

HER
GOOD
SIDE

**REBEKAH
WEATHERSPOON**





An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Razorbill,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 9780593465301

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Design by Rebecca Aidlin
Text set in Excelsior LT Std

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Dedication
tk in 1st pass

HER
GOOD
SIDE

BETHANY

(takes a very risky, yet brave, chance)

The way I see it, everyone has a type, and if you like thick Black girls of slightly above-average height with very clear, medium brown skin, dimples, and boobs just big enough to consider a reduction in the future, then I'm the girl for you. My type? Oliver Gutierrez, hands down. Problem is, I haven't figured out if I'm the kind of person he'd go for. He's had a few girlfriends in his sixteen years and there's been no pattern among them that I've been able to surmise. But today I am determined to find out if I fit into that randomness. Today, I'm gonna ask Oliver Gutierrez to homecoming.

"You want me to come with?" My best friend Tatum asks as we step out of Ms. Robinson's fourth period English class. We both have lunch next, with our other besties Glory and Saylor, and Tatum's girlfriend, Emily. I need to stop by my locker to grab my lunch. Oliver's locker is next to mine. He has fifth period lunch too. This is my moment to catch him and pop the big question. I'll push all my anxiety to the side. That weird, fast-talking mumbly thing I do when I get nervous will absolutely not happen. I'll flash Oliver a sweet,

confident smile and ask him if he wants to join me on one of the biggest nights of the year.

It just sucks I have to do the asking in a crowded hallway and not on a quiet, starlit night on Venice Beach like I'd envisioned a million times.

"No. I have to do this on my own," I say as we stop at Tatum's locker. I wait as they swap out their books and grab their lunch. Then Tatum turns to face me. They put their hands on my shoulders and I hone in on the blue-and-silver glitter artfully streaked all over their beautiful honey brown face. There's a football game tonight. Tatum has some very intense cheerleading to do.

"Bethany Greene, you are an irresistible goddess."

"She's right!" some random freshman agrees as she pushes by us.

"Thanks?" I say to the random freshman's back before I refocus on Tatum's glitter.

"You walk right up to that boy and you let him know that taking you to homecoming will be the best decision of his life. You can do this."

"I can do this."

"You're beautiful and I love you. Go get 'em, champ," Tatum says. Nothing uplifts you like a cheerleader telling you you're beautiful. I can do this. I'm gonna do this. Right now. I let out a deep breath and march down the hall. I turn the corner into the west wing and spot Oliver, head and shoulders over our classmates. He's wearing his royal-blue home jersey, with the number 87 ironed onto the shoulders. He looks good.

I'm what my moms call a *late bloomer*. I've always been more interested in other things that had nothing to do with boys, but sometime over the summer that changed. Actually, I'm lying. I know the exact moment things changed. I had my friends over to swim in my pool. Glory's boyfriend and the other juniors on the football team came by after they'd finished one of their preseason workouts. It was all fun and games until a splash fight devolved into something else. I was laughing, trying not to think about how long it was going to take me to blow-dry my knotless braids, when suddenly Oliver picked me up and effortlessly lifted me over his shoulder.

The air left my lungs, water flying all around us. Over the sound of my high-pitched screech, I could hear Glory telling Landon to put her down. I think their plan was some sort of backward chicken fight. I grabbed Oliver's thick waist with my hands, holding on for dear life until he put me down. I couldn't find my breath, between the water running down my face and the odd laughter bubbling out of my lungs. He playfully pushed me out of the way, wrestling Landon into the deep end. The moment between us was over and so was my late bloomer status. Boys had officially entered the chat.

That night after my three-part skin care routine, I brushed my teeth, kissed the moms good night, exchanged the last few sisterly insults with Jocelyn and Trinity before they were due back to college in a couple days. I climbed into bed and instead of watching my favorite chef on YouTube, all I could think about was Oliver. How strong he was, his tan skin, the tiny pimples on the small of his back,

and the few hairs on his upper lip laying the foundation for what would hopefully be a full mustache one day.

That moment in the pool changed everything. My eyes had been opened to how truly hot boys can be and I'm a little embarrassed to say this crush on Oliver has occupied too much of my mind since. I only have one choice. I have to ask him to the dance.

I walk a little faster and catch up with him just as he closes his locker door. He steps back a bit, his eyes flashing wide the second he sees me, and I know I've made my first mistake. I've come in a little too hot, but I can still fix it.

"Hey, Greene. What's up?"

"Hey," I breathe. "How's it going?"

"Good. You coming to the game tonight?" he asks. It's something so little, but he hikes his backpack over his broad shoulder and all I can think about is that afternoon in my pool. How he's built enough to support all *this*, all of me.

"Oh yeah. I'll be there. I gotta emotionally support Glory while she emotionally supports Landon. Cheer on Tatum while they cheer for you."

"Nice." He smiles, flashing his slightly crooked incisor and I quickly wonder what we'll name our first child. "You heading to lunch?"

"Um, yeah. There was something I wanted to ask you first."

"Sure, what's up?"

"Well. I was thinking—I was wondering if you wanted to be my date to homecoming. To the dance. Landon and Glory are going together of course. So we could all be together."

Stupid, my brain immediately shouts at me. This is not a group thing. It's you and Oliver. Pure romance. "Not that it would be a double date thing. I mean half the school will be there so technically it's like a huge group date. But you and I would be there together."

I finally close my mouth and give him a chance to answer. As I look up at him, I already know what he's going to say. It takes about two seconds for all the stages of yikes to jump across his face. Shock, fear, a desperate need for an escape, bargaining, then finally acceptance. I'm holding out hope as he winces and starts scratching the back of his neck, but my body is already working on its own physiological reactions to the blow that my mind still hopes isn't coming. My face feels all hot and my throat feels like it's closing.

"Oh man, B. I don't think that's a good idea."

"Oh?" I choke out.

"Yeah, I was actually going to ask Poppy Carlisle after lunch." See, I can't blame him for that. Poppy Carlisle just transferred to our school last month, and beyond still having that new-car smell, she's like dumb hot. I mean, I'm cute, but if I weren't painfully straight, I would also have the hots for Poppy Carlisle. She's also newly single, having just kicked Jacob Yeun to the curb. I'm shocked she doesn't already have a date for the dance. But apparently she will. After lunch, when Oliver asks her.

"Oh" is all I can say.

"And I mean—aren't you scared of this?" he asks, motioning between us. "Lan said you'd rather chew off your own arm than let a boy touch you. Homecoming won't be much

fun if you don't even want me to hold your hand." And there it is. Right there, my past just came back to beat my ass right in the middle of the hallway.

So yeah, fine, part of my being a "late bloomer" involved somewhat of a revulsion when it came to boys, but more importantly the concept of doing it with a boy. But that wasn't because I was scared, exactly. I just didn't understand it. And yes, maybe at the end of freshman year when Glory told us she and Landon had done it I burst into tears in the middle of the crowded lunch quad. Unfortunately, a few people overheard my overacting and the news that the mere thought of someone else having sex was enough to make me cry spread through Culver City High School, and I'm sure the greater Los Angeles County, like an uncontained brush fire. So yeah, I'm a late bloomer as far as my family is concerned. But I'm paranoid and a bit prudish to the rest of my school.

"That's not what I said at all." Yes, it is, it's exactly what I said. "Plus, it was two years ago."

"Okay, but, like, I wanna have fun at homecoming and I think it's just a lot of pressure on me to be your first *everything*. And yeah, we can go as friends, but I don't really wanna spend the night after the big game with a *friend*." I let out a slow breath, trying to process the levels of this humiliation, but Oliver keeps talking. "And you know I'm trying to make it to the league. What if I don't live up to your expectations and you have a horrible time, and run back to tell your moms?"

Both my moms played in the WNBA. Now my mom Teresa

is an assistant coach for the Lakers and my other mom Melissa has her own show on the National Sports Network. You can catch *Before the Buzzer* weekday afternoons at two p.m. “Yeah, they have connections, but neither of them are the vengeful type. Besides, even if you make it to the league, you won’t be draft ready for a while. I don’t think our date will factor in.”

It really hits me then that he’s already said no, and I’m still standing here, trying to haggle with him.

“Still, it’s the Lakers, Beth.”

“Yeah, okay.” I muster up a hint of a smile. “Well, I hope Poppy says yes. She seems pretty cool.”

“Hey, thanks. We good?” He smiles back and I can just see it: Tonight when I’m in bed wiping the world’s most pathetic tears from my eyes, I won’t be thinking of that afternoon in my pool and the way the water dripped down his face. I’ll be thinking of this pity smile. I’ll be thinking of the first time I ever got up the courage to ask someone out and how they said no.

And then it happens, the true kiss of death. He lightly nudges my shoulder. The bro nudge. I will never get a chance to make out with Oliver Gutierrez. We are officially just friends.

“Yeah, we’re good.”

“Cool. See ya at the game.”

“Yeah, I’ll see ya.”

Oliver turns and walks toward the quad. In the distance I hear the bell ring. My feet carry me a few feet to my own locker. My whole body numb, I grab my three-tiered

isolated lunch box with the watercolor strawberry print. The highlight of my day. I put a lot of effort into my sandwiches. And I think that might be part of my problem. I need to focus a little bit more on showing boys, specifically Oliver, that I'm a new woman, capable of some really intense hand-holding and some quality end-of-the-night smooching. A new woman afraid of nothing. Kinda.

BETHANY

(inspired anew)

The homies are already at our table when I finally make it out to the quad. Like they can sense me, Tatum's head pops up and they flash me this sweet *Well????* grin. I shake my head and cross the patchy grass back onto the concrete patio. It's hot as heck outside, but at least there's shade over the lunch tables. Shade to hide my misery and pain. Saylor is midsentence, but she moves so I can take my usual seat beside her.

"It just doesn't need to be today. Like, chill," she finishes, before she turns to me and presses her lips to my cheek. "Hey, Bets."

"Hey," I say, sounding a little more pathetic than I mean to.

"What happened?" Tatum asks me. Their girlfriend Emily gives me a hopeful nod, her blonde ponytail bouncing around, encouraging me to spill the beans.

"He said no."

"Why?" Glory asks. The look on her face almost makes me laugh. It's pure disgust, like saying no to me is not only ridiculous, but a truly a bad business decision.

"Apparently Crybaby Bethany left a lasting impression."

“Oh, come on,” Saylor nearly shouts. A few people look over at us, but she ignores them.

“Who’s Crybaby Bethany?” Emily asks. She’s only been dating Tatum for a few months, so she’s not caught up on all our personal problems, but that was my nickname for like a year straight so I’m kinda shocked she never heard about it.

“It’s nothing. I embarrassed myself and I paid for my crimes, but clearly Oliver hasn’t forgotten about it. Also, there was some other nonsense about him trying to impress the moms at some point in the future. I didn’t have the heart to tell him I have a better chance of making the Lakers than he does.” Oliver and I play the same position in basketball. He’s good. I’m better. We’ve played against each other. It’s just facts. Doesn’t change how cute I think he is.

“I feel like he could have just said no,” Glory replies. That look of disgust is still on her face. I do appreciate the support, true Black girl solidarity. “Don’t worry, Bets. We’ll find you a date.”

“I hope so. I just wanted that date to be Oliver,” I admit. My friends know my crush is pretty hefty, but it’s just now that I realize how much I actually liked him and how much thought I put into picturing us together. Rookie mistake, I guess. Maybe I do need more experience with all this.

“Well, now I feel bad for my news,” Saylor says, her bottom lip jutting out.

“I mean, if it’s good news I definitely wanna hear it. If it’s bad news, sorry in advance, but I will use your pain to distract me from mine,” I say. I open my lunch box and pull out the over-the-top sandwich I made. My friends don’t

say anything, but I see Glory's gaze immediately dart to the parchment paper holding the shaven chicken breast club sandwich that I've leveled up with mozzarella, pesto spread, crushed pecans, and a honey drizzle on a toasted ciabatta bun. I brought some Salsitas, the best chips ever made, and some green grapes the size of golf balls. Oliver's rejection was almost enough to make me lose my appetite, but not quite.

"That's true friendship." Saylor laughs. "No, it's good news."

"Let's hear it."

"Jake Yeun and I are a thing. Like a *thing* thing. He's my new boo."

"Oh, you did it!" Tatum squeals.

"Yup. Caught him after Spanish. I think after a week of flirting in the DMs it was time to put him out of his misery." Saylor sucks her teeth and does a shimmy with her shoulder. "Dats my man now."

"Nice," Glory says with a smile.

Just hearing Jacob Yeun's name reminds me I'm not the only person who changed over the summer. I used to sit across from Jacob in second grade. He was this teeny, really quiet kid I used to try to make laugh, but he never really said much. I do remember his favorite dinosaur was a triceratops. In middle school he went full goth skater, which seems to make sense since both of his parents are tattoo artists. He still doesn't talk much, but he makes up for it with how good he is with a camera, like a legit camera, and with a phone. He has the most TikTok followers in the whole

school, thanks to the skating videos he posts. He's also on yearbook and whatever footage the school refuses to post on the official socials, he edits together and makes something five hundred times better for his own account. Smart, if you ask me.

Oh, and over the summer he grew like a foot and just got insanely hot. Long skater hair, sun-kissed skin, the black-on-black wardrobe that always seems to work for him instead of making him look like the drama club's stage crew. All of that is probably why Poppy Carlisle laser locked on him the first week of school. They dated for a bit, but the rumor is she dumped him because he wouldn't have sex with her. That sounds fake. Like, what boy wouldn't do it with Poppy Carlisle, but whatever the real reason they broke up is, they aren't together anymore. And now newly hot Jacob is with Saylor.

"What? What's that look?" Saylor asks.

My brain short-circuits and I realize I'm definitely making a face. I'm picturing Jacob, so my brow is all tucked up from concentration and my mouth is hanging because I'm in shock. It's not that Saylor and Jacob are a thing now. If you think Poppy Carlisle is a ten, Saylor is a firm twelve. She's gotten "Most Photogenic" every year since sixth grade and we all know that's just code for certified hottie.

She's biracial; Black dad, white mom. She has her mom's hazel eyes and dark blonde hair, but unlike her mom, she and her twin sisters have these amazing big, long curls. She's tall and thin. People do fetishize her looks sometimes, but that doesn't change how beautiful she is. She plays two

varsity sports, and is very personable and a friend to creatures big and small. Of course Jacob would say yes to being Saylor's boyfriend.

That isn't the thing tripping me up. I'm in very real shock because my bestie supreme, Saylor, already has a date to homecoming. Rhys Hayes, this white boy who plays the tuba and always has this wave of blond hair flopping in his face, asked her last Friday with a little help from the rest of the marching band's bass section in the upperclassmen parking lot. I knew she'd been talking to Jacob, but this new development is, well, new. I close my mouth. I should probably say something.

"No, I just—ou inspire me. Not even the end of the week and you've locked down a boy for business and one for pleasure."

"I do like to cover my bases." Saylor laughs.

"Yeah, what are you going to do about Rhys?" Emily asks.

"Nothing. I told him straight up we were going as friends when he asked me. And Jacob has to be there for yearbook. He's not going as a dance participant, so if I wanna slow dance with Jacob once or twice, I think I can squeeze that in."

"Wow," I whisper. I think of Oliver's many reasons for rejecting me and how I'm the only one of my friends who doesn't have a date for homecoming now or a boo to call my own. This isn't gonna work. "I need a date for the dance."

"We'll get you one," Glory says before she takes a bite of her simple turkey sandwich. She deserves better lunch meats, but I don't say anything about that.

“Is it that easy though?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s a date to the dance. It’s not a kidney. So Oliver was your top choice, but there are a lot of people at this school.”

“She’s right,” Tatum adds.

“Neither of the Gupta twins have dates. I heard them talking about it earlier,” Emily adds.

“And B, I know this might be a lot for you to process, but . . .” Saylor turns to me and purses her lips together like she’s about to tell me I do need a kidney. “Kayden Smith doesn’t have a date either.”

“No—”

“Just hear me out!”

“No, ma’am. Nev. Er. No. No way. No how.”

“Why not?”

“Because I almost puked talking to Oliver, and he and I are like decent friends. I’m afraid to look directly at Kayden’s face. He is . . . everything. All of it. I would actually die if Kayden spoke to me. I would leave this earthly plane.”

If my crush on Oliver is something real and true, based on my knowledge of the softness of his back skin, my crush on Kayden Smith is the reason I get out of bed in the morning. The only reason he knows I’m alive is because I made a half-court shot that went viral freshman year. He wasn’t at the game. Why would he be? But he saw a TikTok—a TikTok Jacob Yeun made, now that I think of it—and made a point to come up to me in the hall the next day and tell me how

sick he thought it was. I just stared at him and made a bird noise that was supposed to be a thanks. He seemed to take it that way and went on with his day. He hasn't even looked at me since.

I don't consider that my true boy-crazy awakening only because Kayden isn't a boy; he's a sex god. Tall, actually dark, extremely handsome. Perfect teeth, just perfect. He smells like the ocean after a storm. His shape-up is always so crisp, he must have his barber on call. And the thing that really matters to me: His sneakers are always clean. It's weird, but it's hot. But he's too hot for mere mortals like me. Plus, he's a senior! Basketball season starts in a few weeks. We share the gym with the boys and if Kayden makes varsity again, which I'm sure he will, I'll have to figure out how to deal with the amount of drool I'll be producing with him just a few yards away.

"You do not ask someone like Kayden Smith to homecoming," I go on. "You build a marble pedestal and set him upon it. You don't touch it! You just look. From a safe distance where you have absolutely no risk of embarrassing yourself."

"I don't think he's *that* fine." Glory shrugs.

"Because you have Landon vision. You don't think anyone is as fine as him," I say, letting my eyes roll extra hard. Landon is actually the freaking cutest, but he's no Kayden.

"I vote AJ Gupta. He's shy, but he's super sweet. I like that he always holds doors for people," Tatum declares.

"You do have a point. Okay." I shake myself and push the

lingering sting from Oliver's no down with all the rest of my repressed feelings. "AJ Gupta. I'm gonna do it. I need like twenty-four hours to recover, but I'm gonna do it."

"We believe in you," Tatum says. Emily nods enthusiastically. Glory adds her old-church-lady nod. I'm glad we're all in agreement. All hope for my pathetic love life is not lost.

"Perfect. Can we talk some more about Jacob?" Saylor asks.

"Yes. Please," I reply. I unwrap my sandwich and pop one of the loose honey-drizzled pecans into my mouth. I might have zero skills when it comes to boys, but at least I know how to make myself a delicious sandwich.

JACOB

(has no clue what he's doing)

“|| just want to know how? And why? Why? Why would you do this to me?” Heaven groans.

“I didn’t do it *to* you,” I say, leaning against the wall next to her locker. School’s over, but I have about fifteen minutes to get to yearbook. There are two games I have to film this afternoon, and I was supposed to hang out with my best friend Heaven after, but I kind of have new plans. Plans with my new girlfriend.

This time last year I got exactly zero attention from girls. Now we’re a month and a half into our junior year and I am in my second relationship this semester. At first, I had no idea why the new girl Poppy Carlisle was even looking in my direction, but after a week sitting next to each other in chem she just flat-out told me I should be her boyfriend. In retrospect, it was a mistake. For one, I got dumped. Two, Poppy made me realize I have no clue how to interact with girls, in the romantic sense. That’s why she dumped me.

And now I’m dating Saylor Ford, probably the hottest girl in our grade, if not the whole school. Trust me, I have no idea how I ended up in this situation either, but I get why Heaven is pissed about it.

“Are you sure? ’Cause at this point it feels personal. We already lost Axel to this relationship BS. And just when I get you back from Poppy’s evil clutches, you run back into the arms of love. Gross.” The gagging noise she makes really drives her point home.

“I’ve been dating Saylor for three hours. I don’t think we’ve gotten to the point of love just yet,” I say.

“Oh, but I know her and her little IG-perfect family. She’s gonna suck you in with her perfect smile and her mom’s professional lighting kits and you’ll be the worst kind of couple.”

“What kind of couple is that?” I laugh, ignoring the part about the lighting. Lighting is important.

“I don’t know, but it’s gonna be bad. You’re gonna start wearing matching beige-and-white outfits. And khakis. Khakis, Jacob.” I try not to point out that Heaven and I are currently dressed alike in our black Carhartt pants and black Vans. My black T-shirt has the logo from my parents’ tattoo shop, Ink & Pearl. Hers has the *TWICE MORE & MORE* album collage across her chest, but from behind we’re definitely matching. But that’s not the point.

Saylor Ford is Saylor Ford. She’s really into school sports and, I don’t know, stuff like being perceived as a human by the general public. Skating means a lot to me, and that’s technically a sport, but I prefer to be behind the scenes, behind my camera or my phone, whichever the situation calls for. I don’t need to be seen. Saylor is like her own marquee, bright lights and a catchy title in tall bold letters. Her whole crew is like that, which is cool.

They are all pretty nice, especially Tatum Fujikawa and Bethany Greene. Heaven joked about starting a Blasian book club with Tatum once, but it never happened. Glory Johnson has forty-year-old-trapped-in-a-teen-body, real serious put-together energy, but she sticks up for people, which makes the world a better place. Emily Pruitt is the only white girl who hangs out with them thanks to whatever is going on between her and Tatum. She seems happy. Saylor's friends are cool. We just don't run in the same crowds. Until now.

"Am I being selfish?" Heaven goes on. "Yes, I am. I have two friends, Jacob. Well, *had*, but now I have to sit around while the *two* of you play kissy face instead of playing *Gran Turismo* with me. Do you understand what it's like being a third wheel? A fifth wheel? It's a special kind of hell I wouldn't wish on anyone."

"Are you really mad at me?" I ask, because now I'm starting to feel bad.

"No," she huffs out.

"Good. Besides, Valentina does play *Gran Turismo* with you."

"Yeah, and she sets a timer so she doesn't miss a moment of her face-sucking time with Axe. It's unjust is what it is. A violation of terms of friendship. You know I was there when they both dropped the *L* bomb the first time? I just stood there while they had their noses pressed together like this." She presses the palm of her hand against her nose. I laugh at her demonstration though it's completely unnecessary. I know how things are with our best friend Axel Diaz and his girlfriend Valentina Barzola. It was a lot to get used to.

And yeah, I felt the same way Heaven does now, I just kept it to myself.

It's been the three of us for as long as I can remember. We met in kindergarten. Axel's wild energy balanced out my quiet side. Our moms used to joke that he used to do the talking for me and that worked out just fine. My mom and Heaven's mom met at a Korean mom meet up and even though they couldn't be more different—my mom has tats on her face and Dr. Maurene Goo-Campbell is Culver City's most respected dentist—that didn't stop them from becoming friends. We only got closer during the start of the pandemic when we bounced between our houses and our houses only.

I thought we'd be inseparable, just the three of us until graduation finally forced us apart, in physical proximity at least. And then Axel and Val just sort of collided at the beginning of the summer. She can't skate, but she found a way to be with us every day all summer long, and yeah, it was a bit of an adjustment. She's cool though, and Axel's happy so I can't really complain, and at least I had Heaven. We could look the other way or leave together when Axel and Val decided to give each other a thorough oral exam.

Axel becoming part of a two-pack wasn't the only thing that changed over the summer. I changed a lot. I grew a freakish amount and according to half the girls in our school, that seems to have upped my stock value. My nose is now in proportion with my face, but that's just 'cause my head got bigger. Because I stretched out it feels like I'm

skinnier than before, like a light breeze could blow me out to sea. My arms and legs feel like they might get tangled up any second if I'm not watching where I'm going.

But I get the true power of the heightist society we live in now. I'm taller than my dad and I can actually see down the hall instead of looking at everyone's backs. A *late bloomer*, my mom called it. People are treating me differently. Still, I like to think my personality is the same, but I'm more self-conscious. Maybe shier. I'm so aware of myself in an uncomfortable way. I'm still adjusting.

None of that has stopped girls from asking me out though.

Heaven closes her locker, clutching her skateboard in her right hand. Then she lets out this killer sigh. "Why'd you have to go and get hot?"

"I'm not hot. I'm just tall."

"Oh, you sweet fool. They're the same thing."

"What about Ash Becker?" I ask. "She's short as hell and you had a crush on her."

"Oh, I'm talking about the world of the straights. Not lesbian rules."

"Fair enough."

"Just promise me something," Heaven says, suddenly dead serious.

"What's up?"

Heaven steps forward and puts her free hand on my shoulder. "Just don't wear beige."

"You have my word."

"Good. I'll meet you at Axe's after the football game?"

“Ah, yeah. About that. Saylor invited me to go—”

“Ugh!” Heaven grips her board over her head and starts walking away from me. “Goodbye, Jacob!”

I laugh nervously at her dramatic exit because it is funny, but now I’m wondering if I’m making a mistake. I head down to the yearbook office, trying not to talk myself out of the consequences of my current romantic situation. It’ll be fine. Heaven is annoyed and I don’t think she and Saylor will suddenly become best friends, but Heaven wouldn’t kill *our* friendship over this.

I’ve been monitoring how much I’ve been letting Saylor run through my mind all day. Now that I’m alone it’s like she comes sprinting back to the front of the line. Saylor Ford is really my girlfriend. It’s pretty wild. She knows that Poppy dumped me because I wasn’t ready to lose my virginity yet and doesn’t care at all. That’s a plus. Apparently it’s one of the reasons she wanted to go out with me. Saylor’s ex Tagger Evans was “intense.” More like a candidate for an FBI watch list. One of those white boys who carries a little too much unjustified rage around. Anyone seems like a better choice than Tagger, but Saylor’s words were, “Poppy said you were sweet.” Too sweet is probably what Poppy really said. Too sweet and too inexperienced to be her boyfriend.

But the too-sweet thing sounded good to Saylor, I guess, because she just laughed this cute-as-hell laugh that kinda scrambled my brains before she whispered, “I get the sex thing. I wasn’t ready to do it with Tagger either. I’d like to be with someone I can take it slow with.”

That fried my brain completely, mostly ’cause when I told

Poppy I didn't think it was a good idea for us to do it after only dating for a week and a half, she kinda scoffed at me. And then when I explained that I was still a virgin, she actually laughed in my face. She said she'd be happy to help me fix it, but she definitely laughed.

The gut punch of that conversation hits me again as I head over to my edit bay in the yearbook office. I'm on sports and helping out our senior digital editor, Noah Killgore, with the digital component of the yearbook. We've shot some pretty sick stuff so far.

"You gotta tell me how you did it, Yeun," Troy Barry asks me the second I sit down. I turn around and jerk back. He's wheeled his chair two centimeters from mine.

"Gimme some space, dude. Geez."

"Sorry." He wheels back enough for both our comfort and I turn back to my computer. "You gotta spill though. Poppy then Saylor? Holy hell. Are you paying them?"

"I gotta know too," Birk Wilkins says. News travels fast, I guess. I sigh and try to ignore them, but then Madlyn Lowell joins the party.

"I heard why Poppy dumped you so I definitely have questions," she says. I'm not sure if she actually knows, but Madlyn loves other people's business.

I roll my eyes and turn around. "I don't know what's so confusing about it. Someone asks someone out. They say yes or they say no. Sometimes people get dumped. What's the big mystery?"

"I just want you to admit the puberty thing is really working out for you," Troy grumbles. He's pissed at me

because we both used to be shrimps. He's still short and kinda scrawny, but his voice dropped a lot. I'm still terrified that mine's gonna crack at any moment. He definitely sees the height thing as betrayal.

"Well, thanks for letting me know I have no other redeeming qualities," I say sharply. For me at least.

"I didn't even know you and Saylor knew each other," Madlyn adds.

"We sit by each other in Flores's Spanish class."

"Oh. Okay, then."

"So, it's okay?" I ask, still annoyed. "You guys aren't too surprised that someone would like me?"

"Chill, man. You're just lucky. That's all," Birk says. "She's hot. So is Poppy. We're just confused. You barely talk."

"As a close professional associate, I do want to know if you're cool with the fact that she's already going to homecoming with Rhys? Why wouldn't she ask you first?" Madlyn says, like she's really concerned and not digging for dirt.

"Yeah, we'll see if he's still with Saylor by homecoming," Troy says, and for a split second I think about our school's nonviolent conflict resolution policy.

"They are just going as friends. Besides, I'm already going so Noah can spend the night with his girlfriend. I'll be there with her; I just won't be her date. It's not that big of a deal," I say as. Which it isn't. Saylor was up front about the Rhys thing and clear that she has no interest in him whatsoever. I believe her. I have no reason not to.

"Let's all stop harassing Jacob and huddle up, please,"

Mr. Wolfson says, walking in with his afternoon Starbucks. Noah's right behind him. I grab the tablet and hand it over to Noah as he sets down his stuff next to mine.

"You check your grade for Wei yet?" he whispers as he takes the tablet from me.

"What? No? He said he was getting them back on Monday."

Noah shakes his head. "I just saw mine in the portal." I pull out my phone as I follow him over to the empty round space in the middle of the room. I go right to our school's online grading portal. Advanced Placement: FILM III. Instructor William Wei. Script Assignment 2: C-

"Fuck," I say. Not quietly enough though.

"Yooo," I hear Mr. Wolfson say. I glance up and he and the rest of the yearbook staff are looking at me. "With the language, Yeun. Pull it back a bit."

"Sorry," I say, feeling my face going bright red. I'm psyched to have a new girlfriend, but maybe I need to worry a little less about the Saylor's and the Poppys and focus on getting this grade up.

JACOB

(needs to focus)

|| stare at the C minus again and look at Mr. Wei's note. Dark humor is one of the greatest art forms, but make sure you take yourself seriously. Happy to talk with you about it. My short script sucked. I know it did. I worked on it for hours. Missed two trips to the skate park, one with Heaven and Axel and one with our dads and my little sister, Esther. Still, I couldn't crack it. I knew it was crap when I handed it in, but I was out of time. It's not a huge percentage of our grade and if this was any other class I wouldn't be too stressed out, but this is Mr. Wei's advanced film lab. It's only open to juniors and seniors and even then, getting in is hard as hell.

Not for me though. Mr. Wei took one look at the reel I submitted and held a spot for me. And now I'm blowing it and getting in the way of my own plan. Here's my plan:

Step 1: Kill it in our school's film program.

Step 2: Submit the best student project anyone has ever seen.

Step 3: Get into my top choice film school, USC.

Step 4: Become the world's best cinematographer.

Step 5: Win my first Oscar at twenty-seven.

But I have to pass his class first.

This semester we're studying theory, technique, and story. We watch a lot of films—of varying lengths—and practice writing them for a grade. Next semester we focus on genre and specific directors, before we pick a genre and director to emulate for our final project. The fall semester is mostly important for seniors. Mr. Wei has gotten a lot of people into their film program of choice. The stressful part for juniors comes from the fact that if you get into the lab and you blow it, Mr. Wei doesn't have to let you back in next year.

There's a lot of solo work and we are assigned to each other's crews for each project. I thought I had this whole year in the bag, until it came to the actual writing. I can't write for crap. I have an eye for the perfect shot, and the skills to be one of the best Steadicam operators to do the job. I have ideas, but not a full story in me. I got a C on our first script sample about a homicidal tattoo artist. My mom agreed to play the killer, but I need Mr. Wei to sign off on it down the road.

This time I tried to write about a skater trying to rob a bank. Heaven already agreed to be my robber. I didn't want it to seem like I was copying *Point Break* (1991), the best movie ever, but by the time I handed it in, I knew the pacing

was off. I could picture the action, but not the emotion or the motivation. Maybe because I'd never be ballsy or crazy enough to pull off a robbery. I knew this C minus was coming, but I guess I was just hoping by some miracle I'd nailed it or at least gotten a B. I was wrong.

"Jacob," I hear Mr. Wolfson say. I snap out of my panicked thought spiral and focus back on the staff meeting going on around me. "What's the news?"

"Oh, uh. Gonna go shoot varsity girls' volleyball and then I'll be at varsity football tonight. And I was able to recover the footage from last week's cross-country meet. The drives got swapped."

"Excellent and even better. Let's keep an eye on our labeling before and after. Thank you."

"On it," Noah adds, nodding at me and Mr. Wolfson.

"And Coach Fuller keeps trying to get our drives," I say. Our football program is one of best in the state which means the school gives Coach Fuller whatever he wants, including a professional to shoot their game tape. I only cover home games and I'm not really covering the game itself. I'm filming the players, looking for the moments, the memories. Not the touchdowns, but the seconds after. The end zone celebration and, if I'm lucky, those rare tears of joy. Fuller still wants the raw footage I get though, I think for himself.

Mr. Wolfson rolls his eyes. "I'll talk to him."

"Thanks."

"Clubs?" he goes on. Callum Matthews fills us in on where he is with the official club photos and that's where I zone out. I need to talk to Mr. Wei and I need to figure

out how to turn my crappy writing around. I'll get an A on every technical project, but a B in the class is not going to get me into USC.



I have a quick debrief with Noah, then grab my gear and head down to the gym. The volleyball team is playing Hamilton today. I have no clue who will win, but I'm sure I'll get some good stuff. The hallways are basically empty, but there's noise buzzing around the whole school. Concert band practice. Concert choir. Play rehearsal. This year they are doing *Little Shop*. I asked Mrs. Brenner if I could put a camera in Audrey II's mouth, but she said no. Then I asked if I could film opening night with a drone. A small one. She's thinking about it.

I turn the corner to the gym and spot Bethany Greene at the end of the hall talking to AJ Gupta outside the locker room. I have to walk right by them so I should probably say hi. Poppy was kind of weird with my friends. Especially Heaven, and I don't want it to be like that with Saylor. I'm maybe halfway down the hall when AJ pats Bethany on the shoulder and takes off into the boys' locker room. I watch her as she stands there for a second, her expression dropping at first, and then I see it. Her whole face just crumbles. She turns and rushes down the hall.

I probably shouldn't, but I go around the corner after her. I have a feeling I know where she's going. It takes a second for me to catch up, but I find Bethany near the emergency

side exit no one really uses between the teachers' lounge and the library. She's crying. She has her black-and-blue varsity basketball jacket tucked under her arms.

"Hey, you okay?" I say carefully, but my voice still makes her jump a bit. She looks at me for a half a second, before she lets her head fall back against the wall with a thud.

"Oh Jesus. Not you," she groans. I don't know why, but the way she says it makes me laugh. Like I, specifically, really effed up her whole day.

"What? What did I do?"

"Nothing. You're probably the third to last person I want to see me cry right now."

"Who's the first?" I'm genuinely curious and I want to distract her.

"Nope. That information is coming to the grave with me." She snuffles, dabbing under her eyes with the side of her knuckle. She has blue-and-silver glitter on her cheeks and her temples. She's careful not to smudge it.

"Well, I can't fight at all, but I'll give AJ a piece of my mind if he hurt you."

That makes her laugh. "He didn't do anything. I just embarrassed the shit out of myself."

"I bet it's not that bad," I say.

"Oh, it is. But nothing I can't handle. Or get used to, which I guess I should." Her shoulders drop when she looks up at me with this sad smile. I know she said it was nothing, but now I really feel bad. "I'm gonna suck it up real good and go watch this volleyball game."

"I'm heading that way. Come on."

“I need one second.” She blows out a deep breath, then dabs under her eyes again. I don’t know what AJ said to her, but she looks sad as hell and something about that seems unfair.

“Sure you don’t want to talk about it?” I ask.

“It’s not that serious. I’m just a crybaby. You might have heard.”

“You mean Crybaby Bethany?” I tease her.

She laughs harder this time, like a short wheezing noise. A few more tears spill out, but at least she’s definitely smiling. “That’s me.”

“You got a much better nickname now though. Number thirty-four, Bethany “the Beast” Greene. Only player in Minotaur history to hit a shot from half-court. As a freshman and your first season back after the stay-at-home ‘Rona time?”

“Yeah, I really owe you for that TikTok, even though some people thought it was fake. Really helped me with my street cred with my sisters.”

“I’m glad my parents were cool with me being a terrible artist. Must be tough, following up all that star power,” I say. Her moms are legit names in sports and both her sisters play D1 ball. I didn’t know her oldest sister, but her sister Jocelyn was a senior last year. I got a lot of great footage of her and Bethany playing varsity together.

“Lucky,” she says quietly. I’m not sure I heard right, but I figure it’s better if I don’t ask. She snuffles a few more times and then seems to have shaken it off. “Okay. Lead the way.”

I turn back toward the gym but walk slow enough for her

fall in step beside me. My legs are too long now, my sister keeps telling me. I walk too fast. I try to think of something else to make her laugh, but when I look over her smile's gone. She's in her head. I get it, so I keep my mouth shut. The gym is pretty packed when we get there. Back-to-back games on a Friday and most people stick around.

My brain automatically starts looking for a place to set up.

"There's Saylor," Bethany suddenly says. I look to where she's pointing at the top of the bleachers. I smile the second I see Saylor waving at me. I wave back and then look down as Bethany lightly pats my shoulder.

"Good talk," she says.

"Yeah, no problem," I chuckle back. I stand there by the edge of the court until she makes her way to the top of the bleachers and drops down next to Saylor. My girlfriend. Shit, I should have gone up there. I almost do, when both teams start to gather on the sidelines. I rush to the other side of the gym and start mounting my camera to my rig. And then I pull out my phone and send Saylor a text.

Let me get set up and I'll come talk to you at halftime.

Okay! xx
Thanks for being so sweet to my Bethy Boo.



No problem.

I look back up at her one more time before the anthem starts. Focus on this game and then the next one and then afterward I'll try to get a handle on this being-a-good-boyfriend thing.

BETHANY

(is ready to throw in the towel)

I stand by my window seat, looking down at the party kicking off in my pool below. Saylor's on the edge of the deck still in her clothes, clasping Jacob's hand. He's still in his jeans and T-shirt too. They're talking to Landon and Oliver. Yes. Oliver is back at my house, after he rejected me with the old no thank-you. He said hi to me, made sure to suck up extra hard to my mom Melissa about her framed jersey in the hallway, and then was first in the pool. He scored the winning touchdown so I guess he earned this celebration. In my pool. At least he didn't bring Poppy.

I watch as Oliver jumps into the pool again and Landon follows. I realize then I'm kind of staring blankly at Saylor and Jacob where they're still standing on the pool deck. Saylor says something to Jacob. He nods. She smiles. He tries to smile? He looks a little out of sorts. Maybe he has a crush on Oliver too. Saylor kisses him on the cheek and then I see her coming back inside. Probably to change. Jacob looks around for a second before he sits down in one of our deck chairs. I wonder for a second if he can swim and then my eyes and my thoughts drift back to Oliver. What a bummer.

With a sigh, I adjust my own bright pink swimsuit then turn around and flop down on my window seat. I look over at Tatum sitting in my desk chair in their bikini. They glance up from their phone for a sec and smile at me, before their phone has all their attention. Emily had to go home, but that's what texts are for.

I almost look out the window again when a bikini-clad Glory comes out of the bathroom connecting Jocelyn's and my rooms. I miss my sisters. They'd know exactly what to say.

"Okay, spill. Stupid play practice. I feel like I missed everything," Glory says.

"Hey, stage production is important," I reply. I could have filled her in during the football game, but I spent the whole volleyball game trying not to cry. No way I was risking the return of Crybaby Bethany at the fifty-yard line.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. What happened?"

"Yeah, I wanna know. I miss everything on the sidelines," Tatum adds. They did do a lot of cheering today.

"I mean nothing. I found AJ before he skipped off to cross-country. I asked him. He said no. He heard Madlyn Lowell is gonna ask him."

"He turned you down for a hypothetical?" Glory asks.

"Yup."

"Well, that's bullshit."

"What about Isaac Cross? I mean, you love a short king. He's so funny," Tatum suggests.

"He asked Heather Sinclair before the game. He posted a TikTok about it," Glory replies, sealing my fate. So many single boys in my school and somehow there is literally no

one for me to ask to homecoming. Not that I want to do the asking anymore. I've had enough rejection and humiliation in that department to last me a long time.

"Maybe I'll just skip the dance," I say as Saylor flings my bedroom door open. She has a slightly deranged smile on her face. The three of us look at her before Glory turns back to me.

"No. You are not skipping the dance. You're gonna be more upset if you stay home," Glory says.

"Definitely don't skip the dance," Saylor says. "I have an idea."

"About what I can do while you are all at the dance?" I ask.

"Tsk, no. Go to homecoming with Jacob." The idea just kinda hangs in the air for a second. I glance over at Tatum then my gaze skips over to Glory. A half second goes by before she realizes I'm looking at her. She shrugs, the corners of her mouth turning down and her eyebrows going up in the universal gesture of *eh, not a terrible idea*.

"Hear me out," Saylor says.

"I'm listening," I say, but already my stomach is starting to churn. It's one thing to cast your dramatic doubt on a situation. Being dramatic is how I process things. I can't help it. But something changes when your friends also admit defeat on your behalf. Then you know it's truly a hopeless situation. My best friend's dateless boyfriend is my best option. Bleak. Still, I'm listening.

"So you're little smitten with Oliver. I get it. Love takes

time. AJ said no and no always burns a little, but you didn't have a thing for AJ."

"True."

"So, homecoming is one thing; it's only one night. An Oliver-level-love is something else."

"Go on."

"Take a break from the date hunt. Go to the dance with Jacob. Take ah-dorable pictures together. Enjoy your night. We'll make memories, all of us," Saylor says. She's talking a lot with her hands, her whole face animated, full of hope. "And all while you have time to consider who at Culver City High School is truly the man for you. It's a win-win, baby."

"She's right," Glory says. "I like it."

Tatum flashes me a huge smile and nods their head. It's not a bad idea. Missing homecoming because I can't find a date is pretty humiliating and I'm embarrassed to say: The crush on Oliver hasn't completely gone away. It will, but I'm gonna need a little time to convince myself to get over him. But there's one small issue.

"What's wrong?" Tatum asks.

"I don't know. Maybe Oliver was right. May—"

"Yeah, I'm gonna stop you right there," Glory cuts me off. "Oliver's great. That's Lan's bestie, but he's wrong about like eight different things a day."

"No, I know." I laugh. "I just mean he might have been onto something. Maybe I do need more experience when it comes to dating and stuff."

"Listen, you're looking for a boyfriend who wants you

and not every guy is boyfriend material,” Glory replies. “You’re looking for one yes from the right boy, not all the boys. We just need to find you the right boy.”

“Oh no. I want *every* boyfriend. *All* the boyfriends. Hey, Tatum, give me your girlfriend too.”

“Nooo, she’s so cute,” Tatum whines.

Glory rolls her eyes. “Anyway, Saylor’s right. We’ll all be there together. You’ll have someone to dance with and take pictures with. It’s just one night. And we have plenty of time to help you in the actual romance department. I’m thinking makeover.”

“No makeovers. I’m cute as fuuuck. What does Jacob think of this brilliant idea?” I ask. Saylor’s dramatic side is one of the reasons we get along. It’s like her to get ahead of herself. Watch: Jacob has no clue about any of this.

“He’s in. He’s happy to help make it the most magical evening of your young life,” Saylor assures me. In theory, going to homecoming with Jacob would solve my most urgent problem, but I can’t say the thought of it is a real self-esteem booster. I know there’s no use in sulking about Oliver. I just wish my best opinion wasn’t my best friend’s boyfriend. I can still skip the dance or go alone. Neither sounds like an ideal choice. I let out a deep sigh and give in to Saylor’s brilliant idea.

“Hmm, okay. I guess I’ll go with Jacob then.”

“Great! You’ll have a magical time. I promise,” she says.

“How’s the magic going with Jacob?” Glory asks Saylor.

“Okay. I think? I forgot how shy he is. I haven’t really talked to him since like fifth grade, but he really showed up

for our Bets today.” Glory and Tatum look over at me so fast I almost laugh.

“Jacob witnessed my post-AJ breakdown and came to the rescue,” I tell them.

“See, all around good guy before I even asked him to step up?” Saylor beams.

“Go get changed,” Glory tells her, nodding toward my bathroom.

“Oh, right.” Saylor hustles into the bathroom. I glance back out the window. To catch a glimpse of Jacob, my maybe homecoming date. But he’s not out there anymore. I hope all the football energy splashing around in my pool didn’t scare him away.

JACOB

*(believes that hiding and observing
are two different things)*

|| step out of the Greenes' bathroom just as I hear voices
|| coming down the stairs. Letting out a quick breath doesn't
help with the low-grade panic rushing through me. I'm out
of my element. I had all day to get ready for this moment.
The second I said yes to Saylor, I knew what being her boy-
friend would mean. I'd have to go places and do things with
her. Things like splash around in Bethany Greene's pool
with half the football team. In theory, that's all good. In
reality, it's freaking me out a bit.

Not being with Saylor. She's cool. Nothing like Poppy.
Who wanted to spend all our time outside school just the
two of us, doing sex stuff, but wasn't affectionate or into
PDA or anything. The second I met Saylor in the parking
lot after the game she was on me. Kissing my cheek and
holding my hand. It's different but good. Great. But, again,
scary as hell 'cause I'm not actually sure how I feel about
PDA yet. It draws attention and attention isn't really my
thing. Also, I forgot the only swim trunks I have that fit are
bright green with neon sharks on them.

I come around the corner into the kitchen where Saylor

and her friends are standing by the back door. Saylor comes right to my side and takes my hand.

“Oh, look at that pop of color,” Glory says. “You look good, Jake.”

“Thanks,” I reply, but my voice sounds weird. I clear my throat and try again. “Thanks.” Tatum just smiles at me and follows Glory out to the pool. And then there’s just me, Saylor, and Bethany. My new girlfriend and my new date for homecoming. Unless she doesn’t want to go with me.

“Those are some sharp shorts,” Bethany says.

“Thanks. I like your suit.” She’s wearing one of those suits with the cutouts on the sides. It’s hard to ignore how her boobs look in it, but the color is nice. I look down at the black bikini Saylor is wearing. “You look good too.”

She smiles up at me and squeezes my hand. “Thanks, babe. So I told Bethany my idea and she’s into it,” Saylor says.

“Don’t say it like that,” Bethany replies. “It sounds like I agreed to have a threesome with you guys.”

“Yeah, no. Definitely not a sketchy sex invite, but an invitation to fun.”

Bethany tries to hide her laugh by rolling her eyes before she looks back at me. “You’re cool with this? Us going to the dance together?” she asks.

“Yeah. I’m going anyway. I just figured it would be me and my camera. Having a human date sounds like a better option,” I tell her.

“Okay, cool. Well, I’ll get the tickets, I guess.”

“Nah, I got them. My dad would kill me.”

“Mr. Yeun is raising a real gentleman, is he?” Saylor says. I just shrug.

“Come on. I wanna swim.” Saylor tugs me outside. I slide into the pool with her and her friends. It’s hot as hell out so getting in the water is definitely a good idea. Usually I’d be down at the beach skating with Axel and Heaven, sweating our asses off. Now I just kind of exist in the water, not really saying anything while the party happens around me. Saylor doesn’t seem to mind. She’s busy talking to Tatum and Bethany for a while, but she does climb all over me, hanging off my back, hanging off my front, using my shoulders as a diving board. She kisses me a bunch on the mouth. Her friends don’t seem to mind the kissing, especially Glory and Landon who take serious make out breaks every six minutes or so.

The whole time I keep wishing I brought my camera. The Greenes installed the great blue light around the inside of the pool and the fake rock wall lining the small hill the goes up behind the house. I can do something with my phone, but I could shoot some really cool stuff back here if I had my Canon.

“Hey, Jake, do you have one of those underwater setups?” Landon asks me and I swear I could kiss him. Finally, something in my wheelhouse. He and his boys have been talking about football and people at our school I know of, but don’t really know.

“Yeah, I left it at my house though. I have my phone.”

“Get your phone, man,” Oliver says. “Your TikToks are tight as hell.”

I look back at Saylor, who's on my back, her legs wrapped around my waist. "Is that cool?"

"Yeah, of course." She floats off into the shallow end and I head inside to grab my phone. My mom tells me ten times a week to put my phone down and give my eyes a break, but as soon as I fish it out of my bag, it's like my heart stops trying to jump out of my body. There's nothing to be anxious about—I know that. But I'm definitely not relaxed until I unlock my phone.

"Everyone act natural," I say as I walk back onto the deck.

"You taking photo or video?" Glory asks before she starts posing. Saylor and her friends rush behind her and start posing too.

"Both," I laugh. I spend the next while taking video and pictures. We shoot two quick TikToks. I send them to Landon so he can post them on his account. I go back inside to actually use the bathroom and then stop in the kitchen and start looking at everything I shot. The vision is already coming together.

"You're good." I turn around as Bethany walks inside. She wraps a towel around herself and goes right for the fridge.

"Good at what?" I ask. I take the bottled water she hands me.

"Slowly backing into a high shrub and disappearing."

"Yeah." I laugh a little. "It's my superpower."

"I get it. I wanna curl up in a ball under my covers, but it's my house."

“Why? These are your friends. I don’t even know these people,” I joke. That makes her smile and I really wish I had my camera. Bethany has a great smile. She has dimples.

“Oh, Saylor didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

Bethany glances over her shoulder then lowers her voice. “I asked Oliver to homecoming this morning and he said no. His reasons were kinda brutal,” she admits. I look out at the pool too, cringing as I catch a glimpse of Oliver strutting to the end of the diving board.

“Oh man. That sucks. I figured it was just AJ.”

“Nah, he was rejection number two of the day,” she says, and then lets out a heavy deep breath. I’ve never been rejected, because I’ve never asked anyone out before, but I’m sure it hurts. I don’t think I would feel all that great about the person who rejected me showing up at my house to hang out a few hours later.

“I think it’s for the best. Madlyn Lowell is in love with AJ. She might have run you over with her car,” I tell her, and she laughs, those dimples popping. I’m not great a pool-side small talk, but at least I can cheer Bethany up.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. Go to homecoming with me,” she says suddenly, her smile dropping. “I know how persuasive Saylor can be. And yeah, I appreciate the effort, but this is kind of embarrassing. Having to borrow a date and all.”

“No, I want to and you shouldn’t be embarrassed,” I say, and I realize I mean it. Bethany is pretty easy to talk to and I’m not scared of blowing it with the boyfriend duties

around her. “You get a date and I don’t have to feel weird watching Saylor and Rhys all night. I’m not jealous or anything—”

“No, I know. Clearly you and me aren’t like super tight or anything, but it doesn’t seem like jealousy jives with your whole . . . thing,” she says.

“I guess, yeah.”

“Well, I’ll distract you from that weird situation and you can distract me from Oliver and Poppy.” As soon as the words leave her mouth her eyes pop wide in horror. “Shit, sorry. I forgot you and Poppy—”

“It’s okay,” I say.

“Oliver asked her. She said yes.”

“It’s okay.” I don’t know how to explain it. Getting dumped sucked, but I don’t exactly miss Poppy and I’m definitely not stressed out about who she dates next, unless it’s Heaven or Axel. That would be weird. “We had a clean break. And now I’m Team Saylor.”

“Hey, it’s a fun team. Her mom always makes sure there’s catered snacks.”

“Really?” I ask. Saylor’s mom is a professional influencer, but I know that stuff is all smoke and ring lights.

“Oh yeah. Cristine Ford is fancy. You might want to keep a tux or, like, one of those fancy eye things in your camera bag just in case.”

“A monocle?” I laugh. Bethany snaps her fingers, smiling back at me.

“Yes!”

“Look at you two already getting along.” Before I can

turn around, Saylor is next to me with her arm around my waist.

“Truly a dream team,” Bethany says.

“What I miss?” Saylor asks. I unlock my phone and show her the first picture I took of her with Tatum. “Ooh we look cute. Send that to me.”

“I will,” I say. And then she kisses me again. It’s like our tenth kiss already, but it’s the first one I feel present for. The first one where I’m not caught off guard. It’s good. I hope she thinks so too.