moment of nervous-nausea.

“This is quite a turn out.”

“The love of the art is growing!” Bridget bounced on her heels.

“Gag me,” Nate snapped, walking away and taking a seat alone in the back.

Once out of earshot, I leaned over and nudged Bridget.

“So, you and Nate?”

“What?”

“What's the story there?”

“We've been best friends since pre-K,” she said. “It's a love-hate thing, you know?”

I nodded, because I'd witnessed enough of their *love-hate thing* to conclude that much, but something about the way she watched him left me wondering if there wasn't a whole lot more love than hate.

Mr. Rivera climbed to the stage, and the room immediately fell silent.

“The man commands a room, huh?” Bridget whispered.

“I'd say.”

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen,” he said, cupping his hands together in front of him. “Thank you all for joining us here. Unfortunately, and as most of you already know, Mrs. Basting was injured in a roofing accident last week. She is on bed rest for the next few months, unable to direct the fall production of *Romeo and Juliet*.” Some students grumbled while others rolled their eyes. Some, like Nate, didn't seem to care one way or the other. “For those of you who are used to the stunning Basting productions, I regret to inform you that I'm stepping up to take the reins.”

Most of the girls in the audience whistled and giggled. Bridget, as I should've guessed, was among the many.

As I watched our teacher in front of the crowd, I couldn't help but notice the way he commanded the room, the way every eye watched him with admiration. One thing about Webster Grove High School was becoming abundantly clear. Everyone—male *and* female—loved and respected Mr. Rivera.

A group of boys clapped and cheered as Miss Holt joined her co-worker center stage. My little experience in Miss Holt's class after lunch today told me everything I needed to know about her—she was an adult replica of Rachel Canter. Her blonde hair fell straight down her back, complimenting her bright green eyes. And just like Rachel, she walked around a room like the whole world owed her a favor.

“Shh,” Miss Holt said, lifting a finger to her pink painted lips. “Quiet down.” When the cheers and whistles finally subsided, she continued. “We’re starting with brief interviews and sign-ups for crew positions in the back.” She motioned toward a desk set up along the back of the auditorium. “It should only take about fifteen minutes, so actors should start preparing monologues. Also,” she said, looking beyond the first few rows. “You are only allowed to stay for the auditions if you intend to act in the show. We want this process to go as smoothly as possible, so no stragglers.”

Bridget rolled her eyes.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“I have two requests,” Mr. Rivera spoke again. “First, please be patient with us. We're clearly not as skilled and professional as Mrs. Basting, but we will certainly do our best to produce the greatest show possible. And second, we know how much some of you look forward to being in the show.” His gaze fell on Bridget. “But there are more students than there are roles, so some of you may have to settle for less than what you want. Unfortunately, that’s the life of an actor. All I ask is that you please use this process as a learning experience. Don’t let the outcome make or break you. Now, with that behind us, I wish you all the best of luck.”

“Okay,” Miss Holt spoke up again. “Anyone interested in signing up to work backstage should go ahead and line up.”

The two teachers moved off the stage and toward the desk. They sat in unison and began talking to a group of waiting students.

I turned to Bridget. “Should I ...”

“Go, go,” she said, pushing me along. “You have a résumé right?”

“Not exactly.”

“*Steph!*”

“I’ve never done anything like this,” I said, lifting a collection out of my shoulder bag. “But I brought a portfolio. Will this work?”

She took the binder and flipped it open. “*You drew these?*”

“Yes.”

“Honey,” she said, pushing the designs back at me. “Go!”

“Okay,” I said, smiling sheepishly. “Good luck.”

“*Break a leg*,” she corrected me, careful not to skimp on the melodramatic flair.

With a helpful shove from Bridget, I moved toward the sign-up line. I clutched the portfolio to my chest and waited patiently as the group slowly progressed forward.

“Miss Ghijk,” Mr. Rivera said when I finally reached the table. “It’s good to see you getting involved on your first day.”

“Bridget insisted ...”

“I assumed,” he said, grinning as I signed my name under the costume crew. He eyed the paper in front of him and looked back to me. “Do you have any production experience in costuming?”

“No, but I brought—”

“You were instructed to bring a résumé,” Miss Holt interrupted.

“I’ve never done this before,” I said, ignoring her sneer. Keeping my gaze fixed firmly on Mr. Rivera, I continued, “I’m sorry I don’t have any experience in the theater, but I’m not without experience entirely. I’ve been designing and constructing clothing for nine years. I live and breathe design.”

My English teacher didn’t break eye contact as he extended his hand to acquire my artwork. He opened the portfolio, and with a hitched breath, his bottom lip drew in. I couldn’t read him—impressed, shocked, unfazed? He continued to flip through a few more pages without a word, and his eyes wandered wildly across each design.

“Well,” I said after a few long seconds of torturous silence. “What do you think?”

“Incredible,” he said, looking back to me. “You did this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Steph, this is amazing.”

“*Really?*”

“I’m impressed. Your talent would be a valuable asset to our team, and I think—”

Miss Holt’s scoff interrupted him. “I thought you were going to ask your grandmother for input on the costume design,” she said to her co-director, as if I couldn’t hear the objection in her voice.

“I believe what I said was that it was a last resort option to ask her, but she has much bigger things than this production to concern herself with,” he said, trying to keep his voice low. “And besides, there’s no point in asking for outside help when we have a qualified student candidate right in front of us.” He sifted through the designs again. A minute later, he closed the portfolio and offered it to Miss Holt, who declined looking at it altogether. He ignored her blatant disregard for my feelings and passed the collection back to me. “Thank you for coming out and sharing this, Steph. This was truly impressive. You can look for the crew list first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you,” I said, turning to walk away. I clutched the binder to my chest and caught Bridget's eye as I reached the exit at the back of the auditorium. She waved and signaled a thumbs up. Much to her chagrin, I mouthed *good luck* and left the building.

I stepped into the hot summer sun and moved across the empty parking lot. Our latest rental was only one block from school, which was an added convenience for walking to and from, especially since I didn't have a driver's license. It was yet another downside to living on the run—time, even for life's most basic privileges, was a scarce resource.

I rounded the curb on Main Street and made the short walk down the block. I pulled a set of keys from my pocket as I approached the large two-story brick house on the corner. I let myself in the front door and tossed my bag to the side.

“Mom,” I called, looking around the first floor and dodging boxes left and right. She hadn't been home when I stopped by after school to get my portfolio for the auditions. But her car was in the driveway now, so she had to be around somewhere. “*Hello?*”

“Here!”

I followed her voice through the kitchen and into the dining room at the back of the house. I stopped dead in my tracks at the sight in front of me. The room had taken an incredible transformation in the last hour. No longer empty, there was now a large table—complete with six dining chairs—centered on a beautifully patterned rug at my feet.

“What's going on?” I asked, running my fingers along the tablecloth.

“Baby,” she said, her eyes lighting up. “Whaddya think?”

“I'm ... confused.”

“What do you mean?”

“There's furniture.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because, silly,” she said, turning to adjust the curtains. “Why not?”

“Well, for starters, we've never had furniture. And when we leave—and we *will* leave—you won't be able to take it with you.” When she stared at me confused, I simply shrugged. “Aren't you the one always telling me not to own more than I can carry?”

“But,” she was trying to come up with an argument, but she didn't have a leg to stand on. And she knew it. “Okay, listen. This table is more than just a piece of furniture, Baby.”

“Okay?”

“It represents something bigger, a promise I'd like to make,” she said, taking a deep breath and standing taller. “I think it's time we settle down, turn a house into a home, don't you?”

“Well, yeah,” I said, taken aback. *Grain of salt*, I reminded myself. Take anything she says with a grain of salt. Never believe her. There’s always an ulterior motive. Always. “Of course I think we should settle in permanently. I’ve been saying that for years, but—”

“But *nothing*, Baby,” she said, taking a picture from a box and hanging it on the wall. “We’re not leaving. End of story.”

I stood back and watched her decorate, but it was far too foreign. Here she was—a woman who was always on edge and ready to move at the drop of a hat, decorating, putting down roots. She was up to something, but I couldn’t tell what. She was trying too hard, and she had to know I’d be suspicious. After all, we hadn’t even unpacked the boxes in our last three homes. Why the sudden change of heart? What had happened?

I kept watching her, completely aware that there was an angle. I just had to figure out what it was.

She had her wavy blonde hair swept into a ponytail and her hands propped on her hips as she glanced around the room, admiring all the progress she’d made. With the face of a Barbie doll and the attitude of a teenager, I always found it difficult to believe that this 33-year-old, indecisive, often flighty woman was my mother.

“Mom,” I said, pulling another picture frame from the box. “What’s going on here?”

“I’ve already told you.”

“But where did you get all this stuff?”

“What stuff?”

“The table, the chairs, the decorations—everything that wasn’t here when I left for the auditions an hour ago.”

“Oh.” She shrugged. “A friend.”

“A friend?”

We’d only been in town for two days, which obviously meant that this “friend” was most likely—

“An internet buddy,” she said. “He just wanted to help.”

“*Mom!*”

I wanted to be surprised, but God, I didn’t know how. I couldn’t muster the simplest shock. Of course! *That* was her angle. She wanted me to hop on board and be excited for her newfound love. Of course, I couldn’t. Because this wasn’t the first time she’d made the decision to move to a new city—or even state—because of an *internet buddy*. It was just another one of her many adolescent qualities. She couldn’t understand the danger of the unknown; I’d known her to spend days at a time chatting online, texting with old friends, and gabbing on the phone for hours on end.

“Calm down, Baby,” she said. “It’s not like he’s a stranger. I’ve been talking to him for *months*. He’s a nice guy.”

I rubbed my head. “Is that why we ended up here this time? We’re in Webster Grove *because of a*

man?”

“Of course not,” she said, adjusting the curtains again to avoid my stare. “I mean, he did *influence* the decision, but he wasn't the sole reason.” I took a deep breath and backed into the kitchen. “Baby, where are you going?”

“Crazy,” I mumbled. I pulled a bottle of water from the refrigerator before returning to the dining room. “I guess he's been here already, then? Your knight in shining armor, he knows where we live?”

“You don't seriously think I carried all of this in on my own, do you?”

“*Are you kidding me?*” I yelled, feeling the beginning of a terrible migraine. “So what happens when you find out he's an ex-con, Mom? Or you guys break up? *Or you find out he's married?* Do we pack up and leave again?”

“No, Baby, I told you. We're here for the long haul, I promise.”

“But I've heard that before. Things change, Caroline.”

“Really, sweetheart,” she said, embracing me in a hug. “Calvin's a keeper. Oh, and so cute. He has the darkest hair, chocolate eyes, and ... ah, you should see his smile.” Her eyes glossed over at the simple thought of him. “Plus, he's a chef—owns his own restaurant, has a college degree and everything.”

“Woo-freaking-hoo,” I said, shaking out of her hug. “Mom, seriously—”

“And his brother's a *cop*! They ...” She paused and straightened the wrinkles in her shirt. A pause from Caroline almost always meant she was lying. So, I took the next nugget of news with that ever-so-familiar grain of salt. “They looked up your father last week.”

“Yeah?”

“He's in a Georgia prison awaiting trial on homicide charges.”

“*Lovely!*” I said, not disguising my sarcasm for a moment. “You picked a real winner with that one, I gotta hand it to you.”

“All I'm saying,” she said, cutting me off, “is that we won't have to worry about him for a very long time, Baby. Isn't that wonderful?”

Yeah, it was great. Truthfully, though, I'd never worried. Not once. I'd had little reason to believe Richard Levin ever searched beyond our original hometown to find us. I ruled Mom's impulsive behavior off a long time ago as nothing more than incredible paranoia.

“Okay,” I said, pulling a seat from under the table to sit down. “Sit.” She took the chair next to mine and leaned forward. “Tell me about Calvin.”

“He has brown eyes—”

“No,” I said. “*Really*. You better give me more than hair and eye color, Mom. I don't care that he's cute. The car he drives, the size of his bank account, the way he curls your toes—none of that matters to me. *Really*. You know what I want to hear. What makes him different than the rest? What makes him different than Leroy?”

Oh, Leroy, the slimy little devil. He was the latest fling in a long line-up of Mom's ex-lovers; after three months of dating, she found out he was married with two children (and another on the way!). And sure, Caroline Ghijk loves her men, but she only wanted them as long as she could have them to herself. After a disastrous confrontation from Leroy's wife, Mom ended the relationship with the two-state jump into Kentucky.

"I don't know."

"Exactly."

"I didn't meet this one in a chat room, Baby," she said. "I put some money toward one of those legitimate online match sites."

"Ugh," I dropped my head.

I couldn't even stomach that. She invested in an online match service, with money we probably didn't have in the first place. Lucky for Mom, finding a job in each new city wasn't so difficult. Unlucky for Mom, with what little education she had, she wasn't exactly landing top-dollar positions. And she was squandering precious pennies on things as trivial as finding her next 'match.'

"No, listen," she pleaded. "Don't roll your eyes. It's *good*. I signed up, we were paired the next day, and we talked for hours! We knew from that very first day that we wanted to meet."

I lifted my glasses and pinched the bridge of my nose. "How old is he?"

"Thirty-four."

"Age appropriate," I said, dropping my hand.

"First time for everything, huh?"

We shared a smile.

"Just promise me one thing?"

"What's that?" she asked.

"That you'll be careful," I said. "Because ... I can't keep doing this, Mom. It's too much. Please."

Without a moment's hesitation, she nodded. "I promise. I'll be careful."

Chapter Three

Tuesday, September 06

I stood at Mr. Rivera's closed door the next morning and read the list. Bridget was going to be thrilled to learn that she'd been cast as Juliet. Nate, on the other hand, would shudder to learn that his time on stage wasn't limited to one audition at the loss of a bet; he was playing her Romeo.

I scanned down the rest of the cast list and didn't recognize any of the remaining names. Rachel Canter, though, was named understudy for Juliet. I'd kinda be lying if I said I wasn't a *little* excited to see her face when she learned she was only second best to Bridget.

The next page listed the crews. Under the costumes section I read:

Abcdef Ghijk
Costumes - Lead Designer

I tried to smile but failed miserably at that attempt. For the first time in my life, I was officially participating in a school activity. I had a place, a role of my own! Webster Grove wasn't shaping out to be such a bad place, after all. Things were already different, changing. Good.

I opened the door and let myself in the classroom. Mr. Rivera sat at his desk and read silently to himself. He looked up and smiled. "Could you close that behind you?"

"Sure." I nodded, closing the door quietly as I walked in.

Bridget and Nate were the only two students in the room—both who I'd assumed arrived early to check the cast list.

Bridget was bouncing in her seat as I sat down.

"I'm Juliet! *Me! I'm Juliet Capulet! Can you believe it?*"

"Congratulations," I said, now looking to Nate. He was slouched in his chair with his forehead and nose pressed to the top of his desk. "Is *he* okay?"

"I'm gonna kill myself."

"Oh, you are not," Bridget said, responding to his muffled voice. "It's a *good thing*, Nate." She turned back to me and frowned. "He's such a worrywart. Anyway, I looked for your name. Sorry you didn't make the cut."

"Oh, I did," I said, biting my lip. "I'm working on costumes."

"Really?" she asked, scratching her head. "I didn't see your name."

"It's there," I said with a wink. I looked back to the front of the room before turning back and

narrowing my gaze on her. “So ... why is Mr. Rivera keeping the door shut?”

“He thinks people are too dramatic with their reactions to the cast list,” she said, brushing it off.

“What happened,” Nate explained, lifting his head, “is that he made the mistake of leaving it open when *Hormones* here read the list.” Bridget rolled her eyes, but Nate sat straighter. “You think I’m kidding? It was the biggest scene ever created on school property. She jumped, she screamed ... she *cursed*. At one point, she started hyperventilating. We thought she was gonna pass out right there on the floor.”

“And you?” I asked him, having no doubt that his description of Bridget’s reaction was spot-on.

“I actually *did* pass out,” he said, and I didn’t doubt that either.

The bell rang and students poured into the room.

Mr. Rivera stood from his desk and addressed the class. “Good morning,” he said. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

After a lengthy reading assignment and instructions on upcoming research papers, the bell sounded for the change of class. Bridget, Nate, and I stood up and gathered our books.

“Miss Wright, Mr. Bryan, Miss Ghijk— congratulations,” Mr. Rivera said.

“Thanks,” Bridget and I said in unison, both blushing like children. I’m certain I heard Nate mumble *bite me* as we left the room.

We moved into the hallway and through the growing group of students rushing to their next class. I walked side-by-side with Nate as Bridget turned off into French. As we crossed the hallway in front of Miss Holt’s room, she stepped out and stopped us dead in our tracks.

“Nathaniel,” she said, smiling. “Congratulations, our very own Romeo Montague.”

“Thanks,” he said, almost as if talking to her left a sour taste in his mouth.

“And *Steph*,” she said, lowering her head. I could tell from her expression alone that she had no intention of congratulating me on the position I’d landed. And I was right. “I’d hate to remind you again that there are strict policies against student-teacher fraternization.”

I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry?”

“He is your teacher,” she said, bending slightly at the waist. “As am I. And I will see to it that you are watched very closely, young lady.”

A few quiet moments passed. Miss Holt refused to blink and I didn’t respond. Honestly, I didn’t know *how* to respond. What exactly did she want me to say? I hadn’t given her—or anyone!—any reason to think that I needed close watching at all.

“*Right*,” Nate said, breaking the awkward silence. “Off to class. Wouldn’t wanna be late.” He grabbed my wrist and pulled me down the hall. My concern must’ve come across quite clearly because he stopped mid-walk and took my hand. I turned into him. “Hey ... you okay?”

“Fine,” I lied, shaking my head. “That was just ... that was strange, right?”

“Don’t think too much on it,” he said, now patting my back. “She has a thing for him. It’s jealousy, that’s all it is. You made an impact on Mr. R. with your designs, and someone,” he said, looking back at Miss Holt. “*Someone doesn’t know how to hide her insecurities.*”

I followed his gaze and looked back at our young, beautiful math teacher. She was now engaged in conversation with Mr. Rivera—who’d since left his own room. She playfully nudged him, giggled, and smiled as they talked. He seemed uncomfortable, out of his element, and yet he still stood there, friendly and polite. I watched as he forced a fake smile, and all along I could see him trying to slowly ease out of the conversation. I kept staring, feeling strangely awful for him. When he finally glanced up, no longer looking at her, he met my stare from the other end of the hall. Both expressionless, our eyes locked for a few long beats. And just as Nate waved his hand in front of my face, I thought I caught a faint smirk from Mr. Rivera, but there was no way to know for sure, because the bell rang, and we were late for class.

Friday, September 09

Three days passed, and each seemed to drag on longer as they came. Nate and I hadn’t mentioned our run-in with Miss Holt to anyone—especially Bridget. We weren’t really sure what’d happened or why. Still, it was finally Friday. I found zero reason to fret over the uncontrollable.

The final bell rang to end the day and Bridget and I walked out of Physics. We strolled down the hall, out the door, and onto Main Street. Destination: home, for a study date, leading up to the first sleepover of my life!

We walked through the front door to find the house filled with an overwhelming aroma of baked goods. Following the smell to the kitchen, we found my mother in a sundress, pearls, heels, and apron.

“You look like Donna Reed,” I said, taking stock of all the baked goods scattered around the kitchen.

“Who?” she asked, pulling a fresh batch of cookies from the oven.

I sighed and shook my head. “Mom, this is Bridget. Bridget, I believe this creature ...” I looked at Mom again and shook my head. “This is Caroline, my mother.”

“Look, Baby,” Mom said, wearing a smile. “I baked goodies for your sleepover.”

“Yum!”

“Are they edible?” I asked, interrupting Bridget.

“Of course they are,” Mom said. But I had little reason to believe so. She’d never excelled in anything domestic. “Don’t worry, Calvin taught me all the basics.”

Calvin, the chef—college degree and everything. *Woo-freaking-hoo*. Right.

I grabbed a cookie from the cooling rack and took a cautious bite.

“Okay,” I said, chewing slowly. “They’re actually not bad.”

“Don’t seem so surprised.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I told you Calvin would be good for us,

Baby.”

“We're going to head upstairs to study,” I said, a little frightened by her emotional response to my semi-compliment.

“Feel free to keep the cookies coming, Miss G,” Bridget said, and then she and I turned and walked back through the foyer.

In a matter of days, Mom had managed to turn a cluttered and box-filled house into a fully furnished and decorated home. The environment was so welcoming and comforting that it almost felt like another dimension. In the past, the closest thing we'd ever had to furniture was bookshelves made of cardboard boxes. Now, with a dining room table, couch, and chairs, I hoped she could stay true to her word. I was really starting to love Webster Grove.

Up the stairs and at the end of the hallway was a single, large bedroom; my sanctuary. Of all the places I'd slept in my life, it was by far the best. There was a large bay window—padded window seat and all—that overlooked the backyard. The view, though, was slightly obstructed by a giant oak tree growing too close to the side of the house.

My room was the only one left that hadn't been unpacked. Boxes were still stacked and piled across the hardwood floor and in the closet. The bed was unmade and covered in mismatched sheets, pillowcases, and a comforter. My desk was empty with the exception of a laptop and a silver touch lamp.

“Not much for housekeeping,” Bridget said without shame.

“We don't stay put for very long. Why get attached?”

“You need to at least paint these butt-ugly walls,” she said. “How do you even sleep in here? That color is hideous.”

“It's not easy,” I admitted. That much was true; if we stayed, the lime green had to go.

Bridget raised a finger to her mouth and looked around the room. Deep in thought, she turned back to me and smirked.

“How confident do you feel about Monday's English test?”

“Very.”

“Then we're not studying tonight.”

“We're not?”

“No.” She shook her head. “We're painting.”

We ventured into town in Mom's car—thank God Bridget could drive—and returned a half-hour later with a gallon of a lavender paint for the walls. I'd put what little money I had into making that one investment. We returned, and Bridget instructed me on taping off the wooden trim along the floor and ceiling. After taping, we took a break to make a frozen pizza.

The sun started to set and Bridget and I made our way back to my room. After filling a paint tray and holding a roller in hand, I stared blankly at the wall.

“Uh, Bridge ...”

“Hmm?”

“I have no idea what I'm doing.”

“It’s just like painting a set,” she said, like that should’ve been a clue. “One stroke at a time.”

She smiled and dipped her roller into a puddle of liquid lavender. With a few strikes against the wall, the green slowly disappeared. I followed her lead and helped cover the first wall, then the second, then the third, and finally the fourth. By five AM, the room had survived a full second coat.

To avoid the fumes, we gathered blankets from the linen closet and made a large bed on the floor in the living room. Snuggled tightly under the blankets, I rolled to my side and nudged Bridget.

“Hmm?”

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“Your friendship. Making this adjustment so easy.”

“I’m awesome, I know.”

We shared a sleep-deprived laugh.

“The room turned out great,” I said, closing my heavy eyes.

“Yup. I knew it would.”

“Good night, Bridge.”

“Night,” she said, rolling to her side.

I closed my eyes, and for the first time in my life, counted my blessings. Mom had never been much of a mother, only a clueless teenager with a driver’s license. But still, she put a roof (or two) over my head each year. Bridget and Nate were the closest thing I’d ever had to siblings and the best friends a girl could ask for. My designs were getting better with time, and Mr. Rivera himself had recognized my potential. And speaking of ... I might’ve even developed my first real crush. I couldn’t even care that it was on one of my teachers. I liked him. How couldn’t I? It was impossible not to fall victim to his sweet voice, or to be swept away by those dark eyes. He was kind, intelligent. I’d never met anyone like him, someone whose presence alone could demand so much authority and attention. He was basically the ideal man, all rolled up into one, perfect body. He was—

“Steph,” Bridget interrupted my thought.

“Yeah?” I said, quickly pushing the mental image of our teacher aside.

“You ever been in love?”

“Nope.” Not unless you count whatever it was that had me hung up on my teacher. I smiled again.

“I think I am,” she said, sleep falling on her faster than before.

“With Mr. Rivera?”

“No,” she mumbled, rolling over.

“With who?” Silence. “*Bridge?*”

She opened her eyes, no longer looking the slightest bit tired. “Nate.”

I drew my lips together and nodded. Of course she was crazy about Nate ... I saw that one coming from a mile away. But did he like her? I didn't know. I really, really hoped so, though. I wanted my friend to be happy, and nothing makes a person happier than being loved and in love.

I fell asleep with a smile that night. All of those thoughts of love and happiness had my heart ready to explode.

Chapter Four

Tuesday, September 27

“Shouldn't you be working on the costumes?” Bridget asked as I unlocked the front door.

“Nope. I finished the final designs on Sunday, and I'm running them by the directors tomorrow. I'll have my crew start constructing the pieces as soon as I get the green light from Mr. Rivera.”

“Can I see whatcha got so far?”

“Sure,” I said, walking up the stairs with Bridget close behind.

It'd been a little over two weeks since Bridget and I had covered my bedroom walls with a cool, calm, relaxing lavender. Since, I'd taken the time to add a little personality. I'd made a set of curtains to cover the large window, reupholstered the window seat cushions, and framed some of my favorite designs to hang on the wall. The biggest project of all had me sifting through all of the old bedding we'd collected over the years. With a little time and effort, I managed to repurpose old pieces to create some unique patterns on my comforter and pillows. The room was no longer lacking in style or consistency; it looked amazing.

“Oh, my God,” Bridget said when I opened the door. “It doesn't even look like the same place! *Ha!* You even unpacked! And *cleaned!*” She jumped in place and then shot across the room to take a better look at the far wall. “Wow, we really should've taken *before and after* pictures!”

“I'm still trying to forget the *before*.”

Mom popped her head in. “Bridget, do you mind if I steal my daughter for a second?”

“Go for it.”

“The production designs are in the blue binder next to the computer,” I told Bridget. “Help yourself.”

I walked out, closing the door behind me.

Mom wrinkled her nose and sighed, and that was all she had to do. She didn't have to say a word.

“When?”

“Huh?”

“We're moving again,” I said, reading into her twisted expression. “When?”

“We're not going anywhere, Baby,” she said, frustrated that I'd jumped to conclusions. “I just wanted to discuss plans for the evening.”

“We couldn't have this conversation back in my room?”

“Well, no,” she said, brushing a piece of lint off my shoulder. “I wanted to hear your thoughts about having Calvin over for dinner.”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

“*Tonight?*”

“What do you think?”

“It’s too fast,” I said. “You’ve only known him for ... what, three weeks? I don’t know him at all, and I’m not sure I want to. It seems incredibly soon to bring him home.”

“Let me put it this way, Baby,” she said putting her hands up.

“Calvin is coming to dinner. Tonight. You can either stay or go, I don’t care. But it would be nice if you could suck it up and do this for me.”

I sighed and threw my head back. “What time?”

“They’ll be here at five-thirty.”

“They?”

“Calvin wants to introduce us to his little brother,” she said. “So take your hair out of that stupid bun and quit hiding your pretty face with those tacky glasses. I want you to look halfway presentable.”

“Fine.”

“Hair down, glasses off. *Best behavior, Baby.*”

I rolled my eyes and walked back into the bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

Bridget sat on the window seat and flipped through the designs.

“Everything okay?”

I ignored the question. “What do you think of the costumes?”

“They’re amazing,” she said. “My gosh, Steph. Where did you learn to draw like this?”

“Self-taught.”

“Shut up!”

“I’m serious,” I crossed my heart. “I mean, theater, ballet, sports ... the typical childhood hobbies ... they were never really an option for me. When you’re on the move as much as we were, you need a talent that can travel with you.” I sat next to her and stared outside at the large oak tree. As much as I wanted to be there, in that moment, enjoying a conversation with my friend, I couldn’t get over that last conversation with Mom. *You can either stay or go, I don’t care.* Truthfully, I knew she meant that. “I wonder how hard it would be to climb out and sneak away.”

“Planning an escape?”

“Mom's new boyfriend is coming to dinner.”

“Ugh, bummer,” she said. “Wanna crash with me tonight?”

“Nah. I just need to get it over with. She wants me to meet him. She’ll be persistent until I do.”

Bridget spared the thought of the dreaded meeting by keeping me company for a while.

“Can I take the book home?” she asked two hours later. “Nate's coming over tonight to run lines, and I wanna show him the designs.”

Nate's name only came up in conversations regarding the show. The morning after Bridget told me about her crush on him, she never mentioned it again ... and neither did I.

“Sure. Bring it to school tomorrow, though. I want to get them approved as soon as possible.”

“Okay,” she said, making her way toward the door. “I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Wait,” I said quickly. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” she said, turning back.

“Do you think ...” I smoothed my hair and took a step back. “I mean, am I ... do I look ...”

“You're beautiful, Steph—inside and out.” She stepped forward and squeezed my hand. “Don’t let Caroline tell you any different, okay? Call if you need anything. Or even if you don’t. That’s an order.”

With a quick hug, Bridget left me alone. Still wearing the jeans and sweater I'd worn to school, I looked at myself in the mirror. The same ole clothes, hair, and glasses as any other day would have to suffice.

The doorbell rang and the sound of Mom's heels clapped on the floor downstairs. I heard the door open and voices carry on the level below.

“Baby,” Mom yelled at the bottom of the staircase. I walked out of my bedroom right on cue. “Come on down, sweetheart.”

I moved down the steps slowly, finally reaching the foyer. Mom wore a gorgeous black dress with her blonde hair swept high in the back. She threw me a disapproving glance; she was mad that I hadn’t transformed myself into the beauty queen she was expecting.

“Where's Calvin?” I asked, ignoring her disapproval.

“He brought his famous apple pie for dessert. He's taking it to the kitchen.”

“And his little brother?”

“Parking the car.”

“*Parking the*—you said *little* brother, *like he was a child!*”

“No, Baby. He's here for you, silly goose.”

“For me?”

“To keep you company,” she said. “Like a double-date, honey.”

“Mom,” I said, shaking my head. “I'm not interested in—”

The doorbell rang again, and much to her advantage; I was five seconds away from smacking her square in the face.

A man, who I could only assume was Calvin, walked back into the foyer from the kitchen. He leaned his chin on Mom's shoulder and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. I ignored their repulsive affection for one another and opened the door, feeling the sudden brain fog set in.

“Come in, come in.” Mom shoved by me and welcomed the man into the house. He was gorgeous—the typical tall, dark, handsome type ... and well into his twenties. His hair wasn't neat, but a little mussed after a long day. He wore dark fitted blue jeans and a white button-up shirt. I tried not to stare, but our eyes met for a second time; he smirked, and I lowered my head.

This was a disaster waiting to happen.

“Baby,” Mom said. “This is Calvin. And this,” she nudged the man standing next to her, “is Alex.”

“Alex.” I said slowly. “Right, okay. Yeah. Uh, Mom, can I talk to you alone for just a sec?”

Without giving her time to respond, I ducked out of the foyer and into the living room.

“Baby,” she scolded quietly as she followed me. “How rude!”

“Mom!” I yelled. “What is going on in that tiny brain of yours?” She looked stunned that I wasn't happy with her match-up. “Do you have any idea how old he is? Or how old *I* am? *Seventeen! A minor!* And ... God! Does *he* know why he's here? I can't possibly imagine that he does! He wouldn't show up here to meet a *child*.”

“Sweetheart—”

“I can't date *him*, are you kidding me? Not even for one night! He's—”

“Calm down, Baby,” she interrupted. “You'll be eighteen in just a few months, and you're a year older now than I was when you were born. You're beautiful, mature, intelligent—”

“I'm not disputing *my* good qualities,” I interrupted. “I'm questioning *your* quality of judgment. This is highly irresponsible.”

“It's one night, Baby. Calvin had already made plans with Alex. He didn't want to bail on him, so he asked him to tag along. No, he doesn't think he's here on a date, you're right. But just help me out, k? If nothing else, keep him company.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “Mom, stop. I need you to listen to me. That man is—”

“Cute, huh?” She turned on her heels and disappeared back into the foyer.

“Yeah,” I said to no one but myself. “Absolutely gorgeous.”

I walked out of the living room, past the front door, and into the kitchen. Calvin leaned over the stove tasting Mom’s pasta. She stood with her hands pressed to her sides and fingers crossed.

“It’s delicious.” He kissed her cheek before turning to meet my stare. “Baby?”

“Steph.”

“Steph,” he noted. He studied my face for a few minutes—reminding me of how Nate had done on my first day of school—and then extended his hand to shake mine. His grin only widened with each passing moment. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Mom was right. Calvin *was* handsome—much like his brother—though built a little larger and with a much stronger jawline.

“Alex has moved on to the dining room, Baby,” Mom said. “You should go ahead and join him and we’ll be in soon with the food.”

I took a deep breath and pushed through the door separating the two rooms. There he sat, facing me, his back to the large set of windows that overlooked our back yard. He shook his head and bit his lip, and there my heart went, pounding way off beat. Okay. Screw *handsome*. Screw *good-looking*. Alexander Rivera was, hands down, the sexiest man I’d ever seen in my life.

“Miss Ghijk,” he said, wearing a grin. “This may very well be the strangest thing I’ve ever let my brother talk me into.”

“I have a proposition to make.”

“Hit me.”

“If you don’t tell them, I won’t kill you.”

His eyes widened. “You drive a hard bargain,” he said. “Why the secrecy?”

“Call me selfish, but I’m starting to like the life I have in Webster Grove. Mom, however, doesn’t need much persuasion to pack up and leave on a whim.”

“And where do I fit in to all of that?”

“Caroline lives in her own world, Mr. Rivera,” I said. “She can’t handle humiliation or rejection and she views any negativity as ammunition to uproot and start over. Imagine how she’d feel if she found out she set her teenage daughter up on a blind date with her English teacher.”

“Not a date,” he corrected me quickly. “I’m tagging along with Cal.”

“But it’s my responsibility to keep you company.”

“Okay,” he said. “If that’s what you want, then we don’t say anything. It’s only one night.”

“Really?” I asked, and he nodded. I breathed a deep sigh of relief. “Okay… so, I call you—”

“Alex.”

“Right.”

He looked to the empty chair next to his. “You going to sit?”

“Um ...” I eyed the seat and shook my head. “Nah, I’m good.”

“You should probably take a seat, Steph. It’ll make this evening a little less awkward.”

“You know, I’m fine standing.”

He lowered his head and glared at me. “Steph.”

Great. His teacher voice worked on me even when we *weren’t* in the classroom.

I took his order, sliding in next to him and staring at the empty plate in front of me. I tapped my foot on the floor and threw a quick glance in his direction. As he often did, he bit his lip.

“So, your brother,” I finally said. “He’s a good guy?”

“The best.”

More silence. I don’t know how long it lasted, but it felt like hours. Realistically, my bet was on sixty seconds.

“Mr. Rivera,” I said quietly, finally finding the nerve to speak. There was no way I could call that man Alex. “How are you able to be here this evening?”

“I know it’s hard for students to make the distinction,” he said. “But I only teach during the daytime, Steph. I have a whole separate life outside of school.”

“No, I mean ... where does Miss Holt think you are?”

“I suppose she thinks I’m home grading papers or drawing up lesson plans.”

“Because that’s the whole separate life you have outside of school?” I smirked.

“Right,” he nodded, and it made me giddy to see him fighting a smile of his own.

“I meant, where does she think you are? Aren’t you two—”

“Contrary to popular belief, Steph, Karen Holt is *not* an object of my affection.”

“But everyone says—”

“I know what they say,” he said, shifting in his seat. “You’re in high school. You should know by now that you can’t believe half of what you hear. Rumors are nasty, nasty things.”

“*Dinner!*” Mom yelled as she and Calvin busted into the room carrying salads, pasta, and bread. After they took their seats, and the food was passed around and portioned evenly across the four plates, the familiar routine began.

“Baby, do you have any questions for Calvin?” I took a bite and ignored her question. “Anything at all?”

“Hmm, let’s see,” I said, pretending to think hard. “Are you a serial killer?”

“No,” Calvin said, widening his stare. Mr. Rivera chuckled next to me and Mom pursed her lips.

“Rapist?”

“Of course not!”

“Married?”

“No.”

“Homosex—”

“That’s enough, Baby,” Mom snapped. She took a moment to compose herself and then said, “I meant *serious* questions.”

“In my defense, none of those questions were intended jokingly.”

“It’s okay, Caroline,” Calvin said.

“No, it’s not,” she said. “You both mean a lot to me, and I’d appreciate it if you would take the time to get to know each other.” She gave me a hard look. “You need to take this seriously.”

Pain flickered in her eyes. I hated that. Mom had a super-special way of making me feel incredible guilt.

“Where are you from?” I asked, humoring my mother. Plus, if I finally nailed down Mr. Rivera’s ethnicity, Bridget could die happily; she groveled in the knowledge that lessened his mysteriousness.

“Grew up right here in Webster Grove,” Calvin said, taking a bite of the salad he’d helped Mom prepare. “I’ve lived here all my life. Only ever left for college.”

“On a larger scale, though. What about your parents? Where are *they* from?”

Mr. Rivera smirked and lowered his head. “Our *grandparents* are Cuban.”

“Ah,” I said, hiding a smile behind my fork. “Interesting.”

With that, thirty minutes passed slowly. The handsome teacher and I barely spoke a word to one another or to Mom and Calvin. The lovebirds never looked away from one another; they were seemingly head over heels and completely unaware of the world around them.

“Who’s ready for pie?” Calvin asked after the dinner plates were clear.

“Me!” Mom bounced in her seat and clapped her hands, doing an uncanny impression of Rachel Canter— better yet, Bridget. Mr. Rivera and I shared a glance that told me he’d been making the exact mental comparison.

Calvin collected the dirty dishes and disappeared to the kitchen. He returned moments later, balancing four small plates with a single slice of apple pie on each. He passed them around and reclaimed his chair next to Mom. “Eat up, hon.”

“Cal makes incredible pie,” Mr. Rivera said with his mouth full. Unsurprisingly, he was beautiful even when he was sloppy.

“I agree,” Mom said, squeezing Calvin’s hand. “He’s amazing in the kitchen ... *and the bedr—*”

“Don’t say it, Caroline,” I warned her. “*Don’t—you—dare—say—it.*”

The room fell silent again as the Rivera brothers stared between the Ghijk women. The quiet lingered for another two minutes. I savored every bite, knowing that the quicker I ate, the sooner Mr. Rivera would leave. And truthfully, I didn’t want him to go; I enjoyed having his company.

I lifted the fork and took the final bite, knowing it couldn’t last forever. But with that one last piece of pie, a searing pain ripped through my mouth.

“*Holy crap!*” I cried.

Mr. Rivera’s hand landed softly on my back. “Steph?”

“Blood,” I said, only intending to make a silent observation. I wanted to enjoy that moment, the way his hand fell protectively around me, but the painful throbbing and bleeding of my gums had required most of my attention. But after another second passed and the pain subsided, I looked over to see his eyes were still locked on me, full of concern. I spit the chewed up pie into my hand and found, mixed into the crusted apple bits, a large diamond ring.

Calvin buried his head in his hands.

“*Idiot,*” he scolded himself.

“I think *this* belongs to *you*.” I passed the ring to Mom and cleaned my hand and face on a cloth napkin.

“Calvin?” she questioned the jewelry with wide eyes.

“Caroline,” he said, kneeling on the floor.

“Oh, *come on,*” his brother said. “Cal, get up.”

“Caroline,” Calvin continued, ignoring his brother’s objection. “I know we haven’t known each other long—”

“*Three weeks,*” Mr. Rivera interjected.

“But no one else in the world will ever captivate me the way you do, love me like you have, and complete every inch of my heart and soul—”

“Again,” I said. “*Only three weeks.*”

“Baby, please,” Mom pleaded. “*Hush.*”

It wasn't until his thumb began to rub my shoulder that I realized Mr. Rivera's hand was still planted firmly on my back. I looked to him, looking at me, sparking something ... something wonderful.

I needed comfort, and something in his touch told me that he understood that. He was there.

Calvin's voice brought me back to the conversation.

"Caroline," Calvin said. "Will you marry me?"

The moment the word *yes* slipped off her lips, I was out of my chair and leaving the room.

No way. Not happening. Over—my—dead—body.

Chapter Five

Tuesday, September 27

“What's up, Steph?” Bridget asked.

I'd rushed upstairs and called her on the webcam as quickly as my fingers could move.

“You won't believe the night I've had,” I said through tears. “He proposed to her, Bridget! *Proposed!*”

“Whoa. No he didn't!” She shook her head. “What'd she say?”

“Yes!”

“*Noooo*,” Bridget said, lowering her voice. “Oh, Steph. I'm so sorry. *Are you okay?* Should I come over?”

With three light knocks on the door, Mr. Rivera stuck his head in. “Steph?”

I shifted the computer on the desk, facing it toward the window. On the other end of the room, he bit his lip and leaned against the doorframe as I stared at my hands in my lap, praying Bridget hadn't seen or heard him.

“Who was that?”

“Huh?”

“At the door,” she said. “Someone just came in.”

“Oh.” I shook my head. “It was just the radio.”

Mr. Rivera restrained a laugh and mouthed “*the radio?*” I shrugged and turned back to Bridget just as she shook her head.

“No, Steph. I *swear* I just saw Mr. Rivera in your room.”

I laughed nervously, glaring at him over the computer. He was still leaning in the doorway, willingly eavesdropping on the conversation.

I was lost for words and excuses, so I shrugged and steadied my breath. “Bridge, think about what you just said. That's crazy. Why would our teacher be in my bedroom?”

“Beats me, but I swear I saw his face.”

“Oh, well, yeah ... his *face*, sure ... but not ... *him*.” I had no idea where I was going with it, but the words were falling out of my mouth faster than I could stop them. Mr. Rivera must've been wondering,

too, because he stood a little taller and listened intently. “I ... took a picture of him in class the other day and ... I don’t know. I made a full-sized poster for the wall, I guess.”

“No way!” She practically bounced in her chair. “I don’t remember seeing it earlier.”

“I hung it up after you left. I didn’t think you’d understand.”

“Understand? *Honey*, that man is the father of my future children.”

“Bridge,” I warned as Mr. Rivera cupped his hand over his mouth. “Don’t—say—another—word.”

“Oh, come on! Even *you* think he’s dreamy. Don’t think I haven’t caught you swooning.”

“*Bridge!*”

“Okay, okay,” she threw her hands up. “You called dibs.”

“I *never* called dibs,” I said, more for his benefit than hers.

My eyes met his again and I stared at Mr. Rivera. Bridget kept talking, but her words were lost on me. I couldn’t make sense of anything except how incredibly beautiful the man standing in my doorway was. I could’ve watched him all day, standing there doing little else but looking devilishly handsome.

“Steph?” Bridget said. “*Hel-looo.*”

“Huh?”

“Staring at Mr. Rivera?”

“I told you, Bridge. *He’s not here.*”

“I meant the poster, Steph. Geesh. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Fine.” I nodded. “I’m fine. I’m flustered; I’ll be okay. The whole engagement thing has me on edge. I’m in a fog, ya know? I’ll be fine. Listen, I’ve gotta go. Tell Nate I said hi and don’t forget the designs tomorrow.”

“Okay,” she said. “Call back if you need anything.”

“I will.” I ended the session and signed off the computer as an extra precaution. I looked up at my teacher and pursed my lips.

“What are you doing in here?”

“Caroline asked me to check on you.”

“Ha! Sucker,” I shook my head. I walked to the bay window and sat down. “She didn’t want you to come up here and check on me. She just wanted to get *rid* of you so she could be alone with Calvin.”

“I figured as much,” he said, nudging himself off the doorframe. “Mind if I join you for a second?”

“Be my guest.” I stared outside at the large oak tree, wishing I had the guts to jump out. Problems

would be so much easier to run from if I had half the nerve it required to open the latch, jump out, and shimmy down ... but I, unlike Mom, never really cared much for starting over. Tonight, though, and for some strange reason, the idea of leaving Webster Grove in the dust had never sounded so good.

"I would've warned you about the proposal had I known."

"I know," I said, turning back to him and pushing my will to run aside. If nothing else, I had to stop thinking like Caroline. Nothing good ever came from running. Problems follow you wherever you go.

Mr. Rivera sat next to me and rested his back on the sidewalk.

"Steph," he said, his eyes narrowing, fixing his concentration on my hurt face. "I can't promise this will blow over."

"I know."

"But I *can* assure you Cal is a wonderful guy. He's a little goofy, a little too nice for his own good, and one heck of a protector. I know you're worried, but I really think he'll be good for Caroline, kiddo."

"Wish I could say the same about *her* for *him*."

He didn't argue with that. In fact, we both sat in silence for a few minutes, probably in agreement that I was right; Caroline had the potential to ruin the life Calvin had worked so hard to build for himself. She could destroy the man. She destroyed everything she touched.

"What's going on, Steph?" Mr. Rivera's hand found the familiar spot on my back, and he held it there, silently assuring me that there was nothing I could say or do to lessen his concern. "Is it only your mother that you're worried about, or is there something else you're not saying?"

"I hold her back," I said, playing with my fingers. "All she wants is what everyone else has, but it's never been that easy. Things have been hard for her, hard for both of us. And she feels like she always gets short-changed ... and then I somehow end up taking the blame. Like tonight," I said, looking up from my hands to meet his gaze. "If I object to the engagement, and she and Cal end up apart, it would be my fault. I'd never live it down, not for the rest of my life."

"What about what you want?" he asked. "Have you tried telling her how you feel?"

"That's never been important."

"It should be the *most* important. You're family. If you don't look out for one another, then who will?" he asked, still running his hand across my back.

I swallowed hard, trying to listen closely and hear his words, but I couldn't focus on anything but his hand. It was lulling me into comfort, into safety. It scared me that I liked it so much. It was terrifying to think that he could make me feel so safe, so protected, like nothing in the world could ever touch me. But above that, it was alarming the way my body responded to his touch. My heart fell offbeat. Shivers got the best of me, and every last inch of my body was intensely aware of the fact that we were sitting so close. I couldn't steady my breath; I couldn't quit staring. And without a moment's notice, I saw it in his eyes. The realization hit him, and he could see exactly what he was doing to me.

"I'm sorry," he said as if he'd read my mind, as though he understood exactly how much I wanted

what I shouldn't have—him, there, comforting me like that forever. He walked across the room and picked up the portfolio I'd given him at the *Romeo and Juliet* auditions. A change of subject was the safest bet for us, and he knew it just as well as I did. "I've been meaning to ask ... clothing design? What inspired that?"

"It's a stupid story."

"I have time," he said, sitting on the corner of the bed. I could breathe a little easier now that he was safely across the room and out of reach. I watched as he flipped through the pages of the book and smirked. "So?"

"It's childish."

"You think that bothers me?"

"I mean," I grinned. "You're ... *you*." He shrugged like my answer wasn't good enough, so I continued, "You're an adult ... a guy ... *normal*. You're Mr. Rivera. I promise, you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

I sensed he wasn't going to give up until I'd told him *something*, so I took a deep breath and dropped my shoulders.

"Okay," I said, trying to ignore the stress of the evening and recall a story I'd never told out loud. I needed to talk, and I sensed that was his motive, too. He wanted to get me talking ... get me focused on anything else but *everything* that had led to that moment. "Um, let's see. Television never interested me, which was probably a good thing since I didn't have one growing up. I was antsy, always looking for something to do. And when I was about nine years old, I begged my mom to take me to the library to pass the time. She'd allow me to visit, but there were strict rules guiding that privilege: I had thirty supervised minutes each Monday, and I was *never* allowed to sign up for a card. This meant, if I wanted to read a book, I'd have to read small chunks each week until I finally finished it."

"Assuming it hadn't been checked out by the time you returned," he added.

"Exactly," I continued, but not without realizing how incredibly easy it was to talk to him. He was listening. I couldn't remember the last time some had really listened to anything I had to say. "One evening I found something in the nonfiction section. I came across this book, only pulling it off the shelf because it was purple, and took it back to my reading spot. I cracked open the cover with no idea what to expect. It turned out to be an autobiography a woman had written to tell her story of success— from penniless immigrant to a world renowned fashion mogul."

"And she inspired you?"

"After leaving her home and coming to the States, after twenty-five years of having doors slammed in her face," I said. "She took the fashion industry by storm. She didn't drown in criticism. She proved that persistence pays off and now she has a global empire that employs thousands of designers worldwide."

"And that's why you draw?"

"In a way, I guess," I said. "She was the first woman in my life that showed me the benefits of hard

work and persistence in the path of achieving dreams. I didn't grow up with a mother as strong-willed, sassy, and confident as Adriana Holbrook.” Mr. Rivera’s eyes widened as he sat up straighter. He leaned forward, listening more intently now than ever. “I got stuck with Caroline Ghijk, the cowardly runaway queen. And I promised myself—at only nine years of age—that I wouldn't turn out like my mother. I swore I'd strive to be as good as, if not better than Adriana. I want to be someone people admire. I want to make a difference in someone’s life the way she made a difference in mine.”

Mr. Rivera sat grinning and turned his attention back to the portfolio in his lap. He silently flipped through each of the pages. “You think that's childish?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

“Because ... to some extent, it's about proving something. I mean, ideally, you're supposed to work at something because it's your passion, right?”

Light tapping on the door interrupted his response.

“*Everybody decent?*” Mom asked, poking her head in the door without warning. *What exactly did she expect to walk in on?* She came in, still admiring the diamond ring on her finger. “Oh, Alex!” She sat next to Mr. Rivera on the bed. “Aren't Baby's doodles just adorable?”

I turned my head and looked out the window. *Doodles*. My heart stung from that underhanded, yet unintentional insult. Then I had to remind myself that Mom's ability to issue emotional support was right up there with her talent for staying put—inexistent. She never really knew how rude or hurtful she could be; she was completely oblivious.

“Her *designs*,” he corrected her, now looking to me. Through his reflection in the glass, I stared at him as he looked straight at me, “are as incredible as she is.”

Wednesday, September 28

“*There you are!*” Bridget yelled as I walked into class. “I was worried you weren't going to show.”

“Sorry, got a late start,” I said, looking at the empty seat next to mine. The bell was due to ring any second, and Nate was nowhere to be found. I pointed at the desk. “Where is he?”

Bridget shrugged. “I dunno. I've texted him three times; he's not responding.”

“Good morning,” Mr. Rivera said, closing the door. “Pass 'em up.”

Everyone did as they were told. No one questioned him or his zero tolerance policy. Instead, students began sending papers forward without a moment’s hesitation.

“Maybe he's skipping because he didn't do the essay,” Bridget whispered.

Right on cue, Nate walked in. The class stared at him, sopping wet from head to toe. There was no doubt he'd fallen victim to the torrential downpour outside. Mr. Rivera turned and raised his brow.

“I'm sorry I'm late Mr. R,” Nate said. “I got here as fast as I could. I had something to deal with this

morning.”

“Procrastination on your essay, Mr. Bryan?”

“No sir.” His wet sneakers squeaked on the floor as he shuffled to his seat. He slid in behind his desk and pulled the assignment from his bag.

“Absolutely not, Nate,” Mr. Rivera said. “You know the rules. You’re going to have to wait in the hall.”

“Mr. R, man,” Nate said. “Come on! You’re not listening, bro. It was outta my control!”

The class started to whisper, losing interest in what was going on between Nate and Mr. Rivera. Our teacher raised his hand and the students fell silent again.

“Mr. Bryan,” he said, dropping his head. “If you can convince me that whatever you had to tend to this morning was more important than showing up for class on time, I’ll forgive your tardiness. Thirty seconds. Start talking.”

“It’s like this, Mr. R. Some idiot toilet papered my house last night. Mom wouldn’t let me leave for school until every square was off the roof and outta her trees. I don’t know how you missed it, bro. Anyone driving down Main could’ve seen it plain as day.”

Bridget burst into laughter along with the rest of the class. My mouth hung open, and my eyes met Mr. Rivera’s—only for a moment— before he turned back to Nate.

“Okay,” our teacher said. “You’re off the hook. Don’t let it happen again.”

Rachel cleared her throat from across the room as Nate settled in.

“Excuse me, Mr. Rivera,” she said, waving her hand in the air. “I thought your rule was *zero* tolerance? I don’t recall you cutting me any slack when I was tardy on day two.”

“With all due respect, Miss Canter, a broken nail does not constitute an emergency.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to continue class.”

With a final look in my direction, he turned to the chalkboard and began writing, unknowingly showing off one of his best assets. *Thank God for tight pants.*

“You should snap a picture of *that*,” Bridget whispered, staring intently at our teacher’s backside. “Poster-size, can you imagine?”

We both smiled, and Nate sulked.

The time sped by, and class ended with the usual bell. Students fled to the hallway. Within moments, Bridget, Nate, and I were the only ones left with our teacher.

“Miss Ghijk,” Mr. Rivera said. “Can you hang back for a few moments? Miss Wright, Mr. Bryan, she’ll catch up with you.”

Bridget and Nate exchanged a curious glance and moved quickly to the hallway, leaving me alone with our teacher.

“Yes?” I asked, clutching my books against my chest.

“Do you still think I wouldn't understand childishness?”

“No, sir,” I said, grinning. “I *do* think we went overboard though.”

“Let me assure you that we didn't,” he said, fighting a laugh. “Living next door to Nate for four years has been a nightmare. He had it coming.”

I hugged my books tighter, fighting a smile as I remembered the late night hour I'd spent with my teacher the night before.

He and Calvin had been gone for an hour, and I'd already slipped into my pajamas when I heard a tap at the window. I looked outside to find him squatting on a limb of the oak tree. He told me to slip on a pair of shoes and meet him in the backyard... apparently he needed my help with something.

We walked down the sidewalk and into the night, only having guidance by a few overhead streetlights. When we reached a small, one-story house on the curb, Mr. Rivera pulled keys from his pocket and unlocked the front door. He had me wait on the porch while he disappeared inside. Moments later, he returned with so many rolls of toilet paper.

“What's going on?” I'd asked him.

“Payback,” he'd said, sounding nothing like the teacher I'd grown so used to seeing every morning. His demeanor had changed entirely. He was normal ... careless ... just another guy.

Walking to his neighbor's house—carrying countless rolls of toilet paper in hand—we stopped to make a plan; he'd take the left side, I'd take the right. Simple as that.

“Wait,” I'd said before he threw his first roll. “Why are we doing this?”

“This kid has been papering my house for years. I told him his day would come.” He winked. “Ready?”

I nodded, undoubtedly intrigued by the childish spark in his eye as he tossed each roll. I watched him, admiring the effort he was taking to prove his carelessness ... all because I said he wouldn't understand something juvenile.

He was doing it for me. He wanted to prove me wrong, and I liked that he wanted me to see a different side of him. It warmed my heart.

It only took a good ten minutes to cover the entire house and both trees. And after the *decorating* was done, Mr. Rivera walked me home—both of us laughing at our immaturity. He made sure I got up the tree and into my room safely. With a wave from the window, he smiled and disappeared into the night.

Bringing me back to ...

“Why didn't you tell me it was Nate?”

“I thought it would be more fun this way,” he said.

“Well.” I nodded. I tried hard not to match his contagious smile, but I couldn’t fight it. “Congratulations, you were right.”

I turned to walk out of the room as he pushed back from his chair and stood up.

“I have something for you,” he said, stopping me in my tracks. I watched as he took a manila envelope from the top drawer of his desk and passed it to me. “I took the liberty of pulling some information from the Internet last night.”

“What's this?”

“An application for a design program.”

“Thanks, but I've applied for these a million times, and I've never been accepted.”

“Persistence pays, right?”

I couldn’t argue; wasn’t I the one who’d preached at him about the important of persistence just the night before?

“Thank you.” With the envelope in hand, I turned back to the door. When I reached the doorway, I looked back and smiled. “This was really sweet of you, Mr. Rivera.”

“We’re practically family now, so it’s *Alex*,” he said. “And you're welcome, Steph.”

Chapter Six

Wednesday, October 12

Two weeks had passed since Mr. Rivera gave me the application for the design program—which, by the way, turned out to be Adriana Holbrook's summer internship in Paris. In the envelope, he included a raving letter of recommendation and an invitation for one of Adriana's assistants to attend the opening night production of *Romeo and Juliet* to view the costume designs. I'd sincerely thanked him a million times in passing and took his advice and applied for one of the open spots. I put a design proposal together and sent the information the following Friday. The anticipation of hearing back was both exciting *and* terrifying.

I hadn't seen Mr. Rivera outside school since the night we decorated Nate's front lawn. His attitude in the classroom remained strictly professional. There were no more hold-backs after class for idle chit-chat, back caresses, and very few smiles sent in my direction. He kept his distance during production rehearsal, but that's not to say I hadn't caught him staring from time to time.

"That's a wrap for today," Miss Holt said as the actors finished rehearsing the end of Act V. "Tomorrow we put it all together. Friday we add lights. Continue working on your lines outside of school and throughout the weekend. Note: Monday is our first rehearsal with costumes. Miss Ghijk," she said, turning to me. "Let's speed it up and get those done. Remember, only sixteen days until opening night."

"Crews, you still have sixty minutes. Also, we need some actors to volunteer to stay for an extra hour to help finish set construction," Mr. Rivera added. "Unless Miss Holt has anything else to add, the cast is dismissed."

"I'll stay," Bridget said.

"Me too," Nate followed.

"Anything for you, Mr. Rivera," Rachel added from the sideline.

I caught Bridget glaring at Rachel, and I had to laugh. Her patience with her understudy was slowly ticking away. Ever since the cast list went up four weeks ago, Rachel tirelessly memorized lines and blocking *just in case* Bridget *accidentally* fell over and died, needing an immediate replacement.

And my patience with Miss Holt was equally comparable. As Little Miss Blonde and Perky had rudely reminded the entire room, the costume construction was moving along a lot slower than planned. I was leading a crew of five other students, only two who had any kind of sewing experience. The pressure was mounting with a Monday deadline to meet.

"Miss Wright," Mr. Rivera said to Bridget. "Do you have any costuming experience?"

"Yes, sir," she answered. "I worked costumes for both the productions my freshman year."

"I'll take your volunteer services, but I'm putting you on with Steph. Find out how she can use your help, and get to work."

The few actors who'd volunteered to stay behind aided Mr. Rivera, Miss Holt, and the original construction crew. Bridget joined me, sitting down at a table in the back of the auditorium. I had three large sewing machines set up and only one costumer helping with the progress. The rest of my crew sat gossiping and messing with their phones.

"What do you need me to do?" Bridget asked.

"At this point ... there's not much anyone else *can* do."

"Mind if I stick around and chat? I didn't really want to help with the set anyway."

"Sure," I said, still sewing.

"Have you found a dress for homecoming?"

"Nope," I said. "Who has time to think about a dance when your butt is on the line?"

"How many do you have left?"

"Eight."

"Is that a lot?"

"Let me put it this way," I started. "If I didn't have an English report due tomorrow and a physics exam on Friday, I'd be fine. But I haven't even started on the paper for Mr. Rivera's class and *forget* about studying."

"At least there's the weekend."

"Yeah, at least." I sighed. "So, what are your plans for homecoming?"

"Nate and I are going to skip the football game and just go to the dance."

And from what she'd told me, that was the standing tradition: for the past eight dances, middle school included, Bridget and Nate attended each and every one together.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Maybe," she teased.

"When are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Possibly never."

I assumed that much, but it wasn't my place to press the issue. She'd come around. She'd tell him in her own time. Meanwhile, the two of us sat gossiping, laughing, and talking for the next hour. When it was time to call it a night, Miss Holt walked off the stage sporting her *better than thou* attitude.

"Time to pack it up, ladies," she said, with a phone to her ear. "No, Mom, I already told you I can't," she talked into the cell. As she walked away, I distinctly heard her say "because Alex is taking me to dinner."

I looked down, trying not to let it sting. What reason did she have to be on her phone during a rehearsal? Why couldn't that conversation wait? Better yet, why did I even care? It was hard to say. All I knew was that I did. I cared. I hated the idea of her being anywhere near my teacher ...

Without a word, I started to sort the unused material and hang the finished costumes on the wheeling rack. I closed my eyes, fighting tears. *Karen Holt isn't an object of my affection*, I remembered him saying. And yet, there she was ... blowing off her own mother to go to dinner with him.

A heavy emptiness settled in the pit of my stomach, but I couldn't figure out why. Was it because I liked him, or because he'd lied to me?

"You okay?" Bridget asked.

"Yup."

"I wonder who Alex is," Bridget said, helping me hang the costumes. "I guess she's moved past her obsession with Mr. Rivera."

"Alex *is* Mr. Rivera," I snapped.

"*No way!*" she said. "Are you sure?" When I didn't answer, she tapped my shoulder excitedly. "Maybe they're finally hooking up. Nate's been on to them since sophomore year."

"Shut up, Bridge." At the sight of her round eyes and pouted lip, I suddenly regretted how quickly I'd just snapped at my friend. It wasn't her fault I was hurt. *She'd* done nothing to upset me. "I'm sorry. That was awful. I shouldn't have—"

"Wow." She stared at me with concern, putting her arm around me and pulling me tight. "What's with you today?"

"Headache," I said, discreetly wiping a tear. "I'm just stressed. Sorry I snapped."

"Whatevs," she said nonchalantly. "I still love ya."

"Oh," I said, more than ready to change the subject. "I ordered something for you." I pulled a long cardboard tube from under the table and handed it to her. "Keep this sealed until you get home."

"What is it?"

"A surprise."

She turned the tube in her hand several times, trying to figure out what was inside. Suddenly, her face lit up and she jumped two feet in the air.

"*Oh my God,*" she said. "Is this what I think it is? Did you *really*?" I wore a half-hearted smile and nodded. She shrieked and hugged me again, practically snapping my neck beneath her tight grip. "I love you, Steph. *I love, love, love you!*"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Right above my bed."

“Huh?”

“I’m hanging Mr. Rivera right above.”

“*Keep it down or I take the poster back,*” I warned. “Now, I’m going to roll these costumes down to the drama class. Can you pack up the last machine?”

“Yes ma'am!”

I rolled the rack down the hall and to the final classroom on the left. Once in the room, I unlocked the costume closet and slid the clothing inside. I closed up shop and moved quickly back to the auditorium to find a distraught Bridget fumbling with the sewing machine.

“It’s not that big of a deal, hon. You should’ve told me you didn’t know how to close it.” I took over and snapped the lid on the machine. “See? *Easy peasy.*”

A tear streamed down her cheek as she backed away from the table.

“Nate asked Rachel to the dance.”

“What? *When?*”

“While you were gone! Mr. Rivera asked everyone if they had any big homecoming plans, and Rachel nearly screamed with joy when she said she was going with Nate.”

“No,” I shook my head. “That’s not even possible. Did you ask him about it? Maybe she was just trying to get under your skin.”

“I couldn’t.” She wiped away another tear. “He’s already gone.”

“Bridge,” I said, hugging her. “Take a breath. I wouldn’t let this upset you until you really know what’s going on. Talk to Nate. I’m sure there’s an explanation.”

“He’s had a crush on her since sixth grade, Steph,” she said, still wiping away tears. “That’s all the explanation I need.”

“Oh, Bridge.” I hugged my best friend and let her cry on my shoulder for a few long minutes. “Do you want to come over this evening? We can make some popcorn, watch a movie. Forget about boys and school and just party the night away.”

“I thought you had to write your paper for English.”

“Crap,” I said, remembering my incredibly long to-do list. “Yeah, I do. But you know what? Don’t worry about it. I’ll get up early tomorrow morning. No biggie.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Anything for you.”

Thursday, October 13

The alarm sounded at four AM. I opened my eyes and stared at the clock, hating myself for

procrastinating. But Bridge needed me the night before, and I was glad that she'd let me distract her—even if it only lasted two hours before she had to go home.

I rolled out of bed and into the bathroom, taking a quick shower to help wake myself up. Back in my room, I settled in front of the computer and got to work. I might've dozed off once or twice. When I managed to stay awake, my thoughts were running wild, inconsistent, and barely logical. After pounding out the five-page requirement, I looked at the clock and realized I was already five minutes late for Mr. Rivera's 7:20 class. I printed the essay, threw it in my bag, slipped into a pair of shoes, and bolted to school as quickly as possible. By the time I reached the classroom, Mr. Rivera was already fifteen minutes into his lecture. Not wanting to interrupt, I slid down the opposite wall and waited in the hallway until 8:05. The bell rang and the door swung open. The students filed out and went their separate ways down each corridor. Nate walked out with Rachel and ignored my "hello." Bridget soon followed, not noticing me.

"Bridge." I grabbed her wrist. "Can you hang back for a second?"

"No. I have a French test to fail." Her mood hadn't improved much since the night before. I gave her hand a quick squeeze.

"You'll do fine. Just forget him for now. Concentrate on the test. You know the material; you've got this. I'll catch up with you at lunch, okay?"

"Sure," she said, drifting away.

I stepped into Mr. Rivera's room and lightly tapped the open door. He looked up from his desk and raised his brow.

"Miss Ghijk," he said. "Did somebody toilet paper your house last night?"

"No sir," I said, ignoring his playful smirk. "I'm sorry I didn't make it to class on time."

"Happens to the best of us," he said, leaning back in his chair. "What's going on?"

"I was wondering if I could still turn in the assignment? I know it's late, and I'm really sorry—"

"Not a problem," he said. "There'll be a ten point deduction from your grade." I handed him the paper and turned to walk out. "Steph," he said, standing up. "I'm sorry, kiddo. As much as I want to help you out, I can't show favoritism."

"Mr. Rivera," I said, looking back. "I don't expect preferential treatment. I waited until this morning to do it, so ... I get what I get."

"Is that why you were late? You were working on the paper?"

"Yes."

"Is everything okay at home? With Caroline?"

"Yes." I pursed my lips. I didn't mean to be so short with him, but my nerves were on end. And truthfully, I was still a little aggravated about the small bits of the phone call I'd overheard at rehearsal. I didn't want to talk to him. I didn't want to be anywhere near him. I just wanted to get to my next class and as far away from this conversation as possible.

“Then, I’ll ask again,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“Listen, I’ve been up since four o’clock. I’m tired, cranky, and quite frankly, not in the mood to have this conversation. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve gotta go to class. I can’t afford two write-ups in one day.”

I turned on my heel and headed for the door.

“One last thing,” he said as I crossed the threshold.

“What?” I asked, whipping back to look at him again.

He scribbled something on a piece of paper and passed it to me—a note, allowing my tardiness to second period.

“This will buy you some time,” he said, grinning. “Run home and put on matching shoes. High school is a terrible place to make the wrong fashion choices.”

I looked down at my feet and closed my eyes.

Crap.

Chapter Seven

Wednesday, October 19

The dining room was dimly lit as Mom, Calvin, Bridget, and I sat around the table eating Calvin's famous apple pie. I didn't need any reminder about the first time I'd tried his dessert, but I couldn't turn down the offer when he asked. I'd honestly never tasted anything so delicious in my life.

I was still unhappy about Mom's spur of the moment engagement, but I was taking it in stride. Like Mr. Rivera promised, his brother was a great guy. And even if I still thought they were rushing into this relationship way too fast, there were *some* perks. If nothing else, having Calvin around meant we might actually start eating something besides frozen, processed junk.

"They sucked," Bridget said with her mouth full. "Every dress in the store was ugly, tacky, slutty, or overpriced."

"Now what?" Calvin chimed in, pretending to be interested in her hunt for the perfect dress.

"Who knows? Homecoming is only two days away."

"What kind of dress do you want?" I asked. I'd finished the final costumes for *Romeo and Juliet* on Sunday, and while I enjoyed a short break, I would've loved the chance to design something for Bridget. "I could probably come up with something if you're interested."

"Really?" Bridget asked. "You're not tapped out?"

"I am," I admitted. "But ... come on, B, it's *you*."

"Awesome!" she said. "Because there's one design in your portfolio I'd love to try!"

"Let's go take a look."

We walked upstairs to my bedroom, closing the door behind us. And each time I walked in there, I couldn't help but love it a little bit more. I mean, purple walls and a poster of Alexander Rivera were unbeatable, right?

Yes. Okay. I actually had one made for myself. After the webcam call with Bridget, there was no way I was getting out of it. And the picture wasn't so bad. To help me carry out the little lie I'd told her that night, Mr. Rivera let me sneak a quick—supposedly unsuspecting—shot of him with my phone before he left on the night of the engagement. And ... well, yes. Having the poster on my wall felt childish, but a little comforting nonetheless. And since Mom never bothered coming in, it was one less thing for me to explain.

"Does Calvin remind you of anyone?" Bridget asked, throwing herself back on the bed and flipping through my portfolio.

"Like who?"

Ha! As if I didn't know the next two words out of her mouth were going to be—

“Mr. Rivera.”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I’ve never really noticed.”

“*What?*” she asked. “Can’t you see the resemblance— the skin, the hair, the eyes, the face? Heck, even their smiles! They could totally be brothers, Steph.”

I shrugged again. “I guess.”

I hated lying to her, but Bridget loved to talk, and I'd always been wary of her ability to keep things on the DL. Still, I needed no reminder of how much Calvin resembled his younger, sexier brother. In fact, I had trouble staying in the same room with Calvin most days ... the resemblance was almost too unbearable.

“Calvin’s a chef, right?” Bridget asked.

“Yup.”

“Too bad.”

“Why’s that bad?” I asked. Personally, I was pretty excited about the idea of some home-cooked meals in my future.

“It’s not *bad*,” she said. “I just remember Mr. Rivera talking about his brother once, but I’m pretty sure it was a *younger* brother who was a *cop*, not an *older* brother who was a *chef*.”

“You have quite the memory, Bridge,” I said, astounded that she knew as much about our English teacher as she did. Because, according to my Mom, Calvin *does* have a brother on the force. Which meant Bridget wasn’t really that far off. But obviously she still had some things to learn, and the less she knew, the better.

“*Future father of my children*,” she reminded me. “Here it is! This is the dress!”

She passed me the portfolio. “Ah, yes. Color specifications?”

“Black, just like the picture.”

“Then I’m about to make you one very happy girl,” I said. “I designed that last year for junior prom at Carrollton High— no, Wesley— wait, yes, Carrollton High School. I never got to wear it, so ...” I walked to my closet and plucked the gown from the back. “It’s all yours.”

“It’s already done?”

“*And* brand new.”

She snatched it from my hands and held it to her body, examining herself in the full-length mirror.

“I’m going to look so hot in this!” I smiled at her excitement. “I’m not kidding, Steph. Nathaniel Bryan will rue the day he asked Rachel Canter to homecoming over his best friend,” she said. She admired the dress for a few long minutes. “*God! I love you! I love, love, love you.*”

“Yeah.” I smirked. “You’ve mentioned that once or twice.”

Friday, October 21

Bridget and I prepped ourselves for the infamous homecoming dance. She kept reminding me that practice makes perfect: *you—can’t—rush—beauty*.

“Oh em gee!” Bridget said as she backed away from the mirror. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful in all your life?”

“You’re not so great with modesty, are you?” I teased.

“I can’t thank you enough, Steph.”

Bridget was working overtime to rebuild her confidence. Her self-esteem had taken a pretty hard hit after Nate asked Rachel to homecoming. The saddest part of the whole thing was that he never even told her he’d changed his plans. He just stopped talking to her. Worse, he’d stopped talking to *me*. I still hadn’t figured out why *I* was being banished from his inner circle. This wasn’t my fight, but somehow I got stuck in the middle.

“I’m gonna get dressed now.”

I pulled a garment bag out of the closet and carried it down the hall to the bathroom. I unzipped the plastic and stared at the gown—strapless, sky blue, elegant, and long. Best of all, it was ready to be worn for the very first time. I slipped into the self-designed dress and zipped up the side.

I looked at the reflection in the mirror. Dark curls fell down my shoulders, and my brown eyes shined, unguarded by the usual glasses. I hardly recognized the person staring back at me. Abcdef Ghijk was a nerdy, bun-wearing, glasses-sporting brainiac. As I gazed at myself, I realized I wasn’t seeing Steph at all. The reflection was Baby Levin—the girl I was born to be ... with the appearance and demeanor my mother had worked so hard to manufacture over the years.

I walked out of the bathroom and down the hall to my room. Bridget’s mouth dropped as I came in, twirling once to show off the dress.

“Wow,” she said. “I guess you’re ready, then?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Together we strolled through the hallway and down the steps, watching Mom and Calvin fumble with their cameras.

“Hold still, Baby,” Mom said. “Wait a minute. Stop moving. I want a picture of you on the stairs.”

“Hurry up! We’re already running late.”

“Just stand still!”

“*Smile!*” Calvin chimed in, snapping a shot of us standing on the fourth step.

“One more and we’re outta here, Miss G,” Bridget said. “I wanna be the first to ask Mr. Riv—”

“Bye guys,” I interrupted Bridget, grabbing her hand and pulling her out the door.

Moments later, we were standing in line outside the gymnasium. Ten minutes passed before the group moved forward. In the matter of time we'd stood waiting, we received nearly twenty compliments on our dresses. That boosted my confidence a notch. Maybe I actually had a shot of getting into the summer program with Adriana Holbrook. Obviously Mr. Rivera believed in me. Only time would tell.

A chaperone at the door took our tickets as we filed into the decorated gym. A professional photographer was set up in the corner, willing to take a bundle of money in exchange for one tacky memento. Bridget and I weaved through the tables lined up on the outside of the dance floor until we found a spot suiting our need—close enough to the dancing without being too far from the bathroom doors. As Bridget claimed, bathroom access was imperative. *You never know when a fashion emergency might strike.*

“Ugh,” Bridget said as she locked her eyes on a table at the opposite side of the room. “Nate and Rachel are already here. And ew! *What is she wearing?* Steph, look at her. Isn't her dress *awful?*”

“Terrible,” I said, silently disagreeing. Rachel looked stunning in a pink princess gown.

“I'm gonna go say hi.”

“Whoa, Bridge.” I held her back. “Are you sure that's a good idea?”

“Of course! I have to be the bigger person, Steph. I can't let Rachel Canter have the upper hand.” She pulled herself free of my grasp and started to walk away. “If I'm not back in five minutes, send a chaperone.”

“*Bridge!*” She disappeared on the dance floor. The music and the dancing started without warning. The lights were low, and the room was loud. I'd been at homecoming for two minutes and was already hatching an escape plan. With my will to flee so much lately, it was hard not to wonder if I had more of my mother in me than I'd ever care to admit.

“Flying solo tonight?” Mr. Rivera asked as he stood near the table. He wore black slacks and a button up shirt with a tie that perfectly matched my blue dress.

“Of course,” I said. “Taking the new girl to a dance is always a gamble.”

“Interesting fact,” he said, inching a little closer. “Do you know that teachers are allowed to participate?”

“In what?”

“Dancing.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked.

He nodded. “Of course, we're not exactly allowed to ask for a dance. But it would be *incredibly* rude to turn down a student who proposed the idea.”

“So,” I said, casting a sideways glance. “Are you asking *me* to ask *you* to dance, Alex?”

“Me?” He smiled. “No. I'd be fired if I did something like that.” We shared a lingering stare before

he quickly shook his head. “Did you just call me—”

“Oh, well, it’s a shame you weren’t asking,” I said, standing up. I eyed him from head to toe and let out a low whistle. “Yeah, really. Too bad, because you look great, and I would’ve *loved* to take a spin with you.” I sent him a quick wink and disappeared into the crowd, still feeling his eyes watch me as I moved further and further across the floor. Walking away from him was the hardest thing I’d ever done. But I’d just flirted with him, like ... *major flirting*. And if anyone else had noticed, especially another teacher, I couldn’t imagine the repercussions.

I found Nate sitting alone at a table in the back corner, water bottle in hand. I sat down next to him and glared with disapproval.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said. “Just came to find out how a person can go from being your best friend one day to hating your guts the next.”

“I don’t hate your guts,” he said, taking a drink of water.

“I wasn’t talking about me.”

“Oh, *her*,” he said, twisting his face.

“Seriously, Nate? What is wrong with you?”

“*She* came over here and told me that *she* needed to borrow Rachel. *She* said ‘one minute, I promise.’ Well, it’s been *five* minutes, and there’s no sign of them anywhere.”

“I’m sure they just went to the bathroom for some girl talk,” I said, but I suddenly felt the urge to run out and make sure Bridget hadn’t murdered Nate’s date. *If I’m not back in five minutes, send a chaperone.* “I’ll go check up on ‘em and send Rachel back your way.”

“Thanks,” he said. “You look nice, Steph.”

I smirked. “Thank you, Nathaniel. As do you.”

I turned on my heel and rushed to the bathroom as quickly as possible.

The closer I got, I started to hear exactly what I’d hoped I wouldn’t. Yelling and screaming echoed in the hallway. A crowd of girls had gathered around the doors to watch Bridget and Rachel struggle in a pretzel on the floor. No one tried to stop the fight; they only encouraged the brawl with catcalls and cheers.

“*Someone get a teacher!*” I yelled. I fought the crowd to reach the two bloodied girls in the center of the room. “*Bridget! Stop! She’s not worth it!*”

With that, Bridget, who was now sitting on top of her opponent, cocked her fist back and punched Rachel square in the jaw.

I pulled them apart, kicking and screaming. Rachel took a running start at Bridget again when another girl stepped in to hold her back.

Miss Holt tore through the group of bystanders. The majority of the students cleared out on her arrival.

“You, you, and you. *Suspended*,” she yelled.

Mr. Rivera rounded the corner and stopped next to his co-worker. “Someone said there was a fight?” His gaze landed on the three of us and he dropped his shoulders. “*Girls*.” Like Miss Holt, he should’ve been angry. But I saw more disappointment in his eyes as he stared at me. “What happened?”

Miss Holt pointed at me. “Why don’t you ask Miss Ghijk.”

“Wait. *Me*? I was just trying to—”

“Save it,” she said, holding her hand up. “You were involved in a fight on school property. You’ll be lucky if you get by with anything less than a five-day suspension. And all three of you can forget showing up for the fall production.”

“*No!*” Bridget said. “You can’t do that!”

“I just did,” she said with a tone of finality in her voice. “The show is *canceled*.”

Mr. Rivera shook his head. “Pipe down, Karen.” Miss Holt stared in awe at his demand. He shifted his attention back to us. “Okay, ladies. Let’s talk this out.”

“Mr. R,” Rachel whined. “I came in to touch up my lipstick and Bridget pounced me.”

“*Bullsh—*”

“Watch your mouth, Miss Wright,” Mr. Rivera said, raising his voice. “You’re already in hot water; let’s not make it any worse.” The room fell quiet. “We’ll need to call each of your parents and have you escorted home.”

“I can walk.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Ghijk,” he interrupted. “Someone will need to speak with Caroline, as well.” Bridget’s face wrinkled and Miss Holt perked up, both probably wondering how Mr. Rivera knew my mother by name. He continued, “Report to the office first thing Monday morning to discuss the consequences. In spite of Miss Holt’s serious misconception, your punishment does not rest in our hands.”

I stared at the floor. How could this happen?

My experiences at Webster Grove High School were stacking up to be nothing short of memorable. First, I land the job of a lifetime working on the fall production. Second, I get set up on a blind date—or something of that nature—with the hottest teacher to ever walk the planet. That very teacher encouraged me to take a major step in pursuing my dream, and now, at the homecoming dance, I’m being kicked out and facing suspension for ... well, nothing within my control.

Wonderful.

Chapter Eight

Friday, October 28

“Welcome back, Miss Ghijk,” Mr. Rivera said as I walked into class the following Friday.

Bridget, Rachel, and I had received a four-day suspension for the homecoming bathroom brawl. The time off was miserable, to say the least. And Mom *still* hadn't forgiven me for 'rolling with the rough crowd.' I'd be lucky if she ever let Bridget set foot in our house again. And sadly, I hadn't seen or spoken to my best friend since her parents picked her up from the dance.

The classroom was empty with the exception of the two of us, and I nodded in acknowledgment as I took a seat. I propped my head into one hand and tapped a pencil on a book with the other, hoping someone else would walk in soon and ease the discomfort.

“It's been strangely quiet this week without you here,” he finally broke the silence, walking over and leaning on the desk in front of mine, just as he'd done on my first day of school.

“Mmm-hmm.” I pretended to ignore him.

“Are you going to be bitter for the rest of the year?”

“You could've tried harder to help me,” I said, finally meeting his gaze. “You know I had nothing to do with that fight, and you just stood there and scolded me.”

“You said yourself that you didn't want preferential treatment, Steph.”

“On the *assignment*,” I spat. “But what happened at the dance ... I had nothing to do with that. It wasn't fair.”

“Sometimes life's not—”

“I don't need your words of wisdom, Alex,” I said, biting back my frustration. “I know better than anyone how unfair life is. I've been jerked around the country for the past fifteen years; I've had very few friends, a loose screw for a mother, and now I'm dealing with all these feelings for y—” I stopped and took a deep breath. I didn't need to finish that sentence—*feelings for you*. I knew it. He knew it. It went without saying. “Forget it. Life sucks. I know. Spare me the lecture.”

He stared at the floor. “Steph, I'm sorry if I've made things difficult for you. I never meant—”

“What happened with the production?” I asked, hoping to change the direction of the conversation. “Did you find a replacement for Juliet?”

“The cast really came together and worked hard these past few days. Bridget's return to the stage tonight will be welcomed with open arms.”

“Bridget's still in the show? *How*? She hasn't rehearsed since last week. It's opening night.”

“We found a way around the rules, Steph. I arranged private cast rehearsals outside of school.”

Why wasn't I surprised? Of course he did.

"That was very nice of you."

"Some people, like you, put blood, sweat, and tears into this production. I wasn't as willing as my co-director to pull the plug."

I wanted to be mad, but he made it almost impossible. What he'd done for Bridget ... for all of us ... it was admirable.

"Curtain at six, then?"

"Yes ma'am," he said, smiling. "Are we going to be okay? No more fighting?"

"Yes."

"Friends?" he asked, leaning to meet my gaze.

"Friends."

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"*No, no, no!*" I yelled at Nate. "*Wrong costume!* How are you screwing this up on opening night? Hasn't someone been here to monitor the correct protocol? *God!* No offense, but I seriously hate actors! You know you're not entitled to my praise just because you're on stage, right?"

"Deep breath, Steph," Bridget hugged me from behind.

"Oh, *you*," I said with wide eyes, not failing for a moment to recognize the demonic tone of my voice. I turned and pointed a finger in her face. "*You're* the reason we're in this mess to begin with. No one has a freakin' clue what's going on with costumes because *I've* been sitting on my butt every night for the last week because *you* couldn't keep your temper at bay!"

"Steph," Nate said, stepping in. "Listen, hon. We love you, but we're not above killing you. Take it down a notch."

"Can someone get Steph a drink of water?" Bridget yelled.

"Keep it down, guys," I said, trying to lower my blood pressure. "Voices carry to the audience. Let's be professional here."

"*You're one to talk*," Nate mumbled.

"Actors to the stage, curtain in five," the stage manager called into the dressing room.

The cast started to shuffle. With a good luck hug to both Nate and Bridget, I took a breath and let my hair down. The room was finally empty. I sat down and lowered my head in my hands.

"Calm down, Steph," I told myself. "Only three performances and this will all be behind you."

Most of the night was a blur. I vaguely remember several bottles of water and distinctly recall the hundreds of trips to the bathroom. Staying hydrated was my plan for motivation. No one could get too

lazy when they had to keep running off for bathroom breaks. The actors rushed in and out of the dressing room all night, changing costumes, adjusting hair, and touching up make-up. Silent moments would come and go; I was thankful for whatever peace I got.

Finally, the show was done. Curtain call was over. The actors had taken their bows, the audience had clapped their hands raw, and the crowd was beginning to disperse into the night. An hour later, clothing was strewn about the room, resting on chairs, piled on the floor, and I even found one balled up in the corner. I set my crew to work to start collecting and hanging the costumes, taking note of any pieces that might've been torn, ripped, or damaged. Thankfully, no errors were found, which meant I was spared the trouble of arriving early for tomorrow's show to make repairs.

The crew finished their duties and said goodnight, leaving me alone to lock up the dressing room. I pulled the keys from the hook and moved toward the door just as it opened. Mr. Rivera stood smiling for a moment before biting his lip.

"You're nervous."

"Hmm?"

I touched my own lip. "I've noticed you only do that when—"

"Steph," he said, stepping in the room and closing the door behind him. "Can we talk?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Okay?"

"Don't laugh," he said, pointing a finger. "But I'm really curious to know if you believe in fate?"

"I ... uh... well, I don't know. I think. Sure. *Maybe*?"

"I do," he said, letting go of a breath as his shoulders slumped, and he dropped his hands to his sides. I, too, took a deep breath, suddenly nervous about the direction of this conversation. Why were we talking about fate? What did that have to do with anything? Why did it matter if I believed in it? Why did he?

"During the summer," he said, spelling out the answer to the questions I was asking myself. "Mrs. Basting fell off a ladder and broke her legs, leaving me to run the production. Then, of all places for you to turn up on your wild trek across the country, you land yourself in my class where you meet Bridget."

I smiled. I'd never forget that day. Meeting him, Bridget, and Nate all in one day... it was kind of perfect. They made this transition into a new town so much easier for me than anyone ever had.

"It's no secret that Bridget's the reason you turned up at the auditions," he continued. "And then you, kiddo, and your incredible talent, end up designing the best costumes Webster Grove High has ever seen. And school aside, I got the honor of spending an evening with you, learning about your biggest dream and why you've been inspired to design. And all of this, when you add it up ... it's fate, I'm certain. We were meant to meet. We were meant to cross paths, now, at this very point in our lives."

"Oh boy," I said, rubbing my sweaty palms on my jeans. "Mr. Rivera, I'm not sure—"

“Can you spare a few extra minutes before you leave tonight?”

I caught a small glimmer of hope in his eye, so I nodded. “Sure.”

“Good,” he said, backing away and opening the door. He stuck his head into the hallway and mumbled something to someone I couldn't see. He opened the door and a beautiful Hispanic woman moved into the room. Her eyes were as dark as Mr. Rivera's, and natural silver highlighted her hair. She was taller than him, slim as a super-model, but aged gracefully. A thin smile stretched across her lips and she nodded.

“Gran,” my teacher said, excitement dancing in his eyes. “This is her. This is Steph.”

Oh, God. He was introducing me to his grandmother? And maybe I was crazy... *but she looked an awful lot like—*

“Steph,” Mr. Rivera continued, gently placing his hand on the small of my back and urging me closer to the woman. “After everything you’ve told me, everything you’ve been through to get to this point, it is an incredible honor to be the person introducing you to my grandmother.”

“Are you ...” I asked breathlessly, because I couldn’t find the words to finish the sentence. Surely I was seeing things. Surely this wasn’t happening. “*Are you?*”

“I am,” she said, extending her hand to shake mine, but I couldn’t move. *It was really her.*

“Adriana Holbrook,” I whispered under my breath. “Designer to the stars.”

I looked from my teacher to his grandmother and then back to him again. He nodded, and my eyes filled with tears. I should’ve taken her hand; I should’ve introduced myself. There were so many things I *should’ve* done in that moment to make an outstanding first impression, but all I could do was throw my arms around Alex’s neck and hug him.

He’d brought her here; he’d done this for me. The man I’d just wrapped admirably in my arms was quickly becoming the biggest dream come true, and I couldn’t begin to imagine what fate had in store for us next.

This was only the beginning. I knew it.