

Fat Chance, Fat Chance, Charlie Vega

Fat Chance, Fat Charlie Vega Charlie CRYSTAL MALDONADO

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For Phil You told me so • • • For Julius I will miss you every day

Chapter One . ... I imagine being kissed about a hundred times a day.

The tense moment just before the kiss, when they look right at me like there's no one else in the room. The way they caress my cheek, maybe put their hand on the small of my back. To be so close to someone I care about, someone I like or maybe even love, feeling the warmth of their skin near mine, would be magic. They smell good, and I can almost feel their lips on mine, even before they're there. And then they are-soft, gentle. And I forget who I am, just for a second. I forget *everything* else.

I forget that I don't always have the right thing to say. I forget about comparing myself to my best friend. I forget about the issues with my mom. I forget how badly I wish I were a size two.

I forget it all.

Except for that kiss.

And it's not so much the who. It's more about the what. The kiss. A kiss. To be kissed.

It's the stuff my dreams are made of.

But it hasn't happened yet, and I'm beginning to think it never will.

At least, not like this-not the way my best friend, Amelia, and her boyfriend, Sid, are kissing up against my car.

I should be mad at them, and normally, I would be. But for right now, I'm kind of okay with the show.

That's how pathetic I am.

Like, it should set me on fire that Amelia and Sid are kissing

as if I don't even exist. And yeah, that part is kind of annoying. But also, it just sends me spiraling off into my own thoughts about kissing and boys and I'm feeling wistful and alone and find myself missing something I never even had.

I honk the horn.

Amelia finally pulls away from Sid, shooting me an apologetic glance but smiling and giggling. She and Sid whisper to each other, then kiss once more, and Amelia finally starts to get into the car.

"Sorry, sorry," she says as she slides into the passenger seat. "I'm a total jerk. I know."

"You're not a total jerk," I say, pulling onto the road and heading toward my house. "But you think you could say goodbye before I pick you up? It's kind of weird to have to watch."

I leave out the part where their kissing basically makes me have an existential crisis.

"Next time, I promise."

"Sid always leans right up against my car like it's his," I say. "I know my car is a piece of shit, but it's *my* piece of shit."

I'll admit that I get easily annoyed at Sid. He's a senior at another school, and I think he's a little too vain, too aloof. Amelia is kind and giving and warm, and Sid is just sort of *there*. He's nice enough to me, which is good, but he's just... underwhelming. Like, in a slacker-who-smokes-pot-all-day kind of way that doesn't seem to align well with Amelia's popular-and-pretty-with-a-millionextracurriculars vibe.

He is hot, though. Super hot. All muscles and a beard a teenager probably shouldn't be able to grow. I'll give him that. Amelia says he treats her well and that it's nice to have a boyfriend at another school because she doesn't feel suffocated and it gives her a break from everything, so fine. I deal.

"I'm sorry, Charlie, for real. I'm just lucky to have a friend who'll put up with that and still give me a ride home." She smiles and bats her long eyelashes at me. I grin. "So, how was work?" she asks.

"I spent the afternoon putting together a hundred marketing packets for some trade show next week," I say. I work part-time as an office assistant at a small, family-run business that sells medical products, mostly to hospitals. "So, totally riveting, as you can imagine. How was Sid's?"

"If I were lighter-skinned, you'd be able to tell that I'm blushing just thinking about it."

I wrinkle my nose. "Ugh. Let's leave it at that, all right?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel weird or anything. *Lots* of people have never been kissed." She shoots me a sympathetic glance, and now it's me who's blushing. Acknowledging my virginal lips out loud makes it *so much worse*. I've mentioned this to her before, and yet...

"Yep."

We're quiet for a sec, but I relax a little when she pulls out her phone, eager for a subject change. "Did you look at the video I sent you earlier?"

"Which one?" I ask. Truthfully, Amelia and I send each other about a hundred things a day—some of it's just us talking back and forth, but a lot of it is trashy or hilarious things we find online. "Oh, wait! The one of the sleepy puppy who falls off the couch?"

"Yes!" She squeals and the sound of the little puppy snoring fills the empty space in the car. "It's sooo cute. I've watched it ten times already, I swear. Look, look—he's about to do it!"

At a perfectly timed red light, I lean over and watch as the dozy puppy droops right off the couch, and we both erupt into giggles.

"God, we should totally get a dog," I say.

"Right? We could share him—"

"Or her," I interrupt.

Amelia corrects herself, though I know she's probably playfully

rolled her eyes at me from the passenger seat. "Or *her*. Some days that cutie could be with me, other days with you. It would be the most well-loved pup ever."

As we pull up to my house, a single-story white ranch with my dad's beloved Puerto Rican flag dangling from the porch, I point to my mom's Audi in the driveway. Then I sigh. "Puppy would have to live with her, too, though."

I had been not-so-secretly hoping that my mom's job as branch manager at the local credit union might keep her late so that she wouldn't be home yet, but now that I work, too, that's not always the case.

"We could go to my house instead, if you want."

"We're already here." I pull the keys out of the ignition. "Plus, she'll be pleased to see her favorite daughter."

I mean Amelia and she knows it, so she gives me the finger.

We head inside. I'm immediately hit with the sweet scents of apple and cinnamon, and without stepping into the kitchen, I know a candle is burning on the windowsill. It's Mom's favorite to light because it "goes with the theme," meaning the red accent wall and carefully placed apple knickknacks on most of the oak surfaces.

"Mom, I'm home!"

"Charlotte, I'm right here. There's no need for yelling!" my mom calls from the other room. She's yelling, too, though.

"*Amelia* is here," I say, tossing my keys onto the side table next to the door.

The tone of Mom's voice changes immediately. "Oh! Amelia!" she says, and she's suddenly in the living room to greet us. Her hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail, and she's wearing yoga pants, a fit-ted athletic top, and sneakers, signaling she's likely on the way to the gym. She kisses my cheek, then Amelia's. To Amelia, she says, "So good to see you. Don't you look beautiful! Special day at school?"

I glance at Amelia, but I don't really need to to know that yes,

she does. She *always* looks beautiful. She has flawless dark skin that never blemishes and curly black hair that never seems out of place. She's tall and thin and everything looks good on her and it's completely unfair but also, like, if anyone deserves to be that flawless, it's Amelia.

"No, nothing special today," Amelia says, glancing down at her retro-chic outfit—a fitted black turtleneck and tights under a curve-hugging spaghetti-strap dress—with a shrug.

"See, Charlie. You always say people don't dress up for school, but they do! Look how put together Amelia looks." My mom's eyes flit over my outfit—jeans, ballet flats, and what I thought was a pretty cute sweater—as if to say *compared to this*.

"Gee, thanks, Mom."

Mom waves her hand at me. "You know what I mean. Anyway, Amelia, you look great."

"Oh, thanks, Jeanne."

"You know you can call me Mom!"

She's offered this to Amelia about a hundred times now. I suppress an eye roll. "Mom, I think we're going to go hang out in my room and do some homework. Okay?"

"Okay. Let me know if you need anything."

"We will," I call over my shoulder as we walk to my room. Behind us, I close and lock the door as Amelia starts giggling and flops on my bed, tossing her bag on the floor. I laugh a little, too.

"She *really* wants you to call her Mom," I say.

"It just feels too weird to me! I've *never* called her Mom, not since we met in the second grade. Why does she keep saying that to me lately?"

"She just really likes you." I shrug, trying to keep my voice cool. "And you know how she is. Once she's made up her mind about something she wants, that's it. So if she hasn't stopped offering that to you yet, she never will." My conspiracy theory is that my mom secretly wishes Amelia was her daughter and is doing this to subtly reveal it to me. My more realistic theory is that my mom doesn't realize how overtly she dotes on Amelia and that *maybe* it might make her daughter feel some type of way.

That said, it's true Amelia embodies a lot of the characteristics my mom wishes I possessed. I sometimes can't blame her. I wish I could be more like Amelia, too.

As far as best friends go, Amelia and I probably don't make much sense on paper. It feels like she's pretty close to perfect, and I'm more of the surviving-not-thriving type—the sidekick, the brown bestie. Aside from being beautiful, Amelia is the walking embodiment of Black excellence—her grace and warmth and wit are on another level, one which I aspire to someday come near. (But I know that's a long shot, so I find myself being fine just circling in her orbit.)

An athlete who does track and volleyball, Amelia's got a lot of friends. She's an infectious laugher, charismatic, and toes that line between tough and kind. She tells it like it is, but in such a genuine way that no one minds. And her love life is something I've envied for years. She's dated people of all genders—Amelia identifies as pan, and has since at least sixth grade—and I've always admired her unwavering confidence, which I think draws people to her.

I am not sure any of the adjectives I use to describe Amelia can also be used to describe me. I'm anxious and insecure, full of self-doubt, and probably annoying. There are good things about me, sure, but I'm mostly friendless (unless internet friends count?) and I'm certainly not athletic or popular. (I do have great hair, though.)

I've also never dated anyone. And I'm fat. Those things don't necessarily go hand in hand, but for me, I think they do.

I've always been fat, but I didn't know I was fat-with-a-capital-F

until I was in fourth grade, having a great time on a field trip, and one of my classmates told me so. There I was, sitting with Amelia on a bench at the local science museum, when Mason Beckett suddenly *needed* to sit next to his BFF, Elijah McGrady, and he tried to squeeze in between me and him. When Mason struggled to fit—*he* had a chunky body, too—he turned and looked me square in the face and said, "Jeez, Charlie, why do you have to be so *fat*?"

That seemingly small moment made me acutely aware of my body and its bigness, and it was then that I realized that being fat is a thing: A Very Bad Thing, according to most.

The world around me has reiterated that fact over and over in hundreds of ways since: the way people eye my body and shift uncomfortably away when I'm getting on the bus; the way the gym teacher loudly *tsks* me—and only me—every time I have to get weighed at school as part of the "physical fitness test"; the way my doctor doesn't even *hear* me when I'm complaining about sinus pain, and instead assures me that if I "try and lose weight" that'll fix my problems; the way most stores refuse to make clothes that even fit me and then if they do, they're *much* more expensive, as if my fat body comes with a fat wallet, too. So you can see why I envy Amelia so much.

Currently, Amelia is texting—probably with Sid—so I pull out my ancient math book and binder and settle in at my desk.

"I saw you talking to *Benny* outside of study hall today." Amelia is focused on her phone, but she doesn't hide the coy smile as she speaks. "What was that about?"

I roll my eyes. Benjamin (*not* Benny) is this boy that Amelia thinks is obsessed with me, but really we're just classmates. I'm nice to him because he's a generally nice guy and we're in the same biology class. "It was about him needing clarification on the homework."

"I think it was about him *liiiking* you," she says, looking up at

me. I roll my eyes again. When Amelia is talking to me about boys, I'm usually rolling my eyes. "Think about it. Benjamin is basically a science genius. Did he *really* need homework clarification? Or was he just looking for an excuse to talk to you?"

"He *really* just needed homework clarification," I say. "You know he can't always see the board. He has really bad vision." I instinctively push my own glasses higher up on my face.

"He could check online, though," Amelia presses.

"It was easier for him to ask me."

Amelia makes a face like she's not convinced. "I'm just saying. You two are awfully cozy."

"I appreciate you being the biggest cheerleader for my love life, but Benjamin and I are just friends. And hardly that. He's really sweet, but a little weird. You know that," I say. "Besides, I like someone else. You know that, too."

Cal Carter. What is about people with alliterative names that makes them so much better? I don't know. But he's amazing.

Tall. Muscular. Piercing green eyes. Sandy blond hair that falls just so. A smile that's often a smirk, like he's in on some devilish secret.

Amelia groans. "Don't remind me."

For a while now, Amelia has been after me to give up on Cal, mostly because she thinks he's sleazy. That's what I love most about Amelia. She thinks I should give up on Cal not because I have no chance in hell with him, but because she genuinely thinks *he*'s not good enough for *me*.

But she's right that I shouldn't be into Cal-mostly because he's actually into Amelia.

I know, I know. She's told Cal a million times it's not going to happen, but he still hangs around. I should have better sense than to like someone who persists even after they've been turned down, yet here I am. Fawning over him. Because he's nice to me. Really, really nice to me. He tells me jokes. He makes me laugh. He has conversations with me. He even says hi to me when he's around his football friends, which is huge. Basically, he's one of the few guys who will give me the time of day. And have I mentioned he's the knees-weak, butterflies-inyour-stomach, stay-up-late-dreaming-about type of hot? His real smile—not the smirk, though that's great, too—could probably inspire world peace.

And I'd never tell Amelia this, but here's my secret and way-too-embarrassing-to-share hope: one day, he'll realize it was me all along.

Chapter Two \*:

"*Psst.*" *The psst is* not exactly soft. In fact, it's kind of loud. It's not at all an appropriate volume for the library, but whatever, I guess. It's Cal.

He smiles when I look over at him, revealing his dimples, and my heart catches in my throat. (It sometimes hurts my eyes how pretty he is.) For a minute, I think he's calling for Amelia. But then I remember Amelia's not here yet, which means that *psst* was for me.

"Hi," he whispers.

"Hi," I whisper back, unable to wipe what is definitely a goofy grin off my face.

"Whatcha up to?" He's sitting a table away.

I definitely didn't carefully choose my seat so I could steal glances at him. Nope.

"Nothing. Reading." I hold up my book. In class, we're reading *The Catcher in the Rye*. I hate it. Holden Caulfield is not a sympathetic character to me, and I'm over the way he calls everyone a phony. "What about you?"

"Trying to convince you to let me borrow your history notes."

For some reason, I giggle at that.

"So?" he pushes. "Can I?"

"Oh! Yeah, of course," I say, letting go of my book (and not bookmarking my page), digging through my bag (and dropping some pens on the floor in the process), and pulling out my notebook. Cal, Amelia, and I are in the same history class, even though Cal is a year ahead of us. He almost never shows up to class... which is probably why he's repeating junior history. He always asks to borrow my notes, and I always say yes.

I turn to the correct page and hold the notebook out to him. He gets up from where he's sitting so smoothly it's like he's practiced it. Confidence just comes naturally to him. What's that like?

When he reaches me, he leans down and scoops up my pens and holds them out to me.

"You dropped these," he says.

"Thanks," I say softly, trying to hide how badly my hands are shaking when I take them from him. In exchange, he swipes my notebook and his eyes scan the page.

"So, all this, huh?" he asks.

I glance at the meticulously highlighted notes. "Oh. Yeah, I sometimes go a little overboard." I'm kind of embarrassed he noticed. "You don't have to copy all of that. The highlighted stuff is what's really important."

"It's *all* highlighted..." He chuckles and rubs his hand on the back of his neck, and I find myself wishing I *were* his hand. "So, like...let's just say you were only going to focus on the really, really super-important parts. You know, the stuff Mrs. Patel would probably put on a test. What might those be?" He leans over me, holding my notebook, glancing at the paper and then at me. "Think you could help me figure that out?"

And then he adds, "You're just really good at this, Charlie."

"Oh, um, s-sure," I stammer, feeling heat creep up my neck. He's so close to me now. "She spent most of class time talking about the Boston Tea Party. Here." I point to that section in the notes. "'No taxation without representation.' That was really what she lectured on, so...probably that."

"So focus on this," he says, pointing his finger where I'm

pointing so that our hands are touching. "And I can ignore all this other stuff?"

That's absolutely not what I'm saying, but his hand by my hand has me nearly breaking out in a full-on sweat. "Yes." I look at him. "More or less."

His gaze meets mine and he smiles at me, dimples and all, letting the look linger a beat longer than it needs to. "Great. Really great. You're the *best*, Charlie."

My neck and face get even hotter. "Oh, I don't know about that," I manage to say.

He rises to his feet, motioning toward the notebook. "I'll give these back to you in class, okay?"

"Okay. No problem," I say, and he takes the notebook and goes to sit back down at his table.

Did we just...have a moment?

Kind of felt like a moment.

See? This is why my insides get all jumbled like a bunch of weird emojis strung together whenever he's around. *Screaming face, lady in the tub, hospital, screaming face, heart.* 

I keep finding myself glancing over at him and smiling as he copies down the notes. I need to do something to stop looking so goofy, and I decide I'll double-check my math homework—until I realize that my math homework, due next period, is in that notebook. Which Cal isn't going to give back to me until after lunch.

Well, shit.

Amelia interrupts my panic by plopping in the seat next to me.

"Mr. O'Donnell is an ass!" she says, not bothering to speak quietly. The librarian looks over and shushes us, but Amelia ignores her and shoves her biology test in my face. There's a 68 at the top of it.

"Oh, no," I say, frowning. "I'm so sorry, Amelia. What happened?"

"He's a terrible teacher, that's what happened. It's all

memorization, and I hate it!" She sighs, then shoves the test in her bag. "Whatever. I'll do some stupid extra credit and be fine. Anyway. Hi. How are you?"

"I'm *great*. Cal and I just kind of had a moment," I whisper. I try to be nonchalant, but I'm sure I sound super excited. True, I don't typically like for us to dwell on how pathetic my love life is, but could I really not share *this* with my best friend?!

"Oh, yeah?" Amelia is humoring me. "What'd he want?"

"To talk," I say casually. Well. Kinda casually.

"To talk, huh?" Amelia asks, and it bothers me a little that there's a hint of skepticism in her voice—likely directed at Cal's intentions, but still.

"Yeah, to talk," I repeat. Then I pause. "And to borrow my history notes."

She gives me a look. "Of *course*." And that stings a bit. As if Cal couldn't ever possibly talk to me unless he wants something. "Why do you even let him see your notes?"

"I let you see my notes all the time."

"I'm your best friend! Cal is just a slacker. He doesn't deserve your kindness."

I decide not to tell her about how our hands touched.

"Yeah, well. He's cute. And he seemed really appreciative this time." I shrug. "But I just realized my math homework is in that notebook. And he's not going to give it back to me until history class, so..."

"So? Go over there and get it back!"

I just blink at her. "I can't."

"Why not?" she asks.

"I'm not good with confrontation."

"Not sure this counts as that, but fine. I'll do it." Without a second thought, Amelia waltzes right over to Cal, who looks up and shoots her that dazzling smile of his.

"What can I do for you, boo?" Cal asks, eliciting an eye roll from Amelia.

Did he really just call her boo? My stomach drops.

"Not your boo. And I need Charlie's notebook back. Her homework is in there." She reaches for it. Cal uses the opportunity to slip his hand into hers.

"Moving a little fast, aren't we?" he asks with a grin.

She yanks her hand away from his. "Ugh. Give it."

"What's in it for me?"

"I'll consider not breaking your hand off and using your own middle finger to flip you the bird."

A smirk from Cal as he hands her the notebook. "You're coming around to me."

"Not even a little," Amelia says, walking back to our table. Cal watches her go.

She plops the notebook down in front of me. "Thanks," I say, a little more curtly than I intend. I try to push my irrational jealousy aside and focus on ripping my homework out. Amelia holds out a hand, a silent offer to return the rest of the notes to Cal.

I sniff. "I can do it." She shrugs, so I turn and walk over to him and smile. "Hey, Cal. Sorry about that," I say, making my voice soft. "Here you go."

"Finally. Someone who treats me right," Cal says flirtatiously.

It makes me feel good, until I notice that he's not actually looking at me; he's still looking over at Amelia. I sigh, walk back to my seat, and wish I were her.

Chapter Three \*: Sometimes being at work is a nice retreat from my life.

I don't do anything particularly exciting-mostly filing, sorting mail, scheduling meetings, that kind of thing-but I actually find the work oddly soothing. There's something rewarding about organizing, about anticipating others' needs. The group of people I work with are great, too. It's mostly women—even the big boss, Nancy—although many of the higher positions belong to men (of course).

Even though sixteen-year-old-me is the baby by a lot, almost everyone treats me with respect and appreciates what I do. It's nice. Here, I can just be good at my job, and not worry so much about whether I'm cute or pretty or thin or popular or any of those things I wish I didn't worry about but do.

Nancy—who launched this company on her own and made it a success—has even told me she sees potential in me, so she's always trying to give me jobs with more responsibility. Whenever Sheryl is out, Nancy asks me to sit at her desk and answer phones. Nancy also knows I like to write, so sometimes she tasks me with writing projects, too. I can't help but like her.

I don't like Sheryl, who's always really snotty and makes passive-aggressive comments about me sitting at her desk when she's not in, but it's like, if you weren't out so much, I wouldn't be in your space.

Then there's Tish and Dora and Tammy, and they're really,

really sweet. They ask me about school and my home life and they think I'm cool even though I'm absolutely not. That's nice, too.

"Any big plans for the weekend?" Dora asks as I'm doing some filing. She asks me this every week. And every week, I make something up so that I sound more interesting than I am. I feel a little bad about it, but less bad than I'd feel admitting I mostly do nothing with no one.

"Probably going to the movies with my friends," I say.

"Will that boy you like be there?" Dora thinks things with Cal have progressed into us hanging out. I may have implied that once, and now there's no going back.

"Yes! He'll probably be there. It should be fun," I lie. "What about you?"

"I'm taking the boys go-kart racing." Dora has seven-year-old twins who she says keep her on her toes.

"You're going go-kart racing?!"

Dora laughs. "No, no. Not me. I'll be watching from the sidelines. Just the boys. And my husband, of course. He'll be riding."

For some reason, the idea of her husband go-karting with the kids while Dora watches from the sidelines makes me sad. She's fat like me, and I can't help but think that's what makes her unwilling to ride. It sounds like something I'd do, hanging back because I'm too scared that the seat belt won't buckle or something.

"You should do it with them," I say. "I think the boys would like that."

"Oh, no." Dora laughs again. "I'm too old for that." But she's conveniently ignoring the fact that her husband is even older.

"Charlie?" Nancy calls from her office.

I hurry over. "Hi, Nance. What can I help you with?"

"Dave needs some help preparing packages for a big shipment to St. Francis. Think you're up for it?" she asks, with a look in her eye that shows she already knows I'll say yes. Nancy, all of five feet tall, with piercing brown eyes and cinnamon-colored hair that's been cut into a blunt bob, is as commanding and assured as she is kind and soft-spoken—a pretty badass combination, if you ask me.

I smile at her. "Yeah, I think I could do that." I've been asked to do this kind of thing before, so I walk back to the warehouse, where Dave is already waiting. Dave is nice, but sometimes he thinks he's more important than he is. He's Nancy's son, so he kind of feels like he's the boss of everyone, despite Nancy making it very clear that he's not.

"Hey, little lady," Dave says.

Oh, yeah. And he calls me little lady.

"Hey, Dave. Your mom said you need help out here?" I like to remind him that we all know he's related to Nancy.

"Yes. Over there. I need you to help Brian pack and organize a few shipments," Dave says, pointing at a young guy—who, apparently, I'm supposed to know is Brian—before disappearing into his office.

As I get closer to Brian, I realize I do actually know him.

He's in my art class. He's one of those people I've gone to school with for a while and know *of* but don't really *know*. I had no idea he even worked here.

But when you go to the same school in the same town with the same people in the same corner of Connecticut for your whole life, you tend to have at least *some* opinion about everybody. So if you asked me about Brian, I would probably say he's quiet, nice, a little nerdy, and pretty cute (because hello, I'm not blind). He's stocky, with a bit of a belly, and tall—like, maybe even a good six inches taller than me—which is never a bad thing.

"Hi," I say, adjusting my glasses. Being around boys tends to make me nervous, especially if they're good-looking.

Brian looks up from the paperwork he's reading and smiles, and suddenly he's even cuter. He's got high cheekbones, his grin is a little crooked, and his dark eyes crinkle at the corners. My stomach does a little whirly-loop because I'm a hormonal teenager and this guy is looking right at me as if he's known me forever and already thinks I'm great.

"Hey," he says, holding out a hand. "Charlie, right?"

We shake hands. He has a nice handshake—firm, but he's not squeezing my fingers to pulp like a lot of dudes do.

"Yeah, hi. I think we both go to George Washington High," I say, even though I know we do.

"Yes! Same art class. I'm Brian Park."

"That's a good name."

He laughs at that. "Is it?"

"Yeah. Names are one of those things you have no control over, but they can change everything. Imagine being, like, Atticus Mortimer the Third? You're rich, even if you're not. That's just how it is."

Thankfully, Brian's nodding as I talk. "Okay, sure. Like, if you were named Clarence McConkey, maybe life's not so great for you."

"Exactly! There's nothing *technically* wrong with the name Clarence McConkey, but people probably have feelings about it. I mean...yikes." I realize this conversation has probably gone on way longer than it should, but I spend a *ton* of time thinking about names. When you're writing, you're always trying to come up with the perfect names for your characters, and maybe I get a little carried away sometimes. Shrug emoji. "Anyway. Packages?"

"Yeah," he says. "Packages. We're grouping six small ones with each of these large ones. You take the small, I'll take the big?"

I'd normally want to argue about it. I'm no weakling just because I'm a girl, but the boxes *are* big, and I notice that Brian's muscular arms could handle them with ease. He's husky, you know? Like he could be a football player. He isn't, but I'm just saying. He's *really* not bad to look at. I smile and agree, and we get to work.

"How long have you worked here?" I ask as we sort.

"Just started this semester. I found the job through the guidance counselor at school. I like it so far. Pretty painless. What about you?"

"I started in the fall. I like it, too. Everyone's really nice." As I talk, I shift boxes. "I just wish I had a clue what they actually make."

Brian laughs. "You neither? That makes me feel a little better. It's stuff for hospitals, that's all I know. I'm not out here trying to become a doctor, obviously."

"Same here. No thanks. I have a hard enough time thinking about how I'll have to dissect a frog in bio." I pretend to gag.

"Who was it that decided dissection would be a useful skill to have? Cool, I have no idea how loans work and I'd love to learn more about that whole '401K' thing, but yeah, let's dig into this frog!"

I laugh at that. He's totally right, and I'm pleased with how easy our conversation is as we work. Before I know it, we're done. I check my watch (an activity tracker that my mom bought for me so she can track my steps) and realize it's almost time to go.

"All set?" I ask.

"All set. Man, that went way faster with your help," Brian says, looking over at me. Then he chuckles. "Oh. You've got a little something." He points at his forehead. I rub mine with my sleeve.

"Did I get it?" I ask, feeling embarrassed.

"You got it. Happens to me all the time," Brian says. "It's dirty back here. Sorry you had to help while wearing your nice clothes."

I feel a smile involuntarily tug at my lips. I like that he thinks my clothes are nice. "It's no problem. Glad I could be helpful." I turn to leave. "See you in...art class, right?" I pretend I'm not sure he's in my art class even though I know he totally is. Brian smiles at me. "Yeah! I'll definitely see you in art class, Charlie. Thanks again."

. . .

When I get home, my mom's car is missing from the driveway. Small miracles. Inside, on the kitchen counter, there's a note that just says *Enjoy*. It's propped up on a meal-replacement shake, and suddenly my good mood dissipates.

My mom swears by these shakes. They're what got her thin, she says to anyone who'll listen. She loves them so much that she's become a consultant for the company, and now she sells them on Facebook as part of what's definitely not a pyramid scheme (it's a pyramid scheme).

For a while now, she's been trying to get me to drink them, too. She tells me if I just replace one meal a day with them, I can really start to see some results on my body—my unruly body that needs to be controlled, I guess—and I can finally start *living*. Like it's impossible for me to live now in this body I have.

I'm ashamed that I often look at my body and secretly agree.

See, the thing about my mom is that she was fat until, suddenly, she wasn't. Or at least that's how it felt to me. I feel like I woke up one day and the Mom I knew was gone and replaced with a newer, thinner model.

But the change didn't actually happen overnight. Perhaps I didn't want to see what was right in front of me—that my mother's body was slowly shrinking, looking less and less like mine every day, because I couldn't (or wouldn't) acknowledge that she was achieving the very thing I waste so much time longing for.

It went like this: my dad got sick and died, my mom wallowed for a long time, we both got fatter together in our sadness, she had trouble feeling good about herself, she decided to throw herself into losing weight, and then—*bam*. Things were different.

I guess there were a few other things that happened in between, but that's the gist.

It didn't help that my mom and I were never especially close. People always said I was Héctor's girl, through and through. I inherited Papi's brown skin, dark eyes, curly hair, and sense of humor. My mom—white, with light-brown eyes and straight hair, not as easily amused as us—would sometimes grumble about the fact that she felt left out of our jokes.

My dad and I just *clicked*. Our relationship was easy in all the ways that my relationship with my mom is hard. It was like he got me right down to my core from the moment I could talk.

Though he worked construction, Papi's heart really belonged to storytelling. He wrote in his spare time—he loved mystery novels and the art of a good thrill—and passed that admiration for language on to me (though telling stories about ordinary people falling in love is more my cup of tea). Storytelling was just something we did together. When I was a kid, he read me stories at bedtime until I was old enough to read some to him. Then we ditched the books altogether and started making up the stories together. It was our thing, and he even wrote a few of his favorites down so we would remember them. My favorite was "Charlie and the Rainbow Shoes," which we based on a pair of Mary Janes I owned that had rainbow stitching around the edges. In the story, they were magical and let little Charlie do things like swim with whales and fight monsters and ride unicorns and fly. I still have the story in a box under my bed.

Papi had a thing for the spoken word, too. He was bilingual and always seemed to be talking—he just always had stories bursting out of him. He couldn't (or didn't want to?) contain his big imagination, and sometimes that meant he got too invested in new projects that would never go anywhere. If we needed a little extra cash: What if we started a dog-walking business? If we were bored of the same meals: What about a night of homemade sushi and gyoza? If we were seeking some adventure: What if we drove to the coast and explored the shoreline? I liked to think of my dad as a balloon always drifting toward the sky, and my mom as the anchor always keeping him tethered to the ground—not enough so that he couldn't dream, necessarily, but enough so that we didn't go broke or end up at the beach in the middle of the night when it was freezing cold out.

Even though sometimes my parents were like fire and ice, for the most part, they worked together. She never let him float away, and he helped her keep her joy alive.

That's why it was better when we were three. There was a sense of stability, and when things got tough between me and my mom, my dad could serve as the buffer between the two girls he loved most. Because if I got my love of words and laughter from my dad, I got my stubbornness and tenacity from my mom. We aren't so much oil and water as we're just two straight-up firecrackers who both like to be right and have the last word and are—ultimately incredibly sensitive.

So Papi had to help keep the peace, and he made us both feel heard. Mostly, I think he just wanted us to be happy together, our little family, and he'd do anything to make it so.

It's not that we never had nice moments, my mom and I. We did. We both loved reality television. We were always singing old-school Mariah Carey. Shopping brought us together, too, especially when it came to clothes: Mom liked to say she never met a sale she didn't like, and she taught me to dress well, to appreciate the thrill of finding a good garment—which was especially tough to do as fat women.

We also had fun cooking together, dedicating ourselves to delicious food and savoring our creations. My mom was an amazing cook; her love language was food—lots and lots of it, seconds, thirds, even fourths—and she took great pride in feeding others good meals until they wanted to burst. I developed such a joy for eating when I was standing next to her in the kitchen, concocting a meal and delighting when Papi loved what we'd made for him. There was something so pure about the taste of a scrumptious recipe, something so simple, and it brought us happiness together. As a family, we were fat, and maybe we didn't love that about ourselves, but we accepted it.

But then we lost him.

Without him, the balance and the joy in our home were lost, too. Without him there to separate us or draw us together when we needed it, my mom and I couldn't stop fights before we said things we didn't mean, couldn't fill a silence before it got too big.

I was thirteen when my dad died and I was fourteen when my mother's body changed. Mine was changing, too, but not in the way I wanted. I developed, but also widened, going from having "baby fat" to just being "fat-fat." At a time when I was becoming interested in boys and men, I realized how interested boys and men were now becoming in my mother.

As my mom shed her old body and habits like a snake shedding its skin, the things that brought us together began to disappear: no more sitting on the couch watching reality TV; no more shopping for clothes together (we couldn't patronize the same stores); absolutely no more cooking together unless it was grilled chicken and broccoli, no delighting in indulgent meals or whipping up decadent desserts—no, nope, never. Food was no longer a celebration. We ate to survive and nothing more.

I tried it her way for a while. I really did. But I missed my dad, I missed my mom, and I missed my old life. I missed food.

So she shrank. I didn't.

Instead, I refocused. I amped up my writing, which helped me escape my brain. I went online and began to share stories of beautiful girls with happy endings, which made me feel joyful and whole, even if only for a bit. And then, slowly, through those writing communities, I ended up finding feminism and the fat acceptance movement, and I moved on to writing stories about girls of all sizes, from all backgrounds. It started to impact the way I thought about bodies, about nourishment, about diets, about myself.

And that was maybe the final wedge between me and my mom. When I tried to talk about some of the things I was learning or questioning, I was swiftly shut down. Her body had been a "prison," she said, and mine was, too. I could be "free," if only I could commit to being thin.

She started looking at me critically, saying things like, "Do you really want to eat that?" "Are you sure you should go back for seconds?" "*That's* what you're wearing?"

I try not to let it get to me. I recognize that my mom's thoughts about her body and mine are not healthy. And yet...

My own relationship with my body is so complicated. I am endlessly surrounded by messages that tell me to love myself, to celebrate stretch marks and soft rolls, to take charge and take up space, to be unapologetically me. Show off that visible belly outline! Rock a fatkini! All bodies are beach bodies! I get that. I celebrate that. I *believe* that.

But I'm also surrounded by messages that tell me I need shapewear, I need to lose weight, I need to fit into straight sizes, I need to look like an Insta girl, I need to be tiny to be loved. Even my lived reality seems to support this. I don't mean to seem shallow, but it's like, when *everyone* goes out of their way to tell you "what a pretty face" you have, you notice.

Is it any wonder, then, I still find myself wishing so badly for this body of mine to be smaller?

I've quietly tried the diets and the shakes and the workout plans and the control tops and the wasting-birthday-wishes-on-thinness and simultaneously, I've gotten involved in the fat acceptance movement, celebrating Fatness and following the #fatfashion hashtag like it's my religion. I believe that people can be healthy at any size. I think other fat girls are absolutely beautiful.

But my mind struggles to bridge the gap between the two ideologies. I'm fat, and I celebrate other fat people, but I don't quite celebrate me. It makes me feel like a fraud.

My mom says I'm unable to lose weight because I don't want it enough, but she couldn't be more wrong: I would secretly give anything to be thin, while outwardly and openly rebelling against the idea that anyone should have to.

Food comforted me then and still comforts me now. The rush of happiness I feel when I bite into a chocolate chip cookie, the ache of a belly that's a little too full, the anticipation before digging in to a meal—these things bring me joy.

Because of that, I guess I can see why my mom doesn't believe that I try to eat better and exercise, even though I do. It's just that sometimes I look at my mom's lithe body and all the enviably thin bodies around me and my efforts feel futile. It's hard not to turn to food, which is so reliable and so easy.

I return my gaze to the shake on the counter and turn it around in my hand a couple of times. The label boasts ONLY 210 CALORIES AND 24 GRAMS OF PROTEIN, and for a brief moment, I consider giving it another shot.

But no. I throw the shake in the trash and pull out my phone to order some food instead. If I hide the evidence of what I'm about to do, my mom won't scold me—and what she doesn't know won't hurt her.

Chapter Four \*: \* I do nothing all Saturday except read, write, and mess around on the internet. Mostly, I post new pieces of writing and chat with my community of online friends who help critique my work and offer support from the sidelines, which is really nice. In my real life, only Amelia knows I write, and sometimes even that feels scary; sharing my writing is one of the most vulnerable things I can imagine.

But there's something thrilling about it, too, especially when it's well received. I'm addicted, and my hobby often keeps me so rapt that I don't even feel time passing.

When my phone buzzes midday Sunday, I see a text from Amelia.

Jake's? it reads.

She's referring to the small coffee shop downtown where we (and, I'll be honest, most people from my school) hang out. I glance down at myself-still wearing pj's even though much of the day has passed me by, my curly-now-frizzy hair piled on my head, a mess from excessive lounging around-and feel the brief temptation to pretend I didn't see the text at all because it would require me making some kind of effort.

And to leave the sanctuary of my room—which *is* a sanctuary, by the way, from the twinkling white lights to the mountains of books to the window seat where I love to read. I've worked really hard to curate this very particular Instagram aesthetic and I only leave it when I absolutely must. It's the introvert in me.

I weigh my options: say goodbye to the warmth of this blanket and the easy banter with my online friends, or venture out into the real world with my bestie and feel like an actual person?

When my phone buzzes again (**Helloooo?**), I sigh and decide on the latter.

## Just need a few minutes to get ready, I write. I'll wait. You're picking me up anyway!

With long hair like mine, there is no such thing as a quick wash, so I opt to keep it up in the shower and am careful not to get it wet. Once I'm out and dry, I braid it into two plaits, pin it to the back of my head, and slip into a sweater dress, some tights, and boots.

I grab Amelia and we head to Jake's. It's a quirky little coffee shop with delicious lattes, fresh-baked goods, and eco-friendly compost bins where they recycle the used coffee grounds. The mismatched decor makes the place feel cozy and lived in, like maybe you're having coffee at your hippie aunt's house. There's tons of natural light, which makes for getting the perfect Insta pic of your drink, and a tiny section of used books they sell for a dollar each. Obviously, I'm all about it.

It's late January in New England, and the best place to sit is by the fireplace. Unfortunately, that spot is always taken, so Amelia and I settle in two comfy chairs by the window with our large hot drinks instead—chai latte for me, hazelnut coffee for her.

"I saw you posted a new story this weekend," Amelia says, propping her legs up on the small table between us.

"Eesh, I did. I don't know about it, though," I say. "This is the first time I've written from the perspective of a boy. And what do I know about boys and how they think?"

Amelia laughs. "Yeah, but what does *anyone* know about boys and how they think? So come on, Charlie. Give yourself a little credit. I thought Clive and Olivia were really cute together!" I smile at her. "Thanks. But be real with me: Would you change anything?"

"Well..." She taps her chin thoughtfully. "Since you asked—I was curious why Olivia was so scared to hold Clive's hand. She's sixteen, not a nun."

I wince a little internally, if only because Olivia's nerves are totally based on mine. "I mean...not everyone is comfortable just going for it..."

Amelia takes a sip of her drink. "You just spent, like, a *really* long time explaining how terrified she was and I wanted to be like, ugh, just *do* it, girl! It's just holding a hand!" I chew on my lip a little, letting her critique sink in. I maybe take it a bit more personally than I should, and she notices, adding, "I mean, don't stress. Everything else was perfect."

"Okay, yeah." I give her a smile. "I'll work on that next time."

A thoughtful look comes over Amelia's face. "You know, it's really impressive that you just, like, come up with these stories from your brain. You *make people up*. Whole-ass people!"

I laugh. "Guess I've never thought of it like that. Amelia, honestly, writing is super hard—it makes me feel so vulnerable. I mean, you know how reluctant I am to share my stuff. But my dad always used to say that to be a writer, you've got to be fine 'writing naked'—like, baring your soul, being *real*—so I think you're just supposed to power through the fear. It's hard, though! It feels so personal that I can't help but be fiercely protective of it, and then there's this little voice that's constantly concerned it's not quite ready for other people's eyes yet, but then it's like...if I'm not going to share my writing, what am I even doing? I don't know. I sometimes think I should totally switch dream jobs and just do data entry at a novelty mug warehouse."

Then I feel a little sheepish for sharing so much and add, "I fully realize how dramatic I'm being."

"I think it's cute. You *should* get dramatic about things you care about," Amelia says. "I *wish* I were that passionate about track."

I frown at her. "You've been unhappy with track all year. Why don't you just quit?"

She wrinkles her nose at that. "My mom really wants me to stay on. The *legacy*." An eye roll. Mrs. Jones was a track star. "She also says it looks good for my college applications."

"I wish I could say she's wrong, but everyone keeps saying you need to be super involved in a trillion extracurriculars to even be *considered* for college these days." It makes me think of how sparse my own résumé is. There's my job, sure, but writing online probably doesn't count as an extracurricular, right?

"I know, that's what blows. She's right! I just don't want her to be!"

I shoot her a sympathetic glance. "You shouldn't have to do something that doesn't make you happy. Maybe you can talk to your mom and just be super honest with her about it. You're already doing volleyball and your grades are good. I think she'd understand."

Amelia looks unconvinced. "Yeah, maybe. But I don't want to disappoint her."

"You wouldn't."

"I think I'll stick it out for the rest of the year and just not sign up next year," she says. "At least I've met some cool people on the team."

"That's true." I nod, but I'm bummed for her. While I'm used to disappointing my mom, I realize others probably aren't especially not Amelia. Her mom is so great I'd be scared to disappoint her, too. "Oh, I know what will make you feel better! I meant to share this with you. I'm obsessed with this new playlist I found on Spotify. It's called 'Lovesick.'" "Please tell me there's at least one Spice Girls song."

"There are multiple, which is why I know this playlist is meant for you." I whip out my phone and dig through my bag to get my AirPods. I hand the left one to Amelia and stick the right one in my ear. "Here." I settle back in my chair as we listen.

"Ah." She sighs happily.

"Yeah. Pretty great, right?"

We sit and listen until we finish our drinks, then head home. Amelia has homework to do and I, feeling inspired by the playlist, have some writing that's calling my name.

Also: I want to put off going to bed as long as I can so that I can pretend Monday isn't coming.

. . .

Weirdly, no matter how late I stay up writing on Sunday nights, Monday always comes around again. So then, on top of it being the start of another week, I'm super tired. Sigh.

At least my first class is English—my favorite, obviously. It's a bunch of quiet, nerdy seniors. I'm the only junior, which makes me feel special, TBH.

I admire the teacher, Ms. Williams. She's whip-smart and worldly, and in between each book we're mandated to read by the school curriculum (aka a "classic" written by a white dude), she also picks a book written by an author from a marginalized group. For every *Animal Farm* and *The Great Gatsby* we've read, we've also read *The House on Mango Street* and *The Bluest Eye*. It's incredible, and it's in this class I've been exposed to some of my favorite books.

Plus, Ms. Williams gives us time in class to write, and unlike my online writing, *this* writing gets attached to my actual name, which is terrifying but exhilarating. Not that we do anything too rigorous, but we do spend the first ten minutes of each class free-writing in our own notebooks. We're not graded on what we put in there; the only rule is we have to write for the full ten minutes. I really let myself go and spill my thoughts—sometimes about my life, sometimes about what I'm reading, and sometimes just little snippets of story ideas floating around in my head.

Ms. Williams often leaves me little notes on my writing, too, asking questions, adding comments, and underlining and putting smiley faces next to her favorite lines. I love that.

Today, though, we're talking about *The Catcher in the Rye*. I don't love that.

"So now that we've finished the book, I want to hear your immediate takeaways. What did you all think?" Ms. Williams asks.

I wait a second before raising my hand. She calls on me.

"Honestly? I thought Holden was kind of a jerk," I say. Ms. Williams smiles at that. "I felt he was incredibly judgmental about the world around him. He hardly gave anything a chance. And he felt like he was better than everyone. I understand he was depressed, and I want to be mindful of that, but it also sometimes felt like he was just a whiny white dude who hated people for trying to make their way in society."

At this, Chad, the Goody-Two-shoes who hates when race comes up, raises his hand. I know what's coming.

"I disagree with Charlie." There are a few giggles, because honestly, Chad *always* disagrees with me. "I loved Holden. I found him incredibly sympathetic. And he's right; it *is* stupid that most people try to blend in with society. I think he was relatable regardless of his skin color."

I try not to roll my eyes. Technically, like, US Census technical, I'm white, but I'm also Puerto Rican, and Chad's always trying to invalidate my criticisms about race and race relations. But I don't take the bait.

"Holden takes a typical privileged perspective here. It's not always possible or even safe for everyone to stand out—not when their identities are villainized, questioned, discriminated against, or attacked," I say. "Some people *need* to conform rather than stand out."

"How can you say Holden is speaking from a place of privilege?" Chad's face looks both annoyed and disgusted at what I've said. "He's talking about embracing being an individual! That's the least-privileged thing ever. He's basically saying be you, whoever you are, and I agree with Holden. Anyone who chooses not to is just looking for an excuse and, yeah, is kind of a phony."

Before I can interject and run down the laundry list of ways in which Chad is wrong, Mrs. Williams swoops in. "Thank you, Charlie and Chad. Two fair and thoughtful perspectives. Let's dig into this."

It's an hour of literary bliss.

As the bell rings, Ms. Williams reminds us to grab our notebooks from her desk on our way out of the classroom. When I reach for mine, she smiles at me.

"I loved what you wrote about *The House on Mango Street*. I'm glad you could relate to Esperanza. She's one of my favorites, too," she says. "Keep up the great work."

I leave the class beaming.

Outside, Amelia is waiting for me. Her first period is right next to mine, and she's always the first out the door.

"Why are you all smiley on this dreary day?"

I shrug. "Just a great class."

"Nerrrd," she teases.

We start walking toward our next class. As we do, Cal passes us, surrounded by his flock of football bros. They take up more than half of the hallway—they're all so big and muscular, I bet they could collectively pull an eighteen-wheeler without much effort. Most of the boys nod at or say hello to Amelia, and she offers polite smiles back. But Cal grins at both of us. "Hi, ladies! Looking beautiful today, as always!" he says.

Amelia ignores him, but I smile big and take a step toward him instinctively. "Hi, Cal!"

"Oh my gosh! Watch out!" Cal's friend Tony shouts, dramatically putting an arm in front of Cal as if protecting him. Cal looks puzzled, and Tony stares at me, a smile spreading slowly across his lips. "Oh, sorry, man. Thought that was an elephant stampeding toward you."

You know how the movies always show moments where time seems to stop and everything goes in slow motion?

This is kind of like that, only worse.

Because it's happening to me.

I was just called an elephant in front of my crush, all of his popular friends, and my beautiful and perfect best friend.

Some of the boys around Tony yell "Ohhhh!" and "Shit!" but most of them are just laughing, and so are a few randoms in the hall. I wish an asteroid would hit our school right now or, at the very least, that I could say something witty back, but I do something worse: I laugh, too.

Cal frowns at Tony and says, "Come on, man," at the same time that Amelia lunges toward him yelling, "What the fuck did you just say?!"

I grab her arm and pull her back. "It's fine," I manage, even though my insides are trembling.

"Let's go," Cal says, motioning with his chin toward the stairwell and signaling to his friends to get walking. He starts to move after them but then turns around. "Sorry," he says, looking between me and Amelia. "See you in history?"

I nod and say nothing.

"Fuck that guy!" Amelia says, turning to me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's no big deal." I ignore the water that's welling in my eyes. The last thing I want to do is start crying in front of everyone. She shakes her head. "You're not."

Through gritted teeth, I say, "I'm fine. Can we just drop it?"

Amelia stares at me for a second and I can tell she wants to press, but she doesn't. "Okay," she says, relenting. "I get it."

Only she doesn't. That's the thing. She has no idea what this feels like.

Still, I cling to the fact that Cal didn't laugh at the joke. I guess that's why I like him. Even though his friends make fun of me and he could easily join in, he doesn't. He's nice to me. Maybe that makes my standards too low, but I don't care.

"Babe, you want to go shopping later?" Amelia asks softly as we head into our next class. She knows that I like to shop to make myself feel better when things are bad.

"No Sid today?" I ask. Because I'm still tense, it comes out snarkier than I intend.

"He's meeting up with his band. And I'd rather shop with you anyway," she says calmly.

"Okay. Fine. Yes," I say. "That would be nice."

My insides are still jumbled, and I know that this is a moment I will probably remember, think of, and turn over in my brain again and again. But my hope is that we won't ever talk about it. Pretend it's fine and it will be.

Even if I know that's a lie.

. . .

After school, I drive us to a nearby plaza with a few different stores. We go into Amelia's favorite, and I look through the clothes with her, making idle chitchat about her ten-year-old sister, Tess (who annoys her, as sisters do, and keeps trying to steal from her closet).

As I look through racks of clothes I can't fit into, I try to stop the voice in my head that keeps replaying Tony's comment over and over. When I fail, I give up pretending these clothes will fit and wander over to the accessories. At least I can wear a purse. The truth is that I'd need to be shopping at a plus-size store or, at the very least, a store that carries a plus-size section—to buy anything. I haven't ever really pointed this out to Amelia, and I like to think I've gotten pretty good at blending in during our shopping trips—here and there scoring a couple of straight-size items that run big, stocking up on so many accessories that I'm always buying something, even if it's not clothes. It's entirely possible that Amelia totally knows what's up and is too polite to say anything, but I don't necessarily live for the conversation that is *Hey, I can't shop here, can we go somewhere else?* 

Amelia buys a few tops, I buy a pair of socks with little notebooks on them, and then we walk to the burger place across the way.

"Don't tell my mom about this," I say once we sit down with our food.

"Ugh. She's so weird about eating," Amelia says, pulling the pickles off her burger before taking a big bite. She chews for a moment before saying, "I know she lost all that weight or whatever, but she shouldn't put her food issues on other people—especially not on you."

I nod but say nothing. Instead I think about how, when my mom was fat, she, my dad, and I used to come to this burger place all the time, especially when one of us had a bad day. My mom and I definitely don't do that now. We barely even eat together anymore.

"So, you know, while we're here, I was hoping we could talk," Amelia says.

"Isn't that what we're doing?"

"Seriously, Charlie. About earlier. Tony, he's-"

"Don't."

"But—"

"Please. I can't." My eyes plead with her: Just drop it. Don't make me hear it again. Don't make me say it again. Don't make me think it again.

She looks at me for a long time, then finally says, "I'm just sorry, then."

"Thanks."

After a few minutes of eating in silence, she speaks again. "If you're sure you don't want to talk about it ..."

"I'm sure."

"Okay. Then there's something else. I could use your advice. About Sid."

I look at her and put my food down. I think it's really sweet that Amelia sometimes comes to me for boy advice. And she always takes me seriously, even though I have no experience to back anything up—unless reading excessive amounts of romance books counts.

"Of course," I say. "What's up?"

"I think I'm in love," Amelia says.

I nearly choke on my food.

"Really? You're in love with Sid?" I hope the surprise shows on my face more than the disappointment. (Like I said before: Amelia is *way* too good for him.)

A wistful smile overtakes her face. "Yeah. I am. He's so sweet to me when we're together. It's like it's just the two of us, you know? He trusts me and, like, isn't even threatened by the other guys that come on to me, which is nice. And he makes me feel special without fawning over me. He's just...amazing."

"And hot," I add.

"That helps." She bites her lip. "But I'm not sure I should tell him I love him. I mean, we've only been dating for a few months. I want to, but I also think maybe I should wait for something special. Like our six-month anniversary. It's on Valentine's Day."

"That's really cute." It's adorable, actually, but I still can't stop the pang of envy in my gut. I push past it and say, "Honestly,

Amelia, if you love him, I think you should be real with him. Who wouldn't want to hear that their girlfriend loves them?"

"But I feel like he should be the one to say something first."

"Says who?" I ask. "You can totally tell him you love him first."

"I know I *can*, it's just—I don't want to be seen as clingy or anything." She plays with her fries. "You know what people say about girls who say they love the guy first. Dudes will ghost you or break up with you or whatever."

"Well, I think you have to be okay with him not saying it back right away. You have to feel good enough—strong enough—in your feelings that it'll be okay if he needs more time." I take her hand. "But he probably will say it right back, because how could he not love my beautiful, wonderful, amazing best friend?" She gives me a gentle smile, but I can tell I haven't persuaded her. "Riiiight?" I prod.

"Yeah, I mean. It's just. There's more, too."

"More than just telling him you love him?"

She nods. "I think I'd also like to..." Amelia leans in closer to me. "You know. Sleep with him."

I can feel my eyes widen, though I don't mean for them to. "Oh!"

"It's just that, in my head, I have it all planned out. It would be super romantic. Like, we go out to celebrate our anniversary, I finally tell him I love him, things feel really right, and then we just...have sex. It seems pretty perfect."

I'm nodding as she speaks, but my head is swirling—Amelia is ready to profess her love *and* lose her virginity and I can't even fall in mutual like with a boy. It's a selfish thought, I know, but it's hard for me to deny the jealousy I'm feeling right now. I can't even imagine having sex with someone. (I mean, I'm no prude, *of course*  I can imagine it, but I can't really picture me—clothes off—with another person with their clothes off.)

"Yes, it sounds like it could be romantic," I say tentatively.

"But I also don't want to build it up too much in my head or anything. I might be overthinking this. I don't know. I don't know!"

She buries her head in her hands and sighs and I know that I've got to put my own stuff all the way aside to help. Plus, the hopeless romantic in me wants this to happen for her sake. "It honestly does sound pretty perfect, Amelia. I think if you feel ready—like, *really* ready, on both counts—then that's what's important. I don't see a better day than your anniversary-slash-Valentine's Day to share how you feel. It's so perfect that it's like, who even are you, the main character in a rom-com?"

She laughs a little at the last part and looks up at me. "So I'm not overthinking it?"

"Oh, you're totally overthinking it. But you want this, right?" I ask. Amelia nods. "Okay, then. Love plus special date plus Valentine's Day seems like a great reason to get naked."

She tosses a fry at me. "Damn, Charlie!"

"I'm just saying!"

"I hate you and I love you," Amelia says, smiling.

I smile back. "Hate you and love you, too."