

THE

BIGGEST

SCOOP

GILLIAN
ST. KEVERN

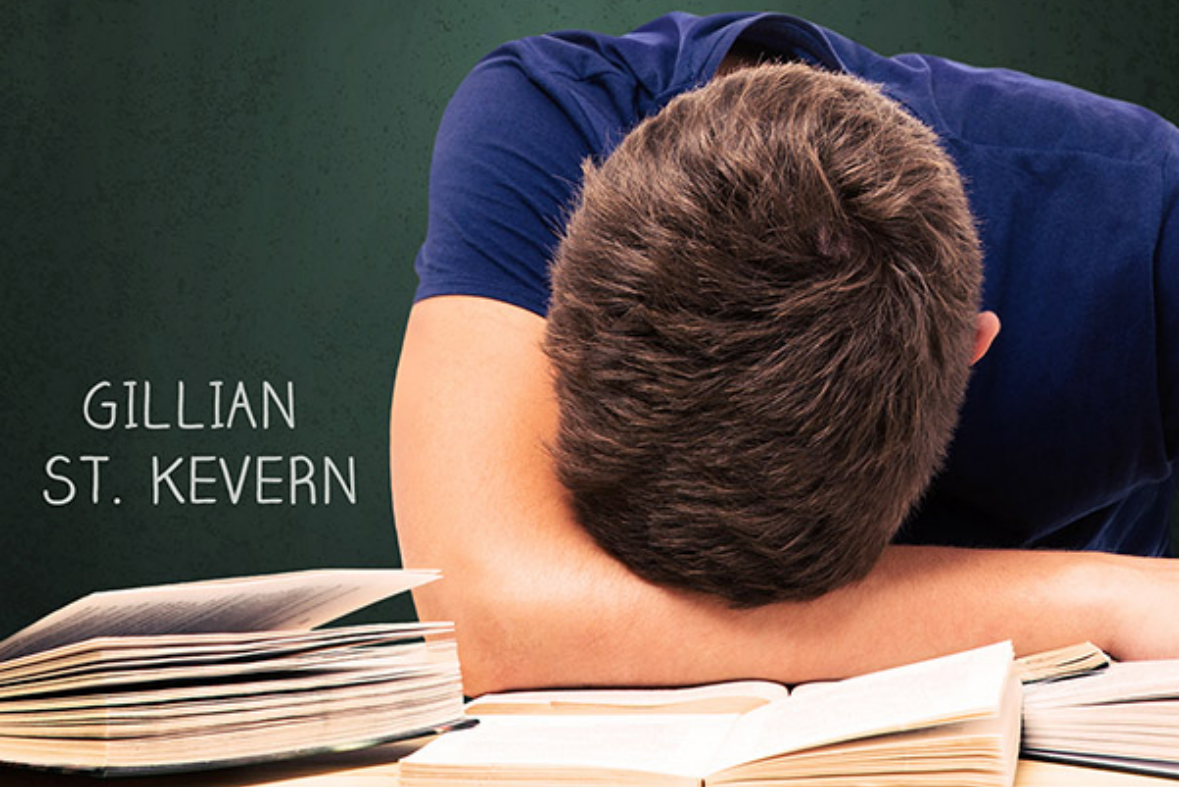


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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE BIGGEST SCOOP

By Gillian St. Kevern

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THE BIGGEST SCOOP

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Photo Description

Two young men recline arm in arm against a striped cushion. They are wearing blue-striped shirts and black trousers. The boy on the left, the taller of the pair, is giving his companion a look of extreme dubiousness. The boy on the right's smirk is pure mischief. Their shirts are somewhat rumpled. Hijinks have either ensued, are ensuing or are about to ensue.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

There's a new boy in school, and he's doing really well, academically and popularity-wise. He's just been elected class president! Now all the girls want to go out with him even more, only a public coming out will save him, or will it? Now there are all these guys coming out of the woodwork, (even a teacher aide? who knows!) and he can't catch a study break. All anyone seems to want to know is, who will get to plant the kiss that sticks?

Sincerely,

Josephine Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

Story Info

Genre: young adult

Tags: high school, bullying, journalism, humorous, geeks/nerds, friends, sweet/no sex

Word Count: 65,551

Acknowledgements

Any DRitC story is a team effort, and The Biggest Scoop was no different! Josephine got the ball rolling with her incredibly fun prompt, and kept it rolling through her encouragement on the Goodreads forums! My friends Julia, Kamilah and Zenia assured me that what I wrote made sense and answered my questions about American high school life. K.C. Faelan got me through the first three chapters, while Sam very ably helped me turn my polished draft into something I could happily submit. Raevyn worked her editing magic, and the formatting and proofing team applied the final polishing touches. The cover comes courtesy of the extremely talented Bree Archer who spent a lot of time working on something that would do justice to Josephine's prompt picture. Thank you, everyone! Without you, this story would never have been written!

I also want to thank Christie for giving me the chance to write this story. I imagine that giving up this prompt was a really hard decision, and I hope that someday we get to learn what your vision for these boys was.

THE BIGGEST SCOOP

By Gillian St. Kevern

Chapter One

Lips that begged to be kissed are a literary trope found only in romance novels, Carly Rae Jepsen songs and teen comedies. Not real life, right? So it was a total shock when Mr. Perry opened the door and ushered the lips into AP English.

I sat up so quickly I caught my elbow on the edge of my desk and didn't even feel it. My heart sped up. Instead of adrenaline, it pumped electricity. I tingled all over, suddenly very conscious that I had forgotten to brush my teeth before school.

"Good morning, class. As you can see, we have two newcomers today. It's rare to have a transfer student at this stage of the academic year, so I hope that you'll make Taylor feel very welcome."

The lips had a name. Taylor. I sighed happily.

I was not the only one. The rustling of loose-leaf was clearly audible. Mr. Perry glanced toward the windows. "Too fine a day for drafts... Now, where was I? Oh yes. Taylor, perhaps you'd like to introduce yourself."

Taylor nodded. He lived up to the promise of his mouth, built upon clean, well-defined lines. Sleek eyebrows gave his light blue eyes definition and emphasized the strength of his jaw. A young Cary Grant, or maybe a Humphrey Bogart. There was something very "leading man" about his forehead and the way he squared his shoulders as he stepped forward. "So, hi. My name's Taylor. I just moved here last week. I've heard a lot about Bernhardt, and I'm looking forward to getting to know you all."

His voice. It had an unreal quality, like it came to us across a stage. Clear, confident, perfect.

Mr. Perry nodded. "Taylor's had a tour of the campus, but I'm sure you all remember how difficult it was to find classrooms your first freshman week. If I could have a volunteer to take him to"—Mr. Perry glanced at a paper in his hand—"Chemistry...?"

Half the hands in the class rose.

"Me, Mr. Perry! Pick me!" Sarah Choi waved frantically.

"I'll do it!" Her best friend, Alexis, actually stood.

Mr. Perry raised an eyebrow. “How nice to see such energy on a Monday morning. If only you were this excited about your required reading.” He scanned the class. “Perhaps someone who actually takes chemistry.” His eyes settled on a quiet girl in the front row. “Emily. And Milo, get down off that chair before you fall.”

Someone sniggered.

I stepped off my chair and sat, my cheeks glowing.

Again, I was not alone. Emily put her hand down, a pleased blush spreading over her face. There was an explosion of activity as the surrounding students cleared their things out of the way for Taylor to take the empty desk beside her.

Mr. Perry went on with his announcements. “Our second visitor is conducting a research paper. Mr. Harper is here to observe our school. Mr. Harper?”

Taylor shifted, adjusting to the AP English chairs. If he was conscious of being minutely observed, he didn’t show it. He leaned toward Emily, mouthing an enquiry. With a second blush, Emily opened her copy of *Wuthering Heights* to the chapter we were discussing. Instead of taking it from her, Taylor glanced up at Mr. Perry, still droning on, and carefully inched his desk toward Emily’s. As Taylor leaned in to get a closer look at the text, Emily tucked her hair behind her ear, now the exact shade of crimson as the Bernhardt school colors.

I felt a deep pang. Why hadn’t I taken chemistry?

“So I’m sure you’ll all do your best to assist Mr. Harper in his research. Now, one last thing before we return to *Wuthering Heights*. Class elections.”

I looked down at my binder quickly, but not before I had caught Logan glancing in my direction, his lip curled. My heart beat again, but this time the feeling that accompanied it was nausea.

“In the absence of any nominations, the deadline has been extended until Wednesday. Now, I know that Carson and Blake are missed, but the fact remains that if a replacement class president and vice president are not chosen by the end of the week, there will be no winter formal.”

I sank back in my seat. Great. Now the girls were glaring at me too.

“I trust that you will think it over and make the best decision, not just for the juniors of Bernhardt but the school as a whole. Now.” Mr. Perry leaned over his desk. “Let’s continue our discussion of Lockwood and unreliable narrators.”

As I turned to the right page, my chair was jolted, and I dropped the book. Jordan smirked and did not apologize. Picking it up, I caught Taylor watching Mr. Perry write on the board.

His expression was serious, far too serious even for AP English. As class continued, I noticed that Taylor glanced at the students around him, adjusting his posture to match and looking to see how Emily made her notes. But even in the same attitude of half-attention as the rest of the class, Taylor had something no one else did.

It wasn't just that he was handsome, or that on him the gray and crimson uniform blazer looked like a tailor-made suit. There was a purpose to everything he did and it created a ripple effect around him. Taylor acted on our class like a magnetic pulse. I watched as hair was smoothed, sweaters readjusted and ties straightened—wait, *Carlos*? But he was dating a cheerleader!

I turned the pages of *Wuthering Heights*, nodding automatically as Mr. Perry talked. Inwardly, there was only one thing I could think of. This was it. I was sure of it. His good looks. The effect he had on the class. The fact we didn't know anything about him beyond his name.

Taylor was the perfect story.

“Of course prom is prom.” Bernhardt’s buildings were gray stone and the corridors long, with high Gothic arches that collected echoes like other buildings did cobwebs. Emily’s voice was almost drowned out by the chatter. If I hadn’t been lying in wait, I’d have missed it entirely in the between class rush. “But it’s more for the seniors. The winter formal’s always been organized by the juniors. We plan, we advertise and sell tickets. The money we make goes to our chosen charity.”

“That sounds like a pretty cool idea.” Taylor’s voice was clearly audible, creating ripples as it went. Students stopped to listen. I felt a thrill travel through me as I crouched beside the water cooler. “How come no one wants to be president? The responsibility?”

“It’s more complicated than that.” Emily was getting closer. “We had class elections at the start of the year, but Carson and Blake—”

Now! I stood.

Emily shrieked, stopping still. She held her binder of notes above her head, staring down at the puddle spreading across her chest.

“Emily! I’m so sorry.” I was sorry. Emily was too focused on her grades to care about clique politics and had always been cool to me. But there were serious stakes here. “At least it’s just water.”

She gaped at me.

“You’ve got time to fix this,” I assured her, nudging her gently toward the girl’s bathroom. “Don’t worry. I’ll take Taylor to his next class.” And before either of them could protest, I stood on my tiptoes to glance at his schedule. “Drawing? Me too. This way.”

Taylor lingered. “Can I help?”

Emily looked down at her dripping shirt. Her shoulders drooped. “No. I’m fine.”

“Come on!” I ushered Taylor down the hall, leaving Emily and her growing puddle behind us. “Ms. Cox doesn’t tolerate tardiness.”

We made it to drawing with seconds to spare. I carefully tore out the page I was working on and gave my sketchbook to Taylor. “You literally just moved here?”

He nodded. “I spent yesterday unpacking. We haven’t even shopped for school stuff beyond the uniform. You sure you want to give me your sketchbook? What if you need a second piece of paper?”

I shook my head. “I won’t need more than one.”

Taylor’s eyes skimmed over me. Wondering how to interpret my statement? “Thanks.”

I nudged my box of charcoals across the table to him, trying unsuccessfully to quell the acrobatic performance in my stomach. I had work to do. Work entirely unrelated to the still life arrangement of shells and driftwood set up on the table in the center of the classroom. “It’s nothing. So.” I took a breath. Like any investigative reporter, I got right to the headline. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

Taylor started. “That’s a personal question.”

I smiled at him. “I’m a personable guy. Well?”

He shook his head, turning back to the still life with a strange smirk. “No girlfriend.”

My stomach did a very unjournalistic back flip. “Boyfriend?”

Taylor looked at me sideways. “No one. I am entirely single.”

I clutched my piece of charcoal tightly. “Single,” I repeated. “Does that mean—”

A shadow fell over me. “Milo Markopoulos, do I need to remind you that this is Elective Drawing, not Investigative Journalism?”

I looked up into the unimpressed gaze of our teacher. “No, Ms. Cox.”

“You get two more warnings.” Her gaze lingered over Taylor. “You must be the transfer student?” As he nodded, something in her rocky demeanor softened minutely. “Don’t let Milo distract you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I won’t.”

I waited until Ms. Cox was at the other end of the room. “What’s your type?”

“Realistic, I guess?” Taylor looked down at the sketchbook. “It’s just a sketch.”

“Not art. People. That you potentially date.”

Taylor glanced across the room. “The teacher just said—”

“It’s fine,” I assured him. “You won’t get in trouble. You’re new.”

“And if I answer the question, will you stop asking me?”

“Momentarily.”

Taylor pursed his lips together. My initial impression of a mouth that was all about kissing returned. I almost missed his reply. “I don’t have a type.”

“You must. Blondes? Brunettes?”

“I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Athletic? Academic? The Life of the Party? Class Clown?”

“I’ll tell you one thing. It’s not chatty guys who can’t take a hint.”

I stared at him. Behind me, I heard Madison giggle.

Ms. Cox looked up from helping Carlos. “Creating a disturbance are we, Milo?”

“Sorry, Ms. Cox.”

“If this happens again...”

“Yes, Ms. Cox.”

I timed myself by the classroom clock. For ten minutes, the only sound in the classroom was the rustle of paper, the rough scratch of an eraser and the echoes of the brass band practicing down the hall.

Ten minutes was pretty much the limit of human endurance for that. “Where did you live before Tarrytown?”

Taylor gave me an “I can’t believe this” look but answered anyway. “I didn’t live anywhere. My family moves a lot.”

“Where did you go to school?”

“We weren’t anywhere long enough for me to enroll.” Taylor shrugged, his attention on the shell taking shape on his paper. “I guess I was homeschooled.”

“Seriously? You don’t act homeschooled.” Leaning over his shoulder to watch Taylor’s sketch take shape, I noticed that his hand tightened around the piece of charcoal he held. “That’s a compliment. You’re really confident. It’s a good thing.”

Taylor put his charcoal down. “That makes me stand out?”

I nodded. “In the best possible way, of course. Just wait. You are going to be—”

“Milo Markopoulos, this is your third warning. I want you—”

“To take myself to the office, Ms. Cox.” I shouldered my bag and stood. “You can give me back my sketchbook in Biology,” I told Taylor. “Save me a chair and I’ll share my notes.”

He just stared.

I stood at the front of the classroom while Ms. Cox filled out the misdemeanor slip. I saw Madison drop her eraser. Taylor reached down to pick it up. She smiled as she thanked him, tucking her black bobbed hair out of her face. When I left the classroom, it was with the knowledge that she’d inched her chair over to be next to his.

It hurt, but gut instinct told me this story was worth suffering for.

By the time I got to Biology, Taylor was the center of a crowd of kids. “I’m not sure what extracurricular,” he said. “I’ve fenced before but not seriously.”

“Basketball.” Alexis sat on the edge of his desk. “You’ve got the height. And the girl’s team always cheers for the guys and vice versa, so I’d be there to help you settle in.”

Logan leaned forward. “If you’re thinking about football next year, then it’s got to be wrestling. Most of the team takes it. You’d get to know everyone in no time.”

I slid into a desk at the front of the classroom. Opening my binder, I placed a fresh piece of loose-leaf on my desk, ready to take notes. Even without turning to look, I was very conscious of Taylor, two rows behind me. If I wanted this story to remain an exclusive, I had to act fast.

The bell rang for lunch. Most of the class ambled for the door.

Ms. Drake glanced up. “Taylor, is it? Stay behind so I can give you the list of study materials.”

A few girls looked inclined to linger, but as Alexis and Sarah Choi took up position either side of Taylor, they recognized defeat and drifted away. No one wanted to cross the Feministas.

I shouldered my bag and followed. I could trip one of them, but was it worth the risk? I was already on the jocks’ shit list without annoying their girlfriends.

I knelt to untie my shoelace, glancing back.

I wasn’t the only loiterer. The man from AP English stood in the hall, appearing extremely interested in the poster calling for newspaper submissions.

I frowned. No one was that interested in the poster. I knew, because since I’d made it we hadn’t had a single submission. Even my fellow reporters hadn’t mustered a tenth of the interest the guy was currently giving it. What was his name? Harper?

He glanced at me, and I looked down, fumbling with my laces. The man’s eyes were hard as concrete. In that second’s glance, I got the impression he knew exactly what I was doing.

Impossible. I took a deep breath, willing my fingers not to shake as I pulled my lace tight and then undid it. As far as he knew, I was an ordinary, unremarkable student with bad timing and an even worse case of OCD. All the same, as I heard the classroom door open and the clatter of feet coming toward me, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being observed.

And then I had a moment of brilliance.

I stood just as the three of them reached me, falling into step between Alexis and Sarah Choi, forcing Taylor to fall behind. “Oh my god, Alexis. Do you know that guy?”

Alexis rolled her eyes toward Sarah. “What guy? My life does not revolve around the members of your sex, freak.”

“Don’t turn around,” I told her. “But that man back there? Totally waiting for you to leave the classroom.”

“There’s nothing weird about that,” Taylor said. “Mr. Harper’s here to observe high school life. He probably wanted to ask the teacher something.”

Sarah Choi glanced over her shoulder. “He’s following us now.” She paused, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “He’s not as old as I thought. Kind of cute. For a member of the patriarchy.”

“Bet he has his own car. And that’s a nice suit.” I sighed. “Man, Alexis. Some people have all the luck.”

Alexis cast a look back down the corridor. “What makes you think he’s following me?”

“He’s not following Sarah.” I held my breath.

I needn’t have worried. Sarah’s shoulders stiffened, and she tossed her ponytail. “I don’t see why not. I’m a free woman.”

Alexis and I shared a glance, our eyes dropping as one to the Friendship is Magic water bottle Sarah held and then back up to the buttoned-up collar of her dress shirt.

“We’re not in middle school,” Alexis said, readjusting her blouse to better display her generous cleavage. “*My Little Pony*’s not cute. It’s childish.”

“Men don’t go for kid stuff,” I agreed. “They’re all about the bass.”

“Oh my god, Milo. Shut up.” What Sarah lacked in curves, she made up for in muscle. Being shoved aside by the school’s champion tennis player? Not fun. “You calling me treble?”

Alexis smirked at her. “Why do you think you play piccolo, Saz?”

“Shut. Up.” Sarah sucked in a deep breath and unbuttoned her collar. “Watch this.” She looked over her shoulder, flashing a lot of white teeth and sauntered down the hall, turning toward the art rooms.

Alexis shook her head. “E for Effort. But this is how it’s done. You watching this, Milo?”

“Avidly,” I assured her.

Alexis swung down the hall heading directly to the cafeteria. She definitely had the edge over Sarah, aware of her appeal and unhurried. But we did not stay to watch the result of her studied saunter. I pushed Taylor down the corridor toward the gym. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to miss lunch,” I lied. “This is a shortcut.”

“I’m pretty sure the cafeteria’s that way—”

“And get between a Feminista and her prey? You’ll thank me later, after you’ve seen them devour their own.” The seniors had the first lunch period and were making their way to their afternoon classes, not paying us any attention. I had Taylor all to myself. Perfect. “Tell me everything about you.”

“Uh—no.”

Despite Taylor’s best efforts, by the time we got to the cafeteria and collected our lunch, I’d learned Taylor read in his spare time, liked games but didn’t call himself a gamer, had no favorite football team and refused to tell me what music he listened to.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“Rude. How else am I going to help you make the biggest decision of your high school life?” We stood at the end of the line, the cafeteria open before us. The majority of our classmates were already seated. I waved toward the tables. “Choosing the right clique.”

Taylor frowned at me. “Bernhardt doesn’t have cliques. ‘Due to its emphasis on academic standards, mandated extracurricular activities and student-led committees, Bernhardt provides a unique learning environment that develops leadership free of rivalries and limiting stereotypes.’”

“Wow. Someone read the school brochure a few times too many.”

“You’re going to tell me it’s not true? Everyone I’ve talked to so far has been nice.”

“Because you haven’t chosen a clique yet. Once you’ve stated your allegiance, everything changes.” I nodded toward the tables in front of us. “Do those look like tables divided by a unique learning environment?”

Taylor considered the tables. “Yes?”

I decided to help him out. It (probably) wasn't his fault he'd been homeschooled. "The table closest to us. Notice anything they have in common?"

"They're all high school students wearing the same uniform? I don't know." Taylor readjusted his hold on his lunch tray. "They look like a pretty good mix to me."

"They're all wearing the school pin."

"They all share school spirit?"

"So there are only eight kids in our entire class with school spirit?" I shook my head. "No, my poor homeschooled child. Bernhardt doesn't have 'cliques.' We have 'circles.' Or 'discussion groups.'" I nodded to the table. "Or the school Spirit Squad. Who eat together at the best table every day because it's convenient for their discussions about school spirit and occupy the most sought after positions in high school society on account of their excess of leadership—and school spirit."

Taylor studied them. "Are you bitter because they sold out of pins?"

"I'm not bitter because of the pins. I'm bitter because like so many of our peers, I envisaged Bernhardt as a place free of cliques and popularity wars. You have to be smart to get in, right? Finally, all the smart kids who never made a sports team, whose essay on the evils of plastic shopping bags never got the recognition it deserved, who got called 'nerd' or 'teacher's pet' and never got a date in junior high, had a place of their own where no one would dump their books. What did we do with this utopia? We realized anyone could be popular, so we'd better claim it first and woe betide anyone who gets in the way."

"*Mean Girls* was a comedy, Milo. Not a documentary."

"Do you see anyone at the other tables laughing, Taylor? That's a noise infraction. The teachers trust the Spirit Squad to set an example for the rest of us and keep us in line. They're kind of like hall monitors, except cooler." I frowned at the back of Logan's head. "At least at Sleepy Hollow, when I got stuffed into a locker, I knew I was getting a better grade at the end of the year than the guy picking on me. Now, I don't even have that."

"Maybe you should avoid getting stuffed in lockers."

"You're looking at a classic catch twenty-two. If you sit with the Spirit Squad now, you will be branded as arrogant and rejected. If you sit anywhere else, you're lacking confidence, identifying yourself as a future victim."

“I can’t stand here all day.”

“There’s safety in numbers. You want to make friends as quickly as possible. The longer you’re alone, the more of a victim you are—and the more victimized you are, the less people will want to be friends with you. It is a vicious circle. I mean, clique.” I paused. “No, I did mean circle.”

“I’ve heard enough!” Taylor turned away.

“Wait, Taylor! You’re making a serious mistake!”

Taylor paused to look over his shoulder. “Are you threatening me with not joining your ‘discussion group’?”

I gave Taylor as injured a look as I dared while in the same room as the Spirit Squad. “I’m giving you the facts so that you can make an informed choice. The sooner you find a group to belong to, the better it is for your high school career.”

Taylor sighed. “Inform me then.”

“First thing you need to know is that the closer and more easily accessible to the lunch line, the higher the social status of the people sitting at it. Over there, for example, the Feministas—you’ve met most of them already. Then the jocks that aren’t on the varsity team, the drama and dance kids. You’d stand a fighting chance there, but only if you can tolerate Musical Mondays.”

“Musical Mondays?”

“Communication entirely in lines from musicals. Sung, not spoken.”

“Pass. What’s that table?”

“Band. You don’t have to smell funny to join, but it doesn’t hurt. Beyond that, the arty kids and the anime club—”

“Isn’t pink hair against the school dress code?”

“Not in whatever series they’re marathoning this week.” I nodded beyond them. “The kids glaring at us? The future librarians aka the Swots. The only rule at their table is that no one talks unless all pencils are down.”

“And the table beyond that? Skaters? Emos? Punks?”

“Any other school they would be the stoners or the dropouts. But this is Bernhardt. The biggest risk they take is waiting until the day before it’s due to start an assignment.” I shook my head. “There’s a rumor Hannah borrowed

chemicals from the school lab without permission to make hair dye, but nothing was proven. Mostly they deal in forged homework assignments and test answers.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Being on the varsity or junior varsity team is dependent on maintaining an A average in your grades. There is an underground trade in homework. Bernhardt’s unique all right. Just not in the way the brochure wants. On that note, it pays to walk around the cafeteria rather than between tables. Less opportunity for people to trip you.”

Taylor gave me another sideways look. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking behind his clear blue eyes.

I was compelled to keep talking despite the fact that I couldn’t breathe. “Anyone else, I’d say pick a table and make the best of it, but you... It’s a risk, but I think you could pull it off.”

“Pull what off?”

“School Spirit.” I nodded to the table.

“Why would I want to sit with a bunch of kids that you describe as power hungry and elitist?”

“They’re not all that way. See the blonde girl, patting her hair? Fern. This time last year, she was the teacher’s pet, known for crying when we dissected frogs and campaigning for meatless Mondays. Then she wound up tutoring Carson, football player extraordinaire. He was captain of the junior varsity team as a sophomore and even played in varsity matches. No surprise when he won class president. Could have dated any girl in the school—and he chose Fern. Now, she’s the obvious choice for Head Cheerleader next year and everyone knows it. Smart, pretty, talented. No one would be able to stand her if she wasn’t so *nice*. But her kind nature makes her exactly what you’re looking for. A way in.”

“Are you seriously advocating I suck up to a girl I don’t know to get to sit at her table?”

“It won’t be easy. Those other girls? Diva supremes. Victoria and Maria don’t like anyone or anything. They’re not too cool for school; they’re too cool for life. And on Fern’s other side is Declan, drama superstar with attention deficit disorder. As in, if he’s not getting enough attention, something’s wrong.

On that note, he is *the* popular gay kid. You can be gay, but you can't be more popular than him. That's the rule."

"That's a stupid rule."

"This *is* high school. It's all about rules, especially stupid ones. And making the stupid rules is a lot better than following them, so let me finish." I nodded to the broad-shouldered guy laughing loudly at his own joke. "Logan is proof that all the education in the world cannot make you less of a jerk. Then again, he is a shoo-in for football captain next year. All he needs is an A minus in all his subjects, and he is pretty much king of the school. You know the saying 'power corrupts'? Logan is that theory in action. And so are most of his friends, except Boomer, there. The tall guy."

"I don't—"

"Boomer's a nice guy," I said. "But he doesn't have the spine to stand up to the rest of them. He's only at the table because he is the only junior on the varsity basketball team, and they had two unexpected vacancies. The rest are Logan's football friends. Actually, Logan talked to you about wrestling, right? There's your opening! Ask him about—" I turned back and found Taylor heading in the wrong direction.

I had to jog to catch up with him. "What are you doing?"

Taylor looked down at my hand on his arm, casually shaking it off. "Having my lunch."

"But you walked right past the Spirit Squad. You even walked past the jock table and the drama kids. You're heading"—I followed Taylor's line of vision all the way to the extreme back table and the sole girl sitting there—"directly to Loserville. Seriously. You do not want to sit there. Everyone will treat you like you have the plague!"

"Good," Taylor said. "Because if they're anything like you describe them, I don't want anything to do with them—or your disgusting opinions."

Every word he said seemed echoed loudly inside my head. Again, I found myself entirely unable to breathe. "My what?"

"I hate shallowness. People aren't commodities. You can't label them and assign value to them like you do clothes or brands. Anyone who tries to makes me sick. And you're the shallowest person I've ever met." Taylor delivered his opinion in the same calm, measured tone that he'd used to tell me he was

homeschooled. Only his lowered tone indicated the seriousness of the exchange. “Go back to your popularity contests and your rules. I want no part of it.”

I stood stunned as he turned, walking over to the almost empty table. The black-haired girl sitting there looked up. Taylor motioned to an empty seat, and after a long moment, she nodded, actually taking out the buds of her iPod to hear him.

I watched Taylor sit with an incredible feeling of numbness.

Having my self-esteem crushed was nothing new. But Taylor...

Taylor had sent my entire self-worth reeling. *And* he'd taken my seat.

Chapter Two

“Milo! I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

I jumped.

A hand clamped on my shoulder, and Candice steered me down the hall. “Newspaper meeting. Or did you make other plans?” Her fingers dug into my shoulder.

The question was rhetorical. My plans were irrelevant compared to Candice, a force of nature in senior form. She was hard as steel and unmoving as a rock. Where other girls restyled themselves to fit the latest trends, Candice’s tight curls and fire truck red nail polish had remained unchanged her entire Bernhardt career, despite student opinion and teacher disapproval. I fully believed she’d caused the recent natural hair movement just by existing.

“You know nothing could ever come between me and a newspaper meeting. I just—forgot. Distracted.” The usual after-school chatter filled the corridors, energy levels increasing the closer we got to the time to go home. “Working on a story.”

“No spoilers.” Candice propelled me into the AP English classroom. “You can give us the full summary at the meeting. Hi, Sam. Ready to start?”

The final member of the newspaper staff slid off her desk. “Actually, um.” She glanced down at the floor. “I’m not staying.”

Candice’s bag hit the top of the desk with a loud *thunk*. “Another orthodontic appointment?” she asked, letting go of me to pat her hair, looking for the pen she habitually kept there. “You’re going to have the most expensive teeth in school.”

Sam didn’t smile. Her hands twisted the hem of her uniform sweater.

I poked Candice in the arm. “What’s up, Sam? Did something happen?”

“I quit.”

Candice stiffened. “You what?”

Sam took a deep breath. “I quit.”

“You can’t—”

“Watch me.” Sam gained speed as she went, like a pen rolling off a desk. “I’m sick of this. Sick of being ignored by my friends, pushed in the halls,

tripped—I hate it! And Coach called me aside after practice yesterday to tell me that she was benching me for my lack of team spirit! Like it’s my fault no one will pass to me!”

“You being benched is only going to harm them,” I told her. “Wait it out. You’ll see—”

Sam shook her head. “Sarah Gillepsie’s been after my place on the team since the start of semester,” she said. “I can’t get benched!”

“So you’re going to give in?” Candice’s voice had a weirdly hollow note to it. I glanced at her, but her face remained as impassive and unimpressed as ever.

Sam looked stricken and then determined. “So what? It’s not like it’s a real paper! Or that anyone even reads it! I wish I’d listened to my friends and joined a real club—”

“That’s fine,” Candice said. “Your contributions won’t be missed. I accept your resignation.”

Sam hesitated. For a moment, I thought she was going to burst into tears, but instead she turned. “Fine!”

As the door slammed shut behind her, I let out a breath. “If this is how Monday turned out, I am afraid for Thursday—”

Candice’s expression didn’t even flicker. She stared fixedly at the door Sam had vanished through.

I had a sudden sickening feeling. Candice was a school legend. She’d gained a reputation amongst students and teachers alike for her take-no-prisoners attitude ever since her first freshman week, when she’d hit the school quarterback with a dictionary when he’d tried to remove her from her chosen desk at the library. No one had ever seen her show the slightest hint of vulnerability in the four years she’d attended Bernhardt. Ice queen didn’t cut it. Candice was an entire iceberg, the single most terrifying person I knew. There was no way she was about to cry!

I swallowed. As the Titanic had discovered, icebergs had a lot more going on beneath the surface. Candice’s non-reaction could have been nothing. Or it could be the frozen shock of someone who’d been pushed too far. “Hey.” Was I going to lose an arm? I put my hand carefully on Candice’s shoulder. “She’ll be back. They’ll all be back—”

Candice crumpled. Her face gave way first and then the rest of her, and suddenly our ice-cold editor was leaning on me. Global warming had a lot to answer for!

I awkwardly patted her back. “A few more weeks, and everyone will forget—”

“But what if they don’t?” Candice had even told off the principal! No way was she crying on my shoulder! I was hallucinating. Had to be. “Last year, our paper won best in state! Now—we have a staff of two and a readership of zero. Even Mr. Perry doesn’t read it, and he’s in charge! If Ally knew what I’d let the paper become—”

“You’re a great editor, Candice. That’s why Ally chose you to take over the paper. She knew you’d stick to it, no matter what happened.” I tried to sound confident. “We just have to wait it out.”

Candice drew a deep breath. “Right. The truth’s more important than some dumb popularity contest.” She let go of my shoulder and turned her back on me. “I guess we need to decide who’s taking over Sam’s features.”

Other people might have considered her rude. I respected Candice’s attempt to regain her professionalism. “I will do anything you need me to.”

“Thanks, Milo—”

“Except cover sports games.”

“Sam was our sports reporter.”

“I can’t, Candice. You know, the track team practices on the indoor track now, the same time as the basketball team? I have been hit by stray balls so many times now they’ve named a play after me. Why would I want to go to a game with all their supporters there? They’d kill me!”

“So I’ll take the guys’ teams; you take the girls’.”

“That’s even worse! At least when the guys play, they’re on the field. The girls’ games, the guys are free roaming. The coach doesn’t even try to keep them in line!”

“Milo, is everything all right?” Candice turned around to look at me.

“We’re high school students. Nothing is ever all right.”

“You know what I mean. We knew that running the Carson story wasn’t going to make us popular, but this... A bit of backlash is expected in the

journalism world, but bullying is something else.” This time it was Candice’s hand on my arm. “If you want to go to the teachers, I’ll back you up.”

I smiled thinly. “So they can tell us what an excellent opportunity this is to develop our problem-solving skills? They’re not going to help. What do you think that assembly about peer support was?”

“I’m serious, Milo.”

“So am I.” I looked down. “I’m their target. If I dropped the newspaper, you wouldn’t have to deal with any of this—”

“Not happening. You’re deputy editor for a reason.” Candice squeezed my arm. “And the reason is you care about the paper—about writing—more than anyone else in the entire school.” She paused. “Except me, of course.”

“But—”

“No buts. It was my decision as editor to run the story, and it’s my decision as editor that you are not quitting.”

“Um—”

“Anyone messes with you, I will feed them their own textbooks,” Candice promised. “Now. Our next issue.”

I managed an actual smile this time. “Next issue.”

Candice sat on the teacher’s desk, binder opened across her lap. “Current events. The junior class elections are the only major school event happening now.”

This day was never going to end. I slumped forward onto my desk. “And they’re not happening.”

“Exactly! This is a story, Milo. We have to report it. As the only junior on the paper, this has your name all over it.”

I groaned. Candice was right, but *man* did I not want to cover the elections. Non-elections. “What story? The entire school already knows that the juniors have had two chances already to elect a new class president, and we didn’t have a single candidate.”

Candice tapped her binder. “And why is that?”

I sat up to frown at her. “You know why. Carson’s left the school, but his friends will make life a living hell for anyone who dares replace him.”

Candice smirked at me. “You’re telling me that won’t capture attention? Former class president bequeaths classmates legacy of fear—that’s a story!”

“That’s an epitaph! Remember how much pressure we got to retract the Carson story? We got accused of being biased and reporting gossip. Coach Burns said if we ran another story painting his team in a negative light, he’d shut us down!”

“Yes,” Candice said slowly. “He did. And that’s exactly why we have to run this story.”

I stared at her. “But the paper—”

“Bernhardt needs the paper,” Candice continued. “It’s the one place in this school where anyone can speak without fear. Freshman, senior, cheerleader, geek, athlete, loner, scholarship kid—everyone’s words get equal weight here. We can’t lose that. We have to protect everyone’s right to speak.”

“But if we tell the truth, they’ll axe the paper.”

“A good newspaper doesn’t just report facts. It challenges them. No one else in this school is going to speak up against the situation, so it’s got to be us.”

“Does it have to be specifically about the elections? Look.” I took some pages from my binder and gave them to Candice. “I went to the shelter that the winter formal funds went to last year. A follow-up piece on how the money we raised was used and how much it meant to them. If the formal is canceled, it’s these people who lose the most.”

Candice hummed thoughtfully, flicking through the pages. “You went to the shelter?”

“I spent all Saturday there, volunteering. There are kids there from other high schools who help out.” I turned the page over so that Candice could see my photos. “Got some quotes and photos. The volunteers are our age, so the story’s relatable—”

“That’s a lot of work just to avoid covering the election.”

“People’s actual welfare depends on the ability of our peers to let go of a grudge! That is a story—”

“A human interest story—and it’s a good human interest story.” Candice handed the pages back to me. “But you know human interest stories don’t cut it for the front page. Not with our peers.”

“Candice—”

“You have to think in terms of the paper, Milo. And there’s only one thing that the students of Bernhardt want to read about. Themselves. E-mail me the shelter story; it’s going to be our page two opener. But the front page—”

The classroom door swung open.

Declan looked right at me. “This classroom’s empty. Let’s go.”

Students filed in after Declan. Desks and chairs were pushed aside and a CD player set up. I just managed to grab my binder before my desk was moved. As I stood, my chair was whisked away.

“Excuse me.” Candice slid off the desk, arms folded across her chest. “We are having a meeting in here.”

Declan raised an eyebrow. “Two people aren’t a meeting. Eight people, on the other hand, are a rehearsal.”

“Rehearse in the auditorium. This is the newspaper’s room—”

Taylor Swift blasted out of the CD player loud enough that I jumped.

“We got a note.” Declan smirked as he held it up. “Signed by Mr. Perry.”

Candice snatched it out of Declan’s hand, scanning it. “Milo?”

I leaned over to read the note. “That’s definitely his handwriting.” Bernhardt credited its reputation for fostering leadership qualities and responsibility to the ‘hands off’ attitude staff took to our extracurricular activities, observing, rather than participating in our meetings. Mr. Perry took that a step further, supervising Candice and I from the staff break room. Still, I couldn’t imagine even laid-back Mr. Perry would betray us by note. “Let’s see... Something, something, drama... I hope you’ll use this opportunity to find common ground—” I narrowed my eyes at Declan. Just as suspected. He’d done something. “This is easily sorted out—”

Candice crumpled the note. “This is bull.” Everyone watching her took a step back. “All the classrooms in this school and you need to practice in ours?”

“We need a room. You can meet anywhere.” Declan shrugged carelessly. “But you’re welcome to stay while we practice.” He turned back to the group, clearly thinking that Candice was not crazy enough to fight eight people at once. “Okay. Let’s take this from the top—”

He did not know Candice like I did. I caught her elbow.

“Let me go.” Candice didn’t budge. “I have a point to make.”

“Please, Candice.” I tugged her toward the door. “I’m not ready to become editor.”

For some reason, she waited until we were in the hall to shake me off. “Why did you stop me? I could have taken the whole lot of them—”

“That’s why I stopped you! Freshman punches quarterback? That is the kind of headline people love. Senior turns on juniors in violent rage? People will question your editing ability!”

“We wouldn’t be allowed to run the story anyway,” Candice said grudgingly. “Because we’d be too involved.”

Was she frowning because our room had been stolen from us? Or was it anger that such an amazing story would go uncovered? “Right.”

“Still. Mr. Perry is hearing about this.” Candice swung her bag over her shoulder, starting toward the teachers’ break room. “Coming?”

I shook my head. “I’ll read your report.”

“Deadline’s Wednesday.”

“I know.”

I took my stuff out of my locker, lost in thought. Had whoever coined the word “deadline” meant it to sound that ominous, or did that happen only when Candice said it? “Dead. Line. Deadline. Line-dead—oof!”

“Sorry, weirdo. Your back was in the way of my elbow.” Logan smirked. The guys at his side snickered on cue.

I shook my head, shutting my locker. “How nostalgic. I haven’t heard that one since third grade.”

Logan stopped grinning. “What did you call me?”

“Nostalgic?” I stared at him. “Are you serious?”

His friends snickered.

Logan clenched his fists. “Tell me what you said, freak.”

“Look it up. You’ll find it on the vocab quiz we took in English last week.”

“Didn’t you ace that quiz, too? Seriously, Log.” Matt nudged him. “How can you forget a word that quickly?”

Logan blustered. “I’ve got a selective memory, okay? I’d know the answer for sure in English class!”

“That’s some selective memory, all right.” Jordan started in on him.

I had no idea why I wasn’t currently being stuffed into my locker, but I did not question my luck. I grabbed my bag and made my way down the hall as quickly as possible, ducking past a downcast figure to make my escape.

A full three seconds later, my brain caught up to me. I paused, looking back down the hall. Logan still stood in the middle of the hall, protesting as his friends joked. None of them noticed the student who walked past them. Nobody gave him a second glance at all.

My heart sank. Taylor had gone from center of attention to not worth a second look faster than Zayne Malik’s solo career. He shuffled down the hall, attracting no one’s attention, another high school misfit, destined for misery until graduation, two long years away.

And it was all my fault.

Taylor’s abrupt reversal in fortune troubled me the entire walk across Tarrytown. It was with relief that I unlocked our apartment door and shrugged my coat off. Finally, the day was over!

It was like Mom knew. A rich, savory aroma filled the apartment like a warm hug. I dumped my bag on the floor with my coat and followed it to the Crock-Pot. Just as I thought. Stew.

There was a note on the fridge whiteboard. “Dinner ready 7:00. No Dairy. Snack in fridge. Don’t stay up late, Spaghetti-O.” She’d signed it with a heart and a couple of kisses.

“*Mom.*”

Mom’s incredibly smart and organized. As night manager of the Irvington General Hospital, she has to be. She knows the names and personal details of her staff, patients and EMTs and never forgets what we’re not supposed to eat on what day (we’re Greek Orthodox. There are a lot of fast days). And yet, despite repeated conversations on the subject, she can’t remember that high school students don’t answer to Spaghetti-O.

I opened the fridge. The snack was an apple, so I wouldn’t have bothered except that I’d skipped lunch. I lingered over the Crock-Pot for a few minutes

before deciding to get my chores over with. I peeled off my school uniform directly into the washing machine. Cold wash: better for the environment, and you don't need to sort!

I took special delight in finding my rattiest pair of sweatpants and pulled the sweater I'd worn yesterday over my head with a sense of triumph. Take that, Taylor! The shallowest person ever wouldn't wear the same clothes two days running!

Or would he if he was trying to impress someone with how not shallow he was?

Mom hadn't opened the curtains, so the living room was shrouded in shadow. I flopped over the back of the sofa to brood. Of course, I wasn't shallow! What was I doing on the newspaper if I was shallow? Shallow people cared only about looks and popularity. They joined sports teams and did cheerleading. Nonshallow people did the unpopular extracurriculars and sat alone at lunch. You could not get any less popular than the newspaper currently, and I hadn't even eaten lunch. Conclusion: Taylor was wrong, and I should start working on my acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Deep Thought.

I muffled my groan in the sofa cushions. There was one great gaping hole in my logic. If I wasn't shallow, why did I care so much what Taylor thought? I slid face-first over the sofa, coming to rest on the floor in utter defeat. I'd have to join a clique, maybe even two. From now on, I was shopping only at Abercrombie. I disgusted even myself.

The doorbell rang.

I dragged myself over to the door on my elbows, more limp noodle than human. "What is it?"

"I just moved into the next building," a voice said. "We got your mail by mistake. I accidentally opened it—"

We got your mail. Those four words changed the scene from gritty documentary to horror. I scrambled to my feet, hoping the familiar voice on the other side of the door was just my imagination.

It was not. "You opened it?"

Taylor took a step back. "Accidentally. Why would I want to read your mail?" He held out the heavy manila envelope. "You can see what happened.

The last digit of your building number got covered by the postage label, and they brought it to me. I'm in building II."

I grabbed the envelope. The pages of my manuscript looked like they'd been crushed—had he read them? Then I caught sight of the cover sheet, and my heart lurched.

Dear Mr. Markopoulos,

*We thank you for your interest in our agency.
Unfortunately—*

I moaned, hitting myself in the face with the envelope. Rejected again!

"It's not that bad," Taylor said. "They said it was good for a first effort."

I laughed at that, reaching for the door handle. "Which would be good—if it was a first effort."

Not until I had slammed the door did I realize just how badly I'd screwed up. I slumped back against the door. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!" How could I have been so dumb? Taylor hadn't just seen the writing I'd shown no one, not even Candice. He knew it had been rejected multiple times! That information in the hands of someone who despised me? "What is wrong with me?" I punctuated each word by slapping myself in the head.

"Uh, Milo? I can still hear you—"

"Just go away!" I slumped against the door. "Haven't you made me miserable enough for one day?"

"I didn't—"

"Go. A. Way."

I listened to his footsteps echo all the way down the stairs, before sliding down the door onto the floor. This was the worst Monday in the entire history of Mondays.

Half an hour later, I climbed the steps of the Building II. Our apartment was one of a row of Dutch Colonial townhouses that had been bought up, restored, refurbished according to modern needs and split into upstairs and downstairs apartments in keeping with modern family sizes. I rang the doorbell, hoping I'd guessed correctly that Taylor's was the upstairs apartment. Coming over to grovel was bad enough, but groveling to the entirely wrong apartment?

The thought was almost enough to make me turn around. Only the fact that there was no way I could avoid school until the entire student body forgot my film script had been rejected multiple times by numerous agents kept me where I was. I hadn't missed a single day of school my entire time at Bernhardt and not for lack of trying! Other students' moms believed them when they had a headache the day of the big history test. Mine gave me the same reception she gave the patients at her hospital.

No, if I wanted to avoid open and abject mockery, Taylor was my only chance. If only I had the slightest clue what to say. I pressed the doorbell and smoothed my hair down with my fingers. I'd changed into my newest pair of jeans and preppiest sweater. Not that I needed dignity for what I was attempting, but I still had pride. That, and while Taylor claimed he didn't have time for popularity contests, he was better dressed to come over and ruin my evening than most of the student body was on a date.

Taylor raised an eyebrow as he opened the door. "What is the point in me going away if you come here?"

"Shut up and let me apologize." I paused. That wasn't how I'd planned this.

Taylor looked at me. "Apologize?"

I don't know why I felt so nettled. "For yelling at you about the mail. I wanted to say sorry."

"And now you've said sorry."

I rubbed my elbow, fighting the urge to look at my feet. "And make it up to you. I thought, maybe I could help you with your homework. You know, the stuff we covered in class before you moved here." I tapped my backpack. "I brought my notes with me."

Taylor snorted. "You take notes?"

"I take great notes. You think I would offer to tutor you and not bring my notes?"

"I sat behind you in Biology. You spent the entire class scribbling on a piece of paper and not paying any attention to the teacher."

"Maybe I already knew what the teacher was going to say."

Taylor laughed. "I find it really unlikely you know anything that doesn't appear in some trashy teen magazine."

I ducked under Taylor's arm and into the apartment. "Who has time to read? Reality TV. That's where it's at." The apartment was the same size as ours but felt wider. There was less furniture, but it made up for that by being big and black, with feature vases placed exactly where they would best catch the eye. The paintings were vivid and modern. The sofa was leather and the flat screen TV took up an entire wall. It was sleek, streamlined and strange. "You live here?"

"I didn't break in here and steal an apartment if that's what you're asking."

"You just moved, right? Where's all the cardboard?"

"What?"

"When Mom and I moved in, we had cardboard boxes for months. You know... Packing?"

Taylor stiffened. "I moved. The apartment was already here."

"How does that work?"

He shut the door, motioning vaguely to the table. "My father does a lot of business in New York. He figured an apartment was cheaper than a hotel."

I took that as invitation to start unpacking my notes onto the table. "Why doesn't he rent in New York?"

"He hates the city. Tarrytown suits him better, and he doesn't get recommended. Things to do, places to go. He hates people recommending him things."

I frowned. "Really?"

Taylor continued. "It's quiet enough for him to work, and the commute isn't terrible." Taylor stood behind me, watching as I opened my binder. "You're serious about studying?"

"Did you think I wasn't?" I sat down, patting the chair beside me.

Taylor retrieved his own binder and sat. "They don't study on *Jersey Shore*."

I elbowed him. "Most of what happens on *Jersey Shore* counts as biology. So, what did you cover already?"

“No, it’s fine. I know how to order in—of course I am.” Taylor had turned his back on me to answer his phone. “I’ve got a classmate here—yes, from school. Where else would I get a classmate?”

I smirked. Parents were the same the world over.

“Helping me with my homework. Uh—I don’t know. I can ask. Sure. See you later.” Taylor ended the call.

“Ask me what?”

“That was a private conversation.”

“That you just had in front of me.”

Taylor tossed the phone from one hand to the other. “Shouldn’t you try to pretend that you’re not listening?”

“It wouldn’t work. I am physically incapable of faking it.” My brain caught up to my mouth a moment too late. “Keeping secrets, I mean. I just kind of blurt things out.”

Taylor’s fingers tightened around his phone. “You’re telling me.”

“It sucks. In elementary school, it was Milo the tattletale, until fifth grade when we had *Harriet the Spy* for summer reading. I was Harriet until we graduated. Middle school was better. I was just Milo the sneak. Then high school. I joined the newspaper.”

“And found your true calling as a gossip columnist?”

“Hey!” I sat up. “I’m not the guy who is getting schooled in science by someone who keeps up with the Kardashians.”

“I’m not sure who that reflects more badly on, me or you. You just admitted to enjoying the Kardashians.”

I shrugged. “No shame in owning who you are.”

“You could just not tell stories.”

“You try it! It’s harder than you think.”

“Not really.” Taylor hesitated and then sat down, still toying with his phone.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “We’ll see how long it takes our classmates to hear about my script.” Would he take the bait?

No. Taylor just looked at me. “I’m not in the habit of spreading gossip.”

“It’s only your first day at high school. Just wait.”

“I’m not going to turn into one of your vapid friends.”

“But if you don’t watch TV and you don’t have a girlfriend, what else are you going to talk about?”

“Maybe I don’t want friends.” Taylor picked up his book again. “Maybe I want to spend my time in school productively. You know, learn something.”

“No one goes to school to learn.” I hesitated. “I saw you heading home. You looked—lonely.”

Taylor shrugged. “I’m used to it. My parents travel a lot. They always leave someone looking after me, but even then I’m usually doing my own thing.”

“Who was that on the phone?”

“My dad’s assistant. She thought I should ask if you wanted food.”

“That depends on the food.”

“I don’t know.” Taylor picked up his phone again. “What is there to order in around here?”

My turn to look at him skeptically. “What happened to knowing how to order takeout?”

By the time I’d run Taylor through the local delivery places, I had to stay and make sure it all arrived properly. That took us all the way through science, and when we were done eating, we were on to math.

As Taylor worked on a practice question, I browsed the DVD shelves. Someone in his family was a serious film collector. Everything from the newest releases to classics were neatly arranged on the shelves. “I cannot believe you have *Some Like it Hot!* It’s my favorite movie.”

Taylor hummed absently. “I think I got this one. Come look?”

I leaned over his chair to glance at the calculation. “Took you long enough. Maybe you should watch more TV.”

Taylor sighed, closing the textbook. “My brain is fried. TV might be all it’s good for.”

I smirked, packing up my own books. As I looked up, I found that Taylor was studying me closely. “What now? Do I have pepperoni in my teeth?”

“You’re actually really smart,” Taylor said slowly.

“Why do you think I’m at Bernhardt?”

“After the crap you spouted at lunch, I wasn’t sure.”

I swept my books into my bag and stood. “I know how the system works. That doesn’t mean I *like* the system.”

“If you’re smart enough to know how messed up it is, how come you’re not smart enough to know better than to go along with it?”

“Because to get people to listen to you, you have to be popular. To be popular, you have to fake who you are to fit in. By the time you’ve done that and people like you, you’re not who you were. You’re invested in the system.”

“It’s high school. Not *prison*.” Taylor shook his head.

“Trust me,” I told him. “Standing up for your values only ever gets you the fuzzy end of the lollipop.”

“The what?”

“The fuzzy end of the lollipop. You know, Marilyn Monroe’s character, Sugar, and her saxophone players? They always run away and leave her with it?”

Taylor’s expression was as blank as a whiteboard that had just been wiped clean.

I dropped my bag back onto the table. “You haven’t watched it.”

“Watched what?”

“How can someone act so superior and not have watched *Some Like it Hot*?” I pushed him toward the massive sofa. “Sit down. You’re about to be educated.”

“By the original dumb blonde?” Taylor snorted. “I don’t think so.”

“You can insult me, but leave Marilyn out of this!” I removed the DVD from its case and looked around for the player.

“Here,” Taylor said, taking the disc. “But I warn you now, I’ll watch it, but I’m not going to like it.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

The ending theme swelled up to fill the gap left by those final words. I sighed happily, arms wrapped around the cushion on my lap. “See?”

Taylor had stopped complaining, and we'd watched the last half of the movie in silence that could have been companionable if he didn't hate me. "It wasn't bad."

"Bad? It was nominated for six Academy Awards!"

"I'll admit. Monroe is actually a decent actress, and there were some good lines. But it's not exactly *The Theory of Everything*."

"People don't want uncomfortable truths. They want to be entertained. Why do you think *Slumdog Millionaire* sold better than *Ghandi*?"

"*Ghandi* was a biographical—" Taylor paused. "*You've* seen *Ghandi*?"

"Don't sound so surprised!" I stood up, releasing the cushion I'd been hugging. "And I'm saying that if they'd cast Dev Patel as *Ghandi*, it would be a lot more popular."

Taylor winced. "I cannot understand how someone who watched *Ghandi* can prefer this sort of thing." He waved a hand toward the flat screen where the credits for *Some Like it Hot* still played. "Ghandi stood up for his beliefs. He never gave in, never stopped believing in a better world—He changed the world!"

"So did Marilyn Monroe!"

"How?" Taylor stood up too. "What kind of a message does the movie send? You can lie; you can disguise yourself; you can steal, but in the end it doesn't even matter?"

"Did we even watch the same movie? It's about the fact that you're not perfect; nobody's perfect, but you can still be happy. There is someone who will love you for who you are—no matter who you are."

"I'm pretty sure that's not what the movie was about—"

"Was too!"

"And even if it was, that's got nothing to do with real life!"

"What, and Ghandi does? How many Ghandis have you met in real life?"

Taylor looked at me again.

"I know he was a real person! But person, singular. I guarantee you that you will not run into anyone like him at Bernhardt."

"But I will meet plenty of people like Sugar or Osgood?"

I balled my hands into fists. “How is dressing like a woman to avoid being killed by the mob any different to dressing like a cheerleader and going to school every day, pretending to be someone you’re not?”

“You can’t compare a bunch of high schoolers to the mob!”

“Want to bet? Join the wrestling practice after school tomorrow and then watch *The Godfather*. See who you think is more humane afterward—”

The apartment door opened. “Taylor, I’m so sorry. Traffic—” A woman in a business suit slowed to a halt. “Who is this?”

“The classmate I told you about.” Taylor motioned toward me with visible reluctance. “Naomi, this is Milo. Milo, this is Naomi, my dad’s assistant—”

Naomi raised eyebrows and shook my hand. “You’re out late on a school night, Milo.”

“Am I?” I looked at my phone. “Oh shit! I mean—See you at school, Taylor.”

Taylor followed me to the door. “You’re not going to get in trouble?”

“What? No! My mom doesn’t get home till three. I’m fine. I have a deadline is all.”

I ran all the way back to my apartment, but it was no use. It was after ten, and I had no idea of what I was going to do for Candice’s front-page article.

“Why? Why does this always happen to me?”

I lay face down on the carpet, wondering what the headline would be. *Written Off: Prestigious History of Bernhardt Student Newspaper Comes to an End as Editor Murders Only Remaining Staff Member*. I couldn’t even blame Candice. I knew she’d give me a fair write-up from jail.

I rolled onto my back. The ceiling was remarkably lacking in inspiration. The poster that had been there had come down, and I hadn’t gotten around to putting it back up, so it just looked like a blank piece of paper. Exactly what I didn’t need. I rolled onto my side.

There had to be a way to write this article. If I couldn’t tell it from my perspective without getting beaten up and the paper canceled for entirely biased reasons, maybe I could tell it from the perspective of Carson’s friends? *Bros before Dances: Junior Class Unanimous in Loyalty for Ex-Class President*. I could talk about Carson’s influence, the many good things that he had done for

the school, such as playing football and... playing football... I bit my lip. He'd won awards for playing football, right?

"Candice wouldn't need to kill me. I'd do it myself!"

I put my hands over my face. There was no way I could write crap like that. If only there was a presidential candidate! Someone who didn't care about cliques or popularity, someone willing to go out on a limb...

I stretched out my hands, feeling on the carpet for pen and paper scribbling down my thoughts. Taylor for class president... Could I sell this? Taylor had the charisma for sure... but he'd committed the ultimate sin of sitting at the loser table. Or was that to his advantage? *Taylor navigates the minefield of high school cliques with an ease far beyond his years. On his first day, he talked not only to Logan, already earmarked for great things on the varsity football team next season and other leading student luminaries, but he took the time to get to know some of Bernhardt's less outgoing students. There. And Logan couldn't even be mad because I'd name-dropped him. Ignorant of the circumstances that led to—Uh. Better not to mention Carson at all—the need for a second election, Taylor promises to be a candidate that the entire junior class can proudly call their own.* That should do it for the academics and fringe groups. They'd support anyone who wasn't a football player or cheerleader. But Taylor would need their vote, too...

Taylor's depth of world knowledge and passion for good causes is only matched by his interest in sports. Not only does he have experience fencing, but he plans to attend wrestling practice, too. The jocks sorted, now it was time for the girls. *Taylor is single, but with the kind of attention his campaign will bring him, he is unlikely to remain that way for long. This reporter sees plenty of study dates on the horizon for this keen student leader.*

I snorted. It was cheesy beyond belief, and I needed to work in band somehow, but I had a story. I just had to refine it. Opening my laptop, I felt better than I had in weeks. I was about to solve everyone's problems. Candice would get her story. The juniors would get their formal. Some lucky girl was going to date the new class president. And Taylor...

How would Taylor take this? I hesitated, remembering the slouched figure I'd seen in the hall.

I want to spend my time in school productively. You know, learn something.

What could be more productive than class president? Or instructive?

“You thought being the new kid got a lot of attention,” I assured my laptop screen. “Just wait until you’re class president. Everyone’s going to love you.”

Chapter Three

There was a message from Mom on the fridge the next morning. *I thought you liked stew :(*

“Mom.” For all that she considered herself a thoroughly modern woman, Mom did guilt like a Greek grandmother. *I thought you wanted me to make friends*, I wrote back.

It was no good. Not with the dishes I’d forgotten to do cleaned and drying on the counter and the Crock-Pot standing empty. I erased my message, conscious of the pizza I’d helped Taylor consume.

I was at a friend’s place—No, that wasn’t right. Taylor and I were far from friends.

Then again, Taylor wouldn’t watch *Some Like it Hot* for someone he despised. “That’s the moral integrity that will make him such a great student leader,” I informed the fridge. *I was socializing with a member of my peer group who is not in the newspaper club. #MiloLeftTheHouse #RedLetterDay #Stewsday #StewIsNowBreakfast*

As I came down the stairs, I saw Taylor lingering outside his building. He fell into place beside me as I walked. “Aren’t you leaving a little late? Or are you collecting detentions on purpose?”

“Not if I take the shortcut,” I told him. I was happy, full of the stew. It flooded my stomach with a warm glow that spread outward, making me feel on top of the world, especially when Taylor started telling me what he thought of the notes I’d lent him. At that moment, I was totally capable of taking on anything Bernhardt could throw at me.

I even felt slightly sorry as we approached the school building and saw a cluster of Feministas at the gates, smoothing down their hair and jostling each other. It had only been a day, but I would miss hanging out with Taylor.

“I’ve got Calc first, but I don’t know where the classroom is. Would you mind—”

“No need,” I told him. “You won’t have any problems getting to class today.” The pep squad practiced before school. Candice must have rushed to school to print the paper and leave it where they could find it. If the pep squad picked up the paper, the entire school would hear about it before lunch. That could only be good for our circulation.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re about to find out.” We’d been spotted, the girls making a beeline toward us. “And let me be the first to congratulate you on your presidency.”

“My what? Milo—”

“Taylor! Hi!” Alexis elbowed me out of the way. “We thought you might need a guide to your first period class.”

“That’s... very kind of you—”

“Who wouldn’t want to help a new student out?” Sarah Choi took Taylor’s other flank, like two lionesses moving in for the kill. “Calculus, right? Me too!”

“Calculus, her? We all know she’s doing remedial algebra.” Stacey folded her arms as Sarah Choi and Alexis herded their prey away from the pride.

“Right? Some girls will do anything for a cute guy.” Sarah Gillepsie shook her head. Her eyes fell on me. I took a step back, but I was too late. “Milo. You spoke to him. What kind of girl does Taylor go for?”

“Uh—”

“You can tell us, Milo.” Stacey’s voice dripped with honey. “We’re friends.”

I raised an eyebrow. Stacey had not been my friend when she’d showed up with Declan to chase us out of our classroom.

Before I could voice my skepticism, a hand landed on my shoulder. “Sorry, ladies. If you want to know more about Taylor, you’ll have to read about him in our election special. Out Thursday.” Candice propelled me into the school building.

“Election special?”

“That was brilliant, Milo. I ran the issue past the pep squad as a trial run, and I tell you, I have never seen them so awake this early in the morning since the school banned energy drinks.” Candice thumped me on the back. “We’re onto a winner here. I want a follow-up article by tonight.”

The hall chatter had a different edge this morning. I made my way from AP Calculus to AP English, trying to put my finger on it. There was an undercurrent of excitement to the talk that seemed more in keeping with Friday than Tuesday. More than one student flicked through the paper. I slowed down to hear what they said.

“I found the cutest dress online. Perfect for the formal—”

“Only one candidate. There’s only one outcome!”

“Single! Do you think he plays an instrument?”

“You want to impress him with your tuba playing skills, Nadine, you might have to actually, oh, I don’t know—practice?”

“Not that it matters if Alexis has her sights on him.”

“She already has two boyfriends... Three is excessive, isn’t it? I’m going to try—”

“Oh my god. Don’t look now, but the emo loser—”

I looked.

Lily stalked down the hall, her shoulders high. Her black hair usually fell around her face carelessly, but today she’d tied it up in a messy bun. There was something different about her face, too. I paused to study her. It wasn’t the smoky eye shadow, or the thick black eyeliner; that hadn’t changed. Her nails were their usual shade of black, and Lily habitually preferred the trouser option of the uniform, pairing it with boots and a chunky metallic belt. Everything about her was prickly and unappealing—except her mouth. I stepped out of Lily’s way, wondering. I’d never seen her wear lipstick in a natural color. What did it mean?

“What’s the meaning of this?”

I looked up to find Taylor standing next to me. “I don’t know. Lily felt like a change?”

Taylor took my arm and dragged me into AP English. “This.” He thrust the paper at me. “You can’t tell me you’re not behind this!”

I took the paper, automatically smoothing out the creases. “Behind this? It’s an article, not a scheme!”

“From the ridiculous amount of attention I’ve been getting, I wasn’t sure.”

I rolled my eyes. “You make it sound like getting nominated for class president is a bad thing.”

“Shouldn’t you ask someone before making a decision like that on their behalf?”

“It’s only a nomination! You don’t have to accept it. Anyway, I thought being class president would be perfect for you.”

“How? I don’t care about popularity. I just want to enjoy high school.”

“And that’s what makes you such a good candidate for class president! Think about it—you’d be fair, weigh everyone’s needs equally.”

Taylor shook his head. “I don’t know who anyone is or anything about this school!”

“What better way to learn?” I put my binder down on my desk and started unpacking my pencil case. “As class president, you’ll have a reason to talk to everyone, regardless of clique.”

“But I don’t want to be class president! There’s got to be someone who’d do a better job.”

“There’s no one. Trust me. We’ve had weeks without a single nomination.” I put my hand on Taylor’s arm. “If you think about it, you’ll see what a good idea it is. You told me yesterday how much all the clique politics sickened you, right?”

Taylor squinted at me. “Is this revenge for that?”

I took my hand back. “I’m doing you a huge favor here! Seriously, I thought you wanted to change the world.”

“Milo. What?”

The rest of the class was filing in, and we were starting to attract attention. “I bet Ghandi was class president.” I sat down.

“Where are you sitting, Taylor?” Sarah Gillepsie swayed over to us.

“He’s sitting with me.” Alexis pulled out the chair next to her desk. “Right, Taylor?”

Taylor looked between the girls. “I already chose a desk—”

The bell rang.

“Chairs, everyone. Including you, ladies.” Mr. Perry waited for everyone to sit. “Now. Before we start announcements, I want everyone to give a big round of applause to Taylor. Thanks to him, you do not have to hear me repeat myself on the subject of class elections yet again.”

Logan interrupted the dutiful snickers. “So new kid.” He glared at Taylor. “Let me see if I got this. You haven’t even been here a day, and you think you got what it takes to be class president?”

Taylor shrugged. “I’m as surprised by my nomination as you are.”

Logan didn’t relax his glare at all. “You just got here. You know no one. Who would nominate you?”

I flinched reflexively, knocking my pencil case to the floor. I knelt to pick it up, hitting my head on the edge of the desk as I sat up. With a loud crash, my binder, copy of *Wuthering Heights* and textbook all hit the floor. When I got back into my seat, everyone in the class was staring at me.

“Now that the mystery of Taylor’s nomination has been solved, we can move on to step two.” Mr. Perry leaned back against his desk. “Is there anyone who would like to nominate another candidate?”

“I call bull.”

“Logan,” Mr. Perry said mildly. “This is English class. If you call bull, you have to provide at least three citations—”

“I only need one.” Logan snatched the paper off Fern’s desk, flinging it toward the teacher. “This is a stunt to generate a story for his stupid newspaper!”

“It’s not stupid!” I was on my feet at once, sending my binder to the floor a second time. “We’re a newspaper, not a soapbox! We take our stories seriously, too seriously to sink to tabloid stunts! I didn’t nominate Taylor for the paper. I nominated him for the school.”

Logan scoffed. “For the school?”

“Maybe you didn’t read last week’s editorial, but in the last month, the amount of juniors late for school, skipping class and receiving detentions increased dramatically. That’s why we’ve had all those assemblies about school spirit lately. Without a voice on the student council, we feel disenfranchised and apathetic. More than usual, even. Candice compared it to—” I looked at the blank expressions on my classmates’ faces. “It doesn’t matter what Candice compared it to. What matters is that we are acting like everyone expects teenagers to act. We are proving our parents and teachers right. Do you want to be a stereotype? Because I don’t. And that’s why I nominated Taylor. Yeah, I’ve only known him for a day, but I already know that he cares about making a difference in the world, and he’s not afraid to speak up for the stuff that matters. So there.” I sat down.

There were a few laughs.

“Hey, if it gets us out of any more of those stupid assemblies...” Boomer shrugged. “Anything’s better than another lecture from Mr. Nesbitt about how it was in his day, right, Lo?”

Logan shook his head. “This is crap. We voted for Carson. We should get Carson. The school’s not happy we don’t have a junior class president? So what. It’s their fault we don’t have one. Just because the school board is a bunch of ass—”

“Stopping you there,” Mr. Perry interrupted. “That is personal opinion, Logan, not fact—well, not without a lot of secondary sources. But as Carson and Blake are no longer students at Bernhardt, the juniors need a new class president and vice president—”

“Says who?” Logan stood, insolently crossing his arms across his chest. He was taller and wider than Mr. Perry. Than anyone in the class except Boomer. “We decided. It’s Carson or nothing.”

“I second Taylor for president.”

The class turned to stare.

Lily leaned back in her chair, kicking her boots up on to her desk. “We didn’t decide. You decided. You want to make decisions for us, you run for class president.”

There was a murmur that sounded like agreement, but Logan interrupted.

“That’s not a bad idea. We should have a president who actually knows how stuff works here. Someone who’ll get things done.”

There was a long silence.

“Someone like me.”

Still nothing. Logan elbowed Boomer.

Boomer dropped his head, avoiding eye contact. “I nominate—”

“I nominate Fern!”

Everyone stared at Declan.

“Fern?”

“Me?” Fern’s expression was proof that you didn’t need permission to nominate a candidate. “I can’t be class president!”

“Why not?” Declan turned to her. “You wrote Carson’s campaign speech for him, right? No one knew Carson’s platform better, not even Carson. You

know Bernhardt, you're organized and you care about making the formal happen."

Fern bit her lip. "I don't know..." Her gaze traveled the room, fell on me and suddenly she nodded. "I accept the nomination."

"Two candidates! This is truly a cornucopia of candidacy. Does anyone want to add a third? No? Then I will direct your attention to where we left off last class. Kathy—"

The class reluctantly opened our books. I glanced over at Taylor. Was I the only one who'd noticed he hadn't accepted his nomination?

I was tripped in the hall. By the time I arrived at drawing, Ms. Cox had given permission for us to use the period to make campaign posters. Taylor was at the center of a ring of girls who giggled as they worked.

I put my bag down on the adjacent table. "Can I speak to Taylor a moment?"

"Sure," Madison said, frowning as she sketched. "But you're not allowed to make him move."

Taylor's lips twitched in what might have been a smile—if he'd been allowed to move. "What's up?"

"Being nominated. I mean, you didn't say you were cool with it—"

"The guy who threw the tantrum in English decided it for me. I don't think I could handle a year of having him tell me what to do."

The anxious wobble in my stomach settled, and I smiled back. "Really?"

"Logan's a jerk, anyway," Alice said, frowning as she concentrated on her sketch. "I don't know why we let him get away with as much as he does. He's not even that cute."

I took out my sketchbook. "He's on the varsity football team. And he's dating a senior."

"She's pity-dating him. He's only her number-three boyfriend."

"Number-three boyfriend?" Taylor asked.

"Of course. Guys do it, so why can't girls? You're for equality, right?"

"Yeah, but I didn't imagine equality like that."

“If people were more open and honest and accepting of each other’s needs and desires, the world would be a better place,” Madison continued. “It’s very feminist.”

“Does Logan know he’s boyfriend number three?”

“No. He thinks he’s number two.” The girls cackled.

“If you’re such ardent feminists, shouldn’t you be supporting Fern’s campaign?” Taylor asked.

“Fern’s so old-fashioned. You know, she’s only dated Carson, and since he left school, she hasn’t been on a single date. With anyone.”

“She’s too busy studying. I heard she’s even tutoring Logan, helping him with his homework.”

“Ugh, I hate when a woman’s subservient to a man like that. I haven’t handed in a single piece of work in English all year.” Madison tucked her hair behind her ear.

Alice paused in her sketching to look at her friend. “You know that counts toward our final grade, right?”

“That’s oppression!”

“How many boyfriends does Milo have?” Taylor asked quickly before an argument could develop.

I started, my charcoal sliding forward over my art paper in a very unfortunate way. “Me?”

“Zero,” Madison said. “Not since he was dumped by the basketball team.”

Taylor blinked. “The team?”

“Not like that!”

“Mr. Markopoulos, that is not classroom volume.”

“Sorry, Ms. Cox.” I sat back down, picking up my sketchbook again and very grimly not looking at anyone else. “It was not the basketball team. I was dating Boomer.”

“And he dumped you because his teammates made him. Therefore...” Alice smirked.

“You don’t know that,” I hissed. “Maybe I wasn’t a very good boyfriend. Maybe we fought. Maybe he was already planning on dumping me. You just don’t know.”

“Milo, this is your second warning. And Madison, Alice, if this chatter keeps up, I will be separating the pair of you.”

“Yes, Ms. Cox,” Alice, Madison and I chorused in unison.

She paused behind Taylor. “You haven’t done a single piece of work this entire period.”

“I’d like to,” Taylor said. “But I can’t work without moving, and if I move...”

“Don’t! You’ll ruin my poster!”

“That does make it difficult,” Ms. Cox agreed. “Well, do your best.”

As she moved around the class, Alice and Madison struck up their conversation with Taylor again. I concentrated on my sketch, but even when Taylor stayed perfectly still, there was a quality to him that just didn’t translate to charcoal and paper.

“You should be very proud of yourself, Milo,” Ms. Cox said as the bell rang and Taylor was finally allowed to stretch.

I was jarred out of my contemplation of Taylor’s physique by her comment. “Why? It doesn’t look anything like him.”

Ms. Cox beamed at me. “You were silent for almost twenty minutes. Maybe Taylor should model for us more often.”

“No thanks,” Taylor said, pushing past us into the hall. “Class president will be bad enough.”

I lost him in the crowded hall, but that was all right. I had an interview with Fern.

“The more I think about it, the happier I am to be nominated,” Fern said. “I was talking to Declan about your article just before English. That must have been why he thought of me at all.”

I looked up from my sandwich. “My article?”

Fern nodded. “About the shelter. I went there after last year’s formal and ended up spending the day playing with the kids. I always meant to go back, but I got so busy with school—”

“Don’t beat yourself up over that.” Declan tapped his fingers on the table. “You can’t do everything, Fern. You’re not Supergirl.”

I was not sure why interviewing Fern necessitated interviewing Declan, too, but we'd gotten permission to eat lunch in an empty classroom on account of their school spirit, so I wasn't complaining.

"That's what you think." Fern elbowed him cheerfully. "Anyway, Milo. You're interviewing me; what do you want to ask?"

I blinked, looking down at my almost empty notebook. I'd entirely forgotten the story. Fern was good.

Scratch that.

Fern was dangerous.

"Let's see. You make straight A's, you're on the school Spirit Squad, if I listed all the committee work you've done, I would blow the newspaper's printing budget for the month... You're obviously qualified for class president. I guess the biggest question I have is do you have time for it?"

"You can always make time," Fern assured me. "In freshman year, I didn't think I'd have time for hockey, studying, the library committee, and the volunteer squad, but I did all that and signed up for the drama club, too. I'd never have imagined me picking up cheerleading! Of course, I had to let some things go. Chess club, for instance, and I haven't done anything with the Meatless Mondays campaign this semester."

Making notes, I paused. Fern had been in the chess club?

"Milo's not interested in that, Fern. You're promoting yourself as class president candidate. Concentrate on all the things you have done." Declan counted them off on his fingers. "You went from picking up cheerleading for the first time last year to making the A-squad this year. You've represented the school as a hockey player, your essay on Amelia Earhart won first prize in the state Women's History Month essay competition, you performed in a garage band last year—"

"Wait up!" I scribbled furiously. "Are we sure she's not Supergirl?"

Fern laughed. "Don't you start, Milo. You're supposed to be impartial."

"I can be impressed and still impartial." I turned to a new page. "What are your goals as class president?"

"Making sure the winter formal is a success for everyone," Fern said immediately.

"And you believe you can do that?"

“Totally. If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s committees.”

“You’ve never been to one of Fern’s parties,” Declan said. “She knows how to have a good time.”

“Declan’s being too kind. He knows I couldn’t do it without help. And the drama club is the best at parties. Especially when it comes to decorations on a budget.” She smiled, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. “No one is better than the drama club at making an impression.”

I was pretty sure the impression was all Fern. “Aren’t you worried that it might be hard to create an event that will appeal to all the different student groups at Bernhardt?”

“Not at all. I’ve worked with most of our class on different events, and I’m confident that I can coordinate a formal everyone will enjoy. I’m also experienced at speaking in meetings, so representing my peers at student council and board meetings will not be a problem.”

It was hard imagining Fern having a problem with anything. “I hate to ask this, really, I do, but—”

“Carson? It’s okay.” Fern looked down at her hands. “Declan warned me you’d have to ask. Of course, I’m upset about what happened, but I think it’s time to move on. And like Declan said in English, I know what Carson’s campaign was built on, so I can carry it on.”

“Are you still dating?”

Fern shook her head.

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize. In some ways, it’s a good thing. I mean, if Carson and I were dating, I wouldn’t have time to run for class president.”

Declan snorted. “Your workload would be exactly the same. The only difference is now you get credit for it.”

“Declan! You’re so mean.”

“Just looking out for you. And on that note, Fern, why don’t you go ahead and get us seats in history?” Declan put his hand on my shoulder, preventing me from standing. “I want to talk with Milo a moment.” He kept his hand where it was until the door had shut behind Fern. “FYI, Milo.” He pulled his smartphone out of his blazer pocket. “I recorded this entire interview.”

I looked from the phone to Declan's smug expression. "You what?"

"If anything appears in your article that Fern did not say, I'm taking this to Principal Kim."

I slammed my hands on the table as I stood. "Are you accusing me of making stuff up?"

"You've always been better at fiction than fact, Milo." Declan shouldered his bag, dropping his phone back into his blazer pocket. "Though not even very good at that. Return our trays, will you?" He walked out.

"Hey!" I hastily slid all our plates together, stacking the three trays and stuffing my notebook into my bag. "I don't know where you get off accusing me of—"

I paused. Declan had come to a halt in front of me. Peeking around him, I could see why.

Alexis stood in the middle of the hall. She'd just taken hold of Taylor's blazer collar, and as we watched, she went to her tiptoes to press her mouth against his.

Taylor made a soft noise of surprise, the only sound in the entire hall. I don't think anyone breathed, not until Alexis let go, stepping back and gently patting Taylor on his cheek. "I'll see you after school," she said. "To work on your campaign."

As she sashayed away, the rest of the hall exploded into chatter, as if to prove they hadn't been staring.

Declan snorted. "That's *one* way to get votes. Going to include that in your election write-up, Milo?"

Sent.

I slumped face forward onto my keyboard. The election report was done. Declan couldn't accuse me of bias. My candidate profile on Fern was as upbeat and polished as Fern herself. She'd have no problems running for president—if Taylor wasn't running against her.

I sighed, sliding off my chair to the floor. Taylor's campaign group didn't have all that much time to prepare for the elections. They'd probably be hard at work even now.

"You're being ridiculous. You knew this would happen!"

I just hadn't expected it to happen so fast.

No, I decided. There was no need to dwell. Taylor getting a girlfriend was inevitable. There were other more productive ways of spending my time than wondering if he had enjoyed kissing Alexis. My article completed; I had homework to do. I rolled over and hit my elbow on the bookcase corner.

When I was done hurting, my eyes fell on a thick book on the bottom shelf. Our freshman yearbook. I flicked through it quickly, settling on the chess club. "Weird." There were only two girls in the club, and neither of them were Fern. "No way."

It was Fern. Her hair was brown and plaited, and she wore glasses so thick they might have been coke bottles. I curled up on my bed with the book. No wonder I didn't recognize her! The other girl in the club looked vaguely familiar too, but I couldn't place her.

I frowned at the picture. Was this why Declan had warned me? But Fern's makeover was nothing if not another example of her amazing accomplishments. And she wasn't the only one. Most of the photos in the yearbook focused on the seniors, but here and there were familiar faces. Declan before he lost weight. Boomer before his growth spurt. Me before my braces were removed. Dark times.

I shuddered and turned the page to the homecoming committee. "Now, they haven't changed." Even as freshmen, Victoria and Maria were polished and put together, easily the prettiest girls in our year. But I did not remember the girl sitting between them. "Sara?"

I got out last year's yearbook, flicking through the pages to see if I could find her anywhere. Instead, I discovered something disconcerting. "Oh man. Lisa." Lisa was the only other freshman to join the newspaper in our first year. We'd been friends until sophomore year when she'd pronounced the newspaper as uncool and taken up cheerleading. Seeing her sitting with Victoria and Maria on the homecoming committee was jarring. I couldn't remember seeing her all year.

The doorbell rang. I closed the yearbook and went to answer it. "Taylor? What are you doing here?"

He held up a DVD. "You told me to go to wrestling practice and then watch *The Godfather*, right? I did the first after school today. I was wondering if you wanted to join me for the second."

Chapter Four

“Great news, Milo. I got permission to do a pre-election special. A simple broadsheet featuring each candidate’s platform and interview on either side. We’re generating interest in a school event, demonstrating our flexibility and initiative and, most importantly, showing demand for a student-led newspaper.”

Candice never sounded this happy. I squinted at my phone. “But?”

“I need your help printing. Can you get to school before first period?”

“I didn’t think there was anything before first period.”

“Welcome to my life. The custodian leaves the side entrance open for us. I’ll be in the computer lab. Got that?”

“Candice, you know this is inhumane, right? The Geneva Conventions cover sleep deprivation—Candice? Candice!”

And that is how I wound up at Bernhardt before sunrise on Wednesday morning. I squinted as I walked through the school. The halls looked dim even at midday. This early in the morning, the fluorescent light seemed even more inadequate, giving the old stone walls the insubstantial appearance of a stage backdrop.

I smirked as I passed the election posters. If the juniors weren’t overenthusiastic about the elections at first; they’d got behind them in a big way now. Posters were everywhere. Taylor’s were a mishmash of different styles. He’d refused to let his photo be taken, so his campaign posters were mostly text based, urging people to “Vote Taylor!”

Fern had, as usual, pulled hers out of the bag. A photo of herself holding the trophy she’d won for most valuable player on the hockey team, and her slogan, “Best for Bernhardt; Best for You.” Simple but effective. The uniform appearance of her posters contrasted effectively against the hodgepodge efforts of Taylor’s supporters. And Fern had a secret weapon. I paused to admire her knowledge of her target audience. Who at Bernhardt could resist a semicolon?

“What the—?”

I stared at the poster, shocked. Someone had scrawled over the poster in sharpie “Biggest Bitch.” “But that’s vandalism!” Who would do such a thing? And to Fern? She would be so upset when she saw it!

If she saw it. I tugged the poster down, ripping it in half and then in half again. It was only then I realized I should have kept it intact to show a teacher. Would there be anyone in the teachers' break room at this hour? Clutching the ripped pieces, I turned—

And came face to face with Declan. "What are you doing?"

"Holy crap!" I collided with the wall. "Declan, where did you come from?"

Declan was shorter than me and in no way intimidating, but as he folded his arms, I wished I could take another step back. "Answer the question."

"It's not what it looks like. The poster—someone wrote on it."

Declan's frown grew. "Show me." As I held up the pieces, his mouth tightened. "And you just found it like this?"

"No. It was on the wall. I took it down and tore it up. I didn't think; I was just shocked anyone would do this!" I noticed Declan's hand clenched a tightly rolled up paper. "Wait. You found one too? What's going on?"

"Someone's playing malicious tricks on Fern." Declan showed me he held several posters. "I had a feeling something like this might happen, so I came to school early today to check. Good thing, too. Whoever this is, I think they got every single one of her posters."

"That's horrible!"

"I've only done half the school. You've got to come with me so we can get the rest before anyone sees them. I'll take this side of the hall, and you do the other."

"Right." I hurried after him, toward the science wings.

Declan worked quickly, his jaw set as he methodically took down every offending poster. I glanced over my shoulder at him as he worked, trying to remember if I'd ever seen him so serious. "Not a word about this in your paper, Milo, or to anyone, especially Fern."

Declan was that worried about her? Maybe I'd misjudged the Spirit Squad. This much concern for a friend was above and beyond the school's dictums. "Wait. Yesterday, when you told me you'd recorded the interview—you thought it was me bullying Fern!"

"You were the most likely candidate," Declan said unapologetically. "No one in the school has a bigger reason to have a grudge against the Spirit Squad than you, what with, well... Boomer."

“Tons of people have reason to dislike the Spirit Squad,” I reminded him. “And yeah, I’m mad about Boomer, but if it was me, don’t you think I’d go after Boomer?”

Declan didn’t say anything.

I stopped. “Is Boomer getting harassed?”

“Look,” Declan said, grabbing my arm. “I don’t know, so don’t get any stupid ideas. This has been going on awhile, and I noticed Boomer’s been acting odd, so I wondered... But this is none of your business. Or the paper’s business, Milo. You got that?”

Slowly, I nodded. “Got it.” It stung, but Declan had reason not to trust me. “So what will you do? Tell the teachers?”

“With how useless they are? No, I’m taking care of this my way. So if you don’t mind, I have a lot of posters to replace.” Declan turned, walking away.

I bit my lip. Declan was a jerk. The way he’d forced me and Candice out of the newspaper room was proof of that! But if he’d thought that it was me bullying Fern... “Hey, Declan? Do you have a good copy of Fern’s poster on you now?”

“Why do you ask?”

I nodded toward the computer rooms. “Because the newspaper club has a meeting now, and we have free access to the copiers for our special edition.”

Forget parachuting, skinny-dipping or Black Friday sales. Nothing is more adrenaline inducing than fighting a print deadline down to the very last second.

I ran down the hall at full tilt toward the doors. I could see students already making their way up the steps toward them. Hastily, I placed my prints in the newspaper stand. Declan had come back after putting up his posters to help me and Candice, and the three of us had each raced to a different entrance. As I straightened the papers, I heard the bells chime and the doors thrown open.

“Out of the way, Freako.” I was roughly shouldered aside.

I drew back against the wall for safety, rubbing my arm. I did not recognize the senior, but from his use of that nickname, he had to be a member of the football team—

I paused. If he was Logan’s friend, why had he taken a copy of the paper?

“There it is!”

I flattened myself back against the wall as the stand was swarmed by girls. The paper was circulated, the girls turning quickly to the part that most interested them. “Nothing about a girlfriend—Milo! Is it true what it says about Alexis?”

Wow. Suddenly the wall had gotten crowded. “Personal space!”

“You wouldn’t make that up, right?”

“Of course, he wouldn’t! He’s on the newspaper! That’s why no one likes him.” Madison tucked her hair behind her ear carelessly. “When questioned about his romantic life, Taylor only had this to say—that he respects and admires Alexis’s independent spirit too much to want to tie her down to the role of ‘girlfriend.’ He is planning to devote himself to his studies, and if successful, the role of class president.” You questioned him, Milo?”

Even pressed up against the wall and with no space to breathe, I had enough professional pride to be injured. “That’s a direct quote.”

Madison smirked, tucking her copy of the paper into her bag. “Let’s go.”

As the girls walked down the hall, I heard a chorus of “All the Single Ladies” break out.

As the crowd around the newspaper stand thinned, I could see a familiar figure on the steps. “Taylor!” I grabbed my bag and turned back to the door only to bump into Emily.

“Geez, I’m so sorry—” I paused.

Emily was usually serious, but I’d never seen her this intently focused, even before an exam. She took a deep breath, her hands toying with the rolled up copy of the newspaper she held. As I watched, she took a second deep breath and walked out the door, heading directly toward Taylor.

Taylor smiled as he saw her, slowing his steps as she approached. I couldn’t hear what they said, but I didn’t need to. Emily looked down, nervous as she played with a strand of hair. Taylor was his usual charming self. He nodded and smiled, the action reflecting in his eyes.

With difficulty, I forced myself to step away from the door and walk toward my first period class. Not everything that Taylor did was newspaper business.

Taylor was late to AP English. He was nearly late to Drawing.

The nervous energy that had sustained me all morning had evaporated. I was lying on the desk, using my sketchbook as a pillow, when I heard a scrape as the chair next to me was taken.

“Are you hoping that Ms. Cox will be so happy you’re not talking that she lets you sleep through drawing?”

I opened my eyes. Not many people look good from below, but Taylor was one of those lucky few. “I think it’s worth a try.” I paused. My plan would only work if I didn’t talk.

...but there was a reason I was on the newspaper. “That’s your second near miss this morning.”

“What?” Taylor was unpacking his bag.

I sat up. “You were almost late. Not all teachers are as relaxed as Mr. Perry.”

“I know. I got told off by the Chemistry teacher. This was actually my fourth near miss.”

“What’s going on? It’s not the like the future class president to be late.”

“That’s exactly what the Chemistry teacher said.” Taylor winced. “I’ve been rushed off my feet since I got to school.” He glanced at me. “You didn’t happen to write that I wanted a study partner did you?”

I shook my head. “No. Why?”

“I’ve had at least twelve girls and one guy offer to tutor me this morning alone,” Taylor said, positioning his sketchbook on his lap. “I figured it was something to do with you and your newspaper.”

“Not everything that happens to you is my fault.”

“No,” Taylor agreed. “Just most of it.”

I paused. How was I supposed to argue that with Taylor smirking at me? “A lot of presidential candidates would be grateful to have such enthusiastic and unbiased press coverage.”

“I’m sure. Though on that note, I can’t give you a campaign update tonight, Milo. I’ve got plans.”

I shouldn’t have bothered sitting up. “Chemistry with Emily, right?”

“No. It’s—a thing. For my parents.”

“A thing?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain. Take it from me that it will be long, boring and not as much fun as watching *Casablanca* with you.”

“Very little is as fun as watching *Casablanca* with me.” I paused a moment to study Taylor. “How has someone who has the world’s best films right there in his living room never got around to watching any of them?”

“When you—” Taylor stopped himself. He shrugged, turning his attention back to his art project. “I guess it’s just not my thing.”

I watched him work on his sketch, frowning. That wasn’t what he’d been about to say. But what on earth was so bad about watching movies?

Lunch was an amazing performance. Taylor collected his tray and walked across the cafeteria, apparently blind to all of the girls trying to get his attention, until he reached Alexis. “Is this seat taken?”

Alexis only needed a moment to gain composure. “It’s a free country.”

Taylor sat down, leaning slightly toward her. A moment later, Alexis laughed. The rest of the table shared their mood of hilarity. All eyes were on them for the remainder of lunch.

“Seriously. He has to be magic. He doesn’t just turn Alexis down in a way that allows her to save social face, but he sits with her at lunch so everyone can see they’re totally cool.” I shook my head. “Who does that?”

Lily rolled her eyes. “God, Milo. You like him so much; why don’t you ask him on a study date?”

I removed my gaze from the Feministas to give Lily my best hurt look. “My interest in Taylor is purely professional. I’m a journalist; he’s a story.”

Lily smiled sweetly at me. “And what happens when he’s no longer your story?”

“Wow. Just because you hate everything isn’t any reason to bring me down.”

“On the contrary, what better reason is there?” Lily replaced her iPod buds with a smirk, effectively ending the conversation.

It was an odd day. Lily usually ignored me, preferring to blot out lunch entirely with the help of her iPod and dog-eared copy of *Interview with a Vampire*, but here she was, with questions about the accuracy of the election special. Another tribute to Taylor's magical prowess? Turning back to look across the cafeteria at Taylor's table, my gaze fell upon the Spirit Squad.

Taylor's magic was not felt at that table. Logan glared at the back of Taylor's head, speaking out of the side of his mouth to his friends. They laughed loudly, but I noticed Boomer frown.

Declan ignored them completely, talking energetically to Victoria and Maria, who listened with their usual studied disinterest. Fern nodded occasionally, attention clearly elsewhere. Probably planning her campaign speech for tomorrow. I had to hand it to her. There was no way I would look as Fern did if I had to make a speech in front of the entire junior class the next day. Fern said good-bye to her friends and was immediately met by a male student offering to return her tray for her. I smiled. Taylor wasn't the only one with magic.

No helpful person of any gender offered to take my tray, but I was so practiced at avoiding people that I stepped over the jock's foot as he tried to trip me without breaking stride. I knew my luck wouldn't hold, however. Talking to Taylor in drawing had given me a burst of energy, but that had faded. The cafeteria food needed time to charge my spent batteries. If I could just find someplace quiet where I could steal a nap...

I stopped in front of the classroom we'd used for the interview yesterday. It was empty, but would it be open? Mr. Nesbitt was dangerously close to retirement and had gone an entire semester calling us by the names of the students he'd taught last year. If anyone would forget to lock a door, it was him.

Mr. Nesbitt's memory did not fail me. The door swung open, and I stepped into the empty classroom—

“Milo?”

“Fern! I didn't know anyone was in here!” I stopped still.

Fern stared back at me. Her eyes were red and there was a smudgy trail down her cheeks. Her mouth opened, but she made no sound.

A loud clatter called my attention to the students in the hall. I shut the door behind me. After a moment, I locked it.

Fern breathed out. “Thank you. I mean, I know I must look terrible, right now—”

“Not at all,” I lied. “Fern, what happened?”

“Nothing happened!”

“Was it the posters?”

Fern’s face fell. “How did you know?”

Too late. I remembered Declan’s instruction to say silent. “I saw one when I got to school. Declan and I went around taking them down and replacing them, but we must have missed one.”

“No.” Fern pressed her lips together and shook her head. “It was pushed through my locker. I only found it now.” She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. “You and Declan? He didn’t say anything to me about it.”

“He didn’t want you to know. I guess he didn’t want you distracted on the final day of your campaign.”

“That is so like Declan, Milo, you don’t even know.” Fern took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Before my eyes, she was transforming back into Super-Fern. Only the red-rims of her eyes and smudged mascara indicated there was anything amiss. “And you helped him? That’s awfully sweet of you, Milo.”

“Of course. Did you know that in Australia, Milo is a chocolate-flavored drink? So I have to be sweet. It’s in the fine print.”

“What, on your birth certificate?” Fern managed a convincing smile. “I’d better look up mine. Don’t want to find out that I’m contractually obligated to live in a forest.”

“It could be worse,” I told her. “You could wind up as a store display in one of those awful home ware stores in White Plains.”

“Relegating me to a mall? Wow, Milo!”

I smiled, relieved. Fern sounded much more like herself. “Seriously though, are you okay?”

Fern nodded. “It’s all right. Whenever something horrible like this happens, something nice always happens to make it right. Knowing that you and Declan worked really hard to take care of me, that’s really special.”

How was it possible that someone could be this together? “Where did you learn to be mature? Seriously. I want the ISBN.”

Fern laughed again. “It’s not maturity. I sort of suspected something like this would happen. I know I can’t make everyone happy and that trying to only

wears me out, so I have to focus on what's important to me—and what's important is that I have friends like you, Declan, Maria and Victoria behind me. That's way more important than someone's jealousy."

I nodded, trying to squish down my envy. Friends who made the haters seem negligible?

But Fern wasn't finished. "That's what I really admire about you, Milo. That you're so strong and independent, and you do your own thing no matter what people say or think."

"I do?"

"Standing up to Coach Burns took a lot of guts."

"And got your boyfriend kicked out of school."

"It's no one's fault but Carson's that he got kicked off the team. Trust me. You did the right thing." Fern sighed, standing up. "I wish I had your courage. If I didn't care so much about making people happy, I might have been able to make him listen to me." Fern bit her lip as the noise in the hall indicated that people were leaving the cafeteria. "I look a mess, don't I?"

"A hot mess?"

"I'm not sure that helps." Fern took out a small purse from her bag and spread the contents out on the table.

I leaned forward, interestedly. I'd never had the opportunity to see what girls put in their bags (Candice's habit of carrying Moleskine notebooks and at least two different newspapers was not, I felt, typically feminine).

Fern studied herself in a fold-up mirror. "It could be worse." She used concealer to patch up the puffy skin around her eyes and looked down at the implements on the table in front of her. "Do you know anything about makeup, Milo?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Maria and Victoria always do it for me. I've got such a problem with mascara. Whenever I try it myself, I stab myself in the eye and end up looking like a raccoon."

"I don't want to stab you in the eye!"

"You won't. It's a lot easier to put on someone else. Please, Milo?"

It was fascinating. I hadn't even realized what a difference makeup made to anyone except Lily, but by the time I'd carefully applied the mascara and Fern had wiped away the last smudges, she looked as perfectly on top of everything as if she'd arrived at school only five minutes ago.

"Thanks, Milo. I really appreciate this." As Fern stood, she impulsively stepped toward me, arms out.

I returned the hug. This really was the weirdest day ever.

Not even Candice was ambitious enough to want to put out another issue of the paper that day, and track and field practice was canceled. I walked out of the main entrance a free man. Or as close to free as a high school student ever got, i.e., with only a few hours homework.

I should have been thrilled. Instead, I was strangely dissatisfied. I had an entire evening to myself, and Netflix had just updated their new releases. The night was mine!

But somehow the thought of spending my night alone on the couch didn't appeal.

"Milo! Over here!"

Fern stood behind two long tables set up on one side of the path leading to the school gates. Taylor was with her, along with the Feministas, a few members of the hockey team, Declan and, bizarrely, Carlos. A little farther down the path, keeping an eye on proceedings, was Mr. Harper. Also present but disappearing rapidly were a vast amount of cupcakes.

"What's going on?"

"What election would be complete without rampant bribery?" Declan's tone was superior, but he had frosting on his cheek.

Fern elbowed him composedly. "It's not bribery if we're both doing it. Show Milo the sign."

It was propped against the table, half-hidden by milling students. It proclaimed in the gray and crimson school colors: "Don't Vote on an Empty Stomach! Fern (and Taylor) for President! Vegan Cupcakes for You!" The "and Taylor!" had been added in sharpie.

"I was thinking how kind you were to help me this morning even though Taylor's your candidate." Fern handed me a napkin. "And I thought I'd return

the favor by sharing my publicity drive with Taylor. Do you like vanilla or chocolate, Milo? What am I saying—you get one of each!”

I accepted the cupcakes in confusion. “I didn’t do that much.”

“It meant a lot to me—and Taylor.” Fern beamed at me. “He wasn’t going to accept my invitation, said it didn’t feel right when I’d worked so hard on the cupcakes, but when I told him what you’d done, he changed his mind.”

“Really?” I looked down the table to where Taylor was nodding in response to something a senior jock was saying. He looked perfectly natural talking to the older student.

“We have got to go out for coffee some time, Milo. I want to hear all about Taylor.”

That drew my attention back to Fern instantly. “You do?”

“Fern! Sorry we’re late—is there still a chance to help?”

“Victoria! Maria!” Fern’s face lit up. “You came after all?”

“What else are friends for?” Victoria looked up and down the table. “If it hadn’t been such short notice, I’d have come over last night to help you bake.”

“It’s all right,” Fern assured her. “You know I love baking.”

“No better stress relief, right?” Maria rested a single, perfectly manicured finger against the table. “I don’t know if I’d have made quite so much vanilla, personally... But I expect it’ll work out.”

Victoria looked away from the senior talking to Taylor and tugged her blazer straight. “You should have your sign somewhere more visible. You can hardly see it with everyone in front.”

“I didn’t think of that—”

“And that’s why we’re here.” Maria patted Fern on the shoulder. “Leave it to us. Though next time you run for president, let us know before you choose your slogan.”

I frowned, watching the two cheerleaders lift the sign. “I like the slogan.”

But Fern had turned aside to answer a question about her recipe. Maybe I’d imagined the note in Maria’s voice?

I drifted down the table. Taylor was still in conversation, chatting with members of the basketball team, but I caught his eye as I passed. “Good luck for tomorrow!”

He nodded, giving me a wave. “See you then, Milo.”

I ate the cupcakes slowly. Was there anything Fern couldn’t do? (besides mascara). Between her overachieving and Taylor’s natural perfection, the outcome of tomorrow’s vote was anyone’s guess. But it wasn’t the election that worried me.

I folded the cupcake wrappers up and slid them in the pocket of my blazer. Was I the only one who’d seen it? Taylor’s thoughtfulness and maturity, Fern’s drive and big heart. There was no better match in all of Bernhardt. No matter who won the election tomorrow, the two of them would be spending a lot of time together as president and vice president. It was, I decided, inevitable.

And when they found their happy ending?

I bit my lip. I could already hear Candice. “Happily ever after isn’t *news*, Milo.” Once Taylor and Fern realized their overwhelming compatibility...

“What happens when he’s no longer your story?”

“So, I’ll go onto the next story.” But I knew that no story would compete with Taylor. How could it? What sporting victory, student achievement, or generous donation from previous graduates could even approach Taylor’s near universal appeal? Other students were good-looking, talented or both. Taylor simply possessed an innate quality that gave everything he did significance. “Taylor could drop a pencil and create a story—”

I gasped. A horrible thought had occurred to me. What if this was it? The peak of my career as a journalist? I swallowed, thinking of the script stashed at the back of my closet. Taylor and Fern’s blossoming romance was the death knell of my writing career, period—

A horn blared. “Oi, kid! Get out of the road!”

I glared at the driver as I finished crossing the road. “You wouldn’t beep at Sir Alan Carmichael!”

Then again, it was hard to imagine someone who’d won as many Academy Awards as Sir Alan Carmichael having a life crisis that necessitated him stopping in the middle of the road to be beeped at. Although—

I bit my lip. Not much was known about the early career of Sir Alan, but he’d grown up on a council estate in England, working several ignominious dead-end jobs to keep a roof over his head as he worked on the script that later made him famous. The way he’d deliberately juxtaposed his heroes’ physical

insignificance against the obstacles they faced in his films and the emphasis he'd placed on the development of his characters suggested that Sir Alan was a man who knew struggle.

“So what would Sir Alan Carmichael do?”

In one of his rare interviews, he'd spoken of the fact that the film in which he'd faced the greatest difficulties had been his most successful because of those difficulties. With studios unwilling to invest large sums in an unknown filmmaker, Sir Alan had foregone special effects in favor of wringing all the characterization he could from his actors, with the result that the film had been nominated for best actor, actress, supporting actor, supporting actress and cast.

Candice was about as immovable as a Hollywood film executive. So how would I wring my victory from her?

I took my usual shortcut through the parking lot, thinking hard. Full of the success of our election issues, maybe Candice would reconsider her stance against film reviews?

Unlikely. But Taylor was proof that many things I'd considered impossible could happen. I'd have to find the right movie, I decided. Something with an educational slant to get past the teachers but still appeal to our peers. With an angle sharp enough to make even Candice flinch but new enough that it wouldn't already have been dissected by the entertainment news.

I smirked, remembering an article I'd seen just that morning. I had the perfect movie.

“Milo, what is this?”

I'd sent the article a mere fifteen minutes ago. Was the fact that Candice had called me immediately good or bad? “I thought maybe we should take advantage of our increased audience by broadening our horizons—”

“We're a school newspaper. Not *Entertainment Weekly*.”

“And many students at our school have an interest in film! Particularly in films like *Boston 1770*!”

Candice did not sound impressed. “We get enough history in class.”

“It's not just about the educational aspects of the film! Look at the cast! It's starring Jet Carmichael, who is nineteen—barely a year older than you! He's our age, and he's facing overwhelming pressure already. Filming's barely

finished and already he's pulled out of interviews in the UK, producing speculation that he's facing a breakdown—”

“We don't print speculation, Milo!”

“Other people are speculating!” I said, stung. “I'd stick to the facts. Like that Jet was the youngest person ever to win an Oscar for best actor, which he did at just nine—but which also led to allegations of overwork and neglect against his parents. He had a breakdown on the set of his next film and hasn't made any public appearances since he was ten. Even the film's publicity department doesn't have a photo of him! His role in the film's been a secret up until now, but now that it's out and he is once again the subject of public scrutiny, it is anyone's guess what will happen.” I talked quickly, not giving Candice the chance to interrupt. “Plus he has his parents' reputations working against him. His mother is an A-lister, widely considered the most beautiful woman in Hollywood. His father is a famous movie director. One teenager with everything to prove against a world that's already judging him—tell me that won't resonate with our peers.”

“Let me put it to you like this. ‘Jock misses football practice.’ Would you read that article, Milo?”

“No...”

“It's the same thing. Face it. If he wasn't Sir Alan Carmichael's son, you wouldn't be interested in him either.”

“That has nothing to do with it! I just saw Sir Alan's name and read up about the film. Look, no one else is following the British film industry. It's a fresh new story—”

“That you can put on your blog. But not my paper.” Candice's tone softened. “Look, Milo. Next year, you can do whatever you like with the paper. Fill the entire thing with film reviews; it's entirely up to you as editor. But right now, the paper's mine. And I say the only reviews are of student productions.”

I took a deep breath. “Entirely up to me as editor—do you mean that?”

“Of course, I do. Who do you think is going to be editor?”

I let out my breath in an uneven laugh. “I guess I just assumed—I mean, you're so much the editor that—”

“What, you thought I'd repeat a year just to make sure you kept your deadlines?” I could hear Candice shake her head. “Not even for you, Milo.”

Though on the subject of student productions, we got an art exhibition in the works. Want it?"

I nodded, some of my elation fading. I had to prepare for life after Taylor. "Sure."

"I'll e-mail you the details. And Milo?"

"Yeah?"

"Please don't turn my baby into *Entertainment Weekly*."

I laughed. "No promises."

Chapter Five

The election took place during second period on Thursday. I sat with the rest of my AP English class in the auditorium, watching as Taylor and Fern were complimented by Principal Kim on their community spirit. How long was an appropriate amount of time to wait before running an article on their compatibility? Or would it be better to feign ignorance as long as possible in order to keep interest in the paper going?

A finger jabbed into my ribs, and I yelped, drawing glares from the teachers sitting on stage.

“Move over, Milo. Don’t make such a fuss.” Candice barely gave me time to move my bag from the seat next to me before she sat.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered. “You’ve got class!” Only the juniors were allowed out for the election.

“What and miss this?” Candice looked to the stage with interest, sizing up both candidates. Her notebook was already on her lap. “So that’s the famous Taylor.”

I smirked as Taylor stood. “Just wait. He deserves all the hype.”

Logan and his friends jostled each other in the back row as Taylor took the podium. Trying to attract attention away from Taylor’s speech? Taylor didn’t seem to raise his voice, but there was a compelling note in it that called my attention back to him before I’d finished turning to see what Logan was doing.

I wasn’t the only one. There was not a single cough, scrape of a chair being moved or whispered comment as Taylor spoke, and a huge applause broke out as he finished. With a smile and a nod, Taylor made way for Fern. I settled back in my chair and became aware that Candice was watching not Taylor but me.

“What?”

Candice just shook her head. “I was wondering if Taylor was attractive. Guess that answers that.”

We voted on our way out of the auditorium. The announcement was made in the cafeteria at lunch. Taylor was announced class president and Fern vice president to thunderous applause.

“Taylor! Congratulations!”

“Oh my god, you did it!”

The Feministas swarmed him excitedly, followed by the academics and emos. I hung back, watching Taylor shake hands and being slapped on the back with mingled pride and sadness. It had happened, just like I’d known it would. Taylor was popular.

“Never mind, Fern! You did your best.” I looked over my shoulder to see Victoria consoling Fern.

“Vice president isn’t that bad,” Maria agreed, looking at her nails. “Better luck next year.”

Was that really what friends should be saying right now? I paused.

In that moment Taylor acted, holding out his hand to Fern. “Congratulations, vice president. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“Ditto,” Fern said. “On both parts. Let me know when you have time to talk. I have some great ideas for the formal.”

Taylor raised an eyebrow. “You weren’t exaggerating being committed to your projects.”

Declan snorted. “Fern’s commitment should never be underestimated.” But his voice was warm.

“We’ll need to organize a committee,” Fern continued. “I already drew up a list of venues to consider, and—”

“Did you forget we have a special practice after school?” Maria nudged Fern. “We’re working out that new cheer.”

“That’s not going to take all afternoon,” Fern said. “After—”

“But you promised to help me with my history essay!” Victoria protested. “And Maria’s math homework—we were busy all yesterday helping you.”

Fern bit her lip.

“Tell you what,” Taylor said. “I’ll give you my phone number. That way, you can get in touch whenever you have time.”

I couldn’t help it. I smirked. Fern had just accomplished what no girl in school had—acquiring Taylor’s number! Long night conversations into the early hours of the morning... Hopefully they would keep up a professional front at school so that the rest of us weren’t sick with envy—

Suddenly I was on the cafeteria floor with a lap full of potato salad.

“Extra, extra! School sneak reaches new low!” Logan caught the eyes of his friends, and they snickered. “Newspaper so hungry for news you’re searching for table scraps now?”

I reached for my spilled tray, flicking a glob of potato off my wrist. “Don’t worry, Logan. We won’t be reporting on you anytime soon.”

He frowned, trying to work out if that was an insult. I took advantage of his pause to scoop up as much of my lunch as I could and go.

Taylor found me in the bathroom picking coleslaw out of my hair. “I didn’t see what happened, but are you okay?”

“No. I’m kicking myself.” I made a face at my reflection. “With how often this happens, I should have a comeback ready.”

“Stay still for one second—” Taylor reached over. I felt a gentle pressure on my hair, and a moment later, Taylor dropped a piece of cabbage in the sink. “There.”

“Thanks.” It was hard not to fidget with Taylor standing so close behind me that I could feel his body heat. I swallowed. Play it cool. Impress Taylor with your commitment to your projects. “Any chance of an exclusive interview with our new class president?”

Taylor snorted. “If there’s only one paper, isn’t everything you write an exclusive?”

“Don’t ruin the illusion. Well?”

“You were beaten to it. By a girl with big hair—”

“Candice?” How could she?

“She didn’t tell me her name. Just launched into her questions. The interview was over before I knew I was being interviewed.”

“That’s Candice.”

“It’s all right. I have a different headline for you.”

Was this how low I’d sunk? Accepting pity stories? “What is it?”

Taylor stepped back, spreading out his arms as if setting out an imaginary front page. “Class President Celebrates Victory by Watching Movie with Friend.”

“At least it’s a descriptive headline,” I said slowly. “But it should have a hook.” And because I couldn’t help it, “Who is the friend?”

Taylor looked at me.

I felt myself turning pink. “Just checking. Your choice or mine?”

They’re more afraid of you than you are them, I told myself firmly. *They’re more afraid of you*. Which must have the two black Labradors *terrified*. Keeping my eyes on the dogs, I opened the coffee shop door. Immediately, the larger of the two beasts lumbered toward me. I stepped backward and collided with Taylor.

“Oof! Some warning, Milo!”

“Don’t blame me! Blame it.” The dog stood there, mouth open to display a slavering pink tongue and white teeth. Its tail wagged ominously.

Taylor shifted to stand beside me in the doorway. “Milo. Are you... afraid of dogs?”

“No!” I shouldered my bag, clutching my notebook tightly. “I’m just... careful around them.”

“Careful.”

“Extremely careful.” I looked back at the hellhound. The second, smaller one stretched and joined its companion looking at us with dark eyes, shining with hunger. “Dogs are unpredictable. You never know when they’re going to jump on you or bark or worse.”

“These dogs are not going to bark,” Taylor said. “Look at them.”

“I’m looking at them.”

Taylor snorted. “Why are we here if you don’t like dogs? There are other coffee shops. No, let me guess—the newspaper’s involved.”

I nodded, carefully inching my way inside the shop. “Owners patronize local art scene. This month it’s photography. Our art club has a few pieces up and”—the big dog padded toward me, and I froze—“Oh god.”

“Milo, relax. He’s just being friendly.”

“Too friendly!” The dog’s nose was in my crotch. “If he was a human, this would be a reportable offense!”

Taylor rolled his eyes and crouched down by the dog's nest of blankets. "Just as well he's a dog then. Here boy."

My tormentor lifted his ears and turned, padding eagerly toward Taylor.

Taylor grinned, running his fingers through both dogs' fur. "How about this for a plan: I distract; you get your story."

"Deal." I made for the back wall and the photo exhibit.

It was an easy article. The bare contemporary interior of the coffee shop was a good backdrop for the art, while the grinding noises from the coffee roasters and the smell of their finished product was a welcome change from the sterile silence of art galleries. I took a few photos of the exhibits and turned to see one beast lying on his back, tongue lolling out of his mouth as Taylor rubbed his stomach, the smaller creature resting its head on his lap.

I took a photo.

"You didn't need to buy me coffee," Taylor said as we left.

"You earned that coffee," I told him, holding my own cup of decaf soy milk caramel latte. "Without you, I'd have been eaten for sure."

"They were really nice dogs," Taylor said. "They would not have eaten you."

"Says you." Relief at my near escape was making me giddy. Occasionally, my hand brushed Taylor's arm as we walked, or he bumped against my shoulder. Every time it did, I felt a new rush of warmth. "Did you decide on a movie?"

"It's a tough choice," Taylor said. "I'm stuck between two."

"What are they?"

"*Beverly Hills Chihuahua* or *Marley and Me*."

"Mean." I gave him a glare and paused. "That student teacher's just across the road."

"Mr. Harper's here to observe. Not student teach."

"So why is he observing us out of school?"

Taylor rolled his eyes. "He's not following us, Milo. Tarrytown's a small place, and this is the main road. He's probably headed toward the train station."

“No need to jump on me, geez.” I elbowed him. “Though if you’re going to force me to watch a dog movie, how about *Old Yeller*? At least that one has a happy ending.”

“Now who’s mean?”

We did not watch *Marley and Me*. Instead, we compromised on an old classic—*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The final credits were rolling, and I was wondering if we had time for a second film when there was a knock at the door.

Naomi answered it. “Another school friend, Taylor.”

“This is Fern,” Taylor said. “She’s here to discuss the winter formal. Mind if we take the table?”

“Of course not.” Naomi packed up her laptop and files.

I watched as Fern opened her own binder. “I guess I’ll say good night and leave you to it.”

“You don’t have to go, Milo,” Fern said. “These things are always better with lots of input.”

Taylor nodded. “And if there’s something you’re not lacking in, it’s ideas.”

I was tempted—very tempted. But there was no use prolonging the inevitable. “You two should get used to working as a team. Besides, I’ve got that article to write.”

“Speaking of the paper...” Fern took a piece of loose-leaf from her file. “Could you run this for me? It’s a call for volunteers for the formal committee. Taylor, you look at it first.”

Taylor glanced over the paper before handing it to me. “How did you have time to cheerlead, tutor your friends, and write a call for volunteers?”

“I used my study period. It didn’t take me that long. One committee is pretty much like another.”

“When do you plan on studying?”

“On the train home,” Fern said. “It’s all right. I’m used to it.”

Returning to our dark apartment was not fun. Thursday was leftover night. Usually I could look forward to tzatziki or meatballs, but the Advent fast took the fun out of leftovers. “I don’t even know why we do this! It’s not like Yaya

knows!” I spread a piece of toast with hummus, trying not to imagine what Fern and Taylor were discussing next door.

Inevitable, I reminded myself firmly. I’d still see Taylor in AP English. So there was no reason to feel like this was the end.

Taylor’s first days as class president went perfectly. I felt a quiet glow every time someone stopped him in the hall to congratulate him or asked a question about the formal committee. Seeing him at lunch, surrounded by a mix of students from the drama club in addition to Fern, Declan and the Feministas, made me certain I’d done the right thing.

If any doubts had remained, they were settled by seeing that the latest issue of the paper was cleared out by the final bell.

“I think we can congratulate ourselves,” Candice said. “This last week has been a roller-coaster, but we’ve boosted circulation, raised awareness, and cemented the paper’s place at the school. In summary, we rock.”

I was still brooding over the changes made to my article. “I don’t see why you had to cut so much. It wasn’t over the word count.”

“The references to slavering animals and fearsome beasts had to go. They detracted from the direction of the article.”

“The students of this school deserve to be warned—”

The classroom door opened. Two girls stood outside, in the slightly too big for them uniforms of freshmen, looking nervous.

I took a deep breath. *They’re more scared of you than you are of them.* “This is the newspaper club.”

“How do we join?”

By the time the meeting finished, we had three new members and two old. Candice had brushed aside Samantha’s apology and given her back the sports reports, but she’d refused to give Lionel back his former position as deputy editor. “We need someone who won’t flake on us whenever tests come around.”

I glowed at the compliment, but our returning staff had made me think. I lingered after the meeting to talk to Candice. “You remember Lisa?”

“Joined the same time you did, right? What about her?”

“Do you know why she quit?”

Candice shook her head. “That was when Ally was in charge. I don’t really remember—weren’t you friends?”

“Not close friends. I was just thinking. Since she quit the newspaper, I’ve barely seen her. It’s almost like she just vanished.”

“Is that your next story? I’d stick to Taylor. Speaking of, if you can get a picture of Taylor holding a kitten, do. We’ll keep it as standby in case our circulation ever drops again.”

Given Taylor and Fern were at the helm, it was no surprise at all that the formal committee had volunteers and then some. When I arrived, only five minutes late, the classroom was already full.

Taylor looked up from where he sat at the teacher’s desk and nodded, but Fern was in full-on organization mode.

“I’ve created different sign-up sheets for each of the groups we’ll need. Decorations for the venue, poster design and distribution, ticket sales and other forms of promotion, as well as music and entertainment for that night. In addition, we’d like one person from each group to be a representative on the committee. Over to you, Taylor!”

“Thanks, Fern.” Taylor stood. “As we’ve got Thanksgiving break next week, we don’t have much time to put the formal together. Fern and I put together a short list of themes to vote on today. I made a few mock-ups last night to give an idea of what we’re talking about. Look at the screen, please.”

I whistled. Mr. Freeman was notoriously possessive about his tech. Even other teachers were only allowed to use it in his presence. How had Taylor managed this? Was it possible that not even teachers were immune to the Taylor magic? Or maybe the watchful gaze of Mr. Harper, leaning against the wall, arms crossed against his chest, was an acceptable substitute for Mr. Freeman’s presence.

“*Frozen* is an obvious choice, and it’s popular,” Taylor conceded. “A blue and white color theme and winter directions would be easy to do. We’re also close to Christmas, so a holiday theme’s another good option. But with the annual Victorian Christmas event at Lyndhurst Manor, a Christmas theme isn’t the most exciting. So we came up with our third option.”

He clicked the next slide, and the Victorian carolers were replaced with a winking Marilyn Monroe.

“*Some Like it Hot*,” Taylor explained. “A return to Hollywood’s golden age. Glamorous ladies, sharply dressed men, a hint of intrigue and a lot of style.”

There was an instant excited buzz of conversation around me. “Yes. That one.”

“I vote for that one, too!”

Taylor paused. “We have other suggestions—”

Declan stood. “Hands up; all in favor of *Some Like it Hot*?”

The vote was unanimous.

“Milo, wait!”

I obediently turned back. So did most of the hall. Taylor had that effect on people. “What’s up?” I asked as he fell into step beside me.

“I wanted to thank you for giving us the idea for the formal theme—”

It was a struggle to remind myself I was filled with guts and intestines and not pure helium. “I think you and Fern did that—”

“And offer you a place on the committee.”

“What, really? Me?”

Taylor nodded. “We’ll need someone to coordinate coverage of the event with the school newspaper. Fern and I agreed that there was no better person for the job.”

Words I never thought I’d hear from Taylor. There was just one tiny detail preventing this from being the greatest moment of my high school life to date. “In here.” I tugged Taylor into the nearest classroom. Fortunately, it was empty.

“If you’re going to ask me on a study date—”

“You’ve got lipstick. Here.” I pointed to my face.

Taylor put his hand to his cheek. “Oh.”

Everything Taylor did was so collected and perfect; I’d never imagined he could blush. “Let me.” I grabbed a tissue from the box on the teacher’s desk and dabbed at his cheek. “Who was it? Sarah Choi? Emily?”

“None of your business.” Taylor turned redder and redder. Interesting.

“I’m obligated to ask.” I dropped the tissue in the wastebasket. “This is a good thing. You’ll have no problem finding a date for the formal.”

Taylor groaned. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Really? How can you—that is the entire point of a formal!”

“Do I have to remind you I’m not at school to find a date?” Taylor folded his arms across his chest.

“I keep forgetting you were homeschooled.” I frowned at him as a thought occurred to me. “Is this your first dance?”

“Kind of? I mean, I’ve been out, and there was dancing, but it was never an event like this.”

“Your first dance! Taylor, this is amazing. The article practically writes itself!”

“Is it really that weird?” Taylor caught sight of my expression and sighed. “At least stress that I am not actively looking for a girlfriend! I want to study—not whatever you are thinking of right now, Milo.”

“Mm.” With the winter formal officially happening, the hunt for partners is on! No one is immune, not even newly elected junior class president, Taylor—

“Do not try to find me a date. Are you listening? Don’t find me a date!”

CLASS PRESIDENT WITHOUT A DATE.

Taylor threw the newspaper down on the cafeteria table. “What is this?”

It was lunchtime, Tuesday. Mom and I had spent Thanksgiving at my grandmother’s place in the city. Taylor had missed school on Monday, making it six days since I’d last seen him. In that time, whatever immunization to Taylor’s impact I’d gained had been lost. I stared up at Taylor, feeling his presence like a shock.

“Well? Milo, I’m waiting.”

I swallowed. “I didn’t say anything about you looking for a date—”

“It’s heavily implied!”

“I quoted you directly—”

“And then undercut that immediately by talking about how new I am to high school life! You make it sound like I just need the right person to come along and change my mind!”

I glanced around. Lily was staring. Students at the tables nearest us paused to watch us, but our quarrel had not reached the Spirit Squad at the front of the cafeteria. “You wanted me to write about the formal—”

“About the formal! Not me! Since getting to school this morning, I haven’t had a minute to myself! I can’t even take a study break without someone interrupting—”

“I’m generating interest in the formal! You’re interesting!” Taylor’s face was taking on a dangerous expression. I knew I should drop it, but somehow was unable to stop myself from talking. “We’re encouraging people to participate in the formal right? You and Fern are student leaders, and you’re leading by example by going to the formal, therefore you going to the formal is news!”

“But can’t you write about it in a way that doesn’t focus on my love life?!” Taylor lowered his voice to hiss at me. “I had to turn three girls down this morning—three! One of them cried!”

“If you’re worried about disappointing people, you should choose a date for the formal soon.” I resisted the urge to glance and see if Fern was watching this. “Fern’s single, and you already know her. Better ask her quickly before Declan does—”

Taylor’s mouth thinned out into a flat line. “Why? So you can write about it in the paper?”

“I—” My fight-or-flight reflex was jammed. I seemed to be stuck in one spot, watching as Taylor pushed the table aside and grabbed my arm.

“If you’re that interested in my love life—” Taylor hauled me onto my feet so quickly that my head spun. I thought I was going to fall. Then I wasn’t thinking at all. Taylor’s mouth was on mine.

The first moment of contact was so strong, my legs almost gave out. Taylor’s mouth was hot, his kiss forceful. Taken entirely unexpectedly, I clutched at his blazer to steady myself, bringing our bodies into collision. This second contact brought another surprise. Pressed against Taylor’s chest, I felt again the warmth of seeing him congratulated but stronger, so strong I couldn’t keep it in. I melted, relaxing against him.

When I gave way, Taylor did too. His hold on my arm relaxed, and his mouth took on a softer aspect. His hand lingered on my side, and I shifted as he did, attuned to his presence. Suddenly, I understood. My interest in Taylor was not professional.

There was a metallic clatter. Someone had dropped their fork.

Taylor pushed me back.

I lurched unsteadily, my mind struggling to process what had happened. “What—”

Taylor looked around the cafeteria. His gaze returned to me and his lip curled. “Write about *that*.” He shook off my arm and stalked out of the cafeteria.

I think I tried to sit and missed. Next thing I knew, I was on my back on the floor of the cafeteria.

“Geez, Milo. Are you okay?” Lily peered down at me. “Do you need the nurse?”

“Nurse?”

Candice bent over me. “Give me the headline.”

“Uh.” It was a struggle to put words to what I’d just experienced. “*Kiss or Out-of-Body Experience? Reporter Unsure.*”

“He’s fine,” Candice reported. “Let’s get him out of here.”

The girls took an arm each and dragged me outside under the trees. I leaned against the cool stone of the school exterior, willing my heart to return to normal. “He kissed me. In the cafeteria.” I swallowed. “In front of everyone.”

“Not quite everyone.” Candice hastily jotted down notes. “The seniors are in class. Not everyone eats lunch in the cafeteria. There’s still an audience—”

Lily snorted, crossing her arms. “An outburst like that is not going to wait until your next issue.”

Candice frowned at her notebook. “The angle—”

“Was perfect.” Taylor had leaned toward me gently, his mouth firm but not insistent. My body had inclined the same way, as naturally as if I’d found a new center of gravity. I brushed my fingers against my mouth, checking that I hadn’t just imagined that.

“Are you sure he’s okay?” Lily asked.

“Okay is relative. The question here is why.”

It slowly occurred to me that Candice and Lily were watching me. “Why?”

“Why did Taylor kiss you? You’re not dating. There’s no way I wouldn’t know that you were dating.”

“It’s Milo. There’s no way the entire school wouldn’t know if they were dating.” Lily folded her arms. “Taylor was annoyed about Milo’s articles. Looks like he got sick of people speculating, decided to give them something to speculate about.”

I came down to earth with a thud. Lily was right. My gravitational axis might be askew, but there was nothing wrong with Taylor’s.

“By kissing Milo?” Candice weighed me again. “They will definitely be asking questions now. Is Taylor gay?”

“I—don’t know.” Someone as perfect as Taylor had to be straight. That was how things went. Toast falls butter side down, the day you forget your umbrella is the day it rains, the super-hot guy is never single. But that kiss—

It was hard to ignore the evidence of that kiss.

“He is definitely not straight.”

Lily snorted. “No shit. The entire cafeteria knows he isn’t straight.”

“He could be bi. The girls—”

“Did he actually show interest in any of the girls?” Candice looked up from her notebook.

“When Emily got water spilled on her, he asked if he could help,” I said slowly. “But he did the same thing when I tripped in the cafeteria. And he took the time to be friends with Alexis even after he turned her down.” For some reason, the realization I wasn’t special hurt. “I think he actually cares about people.”

“Breaking News: Taylor’s actually a decent person.” Lily’s folded arms were directed at Candice and not me. “How is this news? Unless—you want to date him?”

Candice snorted. “Not my type. But with the formal plans of so many students up in the air, this is a story where accuracy counts.”

“It counts to Taylor. And no one else.” Lily shoved her hair out of her face. “Surely—”

“Fern!” I slammed my fist into my hand, interrupting Lily. “He gave her his phone number! He actually volunteered it—that’s a sign, right?” And as Candice and Lily looked at me, another thought occurred. “Did Fern see him kiss me?” If she got the wrong idea, their relationship could be doomed before it even started—

“Enough about Fern!” Lily’s anger was unexpected. I took a step back. “All anyone ever talks about is Fern! She’s so smart, she’s so talented, she’s so nice! It makes me mad! Yeah, she’s nice to your face, but the moment she gets busy, you’re dropped for her popular friends!”

“That’s not true,” I protested. “Fern does so much for the school, for other people—”

“You say that now.” Lily flipped her hair back over her shoulder. “Fern doesn’t have time for anything that won’t look great on a college transcript. See if she’s still got time for you after the formal, Milo.”

Candice shook her head. “Wow, Lily. Tell us how you really feel.”

Lily balled her hands up into fists. “I know what I’m talking about. We were best friends in ninth grade. Now? I don’t think she’s said two words to me all year. And that’s fine. People change. But everywhere I go, people won’t shut up about her. Even now. You’re supposed to be interviewing me, and instead, all we’re talking about is Fern—”

“Interview?” I blinked. “So that’s why Candice isn’t in class!”

“What, you thought I’d skipped out to see you get kissed?” Candice elbowed me. “Relax, Milo. Your story is safe from me.”

“My story?”

Lily smirked at me. “Taylor said ‘write about this.’”

I swallowed. “I’m too close to the source.”

“Work the personal involvement factor,” Candice said. “Especially as something tells me you won’t be getting a repeat interview from Taylor any time soon.”

That hurt. “But it’s too personal.”

“We report on other people’s personal stuff. If we’re going to be a newspaper worth the name, then we can’t play favorites,” Candice said. “Even when we’re the favorites. Thursday deadline, Milo. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got some questions for Lily.”

Chapter Six

AP English. I stared at the pop quiz in front of me. My mind was as blank as the paper. The only thing I could think about was Taylor, sitting two rows in front of me.

“Write about that.”

“And time is up! Pass your papers to the front of the class, please.” Mr. Perry flicked through them quickly. “Good, good. Looks like my allusions to Brontë’s use of framing narratives were not entirely in vain—oh no. No. This will not do.” Mr. Perry came to a halt. “Milo, can I talk to you in the hall a moment?”

Taylor glanced toward me and then quickly away. That hurt more than the snicker from the jocks at the back of the class. Trying to look as if I didn’t care, I followed Mr. Perry out of the class.

“What’s the matter, Milo?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

Mr. Perry held up my blank quiz paper. “These are questions you know! And I know you know them, because you referenced Nelly extensively in the class debate on Monday! For you to turn in a blank paper is uncharacteristic.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you feeling okay? Do you need to see the nurse?”

Feeling like a fraud, I nodded.

“Grab your bag. I’ll write you a note.”

I was the biggest fraud in the entire school, and the nurse knew it. She sniffed as she looked at the thermometer. “Just as I thought. Perfectly fine. Nothing at all the matter with you. I expect you’ve been staying up late, playing with the Gameboy. Teenagers, today. You’re all overtired.”

I didn’t correct her. “But I can stay?”

“Yes,” she said grudgingly. “But only until next period. I want you out of here when the bell rings.”

I pulled the curtains around the bed in the nurse’s office with a feeling of relief. Next period, Taylor had AP Chemistry. I was safe!

But after that was drawing. I sighed, flopping onto the bed with a moan. Why was life so difficult?

“Are you in actual pain or is it a teenage crisis?”

I’d forgotten the nurse. “I’m fine.”

“Let me know if that changes.”

I bit my lip. Ms. Cox was not going to take as charitable a view of my condition as Mr. Perry. Still, I had a fifty percent chance of getting sent to detention, so maybe it wouldn’t be that bad?

The white ceiling of the nurse’s office stared back at me, just like my blank page had. Even here, there was no escape. My article was due tomorrow. I had no idea what I was going to write.

Write about that.

What had Taylor meant? The more time passed, the less certain I was—of anything. Once again, I replayed the circumstances that had led to the kiss in my mind. Taylor was angry, I knew that much. The kiss had been to prove a point.

Even now, a full day later, my chest burned at the thought. At the time, the kiss itself had distracted me, but now I was fully conscious that Taylor hadn’t been thinking of me, my feelings and how embarrassing it was to have your personal life put out there for the entire school to see.

Was that the point? Seeing how I liked it when the spotlight of interest was turned on me? I turned over angrily, pulling the pillow over my head, but I couldn’t stop myself thinking.

“Not another one of you! I suppose you’ll be wanting to rest too.”

The nurse had a fresh victim. I relaxed. With any luck, she’d forget about me.

“I’m fine. Just a mild headache. I don’t want to miss class.” Fern?

The nurse snorted. “You’d be the first. Sit down, and let’s take your temperature. A headache, you say? When did it start?”

I carefully pried the curtains apart so I had a thin gap to peer through.

It was easy to see why Mr. Perry had sent Fern out of class. She looked pale, and there was an uncharacteristic flatness to her. “This morning. It’s nothing to worry about—”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Now, are there any stresses in your life right now, anything that might be causing you—”

I cleared my throat loudly. “I’m feeling a lot better! Time I got going.”

The bell rang as I was making my way down the hall, and I changed direction for my locker. I walked slowly, still mulling over my thoughts. Now I had some new ones to weigh. Had Fern been surprised to see me, or apprehensive? Had she been relieved that I was feeling better or that I was not there to hear her interview with the nurse?

I opened my locker and a folded up piece of paper fell out. A note? I unfolded it.

It took me a moment to understand the sentence. “*Perfect*” *Fern is bulimic*. When I did, I was furious, scrunching up the piece of paper. Did they think this was funny? Or that I’d believe it? What was the point of slipping such a cruel note into my locker unless—

I felt dizzy.

Unless they thought I would print it.

Halfway to AP Calculus, I realized I’d left my textbook in my locker. I saw Declan in the hall, hurried to catch up with him. “Declan! I need to talk to you.”

Declan ignored me, heading in the direction of the music block. “Shouldn’t you be talking to Taylor?”

“I—what?” We didn’t have time for this. The bell was going to ring any second. “It’s Fern.”

“Fern?” Declan turned.

I hauled him into the wheelchair accessible bathroom. “Someone slipped this into my locker today.”

Declan frowned at the note. “It’s not true.”

“I know that. It’s probably the same person who destroyed Fern’s posters.”

Declan slipped the note into his pocket. “Are you going to print this?”

“What? No!”

“Good,” Declan said. “Not a word to anyone. I’ll handle this.”

The bell went before I could stop him walking away. I ran to my next class, but it was no good. I stood at the front of the class while Mr. Nesbitt recorded

my lateness in the roll book with his intolerably ancient handwriting. “We really cannot have this behavior, Neil,” he scolded me gently. “Punctuality is very important. If you were this late to a business meeting, you might lose your job.”

“My name’s not Neil.”

“Of course, you will. Now take your seat and we’ll continue from where we were before Neil arrived.”

Mr. Nesbitt’s droning voice was usually comforting the same way white noise was, forming a comfortable insulating barrier between the world and myself. Today it was a distracting scratch that interrupted my thoughts. I couldn’t tell whether I was more upset by the note or the implications. The anonymous note writer believed that I would report any rumor I heard without any concern for truth. Worse, so did Declan. Did the rest of my classmates think the same?

Did Taylor?

I pressed my fingers to my lips. The kiss was clear in my mind. Even clearer was just how right it felt to be pressed against Taylor. I remembered the moment I’d felt him relax. Maybe he didn’t dislike me as much as I thought? To kiss me like that—

No. It was impossible that Taylor would ever go for someone he didn’t respect, and there was no way he respected someone who wrote a glorified gossip column. *Write about that—*

Fine, then. I would.

I pulled a fresh piece of loose-leaf from my file and began to write. *Why Coming Out is Hard. No, Not Like That.*

I was up past midnight editing my article. By the time I sent it to Candice, I’d rewritten it so many times I couldn’t even remember which version I sent. Not that I cared. I was done with the newspaper, done with school, done with Taylor.

Seeing the familiar gray stone building rising up to greet me beyond the wrought iron fence was almost enough to make me turn on my heels, but I made myself march toward the building without flinching. I would show everyone. Prove they’d misjudged me, make them eat their words.

When I walked down the hall, conversation trickled to a halt and then restarted hastily. I smiled grimly. As if I needed more proof that people had read it. The paper stands were already half empty, and everywhere I looked, I could see the photo of Lily and her camera. *HIGH SCHOOL EXHIBITIONIST: Chance Encounter gets Junior Photographer Her Own Gallery Exhibition*. My article was on the second page.

I got my textbooks for my first classes, wondering how Taylor would take his demotion to second page. Would he be relieved at first or miss the attention? Would he even notice? We might attend the same school, but for all I knew about his state of mind, we might have been on opposite ends of the globe.

“Milo!” I froze, but it was too late, Alexis and Sarah Choi had flanked me. “That was an amazing article!”

“I didn’t—” What? “You really think so?”

Sarah Choi nodded. “I didn’t realize there was so much pressure on guys. I mean, with all the privilege you get, I figured that men didn’t have any *real* problems.”

“And you’re always alone, so I never thought you cared about others’ opinions that much,” Alexis continued. “Or that in a school as accepting as we are there would still be the pressure of expectation and disappointment. Poor Taylor!”

“You’d be surprised.” Wait. “Poor Taylor?”

“Just think what he is going through right now. At least you had time to get to know us before coming out. Taylor’s still so new to the school.” Alexis shook her head.

I had a sinking feeling. “I didn’t say that Taylor was thinking about coming out.”

“Of course, you couldn’t say that. Not without outing him. But when you talked about how important it was to allow people time and space in which to become comfortable with who they were, that was totally about Taylor!” Sarah nodded enthusiastically. “So we’ve got to support him.”

Sinking nothing. I had a weight tied to my legs and was plummeting toward the ocean floor. “Support him by respecting his right to privacy and space, right?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Milo! We’ve got to show him that we’re behind him all the way. We can’t do that by letting him have *space*.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, feeling increasingly desperate as we neared the corner where our paths parted.

“We don’t want Taylor thinking we’re rejecting him, right?” Alexis slapped me on the back. “Wait until English. You’ll see.”

I watched them sashay down the hall feeling utterly lost. Maybe Mr. Perry wouldn’t mind if I missed English twice?

It was the worst AP English of my life.

Taylor was surrounded by a buzz of excited chatter. The girls were earnest in their support and encouragement, and the guys... the guys were even more so. One look at the throng around him and I knew I had no chance of speaking to Taylor that period.

Instead, I slid into my usual desk, shaking my head at the guys making a spectacle of themselves. Seriously, Carlos? No wonder no one had ever met the cheerleader girlfriend! Others had me in disbelief. Kyle had called me a fag to my face! He had no business leaning on Taylor’s desk. And quiet, serious Zachery, who only spoke to answer a teacher’s question... Who could have predicted that?

But it was Boomer who hurt the most. Boomer, who had his hand resting on Taylor’s shoulder and was laughing with him.

I looked aside quickly and caught a sour expression on Declan’s face. I swallowed, remembering my own advice to Taylor. *You can be gay, but you can’t be more popular than Declan*. This was not going to end well, I knew it. I dropped my books onto my desk and slumped in my chair, braced for something dramatic.

“Good morning, class. You’re all here? Splendid.” Mr. Perry swept into the room, the ever-present Mr. Harper behind him. “Before we start, I think some congratulations are in order. Lily, securing exhibition space in Studio A is something to be very proud of! I will be checking out the exhibition when it opens. And Milo, congratulations on a very thought-provoking article. I think it’s your best piece yet.”

As the rest of the class dutifully applauded, Taylor shot me a glare. His expression said plainly “I should have known.”

I offered a weak shrug and an anguished grimace. Boomer's hand was still on Taylor's shoulder.

I timed my arrival to drawing late enough that all the seats around Taylor would be taken. My classmates did not disappoint. I dropped my bag by the table nearest the door and watched the clock. I was out the door the instant the bell rang, leaving Taylor alone with his horde of supporters.

Lunch was where things started to get weird. A couple of seniors had lingered in the lunchroom to talk to Taylor. I smirked a little as I noticed Christopher among them—I'd had my suspicions about him for years!—but Jacob had been dating the same girl since freshman year. What gives?

For the first time, Taylor's perfect composure seemed to be showing cracks. He nodded in response to whatever Christopher was saying, but his eyes were wandering the cafeteria. When his gaze settled on me, I saw his throat tighten.

Not a good sign. I tucked my apple into my pocket and rewrapped my sandwich.

But as I stood to return my tray, Taylor moved toward me.

"Hey!" Christopher protested. "I'm not finished. We really mean that—"

"That's great," Taylor said, weaving through the tables toward me. "But another time. I have to—"

Logan's chair screeched as he stood. "All right, new kid. I have had it up to here with you. Who do you think you are, coming in here acting like you're so much better than the rest of us, like you're so far above it all?"

The cafeteria fell silent as everyone turned to stare.

"I wasn't intending anything of the sort. So if you don't mind—" Taylor tried again to side step Logan, but the football player blocked his path.

"Yeah, I mind. You think being class president means you get to do what you like? It means shit. You're still the new kid, and when a senior football player talks to you, you show respect." Logan took a step into Taylor's personal space, looming as hard as he could. "Or you face the consequences."

"I mean no disrespect to you or your friends, Logan," Taylor said. His voice was calm and reasonable, even with Logan in his face. "But I'm in a hurry. Perhaps we can continue this discussion later?" He stepped around Logan.

Logan turned, grabbing Taylor's arm. "I'm not done with you," he snarled, tugging Taylor back so that he stumbled. "Think being a fucking fag means I won't hit you? Think again, freak!"

The students in the adjoining tables hastily grabbed their bags and pulled their chairs out of the way. "Fight! Fight!"

Taylor didn't try to shake off Logan's grip. "This is a really bad idea," he said. "You don't want to do this."

"Don't tell me what to do!"

I was frozen in my spot as Logan raised his fist. I had to do something—but what? Run for a teacher? Useless as I was in a fight, I couldn't leave Taylor. I took a step toward them—

There was a loud crash. Logan slammed into the table hard enough it skidded forward.

Mr. Harper stood over him, one hand on Logan's shoulder and the other twisting Logan's arm behind his back. "Stand down, son."

Where had he come from? I hadn't even noticed him until he was there, barreling into Logan like a charging bull. He stood there now, casually pressing Logan against the table as if it was nothing, while the entire cafeteria stared, too stunned to move.

Except one. "This isn't necessary," Taylor protested. "It's just a simple misunderstanding."

Mr. Harper was unmoved as Logan whimpered. "The principal will be the judge of that. Are you all right, Taylor?"

"Fine. He barely touched me—this is way out of proportion to what happened."

Mr. Harper grunted. "You. Kid." He tightened his grip on Logan's arm. "We are going to stand up and walk very calmly to the principal's office. Do you understand?" He took Logan's yelp as affirmation and propelled him out of the cafeteria. Taylor followed, his expression perfectly blank. There was a moment's stunned silence.

"Oh my god." Victoria sat back down. "Can you believe—"

There was an explosion of chatter. Jordan picked up Logan's bag. "Matt, you go tell Coach! I'm going to tell the principal what really happened."

Fern paused, picking up her spilled notes. “We all saw what happened.”

“He was totally baiting Logan! Trying to get him in trouble—where did that teacher come from anyway?” Jordan grabbed his own bag. “He’s not even a real teacher!”

“You can’t seriously—”

Declan put his hand on Fern’s arm. “Jordan has a great idea,” he said. “I think we should go and make sure that the principal hears *exactly* what Logan said.”

Jordan caught Declan’s expression belatedly. “Obviously he didn’t mean *that*. He was just upset—angry. Because Taylor—”

“Taylor,” Christopher said, “who was perfectly calm and civil the entire time? You’re right. It’s time the principal heard a lot of things.”

“But you’re on the football team!” Jordan protested.

“I *was* on the football team.” Christopher stalked toward the door. Fern, Declan and Jacob were right behind him, Jordan hurried at their heels, protesting that they were taking things entirely the wrong way. There was a second stunned lull and then a maelstrom of activity as everyone reached as one for their bags.

We weren’t allowed in the office, but a large crowd lingered in the hall outside, waiting for any developments.

Coach Burns barreled through us, Matt and two other members of the football club at his heels. “Preposterous! My team works hard, gives their all for the school—and this is the thanks they get!” His eye fell on me, and his lip curled. “Now I see where this started. Another one of your scoops, Markopoulos? High time your stupid, little gossip rag was shut down for good.” He slammed the office door behind him.

“Don’t let him get to you, Milo.” Fern had decided that I needed an arm around me and had been standing next to me since she’d first spotted me in the crowd. “With how many people are here to support Taylor and tell the truth, Coach doesn’t have a leg to stand on. Taylor will be fine.”

I managed a weak smile. Fern meant well, but I knew that not everyone in the crowd was on Taylor’s side. The jocks had noticed Fern’s arm and elbowed each other as they snickered.

“I think it’s disgraceful that a student isn’t even safe at school!” Victoria flicked her hair over her shoulder. “That aggressive reaction from someone who isn’t even a real teacher! My parents will be hearing about this.”

There were a few mutters of assent.

“Logan might have been seriously hurt!”

“Serves him right! He was asking for a fight—”

“If you ask me, that man knew exactly what he was doing.” Lily stood at my other side. “He could have hurt Logan, but he didn’t. The way he handled the situation...” Lily drummed her fingers against her folded arm, frowning. “Something about it...”

Before I could ask her what she meant, the office door opened and Principal Kim stepped out. “Now, I’m sure you’re all anxious to know what’s going to happen to your friends,” he said, peering at us over his glasses. “But some serious accusations have been made, and the situation needs an in-depth review. Taylor and Logan will both be going home for the rest of the day.” He raised his voice to be heard over the resulting protest. “I know you’re anxious to tell me what happened, and I want to hear from all of you, but it’s time for class.” He held up a clipboard. “I’m going to ask that everyone who has something they want to contribute to the discussion leave their name on this list, and I’ll do my best to talk to all of you. The rest of you, make your way to your assigned classrooms, please.”

“Where are you going?” Fern asked. “You’re not going to leave your name?”

I shook my head. “Taylor’s got you, Declan, everyone else behind him. He doesn’t need me—and you heard Coach. He’ll object to anything I say. Taylor’s case is stronger without me.”

“You sell yourself short, Milo.” Fern gave me another quick squeeze. “Especially after your article in the paper today. I think the principal will be really interested in what you have to say.”

I smiled weakly. I needed to get my hands on a copy of the paper ASAP, find out just what it was I’d turned in to Candice.

School had other plans for me. I was called out of sixth period Spanish to go to the principal’s office.

“Take a seat, Milo.” Principal Kim rested his hands on top of a copy of the newspaper on his desk, which was opened to my article. “First, can I just say that I found your article in the paper this morning extremely elucidating. It takes a very brave young man to discuss his fears so openly, and I was very interested in what you had to say about your experiences at Bernhardt.”

I sank into the chair. What on earth had I done?

“But it’s what you didn’t say that I’d like to talk to you about today.” The principal looked at me significantly.

I was completely lost. “Sir?”

“There have been some serious allegations made. It’s been reported to me that Logan and his friends have been tripping, shoving, verbally harassing or otherwise intimidating classmates. Your name was mentioned frequently as a target of this behavior. And yet, there is no mention of it in your article here.” The principal laid his hands flat on it. “When I first read it, I felt it was a warming testimony to the maturity of our students and their commitment to our school’s policy of acceptance. In the light of today’s events, I reread it, and I noticed there were some worrying omissions. For example, it is not uncommon in this country for students to be bullied for being open about their orientation. You don’t mention this at all, either as a fear that you felt before deciding to come out or in your experiences since.” He paused.

I said nothing.

The principal took his glasses off. “There’s another thing that struck me as strange. While you state that being out made no difference in how you were treated in class or as a member of the newspaper, you make no mention at all of the impact on your participation in sports. I remember you left the squash team unexpectedly last year. And this year, your only sport is cross-country—in which you spend most of your time alone.” The principal regarded me earnestly. “I can think of a few reasons why you might decide to be silent on such a significant portion of student life, and I don’t like any of them, Milo.”

“Mr. Burns said that if we ran another story painting the football team in a negative light he’d shut the paper down,” I said. “And he meant it.”

“He made this statement to you? Was there anyone else present?”

“Candice,” I said. “And Logan and Matt. This was after what happened with Carson and Blake.”

“Indeed.” The principal made a note. “I stand by what I said at the time—an issue with such far-reaching consequences should be brought to the attention of the staff first, but I know you thought you were doing the best thing. I want you to feel that you are always welcome in my office, Milo. Now, back to Logan’s behavior.”

Had I done the right thing? I lay face down on the floor of the AP English room while the newspaper meeting went on around me, replaying the interview with the principal. There was no harm in confirming what he already knew, right? And I hadn’t given away any confidences, just suggested that he talk to Declan and Fern...

I groaned. What if they needed someone else to make the first move? Once the principal had asked about bullying, it had been surprisingly easy to tell him what had happened. Should I have been more explicit?

“He’s still groaning,” one of the freshmen said. “You’re sure he’s all right?”

“Milo does that from time to time. Usually before a deadline. Just be careful not to step on him,” Candice said matter-of-factly. “Now. I want our spotlight on discrimination to be school-wide. We’re going to need input from all years and all groups.”

One of the freshmen raised her hand. “Not everyone’s going to be willing to put their name out there,” she said. “What if we made anonymous comment boxes that people could leave their stories in?”

“Or an e-mail account for people to send stories to,” Lionel said. “These days anyone can create a burner account and there’s free internet in the library. Easy.”

“We can make posters.” Sam warmed to the idea. “And people can indicate in their e-mail if they want to be interviewed or stay anonymous.”

“I like it.” Candice wrote furiously. “Sam, I want you making the poster. Lionel, you’re our tech guy. Can you set the newspaper up with an e-mail for this? Hannah and Alyssa, you think you can come up with a comment box for us? Great. That just leaves Milo.”

“Not the feature article, Candice. I can’t.”

“*CAFETERIA-GATE: Bernhardt’s Reputation for Acceptance on the Line After Cafeteria Confrontation.* It has your name all over it! There’s no one

better.” Candice nudged me with the toes of her non-regulation boots. “Not only were you the only one present when it happened, but you know both parties involved.”

“And that’s why I can’t write it! I’m too involved!” I rolled onto my side. “Besides, the principal told me to let them look into the situation.”

“But that doesn’t mean you can’t—”

There was a knock on the door, and Mr. Perry looked into the room. “Hard at work, I see. I hate to interrupt, but the principal is wondering if he could have a word with you, Candice.”

Candice picked up her file. “We’ll continue this later, Milo,” she said. “Everyone else, you have your assignments.”

It was a fine enough day that Ms. Leech suggested the cross-country team might prefer to practice in the park where we did most of our summer training. “Make a nice change. Keep things fresh. Well, what are you waiting for? Off you hop.”

We shared a look. The cross-country team consisted of everyone who wasn’t on a team and couldn’t produce a valid medical excuse to get out of the mandatory sport activity. At one point or another, we’d all been target practice for the basketball team. Last week, that would have been “youthful hijinks” that we should “learn to laugh at.” Now? Seemed like the principal’s investigation was already making waves.

Lakes Park is great in the summer. The shade from the trees keeps some of the heat off and, if you ignore the mosquitoes and don’t mind dodging small, wet children and boating enthusiasts, it can be a nice run. In December? Not so much. The park was cold and damp, and the presence of the water just seemed to make the park even colder. I put on a burst of speed, hoping to get warm before I ran out of steam.

I’d outdistanced the rest of the club and was on my way back when I spotted Matt pushing his bike and Jordan walking beside him. How could I have forgotten? The park was also a shortcut for the students who lived in the Pocantico Hills, Mt. Pleasant or Hawthorne.

I had to act fast if I wanted to avoid getting pushed in the lake. I scrambled up the bank and into the forest, flattening myself on the ground behind a ridge and hoping desperately that I hadn’t been seen.

“—absolute bullshit! The football team’s the best of the best—so why should we put up with this crap?”

“Calm down, Jordan. Coach said to keep our heads down while he sorts things out. He didn’t say we should act like sissies.”

“That’s basically what it amounts to. Letting some bitch-ass fag lord it over us as class president? We have to do something.”

“Think clearly, man. We got to do it in a way that doesn’t get pinned on us. You want to wind up like Carson and Blake?”

The crunch of their footsteps passed and started to fade. I waited until my heart had slowed to a more normal speed and I could hear the familiar plod of another cross-country member to pick myself up and slide back down the bank.

Lily had her headphones in and didn’t even notice that I’d joined her. I took a deep breath, and tried to copy her distant expression as our path took us past another gaggle of jocks. Inwardly, I could only think of one thing. Taylor was in huge trouble. I was the only one who knew—and I couldn’t do a thing to help. No one in the school would believe what I’d just heard. It was too stereotypically awful. Bernhardt students did not act like middle school bullies. And even if they did, would anyone believe the story coming from me?

No, I decided, breaking into a sprint as we reached the end of the park track and the school came into view. There was only one option left—the headline article.

Chapter Seven

Taylor wasn't at school on Friday.

Logan was, and he swaggered down the hall with an increased self-respect that did nothing for my peace of mind. Would my article work?

We had a whole-school assembly second period.

"Bernhardt Academy was founded on the principle of providing young scholars a place to learn that was free of religious or political creed," Principal Kim said from the podium. "A place where any young man or woman might be free to express him or herself fearlessly. To that end, we've allowed our students freedoms not often extended to their peers. The freedom to hold meetings and practices without teacher supervision. The freedom to make decisions as a student body. For the most part, you have conducted yourselves in a way that shows that you are deserving of our trust in you." He paused. "You are waiting for the 'but.'"

I wasn't the only person who glanced at Logan, lounging insolently in his seat.

"In envisaging a place of freedom, our founders envisaged a place free of fear. Sadly, for some students, Bernhardt has become a place where they cannot express themselves without fear. This is not a problem shared by one or two students. This is a problem that concerns the school as a whole. Freedom cannot flourish where there is fear. Therefore, I ask you, as students of Bernhardt, to challenge fear. If you hear hateful language, challenge the speaker. If you see anything that strikes you as unfair, speak up. If you are not confident to do this yourself, myself and any of the staff are available to help you. Let's make our school a place where everyone feels free to be themselves."

I glanced at the teachers, standing at intervals around the gym. Coach Burns was there, his face a set, expressionless mask, and his arms folded across his chest. But Mr. Harper was absent. Fired? I bit my lip. If that was the case, Taylor could be in serious trouble.

Fern had baked vegan chocolate chip cookies for the formal volunteers. "I'm sure everyone wishes Taylor was here," she said. "I do, too. But I think the best way to show our support for him is to concentrate on doing as good a

job as we can. The formal is just under two weeks away, so we don't have much time."

I chewed my cookie with a sinking feeling. Stress-baking again? That could not be a good sign.

"Fortunately, Victoria and Maria have stepped up to help fill the gap. They've got a ton of experience working on the homecoming committee for the last two years, so with their help, I'm sure we can make this happen."

I joined the decorating committee.

"We're going for 1930s glamour." Victoria tapped a perfectly manicured fingernail against the picture she held. "Obviously, we can't decorate an entire room like this, but the venue is allowing us the use of their tablecloths, piano, carpet and rope. We're going to make a red carpet area for photo shoots at the entrance. And for the walls, we're going to make silhouettes of people standing in front of windows with a cityscape beyond—like you see in noir movies. I need a few people who are good at drawing to copy this design onto the big poster paper and then the rest of us can paint it in with the black paint."

"While we wait for the silhouettes to be ready, we can start cutting out tickets. I borrowed scissors from the art department; this should be enough for everyone." Maria lifted a box onto the desk with a heavy metallic *thunk*.

"Leaving me to go over poster design with that group." Fern breathed out. "Thanks so much, you guys! This is such a help."

Maria smirked at Victoria. "What else are friends for?"

I joined the group cutting out tickets, trying to tell myself that my dislike was unreasonable. It was good of them to help us at the last moment. Why didn't I feel grateful?

"You'd think that since we're doing so much for the school, an extension on our homework would be the least they could do..." Maria heaved a sigh. "I should really be at home, studying now. You're lucky to have me at all."

Bad luck was still luck, I decided. "At least we're all in the same boat on that front. I plan to use the weekend to get ahead on my projects."

Maria looked at me. "I don't know how you find the time! It takes me the entire weekend just to catch up on my social commitments."

"Do you catch up with your friends after school then, Milo?"

How had I let myself get into this trap? "I—don't."

“And what about dating?” Maria asked. “When do you find time for that?”

Victoria elbowed her a little too quickly. “You forget—”

“Oh! Milo, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” Maria simpered at me, all fake sympathy.

I forced my jaw to unclench, smiled back at them. “It’s fine.”

“Poster’s ready to print! Milo, would you?” Fern had come over with the finished poster. She stood behind me as I looked it over. “Looks lovely, doesn’t it? It feels like it’s really happening. We’re going to have a formal.”

“Of course, it’s happening. And it’s going to be great,” Victoria assured her. “With you organizing, how can it be anything but?”

“I haven’t done all that much. Without the volunteers and Taylor—”

“Oh, *Taylor*.” Maria was dismissive.

“Didn’t we tell you? Once again, Fern ends up doing all the work—”

“If I’m going to be accused of doing any work at all, I’m going to need a pair of scissors.” Fern took my vacated seat. “Any questions, Milo?”

“You said one hundred copies, right?”

“That’s right. We can start putting them up immediately.”

With a feeling of misgiving, I went to the computer room. When I returned with the finished posters, it was to find that Fern, Maria and Victoria had vanished.

“For people who like to talk about how busy they are, they sure haven’t done a lot today.” Alexis snorted, putting down her scissors and reaching for the stack of posters. “Soon as these are up, I’m going home.” There was a general chorus of agreement from the Feministas.

“I signed up to help a good cause. Not hear how hard AP History is! If you struggle so much, why didn’t you just switch to history? It’s not rocket science!” Sarah Choi held out her hand for a pile of the posters. “Milo, let Fern know we left.”

“Do I get a choice?”

The slamming of the door answered that question.

The art kids who were working on the silhouettes stayed as long as they could before needing to leave to catch their train. By this time, me and the few remaining members of the drama society were almost done with tickets.

“You live locally, right, Milo?” Stacey stood. “You mind? It’s just that I’ve got a long commute—”

“Go ahead,” I said gloomily. After all, there was nothing waiting for me at home but a dark apartment and an empty sofa.

It was about half an hour after that, Fern returned. “What happened, Milo? Where is everyone?”

“They had to leave. Trains.” I took the opportunity to stretch. “Don’t you commute, Fern?”

Fern looked at the clock. A horrified expression crossed her face. “Fudge! I totally lost track of time—don’t laugh, Milo! This is serious! I’m not going to get home until after ten, and Daddy doesn’t want me using public transport alone that late at night!”

“I’m sorry, Fern, really I am.” I wiped tears out of my eyes. “But fudge?”

Fern put her hands on her hips and glared. “Be a bit more sensitive! I’m going to be in a lot—a lot of—” With the most undignified noise I’d ever heard her make, Fern dissolved into giggles.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said at last, when we’d both laughed ourselves out. “I shouldn’t be laughing at all.”

“You probably needed that more than you realized.”

“You might be right. Still, I don’t think Daddy’s going to be laughing.”

I lingered as Fern called her father. “Yes, I know—I’m really sorry! I was so busy I lost track. What? Well, I can ask, but I don’t know if the school will still be open when you get here.”

“You could wait at my place,” I offered.

“What? Oh, really? That would be wonderful! Did you hear that? Milo says I can go to his house—yes, he’s a boy, but—I don’t really think—all right, I’ll ask.” Fern cradled her cell phone against her blazer, making an “I’m so sorry” face at me. “Dad wants to know if your parents will be home.”

I shook my head. “Mom works nights.”

“It’s just Milo—no, Daddy! Absolutely not—this is the Milo who wrote the article! Yes—so can I please visit?” This time Fern’s grin was triumphant. “What’s your address?”

I gave it to her.

“No, that’s Taylor’s house—they’re neighbors. No, Taylor won’t be there. He’s in L.A. for the weekend—of course, I’m sure!” Finally, Fern was allowed to hang up. “Sorry,” she said. “I’m the only girl in the family. He gets a bit protective.”

“I’m just glad that you’re not going to meet my mom,” I said, praying I would be in time to clear the whiteboard of any embarrassing messages before Fern saw it. “Taylor’s in L.A.?”

“Oh! Fud—” Fern grimaced. “I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone. He’ll be back at school Monday.”

Not good. Our next publication date was Tuesday. “What’s he doing in L.A.?”

“He didn’t say. But why don’t we take the tickets with us? We can finish them while we wait for Daddy.”

“We’ve got hummus,” I reported from the kitchen. “And pita.” Was pita vegan? I squinted at the ingredients.

“I’m fine! You don’t need to feed me,” Fern called back from the lounge where I’d got her set up with scissors at the coffee table.

“You have to eat something!” I added a jar of olives to the tray I was making. This would have to do.

When I carried the food into the living room, I found Fern flipping through the yearbooks. “How did you get a copy of these? I thought only seniors—”

“One of the perks of the newspaper club,” I told her. “Since we organize it, we each get a copy.”

“We look so young, don’t we? It was only a few years ago, but already everyone’s grown up so much...” Fern spread some hummus onto her bread, looking at the pictures. “Look at Lily and me in chess club. You’d never recognize us now, would you?”

I took a piece of pita for myself. “You’re both so different,” I said slowly. “It’s hard to imagine you ever being friends.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Fern corrected me. “We both care a lot about the same issues—the environment, living sustainably, eliminating discrimination. We just approach it in different ways. Don’t tell anyone this, but under her hard exterior, Lily’s a big softie.”

“She fooled me.” I bit my lip. It wasn’t my place to ask, but I was curious. “Did you have a falling out? Over your different approaches?”

Fern shook her head. “I suppose we just... grew apart. It’s sad, but it happens sometimes. In freshman year, Lily was my only friend, but in sophomore year, I tried new things, met new people, and Lily... didn’t. I think she took it personally. The final straw was when I dropped chess club.” She sighed. “It’s really hard, trying to keep up with everything. In some ways, I miss freshman year. Life was a lot simpler then.”

“I don’t.” That had come out much more bitter than I’d anticipated. Before Fern could ask, I stood, making my way over to the TV. “How about a movie while we work?”

“*Some Like it Hot?* After all Taylor’s told me about it, I’m curious.”

I fumbled, almost dropping the DVD. “What? Taylor told you?”

“Yeah.” Fern beamed at me. “He told me the two of you watched it together his first night here.”

I swallowed. “Did he tell you why?” Not my script. The thought of anyone, even Fern, knowing about my script—

“You came over to see if he needed help with his homework and ended up staying.” Fern smirked. “And then ended up getting so distracted by the movie that you entirely forgot about the time. I think that’s really sweet—and so does Taylor. Did you know he’s watched it twice since then?”

I breathed out in relief. He hadn’t told—“He what?”

“He said the first time he ended up watching you instead of the movie, so he had to watch it again to see what he missed.” Fern sighed happily. “And the third time, he watched it to see it how you saw it. That’s so romantic.”

I stared at her.

“What’s the matter? Was that supposed to be secret?”

I shook my head. “Fern.” I made an abortive gesture with the remote. “I—Taylor doesn’t like me.”

“You’re kidding, right? Of course he does.”

“Did he say so?”

“Not explicitly. But it’s obvious, the way he talks about you. I’m serious, Milo.”

“So am I.” I sank into the nearest armchair, feeling dizzy. “You don’t understand—I ruined everything!” And before I quite knew what I was doing, I was spilling the entire saga of my ineptitude to Fern.

Fern was as good at listening as she was most things. “Once you explain to Taylor that you didn’t realize how your article could be taken out of context, he’ll forgive you,” she assured me, patting my arm. “Assuming he is even mad at you to start with.”

I groaned. I’d allowed myself to slide limply down the armchair and now rested against its base, my legs stretched out on the floor. “You didn’t see how he looked at me.”

“You haven’t heard how he talks about you when you’re not there.” Fern paused. “I’ve never seen anyone look so much like a limp noodle as you do now. Is that why your mom calls you Spaghetti-O?”

“Oh my god.” I’d forgotten the whiteboard.

Monday, I caught sight of a familiar black-suited figure lingering in the hall outside AP English, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Mr. Harper was back.

“Have you heard? Logan’s been banned from wrestling for the rest of the month.” The Feministas were crowded around a desk. I couldn’t see the occupant, but I was confident I knew who it was.

“That’s not all. I saw him Friday afternoon, with the custodian, picking up trash. Apparently, the principal’s calling it school service—”

“Like community service?”

Alexis nodded. “It’s supposed to make him more school minded.”

“Let’s drop the subject.” Taylor sounded just like he usually did. It was a relief, after all the time I’d invested into worrying that weekend, and I placed my books on my desk, letting the familiar cadence of his voice reassure me. “Logan’s been punished. Whether or not he learns from it is up to him, but we’re not helping matters by rehashing it. Tell me about the formal plans?”

“We’re a day behind. Tickets were supposed to go on sale at lunch today, but they weren’t ready—”

“Fern says they were, and that someone took them out of her bag. Personally, I think she never finished them—”

“She did,” I cut in. “I know because I helped her. We finished them at my place after you all went home.”

Alexis, Sarah Choi and the others all stared at me. “But that still makes no sense. Who would steal tickets?”

“Maybe she lost them and couldn’t say,” Sarah Choi suggested. “She got sent to the nurse during first period. Stacey has Japanese with her; she said Fern looked awful—”

“We’d better do our best to make sure the tickets don’t cause her any stress then,” Taylor said. “I’ve got a copy of Fern’s master document. We’ll have an emergency meeting after school. If we all pitch in, we can make this happen.”

It was the way he said it, his implicit confidence that we would not let him down. Nobody could say no to that tone. Nobody did.

Logan scowled as he entered the room and saw Taylor present. There was a moment’s pause, and then he chose the row that Taylor’s chair was on to swagger down, making a point of bumping into it. Taylor didn’t react, but Logan’s action did not go unnoticed.

“How immature.” Sarah Choi frowned.

“Seriously. What does he think this is—elementary school?” Alexis tossed her braids scornfully.

Logan bristled. “I fight my own battles! I’m not the one hiding behind a bunch of girls.”

“Two things,” Taylor said, calmly setting his binder on the desk. “Before you accuse me of hiding behind my friends, remember I saw you without yours in the principal’s office, and you were not nearly this tough. Second, you’re either implying that women are less capable of defending themselves than men, or that you consider them inferior—neither of which is an opinion I would be proud of.”

In the pause that followed, every girl in the class turned to look at Logan.

Mr. Perry cleared his throat. “Before Logan says anything else he may regret, perhaps we should turn to today’s worksheet—the women of *Wuthering Heights* and what we think Brontë communicates about gender roles in her work.”

I opened my binder, but I couldn’t concentrate. Tucked amongst my notes was my front-page article for the paper and something that had been even more

difficult to write—a formal invitation for Taylor. I glanced across the room at him.

Taylor listened to Mr. Perry, but as if he felt my gaze, he looked up at me. Our eyes met for an instant, and then he turned back to the class, leaving me infused with a happy glow. How had I ever imagined this was professional interest? If Fern was right and Taylor felt the same way—

As the bell rang and as our classmates filed out the door, I caught Taylor's arm. "Can I talk to you a moment?"

He nodded to Emily. "I'll catch up with you. Well?"

I held out my article. The formal invite was mixed in with the papers. "My article for tomorrow's paper. I thought you might like to see it before I give it to Candice."

Taylor's fingers bumped mine briefly as he took the papers. "*Students Rally Around Class President?*"

I fought the urge to blush, looking down at the desk between us. "Candice decided to do an issue exploring discrimination at Bernhardt. I thought I'd offset the negativity by concentrating on something positive."

"And that something is me?" I heard the rustle of papers. "You make it sound like I'm the center of everyone's attention."

I nodded. Logan and his friends would think twice about messing with Taylor if they thought they'd be observed. "Going from new kid and knowing no one to class president, you're kind of an inspiration."

"Really." Something in Taylor's tone—I looked up, but was not in time to catch his expression. "You're hanging out with Fern now?"

"After the formal committee meeting Friday." I watched as Taylor's grip tightened around the papers. "The next page—"

"I've read enough." Taylor took the papers and ripped.

It felt like I'd been slapped. "Taylor! You can't—"

"Watch me." Taylor put both halves of the paper together and tore again. "You're very good at manipulating public opinion, Milo, but I haven't forgotten how you talked down the Spirit Squad when we first met—and here you are, best of friends with Fern and Declan." He ripped the remaining quarters once more and threw the pieces at the bin. "Thanks to me."

I watched helplessly. “That’s not it at all—”

“For the good of the school?” Taylor’s smile was thin. “I actually believed you meant that. And all the time, this was your plan.” He turned, picking up his bag. “It ends here. You want to be popular so badly, fine. Just don’t use me.”

It wasn’t until he had reached the door that my body caught up to the instructions my mind was screeching at it. I stumbled after him, reaching for his arm. “Taylor! You’ve got everything wrong—”

I collided with a wall.

Mr. Harper blocked my way, his hand on my arm, unmoving. “None of that,” he said. “You want to calm down.”

I was too stunned to respond, only dimly aware that the students in the hall had stopped to stare.

Taylor paused, not looking back. “When we first met, I didn’t think my opinion of you could get any lower. Guess I was wrong.” He walked away.

My head spun, and my knees shook. I shook myself free of Mr. Harper’s arm, staggering toward the bathroom. I was going to be sick.

My day did not get better.

Jordan turned up to the cafeteria with a pizza box decorated with ribbons. “This is full of cheese, but Stacey, be my formal date, please?”

Stacey squealed, setting off a chain reaction of screaming that brought the cafeteria to a standstill. “Oh my god, Jordan, I can’t believe you! Yes!”

“Disgusting,” Lily said. “I am going to physically vomit.”

I smiled wanly. I had only managed a bite of my apple before realizing that food was not happening for me today. “If Stacey actually eats that pizza, you won’t be the only one. Isn’t she lactose intolerant?”

Lily brightened. “I’d totally forgotten. Thanks, Milo.”

I bit my lip. Before Jordan had been picked for the JV team, he’d been dating Lily. “Are you—um.”

“Fine,” Lily said. “These artificial social constructs are interesting from an anthropological perspective—but not much else. Dressing up an excuse to flaunt how much happier you are than your peers in the guise of supporting charity? Count me out.”

“The shelter’s a genuinely good cause.”

“So I’ll donate my time as a volunteer. Get more out of it that way than standing around all night regretting my life choices.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

Lily had picked up her iPod, and now she put it down. “You can’t say that. You and Boomer were easily the most sickening thing to happen at homecoming.”

I looked over to the Spirit Squad table. “Yeah. We were pretty gross.”

“You’re not supposed to agree with me.” Lily hesitated, tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear. “You don’t—miss him at all?”

I looked down at my apple. “Not as much as you’d think. We were such an easy fit... But then he ended it so easily, I just—can’t imagine myself feeling the same way about him again.”

“Brutal.”

“Honestly? I’m glad it—we happened. You don’t want to know how long I spent wondering how he felt and if I’d ever have the guts to say something. Doing it, actually making the move...” I pressed my mouth together. It wasn’t Boomer I was thinking of. “If I hadn’t done that, I might still be chasing a ‘never going to happen.’ For that reason alone, it was a good thing.”

I expected something bitter. Instead Lily bit her lip. “So if there was someone you knew that you had no chance with—way, way above your level, smarter, tougher, cooler, everything you wish you were and aren’t, someone with no reason to want to go with you—and you knew that but *still*?”

I grimaced. Taylor? “It’d be really hypocritical of me not to say go for it. You’ll never know unless you do. And since I think I turned my own stomach with that, I’m gonna go.”

Fern showed up for fifth period, her right hand in a brace. “Early onset RSI,” she explained to her cluster of friends. “I’ll be fine, but I’m not allowed to use my hand to write or anything for a while. I’ve got a mini-voice recorder, so I can take notes that way, but I guess I’ll be relying on you for a while.”

“Actually, my pen ran out during history, so I can’t lend you my notes...” Maria looked apologetic and Victoria nodded.

“I had the same problem in Chemistry.”

“You can borrow my notes,” Emily offered.

“And mine,” Alexis said quickly. Regretting her comments that morning? I smirked, but my smile faded as I remembered what else Fern had missed that morning. I made my way to the newspaper meeting room feeling like I dragged myself through concrete.

Candice was in her element. “We’ve never had so many submissions. The hard part is going to be narrowing these down. I think we can fit ten each on the inside pages, but the cover will depend on Milo’s article.”

I swallowed. “About that. Can we talk a moment?”

Candice followed me to the door. “What’s up? Don’t tell me you haven’t written it. You’ve never missed a deadline.”

The pages that Taylor had torn up weren’t my only copy. I had the article on USB in my pocket, but I could not forget Taylor’s words as he’d ripped it up. *You’re very good at manipulating public opinion.* “I’m quitting the paper.”

“You can’t quit,” Candice said. “You’re deputy editor. If you need more time or the article’s a problem—”

“I wrote the article. The problem’s me.” I took a deep breath. “I’m not a real reporter. I’m not brave or dedicated or any of the things that people think I am. I don’t write the truth. I write what I want people to think the truth is—I’m a fake.”

Candice put her hand on my shoulder. “Everyone has doubts sometimes, Milo. They question their motivations, if they’re really writing for the right motives. But you don’t improve by *quitting*.”

I looked at my feet. “I’m never going to be a good reporter. I don’t even know if I’m a good writer. The best thing I ever wrote is an article that no one read the way I wanted.”

“And so you’re just walking out?” Candice stiffened.

It was even worse than I thought it would be. “I am.”

Candice followed me down the hall to yell at me. “You can forget ever coming back! I am never, never forgiving you for this, Milo!”

“Then don’t forgive me! I don’t care!” Distracted by my rejoinder, I was too slow to avoid collision with someone coming down the hall.

Taylor put his hands out to steady me. “What’s going on?”

My face burned, and I jerked myself away from him. “Nothing,” I replied at the same moment that Candice spoke.

“Newspaper business.”

Taylor looked between us. “I was hoping to talk to both of you about the newspaper representative for the formal.”

“You can relax,” I told him. “It’s not me anymore.”

Candice folded her arms over her chest and glared at Taylor. “Are you behind this?”

“No, he’s not! It’s my decision, Candice! I know you don’t like it, but tough!”

“You’ve never talked about quitting before! Even when no one in the entire school cared about the paper but us, even when we were ostracized by our entire peer group, you never let it get to you, but he shows up, and suddenly we’re not good enough for you anymore? Is that it?”

“Milo’s quitting?”

“Quit.” I stepped past Taylor and walked down the hall. “So you can relax. I won’t be writing any more articles.”

“You’re not quitting!” Candice yelled after me. “I’m firing you!”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her it didn’t work that way.

I reached my locker and leaned against it face-first. I’d thought high school life had been getting *better*.

I was still trying to summon motivation to open my locker when Fern found me.

“Milo! Taylor just told us you’d resigned! Is everything okay?”

“You’re asking me? I’m not the one wearing a cast!”

“It’s just a wrist brace,” Fern assured me. “I overdid it with the tickets Friday and then catching up on homework over the weekend. Speaking of the tickets—”

“I heard.”

“We’re having an emergency meeting to cut them out now. You’re welcome to join us.”

And see Taylor? I shook my head. “I should get going.”

“Did something happen? Taylor wouldn’t say anything about why you’d decided to quit.”

“It’s nothing.” I opened my locker. Something red fell toward me. I stepped back and it spilled everywhere, separating out into individual papers that fluttered to the ground. “What on earth?”

“The tickets! In your locker—” Fern gasped. “Milo, you took them?”

“What? No!”

“I can’t believe this!” Fern had tears in her eyes. “We worked so hard—I really thought the shelter meant something to you!”

“You’ve got it all wrong! Someone must have put them here—”

But Fern was backing away. “Just don’t. This is—I never want to talk to you again!” She turned, running down the hall, leaving staring students, craning their necks to see what the cause of the disturbance was.

Belatedly, I became aware of a presence behind me. “Littering in the halls?” Coach Burns crouched to pick up one of the tickets from the hall. “Or are these the tickets reported missing this morning? Theft of student property’s a serious offense. I think it’s time you had a little chat with the principal, Markopoulos.”

Chapter Eight

Every step in the direction of school Tuesday was an effort. “You can do this,” I told myself. “You’ve done it before. Just remember. Today cannot possibly be any worse than Monday.”

It was worse.

The paper was out, the stands half-empty. Knowing that the paper had been a success even without my contribution was a mixed relief. I glanced at the lead article and swallowed. *WHY QUITTING NEVER WORKS*. It was safe to say that Candice was still angry.

But as I made my way down the hall, it became apparent that I had bigger problems.

“Is that even real?”

“It looks like Milo’s handwriting. I sit next to him in Spanish, so—”

“But who would—” Stacey caught sight of me and nudged her friends. They melted away down the hall, leaving me with a clear view of what they’d been looking at.

It was an A3 poster, and written in the font the newspaper used for headlines was “EXTRA EXTRA: MILO REJECTED!” Pasted beneath that, enlarged so that the lines where it had been ripped up were clearly visible was my formal invite.

I tugged the page off the wall, crumpling it up. Behind me, I could hear snickers and furious whispers.

“Serves him right. Did you hear about the tickets—”

They were still talking about the tickets in AP English.

“I think it’s disgusting,” Alexis said. “Taking advantage of Taylor’s newness to the school and making friends with him, just to use him as stories! And pretending to work for the formal, just to sabotage it. I suppose that would have been a story too!”

“Milo quit the paper before the tickets were found,” Lily said. “He wouldn’t have done that if he was just in it for the story.”

“Because he already had what he wanted! In with the popular kids, Logan in trouble. He was probably trying to get Logan kicked off the team! You know Milo’s always had it in for the football team. Carson and Blake—”

“Maybe,” Taylor said, “before we get too carried away, we should hear what Milo has to say.”

There was a long pause.

“He’s not going to say anything. He’s been face down on his desk since he got to class—” Sarah Choi stopped suddenly.

I felt someone standing over me, a slight pressure on my arm and Taylor’s voice. “Milo?”

I was going to be sick again. “I didn’t take the tickets.”

“Then how did they end up out of my bag and in your locker?” Fern demanded. “They didn’t move themselves!”

“When the tickets were in your bag, were they loose?” Lily asked suddenly.

“What?”

“Did you have them loose or were they inside something?”

“I had them in a bag, of course. So nothing would happen to them.” Fern sounded puzzled.

“And was that bag in Milo’s locker, too?” Lily folded her arms. “Why would Milo go to the effort of removing all the tickets from the bag and putting them in his locker where they would fall out the first time he opened it, when they were right there in a bag that would have kept them secure and contained?”

“Maybe he wasn’t thinking?”

“Somewhere along the line when he was taking all the tickets out of the bag and trying to keep them from falling out of his locker, he must have thought ‘there has to be a better way.’” Lily’s voice was heaped with scorn. “Milo’s not stupid. The rest of you on the other hand...”

“What are you implying, Lily?”

“I find it weird that with all the drama in your life, Fern, you’re always the victim.”

“How can you say that? You took my history textbook the week before our exam—”

“I did not.”

“It was found in your bag!”

“Anyone could have put it there.” I heard a metallic *thud* as Lily kicked her booted feet up onto the desk.

“Are you seriously suggesting that the same person who took my history textbook took the tickets and planted them on other students? That’s insane.”

“Yeah,” Lily said. “I am. And I think she’s in this class.”

The classroom was so silent that even with my face against the desk, I could hear Fern inhale. “I am not going to stand for this. If you’re serious about what you’re saying, then I want to take this to the principal.”

There was a clatter as Lily stood. “Ready when you are.”

“Me, too.” Declan had been uncharacteristically silent until now. “If you remember, I gave you the same suggestion last week.”

“Fine!” I’d never heard Fern so angry. “At least I know who my *real* friends are—”

“Good morning, class—good-bye.” Mr. Perry’s voice sounded confused. “I didn’t think *Wuthering Heights* was bad enough to cause a general exodus. Perhaps it’s just as well we’re not starting *Great Expectations* until next semester.”

There was a general clatter as students returned to their seats and started opening books and getting out pens. I felt Taylor’s presence beside me shift away. It sucked. Even knowing how little he thought of me, some part of me was still desperate for his attention.

“As I should not have to remind you, your project for *Wuthering Heights* consists of a take-home essay written on a subject of your own choosing. Your homework assignment was to come up with the topic for your essay. I’ll be using this class to check that everyone has a suitable topic. Please have your assignment sheet ready on your desk, and you can use your spare time to start working on your essays.” Mr. Perry walked from desk to desk until he got to me. “Milo, you’ve been laying on your desk all class. This won’t do.”

I made a halfhearted attempt at agreement.

Mr. Perry shook his head. “Do you want a detention?”

I sat up. “Sure.”

Mr. Perry stared at me. “That—was not the reply I was expecting.” He paused. “You really want to go to detention?”

Ignoring the looks I was getting from my classmates, I nodded.

Mr. Perry pursed his lips but wrote me the misdemeanor slip. “That’s settled it. I don’t care what the Board says, we’re doing *The Grapes of Wrath* next year, and that’s final.”

Biology was tolerable only because we had a test and no one was allowed to talk. Taylor was waiting for me outside drawing, however. My heart sank as I saw what he held. A copy of the poster.

“Milo, we need to talk.”

I tried to step around him. “I don’t think we do.”

He blocked my way into the classroom. “I mean it. I wanted to say that I had nothing to do with this. I never saw the invite—”

“That was beyond obvious.”

“And if I had—” Taylor trailed off.

At a loss? I couldn’t even enjoy the strangeness of seeing him flustered. “You’ve got nothing to apologize for. Something like this isn’t your style. I know that.”

“I hate seeing you this upset. Is there anything I can do?”

“You can get out of my way.”

“I mean it. Milo, I—”

“Aw, a lover’s quarrel?” There was a snicker behind us.

Wearily, I turned.

Logan stood in the hall, Jordan and Boomer behind him. There was a gloating note in his voice. “Going to kiss and make up?”

A thought flashed through my head. I had three and a half more days of this ahead of me this week.

“That’s none of your business—” Taylor trailed off as I snatched the poster from his hand and turned. “Milo, what—”

Logan smirked at his friends as I walked up to him. “This will be good. What, do you think you can—”

Nobody was expecting me to punch Logan, not even me. Which was quite possibly the only reason I succeeded. I’m not really sure. All I remembered was

that the crunch as my fist connected with Logan's jaw was really satisfying, and then we were on the floor, Jordan's arm around me as I tried to feed Logan the poster and Jordan tried to pull me off.

"He's gone mental! Someone get a teacher!"

Principal Kim shook his head. "I don't think I heard that right. You said that Logan was minding his own business and *Milo* punched him?"

"I'm not lying," Logan croaked. He was holding an ice pack to his jaw. "I wasn't doing anything!"

"I find that highly unlikely. You're on the wrestling team, and Milo—" The principal paused.

"Milo has the physique of string cheese," I supplied helpfully.

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Logan's telling the truth. I was having a really bad morning, he was being a jerk, and I'd had enough." My knee throbbed where I'd grazed it on the floor, my hand still tingled with antiseptic where the nurse had bandaged me up, and as if that wasn't bad enough, I had a headache coming.

"A really bad morning," the principal repeated. "Something to do with this?" He patted the poster on his desk. "Do you have reason for thinking Logan was involved in this?"

I hesitated, but shook my head. "He's used the 'extra, extra' line to tease me before, but I'm not sure someone who thought 'nostalgia' was an insult has the mental capacity to paste sixteen pieces of paper back together or link it to me."

"You see? Milo's harassing me!" Logan whined. "He needs to be punished!"

I stared at him. It was really hard to believe that I'd ever been intimidated by Logan. In the presence of a greater authority, he caved embarrassingly.

"I'm still not entirely sure the incident wasn't provoked," the principal said. "But violence toward another student is not tolerated at Bernhardt, under any circumstances. You'll not be joining any cross-country practices for the remainder of the semester, Milo."

"He doesn't even like cross-country! Make him give up the newspaper club!"

I stood. “Too late. I already quit.” I faced the principal. “Nothing you can do to punish me can possibly make me feel worse than I already do, so I’m going home.” I picked up my bag and walked out of the office.

Taylor was waiting in the corridor outside. “Is everything okay? I wanted to tell the principal what happened, but they wouldn’t let me in.”

“Everything is fine.” I walked past him.

He jogged after me. “Everything is not fine! Milo, you need to talk to someone—”

I increased my pace. “Why? So you can tell me what a gross human being I am?” We had the attention of the kids in the hall now, people openly staring. “I have had it with talking to you!” I flung my way out of the school doors and toward the gate, my heart still thumping with adrenaline. I’d punched Logan, and I’d walked out of school.

My angry momentum gave out abruptly ten minutes later. I groaned, dropping to my knees in the middle of the sidewalk and putting my head in my hands. I’d punched Logan and I had walked out of school!

Immediately, someone collided with me. There was a pain as a knee dug into my back, a startled exclamation and then a weight on my shoulders. I pitched forward onto the concrete as the person hit the sidewalk ahead of me and ended up tangled in his limbs. He groaned, and I hastily uncurled.

“I’m so sorry, I had no idea—Taylor?”

He spat out blood and gravel, heaving himself onto an elbow. “Bloody hell! Why did you stop?”

“I didn’t know anyone was there!” I brushed the gravel off my own palms, holding out a hand to Taylor. “You followed me?”

Taylor shifted cautiously, sitting up. “You should come with a warning sign, seriously!” He looked at his hand, noticing the blood on it for the first time. “Milo Markopoulos, hazard.”

“Here.” I always had a packet of tissues in my bag. Taylor let me dab at his mouth. “It doesn’t look like a bad cut—look, we’re near the park; we can clean this up there.”

Taylor grunted, getting to his feet.

I let out a sigh of relief as he stood. If he’d broken anything tripping over me... “It’s this way. Come on.”

“A big flashing neon light. Maybe even a siren—”

I rolled my eyes, using my water bottle to dampen a tissue. “Stop being such a baby. You’re not that hurt!” I’d chosen the sunniest bench I could find, but it was still cold in Patriot’s Park.

“No thanks to you! Who stops dead in the middle of a footpath like that?” I had to duck out of the way of Taylor’s hand to keep ministering to his scraped chin. “Only you! You’re a—a menace! A danger to life and limb and peace of mind—”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Am I really?” A snatch of laughter caught our attention, and we looked across the park. At the base of Captor’s Monument, a couple of tourists were taking selfies. Taylor lowered his voice as he turned back to me. “All I’m saying is that if Washington Irving was alive now, it wouldn’t be a Headless Horseman haunting this town.”

“How rude. It’s not like I forced you to trip over me. I didn’t even know you were behind me.” Taylor’s chin was as clean as it was going to get. I screwed the lid back on my water bottle, dropping the tissue into my bag. “There. All better.”

Taylor eyed me dubiously and felt his chin. “Still.”

“Still nothing. I didn’t ask you to come chasing after me! In fact, I’m pretty sure I told you to go away.” I nudged Taylor with my foot. “How is you not listening my fault?”

“Because it’s all your fault! Since meeting you, I haven’t had a moment’s peace! If I’m not getting harassed in the hall, I’ve got someone crashing my study period or interrupting class to get my attention—”

“Again, it’s not my fault you are handsome, likeable and single—and I tried to help you with one of those, so there.” I folded my arms. “Besides, if I’m so terrible, why are you running after me instead of away?”

Taylor snorted. A hint of a smile played around his jaw. “I should be. You’d think by now I would know better, but here I am.”

I stared down at him. Every word Taylor said was true. He had no reason to like me, and I had no reason to still like him, but my heart had started to beat in a way that had nothing to do with exertion from my mad run and everything to do with Taylor looking directly at me. “Why?”

Taylor shook his head. “I can’t figure it out. Or more accurately, I can’t figure you out.” He patted the bench. “Sit down, Milo. I can’t think with you looking like you’re about to bolt again.”

I was too surprised to argue. “I thought that was what you wanted.”

“I don’t think I could catch you a second time. You’re surprisingly fast for someone so short.”

“Cross-country,” I said smugly. “What did you expect?”

“That’s it exactly.” Taylor leaned toward me. “How is it that someone who is so obvious in everything still manages to have so many hidden depths? That face you’re making now—you’re trying to work out if that’s an insult or not. It’s a statement of fact. Sorry, but it’s true.”

I crossed my hands over my chest a second time. “I told you that I wasn’t good at secrets.”

“Or subtlety. Or restraint. Or—”

“Enough! I can still leave.”

I didn’t mean the threat seriously, but Taylor caught my arm as if he thought I did. “It’s not a bad thing,” he assured me. “But it just means that I keep thinking I’ve got you figured out and then you catch me by surprise, and suddenly, I don’t know anymore.”

That was not the way someone who hated me would talk. “How do you mean?”

“Well, like—biology! I haven’t seen you do a single thing in that class that resembles work! Not the work that we’re meant to be doing. You write articles, you do your math homework, you read... and somehow you still know more about biology than I do.”

“That’s not a secret.” I hesitated. Having found something I’d kept secret, even inadvertently, I was reluctant to share it. But with Taylor looking at me, sharing wasn’t exactly optional. “Last year, Mr. Saltberg retired. You’ve probably never heard of him, but he is the best English teacher in the entire state. The kids he taught have gone on to make movies, write novels—a letter of recommendation from Mr. Saltberg would get you into any film school in the country—no, the world!”

“I should have figured films were involved.” Taylor shook his head. “So? What does an English teacher have to do with science class?”

“In his final year, he was allowed to do whatever he wanted. So he did an elective course on his passion—writing for film. Obviously, I had to take it. I mean, that’s the entire reason I came to Bernhardt, to be taught by him. But there was a schedule clash. The only way I could take the elective was if I took senior Biology—”

“As a sophomore? How did the school even allow it?”

“I had to prove I could do it first. I spent the entire summer studying, crammed two years’ worth of science into two months. The school made me do a mock exam on the condition that I could only take senior Biology if I passed. I did.”

“You’re kidding. They seriously let you take two senior classes?”

“Hey, Candice is taking a college course in journalism.” I shrugged. “If you get all the credits and can satisfy the school that the course is legit and you can handle it, they’ll let you do anything. All part of fostering a uniquely challenging learning environment.”

Taylor frowned. “So if you’ve already passed senior biology, why are you even in class? Shouldn’t you, I don’t know, be taking college courses too?”

“It’s really dumb, but I still need the extra science credit to graduate. I could have gone for chemistry, but Boomer took biology, so.” Please don’t comment on Boomer. “Mystery solved. Not so much of a secret, was it?”

Taylor considered me with an expression I couldn’t decipher. “I disagree. That’s—writing’s that important to you.”

I felt my cheeks heat. “Yeah.” It was really hard to look at Taylor, and I found myself dropping my gaze. “You didn’t think I joined the newspaper for the express purpose of making you miserable, did you?”

“There were times I wasn’t sure,” Taylor said dryly. “I guess—I’ve met some reporters who weren’t as professional.”

“What do you mean?”

Taylor hesitated. “This is just between us, but my family—didn’t have a positive experience with the press. There are people who only care about the story and don’t think about the cost—the human cost, I mean—of running it. What was reported about my parents wasn’t true and it—it very nearly destroyed their marriage. Very nearly destroyed them. They got so much hate for something that was no one’s business but ours! As a kid, watching that

happen and being unable to stop it..." Taylor shook his head. "You can't imagine what that's like."

I swallowed. Taylor was right. I'd run afoul of my peers plenty of times, but to be held up to the scorn of the wider reading public...? "But your parents—they're okay now? They're still together?"

Taylor nodded. His mouth thinned out into a grim smile. "Yeah. They are. Mom says that because of the extra scrutiny, she was driven to be even better at what she does, prove the critics wrong, but there's still people who believe the lies. Dad—he's a really private person, so he coped by going inward, throwing himself into his work. He cut himself off from the wider world. He's better now, but he's still kind of reclusive."

"And you?"

Again Taylor's smile was a little too grim for my peace of mind. "I'm an elementary school dropout who started high school two and a half weeks ago and already lost the one friend I made—"

"Hello? Class president? You've made a lot of friends! Alexis, Sarah—"

"Um. Excuse me?"

I was startled to see the tourists standing a few meters away from us. I'd entirely forgotten we weren't alone in the park.

The girls looked to be college students, but their accents were British. "Can we take a photo?" One tucked blonde hair behind her ear, looking at Taylor. "I mean—" She trailed off with an awkward giggle.

Taylor was silent. I looked over and saw that his face was fixed in a grim expression. No wonder the girls felt awkward if that was what they had to contend with.

Luckily, I was there to come to the rescue. "Sure."

The girls blinked as I took the iPhone from them. "Uh—"

"With the monument in the back, right? Smile." I took a few to be on the safe side. "Going to Philipsburg Manor next, right? Just follow Broadway past the high school. And if you've got time after Sunnyside and the Cemetery, you should check out the Christmas event at Lyndhurst. It's always good."

"Thanks?"

"Any time," I told her. "Though if you want—"

“Hey. Tour guide.” I looked up just in time to catch my bag as Taylor threw it to me. “We should go.”

“Enjoy your stay!” Clutching my bag, I jogged after Taylor.

Taylor walked at a fast pace out of the park. It took me effort to catch up with him, but I did, falling into place beside him as he strode down Broadway toward home.

“Notice how I am walking to one side of you and not immediately behind you where you would have no idea I was there.” Taylor didn’t respond, so I glanced at his expression. “You’re not mad about a couple of tourists being tourists? Sleepy Hollow is only famous for one thing! Well, two if you count Caitlyn Jenner... But if you’re going to sulk every time someone asks you where to find the Headless Horseman, then you’re just going to be miserable.”

Taylor took a deep breath. “Didn’t realize you were so knowledgeable on the subject.”

“You live here for any amount of time and you have to be. Just wait until next October,” I told him. “You have read the story, right?”

“The story? Not the film?” Taylor’s expression had relaxed enough to show amusement. “Or the TV show?”

“We do not talk about the TV show.” I elbowed him. “Anyway. The story and the film are both cool in their own rights, but I have to admit I like the story if only because I remember opening the book and realizing it was about the place I lived. It gave me a really cool feeling. Like maybe, somewhere there was a book about me. I think I read every book in the school library in elementary looking for the book that had me in it and then when I complained to Ms. Van Cleef that I couldn’t find it, she told me I’d just have to write it myself.”

Taylor smiled. “And that’s how it started.”

“So now you know everything about me.” We’d slowed down to an actual walk, and I found myself dragging behind, as if I could stretch out the moments by walking slower. “You’ve got me figured out now.”

“Not quite.” Taylor hesitated. “Why does someone who cares so much about writing quit the newspaper? I know you didn’t do that lightly.”

I hesitated. “You really want to know?”

Taylor stopped walking. He waited until I turned toward him. “Was it because of what I said?”

“Not everything I do revolves around you.” I fought the urge to fidget, looking at the embroidered B on Taylor’s blazer. “But when you said I was good at manipulating opinion, I realized that you were right. I mean, everything else you said was wrong—completely and absolutely wrong, and I’m still mad about that—but I was using the truth for a reason, not presenting facts. I thought since I was doing it for a good reason that it was okay, and maybe it would have been if I were writing fiction, but a newspaper... A newspaper’s different. So I had to quit.”

“What was your reason?”

I sighed. “You’ll never believe me.”

“Try me.”

“I don’t think I want to.”

“Milo, please.” Taylor’s voice had a note in it that made me look at him. Instead of the scorn I was afraid of, he was studying me seriously. “When we talked after English, I was angry. I was annoyed at how the situation with Logan escalated so badly and that my sexuality had become a school talking point. I didn’t actually read your article about coming out till after, and that’s when I knew I’d made a big mistake.”

My heart constricted weirdly. Was it possible to be happy and scared at the same time? “But this is really unbelievable. I was the only one there—besides Jordan and Matt, and like they’d admit to this—but I heard them talking in the park about how they were going to get revenge on you for what happened to Logan.”

“Revenge?” Taylor raised his eyebrows. “They are aware we’re not in middle school?”

“I told you! I don’t know what they’re planning, only that they realized they had to avoid getting reported. I figured if they thought that you were always surrounded by people—”

“They’d give up.” Taylor frowned at me. “Wouldn’t it have been easier to just go to a teacher?”

“So I could be not believed by a staff member instead? Great plan.”

“I mean it. If we approached the coach—”

“You want to talk to Coach Burns; you are on your own. I am not going anywhere near him.”

“No one’s got a more vested interest in the football team behaving themselves than him, right? Anyway, so far they haven’t tried anything. Maybe they got over it.”

I eyed Taylor balefully. “You are so homeschooled it hurts.”

“Shut up.” Taylor nudged me with his shoulder and started walking again. “Just because I choose to believe that our peers are capable of acting maturely—”

I laughed.

“Really—”

“Not that. You just reminded me. When Fern swears, she gets really—Brady Bunch. She actually says ‘fudge.’ When you swear, you get all British.”

Taylor tensed. “I do not.”

“Bloody hell. If that’s not British—”

“So, if you’ve quit the newspaper, are you going to work on your film script?”

I groaned, dropping to the sidewalk. “Don’t talk to me about my film script!”

Taylor scrambled to a halt. “More warning! Seriously Milo—” He caught sight of my face. “It’s not that bad. Every writer gets rejected to start with. When you look at authors like J.K. Rowling—”

“You’re not helping! You don’t know how long I’ve been working on that script—”

“How many people your age have even written a script, let alone sent it to anyone? You’ve just got to keep at it. Candice is right. Quitting won’t make you a better writer—”

A dark car pulled up right beside us. “Taylor!” Naomi leaned across the vehicle to throw open the passenger side door. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Naomi,” Taylor said. “Sorry. I would have called—”

“The school beat you to it. Seriously—your father is paying me to keep an eye on you, and you’re ditching classes to hang out with a delinquent!”

I’d opened my mouth to defend Taylor; now I closed it. I’d never been called a delinquent. I had to savor it.

“Milo’s not—”

“Shush,” I told Taylor. “Let me have this moment.”

Naomi impatiently gestured to the seat beside her. “Get in the car. Harper’s looking everywhere for you! Your parents—”

Taylor slid into the passenger seat. “You didn’t tell my parents?” Belatedly, he remembered me. “See you tomorrow, Milo. And seriously, stop sitting on the sidewalk!”

“I’m a rebel!” I yelled after the car. “I do what I want!” I don’t think they heard me, but it felt good. I picked myself off the path, started off in the direction of home. I was a delinquent!

But as I trudged through the village, a disquieting thought occurred to me. How did Naomi know Mr. Harper? And why was Mr. Harper looking for Taylor? This was clearly not the relationship of a normal student and a teacher at school for an observation.

But what was the relationship?

It was a relief to reach the steps to my apartment. Worrying about what possible relation Mr. Harper had to Taylor had opened the gates to other alarming thoughts. What if this went on my high school transcript? What if no college wanted me? What if no one ever wanted my film script?

I closed the front door of the apartment behind me with a sigh. *Finally, home!*

“Milo Markopoulos! What is the meaning of this?”

I jumped, hitting my shoulder against the door. I was so used to coming home to an empty apartment that I’d entirely forgotten that Mom would be home. “Mom!”

She stood in the kitchen doorway, her hands on her hips. “The school called. They said they sent you home for fighting with another student.”

“That’s not—”

Mom advanced on me. “What is wrong with them? Don’t they know how lucky they are to have you as a student?” Before I could protest, she crushed me against her in a hug. “Sending you home! How dare they?”

Mom was shorter than me, but she had surprising upper body strength. I couldn't free my arms. All I could do was pat her side. "I *was* fighting with another student."

"What is that student doing, picking fights with my son? It is a disgrace! I've every mind to go and have a word with that principal of yours, tell him that we're not standing for this!" Mom tightened her grip on me fiercely and then let go. "The nerve." Her expression softened as she looked over me. "You poor thing—you must be starving! Come into the kitchen; I'll take care of you."

My family expresses love through food and guilt trips. Escape was futile. I followed Mom into the kitchen. "I'm not really hungry."

"Nonsense. You look thin. Pale. Have you been getting enough sleep?" Mom put a plate in front of me and then smoothed my hair off my forehead to peer at my eyes. "My poor son. What have they been doing to you at that school?"

The phone call from the school had set off a chain reaction of cookery if the counter was any indication. I took one look at the pile of dishes in the sink and knew I was in trouble. "It's not a big deal! The football team is just being jerks—"

"The same boys that were so nasty to you about the newspaper article? Why doesn't the school discipline them?" Mom put a steaming slice of her Lenten moussaka in front of me.

"They are getting disciplined. And so am I. Mom, you don't understand! I hit Logan. Then I walked out of school—"

"About time someone stood up to them." Mom put a glass of water in front of me. "It's like I told your principal. 'My son is a good kid. He's never hit another student, so he must have a very good reason to be hitting one now.'"

It was hopeless. I started in on the moussaka, knowing that nothing I said could convince Mom that I was not the shining bastion of moral integrity she took me for. "I wasn't exactly weighing the issue when I hit him."

"You see? You were goaded beyond endurance. Your principal agreed your actions were very unusual—"

"Have I been suspended?"

"Suspended? I would like to see them try to suspend you! After what I pay in school fees—"

“But my transcript,” I said hastily. “Is this going on my transcript?”

Mom sniffed. “I don’t think your principal knows what he’s doing! He said he wanted to know more about the situation before making a decision. What more is there to know? I put him straight in five minutes!” Mom stopped pacing the kitchen and pinched my cheek. “I don’t know what goes on at his school, but I know my son!”

I smiled faintly. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Now, tell me about this boy who thinks he’s too good to date you.”

I choked. “Mom!”

“He’s the one behind this, isn’t he? I told the principal that he had to be the problem. There was no way that you would quit the newspaper otherwise.”

There it was. The guilt. I swallowed, pushing my plate away. “Actually—”

She took it well. As in, she stayed silent throughout my explanation, stroking my arm and listening carefully.

“And not only am I a terrible human being,” I wound up. “But I’m a terrible writer, too!”

“Milo Markopoulos,” my mom said seriously. “I ought to slap you. You are not going to give up on your dreams because some pretty boy with nice cheekbones tells you it’s no good.”

“Mom! Taylor’s not just pretty—”

“No, Milo. Listen to your mother.” She took my hand, squeezing it earnestly. “I would do anything for you, you know that. I moved you here from New York after your father died, because I wanted you to grow up somewhere safe, but I also wanted you to have the chance to grow up somewhere you could choose the life you wanted for yourself. You know I love your yaya, but she is traditional. When I wanted to go to medical school...” Mom shook her head. “It was as if I’d torn out my uterus and dumped it on the floor in front of her. Get a further education? High school was good enough for the rest of our family, why wasn’t it good enough for me? Did I think I was better than the rest of my family? How was I going to attract a nice man with an education?” Mom sighed. “And now look at your cousin, going to law school. Such a clever boy, has his grandfather’s brains. Not a word about the fact that Grandfather didn’t even finish high school!”

I made a soothing noise.

“And then I met your father. He had such pretty eyes, Milo. Yaya was delighted, of course. He was Greek! And Greek men want their wife at home. Stephen and I weren’t planning on starting a family until we’d graduated, but you wouldn’t wait...” Mom smiled fondly. “I have to admit, there were times when I regretted not finishing medical school. For all my big plans, there I was, a typical Greek housewife with a baby. But when Stephen died—you were my support, Milo. I could not have gone on without you.”

“Mom.” I pushed back my chair to go to her.

Mom accepted my hug placidly. “Which is why I will always support you in living the life you choose. And why I am not about to see you give up on your dreams. The newspaper doesn’t want you? Fine. You get that script of yours out, and you work on it no matter what that Taylor says.”

It wasn’t worth pointing out that Taylor had encouraged me to do the same thing. “Thanks, Mom. You know, I think I will.”

My script had been untouched at the base of my closet ever since Taylor had delivered it. Sitting on my bed, I carefully read the cover letter through. The rejection was not as final as I’d first thought and the criticisms not as damning.

As I skimmed through my script, I could see they had a point. I’d favored what was conventionally funny over what was true. I grabbed my laptop, pulling up the file, and began to write.

Chapter Nine

Wednesday. I trudged down the hall toward my locker, avoiding eye contact with other students. If I could just survive today, I would be halfway through the week. Just think! Only two more days and then the weekend, ten more days until the end of the semester...

I shuddered. Why hadn't I said yes when Mom asked if I wanted to stay home? Maybe it was shock. Mom didn't let me take time off for anything less than a severed limb, but this morning, she hadn't even mentioned the thermometer.

"Ah, Milo. Glad to see that you decided to join us today." The principal rubbed his hands together, looking not at me but over my shoulder. "Your mother... Is she joining us today?"

I shook my head. "Not that I'm aware."

The principal straightened up. "I see. Well, have a good day, Milo. And remember if you need anything, my office is open." He walked back down the hall, hands in his pockets and... whistling?

Great. I hadn't even reached my locker and my day was already off to a weird start. I braced myself and continued down the hall. Knowing my luck, it would only get weirder.

It did.

At lunch, the drama club broke out into a sudden song. I looked up from my folder, confused. "Is that a Pointer Sisters and Van Halen mash-up?"

Lily agreed with my dim view of the situation. "Just because the songs are called Jump doesn't mean they should be combined."

Even so, we both watched as the song and dance routine came to its conclusion, and Declan held out a basketball to a laughing Boomer. Something was written on the ball—a promposal? From the way the surrounding students erupted in applause as Boomer ducked his head and took the ball, the answer was a "yes."

Lily snorted. "Now there's a couple that's not going to be together after the last song."

I smiled faintly. "Right. Declan's got a boyfriend. If the school rules didn't ban anyone over twenty-one from attending school events, he wouldn't be

asking Boomer at all.” Even so, it was really difficult to watch. I looked back to my folder, wondering if the weird feeling in my stomach was due to the triumphant smirk Declan had sent in my direction, or the fact that Taylor was among those congratulating them.

I hadn’t had the chance to talk to Taylor all day. He’d entered AP English not just talking to Logan, but laughing with him. Whatever the joke was, it had to be a good one. Taylor was now instated at the school spirit table, with Victoria and Maria on one side and Logan on the other. My heart sank. To a casual outsider they looked like they’d been friends forever...

“You still planning on skipping out on the formal?” I asked Lily quickly.

“Actually, I changed my mind. After our talk, I decided I might as well practice crashing and burning now, so I’ve got it down for when no one wants to go to senior prom with me.”

“I—don’t know whether to applaud your practicality or worry about your defeatist attitude.”

Lily shrugged. “If you’re going to aim high, you need a parachute.”

I smiled faintly. “Since we’re both going anyway, do you want to maybe go—”

“Hey, Lily.” The table shook as a heavy book bag was dropped onto it. “Milo.”

“Candice?” I blinked up at her. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m not here to ask you to come back to the newspaper, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Candice rested her hands on her hips. “We barely notice that you’re gone. In fact, I don’t miss you at all.”

I eyed her dubiously. “So you’re skipping class for the express purpose of letting me know how much you don’t miss me?”

Candice snorted. “I came to let you know you’d been replaced, so it’s no good holding out hope that you’ll be welcomed back once you see the big mistake you made.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Lionel?” How was that news? “He was deputy editor before.”

Candice smiled sweetly at me. “I’m not talking deputy editor. We got a new junior on the paper, taking over the winter formal and school politics side of things. Since he is heavily involved in both, he’s the perfect fit.”

“Who?”

Candice leaned in. “Taylor.”

“What?” I jerked my head back to look across the cafeteria. Taylor was talking to Maria and Victoria. “There’s no way.”

“Yes way. Caught me before school, told me he wanted to start immediately.”

“But—” I bit my lip. What Taylor had told me in Patriot’s Park was private—too private to be shared. But knowing that, why on earth would he sign up for the newspaper? “It makes no sense.”

“Face the facts, Milo. You are not the only person at this school capable of writing a decent article—so you might as well put away whatever it is you’re working on now.”

I hastily closed my folder. “I’m not writing for you.”

“Keep quitting and you’re not writing for anyone.” Candice picked up her bag.

“Candice, wait!” Lily stood. She took a deep breath, fidgeting as Candice turned to look at her. “So. Um. I had an idea for an article, if I could get your opinion on it.” She held out a piece of paper.

I watched Candice take the paper with that feeling you get in dreams. When you know what you are watching cannot possibly be happening, but you go through the actions anyway. Only instead of flying away through the cafeteria windows, I was rooted to one spot, watching as Candice unfolded what was definitely not an article proposal.

“Photographers and journalists,” Candice read. “They go together like peanut butter and jelly. Lois and Clark. Rizzoli and Isles. Formals and dates.” She looked across the table at Lily. “This what I think it is?”

Lily might have been blushing, but it was impossible to tell under her layers of foundation. She looked down, tucking a strand of hair behind an ear. “I know you don’t really go for cheesy, so I thought, just maybe—I have a new lens for my camera and two tickets to the formal, so I thought—”

Candice tucked the invite into her shirt. “You got yourself an article, Lily. By which I mean I would love to be your date.” She nudged me as she left. “Pick your chin up off the floor, Milo. You’ll trip someone.”

The bell rang for the end of sixth period. I stood up with a sigh of relief. Nothing else crazy had happened!

In retrospect, that should have been a warning, but Candice and Lily had thrown me for a loop. Candice... well, all the times she'd remarked that she relied on me to keep her up-to-date on which guys were attractive or not suddenly made a lot more sense. Lily, on the other hand, was a total dark horse. No one could have predicted that!

I lingered, letting Emily, flanked by Maria and Victoria, leave the classroom before making my way down the hall. I was not even slightly interested in girls. So why did Lily and Candice going to the formal bother me so much?

I leaned head first against my locker with a groan. All my friends had a date to the formal—except me. “Fine, world, I get it! I am an unlikeable human being who is going to the formal alone!” As I opened my locker, I saw a movement to one side. Jordan and Matt were standing behind me. “What now? Here to make fun of me?”

“We did consider it.” Matt glanced to his friend. “But you sound like you’ve got that covered.”

“Please.” Jordan folded his arms. “Don’t stop on our behalf.”

I glared at them and threw my books into the locker. “I am so done with this school and everyone in it!”

It wasn’t until I was halfway down the path to the gate that I realized I’d thrown my folder in with my books. Heaving a sigh, I turned around. My script was the only thing I had in my life right now that I even liked.

Thankfully, the halls were empty, everyone having moved on to their after-school activities. I slid my folder into my bag and paused. “Hello?”

The hallway was entirely empty. I hesitated, looking up and down. I could have sworn I’d heard my name—

There it was again. A voice talking animatedly from behind the bathroom door. I took a deep breath and stepped toward it. I couldn’t imagine anyone talking about me with that much excitement meaning anything good. Very carefully I inched it open.

Taylor had his back to me. He faced the mirror, waving his hands. “I’m a personable guy. No.” He readjusted his posture, one hand on his hip, the other raised in an exaggerated shrug. “I’m a personable guy,” he repeated, tilting his head as if talking to someone who wasn’t there.

I swallowed noiselessly, feeling a clammy weight settle across my shoulders.

Taylor paced the length of the bathroom, his hands flung up above his head. “Hello? Class president? You’ve made a lot of friends!” Just as quickly, his mood transformed again, slamming both fists down on the counter as he glared at the mirror. “It’s a newspaper—not a soapbox!”

I couldn’t move.

Taylor straightened up, folding his arms across his chest. “I bet Ghandi ran for—” He glanced toward the door.

I watched his face fall. Was that how I looked?

“Milo! I didn’t—this is not what it looks like!” Taylor took a step toward me and then stopped.

“That’s good,” I said, my voice echoing weirdly in the bathroom. “Because it looks like you were impersonating me.”

Taylor jerked his hand back to his chest. “Then it is what it looks like.”

I gripped the bathroom door tightly. “Why? Are you mocking me?” Was that how Taylor had become friends with Logan?

Taylor’s shoulders drooped. He seemed to have lost height, diminishing as his energy left him. “Nothing like that. I can’t explain this, but all I can say is that it’s not—I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you.”

“Okay.” I closed the bathroom door.

After a moment, it occurred to me that I should probably be walking.

“Milo! Wait!” There was a crash, and I looked back to see Taylor stumbling out the bathroom door, one foot caught in his bag. “Look—I know how that looked, and I can see how you’d be upset, but I promise you, it’s nothing like what you’re thinking.”

I kept walking. “But you won’t tell me what it is.”

Taylor fell into step beside me. “I can’t.”

“It’s fine. It’s a free world. You can do whatever you like.”

“It’s not fine.” Taylor’s voice was low and the hand he placed on my arm gentle. “It’s obvious you’re upset.”

My body immediately turned traitor, inclining toward him completely independently of me. I kept my gaze straight ahead, refusing to look at him. “I’m not upset.”

“Milo—” Taylor stepped into my line of vision.

I turned my head away. “You said it yourself. You wouldn’t do anything to hurt me. Therefore, I am not hurt. Therefore, you should let go of my arm. Now.”

Taylor did not let go of my arm. “That is crap, and we both know it.” He placed his free hand on my shoulder. “Look at me. Please.”

Unwillingly, but unable to do otherwise, I raised my face to his. In my chest, my heart lurched, stalling as it shifted gears, beating with the awareness of Taylor’s proximity.

His eyes scanned my face with an attention to detail that was a little alarming and a lot electrifying. It was entirely too personal, and if I’d been able to move, I’d have stepped back, but my body had definite ideas on that front. Somehow, my hand had slipped between Taylor’s blazer to clutch his shirt, just like his hand had traveled independently to the small of my back.

And Taylor still continued to look.

What on earth did he see? What was he searching for? His eyes were serious, with an intensity I couldn’t decipher. In pure self-defense, I looked at his mouth instead.

That was a mistake. Taylor’s mouth opened, a hint of teeth showing as his lips drew back in a smile.

I licked my top lip, feeling unaccountably nervous as Taylor leaned toward me—

“Hey, Taylor! Does the formal master doc contain the—”

I tried to jerk away from Taylor, just as his hand reflexively tightened around my arm.

I heard Alexis’s footsteps slow to a halt. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Yes—”

“No!” I spoke loudly to drown Taylor out. “I was just leaving.”

“Are you sure? Because I really don’t mind waiting—”

“I’m positive!” I used my free hand to pry Taylor’s hand off my shoulder. “The formal committee needs you, President. You can’t keep them waiting.”

Taylor slowly picked up his bag. “You’re sure?”

“Totally.”

“And you’re—”

“Fine. We covered this.” Seeing my opportunity, I took it. I was down the steps before Taylor could think of another question. But any elation I felt at my escape was overshadowed immediately by the knowledge that this was temporary. There were two more days until the weekend.

“There is something definitely wrong with that boy, Milo.” Mom shook her head, putting a second plate of toast in front of me. “I wouldn’t have anything to do with him.”

“Easier said than done,” I grumbled. Not that I had room to speak. Mom was feeding me faster than I could keep up.

She sat down, leaning across the table to smooth down my hair. “Why would anyone not want to go to the formal with you? No, there is definitely something not right there at all.”

I smiled faintly. Mom was too biased to be a factual source, but she did make me feel better. She’d gotten up early just to make me breakfast. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You go to school today and you show him what a mistake he’s made. There is only one Milo Markopoulos. And tell that principal of yours that, too.” Mom frowned, brushing some fluff off my blazer. “I’ve half a mind to call him myself.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Nonsense. They’ve been taking you for granted far too long. It’s time they knew how lucky they are to have you there.”

The morning was uneventful. Mom did not make good on her threat to call the principal and I managed to avoid Taylor entirely. After I climbed out the window of the Drawing class so he couldn’t talk to me after class, he took the hint and started avoiding me too. I sat with Lily at lunch, trying to ignore the

lingering guilt I felt whenever Taylor looked my way (which was often). He was being the jerk here, not me.

And his first article was on the front page.

I could have been chewing cardboard for how little I noticed my lunch, reading Taylor's article for the second time. It was good. Polished, well reasoned with a strong message calling for the student body to set aside its differences. Taylor had a headline, a hook and a compelling argument that led to a strong conclusion. It was like reading a checklist on how to construct a solid article.

That was it—it was like reading a checklist. Mechanically, the article was good. Taylor had not needed my help studying for AP English, if this was any indication of his essay writing ability. But the spark that should have been there wasn't.

Or was I just jealous? I chewed my lip. Writing was my thing—had always been my thing. Was Candice right and I needed to accept that I was not the only person in my grade—in my AP class—with a passion for it?

Lily snorted. "How the mighty have fallen."

"I thought you tolerated me—oh."

Fern was back at school. The cast on her wrist was gone, but her lunch tray trembled slightly as she scanned the cafeteria. Taylor sat in her seat at the Spirit Squad table, and Emily occupied the remaining free seat. Maria and Victoria casually avoided catching her eye.

Fern bit her bottom lip. She might have been annoyed; she might have been trying to stop it from wobbling like her tray. She raised her gaze, scanning the other tables for a free chair.

I stood up and waved.

"What are you doing?" Lily hissed at me. "She set you up with the tickets!"

"There's no way Fern did that," I said out of the corner of my mouth as I continued to wave. "Trust me. I know."

Fern caught my gesture and blinked.

"She's seen you. You can stop waving—god, now everyone's looking." Lily put her face in her hands.

"This'll be great practice for when you and Candice show up to the formal together," I told Lily. "Fern's coming this way!"

“Wonderful. Maybe you can sit down now?”

I drew out a chair as Fern approached. “How is your hand? All better?”

Fern carefully placed her tray on the table. “Not quite. It still twinges. I’m not supposed to write anything.” She hesitated to sit. “You really don’t mind if I join you?”

“Absolutely not!” I kicked Lily under the table.

She sniffed, opening up *The Vampire Diaries: Dark Reunion*. “It’s a free country. Besides, it’s not like we’re any great catch.”

Fern sat. “Don’t say that, Lily.”

I pulled a face at Lily, willing her to pick up my thoughts. We wanted Fern to stay, not leave immediately!

Lily returned my gaze blandly. “Why not? It’s true. We’re here because no one likes us—including you.”

“That’s not true.” Fern pressed her palms flat against the table. “A lot of people like you, Lily, but they’re too intimidated by your attitude to let you know. They think you don’t care. And Milo’s always done his own thing, no matter what anyone else said. A lot of people admire that—I admire that.” Her cheeks were pink, and she looked down at her tray. “So there.”

Lily and I stared at each other and then her. “You didn’t admire Milo’s attitude when you were accusing him of taking those tickets,” Lily said slowly.

“I know.” Fern looked at me. “Milo, I’m sorry. I was stressed—I was worried, and when I saw the tickets—I just jumped to the obvious conclusion. It wasn’t until much, much later that I realized, about the only person who couldn’t have taken the tickets and left the notes in my locker was you.”

“Notes?” Lily asked.

“You don’t have to apologize, Fern,” I said quickly. “Everyone makes mistakes—”

“No,” Fern said. “You deserve to hear this, Milo. I mean, once I calmed down enough to think, it was obvious. Like, the face you made when Mr. Perry asked if you’d considered running for class president?”

Lily snickered. “That was hilarious.”

“What face?” I thought I’d managed to conceal my abject horror.

“And when we had that abstinence campaigner speak to us?” Lily smirked. “I didn’t watch him at all. I just—”

“Watched Milo? Me too.” Fern tucked her hair out of her face. “So you see, there’s absolutely no way Milo could keep his face straight long enough to take the tickets, let alone everything else. And that made me think about other things. Like why someone who’d found a mistake in my history essay that the teacher had missed would even feel like she needed to compete with me.”

“What abstinence campaigner?”

Lily kicked me. “You can’t make up for an entire year with one apology.”

“I know.” Fern leaned forward earnestly. “I totally understand if you never want to be friends with me again. But I had to say it—to both of you. I made a big mistake, and I’m sorry.”

Lily blinked a little too quickly. “About time.” She shrugged carelessly.

I eyed her skeptically as I stood. That was the least convincing affectation of disinterest I’d ever seen. “I’m going to leave you to your reunion.”

There was absolutely nothing the matter with my face, but Lily and Fern looked at me and dissolved into giggles.

My reflection frowned back at me from the bathroom mirror. I raised an eyebrow, tried a grimace. No, there was nothing inherently funny about it that I could see. I screwed up my face; still nothing. “What is the matter with everyone?”

Footsteps clattered in the corridor outside. I stepped back from the mirror, reaching for my bag.

The bag was kicked across the floor before I could pick it up. A second foot connected with my ribs, and I was too surprised to do anything but fall over.

Logan smirked down at me. “So. We meet again.”

“What are you talking about? I saw you in Biology—give me that!”

Logan was not alone. Jordan and Matt had squeezed in the door after him, blocking me from reaching my bag.

“Hold him back! Come on—there’s two of you!” Logan took a step back.

Don’t think! I lunged toward him, swinging wildly. Matt caught my arm, jerking me backward.

Jordan hesitated. “But he’s mental! I saw what happened in the hall—”

“There’s three of us and one of him! What? Want me to tell Coach you’re too chicken to tackle Milo Markopoulos?”

I grunted as Jordan grabbed my other arm, trying to tug myself free. “Too scared to face me without two of your buddies? If anyone’s chicken here, it’s you, Logan!”

Matt snickered, twisting my arm painfully. “He’s got a point. I still can’t believe he got the jump on you in the hall.”

“Shut up!” Logan’s ears were a dull red color. Embarrassed or angry? Neither boded well, and I watched as he folded his arms. “You picked the wrong guy to piss off, Markopoulos. You are in trouble now.” He threw open the door of the nearest stall. “Swirlie time.”

I bit my tongue to stop myself from saying “really?” This was the worst Logan could come up with?

“Logan? He’s not looking intimidated.”

Logan scowled, pulling the toilet handle down. “You think I’m faking? Seriously, I won’t hesitate to make them dunk you.”

I watched the toilet flush with a feeling of resignation. “Leaving the hard part to someone else? Weirdly, I have no problems believing that.”

“You’re right,” Jordan said suddenly. “He’s not scared.”

“What gives?” Logan stared at me. “You don’t—like this do you?”

“If he’s getting off on this, I’m getting out of here,” Jordan said.

I rolled my eyes. “You can’t catch gay. Geez, it’s like I’m interacting with actual children.” They were all looking at me. “Seriously, think about this! I am short, smart and went to public schools before Bernhardt. You really think this is the first time this has happened?”

Logan glanced to his cronies for support.

“Anyone else, this’d be a classic case of reverse psychology,” Jordan said. “But Milo.”

Logan’s frown deepened. “Milo,” he agreed.

“You guys ever wonder if all we’re doing is recreating the negative patterns impressed on us in our childhood?” Matt shook his head. “I mean, I was at

Sleepy Hollow Middle School with Milo. I know exactly who he's talking about. Those guys were jerks."

"When I was in third grade, there were these sixth graders who used to wait for me in the hall by the water fountain," Jordan said suddenly. "They used to tell everyone I peed myself. The school nurse was convinced I had a bladder problem."

"Keyword—used to. As in 'not anymore.'" Logan shoved my bag back behind him as he gesticulated. "We got one chance at this—or are you going to let one single loser ruin everything? We don't stop this right now, we stand to lose everything we worked so hard for. Picture it. Next year, we're the seniors. We got the entire school looking up to us. 'There's Jordan,' they'll say. 'Captain of the wrestling team.' Course that doesn't mean much when he lets himself get pushed around by some twig with a pen—"

"Hey!" I protested.

"It's true," Matt said. "Man, Logan, you don't want to know what they said about your absence at the Meet on the weekend. When they heard you got floored by Milo Markopoulos—"

"You see? We're going to be the laughingstock of the Westchester area. Maybe even the entire state."

I squirmed and finally succeeded in freeing myself from Matt's grip. "You don't need my help there," I said. "So give me my bag and I'll let you get on with that."

Logan frowned at me. "You want your bag back?" He dangled it above the toilet, casually shaking it.

The binder with my script lurched toward the side. I lunged forward, trying to grab it. "Don't!"

Matt snickered. "Threatened with bodily harm, he doesn't flinch, but you threaten his books—as if there was any doubt we went to the nerd school!"

"Shut up!" I fought furiously, desperate to reach my bag. My elbow connected with Matt's jaw in the process, which was momentarily satisfying. "No—it's going to fall!"

"What—this?" Logan caught the binder as it slid. "What is this anyway, your homework—"

"Don't look at it!"

Logan jerked his head up in surprise at my vehemence.

I realized then that I'd given myself away. "Dump it! I don't care!"

"What do we have here? Another prom confession maybe?" Logan flipped open the binder. "Well, well. Guys, we got ourselves another Spielberg."

"Don't read it! Let me go—I'm going to murder you—"

"Jesus, Jordan, hold him still!" Matt grunted as he shoved me back against the wall, adding his weight to his strength to keep me pinned.

"I'm trying! How can someone this skinny be so tough—"

"Fade In. Exterior, Barrytown School, Westfield." Logan snorted. "No prizes for guessing what that is based on."

"I'm going to rip your vocal chords out of your throat—"

"Logan, maybe you shouldn't read that—"

"No way." Logan waved my script at me. "Any writer's got to learn to deal with critiques, right? We're helping, Milo. Workshopping."

I strained, using the wall to try to give myself some force against my captors. "They're going to need a workshop to patch you back together when I'm done—"

"What kind of a story is this anyway? Teen drama? Comedy—romance? Let's see—" Logan flicked through the script. "'Suddenly the classroom door opens. THOMAS, a handsome student with a uniform that fits like a glove, chocolate brown hair and summer-blue eyes steps in, followed by MR. PRINCE, a middle-aged teacher with a vaguely hopeful expression.' He's hopeful all right—he's hopeful anyone will read this crap—"

Jordan and Matt laughed. I felt the fight go out of me abruptly. "No—" I'd never let anyone read my script.

They weren't expecting my body to go limp, and I slid to the ground unimpeded.

"What the—" Matt nudged my leg with his sneaker. "Did we break him?"

"Not us. The realization that his writing sucks. There's only one place for trash like this. And as it happens, it's right here." Logan balled up the piece of paper he held.

I watched him drop the paper in the toilet and pull the handle on it with that same not-really-happening feeling of a dream. This was exactly the same

situation that had played out in my fears over and over again. Now that it was happening for real, I was frozen, unable to react.

“What’s going on here?” Taylor’s voice sounded distant. Like he was a long way away.

“Just giving Milo some creative feedback.” Logan was smug, sure of himself as he crumpled another page. “You should read it.”

“This looks like bullying.” Taylor snatched the binder from Logan, glancing down at it. “Not to mention destruction of personal property. The principal’s hearing about this.”

“Come on, it was just a little fun.” Logan’s voice dropped to that ingratiating whine, but I couldn’t even find it in myself to be irritated. “We didn’t mean anything by it.”

“All Logan’s idea. We’re just doing as directed. We can’t be considered culpable,” Matt added hastily.

“No matter whose idea, you have to know that this sort of thing is wrong.” Taylor crossed his arms “As members of the Spirit Squad, you’re supposed to set a good example.”

“We are setting a good example. Not letting ourselves be pushed around by a sneak with a pen.”

Taylor placed his hand in front of me. “Milo’s not pushing anyone around. He resigned from the paper.”

I stared at the hand. Why was it there? What was Taylor trying to communicate? It wasn’t until Taylor took my hand and tugged it that I got the hint. I got to my feet, keeping a hand on the wall to balance myself.

“Typical. Everyone always takes his side.” Logan folded his arms across his chest. “Come on, man. I thought you were cool.”

“We must have very different definitions of cool.” Taylor nudged me in the direction of the door. No one tried to block my path. “Mine doesn’t involve picking on someone who can’t fight back.”

Logan snorted. “Don’t you believe it. Carson and Blake had a beef with Milo, and what does he do? He gets them expelled.”

I stumbled, almost planting myself face-first into the doorway. *No! Not this!*

Taylor caught my arm automatically. “What?”

“That’s not important now! In fact, none of this is important!” I motioned frantically to Logan. “Go ahead, flush the rest of my script! You’re right, that is the best place for it!”

Taylor’s hand tightened on my arm in a warning grip. “That’s not true. Milo wouldn’t do something like that.”

“He would if his precious paper’s involved. Don’t know what his grudge against Carson was, but they were sniping at each other for weeks and then out of nowhere, Milo’s article came out, making it look as though Carson and Blake were drinking on school property—”

I ground my fists together. “They were drinking on school property!”

“After homecoming!” Jordan protested. “That’s like—tradition!”

Taylor frowned. “Isn’t that illegal? We’re underage.”

“It happens,” Logan said dismissively. “No one cares. Not until Milo made it something the school couldn’t ignore, by running an opinion piece about it. Next thing you know, the school board’s involved, the police are making enquiries—it was a witch hunt, and Carson and Blake were the victims.”

“They didn’t just break the school rules. They broke state law—” My angry protest died as Taylor let go of my arm.

“Milo, is this true?”

The December chill had nothing on Taylor’s expression. It was very hard to speak. “I didn’t expect it to get so big! I just wanted to draw attention to the unfairness of the situation—” Just like the reporters that Taylor despised, I hadn’t thought of the personal consequences to Carson and Blake.

“By getting them expelled!”

“They weren’t expelled!”

“They weren’t expelled then where are they now?” Logan crossed his hands over his chest.

I looked down. “I can’t tell you.”

“Right. Because the principal said not to? You weren’t thinking of that when you were getting your revenge—”

“Enough!”

Logan stepped backward at my exclamation. I grabbed my bag from him before he could drop it, pulling it over my shoulder.

“You’re right. It is my fault Carson and Blake aren’t at school here. You’ve reminded me of that every single day since they’ve left, and you know what?” I looked around the bathroom, from Matt and Jordan’s belligerent expressions to Taylor’s blank one. “If I had the chance to do it over, I would still write the article.” I ducked under Mr. Harper’s arm—when had Mr. Harper joined us? Then again, when wasn’t Mr. Harper lurking in the background?—and out the door.

Taylor followed me into the hall. “Milo, what the hell?”

I stopped. If I was honest, it was this that I’d feared more than anything else. “I’m sorry, Taylor.”

“What are apologizing for? What they said?” He stood just behind me. “You didn’t force those kids to drink.”

“I’m exactly the sort of reporter you hate. Running a story despite the personal consequences to the people I write about. Logan’s right about that.” I swallowed. “I—should have told you in the park, but I liked—talking to you too much.” Even now, with the knowledge that he’d been practicing my gestures, it still hurt. “You don’t have to tell the principal about this. I don’t really care what Logan and the others do. I was just scared you’d find out.”

“And now I have.” Taylor’s tone sounded grim.

I was unable to turn to look at him. “Now you have.” I took a deep breath. “Thanks. For being my friend. It was really... cool. While it lasted.”

“You can still say that? After everything?”

There were kids in the hall, staring at us. They didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. “Not that it makes any difference now, but yeah.” The upside to ruining everything was that I could say that, even knowing I would regret it later. Nothing could possibly be worse than this moment. Feeling the weight of Taylor’s gaze boring into my shoulder blades, I made my way down the hall.

Taylor followed me as far as the hall doors. “So you’re just going to walk away, leaving me with the fuzzy end of the lollipop?”

I stopped myself from turning to look at him just in time. That would have been fatal. “Taylor, I *am* the fuzzy end of the lollipop.” And before he could laugh at me, I marched down the steps. The mood I was in, I could take anything—except Taylor laughing at me.

Chapter Ten

The morning traffic rumbled past outside, interspersed with the chatter of passing pedestrians or the occasional bird. It was like they were doing it on purpose. I pulled my pillow over my head, burrowing deeper into my blankets. I was miserable, dammit, and nothing was going to change that.

There was a knock at my door. “Can I come in?” Mom asked.

I grunted.

I felt the bed shift as she sat on the end. “I called the school, told them you were staying home today.” She patted my side through my nest of blankets. “So you just take it easy, Spaghetti-O.”

I grimaced even though she couldn’t see me. “Thanks.”

“Breakfast’s ready whenever you are. I made pancakes. Real ones, with eggs and milk.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Well, if you change your mind, they’re in the kitchen.” Mom’s hand came to rest on my arm. “You’re sure you don’t need a strong male presence in your life?”

There had been a phone call from Yaya the night before.

“Mom! You not remarrying has nothing to do with the fact that I am never leaving this house again!”

“I know, honey, but if there was someone at home you could talk to—”

I raised myself out from the covers to look at her. “There is no stepfather in the world who could make Logan a nice person. Unless, maybe, he was Logan’s stepfather.”

“I’ve got half a mind to call that child’s parents—”

“Mom, it’s fine! I’m totally happy staying here alone and miserable. Please.”

She sighed, standing. “As long as you’re sure. You let me know if you need anything.”

I burrowed back beneath the covers. Finally! I could be miserable in peace.

The doorbell rang. I burrowed more deeply under the covers to ignore it, blocking out the conversation in the hall.

For a few minutes, everything was silent. Then my door banged open.

“Hurry up and get out of bed! You’re going to be late.” My blankets were seized and tugged violently.

I grabbed them before they could be snatched away. “Taylor? What are you doing in my bedroom?”

“Getting you ready for school!” Taylor tried again to pull my blankets away and then went for the expedient process of simply pulling the mattress off the bed. I slid to the floor in a tangle of blankets, and he grabbed my flailing arms, pulling me to my feet. “Don’t just stand there! Get dressed!”

I clutched my sheet to my chest, watching as Taylor threw open the doors of my closet. “I’m not going to school.”

“That’s what you think.” Taylor threw a shirt at me, followed by my blazer. “Come on, Milo, move!”

In catching the shirt, I lost hold of the sheet leaving me standing there in only my boxers. I pulled the shirt on, hoping Taylor wouldn’t notice. “What is even happening? This is taking class president way too far!”

Taylor smiled grimly at me, holding up my trousers. “You should have thought of that before you nominated me.”

I grabbed my pants out of his hands, pulling them on as I stumbled into the hall. “Mom! Taylor’s picking on me!”

“I know, honey.” Mom pushed a ziplock bag into my hands and kissed my cheek. “You have a good day at school, Spaghetti-O.”

“*Mom!*”

“You heard the woman.” Taylor had my backpack and blazer over one arm and the other planted in the middle of my back. He propelled me out the door and toward the waiting car. “Will we be in time for second period?”

“Traffic willing.” Naomi was already behind the wheel. She caught my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Good morning, Milo.”

Taylor nudged me and I folded into the back seat automatically. “Good morning—no, this is not a good morning! This is not what I wanted at all!” I started to climb out of the car.

Taylor swung my bag onto my lap and followed it with my blazer. “Trust me,” he said. “You miss school today and you will regret it for the rest of your life.”

He poked me again, and I automatically moved over so that he could sit. With anyone else, that level of hyperbole would raise eyebrows, but Taylor gave it the ring of truth. Maybe he was cut out to be on the newspaper after all?

Naomi started the car and pulled out onto the road. I slid face-first into the passenger seat headrest.

“Seatbelt,” Taylor ordered, gathering my blazer back on to his lap. “Then breakfast. Then we can finish getting you dressed.”

I buckled myself in. “We nothing! I can dress myself?”

“Really?” Taylor smirked. “After what I just witnessed, I’m not sure.”

I snatched my blazer out of his hands. “I was surprised! Normal people don’t usually just barge into someone’s bedroom and pull them out of bed!”

Taylor took my complaint with composure. “Here’s your tie. Damn! I forgot a hairbrush.”

“I’ve got one in my handbag—from the hotel. In case of unexpected press appearances,” Naomi said. “In the inside pocket.”

“Got it. Milo, hold still—”

“You are not brushing my hair!”

I arrived at school, shell-shocked but marginally presentable.

“How on earth do you even survive on a day-to-day basis?” Taylor herded me toward the classroom.

I clutched my bag to my chest. “I do just fine when I’m not being hounded! And I wasn’t expecting to be getting ready for school—I wasn’t expecting to be here at all!”

At least AP English was normal. I shook off Taylor’s hand and made a beeline to my usual desk.

Seemingly satisfied with dragging me to school, Taylor lingered in his usual spot, exchanging greetings with Emily and Boomer.

I studied him as I put a piece of loose-leaf on my desk. Maybe he thought getting me to school was the entire battle? I could lose him after English, sneak back home—

The intercom chimed. “There is a change to today’s schedule. All students to the auditorium please. All students to the auditorium.”

Conversation ground to a halt.

“What’s going on? Mr. Perry, this isn’t another special assembly, is it?”

“We elected a new class president already, geez!”

Mr. Perry shook his head. “You heard the announcement. Everyone to the auditorium.”

I found Taylor walking beside me in the hall. “This is your fault,” I told him. “You did something.”

He shrugged. “Just wait and see.”

What the hell was going on?

The auditorium was full of students milling around. One man in a suit stood on the stage, watching us file in; two more leaned against the walls with their arms folded. One was in consultation with Mr. Harper. My heart sank. This could not be anything good.

“Everyone line up! We want you sitting by class groups.” Mr. Perry ushered us toward a row of seats. I ducked under Taylor’s arm and inserted myself between Fern and Lily. “What is going on? Do you know?”

Fern shook her head. “No one knows anything. The staff is being weirdly quiet, and we had a uniform spot-check before school. It’s really weird.”

A uniform spot-check? Maybe this was beyond Taylor? I looked back to see that he had already been surrounded by the Feministas. He returned my frown with a bland smirk, revealing nothing.

I folded my arms, facing front. I might not know what was going on, but I wasn’t going to let him get to me.

As the last freshmen were finally ushered into their seats, the principal walked out onto the stage, followed by a short man with silvery-gray hair and a broad navy jacket.

“There’s no way.”

“What? Milo, do you know that man?” Lily glanced at me.

“He’s familiar.” Fern frowned. “I know I’ve seen him.”

There was a similar murmur going through the auditorium, kids turning to each other for confirmation.

“Good morning, scholars.” The principal beamed. “We’ve called you out of class for a very special reason. A very special guest has asked to come and spend the day with us. I’m sure you all know that Sir Alan Carmichael has produced many wonderful films, many of them award-winning.” The principal waited a moment for the excited buzz to die down. “But I was surprised to discover that he is also a passionate supporter of youth endeavors in the arts and has offered to share his experiences with you. This is incredibly generous of such a busy man, so I hope you’ll show your thanks with a round of applause—”

Anything else the principal said was drowned out in enthusiastic clapping.

My hands shook. I watched Sir Alan shake hands with the principal and then step up to the podium. He detached the microphone from its stand, placing a hand on the podium as he stood beside it. “Thank you very much for the warm welcome, Bernhardt. I’ve heard a lot about the school, and I’m delighted you could make time for me today.”

Hearing the clipped British accent I heard in so many documentaries and commentaries in real life was eerie. A burst of goose pimples traveled through me like a shock.

“As Mr. Kim said, I’ve come here today to talk to you about my experiences as a student in the U.K. and how I got to where I am today—”

Lily leaned over. “Who’s Mr. Kim?”

“Maybe he means the principal—”

I gripped both of their arms. “No talking. No breathing!” Sir Alan Carmichael—*Sir Alan Carmichael!*—was in our school, talking to us.

Sir Alan Carmichael’s talk was followed by the chance to ask questions and lasted until the end of third period. As the final applause ended, the principal took the stage once more. “Sir Alan will be spending the rest of the day at school, observing our classes. There will be other chances to talk to him and answer questions, but please remember that there are a lot of you and only one of him, and he may not have the chance to talk to all of you.”

He led Sir Alan and his dark-suited companion from the stage.

“Holy crap! I cannot believe this—can you believe this? I can’t believe this!” Alexis turned to talk to her friends. As if that had been a signal, the entire auditorium erupted.

“We’ve got Drama next. Do you think he’ll come? God, if he watches our rehearsal, I think I’ll die—”

“I literally cannot believe this!”

“What is someone like Sir Alan Carmichael doing here? I mean—it’s crazy! He’s not even from Tarrytown!”

I swallowed. I’d been so overwhelmed by the fact that Sir Alan was here—*here! At my school!*—and had answered my question, that it hadn’t occurred to me to wonder why. Now that it had, I glanced at Taylor.

His expression was as blank as it had been before, only now there seemed to be a decidedly smug edge to it.

I fought my way past three cheerleaders to catch up with him as we filed back to class. “You! You did this!”

Taylor shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re implying, Milo.”

“But you knew this would happen. You had to.”

“I found out about it,” Taylor agreed. “And I knew you couldn’t miss it. Less talking, more walking, Milo. You know what Ms. Cox is like about people being late to class.”

Halfway through drawing, the door opened and the principal peeked in. “I hope we’re not interrupting?”

There was an excited rustle of paper as Sir Alan and his security team followed him in. “Please don’t let me interrupt,” Sir Alan said. “Go on as usual.”

He went from group to group, pausing to look at every student’s work, giving some advice or asking questions.

“Lily,” he said, reading her name from her sketchbook. “You wouldn’t happen to be the photographer?”

Ms. Cox carried over a file. “I have some of Lily’s work here.”

Sir Alan flipped through her work. “You’re already working on a portfolio? Tell me about this photo here. What’s the story behind it?”

Lily tucked her hair out of her face. Her voice was so quiet that the students at the surrounding tables strained to hear. “It’s a reaction to all the airbrushing and photo shopping of models. I wanted to show that a camera can lie.”

“That is why you’ve got the mirror here? Very nicely done. You know, there’s a man in New York you should talk to. He’s in film, but he is working on similar lines—” Sir Alan beckoned to one of the men in dark suits. “My card case.” He gave Lily a business card. “I’ll let him know to expect your call.”

We were all startled when the bell rang.

“Already?” Sir Alan stood. “I can see there are some very talented students in this class. Keep up the good work, and I look forward to meeting you again at a gala or gallery opening in a few years.”

I joined in the hasty chorus of thanks with the rest of my classmates, but I couldn’t help but notice that throughout the visit, Taylor had been hanging back, out of the way. Even now, as Sir Alan’s eyes fell on him, Taylor’s only response to his attention was a quick nod. Behind him, Mr. Harper looked politely bored.

Mr. Harper? I blinked.

As Sir Alan walked down the hall, the dark-suited men drifted behind in an apparently casual manner, but he was never out of their sight. It reminded me very strongly of the way that Mr. Harper followed Taylor.

Taking a breath, I turned to look behind, to see if my suspicions were right.

Taylor was in the middle of the flock of people congratulating Lily. “You’ve worked hard. You deserve this.”

“Are you going to call this guy?” Madison demanded.

Lily tucked her hair out of her face. “What do you think? If Sir Alan Carmichael tells you to call someone—” She shook her head. “This is unbelievable.”

I swallowed. And Lily didn’t know half of it.

I didn’t remember walking to the cafeteria, but I must have because I wound up sitting in my usual seat with a tray of food that I didn’t even like. Taylor sat beside Lily, listening as Fern and Declan speculated wildly about what might have brought Sir Alan to Tarrytown.

“If he saw Lily’s work in the gallery, maybe—”

“He’s a famous director! He’s in New York for a press conference—he doesn’t have time to go to galleries! Maybe one of the crew he works with is a graduate,” Declan suggested. “He was really interested in our performances, he asked about them in music. Mr. Saltberg—”

“Mr. Saltberg.” The rest of the table nodded, considering the question answered. The conversation drifted onto Sir Alan’s directing accomplishments.

Taylor joined in the conversation casually. He did “interested” so well that I started to wonder if maybe I was wrong. I mean, it was too incredible. Jet Carmichael, at our school? In my class? Hauling me out of bed in my boxers?

I buried my hands in my face. Taylor had said he’d never attended school! The scandal he’d mentioned in the park, his desire for an ordinary school experience, his unusual maturity—it all added up! It was the most incredible story I’d ever uncovered—and if I said anything, Taylor’s normal high school experience was ruined!

“There, there, Milo.” Had I groaned out loud? “There’s still two more classes. Maybe Sir Alan will come to one of those and you can talk to him.” Fern patted my shoulder.

“What have you got? Spanish and Musical Theory?” Declan grimaced. “Hard luck. Still, he did answer your question at the assembly. So that’s kind of like talking to him.” He leaned across the table. “He told me—”

This was going to be the longest lunch of my life.

The fact that I made my way through Spanish and Musical Theory without blurting out what I knew was a minor miracle, made possible only by the fact that Taylor was in neither class. I made my way toward the door. Only a few more meters and then I’d be out the door, away from anyone I could tell—

“Sam! Finally! Get to the AP English room!” Stacey dashed down the hall.

Sam paused, putting her books into her locker. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s there! Carmichael—he said he wants to meet the newspaper club!”

“Oh my god!” Sam slammed her locker shut and ran for it.

I hurried after them. Sir Alan Carmichael wanted to meet the newspaper club!

I felt a rush of triumph. Vindicated at last! Forget the isolation, the jibes, the disinterest—Sir Alan Carmichael wanted to meet us. Not the jocks, not the cheerleaders—us, the newspaper club!

I stumbled. I was no longer part of the newspaper club.

I swallowed, looking at the AP English door. No one would blame me. No one would possibly blame me. I had done more for the newspaper than anyone except Candice, suffered for it more than anyone except Candice. I'd been deputy editor for the entire school year!

“And then I quit.”

I couldn't make myself turn around. Instead, I stepped backward, until I backed into the opposite wall. Using the row of lockers as a guide, I tore myself away from the AP English classroom.

This was Candice's triumph. Her big moment. I trudged down the stairs. She wouldn't even miss me. No one would miss me—

“Milo Markopoulos, you stop right there!”

I stumbled, almost taking the remaining stairs face-first. When had Candice been replaced by a loudspeaker? “What have I done?”

Candice stood at the top of the stairs, her hands on her hips. “I've been looking for you everywhere. Come on—Sir Alan's waiting.”

“But—” I stood stock-still, trying to absorb this. “Candice, I quit! I'm not part of the newspaper anymore! You said—”

Candice grabbed my hand and hauled me after her. “Don't be stupid, Milo. I told you, didn't I? You're my deputy editor, and I decided that you're not quitting.”

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. “Of course. How could I forget?”

“Beats me.” Candice squeezed my hand. “I think your break from the newspaper has been bad for your memory. So let me remind you—as editor, I get first pick of articles, which means the report about Sir Alan is mine. But if you promise not to drool on him and embarrass us, I *might* let you write a feature article about one of his movies.”

“Really?”

“I said ‘might.’ It's contingent on you not embarrassing us—Milo! No, I said *not* embarrassing—Milo!” With an exasperated sigh, Candice returned my

hug. “I really don’t know why I put myself through this,” she grumbled. “Come on, you sap. Let’s meet Sir Alan.”

I didn’t walk home. I floated.

It had been, without a doubt, the best day of my life. Sir Alan sat on a desk, chatting with the others while he waited for us, sharing anecdotes about starting out in the film industry. He spoke of holding down jobs as a technical writer and then a baker, writing scripts in odd moments before realizing that he wanted to be behind the camera instead of writing for it. We were fascinated by his unlikely job experiences and how they’d fed into his later career, felt indignant on his behalf at his early critical reception and were encouraged by his account of his numerous failures and difficulties. He’d read the last few issues of the paper while eating lunch with the principal and had something to say for everyone on the paper—especially Candice.

“It’s not everyone who can hold up under the enormous internal and external forces that being the editor of something as polarizing as a newspaper entails,” he told her. “What you’ve accomplished here is commendable, not just in terms of organization and hard work, but personal integrity. One of the most important traits any writer can possess, fiction or nonfiction. You can write well, you can polish your work until it shines, and you can research trends and target audiences, but if your work isn’t genuine, you’re not going to connect with your audience. Candice, you don’t inspire your staff by preaching journalism, you inspire them by living it.”

Candice glowed. “Can I take that as a direct quote?”

Sir Alan laughed. “With pleasure. And finally, Mr. Markopoulos.”

I started. “Me?”

“Indeed. I’ve heard a lot about you, but I have to say it is your work that I am most interested in.” Sir Alan patted the pile of papers beside him.

It took me a moment to recognize them, but then the last time I’d seen my script it had been in the process of being flushed down the toilet. The front pages were missing, and it was definitely crumpled, but in addition to my notes and corrections were other notes, added in a big, bold hand that favored navy ink. “But my script sucks.”

Sir Alan smiled. “There are some shortcomings,” he admitted. “But the structure is good and the premise solid. If you have the time, I’d like to give you some feedback now.”

Sir Alan Carmichael had given feedback on my script.

There was the crunch of gravel underfoot as Taylor fell into step on the footpath beside me. “You can thank me any time, you know. Or has my entire existence been blanked out by the presence of Sir Alan Carmichael?”

“He read my script. I can’t believe—he read my script!” I danced ahead a couple of steps. “You showed it to him?”

“After you left, I rescued it from the bathroom.” Taylor smirked at me. “He was curious, so I let him read it. It was then he came up with the idea of visiting the school.”

Sir Alan Carmichael had visited Bernhardt to talk to me.

That thought led to another one. I shot Taylor a frown. “Just how long have you been Jet Carmichael?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Shortly after I was born?”

“You know what I mean! You—I cannot believe that you’ve been keeping this a secret the entire time!”

“It wasn’t completely a secret,” Taylor said. “We just didn’t tell anyone.”

“How is that not a secret?”

Taylor shrugged as we turned down the byroad toward the apartment block. “Taylor’s my middle name, what my parents and family calls me. I used it on my school application and all the paperwork.”

Family and the entire student body of Bernhardt wasn’t exactly a select group, but that still gave me a happy glow. “But the principal knows?”

“All the staff do, and the board. It was part of getting permission for Mr. Harper.”

“And he’s your bodyguard?” I was so, so glad I’d never run the story speculating why exactly the teacher was always around when Taylor needed him. “To protect you from other students?”

“More for rogue reporters or general weirdoes,” Taylor said. “My parents being so famous, there’s kind of a lot of them. Harper’s job also included keeping an eye on me and reporting back to Mom and Dad.” Taylor glanced at me. “I told you about my family getting a lot of abuse from the press. You probably know why now, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I was a kid when it happened, so I didn’t exactly pay attention, but Sir Alan—I mean. Your dad’s my favorite director. So I’ve read a lot about his career and—stuff.”

Taylor’s mouth twitched. “Stuff?”

“Well, I don’t know what really happened! I just have the press account, and according to you, they got it wrong!”

Taylor nodded. “Yeah. My parents have their flaws but neglecting me was never one of them. But all that pressure and scrutiny of the press on top of the child services investigation and working on the film... I got overloaded. It made me sick. There was about a year, maybe a year and a half, when I was just recovering. I stopped going to school, so my parents hired tutors. The tutors knew that if I complained, they’d get fired, so they didn’t try too hard to make me do anything I didn’t want to, so I... didn’t. And then, I got a tutor who was actually decent, got me thinking about my future. I realized I wanted to act, but my parents were afraid that I couldn’t handle the pressure and would relapse. So we came up with a plan. If I could keep my grades up, I was allowed to audition for a role. If I completed the film, I’d be allowed to attend school. If I handled school okay, I’d be allowed to apply for college.”

“Wait. So when you said you were at Bernhardt to study—”

“I meant it! You’re only getting that now? Seriously?”

“I don’t know anyone who has come to school to study!” I protested. “And I’ve been to a lot more school than you have!”

“But now you get it.” Taylor shook his head. “Meeting you has been like a crash course in high school—I think you managed to fit an entire education’s worth of social anxiety into one month.”

Taylor did not actually sound annoyed. “Which you handled.”

“Yeah.” Taylor shook his head. “Somehow.” He hesitated. “My parents couldn’t believe the reports they were getting from Harper. Me, running for class president. Making friends. Taking on responsibilities. Making formal plans. I had a hard time keeping them from showing up at the school sooner.”

“I have that effect on people, I guess.” I still could not believe it. Sir Alan Carmichael had wanted to meet me!

“You have something.” Taylor sounded doubtful. “Well, now you know everything.”

“Not quite. You grew up in the U.K., right? How come you don’t sound British?”

“I’m an actor... with an American mom.”

“She taught you?”

“I taught myself. Believe it or not, they wanted me to have a normal childhood, but when they overheard me practicing her accent they realized that acting was in my blood. That’s how my career started.”

“All those days you were absent or away from school, that was movie stuff?”

“Press conferences and interviews. They’re done in advance and released closer to when the film’s released. Which is end of next week.”

“Next week.” I glanced at Taylor worriedly. “It’s one thing to be Taylor when no one knows what Jet looks like. But once the film comes out—”

Taylor nodded. “As long as I make it to the end of the term, it’s fine.”

“It is not fine! It’s Monday! We still have—seven days of term left, not counting the weekend!” The thought was terrifying. “I’ll never make it!”

“Not make what?”

“Not telling anyone! Taylor—how could you do this to me?” I slapped him on the arm. “This is the worst!”

“Ow!” Taylor dodged out of my reach. “How is this the worst? You don’t have to do anything—just don’t say anything!”

“Exactly! Secrets! I’m terrible at them—and this!” I moaned again. “This is the single biggest story I have ever uncovered—and I can’t tell anyone without making it so that you can’t go to school! Taylor, I’m going to explode!”

Taylor must have been getting used to me. He stopped when I collapsed, so the foot that nudged me was entirely on purpose. “People don’t explode. Not without help in the form of incendiary devices.”

“Watch me!”

Taylor laughed. “You’ll be fine.”

I let him tug me to my feet. “You won’t be laughing when I accidentally blurt out your identity in front of Alexis and Sarah,” I told him balefully. “Or Candice. Or our entire year group. Or anyone with ears!”

“You won’t do that,” Taylor said composedly, placing his arm around my shoulders.

How could he be so calm? “You don’t know that!”

“I know you.” Taylor’s response was immediate and sent a fluttery feeling of warmth to my chest, even as my gut twisted in despair. “I trust you, Milo.”

I eyed him sourly, letting him propel me toward home. How was that not cruel?

“So, I was thinking,” Taylor continued. “We never did watch *Casablanca*. I’ve got promo stuff Saturday and Sunday, but maybe if you wanted—What now?” A black car came toward us down the street. Taylor detached his hand from my shoulder and stepped toward the road, waiting as it pulled up.

Naomi rolled down the window. “Taylor! Get in. We’ve got a flight from Teterboro in only a few hours.”

“But we’re flying out tomorrow—”

“Plans changed. There’s no time to lose.”

“Flying?” I asked as Taylor pulled out his phone.

“Back to L.A. for a second round of interviews. Can I have your number?”

“My number?”

“Please? It’ll be really boring, but if I have someone to talk to...”

“You’ll be talking to the interviewers.” But I gave him my number anyway.

I watched the black car pull away, taking Taylor—no, Jet—with it. In one entire day, I seemed to have experienced the entire emotional scale, right down to the feeling of loss as the car disappeared around the corner.

“I could write about it... but no one would ever believe me.” I bit my lip as the enormity of the secret I was keeping crept over me again. “No one would ever believe me.”

Was that what Taylor was counting on?

Chapter Eleven

I took the stairs at a run, slammed the door behind me and took a deep breath. “Taylor is really Jet Carmichael! He’s been attending our school, pretending to be a normal teenager to catch up on the schooling he missed! And nobody knows!” I panted.

The living room was unmoved. The only sound was that of the traffic in the distance, but after a moment’s thought, I locked the door. I couldn’t be too careful. This—I’d never had a secret like this before.

With a groan, I flopped face-first onto the sofa. I hit the remote, the television flaring to life. “And rounding out the evening’s news, reclusive director Sir Alan Carmichael has made an unusual visit to a New York school. Our reporter, Avani Malakar, has more.”

“Thank you, Jake. I am standing outside Bernhardt Academy, a private school with a strong academic focus in the town of Sleepy Hollow—”

“Tarrytown!” I pulled the cushion over my head. I had to focus, figure out what I was going to do.

“According to these Bernhardt students, Sir Alan’s visit was a complete surprise. No one had any idea he was coming—”

“Yeah,” I said. “No one but Taylor, the principal and the entire staff!”

“—until Sir Alan made an appearance at a special assembly. He then spent the rest of the school day visiting classes and clubs.”

“Club, singular!” I sat up to glare at the TV.

“These students actually spoke to Sir Alan.” The reporter thrust her microphone at a pair of students standing on the sidewalk beside her. “What was it like?”

Stacey giggled. “It was so weird. I’ve never met a celebrity, so to have one visit our school was really cool!”

Trust the drama club to be present when a camera showed up! I smirked. If they only knew that a celebrity had been attending our school for over a month now...

“Do you know why Sir Alan came to your school?”

Declan preened. “Bernhardt’s always had a strong reputation for the performing arts. Mr. Saltberg’s classes on drama get a lot of acclaim—”

“Film! His classes on film!”

“And the school’s even named for a famous actress.”

“No, it is not!” I stood up, pulling my phone out of my pocket. “The Bernhardt family were some of the original settlers! They had no connection to Sarah Bernhardt at all! And it’s not the drama club Sir Alan was interested in— What am I doing?”

I dropped the phone onto the sofa as if I’d been stung. Halfway through calling the local news station. What was I, mad?

“They’ll ask for my sources. And then what do I tell them? Sir Alan Carmichael’s son told me?” I groaned. This was going to be a nightmare.

“Back to the studio.”

“Thank you, Avani.” The anchor leaned forward across his desk. “Sir Alan hasn’t always been on the side of youth. The director has garnered criticism for the behavior of his son, Jet, who is said to be a regular of the party circuit in London.”

“Wait, what?”

“Jet is reportedly in America now ahead of his first film as an adult, *Boston 1770*, and it is possible that Sir Alan is in the States to keep an eye on his wayward son.”

“Again, what?”

“And now, the weather—”

“Augh!” I ran into my bedroom and opened up my laptop. What did he mean, wayward son? “Taylor’s the most mature person I know! There’s no way he has fun!”

The Internet said differently. Browsing the Oh No They Didn’t archives, I discovered a string of articles about how Jet Carmichael had made a habit of being seen falling out of famous London nightclubs at early hours of the morning, in the company of other celebrity wild childs. “Wild childs? Not wild children?” But it wasn’t the quality of the writing bothering me, it was the facts. And the facts put Taylor on a downward slope of excessive partying.

Taylor was usually just an “also there” in the text, but sometimes there was a grainy picture of a thin youth with long bleached hair, in a state that clearly

said he had not been up late studying. The last article dated a year earlier. Had he given it up, turned his life around? Or—

I closed my laptop, sliding to the floor. “Why is liking people so hard? At least when I was a social outcast, things were simple!”

“You weren’t seriously planning on staying home to avoid saying anything people might hear.” Taylor walked beside me as we made our way through the hall. “That’s ridiculous, even for you.”

“Shows what you know,” I grumbled. Taylor was not treating my dilemma with the appropriateness it deserved.

“I think you’re just bad at mornings and trying to hide it.” Taylor leaned against the locker next to mine. “Up too late watching movies?”

I gave him an injured look. “Unlike some people in this conversation, I spent the weekend doing my homework.”

“You make it sound like I was having fun.”

I bit my lip before I could say “weren’t you?” Jet’s reputation for partying had been on my mind since the TV report Friday, but somehow, even when Taylor had texted me from L.A., I’d been unable to ask him the questions I’d wanted to.

Taylor misinterpreted my hesitation. “You really are that afraid of slipping up? I’m surprised you didn’t pack duct tape for your mouth.”

In the act of pulling the roll of tape out of my bag, I froze. “What if I had?”

“Give me that!” After a brief tug of war, Taylor got the tape away from me. “Sometimes, Milo, I really wonder about you.”

“That makes two of us!” I shut my books in the locker. “Still, it is your high school career at risk here, not mine!”

The bell ended further discussion, though not my torment. Many of my classmates had been interviewed over the weekend, though none could top Declan’s television performance. Every time the subject of Sir Alan came up, I had to physically cover my mouth. I was in agony.

Taylor just smirked.

“What’s with the smug grin?” Alexis asked him during lunch. “You look way too pleased with yourself for someone who doesn’t have a formal date.”

Taylor blinked. “I do?”

“You’re right.” Sarah Choi joined in the close consideration of Taylor. “I *thought* he was weirdly happy to be in AP English on a Monday.”

Lily leaned in. “He’s not the only one. Look at Fern’s expression.”

Fern, in the process of eating a vegetable sushi roll, froze. “What about my expression?”

I smirked. Finally, someone else shared my pain!

Declan leaned back in his chair. “Now that you mention it... She has been in a very good mood today.”

“How would you tell?” I ask. “Fern’s always in a good mood.”

“This is an especially good mood,” Declan continued. “Something happened. Something involving Taylor and Fern.”

The same thought occurred to all of us at once. My stomach lurched in an entirely new type of horror.

“Oh my god,” Alexis said. “You two are—”

“I knew it!” Declan said. “The two of you are perfect together—”

“What? No!” Fern choked on her sushi. “It’s not that!”

Taylor passed her his water bottle. “Much as we hate to disappoint, Fern and I are not going to the formal together. At least, not as a couple. “

“But it is formal related.” Ability to breathe restored, Fern set down the water bottle. “I was waiting to make the announcement at the committee meeting today, but now, I don’t think I can.” She smoothed her hair out of her face. “We’ve sold enough tickets that we’ve covered the costs of renting the venue, DJ and catering, and we’ve still got a week to go! From now on, every ticket we sell goes directly to the shelter—isn’t that brilliant?”

“That’s great news!” I clapped, the others at the table following my example.

“Maybe now you’ll let yourself get some rest,” Declan started.

At the exact moment, Fern said, “Of course, we can’t relax now—”

“Typical vice president,” Taylor said after the laughter that followed. “But Fern’s right. We still have a lot of work to do with the decorations, snacks and setting up on the day.”

With the conversation turned away from the dangerous topic of Sir Alan, I should have been able to relax. Yet, the sudden surprising thought that Taylor and Fern might be attending together had set off a chain reaction of panic through my body. I took a deep breath, trying to look casual as Declan and Taylor talked lighting. Did this mean Taylor didn't have a date to the formal?

He doesn't want a date, I reminded myself. And even if he did, he wouldn't want to go with you. He already turned you down once.

But that wasn't on purpose.

I stole a look at Taylor. No greater contrast to the Internet pictures could be imagined. His short-cut brown hair was shiny, his complexion healthy, and he had an energy to him that said "well rested." He did not look like someone who was worried about his datelessness. He did not look worried at all. He nodded, giving every impression of listening seriously to Declan's opinions on lighting, while remaining politely committed to his own decision.

It was just possible that he felt enough guilt over my promposal winding up plastered all over the school that he might say yes, I decided. The dreadful certainty that I was going to ruin everything gave way to a new kind of apprehension. But could I ask him?

Could I not? This was the thought that troubled me through my remaining classes. When I caught myself trying to conjugate "go to the formal" in Spanish, I realized I was as capable of not blurting out an invitation as I was not breathing. Try as I might to contain it, the impulse was not going to be contained. And since it was going to happen anyway, I might as well get it over with as soon as possible.

News of Fern and Taylor not being a couple seemed to have breathed fresh hope into Taylor's admirers, and the committee had increased numbers of volunteers, many of whom were inclined to linger near Taylor, talking loudly about the fact that they did not, as yet, have a date. Girls were by far the most obvious offenders, but the guys were equally shameless. Declan and I staked out seats at the table nearest Taylor for the best view of the action.

"Carlos was obvious," Declan said. "I mean, a cheerleader girlfriend does not account for knowing all the words to *Born This Way*." He smirked at me. "That, and his cheerleader girlfriend apparently attends an all-male school. Totally Freudian."

I mentally kicked myself for not thinking to check Carlos's sources. From now on, every girlfriend was being interrogated. "And Christopher?"

“He’s only out to friends,” Declan reported. “His parents think it’s a phase. They tried to make him go to therapy. Luckily, his therapist is sane and had none of it. They compromised, and he’s keeping things low-key until college.”

I bit my lip. I didn’t want to know if Boomer and Declan were serious, but at the same time, I couldn’t not ask. “Your boyfriend’s at college, right?”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Declan said immediately. “I dumped him after homecoming.”

I froze. “I had no idea. I’m sor—”

“Said he wasn’t interested in parties, that he was only joining a fraternity for the support. Apparently, his fraternity brothers are really supportive. He put photos on Facebook of them supporting each other, and when I asked him about it, he said ‘a kid like you wouldn’t understand,’ and ‘we never said we weren’t in an open relationship.’” Declan scowled. “Like ‘Naked Thursday’ is a really hard concept to grasp.”

“Um—”

“So what? He can have his frat parties and his experimentation and his open relationships. I’ve moved on! And not only is Boomer not going to college for another year, but he takes training seriously. He’s not going to get wasted at a party and lose all sense of proportion.” Declan finished with satisfaction. “But then you’d know all about that.”

I swallowed. If Declan and Boomer were serious, then I really needed a date.

Taylor finally managed to extricate himself from his fan club. I caught up with him in the hall, and we walked toward the main door.

“See?” Taylor said. “It’s been one whole school day without me getting mobbed by the press. I knew you could do it.”

I smiled weakly. Now that the time had come to ask him, I was having trouble finding the words.

“Did you decide to just stop speaking entirely?”

“That’s plan B.” I took a deep breath as we stepped outside. “Taylor. There’s something I’ve got to tell you—”

“It’s him!”

Camera shutters rattled at us like gunfire. Alarmed, I took a step backward. My heel caught on the first step and I went down backward.

“Look this way, Jet!”

“Is it true you are attending this school under a fake name?”

“Are you preparing for a new role?”

“Stay back!” Mr. Harper surged out of nowhere. He took Taylor by his elbow, screening him from the reporters with his bulk. “Mr. Carmichael is not giving interviews. And might I remind you all that this is a school.” He pushed Taylor back through the doors.

The reporters didn’t follow. “That’s him all right. Get a good photo?”

“It’ll have to do. Security will have him out the back door—we’ll not get another chance.”

“Hey, kid.” Suddenly I was the focus of attention. “You friends with Jet?”

“I—what?” I gaped at the microphones thrust at me.

“Is he your classmate? What is he like? Who are his friends?”

I fought back the wave of nausea to get to my feet. “I don’t know,” I said, weaving through the reporters. “I got to go.”

There was a newspaper clipping pinned to the fridge when I woke.

How does it feel to be making news instead of writing about it? xxx Mom PS. We need to get you to a hairdresser.

“Mom!” I ripped the clipping from the fridge and threw it across the room. “I don’t want to be making news!”

I lasted about two minutes before I picked it up to read.

Taylor and I were front page. The photographer had caught our surprise clearly. Taylor’s expression was guarded, I was falling over. But while Taylor looked like he might have been posing for the photo, grimly good-looking even caught unawares, I was a disaster. I didn’t need a haircut. I needed a fake I.D., a change of address and a personal stylist.

“How does this always happen?”

I wasn’t named in the article, but that didn’t matter. Everyone at school would recognize me. Frowning, I scanned the bulk of the article. The word from Jet’s representative was that Jet was present at Bernhardt to round out his education. He’d had a successful first month at school, elected class president

and popular with fellow students. He was described as intelligent and thoughtful. Students were not surprised to learn that he was a former child actor. The visit from Sir Alan Carmichael had only confirmed their suspicions—

“What suspicions?” I threw the article back across the kitchen with a groan. If this was what school was going to be like, I’d already had enough.

“Of course, I knew.” Declan was supremely smug. “Seeing Sir Alan only confirmed it. There’s a family resemblance around the eyes.”

I stared at him. “You didn’t say anything about your suspicions when we were discussing Sir Alan’s visit.”

Declan dropped my gaze. Was he blushing? “Well, I couldn’t, could I? Not with Jet right there.”

“I didn’t know,” Fern said frankly. “In retrospect, I don’t know how I didn’t suspect something. He was traveling every single weekend—He went to L.A. three times!”

“If anyone should have worked it out, it was Milo,” Lily said. “No one spent more time with him than he did.”

I blinked. “That was just hanging out!”

“There’s no way Milo knew,” Declan said with certainty. “I mean, Milo keeping a secret?”

“That’s where you’re wrong!” I was unreasonably annoyed. “I did know.” For about one day.

Declan whistled. “Someone’s in a bad mood.”

“He’s been crabby all day. In English, he actually said ‘I don’t care,’ to a question. If I’d said that, it would have been detention for sure, but Mr. Perry just told him to take it easy.” Sarah Choi huffed. “Male bias in action.”

“Leave Milo alone,” Fern said. “He’s worried about Taylor.”

“For that matter, where is Taylor?”

“I don’t know.” I poked miserably at my tuna salad. “He’s not replying to my text messages. Maybe now the media found out, he can’t come back.”

“They were hanging around at the entrance again today. Principal Kim asked them to leave.” Alexis had her arm draped over Taylor’s empty chair. “If

they're going to do that every day, the school board might not let him come back. I mean, that's got to be a hazard."

Sarah Choi sighed. "Way to go, Milo."

"What?"

"Well, how else did they find out? You're the only one who knew!"

My chair was abruptly jostled from behind. "Yeah, sneak. Way to blow the only good thing to happen to this school all term."

"I didn't tell—" My protest died as I realized who I was arguing with. Logan?

"Who else would? Face it. We all know that you put the story before everything else. Why? Because you did it before."

Fern's chair scraped the cafeteria floor as she stood. "If this is about Carson and Blake, then you need to drop it. You don't know what you're talking about."

Logan stalled for a minute. "Storytellers stick together, huh. You didn't think we'd forgotten you making stuff up—"

"Fern didn't—" Lily and I started at once.

"Logan can think what he likes," Fern said. "I've got more important things to worry about." She sat down again. "The formal is only four days away, and we've still got a lot of work to do on the decorations. Declan, the drama club—"

"Entirely at your disposal," Declan assured her.

Boomer leaned past Logan. "Basketball club, too."

"A load of men. Just what we need." Alexis leaned across the table. "Just watch, Fern. We'll have the decorations done so fast these boys won't know what hit them."

"I don't care who hits who," Fern said. "Just as long as the decorations get made."

Lily nudged her. "Some pacifist. I'm starting to think that if the formal's not a success, there's going to be a murder."

"Murder on the dance floor." Logan nudged my seat again. "How appropriate."

I rubbed the back of my neck, watching as he sauntered away laughing. Was it me, or was there something distinctly unfunny about that laugh?

The biggest joke was the newspaper meeting. All of us stood there, looking at Candice as if she'd grown a third head. Had we misheard?

Candice looked back. "What? You heard me."

"Just let me double-check." I ran my hand through my hair. "We have the biggest school story in the state—no, the *country*—"

"And you're telling us not to cover it?" Lionel looked at the rest of us. "She has to be joking."

"No joke." Candice crossed her arms across her chest. "I talked to Principal Kim about why Jet was here. Turns out he missed a lot of school being a Hollywood big shot and needs to catch up. For the last month, he was, for the first and only time in his life, an ordinary kid."

I bit my lip. Taylor was never going to classify as ordinary. His mouth alone disqualified him.

"Milo, don't make that face. This is a serious newspaper meeting, and it's very off-putting." Candice tapped her foot against the desk she was sitting on. "Anyway. Those vultures outside are the perfect example of what a reporter is not. I want us to demonstrate true journalistic integrity."

"By not writing about Taylor?" Sam looked skeptical. "But we ran all those articles on him—"

"Articles treating Taylor as just another student. Milo, I swear, if you do not control your face, I will control it for you." Candice glared at me and then turned back to the others. "No, as far as the newspaper is concerned, he is Taylor, not Jet, until such time as he releases a press statement or exclusive interview to the contrary." Candice opened her binder. "Now. There is the possibility that outside media are going to be taking an interest in our school publications, so our next issue is going to be amazing. Let's show the world what it means to be Bernhardt. Got it? Good. I want your article summaries tonight."

It was really lucky I was still barred from cross-country practices. Working on my article ("A School Under Siege") kept me so busy that it wasn't until the

paper was out and I slid into my seat first period that I had a moment to spare for my dilemma.

It was Friday.

The formal was Saturday night.

Taylor was not responding to my texts or calls.

Life After Social Death: True tales from the winter formal. I tapped my pencil against the page. Everyone loved a good tragedy, right?

“If that were true, I would be the most popular person in the entire school!” I crumpled up the page. About to toss it into the trash, my gaze fell on a familiar blonde head. I breathed out in relief. Fern wouldn’t let me down! No way she would have had time to mastermind a formal, being Fern, and find a date!

I caught up to her on our way to AP English. “Fern. I was wondering. The formal tomorrow. You don’t have a date, right?”

“Right!”

I paused. That was—oddly positive for someone without a date. “Don’t you want one?”

“I think the excessive importance the media places on relationships detracts and devalues from important platonic friendships, and other relationships.” Fern tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, gazing at me earnestly. “It also teaches people ‘you’re nothing unless you have someone with you.’ I think that’s wrong. I always admired you and Lily for your courage to strike out alone, while never imagining I could do the same. What happened after the tickets showed me that I’m stronger than I ever imagined. And I want the school to know it.”

I stared at her. “So—no date then?”

Fern beamed at me and stepped into the classroom. “No date.”

I slumped at my desk, smoothing out my piece of paper. *Confessions of a Dateless Wonder.*

Though—if I were honest with myself, it wasn’t a date I wanted.

Where was Taylor now? What was he doing? Did he miss me? Or—

I bit my lip.

The appearance of the paparazzi during my aborted promposal looked bad. Did Taylor think I was about to apologize for informing them—that I was responsible? Was he angry? Was that why he hadn't got in touch?

Declan laughed. I glanced up to see him leaning over the back of his chair to talk to Boomer. I quickly looked away. What if—

Just because Declan's older boyfriend succumbed to the lure of the party scene doesn't mean that Taylor is going to forget you because he's famous again, I told myself. Honestly. It's Taylor.

But how well did I really know Taylor? Jet was an actor. A really, really good actor if he was winning awards at nine years old. Was it possible that—

“No!”

“I understand Dickens is an author that provokes polarizing opinions, but his inclusion in our curriculum is not up for debate, Milo.” Mr. Perry eyed me sternly. “I know you're all preoccupied with the formal, but I want everyone to have purchased a copy of *Great Expectations* by the end of next week and to have read it for the first week of next term. No, Jordan, you can't watch it on Netflix. Any other questions?”

Sarah Choi raised her hand. “Can students other than Jordan watch it on Netflix?”

“You know,” Mr. Perry said as the class snickered. “I'm almost tempted.”

Everyone in the school had gone mad.

It was nine on Friday night when the call came. I was upside down on the sofa watching *The Philadelphia Story* when my phone rang.

I stared at it, vibrating on the living room floor. If it had been armed with electric shocks, it could not have hurt more. It wasn't Taylor. The ringtone was one I hadn't heard since Boomer had dumped me.

I swallowed. Could I do this?

I'd spoken to Boomer since. Simple things like “I found your protractor in my pencil case,” “I don't own that chair,” or “I'm fine.” This was different. I didn't know if I could do it—

The phone stopped ringing.

“No!” I hit redial. “Connect, damn you! I know he's there, he has to be!”

It was only when I stopped trying to call him that I saw the notification letting me know I had a voice message. Carefully placing my phone down on the coffee table, I hit play and ducked behind the sofa.

“Hey, Milo.” Boomer was always quiet, as if trying to compensate for just how big he was. The day he’d dropped into normal volume with me had been a big one. Hearing hesitation in his voice again hurt. “I know there’s been a lot of stuff between us, but I still think of you as a friend, and I really, really hope you won’t hold that against me and you’ll listen. This is serious.”

A lot of words for Boomer. I drew my arms around my knees, listening hard.

“I was heading home after practice when I realized I forgot some stuff in the locker room. I turned back to get it and some of the wrestling team were still there. Jordan, Matt, I forget who else. They were talking about you. They stopped when they saw me, and I acted like I didn’t hear, but Milo—don’t go to the formal. I mean it. They’re gonna do something to you.”

“What?” I unwound from behind the sofa. “That can’t be the end of the message! Boomer!”

Still engaged. I tried Boomer two more times before giving up. I groaned, sliding on to the floor. “Perfect.” Exactly what my life needed.

After a moment, I sat up, reaching for my scattered DVD collection. If I was about to relive *Carrie*, it only made sense to rewatch it.

Chapter Twelve

“Not that I would ever try to dictate your choices but wouldn’t *Cinderella* be a better choice than *Carrie*?” My mother smoothed my hair as she leaned over the sofa.

I looked up at her sourly. “Are you calling me a princess?”

“Well you won’t meet your handsome prince lying around in your pajamas, Spaghetti-O. At the very least, it would give us some variety. That’s the third time today.”

I hit pause and sat up. “I’m not going to the formal!”

“I don’t know why I gave you money for two tickets if you’re not going to the formal.”

“*Mom.*”

“And Taylor hasn’t called you back? He’s cutting it close. If he doesn’t call in the next couple of hours, you’ll have to go without him.”

“I’m not going without him! I’m not going at all!”

“I’m right here. There’s no need to yell.” Mom turned to the laundry. “I’m going to iron your suit. Just in case.”

“You’re wasting your time,” I told her, pressing play again. “I wear that suit, it’s just coming home covered in pigs blood.”

“You know, if I hadn’t gone to the medical students’ ball by myself, I would never have met your father,” Mom reminded me. “And if he hadn’t decided to go to the ball even though he didn’t have a date, he wouldn’t have met me. And that truly would have been a loss.”

I hit pause. “I thought you met in Professor Green’s lectures.” I followed Mom into the laundry. “And that’s why I’m named Milo. After the professor.”

“Of course we saw each other in class.” Mom already had the ironing board out. “But your father was so serious and so good-looking. I’d never have had the courage to talk to him if it hadn’t been for the ball. And the professor saw us dancing and decided to make sure that we were lab partners for his next assignment, and well—You know the rest. Go get me your suit.”

I took it out of my closet. “But you always say how much you regret not finishing medical school, dropping out to have me and support Dad.”

“It’s not how I thought my life would go,” Mom admitted, smoothing out my suit as she waited for the iron to heat. “If I had the time and money for medical school now—but I know it’s not happening.” Mom shook her head. “And your father... For all he acted like a modern man, he wanted what every Greek man does! Our marriage was not perfect, but I loved him all the same. And I never regret bringing you into the world.” Mom leaned over to squeeze my cheek. “If your father were still alive, he’d say the same. So none of this moping. Why don’t you try calling Taylor again?”

“You know why! I told you why!”

Mom held up her hand. “Isn’t that your phone? It might be Taylor.”

“It won’t be Taylor!”

“I think it is.” Mom hurried into the living room. “Milo, you’re going to miss the call.”

“I don’t want the call! Mom—Mom, don’t answer it!” I hurried after her.

I was too late. “Yes, he’s here. I’m sure he’d love to talk to you, *Taylor*.” Mom smirked at me. “Here he is.”

“You don’t know that he’s calling about the formal!” I snatched the phone away. “Hello?”

Taylor sounded amused. “I’m calling about the formal.”

I shut the door of my bedroom behind me. “I’m not going.”

“You’re not?”

“Absolutely not. No way at all.”

“But—” Taylor drew a deep breath. “After all the hard work you put into making this happen... Don’t you want to come?”

“I—guess.” I flopped down onto my bed. “But school’s been... really weird lately. Everyone’s going to the formal with someone. I don’t want to be there on my own.”

“You won’t be there on your own,” Taylor assured me. “I promise.”

Even over the phone, his voice inspired a warm flutter in my internal organs. I felt a familiar lurch as my restraint gave. “It wasn’t me who told the press! I don’t know how they figured out you were at Bernhardt—”

Taylor snorted. “Is that why you’re staying home? I’m not mad at you, Milo. I know that wasn’t you.”

After all the time I'd spent worrying, it didn't seem fair that Taylor could sound so certain. "How?"

"Remember the tourists in the park? You took their photo with the monument."

I frowned. "What are you—no way. They recognized you?"

"I'm a lot more well-known in the U.K. than I am here. That's why I'm in the States for school—less chance of being recognized."

"So you thought." Taylor knew it wasn't my fault! "And they outed you?"

"Yeah. Turns out that they'd taken some photos of us talking on the bench before they approached me for a photo. After your reaction, they weren't sure if it was really me or not, but after they heard about Dad visiting our school, they sent the photos to a UK newspaper."

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "It'd be really easy to identify the school from our uniforms."

"Exactly. So—what? No, the red carpet's for the entrance—the photographer's booth."

I sat up. "You're there now?"

"Right. Helping with set up."

"But I thought—" I swallowed. "The media disaster, everything...?"

"I had a really hard time convincing my dad this was a good idea," Taylor confessed. "I don't know if you know this, but—"

I dug my fingers into my duvet. "You've got a reputation for partying hard?"

"I was wondering when you'd look me up." Taylor didn't sound bothered. "Yeah. That's all in the past now, but Dad's worried that if this gets out, the media will jump on it as proof of me backsliding. He's been super careful to make sure that there's always someone keeping an eye on me. Harper and I have been marathoning Spaghetti Westerns."

Taylor had not been clubbing in L.A. and forgetting me! "You can't blame me for that."

"You're a bad influence. First classic Hollywood, then co-ed dances. Where does it end, Milo?"

“I can see the headlines. ‘Tarrytown Tragedy: Student Attends School Sanctioned Social.’ Yeah, it’s all downhill from here.”

“You think you’re joking, but there are reporters who will deliberately misconstrue anything.”

“I’m a journalist, Taylor. I don’t believe everything I read.”

“How could I forget?” Taylor sounded pleased. “Anyway, Dad didn’t want me to come, but Mom was all about it. She wants me to go to prom, too, have a proper high school experience. That’s why I’m here so early, to avoid the media noticing me. If we can pull this off, who knows? Maybe I’ll even be able to come back to school.”

Not a bad thought. I perked up. “Really?”

“Let me guess. ‘Class President Revealed to be Weirdest Teen in the World: Actually Wants to go to School.’”

“You’re getting better. Maybe you are newspaper club material after all.”

Taylor laughed. “I’ll see you later. Bye, Milo.”

“Bye.” It wasn’t until I’d ended the call that I realized my mistake. Taylor thought I was going to the formal. “What is wrong with me?”

Maybe I’d watched *Carrie* one time too many, but Taylor’s kindness had acquired a sinister dimension. I couldn’t forget what I’d seen in the bathroom, how he’d been practicing my mannerisms, or his sudden friendliness with Logan.

Logan, who, according to Boomer, was planning something at the formal.

I groaned. “I don’t want to be a Stephen King novel!”

“Put your suit on. You’ll look great.” Mom bustled into my room, to lay the suit over the back of my chair. “You get your good looks from your father’s family.”

The only thing I got from my father’s family was the nickname “Marco Polo,” which had lasted all the way through to middle school. I thought about correcting Mom, but it seemed like too much work. That, and Spaghetti-O was bad enough. “I’m still not going.”

“I wish I could be there to see you.” Mom sighed as she started picking up my laundry from the floor. “I used to love a good dance.”

I sat up. “Mom. Do you want to go?”

“Me? This is your dance, Milo.”

“But I have the two tickets. You don’t want to waste two tickets.”

Mom stood up, arms full of wrinkled clothes. “You really want to take your old mother with you? Won’t your friends think that’s odd?”

“Let them,” I said grimly. If I had to be remembered as the weirdo who took his mom to the formal or the weirdo who wound up covered in blood, I would choose Mom. Besides, the explosion that would happen if anyone dumped blood on me when she was around would hopefully be enough to take out Logan, if not one or two of his friends.

“Spaghetti-O.” Mom gave me a tight hug. “My hair’s a mess—do I have time to wash it?”

“Mom, you look fine.” I had been repeating myself since we left the apartment. Maybe she did need to get out more if going to her son’s school dance resulted in this much fuss.

Mom patted her hair. “I wish I’d had more time to do something with it... Doesn’t everything look nice! Was this all your idea?”

“It was the formal committee’s idea. And their hard work. I just cut out tickets and printed things, mostly.”

“And no one could have been better at it.” Mom clutched my arm. “Is that a photographer?”

I stood on the red carpet with her, grinning at the photographer’s command and trying to avoid catching the eye of any of the students waiting for their photographs. “Please don’t make this our holiday greeting card.”

“Milo, it’s perfect.”

I led her away before she could decide she wanted a second photo, just in case. “No, Mom. I absolutely forbid it.”

“Two copies then. One for me, one for Yaya—”

I had made a terrible mistake. I looked around in desperation. “Look! Principal Kim’s here. You know. The one who doesn’t appreciate me enough.”

Mom looked with me. “Is that him? He’s a lot younger than he sounds on the phone.”

I gave her a nudge. “Why don’t you talk to him?”

Mom squared her shoulders. “You know, I think I will.” She marched over to him.

I took shelter beside a large potted palm, using its bulk to screen me as I sized up the ballroom.

The winter formal was obviously a success. The dance floor was full of enthusiastic couples and friend groups, dancing to the swing band’s covers of pop songs in jazz styles. A projector had been set up, throwing dancing scenes from black and white Hollywood movies onto a wall. Dry ice drifted across the dance floor, catching the images so that the movie stars mingled momentarily with the students on the floor and the silhouettes created by the decorating committee.

The students at the tables around the dance floor, or mingling in front of the buffet, looked equally unreal. It wasn’t just that in crisp suits, dresses, heels and updos, my classmates did not seem like themselves. They had taken on something of the glamour of the evening. Or maybe I wasn’t used to seeing them awake and alert?

As I tried to put my finger on the cause of this strange transformation, a ripple of interest went through the room. Candice had arrived. Her cocktail dress was as startlingly red as her lipstick. Part of her hair was caught up in elaborate cornrows that ended in an explosion of curls. Her high heels looked deadly. As she surveyed the ballroom in satisfaction, calculating her next headline, I heard one of the seniors turn to his friends.

“When did Candice get hot?”

When Lily stepped into place beside her, there was another murmur. Lily took the attention in stride. She’d forsaken a dress, but her black trousers were paired with a glittery bodice, and in place of a belt, she wore an elegant sash tied around her waist. Her black hair was set in loose curls, and as promised, her hand rested lightly on the camera hanging from one shoulder.

“Lily! Candice! You look amazing!” Fern detached from the group she was standing with to welcome Candice and Lily. I smirked as I saw Fern’s dress. That shade of pink, matched with gloves and a chunky bracelet? I didn’t need to see her from the front to know that Fern had been inspired by *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. And why not? If anyone in the school could pull off Monroe, it was Fern.

Feeling better now that I'd identified three friendly faces, I scanned the room. Boomer was not hard to find, literally head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd. His suit was definitely the same suit he'd worn to homecoming, but the vest was new, and matched that worn by Declan standing next to him. As if the couple look wasn't bad enough, Declan had chosen a bow tie.

I tugged the bow tie at my neck. Forget whatever Logan had planned. If Declan thought I'd tried to out dress him... Maybe I'd just stick to the wall for the rest of the evening.

"Milo! You're so quiet, I barely recognized you."

I started. Had Maria ever talked to me before? I couldn't remember. "Admiring the view," I said. "What are you doing?"

Maria shrugged, sending a wave through her slinky, glittery flapper style dress. "Victoria asked me to get her a drink and then vanished. I've been holding it five minutes—Milo, you don't have one. Take it. And if you see Victoria, tell her to get her own. I'll be on the dance floor."

"But I don't—"

Maria paid my objections as much attention as she usually paid me. I shrugged, taking a sip of the drink. I winced as I watched Maria make her way to the dance floor. Whatever Victoria was drinking, it was bitter. Juice, but mixed with something I couldn't identify that left a strange aftertaste.

Suddenly, the weird flavor to Victoria's drink was of no interest to me. Maria paused, laying her hand on the arm of a dark-suited guy. She smiled, nodding in my direction before vanishing into the crowd of dancers.

My heart did a whirl of its own as the guy turned around to look at me. Taylor always looked incredible, but Taylor in a suit was another level of amazing. It fitted his form exactly, the bold black lines accentuating his strong shoulders. His smile as his gaze settled over me sent a rush of warmth through me, and I took a second gulp of my drink in an effort to stave off my suddenly dry throat.

Taylor sauntered over to join me. "You took your time. I've been looking for you."

I raised an eyebrow. "Maybe you weren't looking in the right places." Then I noticed something else. "You chose a bow tie?" Declan couldn't kill both of us! I was safe!

Taylor tugged it. “It was this or come in a dress, and weirdly enough, a bow tie is a lot easier to find on short notice than a flapper style dress that will fit a guy.”

Was it my imagination, or did Taylor’s voice sound strangely hurried? “In Tarrytown? I can believe it.”

“Maybe that’s why I didn’t see you sooner. I wasn’t sure whether to look for Joe or Josephine.”

I elbowed him. “I love *Some Like it Hot*. That doesn’t mean I want to live it.”

Taylor bumped me back. “Too bad. I was hoping I could convince you to try the tango scene with me.”

“We’d need a rose. And the ability to tango. Both of which I, personally, am lacking.” Looking out at the crowd, I saw that there were chairs free at the table that Fern, Candice and Lily had taken. Turning to let Taylor know of this fact, I discovered that he was still watching me.

Taylor swallowed. “Milo, do you—want to dance?”

Distracted by his mouth, it took me a moment to register his words. “With you?”

It was hard to decipher Taylor’s expression. “I’m not inviting the palm to dance.”

“Excuse me for wanting to be sure,” I said quickly, trying to outrace the pounding in my heart. Taylor. Wanting to dance. With me. “I seem to remember you telling me several times that you weren’t interested in that kind of thing.”

“So you did listen.” Taylor’s smile was tentative. “If you don’t want to, that’s fine—”

“I want to!” That had come out entirely wrong. To cover my embarrassment, I placed the glass that Maria had given me in the palm. “I’m ready.”

Taylor took my hand. Surprised to find myself guided, I let him lead me. As we approached the center of the dance floor, my stomach lurched. Right in the middle? This was not a good idea. “Taylor, I don’t—”

“Trust me.” Taylor knew exactly where we were going. As he came to a halt in the middle of the moving crowd, I realized that the dancers around us

were more interested in their partners than us, and more importantly, that they formed a wall between us and the rest of the room. There was no one to watch as Taylor turned toward me and I immediately stepped on his foot.

I'd never danced formally with a guy. Neither, it seemed, had Taylor. There was a moment where we both tried to take the lead. Sorting out whose hand went where took time. Taylor solved our problem by putting my hand on his shoulder, and settling his on my waist.

"You're shorter," he said when I protested.

"That's height-ist," I said, even as I automatically stepped back as he led forward. "I want to lead at some point."

"You can try." Taylor's tone was incredibly pleased with himself.

The magic that happened whenever Taylor was near me was in full force. Instead of stepping on his foot like he deserved, I found myself unable to resist the urge to rest my head against his chest as we danced. "You realize," I said, raising my voice to be heard over the band, "that this makes you Daphne."

Taylor laughed. He lifted the hand holding mine in a wave, looking at someone across the floor.

Looking over his shoulder, I saw Fern slip across the dance floor to talk to the band.

I nearly stumbled. Boomer's warning came rushing back. This was it—this was what Boomer had warned me about!

"Milo, are you okay? What's wrong?" Taylor was looking down at me with such concern it was hard to believe he was acting.

It was so real that I couldn't tell him that I knew. "Suddenly, I don't feel well. I have to go."

Taylor supported me to the side of the floor. "Do you need anything? Another drink—"

I waved him off. "I'll be fine. Let me get to the bathroom—" In my haste to get away from him, I stumbled, bumping into another student. Leaving Taylor to make my apologies, I made for the men's room.

Once there, I took a deep breath and splashed cold water over my face. Leaving the tap running, I leaned over the sink. Despite not being in contact with Taylor, I still felt dizzy. How was it that his presence still affected me, even when I knew he didn't mean it?

My reflection in the mirror looked flushed. I put my hands to my cheeks, found that they were hot. Was I sick? That was an easy out, at least. I could find Mom, ask her to take me home. Which was good. I breathed a sigh of relief, turning off the taps. I'd been planning on climbing out the window—

There was the sound of footsteps at the door. I looked up to see Matt pull the door shut and lean against it. "It's time. Now guys!"

"What are you doing—" I got my answer as one of the stalls opened, revealing Logan and a sport's bag that clinked when Logan picked it up. I stepped back—right into Jordan. He clamped his arms around me, and before I had time to struggle, I was restrained by the wrestling team's star.

"Let me go! Somebody—help!"

"Keep him still," Logan instructed. He pulled a glass bottle from his bag, dropping it in my trouser pocket, and shoving a second one into my jacket pocket. "There." He slung the bag he was carrying at my feet.

Matt opened the door. "Teacher! We need a teacher—Coach!"

It was only then that I registered what was happening. I started to fight anew. "You won't—you can't do this!"

"Watch," Logan said with triumph, his tone dropping as Coach stepped into the bathroom, Victoria beside him, and followed by a handful of interested students.

Coach looked around the room at us. His mouth tightened at the sight of the bag, left open so that its contents were clearly visible. "What's going on here?"

"Milo didn't think much of the party," Logan said. "I noticed him acting weirdly. I told Matt and Jordan what I'd noticed, and we followed him in here. Found him helping himself to a drink." The bag clinked as Logan nudged it with his foot. "He's drunk. You can smell it on his breath."

"Milo?" The crowd in the bathroom had grown. Alexis shook her head. "No way."

"And after what he did to Carson and Blake!" Maria shook her head, her arms folded. "The hypocrisy of it."

"That's a big word." Fern had her arms folded by the door. Taylor was beside her, his expression unreadable. "Did you look it up specially?"

I blinked at her tone. I'd never heard that bite in Fern's voice—or seen Taylor look as quietly furious.

“This is all wrong. Milo would never do this.”

“I know what this looks like, but I’m not drunk! They staged this! It’s not—” I tripped over my tongue suddenly. Taylor and Fern were defending me? But—

“A likely story,” Logan scoffed, arms folded across his chest. “I haven’t heard anything more obviously fake since I read your last article.”

That got a laugh from the watching crowd, but Coach wasn’t smiling. He put his hand on my shoulder. “Jordan, let go of him.” He leaned in to sniff at me.

I felt my heart sink. I knew now what the funny taste of the drink Maria had given me was. “I didn’t know what it was,” I told him. “The drink was—”

“Enough,” he said, keeping his hand on my shoulder. “Nobody move. Nobody means you, Logan.” The smirk suddenly vanished from Logan’s face. Coach scanned the watching students. “Fern. Get Principal Kim in here at once.” As Fern disappeared to do his bidding, Coach folded his arms. “I’m very disappointed in you, boys.”

From the look that passed between Logan and Matt, this wasn’t part of their plan. I was equally confused.

“Out of the way.” Principal Kim had arrived. The students nearest the door stepped back to let him pass. “Now, then. What’s happened here?”

Mom was right behind him, and from the way her mouth pressed into a thin line the moment she saw the bag and its contents, I knew that someone was in serious trouble. I just hoped that it wasn’t me.

“Milo—” Logan started again.

Coach waved at him to be quiet. “Victoria called me over, said there’d been some disturbance in the men’s room, that I was wanted. When I get here, I see Jordan restraining Milo, Logan by the bag. Matt at the door. They tell me they caught Milo drinking, he says his drink was spiked and this staged.”

“That’s very interesting,” the principal said.

“*Interesting?*” Again, I had that weird feeling that something was going on I didn’t know about.

“Very,” Principal Kim continued mildly. “You see, I’ve been talking to Mrs. Markopoulos, and it seems that Milo spent the entire day at home until she brought him to the formal. His decision to attend at all was last minute.”

Mom folded her arms, glaring at Coach. “And I can tell you for a fact that my son does not own that bag!”

Victoria gave an empty little laugh. “Milo brought his *mother* to the formal?” She looked around at the surrounding students for support. “I find that very convenient.”

“And I find the fact that you heard a disturbance in the bathroom from the buffet table convenient.” Coach’s comment was grim.

“But you believe us,” Jordan said uncertainly. “Right, Coach?”

Coach looked ahead, stone-faced. “Let’s hear what Principal Kim has to say.”

“This drink that is supposed to be spiked,” the principal said calmly. “Where is it now?”

“I have it,” Taylor said promptly. “When Milo suddenly felt sick, I thought maybe there was something wrong with it.”

As he handed it over for the principal to sniff, I stared. Was Taylor on my side or not?

“Yes,” said the principal. “Definitely spiked.” He looked at Taylor. “Why did you think there was something the matter with the drink?”

Taylor hesitated. “I don’t know if I can say.”

“He needs time to think of a lie,” Victoria said. “This is so obviously made-up—”

“Taylor knew that the football team was planning revenge against Milo,” Boomer said, his voice loud enough to be heard over top of Victoria’s protests. “And he knew because I heard them and told him and Fern about it.”

“Fern asked us to keep an eye on Logan,” Declan added. “We saw him enter the bathroom about a half an hour ago. Jordan followed a little later. They’ve been in there waiting until Milo went in and Matt followed.”

“Of course they’d say that! They’re all Milo’s friends!” Logan balled his hands up into fists. “You can’t honestly believe that, Principal!” And as Principal Kim made no reply, Logan turned to the Coach. “You tell him, Coach!”

“I think,” Coach said slowly. “That this is a bad case of misunderstanding. Team spirit—”

“Team spirit!” Mom’s exclamation made the students surrounding her jump. “To frame my son—”

Principal Kim raised his hand. “Perhaps we should let Logan, Matthew and Jordan explain.”

Amazingly, my mom subsided.

Matt and Jordan glanced at each other and shuffled awkwardly. Logan, however, exploded.

“Fine! We faked it. We had to do something! Carson and Blake get kicked off the team—kicked out of school!—and no one seems to care how unfair that is! All because of a stupid article that he invented!” Logan flung his arm at me.

“My reporters do not invent facts!” Candice cut in. “Milo had proof.”

“Then why didn’t he do something with it?” Logan crossed his arms. “We all know that in case of student wrongdoing, we’re supposed to go to a teacher. Instead, the first anyone hears of it is two weeks later, when the school paper runs the story, and Carson and Blake get expelled before they can even defend themselves!”

“I went to the teachers!” I said. “They didn’t listen! Instead Carson found out that I reported him.” I glared at Logan. “When you told Taylor that I had a grudge against Carson? Other way round. He and Blake were trying to scare me into taking back what I’d said.”

“And the teacher Milo went to was me.” Coach looked to the principal. “I admit, I mishandled it. I wanted to wait to address the incidents until after we’d played our final match of the season rather than risk losing our two best players. The effect on team morale—” He shook his head. “I let Carson and Blake know they’d been reported in the hopes that they’d keep their noses clean until the season was over. By the time I got wind of the fact they’d been harassing Markopoulos, the story had already run.”

“Yes,” the principal said. “You said the same thing to me at the time.” He sighed. “With the football season behind us, perhaps it’s time we can be totally honest.”

“What do you mean?” Jordan sounded like someone way out of his depths.

It was Fern who answered him. “It means we’re going to stop covering for Carson. Right?”

“Not how I would have put it,” the principal conceded. “But yes. It seems that there are some misconceptions about why Carson and Blake left Bernhardt.”

“They weren’t expelled,” Fern continued. “They were dropped from the team and received a one week suspension. Carson chose to leave. He couldn’t stand being stripped of being class president or losing the football captaincy. Blake went with him, because if they left Bernhardt before they were suspended it wouldn’t be on their student transcripts. Carson’s already playing football for his new school.”

“That’s not true.” There was an emptiness to Matt’s protest. “Carson, Blake, they wouldn’t.”

“It’s true,” Principal Kim continued. “Carson’s father wouldn’t hear of his son not playing football, and rather than accept the school’s punishment, chose to withdraw his son. He persuaded Blake’s parents to do the same.”

“They asked the school to keep it quiet, so that their sons could start afresh in their new schools with a clean slate,” Fern said. “Personally, I think they were counting on the shock factor when you encountered them in the football tournament next year working in their new team’s favor.”

“You’re his girlfriend!” Logan protested to Fern. “How can you say that?”

Fern smiled grimly. “It’s not very nice to find out that your feelings of friendship have been used against you. I’m pretty sure that Blake was involved only because he couldn’t say no to Carson. But Carson... Carson doesn’t deserve friends who would go to these lengths for him.”

“It’s my fault too, boys,” Coach said. “I should have been straight with you from the start. But like the principal, I thought Carson and Blake could benefit from a fresh start.”

“A fresh start!” Mom was making up for her uncharacteristic silence with sheer volume. “And where did that leave my son?”

“Or my paper?” Candice was not going to be left out.

“I owe the two of you an apology,” Coach said. “I put the team’s interests over that of the school, and you got the short end of the stick. Principal Kim and I have been discussing ways to make sure this doesn’t happen again. I can’t promise I won’t make other mistakes, but I can tell you that I’ll do my best to have my team set a better example.” He looked to the football players. “You know what you need to do.”

Matt and Jordan mumbled something apologetic, but Logan frowned, looking at Fern.

“I still don’t believe it. What makes you think Carson would use our loyalty like that?”

“Because he used mine the same way.” Fern’s tone was sympathetic, but her voice was loud enough that everyone in the crowded bathroom could hear her. “He didn’t want a girlfriend. He wanted a passing grade. Don’t get me wrong. I love helping people, and I was really flattered to be asked to tutor him and his friends, who gradually became my friends. But there was a point that I realized I wasn’t helping Carson. I was doing his homework for him. And Blake’s. And Maria’s and Victoria’s.” Fern waited until the stir created by this last sentence died down. “Whenever I tried to talk to them about it, something would happen. I found notes in my lockers, my science homework was destroyed, my cheerleading uniform slashed... But my ‘friends’ always came to my rescue until I believed that I needed them more than I needed to do the right thing.”

Logan said nothing. His expression was troubled.

Maria, meanwhile, had plenty to say. “That is the most preposterous thing I have ever heard! It’s ridiculous!” She tossed her head back, her curls rippling beautifully. “Any excuse to make yourself the victim—”

“That’s what happened to Lisa,” I said. “Why she quit the newspaper after becoming friends with you. She didn’t have time to do it and your schoolwork. Sara, too—”

“Sara had that huge crush on Carson,” Alexis agreed, turning to Sarah Choi who nodded.

“And Lisa went to homecoming last year with Blake. I thought it was weird, that someone who was more interested in books than boys would be the date of one of the most popular guys in our year.”

“You can’t seriously believe Fern!” Victoria looked around. “She was caught inventing stories!”

“Fern might have been wrong about who took the tickets out of her bag,” Lily said. “That doesn’t mean they weren’t taken.”

“Fern wasn’t at school when her posters were vandalized,” Declan agreed. “Since she has such a long commute, it was impossible.”

“But that doesn’t mean it was us—”

Fern folded her arms. “Word of advice, Victoria. If you know someone has permission to bring a recording device to school, make sure it’s off before you rifle through her bag. I found your conversation very enlightening. And Principal Kim thought the same.”

“Lying!” There was genuine fear in Maria’s face. It made it difficult to look at her. “She’s lying—whatever is on that tape, she’s faked it—”

“Let’s continue this discussion Monday,” Principal Kim cut in mildly. “When your parents can join us. Until then, it would be a shame to let the formal that you’ve all worked so hard on be overshadowed by disciplinary measures.” He motioned to the door. Students reluctantly took the hint and drifted out.

“Milo!” Mom hugged me tightly, making me clink. I’d entirely forgotten the bottles stuffed into pockets. “Let’s get those awful things off you—”

“Let me.” Coach picked up the bottles. “If this goes as far as the police, we might need to verify whose fingerprints are on these.”

Mom squeezed me. “You think it will go as far as that?”

Coach shrugged. “I hope not, but some parents will go an awfully long way to get their precious offspring out of trouble.”

I studied him, puzzled. “They’re your football team!”

“Right,” Coach said. “Which means it’s my business to know them. Know how they react under pressure.”

“And that’s why you knew they set this up?”

“They’re good kids. Just misguided.” Coach shook his head. “Carson fooled us all.”

Mom snorted. “Misguided? I think if anyone is misguided here—”

Taylor put his hand on my shoulder and steered me toward the door, leaving them arguing. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I assured him. “I didn’t have much of the drink.”

News of what had transpired in the men’s room was rapidly spreading throughout the ballroom. Excited students formed groups, discussing what had just taken place. Taylor guided me around them, to an empty space on the dance floor.

“You look kind of pale.”

“I’m stunned. I mean—I wasn’t exactly expecting that!” I shook my head. “Is Fern okay? I mean—”

Taylor laughed. “It’s not Fern who needs to worry, it’s her so-called friends. They’re going to have a lot of trouble explaining that tape.”

The band started to play again. Taylor took my hand, and I automatically leaned against him again. With my head still whirling with everything that had happened, Taylor’s solid presence was infinitely necessary. “You knew about it?”

“Fern asked my advice about what to do with it when she first found the recording. We went to the principal about it last week, even before Boomer contacted us. And Fern’s got you, Declan, Lily... She’s going to be fine. Look.”

Taylor turned us so that I could see Fern, surrounded by a large group. She looked every inch the master of the situation, reassuring Declan and confidently putting the facts of the matter before a pair of seniors. As she looked up and saw us, she smiled, turning to murmur something to Candice.

Future student president in action? I smiled, despite myself. “And now everyone knows she didn’t make anything up.”

“It’s all worked out.”

“Not quite.” I frowned. “There’s still Logan.”

“Logan?” Taylor glanced around, but there was no sign of him. “Fern was sure that once he knew the truth about Carson, he’d have no reason to pick on you. She said Logan’s loyal, not vindictive.”

“I don’t know.” I couldn’t forget that Logan had forgotten a word that he’d gotten right on a spelling test. I very much suspected that somebody had given him the answers... Maria or Victoria, maybe? They might have been preparing a second Carson.

As I looked up to share my theory with Taylor, the band started a new song. I knew the brassy flourish at once, and the throaty purr that followed.

“I want to be loved by you—” It wasn’t Monroe, but it was her song.

“Taylor. They’re playing my song.”

“Our song.” Taylor went pink. “At least, if you want to get technical, I think it’s Monroe’s song...”

“Nope. All mine.” If it hadn’t been for Taylor’s arms, I might have floated. He kept me grounded, even as we continued to whirl in time with the music. “You planned this?” Now the signal to Fern made sense. Taylor had arranged the band to play the signature song from my favorite movie! But why? For someone who didn’t care for romance this—

Suddenly it made sense.

“You’re not going to share?” Taylor smiled, but there was an uncertain note to his voice. “Yeah, I planned this. After all the confusion between us, I wanted to make sure there was no possible way you could misconstrue this.”

“‘I want to be loved by you’ is pretty hard to misconstrue.” Note to self: warn Mom not to mention *Carrie*.

“You’d think,” Taylor said grimly. “But all the same...” He looked down, approximately the same color as Candice’s dress. “Milo, we don’t always agree on things, but I think that’s a good thing. You make me see things in a different way. Do things I never thought I could. Feel things I never have.” He stumbled over these last words.

I was enchanted. Taylor was many things, but to see him made clumsy over a few words was really touching. “Feel things?”

“I’ve been trying to work out how you do it. When you walked in on me in the bathroom at school, well—I’m an actor. That’s how I figure people out. Copying them, trying to get inside your head.”

I had to admit, that explanation had never occurred to me. “You want to get inside my head?”

“Yeah.” Taylor sucked in a deep breath, looking up to meet my eyes. “Or I thought I did. I know now what I really want is... Milo, I don’t know how to say this, but I want—I mean, I’m hoping, that you will—mmph.”

I finished Taylor’s sentence for him, leaning up to press my lips against his. The warmth I’d felt in the cafeteria rushed through us, igniting instantly when we touched, Taylor pulling me toward him even as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Distantly, my ears registered whoops, cheering and a scattering of applause, and I knew we’d been seen. I didn’t care.

In the gentleness of Taylor’s kiss, in the way his body had inclined toward mine as readily as if he knew what I wanted before I did, the way his mouth shifted into a smile even as he kissed me, I found the certainty I was looking for.

As a click that could only be that of a camera registered, I pulled back just far enough to whisper to Taylor, “I think you’re going to be front page news again.”

Taylor laughed, settling me against his chest as we began to dance again. “As long as you’re sharing the headline, I’m okay with that.”

Epilogue

“Hey,” Candice announced. “I’ve come to show you the damage.” She paused in our living room doorway. “Superman pajamas?”

I sat up so fast that I banged my elbow on the coffee table. “Candice? What are you doing here?”

“I just told you.” She sat down on the sofa, putting her laptop on our coffee table. “Why so sleepy? Your mom said you’d been awake hours.”

“Mom!” It wasn’t that I was sleepy, exactly. I’d had the best night of my entire life. Part of me was still riding that high. I wasn’t over the moon; I was on another planet entirely.

“Don’t bother her,” Candice said. She had a YouTube video already keyed up. “Like I said, you have to see this.”

The video needed a moment to buffer. I frowned at the title. “All You Need... Jet Carmichael Premiere?” *All You Need to Know About Hollywood* was one of my favorite opinion shows—usually. I enjoyed the hosts’ sense of humor and style of delivery, but when the topic was Taylor...

“Tonight’s breaking news,” the female host announced. “Contrary to all expectations, Jet showed up to the premier of *Boston 1770* and even talked to the Press!”

“Even more of a surprise—the kid can act. We weren’t part of the audience, but critics are already praising his performance.”

“There will be many journalists today who owe Jet an apology. Including you, Graham.”

Graham grinned roguishly. “In my defense, a mental hospital and your typical American high school are not entirely dissimilar. Still, we think we’ve solved the mystery of Jet Carmichael’s behavior, don’t we, Jean.”

Jean nodded. “Jet Carmichael is an ordinary teenager.”

“Our evidence? Like any other kid his age, Jet ditched his parents at the earliest opportunity. Here they are, arriving at the premier without him.”

A clip played. Sir Alan unwillingly paused while his wife, glamorously beautiful as ever, laughed at the camera. “You know boys,” she said. “We’re

not allowed to sit with him. He's afraid we'll embarrass him in front of his friends."

"There you go!" crowed the male host. "How much more teenage does it get?"

"As it turns out, this much more teenage." A new clip started playing. Fern, Declan and I stuck as closely to Taylor as we could, walking down the red carpet in our formal clothes. "Instead of arriving with his costars, his famous parents or his A-list friends, Taylor shows up with his high school classmates."

Declan's attitude managed to suggest that this was not the only time he intended to be making a red carpet appearance, but Fern and I were obviously uncertain.

I had a sudden feeling of foreboding and looked up to find Candice was watching me closely.

"And Jet's classmates?" There was a smug note in the host's voice.

"Jet!" In the red-carpet clip, a journalist called out loudly. "Aren't you going to introduce your posse?"

Jet looked as though he would have liked to keep walking. He was propelling me down the carpet as quickly as possible with his hands on my shoulders, but Fern paused.

"It'd be rude to ignore him—"

Reluctantly Taylor turned to the microphone thrust at him, a chain reaction of flashes starting behind him. "I don't have a posse. These are my friends. Declan—" Declan preened "—is the president of the Bernhardt drama club. This is Fern, junior vice president. And Milo, bane of my existence."

The journalist started on another question, but the clip paused.

"So," Jean started. "Not only does Jet Carmichael have friends—"

"But his friends are comedic gold," Graham finished. "We could do our entire show just on the faces that the last kid makes. Here's the clip again. Make sure you watch his face."

"—President of the Bernhardt drama club—"

"There! What is that expression?"

"Taylor invited Lily," I grumbled. "But she had that exhibition. We didn't want to invite Declan but apparently he whined to Fern and she felt sorry for him."

Candice snorted. “That’s not even the best bit.”

At the same time, the host said, “It gets better. Watch what happens as the interview continues.”

Taylor left his arm draped over my shoulder as he launched into a description of his struggles with his character. I had my arms folded across my chest, clearly resenting Taylor’s introduction of me.

“Jet shifts his hand—where could it have gone?”

Jet had casually dropped his arm from my shoulder. A second later, shock flickered across my face, and I craned my neck to look behind me. When I turned back, I was pink. If Taylor had noticed any change in my expression, he gave no indication of it, continuing the interview smoothly.

“Turns out, that like any teenager, Jet enjoys playing jokes on his friends.”

“I’m not so sure that was a joke,” the female host said. “When the premier ended, Jet was seen holding hands with—” She looked down at the paper in front of her. “Milo Markopoulos.”

I put my face in my hands. “How much more of this is there?”

“And as Jet’s friends, what was your opinion of the movie?”

“It was all right—” Declan started.

Fern elbowed him. “It was better than all right! It was great—you were great, Jet. You don’t have to be embarrassed about it.”

“Was he embarrassed?” the journalist asked.

Taylor started. “I wasn’t—”

“Why did you cover my eyes if you weren’t embarrassed?” It was weird watching me on the small screen.

Taylor’s cool command of himself flickered for a second. “That was—”

“He didn’t want Milo to see the kissing scene.” Declan was as superior as usual. “That’s all it was.”

“There was a kissing scene?”

Fern was a similar shade of pink to her dress. “It’s not how you expect to see your friends! I didn’t know where to look.”

“It’s just acting,” Declan said. “I know that in our production of—”

“Why wasn’t I allowed to see you kissing people?”

Taylor put his hands on my shoulder again, steering me away from the journalists. “The problem is that when people get kissed around you, stories happen—”

“There you go!” The YouTube video returned to the hosts. The male host leaned across the desk. “Typical teenager who doesn’t want his friends to laugh at him or blossoming romance? Let us know what you think by using the hash tag AllYouNeed on Twitter—”

Candice closed the laptop. “Well? What is your journalistic opinion?”

“Shut up.” As soon as we’d arrived at the after-party, Taylor had taken me aside so that we could discuss my opinion on him kissing people. There had not been much actual discussion, but I’d been distracted enough to entirely forget about the incident until now. “Trust the media to get things entirely wrong.”

“Can I quote you on that?”

I stuck my tongue out at Candice. The paper was on hiatus over the winter break, we both knew that. All the same...

If I told the story, I could make sure it was told right.

“Come to think of it... It would make an excellent story.”

Candice snorted a second time as she picked up her laptop. “I’m not printing it.”

I didn’t pay her any attention, already reaching for a pen.

The End

Author Bio

I didn't know what I wanted to do with my BA, but I knew one thing: I was no way, definitely, absolutely not going to teach. Never. Then I tried it. That was eleven years ago, now, and I am still happily teaching English. I live in a tiny, tiny town in rural Japan with students who make Milo look restrained.

The Biggest Scoop is my second LOR story this year. Deep Magic is a paranormal romance set in Wales. I'm currently working on the sequel to a different paranormal romance that I hope to see published this year.

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