



ALWAYS

ALI!

By
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Marciniak

“What Are You Talking About?”

She pulled a piece of paper out of a folder on her desk and held it out in front of me. It was a copy of a birth certificate. *Her* birth certificate, and the father’s name had been highlighted.

Thomas Caldwell.

There was not enough air in this room. My hands went cold. My vision blurred. An ache settled in the pit of my stomach. I reached behind me and steadied myself on Nikki’s desk. The world suddenly seemed a little wobbly.

“There are lots of people named Thomas Caldwell,” I said.

“I anticipated you would have that doubt.” She pulled something else out of the folder. It was a picture of my dad holding a newborn baby. I recognized the picture.

“That’s a picture of him holding me. Are you trying to say I’m illegitimate?”

“That would be an interesting twist,” she said, “but no. That’s not you. It’s me.”

“I have this same picture in my baby book. It’s not you. It’s me.” It was the picture that was used whenever a publicity photo of Dad with his daughter was needed. Dad said he figured it maintained my privacy but also showed he was a family man.

But then she showed me another picture. One with my father holding the same newborn, next to a woman I didn’t recognize, someone who looked a lot like Samantha did now, lying in a hospital bed.

“That’s my mother. And that’s me.” She pointed to my father. “And that’s my father.”

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CHRISTINE MARCINIAK

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Dedication

To my brothers, Pete, Ted and Leo, because they taught me what family was really all about.

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Chapter 1

It was time for a plan.

Sitting cross-legged on the bench in the gazebo, I opened my brand-new red Moleskine notebook and took out a pen. On the lake, ducks swam placidly while the late summer breeze played with my hair. They paddled wildly under the water, where I couldn't see, but they made it look so easy.

ALI'S SOPHOMORE YEAR PLAN I wrote at the top of the page.

Get straight As without anyone accusing me of cheating.
Do not lose any siblings while watching them at the playground
Do not attempt to be on TV, reality or otherwise
Get into the Blue And Gold Society

I clicked the pen closed. Simple enough plan.
The *William Tell* "Overture" played on my phone. My mother.
To answer or not to answer. If I didn't, she'd just call back. Incessantly.
Until I did answer. Might as well get it over with.

"Hi, Mom."

"Four words," she said. "*Wake Up With Ben.*"

I wasn't sure where to go with that. Hopefully, she was referring to Ben Stanton's early morning news/talk show.

"Are you going to be on it?"

"No. You are," she said almost breathlessly.

Oh, no. That totally conflicted with goal number three.

“No, I’m not,” I said, forgetting one of the most important rules for my own life—it is pointless to argue with Margo Schaefer.

“I’ve set it all up. He managed to fit you and Mark into the lineup tomorrow morning. You’ll have to get to New York early, though. I think they start prepping around five.”

She wanted me to be in a city two hours away by five o’clock the next morning? She was crazy.

Setting aside for the moment that classes started tomorrow, there was something else I didn’t understand.

“Why would Ben Stanton want me and Mark on his show?”

“Why? You’re the hottest brother/sister team since Donny and Marie. He recognizes that. He knows a good thing when he sees it.”

There were several problems with her explanation. First of all, I’m sure there are more recent brother/sister teams Mom could have used as an example. Second, Mark and I might be brother and sister, but we were hardly a singing/dancing/acting duo. Third, I’m fairly certain Ben Stanton had no idea who we were, except in reference to Mom, which means this was all her. As usual.

“Why do you want us to be on the show?” I asked.

“You need to keep your faces out there. It does no good to let people forget who you are.”

I’d very much like people to forget who I was.

“We can’t be on TV tomorrow,” I said. “It’s the first day of classes.”

“Nothing much happens on the first day, you could skip it.”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. If I listened to my mother, pretty soon I’d be crossing number one off my list, too.

“We can’t, Mom.”

“It was difficult to get this set up. You really have to try harder to work with me here.”

Still counting. Up to twenty now.

“Mom.” I tried to make my voice firm. “You’ll have to call and cancel it. Mark and I can’t be on TV tomorrow.”

As soon as I said it, I knew I’d worded it wrong. It gave her hope we’d be on TV in the future. I *really* didn’t need her thinking that.

“Fine. If not the first day of class, when you will have no work or no tests, when should we schedule it for? The day of a major exam or presentation? Would that be better?”

I was not going to be guilted into doing something I didn't want to do. Especially when that thing was basically doing publicity for my mother. She didn't need my help for her publicity machine.

"There isn't going to be a good day, Mom. Besides, I don't want to be on TV."

"Think of your father," Mom said.

This was a new approach, since when I thought of my father I thought of how he detested the idea of Mark and me being in the public eye at all.

"What?"

"It could only help his Senate campaign if you and your brother were out there being charming on his behalf."

I pulled my phone away from my ear and stared at it as if that would provide some sort of explanation why my mother would say a thing like that.

"Dad doesn't want Mark or me involved in his campaign. That's what he told us."

"He doesn't know what's good for him. The two of you are his biggest assets. He should use you."

That was the difference between Mom and Dad. He didn't even consider "using" us.

With a flurry of wings and splashing, the ducks all took off at some invisible signal and flew across campus. I wanted to fly away with them, but I couldn't fly far enough away to not have to deal with my mother.

"Ali!"

I turned and saw Heather Franklin, my roommate, coming toward me.

"Got to go, Mom. Things to do before classes start tomorrow."

"Find a way to get into New York tomorrow morning."

"Not happening, Mom. Talk to you later."

I hung up before she could say any more. I knew why she'd called me instead of Mark. Mark was good at standing up to her, and I often caved to whatever she wanted. But this time I hadn't caved. I'd stood my ground.

There was no way I was going into New York tomorrow morning instead of going to class.

Although it would be kind of cool to be on *Wake Up With Ben*.

"Would you believe my mom thought it would be a good idea for me and Mark to be on *Wake Up with Ben* tomorrow morning," I told Heather as she entered the gazebo.

She got a wistful look in her eye.

“It has been so long since I’ve been on that show. I’d give anything to be on it again. He can make or break you, publicity-wise.”

While Heather might want to recapture the fame of her early childhood, when she and her twin sister Lily shared a role on a long-running TV series, I’d had my brush with fame last year and was done.

“I don’t want publicity,” I said. “Been there, done that, have the scars to prove it.”

She made a face. “How can you joke about someone almost killing you?”

“It’s either that or get all maudlin about it. Isn’t it better to joke?”

She didn’t look too certain.

“Maybe,” she conceded. “Listen, I was looking for you because Mrs. Waverly needs people to man the tables for the new-student orientation, and it will get you service hours, which helps with getting into the Blue and Gold Society.”

“Perfect.” I closed my notebook. Service and academic honors were the two main criteria for getting into Bryant Academy’s most prestigious club; this *would* help toward my goal. “Do I have time to go back to the dorm?”

“Better not,” Heather said. “She might fill all the spots.”

I shoved my notebook and phone into my bag.

“Let’s go.”

The nice thing about this being my second year at boarding school was that it felt like coming home; it wasn’t frightening and new and filled with unfamiliar faces anymore. As Heather and I walked to the student center, nearly everyone we passed waved hello and called us by name. We were not anonymous freshmen anymore. We were SOPHOMORES.

We also each had a certain amount of fame, which might be why everyone seemed to know us, even people we’d never met.

The brick student center in the middle of campus was a hive of activity. Everything was crowded, from the bookstore to the arcade to the snack shop. Even all the pool tables were in use. I had a sudden urge to get French fries and play pool, but Heather dragged me toward Mrs. Waverly, who held her clipboard like a commanding general planning an invasion.

“We’re here to volunteer,” Heather said.

“Ah, yes. Heather and Ali. Perfect. We need two people at the academic club table.” She pointed toward one of the dozen or so tables circling the central lounge section of the student center. “You just answer any questions they might have about any of our academic clubs.”

“Right,” Heather said.

“We have academic clubs?” I asked her as we made our way to the table. She laughed. “Ali, your head was so not in school last year.”

“This year will be different, I promise.”

We sat on folding chairs behind the table. There were several sign-up sheets taped to it.

“Spanish Club, French Club, Math Club, Science Club.” I read. “What do people even do in these clubs? What are we supposed to tell people about them?”

Heather frowned. “I’ll text Lily. I bet either she or Sanjita knows.”

The unhelpful answer we got back from Lily was that they talked about math in math club and Spanish in Spanish club.

“We’ll wing it,” Heather said.

Freshmen were starting to gather. They all headed toward the snack table and the sports tables, though. It didn’t matter that we didn’t know what our clubs were supposed to be about—no one came by.

Except Mark.

“Can I sign up for one of these clubs?” he asked, pretending to be new to all of this.

“Get out of here,” I said. “You’re a senior. This is for freshman.”

“I think that is ageism or something. I can sign up for a club if I want to.”

“Okay,” I decided to play along. “Which do you want, the Math Club or the French Club?”

“Which one has more girls in it?” he asked.

“Probably French,” Heather said. I wouldn’t have bothered to answer him.

“Oh, and by the way,” I said, super-casually, pretending to straighten the taped-down sign-up sheets. “Mom thinks we should be on *Wake Up With Ben* tomorrow.”

He made a sound that might have been obscuring a muttered curse.

“I told her no.”

He smiled at me, a true, proud, big-brother smile, and gave me a high five.

“Good for you! Did she go ballistic?”

“She tried to guilt me into it, but I wasn’t swayed.”

“Good girl!”

A couple of freshman girls, looking very young despite only being a year younger than us, came by our table.

“What clubs can we sign up for here?” one asked, their eyes on Mark.

“What one did he sign up for?” the other one added.

“He’s not real,” I said.

Mark’s expression changed from proud to amused.

“I’m not real?”

“I mean he’s not a freshman, and he’s not signing up for any of these clubs.”

“I’m signing up for the French Club,” Mark said, making a liar out of me.

“Ooh, then we will, too,” one of the girls said.

“I thought you were taking Spanish,” her friend said to her.

“So, I can’t broaden my horizons?” She signed her name with a flourish to the French Club list, and her friend did the same. Then, they moved away, giggling and glancing back at Mark.

“French Club?” I asked him.

“It’s so much fun to mess with freshmen.” He gave me his lopsided grin and ran his hand through his blond hair. “I’ll catch you girls later.”

“Or you could stay here and attract more girls to our table,” Heather said.

“As tempting as that is, I don’t want to run the risk of actually signing up for the French Club.” He gave a fake shiver. “*Tschuss*,” he said with a salute-type wave and headed off.

“*Tschuss*,” I repeated automatically.

Heather looked at me.

“What?”

“We just got back from our grandmother’s in Germany the other day. That’s how everyone says goodbye there.”

“I thought people said *auf wiedersehen*.”

“This is a little less formal.”

Another girl approached our table. She looked like she’d just stepped out of a brochure for a boarding school with plaid shorts, polo shirt and long, straight hair.

“I know who you are,” she said with a starstruck look.

Heather’s show might have ended a couple of seasons ago, but her fans always managed to find her.

“Nice to meet you,” Heather said, holding her hand out to the girl.
“I’m Heather Franklin.”

“Who?”

Heather took a step back.

“There goes my comeback *and* my ego,” she muttered.

I patted her on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, anonymity can be fun.”

“Like you’d know!” Heather said.

“I meant Alissandra Caldwell,” the girl said, ignoring our banter.

She recognized me? This shouldn’t have surprised me after last year, but yet, it always takes me off-guard.

“I’m only called Alissandra when I’m in trouble.”

“She gets called that a lot,” Heather added.

“I’m learning to follow the rules.” I said to Heather, “Lily always said I would someday. She’ll be so proud of me.”

“Our little girl is growing up,” Heather said wistfully.

I held my hand out to the girl and introduced myself, even though she already knew who I was.

“I’m Ali. Are you a freshman?”

“Sophomore, like you. I just transferred in.”

“Welcome,” I said. “Are you going to sign up for a club?”

“What clubs are *you* in?” She inspected the sheets of paper as if expecting to see our names written down.

“None of these,” Heather said. “I’m in the drama club and run cross-country.”

“I like running,” the new girl said. “What about you, Ali? Do you run?”

“Only when I’m being chased,” I answered.

Heather shook her head and groaned.

“You are so lame.”

“What clubs are you in?” the girl asked me.

“Drama and tae kwon do,” I answered.

“Where do I go to sign up for those?”

I didn’t know which tables had which clubs.

“One of the other tables. Are you sure you don’t want to sign up for any of these?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so,” and she wandered off to search the other tables.

“Looks like you have a fan,” Heather said. “Or maybe another stalker,” she added with a gleam in her eye.

“Been there, done that...”

“Have the scar to prove it,” Heather finished for me, bumping my shoulder with hers. It was good to have a best friend at school.

Chapter 2

No one else signed up for the clubs we were hawking. Mrs. Waverly gave us a disapproving look when we handed in our sheets.

“You were supposed to make these clubs sound like fun.”

“Some things are impossible even for us,” I said, giving her my most charming smile.

She shook her head and collected the rest of the sheets.

“Now what?” Heather asked.

“A game of pool?” I suggested.

“I was thinking more along the lines of finishing unpacking.”

That would probably be a better use of our time. Unpacking bores me, which is why I’d ditched the chore and headed to the lake with my notebook earlier.

We headed back to the dorm. Our room this year was on the third floor, and we shared a bathroom with Lily and Sanjita, who had been my roommate last year. We’d just switched this year, which worked out for all of us.

Back in our room, Heather started putting my clothes away while I made my bed. We left the door open so people would feel free to stop by.

“I see Carly took you shopping,” Heather said.

My best friend from home and my best friend from school agreed I was hopeless when it came to fashion.

“She did. Do you approve?”

“Very much so. I may be borrowing *your* clothes this year.”

“That would certainly be a first!”

I spread my quilt on the bed and opened a storage bin that held my school supplies and personal touches. First out was my teddy bear, who immediately got the place of honor on my pillow.

Nikki, short and round, her cropped dark hair beginning to grow out, stopped by the room. She looked incomplete without tall, willowy Becca by her side.

“Did you guys hear Becca’s not coming back?” she asked, coming in and sitting on my newly made bed. She picked up my well-worn bear and smoothed his ear.

“I saw it on Facebook.” I put a Popsicle stick-covered can on my desk. The can was a penholder made for me by my six-year-old half-siblings.

“So, who’s *your* roommate this year?” Heather asked, unzipping my second suitcase.

“Some new girl named Samantha. She’s from Jersey, and she’s all about color coordination.”

I laughed. Nikki’s idea of style veered more toward Harley than Martha Stewart. This should prove to be an interesting year.

“Sure, you think it’s funny now,” Nikki said, “but wait until I’m swallowed by paisley. You won’t be laughing then.”

The girl who had recognized me at orientation, the one who looked like she’d stepped off a boarding-school brochure, poked her head into the room.

“So, this is where you got to, Nikki,” she said, then noticed me and Heather. “Oh, is this your room? I like it!”

“I’m sure it looks very much like yours,” Heather said. After all, the dorm rooms were fairly uniform.

“I love that poster,” she said. “Who is that?”

“Clark Gable.”

The full-length picture of Clark Gable made me smile whenever I looked at it. Plus, it had the advantage, after last year’s drama with Chet Arnold, that neither Heather nor I were going to be dating or kissing Clark Gable.

“So handsome.”

“Dead,” Heather said rather flatly. “I mean, he’s been dead for decades.”

“Yeah, well, I knew that,” the girl, who I presumed was Nikki’s roommate Samantha, said. But she hadn’t known who he was, so how likely was it she’d known he was dead?

Lily and Sanjita came in through the adjoining bathroom.

“Love what you’ve done with the place,” Lily said. “It’s an interesting cross between peaceful scenery and retro Hollywood.”

“That’s the look we were going for,” Heather said.

“You guys are sisters, right?” Samantha said, looking from Heather to Lily and back.

“We can’t deny each other even if we wanted to,” Lily answered. “Who are you?”

“Samantha Braski. Just transferred in.”

“She’s my roommate,” Nikki said, with a badly disguised fatalistic sigh.

“I’m Lily Franklin.” Lily made it a point to never assume someone would recognize her and Heather from when they were on TV.

“Sanjita Sharma.” Sanjita held out her hand for Samantha to shake. “I’m from Texas,” she added quickly, because people always asked if she was from India and she’d learned to just get that out there right away.

“I’m from New Jersey, fairly local.”

“Ali is the most local,” Sanjita said. “She only lives an hour away. She could practically be a day student.”

“I know,” Samantha said. “But she spends part of the year in California with her mother.”

“Only two weeks,” I said, dipping into the bin for notebooks and folders.

It was strange having someone I’d just met know things about me, and I didn’t like it. She apparently didn’t know I spent summer and winter vacation in Germany with my grandmother, though. Dad made sure that information never made it into any news reports. He may have relaxed his stance on our privacy a little, but he still had pretty tight control over the reins. I was beginning to appreciate that more and more.

“So, you don’t get to see your half-siblings too often,” Samantha said. “They’re six now, right? I used to watch their show. *Triple Trouble*. Sophie, Phoebe and Brennan. They’re so cute.”

I put my notebooks on the desk.

“They’re six, yes.” I said. “I also have a brother who goes here. Mark. He’s a senior.”

“I know.”

I looked over at Heather, who raised her eyebrows. Maybe she hadn’t been too off-base with that stalker remark earlier.

“I’ve always wanted a sister,” Samantha said, sitting next to Nikki on my bed.

“Do you have any brothers?” I asked.

“I’m an only child. Though I’ve had step-siblings over the years.”
Sounded like a typical confusing modern family situation.

“Do you play field hockey?” Sanjita asked. To Sanjita, field hockey was essentially synonymous with life. “We can always use new players.”

Samantha turned to me instead of answering.

“You play field hockey, right? I saw that on TV last year.”

I could feel the color rise in my cheeks.

“Um, no. That was my mother’s idea. I wasn’t very good at it.”

Sanjita looked like she was about to choke on her laughter.

“Not good,” she managed to sputter out.

Ah, such supportive friends.

“No, I don’t play,” Samantha said, finally answering Sanjita. “I already signed up for tae kwon do and drama club at the orientation today.”

“Those are Ali’s activities,” Nikki pointed out.

“I know.”

Maybe it was a breeze that came through the window just then, but I felt a shiver. Last year, I’d wanted to be famous. I’d never really understood what that meant. Lily had tried to warn me, but I hadn’t believed. Now I knew, and I wished I could wind back time.

Once again the *William Tell* “Overture” played from my phone. What could my mother possibly want? She’d talked to me less than two hours ago. I answered, knowing it was better to get it over with.

“Have you gotten the details squared away with Ben Stanton?” she asked, not bothering with hello.

“There are no details, Mom,” I said. “I can’t go.”

“It’s just very important, because I think you could have a chance at a pilot they’re going to be filming, and it would help to keep your face out there so people don’t forget you.”

“What are you talking about?”

The other girls watched, silently, as I did polite battle with my mother.

“It’s a family sitcom filming in New York. It would be perfect for you.”

“I don’t want to be on TV.” I felt that no matter how many times I said this it never really penetrated my mother’s brain.

“So, make sure you call Ben Stanton. It’s important.”

And she hung up.

It would not be easy to call Ben Stanton, since she’d never given me his number. It didn’t matter anyway—I wasn’t going, and I’d never said I was. It was not my responsibility to cancel.

“Your mother still think you should go into the city tomorrow?” Heather asked me.

“Yeah. And now she thinks I should audition for some sitcom they’re going to be filming in New York.”

“What sitcom?” Her eyes went wide.

“She didn’t say. It doesn’t matter, because I don’t want to be on TV. Not to mention my dad would never allow it.”

“That was Margo Schaefer on the phone?” Samantha asked, her voice filled with awe.

“Yeah, that was my mom.”

I wasn’t in the mood to indulge someone’s hero worship. That was just my mom on the phone, being as demanding as ever.

She was going to be mad when I didn’t go into the city. It was absolutely impossible for me to go in, and if she gave it any thought she’d realize that. Plus, I didn’t want to go. Not really. At least not tomorrow.

But if I didn’t go, she’d call me and complain. I suppose I could deal with her criticizing me. I’ve been dealing with it for years.

“It must be so amazing having a movie star for a mother,” Samantha continued. “And your stepfather is Dennis Elliot. He is so hot! What’s he like in real life?”

What was my movie-star stepfather like in real life? Who knew? I only saw them two weeks a year.

“He’s pretty nice. Isn’t it time for dinner or something?”

Nikki checked the time on her watch.

“Oh, it is. I’m meeting up with Jenna and Faith. Want to join us?” she asked Samantha.

“I think I’ll eat with Ali and her friends.”

Heather gave me another raised-eyebrow look, and I shrugged. True, Samantha was being a little pushy, but maybe she was just nervous. There was nothing wrong with us making a new student feel welcome. If we’d been new, we’d want someone to do the same for us.

The five of us headed over to the cafeteria. Sanjita and Lily walked ahead, Samantha in between me and Heather.

“It must have been so cool being on TV last year,” Samantha said to me, bouncing a little as she walked.

“It wasn’t as great as I thought it would be, actually.”

“Why not? I can’t imagine that being on TV would be anything less than amazing.”

In front of us, Lily gave a laugh-snort.

“It can be great,” Heather said. “It wasn’t TV Ali disliked so much as some of the things that went along with it.”

“Oh,” Samantha said with a knowing nod. “You mean like the guy who tried to kill you on TV? Can I see the scar?”

My hand went protectively to my neck. See the scar? I didn’t want anyone to see the scar.

“It’s barely noticeable anymore,” Heather said.

All the same, Samantha got in front of me and took hold of my hand, moving it away from the scar. I pulled my hand out of hers and took a step back, anger boiling through me. How dare she inspect me like a cow at a county fair? I wasn’t fast enough, though.

“Wow. That’s worse than I thought it was. You could have died.”

“I prefer not to dwell on it,” I said with as much dignity as I could muster.

“Oh, sorry, that was kind of rude of me.”

Ya think?

“I’m just so used to being with my friends, and we don’t hold back—you know.”

I didn’t know. I wasn’t used to being around people who refused to respect boundaries. Well, except for my mother. Even Carly hadn’t inspected my scar like that. She’d been sensitive to my uneasiness about it.

“So, why did you come to boarding school?” I asked, holding the dining hall door open for her. Hopefully, I could move the conversation far away from me and my past problems.

“My mom and stepdad divorced last year, and we had to move. I would have been going to a new school, one that wasn’t as good, and my mom is trying to work as many hours as she can to make up the difference, so we thought I’d go away to school. I got a scholarship, so that made it possible.”

“Sounds rough,” I said.

“Doesn’t your dad help out?” Heather asked.

“My mom is not in contact with my dad,” Samantha said. “I’ve never even met him.”

“Really?”

My parents might be divorced, and maybe I didn’t have the best relationship with my mom, but I at least had a relationship with her. I couldn’t imagine not even knowing one of my parents.

“That’s too bad,” Heather said.

Samantha shrugged. “It is what it is. But I’m going to meet him. I have a plan.”

Lily, already picking up her tray ahead of us, turned.

“You have a plan? Sounds like Ali. She’s always got a plan.”

“What’s your plan?” I asked.

“Still working out the details.” She grabbed a tray. “What’s good to eat at this place?”

“Pasta is always safe,” I answered.

“But fattening,” Heather said.

I looked at her in her size-2 jeans.

“Not that you have to worry about that.”

“The camera adds ten pounds.”

Once again Lily turned to us.

“You’re not on TV right now, so it doesn’t matter. Eat right, or I’m telling Mom and Dad.”

Heather made a face, but her sister had already turned away again; she took a salad. I grabbed a plate of ziti and a side salad and a dinner roll, with a dish of Jell-O for dessert. We found a table by the window.

“So, do any of you have boyfriends?” Samantha asked.

An awkward silence followed. We’d had boyfriends, all of us—last year. Not so much, now.

“I used to date Chet Arnold, but we broke up,” Heather said.

“Chet Arnold?” Samantha looked confused, “But I thought Ali was dating him. I saw their picture on SCZ.”

The fact that Heather and I had managed to stay best friends through everything that had happened with Chet and me was nothing short of a miracle.

“I never dated Chet,” I said.

“They just made out on the beach and got caught,” Heather finished. Samantha had the good sense not to pursue that topic.

“Did you date an actor, too?” she asked Lily.

“No. I went out with Mark for a while, but we’ve decided we’re better as friends.”

“My boyfriend got expelled last year,” I admitted.

“Mine, too,” Sanjita said.

Even after several months, it was hard to get used to not having Liam around.

“I’m going to have a boyfriend,” Samantha announced.

“Who?” Lily asked with a touch of amusement in her voice.

Samantha scanned the faces in the dining hall and then pointed to a cute guy with dark hair, chiseled features and a brilliant smile.

“Him.”

“James Rheinold,” I said.

My *first* boyfriend.

Chapter 3

“You don’t want to go out with him,” Lily said.

“Why not?” Samantha demanded. “He’s definitely the cutest boy in the room.”

“Oh, he’s cute,” Lily said. “And he knows it.”

Sanjita buttered her roll.

“Lily is not unbiased in this matter. She used to go out with him. So did Ali, for that matter.”

“So did half the girls in this cafeteria,” Lily said.

“That means I have a good chance with him,” Samantha said.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” I said.

James and I *had* become close last semester, after Liam left, but we hadn’t dated again; I’d insisted on keeping that boundary. I didn’t want to just keep jumping between boyfriends. Now, I watched as he flirted with some freshman girls and felt a tiny pang of jealousy. No, I didn’t want him to be my boyfriend again—been there, done that—but I did kind of wish it was me he was flirting with. We’d texted some over the summer, but it hadn’t been the same. I’d missed him.

James must have sensed us watching him because he turned toward our table and waved. A minute later, he was pulling a chair up next to me.

“How’s my best girl?”

“Fine, James. I see you’re wasting no time.”

“Will you go out with me?”

“No.”

“Then there’s no point in me not checking out the new talent.”

Across the table, Lily rolled her eyes.

“You are such a chauvinist.”

“But I’m a lovable chauvinist,” James said. He turned his charms and attention to Samantha. “Hello—James Rheinold. And where have you been all my life?”

Samantha blushed and shook his hand.

“Samantha Braski. And I’ve been in New Jersey, but I’m glad to be here now.”

“Have you seen the gazebo?”

“Only in the distance and on tours,” Samantha answered.

“How about I show it to you after dinner?”

She practically glowed.

“Sounds wonderful.”

James turned back to me, a proud smile on his face.

“Aren’t you sorry you didn’t say yes?”

“So you could show me the gazebo?” I asked. “No, I’m pretty okay with my answer.”

“You’ll change your mind one of these days.”

“Maybe I will.” I hadn’t meant to say that. I’d meant to say I was going to stick by my guns. We’d already gone out, it hadn’t worked out, and now we were better off as friends. Apparently, my subconscious had other ideas.

James’s already big smile got even bigger.

“Can’t wait,” he said. He pushed his chair back. “I’ll see you after dinner, Sammy, and show you around.”

She nodded, speechless.

James put the chair back at the other table.

“Ciao, girls.”

“He asked me out!” Samantha said in an awed whisper.

“He asked *Ali* out,” Lily pointed out. “He asked you to see the gazebo. He’s a playboy. A Casanova. Don’t take him too seriously.”

“I don’t care, he’s adorable.”

I watched him walk back across the dining hall, stopping to talk to just about everyone, smiling and flirting and joking with people. Mark was like that, too. I wanted to be more like that instead of just basking in their popularity vicariously.

“Don’t you think he’s adorable, Ali?” Samantha asked me.

“Of course he is,” I answered automatically.

“He’s in love with Ali,” Sanjita said.

I snapped my attention to her.

“What are you talking about?”

She put her fork down and looked me straight in the eye.

“Ever since you two broke up, he’s been trying to get back together again.”

“He’s dated, like, two dozen people since then,” I pointed out.

“Right. And none of those worked out because he’s waiting for you.”

Could she be right? Did I feel the same way? I glanced back across the cafeteria. James had reached his table again. Maybe I should go out with him again. We were older now, wiser. Maybe it was time to give him that second chance...

“Too bad you just told him you wouldn’t go out with him,” Samantha said. “And I said I would.”

I *had* said that. He’d asked me out. I’d said no. I had to be happy with that answer. Besides, I needed to concentrate on my grades and getting into the Blue and Gold Society. I didn’t need the complications of a dating relationship on top of everything else.

After dinner, James came and collected Samantha for her private tour, and Heather and I went up to our room. I lay on my bed, my arm around my one-eyed teddy bear.

“Do *you* think James is in love with me?”

“Of course he is,” Heather said. “Everyone knows it. I thought you knew it, too, and that’s why you keep playing hard to get with him.”

“No, not really,” I said. “I mean, I figured he liked me or he wouldn’t keep hanging around, but I never imagined it was more than that. Or,” I amended, “if it was, I figured it was just because of who my mother is. She has that kind of effect on people.”

“You have that kind of effect on people, too,” Heather said.

“I don’t,” I argued. “But maybe someday I will.”

Heather stretched out on her bed, typing on her tablet.

“Chet says hi,” she said to me.

“You’re chatting with him?”

“Yeah, he’s on set but taking a break.”

“Tell him I say hi back.”

“I already did. I figured you would.”

“Are you guys getting back together?” I asked.

“When I graduate from high school and move back home to Malibu, if Chet hasn’t found some permanent love, then maybe. I won’t rule it out. I like him. It’s just too complicated right now.”

“Love shouldn’t be complicated when we’re only fifteen,” I said.

“I’m pretty sure love is always complicated.”

“It shouldn’t be. It should be like in a fairy tale. Boy and Girl meet. Fall in love. Live happily ever after.”

“Have you looked at some of those fairy tales more closely? I don’t think that’s the kind of romance you want.”

“Right now I don’t want a romance at all.”

My phone buzzed with a text from Danny, a friend from back home.

END OF SUMMER PARTY TONIGHT. WANT TO COME?

CAN’T, DANNY, BACK AT SCHOOL. WILL LET YOU KNOW WHEN I’M HOME FOR THE WEEKEND.

“Who was that?” Heather asked.

“Danny invited me to a party tonight.”

“Danny?”

“A kid from back home.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Hardly. I haven’t seen him all summer.” I rolled over onto my stomach and rested my chin on my hands. “But I did have a summer romance.”

She put her tablet away and got comfortable.

“Do tell.”

“His name is Kai. His family moved in down the street from my grandmother.”

“So, now you have a long-distance thing going on?”

“Nope. We ended it. It was just a summer romance.” I could say this without even a hint of emotion, but the truth was, there had been times this summer when I didn’t want fall to come. It had been less than a week since I’d last seen Kai and we’d kissed goodbye; and honestly, I really missed him. “This is going to be my romance-free year. I need to concentrate on schoolwork.”

“We’ll see how that works out,” Heather said.

Samantha wandered into our room and settled into my desk chair before speaking.

“James is the most amazing guy.”

“He’s nice,” I agreed.

“I dreamed of having a boyfriend, but I didn’t think it would happen that quickly.”

“Sort of a fairy tale thing, huh?” Heather asked, with a significant look in my direction.

“He’s your boyfriend already?” I asked. This was my non-romance year, and I didn’t want to date James again anyway, so why did it bother me that she might be going with him after only being here less than one day?

“Not officially yet.” She picked up a pencil and played with it. “So, is everyone here best friends with their roommate?”

“No,” I said. “But it sometimes ends up that way in the upper grades because you can pick your roommate.”

“Okay. Good. Because I don’t think Nikki and I are destined to be best friends. I thought maybe I was breaking some unofficial code or something.”

“You only just met her,” Heather reminded her. “Give her a chance. She’ll grow on you.”

“Like a fungus?”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

“She’s fine,” I said. “Really, trust us.”

“You guys are best friends, right?” Samantha waved her finger from Heather to me.

“Yeah,” Heather said with a shrug. “Someone had to be her friend, so they recruited me.”

“And when her sister was tired of her, I offered to take her on. Doing my civic duty and all that.”

Samantha looked confused.

“I thought you guys liked each other.”

Heather reached across the space between our beds, her pinky outstretched. I linked my own pinky with it.

“BFF,” we said together.



The next morning Samantha appeared at our door again.

“Is what I’m wearing okay?” she asked. She had on the plaid skirt and button-down white shirt that was the school uniform.

“It’s not like you have a choice,” I pointed out. “You look fine.”

“I want to make a good impression.”

“Well, you’re not going to stand out in the crowd,” Heather said, coming up behind me, putting her long unruly red hair up in a ponytail. “But that’s kind of the idea.”

“I’m nervous,” Samantha admitted. “Don’t leave me alone, okay?”

“Don’t worry,” I said, adjusting my skirt. “You’ll be used to this place by the end of the week.”

“I’m sure.” She pushed past me into the room. “Heather, can you do something with my hair for me?”

I crossed my arms and glared at her, but she didn’t notice. I took a deep breath. Yes, she was rude, but there was no reason for me to be upset that she wanted Heather to do her hair. Heather wasn’t my personal property. There was no reason Samantha couldn’t be friends with her, too.

“I’m not really much of a hairdresser,” Heather said, pointing to her ponytail.

“Then can you help me with makeup?”

Heather had spent a lot of last year helping me with my makeup; I felt confident enough to solo now, though. She agreed, and Samantha ran to her room and came back with a handful of tubes and containers. Heather did her eye makeup for her.

“I’m sure you can do the rest yourself,” she said.

“But I always look like a clown when I try.”

So, Heather did her blush, too.

“It’s getting late, we better get down to breakfast,” I said.

“You go on ahead,” Samantha said. “We’ll be right there.”

That hadn’t been exactly what I had in mind.

“I’ll wait,” I said.

Lily walked through the connecting bathroom.

“You have my hairbrush,” she said to her sister.

“I don’t,” Heather said. “You can look.”

Lily picked up a hairbrush from the desk.

“This is mine.”

“It’s not,” Heather insisted. “But feel free to use it. Just bring it back.”

Sanjita came into the room next.

“Is anyone going down to breakfast?”

“Go ahead,” Samantha repeated. “Heather’s helping with my makeup, and then we’ll be down.”

I would have waited, but Sanjita and Lily agreed to head over, so I went with them.

“Why is Heather doing Samantha’s makeup?” Lily asked as we rounded the first landing on our way downstairs.

“She asked,” I said.

“Yeah, but her makeup was perfect yesterday. Why does she need help today?”

“Maybe someone from home did it for her before she came here.”

“I suppose,” Lily didn’t sound as if she thought that was at all likely.

The dining hall was crowded. Everyone was up and ready early for the first day of classes. A week from now there’d be plenty of people rushing in for a banana or bagel before their first class; today everyone wanted a full breakfast. We managed to save two seats for Heather and Samantha.

They came in a few minutes later. Heather only had a container of yogurt on her tray.

“Seriously?” Lily asked. “That’s all you’re eating?”

I looked at my waffle and felt like a glutton.

“The camera adds ten pounds,” Heather said it like was it was her new mantra.

“But you’re not on camera,” Lily responded. “At least have a piece of toast.”

“Ugh,” Heather said. “Carbs are death.”

Lily shook her head. “If you start losing weight, I’m telling Mom.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Heather said. “I can take care of myself.”

“I’ll make sure she eats healthily,” Samantha said. “My mom is a nutritionist. I know all about this stuff. You don’t have to worry.”

“It’s a good thing you transferred in,” Heather said in her deadpan way, although she did manage to refrain from rolling her eyes.

Samantha grinned smugly.

And I wondered how good a thing it really was.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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