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~~Prelude (Part I)~~

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Thanks to l3rainy for the current side cover! [THIS HAS BEEN REVISED]

Part One

THE SEARCH

"You found me."

"Did you ever doubt I would?"

Mary Margaret/David

Magic

Once Upon a Time: A Land without

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (1)~~

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The Wattpad version contains all the unedited chapters. Mind you that there are some stuff different between this and the actual book (for instance, there are some scenes in the book that are not written in the Watty version). Please do NOT reproduce or plagiarize this. Otherwise, I'll sacrifice your firstborn to Hades.

ღ Finding Cinderella- 1 ღ

-Kylie-

"Well, look who's here."

I didn't bother to gaze up to know who was coming.

It was already too obvious, what with the screaming fan-girls and whatever else; I knew perfectly well who it was. Who wouldn't, anyway?

Gracing his presence was something of a daily routine for most of the students here in Broadway Heights, and I wondered why no one had gotten tired of it over these past four years. Anyhow, let me tell you something about the person I was referring to.

I knew what you're guessing; trust me, you were far from the truth. He wasn't Hollywood actor, a billionaire, or a star athlete. Or even someone who could perform miracles like walking through walls or something. In fact, he didn't apply to any of the above. In actuality, he was even more attractive and desirable than all of that put together.

He was the Prince.

But here's the deal breaker: he never came from a royal family.

Confused? No, you're not. How many times have you seen someone so ruthlessly exposed in the limelight? So much so that they might as well have actually been freaking royalty? After all, he certainly looked the part: tall, handsome, well built; well read.

He had those cute little dimples with the gorgeous eyes and stunning smile to match. The shine you got from those straight pearly whites could blind you if you dared to look long enough. No, he didn't have a white horse, but he had the next-best thing: a deadly, unbeatable red Porsche. Most girls would die just to stand next to it.

Even his name fitted his title, considering that it probably came from one of the Knights of the Round Table in Arthurian Legend.

In short, Tristan Hartford was the very epitome of a Prince: the most dashing and unobtainable young man on the face of the planet.

And all I could think to do was roll my eyes at him. Prince, my ass.

"Once upon time, there was peace, and now it was unfortunately over." I slammed my book shut and let out an exasperated sigh. Honestly, I wasn't the bookish type, which explained why hardly a single piece of information had registered in my mind while reading. Let's just say I'd only picked the book up in an effort to avoid his unshakable presence.

"Jules, come on. Let's get outta here," I said to my best friend Julianne Johnson, who was busy stargazing at Tristan.

"Already? Why?" the redhead asked. "We only just sat down."

"Please, don't even ask. You clearly know the reason why."

She glanced at him again, and returned to me with a playful smile growing on her fleshy lips, "Whatever you say, Kylie."

But before we could escape and enter the overcrowded school building, footsteps came rushing behind and someone slung their muscular arms around my shoulders. D

espite managing to avoid his existence for a whole four minutes, I knew that my grace period had just ended.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear...

"Hey, Kylie! So why are you ignoring me, huh? I've tried calling you a couple times already."

I hastily pulled away from him, turning around; I put up my best sarcastic expression. I didn't want to face him, but it's not like I could avoid it forever. There stood the dark-haired guy, within his infectious ever-charming aura. Good thing I was already immune to that.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Didn't see you there," I said scornfully. That's it. Bring out the sarcasm, like we practiced. "But wait, how did you get here? Did someone leave your cage open?" Score!

He let out a soft whistle of self-pity. "Well, someone's pretty grouchy today," he uttered nonchalantly, averting his gray eyes away from my own piercing stare of despise.

"It's because I have allergies," I informed him.

"Allergies? To what?" he asked. No, he wasn't oblivious to the fact that I disliked him. Actually, he was just mocking the whole situation.

"Pretentious people like you, of course," I snapped.

He smirked haughtily. "Ooh, big word. Have been reading your thesaurus lately?" His eyes dropped on my book. "Figures. Look, Kyles, I came here with a good vibe, okay? Until you start freaking out. Again."

A brittle laugh rang out of my lips yet my cold expression remained. "Hey, I'm not freaking out. Jeez, I'm just impassively telling you that you should get out of my sight," I said sweetly. "Or better yet, I should go first because Nostradamus predicted that a guy talking to me right now would be a loser."

Suddenly all nerve to deal with him diminished and I just walked away.

"That was a totally cool comeback, girl," Julianne commented.

I grinned and we both made a high-five and a low-five. That was something we always did when either of us would have done something badass or whatever, ever since the ninth grade.

"But mind you, sarcasm would always be his defense mechanism," she reminded.

From a distance, I could hear his laughter echoing amidst the crowd that had been watching us all this time with baited breath.

"Yeah, good idea, walk away. Can't expect anything more from a tomboy like you."

Oh, that did it. Everyone else in the area went into hysterics at his remark. Blood rushed to my face, and I didn't have anything to cover it up. Even if I did, it still wouldn't have been enough to conceal my utter embarrassment.

Jeez, what a freaking douchebag!

The laughter continuously echoed in my ears, making each of my nerves snap.

"Told you," said Julianne. She tapped my back for reassurance, knowing I possessed precious little tolerance towards idiots like him. I closed my eyes, forcing myself to relax.

"Remember who you are to me, Kylie," he called aloud. "The universe is laughing behind your back now."

My eyelids fluttered in dread, and I groaned.

My life wasn't a fairy tale nor did it revolve around sovereigns, crowns, lavish clothes, and I certainly was not a royalty. Since Tristan was the so-called "Prince", of course, he definitely required a so-called "servant".

And unfortunately, that was me.

In his face.

"Jules, can you, like, resurrect me?" I exhaled after we had finally escaped the crowd and found an almost-empty hallway to stay. "I think I just died from embarrassment."

"You know it's physically impossible to die because of that," said Julianne, as the know-it-all she always was.

I rested my head on the wall. "Who knows, I might turn out to be as an exception to that rule."

"Uh... yeah, but before that, I think you have to deal with something right now, Ky." She pointed her finger.

I looked around and saw a girl, having both of her hands on her face. Even as her dark curls cascaded down her face covering it up, I knew who she was. Oh, not again. Before I could bolt myself away, the girl looked up, tears streaming down her enflamed face and said, "Harris. C-can I t-talk with you for a moment?"

There were only five words and fourteen letters that could describe what I felt now.

I. Hate. Him. So. Much.

Wait that was an understatement.

Gritting my teeth, I wiped my left shoulder with a handkerchief and prayed that the tearstains would come out without much hassle. Now I know what you're thinking, but trust me, I was not into bringing out the waterworks—at least not anymore. Anyone who did cry was just kidding themselves.

"You okay there?" asked Julianne. She had her chin cupped in her hands as she stared at me in a bored manner.

"Fantastic as ever, Jules," I moaned.

"So how was the session with Bella?"

"It's getting worse even to the point where I think I might literally rip my hair out someday, I'm not even kidding." I traced my fingers on the coat's wet patch, which had more or less vanished, and exhaled deeply. I wasn't that pissed about having my coat wet, since there was a good reason behind it-it was where Bella had just wailed like a banshee for the better part of thirty minutes.

"Chill down." Julianne snickered as she pushed a red curly strand of hair behind her ear. "What'd you guys talked about?"

"Same old crap as usual. Tristan this, Tristan that. It's getting to the point where I don't even know what to say anymore so I started recycling my old speeches. I don't know how to make her feel better." I sighed. "I've been dying to tell her that she never stood a chance, and that she was like, the twelfth girl he's dumped. But as we all know, that would be the last thing a broken-hearted girl wants to hear, right?"

She shrugged. "Guess so."

"Why does this seem to go on forever?" I threw up my hands in the air. "That's it. I'm so done."

"What do you say; let's grab some Cokes before we get home?" Julianne suggested, jabbing her thumb at her back. She smiled sympathetically. "Gee, I hate to say this, Ky, but you seriously look dead-beat now, and I think you need a little refreshment to calm your nerves down."

I gave her a flat look. "I always look dead-beat, Jules. No matter how much I fix myself, I still look like a mess." I shook my head. "Thanks, but no. Not today. I have to find that jerk and settle this once and for all."

After Julianne drove me home, I slowly dragged my feet to the porch. I'd spent nearly an hour finding Tristan around the campus, but I'd had a tough luck for that. He was probably away for the day, flirting with girls and playing billiards. So much for the long day.

Next to our yard stood Tristan's humungous residence. I saw mom and Lois, his mother, sitting on one of the white chairs in their wide yard. They'd been close friends since we moved into this neighborhood four years ago-few weeks after Dad's funeral-, and I couldn't help but like the Hartford family since they were so darn nice! Well, except for their only son, of course.

I waved my hands and called, "Hey, Mom, Lois!"

A beautiful, dark-haired woman who was sitting at Mom's side waved back at me, while Mom answered with a smile, "Oh! Hi, honey! I brought your favorite pudding a while ago. It's in the fridge."

As food suddenly registered in my mind, my eyes brightened despite of the weariness I had right now. "Really? Aw, yeah. Thanks!"

Quickly, I entered the house and in the living room, I spotted Lacey watching TV while reclining on the couch; her hair, which was two tones darker than mine, was like long sun rays spread on the red throw pillows. She shifted half of her attention to me.

"Hey sis," she greeted, waving her fingers. "Where did you go?" She was oblivious to what was happening to me, as usual, although we went to the same school together.

"Where else do you think?" I groaned as I took off my bag and threw it on the couch. "Of course, I'm fresh from another batch-"

Clattering sounds from the kitchen distracted me. I stood there, seething at him swaggering around the cupboards as if he owned the place. So he was here all along!

His eyes suddenly targeted mine. He waved a spoon at me in greeting. "Oh, hey, Kyles! It's about time."

I marched up to Tristan and slammed my palms on the kitchen table. "What do you think you're doing?" I yelled so loudly that even Lacey had her head turned. She lowered the volume instinctively, apparently more interested in our argument than the film.

Raising his eyebrows, he opened a familiar plastic cup without looking at me. "Jeez, you're so effin' loud. Hey, I don't see anything wrong with eating a pudding." He took a spoonful scoop and dug it in his mouth. "They say it helps you ease the pain of a breakup."

My eyes practically popped out. "What! That's my pudding, you freakin' moron! Give it back!"

"Wait, your pudding? But this doesn't have your name on it."

"Wha-how dare you! It's mine, so give it back! Give it back!"

"Huh?" He looked at me innocently. "Can't hear you."

I crossed my arms and let the frustration run riot; oh God, he was impossible. My stomach was starting to grumble, yet I just kept on staring at the vanilla pudding that was supposed to be mine. I'd been waiting for weeks just to have that flavor again, but now it was on the hands of the devil. There was no way I could snatch it from him since he was already halfway done with it.

"Why don't you just go to hell, Tristan?" I said between my gritted teeth.

He grinned, causing his dimples to show, the ones I wanted to dig into with a knife. "We'll still see each other there, Kylie."

"Ooohhh," my sister crooned.

Jaw clenching, I closed my eyes. "Lacey."

"Peace!" she chirped.

I opened my eyes and tried to compose myself. "Do you have any idea what happened a while ago, Tristan?" I asked after a moment, trying to control the loudness of my voice. "Bella came to me, crying her heart out over you. Seriously, when will you ever get even a nip of guilt about it?"

He snorted. "You know I'm not the type, Kyles."

"Oh, right, because you're actually the type that always acts like arrogance is a virtue."

"Virtue is knowledge," he pointed out nonchalantly. "So if you said a few weeks ago that my arrogance is as big as the moon, then-wow, I already bested Newton, thank you very much."

I raised my eyebrow. "Wait, what did you say? Because all I heard was 'blah, blah, blah, I am a jerk.'"

His hands flew up in surrender.

"Listen, Tristan," I griped, "if you want to be a playboy for a lifetime, you might as well ship yourself to a research camp; because, you know what? You're like the perfect guy that could be used as an outline to build an asshole!" I just had to add the cussing. Otherwise, I'd have regretted it later. Any opportunity to insult Tristan was taken as often as it could.

"Ouch, Kyles," he said, putting a hand on his chest like I had actually hurt him. "You can't say mean things like that towards your best friend."

I stared at him blankly.

Seriously, "best friends"? I couldn't remember a time when we'd actually acted like best buddies. He always called me a 'tomboy', treated me like a servant, or instead made fun of my haggard appearance. Now, he was calling us "best friends"?

Well I'd admit; we only put up that act when our parents were around, but in reality, the whole thing was in his overinflated head. I didn't really consider him a friend anymore, not even an acquaintance. Not since, he showed his true colors.

Besides, it wasn't like I got any benefits from the charade. Mostly it was just him enjoying everything while I clear up his mess, from his terrible household manners, to his stupid personal relationships. Well, it wasn't like I barged myself into his affairs-jeez, I never wanted to do that.

Let's just say I was more like the "resident counselor" to that stuff, listening to all the pathetic dramas from those girls he'd broken up with, just like what had happened with Bella. And I couldn't do anything about it because they kept on coming to me like a horde of zombies.

I laughed at him mockingly.

He brushed his upper lip with his finger and grinned again. "So you don't like the idea of best friends... That means you want to go to the next level, huh? We can have an intimate relationship if you'd like, Kylie."

Then again, Lacey made teasing sounds. She was surely enjoying this scene.

Tristan's words sent shivers down my spine. Just the thought of having that kind of relationship with him made me want to puke.

"I dare you-no. I double dare you to say that again. Are you out of your mind? I mean, who in their right mind would go out with you?" My eyes flamed with anger, and he cringed slightly. I could feel myself barely towering over him.

Clearly, it was a stupid question, since I knew many girls crave him and wanted to take their relationship with him to "the next level". After all, they weren't in their right minds. Too stupidly love drunk to see through the deceiving Prince-like aura he created and see the true evil, conceited jerk deep inside.

"Damn," he grumbled between his heavy breathing, "this is rich, coming from a girl no one wants to date with." His lips curled into a smirk as he reveled in his insult.

I clenched my teeth. "What. Did. You. Just. Say?"

"Here we go again," Lacey sighed. I wasn't sure if she was referring to the fight

t scene in the film or the fight scene inside this house, but trust me, she was already used to this kind of stuff.

Tristan shrugged; his eyes were focus, not on me, but on the ceiling. "Relax, Kyles. You might think that you're a guy and that you can pick a fight. But we both know what you really are."

My fists clenched. He had to be so stupid if he didn't know the reasons behind my boy-like attitude, or if he did know, he just couldn't understand them.

Now he'd just reminded me about the shame he'd done to me back at school.

"Get out!" I yelled, pointing my finger straight to the door. "I don't ever want to see your face in this house again! And don't ever call me Kyles!" That was the nickname he had made up for me, and I hated that—it was like a guy's name!

He was stumbling his way out of the front door while I shoved him forward, yelling death threats if he might come again.

"Go fly a kite or jump off a bridge! Just go away!"

"If I'd go away, your life would surely suck," he said.

"I don't care! So shut the hell up and get outta here!"

After he was gone, I took a deep breath to collect myself. I thought I was going to have a stroke. Seriously, all the blood inside my body was steaming away, and so much of it had rush to my head that my temples almost exploded. I looked at the mess he'd made in the kitchen. Darn, another cleaning spree again.

"Chill out, sis." Lacey giggled; her attention now back to the TV. "You'll get over it someday."

I blew a short strand of blonde hair away from my face. You know how many times I'd heard those words from her? It was uncountable. Well, I couldn't blame her for having a carefree view about life, particularly about her own. Anyway, what did she have to worry about? Tristan never bugged her. He actually treated her like his own little sister so she always said that he was one heck of a nice guy.

Tristan this and Tristan that.

Change the freaking record!

"Get over it someday?" Oh, come on. Someday was way too far away, for crying out loud.

They say that some people are like clouds - when they disappear, it's a brighter day. And I can't wait for the holy day when that "Prince" disappears from my life forever.

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (2)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED. Edited by: TheRegularNonsense]

ღ Finding Cinderella- 2 ღ

-Tristan-

Kylie wasn't talking to me.

Normally she'd make the effort to pull a face at me, or at least murmur a death threat or two under her breath. But today in this unbearably dull English lesson, I wasn't even worth that.

She was probably still pissed off about the breakup I'd had with another girl two days ago, though I still wondered why she was making a big deal about it.

Hey, it wasn't my fault that most of those girls would rush to her like she was Oprah Winfrey, who would give them a reflection guide or something. And it was not even like Kylie had the slightest idea when it came to that stuff, so I didn't even know why those girls would consult her.

Maybe it was because they thought Kylie and I were good ol' best buds. Ha!

But I really enjoyed seeing her frustrated anyway. Seeing her grind her teeth with balled fists would never get old. It was Kylie's signature look! I smiled to myself as I thought about it.

When the bell rang, she quickly shot up from her seat and dragged Julianne behind. I was going to catch up with her, but my loyal subjects Clark Young and Grey Walter had already started tagging along with me.

Oh, well. I'll just talk to her when she cools down.

As we guys began to talk about video games and stuff, making our way to the cafeteria, we were suddenly stopped in the middle of the hall. A crowd, composed mostly of girls, had hurriedly surrounded us.

"H-hi!" one of the girls stammered. She had a straight brown hair that reached her shoulder, and-well, she looked okay. "We're here to, um, give these to you."

And every one of them lifted those little bags and note cards while giving me an expectant smile. I could only stare at them in confusion.

"Oh cool. Thanks," I said. "For what, though?"

The girl blushed as if what I'd said offended her or something. "Uh... As a Valentine gift?"

Slowly, but surely, I processed the information I'd just heard...

"Valentine," I said carefully, then snapped my fingers. "Oh, it's Valentine's day!" I turned to Grey and Clark, whose faces were strangely blank, and asked, "Is it, really?"

"Dude, are you serious? Where have you been this entire time?" Grey muttered.

Huh, so it was. No wonder the girls were so possessed at the moment and no wonder Kylie looked so pissed off.

"Damn, I forgot the date today," I mumbled and quickly turned to the girls. I brushed my hair, laughing. "Ah, thank you again. This is really sweet," I said, winking, as I took those bags from their hands.

They giggled and whispered to each other like usual.

You know how many times I said those words per year? Maybe a hundred and one times automatically. I couldn't care less about the gifts they gave me.

The crowd was getting huge at every passing second, yet I managed to make a clean getaway by thanking the crowd, then ignoring them as I walked away. The crowds always irritated me but I never showed it. All these people could get so annoying. I'd been surrounded by praise my whole life, as if I was a living monument or something. Sometimes these people made me forget who and what I really was.

Luckily, there's one person who reminded me of my real identity... even though she didn't exactly like me, at all.

"You've certainly not lost your touch. I swear, every Valentine's Day, your personal magnetism only gets stronger," Clark remarked after we'd successfully sat down (ages later) at our usual spot in the cafeteria.

Apparently, a lot of girls hadn't gotten the chance to give me gifts yet, but we couldn't just spend the whole day collecting heaps of boxes and making empty thank-you speeches.

I pushed the mountain of gifts to them across the table. "Get them."

"What?"

"They're all yours. You guys can eat them, or give them to the charity, whatever. Just get them away from me."

Grey raised his hands. "Hold on, T. This is serious. I thought you like receiving this kind of stuff. Why are you giving them away so suddenly?"

I slumped in my seat, my hands collapsing on my sides. "I always get the same old shit every year, and it's getting boring already. There isn't anything fun about this school anymore," I muttered.

"Dude, check this out," Clark said, snickering. He held out the note card, and I grabbed it from him.

There, in neat handwriting, was written: Roses are red. Violets are blue. I have no Valentine today, thanks to you.

It was obviously from Bella. I snorted.

"Wow, I'd never known girls got all poetic like that after they went through breakups..." Clark said. "Especially with you."

I shrugged, scoffing. "Nah, Bella could just be frustrated and wanting to make me feel guilty."

Then I saw the P.S. at the end, saying she still liked me and was hoping for a second chance. When I say I'm breaking up with someone, I mean it. There was no way I was getting back together with Bella. Not on Valentine's Day and not ever.

Why would we ever be a couple again? Getting back with an ex is pretty much like going to a yard sale and buying back your own crap.

I had chemistry with many girls at the beginning of relationships, but all that had just dried up within days. Yeah, I didn't refuse them when they came, but I didn't chase after them when they left. Almost all my past relationships had lasted about a month, and they hadn't felt right at all. I guess you could've called them "relation-shits" instead of "relationships".

Someone suddenly poked the dimple on my right cheek; I almost yelled out loudly. Seriously, who would just poke someone's dimple without their consent? If it were Kylie, though, it'd probably be another story.

I turned to the person who poked me, and-oh, shit.

"Hey, Tristan," Fiona Ryder greeted me in her ever-sickly sweet tone. She had her dark eyebrow up and her pink lips in a smirk as she said, "Happy Valentine's Day."

As she was about to wrap me in a hug and give me a kiss on the cheek, I dodged away as fast as I could. Fiona almost landed her face on the table if she hadn't supported herself with her hands just in time. Her russet eyes flashed, and Clark and Grey tried to stop themselves from laughing. I raised my hands, not feeling any guilt at all.

"Gee, Fiona, a simple hi would be enough," I said. "Listen, this isn't supposed to make you feel bad, but let me remind you that we are not together anymore."

At her back was her best friend Veronica "Ronnie" Sullivan, who was the head cheerleader of Broadway Heights cheer squad. The scarlet-haired girl rolled her eyes as she almost discreetly snorted a laugh.

"Huh, and I thought you would like it." Fiona scowled, crossing her arms across her chest. "It's just a gesture of friendship, Tristan."

What she actually meant was that: she was flirting with me beyond a general acceptance of friendship.

I was about to say a counterattack, but then I just snapped my mouth shut. It was pointless to argue with a person who had a mind of a steel trap that was always closed.

"So, anyway, I heard you broke up with Bella Matrix," she said with a touch of boredom.

I deadpanned, "So?"

"Oh, just nothing." She turned her head away and murmured to herself, "Finally. Served her right."

"Fiona, what are you doing here?" I complained, ignoring what she'd said.

Grey could be heard munching on popcorn while watching the scene, as if he were in the cinema.

Fiona rolled her eyes. "Are you trying to say that I'm not allowed to be in the school cafeteria?"

I hit my forehead with my palm. God, why did I have an ex-girlfriend like her? Had I been drunk when I met her?

"Jeez, no. I mean, why are you here in our spot?" I said, trying to control my frenzy. "Your friends are over there." I motioned to the table, not too far away from us.

"Oh, well, actually I was just going to ask you something," Fiona answered, shrugging casually. "You're going to the ball, right?"

Ah, yes. Broadway Heights High School's Valentine Ball was a yearly special event that celebrated the school's birthday, and at the same time, Valentine's Day. The entire school looked forward to it, since anyone from any class could attend the ball, freshmen to seniors.

I'd heard that the student council had changed some of the Ball's programs that year. I was pretty sure they'd added an event called "Fate Dance" or something like that. No one, well, other than the people on the student council really knew what that was, and it was something everybody was waiting to see.

Last year, I'd been chosen as the King for the initial dance. I'd thought the experience would be epic, but ended up being awkward as hell because they'd also conveniently chosen Fiona as the Queen.

That was one of the most remorseful experiences I've had in my life.

And now, she was asking me if I was going to go the ball. I could sense something bad behind that sinister smile of hers.

"Silly me. Of course, you are, since everyone's expecting you to come." She laughed. "So do you already have a date?"

"Yes," I answered immediately without even thinking.

"Really? Who?" asked Clark.

I glared at him, and he averted his wide eyes, slowly shutting his mouth. I didn't have a date actually, but I had told Fiona that because I wanted her to get outta here.

"Ooh, that girl must be so lucky then," she mocked. Her manicured fingers wrapped around my arm as she came closer and purred in my ears, "But you can come to me if you'll ever get bored with her during the night. You know I'm always here."

I pulled her off me. "That's it, Fiona. Beat it, okay?" I then noticed that Ronnie was giving her an incredulous look.

Fiona threw her brunette head back as she laughed again. "Bye, prince! See ya around!" She waved her hand in the air as they left.

She was one hell of a crazy woman. As of yet, she was one of the vilest females I'd ever encountered, probably the second most vile, if I'd had to rank them. The first, of course, would have been Kylie, but again that's another story.

Grey started a slow clap, shaking his head in awe. "Whoa! That drama. Sweet Jesus, the feels, man." He fell down laughing. "Too bad the other guys weren't here yet. They would have brought us more popcorn." Seeing my glare, he coolly shrugged. "What?"

"You better shut your mouth, Walter," I grumbled to the blond.

"So, Tris, what are you going to do now?" asked Clark.

I sighed. "I dunno. Find a date, perhaps, so she can leave me alone during the event."

"If you found a girl, though, the rest would surely kill her," he replied, giving me a knowing look.

"I know."

Grey nudged Clark. "Hey, speaking of girls, have you picked out one of them for the ball?"

"Yeah, but I haven't asked her yet."

Clark didn't need to sweat over that. With his good looks, his Mr.-Nice-Guy attitude, and his spot in the varsity swim team, he too had a long line of admirers of his own. But his heart and mind would still be in that one particular girl.

He was just always so oblivious and unsure of himself, however, ever since we were in middle school. He should just ask the girl out!

"Good luck with that, bro. Watch out for the big sister, though. She can chew your head off," I said.

"Is that supposed to be taken metaphorically or literally?"

"How about both?" Grey answered playfully.

Right on cue, I saw Kylie and Julianne, with full trays in their hands, scanning the whole cafeteria for an empty seat. I gave them a wave and motioned for them to sit down with us, but when Kylie noticed me, she just glowered and walked away.

I gave a soft laugh. Ha! She'd finally returned to her usual self.

Suddenly, with my mind already on the Valentine Ball, a light bulb flashed on in my head. I knew just what to do.

"Anyway, T, you're in the search for a date, right?" Grey inquired. "I can give you a girl's number if you want to. She's pretty hot-"

"No need," I said, a devilish grin forming on my face. "I already have one in mind."

#####

~~ღ Finding Cinderella (3)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

ღ Finding Cinderella- 3 ღ

-Kylie-

Valentine's Day. What a big, pink sugar coated mess...

It was really weird how fleeting Earth time was when you spent most days staring into space. But how could whole days have passed me by and not Valentine's Day?

Well, it's not like I hated Valentine's Day; I was sure Hallmark really needed that extra boost. It was just that, it always reminded me of that experience back in the ninth grade, which I couldn't forget no matter what I did. I also hated the way people mistook my bitterness as a by-product of being single or not having a date for Valentine's.

I could practically feel the love in the air; it made me nauseous. That insipid stench of conveniently applied colognes and perfumes wafting together with scents of breath spray and anti-dandruff shampoo truly made my stomach turn.

I was pretty sure Julianne and I were the only people who didn't get gifts from anybody that day, much to her disappointment. So we just exchanged chocolates with each other, and I pretended to be mildly interested in our "tragic" situation.

I couldn't complain. Sometimes, it was hilarious to have your best friend as you

r valentine.

If I hadn't met Tristan, I'd probably be living a little differently. I tried to imagine myself as infatuated as the people around me.

Even though I acted like a boy at times, what with my baggy clothes and all, deep down inside I'm still a girl. But that guy couldn't understand any of it; he was an idiot. He was the one who made up the "tomboy" nickname just to piss me the hell off, and the word spread like the plague throughout our campus...

Now people actually saw me like I was some kind of freak of nature, so most guys steered well clear of me, perhaps out of fear.

Bah! Whatever. Forget about boys. They're just a bunch of jerks, anyway.

While we were passing by his table, Julianne asked me why I was ignoring Tristan's invitation to sit with his friends, but I just shrugged, hiding my grumpiness by munching on a cheeseburger. I never liked to stick with that guy for more than five seconds; otherwise I might get a rash.

Besides, it would be totally awkward if we, the unpopular duo, sat down at a table with the popular guys. To be honest, I would rather sit alone on a spike than entertain the likes of them.

"He was just being nice to you, Kylie," said Julianne as she picked a fry off her plate and chewed it. "You've known each other for years, but you still act cranky around him."

"I hate the guy," I said frankly, without a trace of guilt or remorse. "You already know what kind of hell he's been putting me through."

My eyes darted to his table across the canteen, where he was laughing with his minions probably constructing another evil plan. Oh, groan.

Seeing my expression, Julianne giggled. "You two got a really tight bond, huh? Who knows, maybe you'll marry each other someday in the future."

I almost barfed when she said that.

"What kind of 'tight bond' are you talking about?" I snarled. Sometimes I thought Julianne was going insane. Marry each other? I'd rather spend the remainder of my life being alone than be stuck with that jerk forever, thank you very much. "Please stop saying things you know will get me mad, Jules."

She laughed hysterically. I tried to ignore her and looked away. Really, what was the fun in this whole situation? I couldn't stand conversations, which included him.

"Hey, people!" a saccharine voice called through the crowd.

Vanilla perfume reached my nostrils as Lacey sat down and hugged me after she placed a truckload of her received Valentine's gifts on the table with a loud crash.

How was she able to do that year after year?

Lacey was neither a cheerleader nor a celebrity in our school—she was just an ordinary junior student, actually—but guys were still attracted to her anyway. What was she doing right? Was it the looks? Maybe Tristan had turned her into another one of his cronies... But then again, at least she was nice to all the cliques at our high school.

I eyed a baby blue card stuck on her golden chocolate box. The label said it was from Clark Young. Maybe I had to throw that chocolate away before Lacey could eat it up, because who knew? It might have been poisoned or spiked with love potion for all I knew. Tristan and his friends could be very dangerous if they wanted to be.

"Guys, I want to tell you something," Lacey was squealing, leaning closer to us. "Okay, here it is... I've been chosen as Queen for the ball!"

Julianne gasped and congratulated her on the spot for her big opportunity, but me? I just frowned and stared at Lacey skeptically. No, I wasn't jealous of the popularity she'd experienced growing up—in fact, I was happy for how well she was doing in her high school life—but I was a little uncertain all the same. After all, they might have chosen Tristan as King. The ball was his holy occasion, you know.

I'd never have allowed that guy to lay his filthy claws on my sister, even if it was just for a dance.

"So... who's your partner?" I asked, failing to add a nonchalant tone to my voice. "Is it Tristan?"

"Hmm, no," Lacey said. "They didn't choose the previous king to come back again. I don't know who the king for this year's ball is, but they said he's in your year."

Thank goodness, it wasn't him. Now my mind could somehow manage to be stress-free.

"But don't spread it to the others, guys. It's supposed to be a secret," she implored.

I munched away at the rest of my burger while the two talked about outfits and makeup for the Valentine Ball. I couldn't really join in, since I had absolutely no taste in that kind of stuff; besides, I certainly didn't have plans to attend the ball in the first place. I'd have preferred to be watching a movie marathon than wasting my time at an event like that. And if I did happen to attend the ball, Tristan would definitely make fun of me. He would say I looked hideous in a cocktail dress or something.

Julianne and Lacey were practically crying after I told them I wasn't going. Lacey begged me to come anyway, telling me I'd lose half my life if I didn't; I still shook my head, though, confident in my decision.

I was not going to the ball, and that was final.

But when I told them, they looked as if a kitten had just died in front of them.

"Really, guys stop it with the faces," I said, shaking my head and laughing. "I'm not going to change my mind, I swear."

I raised my palm as a sign of the pledge, and Lacey just pouted her lips. "Okay sis," she sighed; "you should come with us after school, though. We're going shopping."

I narrowed my eyes at Julianne, who grinned widely. "Shopping?" I said.

One of the things I hated most: shopping. It's seriously tiring, not to mention annoying spending your entire day roaming around the mall, looking at things you couldn't even buy.

But Lacey and Julianne kept chanting "please" over and over for nearly two minutes until I finally sighed and nodded. Guess I had no choice then. These girls were so persistent that they'd never quit until I gave in.

"Fine," I grumbled resignedly.

"Yay!" Lacey said, clapping her hands before hugging me tightly.

I sighed again. I bet this day would be way longer than I'd expected.

"Green gown? Yuck! That will make me look like a giant broccoli with boobs," Lacey said.

Then Julianne answered, "Pfft, how about blue, then? It matches your eye color."

"Hmm, yeah, but I don't really think it suits me too well."

"Oh, so would the black be better on you?"

"It'd look very sexy at the ball, but..."

"Oh you'd look totally sexy in that."

"I know, right? But doesn't it make me look fat?"

It just went on and on and on. Did I mention I hated shopping? Oh yeah, I did that already. Well you get the picture.

I resisted the urge to block my practically bleeding ears with my hands. Why wouldn't this end? They had been talking without end about their preferred dresses - constantly complimenting and reassuring each other ever since lunch break and on until after school- and they still hadn't decided on a final outfit yet.

Wow, I'd never thought girls could be so meticulous about colors. Okay, so yeah, I'm a girl, but I didn't exactly go crazy over favorite colors or whatever. That's Lacey's job, not mine.

"Sis," said Lacey, demanding my immediate attention as she curled her arms up on mine. "What color do you think would flatter me?"

"Gee, I don't know, a rainbow?" I said, brushing my nose. "Sorry, guys, I'm totally clueless about fashion and stuff like that," I added as I shrugged for good measure.

"Typical Kylie," Julianne said with a chuckle, shaking her head in amusement. "You'll never get any fashion ideas out of her."

I made a face, and she laughed even harder. Had that been intended to be an insult? Well, she was just lucky she was my best friend. Her words couldn't hurt my ego, unlike Tristan's.

As we left the building, Julianne ran ahead to a car that was parked a couple feet away from us. Lacey ran excitedly for the back seat while I lazily made my way to the front. I was reaching for the handle on the door when, suddenly, someone grabbed my waist and pulled me away.

I screamed. Who the hell-

"Kylie!"

That annoying voice.

I spun around; my fist was already balled up, but before it could land squarely on his cheek, he quickly evaded and blocked it with his hand.

"Hey, hey, easy there, tiger." He smiled cheekily. "Did you miss me?"

"Since the few hours we saw each other in the cafeteria? Yeah, really missed you, babe."

"That's cute," Tristan answered casually.

Ugh, son of a building block. Couldn't the guy detect sarcasm?

Lacey poked her head out of the car and gasped loudly. "Ky, what are you-oh, my God! Seriously, are you guys planning to have a wrestling match in the middle of the parking lot?" she exclaimed.

I pulled my hand away. "Where the hell did you come from?" I exclaimed at him. "Appearing out of nowhere like that, don't you know better than to sneak up on people?"

He shook his head. "Jeez, calm down Kyles. No need to make a scene. I just wanna talk to you."

"Oh, get lost, Hartford."

I thought he would get pissed off, but then his lips formed an arrogant smirk. "Aw, c'mon!" he said. "I came all the way here just to see you."

Julianne shriek from inside the car, as if this whole scene were in some kind of romantic film. "Wow!" she cried. "Could it be that you two are already heading to the dating stage?"

"What!" I screeched. Ooh, that girl was so dead.

Tristan snorted. "Nah, it could never be like that, could it?"

I sighed in relief. At least he could admit it.

Then he continued, "Actually, I just wanted to know where you guys are going right now."

I could sense something fishy going on. Crossing my arms, I tilted my head to the side and tried to look superior. "We're going to the amusement park, why?" I lied, forcing a mean grin. I knew just how much Tristan hated amusement parks. Hearing one word about them was enough to make him shudder, or at least get him a little irritated.

But he just made a face, yanked on my left arm, and began leading me away down the street.

"Oh, really? Well I was wondering if you might spare me an hour, or two."

"What? No way! Why should I come with you?" I gasped, trying to pull my arm out of his grip, though he just tightened it more. "Lacey! Julianne! Get this idiot's paws off of me!"

"Girls, please excuse us. We're just going somewhere," he said to Lacey and Julianne, ever the gentleman... bleeh!

I spun around and saw the two with amused expressions on their faces. How could they look like that while I was in the middle of a crisis? I guess Tristan's evil charm had worked on them, as usual.

"Wait, are you deaf?" I cried out. "I never said I was going anywhere with you!"

I looked helplessly at Lacey, but she just shrugged and made one of those "I-can't-do-anything-about-it" smiles. Gah, this was so frustrating! Even my sister was trying to hook me up with this kind of guy!

Tristan started dragging me across the parking lot, and I began to pull harder in the opposite direction. I needed to escape from this situation badly, before he could do God-knows-what to me. I tried yelling loudly to make him let go, but

he just sighed and picked me up in one swift motion, effortlessly carrying me over his shoulder.

"What the-Tristan, put me down right now!" I screamed, pounding him on the back several times. "Let me down! Let me down before I kill you!"

But all he did was ignore my yells, laughing his heart out like the evil person he was. And yes, I was definitely putting him down as "evil" after this little stunt.

He continued to carry me until he reached his red Porsche, where my head smacked hard on the seat after he'd thrown me inside. I cursed. Was this a right way to treat a woman? Oh wait, that's right, he didn't even see me as a girl, how could I have forgotten?

"Jeez, Kylie, you could do with losing a few pounds. I could hurt my back," he complained as he started his engine.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "So? What the hell is it this time?" I continued. "Where exactly are we going?"

He rolled his eyes. "Calm down, Kylie. I promise I'll get you back in one piece," he said. "Just stay with me, don't ask too many questions, and everything will be fine."

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (4)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

ღ Finding Cinderella- 4 ღ

-Kylie-

"Put me down, you idiot!" I yelled at the top of my lungs as Tristan carried me through yet another parking lot.

I'd refused to leave the car the minute I'd seen the Runaway Shoppe, but Tristan had overpowered me once again, tossing me over his shoulder without breaking a sweat. I just knew I was in for a terrible time. The Runaway Shoppe was exactly the kind of place I'd always hated, so whatever Tristan was planning to do there, it couldn't have been good.

When we stepped through the glass doors though, I was amazed. The shop was so colossal; a Ferris wheel would've fit inside without a problem. Everything around me looked so vintage-y and artsy, not to mention smelled nice, if you considered the sweet-smelling air freshener; the pink room we'd entered contained a front desk, makeup displays, and accessory racks, along with a variety of other luxury items I couldn't even begin to count. If I hadn't known any better, I would've easily mistaken this place for a mansion.

Why was I even here?

Tristan immediately dropped me on a pink, squashy couch, leaving me to bounce off the hard part in the middle. Damn, my butt hurt! I'd probably already broken twenty bones today because of his terrible manners.

"Tristan, I hate you," I muttered, gritting my teeth, "I hate you to the moon and back. You know what, you always make me feel like doing a roundhouse kick to your face." Pushing myself off the couch, I tried to make a break for it, but he just stepped in front of me in one sudden movement.

My eyes flashed. "What the fudge—"

"Stay here and keep quiet," he cut me off with a straight face, "or else I'll have to find a leash."

"What do you think am I, a freaking canine?" I shouted, making some of the customers look at me in shock; my face heated up, not with embarrassment, but with fury.

Tristan was about to reply when a woman seemingly in her forties emerged from the back of the store, calling his name in surprise. She was clad in a well-design

ed floral dress, as if she had just stepped out of a fashion magazine. I was a little confused until I realized she was probably the Runaway Shoppe's manager.

Oh yeah, Tristan was freaking rich-how could I have forgotten? His dad was a well-known engineer with affiliates practically everywhere, and I wouldn't have been surprised if he had connections with the Yakuza.

"Tristan, welcome!" the dark-haired woman said, giving him a warm hug that he returned easily. "It's been a while..." Her cat-like eyes then fell on me, and she smiled: "Oh, you brought a girlfriend, I see."

Hoo, boy. Why did it always have to be like this? Whenever we went places together, people always saw us as a couple, no matter where we were. How could they misinterpret such total enemies as star-crossed lovers? That was why I absolutely hated being around Tristan. Anything to do with him meant headaches, headaches and more headaches.

Sinking down into the couch, I crossed my arms and sighed with impatience. Meanwhile, Tristan was snickering as he shook his head. "No, Morgan, she's just a friend, actually." He turned to flash a cocky grin at me, and I scowled.

Morgan only nodded and smiled, saying, "Oh, all right. Well, what can I help you with, then? Is there anything you're looking for?"

"Do you have a ball gown that would be flattering on her?" Tristan asked, jabbing his thumb at me. "We need one that's super exclusive."

My eyes widened, and in a low voice, I said, "What?"

"Of course!" Morgan said to Tristan. "We just received some newly designed garments straight from Paris. Wait just a moment, please, and I'll go get them." She clapped in the direction of some female assistants on the side, and they quickly strode into the next room, where I bet all the designer clothes were on display.

In the meantime, my eyes darted straight to the back of Tristan's head, and I gave him the worst glare I could muster. "What exactly are you doing?" I snapped at him. "Why are you picking out a dress for me? You know how much I hate that stuff."

"Kylie, behave," he said, not even bothering to turn around. "And don't start freaking the hell out, because I'll be the one paying, so no worries. I'm only doing this to make you smile for a change," he added, looking back to give me a wink.

Oh God, somebody restrain me from stabbing him with a pen.

"Shut up, Tristan," I said. "Don't you dare try to use your charm on me either, since we both know that'll never work. I want to get out of here, now."

He sneered. "Aww, but don't you want a present?" he said. "Plenty of girls would die to be honored like this, you know."

"Well, excuse me," I scoffed, "but I'm nothing like those stupid bit-

He held up his finger to cut me off, saying, "Easy with the words, Kylie."

Oh, please! Since when had he become so ethical? Lacey had probably tried teaching him manners, but it was obvious how effective that had been.

I swallowed the end of my sentence and continued: "Fine, stupid witches, whatever. Anyway, if you're only doing this so I can go to the Valentine Ball with you, then no thank you-" I held up a hand "-because I'm already refusing your offer."
"

"Oh, so you figured it out that quickly, huh?" he said. Just because I'm a blonde doesn't mean I'm stupid, Tristan! I know all of your tricks! I wanted to say it out loud, but he kept on speaking: "Don't think I'm asking you out, Kylie, because that'd never happen in a million years."

I snorted. "Yeah, like I didn't already know that."

"I'm sure you did know that," he said, "but see, I'm not asking you, I'm forcing you to go out with me... though I do know I'm hard to resist."

I rolled my eyes. Had Tristan been trying to imitate Johnny Bravo right there? If so, then he'd succeeded in making me even more furious. What a conceited, evil, overconfident jerk! I was probably the only person who could even match up to

his attitude.

"Don't waste your precious efforts, Tristan," I said with an exasperated sigh. His argument was just plain stupid. "No matter what you do, you can't make me attend the ball, with or without you. Why are you exactly doing this?"

"I need you to do something for me during the ball."

"Oh, really? Well, sad to say, I refuse to accept any job offers from you starting this day. Period."

"Kylie-"

"I said I'm not going, dammit."

"Oh, yeah?" His eyebrows arched as his hands dove into his pockets. "Well, then, I guess I'll just ask your mom for permission. I bet she can make her child go out with me." He proceeded to pull out a Blackberry and began punching in numbers, but I just rolled my eyes again.

Yeah, go on, Tristan, like I'd actually believe you'd dial my mom's phone number
-

"Hello, Mrs. Harris? Yeah, it's me, Tristan. Look-"

Then I could hear a tiny noise coming from the phone-my own mother's voice.

Oh, you've got to be kidding me.

I lunged at him in a rush, grabbing the phone out of his hand and running for my dear life out the door of the Runaway Shoppe. I didn't know where I was heading, and everything was a blur as I sped down the sidewalk; then I heard a faint sound escape from my phone, and I held it up, surprised.

Oh, crap, it was still connected to Mom!

"H-hey, Mom!" I answered shakily, trying to make room for speech between my heavy breaths. There was music blaring through the phone, and I guess she was still having her yoga lecture.

"Kylie? Oh, so you're hanging out with Tristan," she said, relieved. "Are you two all right? Is there an emergency?"

Yes, Mom, yes! I'd been in a life-or-death emergency all afternoon. In fact, I was running like hell to escape the clutches of evil!

Tristan's voice echoed through the crowd, and when I looked back, I saw him dashing towards me at top speed, his sharp gaze enough to slice me into pieces. My steps doubled, and I thanked God for my long legs. I was practically running like a cheetah, and with that extra boost of speed, I managed to blend in with the huge mob of people, knowing Tristan would have a hard time finding me now.

"Honey, is everything all right?" asked my mom. "Where are you? You sound like you're... running?"

"Huh? Oh, ha-ha, yeah, everything's perfectly fine. Tristan and I are just doing the Amazing Race, that's all." Oh, and did I forget to mention that I was a fantastic liar?

At long last, one of my few talents was actually coming in handy.

"You're doing wha-"

"The Amazing Race! Haven't you heard of it? It's all the rage nowadays! Anyway, I gotta go now, so see you later!" And with that, I pressed the off button.

I knew it's rude to cut off someone when they're talking, but to be honest, I had no choice. After all, I didn't need Mom bombarding me with questions about this whole thing. If I told her the entire story, she'd probably just side with Tristan because she loved him so much.

Darn, why did my family have to be so close with Tristan's?

My breath came out in short gasps as I ran another length of sidewalk, and I figured I'd already lost myself mid-city, but I didn't care. As long as I was away from the evil prince, I would be all right. When I looked back, though, Tristan was nowhere to be found, and I gave a chuckle of satisfaction; after all this running, he'd finally given up on me.

Then my face slammed into something solid as I rounded a corner, and I toppled over, smacking my butt on the ground. I felt a shock of soreness travelling through my body, from my nose to my rear, and I wondered for the umpteenth time what I'd done to deserve this crappy day. Why was I experiencing every torture strategy in the book?

Never mind what I'd said earlier. This was why I hated Valentine's Day.

"Oh, shoot. I'm so sorry," said a voice, which startled me. "Come on, let me know if you're okay. Are you able to stand up?"

Huh, was the wall talking to me? I'd figured I'd hit a dead end or something.

Then a hand appeared, offering me to help me to my feet. When I looked up, I saw a tall guy with chocolate-brown hair dressed all in black, leaning over me; he was wearing Ray Bans, so I couldn't see his eyes too clearly.

I grabbed his hand, and he easily pulled me up. Whoa, his hands were so soft and smooth, just like a baby's butt... and he smelled nice, too.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a deep voice. "I'm really sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going, and I—"

"Err, no," I said. "It's entirely my fault. I guess I should be the one apologizing, but thanks, anyway," I added, smiling and giving him a thumbs up for reassurance. Great, with my disheveled appearance, the guy probably thought I was always this awful-looking, what with my tangled hair, sweaty face, and possibly-broken nose.

But he just grinned casually. "You haven't changed a bit, huh..." said the guy thoughtfully. "I'm glad you're still the Kylie Harris that I knew."

The smile on my lips froze. Wait-how did he know me? Had I just found myself a s

talker?

"Uh, do I know you?" I asked cautiously, heart burning with part exhaustion, part anxiety.

"What, you've already forgotten about me?" He chuckled. "Well, I'm not surprised ..."

Once he'd removed his glasses, I swear I could feel my feet melting into the ground from all the hotness. Holy macaroni; he had such cool blue eyes! There were a few freckles on his face, but they didn't look bad on him, and with all my bad luck that day, it was a miracle I'd found a good-looking dude who was also nice .

But then my eyebrows furrowed. He seemed strangely familiar...

"It's me, Erik Taylor. Remember?"

The moment he stated his name, my face grew hot immediately. My mind paused, and in its place was a mess of uncontrollable thoughts, all overwhelmingly cliché and frustratingly random.

So that was why!

Oh by the beard of Zeus, why did this have to happen to me now?

I couldn't believe it, but he was right there in front of me. Erik, the guy I had a crush with ages ago, and Erik, the guy who'd broken my heart for the first time.

#####

~~♡ Finding Cinderella (5)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

♡ Finding Cinderella-5 ♡

-Tristan-

I really didn't know what's wrong with that girl.

I mean, I'd offered her a once-in-a-lifetime chance, one that any other girl would've died for, but all she'd done was blow up in my face and storm off. Now I was here, making my way through the middle of the city, searching every damn corner for Kylie but not having any luck.

Why was I even bothering, anyway? I didn't care if she wanted to get lost on a crowded street. This wasn't my problem anymore, and I was done looking.

Glancing at my watch, I realized I'd spent almost an hour roaming around for nothing. It was already dark out, so chances were, Kylie was at home, laughing triumphantly at her ninja-like success in ditching me here.

So I headed back to the Runaway Shoppe and apologized to Morgan for our sudden disappearance, proceeding to clamber into my car when I was finished.

The entire way back, I couldn't help thinking about how my plan to force Kylie into the dance had gone very wrong. Once Fiona heard about this, she would surely laugh and throw herself on me again. Oh, screw this. Whatever.

A couple minutes later, I was pulling over in front of my house to the side of the road and hopping out of my car, glancing at the neighboring two-story house. As I made my way towards their porch, I let out a deep sigh, trying to dissolve my frenzied attitude; that was what I always did when I was angry, took some time to cool off so I wouldn't cause uproar. Even though Kylie's callous actions were already getting on my nerves, I still didn't want her, or anybody else, to see the other side of me.

I approached the doorbell to ring it several times in a row.

After a few moments, the door clicked open, and there stood Lacey with her usual smiling demeanor, which faded the moment she laid eyes on me. "Whoa, T, what happened to you?" she asked, concerned.

I shrugged. "Well, other than Kylie making me look like a dumbass today, nothing much," I replied.

"Oh, did you two fight again?" she said. "Would you mind telling me all the details? Maybe I can help!"

Typical Lacey—always acting as a peacemaker between us. Yeah, she and Kylie were sisters, but why did they have to be so different? Lacey was the kind of a girl whose personality guys loved, whereas Kylie... well, Kylie wasn't so much a girl as a lion.

Honestly, I was glad that Lacey was trying to help out, but it didn't feel right to tell her everything that had happened, so I rubbed the back of my neck and said, "Uh, it's a little... personal. Sorry, Lacey."

I figured she would frown and demand an answer, but instead she just grinned as if she hadn't even heard my reply. "It's all right, Tristan. I just hope you two can work everything out," she told me.

I nodded, though not entirely on board with the "working it out" plan. "Yeah, that's why I need to talk to her now. Do you know where she is?"

"Actually she's inside right now, and I can call her if you want, but just a little warning..." She leaned in a little and whispered, "Kylie's kinda weird right now. I tried talking to her, but she just had this look on her face like she was hypnotized or something. I think you're the only—"

"Lacey, get inside," said a voice from the inside, and I looked behind her to see...

Kylie.

She'd already changed into a set of SpongeBob PJs, and the moment I saw her, I could feel my optimism fizzling out—while I'd been out searching for her, she'd been having leisure time in her bedroom, just as I'd guessed before. Wow, she pro

bably thought I was a total idiot.

Meanwhile, Lacey was backing through the doorway and giving me a quick wave, while Kylie was stepping out into the porch and closing the door behind her.

"Oh, so you're here already?" she said, crossing her arms. "Did you enjoy the wild goose chase?"

I knew she'd already figured out why I was here, but as I examined her face, I frowned. Lacey had been right in believing something was wrong with her.

"First of all, tell me exactly why you look so weird right now," I said sternly. "You just ditched me an hour ago, and now you look... creepy."

She scowled and said, "So you're here to insult me? Go on, then, do it."

I didn't respond, instead moving my face closer to hers, which made her jump in surprise. The expression on her face nearly caused me to laugh. Straightening up, I finally said, "Your eyes are brighter than usual, and your face is all red, almost like you're... like you're aroused or something... Wait a minute," I said slowly, "have you been reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*?"

Kylie hit my head with her knuckles.

"Hey!" I exclaimed. Damn, I didn't see that coming.

"If you don't have anything nice to say, can you just go away?" she snapped, which made me chuckle a little. I still hadn't gotten over her signature angry face.

"I won't go away unless you state what's going on with you right now."

She sighed in a un-Kylie like manner and said, "Why would I? You wouldn't understand, or even care about it, anyway."

"Really?" I dug my hands in my pockets and looked up at her, saying, "Try me." W

hen she didn't respond, though, I sighed impatiently. What a typical tomboy, being so stubborn all the time.

"Spit it out, Kylie," I finally added, "don't make me wait."

"Gah! Fine," she exclaimed, "I-I met..." She gulped. "I met Erik, okay?" At the mention of his name, her face became even redder, and I could barely believe my eyes. It was unusual to see Kylie worked up like this over a guy, and to be frank, I found it a little distressing.

"Aha! So that's why you ditched me," I said; my veins snapped as I thought out the whole thing over. If my hunch was correct, Kylie's actions had been completely inexcusable. "You ran away from me just to meet up with that guy, and I-"

"What are you talking about?" she interrupted me. "I didn't ditch you because of him. The fact that we met up was purely accidental, and I didn't even know he was back in town!"

I grunted. "Oh, so you're the last one to hear the news, huh? Erik Taylor has been back from Florida since the beginning of senior year."

Her jaw practically dropped to the floor.

"What the... why did no one tell me about this?" she cried, then murmuring something else that I couldn't catch, and I found myself thinking, what the hell? Just because Erik was back, she was suddenly all melodramatic? Weird.

"Of course we weren't going to tell you," I said with a hint of impatience. "Nobody-especially not Julianne, Lacey or I-would dare bring up the issue, since you'd probably end up bawling like you did back in freshman year. But honestly, Kylie, why do you even care about that? You shouldn't be talking to him. He rejected your feelings."

"Shut it!" Kylie snapped. "My God, Tristan, don't you ever remind me about that! It happened three years ago, so that whole thing is already ancient, okay?" Her voice seemed angry, but her eyes told me otherwise.

I had a feeling she was replaying the memory over and over in her head, the same one I'd never witnessed, but had heard about from Lacey and a few others. At any rate, this definitely wasn't going to be easy. Hell, just seeing her like this

was giving me a strange feeling, which was bugging me to no end, and trying to get through to her would be problematic for both parties.

"Ancient, huh?" I said at last, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "Then why do you still look like you're drooling over him? Are you still that obsessed with him?"

"What - drooling? Huh, what a nice choice of word." She held up a finger and continued: "Listen, mister, in case you didn't know, most girls look a little different when they see someone they actually like, even though it may be hopeless for them. You can blame the hormones, I don't care, but it happens to apply to all girls, so don't start making any judgments."

"Really? You still consider yourself a girl?" I chuckled. "Give me proof, then."

"Don't start that crap again, Tristan. You'd never know the reason why-"

I held up my right hand to cut her off. "Oh, I know perfectly well what the reason is. You're talking about why you're such a tomboy, right? Why you put up all these barriers? Well, I know exactly why you do it. It's because of Erik, isn't it?" When she didn't say anything, I continued: "He rejected you, and after that, you began seeing all of us guys differently. You starting saying that we're all the same, that we're a bunch of jerks, right?"

She took a small step back, taken aback my answer, and I knew I'd hit home.

Erik was the culprit.

Kylie had always thought I was clueless on her motivations for being such a tomboy, but she'd been wrong, since I'd figured out her reasoning a long time ago. If Erik's refusal of her confession wasn't what had caused her tough attitude, then what had?

Nope, that bastard Erik had been the cause all along.

"But it's true!" Kylie burst out suddenly, fists already balled up. "You're all the same!"

"No, we aren't," I said in a neutral tone.

"Yes, you are!"

"No, we're-"

"Yes!"

"No!"

She flung her hands up in frustration. "Yes! Just admit the darn fact already!"

I did not admit the darn fact, instead choosing to flick her large forehead with my finger, which she swatted away in self-defense.

"Hey, what was that for?" she demanded, annoyed.

"You're too obstinate and brainless, you know that?" I grumbled. "If you really believe that we guys are all the same, why do you still look like you're crushing on Erik? Besides, what's all that great about him, anyway? He's always hiding behind his sheet music or books or whatever like a creepy nerd."

"That's what's great about him! Erik's the type of guy who doesn't like to show off. He's down-to-earth and very nice, totally different from the rest of the male population, and I'm so glad he hasn't been influenced by people like you."

Oh, great, we were opening the big book of Erik Taylor once again. I had never figured out why Kylie defended that guy. I thought she'd already ended all her fantasies about him by now, but shit, was she actually still into him?

I clenched my fists and stared at the ground. "Huh, you're talking like you've known that narcissistic nerd for ages... Trust me, though, you don't know him as well as you think."

"He's not a nerd, I already said that!" she exclaimed, stomping her foot. "Do we have to repeat this whole debate all over again?"

"So you don't like me calling him a nerd, but you're fine with 'narcissistic'?"

"Oh for Chrissakes, just shut up!" Kylie exclaimed. "If you're going to be so critical of Erik, why don't you look at yourself for a change? Honestly, it's like you've been referring to yourself in third person this entire time."

I shrugged. "But I'm just telling the truth. Erik's a narcissistic--"

"Stop insulting him! You're only making up all of these because you've never liked someone for real!"

My jaw clenched, and she quickly lowered her head in embarrassment, apparently surprised she'd said what she had. But my heart was already banging in my chest, putting me on edge. I knew she'd believed what she'd said entirely, and her accusation seemed to sting me more the longer I thought about it.

Dammit, what the hell had she seen in Erik that could turn her into this? She wasn't acting like her normal tomboy-self, and it was infuriating to watch. Why was he the one who could bring this side of her out?

I took a few steps closer to Kylie, that made her press up against the door, and before I knew what was going on, I'd already placed my hands against the wall on either side of her, my gray eyes locking with her startled blue ones. A hint of perfume invaded my nostrils as I leaned in towards her ear, whispering:

"But what if I have?"

Then I was standing in front of her again, my hands at my sides; complete shock had paralyzed me, and I was left wondering:

Did I actually just say that?

Oh, no shit.

What had I just done?

Kylie's eyes were wide with surprise, but curiosity was filling them by the second, and she asked me, "What are you saying?"

I couldn't bear to make eye contact. I'd been so stupid to say something ridiculous like that. I should've been ashamed of myself. How could I have let myself go that far, I never should've-

"Whoa, wait a second," she said, her voice shaky. "Don't tell me-"

"Forget it," I cut her off. "Never mind what I just said, it's not important." Then I turned my back on her, unwilling to argue any longer. I was beat, mentally and physically, and I couldn't handle any more of this Erik crap tonight. "I'm outta here; I'm tired of bickering with you. You refuse to listen, anyway, so what's the use?"

"Well, I'm glad you've finally realized that!"

Then, just as I was about to head towards my house, she shouted, "Hey, T!"

I turned around and saw her hurling my phone, which I managed to catch just in time. It was off, but thankfully, there was no scratch.

"Try calling my mom again and you're dead," she exclaimed.

"Yeah? So here's my warning for you," I said in a low voice, turning to look Kylie in the eye, "you'll be sorry for everything."

She squinted at me, saying, "What are you-"

"Happy Valentine's Day, Kyles," I muttered before leaving her alone by the door.

#####

~~♡ Finding Cinderella (6)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

♡ Finding Cinderella-6 ♡

-Kylie-

I really couldn't understand myself. I mean, I'd sworn to death that I'd never feel the same way I had back in the ninth grade, but why did I still get shivers down my spine whenever I thought his name?

Frustrated, I rapidly snapped the scissors and accidentally divided the supposedly heart-shaped cardboard cutout in half. Uh-oh.

"Harris, seriously, what on Earth are you doing?" Marie Crandall, the President of the literary club, gasped from the back. "This is your fifth time cutting the hearts in a wrong way. Look, I really appreciate that you're trying to help us, but please don't play around, ruining those things. We spent long hours just to make them."

I turned to her and brushed my head coyly. "Sorry," I said with an apologetic smile. "I won't screw up this time, I promise."

Sighing, Marie pushed her glasses up her nose and walked back to her table.

I mentally slapped myself as I turned to my work. Actually, I was never been part of this club, or any other school clubs, but since I had nothing much to do around, I'd decided to tag along with Julianne and the other club members.

I'd been cutting these colored papers for hours just to distract myself from the thoughts of Erik's face, but I realized no matter what I did, I still couldn't get him out of my mind.

Just fantastic.

"Kylie, let's go grab some snacks. I'm getting hungry," Julianne said as she went to my side.

I stood up from my Indian seat and tapped my pants. "Sure thing. My throat feels like sandpaper now."

"We're going out for a while, people! We'll be back," she said before we left the room.

On the way to the cafeteria, we noticed the hallways were jam-packed with students roaming around, carrying streamers, boxes, balloons, stage props, and any other equipment. Most of the classes had been on hold for the day since—aside for the preparations—everyone's minds were focused on the Valentine ball, and not on the lessons.

"What have you been up to, Kylie?" Julianne asked as we went to the line in the cafeteria.

I grabbed a sandwich from a tray, asking, "What do you mean?"

She took some mango tarts, a pineapple pie, some chicken nuggets, two packs of Oreos, and a tuna sandwich; and ordered a bottle of Coke to the lady behind the counter, before shrugging. "You seem to be spaced out since the last two days."

As she said it, there came the flashbacks again. All of my mental training on "How to Forget the Guy Who Rejected You" had suddenly disappeared the moment I'd seen Erik in that alley.

"Oh, Jules." I groaned. "If only you know..."

"Then why won't you just tell me?"

"All right." I sighed before muttering, "Days ago, I ran into Erik somewhere in the city, like, literally ran into him."

She raised her eyebrows. "Ooh, interesting. You finally met him once again. Well, imagine after all these years..." She laughed as she studied my horrified reaction. "So how were you guys? Did you two talk after?"

I shook my head. "I was just glad I was able to run away from him. I did not want to have a conversation with him, not at that time yet. God, I nearly collapsed on that spot."

Her grin widened. "Oh, my gosh. So you're, like, so into him again, aren't you?" She poked my side as she made teasing sounds.

And I couldn't help but be flustered. "No! Shut up, Julianne."

Crap. Was I honestly freaking out over Erik again? No way! I'd been right on the verge of success, having almost forgotten everything, but why had he come back? Some part of me was desperately wishing I hadn't bumped into him in the first place.

I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head, trying to erase his face from my mind.

We'd finally reached the cashier and paid for our snacks. I looked at Julianne's tray and rolled my eyes. I wouldn't be surprised if one day she bought all the goods in the menu. After all, she was quite well known for buying nearly the entire cafeteria without even thinking about the price.

We started to eat our snacks all the way back, and then I said, "Hey, why don't we check out what Lacey's doing right now?"

"Won't we be a distraction to their practice?"

"We're just gonna take a quick peek. Come on. I think she's in the dance studio."
"

As soon as we arrived in the room, I poked my head through the half-open door. The room was huge and a bit dim, and the warm atmosphere was mixed with the scent of sweat and perfume, making my nose itch. There was Lacey on a chair near the wide mirrors. I gave a wave, and she flicked her eyes on me, motioning us to come in.

"Hey, so how's it going?" I asked as soon as we went to her side.

Lacey had her long dark-blond hair pulled up in a bun, and I could see the sweat rolling down her neck and face like raindrops. "It's going well. Just a few steps to master and we're done," she said with a lazy smile.

I grabbed a towel from her bag, and put it under her shirt on her back. "Your shirt's too wet already. You have to change as soon as you get home, okay? Otherwise you'll catch another cold." I noticed that her skin felt warmer compared to before.

"All right, thanks."

"Where are the others, Lace?" Julianne asked as she looked around. "Why are you alone here?"

"The others went out to grab some bites. I stayed here to get rest. I feel kinda dizzy." Lacey rubbed her temples. I offered her my food, but she just shook her head. "No, I'm cool."

"Gee, how did you guys survive here?" Julianne fanned herself and walked around. "Why didn't you open the air cooler? It's still February, but it already feels like summer in here."

"I think the appliance's broken." Lacey shrugged. "It's okay, though. Seems a bit chilly here sometimes."

"Oh, so by the way, how's your partner?" Julianne wiggled her eyebrows. So typical of her asking about boys and the likes. "Is he a hottie or a nottie?"

Lacey flashed me a look, seemingly giving me a secret message, before turning to her and saying, "Hmm, in a scale of ten, I think he's eleven."

The redhead laughed. "So you think he's much hotter than Clark?"

Blushing, Lacey answered, "Of course, not. He's fifteen, for me."

I merely looked at them with a frown.

"What's the name of your dance partner, anyway?"

"Can't tell. As I said, the King and Queen are should be a secret to everybody. You girls will just find it out if you watch the dance, because that'll be the only time our identities are finally exposed." Lacey turned to me with a thin smile. "I wish you'll change your mind and attend instead, Ky. You're gonna miss something major."

I shrugged. "I don't care. I'll just find it out soon from the others."

The noise from the outside distracted us, and we figured out that Lacey's companions were returning to the studio. Lacey bid us goodbye as we left, but before Julianne and I could completely walk away, my heart skipped a beat as my eyes fell on Erik.

"Oh, speaking of the Valentine Ball," Mom said as she took the last of the casse role. "Kylie, didn't Tristan ask you to go with him the other day?"

The spoon of meatloaf stopped halfway to my mouth. Oh no, if Tristan had told her everything from two days ago...

Lacey stared at me, mouth hang open. "Really, sis?"

"W-what? No, he absolutely did not," I stammered, quickly shaking my head. "Why would he even ask me out? Face it, Mom, Tristan would never do that."

Lies. Well, okay, maybe just half lies, since he hadn't asked me so much as forced me into the ball, but still...

Mom shrugged, munched, and said, "I just thought I heard something about it. It

made sense, you two being so close and all."

I tried not to gag while chomping the meatloaf. When would she see that weren't that close after all? She'd always thought of us as being five-year-old best friends, playing in a sandbox or something, but there was no way Tristan and I could even stay in the same room without ending up at each other's throats.

"Anyway, Kylie, your Aunt Jacqueline called," Mom said, which caught my attention. "It's about your college."

Aunt Jacque was her older sister, who lived with Granny somewhere in London, and she was the coolest aunt I'd ever known in the world. Hearing about her made me feel excited.

"So what did she say about it?"

Mom smiled. "She's been thinking of helping you to enter Imperial College this year, since she knows you really want to take up medicine."

"Wow," Lacey breathed.

"Whoa, wait, Imperial College?" I asked disbelievingly. "Seriously, no way. Isn't that one of the most prestigious colleges in the world? God, that'd be a dream come true!" I nearly did a happy dance in front of the dining table.

"Yes way, honey. She even said that she's going to support your financial matters." She raised a finger. "Provided that you pull up your GPAs, though. Especially your math."

My smile froze, then slowly it faded away. Before I could stop it, a groan already escaped from my lips. Of course, there was always a condition.

Lacey made a fist-pump in the air, giving me a look of assurance. "You can do it, Kylie."

Well, it seemed like I needed a miracle for me to do that.

Even though I didn't want to go to school on the night of the ball, I still had to, just for the sake of my sister. I had helped her carry her dress and other important stuffs to school, and honestly, I wanted to see her perform later; maybe cheer her on. Still I'd chosen to steer clear from the people and stick in this dressing room for almost an hour, not up to face anyone else I might find (a.k.a. Erik or Tristan).

Speaking of Tristan, I wonder what had happened to him after I'd turned him away. He'd certainly looked like Spartacus at my front door Valentine's Day evening, and to be frank, I'd had no idea the chase through the city would have had such an effect on him.

Gee, that guy could be so weird sometimes, and I guess that night had been no exception. He'd just been speaking nonsense, giving me such weird answers, like his response when I'd pressed him about never liking someone for real—the words had slipped right off my tongue actually, and I'd thought he would laugh his ass off about it... but instead, in that serious voice of his, he'd just replied with ...

"But what if I have?"

Pfft! Who was I kidding? Like I was actually going to believe that! I just hoped that hadn't meant he was messing with another girl again or something.

A knock distracted me from my trance. Clark entered the room, eyes scanning around. I hated to admit it, but he looked pretty good in his tux, with his brown hair all gelled into place.

As soon as he noticed me, he sucked in his breath and said, "Kylie. Hi. Uh—where's Lacey?"

"She's in the other room." I jerked my head to the left and glowered. "Why?"

He began to sweat in bullets. "Ah—well, I just wanna check her if... if you know, she's okay and all. I just want to make sure."

I crossed my arms. "She's okay, Clark. Now go back to your friends, they might g

et bored waiting for you."

"Nah, they're fine. Why aren't you dressed yet? The program's gonna start an hour," he said, managing to sound calm and casual this time.

"I'm going home after Lacey's done with her preparations. I never have plans to attend, just so you know."

He wrinkled his nose. "Wow, Kylie, you don't have to be that indifferent-"

I heard muffled noises from the other side of the room-and it sounded like they're calling Lacey's name in distress. Clark must've heard it, too, since he snapped his head and dashed to the place. I followed, and when he pushed the thick curtain open at the entrance, my eyes grew wider.

Lacey was lying unconscious in the blonde girl's arms. Another girl on the side, a brunette wearing a blue cocktail dress, was fanning my sister with a magazine

"Jesus Christ! What happened?" Clark shouted as he made his way to Lacey.

I ran to the other side, my heart pounding so hard in my chest. "Lacey? Lacey?" I quickly checked her. She had no scratches or whatever physical injuries-thank God-, but as I touched her, I realized that she was burning hot.

"We-we don't know!" the blonde girl cried. "She was about to get her dress when she fainted!"

"Are you ready, girls?" a voice called from the door, and there entered a guy with curly auburn hair. He was also wearing a black tux, and on his back were little-what were those, fake wings? Seeing the turmoil, he took a step back in surprise. "What the actual-"

I squeezed Lacey's clammy hands as I turned to them. "She fainted because of a high fever," I said, catching my breath. "We need to get her to the clinic."

So that was why she seemed so strangely quiet and tired these past few days. Lacey had been working so hard for this that she hadn't even checked her condition!

Why had she been keeping that she was feeling sick all along? Had she thought of missing this chance of being the Queen if she would back out herself?

"I'll carry her," Clark said. The girls moved away as he began carrying her in his hands in a bridal manner.

"Ugh, darn it," the guy who just entered whined. He expressed the words in a high-pitched tone, so I assumed he wasn't that manly, after all. "What about the dance? We only have fifty-minutes left!"

Clark whirled on him with a glare. "Lacey's health is much more important than the dance, Steven. Find a replacement."

"That's what I'm thinking, Young!" Steven shot back with a glare as well.

Seething, Clark walked out of the room with Lacey still lying in his arms. I was about to rush after him, but a hand caught my shoulder.

"You! You're Kylie Harris, right?" Steven demanded; his wide brown eyes were dancing frantically. I could feel the tension from his grip.

"Y-yeah," I stammered.

"Do you know how to waltz?"

"Of course, n-"

He snapped his fingers. "Perfect!"

"What!"

He jabbed his thumb at me, nodding at the girls who were petrified in the corner. "Len, Krystelle. Get her. Now!"

I was so screwed.

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (7)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

ღ Finding Cinderella-7 ღ

-Tristan-

I glanced at my watch for the twentieth time and sighed impatiently. Grey and I had been waiting for Clark outside the auditorium almost a whole half hour, but we'd had no luck, seeing as he hadn't appeared yet. He'd probably fallen asleep in the men's lavatory or something, but who really knew?

Several cliques had surrounded us as soon as we'd arrived, and they hadn't left us ever since. Still, I could only stuff my hands into my pockets and lean against the wall, feeling totally not up for socializing.

Things just didn't seem right these days, ever since Kylie had ditched me and brought up the whole Erik problem again; if I didn't know better, I would say I was actually worse off than I was before.

"Man, look at all these chicks," Grey muttered as his eyes kept on staring at the girls who would pass in front of us. He whistled. "This is like one of the best things in parties like this."

"You mean; you show up here just to check out their booties," I said monotonously.

"But they're great, you know-especially those that give off a little bounce." He cracked up. "I mean, there's nothing more amazing than them!"

"It's about time you cut back a little, you horndog." I shook my head. "So... have you checked on Clark yet? Where the hell is he, anyway?"

Looking at his phone, he said, "I've tried contacting him several times, but all I get is voicemail. I wonder what's happened to him."

Then a sound crackled from inside the auditorium, echoing across the crowd and cutting off the music that had been blaring for ages: "Welcome to Broadway Heights' 23rd Annual Valentine and Commemoration Ball!"

The speaker had to be the student body president, finally opening up the program. Wherever Clark was, he'd be arriving at the dance so late.

"Clark's probably lost," I said, scanning the crowd for his face before giving up and adding, "C'mon, let's just go inside without him. He'll catch up later on. The others might be missing us already. "

As I started to walk towards the entrance, I saw Grey out of the corner of my eye, grabbing a blonde girl out of the crowd and wrapping his arm around her. Her name was Sylvia, if I remembered correctly, and she was wearing a skimpy short red dress. If this ball had held a Least Dressed event, no doubt this girl would've won immediately.

They were going ahead of me when a guy bounced out from nowhere, making me jump back in surprise. He was grinning so wide I thought his face would break in half.

"Hi, good evening!" he greeted with such enthusiasm. "I am Cupid and--"

"Nope." I frowned. "You are Steven Davis."

He dramatically rolled his eyes as his shoulders collapsed. "Oh, wonderful, Hartford. You just ruined my act, thank you so much. Seriously, do you see these wings?" He pointed sharply at his back. "I'm a cupid now. Duh!"

What kind of spirit possessed him tonight?

I looked around, seeing a few people from the student council that had the same bizarre get-up as his. They were holding some strings of different colors, and I wondered what they served as, before turning back to Steven-I mean, Cupid. What ever.

"What's going on?" I asked, giving him a weird look.

He easily returned his smile. "Well, you have been chosen as one of the participants for the Fate Dance, which will be after the King and Queen's performance!" he exclaimed and lifted five strings that were also in different colors and designs. "Please take a string."

Curious, I pulled a red one out of the pile. It looked more like a ribbon used for gift-wrapping than a string, but what the heck. It has the length of an arm and the width of an inch, and I could see the words "The Heart" printed in gold letters between two golden heart patterns.

Wow, the student council must have spent a fortune on these...

"Oh, you got The Heart string! Perfect! Don't lose it, 'kay?" he said, "There's only one pair of strings with the same word and pattern. Once the Fate Dance starts, make sure to find the girl with a string that matches yours. There are only going to be twenty-four chosen participants-twelve boys, twelve girls, so it won't be hard for you to find your partner later."

"What if I'm going to swap this with another string?"

"Uh-uh, you can't. Once you get a string, you're not allowed to exchange it with another. Those are the rules. Besides, you'll ruin the spirit of the Fate Dance if you choose your partner yourself. Oh, and please tie it around your right wrist."

I shrugged and began to do what he'd said. This looked like some pretty interesting stuff. Now I wondered who's going to be that girl...

"Okay, that settles it. Good luck!" He winked and made a flamboyant wave as he left.

I was hardly able to contain a smirk as I roamed around to find the rest of the senior class. It was more difficult than I thought, though. I could barely recognize anyone I knew, since their typical jeans and T-shirts had been replaced by formal attire.

"Yo, T, where have you been?"

I turned towards the voice and saw Grey approaching. He slung his arms around my neck, and his green eyes dropped on my hand.

"What's that ribbon for?" he asked.

"Ah, some stuff I got from Steven. You know, the she-man?" I snickered. "He said that this is for the Fate dance. I don't know what's gonna happen, but let's just see later on."

"This year's committee has finally managed to wind up something creative for the ball, yeah?" He scanned around, grinning. "Look at this place! Now this is what I call a good time."

I kinda agreed with him. This event was looking way better than it had in past years. For one thing, the place seemed much brighter and more party-like, probably due to the unique theatrical lighting. On the wall of the stage were pasted glittery red words, which read: "BHHS 23rd Annual Valentine and Commemoration Ball" and heart-shaped cutouts that students had spent hours making were dangling from railings up above. To top it all off, red and white balloons were floating all over the place, along with matching flowers, giving the place a fairy-tale theme perfect for the Valentine Ball.

Walking towards the other seniors, we found ourselves surrounded by friends, and my eyes were trained on the bare backs and attractive curves of the girls. I couldn't help thinking they looked especially appealing tonight. Now I'm turning like Grey...

"T, where's your date?" he asked, elbowing me and distracting me from my thoughts; his voice was raised, seeing as the music was drowning out all other sound. "I thought you asked a girl."

I narrowed my eyes at him. Great, he just reminded me of Kylie. Smoothing down the back of my suit, I said, "Nah, she turned me down. I guess she feels too old for parties like these or something."

Then Grey laughed, and it wasn't a normal laugh. I could hear a snort in there, and a little saliva flew out of his mouth, as he slapped my back and said, "Tristan, don't tell me you're referring to Kylie Harris!" His laughter doubled. "No, shit."

"How the hell did you even know it was her?" I snapped at him.

"Bro, Kylie's the only girl in school who can treat you like that! Wow, you got some nerve, huh?"

I grimaced. "And I thought she was going to save for tonight from Fiona. Hell, now I need to keep my distance when the witch is around."

"Don't sweat it, man. Hey, it's not too late for you to find a date tonight. See these girls around? You can easily get any one you want. C'mon, let's go. After all; a campus prince can't go dateless at this kind of occasion."

Grey pulled me to the side, and together we headed towards a table surrounded by girls, who were giggling and talking so loudly even I could hear them:

"...I'm worried the boys will think I'm fat..."

"Seriously? Of course, you're not fat. Even I'm jealous of how good you look right now."

"Oh, my gosh, speaking of boys, have you guys seen Tristan Hartford yet?"

"Yes! I saw him outside a while ago, and he's so smoking hot tonight."

"I totally agree! Even Grey Walter loo-"

"Hush, guys! Oh God, I think they heard us."

One of the girls nudged the others as she spotted us getting closer, and their f

aces grew pale with a twinge of red, no doubt mortified that we were not only standing in front of them, but could have heard everything. If Kylie had been around, she definitely would've freaked out, calling them names and complaining about teenage girls these days.

As Grey explained to the girls that I didn't have a date, I could only shake my head. He sounded like he didn't give a crap about what we'd just heard. Then, as expected, the girls made uproar, tugging at my arms like this was a game of tug-of-war. I simply sighed and slid into the seat they were surrounding, trying to show I wasn't affected.

"Girls, please take care of T," Grey said, gesturing to me; "he seemed pretty bored earlier, so you better make this night unforgettable for him. Ciao!"

Then, with a wink and a smile, he was gone.

I just stared after him, dumbfounded. That jackass! I'd thought he would hang out with these girls along with me, but as I glared at his back, I noticed Sylvia glowering at the girls around, and I realized why he wasn't staying.

Turning back to the table, I examined my new company. There was a girl on the other side biting her nails, listening to her friend, while another one was on my right, twirling her red hair endlessly around her finger. Then I swiveled my head to the left and almost jumped as another redhead sputtered out a laugh, visibly spewing from her mouth as she kept on snorting.

Jeez, what the heck was wrong with them?

Grey had to have meant this as a joke. There was no way I was dating these girls!

After introducing themselves to me (though it was useless, since I didn't plan on memorizing all those names), they began to open up a new topic, thankfully not about us guys. I figured I could join in on their conversation, but as it progressed, the subject matter headed towards something no guy would ever want to relate with.

Good going, Tristan-now you're stuck with these weird chicks for the entire evening.

Finally, some of the school faculty appeared to give speeches to the student body, but nobody bothered to listen. While the speeches went on, I tried to be interested by the blabbering girls beside me, but the longer I stayed there, the older I got, and I wondered if I would have a head full of gray hair before the night was over.

Damn, why couldn't I find a single entertaining thing at this ball? If Kylie had been here, at least I would have had a good laugh.

I twisted around, hoping to see my friends, but instead of them, I saw Fiona parading around. Shit. Quickly, I pulled my head back, and the dark-haired girl beside me poked the dimple in my cheek and giggled. My jaw clenched with irritation.

What was wrong with these people? Getting my cheek poked was literally the most annoying thing that could've happened to me, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised it was going on here.

Unfortunately, the girl must have seen my annoyance, because her face immediately fell with embarrassment. Great—now, it looked like her humiliation was my fault.

But another girl distracted me on my other side, saying, "Tristan, can I ask you something?" The flirty tone was obvious in her voice, and I couldn't seem to remember her name—what was it, Clara, Claudius?—but she was already inching closer to me, practically sitting on my lap.

I tried to back away, not up for games at the moment, but other girls were pressed up against me like sardines, and I couldn't move.

"Uh, sure," I said, trying to hide my uneasiness. "You can ask me anything, cutie."

Be nice, Tristan, just be nice...

The girl grinned, tucking a strand of straight, chestnut hair behind her ears and asking, "Do you think I look fat in this dress?"

I almost face-palmed. Seriously, why do girls always ask weird questions about their looks, especially to guys? Why haven't they figured out we never have the r

ight answer?

Sweat prickled at the back of my neck as I glanced away from her, trying to figure out what she wanted to hear. I couldn't give the honest answer, since I could only afford that with my mom or relatives. Where the hell were Grey and Clark when I needed them, anyway?

I looked at her again, and this time, her smile tightened.

Oh, snap-it looked like I had no choice but to beat around the bush, giving a "sensitive" answer.

"No, no, of course not!" I said nonchalantly, making a show of being interested in her shiny black cocktail dress. "You actually look pretty cute!"

The girl's eyes lit up with hope, and her smile grew wider, causing her friends to start nudging and teasing. Meanwhile, I was displaying a fake grin, but on the inside, I was cheering myself on: Bravo, Tristan, you really are a genius!

I'd finally escaped from a woman's trap! And to think I hadn't believed I could do it.

The girl was about to speak up, but she stopped when we heard the emcee tapping on the microphone, saying, "Thank you for that wonderful speech, Mr. Johnson. And now, this is what you've all been waiting for, let's welcome... the King and Queen of the night!"

The lights dimmed, and an orchestral music slowly arose from the speakers. Everyone got up and began to crowd towards the center of the room, buzzing as if someone were performing a miracle for them. The King and Queen had just emerged, but since I had no interest in seeing them, I didn't move.

Then two guys passed behind me, and I caught a bit of their conversation:

"Whoa, did you look at that girl? Who is she?"

"Yeah, isn't it strange? I thought Lacey Harris was the Queen!"

In an instant, my brain was slamming on the brakes, and I was looking around in confusion. Had I heard them right? Was Lacey not the Queen? Because if she wasn't, then who-

Growing curious, I excused myself from the girls' table, much to their displeasure, and wandered over to the tight crowd, where everyone's conversations were all focused on the King and Queen. Now I really wanted to know more, but when I tried to squeeze into the mob, there was no space for me to enter.

Finally, I grew impatient. Clearing my throat, I shouted at the people in front of me, "Move!"

Startled, they glanced at me with wide eyes and quickly cleared the way, which made me smile to myself. Being popular really came in handy sometimes. Nobody ever wanted to mess with me.

At last, I came forward from the crowd, searching for the root of all this commotion. My eyes eventually fell on a pair dancing briskly in the middle, but the minute I saw them, my muscles tensed.

What the hell? How could that guy dare to show his face and be the chosen King of the ball?

I started to get pissed at the sight of him, but when my gaze fell on his dance partner, the rage began to die down, and I found myself rooted in place, probably resembling a goldfish with its mouth hanging open.

Wow...

I couldn't find the right words to describe her.

She was the loveliest girl I'd seen that night. There was a white mask covering the half of her face, and it suddenly made me more intrigued. Her midnight black curls were like waves, flowing down to her curvy hips, and the white ball gown framed her thin figure perfectly, trailing across the floor as she gracefully turned around.

She was looking straight into the King's face, red lips moving as if she were ta

lking earnestly to him. The others were muttering how perfect they looked together, and I couldn't help but clench my fists at my sides. That guy sure had a lot of luck, getting that kind of girl as a dance partner. I couldn't be blamed for being jealous, especially when it came to someone like her.

Then the beautiful girl tore her gaze away from him, and for a brief second, she wasn't looking at him anymore, because instead, she was looking at...

Me.

Her dark eyes were staring into my own eyes, strangely familiar, and they widened the moment we made eye contact. Before I knew it, she'd glanced away from me again, and I found myself completely awestruck, wondering what had just happened.

My heart was pounding so loudly in my chest, I swore the entire room could hear, and goose bumps had begun to spread over my body. Taking a deep breath, I swallowed hard, but stopped when it became uncomfortable. Crap, where did my saliva go?

This was the first time I'd ever felt this way. I'd seen so many girls before-hot girls, gorgeous girls, but they'd never struck me like this, never given me this nerve-racking feeling that I found so strange and new. And as I watched the beautiful stranger taking smooth steps across the dance floor, one coherent thought formed in my mind:

I, Tristan Jon Hartford, was still lost in her eyes.

#####

~~ღ Finding Cinderella (8)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

-Kylie-

Oh.

My.

God.

You just have to breathe deeply, I told myself for the millionth time, just like Mom does in her yoga lessons. Just breathe... deeply...

I could feel my intestines doing knots, but then again, it was understandable. How on Earth could I be calm while unexpectedly doing a waltz in front of hundreds of people?

Not to mention I'd been freaking paired with Erik!

Okay, so maybe it hadn't been me, exactly. Lacey had been his original partner, but with the whole "fainting" incident, things had turned out totally different from the plan. In my head, I begged my whole life to Steven and his angels that I wasn't going to dance and they said okay and I went home to play some Outlast and that was the end of story.

Sadly, things never worked out the way they did inside my brain.

So here I was, dancing before Erik in disbelief, taking small steps in time with his and trying to break eye contact, even though I couldn't do it.

I really couldn't.

I'd been rendered completely awestruck at how handsome he looked in his white tuxedo, and with his hair fixed, his thick lashes, and his pearly whites flashing as he smiled, he certainly looked like a King.

Some part of me wished the dance would last longer, but the rest wished time would

ld speed up and we would finally stop. All I really wanted was to run and hide, since nobody, especially not him, could know this was me.

Although it had been totally against my will, I had agreed with those student coordinators to do this, just as long as nothing got out about the big switch. I didn't want the whole student population to think that I, a girl whose outfit of choice was jeans and a sweatshirt, would willingly put on a ball gown. That's why I had forced those girls back in the dressing room to let me wear a mask and a wig, and thankfully, they had agreed.

After I begged on my knees.

Now my face was starting to itch, and I couldn't let go of Erik's hand to scratch it. Just great-not only had the makeup made my face smell like Play-Doh, but it had induced an allergic reaction, too.

"Hey, are you okay?" Erik whispered, startling me as I danced. Oh, no. He had to have seen my face scrunching up from the itch!

I quickly shook my head, face burning red.

"Don't be nervous," he replied with a light chuckle, voice preferable to the song playing around us. "Just follow my lead, and everything will go smoothly, okay?"

Aah, wasn't he a gentleman? Erik's chivalry had always been one of my favorite traits.

As the song played on, we circled around the room a few times, making my brain spin. I tried my best to follow his lead, just as he'd instructed, but the routine was starting to get trickier, and I found myself growing more and more confused. Finally, when Erik stepped to the right on a complicated move, I anxiously followed, only to tread on his foot in the process.

Erik hissed under his breath, and I panicked.

"I-I'm so sorry!" I exclaimed, my words tumbling out rapidly. "I didn't mean to do it, I swear! I'm just a complete klutz at dancing, and I-"

His eyes widened, and he interrupted me with, "Whoa, whoa. Wait a second... this may sound weird to you, but your voice and that kind of reaction are seriously familiar to me..."

Then, after another moment, his eyes went even wider, and he murmured: "Kylie?"

I nearly had a heart attack.

Shoot, he actually noticed me, what am I going to do, what am I supposed to say-

Erik was squinting at me now, giving me a once-over, and I swallowed hard.

"Oh, yeah, I can see it now!" he finally cried out as if he'd won the lottery. "You really are Kylie! If it weren't for your voice, I couldn't even tell this is you. You looked like such a different person! But wait," he added, confused, "why are you wearing a wig and a mask?"

Crap.

This was so not happening. My secret was out, and it hadn't even lasted an hour!

"Erik," I whispered hurriedly, voice as desperate and pleading as a child's. "Please, please try to keep quiet. I don't want anyone to know this is me, and I'm begging you not to tell this to anyone else, ever. I swear I'll do anything you want. I don't care, just plea-"

Erik laughed, and as we moved across the dance floor, I stopped talking just to stare at him.

"It's fine, Kylie," he said, "I get it. I'm not one to tattle, anyway, so chill out. You can consider your little secret safe with me."

Then he winked, and I could feel my cheeks heating up as I processed how adorable he'd looked while doing it.

"Really? Really?" I said in a rush. "Like, you'll never tell anyone about this? Do you swear it? Cross your heart, hope to die?"

He nodded his head and grinned. "Just for you Kylie, I promise. Cross my heart, hope to die."

I broke into a broad grin, and I couldn't help but picture myself running around after the event was over, dancing in the road like a total wacko. I was practically dying with happiness. Hallelujah, I'd been saved!

Now Erik really was the nicest person in the universe. Take that, Tristan!

"But Kylie," Erik was saying, eyebrow raised, "don't you hate dressing like this? This is the first time I've seen you wearing a gown, I think..."

At the thought of my dress, I scowled, remembering an argument I had with the girls back in the dressing room:

"C'mon, Kylie, change into these clothes! We're already running out of time!" Krystelle, the blonde girl, said.

"No! Why did you even pick that gown, anyway? I wish you give me something with sleeves or a hood or whatever, because I'm so not wearing that kind of outfit."

"Huh? But Ky, when it comes to being a Queen, the get-up has to be like this!" Len was practically crying as she begged.

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "If I wear something like that, everyone's going to say, 'Divert your eyes! That girl looks pathetic!'"

"Well said, Kylie," Krystelle responded, shoving the dress on me, "but you really don't have a choice, do you?"

"Ugh. Don't even talk about it. This dress is totally embarrassing," I muttered, shaking my head. "Whatever, you can laugh all you want, I guess. It'll be worse for me if I act humiliated, so I've been trying to seem confident in the dress so I don't look self-conscious. Besides, I'm doing this for my sister's sake, not to mention the well-being of our Valentine Ball-if it's not obvious, this thin

g isn't about me at all."

Erik laughed and said, "Oh, is that so?" Clearing his throat, he continued: "But it's all right, Kylie, just hold your head up. You do want everyone to see how pretty you look tonight, don't you?"

What?

Did he just call me... what?

"P-pretty? No way! Y-you have to be kidding," I stuttered, sounding like a startled chicken.

"I'm telling the truth, Kylie. You look gorgeous."

Yikes!

I had no idea what to say in return, so I just removed my gaze from him, heart exploding all the while. Hopefully, the orange lights around us were enough to hide the redness in my cheeks. Inside my gloves, my palms were sweaty, too, as if all the water inside me were being pumped out during this single waltz.

I couldn't believe it. All my first-time experiences had occurred this very night. My first dance, my first compliment from a boy, my first time being close to a guy that wasn't Tristan...

And all of them because of Erik.

My eyes scanned the room as I followed Erik's footsteps. Whoa, many people were gathered around us, all gossiping, apparently. The discomfort started to get to me, what with all these students acting like I was a billboard or something.

Then, as Erik and I circled the dance floor for the millionth time, my gaze fell on a conspicuous person in the crowd. He was staring at me intensely, too, as if I were a-

Holy Shih Tzu.

Face turning pale, I snapped my head to the other side. I'd just seen something-or rather someone-whose identity hadn't registered until now, someone whose gaze could be imprinting itself into my brain cells for good.

The person staring had been Tristan.

I'd seen him. He'd seen me. From the look on his face, I gathered he was secretly plotting something, just like all the antagonists did in the movies.

But worst of all, he might have recognized me!

"Everyone, please give a round of applause for the King and Queen's wonderful performance!" the emcee exclaimed over the microphone.

Ha, thank goodness, it's over!

I could've jumped for joy and shouted hooray! That was, if it wouldn't have made me look insane... But seriously, this was fantastic. The emcee must've heard my prayers and finally ended the waltz, meaning I didn't have to dance anymore!

The auditorium erupted with claps and cheers, and Erik released me from his grip. Before long, he was bowing courteously to the crowd, and it took me a couple seconds to understand what was going on. When I finally put it together, I grabbed the skirt of my dress, bent my knees ever so slightly, and bowed my head, hoping I was doing the right thing.

At last, the clapping began to fade out as the host read from our program, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, it's time for the Fate dance!"

Everyone began to talk amongst themselves, and Erik and I made our way to a dark corner, where we could - hopefully - not be bothered. As we walked, I heard him whisper, "So, uh, good luck?"

"W-what? Why do you say that?" I asked breathlessly, eyebrows knit together. I was still so freaked out by Tristan's presence, my heart refused to stop pounding

.

"Well, I just wanted to wish you luck with your Fate Dance. I can see we don't have matching strings," he replied, pointing to the red ribbon laced through my fingers. "Mine's gray, so I guess I don't have a chance to dance with you again."

"You were given, too?" I asked, noticing the thing around his wrist, with the words written "The Mask", just now. "What's this all about?"

"All participants who have the Fate strings, come to the center please!" the host called through the noisy crowd. The voice was saccharine, and I recognized it belonged to Steven.

"And that's our cue." Erik smiled. "I hope you got a good partner for the dance!" Then he proceeded to the center, joining the other chosen ones.

"Make sure you both have the same color and pattern!" a female host announced. "We'll give you five minutes to search, and when time's up, you should all be paired by string!"

I just stood there for a couple minutes, wondering if I should participate in the event or not. As I held up my Fate string, I studied the heart designs on it for a few seconds and sighed.

It looked like I was calling it a night, since I'd have more fun spending my time in a cozy bed rather than in a hot school with all these drunken, nocturnal party animals. I didn't care if my partner would end up alone during the dance—he could just do boogey all by himself or whatever. Moreover, there was Tristan, who I needed to avoid before he could actually locate me this time.

My eyes searched for the exit door, and I perked up when I spotted it...

...on the other side of the auditorium. Fantastic.

Groaning, I hitched up my dress and edged around the room, distancing myself from the crowd as much as possible. Luckily, I'd chosen to wear my sneakers under the ball gown. I'd refused to wear Lacey's stilettos, which had made me feel like a monkey limping across the sidewalk. Now I was still grateful for the comfort my shoes were providing. Yeah, they looked ridiculous, but no one had even noticed, so I was probably in the clear.

People were pushing past each other in frenzy that their ear-piercing howls mixed with the loud music were enough to shatter a glass.

Meanwhile, I was focused completely on the exit, as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world, which it was, since I desperately needed to go home and take a pee. Seriously, I wasn't kidding-if I spent another hour in this horrible place, I didn't want to think what horrible things would happen to me, and my bladder.

But with thousands of steps to take and hundreds of kids to push away, I'd be out in no time at all! Yay!

Not. This could take hours.

I felt like I was walking through the Amazon Rainforest. For the love of Peter, Paul, and Mary- why couldn't they just clear the way already? I needed a clean toilet!

Then someone in the crowd tapped my shoulder. I jumped. Oh, come on! My bladder was about to explode!

Totally pissed, I spun around, ready to shoot daggers at the culprit, but my body went tense as I saw a familiar figure taking a step closer to me. Heart beating fast, mind racing, knees shaking- if this kept up, I was going to collapse any minute now.

"Uh, excuse me?" he said, eyes locked on mine.

Bloody hell...

Somebody. Please. Shoot me now.

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~~♡ Finding Cinderella (9)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED. Kylie's twitter account at the external link.]

♡ Finding Cinderella- 9 ♡

-Tristan-

I finally found the girl I've been looking for.

Her eyes grew huge and her lips froze open as she spun around. I just stood there like a statue, with my hands shaking half way from her shoulder.

Wow, she looks even more beautiful up close, I thought, swallowing down my anxiety.

It's really weird. I mean, I'd never been like this before. Flirting and attracting girls was just so easy for me, but now, I could barely give her a smile.

Should I even smile? No! Don't smile! There might be something stuck in between your teeth.

I snapped my mouth shut.

Okay, T, stay cool and don't say anything that will make you look stupid.

Sucking in my breath, I gulped down, and finally said, "Uh... I noticed that we're holding the same strings-the Heart strings-" I lifted up my right wrist "-the refore, I'm your dance partner for this event. And, uh, the dance is on that way, in case you haven't noticed."

She dropped her mouth even more, but shut it quickly and turned away from me. I rubbed at the back of my neck, feeling the awkwardness around us.

I peeled my eyes away from her and looked around, noticing that most of the participants had already found their partners and were settled with them in the middle. Some acoustic love song was already gently emerging from the speakers. The five-minute search was almost over, and I still hadn't received this girl's approval.

I turned to her again, sweat slowly rolling down from my forehead. She still didn't reply or give me any reaction to what I'd just said. She just stood there, hands hugging her waist. Her eyes were distant as though she was thinking deeply about something. I never thought this girl could be hard to get.

But of course, I'd never been the type of guy who would give up so easily.

Bending slightly, I lifted my right hand to her and finally offered my best smile. After all, I was the unbeatable prince of this campus. I should keep up, and play along with the title.

"So, my beautiful lady," I said in my politest manner, "may I have this dance?"

Eventually, she looked back up at me, meeting my gaze, which once again astounded me. Wow. Although the mask, plus the harsh golden lights and shadows around us covered her face, she was still growing more and more gorgeous every second. Her long dark lashes fluttered a couple of times; she seemed to be surprised to how I had approached this situation. I always knew girls loved gentlemen, so I was going to show her one.

"Please?" I asked. I remained in my bent over position, not feeling an ounce of irritation. I watched her facial expression changing with each moment, as if she was finally considering.

At last, she lifted her right hand and pressed on mine. There was a sudden jolt of electricity at the first contact, and I couldn't help but to beam in triumph. I'm really feeling lucky to get this beautiful girl tonight, I thought as I led her in front.

She finally fell for my charm.

-Kylie-

I never realized how insane I could be until I found myself standing in front of him.

I didn't want to dance with him.

I didn't want to dance with anybody. And even if I did, it seriously wouldn't be him. He'd be the last person on the universe I would dance with.

But seeing his strange aura and courteous approach, I just found myself going along with him, as if there was a strong magnetic pull in his actions that kept me drawn to him. Genuine, courteous expressions and gestures were things that I had never seen in him until just now. He always had a cheeky attitude that never failed to aggravate me every single day. But where's it gone now?

Is this... is this really Tristan?

My heart never stopped its erratic beating once while we glided effortlessly across the dance floor. I felt even worse when I noticed that some of the girls around us were glaring at me as if my dancing with this jerk was a crime. But seriously, what I just did feel like a crime.

I was dancing with my mortal enemy, for Pete's sake!

His arms tightened around my waist, which made me flinch, as we went along. I couldn't believe his hands were around me. I looked up with eyes of rage and noticed that his cocky little smirk remained on his face.

I really wanted to scratch that off.

With his mischievous smile that showed off his dimples, and his black hair standing up on his head in a mess, he certainly looked like the demonic prince in a black tux - minus the trident, though. That's why most girls claimed they would die just to have a chance to dance with him, to touch his hand, to smell his shampoo, and even to count his eyelashes. But then again, he's Tristan Hartford, the guy who could always attract girls by his charms.

Yeah, right.

I gave him a smirk back. At this moment, I decided that I wasn't going to act as Kylie. This guy seemed not to recognize me, and that's a good thing.

Okay, Kylie, don't show any emotions. Don't show how badly you need to take a pe e. Seriously. Just act like you're a wall or something-

"Oh," I muttered, as I felt his shoe trapping the bottom of my gown.

His head shot up, a crimson shade filling his face until it reached up to the tip of his ears. I quickly bit my tongue, preventing myself from making any noise that would easily reveal my identity. I dreaded having another person know my secret - especially this person.

He quickly lifted his shoe off and mumbled, "Sorry."

My eyebrows rose at him in surprise, noticing his expression was a little mortified. Whoa, this was my first time seeing Tristan feel any sort of remorse, and it's giving me a... weird feeling.

I nodded at his apology and tentatively went along with his steps. It was my fault, anyway. His little steps were all fine, but it's just a little difficult to follow at first - especially when my feet were not in the mood to go along with his.

Two small slides, a spin and another slide... Ah, I think I got it. Well, I think he worked this out for himself.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Erik dancing with a girl wearing a flashy black dress. Veronica Sullivan. On the audience, I saw Fiona Ryder; her arms crossed over her chest. With her ebony hair coiffed above her head and her sparkly red dress, this girl stood up among the crowd. She held her head up high with boredom and annoyance as she watched us.

I sighed. Since when did occasions like this become torture sessions?

Tristan cleared his throat, and I turned to him. His mouth opened, closed, and then opened again. I tried my best not to laugh. It was funny to see how he was struggling for words.

"Uh, I guess I didn't introduce myself to you yet," he finally said, "I'm Tristan Hartford, and I'm sure you've already heard about me."

How could I have not? You're, like, the douchebag of the century!

"So, what's yours?" he added.

Upon hearing that, I became completely aghast. Ack - he's asking for my name! I bit my lip, and looked down, shaking my head a little.

"Okay... I guess you don't want to give me your name right away. But that's okay," he said with a chuckle. "Say, do you wanna hangout after this? Drink cocktails; stroll around and... maybe get to know each other?"

I shook my head again.

He bit his lower lip. "Oh... it's cool for me. I guess you'll be with your friends the whole night, right?" he said in a low, dissatisfied tone. But it quickly changed into something lively when he said again, "But I'm thinking, what if you and your friends would join us? I think it's going to be a blast."

I purposely stepped on his shoe.

"Ow," he hissed then forced a grin. "I, uh, I'll take that as a no." Then he went silent. His eyes were fixed on me for a moment, and then they turned away. He was puffing quite heavily as if he had bronchitis or something.

Was it just me, or was I seeing Tristan getting nervous? The overflowing confidence that he had always maintained seemed to disappear in the moment.

I glanced away from him, letting my mind wander around the thought.

Okay... now this was getting really awkward. Seriously, was that music never going to stop playing? That love song was practically making my eardrums burst.

"Hey, do you have any interest, like sports or anything?" Great, he's talking to me again. "Well, I like sports, especially basketball and soccer. But I'm not really into playing them since I'm more into academic stuff, like Math."

Should I say wow, or something?

I tried not to an eye-roll when he laughed. Yeah, he could be a potato head at times, but Tristan actually had a brain full of numbers and arithmetical crap. He could boast himself and his Math prowess, whatever. He might be lucky that he got his brains from his Dad. Great, now he was reminding me of how I barely hang on to a C in Calculus.

"So, uh..." he trailed off, licking his lower lip, and added cheerfully, "Tell me what sports you're interested in. Maybe we have the same interests! C'mon, don't be shy."

Wrestling, T. Wrestling. I absolutely love that sport and I even follow the moves on TV. I can try them with you if you ask me another darn question.

I shook my head again, groaning silently.

"Ah, I'm so stupid. Of course, you don't like sports. You're a girl, so you mostly like women stuff like shopping," he said, his voice dropping down once again.

He might be feeling utterly disappointed, since he's the only one holding down his conversation with himself for the entire time, not getting any information from me at all.

Of course, I couldn't just talk and let him discover who I was. I didn't want to send myself to my own deathbed this early.

"Uh, listen. I've been wondering about this for a while now, but... why are you wearing a mask?" he asked hesitantly after a moment. "You're the only one who around has that on. Why don't you remove them?"

I held my breath.

"Please? I want to see your face," he pleaded in a whisper. When I shook my head for the hundredth time, he said, "Why? Are you shy? No, don't be. Don't mind what other people would think, okay? Just show me who you are. Only me." He smiled. "I know there's a great beauty obscured under that mask. It would be a shame if you keep on hiding it."

As he said that, I finally knew one of his moves: he was always using his oh-so-charming words to trick girls like this! I twitched my lips in a frown, showing how sickened I was because of the thought.

"You... really don't want to, huh?" A quiet laughter escaped his lips. "God, I can't believe I met such reserved girl like you tonight." I flinched when he slowly lifted my chin with his finger and added, "And you, Miss, have tickled my fancy. You really look so beautiful. I want... to know you better."

Goosebumps filled me, and then my breathing came out rapid. I suddenly got the funniest feeling in the pit of my stomach. In my ears, there was a silence, which was only interrupted by the strong beating of my heart. It was deafening, like it was going to blow up any second now. What the hell was this? Why was I getting some strange feelings?

Dammit, I should've left already!

But I couldn't. It felt like my feet were glued on to the floor and my arms were stuck to my sides. I couldn't move an inch!

Tristan's breath felt so warm on my face, and I realized that he was getting much closer; our noses were almost bumping with each other. This was the first time having him so close to me... What was he doing?

I gulped, my cheeks heating up even more than before. My eyes were getting watery for some unknown reason, but I quickly blinked them away. I tried to halt him, but all I did was make gasps with my parched throat.

Closer...

Closer...

No, no - stop. This can't be happening. Don't you dare Tristan! I swear I'm going to knock you so hard you'll be scarred for life if you-

A sudden gush escaped between my legs. I jerked away. Tristan quickly straightened up, pulling away from me with his mouth hanging open in shock.

Uh-oh.

I gulped. Had I actually wet myself? I was having these weird sensations all over, and my stomach had been dancing the entire time, so maybe I was having a sickness like diarrhea or worse. Yeah, that's it!

I pushed Tristan's hands away from me and stepped back. His face immediately switched to a blank expression.

Sorry, T.

No, scratch that. I wasn't even sorry, and I didn't give a crap about anything.

He blinked several times, as if he was finally returning to the present, and exclaimed, "Wait! Don't leave-"

Too late. I had already pulled up my dress and was sprinting with speed through the crowd.

In case of emergency: run like hell.

#####

~~♡ Finding Cinderella (10)~~

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Click on the external link to read Kylie and Tristan's interview made by AndreaP orcelainDoll!

[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

♡ Finding Cinderella-10 ♡

-Tristan-

"A round of applause for the participants of the Fate Dance!" the host announced over the microphone. "As this night's program comes to a close, we would like.. ."

While everyone was so eager at this moment for the real party to start, all I could do was stand there in disbelief, staring at the back of the beautiful girl in the crowd, until she disappeared and vanished like a bubble after I'd blinked.

No, I can't let her get away like this!

I began to dash after her, but then a girl stepped in front of my way.

"Tristan, hey!" Ronnie said with a fervent smile. "Um, wanna dance?"

I shook my head as I passed her. "No, sorry. I gotta go."

As I left, I could hear Ronnie's groans at my back, but I didn't mind her, seeing as I was much more occupied by that mysterious girl. To be honest, I really couldn't understand myself. Why was I drawn to her this much?

Then, just as I was reaching the auditorium door, someone from the right yanked on my arm and pulled me to the side.

Stumbling, I came face to face with another girl, this one with dark hair coiffed above her head. She leaned in to wrap her hands around my neck, her ruby lips turned up into a glossy smile.

Oh, great. Just great.

"Tristan," said Fiona in a sugary tone, and I recognized it as the one that so many guys had fallen for before; even so, I could only respond with a dark glare.

"Fiona, what is it this time?" I grumbled.

Her lips curled into a frown. "Gee, T, rude much?" she said, pushing a finger on my chest and tilting her head to the side. "I just wanna have fun with you tonight. Is that too much to ask for?"

Before she could trap me here, I managed to detach myself from her and step back, saying, "How about a no? Look, just have fun on your own or with your football captains, but not me. Right now, I've got business to take care of."

"Ooh...." She curled her lips downward, mocking. "Did your date ditch you? What a pity. Listen, Tristan, why don't you just forget about her-"

"I don't think it would ever be possible," I interrupted and jogged away. I could hear her screaming and stomping her heels behind me.

Damn, Fiona could be a drama queen. When would she ever stop clinging to me? What a pain. Whatever Fiona's thoughts were, she was only embarrassing herself, and I had nothing more to say to her tonight.

As I stepped out of the building, cold wind blasted my body so intensely that I had to hug myself for warmth. Aside from the chirping of crickets and the muffled noise from indoors, there were no sounds around me. I scanned the surrounding area, my hope fading out in an instant. There was no sign of the girl anywhere.

Several kids were strolling a short distance from me under the light of the full moon, probably getting some fresh air. I approached them, asking if they'd noticed a girl leaving the building, but all they did was stare at me wide-eyed and shake their heads.

Was I too late already? I couldn't help to think that she had run so fast even Sonic would be jealous.

A moment later, I found myself standing alone in the middle of the sidewalk, gasping for breath. I kicked a pebble off the path, and the motion seemed to make all my turmoil unleash upon on me at once, the disappointments flooding me without an end.

Thinking about everything that had happened, I cursed at myself. The fault belonged entirely to me, and the stupid actions I'd taken that night. The moment I had seen the girl's shocked expression, I had realized how far I had allowed my teenage hormones to go - I'd almost kissed her! -, and I'd known how badly I had blown my mission to get with her before I had even started.

I figured I must've really scared her to death, but honestly, what other explanation was there? She'd left without saying a word to me. How else was I supposed to interpret that?

Nice, Tristan, you've screwed up everything.

I kicked another pebble off the sidewalk again, and expected to hear it land softly in the grass. Instead, I heard a dull thud, followed by a stream of muttered profanities. I gathered I must have hit something... or someone. When I looked up, a dark figure was approaching me from the shadows.

"Tristan?" It was Clark, and he was glaring straight at me, apparently baffled by my behavior. "What are you doing here? Why the heck are you kicking stones at people?"

"I didn't mean to," I said, "but shouldn't I be asking what you're doing here? You're late, bro. What's up? Where have you been this whole time?"

Before responding, he dug his hand into a pants pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, which he used to wipe sweat from his forehead. "Well, I drove Lacey to her house," he replied, "and I ended up staying with her for a couple hours..."

"Really?" I said, confused. "Did... did something happen to her?"

"Yeah, it was bad. She's actually sick and ended up fainting in the dressing room. I carried her all the way to the clinic myself." Clark was still dabbing his forehead with the handkerchief, but I could see a serious look on his face even in the dark.

I nodded. "Ah, so that's why she was a no-show for the opening dance... Do you think she's okay now?"

"Guess so." That was strange for him to say that kind answer.

I furrowed my eyebrows. Something was starting to sink in, and after thinking about it some more, I continued: "Wait, wait, you said you stayed with Lacey for a while after driving her home, right? How did you manage to do that with... you know, Kylie? She'd definitely freak out if she saw you around Lacey, so..."

He slipped the handkerchief back into his pocket and shrugged. "Kylie wasn't there."

"What?"

"I said; she wasn't there. The only person I came across when I got in their place was their mom. I swear to God, man, I couldn't keep calm while talking to her. Mrs. Harris seemed nice, though."

"So where was Kylie?" I couldn't help but ask.

Clark's lips tightened. "What's with the questions about her?" he said. The tone in this voice was rather cold, I noticed.

"Just answer me. Where's Kylie? Haven't you seen her around while you're on your way back here? It's highly unlikely for her to be out this late." I looked at my wristwatch. It was five minutes to midnight already.

"I-I don't know, Tris," he answered, "And how would I even know? It's not like we talk with each other without ending up being apathetic. You know Kylie doesn't like my guts." He shrugged again, eyes distant. "Damn, that tomboy was such a huge problem," he muttered, "just because she's Lacey's older sister doesn't mean she has to—"

"Clark," I interjected. My ears were ringing as he said those words with such an insensitivity. Yeah, I always tormented Kylie behind her back, but when the others did that to her, I... somewhat felt uneasy and ticked off.

"But she's really starting to get..." He glanced at me and his jaw clenched. "Ah, dang. I'm sorry I'm rambling shit already. It's just-never mind."

I let him pass on that one as seeing the look on his face right now. "What's with you being so worked up? You okay?"

"Yeah," he said distantly. He went silent for a while and continued, "I just got rejected. That's all."

"Wait - what?" I exclaimed, staring at him with wide eyes. "You mean, by Lacey?"

"Who else?"

"Seriously? Why? I thought you and her-"

"I don't even know; I'm trying to figure it out. She just told me. Isn't it funny that after all the unconditional care I gave to her, she just turned me down in return? And she did that after a moment she woke up a while ago." He made a dry laugh. "Can you imagine that?"

I tapped his back, giving a sympathetic smile. "Sorry to hear that, bro. But hey - don't feel like it's already the end of the world. I mean, you can, like, just find another girl, right?"

He shoved me, scowling. "Are you for real? That's what she also told me! Thanks, man. Thanks a lot for reminding me that."

"Whoa - chill! I was just giving a suggestion," I stammered, waving my hands. "And I thought I was helping! But I guess not. Okay, I suck already. Don't go apes hit on me, Clark."

He heaved an infuriated sigh. "But that's just ridiculous. Me, finding another girl, seriously? Yeah, I think I can do that - when hell freezes over." I saw his fist clenched on his side. "I don't want everything to end this way. I gotta do something."

"Right," I said. Wow, he was totally whipped...

He jerked his head towards the auditorium. "Let's cut this and get inside already. It's freezing out here."

"Yeah, I'll go later." I nodded. "I'm going to stay here for a while."

Without saying a word, he began to walk inside. Man, he was getting touchy. The serious way he'd dealt with the whole thing really made me feel like a moron for saying that kind of suggestion.

I had already seen this whole scene coming ever since I saw those two going all-romantic with each other. A serious relationship between them would nearly be impossible to happen since there was Kylie, who had been making barbwire fences around her sister.

That girl would definitely track down Clark once she saw him advancing towards Lacey and make sure he would never see daylight again. Poor guy - it had to be difficult for him to deal with Kylie when she was so against him.

Not even I can handle her wild side very well.

Speaking of her, I wondered if where she was right now. I had been certainly troubled when I heard from Clark that she hadn't been in her house.

Sitting on the staircase outside the auditorium, I fished my phone out of my pocket and searched her number. It took me several tries before she finally picked up.

"What?" That was her usual greeting for me.

"Are you in your house right now?"

"Why?"

I sighed. "Clark said you weren't there when he dropped Lacey. Where did you go?"

A pause. I just noted that she seemed breathless on the other line, but decided not to question her that.

"None of your business," she said finally.

"Kylie."

"I... I just went out to buy something!"

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes! Jeez, why do you ask?"

"Well, I was just..." I pressed my lips, hesitating. "Forget it. So, what are you doing right now?"

"Oh actually, I was about to close my eyes and have a good night's sleep when someone ruined it by calling in the middle of the freaking night! Are you drunk or what?"

"I'm completely sober." A smile slowly grew on my face. "Kyles, can I ask you something?"

"Make it quick."

"Are you... wearing your white cotton undies right now? You know, the one you always considered as a lucky-"

"Tristan! You - you pervert!"

I roared with laughter. "In here, I can see you blushing."

"Gah! I want to throw a microwave at your face!"

"Why do you always target my-"

She hung up abruptly, yet I still couldn't get off my grin as her mortified image floated in my head.

"Good night, Kyles," I whispered, putting back my phone into my pocket and getting up from the stairs.

Before I could go back to the party, I swiveled to face the empty space around me, feeling suddenly deflated. I knew everything was already hopeless, but some part of me still wished to see the mystery girl again - even a simple glimpse would do. But it seemed as if that wouldn't be happening anytime soon.

Will I ever have the chance to meet her again?

Then the answer came to me before too long:

Yeah. Maybe, someday.

I mean, it couldn't be that hard to search her in the wilds of the school, right?

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (11) [SPECIAL CHAPTER]~~

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the amount of embarrassment I have for this chapter is very extreme (i wrote this when i was still a noob in writing). it's better if you skip this part. but if you're really curious of what this is all about, proceed with caution.

-Clark-

I should've headed straight home instead of coming back here.

I'd thought this night would be unforgettable, that I'd be doing things like partying all night and getting drunk for the first time- this event would be the last of my high school career, so I had to do some noteworthy stuff, even though I'd probably end up breaking some rules.

But instead, here I was, on my own, sitting in front of some withered red roses in a vase that somehow reflected my situation, on one of the Valentine Ball tables. If talking to imaginary friends would be considered acceptable behavior for a seventeen-year-old guy like me, I would've done it already- my friends were already on the dance floor, grouped in large circles, but I wasn't that interested in joining in. All they were doing was some kind of a weird chicken dance; bopping all over the place like Mexican jumping beans, and that wasn't something I could see myself participating in.

Grey was nowhere to be found, but I supposed he was with the football players, lurking in the corner and trying to look cool and all. And as for Tristan, well, I'd just seen him moments ago, being swallowed by a swarm of admirers- he'd found the courage to stay and hang out with them, flashing a smile I'd known was hiding his true weariness and indifference. Even so, I'd seen some unusual expressions on Tristan's face tonight, and while grooving with the others, his eyes had seemed strangely distant. At first, I wondered what was happening to him, but when an answer finally came to me, I couldn't help but smirk- maybe he was still wondering about the Queen of the ball.

But how could he be that dense? I smiled just thinking about it- he'd known Kylie for four straight years, yet he couldn't even notice her beneath the makeup and a wig? I had to admit, whatever they'd put on her face had to have been magical, since even I hadn't been able to recognize Kylie at first glance, but it was a different case for Tristan- they lived in the same neighborhood, for crying out loud! He saw her every day!

When he'd asked me about the mysterious girl earlier, I'd been dying to spill the beans, just to see how he'd react, but his serious face had stopped me from saying anything. However, the situation was getting more and more interesting, and I was curious as to how far Tristan would go just to learn the girl's identity.

Curiosity aside, though, I was glad I hadn't spoiled the secret, since Kylie definitely would've beaten the crap out of me if I had. I knew that, since I'd gotten the information from a second-hand source...

Lacey...

I sighed heavily- the moment I thought her name, I could feel myself drifting back to the time we'd spent alone in her house. It's a great feeling, having the most special girl in the world by your side... looking after her, talking to her, trying your best to make her smile...

It had been so perfect, I'd figured it'd be a good time to confess my feelings for her, ask her to go out on a date with me; I'd actually said the words to her, but the thing I'd feared most had happened instead.

Have you ever fallen for somebody so hard, you only want to protect them, value them, care for them unconditionally, and then they just reject you in return?

It.

Really.

Sucks.

As I sat by the dance floor, I pulled my phone out of my jacket pocket and searched for her number, but before making the call, I stopped, thinking that it wasn't the right time to call Lacey and talk things over. The best thing to do would be to give her space, but for how long?

I was about to close my eyes and try to relax, but a voice startled me, and I sat up instead, finding a girl standing on the other side of the table. From the looks of it, she was a sophomore, and based on her facial expression, she was worrying hard about something.

"Uh, hello," she said softly, "do you mind if I sit here? Most of the tables are already taken..."

I shook my head, saying, "I don't mind at all. Feel free to sit down."

Her lips formed into a shy smile as she cautiously slid into a chair. "Thanks," she murmured, proceeding to bite her lip while watching the passers-by. I bet she was feeling self-conscious with all these people around. When she caught me staring, though, she quickly turned her head to the side, apparently flustered.

I bit my lip, preventing myself from laughing- this dark-haired girl was actually kinda cute.

Lacey looks a lot like that when she's embarrassed...

Clearing my throat, I said to the girl, "A wallflower, I see."

Startled, the girl turned to look at me, seemingly surprised that I was talking to her; well, that made two of us. I figured she would ignore me, but she soon answered: "Um, well, yeah. I've never been a party girl- I just feel too awkward at stuff like this."

I smirked. "This is your first time at a dance, right?" When she nodded silently, I continued: "That explains it. I know how it feels to be in your situation, but you have to let your hair down sooner or later, or you'll miss this high school heaven entirely. Believe me, it's better to overcome anxiety than stay on the sidelines, know what I mean?"

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Yeah... maybe you're right."

I leaned closer to the table and said, "My name's Clark, by the way. What's yours?"

After a brief pause, she finally replied with, "Luna."

"Luna... That's a lovely name," I said, finding myself winking at her. Luna's eyes widened, and she looked down, mumbling something I couldn't comprehend, which made me chuckle to myself.

As the night went on, I kept talking to Luna, though I was the one who had to open up new topics just to keep the conversation going- it was my hope that if we

spoke long enough, she'd eventually overcome her own shyness. Thankfully, my strategy began to prove effective, since little by little she began to open up; once she did, I found her to be nice, surprisingly talkative, and very cheerful. She laughed at all my jokes, even the corny ones, and though we didn't get into anything personal, we had fun observing the people around us, glancing at each other and bursting into laughter as we realized how ridiculous some of these partygoers were.

Luna was a fun girl to be with, and despite the fact we'd just met a couple minutes ago, I found myself growing more comfortable around her. Still, at the same time, my guts were telling me I was only this content because she resembled Lacey, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was true, and the worse I felt.

What on earth was I doing?

Luna was tilting her head, probably wondering why I'd stopped talking so suddenly; the way she was looking at me reminded me of a kid staring at her celebrity crush- no! No way! This couldn't be happening!

"Clark? Are you okay?" she asked, eyebrows drawn in concern. "Is there something wrong?"

"Uh-" I quickly answered, sliding out of my seat. "I need to go to the restroom."
"

She pursed her lips, but made an effort to smile and nod. After giving her a wave, which I actually meant as an 'I'm sorry', I headed to the only place where I could hopefully contemplate my sucky life.

Pushing several people away, I finally reached the restroom and went straight for the sink, twisting the faucet handle and cupping my hands underneath it. When enough cold water had pooled in my hands, I splashed it on my face, then repeated the process twice before looking up to stare at my reflection; it had been a long time since I'd studied myself in the mirror, and I found my hair to be a mess, several strands sticking out in different directions. Dark circles had already formed under my boring eyes, and I noticed the color in my face had drained.

I looked like a sick Goth. No wonder the people around me were shooting me weird looks. Small droplets of water were rolling from my forehead down to my jaw, and I wiped them away with my hand, still staring into my own eyes.

Why did Lacey reject me? The question kept playing in my mind like a broken record, and I got the feeling I was sinking into a deep pit.

Things had been going so smoothly between us, and I'd thought she'd felt the same way as I had... so why had this happened? Had I just been imagining things? Maybe I'd been getting my own hopes up, tricking myself into believing that Lacey had liked me back; I wished I'd been a mind-reader so I'd have known her real thoughts. But even if I do have one, would I even have the courage to handle the truth?

"I'm sorry, but I really can't do this. My situation is kind of complicated. Just... find another girl, Clark."

What the hell did that mean? Me, finding another girl? Seriously?

Ever since what had happened two years ago, I'd always seen Lacey as one-in-a-million. I'd been a sophomore back then, heading to the library, not to read a book but to take a nap; when I'd gotten there, and I found her crying by herself in one of the corners of the room. She was the innocent type, the one that swoons just from the thought of love. With a book clutched in her hands, she wept over the loss of one of the characters, moved by the black words that formed colorful events in her head. She's pure and fragile as glass, and I'd never find another girl like her.

But what was this complicated situation she'd mentioned? Maybe there was something Lacey didn't want me to know about... Did it involve her friends? Her studies? Family matters? I just wished she'd told me more about this "situation" so I could think of something, anything that could help her.

Why did she have to leave me hanging like that, without telling the whole story? How was there any chance I could fix things between us now?

God, Clark, you sound like a wimp!

I clenched my fists as they rested on the sink and let out a puff of air. If the guys had heard my thoughts, they would've laughed and said, "Grow some balls, man!"

They would've been right, though. I still had to try for this, no matter what Lacey's problem was- I couldn't give everything up now, when it would be so pathetic of me to do so.

I had to do my best to get her back, and I had to do it soon. No time for procrastinating anymore... but where could I start? Think, Clark, think!

You have to deal with her sister first, the voice in my head chimed in, and I realized it was right- Kylie was problem number one. Everything would go smoothly for me if Kylie weren't building barbed wire fences around her sister- if this were the Underworld, Kylie would definitely be Cerberus, guarding the pathway within. As I thought about it, I realized I'd never been able to access Lacey without going through her sister's ranting and scowling...

But every girl has a weakness, right?

I hoped to God Kylie had one- if someone knew about a secret weakness of Kylie's, I'd be able to advance easily in this situation. Tristan would be the one to ask about that, but no, I couldn't do that now, since Kylie already despised him so much; even if I had my own problems to face, I didn't want to create any trouble between them.

Realizing that I'd hogged the bathroom sink for too long, I stepped back and exited the bathroom with heavy shoulders. As I walked, I decided not to go back to the table where Luna was sitting- it wasn't that I disliked her, it was just that it felt... I didn't know... like the wrong thing to do, maybe? Like I got more guilt the longer I hung out with her, and she wasn't the girl I needed right now.

Wanting to get some fresh air, I wove through the packed mob, but halted when someone tugged at my shoulders from the back; startled, I turned around.

"Finally!" Tristan exclaimed. "I think it took ten years to find you, bro." His head swiveled as if he were searching for something, and he added, "Hey, where's Grey? I thought you two were together."

I shook my head. "Nope," I replied, "I left him a couple hours ago and haven't seen him since. Guess he's still hanging out with his teammates in the corner."

"Ah, as expected from him- he always disappears in times like this," Tristan said with a smirk. "So are you coming with us?" He jerked his head to the side, where most of the cliques could be found.

I cocked an eyebrow and said, "To where?"

"Huh? Haven't you heard? There's a party at Brett's house after this, and everybody's going." After seeing the confused look on my face, he explained: "You know, Brett Ben Ten from English class, the one with the Justin Bieber hair?"

I chuckled. "Ah, the dude who can't stop talking about Game of Thrones and his Olympic-sized swimming pool? His name's Brett Bentham, stupid."

"Well, excuse me for confusing the names, they sound practically alike," he retorted. "You know that I never listen to roll call. Anyway, let's go now—the others are waiting for us."

I waved a hand and said, "Nah, I'll catch up later."

"What? Where are you going?"

"Somewhere" was the last thing I said before turning and leaving him there, baffled.

Alone at last, I thought as I finally stepped out of the entryway. The school's exterior was surprisingly quiet, and as the auditorium door shut behind me, I leaned against the wall and sucked in the cool air, ready to mull things over.

This situation was just like a role-playing game, and in every role-playing game, you need the right strategy to get the job done. If Lacey was the damsel in distress, then Kylie would definitely fit as a boss monster, which I understood was a kind of a rude title for her, but there was nothing else I could think to call her.

Now, in video games, no matter how strong the boss is, it always has a weak point. And if this analogy was correct... Of course! Kylie had to have a weak point, which I'd already figured, and if I wanted the advantage, I needed to know what that weak point was.

But one can't defeat the boss monster all by himself, of course. Seeking help from others is the best way to beat the challenge, and when it came to Kylie, I had to have at least one brave person to help.

The sound of the door swinging open distracted my thoughts, and as I glanced to the side, I noticed a tall guy striding through the doorway, his gaze fixed on his phone. With the light of the screen illuminating his face, it was easy to recognize him- he was a former member of the swimming team, though I didn't think he was competing anymore. No, this guy had only lasted for two months- known as the "mysterious" team member, he'd never mingled with large groups of people very often, and he hadn't mixed well with most of the other swimmers. Despite that, he was a fairly nice dude, and somehow we'd both formed a good camaraderie with each other during practice sessions.

Then, as I stared at him, an idea began to form in my mind.

Perfect.

Smiling to myself, I inched closer to him, tapping him on the shoulder; his eyes lifted from his phone, and when he spotted me, he grinned. "Ah, Clark! It's you!" he said in surprise, holding up his hand for a high-five like the ones we'd always done before swim practices.

This looks like a good start for me.

I nodded at my former teammate, returning a half smile.

"Long time no see, Erik."

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~~♡ Finding Cinderella (12)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella-12 ♡

-Kylie-

My heart pounded to the beat of my feet racing over hard ground. Sweat beaded on

my forehead and neck, making my hair to cling to them as my throat ached for more air. I pulled the wig and the mask off. They were actually owned by the Dram a club, but I didn't care as I threw them behind.

Pulling my dress up even higher, I kept up my sprint, anticipating the relief of finally getting away from this place. Finally, I rounded the curve in the path, but came to a sudden halt when I saw what was on the other side.

My breath caught in my throat as I watched a figure coming closer and closer to me. Before I could even take a step back, he was already in front of me. When he leaned down, his face was illuminated by the moon's light. I gasped and started to mumble a prayer.

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no!

Why was Tristan here? I thought he was in the-

"You," he said with his husky voice.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I began to take tiny steps backwards, but he only followed me, his paces synchronized with mine. His gray eyes were like saucers in the moonlight, filled with rage, and his lips twisted up with frustration; dark hair was sticking to his forehead, making it clear that he'd been running all over the place... but why?

Oh, groan. When it came to stalking people, this guy would be worse than Jack the Ripper.

His hands traveled to mine, and I felt him tighten his grip, which made me shudder. His breaths were hot against my face as he leaned closer to my ear and hissed:

"Don't run. Don't hide. Don't even try to deny this from me. Your secret is out, Kylie. This game is over."

I jolted my head upwards, a scream escaping my mouth, and then twenty pairs of e

yes snapped towards my direction. Julianne, who was sitting across the table, stared at me with her mouth hanging open, her other hand was about to flip another page.

Someone cleared her throat loudly, and I turned to see Ms. Hale peering sharply at me through her spectacles. She pointed at a sign on her table, which read: Keep Silent; and blood immediately rushed to my cheeks.

I was in the freaking library!

"Ah... sorry for the noise!" I said sheepishly, brushing my head. Then I quickly lifted up a book to cover up my face.

"Kylie."

I peeked over the book. Julianne pointed her index finger at the corner her lips, and I wiped my hand on my mouth. Oh, turds. Now I wondered how many people had seen the drool on my face.

Shaking my head, I blinked several times as I tried to focus on the writings on the book. My heart continued to beat so hard in my chest. That dream had been so vivid, so real, that for a moment I'd thought Tristan's burning look would actually set me on fire. Why had I dreamed about him knowing my secret? Did... did it mean something?

No! Scratch that, it wasn't real. And I prayed to God it would never become real, either. It had only been a dream, a nightmare, in fact. There was no way Tristan could find out about my secret, and even if he did, it would probably be way far into the future. As far into the future as the day we separated our ways, and I would be in the North Pole saving the penguins.

"Kylie," Julianne called again.

"What?" I asked.

"You're reading the book upside down." She stifled a laugh. "I never thought you could be that talented."

Turning the book upright, I frowned at her. "Why, can't I practice?"

"Gee, what's with you today, huh?" She casually turned a page, her eyes rapidly flicking through. "It's Monday, yet I still don't see your adrenelines kicking in. Have you had enough rest last weekend?"

"Actually no, and I'd been hibernating for one and a half days, Jules," I said, rubbing my eyes, and then just realized that I was reading a Calculus book all along. I instantly put it away like a hot potato.

"Well, you even beat me with that? Between us, I was the one who stayed up all night at the ball but only had sleep for a couple of hours." She let out a small yawn. "And as a matter of fact, I'm still bushed I keep on nodding off during classes."

I sighed. "If only you know the story of my life..."

She raised an eyebrow skeptically. "What do you mean?"

"Oh - I mean, I just totally hate Mondays that's why I keep on snoozing," I quickly blurted out, forcing a grin. "P-plus, you know I always stay up late for Saturday Night Live 'cause they're just so damn hilarious to watch. Yeah!"

Darn, I almost gave away a clue about me joining the ball. Yeah, Julianne was my best friend, but I so couldn't tell her about it because she could be a huge chatterbox sometimes.

Thankfully, she didn't press it afterwards.

"Oh, speaking of the ball, I have lots of juicy stuff to tell you," she said excitedly, shutting the book close. Told you so. "But before we go on for the full details, you have to know something. Oh wait, let me ask you first - do you already have an idea about who the King of the ball was?"

And I was like - oh, my God, Jules, yes! I even came face to face with him, and it was like the most awkward scenario I've had so far in my life, even more awkward than the time I was taking my poop in a public toilet and I accidentally farted - "No. Do you? Because I want to know about it, too!"

"Oh, gosh, Kylie. You'll never believe it, like, seriously," she breathed in astonishment. "The King of the ball was no other than Erik Taylor!" And there came her fangirl squeals.

I waved my hand at her, trying to shut her mouth. "Okay, okay. I get it; it's Erik. You don't have to wail like that," I hissed after I noticed some students shooting glances at us.

"When he came out, I was like 'no way' all the way," she continued, her hands flying in the air. "Really, Kylie. It's like my eyes were tricked, and it wasn't even a Halloween yet. Lacey was right, you should've attended the ball!"

"Julianne! Shut up," I uttered. "Look, we better continue this outside. Ms. Hale is beginning to bellow."

As we grabbed our things and went out, Julianne continued to prattle about him and the ball. I could hardly contain my cringing because of the flashbacks I was beginning to have. That night held my worse experiences in my seventeen years of existence so far, and all of them were because of Tristan. That moment where he had been so close to me that we almost - no, I didn't want to imagine that - kept on haunting me to no end!

"...and then there was this girl who was paired with him," Julianne went on as we settled on a bench outside the school building.

I lost track of her story because she was speaking so quickly, but that one caught my attention. "Huh?"

"Yeah, everyone was wondering about her. I mean, she was the only one who's wearing a mask that night. Why would she be, anyway? The event wasn't even a masquerade."

"Oh," I puffed, getting a little uneasy about the topic.

"Lacey was sick that night, wasn't she? Did the student council just pick a random girl to be her replacement?"

Hell yes, exactly! "Uh... How would I know?" I asked, shrugging.

She laughed. "Right, you didn't attend. Why did I even ask you about it? In all fairness, though, they picked a good one."

I nearly choked on my spit.

"Seriously, it's like she got one of those What Not to Wear makeovers or something." She stopped and looked past at me. "Hey, is that your sister? What is she doing over there?"

I turned around. On the bleachers sat a blonde girl with her hair clipped in five thousand barrettes. She had her chin on her arms, staring remotely at the football field where several players were practicing. Julianne and I decided to go to her.

Smiling, I sat beside her. "Hey, don't you have class right now?"

"Oh, hi. No, our teacher's away," she said in a little voice.

I put a hand on her back and gazed down at her. "What's with the sad face, Lacey? You've been like this ever since the entire weekend. How are you feeling?"

She lifted her head up and spun her attention to me. Her large blue eyes were gleaming, and after a second, she burst out crying.

"Then there goes the precipitation," Julianne muttered.

I stared at her in incredulity. "Lacey, why are you...?"

She grabbed a handkerchief and blew her nose out. A sense of déjà vu came over me, and I realized she was making the same gesture with Bella. Wait. Was she crying because of a guy?

"Oh, no. Hell no," I exclaimed at the thought. "Lacey, don't tell me a guy did this to you! Who is he? What does he look like? You've to tell me right now because I'm so gonna skin him alive with a cheese grater! How dare him to make you cry!"

"No," she mumbled. "It - it's me. I..."

My eyes widened. "Are you pregnant?"

"Whoa - contain yourself, Kylie," Julianne hushed.

"What? Of course, not!" Lacey rolled her eyes and sniffed. "It's just - I turned down Clark!" Then she wailed so loud I had to push myself away. "I - I can't believe I did that to him!"

Julianne gasped. "Oh, so that's what you've been texting me about since Sunday!"

"Really?" I asked.

"Y-yeah, and he's not talking to me anymore. Of course, why would he, right? I hurt his feelings. It makes me so guilty I can't even - whatever!" Lacey hiccupped and wiped her eyes.

"Oh, come on!" I clasped my hands on my chest, grinning. "Stop crying because what you did was absolutely right!"

Lacey and Julianne just blinked at that.

"Don't you get it? That's what I've been waiting for! For him to stop clinging around you!" I cried. Then I studied their faces and put up a frown. "What?"

"B-but, Kylie! Why? Clark's charming, intelligent, considerate... He's like a perfect guy a girl wants to date with!" Lacey complained, her lips trembling.

I rolled my eyes and said, "Oh, stop it, Lacey. Forget that guy already. I've already told you how I feel about him, and he's not perfect, especially not for you."

Julianne just cocked her eyebrow at me.

"But-"

"No buts. I mean it."

"Ugh. You, sister dearest, are impossible," Lacey said, shaking her head.

As I watched her, I noticed she looked like a miserable porcelain doll. Her lips were frozen in a thin line, and her glistening eyes were distant. My heart sank

.

"Do you still remember the rule, Lacey?" I asked after a momentary silence.

She sighed. "'None of Tristan's friends should ever date me.'"

"That's harsh," Julianne commented.

"Jules." I gave her a warning look and turned back to my sister. "Yes. So forget about him, okay? It's as simple as that."

"No, it's not. I don't think it would ever be that simple."

I wrapped my hands around hers, staring at her with genuine sincerity. "Look, Lacey, I love seeing you happy with a guy you like, but... you have to understand, it's so much more difficult if you choose him. Just think about it - he may seem like a great guy, but he's Tristan's friend, and like-minded people tend to associate with each other. 'Birds of a feather flock together', right? We have no idea what's on his mind, so what if he turns out to be exactly like Tristan?"

"Kylie." Julianne flashed me a disapproving look.

I ignored her. "You know what Tristan's like, with all those broken-hearted girls... I know it's terrible to judge people, but I don't want you to end up as another one of those girls left in the dust, and I... I do hope you understand, and I'm really, really sorry if I was being a horrible sister to you, but I just ca

n't stop me from being worried-

Lacey chuckled, though the laughter didn't reach her eyes.

"Okay. I get your point," she said quietly. "I'll... try to think that."

I nodded. "Good."

She bit her bottom lip and lifted up her phone. "Oh, I better get going now. My next class is about to start at any minute."

"So... you feel okay now?" I asked as I watched her slinging her bag on her shoulder and standing up.

She bobbed her head lightly. "Uh, yeah I guess... thanks for your time, guys."

When she was finally out of earshot, Julianne inched towards me. "What was all that about?" she said with a glare.

I shrugged. "I'm just protecting her."

"No, who are you kidding?" she said bluntly. "You're actually limiting her freedom to get the guy she likes and have her own happily ever after!"

I scoffed. "Come on, a happily ever after? Jeez, she's only sixteen. Besides, does that thing still exist in this world particularly in high school?"

"So what are you trying to imply? That you'll let her have her first boyfriend when she's finally eighty and having dextrose and shots?" Sighing, she shook her head and shifted herself towards the field. "I bet she'd never forget this experience."

"But she can suck it up and get over soon," I said, my guts started to twist as a vague memory came to me.

"It's not that easy. Hello, Lacey totally likes the guy since freshman year! I even think she's falling in love with him for real."

"Pathetic."

"Trust me; you would think twice saying that word again once you know how it feels like."

"Feels like what?"

"Oh, Kylie, you little naive..." Julianne smirked as she stood up from the seat. "I mean, when you finally find the guy, who not only can give a smile in your face but in your heart as well." She winked and started to walk away.

I only stared at her, wondering what she exactly meant by that.

#####

~~ღ Finding Cinderella (13)~~

#####

ღ Finding Cinderella- 13 ღ

-Tristan-

I hadn't been able to sleep for the past couple of nights.

No, I wouldn't consider it insomnia. It was only because a certain someone had invaded my mind - every detail on her face, every movement she'd made, every second that had passed back at the dance was still fresh in my mind, even though it had happened days ago.

It might have sounded strange, but I really felt a connection between this girl and myself. Something I hadn't felt with another person in a long time.

They say that if you're thinking of someone, the person in your thoughts may be thinking about you, too. Was that the truth, or was I just an exception? Damn, just knowing how often I lay in bed thinking about her, and how she probably didn't think of me at all, really did suck.

Tossing my backpack on my shoulder, I jogged downstairs and saw Dad reading a newspaper on the dining table.

"Morning," I greeted him.

Dad looked up from his paper. "Mornin', son."

I took a ham and an egg and slapped them between the two toasted breads. Mom came out from the kitchen and settled two clean plates on the table.

"Oh, Tristan, are you going to school already?" she asked, confusion drawn on her face. "Why don't you settle down and eat your breakfast first? It's still early."

"Nah, this is enough for me," I said, gesturing at my badly arranged sandwich. "I gotta go so I can catch up with the Harris girls."

Mom's olive eyes lit up. "Oh, you will drive them to school?"

Taking a huge bite, I nodded. "Yeah, that's the plan."

"That's great to hear. It's been a long time since you did that with them," she said happily, "honey, you should do that more often now, so those girls won't have trouble catching up the bus. Emilie would surely be grateful."

I snorted at that as I munched. "Right. And while I'm on that, I might as well wear plate armor in case Kylie starts throwing tantrums on me all the way to school."

Dad casually took a sip from his coffee. "Well, that reminds me of someone," he said, pointing out Mom.

"Arthur." Mom flashed him a warning look.

I grinned. "See? Dad agrees. Anyway, I gotta bounce now. Bye." I leaned to kiss her cheek, had another bite of my sandwich, and took off before she could start freaking out.

Mom and Kylie had really something in common, which might have been why Mom was so fond of her.

Luckily, as soon as I stepped out of the house, Lacey and Kylie were already heading out of their lawn. I called them, waving my hands in the air. Lacey noticed me; she waved back and nudged Kylie, who just gave me a scowl in return.

"Hey, beautiful morning, huh?" I said as I leaned on the door of my car parked beside the curb.

"Yeah, it is," Kylie shot back, "until you came."

"Not talking to you," I ventured. Her face immediately turned red and scrunched up in annoyance. I laughed. "Just kidding."

"Screw you," she muttered. "Let's go, Lacey. We don't have all the time in the world to deal with such jerks." She grabbed Lacey's hand and walked away.

"And this jerk decided to be a gentleman for today to offer the two ladies a fancy ride to school," I called out and smirked. "Only the vehicle isn't that fancy enough, but is certainly much better compared to that smelly old bus."

Lacey pulled Kylie back, saying, "Really? You're gonna drive us to school?"

"Yes."

"Cool, I'm in!" Lacey skipped towards me and turned back to Kylie, gesturing her . "Sis, what are you waiting for? Come on!"

"No, Lacey. That's a deathtrap!" Kylie shouted.

"Oh, please, we are already being offered a fast ride. It'd be such a hassle to walk all the way to the bus stop," Lacey answered. "Just for this once, sis?"

"Don't worry, it would be fine if she won't join us," I told her. "I just want you to come with me because there's something I'd like to talk with you while we're on the way."

At that moment, Kylie marched towards us. "Fine. I'm in," she said, glaring at me. "Oh, I do apologize if I would sound a bit prying, mister, but I would like to know what that something is all about as well," she added, faking courtesy.

I grinned. "That caught your attention, huh?" I turned around and, to tease her more, I politely opened the front door for her. "Well, ladies first"

Kylie threw her bag on the back seat and leaped over the door. Sighing, I rolled my eyes at her ignorance and let Lacey sit beside the driver's seat instead. I entered the other side and started the engine.

"I'm glad you put the top down," Lacey spoke as she pulled on the seatbelt. "I just love the feel of the morning breeze."

I twisted to Kylie, who had her arms crossed over her chest.

"You okay there, Kylie?" I said.

She only grunted and looked away. I chuckled and turned my eyes back on the road .

After a moment, Lacey asked, "So, what is it you'd like to talk about?"

"Oh, well, actually I was kinda wondering if you knew the girl who replaced you

at the ball," I said on-point.

"What?" Kylie piped.

Out of the corner of my eye, Lacey looked at me in surprise. "Is that it?" she asked uncertainly.

I nodded. "Yeah. So... do you know her? What's her name?"

The ride immediately went silent. Puckering my eyebrows, I turned to Lacey in curiosity. She seemed to be shooting strange glances at Kylie. I whipped my head about the back, and Kylie flashed her eyes on me.

"Eyes on the road, T! Do you want us to get killed?" she exclaimed.

I heaved a sigh and did what she'd said. "What's with you girls being quiet right now?" I observed and steered the wheel to the right.

"What's with you asking that question to Lacey?" Kylie snapped back.

"That's apparently none of your business." A smile stretched my lips again. "Unless you're getting jealous right now."

"Huh, what makes you think I would get jealous?"

"I know you've got a crush on me."

Kylie laughed. And it wasn't even a ladylike laughter. It was boisterous, half-laughing, and half-hiccupping. She banged the seat with her fist and managed to choke out, "W-what? Me? Having a crush on you?" She cackled even more. "Bless your delusional heart, T-Tristan. Oh, my God, my ribs. Ouch."

I tightened my grip on the wheel as I felt blood rushing to my face. "Can't you take a joke, Kylie?"

"That's why I'm laughing so hard!" She exhaled noisily. "I practically died! Jesus, I need oxygen."

I decided to ignore her. "So, Lacey, can you tell me who she is?" I asked again.

"Excuse me, um, she?"

"I was talking about the anonymous Queen of the ball."

Kylie huffed. "Seriously?"

"Shut up, Kyles."

"Oh, right!" Lacey giggled. "Sorry, my head's in the clouds. I'm such a dummy. Um, about your question... that girl, um..." She took a pause as if she was pondering about it. "Actually... I have no idea about that," she mumbled lastly.

"What?"

"I passed out that time, Tristan," she answered, her voice getting stronger as she went on. "So I really have no memory about that. I-it was the last minute, and the student council didn't have any choice but to pick a random girl, I guess. .."

My hopes began to fizzle out. I had thought this start would be easy for me.

"I... think that's understandable," I muttered. "Did they mention to you about the girl's name, though?"

Lacey shook her head. "No, they didn't. I'm-I'm sorry I can't give you enough information."

Well, this sucks big time.

I sighed in defeat. "It's all right, Lacey. I think I'll try to find that girl at school, if I'm lucky enough to spot her around."

"Ooh," Lacey chanted, wiggling her eyebrows. "I think I'm getting something out of it! T, are you interested in that girl?"

"Yeah. She's very beautiful," I said distantly as the girl's face drifted into my head.

"Oh, gosh. You heard that, Kylie?" she squealed, "Tristan said that yo-she is very beautiful, like, he's just so that into her!"

"What? W-why are you telling me that? I have no idea what you two are talking about," Kylie stammered quickly. "T, can you drive a little faster?"

"As you wish." Grinning, I pressed the accelerator hard the car sped up like a bullet train through the highway, and we reached the school's parking lot in just a snap.

"And we're finally here." I turned the ignition off.

"Wow. Thanks for the ride," Lacey said, taking off the seatbelt. "Let's go, Ky-o h, are you okay?"

I turned around and saw Kylie pressed on the seat like a flat pancake; her face was all white and her hair stood up in every direction.

"TRISTAN, YOU IDIOT!" she shrieked. "I said you drive a little faster! Not a ten-thousand-miles-per-hour faster! You were practically over the speed limit."

"Almost, but not quite, so we're in the clear."

"Whatever. God, that nearly made me throw up." She hopped down over the door and grabbed her bag. "Do that again, and I'll whack you in your freaking esophagus!"

I smiled casually. "Cool. So does that mean you want to ride with me again?"

She made a face and stomped her way to the school entrance.

Well, it seemed like I already screwed up someone's morning.

#####

~~♡ Finding Cinderella (14)~~

#####

♡ Finding Cinderella- 14 ♡

-Tristan-

As soon as I'd stepped onto campus, my head couldn't stop turning around, scanning the mob of students, hoping I'd spot her at last. I'd been keeping an eye for every girl around with similar facial features, comparing them with each other and praying for the best.

Long, curly, black hair...

There! A girl with the same hair was leaning against her locker, laughing with her friends, and when one of them finally caught me staring, the friend nudged the curly-haired girl and pointed to me. Then her eyes shifted to mine, and the corner of her lips turned upwards with shyness.

Before passing her locker, I smirked, yet all I felt was disappointment. She didn't have the exact features of the mystery girl.

"Tris! I've been calling for you three times already!"

A voice startled me out of my thoughts, and I turned to see Clark jogging up to me. We pumped our fists in the usual sign of greeting, and I said, "Ah, I didn't hear you."

Small, oval-shaped face...

He flicked my left shoulder and said, "That's all right, bro. Seems like your head's in the clouds again, yeah?" He chuckled, adding, "You're just like all the others who haven't gotten over the dance yet."

"Tell me about it."

The noise dissipated when we entered our homeroom, and then was replaced by several greetings from some of our classmates.

Slipping my backpack off my shoulder, I headed to my seat at the back, where the gang was laughing and talking about something or other. They gave me high-fives and slaps on the back as usual. I returned them absentmindedly, what with these millions of random thoughts swarming my brain.

Leaning against the wall, I glanced out the side window, my hands inside my pockets. The raucous noise around me rang in my ears, but I wasn't distracted by it as I kept on scanning the students who were walking through the school entrance.

Tall, slim build... Small nose... Huge, dark eyes...

"Bro, that song is so old!" I heard Ryo Knight, one of my pals, exclaim in his Japanese accent as another guy played a Westlife track on his phone.

"So is your mom, but I don't see you complaining," William Reed countered, followed by several outbursts of 'Ooh, burn!' and laughter from the others. "Anyway," he continued more seriously, "I have no choice but to use this. She likes old songs, from what I've heard."

"So... you're actually dating her? For real? It looks like you're getting serious over here," another dude, Justin Case, responded. And yes, that's really his name. Creative, right? His parents had to have been huge jokers.

"Why would I not be serious? Monique's a great girl, man."

My head turned towards them in a snap. All their mouths were frozen into O shapes as they stared at a bewildered William.

Eventually, Grey said, "Dude! Did you not realize you're dating T's ex-girlfriend?"

"Seventh ex-girlfriend," Clark added, and the group's gazes darted towards me, William's face turning as white as the classroom wall.

I raised an eyebrow at them, wondering why they were overreacting. I mean, okay, I had dated Monique, and her personality had been somewhat interesting, but apparently, my relationship with her had been just like all the others- childish, confusing, and not too serious. It was hardly even worth remembering.

"Dude, you just broke the bro code." Shaking his head, Grey leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms. "That girl is off-limits, and you know the punishment for that."

So typical of him. Instead of memorizing our coursework, he'd instead memorized the entire contents of the Bro Code.

"Damn, I feel terrible," Will said, his eyes wide. "But really, I didn't mean it. I completely forgot that she was Tristan's ex!" He turned to me, continuing so solemn-faced: "Please don't beat the life out of me. I just got rid of a nasty bruise from last week, and I'm really not looking to get demolished today, so if-

I just shook my head and said, "Nah, don't worry, bro. I'll let it slide." William's jaw dropped, and I kept going, "Well, if you really like her, then forget the rules, and seize the opportunity. Prove you're actually cut out for her, and don't let her go. That's how it works, right? Oh yeah, and don't forget to give her sunflowers every once in a while. Those are her favorites."

The other guys just stared at me while Justin started a slow clap. "Whoa - that's incredible!" he exclaimed. "Such deep thoughts from the prince of campus!"

Grey nudged him and said, "Nope, he's probably just high right now. He was, like, quoting a Nicholas Sparks book or something, which is definitely creepy for him."

"I'd rather you called me considerate," I said, grinning before I resumed my search.

After a few seconds of staring outside, I heard Will speak, apparently recovered from his slip-up. "What's the matter with him?" he asked from behind me. "He's been acting like that for a while now, looking through the window like he's in some music video."

"He's just searching for someone," Clark said, sounding as if he knew what was going on in my mind. "Aren't you, Tris?"

"I'm just--"

A voice calling my name in a high-pitched tone stopped me. Turning around, I saw Ronnie sitting on top of the teacher's desk, waving at me with her legs swinging back and forth underneath. Tossing her straight, golden-brown hair behind her shoulder, she shot me a smile, and then asked, "Wanna come with us after school? There's a new club in town that we want to try out."

Her friends all agreed, nodding their heads at me for encouragement, but I just shook my head and said, "No."

"But we can go bowling after! You like that, right? Please, please come with us?" Ronnie gave me her puppy eyes. "Just this once. For sure it'll be fun!"

"No."

She looked like she was about to cry. "But Fiona won't be there--"

"No." I sighed. "I'm sorry; I just don't feel like it. Try again next time."

Facing the window once again, I tried to ignore the mutters and groans from all the girls. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ryo shooting up from his seat, one hand springing up into the air and the other pulling up Justin.

"Since Tristan's not joining, we can be his replacements!" he called. "I think it would be ten times more exciting if we-"

"Definitely not!" was Ronnie's grumble. If Ronnie had been a cartoon character, Ryo's question would've made smoke blow from her ears and nose.

I felt bad for my friend, though, being burned yet again. Behind me, I heard him moaning, "Chikushou, nandemonai!" and God only knew what the meaning of that phrase was. Probably a string of curses they used in Japanese TV or something.

Then someone slung his arm around me; it was Grey motioning for me to sit down. I gave in, slumping into a seat before crossing my arms across my chest.

"Wow, this is the first time we've heard you decline a hot girl's offer," Justin remarked, his brows scrunching up. "Watch out, they're going to skin you for that one."

"Whatever. I got a lot of things on my mind right now."

"We can tell that," Clark said, poking me in the shoulder. "Still thinking of the girl, huh?"

"That's just like him, thinking of the opposite gender for hours," Grey commented, then glanced at Clark. "Who is she, anyway?"

"That's what he's trying to figure out."

I put my arms on top of the desk, leaning closer to my friends. "Do you guys have any information about the girl who took over for the opening dance? At the Valentine Ball, I mean. Do you know anything about the Queen's replacement dancer?"

Ryo said, "Eh? You're into that..."

"Just answer the question."

The guys looked at each other and shrugged, and disappointment drove through me

like a bulldozer again.

"Even we were wondering about her," Will remarked, but when he saw my heavy gaze, he hurried to revise his statement: "B-but, you know, not in that kind of way. We weren't calling dibs or anything. She's yours. All yours."

"Ooh, wait, wait, I think I know her!" Justin hooted all of a sudden, snapping his fingers as if he were getting an idea. "The girl who replaced Lacey Harris, huh? I think I know who you're looking for!"

For a moment, I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest. Snapping my head up, I couldn't help but giddily ask, "You know her? Really?"

"No." He snickered. "Ha! Got ya, T!"

There's always that one friend of yours that you just want to smack in the face with a brick.

I pointed my finger at him sharply, giving him a death glare. "Okay, you may have got me there, Case, but you better shut up before I could go Darth Vader on you."

"Oh, don't worry, dude," Ryo exclaimed to Justin. "I know Kung Fu! We can go Neo over him."

"What?" I stared at them as if they were losing their minds. And by now, I think they really were.

Justin spread his arms out like Jesus. "Welcome to the Matrix, sucker."

The rest of them cracked up and gave high-fives.

"Fuck you, guys," I muttered. "Do you think this is a joke?"

Clark took the opportunity to cut in, saying, "You're actually making a big deal out of this girl?"

I wanted to argue, but I realized he had a point. Why was I making a big deal out of her? I usually just kept calm and waited for a girl to approach me, and if she didn't, I'd just assume she was an introvert and forget about her. It was the typical behavior of a guy, though I knew it wasn't the best way to go.

But now everything seemed to be changing, and I found it strange to have a particular girl stuck in my brain for minutes, hours, days, maybe months, if this kept up. Overall, I had no idea what had been going on with me lately. Had I hit my head somewhere without my knowing? I'd been acting nuttier than peanut brittle, and I had no clue why.

All I understood was that she was a girl I didn't want to forget.

But if I don't forget about her, I might drive myself crazy...

My friends were still waiting for a response, and the only one I could give them was a shrug and a head shake, since I had no idea how to answer them best.

Raising his hands in surprise, Grey said, "Whoa, the Casanova's getting serious just because of a girl? For real? That's news to me." He then turned his attention to the others and said, "All right, listen up brothers, enough dicking around. T's in serious condition here. And this kind of thing only happens once in a blue moon, meaning we'd better make the most of it." Then he looked back at me, jabbing his thumb back at himself and adding, "We'll be your wingmen in the search for whoever that girl was."

"So... this is like a search party?" Clark asked; his face similar to a person about to witness the apocalypse.

"Yeah, let's call her Cinderella!" Ryo said, causing all of us to stare at him as if he were stupid. And yes, he really did look like stupid, his finger pointing upwards as if there was a light bulb on his head.

"You're a big fan of that story?" I asked with a sneer.

"Lie! I only know that because my little sister was forcing me to watch the Disney version with her... along with the other movies, like Barbie and Bratz."

Grey patted him on the back, saying, "I know how it feels, bro. I have a young cousin who's like that, only she goes for Twilight and shit. Anyway, I think Ryo finally has a point here. The girl's like Cinderella, since no one even knows her identity, Tristan is the prince, of course, and we guys are like... like..."

"The mice," Justin filled in.

"Exactly." Grey nodded, then slapped his forehead when Justin's words sank in. "No, jeez! Why would you compare us to the mice? We're like... like... uh, forget it."

"So, you guys are really helping me to find her?" I asked.

"Dude, a bro doesn't let a bro have all the action alone. We got your back, right, guys?" Grey held out an open palm, glancing around us with his brow rose. Beaming, we all slammed our hands against his as a pact and let out several hoots.

Everyone else in the room was staring at us as if we were a bunch of idiots, but at that point, I really didn't care.

"Awesome," I said breathlessly. "Then what's the plan?"

Before any of them could answer, Mr. Cross entered the room, and everyone rushed to their seats. His grey brows knitted, and after waiting for us to settle down and keep quiet, he slammed his book onto the table and proceeded to the blackboard. Without saying a word (and without apologizing for his delay), he began to write down a series of long mathematical equations, much to the class's frustration, but no one dared to speak up as we copied them in our notes.

I caught a glimpse of Grey mouthing at me, "Plan. Later," and gave him a quick nod, finally sensing a ray of hope that managed to lighten my mood somehow.

Cinderella, huh?

If she was Cinderella, she should have at least left a glass slipper behind as a clue, right? But she didn't leave a single thing...

Cinderella, where on Earth are you?

#####

~~ღ Finding Cinderella (15)~~

#####

ღ Finding Cinderella- 15 ღ

-Kylie-

Okay, I admit I was kind of lost.

That didn't mean I was physically lost or anything. My head had only ventured in to Neverland again, and an overwhelming barrage of random thoughts was whirling inside of it. I'd almost got a detention back in the English class because of Tristan's constant dissing towards me, almost collided with the janitor while rounding a corner, almost entered the boy's lavatory, and now, in addition to all these embarrassing moments, I was almost slipping.

What did I mean by that?

Well, let's turn back the clock for a few seconds ago.

I'd slipped on the wet floor, and before I knew it, I'd found myself flying through the air. Lucky for me, I managed to regain my balance before hitting the white tiles.

Phew, that was close.

Even so, some students must've seen my performance, since they were all shooting glances at me, and trying not to crack up. Goodness, I was much clumsier than Lancey when it came to actions...

With a flustered face, I continued on my way to my locker and tried not to bang my head on the metal door.

5... 24... 13... 15... 3...

Wait, what was the combination again?

Shaking my head, I rotated the lock once more and thought for a couple of seconds before finally remembering the combination. Then I pulled the door open, exposing random junk that began to tumble down as I shoved my books inside, and caught a glimpse of the scary clown pictures I'd pasted on the back of my door.

I'd intended for them to be some kind of protection, mainly from the jerk who liked to snatch my stuff and play sick jokes. It was too bad for him that he had a coulrophobia.

In other words, the prince got the phobia for clowns.

That devil... I wondered if telling everyone about that little secret of his would finally prevent him from causing me problems.

My lips formed a lazy half smile as I slammed the locker shut, and out of my peripherals, I noticed a pair of brown eyes staring at me. When I turned around, there was Julianne, complete with raised brow and crossed arms.

"Did I just see you slipping on the floor a minute ago?" she asked.

I couldn't think of any excuse to that. Except, moronically, "Jules, I didn't slip, I was simply practicing a new interpretative dance move. Did you like it?" When she didn't say a word, I sighed and added, "Yeah, me neither."

We began to walk towards the cafeteria.

"You know, I've been trying not to say this to you ever since this morning, but I totally can't help myself right now," Julianne said hesitantly, "and I'm sorry if this offends you, but... what happened to your hair? It's all frozen up like a pine tree."

I raised my eyebrows. "Yeah, isn't it cool? Every time I attempt to look into a

mirror, it reads 'viewer discretion is advised'."

She bit her lip and nodded, trying not to laugh. "Right."

"You know whose fault is this."

Soon we'd grabbed our trays and were coasting along with the long line. Julianne was chatting with a girl behind her - probably a member of their Club - so I was stuck in the middle of the line with nothing to entertain me while I waited. I glanced around, trying to find inspiration, but when I saw Tristan and his crowd in the designated "popular" seats, I snapped my head away from them.

Forget inspiration - having to look at the devil felt more like depression.

In front of me was a strange guy with a black wool cap on his head. He began to drum his fingers on his tray, as if matching the movements to music. When I snuck a glance at his side, I noticed a pair of white cords dangling in front of his neck and leading into his ears. Hmm, I wondered why he seemed so...

"Hey!" a voice from the crowd called.

Unexpectedly, Julianne gasped, "Oh, my God! My crush is coming here!"

And there she went freaking out, fingers shaking vehemently, when a guy with curly ginger hair came into view. He went to the guy, who was in front of me, and when he caught us staring at him, he grinned.

"Hey, you're that girl back in the ball, right?" he asked.

At that moment, the guy with the cap turned to us and pulled out his ear buds.

I nearly screamed.

Eek! Who the heck had been planning this scenario? Life probably loved me so much that it had ensured I'd be given the chance to further embarrass myself in public!

I didn't want to believe Erik was right in front of me. I tried to convince myself he was only the product of my crazy thoughts, but when he said, "Oh, hey, you girls," and tactfully not mentioning about my bird nest of a hair, I wished I could just die in place and let time forget about me.

Keep calm. Don't act like you're meeting Santa Claus or anything. He's just Erik, there's nothing to worry about.

"Y-yeah," Julianne stuttered, and I just realized she was talking to the carrot-top guy.

"Great to see you around here," he chirped. If I would look closely, I think he was kind of cute, what with his soft blue eyes and laid-back smile.

"Hey! Who's holding the line?" someone from the back yelled.

Carrot-top guy raised his hands and backed away from us. "Dude, grab me some tar ts. I'll pay you later," he said to Erik.

"Fine." Erik stepped to the side and cocked his head towards me. "You go first, Kylie."

"Okay, thanks," I mumbled, sounding like I was munching a tissue.

An old woman, Linda, was staring at me; her wrinkly eyes half-shut and her dry lips nothing more than a thin line. She always looked that bored, I was positive she hated her job as a lunch lady.

After clearing my throat, I spoke to her: "Can I have a tuna sandwich, please?"

Linda grabbed one from a silver tray and handed it to me. "Anything else?" she asked hoarsely.

"Uh... and a Coke," I added, "Yeah, I think that's all."

"Why, Miss Harris, what's the matter?" asked Linda. "You usually order almost everything on the menu. You on a diet?"

"I don't feel like it," I said aloud. Oh, boy. Did she seriously have to go and say that? Great, now Erik might be thinking that I'd been such a greedy pig.

I tried to keep myself composed as I reached for my wallet. Then a hand stopped me, and when I looked up, I saw Erik shaking his head.

"Here, I'll pay for this for you," he said.

"Huh? No way!" I replied, gesturing for him to stop. "Why would you pay for me?"

"Well, it's because I want to."

"But—"

"Kylie, I insist."

"Erik—"

Before I knew it, he'd already pushed a roll of money towards the cashier and was telling me, "Oops, too late. I paid for it already."

Why on Earth was he doing this?

Linda glanced at me warily before punching the numbers. When I realized my mouth had been open for quite some time, I snapped it shut, trying to neutralize my face after that shocking favor of Erik's.

It might have been only a small act of kindness, but it had been enough to make my day a little less crappy.

"I think I owe you for this," I told him after we exited the line.

"You don't have to worry about that," Erik assured me. He had only bought himself a burger and a bottle of water.

"Are you sure you're not going to sue me for this in the future?" I asked, chuckling timidly.

"Stop worrying too much, Ky, really. Free food tastes much better, right? So just chill out and enjoy the treat." He patted me on the shoulder, giving me shudders all over.

"Uh, so thanks again...?" I mumbled.

"Just expect there to be a lot more in the future."

"What do you mean by that?"

Before Erik could answer, Julianne and the other guy came to us.

"Oh, I almost forgot-" Erik put his arm over the guy's shoulders "-meet my pal, Peter Parker."

I almost blurted out 'Please don't tell me you're Spiderman' if I hadn't bitten my tongue just in time.

As though reading my expression, Peter laughed. "Yeah, I was named after a Marvel Hero. Blame my parents for being such huge comic book fans. Mind you, I had friends at middle school named James Bond and Moe Lester. Harsh for boys. Anyway, just call me Pete."

"Okay, it's good to meet you, um, Pete. Name's Kylie," I said and motioned to Julianne. "And I reckon you already know my friend's name?"

"Yeah, we actually met at the ball." He grinned. "Right, Julianne?"

Blushing, Julianne went catatonic on the spot.

I tapped her shoulder. "Uh... sorry about my friend here. Sometimes, she goes beyond the line between proper fandom and severe obsession when she encounters someone in particular."

Pete just shrugged, apparently oblivious about Julianne's obsession over him, and turned to Erik. "Well, dude, I didn't know you're friends with these chicks."

"Kylie and I have known each other since we're freshmen." Erik beamed at me, and I squirmed. "And I think we clicked as friends because of-what-Minecraft?" He laughed.

I nodded meekly. Wow, I couldn't believe he still remembered that! Back in the old times, we two had been talking non-stop about the game until our teachers had to scold us for that.

Oh, those good ol' memories.

"That's cool. Hey, I have an idea," said Pete before looking at us. "Why don't you girls join us and meet our other friends? We're eating outside." He jabbed his thumb toward the cafeteria door on the right.

"Uh... um." I gulped. Should we, or should we not? I could feel my stomach doing flips.

"Come on. It's really okay for us guys," Erik said.

I opened my mouth to say, but a hand touched my shoulder, making me yelp in surprise.

"Sorry, fellas." It was Tristan, and his face was showing nothing but seriousness. "But I think they're staying here with us."

The smile on Erik's face gradually disappeared and was replaced by a straight, t

ight line.

"Hartford," he said.

"Taylor."

Pete started to take steps backwards, looking at Tristan with wide eyes. Was he intimidated because of him?

I sensed dread as I shifted my eyes between the boys.

Erik glanced back at me, and he grinned. "Well, if you girls don't want to, then okay. That's a downer, but I guess we can't press it anymore. Maybe next time, though?"

Without even thinking, I nodded almost immediately.

"Awesome. Looking forward to that. Bye now!" After a brief wave, Erik and Pete had disappeared into the mass of students roaming around.

"Whoa, so what was that about?" Julianne exclaimed, somehow recovering from her fossilized state.

I shot a glare at Tristan before walking past him.

"Hey, I didn't do anything wrong!" he said, catching up after me. "I was just saving you."

"Saving from what?" I bit back.

"I know you don't want to come with them, but you weren't speaking back there. So I came to answer them for you."

"Well, I don't remember calling 911 for a superhero to come and rescue me," I sa

id sarcastically. But to be honest, he was right. I hadn't wanted to come with t hem, because, hello? A whole hour with Erik? That would possibly be the death of me.

He crossed his arms and smiled haughtily. "Superheroes don't need any agency to save a damsel in distress. Most of them just work on their own accord."

I set my tray on the table and snorted. "Great, now tell that to your girls, because I'm not buying that. I'm not a damsel in distress, Tristan, and will never be one."

"Ooh, right, I forgot." He nodded. "You're actually the badass-"

"Say a wrong word and you're dead."

"-princess."

I blinked, my heart pounding. Shut up, you little mass of cardiovascular muscles !

"What do you take me for, an idiot?" I scoffed. "Listen, if you're done pissing me off, then scram, you evil creature. Shoo!"

"You know I never get tired pissing you off, Kyles." Smirking, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and took steps back. "Nice hair, by the way."

"This is the fault of your reckless driving!"

"Later!"

I slumped in the seat and sighed. My lunch was starting to go rot on the tray because of those appalling encounters.

"Julianne, you okay?" I asked after a while.

Looking into space, she was still as solid as ice that I had to snap my fingers in front of her vision.

"My brain neurons are slowly processing everything that has happened," she said remotely. Uh-oh, she was speaking in a Sheldon Cooper language once again. Prepare the tissue, please. "And I keep inquiring myself whether I should be jumping for joy after enduring that moment with the guy I am infatuated with, or stabbing myself for being so horrendously eccentric."

"My thoughts, exactly."

She put a hand under her chin and sighed. "Ah, love. You are, sometimes, aesthetically pleasant to the heart, yet most of the time, miserably treacherous, I must say."

I raised an eyebrow, unwrapping with my sandwich. "Since when did you become like this?"

"Ever since I spilled that fruit punch on his tux that unexpectedly lead him on asking me for a dance."

That was when, for a brief moment, the smile on my face was swept away, and the words she'd just spoken made the memory of my Fate dance flash through my mind again.

Then a couple loud claps erupted from the middle of the cafeteria, and everyone else shifted their attention towards the source. Julianne muttered something under her breath before standing up to see what was going on.

"Kylie, you gotta see this now," she hissed at me. "I think Tristan has something to announce."

Him again?

I headed over to the crowd and craned my neck so I could see well. Tristan and his ridiculously tall friends had gathered in the center in all their glory, managing to grab the attention of every student without breaking a sweat. Kids around us were whispering wildly, visibly intrigued by their presence. I just shook my head, because the last person in the world to care about them would be me. But

due to a sudden, peculiar sensation that had hit me, I stayed standing there and waited for one of them to speak up.

"Hey, can you hear me over there?" Grey's voice called to the crowd at the back.

"How about the kids on the other side, am I clear? Yeah? Okay, so listen up, folks!" He paused, waiting for everyone to grow silent, then continued: "We're probably holding up your lunch time, guys, but our friend Tristan here has something important to announce. Anyway, this wouldn't be long, so just sit tight, and I'll let Tristan do the talking."

Tristan stepped out from behind Grey, and I was sure what came next wouldn't be good.

"Let's just cut to the chase," Tristan announced, his hands resting in his pockets. "Almost the entire school population attended the Valentine Ball last week, so a lot of you guys witnessed the opening dance, am I right?"

Several affirmations followed.

"But there was one thing about the opening dance that's been bugging me lately - well, maybe not just me, since I'm sure some of you have been bugged by it, too - and I wanted to know, who was the girl who took over Lacey Harris' role as Queen for that event? Do any of you know anything about that?"

Almost immediately, the place began to buzz as everyone started discussing the topic, though the only feedback I could see were shrugs and shaking heads. Swallowing my fears, I slowly began to move backwards, one step at a time.

Julianne turned to me and whispered, "Wow. That issue has taken the campus by storm since Friday last week."

"No one, right?" Tristan said, his voice getting stronger. "It's very strange that nobody knows the answer... or at least, we think no one knows the answer. Perhaps there have been some people around here secretive enough to keep this under wraps. But then again, I won't pressure them into coming forward, since I have an idea of my own, and all of your help will be very much needed to make this effective..."

Great, just great. Why was my life so good at becoming dangerous?

"I, together with my team here, will propose a challenge to the entire student body of Broadway Heights. The rules are pretty simple: search for the girl, bring her to me, and-"

"WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?"

The clamor was cut off in a snap, and every one of us spun around to see a tall girl standing in the back, her arms crossed over her chest. As she began to step forward, the mob parting around her. The loud clacking sound of her heels on the tiles was enough to wake the Underworld.

Her typical calm image was now twisted in annoyance, and she seemed almost like an angry bull, her cheeks flushed and her eyes flashing with intensity. I snuck a quick glance at Tristan, noticing that his pale face was displaying the most petrified expression I'd seen in a long time. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but then snapped it shut and gulped audibly.

"Tristan, please tell me I heard you wrong," she said, the sweetness of her voice fringing with bitterness.

Holy crap on a cracker.

Here came Fiona Ryder from the dark side, back in action again.

Only this time, she was more sinister than ever.

#####

~~ღ Finding Cinderella (16)~~

#####

ღ Finding Cinderella-16 ღ

-Tristan-

"Ex-girlfriend alert, dead ahead," Clark warned me, barely above a whisper.

I nudged him in the side, making him hiss with pain. His words were only causing me more apprehension, so if he knew what was good for him, he'd stay as silent as possible.

I shot an alarmed look at the other guys, noticing their faces had gone slack, their mouths slightly open in shock. But their expressions were nothing compared to mine-I'd gone so frozen that I couldn't even tell if I was breathing or not.

Finally, I took a sharp intake of air and hissed to the guys, "Abort mission, now!"

After a second, they nodded, and Grey was the first one to step forward. Waving his hands in the air, he yelled in a shaky voice, "Sorry for the inconvenience, folks, but there's been a little, uh, misunderstanding. So I guess we should just stop here..."

"...and forget about everything we just said," Justin finished for him. "Have a good lunch, and thank you!"

As luck would have it, everyone started to clear the way, returning to their seats without too much trouble. I noticed that shoulders were slumped and faces were frowning as complaints and murmurs floated all over the place, but I didn't have time to address them further, much less apologize to them...

Especially when Fiona was charging towards me like a voracious leopard.

She had her hands on her hips, her russet eyes gleaming with anger. As my friends began to back away step by step, all I did was stare at her, making my expression much colder.

"Explain yourself, Tristan," Fiona demanded, managing to control her tone. "What's this 'challenge' I'm hearing about?"

As I sucked my breath in, I tried to say, "It's nothi-"

"Don't you dare say it's nothing!" she shrieked, dropping all pretenses of sanity in an instant. "I've heard this has something to do with-"

Her yelling was gaining much attention from the crowd, so I grabbed her arm before she could continue and dragged her out of the cafeteria.

"Tristan, let me go! Let me go!" she complained as she tried to break free, though my grip on her arm was too firm. "Nobody does this kind of thing to me, not my best friends, not my ex-boyfriends, and not even my parents, so if you—"

"You'd better stop whining this instant, Fiona," I demanded. We'd stopped in a clear, noiseless hallway, and I'd turned to face her, allowing me to observe how agitated she really was.

"What the fu— fine! Okay! Whatever!" Fiona took a deep breath and began to rub her temples. "Tristan, why don't we just get back to my question, 'cause seriously, this... this drama is giving me a huge headache already."

"Ah, so you hate the drama?" Laughing dully, I placed my hand on the wall and offered her a half shrug. "Actually, Fiona, there wouldn't be any drama if you just quit starting it."

Fiona just crossed her arms. "Who's this 'girl' I heard you mention, like, ten minutes ago?" she asked with gritted teeth, completely ignoring what I'd just said.

"What girl—"

"Don't even try to deny it. I heard you very clearly, T."

Crap, she'd actually heard the announcement. Her bionic hearing must have been responsible.

My jaw grew rigid. "So what about it?" I said. "Why would I care if I'm searching for a girl? It's supposed to be none of your business."

"Because I'm your ex-girlfriend."

So dumb. She was really dumb. For real.

"Classic, Fiona, that's a classic. Where the hell did you get that kind of logic?" I shook my head and continued: "Can't you understand anything, or are you just playing dumb? You're my former girlfriend, meaning you're my ex, and Fiona, our time has expired. I no longer owe you any answer."

Vanity was radiating from her in waves, and with her head held high, she declared, "Just because you broke up with me doesn't mean I broke up with you."

I practically slapped both of my hands to my face. Seriously, I didn't know what exactly she was trying to imply because, as a guy, I never knew what was going on in a female's mind. Whether Fiona was faking it or just being stupid, this situation was getting complicated.

"Oh, give me a fat break. The heck does that even mean?"

"Just sayin'. Duh."

I rolled my eyes. "Look, just face the fact that we're not getting back together," I exclaimed, then sighed. She was just like the previous ones. "Move on, jeez."

Holding up her hand, she offhandedly said, "Oh, you don't need to repeat that. I've heard that line over and over again from you."

"Yes, because that's it! That's what I wanted you to do. Find another guy already since I'm done. I'm seriously done. You know what, sometimes I wish we were better strangers."

She tilted her head to the side. "Is that supposed to be a challenge for me, Tristan?" She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine. But remember; don't go running after me when this is over, T."

I snorted. "Yeah, whatever you say. I think I'll just do that when pigs fly. But remember this as well, Fiona, don't ever dare mess with my plans again just like what you did a while ago," I said gravely.

"Plans? Like having the entire school search for the 'Queen' of the ball just fo

r you? Are you really that desperate?" Scornful laughter rang out from her lips, and she said, "Oh, poor you. Come to think of it, I can even help you with the search, because you're just that special."

My eyes widened in surprise, and I exclaimed, "Wait, you mean, you don't-" but then bit my tongue before continuing.

Fiona Ryder, one of the main sources of all campus gossip, didn't know who that girl was? That was impossible! What kind of magic was operating in this place?

"Speechless already? Oh, I must've surprised you. You're welcome, Tristan. It'll be my pleasure to help you, you know. Once I find her, however..." She paused, as a small, sly smile crept onto her face.

I swallowed and reined in most of my surprise. "What are you going to do to her?"

"Oh, why would you care to know? It's supposed to be none of your business," she mimicked me.

I opened my mouth to argue, but instead took a deep breath to put out the flames rising in my chest. Finally, I was calm enough to say, "Yeah, like you'll be the first one of us to find her. Good luck with that."

"Trying to test me?" Fiona said with a smirk. "You have no idea what I can do, Tristan."

I put my hands in my pockets and shrugged. "Oh, well, that's cool. Don't worry, no one gives a shit about what you can do, anyway."

At that, Fiona took a step back, her mouth dropping. Her wide eyes were now glistening, almost as if she were close to tears. Waving her hands in front of her, Fiona faltered, "Oh, my God. Take that back, Tristan."

"They said that words cannot be taken back once they're spoken."

"Gosh, you're despicable!"

I smiled cockily. "I'll take that as a compliment."

She balled up her fists and whined, stomping her heels away before finally disappearing from the view. Alone at last, I pressed the bridge of my nose, feeling somewhat light-headed. The plan that the team had formulated four hours ago would have been flowing smoothly if only Fiona hadn't shown up.

I honestly didn't know what I was supposed to do next. After listening to her threatening words, I couldn't just continue with the plan, since having the entire student body search for the girl- Cinderella, as we six had decided to call her -would be an easy way for Fiona to scout her out.

Speaking of being a witch, Fiona certainly knew how to play the part. The longer she stayed a thorn in my side, the more difficulties she created for me, and my regret for having a past with her was growing every second.

She'd been gorgeous, confident, and witty, and that might have been the main reason why I'd dated her. She'd been so great, but it had only been a matter of time until I discovered her real self.

After first realizing I hadn't liked her anymore, I'd dealt with her in a nice manner, telling her I was no longer interested in the simplest ways I could think of. Now I was downright rude to her, but still she wouldn't bug off.

Damn, does this mean the search is over?

"So how was your talk with Fiona?" Grey asked.

We guys were hanging out in our usual hangout spot, which were at the front steps outside the school entrance. Thankfully, it was our vacant time for our teacher wasn't around, so it gave me more time to think.

A groan left my lips, and I said, "It didn't turn out right. It was tragic."

"Of course, she's Little Miss Drama Queen, like she has more issues than Times. What did she do, anyway?"

"Bitching around, of course. She'd probably inhaled like ten helium balloons or something that's why she was like that. She even threatened to do something to the girl once she knew her name," I muttered, then raised my hands in surrender. "Guys, I think including everyone in the school in this game won't be such a brilliant idea. You know Fiona. She has connections with everyone."

Clark faced me, his forehead creased. "Say what?"

"So does that mean the plan's over?" Justin asked me.

"Aw, that's too bad!" Ryo said as his face fell. "I was kinda excited for that, y'know."

"Over? C'mon, guys, we can't say it's over unless we quit," Grey said, resting his elbow on the tiger statue, frequently referred to as "Tom," at the top of the newel post.

"Yeah! It's just like playing video games," Ryo chimed in, like the geek he always was. "If the first game plan isn't working, we'll just switch to another one."

Will gave him a fist bump and said, "I was about to say 'burn', but you have a point there. Attaboy, Ryo, you're a genius!"

"I'm Asian," was the dude's response, and the rest of us rolled our eyes.

Then Grey directed his attention to me, saying, "Just stay cool, T. No need to be stressed out by the Queen Bitch."

Clark nodded. "Yup, I've already got a secret weapon to get rid of her."

"Oh, my God, dude! Are you going to shoot her?" Ryo exclaimed.

"Relax, Ryo, quit spazzing. I just got something up my sleeve that'll surely work out." Clark rubbed his hands furtively, and when he noticed all of us were staring at him, he added, "Of course, I can't spill it to, guys."

Grey shrugged. "Okay, whatever that is. You'll surely have your girl before too long, Tristan." He patted the statue. "That's what Tom here says so."

My girl, huh...

A wide grin spread across my face, my eyes lighting up with confidence. These idiots might have seemed insane, but at least they were trying to help me.

Why did I sound like such a quitter? I was the unbeatable prince of this school! I lived by that title. I always had, and I always would.

Grey was right. I simply couldn't let myself be susceptible to Fiona's intimidation. She wouldn't be able to twirl me between her fingers, not like all the other guys she'd tangled with.

A girl from a distance caught my attention. She was passing across the entrance, struggling with books and papers in her hands. She was probably trying to take a last-minute review of her Calculus lessons.

When she caught me staring at her, she tripped over herself.

I cracked up. "Way to go, Kyles! Can you do that again?"

She stuck her tongue out and dashed away.

A smirk snuck on my lips, as my eyes followed her.

I was going to make sure no one blocked my way in the search for Cinderella. And once I thought about it, maybe this wasn't a 'game over' after all.

This was merely the start of the chase.

#####

~~ღ Finding Cinderella (17)~~

#####

ღ Finding Cinderella-17 ღ

-Tristan-

The rest of my day went on smoothly, although there was a part of me was quite uneasy, no matter how I tried to settle it down. Fiona had repeatedly flashed me her penetrating gaze, as if she'd been watching my moves.

You know her eyes were as sharp as the colossal squid's, so the plan of actions had to be sneaky.

However, it seemed that luck wasn't on my side these days, unfortunately.

"Here's the final one." Grey tossed down a picture of a girl. "She's from my Economics class."

I gathered all the scattered photos that the guys had collected from each female participant of the Fate dance, and scrutinized them one by one.

First picture: a blonde with freckles across her face. Nah, Cinderella had a dark one.

Second picture: a ginger... nope.

Third picture: a pretty brunette, and I recognized this person as Ronnie.

"Flip the photos," Grey suggested, leaning closer to my side. "We made them write the name of their Fate strings for you to be able to recognize them easily."

I flicked the back part of Ronnie's photo. There it was written: The Mask.

Shrugging, I put it aside, and Ryo quickly grabbed it.

"You're not going to take this, are you?" he asked perkily.

"Nope. All yours," I said, turning another photo.

"Oh yes, hell yes! I finally have a picture of her." He flapped the photo in the air like a ten-year-old kid having a Happy Meal for the first time.

Justin slapped him on the back. "Dude, you sound like a creepy stalker."

As I kept on turning each photograph, I felt as if I was sinking in the deepest part of the ocean, dissatisfaction drowning me in huge waves.

Seventh picture: a dark-haired one, The Hourglass.

Eighth picture: a short-haired, The Sunrise.

Ninth picture: a brunette, The Harp.

Tenth picture: a blonde, Monique Mayfield, The Turquoise.

Eleventh picture-

My fingers froze.

This last girl had a long, curly black hair, which was very familiar to me. Small, oval-shaped face... small nose... huge eyes... I covered her eyes with my finger like a mask. Her features were pretty much similar!

Was she the one...?

I gulped.

"So, T, how's the inspection?" Grey asked.

A hint of doubt still lingered in my mind. I held up a hand. "Hold on, I have to make sure with this one," I said, eyes focused on the girl. The tension was building up in my chest.

I held my breath as I flipped the photo.

The Mirror.

Sighing, I dropped the photo together with the other ones on the table.

Justin took and examined the eleventh girl's photo. "Well, this one's cute," he said, "I think I should get her number or something soon."

"Damn. None of them was my pair," I muttered to no one in particular.

They all fell into silence. We had already managed to come up with five plans; still, they didn't seem to work out when we put them into action. There might as well be 'epic fail' signs plastered on our foreheads.

In simpler words, coming up with the perfect plan was harder than I had thought.

"Don't worry, Tristan!" Ryo chirped. Undoubtedly, he would be the only guy in the gang who still would have that much enthusiasm when everyone else was starting to get down. "We still have plan F!"

I snorted a laugh. "Yeah, though I'm starting to doubt we can eat the whole alphabet cake and shit out another 'perfect' plan."

"Hey, if all else fails, there's still the plan W-T-F," Justin chimed, folding the girl's photo and inserting it into his pocket. "See that building over there? Go climb it up and jump off it." He cracked up.

"Thanks for the suggestion, man," I scoffed. "Why don't you execute the plan first?"

"Oh, burn!" Will hooted, because that was what he would always do.

Grey began to gather the rest of the photos. "If this shit goes on, I bet this would become as the eighth wonder of the world." He glanced at me. "That girl of yours, T, is absolutely mysterious. I mean, does she even go here?"

"Jeez, of course, why would the student council choose a Queen that doesn't..." My words trailed off as a memory came to me in a flash. I snapped my fingers. "Wait, hold on a sec... speaking of the council, Steven said that there were twelve female participants that had been chosen for the event and-" I pointed at the photos "-we've only got eleven pictures of them. Where's the twelfth?"

They looked at each other and shrugged.

"Holy crap! She really doesn't go here!" Ryo exclaimed all of a sudden.

"No, that's impossible!" I said. "She's around here, I know. Probably she's just..."

"Trying to get away from you," Clark murmured after his long silence.

I stood up from my seat. "I have to talk to Steven."

A few minutes later, I found myself standing in front of the student council office. The door was already ajar so I let myself in. I was half expecting to see Steven twirling the chair to face me just in time. That was what he always did every time a person came in, acting like the President of the council - although he was only the Secretary.

Instead of him, though, I found the council's adviser, Ms. Ritchie, sitting in the front desk. She seemed to be lost in her own little bubble. Her fingers were fluttering, her eyes were closed, and her mouth was mouthing some words in a... sensual way.

Jesus, was she writing another erotic novel of hers in the office again?

This was such an awkward timing.

I faked a cough.

She opened her eyes and closed her laptop immediately. Then she tapped her pale-blond hair and straightened her violet blouse as if she was trying to compose herself.

"Hello, Mr. Hartford," she said in her shrill voice, her wrinkly red lips forcing a casual smile. "Is there something you need?" She raised a hand before I could open my mouth. "Oh, let me guess, you're here to report about your yet another bloodbath with somebody, aren't you? Last time, a poor lad came here with a badly bruised face and a missing tooth."

My eyes widened in surprise. She still remembered that? Huh, so typical of her.

"That last time was, like, what-two years ago?" I snickered. "But come to think of it, if that actually did happen now, won't I be too kind if-you know, I turn over myself to you willingly, instead of escaping like what does the culprit tend to do when he did something bad, right?"

She raised an eyebrow and pushed up her glasses in a prim and proper way. "Interesting, Mr. Hartford. I was simply testing you, and I must say that the level of your sarcasm and wits seems to increase even higher and higher every year," she said and opened her laptop to resume her typing.

I smirked. "Ma'am, you have no idea how many times I practice that with someone every single day," I said, intending that someone as Kylie.

"So what brings you here, young chap?"

"Actually, I'd just like to know if where Steven Davis is."

She looked up at me. "Oh, he and the rest student council, together with Mr. White, are out for a conference held in Columbus High," she answered completely, pushed up her glasses again, and went back to typing.

"So... when will they be back?" I asked.

"They left just this morning, and since the conference covers up for three days, then I assume they will be back this Friday afternoon."

"Damn," I muttered. Another bad timing for me.

Ms. Ritchie flashed me a look. "I don't need any blaspheming, Mr. Hartford. Not in this office," she demanded.

"Right, got it," I said. "Well, I think I have to go now. Sorry if I distracted your... uh, hobby," I added hesitantly.

I let out a defeated sigh as the door closed behind my back. Steven was the only one I knew who could give me the definite puzzle piece to help me figure out that mysterious girl's identity, but dang-he wouldn't be around for three days!

What a tough luck.

Putting my hands in my pockets, I began to walk back to the room where the guys were, but when I was about to round a corner, a girl collided on my chest.

"Ow, crap!" she cursed, brushing her nose. She looked up, and the usual scowl appeared on her face. "You again."

"Kyles."

"Bummer."

"Oh, yeah? Well, that's all right. You're not the only one who feels pretty bummed," I said with a dry laughter. "You have come across with me many times, and I have come across with that girl zero time, so we equally have a crappy day."

She snorted, shaking her head. "You're still finding that girl, seriously? The ball was over, like, a week ago."

"You know, me, Kyles. I don't stop until I get what I wanted."

She took a step back. "Why her? I mean, there were probably many girls better than her at the ball. Why do you keep on looking out for that specific girl?"

I took a step forward. "Because she has caught my interest without even trying." I smiled and put both of my hands over her shoulders. "Why do you seem to oppose every time I talk about her, Kylie? Are you jealous?"

As I continued to peer down at her, a strange, faint feeling of familiarity suddenly coursed through me, making my chest drum faster every second. Wait. Why was I having this kind of sensation as those huge blue eyes of hers locked with mine?

The face of the mysterious girl flashed through my eyes. I blinked, taking a few steps away from Kylie.

"You done?" she deadpanned. "Because I'm going to my next class right now." She walked past beside me, and turned back. "Oh, and as for your question. You know the answer, right? 'Why would I?'"

With that, she was off.

I shook my head, rubbing my temples.

My eyes were probably just tricking me. I think I needed a break.

I was hoping for a normal day as the next day came in a flash. However, when Fiona showed up at our table in the cafeteria, I knew another shit was just about to get real.

She dropped two things on the table: a white half mask, and a curly black wig.

"As the president of the Drama club, look what I just found in our prop room," she said smugly, crossing her arms and lifting up her chin. "Check it out, honey."

The guys' faces had gone limp straightaway.

Reluctantly, I grasped the silky wig. A huge lump began to form in my throat. The image of the girl and her hair swaying through the air as she danced flashed through my eyes, and I felt something sharp slice through my chest.

Then my gaze fell on the mask, and I suddenly felt even worse. I paid a lot of attention on her that I practically know every detail about her features. Those silver trinkets and designs pasted on the mask were the same as the one Cinderella had!

"No. No to the way, Fiona." I shook my head, pushing them away.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes to the way, T."

"Who... who owns them?" My voice was quavering when I asked, but I tried to make it as emotionless as it was.

"No particular person owns those things, Tristan," she spoke in breeze. "Everyone in the club uses them during performances."

I hollered in incredulity, "Are you kidd-"

Fiona's sharp laughter cut me off. "You think I'm pulling your leg? Oh, puh-leas

e! Believe it or not, that is that. You have underestimated what I can do, Tristan. Now, see? I have contributed to your puzzle pieces. And these two things-" she motioned "-are the proof that that girl was simply just an illusion." She shrugged, smiling slyly. "I think I'm done with my part now. Oh, and you're welcome. Good luck finding that girl, Tristan." She wriggled her fingers as she left.

"Uh... she was really kidding, wasn't she?" Will asked, reluctant.

"No... I-I'm positive these were the real stuff that girl had used in the ball," I stammered. I was sure my face had turned into a dark shade of crimson. Facing them, I said, "What kind of damn trick is this?"

"Chill out, T," said Will, tapping my back.

"Well... you're kinda obsessed now, aren't you?" Clark pointed out teasingly. Despite his joking tone, there was something strange about the way he talked.

"I think she's bald, that must be why she wore a wig," Ryo said with a firm nod. I wanted to punch his lights out for that comment.

"Jeez! You're not helping," I barked at him after having a mental face palm.

Grey cleared his throat and said, "Or she was in disguise."

The five of us stared at him with invisible question marks floating above our heads. We didn't understand what he meant.

"She was in a disguise," he repeated slowly as if he was speaking to a child, only his voice had conviction in it. "She wouldn't wear a wig if she didn't want to conceal herself, right? I doubt she's actually bald."

"She is Cinderella; I feel I have to remind you this," Ryo stated, rolling his eyes.

"So she's originally might be... a brunette, a redhead, a dark-haired, or a... blonde," Justin added and looked at us. "Right?"

A feeling of dread wafted through me. Hearing about their opinions made my whole body solidified on the spot. There was no way we could and would have called every female in the campus, lined them up and examined them one by one like they did in the movies and books.

"Hey, who knows? There might be a chance we know this girl, but maybe we weren't paying too much attention hence why she might slip out of our grasp," Grey said with a shrug. "I was getting those vibes already-strange, I know."

I stared at him in astonishment. I had never thought of Grey as a man with a functioning brain, but then again, a lot of my assumptions today had already been proven incorrect.

"Grey actually has a solid point," Will pointed out and sent Grey a thumbs-up sign.

My jaw went firm. Thoughts ran through my mind consecutively. I was stuck in the spot staring at an approaching figure, even though my mind was on Cinderella.

Her name... I need to get to know her name...

The strange thing was that, the moment I pondered for a perfect solution, my eyes fell on a shocked-looking Kylie.

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (18)~~

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ღ Finding Cinderella-18 Ϙ

-Kylie-

Stunned. Alarmed. Embarrassed. Those were how I felt as I stood there in front of their table.

My attention was locked on those two objects, wondering how they had gotten to Tristan's very hands. It'd be impossible for Steven—or even Len and Krsytelle—to hand it over to him since I'd heard they were away at this time. Plus, they'd promised to me nothing would leak out from the secret. At least, that was what I thought.

Whatever! Whoever that person was, I hoped he or she would be struck by ten million lightning bolts!

Tristan's reaction was something I couldn't exactly describe. All I could come up with was, his face was as the same as the dog spotting a squirrel.

My heart slamming into my ribs, I tried to divert my eyes.

Wooh. Relax. Don't act like you're nervous, Kylie; or else, he'll suspect you.

He stood up from his seat.

Oh, screw this.

I sprinted away.

"Seriously, are you guys playing hide and seek or what?" Julianne asked.

We were pushing past through the mob of students to get to our classes. I'd been keeping an eye on Tristan practically that whole afternoon. Being around him was equivalent to being pushed into the deepest pits of Tartarus, seeing as my top secret already had a ninety-eight percent chance to be brought to the surface.

"Huh?"

"Well, I'm just saying," she said. "I notice you two seem to be acting like cats and dogs today. Not that it's a huge surprise, since both of you basically act like that all the time. It's just that—" she shrugged "—there's really something

weird going on. Or maybe it's just me."

Lacey nudged my rib. "Sis, does Tristan finally know?" she whispered.

"I don't know. God, I hope not," I answered in a low voice.

Julianne faced us. "Tristan knows about what? What are you guys murmuring about?"

Lacey and I shook our heads at once.

"No, I heard you guys talking." She raised an eyebrow. "Mind sharing it with me?"

I swallowed. "No, it's... nothing. We, uh..."

"It's about Tristan," Lacey cut in. I nearly covered her mouth with my hands, until she continued, "I'm just asking Kylie if-if Tristan knows how to uh, solve my Geometry homework! Yeah, that's it!" She laughed nervously.

I mentally made a face-palm. Lacey was such an expert in making lame excuses, so there was no surprise when she'd said that. No one could blame her, though, since she never lied, not for her own reasons, but if I would force her into it, she could still manage to bend the truth a little...

Wow, I didn't deserve to be alive. What kind of a role model for Lacey was I?

Julianne shook her head. "I hope the both of you are not keeping anything from me," she said and went ahead of us.

Last period came at last, but I couldn't completely jump for excitement to that since that meant I'd be facing one of the world's most terror teachers of all time yet again.

As the Calculus class went along, I was sure I looked like I was constipated. Mr . Cross stood up in front of the class like a Queen's guard, emotionless. His lecture about functions and derivatives wasn't recording properly in my brain, because aside from the fact that my brain actually refused to record them, all I could think about was Julianne's reaction a while ago.

She'd been upset, hadn't she? But what had Lacey told her had been just a white lie. I mean, little white lies are just fine, right? Everyone tells them now and then-they're necessary to get out of trouble, or provide protection.

But once they're revealed, they bounce back right at you, a little voice in my head said, and the impact is ten times worse than being hit with a coconut in the face.

Shut up! This would be a one-time deal... or so I thought.

Even so, my guts started to churn. I felt bad for keeping this from my best friend.

The class seemed to go on to eternity. Still, nothing made us feel motivated. The only exciting thing that we found in this class was the beautiful last words: "Class dismissed."

It was like a wakeup call, since everyone quickly scrambled out as if we'd been locked in the room for one year.

Before I could get away, though, Mr. Cross called me, and I already knew the next thing wouldn't be that great.

"Based on your previous test results," he said in a monotone voice, scanning his record book. "It seemed that you're struggling too much with the subject."

"Uh... yeah," I mumbled. You don't say, Sir.

"So what are you going to do about this?"

I scratched my head, having no idea what to say.

He sighed. "Listen, Miss Harris, you're the one who creates your grades, not me," he said. "I merely teach you the course and calculate your grades. If you won't do something about this, then...I'm sorry, but I don't have a choice."

In other words, he was just trying to be Gandalf, saying, "You shall not pass."

I groaned to myself. "Yes, sir, I'll keep that in mind," I muttered.

"Very well. You're dismissed."

If I didn't have the drive by taking up medicine after graduating from this hell hole, I wouldn't have proceeded to the library right after and borrowed a Calculus book to help me pull my grades up. Yeah, you heard me right; I really craved to take up med. Ever since my Dad passed away due to heart failure, I wanted to save human lives, like a modern day Wonder Woman in a white coat.

I was about to step out from the school building when I noticed it was raining quite heavily. So I just stayed there outside just like with a few students, waiting for it to stop. Moments later, I felt something covered my head and shoulders. It was a violet varsity jacket. I looked up and saw Tristan with his jacket on, the hood almost covering the half of his face.

Hide and seek was over. He found me.

Frowning, I took the jacket off, but he put his hand on my head to stop me.

"Don't. Do you want to get wet?" he asked, face straight.

"Why are you doing this?"

He looked up to see the dark sky. "I don't think the rain would stop at any minute," he said, ignoring my question, "so I guess we'll be stuck here probably for another hour."

I winced. "Darn. I don't want to stick here with you for a full hour."

"Neither do I." He grinned at me. "Let's run."

"Wha-"

He grabbed my hand, and before I knew it, we were already running under the rain. Tristan led me to his car-its top was down. I wanted to refuse to ride with him since he might do another speeding again that would finally earn us a ticket to jail, but seeing my state right now-wet shoes, damp hair-I had no choice but slid into the car.

"Take me home straight, okay?" I said firmly.

He only smiled as he turned the ignition on.

One thing you should know about this guy: he could be a master of deceit.

"Really? I said you take me home straightaway," I grumbled.

"But you didn't complain when we got here and ordered these." Tristan motioned to the hot chocolate drinks and honey bagels on our table.

I scowled as I munched. "Food comes first."

We were sitting under the canopy outside the Crest Coffee Shop. The rain still fell down endlessly. Several people around were dressed in heavy coats and bore large umbrellas, walking quickly past each other.

After a long silence, Tristan said, "Are you really that studious you even carry that book up to here?"

My gaze dropped on the Calculus book beside me. I hadn't realized I'd been clutching that around. "Psh, how I wish that I am."

"From that look on your face, I know you've hit another trouble with that one."

"You don't say." I took a sip from the chocolate, and it burned my tongue a little bit. "You know, every time I heard the word 'Math' or anything that's related to that term, I always feel like wanting to throw my notebook out of the window."

Tristan nodded his head. "Ah, I get it. Henry Cross must be giving you a rough time, yeah? That old guy always acts like Adolf Hitler on crack. You should've told me sooner about that, Kyles. I'm a genius in that field."

"Dude, you sound way too cocky with that one," I scoffed.

Smirking, he raised an eyebrow. "But you know I'm right."

I rolled my eyes, taking a bite from my bagel. He always got A's from that class.

"Come on, with that down look on your face, you badly need assistance with your studying. I can help, you know, without charge or anything."

Just having the thought of me having a one-on-one math session with him made me feel horrified. He completely knew that we couldn't last in a room without getting each other's nerves even if our lives depended on it.

"Never mind, I can handle it myself," I responded, unwavering. "And anyway, I'm afraid you might end up teaching me the wrong methods."

"Darn it, my secret's out," he groaned. "How'd you know my plan? You must be a psychic."

"Jeez, T, don't you ever lose disturbing ideas? You seriously need a twenty-year brain therapy," I said, giving him a weird look. I shook my head. "Why am I talking to you right now, anyway?"

"It'd be awkward if you talk to yourself, Kyles," he pointed out.

"Stop calling me that!"

"Why? With that tomboy looks of yours, the name suits you perfectly."

"You're impossible!" I snapped.

"You are more impossible. You just don't know that."

I grunted and looked away. I should stop with this one; otherwise, this argument would go on for only God knew how long.

The chimes clang softly in the air as the shop's door flew open. Several girls wearing navy blue coat and blue-and-white plaid skirt went out, pushing and giggling with each other. As they began to pull out their umbrellas, one of them turned her head in my direction.

She was really gorgeous, like she could be a model, I must say. Her long hair was as black as ink, and it flowed straightly to adorn her creamy-white face. Those almond-shaped eyes of hers widened, and I frowned. Her look was enough to make me insecure about myself for the whole week.

Is there something on my face? Why is she staring at me like that?

Then it hit me.

I whipped my head to Tristan. He was looking straight at her, his eyes displaying the same expression with the girl's. Shock.

Wait. Was I witnessing a love at first sight scene?

Cautiously, I turned to the girl again. She smiled at him, before opening up her umbrella and going after with her friends. I spun back to Tristan; he was still

having that mesmerized look on his face.

I tried not to barf.

"Wow, it's been a long time," he said, blinking from his trance.

I knitted my eyebrows. "You know her?"

"She was my first girlfriend."

"What?" I gasped.

His first girlfriend was a student at Melrose High School for Girls, which was the rival of Broadway Heights in sports and academics? That was news to me.

He nodded nonchalantly.

"What's her name?" I probed.

"You don't have to know."

"Oh, come on. What?"

"Stubborn, aren't you?"

"So? Just tell me her name already."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Tristan."

The corner of his lips curved up. "Her name's Kylie."

"Cut the crap, T!"

"Stop it already, Kyles. I'm not up for any question games."

I just let out a loud sigh. Whatever. Such a sad thing to think that a beautiful girl like her had her heart toyed by a self-centered, not-so-charming prince.

"Aw, you don't have to be jealous," he said, grinning. "We're completely over with each other three years ago."

"Seriously? Why do you always rub that word on my face every time-" I stopped when I felt my phone buzzed in my pocket. Lifting it up, I saw two unopened messages on the screen.

The first one came from Lacey, asking where I was. I sent her a reply: Kidnapped by the devil. Don't worry, I'm fine.

The last message came from an unknown number. It said: Hi :) - E.

Who's E?

Then a sudden realization hit me.

"Oh, my God!" I cried; my fingers went shaking so suddenly. I felt like I was having seizures!

Holy guacamole. Was this Erik? How did he get my number?

"What's with you?" Tristan asked.

I stuck my tongue out at him, and went back to my phone. I bit my lip, trying no

t to crack a wide grin. What should I reply to him? A simple hi wouldn't cut it, since it was one of the lamest conversation starters in history. But I hadn't had anything too brilliant to think of. Darn, I wasn't really good at this.

Tristan leaned closer to my shoulder. "Who are you texting?"

I pulled myself away, covering my phone. "None of your business."

"Kylie."

"Go away."

He snatched my phone so fast I didn't have time to dodge away. I tried to reach it out, but he put his hand on my face, pushing me as far as he could.

"You took my phone weeks ago. Now it's my time to take yours, too," he said, looked at the message, and frowned. "E? You mean, Erik Taylor?"

I managed to shove his hand off my face. "Give me back my phone!" I yelled.

"Ah, let me handle this. I know what to reply to him."

My eyes narrowed. "Don't you dare!"

He grinned evilly as he turned around and started punching the keypads. Shrieking, I tried to pull him and reach out for it, but he didn't even shift a bit. Jesus, was this guy made up of platinum or what?

"Tristan! Stop it!"

"I'm not done."

My fists clenched in rage that I wanted to whack his head with the nearest thing I could grab. But in the end, I slumped back to my seat, crossing my arms over

my chest, and took a deep loud breath to calm my nerves down.

"There." He faced me with a grin, feeling triumphant.

Gritting my teeth, I gave him a death glare.

"You know, if your eyes were real weapons, that sharp look would have caused massive destruction," he said with a snort.

"And I would pitch them on your face first, you freaking idiot!" I slammed my palms on my table. "For the last damn time, T, give me back my phone!"

Shrugging, he heaved a sigh and handed it back. I grabbed it, and at the same time, it buzzed. My heartbeat skipped. Another message from Erik!

I flashed Tristan a look, before opening the message up.

Erik: Really? Sorry if I'm disturbing you two.

My mouth dropped in surprise, and I looked for Tristan's reply to him. Guess what it was?

Don't talk to me. I'm with Tristan right now.

I felt my cheeks flushed as the blood inside me began to boil again. Clutching my phone hard in my hand, I took off from the place without saying a word. Every raindrop felt like cold pebbles on my skin, sending shivers through my body. In a matter of seconds, I was soaked, but I didn't care as I continued my way.

"Kylie! Where are you going?" Tristan's voice called through the noise.

"I'm going home!" I screamed without turning to him.

That jerk! How dare him to do that to me. He had just blown up my chance to have

a decent conversation with Erik through text message at least! Could he get even meaner than that? What was Erik possibly thinking by now?

Gah! Tristan should just rot in hell-

A hand touched my shoulder, and I recoiled away.

"Go away, Tristan," I demanded, facing him.

He had his hood on again, but his hair was already damp, droplets dripping down its ends to the tip of his nose.

"You forgot your book." He lifted up it up.

I seized it from him and gave him a dirty look. When I was about to turn away, he immediately grabbed his varsity jacket folded in his arms and put it over my head again.

"You know what, if you were in a movie, you just don't fit the role for a dramatic walk-in-the-rain scene. With that look on your face, you should be more likely in horror."

"Listen, just because you've got a shitty day doesn't mean you have to chuck your frustration on me," I retorted. "God, Tristan, you better back off before you could drag me into another disaster again. Mind your own business, got that? Just freaking leave mine alone."

His face didn't even seem to change a little bit. It remained calm and serious, like my words didn't reach his ears. I sighed infuriatedly, and then noticed the rain was beginning to fade away.

"Sometimes, I wish you were..."

"I'm what? What are you talking about?" I barked, giving him a weird look. Must Tristan be finally losing his mind because of what had happened at the cafeteria that noon?

He shook his head. "Ah, forget it. Let's go home," he said and pulled up a small smile. "It's real this time, okay? Oh, and you better cover up yourself already because..." He pointed at me.

I curiously looked down and gulped; face growing hot. My bra was showing through my wet shirt!

"Stop staring!" I covered myself with my hands.

He snorted. "What would I stare? I mean, you don't even have the actual bust line to get us guys excited."

"Damn you!" I sprinted to his car; smoke was practically blowing out of my ears.

Could someone just give him a one-way ticket to Mars, please?

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (19)~~

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ღ Finding Cinderella-19 ღ

-Kylie-

I woke up with a groan coming out from my lips. Heat was sizzling in my back so badly that I wanted to pull myself up, but some heavy feeling pinned me to my sheets. I'd been like this for two days already, after the rain.

There was a knock on the door, and there entered Lacey, already dressed up for school.

"Hey, I was about to wake you up," she said, coming to the side of my bed.

"What time is it?" I asked her. God, my mouth tasted like death. Everything around looked so gray that it seemed too early to be getting up.

"Oh, look, it's already skin-thirty," Lacey exclaimed, looking at her bare wrist.

I stifled a laugh.

"No, seriously, you need to get out of the bed and fix yourself up," she said with a giggle. "It's already twenty-five minutes before school starts, and you don't want to be late, do you?"

I covered my face with a pillow, groaning.

"I can't get up," I slurred. My head was throbbing so hard, it felt like there was a hammer beating on it.

"Huh?"

I removed the pillow and let out a sigh. "I can't get up," I said more clearly and coughed. "It's like there's a strange force pulling me down, restricting my freedom of movement."

Lacey's delicate features crumpled up. "Uh," she muttered, scratching her head, "you mean laziness?"

I just closed my eyes and placed an arm over my warm forehead. "Please wake me up when school ends."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, if that's it, then get up already. We might miss the bus! Or..." Her lips stretched into a mischievous smile. "Do you want me to ask Tristan for another ride with him?"

I immediately jolted upright, ignoring the pain that had increased when I forced myself to sit up.

Lacey laughed and waggled her fingers at me, singing: "Just as I thought. Twenty-two minutes left!" before skipping out of the room.

I rolled my eyes and dragged my lazy feet to the bathroom. I stopped for a moment when something appeared in the corner of my eye. Turning around, I saw Tristan through the window on the other side, leaning on what I supposed was his mirror. Headphones over his ears, he was rocking his head while mouthing lyrics to an unknown song.

In a matter of seconds, his head rotated towards me, as if something had signaled him. Our windows were both hazy from all the dewdrops, but I could still see his image forming a smirk as he grabbed his backpack and exited his bedroom.

My phone buzzed on the desk, and despite of what I was feeling right now, I lunged at it, half-expecting it would be Erik. Instead, much to my disappointment, it was Tristan, saying: Ugly.

Scowling, I texted back: Shut up. I always wake up with a good attitude, but then idiots like you happen.

Then he replied seconds later: Meh.

Me: I swear I'll get a payback from you for what you did that Wednesday!

Him: What are you talking about?

Me: Don't play dumb! You know, back in the coffee shop? Grr!

Him: That was already two days ago! Can you not get over it? Jeez, it's not a big deal. It'd been just Erik.

I rubbed my temples as I threw the phone on my bed. He just wouldn't understand

it, of course. What a royal pain in the ass.

I scratched at the back of my head as I listened to Julianne's speech about limits and all the devastating numbers written across her notebook.

"...so you have to factor both the numerator and the denominator-" she pointed her black ballpoint pen to the equation "-to circumvent the indeterminate form, get it?"

You know that awesome feeling you get when you finally understand Math? Yeah, me neither. How was I supposed to know all this stuff when I didn't even know the meaning of "circumvent"? I should've been checking the thesaurus for some time now.

While trying to prevent myself from having a nosebleed, I nodded uncertainly and sniffed.

"Are you sure?" Julianne eyed me closely, her dark red eyebrows arching up.

"Uh... there's only one thing that I can't quite understand," I said with a forced smile, feeling as miserable as a dying cat.

"Okay, point it out and I'll explain it again."

"Great! Let's see, uh..." I began to say, coughed, and pointed to the first solution. "I don't get this part."

"Uh-huh, so in that-"

"This one, this one, too, and... Ah! And this, this, this, this, and finally this one," I said as I pointed at the work from top to bottom, page one to page two. I paused, took a deep breath, and continued: "Or better yet, repeat the whole thing."

Julianne gazed at me wide-eyed. "But Kylie, this is already the third time I've explained the entire lesson to you," she said in shock. "Do we really have to go back to the start? I'm running out of saliva."

This was always the main problem I had whenever my brain cells were dead.

I rubbed my temples. My eyes were kind of heavy and blurry, and I wanted to doze off for a moment; at the same time, though, I didn't want to take a break and spend my free time resting my exhausted body. I had a lot of catching up to do on schoolwork, and if I didn't complete it, I'd be screwed for life.

"Okay, well, let me solve this one, and then you tell me if it's right," I said, grabbing the pen off the table and starting to solve the easiest equation I could find. My mind was whispering, "I have no idea what I'm doing," but my hands continued to work by themselves.

Minutes later, I found myself puffing out my chest in triumph. Julianne took the notebook, her eyes scanning rapidly through all of my work. In a little while, she handed it back to me, staring at me levelly.

"How did you do this?" she asked as I grabbed the notebook.

A wide grin spread across my face. "You mean I did it right? Hell, yes!" I exclaimed so happily, I almost jumped to my feet and let out a scream of joy.

"Nope," Julianne said indifferently, and my face dropped. "Don't get too excited, because you made a lot-I mean a lot-of mistakes in that problem and you're now here near the correct answer."

"But... it was the shortest equation and somewhat easy to solve..." I uttered, voice dropping on the last word.

Julianne flicked her finger up, saying, "Math rule number one? If you found the equation easy to solve, go back and re-check, since you must be doing something wrong."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "Gah! I'm out. Can't take this crap any longer," I groaned and sniffed again, squeezing my eyes shut. "Darn, Mom is so going to kill me once she knows my results. I just have to prepare my résumé for McDonalds if don't end up passing Calculus."

"Aw, don't say that, girl. I thought you weren't a quitter!"

"But it's different when it comes to Math." I shook my head, and then lifted a finger when an idea popped into my head. "Hey, why don't you tutor me at home after school? I think it would be a lot of help."

"I'm busy with school activities. You know, the Literary Club? The school paper? So, I can't. Sorry," she said with a small shrug. "Listen, why don't you just ask Tristan to help you? You two live right next to each other, so it's much easier for you to contact him anyway. Besides, he's way better at the subject compared to me."

My head ached even more when I heard his name.

"No flipping way!" I exclaimed as I opened my eyes in terror, but Julianne just looked back at me curiously. "Come on, Jules, just for this week- I swear I won't be heavy baggage to carry. Pretty please? With cheese and pepperoni on top? You know you want that."

"I told you I have activities after school," she said, smiling and rolling her eyes.

"You can make yourself an excuse from those for once," I persisted. "And it's not as if those clubs have that many activities to do, like, preventing the melt-off of icebergs in Antarctica or something. Those club members are just sitting around in their rooms, talking about gossip and whatever. I'll bet you're the only member who even does anything."

"Exactly," she replied. "That's the reason why I'm taking action on that matter."
"

I slapped my hand to my forehead. "Julianne!"

"Okay, look, what's wrong with asking Tristan for some help?"

"Everything."

"Oh, please, Kylie, it's not that bad if you ask him. You have to set aside your hatred over him- God only knows the reason behind that-and tone down your... your pride for a moment. Trust me, you need him for this."

Her eyes looked into mine, glinting as if they were forcing me to consider her words; however, I didn't even spare a second to think about it. My decision was final.

"Ah, whatever!" I moaned, brushing my itchy nose. "Forget everything. I can handle this myself."

"Right." Julianne sighed, shaking her head. "If you say so, Ky, but don't say I didn't give you any advice."

"Fine, Jules, fine!"

"Okay, okay, relax. You've been having high blood pressure or something since yesterday." She paused, as if waiting. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Aren't you going to tell me what's got you so stressed out?" she wanted to know

I rubbed the back of my sweltering neck with clammy hands. Feeling lightheaded, I sunk further into the bench.

"I'm all right," I replied evasively.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Uh-huh," I assured her with a firm nod. I've been acting like I'm okay since yesterday, Julianne, so please don't interrupt my performance.

"You really are not. Have you seen your face? It's white all over. You've been like this for days." Then she paused. "You're sick, aren't you?" she said with sudden clarity. "Let me check." Julianne's voice hinted at a lot of worry, but when she lifted her hand towards my forehead, I dodged it feebly.

"Jules..."

"Crazy, why did you force yourself to go to school?"

"I don't want to miss my classes."

"Well, aren't you that dedicated?" She shook her head. "You really should go to the clinic and take a rest there," she prompted. "Or do you want me to drive you home instead?"

"No, really, I'm fine," I insisted with a grin, avoiding eye contact. "It's just a little headache."

She sighed, and then a series of beeps pierced the air. Distracted, she reached into her pocket and grabbed her phone.

"Darn, another emergency meeting of the club," she said.

"You should go now," I said, nodding. I began to grab my things from the table. "I'm just going to the library to return a book."

She frowned. "You sure you can handle yourself?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I swear. See you later."

My teeth clattered as the cold breeze from the air cooler seeped into my skin. I wrapped my arms around me and wished I'd brought two thick jackets along with my blue cotton sweatshirt.

I was scanning the bookshelves for another Calculus book. My vision was blurring so badly, I needed to rub my eyes in order to see more clearly, and after I had , I noticed a person on the other side of the shelf staring at me through the gaps of the books.

When we both stepped out, my jaw dropped.

"Hey, Kylie," he greeted me.

"Oh, Erik, it's you," I said sheepishly. "You scared me for a second."

"Sorry." He laughed and looked around. "You came alone here?"

"Yeah, Julianne's at her club meeting right now," I said, and then I just remembered something. "Oh, I almost forgot. About that message you received that Wednesday... I'm sorry. But it wasn't me, I swear. Tristan was actually the one who sent that," I muttered, embarrassed.

Erik laughed, and I guess he was the only one out of the two of us who could find anything amusing.

"Yeah? I see. I really thought I was such a huge bother to you guys."

"If anyone of us was a huge bother, it was him," I blurted, then my cheeks heated up even more when I realized how it sounded a little bit wrong. "T-that guy. He was lucky I didn't slug him," I mumbled. "I'm sorry if that made you upset or whatever."

"It's okay. Let's just forget about it. So..." He cleared his throat and said, "What's up? What have you got right there?"

I showed the book I had, rolling my eyes. "I know. I'm turning into a huge nerd now," I told him in amusement. "You?"

"Well, look what I found in the deepest parts of the shelves." He lifted up a The Walking Dead comic book. "I know. I'm still a huge sucker for this."

I snorted a laugh. "At least it doesn't make your head crack all day."

We went to a table and settled there.

"You must be working hard in your studies," he remarked. "Getting ready for college, huh?"

If I ever pass senior year...

Though I was full of doubt, I nodded, just so he wouldn't be disappointed with me.

"Which university do you want to attend?"

"Um... Imperial," I said doubtfully.

"Hey, that's great! I know you can do well, Kylie." He grinned. "Me? Well, I'm still thinking about my decisions. It better goes that way, doesn't it? Better than jumping into stuff you're not quite sure of. It's kinda hard for me ranking all those universities and colleges, choosing which the best among them is."

"Wow, that's definitely a big task to tackle."

"Yeah, sometimes I just push the college stuff aside and wish for a letter from Hogwarts to appear in my mailbox."

We stared at each other for a moment before erupting into laughter. Erik's words had broken the ice, and somehow, I felt a little better. Someone made us hush, and we both bit our lip, suppressing our laugh.

A silver trinket around his left wrist caught my attention.

"Hey, I just noticed that thing just now." I pointed at the object. "Is that an

identification bracelet? That looks cool."

He lifted it up. "Uh, yeah, it came from someone I knew."

"Best friend?"

"Girlfriend."

I gulped hard and continued: "Oh! Yeah, you had a girlfriend before. Cyrene? That's her name, right? Cyrene... Chen?" My heart thudded loudly as I mentioned the name.

"Yeah, Cyrene. You still remember her, huh?" he said, voice dropping. His shoulder slumped as he sighed heavily. "We broke up when I moved to Florida."

I'd never seen her in my whole life, but seeing his eyes going all dreamy, I could tell this Cyrene girl was a total chick.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Ah, was it because of the long-distant relationship?" I blurted out.

"No, that wasn't the reason for it. We could've worked that thing out, you know. It's just that..." He half shrugged, half shook his head. "Something happened."

I stayed put in silence, not wanting to pry about that "something", and just let him continue his story.

"Actually, I didn't know what the problem was. I didn't even know what I'd done wrong. She just continued to shut me out. If only she had told me why, maybe I could've done something to work things out between us... but, well, I was too late because..." He paused. "Someone already took her from me."

The atmosphere felt even more awkward now. This was the first time Erik had ever talked to me like that. If this had occurred back in our freshman days, I definitely would've made an easy joke about it instead of giving him a sympathetic look, as I was doing now.

Fragments of my own past flashed through my mind. What had happened back in that year may have been caused by a childish prank (blame Lacey and Julianne, not me), but the result had been much more embarrassing than I'd thought possible. Erik's words: "I'm sorry, but I already like somebody else" were eight words I never wanted to remember again.

Now he was just talking about that "somebody else". I had to admit, I'd used to hate her, but it hadn't lasted long because I'd found it pointless and silly to hate a person I didn't even know.

"Oh, that's... too bad." The hot lump in my throat had gotten bigger, and I cleared my throat to continue: "Curse that guy who stole Cyrene, then."

I didn't know what else to say aside from that.

He laughed. "Yeah, curse that guy. But it's all okay now, Kylie. I sucked it up, got over it when I moved to Florida. And this identification bracelet was the last thing I had from her."

I gave him a small smile, which then he returned.

"Kylie, can you do me a favor?" he asked. I lifted an eyebrow, and he carried on: "Can you keep this from everyone else? I don't like other people knowing that."
"

"Of course." I grinned, giving him a thumbs-up sign. "Look, you keep my secret, I keep yours. I think it'd be fair for both of us."

"Aha, genius," he said with a laugh. "I know I can always count on you, so thank you. Anyway, I told you that your secret is safe with me. Don't worry too much, Kylie."

"Well... all right."

With that, we fell into silence. It seemed like we had no idea what to talk about next, just so we could break the uncomfortable tension in the atmosphere. Soon, I began flipping through the book, only to keep myself from thinking too much about stuff. The breeze was slipping through the thin material covering my body, and I closed my eyes, exhaling warm air from my mouth.

"Kylie?"

My head shot up. Erik was looking at me with doubt smeared across his face.

"Uh, remember that incident near the lockers when Lacey and Julianne—"

I quickly stood up, forgetting how weak I was. He watched me, his mouth hanging open.

"Kylie—"

Oh, no. Please, Erik, don't bring that stupid thing back again.

"Uh—I think I should go to my next class now," I stammered, the words tumbling out swiftly. "It's been nice talking to you for a short time. See you around."

I didn't give him any chance to say goodbye to me. I went out of the library, forcing myself to walk across the hall, praying that I could do this.

"Hey!" he called out from behind me. "Kylie, hold on! Listen, I didn't mean..."

I kept my attention on the path, pretending I couldn't hear him.

Then, all of a sudden, my muscles tensed as a strange feeling began to crawl over my skin. A sickening sound rang in my ears, and I shook my head with pain, shut my eyes, and then opened them again.

I stopped walking and pressed my hand on the wall.

Everything was swirling in my vision. Black spots swarmed before my eyes. I tried to fight them, yet they continued to invade my line of sight.

"Kylie, are you-"

Strong hands grasped my shoulders, and then Erik's voice calling my name was the last thing I perceived before darkness completely overtook me.

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~~♡ Finding Cinderella (20)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella-20 ♡

-Tristan-

I had a bad feeling inside.

You know the one-a twist inside your stomach that creates so much uneasiness, you feel it physically, a gut-wrenching feeling that something is either about to go wrong or already has. I had no idea why I was experiencing this kind of sensation so suddenly, but I wouldn't let it ruin my day.

"Show me what you got, Hartford," Grey said aggressively, bending down slightly with extended arms.

"If you say so, Walter."

The ball made a loud thumping noise on the court as it bounced harshly off my hand. Every time I attempted a slide in the opposite direction, Grey would coordinate his movements with my own; as expected from a football player, he was fast. He kept trying to steal the ball from me, and my shoes squeaked as I tried to find an open space in their defense as quickly as possible.

I quickly switched directions and dribbled hard, rapidly whisking the ball behind my back. After that, everything happened so fast- two quick spins and a slide later, I was escaping Grey and the other opponents' defenses.

The hoop was finally in front of me again, and before anyone from the opposite team could block me again, I speedily headed onwards and performed a slam-dunk.

Score!

Several whoops followed, mostly from the female crowd sitting on the bleachers. They were giggling and cheering with excitement, as if this were an actual competition.

A loud whistle came from the back, and a plump guy with a black gym coat moved forward.

"Okay, good game, boys!" Coach Condor's voiced boomed. "Since team B won, they will receive the highest mark for this test!"

My teammates crowded around, giving pats on the back to each other and handshakes to the opposing team.

"Man, how'd you do that trick?" Grey asked.

Gym class was finally over, and we guys were fixing up ourselves in the boys' locker room.

"I swear I didn't see that coming," he added, brushing his damp blond hair with a towel.

"Might have been my adrenaline kicking in," I said with a shrug, then took a gulp of tepid water from my bottle.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Justin plopping down on my other side. He bent down to tie his shoelaces.

"Have you heard those girls? They're screaming your name like it's a ritual," he said as he ran his fingers through greasy, dark brown hair.

Grey leaned closer to my ear and muttered, "He's just jealous that you took the final shot."

I took out a fresh shirt from my locker and pulled it on. "Shut up, man," I said, shaking my head.

"But you know what?" Grey said loudly as he pulled away and twisted his torso. "With that agility and ball-handling skill of yours, you should be a shooting guard for the Rebounders. Right, Justin?"

Justin offered us a quick nod.

Ah, the Rebounders - one of the Broadway Heights' assets. The team held a four-year winning streak, the longest out of all other high school basketball teams in the state, and playing on the team was something to be proud of.

"You were joining the basketball team back in middle school," Grey reminded.

"Yeah, but... nah, forget it. Basketball isn't really my thing," I said as I bent down to grab my bag from the seat and hoisted it over my shoulder. "Besides, I have other plans in mind, and engaging in any sports falls at the bottom of my list."

The three of us got out from the room and headed to the cafeteria to grab some bites before we could proceed to our next classes.

"So, how's the finding Cinderella operation going, T?" Grey asked as he slung his arm around my shoulder. "Any luck?"

I shook my head.

"That chick has probably not any interest to show up to you," Justin told me. "She's quite a catch, but she's just so hard to get."

"I know, I know," I said huffily. I pulled away from Grey and stepped in front of them. "But you know what, guys, this might turn out really weird to say, but I'm having this feeling-

Someone bumped my back real hard. I turned around and saw a skinny dude scrambling his feet away from me to his friends.

"Shoot, I-I'm sorry, uh, man," he stammered. "I didn't mean to. These idiots were the ones who pushed me."

I nodded without saying a word, and then signaled Justin and Grey go on.

"Wait, Hartford!" the guy called. Was he in one of my classes? I wondered what his name was, since I hardly noticed anyone who wasn't worth my attention. He caught up behind us, and said, "You know Kylie Harris, right?"

"Obviously," I said with a sneer, turning to him. "Why?"

"She's in the clinic right now."

"What?"

"Y-yeah, I saw a guy carrying her to the clinic a while ago. She must've fainted or something," he said, brushing his frizzy hair. "I'm not so sure... but well, I just thought you wanted to know, seeing that you two were close. Sort of."

This may explain why I've felt so troubled!

"Hey, Tristan!" Grey called out when I started to sprint towards the clinic. "You're leaving-?"

"I gotta check on Kylie," I said, jabbing my thumb at the back.

The path blurred as I ran, feeling a surge of adrenaline. Their calls rang in my

ears, but my mind remained focused on the place, or rather the girl, I needed to check on. The clinic came into view, and I slowed down. I reached for the doorknob, but when it wiggled, I stopped halfway.

The door flew open, and I took a step back, frowning.

No. Way.

"Thank you, Nurse Lloyd," the guy I'd encountered said towards the room behind him as he shut the door.

He faced me, and in a flash, the upward curve of his mouth fell down and was replaced by a thin line. My eyes grew larger. Hundreds of thoughts began to swim through my brain, and I had no clue what to say or do.

With a final gulp, I raised my head and demanded, "What did you do to Kylie?"

"Hey there, Hartford," Erik said, coolly shoving his hands into his pockets. He must've seen the glare on my face, since he added, "You look kind of worked up, huh? You okay, man?"

That's the answer to a question I never asked.

"What did you do to Kylie?" I asked again, emphasizing every word through gritted teeth.

Erik let out a snort, shaking his head. "Whoa, keep it cool, Tristan. I didn't do anything to her, so don't accuse me like that," he said. "Besides, you should be thanking me for being with her when things went wrong; otherwise, no one would've saved her from her fall."

I exhaled, trying to dispel the heat inside me. "Whatever," I said, though the harshness in my voice failed to disappear.

"I didn't know you would be that concerned when it came to her."

"Why? Does it kill anybody to show a little concern?"

"Well, I just thought you hated each other's guts. It's obvious from the way you treat each other... or more exactly, the way she treats you."

"Yeah, I may fight with her a lot," I said, fists clenched, "but if you lay a finger on her, you'll be facing me."

"Hey, are you trying to say that I'll do something bad to her?" he said, the coolness and boredom in his tone ever-present and thoroughly pissing me off. "Oh, come on, T. Why are you complicating this conversation? Look, don't even say stuff like that, 'cause it's obvious you still don't know me. Think twice before you react."

I laughed drily. "Did I touch a nerve?"

"I'm not that kind of guy, and Kylie knows that."

"I doubt that." Yeah, she may have known him, seeing as she'd liked him a long time ago, but ever since that incident had happened, I'd sensed there was something about him that Kylie couldn't possibly figure out.

Erik tilted his head. "What are you trying to say, Hartford?"

"I don't trust you, Taylor."

"Huh. That's cool, I'm fine with it. It's not like I can do anything to change your mind. Kylie trusts me, and that's all that matters now. "

"Huh, right," I muttered, reaching for the doorknob.

Erik stepped aside and gave me a half smile, saying, "There are some things you just don't know, T." He was about to turn around when he added, "Oh, and just a piece of friendly advice: you gotta take care of her."

Something in his tone bothered me—something venomous laced through his words, so

mething whose meaning was concealed from me.

"What are you talking about?" I asked coldly.

He simply shrugged, turned his back on me, and walked away without saying any word.

Something important popped into my mind, and I opened my mouth to call him back, but then shut it closed. Erik was the only person besides me who the mysterious girl had danced with, and there might have been a chance that he knew something about her. Yet I opted not to talk to him, since I might finally lose it. Having just one talk with him was enough. I'd figure out Cinderella's identity without asking anything from him.

Cold, citrus-scented air rushed past through as I entered the room. There was no noise except for papers flapping on a wooden table, which was located near an open window. I walked slowly through the room, scanning it to search for Kylie...

...and there she was, lying peacefully on a white bed in one of the curtained stalls.

I was about to proceed in her direction when an elderly woman in a white suit popped out from nowhere, making me jump a couple of feet away.

"Nurse Lloyd," I breathed.

"Oh, Tristan, it's you. May I help you with something?" she asked in her sweet, raspy voice.

I broke into an uncomfortable grin. "Nothing much. I'm just checking on Harris. How is she?"

Nurse Lloyd turned her gray-haired head towards the patient with a smile. "Oh, she has a high fever from excess fatigue- she must've been exposed to the rain, which would've worsened her condition even more."

"Yeah, she was out in the rain," I said, remembering how she'd been drenched after she'd walked away out from the coffee shop. That idiot clearly didn't know ho

w to take care of herself.

Nurse Lloyd shook her head, mumbling something I couldn't hear, and said a little louder, "Well, there's nothing too bad about her condition right now, so don't worry, dear. She just needs enough rest and some supplements, and I'm happy to say she's recovering quite quickly."

"That's... good to hear."

"Oh, have you by chance met the boy who brought her here? He just left a moment ago, and if I remember correctly, his name was Erik Taylor...?"

"Uh, yeah. That's his name," I muttered. But our meeting didn't go too well.

"Oh, yes, yes. I don't see the boy around too often, so I easily forget his name. Forgive me for that. Anyway, don't you have class, Tristan?" she asked, her dark eyebrows rose.

I glanced at the clock hanging on the bare white sidewall. "Nope. I still have twenty minutes before my next class starts. So, uh... is it all right if I just stay here for a while?"

Her hazel eyes glanced at me in possible amusement, her pale lips shaped into a small smile.

"Well, if that's what you say," she said with a nod. As she grabbed a stack of file folders from the table, she added, "Anyway, it's good timing to have you around here, since I have to deliver these papers to the office. Is watching the clinic for a while fine with you? Or is that a huge bother?"

"No, it's fine. I don't mind." I waved my hands at her and said, "Please, go on."
"

After giving me a pat on the shoulder and a smile, Nurse Lloyd went out. Soon I was pulling out a chair and sitting beside the bed, where Kylie was snoring softly, her hands resting on her stomach. All the muscles in her face were totally at peace, and no twitches or any other movements were visible.

Who would've thought that this person, who always acts like a behemoth during the day, could seem a little more child-like while she sleeps?

I pulled the blanket further towards her chin and touched her forehead to check if her temperature was any better. Nope, it definitely wasn't- she was burning hot.

As I stared at her, I realized there were some things I'd never noticed about her until now. For example, Kylie had an elegant, strong bone structure; with cheekbones so sharp, you could slice bread on them. Even though her forehead was large and her nose was small and a bit crooked, the little flaws made her appear better than an airbrushed model would have. My eyes moved down to her thin, peach-colored lips, parted as they puffed out warm air.

I had to admit, Kylie could be pretty if she at least fixed herself up.

When she shifted a little in bed, her pageboy hair fell over her cheeks in a mess. I swept the strands off her face, but my heart almost skyrocketed out of my chest as I came to a sudden realization:

Holy crap, I'm checking her out!

Heat uncontrollably rose to my face, and I turned away.

What am I doing?

I gazed back at her. She was still sleeping soundly, yet at some moments she would suddenly jerk to the other side of the bed or rattle off something incomprehensible. I was glad she wasn't awake, or else she wouldn't have hesitated to whack me in the face with the pillow.

Swallowing a huge lump in my throat, I tried to compose myself, yet as each second passed, I felt the rhythm in my chest begin to race. I couldn't tell exactly why I was so anxious when I studied Kylie. Even if I didn't want to believe - I never wanted to believe it but...

...why did I have the feeling she was the girl I was looking for?

-Kylie-

White.

Everything around me was white.

"She's conscious," a distant voice echoed in my ears.

Blinking in surprise, I turned my throbbing head to the side, and I could see a mass of red curls looming over me through the haze. Julianne was watching me with her wide eyes.

"Hey," I managed to say through a dry throat.

"Hey yourself," she said with a scowl as she stood up straight. "How dare you get sick and leave me all alone? I can't bear to be with those goons in our classes, you know that? And see? This is what you get when you don't listen to me."

I forced a smile. "Gee, I'm sorry, Mom. It won't happen again."

"Kylie! Oh gosh, are you feeling better now?" Lacey exclaimed as she popped out of nowhere. "My fever must've transferred to you or something." Her face was pale with much anxiety, and she gripped my arms with her clammy hands.

"That's silly. Relax, Lacey. I'm totally fine now..." I said, rubbing my head. "Or so I think... How did I end up here, by the way?"

Julianne and Lacey looked at each other and shrugged.

Wait, the last person who was with me a while ago was...

Even though the fragments of what had happened were fading fast before my eyes,

I felt my face turn even hotter at the sudden thought.

No, Erik couldn't possibly be the one who carried me here!

Thinking about it made me want to crawl in hole and mope from embarrassment. What did Erik think of me now? Maybe he was appalled, since carrying a person like me was like carrying a toothless orangutan to a vet. It wasn't my fault my weight was in the tons.

I pushed the thoughts aside and tried to close my eyes, yet there was no way sleep would find me once again. Turning my head, I noticed a guy in a gray shirt leaning over the nurse's table, his head buried in his arms. My mouth froze open once my brain had instantaneously recognized him.

"What's he doing here?" I asked with a glower.

"Isn't he so nice?" Julianne wiggled her eyebrows at me. "Tristan totally skipped his last class just to watch over you."

"What!" I shot up from the bed, but moaned and rubbed my temples when pain shot out of my veins. "Aw, damn. My head."

"You shouldn't force yourself. You're still in a recovery state," Julianne reminded me.

"Wait, is my face clean? No marker, paint, crayon, anything?" I cried out, touching my face in complete terror.

"What are you talking about? Of course, it doesn't have any marks except for that drool on your mouth."

I quickly wiped the corner of my mouth with my hand, breathing a sigh of relief. One time last year, Tristan had drawn all over my face while I'd been sleeping; that incident had made me the huge laughing stock of the whole class, and it was something I never, ever wanted to happen again.

A groan from Tristan made us turn around in alarm. He was rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and running his fingers through his messy, tangled hair.

"What's with all the noise?" he complained, then yawned. Seeing me fully awake, he added with a glare, "Ha, of course it's you. You're the only one in this room who can be that noisy." He stood up and stretched his body.

"Way to make me feel better, Tristan," I retorted. "And since you're here, I think it'd be best for me to leave."

Pulling off the blanket, I jumped down from the bed, but at that moment, my whole body began to ache right along with my dizzy head. The black mist surrounded my field of vision again. I felt my body falling lifelessly through the air like a piece of paper, but before I could land on the floor, something circled around my waist.

I gasped.

"You shouldn't push yourself so hard," Tristan said, staring down at me with seemingly cloudy eyes.

How the hell did he catch me so fast?

Feeling his hands around my wrist and my body, I shoved him away, as my chest was beating erratically.

"Back off," I said, taking tiny steps back. The warmth from his grip remained on my skin, contrasting with the coldness of air inside the room. It freaked me out even more, and I was sure I'd be having seizures in no time.

Julianne was scratching her head, while Lacey was covering her mouth. Both weren't saying a thing, not even looking at us, as if they too felt the excess of awkwardness in the atmosphere.

I cleared my throat and said with composure, "Julianne, Lacey, let's go now."

Lacey's eyes widened. "But you're still weak and..."

"I told you I'm fine," I insisted, grasping Julianne's arms in case I fainted again.

"Here, let me help you," Tristan said, facing his back to me and bending his knees slightly.

"What the heck do you think you're doing?" I exclaimed. Was he going to fart in front of me? Oh, gross. That wasn't the kind of medicine I was looking for at the moment!

"I know you won't be able to walk long distances for now, so I'm offering you a piggyback ride."

"Piggy-what? Excuse me?"

"C'mon, don't make me wait."

"But I didn't ask you to do it! I'm not a kid anymore, T. I can handle myself."

"Don't be such a pain in the ass, Kyles- I'm ignoring my pride right now just to offer you some help. Stop asking questions and get on already."

Wow. That was a surprise. But riding on the devil's back? That just screamed madness! Jeez, I couldn't even bear to picture it.

"I won't."

"Yes, you will."

Letting out an exasperated sigh, I said, "Why do you always like to argue with me?"

"Why do you always have to argue with me?" Tristan barked back.

"Sheesh. You're being immature right now."

"You're also being immature right now."

"Hey! You can't just copy what I-"

"Um, guys?" Lacey cut us off tentatively, stepping in between us. She looked at me, then at Tristan, before sighing deeply. "Can you two stop with the bickering, please?"

Smirking, Tristan raised his eyebrows at me, and I did nothing but roll my eyes. There was no freaking way I would ever ride on his back.

"Oh my God, this is so embarrassing," I muttered as I lowered my head and closed my eyes.

Yes, I was allowing him to carry me out of the school building, where many people would see how close we were. We'd been debating for a couple minutes back in the clinic whether I should have agreed or not, yet I'd been soundly creamed when Julianne and Lacey had gone to Tristan's side.

"I swear I'll never do this again," I groaned again. Out of my peripherals, Julianne and Lacey was trailing to the side, but their distance from our spot was way too far, as if they were trying to ditch us. I gave them a defeated face, and they just gave me an apologetic smile in return.

What great luck I had here.

"Do you think I wanted this to happen, too?" Tristan snapped at me. "My reputation's already crumbling, Kylie, and I don't want it to turn even worse."

"Bah! You really care about that stupid thing?"

"Can't I? And it's not stupid."

"It certainly is! Oh, what a bigheaded jerk you are."

"Shut up."

"Huh, touch a nerve, Tristan?" I pinched his ears, making him pull his head away

"Hey, knock it off you little-"

With a devilish grin, I craned my neck over his shoulders to see his pissed off reaction. Not only were the tips of his ears turning red, but his cheeks were as well. I didn't know why was that so. Sweat was running from the tips of his hair down his pinkish neck, and I suspected that he was having a hard time carrying me. Oh, yes, he should have been making a little sacrifice, because he was the one who'd chosen this.

We walked for a couple of feet in silence, and I'd almost dozed off when Tristan faked a cough.

"Kylie?"

"What?" I grumbled.

"May I ask you something?"

I rolled my eyes. "Shoot. It's not like I can stop you, anyway."

"What's with you being so snappy? I was just going to ask where you were during Val..." He paused, as if thinking twice about what he should say, then finally shook his head. "Nah, scratch that. Never mind."

There. He'd better have been finished talking, since my mind was full of steam right now, and I didn't want another round of arguments with him.

At the parking lot, several kids were glaring at us while whispering to each other. I frowned at the sight of them. Great, now this scene would instantly be on the front page of the school paper. Two of the most well-known archenemies in the history of Broadway Heights having a piggyback ride? Wow. That was equivalent to dropping a nuke overall the state of Connecticut, and I wasn't even kidding.

Don't worry, Kylie. This won't last long.

I felt my face go as colorless as it could. I guess this was the most disturbing thing I'd ever done in my seventeen years of existence, but even so, the warmth circulating through my body told a different story. For some reason, it felt welcoming and... safe at the same time. Strange and downright stupid, I know. My heart still hadn't stopped its wild beats, and I felt butterflies-no, screw butterflies; I could feel the entire zoo erupting in my stomach right at that moment.

Feeling utterly mortified, I couldn't do anything but bury my face in Tristan's back. From his shirt, I could smell the familiar scent of detergent I was always using at home, and faintly... Tristan's scent.

#####

~~ღ Finding Cinderella (21)~~

#####

ღ Finding Cinderella-21 Ϙ

-Tristan-

For the past few nights, I could barely sleep because my mind had been consumed by all the random thoughts. It was as if everything was starting to overwhelm me, and the thought of it made me restless because I was honestly not sure I would be able to digest the growing truth. I could feel the tension in my mind and in my chest, but I didn't know what I should do about it.

Yeah, anxiety sucks, doesn't it?

Fingers snapped in my dim field of vision, and I blinked several times.

"Earth to Tristan, Earth to Tristan," Grey chanted at my side. His voice was kinda inaudible, since I had my headphones in and a rock song was blaring in my ears.

What surprised me the most, though, was that the others had leaned in towards me and were already scarfing down the rest of my lunch.

"Hey, stealing people's lunches isn't funny!" I shouted at them, shoving their hands off my plate.

Their laughs echoed around the room, causing the other students' heads to swivel towards us. My friends could be complete assholes, especially during lunchtime, and that fact didn't seem to be going away anytime soon.

"Says the guy who always runs off with the tomboy's lunch," Will said from across the table. He had his arms wrapped around none other than his current girlfriend, Monique, whom he'd finally gotten the nerve to ask out.

I simply shook my head at Will's statement, remembering back in my sophomore days when Kylie would chase me across the field just to get her lunch back.

"What?" I grumbled as I felt a nudge from Justin.

"Hey man, what's with all that sulking? Anyway, wanna come with us this weekend to--"

I interrupted him by saying, "Sure, whatever," so that he wouldn't bother me any more.

As I increased my phone's volume, everything around me seemed to be drowned by my thoughts. It was like I was transported to another world, with my phone, my music, and two particular people in my mind only.

And thinking about everything drives me insane!

Every time the girl at the ball crossed my mind, there was a chance that Kylie would flash through my thoughts as well, as if their two separate images were combining and producing the same result. I didn't know how to explain it. Was my mind

tricking me? Whatever the case, I knew I shouldn't make stupid conclusions, since it'd be absurd and farfetched. Kylie hated to doll herself up, let alone attend dances, for that matter. She always acted reckless and stubborn, whereas Cinderella acted graceful and smooth.

The two were complete opposites.

But then again, why was I getting the feeling that they were the same person?

I'd never known looking for the truth could piss you off this much.

In spite of that, I figured keeping up the search would be worth a shot.

-Kylie-

"I've been slacking too much!" I cried out, slamming my notebook against my forehead.

Julianne, Lacey, and I were sitting on the bleachers surrounding the field, since that nerdy best friend of mine had dragged us here just to watch her Pete playing Frisbee with his friends. And when I say friends, I mean none other than Erik and his pals.

Julianne was waving her hands in Pete's direction, as if she was his number one fan, but just watching her all shaky and giggly made me wince. Her actions were just the same as those girls who always praised Tristan's graces.

Talk about obsessed fan girls.

Something bumped my side, and I turned to see Lacey with a lollipop in her mouth, giving me a meaningful signal to look across the field. Heaving a sigh, I glanced over at the Frisbee players, who were running like a swarm of bumblebees.

Erik was jogging over to where the blue Frisbee would go, and when he jumped high

h to catch it, the smile on his face widened. Seeing him grin made the corners of my lips turn upwards uncontrollably. Smiles were so contagious.

Erik spotted me from a distance, and he waved at me, much to my surprise.

"Ooh la la," Lacey sang, "look who's waving. Wow, sis, I didn't know Erik had his eyes on you."

Was that supposed to be a compliment or a joke?

However, I didn't remark on it, just rolled my eyes and returned to my work. My purpose had been to find peace in this place and carry on with my schoolwork, not stare at people, but I could barely concentrate on my lessons with the chants of cheerleaders, the thuds of runners, and the yells of students distracting my thoughts.

Julianne let out another girly yelp, and I couldn't prevent myself from saying, "You know what you look like? A silly lovesick frog that's just waiting for some big old bug to fly in her mouth."

Snapping her mouth shut, she turned her eyes towards me. "Come on, Kylie, I'm just trying to show my support for Pete. I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

"Whatever," I said with a snicker. "You think you seem okay from a distance? It turns out, you look more like a stalker than anything. Watch out for police dogs."

"Hey, I'm not stalking him! That's a strong accusation, Ky," she retorted. "I'm just looking at him... all the time."

"Right, whatever you say," I said. As my eyes dropped to my problem sets, I felt a vein popping in my head. Another day of math torture, fantastic.

I raised my notes to Julianne's eye level and asked, "Um, Jules, can you please explain what this is all-"

"Yay! They scored!" Julianne automatically shot up from her seat, as if there wa

s a spring attached to her butt, and she waved her hands so wildly.

I smacked my palm to my face. Oh boy, she was a nutcase.

"Julianne! I thought you were going to help me with this?" I cried out in frustration, tugging her frilly peach skirt just to make her sit down.

"I'm so sorry, Kylie," she said, her attention fixed on her idol. "I get distracted too easily because... you know." She gestured towards Pete again, and I let out a groan.

Something covered my eyes and shocked me for a brief second. I didn't have to wonder who the culprit was, though, since the sweet aroma from his rough hands gave it away.

"Guess who?" he whispered at my side.

I mentally rolled my eyes. "Tristan, don't you have any talents or hobbies besides being a royal pain in the neck?"

"If being awesome counts as a talent, then yes."

"You have some serious issues, did you know that?"

Laughing, he removed his hands from my eyes, and I blinked several times to regain my sharp vision before spinning around and giving him a glower. He'd come here all alone, and I wondered why his minions weren't with him.

"So what's up?" he asked, stepping down from the bleachers and moving in front of me. "What are you girls doing here?"

"Ah, nothing much," I said sarcastically. "Just hunting some wild game, that's all."

"Don't tell me you're referring to the guys over there," he deadpanned as he nodded his head at the people in question.

I took a quick glance at the field and was surprised to see Erik looking in this direction, too. I couldn't tell why the usual smile on his face had disappeared, but when I viewed Tristan, I figured it out.

There seemed to be static electricity between them, making their gazes lock on each other. Tristan's jaw went firm as Erik smirked deviously before returning to the game.

What's with these two giving the cold shoulder to each other?

Lacey cleared her throat, making my attention snap back to Tristan's statement.

"What- no!" I answered incredulously and faced my books again. "If you have no other business here, will you please just go away? I don't have time to deal with you, I'm busy."

He chuckled; I could sense a tremor in his voice. "Take it easy, Kylie, I was just joking. Actually, I have something to talk with you about..."

"I don't want arguments with you right now, T."

"We won't have any arguments if you will just listen to me, Kyles."

I sighed. "Fine. What?"

He signaled for Lacey and Julianne to clear the seats, and that to my shock, he sat down with only a few inches between us.

"Well, you see-"

"Tristan, will you please, um..." I trailed off, gesturing for him to move further away. When he didn't budge, I was the one who moved instead.

"Didn't you get what I just said? I said, you must listen to me," he said, scooting nearer.

I moved farther away. "Tristan, don't come any closer."

"Why?"

"Just don't come closer! You're probably going to hit me."

He shook his head, lips turning into an amused smile. "I absolutely won't and never will, but look..." He shifted closer again, and my pulse started up a frenzied beat. "Okay, just once, try to listen. This may sound a little weird--"

Sliding away, I raised both of my hands between us, saying, "Stay where you are."
"

He only slid closer, damn it. "But I've had this question stuck in my head for the past few days..."

"That means you're finally thinking. Congratulations," I said, inching away. "Now would you back off a little bit? It's nicer to have a conversation if we're on a meter away from each other." I glimpsed at Julianne and Lacey and noticed that their faces had gone blank. When I tried to send them a distress signal, Tristan's nail-biting glare stopped me mid-glance.

He was totally creeping me out.

"I've tried to talk with you about this for a long time, but I... I didn't have the nerve, you see."

"I said back off," I demanded between clenched teeth.

"But I finally decided I shouldn't waste my time like that, so here I am."

I pulled myself away with a gulp. "Dammit, Tristan, I'm warning you. Try to come near me and you're dead. I swear I'm going to punch you so hard my fist will go

through you," I told him, cracking my knuckles and trying to look as tough as possible.

I guess my warning really sucked, though, since he continued approaching me. The flames in his eyes sparked.

"I need you to take this seriously," he pressed.

"W-why are you so-" I couldn't even carry on my sentence, since my whole body was starting to shiver so badly.

Now I regretted coming along with Julianne. This place had smelled like trouble before he'd even gotten here, and I should've gone to the library instead.

"Don't make this into a huge joke, Kylie. Try doing that and you'll be toasted for life."

"Y-you can't be serious, you jerk."

"I'm completely serious. And don't call me jerk."

Okay, he'd definitely lost it.

"Do you understand me?" he asked slowly, emphasizing each word. Was he even paying attention to everything I'd said?

"Screw it, Tristan. Forget I brought this up. I-I'm not interested anymore."

"Answer me in all honesty, Kylie."

"Shut your trap, Tristan, before I can take out your tonsils and sell them in the black market."

"Kylie-" he warned.

"Gah! Just beat it, okay? Whatever it is, you know you can't get anything from me, T!" I yelled in frustration, blood boiling at its peak. "Jeez, I'm outta here."

With a final glare, I stood up from the bench and was about to turn away when a hand grabbed my wrist and yanked me so hard. I gasped out loud. My shoes squeaked on the metal as I twisted around, stumbling swiftly.

A strong grip caught my shoulders before I could fall flat on the bench. My head shot up, cheeks growing slightly warmer. Tristan was staring at me so sharply; I thought his eyes would pierce through my skull. He pulled me closer, our foreheads almost hitting each other.

"Game over, now, Kylie. Tell me," he said in an unusually low voice.

I gulped.

"Where were you on the night of the Valentine Ball?"

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (22)~~

#####

ღ Finding Cinderella-22 Ϙ

-Kylie-

I think I'm getting sick again.

"Wha-what are you t-talking about?" I could barely speak without my voice quavering, and all the muscles in my body had frozen up on the spot.

Tristan's grip on my shoulders was tightening by the second, preventing me from making any movements; those gray eyes of his had locked onto my blue ones, as if they were trying to dig deeper for answers.

I immediately shifted my gaze off him.

"Answer me, Kylie," Tristan said roughly, "where were you during the Valentine B all?"

Was he already having suspicions about me? But... but how? I mean, even though his investigation had come somewhat close to the truth, I'd figured that idea would never cross his mind... unless someone had spilled the beans to him, or my disguise hadn't been effective at all and he'd only realized everything just now.

But he was merely asking-okay, forcefully asking me for an answer, so maybe there was still a chance I could warp his ideas a little.

I pushed him away and let out a deep breath, trying to compose myself. I mustn't show how nervous I was; otherwise, it would make him even more suspicious.

Looking straight at him, I innocently said, "Do you have any idea what you're asking? I was in my house, of course. Where else would I have been that night?"

"You look pale and sweaty," he observed. "Are you nervous, Kylie?"

Dammit.

Laughing sarcastically, I said to him, "Nervous? Nah, I'm not nervous, T. Actually, I'm hyperventilating for fun!" I dropped the act and added, "And I've had enough."

I turned away, but then Tristan grabbed my arm again, though with moderate force this time.

"Stop. Don't you dare walk away if you're not going to answer me," he said in a

rather urgent voice. The seriousness in his face was still there.

I faced him and sighed. "What else do you want to hear, Tristan? Okay, I repeat: I stayed in my house that night. That's it. Period. Am I speaking in an alien language, and that's why you can't understand a word of it, or did you just smack your head on the ceiling fan when you were born, which would explain why you're being so stupid?"

His brows puckered, as if to show how badly he wanted to know everything. "I don't believe you, Kylie."

My breathing hitched, but I finally said, "Fine! I don't care. This talk is over." I turned and began to walk away before he could notice my wobbling knees. I need to get out of here. I need to get out of here. I need to get out of here. I need to get-

"If memory serves right, Clark said to me that when he came to your house that night, you weren't there," Tristan called out.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"And then you said you went out to buy something. Now, at this time, you said you stayed in your house. Which is which, Kylie? Or was there something that you did other than those?"

Crap!

I'd totally forgotten that alibi I'd told him!

I fiddled my fingers fretfully and stammered, "Ah! Yeah, yeah I forgot to tell you that. Actually I was, uh..." my voice faded away. I didn't know what to say since it might come out very wrong.

"You're not telling me something, Kylie."

"N-no! I...I..."

"Then why can't you answer me straight away?"

I opened my mouth to argue but then snapped it shut, having absolutely no idea what to say.

Is this the end already?

"Hey there," a voice startled both of us. I spun around and, much to my surprise, saw Erik approaching; a grin was visible on his face, displaying how cool and collected he happened to be at the moment.

"H-hey," I squeaked, my lips barely moving.

"So, Kylie, are you ready?" Erik asked. I drew in my eyebrows in confusion, and his eyes twinkled, as if he were trying to convey a secret message. He continued: "Didn't we plan to go to the library right now? You were the one who brought it up yesterday."

For a moment, I wondered what he meant, but then it hit me-I knew it! He's bailing on me out!

"Oh, right! I almost forgot about it," I exclaimed, and Erik grinned as I hopped down from the seat. Once again, though, Tristan grabbed my arm, preventing me from getting away.

"She's not coming with you," he said heatedly. There was an inexplicable look on his face-a mixture of anger, despair, embarrassment... I didn't know. I wasn't sure. But chances were; he was trying to figure out what was going on. "We still have some unfinished business to take care of."

"Actually..." I yanked my arm away. "Our conversation is over, T. Take it or leave it, I don't care."

Tristan's fists were clenched at his sides, and the dark look on his face remained as he watched me turning my back on him. Though he couldn't see it, I was secretly beaming in triumph.

"Come in."

"Is it really all right? Someone might see us."

"No, really. Anyone's free to come here as long as they don't make a mess or damage the property."

I sighed. "Well, if that's what you say..."

My jaw dropped as we entered a huge shed. The place was bordered with a variety of well-cultured herbs, shrubberies, and flowers, all potted and lined up neatly. The atmosphere was somewhat hot, but maybe that was because the sun's heat was trapped within the glass walls of the structure. I wrinkled my nose - the air in here smelled like fertilizer.

"So do you like it here?" Erik asked me as he headed to a row of unfamiliar plants.

"Definitely," I said in awe, still scanning the place. "This is my first time in the greenhouse, actually. Do you come here often?"

"Yeah, ever since the ninth grade, in fact."

"Whoa, I didn't know that! So that's why you kept disappearing in some of our classes!" I said, amused.

"Nah, they just bored me to tears." He shrugged and began to pull weeds out from around the plants. "I just come to school for lunch."

"You're kidding me," I laughed before clearing my throat. "So, what do you do in this place?"

Erik bent down over a plant as if he was examining it, and then pulled out another unwanted flower. "What I'm doing right now."

I blinked several times and said, "P-pulling the weeds? Are you... feeling okay? Isn't there somebody assigned to this job?"

He straightened and continued to inspect the area. "Well, you could say that this is my hobby," he explained to me. "Whenever I have nothing important to do, I help out by taking care of this greenhouse."

As he spoke, I felt my guts began to churn. Was he aware that other people could see his work as useless and not good? There were many mean guys in this school, and they'd think they could take advantage of anyone as kind as him. But I knew Erik, and he didn't care what other people thought-he always did whatever he wanted.

Bending down over the plants, I began to pull out the weeds. The pollen tickled my nose, and I sneezed-darn it, this was why I hated flowers.

"Hey, you don't have to help me," Erik said.

"I don't have anything to do, either," I answered, rubbing my nose. "Besides, I think this is the only way I can repay you for saving me from trouble a while ago." I bit my lower lip, and then added, "How did you know that Tristan was asking me about... you know?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Judging from the way he looked at you, I quickly figured out that you were having some trouble with him."

"Some isn't the right word, Erik," I said breathlessly, still unable to get over what had happened earlier. "I swear to God, Tristan gave me an awful scare. I wonder how and where he got those suspicions, but seriously, I thought I would be dead by now if you hadn't come in time to rescue me."

Now that I thought about it, maybe it hadn't been so bad having Erik in the know about my secret. He understood what I was going through when I was around Tristan, and he actually stepped in to help me escape from that guy.

Like a knight in shining armor.

My face heated up at the thought, and I quickly shook my head. Why was my imagination being so weird?

"Don't worry too much about it, Kylie. I'm sure he'll get over it soon," Erik said with reassurance.

I shrugged. "I hope so, but I think not. I know Tristan—he won't stop pursuing something until he gets what he wants, and I don't even know if I would last against him. He's such bad news for me."

"Well, in that case, why don't you steer clear of him?"

"As much as I want to avoid him, I... I don't know. It's kinda complicated."

"Then why don't you stick with me instead?"

My head shot up in surprise, mouth dropping as Erik raised his eyebrows at me. The smile on his face grew huge, as if he were looking forward to my answer.

Finally, I stammered, "Uh, what?" although I'd heard him very clearly.

His electric blue eyes twinkled. "Stick with me, and you'll be fine."

As I closed my locker door, Julianne's hand slammed next to my locker, making my heart practically leap out of my chest.

"Gosh, Julianne, you scared the bejesus outta me!" I exclaimed, putting my hand over my pounding chest. "Don't do that again, or I might develop a friggin' mental disorder."

Julianne didn't look amused at all—her eyes were glowing as they stared at me, her lips curling in displeasure.

Grabbing my hand, she began to walk off, saying, "You have to come with me."

"What? Why?" I tried to pull away, but her grip became stronger.

She stopped walking for a moment and faced me. "You have some serious explaining to do, Kylie. I overheard a conversation between Lacey and Tristan yesterday, and it had something to do with the ball. Lacey kept on denying something about you, and then she even said-

I quickly pressed a hand over her mouth.

Oh. My. Goodness. She was definitely going to give me a serious heart attack.

"Julianne," I hissed. "Please, not in front of the people."

She pushed my hand away and cried, "I knew it! I knew it! That's why you were acting so strange over the past few days! Why didn't you guys tell me anything about it? Oh, my gosh, and after all this time, too! We're best friends, Kylie, and we swore we wouldn't keep secrets from each other!"

My face went pale. "I'm so sorry, Jules," I said pleadingly. "Please don't get mad at me. But you see I-I can't-

"Oh, whatever. Forget it," she said. "What's important is that you tell me what you did during the ball. In a nutshell. Now."

"Hush! Somebody might hear you. And can we talk about it later? You know we have English in five minutes."

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Cox's not around today-I checked for her in the office," she said casually. Oh, of course. Julianne was the only student I knew who bothered checking the faculty rooms on occasion-it was one of her ways of gaining recognition among the teaching staff to survive high school. "So now you really have to tell me the news before the suspense kills me."

"Fine, fine, but this isn't the best place to talk about it," I replied, glancing at all the kids roaming around the locker area.

"Follow me." Julianne once again grabbed my hand and dragged me over to the women's restroom. I was about to grasp the knob, but then the door flew open and revealed two of the most popular girls at school.

Fiona Ryder and Ronnie Sullivan. The Queen Bee and the Head Cheerleader.

Talk about great timing.

Ronnie's green eyes brightened up as she smiled at us. Fiona did as well—but of course, not a friendly one, since the sinister undertones hinted that she thought herself too good to acknowledge our presence. They looked like they had the entire beauty salon in their purses and had spent the entire last period redoing their makeup.

The tension broke in a blink of an eye, and the two brushed past us, the strong scent of perfume drifting with them. Ronnie's straight hair swayed smoothly against her back as she swung her head, singing, "I'm sexy and I know it!"

"Oh, please, you're slutty and you blow it," Julianne yelled as soon as we'd entered the restroom and locked the door.

I nudged her in the side and said, "Hey, tone it down. She might hear you and charge all the way back here."

"But it's the truth! Didn't you know that Ronnie's been hooking up with Fiona's ex-boyfriends? Gee, that's totally not right, don't you think? And I swear I saw Ronnie giving Tristan the 'hey-come-over-here-lover-boy' wink in front of the main building some time ago. All hell would definitely break loose if Fiona found out about her best friend's sideline job."

"Julianne," I said after she took a deep breath, "you're babbling too much."

"Right, sorry. I can't stop babbling, especially when my news is sizzling hot."

I groaned. "Now that you say that, I don't think telling you about my situation is a very good idea."

She waved her hands at me and said, "No, no! I won't tell anyone, promise! You know I've never broken a promise in my whole life!"

I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well..." she cracked, forcing a smile. "Except for when I promised I'd never pick my nose in public. I've done it before, and I know it's gross, but whatever! Puh-lease Kylie, tell me everything now! You know you don't want to leave me hanging." She gave me a pleading face, and I simply rolled my eyes. "I promise I'll never ever leak it to anyone until the day I die. Please, please just tell me, Kylie."

"Okay, okay. Relax. Hold on for a sec. We should check if this room is all clear," I said.

She rolled her eyes. "All right."

After we had checked each cubicle and made sure no one was lurking in them, I said with a sigh, "Okay. How should I start this...?"

Julianne's eyes were growing larger by the second, forcing me to finally spill. I guess I had no choice now. I'd been caught.

As soon as I opened my mouth, all the words tumbled out. I told her everything, from the time Lacey had been sent to the clinic up until the time I'd run away from the dance at last. As being the good listener she always was, Julianne listened intently to everything I said without judging anything. My heart was racing so fast, I thought I'd break down as I continued to rattle off events to her.

When I finally finished, I took a deep breath, and Julianne's hands fluttered as a single brief scream escaped her mouth. She looked like I'd just offered her a diamond ring.

"Oh, my God. I mean, seriously. Oh. My. God," she said disbelievingly. I'd already known her reaction would be like this. "I can't believe this all happened to you," she muttered to herself before turning to me. "You know what? I bet this would be a great hit in the school paper! The headline would be like, 'Cinderella on the Loose: Who Was That Girl at the Ball?' or maybe it would be better if I put, 'Mystery Girl Spotted-'"

"Jules!" My loud voice echoed against the pink walls of the room, and I shook her shoulders to make her stop dreaming. I hissed, "You promised you wouldn't tell this to anyone! And now you're planning to turn it into a news article? Are you losing your mind? I'd be screwed, Jules! I'd be screwed!"

Her menacing grin widened. "But rumors about it have been going wild around the school!"

"Exactly! And God only knows what will happen to me once the truth spreads throughout whole campus. I don't want everyone's attention drawn to me, Julianne. That's just intimidating for me. Please, I'm begging you, don't tell anyone about it." Now it was my turn to give her a pleading look.

She laughed. "I'm just tricking you, Kylie," she said between giggles. "So this is why Tristan likes to tease you so often. You have the best freaked-out expression in the universe!"

I frowned, crossing my arms over my chest. "That is so not funny, Julianne. It's not my fault I'm skittish."

A bang on the door made us jump out of our skin.

"Hey, who's in there? Can anyone open up?" a high-pitched voice called from the other side. The girl knocked on the door again, much louder this time, and I bet she was desperate for either the toilet or the mirror.

"I'm telling you, don't come in," Julianne said aloud. "There's pee leakage in here! It stinks, like, seriously."

The knocking stopped, and then we heard a couple of curses outside, as if there were actually a lot of girls already waiting.

I looked at Julianne, but she simply shrugged and said, "They'll live." She leaned on the sink beside me and dreamily continued: "So... isn't it great, Kylie?"

"What's great?" I asked.

"Gosh, don't you know? Oh, Kylie, you're so thick! Have you been living under a rock or something?" she squealed again. I was about to cover her mouth with my hand, but then she quickly lowered her voice and continued, "Tristan Jon Hartford has been looking all over for you! Haven't you noticed that over the past few days, he and his friends have been acting like Sherlock Holmes?"

I slapped my palm to my face. "I know that, okay? It's already even giving me cancer," I muttered.

"No, Kylie! Your situation would be any girl's fantasy, and so many people would be super jealous of you! I mean, hello? The campus prince, and one of the cutest and most popular guys in the history of Broadway Heights, is chasing after you! It's like a huge freaking fairytale, Kylie. Open your eyes! Can't you see it? Huh?"

At that moment, my brain cells chose to commit suicide, and all I could do was deadpan, "I don't eat carrots."

Julianne's hands flew up in frustration. "Oh, for heaven's sake, you make everything around you so darn hopeless," she uttered with a groan. "Honestly, I feel bad for Tristan, Kylie. Yesterday he looked like a desperate, infatuated guy. It's so strange for him to be like that, and... and I must say he's very unfortunate that he got you. Listen-" She stared straight into my eyes with solemnity and said, "Why don't you just tell him that you're the girl? Tell him you're the one he danced with that night-obviously the poor guy wants to find you!"

"Wants to find me? No way!" I cried out. "What Tristan's looking for is the girl from the ball, and she... she wasn't me at all, Julianne. That girl doesn't really exist. She's like... like an illusion to everyone, and she only existed on the night of the ball!"

"That's not true, Ky. You're still you whether you put on a wig, a mask, and wear an extravagant dress or not."

"You don't understand, Julianne." I sighed, remembering how I'd faked everything about myself during the ball. "Really, it's the truth. That girl wasn't the real me." I turned to face the wide mirror and noticed how freakishly pale I'd gone; comparing myself to my "other" image, I noticed that there was a great deal of difference between us. "I can't really tell this to anyone, especially not to him."

"But-"

"No buts, Jules. And stop showing any signs of pity for Tristan. It's better to leave him like that, and... okay, I'm not trying to be rude, but I really don't care about him, like, at all."

"Just give him one hint, Ky. Just one. It may be the only way to finally let him rest in peace."

"No! I won't and I never will. I don't trust him," I exclaimed in exasperation. "He's a jerk, a downright evil jerk. I don't know what he'd do to me if he found any of this out."

"Kylie... I think you've been judging Tristan's character too much," Julianne said glumly, folding her arms over her chest. "A downright evil jerk? What if that's just his façade? What if everything you think or say about him doesn't touch on his real personality? Listen, why don't you take the time to know him better? Give him a chance at least!"

"Oh, trust me, I've heard that dozens of times already, and not just from you, but from everyone else, too."

"See? Then maybe it is true." She shrugged calmly. "I'm only being observant, Kylie, and just like everyone else, I say what I think."

As her words echoed in my head, I took a long pause. My conscience was kicking in, making me feel worse with every passing second, but I finally shook my head and boldly answered, "No! He used to pick me, Julianne. Ever since..." I trailed off, remembering those gray days in the past. "Ever since that Valentine's Day back in the ninth grade! Don't you remember those times? I can never get them out of my head. They still haunt me, like a freaking horror movie."

"Ooh," Julianne said. "I remember that. One time, he put a tarantula in your locker that made you go insane for the whole week."

"Yes! And not only that. There's a lot more humiliating stuff he had done to me. I was easily picked by him and his fargin' icehole friends, Jules, you know that. Tristan's the boss. He's the reason why I'm uncomfortable around people until now! It's his entire fault." I rubbed my forehead and drew in some air. "Just re-calling all those things pisses me off."

"But didn't you notice something about him these days? He seemed to change—"

"No. Probably that's just his outward appearance. I mean, he's just pretending. He's actually very calculating and nasty."

Julianne let out a low whistle. "Oh-kay. Well, it seems that I can never force you to change your outlook. Prove me wrong, or prove yourself wrong-it's up to you to find this stuff out."

I made a lazy half-smile despite my feeling of exasperation. "There's no need for any proof. He is Tristan-he's like that and will always be like that. I can't trust him anymore."

"Hmm... we'll see about that soon." Julianne snickered as if she were too confident in herself.

I inhaled deeply, and then sighed to calm my frenzied nerves. "Whatever," I said and started to walk on the door. "Why don't we just go outside and get some air? We've been hogging this room for too long already."

Tugging her bag over her shoulder, Julianne followed me, an amused smile still on her face. Surprisingly, there were no angry girls lining up as we opened the door, and I suspected that they'd bought Julianne's "pee leakage" trick a while ago.

"So, Kylie, how long will you keep the secret from everyone else?" Julianne asked as we went downstairs.

My shoulders dropped, and I said with a sigh, "As long as possible, I guess. Let's just hope for the best."

Julianne moved in front of me and stopped walking. I halted, my forehead wrinkling in confusion.

"Sooner or later, secrets are always revealed. Mind you, Kylie, they don't last long," she said knowingly before walking away.

My mouth hung open.

I didn't know how to react. I just stood on the spot, silent and frozen. Pressing my palm against my chest, I felt tight obstruction building up. It seemed that Julianne's words had knocked the breath out of me.

She was right. Secrets didn't last long, specifically in my case... and especially when Tristan was already trying to puzzle out the pieces.

Why? Why does he keep looking for me? What does he want?

Everything was like a ticking time bomb that would explode any minute from now, and I had to be more careful from this moment onwards. Erik's words from yesterday had swarmed my thoughts.

Maybe I should have considered them. I knew it would be hard to do, but... but I thought there'd be no harm in giving it a go.

A smile slowly snuck onto my face.

Right.

I need to stay away from Tristan at all costs.

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~~ღ Finding Cinderella (23)~~

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ღ Finding Cinderella-23 ღ

-Tristan-

I should apologize to Kylie.

She must've been very upset with the way I'd approached her some time ago, because it had led her to turn her back on me completely. Every time I tried to wave at her or do anything to get her attention, she would flip out; she wouldn't turn in my direction, either, so maybe I'd scared her deeply. I guess I shouldn't have brought that question to her, but I'd just jumped into action so fast, I hadn't taken my brain with me. My mind was kinda messed up.

How long will she stay angry with me?

Thinking too much could probably make your thoughts become real, because as we guys were heading on the locker area, the first person I saw in the crowd was her. She was leaning against her locker, books clutched in her arms as she stared at the floor.

I guess this was the right time to talk to her.

I was about to approach her when she suddenly turned her head in my direction. Little by little, a grin grew on her face as she started to walk towards me, and I smirked. Just as I'd thought—she really couldn't handle missing me.

I raised a hand and said, "Hi!"

Out of the many things I could have said to her, why did it have to be 'hi'? But no one could blame me—I was already tongue-tied, I couldn't move, and I couldn't look away from her.

"C-can we uh..." I stuttered. "Can talk for a sec—"

Then she passed by me as if I were invisible.

What the hell?

"Dude, she burned you bad," Clark said, laughing.

"Shut up," I grumbled. Of course, I should've expected Kylie would never be nice to me that easily.

I spun around, and my fists impulsively clenched when I saw that she was heading towards Erik. The smile on her face was something I hadn't seen for a long time, and the worst part was, she was giving it to him. Then again, I couldn't be sure, but... I had a feeling she was faking it, seeing as the smile didn't reach her eyes.

Something's not right here...

When Kylie wasn't looking, Erik turned his head in my direction and smirked deceitfully before blending in with the rest of the crowd.

My eyes blazed. Dashing towards him, I pulled back my fist, but before it could even hit him, the guys had already fastened me in place and were preventing me from making any movements.

At the same time, Kylie whirled around and cried out in shock, "Tristan, what are you doing?"

"T, what's with you?" Ryo exclaimed as he outstretched his arms to block my path.

"Dude, calm down," Grey said, tightening his grip on my shoulder before I could bolt again. I struggled against the guys; my intense eyes providing a stark contrast to Erik's unemotional ones. Grey only continued to block me, saying, "Whatever this is, stop it before the teachers spot you."

The guys finally released me when I shoved them away. I noticed that the brawl had made the other students stop in their tracks and watch us-gossip was spreading almost immediately between them, but that didn't matter much to me.

I grabbed Kylie's arm and pulled her closer to me, irritably saying, "I should be the one asking that. What are you doing, Kylie? How many times do I have to tell you-"

She pulled away with surprising force, and my face went rigid as I stared at her. She was absolutely angry, and as always, she'd put the blame on me.

"Whatever I do, wherever I go, it's not supposed to be any of your business, Tristan," she forced out through gritted teeth. Her face was as red as a ripe tomato, showing that she was embarrassed by everyone's attention. "Can you please stop now? Just... just leave me alone."

I took a deep breath and tried to compose myself. "Fine. It's your choice. I don't care what happens to you." I glared at Erik, but the bastard just gave me an oblivious look. Oblivious, my ass.

Kylie let out a laugh, but it sounded sour in my ears. "That's what I've been asking from you for a long time," she said, taking a few steps backwards. "When did I ask you to be my bodyguard? Never, right? Thank God you finally came to your senses." With that, she turned her back on me and walked away.

"Take a chill pill, T," Erik said with a malevolent grin before jogging after her.

Everyone else dispersed in a snap the moment I glared at them. The chatter still went on, but it was gradually receding; others gaped at me as they cleared the way, as if I'd just lost my mind. I'd never been the type to start school fights or anything, but this time was different—it seemed like the strong feelings of mine had been taking control, and I hadn't been able to help it.

Seeing Erik reminded me of something I'd overheard from a long time ago, and I wanted to beat the shit out of him because of it, because of his words. I'd kept it to myself since that day, though—I didn't want Kylie to get hurt.

But if I told her about Erik from the past, would she still be hanging around with him, or would she hate me even more?

Stupid girl. When will she listen to me?

"Is he all right?" I heard Clark whisper unsteadily from behind me.

"Yeah, he's fine," Grey said calmly, as if he knew what he was talking about. But then again, he was always like that. He let out a snort, seemingly amused despite what had happened. "Just seething with jealousy."

-Kylie-

Why did my heart feel so bad?

This was supposed to be my chance to free myself finally from him. I was already sick and frustrated with our stupid fights, his attitude, his thoughtlessness, the way we treated each other, everything. So I was ignoring him, and I should have been feeling glad because of it—I wanted him to feel bad inside, like knives were slicing through his chest, because that didn't even compare to what I'd been feeling for a long time.

Mission "Stop-Acknowledging-Tristan's-Presence" was somehow working, which I'd learned when his face had gone all pale and aghast a moment ago. I should have just been happy, but I felt... terrible at the same time.

Goddammit, why do I care, anyway?

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

"I've had enough!" I wailed as I slammed my tray onto the table.

From the other side, Julianne automatically looked up from her sub sandwich with startled eyes. "What in the world? Really, Kylie, I'm eating here. Stop ruining my concentration," she complained before taking another bite.

Fuming, I settled into my seat and began stabbing the meatballs in my spaghetti with a fork. "His attitude is so rotten. If he does that again, I swear I'm going to slap his man boobs so hard it'll give him breast cancer."

Julianne choked on her orange juice and coughed a couple times. "Oh, my God," she muttered, wiping her mouth with a tissue. "Of all the greatest threats, that is by far the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. What did he do to you, anyway? You've practically been breathing fire all morning. Oh, wait, wait—did Tristan finally find out...?"

"No, it's not that!" I shrieked. "He made a freaking scene in front of the whole

student body, Jules. Tristan attempted to attack Erik! If his friends hadn't gotten there in time to stop him, there definitely would've been a bloody riot."

"Oh, darn, I can't believe I'm the last person to know about this. I wish I'd seen the actual thing," she said, shaking her head.

I frowned at her remark. "So you'd have an addition for your gossip column?"

"Not only that," she said casually, as if she couldn't care less. "I wanna sell popcorn to the audience."

"I should get an award for Most Embarrassing Moment of the Year," I said with a frustrated sigh. "That jerk has definitely lost his mind. Why would he want to assault Erik? As far as I know, Erik hasn't done anything bad to him. I don't even know how to explain it-Tristan's being so unreasonable!"

Gulping down her sandwich, Julianne answered, "Maybe it's because of you."

"What do you mean?" I deadpanned.

"C'mon, let's be serious. There are guys who act aggressive like that when they see other guys around the girl they're into, even though they can't just be honest about it to the actual girl," she stated matter-of-factly.

My jaw fell. What? What was that? My thoughts were getting sluggish, and a few decades later, I put on my poker face and asked, "A-are you trying to say that Tristan likes me?"

Julianne dropped her sandwich on the plate and started a slow clap. "Hallelujah, at last!" she cried in awe. "Oh Heavenly Father, Buddha, Jesus Christ, thank you so much for knocking some sense into my friend's head! She's finally thinking!"

My brain practically exploded out of its skull.

"Jeez, Julianne, you're exaggerating things! Stop with the drama." I scowled. "That's not the reason, it's-it's impossible! Extremely impossible!" I smacked my hand to my face. That was the most outrageous thing I'd heard in my life!

"The one who refuses the obvious is as foolish as the one who accepts the lie, Kylie. Please remember that."

I leaned over the table and said mockingly, "Wow, Jules, you're so deep, I can't even see—"

"Shut up."

"Fine," I replied, straightening up with a grimace. Hah, I still wouldn't believe her. Tristan? Liking me? That was a huge freaking joke! "Senseless. Childish. Damn it, who the hell does he think he is?" I suddenly bellowed, flailing my hands like a disturbed chicken.

Julianne heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes. "Now, now. Calm down, girl. Your lunch is getting cold."

I looked down and saw my meatballs had been poorly mashed by my stabbing. My appetite suddenly disappeared, and I rested my chin in my hands and groaned, "Let's just stop talking about this, okay? It makes me want to pull out my own hair." So much for the day's series of unfortunate events.

"Hey, girls. Mind if I join you two?" said a cheerful voice, interrupting my thoughts. My half-shut eyes grew larger when I noticed Erik was standing beside our table, his hands casually buried in his jeans pockets.

Julianne's mouth turned into an O, and she raised an eyebrow at me.

My head shot up, and I stammered, "Uh, no, it's cool. Have a seat."

"Oh, wait guys, I gotta leave you two for a moment," Julianne said quickly, standing up.

I flashed an alarmed look at her. "Where are you going?"

"Uh, I'm going to get a drink!" she said uncertainly and took off without waiting.

g for my protest. That girl! I knew she was lying, since her orange juice was still half-full. What she meant was that she was going to leave Erik and me alone!

Erik sat at Julianne's place, and when he smiled, I forced myself not to cover my face. This was so awkward.

We remained in silence before I cleared my throat and said, "Oh, um, sorry about Tristan's behavior earlier. I don't know what got into him or why he did that to you. Yeah, I know what he did was very embarrassing, and I'm sorry again."

I didn't know why I was suddenly apologizing on Tristan's behalf when he was the one who was supposed to make an apology. But whatever-that guy would never be sorry towards Erik, anyway.

"No," Erik said in a serious tone that made me stop. I blinked several times, trying to figure out what he meant by that. Is he angry? But then he chuckled, and I was a little relieved. "It's all right, Ky. You shouldn't be sorry, since it's not your fault. Maybe he's-" he shrugged, crossing his arms on the table "-having problems of his own, I guess, and he's venting it out. I'm not sure."

I exhaled and said, "Well... maybe. That guy has problems controlling his temper sometimes."

"C'mon, Kylie," Erik chirped. "Smile! Don't let it ruin the rest of your day. You're too cute to be sad."

I snorted a laugh.

He shook his head as he chuckled under his breath. "Look, uh..." He paused, hesitating, but then said the thing I least expected: "I know you're still feeling down, so I'm planning to, uh, take you somewhere after school...? If you're not busy or anything, that is."

My mind was still processing what he'd said. I stared at him for a couple of minutes, then stammered, "W-what? You... you're asking me out?" Were my ears tricking me? Or was I simply hallucinating?

Erik rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes shifting back and forth. "I know it's sudden, but... yeah, you know, just to chill out, take a break from stuff, and talk. Uh, and besides, it's the least I can do to hopefully make you feel better

."

"Ah," I said in realization. For goodness' sake, he meant it as a friendly date just to help me cheer up, and nothing more.

My mind was reeling with pictures of how things were supposed to be happening, and that was what had mostly screwed me up in life. I knew I looked like I'd just been offered a house and lot package, since what he'd said was something I didn't usually hear every day, and yeah, I sucked for taking it the wrong way. Why did I have the tendency to think and expect too much? I needed to take note of that.

"But if you're busy with something, it's cool, I understand. I can--"

"Okay," I just blurted out. I felt a sudden churning in my stomach when I realized what I'd said, but I couldn't take it back now, especially since Erik was letting out a sigh of relief, like he was really looking forward to it.

"Awesome," he said brightly. "Then I'll pick you up after school, okay?"

I nodded, forcing my lips to curl upwards.

Erik was about to speak when a tweeting sound emerged out of nowhere, making us blink in surprise. He patted his pockets and fished out a vibrating phone. "Sorry, I got a call," he said, grinning.

I signaled for him to go ahead, and he got up from the seat as he lifted the phone to his ears and answered it. When he was finally out of sight, I buried my face in my palms—wherever Tristan was, I could sense his heavy gaze on my back, and it made me feel even worse. God, why was Julianne taking so long, anyway?

There was a possibility I was now paranoid.

Why did everything feel so bewildering?

-Tristan-

Why did everything seem so strange?

I'd begun to notice slight changes in Kylie. Aside from her constantly ignoring me, which was already a natural thing for us, of course, I noticed that she'd been hanging around with Erik frequently. Wait, was I missing something? Whatever it was, it wasn't my business anymore. I'd already made it clear to her that I wouldn't care what would happen to her.

But I found myself groaning just thinking about it.

Someone poked my shoulder, and I turned to see Lacey standing at my side.

"Tristan," she said quietly, sitting beside me on the bleacher. "I've been calling you for ages already."

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. "Sorry, I was spacing out."

"You don't look well..."

I focused on the football field. It was already five o'clock, and students were on their way home or heading to other places.

Had I really just spent two hours thinking about her? I guess I had.

"Well, something doesn't feel right these days," I said with a shrug. "I don't know now what it is, but it's bugging the crap out of me. Wait, what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be home by now?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh, but I was looking for Kylie. We're supposed to go home together. Do you happen to know where she is?"

I stared at her. Didn't she know her sister didn't even want to see me at all? But she must've got what I was thinking, because she quickly snapped her mouth shut.

"Maybe she just went out somewhere," I suggested. "Why don't you send her a message?"

"I did, but she's not responding," she sighed. "I hope she's okay."

"Trust me, she is. I don't think anyone would dare cross her path—she can be quite the gremlin when not handled carefully."

"T!" she cried.

I laughed, easing up a little. "Okay, I'm sorry. But hey," I said, turning to face Lacey sternly. "Speaking of your sister, your mother really needs to think about keeping her on a leash."

Lacey raised an eyebrow. "Oh, did something happen between you two, and that's what started the fight this morning?"

"You... you know about it?"

"Everyone knows it," she said nonchalantly, looking out at the view in the distance.

Of course, she knew about the incident. Rumors spread like wildfire on this campus.

"Well..." I said hesitantly. "It was just a little misunderstanding."

"Gee, I've already heard that story before."

An idle smile spread across my face. "And it's really tiring, isn't it? It's like a cycle that never changes. I guess we'll never get along with each other. "

"Hey, don't say that. I've always known that you two will work it out. It may not be now, but maybe someday."

"Huh, easy for you to say." Snickering, I flicked her head playfully, disheveling her hair. "But that's cool."

Lacey let out a breath, as if she was the one carrying the problem on her shoulders. I saw a couple of kids still playing on the field. The surrounding area was already looking shady, and the temperature had dropped. I pulled my jacket tighter around my body, and Lacey blew on her hands, a slight breeze blowing past us. She tucked her hair behind her ear while murmuring to herself, and I wasn't sure whether she was trying to say something or not.

We spent several minutes in silence until Lacey broke it by blurting out, "T, what do you think of my sister?"

"What?"

"Do you like her?"

I blinked, surprised by her unexpected question, and my mouth hung open.

She laughed, but I could sense a quiver in her voice. "Well, sorry if that came out suddenly, but you see, I've been wondering about that for a long time," she explained simply. She was looking at me in confusion, eager for an answer, but when I didn't speak up, she pleaded, "Come on, T. Please? Please answer me honestly, and don't leave me hanging. I know I'm being nosy right now, but pretty please?"

"You really wanna know?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes!"

"The truth?"

"Huge yes!" she exclaimed again. "Answer me, do you like Kylie?"

Slowly, my smile widened. I tried to cover my mouth with a cold hand, but it still didn't manage to cover the uncontrollable grin that was forming. I knew I looked like dork.

Lacey must have noticed that I was flustering because of her question, since she giggled a lot and sang, "Aha, my instincts were right all along!"

I chuckled nervously. "Come to think of it," I said, my vision distant-her question had really dug deep into my subconscious- "I was always the kind of kid that tease the girl I like just to hide what I really feel for her."

Lacey's hand flew to her mouth, and her eyes grew even wider with shock. Of course, I couldn't blame her-this was the first time I'd ever admitted it to another person.

"Oh, my gosh. This is a major exposé," she said breathlessly. She opened her mouth, then shut it, then did it all over again. Biting her lower lip, she tried to prevent her smile from growing again. "So, um, when did it start?"

"Hmm, I wonder..."

"Why did you like her?"

"Uh..."

"Did you find her very special?"

I scratched my head. "Uh, does liking someone really need to have a reason?"

"Well." She shrugged. "I guess not. You're right-it doesn't need a reason at all."

I smiled. Looking back, I realized there were many things still waiting to be said. "Well, I can't tell when it started. I found her very weird, and funny... I noticed she's herself no matter what other people said to her, and that fearless attitude of hers was really something. Before I realized it, she'd already become so special to me, and... I just can't compare her to others."

I sucked in some air after I was finished and waited for Lacey to respond. I just couldn't believe I'd finally said those words-saying them had made me realize many things, and it had given me a strange, yet satisfied feeling. The things I hadn't wanted to believe at first were coming to the surface, and I guess there was no stopping them now.

Lacey raised her index finger like something had just popped into her head. "T, if you really like my sister, then why do you date other girls?"

I raked a hand through my hair, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Uh... to see if she cared or not? Or if she will get jealous or something?"

Lacey's face crumpled in disbelief, and I snorted out a laugh.

"Yeah, yeah, I know what you're thinking. But that method doesn't work with Kylie at all-she's very impossible." I smiled lamely. "What I was doing didn't feel right, which was why I broke up with those girls so quickly. Not cool, right?"

"Ugh," Lacey groaned. "You boys are hard to understand."

I frowned. "Hey, we are not. It's you women who are hard to understand, especially when you're on your T.O.M."

"Huh? What's that?"

"Time of the Month." I snickered, and she made a face.

Silence fell over us again. Lacey was resting her chin in her hands and looking across the field with dreamy eyes, as if she was off in her fantasies. I found the whole situation slightly comical, though everything already seemed doomed to failure.

You know that dreadful feeling you get when you like someone you know you should n't? Yeah, that was definitely what I was feeling.

Lacey finally shook her head and laughed. "You really are amazing. Why don't you just tell her right away? I bet Kylie will be extremely happy once she hears it ."

"Happy? Are you kidding me?" I slapped my palm to my forehead. "God, I swear she 's going to get mad. And there's also a huge possibility that she'll kill me."

"No, she won't."

"Yes, she will. She's Kylie, remember?"

"But--"

I sighed and said, "Trust me, Lacey, she'll kill me. She could have me eaten by a lion, drown me in a bathtub, sink me in quicksand, push me off a building, run me over with a truck, fry me in the desert, and do so much more just to get rid of me."

"Gee." Lacey wrinkled her nose. "You're going overboard. Kylie would never do all that stuff."

I smirked and said, "But still."

She'd never believe me, anyway. It's better if I keep all of this close to my chest.

"You know what, Lacey," I said after a while, "just because of this talk, I realized something."

"What is it?"

"Screw Cinderella and chase Kylie instead."

Lacey laughed. "You know," she said, "it's really incredible to think that your heart can always tell who you're in love with even when your eyes don't recognize who they are."

"Huh?" I asked, clueless as to what she meant. Maybe she was referring to Clark-those two were as hopeless as I was. Or maybe she was quoting some passage from a book again. She always did that whenever her head was in the clouds.

"Now you said that, I guess I can't really keep this from you any longer, T," she said, smiling apologetically. "I feel bad about it, I swear, so I'm sorry-I'm really sorry I kept this from you all this time."

"What... do you mean?" I felt my stomach suddenly drop.

"I know you'll get upset because of me, and I know Kylie will get furious because I broke my promise, but I have no choice. Secrets are eventually revealed, and promises are meant to be broken, right? So... yeah."

"Lacey?"

"But that's not really important now. I just wanted to tell you that-" she paused, her smile broadening even more "-congrats. You did it."

I just gaped at her, my mouth open. "I did what?"

"You found her!" she sang in pure excitement. My mind was still processing what was going on, so I could only sit frozen in place while she shook my shoulders as if to wake me up, exclaiming, "Don't you realize it? Open your eyes, Tristan! You've already found the girl you've been looking for so long!"

Then it hit me.

"Y-you mean-?" I couldn't continue-it felt like a huge ball stuck in my throat.

Lacey patted her pockets as if she was searching for something. At long last, she slid it out, and my breathing stopped in an instant.

"I've been waiting for the right time to give you this," she said.

There was like a cord that had suddenly been pulled from the back of my head, making me paralyzed. There were no words to describe exactly what I was feeling.

Christ.

It was the red string from the ball. The Heart string.

The one that had been paired to mine.

The one owned by the mysterious girl.

I couldn't believe my own eyes, but it was really in front of me, in my own hands. And seeing the final proof made me speechless and out of breath.

My hunch was right all along. Why didn't I believe myself at first?

Swallowing the huge lump in my throat, I lifted my wide eyes from my hand.

Lacey looked at me, immeasurable relief in her face. "Kylie's lightning fast, so you better go and find her," she chirped, flicking up a finger in front of me. "The clock's ticking. You have to say it before it's too late."

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~~♡ Finding Cinderella (24)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella-24 ♡

-Tristan-

I got that old feeling again-that old feeling I'd been trying to forget.

I was happy that I'd found her, but I also felt nervous about the whole thing. Maybe I was scared because she'd meant more to me than any other person. Out of all girls, I'd chosen her, although these feelings were only one-sided. That really seemed like something that would happen to me.

She was like my personal drug. And God-I was still highly addicted! After all this time, she still ran in circles in my mind.

Now here I was, driving all over the city just to find her. I'd been to all the places where she would possibly be, but had had no luck; Lacey and I had tried contacting her several times, but she'd never answered. It was making us sick with worry.

The rush of wind hit my windshield as I sped onto the highway. My foot pressed hard against the accelerator as I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, concerned. It was already night, and bright neon and electronic billboards lit up the city-it was unlikely that Kylie would be going home this late.

Where was she?

-Kylie-

He'd said this would be a date, but I didn't want to classify it as one, not because it sucked-well, sort of-but because I'd been keeping in mind that we were just friends, strolling beneath the orange lights of the park and slurping milkshakes. Everything was actually going pretty well, though it would have been better without my spaz attacks from a while ago.

Words couldn't describe how nervous I was about this whole thing. I was trying to put it into perspective and remember I was the one calling the shots so I wouldn't be nervous, but hell, I was so socially awkward and goofy that I'd messed everything up like I always had. I'd tripped on the road a couple of times, snorted Coke out of my nose while laughing at Erik's jokes, accidentally poured mustard on my shirt and made myself look like a freaking five-year-old, made the lamest puns in the history, realized my fly had been open for the past couple hours.
..

I would definitely not consider this a date, because if I did, this would be the most awkward one in the universe.

Well, at least, the video game arcade we'd gone to at the mall had been great.

Why couldn't I act like a normal person, for crying out loud?

And now, at this point, Erik must've been totally freaked out by me, since he kept on taking calls like he was all, "Dude, get me out of here," and the thought of it made me want to push myself in front of a bus.

A few minutes later, Erik jogged back to the bench where I was resting my tired butt. "Sorry if I've been getting too many calls," he said with an apologetic smile. "My friend Monique is so stubborn, as always."

Hearing the name, I gulped down an icy chunk of milkshake and coughed. "Monique? Mayfield?" I managed to say. "You know each other?"

Okay, that was a dumb question-everyone knew her at school.

"Yeah. Actually, we've known each other since middle school, and she's in some of my classes this year." He shook his head. "And the reason she's been calling me is because she's trying to compare her Bio assignment with mine. It's become her habit or something."

That was kind of news for me. Wow, this was such a small world after all.

"Cool, you must be smart, then," I snickered.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said with a chuckle.

For a little while, we stayed there without a word. Feeling edgy, I continued to sip the rest of my milkshake, making loud slurping sounds our background music; when I scanned the area, I saw a few people taking a night stroll.

Erik cleared his throat, and my head instantly turned to him.

"So, uh, did you have fun?" he asked.

"Y-yeah!" I sounded so uncertain. Maybe it was because I still felt panicky going out with him alone.

Erik beamed as relief washed over his face. Had he also been nervous this whole time? I'd never thought of that. "Great, then maybe we'll do it again next time if you want. But in a different, much better place, of course."

My heart started to bang against my ribcage. Thoughts swirled through my mind about whether I should say yes or a no—I didn't want to sound mean towards him, but at the same time, I didn't want to look hopeful. It confused me. I mean, I liked him, and I'd really liked him ages ago, but I could still remember the time when he hadn't acknowledged what I'd felt for him. I was still feeling a bit of a sting from the "ouch" factor of someone not being interested in me.

It had become a tiresome cycle of me getting my hopes up and then being ultimately crushed in the end.

Not knowing the right thing to say in return, I just smiled casually.

"Oh yeah, I have something for you," he said. I raised an eyebrow at him, and he signaled for me to turn around, so I did, my heart beginning to accelerate faster and faster. I squeezed my eyes shut when I felt hands and warm breath brushing the nape of my neck.

"There."

I opened my eyes and bent down, and the first sight that met my eyes was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen. It was a silver and blue necklace, and its tiny crystals

tals formed a perfect circle, letting out a faint glow when the light from the lamp post hit them.

I spun around, my mouth hanging open.

"Looks like you don't like it," said Erik.

"A-are you kidding me?" I stuttered. Spaz mode was activated once again. "This looks so freaking dope! Holy cow, who knew I'd ever wear this kind of thing?" My voice dropped. "Wait, you're kidding, right? This thing can't be for me—"

He laughed. "Kylie, you're overreacting. It's for you, okay? And it looks great on you."

"You're really kidding me."

"Whether you believe me or not, it suits you. The blue really brings out the color of your eyes."

I was melting.

"You know what, Kylie? I think dresses would definitely flatter you. Out of all the other girls at the ball, you were the one who stood out—why don't you try wearing one again for a change?"

My smile froze. Actually, I had girlish clothes lying in the deepest part of my closet, the kind that showed off the shoulders and stuff. But if I wore them, everyone would think, "She's trying too hard, it's gross", and that was something I never wanted to happen.

I shook my head to oppose the idea.

"Sometimes I don't get you," said Erik. "Usually girls like to dress themselves up, but so far you're the only one I know who doesn't like it."

I snorted. "Sorry, Erik, but I'm a different kind of female. Besides, I'd rather

not be a girly girl. That kind of lifestyle is not meant for me. But hey, thank you." I raised my eyes to him, and when he stared back, I hurriedly looked away. His eyes were gorgeous, like giant blue meatballs. "And, uh, for this. That's so nice of you to... to buy such an expensive gift for me. But seriously, I don't know what I did to deserve this kind of thing."

"Actually, I didn't buy it from a shop. It's from my mom, and out of all her other possessions, that one is her favorite. She gave it to me before..." He looked down. "Well, before she and Dad divorced..."

My eyes went wider. I couldn't believe I was holding a precious memory from his mother. Now I felt ten times more anxious than before, since I had a tendency to lose things easily.

"She told me that during a first date, I should give it to the girl I-" He paused and locked his gaze on mine. "-to the girl I like..."

The milkshake cup fell into my lap at the same instant my stomach twisted into knots.

Why... why is he saying that? When he said the words with those deep eyes... the feelings that are supposed to be gone are starting to-

"Kylie, you see, I..."

No. Oh, hell no. I hadn't seen that coming! And it... it couldn't be happening!

Breaking eye contact, I jumped off the bench and blurted out, "Whoa, guess what? I suddenly have a ton of motivation to clean the stove in our house tonight!"

Erik rubbed the back of his neck. "Ah, that's... good to hear. You work really hard, huh?"

I wanna die. God, how I wished there was an undo button in real life. "Yup! Mom always says that-" I trailed off and gasped, realizing something. "-speaking of... Wait, what time is it, anyway?"

Lifting his wristwatch, he answered, "Quarter to nine."

"What!" My voice was so loud; it probably could have been heard throughout the entire city. All those nail-biting moments had made me lose track of time! "Shoot! I'm so sorry, Erik, but I seriously need to go home right now."

I knew I was a total idiot for forgetting my phone in my bedroom, meaning I hadn't told Lacey or Mom about my plans after school. I wasn't usually out at this time to simply hang out, go places, or do unimportant things, so they must have been worried about me right now. I just had to rehearse mentally what to say when I got home.

Before I knew it, we were speeding through traffic on his big motorbike. Yeah, I'd never known Erik could be this badass.

I had always been frightened of riding one before, since I'd always thought I'd be blown off the bike by high-speed winds. It was like a wild roller coaster ride, but I finally got over the initial fear, and riding actually felt thrilling.

My guts stirred at every roar of the engine. I had my arms around Erik's hips, and it was driving me insane, though our position wasn't the only thing making me crazy.

He'd said that he liked me in such a quick and straightforward manner earlier—was it even real? He'd just been kidding, hadn't he? But if he'd been serious, then it would've been the first time someone had confessed to me... and holy crap, it would definitely scare the living daylights out of me.

Why was I so frightened by the whole idea? On top of that, something else was pulling me back—it felt so weird that I couldn't even explain what it was.

Fortunately, we reached my home before I could collapse on the spot. No light was visible through the windows of the house, and I guess everyone had already hit the sack. I let out a sigh of relief—all I had to do was to sneak in and pretend nothing had happened.

Erik switched off the engine, and I swung off the seat in one swift move. I took the black helmet off my head before giving it back to him.

"Well, thanks for the wild ride," I said, breathless. After that long ride, my ears were ringing, and I felt like I was still moving.

Erik took off his helmet, making his hair bushy. "Don't mention it. At least you arrived home much earlier than midnight," he answered with a smile.

Snorting out a laugh, I rolled my eyes. "Huh, so much for being Cinderella in jeans and Converse."

"Kylie?" said a familiar voice, distracting my scrambled thoughts.

I turned around and took a step back in shock when I saw Tristan standing behind me. He looked exhausted, with his red sweatshirt wrinkled and his hair in a mess. The bright, silver moon shone light on his ghostly white face; a cloud of smoke puffed out of his mouth as he exhaled, as if he'd stayed too long outside in the cold.

"Tristan? What are you doing here?" I asked in disbelief.

His eyes flicked to Erik, and I tensed. Oh, no. Don't tell me he's up for a fight again.

Erik coughed, breaking the increasing tension in the atmosphere; I quickly swiveled towards him and tried to force a smile, but failed.

"So, I think I should go now," he said, placing his helmet back on his head. "I enjoyed your company tonight, Kylie, and I wish I could stay and talk to you for a couple minutes, but it looks like someone's already waiting for you." He glanced at my back with some seemingly strange meaning.

Agitated, I didn't know what to say.

Erik started the engine, which generated a loud noise that echoed through the quiet neighborhood. He gave me a nod, saying, "See you in school, Ky. Have a good night," before taking off down the dark road.

My mouth hung open as I stared after him—he'd been in such a rush, he hadn't even waited for my reply.

No word could describe this day. I never wanted this to happen again.

Taking a deep breath, I faced Tristan and looked at him grimly. He gazed at me for a second, then quickly shifted his eyes away; his jaw went firm, and he gulped before looking down at the ground like he was discomforted.

"Why... why are you here?" I asked, trying to control my steady voice.

Sucking in the cold air, he raised his head but still avoided my gaze. "I-" he said hesitantly. He glanced at the thing hanging around my neck, and I squirmed. "I didn't know you and Erik were going out. Huh, it's... it's such a shame."

A block in my throat had formed. "You sounded like you oppose the idea," I said. "Does it have something to do with you, and that's why you went mad this morning? Oh wait, you went mad a long time ago, never mind."

"Don't you know?" he asked angrily. There was something in his eyes that I couldn't understand.

"Ah, so that's been the reason all along? That... that you don't want me to be with other people?" I faked a laugh. "Wow, Tristan. Jeez, if that's it, then it's pathetic, and I'm... I'm disappointed. You can't stand me talking and hanging out with anyone else! So if I happened to be together with somebody else, you wouldn't last for three minutes, let alone one month, for instance."

"Exactly," he said loudly, which made me step back in surprise. He opened his mouth, closed it, and said with a shaky voice, "I... I don't want to see you with someone else, especially that guy."

"You... you really despise Erik," I whispered. My stomach started to knot up, and I felt vaguely nauseous.

"I should tell you this for your own good." He looked straight into my eyes with his penetrating gaze and said, "You must be cautious about him, Kylie-"

I quickly covered my ears. "Shut up," I said, my voice trembling. "Don't you dare say what's good for me. You're only concerned with your own feelings."

"No, I-"

"Don't screw with what people feel just because you can't figure out what's going on with your own messed-up head!"

I tried to pass him, but he quickly grabbed my wrist.

"Why won't you let me finish what I have to say?" he asked; a hint of desperation in his tone.

Yanking his hand away, I said, "I'm already tired of listening," before returning to the front door. I felt the sting of tears that hadn't formed yet in the corners of my eyes. Why?

"Or are you just afraid of understanding reality?" I heard him say. "Erik isn't being true to you, Kylie. Remember in the ninth grade when you had the... the braces and stuff-"

My heart burned when he spoke those words. All the things I'd ever wanted to forget flashed back through my thoughts, and they maddened me to an extreme. "Shut up! Don't you ever remind me of those times, Tristan!"

"-and he didn't even treat you the same way back then as he does right now? Didn't you notice that? The guy is just interested in your appearance, Kylie! He doesn't even know the real you!"

I faced him and opened my mouth, teeth clenched, but I couldn't think of a good comeback. My breathing was getting shorter every second, and all I could do was gasp. "Stop saying that..." I managed to croak out. "Erik is not- Erik is not-"

"Are you so desperate to impress him that you'd go so far as to doll yourself up at the ball?" he said bitterly. "And... and lie to everyone about it?"

I froze with fear and shuddered in disbelief.

The moment he said those words, everything seemed to stop. My already misty eyes scanned his own eyes, trying to figure out how he'd finally found out. I couldn't

't believe it-it was like there was a strong force pushing me down that made me feel weak physically, mentally, and emotionally.

He knew it. The secret I'd been keeping from him. Julianne had been right all along.

Feeling ashamed, I bit my lip, not knowing what to say back.

"I thought you weren't afraid to show who you are, Kylie," said Tristan, barely above a whisper. "Since... since when did you become so shallow?"

What...? Shallow?

My hands turned to fists, and my nails dug into my palms. The anger and sadness I'd been hiding for the entire day surged through me with so much power, my chest squeezed in. I didn't know what to do. I blinked several times to erase the steam clouding my vision.

"Ha... ha-ha..." I tried to fake-laugh to hide what I really felt, but my cracking voice gave it away. Gasping for air, I continued venomously: "Says the guy who changes girlfriends like he changes clothes, who likes the crowd's attention on him, who's never cared about anything except his public image... D-do you have the right to criticize me? T-to insult me?" I tried to pull it back, but a single tear finally escaped from my eye, and I quickly wiped it away.

Why do I feel weak in front of him now? Why is this happening, damn it!

Tristan walked towards me, extending his hands as if to touch my arms, but I flinched away. His eyes were telling that he was sorry, but I didn't buy it. I continued to stare at him, my eyes burning with rage.

"How dare you say that! You don't know anything!"

"Kylie, I didn't mean-"

"No! You are the shallow one, Tristan!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "And I hate you! I hate you! I hate-"

He pulled me by the wrist without hesitation, and soon I was rapidly turning around, landing against his chest. His arms encircled me gently, pulling me closer and making my face sink into his shirt even more; I could feel and hear his heart beating erratically. It felt like my throat had been cut off, and I couldn't breathe.

Tristan was hugging me for the first time.

For some reason, my own heart was beating faster than usual, and it felt overwhelmingly different. Tristan was a lot taller and bigger than I was, and everything seemed even more perplexing and terrifying than I could ever have imagined it.

"I'm sorry if I say rash things to you when I know I shouldn't," he whispered to my head.

"Damn you, Tristan!" I struggled to free myself from his arms, but he didn't even budge. "Let me go! I hate you! You are the worst!"

"Hate me all you want, I accept it. I-I deserve it for being such a jerk and an idiot. I've made so many mistakes that I know I can't go back from."

I didn't like this feeling. I wished I could turn it off somehow.

"Tristan."

"I'm so sorry for messing things up, and I know I won't be forgiven, but please, listen to me. I don't know how I'm supposed to say this to make you believe me, but I... I..."

I pressed my hands against his chest and pushed him away. His words had sliced right through my ego, and it was something I couldn't bear. I held up a hand to stop him from coming closer, then locked my blazing eyes on his.

Tristan's arms dropped to his sides, and his mouth fell open as if he was attempting to say something. But before a word could escape from him, I said, "Stay back, and just stop, seriously. After all the things you've done to me, it's hard to believe in you anymore."

"I said I'm sorry. I mean it, Kylie."

Biting my lip, I looked down and said, "I heard you, but I'm already fresh out of tolerance."

"Kylie, please. Why won't you-"

"I wish you'd said it a long time ago..." I looked up. "You're too late now."

And with those final words, I shut the door, leaving him frozen outside. Heading to my bedroom with immeasurable weariness, I pressed my palms to my palpitating chest.

Something's wrong with me. I shouldn't be like this. I'm usually so sure of myself, but ever since he held me so close, I don't know what to think, what to do, and most of all...

...how exactly I feel about everything.

-Tristan-

The moment she slammed the door in front of my face, everything crashed down around me. I blinked for a couple of times as I gulped for air. I'd never believed this night would end like this.

She's not only mad, but hurt as well.

The last thing I'd ever wanted to do was make her cry, but crap, I just had.

It was entirely my fault. I was such a fuck-up. It just seemed like no matter what I did, I still ended up maddening her-hurting her. Why did I keep on doing such goddamned stupid things? The one person that meant most to me, over everyone

else, and I didn't show her or tell her how much I cared... She had no idea about any of this.

There are so many things I want to say to her but... I just don't know how.

My mouth would always be stuck, and all the words I'd want to say would just stop whenever I tried. I was terrified to make any moves, too, since she might say I was ridiculous and shut me down.

But it had all happened because of my stupidity. She was right-I was the worst type of guy after all.

Shit.

I'd never thought the distance I'd taken for granted could become wide. It was as if the gap between us was growing five centimeters per second, and that scared the hell out of me. I'd never wanted her to drift away from me-she was the kind of girl who had a chemical that drove me crazy.

I ended up realizing what I've wanted all along, but I wasted all the time I had.

Now I regretted the things I hadn't done while I'd had the chance. For who knows how many long hours, I'd waited for her to come home as I'd stood in the cold outside. But in the end, it hadn't paid off, and it hadn't even mattered, since I'd still been too late. That bastard had already gotten her.

I don't want everything to end like this. Maybe I need luck to get her once again.

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~~Interlude (Part II)~~

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Thanks to CharPz for the cool fan-made trailer!

Part Two

THE CHASE

"When you find something that's worth fighting for,

you never give up."

Belle

Once Upon A Time: The O

utsider

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~~Finding Cinderella (25)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

-Tristan-

Three words, eight letters, one regret.

I miss her.

She'd become the girl I didn't recognize, and she didn't even wave when I walked past her. I didn't know how long it had been since we'd faced each other, but it seemed like ages. Just because we didn't talk anymore didn't mean that I'd forgotten about her, or that I'd stopped caring about her— truth was, I still did. No matter what I said during the day, like, "Ah, screw this, I'm done," no matter how hard I tried to just let it slip away, when I got home, she was all I could think about. I'd never expected to fall for her the way I had, but despite all that, I wished for a second chance at doing all the things we'd once done, but in the right way. No awkwardness or anything, of course.

But for now... I didn't know. Timing and distance had been putting me to the test, giving me a constant heavy feeling in my chest. Feeling down bugged the crap out of me, so I just sucked it up and decided at the last minute to hang out with the guys that weekend.

Twirling my keys between my fingers, I headed downstairs, caught the scent of yeast and burnt sugar. When I went into the kitchen, I saw Mom arranging her newly baked mango tarts on a tray. From the ecstatic look on her face, I could tell she was in a good mood, and that was good timing for me.

I knocked on the doorframe and said warily, "Hey, Mom, I'm going out with my friends to Jack's. That okay with you?"

A curly strand of black hair fell to the side of her face as she looked gravely at me. "No alcohol, Tristan."

I raised a hand and said, "Rest assured, Mom, it's a decent place. Alcohol-free, no-smoking pool hall. Besides, I don't drink..." Okay, that one was a half lie,

since I'd drunk twice before, but I'd never been a heavy drinker or anything-I kept myself sober at all times.

Mom raised her eyebrow at my remark, and then shook her head like she didn't believe me. I was glad she wasn't freaking out about it, though.

"All right, just come home before dinner, okay?" she said as she wrapped aluminum foil around the top of the tray. "Your father's coming home tonight."

Speaking of which, I hadn't seen Dad for almost two weeks-he'd been staying in Massachusetts for a project and had to observe the maintenance or something. He was really that much of a workaholic.

Anyway, I couldn't help but grin at the news, since I'd asked Dad to bring me information about the MIT admission.

"Sure, then. Thanks, Mom." I kissed her cheeks and tried to take one of her homemade pastries from the tray, but she lightly slapped my wrist, and I shook my hand, mock hurt. "Hey, why don't I get one?"

"It's not for you, dear. It's for Emilie," she said. I gulped when I heard the name of Kylie's mother, already knowing where this was going. "Oh, right-since you're about to leave now, you might as well bring this to them while you're on the way. I still have to finish the next batch, you see."

"Uh, I can't." I hesitated. "I'm in a hurry now. The guys are already waiting for me."

"Please, Tristan." She rolled her eyes as she wiped her hands on her yellow apron. "It's not like you're going to spend an entire hour just giving this to them. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Mom, you just made a bad request, okay?" I muttered. "I'm not going in there."

"What?" She put her hand on her hip and scrutinized me. "Wait...Tristan, tell me. Did you and Kylie fight again?"

Ha, of course. She would know in an instant, since my worn-out look would probab

ly give it away. I raised my eyebrows and shrugged, trying to look oblivious.

She sighed and grumbled, "Oh, just as I thought. I hardly see you two talking to each other these days."

"We've never had a decent conversation, Mom, just so you know."

"I wonder what's wrong with you kids. Why can't both of you settle your differences and get along with each other? I think Emilie and I should talk about sending you kids to a counseling session or something. For Pete's sake, how can I have grandchildren if you two keep doing that?"

My eyes grew wider with shock. "Mom!" I exclaimed. "What the heck?" Grandchildren? Jeez, how had she come up with that? That had never even crossed my mind.

Mom's smile sent chills through my nerves. Women were indeed very suspicious human beings. Damn, this had turned into a weird conversation-I needed to leave.

"I gotta bounce now," I said, stepping backwards.

"Hold on, Tristan. You're forgetting something." She lifted the tray off the counter and handed it to me; I opened my mouth to complain, but she cut me off. "Now, go and give this to Emilie. And be sure to make up with Kylie while you're at it-both of you should have a humble disposition, okay? I know that you and Kylie have done something wrong, so you two should be willing to admit it and apologize."

"But Mom-"

"No buts." She crossed her arms over her chest and added, "I'm your mother, Tristan. Your argument is invalid."

"Fine! I'll go now," I groaned. She was always using that line to win our discussions, and not even Dad could defeat it.

Shaking my head, I walked out of the house as I carried the tray. Now how am I supposed to do this?

I might be given a second chance to say what I wanted to say to her, but I might end up tongue-tied again, and that was something I couldn't control.

My phone rang, and I walked more slowly as I fished it out of my pocket.

"Yo," I answered, then paused—the garbled sounds blaring on the other end were so loud, I had to move the phone a little farther from my ear. "What's up, guys?"

"T, where the hell are you? The others have been asking when you're gonna get here," Grey said, the connection getting choppy.

"Uh, sorry, I'll be a few minutes late."

A series of crashing and banging sounds followed, and I figured they were playing arcade games.

"I can't play this! The key controls are weird, goddammit!" It was Ryo, who was of course—a hardcore gamer in every field.

"Ha, I can't wait to own you guys." That was Justin, his voice sounding distant. "Is that T? When's he coming?"

"He said he'll be late," Grey told them and returned to me. "Is there a problem?"

"Sort of. Mom is forcing me to make peace with Kylie."

"Jeez. There's nothing wrong with that—all you have to do is to sweet-talk her, and bam! Everything's solved. It works like a charm with girls... Hey, weren't you the one who taught me that?"

"Was I? I don't remember that one. But dude, you know that crap never works on Kylie. You definitely can't sweet talk her, or else you'll earn yourself a slap in the face. Besides, everything's totally different this time." Yeah, it really is different.

He laughed, not seeming to get what I meant. "Okay, whatever you say. Just do it already and get here fast, yeah? You're missing the game!"

"All right." I hung up with a grunt and proceeded with my mission.

Because I was busy trying to figure out what to say, it took me, like, forever to reach Kylie's house, even though it wasn't that far away. I didn't want to face her at that moment, since it seemed like I'd be bothering her. Then again, if I didn't make even a little effort, she was never going to know any of this.

Should I tell her to stop pushing me away or just let it happen...?

And there I was, standing in the same place she'd walked away from. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath before ringing the doorbell. Here goes nothing.

A few minutes later, the door clicked open.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Harr-" The forced cheerfulness in my voice faded away in a snap.

Kylie was front of me. Her face was still as grim as the last time I'd seen her, and she clearly was not glad to see me. She was still wearing the necklace I presumed was from Erik, and seeing it made me feel even more dreadful. Damn, did he already own her by now? No way!

"Hi," I said under my breath, trying to avoid her unusually cold stare.

We just stood there in uncomfortable silence until I blurted out, "Oh, uh, Mom wants to give this to you guys."

I reached out the tray to her, and the moment her fingers accidentally brushed mine, she recoiled. I couldn't help but smile in my head-her jumpy nature still amused me as much as ever.

Lowering her head as though embarrassed, Kylie quickly grabbed the tray and murmured something I couldn't hear. I was about to ask her, but then snapped my mouth

h shut. Still looking at the ground, she quickly turned away and-

Bonk!

She'd hit her head on the doorframe.

"Aw!" Kylie brushed her head gingerly.

"Are you okay?" I automatically asked. This girl had always been an accident magnet.

Still, I was being ignored. Kylie slammed the door in my face just the same as last time, and I stood outside, waiting to see if anything was gonna happen like the loser I was. Even so, nothing happened, and I wished she'd at least give me her usual scowl so I'd know I was still here. I missed the old Kylie a lot.

With a sigh, I headed over to my car, which I'd parked in front of my house. But I stopped when I heard a familiar voice calling my name from behind; spinning around, I saw Lacey skipping towards me.

"Hey," she said, gasping.

I gave her a nod.

"T, are you still alive? Looks like your 'princely' aura is fading." Giggling, she poked my shoulder, but all I did was to force a smile.

Although what she'd just said had been a joke, it was still partly true. If everything had been the same as before, I'd have been pissed off by that fact, but now I really didn't care about it.

"And I haven't heard anything from you since, you know, that day," she continued in her usual cheerful tone. "So, have you told Kylie yet?" Her eyes lit up with excitement.

"How am I supposed to tell her if she's ignoring me in the first place?" I growl

ed.

"Aw, too bad..." Lacey brushed back her hair, her lips curling in disappointment .

"And furthermore," I added with a shrug, "there's that guy guarding her like a g
reyhound."

"Ooh, so cool! This is just like a story from a book I read where this girl is t
orn between two suitors with drastically conflicting personalities!" She was bla
bbering with much enthusiasm, but I just snorted at the idea.

"Yeah, and by now, she's already put me on her list of rejects." I shook my head .

She nudged me in the side. "Aw, do I sense a bit of jealousy in your voice, bro?
"

"Jealous? Ha! Why would I be jealous?"

"I hit a sore spot, eh?" she teased, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Cut it out, Lacey. Look, I have to go." I started to walk towards the car.

"Where are you going?"

"Jack's," I answered, opening the door and nodding to her. "Wanna come? Clark's
there."

Lacey blushed, and I chuckled. She was still crushing on him, huh? But she'd tur
ned him down, the poor guy. Wait... I was heading towards the exact same fate, u
nfortunately.

"Laceeey!"

Both of us turned when we heard Kylie shrieking from the porch. Her face was scrunched up with crossness, just like always, but she was avoiding looking in my direction, as if I wasn't there.

Lacey smiled apologetically at me, mouthing, "Here she goes again," before jogging her way back to their house.

Sighing, I entered the car. I didn't know if everything would ever be the same again, but it definitely wasn't fixed yet.

I hoped Kylie didn't think I hated her-I just couldn't talk to her. It was funny how she seemed so close, yet so damn far; perhaps teleportation would come in handy nowadays.

As I entered the pool hall, I noticed that the place didn't have that big of a crowd, unlike other times, when the place would be packed with teens and adults. There were still those frosty-haired dudes wearing all-dark clothes, girls in sunglasses, and a few familiar people who greeted me as I walked past them. It was the same, good old place to hang out at during boring weekends.

There were about a dozen pool tables or so, and the last table was where I found the guys meeting up, probably choosing teams.

"Hey."

"Ah, you're finally here!" Clark exclaimed, fist bumping me. He grabbed a cue stick and tossed it to me. "Let's start the game now."

"Hold on a moment, guys, I got a call." Will quickly rushed to the back, lifting his phone to his ear.

"So... what do you guys want to bet on?" Justin said as he leaned over the table, taking a few practice strokes.

"I know!" Ryo piped up. "Since T was late today, why doesn't he just pay the fee for pool?"

"And for booze outside later, too!" Justin added. "Fifty shots of beer in three minutes. And just for fun, no bathroom breaks."

"Deal!" the rest chimed in.

"Awesome. Then let's get this game on already!" Ryo said, shooting a malicious grin at me.

"C'mon, guys. I'm strapped for cash!" I objected, but they just laughed.

"This is your punishment, you know that. Besides, it's fine—we're going to have a good time."

"Huh, you're just saying that because you always win all the bets." I shook my head. "But fine, whatever. You guys play first, and I'll just cool down over here for a moment." I settled down on the couch on the corner, and the others looked at each other and shrugged before starting the game.

"What's the matter with you, T?" Grey asked as he sat beside me, applying chalk to the tip of his cue. "How did the talk go, by the way?"

"No luck. She's still avoiding me."

"Well, well. Seems like you need medicine for that," he said with a chuckle, and when I only looked at him in confusion, he grabbed his black mountain backpack from behind him and pulled out a gray metallic water bottle. "Here, drink this."

I grabbed the bottle and twisted the cap open. The scent of alcohol drifted past, and I frowned at him. "Dude, this is vodka." This guy was breaking the rules again.

"What? For me, alcohol is the best medicine, except for treating diarrhea, that

is. You might as well drink that once per day."

"Don't give me that crap, Grey. I don't need this." I shoved the bottle back at him. "Really, I'm being serious here."

"No shit, Sherlock." He laughed, but I just kept my face neutral.

"No, this time, it's true. I mean, Kylie won't even look me straight in the eye, and she's been avoiding me to the point of shoving me and yelling at me. It's just strange, since I was being nice to her the entire time..."

"Wait, hold on right there, bro," he said, waving his hand. "That tone... you're into Kylie, aren't you?" He read my silent reaction before snapping his fingers. "Ah, all right, no need to answer me. Though it's quite hard to imagine, since you two are like cats and dogs, I've already seen it coming."

I snorted.

"But... there's one thing I don't get. I mean, okay, this may be a strange thing to say, but the last time I noticed you, you were going ballistic searching for that mysterious girl, and now, you're on to Kylie?" he stated slowly, as if trying to digest the information. "What's with you, bro? Changing leagues?"

"Why would I when they're already in the same league?"

"What? Wait, so you mean that she and the girl..." He paused, pointing to random points in the air like he was puzzling out the pieces. Suddenly, he pushed himself back in shock, exclaiming, "Daaamn. Dude, you've gotta be kidding me!"

"Nope. Her sister was the one who told me herself."

"This is, like, a massive turn of events!"

"Yeah, I know. I didn't even believe myself at first."

Setting his cue stick aside, Grey leaned into the couch even more; his face went

firm, and it was then that I knew things were about to get serious. "So in that case... you must've made a move on her, right?"

"Why would you say that?"

He shrugged. "Even if you won't admit it, I can see that you care for Kylie. And based on how you're dealing with things right now, I can tell that you actually made a move on her."

I remembered the night when I'd hugged her for the first time. What I'd done had been so sudden, like there'd been a sudden force pushing me to do it when I'd seen her crying in front of me. I hadn't been able to help it. Maybe that counted as a move—a failed move, to be more exact.

"I didn't... intend to."

"Then maybe that's why she's paying no attention to you." He shook his head, patting my back. "Maybe you just have to take things slow, bro."

"Yeah, and maybe when I find out why she hates me, it'll turn out that she wants to be with Erik," I muttered.

"Ah, that guy you wanted to beat to a pulp a while ago? That Erik dude seemed to be a fairly nice guy, and Kylie must've like his side better than yours."

"Huh, are you kidding me?" I scoffed. "He isn't as nice as you think he is."

"Whoa, chill, man. What'd he do, anyway?"

The memory came to my mind, and I glared at Grey, who was surprised by my sudden anger. "Erik's actually—"

"Hey, guys. Aren't you gonna play?" Will asked, walking towards us.

Grey raised his eyebrow at me, and I simply nodded at the billiard table so I could get into the game and forget about the topic.

"Hey, bro. Lookin' down all of a sudden, huh?" Grey tapped Will on the back as we headed back to the table with our cues. "What's up?"

"Monique's been acting weird lately. I tried to ask her about the problem, but she said that if I don't know, then she's not telling me. And I was like, 'what the hell?' What's that supposed to mean?" Will looked at us questioningly, and Grey and I just shrugged.

"Women," we three said in unison as we rolled our eyes.

Grey slammed his hands on my shoulder and Will's and said, "Since you two have women problems, maybe you should just get drunk and let the day pass."

Laughing, Will punched him in the chest and went ahead of us to join the others at the billiard table.

"Huh, right," I grunted at Grey, who was casually applying chalk to his stick again.

"C'mon, bro. Still thinking of that Erik dude as competition, huh? What do you say we beat the shit out of him?" When he said it, he meant it seriously—Grey was the juiced-up jock of our gang, and he was always up for matches, especially when it came to helping his pals. Lucky for him, he still managed to keep up his clean status, thanks to his crafty strategies and his spot on the football team.

"Nah, forget it. He's not worth the trouble," I said, watching the pool balls shoot into the pockets. Clark thrust a fist into the air at his success. "Let's just see how everything plays out later on."

"It's your choice," I heard Grey said at my side. "But mind you, if this continues, she'll be snatched up by the other guy."

I raised my eyebrow at him and bobbed my head, considering his words.

He turned his eyes on me as he flashed a smirk. "You only got three choices, T: give up, give in, or give it all you've got."

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~~Finding Cinderella (26)~~

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[THIS CHAPER HAS BEEN REVISED]

∞ Finding Cinderella-26 ∞

-Kylie-

Every day, every minute, every second, I felt like crap.

I mean, I woke up feeling fine, but as the day passed, my mood fell downwards. I started thinking about every little stupid thing that had happened to me, and I couldn't seem to let it go. The bad thing was; it was the exact same stuff that I was dealing with-no part of the situation was changing or anything, just the fact that it was a different day.

Then again, I figured it was pretty normal for me. I was still the girl who was almost flunking Math, who had never been normal, who was still trying to hide her secret from everybody in school, and who was trying to avoid a guy for the rest of her senior days...

...who, by the way, was sitting beside me.

Oh, joy.

"...the traditional approach was the first way to congregate Shakespeare's tragic play, which proves that it is based on the time this play was written..." blabbered our English teacher, Mrs. Cox, but I could barely concentrate on the topic, since Tristan's strange behavior was bugging me.

When Mrs. Cox turned her back to write something on the blackboard, I shot him a look, but he quickly diverted his eyes to the front. Seriously, we'd been doing this weird stuff for the entire period-how I wished I could transfer my seat anywhere but here...

Groaning, I rested my chin in my hand and tried to focus on whatever was on the board. Mrs. Cox's hawk-like, wrinkly eyes were scanning the class as she spoke, so it would be better to stay focused on her; otherwise, she'd go bloodhound over us.

A few moments later, I heard a soft ripping sound from my right. I glanced over and saw Tristan ducking low over his desk, as if he was secretly doing something. I turned to the front again.

Something bounced onto my desk. It was a folded paper. Confused, I slowly turned to my left, thinking it might have come from Julianne, but she didn't look back at me-she was completely absorbed by the teacher's speech about Shakespeare, so I guess she wasn't the sender. No one else had been signaling me about the note, either, so it was then that it finally dawned on me.

Eyes growing wide, I snapped my head to Tristan, and he was pointing straight at the note, his eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. I scanned the note, and could see his handwriting all over it. It wasn't addressed to anyone, so maybe it wasn't for me, but for someone else instead. Besides, there was no way Tristan would send me a note. I mean, what would he even write to me? A homework assignment? His electric bill?

My eyes flicked to the person in front of me. It was Ronnie, and she was shaping her nails with a nail file underneath her desk as usual, although it was strictly prohibited during classes. Mrs. Cox was writing on the board again, and I quickly poked Ronnie's shoulder. She turned to me, and her face went all confused when I flipped up the note for her to see.

Right, this must be his urgent love confession-I'd better give it to her.

But when I was about to hand it to Ronnie, Tristan scrambled off his seat and snatched the note from my hand. Ronnie and I both gasped and looked at him in shock as he slumped back into his seat, making a loud creaking sound.

"What's with all that noise?" Mrs. Cox suddenly stopped writing and turned to us, but no one dared to speak up. It was like the whole room had suddenly been muted, so with a sigh, she returned to her writing again.

I spun to face Tristan and tried not to crack up. He was stooping over his desk again, but I could see his neck and ears turning beet red. Lucky for him, he hadn't been caught. Oh, right—he'd never been caught in any of his classes, since most of the teachers thought of him as an attentive student. I wondered if Tristan ever had a nerdy ego. But just thinking about him wearing huge glasses and a bow tie made me slap my palm to my face, suppressing a laugh.

Wait.

Why was I even laughing when I should be pissed off at him right now?

Erase the thought. Erase the thought!

Something dropped onto my desk. I peeked through the space between my fingers and noticed the same folded note resting on top. There was writing on it, and my chest drummed faster when I finally got a clearer view of the message:

This is for KYLIE HARRIS only.

I raised my eyebrows at Tristan. With an exasperated sigh, he hissed, "Keep it and read it later."

"Why would I?" I muttered with a scowl.

"Because."

"Because what?" Why was I even talking with him, anyway?

"Just read it. Don't be so stubborn, Kylie."

"Jeez, you're a one heck of a bothersome—"

That was when we heard Mrs. Cox clearing her throat. Slowly, Tristan and I turned our heads towards the front. Shoot. She was standing in front of us, hands on her hips, and the corners of her red lips were tightened in a straight line. Eve

ryone's eyes darted in our direction, and I couldn't tell whose face was redder between him and me.

"Mr. Hartford and Miss Harris, you know I've been observing the both of you. What do you two think you were doing during my class?" she said, trying to stabilize her tone. Her eyes were shifting back and forth between us, waiting for an answer.

I melted in my seat, mumbling, "Um, t-talking." I threw a sharp look at Tristan as I shoved his note under my desk.

"And what are you supposed to be doing?"

"Uh, listening to the discussion," Tristan answered hesitantly, raking his hair up; his composed façade contrasted with my frantic state.

I hoped Mrs. Cox wouldn't send us to detention, or else I'd die.

"When will you start?"

"Now. Sorry, ma'am. It won't happen again." He looked at me, but I continued shooting daggers at him.

Mrs. Cox bobbed her head and turned back on her heel towards the front. I almost let out a whoop, since she hadn't said anything about detention; however, she still looked at us and said, "Very well, now since you two have finally decided to join the class, will the both of you read the excerpt from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet on page fifty-four?"

Both Tristan and I obediently flipped our books to said page number, and my jaw fell to the ground. Act two, scene two. Good grief- that was the famous scene! The freaking balcony scene!

"Please stand up and read out loud to the class. Mr. Hartford will read Romeo's line, as Miss Harris will read Juliet's."

Oh, the horror!

Someone from the back let out a whoop, and I panicked. Freaking no! Why on Earth did this teacher have a knack for embarrassing students in front of the rest of the class? I wanted to take back what I'd said earlier-I'd rather be in detention than reading this dialogue to the whole class!

She raised her perfectly sculpted eyebrows, and with a sigh, Tristan stood up from his seat with surprising calmness, like he hadn't been bugged by it. Not having any other choice, I also stood up, book in my hands. Everyone had gotten to buzzing, and I heard Grey cough and clear his throat a couple times.

"'Lady,'" Tristan began to read aloud with conviction. The buzzing stopped, and every ear began listening to him. "'By yonder blessed moon I vow, that tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops-'"

"'O, swear not by the moon, th'inconstant moon. That monthly changes in her circle orb.'" My voice cracked at every word I said. Was I even saying them right? I sounded like I was doing a tongue twister. I swallowed and continued: "'lest thou at thy-'" screw this word "'l-love prove likewise variable.'"

I decided to go to Mars after this and have my funeral there.

"'What shall I swear by?'" He was really playing the role by heart.

"'Do not swear at all...'" Because I'd be the one swearing like crazy. "'Or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self, which is the god of my idolatry, and I'll believe thee.'"

"'If my heart's dear love-'"

And that was when everyone else in the class clapped, giggled, and made yeeeeee noises.

I examined them-they all had huge smiles on their face and kept shooting weird glances at us. Julianne dramatically clapped her hands in the air and wiped away invisible tears, just like what she'd do when she watched Degrassi and Gilmore Girls. Some whistled, some squealed, and half of the female population was preparing to have me barbecued later.

I had no idea how many times my heart skipped a beat throughout the whole period

I dropped my head down nervously, letting hair fall over my features, but it still couldn't hide the heat glowing in my face. My knees were shaking so badly, I bet I'd pass out any second. Peeking through my curtain of hair, I noticed that Tristan had been staring at his book the whole time; his face was frozen in place, not showing any signs of emotion at all.

But in a split second, I saw him smile.

I nearly fainted. He was definitely enjoying this, and no, he wouldn't be forgiven. Ever. This crappy day should've been enough, but he'd added even more crap by dragging me into his own crappy troubles. Crap.

I took a deep breath, trying to relax myself.

"Kids, please keep quiet," Mrs. Cox said strictly, as if she wasn't bothered. Everyone quieted down. "Carry on, Miss Harris."

What? Come on, give me a break!

Clearing my throat, I straightened myself and lifted my book up. There was no stopping now—I had to finish this before it could get any worse.

This was definitely a different day.

"O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?" Julianne dreamily sang as she leaned against her locker and gave me a look.

"Shut the heck up, Julianne!" I cried and banged my forehead on my locker door. I still couldn't get over the humiliation I'd experienced a while ago, and thinking about those creepy smiles and the teasing the others had been giving me all day made me mentally puke.

Julianne pinched my shoulders playfully, and I gritted my teeth. "Why are you being so bashful, huh?" She tickled my sides, laughing hysterically, and I pushed her hands away before I could end up rolling on the floor.

"Stop it, Jules! Who do you think wouldn't freak out because of that-that mortifying scene, huh? I'm lucky I survived." I opened the door and saw my reflection in the small mirror pasted inside. My face was still pure red, which was why everyone was teasing me.

"Me, of course," Julianne said from behind the door. "If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't freak out as long as I was reading it with my crush." She sighed thoughtfully, and I simply shook my head. She continued: "In fact, I would savor every second of it, having his charming lines dig deep into my chest forever..."

"Bleeh, you're turning into a lovesick bug again," I said. "You're just saying that because you're referring to your crush. What about me? It was Tristan, my... my freaking mortal enemy!"

"Hey, haven't you heard of the saying, 'the more you hate, the more you love'? Or should I say it again to knock the meaning inside your head for good?"

"Wow, I'd rather eat a cactus than believing that." With a last look in the mirror, I slammed my locker shut and turned to her. "Enough of this, okay? Let's just go."

As soon as we arrived to our usual table in the cafeteria, Lacey was all, "Hey, why's her face so red?"

"It's-it's because of the sun!" I immediately answered.

Julianne glanced at me and laughed. "If only you were there to witness, Lace. You would surely feel the ants around you."

"What? Why? Did she and Tristan finally compromise or something?" Lacey asked, ginning. She looked at me, keen for an answer. "Kylie?"

"Nope. But it's way better than that."

I groaned to Julianne, "Please, don't give her anymore ideas."

Someone tapped me from behind. It was Grey and his friends passing by, waving at us.

"Hi there, Nerdy," he called to my best friend, and then he nodded at me. "You did a great job in your role a while ago, Harris. Keep it up!"

They laughed and went away, except for Clark, who remained for a couple of seconds to say, "Hi," to Lacey before catching up with them.

I shot a look at Lacey, and she shrugged, saying, "What? It was just a 'hi'."

I exhaled exasperatedly. Those fargin' iceholes—they'd been making fun of me again! Fortunately, Tristan hadn't been with them, or everything would have been even more terrible.

"Julianne," I said, punching the palm of my hand with my clenched fist. "You've got to stop me right now before I launch myself at them and break their necks."

She tapped me on the head. Why did everyone always do that like I was a five-year-old kid? "Relax, my friend," she silenced me. Oh, right—she was a few months older than I was, so she'd been keeping up her role as an older sister. "Just inhale. Exhale. Repeat that process to infinity. It'll soothe your nerves."

"Kylie Harris, can I talk to you for a moment?"

The three of us looked up at the source of the voice. Ronnie was dashing towards me in her high heels, and I pressed on the seat.

"Oh, my God. It's Ronnie Sullivan," Julianne muttered, inching away. "Watch out, she's bad news."

"I'm going to say it right off the bat. Kylie, answer me honestly—" Ronnie puffed out air before continuing: "Are you and Tristan dating?"

"What." It sounded more like a statement than a question.

"Okay, I repeat, are you and Tris-

"Stop. Okay, fine. I heard you very clearly." This was bad-now I was the focus of these fan-girls' jealousy. I was so dead. "Jeez, what made you think that? Hold on, is it because of what happened in class?"

"Um, yeah, duh. Like, everyone's having suspicions because of that." She stared at me, her eyes begging for the answer she wanted to hear. "Tell me, is it true?"

"Heck no!"

This was going so outrageously! One rumor after another... though I should've been thankful that all the talk about the Valentine Ball was dying down and everyone seemed to have forgotten about it. But what was with this new stuff? How could they come up with that silly of a conclusion?

"Really? Really?"

"We're not, I told you." We're not even friends! I wanted to add.

Ronnie pressed her hand to her chest. "Oh, thank goodness. I thought it was real, but I should've known better. Like, wouldn't it be so weird if you, who are known to be one of the guys, actually dated a guy, a popular guy? You know, all that impossible stuff... isn't it strange to think about?"

I pursed my lips as Julianne instinctively grabbed my arm before I could rip out this cheerleader's salon-like hair. What was that supposed to mean? Did everyone in this school view me as a dude, so much so that I didn't even have the right to hang out with a guy anymore?

I scrutinized myself-worn-out sneakers, ragged jeans, oversized t-shirt, and khaki jacket with rolled-up sleeves. Oh, okay, I really looked like a dude. Switchblades and rifles were the only things I was lacking before becoming a complete Rambo-wannabe.

Ha! Screw what people thought of me.

"But anyway, I'm so glad I heard it from you, Kylie. Thank you," Ronnie said shakily. "Finally, I can relax."

"Wow, you really like Tristan, don't you?" I said just to change the topic away from me, somewhat surprised that I was talking to her naturally now.

"Are you kidding me?" she squealed. "Of course, yes! Very much. Hey, do you think you can help me? You two are, like, super close, right? Considering that you are neighbors and all, maybe I can ask you to--"

"Can't, sorry," I said, waving my hand.

Bringing two different people closer like what Cupid would do? That was a huge no-no for me. I'd already encountered stuff like this where girls had asked me to help them gain access to Tristan like I was a freaking bridge, but I'd usually turned them down because I'd known trouble would be sure to come, and I hadn't wanted to be involved.

"So the gossip was true after all, huh?" a loud, lethal voice emerged from nowhere.

Ronnie looked at us with startled eyes before we all turned to the back. Oh, no. It was the Witch Queen and her three minions, and all of them had their hands on their hips, eyes staring at Ronnie with intensity. They smelled like a spice basket, and all the floral scents floating around made us feel like I'd just wandered into a botanical garden.

Julianne was already on the edge of her seat, pressed on the wall. "Oh, my God, it's Fiona and her Dementors. More bad news," she muttered.

Why are all these people here so suddenly?

"Hi, Kylie, Julianne, Lacey," Fiona greeted us with fake amusement. Her stoic facial expression was even more disturbing than before. "Looks like you girls were having some fun, huh? Oh, would you mind telling me what the topic was? I think I just heard that my best friend likes my ex-boyfriend, and that's like news to me."

"Bestie, please, I can explain-" Ronnie tried to reach out to her, but Fiona stepped back.

"Shut up, Sullivan, or else I'm going to grab your pom-poms and shove them up your ass!"

Ronnie's face was steaming up with embarrassment. The three of us merely exchanged alarmed looks, though we didn't say a word. We didn't want to get on these wild girls' bad side. Boy, Fiona was even worse than I was when it came to making threats.

"I can't believe you, Veronica," Fiona continued, her entire face contorted with ferocity. "Have you forgotten about the friendship rule we've kept this whole time? Don't go after a friend's ex, that was the first rule, and no one's ever made an exception to that. But someone broke it, and guess who? The person I considered my best friend! I didn't want to believe the rumors at first because I trusted you, but you just proved them right."

"Bestie-"

"Don't you ever call me that again! Do you understand?" Fiona snapped at her, and when she looked at me, I held my breath. She leaned closer to my ear, her fingers grasping at the back of my head. "You better look after Tristan, Kylie," she hissed.

What?

Immobilized, I only stared at her as she pulled away with a sinister smile.

"Let's go, girls. My perfume's starting to become rotten because of this god-awful smell reeking around," Fiona said, looking up and down at Ronnie. "Someone must've scented herself by Chanel number hoe."

With that, Fiona turned her back on us, and the rest followed her away in a snap, laughing hysterically.

Ronnie dashed towards them, trying to get Fiona's attention by yelling her name,

but no luck—she was completely ignored, and I couldn't help feeling pity for her.

All that drama.

"What was that all about?" Lacey asked.

"Dunno. I really have no idea what's going on," I said and faced Julianne. "Is this the remake of World War Z, but with the most popular girls in school acting out instead of rotting zombies?"

"No. It's the Bitch Wars," she muttered. "Wait, did Fiona whisper something to you?"

"Uh—she said that I... better look after Tristan." Right, like, I was his babysitter or something.

Julianne and Lacey exchanged looks.

"That's it? She didn't say anything after that?" Julianne asked.

I shook my head. "I don't even know what she meant by that. But it's kinda weird, isn't it? Why would she tell me something like that?" Was that some sort of a warning?

"Well, whatever her reason behind that, I think you have to do it," said Lacey. "Maybe Fiona knows something that we don't." She shrugged, sighing. "But anyway, I sort of feel bad for Veronica. Imagine your best friend calling you in that word."

"Yeah, me too. I think Ronnie's a pretty nice girl," I admitted. "Although she can be a biznatch sometimes."

Julianne faced me, cocking her eyebrow as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Kylie, you may not know it, but I think you can actually see the good in anyone."
"

I stared at her.

"You actually overlooked Ronnie's bad trait and said that she's nice, so it's like you can somehow see a person's good side despite his or her façade."

"And your point is...?" I asked.

"And my point is that you have to try it on Tristan."

Just as I'd expected - this topic had fallen to him in the end. Lacey nodded at Julianne's remark.

"I don't know, Jules," I said with a shrug, since I didn't know what more to say

She leaned to me. "Well, why don't you try believing him, at least? The most important thing you can give someone is a chance, you know..."

Julianne's words struck me like lightning again, and at that moment, I wondered why those words weren't included in my dictionary.

-Tristan-

The rest of the day went by in a blur, but I couldn't stop thinking about the letter I'd given to her. Had she even read it? I guess she hadn't, considering she hadn't even come up and told me what she'd thought of it. Maybe she'd just thrown the letter in a trashcan and forgotten about it.

I looked at her in the distance. She was passing by with Julianne, and she seemed to be happy as always. I sighed.

"Look, isn't she so beautiful and impossible for you to get?" Grey, who was sitting on the top of the bench, pushed me and laughed. "But wouldn't it be a shame

if you fell head over heels for her?"

"Shut up."

"Oh, Tristan. You're really upset, huh?" Lacey said from my right side. "But stop playing like a tragic hero! It's your fault you've been annoying her when you could just have told her sooner."

"I know, Lacey," I grumbled.

"You guys are talking about Kylie, right?" Clark asked. He was sitting to my left, as if he was distancing himself from Lacey, and he hadn't been able to stop fidgeting ever since she'd come over. "I... I actually couldn't believe that you, you know, like her," he said and then mumbled something to himself while shaking his head.

"Gee, Tristan, what's with your taste? That girl's very difficult," Justin spoke up.

Will hooted. "Ha! Says the guy who had a crush on her back in tenth grade."

"What! I did not! You just made that crap up, right?"

"Dude, stop denying it. You were the one who told me that!"

"Really, Justin?" Lacey laughed.

Shaking his head with a chuckle, Justin hit Will in the chest with his fist.

I could only look at them, dumbfounded. No wonder why Justin had been restless whenever she'd been around back then.

"Ooh, someone's jealous." Grey patted me on the back.

"Cut it out, Grey. I'm not jealous, got it?" I frowned as I shoved him to make him stop. I hated to admit that I was kinda jealous whenever it came to her when I knew I shouldn't be. She had no idea how pissed I was because of that, and I had to hide it from her and from everyone else. "And yeah, I know she's much too difficult and stubborn," I continued, "but I have to admit, maybe she's worth it all."

"See, you just said what you're supposed to!" Lacey said, sounding like a grade school teacher. Here she was again, acting like the expert with this kind of stuff even though she'd never even gone through it. "If she's worth it, you won't give up. If you do give up, then she's not worth it. Do you get me?"

We guys simply stared at her with our mouths hanging open, mind-blown. Man, where did she get stuff like that? It sounded like what grandmothers would say to kids during snack time.

"Ah, in short, it's carpe diem, Tristan," Grey stated matter-of-factly. "She's trying to say that you have to grow some balls and take the risk, even though you know they'll be cut off in the end." His words of wisdom always sounded misleading and sometimes contained double meanings. He leaned close to Lacey, but I could still hear what he was saying: "Hey, why don't you try saying it to the guy on his other side?" He nodded his head towards Clark, who shot him a wary look.

"Grey, give it a rest, okay? Stop trying to sway her," I told him and bent down closer to Lacey, whispering, "I swear you have to get outta here before you end up hearing things you never wanted to hear. Save your innocence."

She continued to stare at the ground, hand under her chin as if she was absorbed in her own little world. She must not have gotten what Grey was saying, since she wasn't showing any reaction.

"Oh, I know!" She suddenly sprang up from her seat, jumping in front of us; her eyes displayed a good deal of excitement. "I finally know what you gotta do. I can't say it's a great idea, but I think it's worth a shot, believe me."

I exchanged glances with the others. Lacey never ran out of ideas when it came to these types of problem, and anyway, what she'd said earlier had had a point. In fact, it had actually been logical.

I gazed at Kylie, and when she caught me staring at her, she quickly turned away and buried her face in her book.

Looking back at Lacey, I finally said, "Sure. Tell me."

I threw my bag on the bed and rummaged in my bedroom for that thing I hadn't used for a quite long time. There-I found it under my bed. I pulled it out and blew the dusts off the black leather case, before pulling out the acoustic guitar, which was Dad's birthday gift for me last year.

I plucked each string. Gladly, they were still in good condition. While tuning the guitar and practicing it, I couldn't help to smile about Lacey's plan.

If I wanted something I'd never had, I had to do something I'd never done. Taking chances was better than doing nothing, anyway.

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~~Finding Cinderella (27)~~

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[THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN REVISED]

∞ Finding Cinderella-27 ∞

-Kylie-

"Hey, gotta go now. See you later, Ky," Erik said, getting up from his seat and slinging his bag over his shoulder.

Julianne and I both waved goodbye to him before he jogged away, in a hurry like always. I'd been wondering about it for some reason, but hadn't questioned him about it because it would look like I was interfering in his matters. Instead, I went back to my schoolwork in an attempt to finish it as soon as possible while my motivation was still up. I never liked to do my homework in the house, anyway, because I'd still be doing it at school. Yup, I was such a good student.

Moments later, I heard Julianne sigh, scooting closer to me. "You know, Kylie, if you asked me, I'd bet on Tristan," she said, unwrapping a piece of gum and plunking it in her mouth.

What she'd just said had been really random.

"What? I didn't ask anything," I said as I wrote stuff in my notebook. "Here we go with the Tristan thing again. Just drop it, Jules - I have to concentrate right now."

"Girls!" someone called from behind us, and without even looking, we could already tell who it was.

"Lacey, where have you been?" Julianne said, chewing.

"Oh, just somewhere..." Lacey puffed as she sat on the opposite side, facing me. She leaned closer as if she was examining my face while I wrote. "Hey, why's her face in sour mode? Sis was just having a good laugh a while ago, and now she looked upset...?"

"It's just my face," I said.

"Don't worry about it, she's fine," Julianne answered. "I simply mentioned Tristan's name, and she was instantly in a bad mood again. Like flipping an on-and-off switch."

I dropped my pen to say my fantastic comeback, "It's because-because-I'm... I mean, he's, like, sending off these really bad vibes, okay? And then the whole universe blows up, and it's like a serious bummer."

"Jeez, why do you overreact every time we talk about him?" Julianne asked, raising her eyebrows. Her lips curved in a somewhat teasing smile.

"Me? Overreacting about Tristan?" I stammered. I didn't even know how to reason it out or explain myself. "Huh, well excuse me, but I'm just being cool," I said instead to make me look calm and to make my stress levels lower; deep inside, though, I was having spaz attacks again.

"Girl, please," they chorused, exchanging meaningful glances that only they understood

"'Cool', huh? I think it's already different." Julianne tickled my sides again, which made me half snarl and half laugh.

Eventually, I propped myself up while slapping her hands just to get away from her.

"Stop! I don't know what you guys are talking about, but really, just stop it," I demanded, clenching my teeth.

"Really? Being cool, sis?" Lacey spoke like she was provoking me. She cocked her head to the side as if she were looking at something behind me before giving me a grin. "Then if that's it... he's right over there," she said, pointing in my direction. "I dare you to go and talk to him. I think he wants to tell you something."

"W-what? Since when did this become a dare?" I stammered, not daring to look behind me, even though I assumed she might be bluffing.

"Hey, you just said you were cool with him, so we're testing to see if you were telling the truth or not," Julianne ventured. "I thought you never backed out from dares."

"You guys are seriously teaming up against me." Just as I was about to pull a serious face, I heard a distant melody.

"Uh-oh, Tristan's coming closer!" Lacey squealed, her cheeks lighting up in a shade of pink. "Look, turn around already!"

I crossed my arms and tried to make myself look angry. But no matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't help but feel nervous—the tune sounded dark, but somehow heartening at the same time, and it seemed to be getting closer and closer.

"Oh, my goodness... No. Way." Julianne gasped as she stared behind me as well. "Lacey, I honestly thought you were just joking... Gosh, Kylie, you really have to

o see this." Beaming, she held my gaze, nodding her head to encourage me to look

I still stood in my spot and tried to block out the sound by thinking of random things.

His steps came even closer and halted. That was when I finally get a clearer picture of the sound. It was like being submerged in a flowing river; all the harmony was flowing past him, the notes of the chords forming different levels as he strummed them at the same time. My heart accelerated faster. It made me feel such emotion that I could barely handle listening to its incredibly smooth sound.

"Will you listen to my story?"

It'll just be a minute

How can I explain?"

I turned around; eyes growing wide, mouth hanging open. It was like a sudden electricity had struck me when I'd heard him sing.

"T-Tristan, why... why are you-?" Then I was lost for words.

He'd started to sing quietly at first, but the song grew louder, as if his confidence was growing, too.

"How can I explain?"

Whatever happened here never meant to hurt you

How can I cause you so much pain?"

His voice was raspy and deep, though he sang with unfaltering conviction. Tristan was not the kind of person who had a voice for performing on stage, nor was he the type to sing a song like this. I'd actually seen him pick up a guitar before, but most of the time it would only be in his room, and he'd never dared to si

ng.

This was the last thing I'd expected him to do.

"When I say I'm sorry

Will you believe me?

Listen to my story

Say you won't leave me..."

I couldn't believe I was saying this, but Tristan was the very first guy, and so far the only guy, who'd gathered enough nerve to sing to me. My stomach did little flips.

"When I say I'm sorry

Can you forgive me?

When I say I will always be there

Will you believe... will you believe in me?"

A song for an apology. This was his way of saying, "I know I screwed up, and I'm sorry." If everything were still the same as before, I would've immediately laughed in his face for doing such an embarrassing thing. But right now, I didn't even have the energy to move away, much less speak up.

After the last strum, Tristan stopped and waited for my reaction. I only stood there, mouth glued shut. His eyes begged me to say something - forgive him, forget about everything, make a fresh start. Then Julianne's words flashed through my thoughts:

"The most important thing you can give to someone is a chance, you know..."

"I'm sorry," he began to say. "I know that word's being tossed around so much, people don't care about it anymore. I don't even know if you'll ever accept it or not, but I'll still say it no matter what." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry about all the things. I'm sorry for dragging you into trouble back in the English class yesterday, I'm sorry for upsetting you, I'm sorry for making you mad, I'm sorry for bothering you right now. And... I really mean it."

At that point, I realized that everyone could say sorry, but the genuine apology lay in the sadness in his voice, the look in his eyes. I also knew that he'd upset himself just as much.

"You know that an apology is never something that I'm quick to let out. And the fact that I'm openly admitting I was wrong... well, I guess that's gotta count for something. Hopefully." Tristan tried to smile but didn't really manage it, though for some surprising reason, it made me blush.

Lifting his guitar, he turned his back on me and walked away.

He really meant what he said, Kylie. He may be a total jerk most of the time, but he actually is a sweet guy. Stop being such a mean person. Don't screw his effort. Just forgive him. Give him a chance. That may be the only way you'd finally forget everything that's happened.

I ripped my gaze off him walking away, turning to Julianne and Lacey, who were already giving saddened looks at me.

"Aren't you going to say something to him?" Lacey said softly, as if she was going to cry. She was always sensitive about stuff like this.

I wanted to tell her to stop stressing herself out, since she had nothing to do with this. However, I didn't say a word. With a heavy feeling welling up in my chest, I went back to the table and quickly gathered my books. I wanted to go home and curl up in bed already.

"Don't be angry about this, but I have to say this as your best friend, Kylie," Julianne said in her usual blunt fashion. "Sometimes, I just really want to slap you in the face. Hard."

My English book fell off the edge of the table. I was about to pick it up, but my fingers froze when I noticed a paper stuck between the pages. The memory flashed back - before I'd left class yesterday, I'd decided at the last minute to get the note from my desk and read it later.

Straightening myself, I slowly unfolded the paper.

Don't worry, Kylie. I won't annoy or tease you, this time or ever again. I absolutely won't bother you...so please, don't be mad anymore.

-T

Another apology.

A sudden urge made me dash in the direction where he was headed. My pulse was beating faster at each step I took. He was there in the distance; the guitar was now strapped to his back, and he was still walking away. I finally stopped a couple feet behind him, panting. Tristan turned around.

"You... you should really consider yourself lucky," I managed to say between gasps. I glared at him. "You know what? I wanted to knock you out with that guitar. I wanted to stuff rocks down your shirt. Spray pepper in your eyes. Rip up that note of yours..." A pause. "I would do those things, Tristan, I really would. I f... if only my conscience hadn't been eating me up," I continued in a low voice.

"Does that mean you're...I mean, I'm finally-?"

"We know that no one's perfect, but when you say sorry, at least make an effort not to do the same stuff all over again."

"I'm not promising anything, but I'll do my best."

"Yeah, I know you shouldn't promise, because even 'abracadabra' won't save you from being a jerk."

He shook his head, but his dimples showed that he was smiling.

"But after what you've done today, I admit I'm...quite confused now. I-I don't know whether I should hate you or not..." I waited for him to say something, but he didn't. "I mean, you just—you just did that stuff where a lot of people could see!" I wailed and then lowered my head, embarrassed.

He laughed; there was a huge relief in his voice that I sensed after quite a long time. "You really don't like surprises, do you?"

I lifted my head. "It's not like that! Just try to make it a little more reserved, because a lot of people are already making up rumors about—" I quickly bit my lip, but it was too late now — he was pulling up his eyebrow like he'd figured out what I'd been saying.

"You and me going out, right? All sorts of stuff..." Feeling a little uneasy, Tristan looked away, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I already heard that, I'm sorry. I understand."

This reconciliation was somewhat awkward, and I hadn't expected it to turn out that way.

I twiddled my fingers behind me. "Forget about it; it won't last that long, anyway. You know how gossip runs around in this school. But, um, by the way, I must say—" The corner of my lips turned up uncontrollably. "What you just did was really cool, huh? I never thought you could sing like that."

He snorted. "I have the potential for the X-Factor, right?"

"No. Just for Laughs." I laughed, really laughed, and it made all the worries in my chest gradually fade. At this point, I was surprised at myself—after all those things that had happened, who would've thought that everything would be like this right now?

Maybe this had to happen like it should.

Despite the fact that some part of me was still reluctant about him, I was starting to think this was the start of something good.

Tristan stepped closer to me until there were only a few inches between us. My h

heartbeat was racing so fast I could barely breathe.

"Kylie..."

I was quite unprepared for what he was about to say. My brain raced on, my throat went dry. I was honestly impressed by what he'd done just to make me forgive him, but I would never be more impressed with anything else he did; that is, until he took another small step and said:

"I miss you."

He brushed the top of my head in a playful way, smiling warmly.

I tried not to frown, but I couldn't help it, since I was curious about what he'd meant. "It doesn't make sense. We see each other, like, every five seconds and now you say that—"

As I looked into his eyes, finding a deep stare that might be hiding something, I stopped myself from saying more, and my face turned seven shades of red.

"You are so dense." He emphasized each word, lifting his hand off my head. "I know it's hard for you to understand when I say that. But that's cool. I'm still glad the old Kylie's back."

"What? I really don't know what you're talking about. Why won't you at least explain it to me? Jeez." I puckered my brows and brushed back my disheveled hair. He was the only person I knew who would give me a pat on the head like that.

"Nope."

"Tell."

"No."

"Tell."

"Still stubborn to the core, I see."

"You, sir, have tickled my fancy." I grinned as I remembered those words he'd used back in the ball.

He chuckled, seemingly remembering them as well. "They say curiosity killed the cat."

I put my hands on my hips and raised my head higher. "But I'm a unicorn."

He sighed. "Look, I don't know how to say it without making myself sounding ridiculous. You might think I'm pulling your leg."

"Try me." I crossed my arms across my chest.

"You sure?"

"I'm all ears."

Well, that was the first time.

-Tristan-

Sometimes when you take a turn, everything falls apart, yet when you take another, things start to bloom.

Sometimes, although I'd thought everything had already been hopeless, I'd still carried on because I loved her. Then I'd thought, "Maybe there's still hope somewhere." And yeah, there definitely was.

Wait, did I just say I loved her? Whoa. I simply couldn't imagine I'd ever say that to myself - that step by step and little by little, I was falling harder for this bittersweet girl who could be insane most of the time, who always seemed to enjoy my pain, and who might even wind up killing me someday.

There was really something about her.

Now here she was, waiting for me to speak the words I'd held back all this time. Her eyes examined me as if she were putting a puzzle together. I attempted to speak, but the words didn't seem to come.

What if the answer I want isn't the answer I receive?

"Earth to Tristan."

I blinked twice.

"You're zoning out," said Kylie.

"Sorry, I was just uh..." I was just trying to figure out how to say it to you.

"Nah, actually you don't have to answer that, because it seems like you're going to get sick." She tapped me on the shoulder, laughing uproariously. It was good that she was laughing her heart out now. I didn't want to see her face all blue

I simply smiled at her, even though I was a little dismayed at myself.

"Well, uh, I think I should get back to the other two now. I still have stuff to do." She started to step backward, giving me a small wave.

"Yeah, they were already waiting for you."

With a satisfied nod, she turned her back to me on just as I turned in the opposite direction. I should've run up, called her name, picked her up, hugged her, and told her I loved her. There had been so many chances. But everything was only

reeling in my head; I didn't want to mess things up now.

I continued to walk to the place where the guys might be chilling out. Those idiots had just stayed on the sidelines after they'd shit bricks about me doing the plan.

"Tristan?"

A smile appeared back on my face; I faced her with an anticipative look.

"Yes, Kyles?"

"Friends?" she asked from a distance.

Friends, huh? She really has no idea.

Even though I wanted us to be more than that, I just sucked it up, nodded, and said, "Yeah, friends."

She smiled again, and I was so damn happy.

Someday, in some way, I would tell her what I felt for her, and hopefully, she'd be able to accept it. I knew it would take some time, but for now, I would take advantage of this miraculous success. I knew, somehow, that every step I took now would be the first steps towards reaching her.

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~~Finding Cinderella (28)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella-28 ♡

-Tristan-

Ever since Kylie and I had finally reunited, I couldn't help but feel overjoyed all the time. It was like one of the old days, when Kylie's family had moved into our neighborhood a few weeks after her father's death.

I could still remember the first time we'd met. Our first meeting hadn't been formal—it had only been the result of an accident. Kylie had hit the window of my bedroom when she and Lacey had been playing baseball, and she'd talked to Mom and me and promised to pay for the damage, which meant having to lose a week's allowance. Not bad for a fourteen-year-old kid, especially one who'd already showed assertiveness towards people whom she'd just met over a few days.

So yeah, that's how it started. We became friends, and it had been somewhat strange at first, since she was a girl and there had been things I'd been a little bit hesitant to indulge her in, like skateboarding, catching frogs, and climbing trees, still, she'd tried and done everything.

Thinking of those times made me feel alive.

I wondered if Kylie still remembered. She'd never spoken about them as years had gone by, and everything around us had changed. We were friends now, but I was still unsure if we could do all those things once more, like we used to.

-Kylie-

I took a deep breath.

"Today's gonna be my lucky day," I told myself like it was a mantra and hopped down Tristan's car.

His mouth curled up as he waited for me so we could walk together. "Yeah, right," he said sarcastically. "Like you can predict what's gonna happen to you."

I threw a glare at him. "Hey, if I thought it often enough, as if I really believed it, maybe I actually would have my lucky day," I answered. "Right, Lacey?"

"Huh?" she called from far ahead. Her earphones were plugged into her ears like she was trying to drown herself in her little world again.

"Well, yeah sure. I think that's gonna help you earn some luck if you have at least tried studying your Calculus lessons in advance," said Tristan.

My face went pale, and I felt a little guilty. "Ha-how did you...?"

"Have you already forgotten that Cross is also my instructor? I know his teaching patterns. When he's late to class, expect him to give you a pop quiz; when he teaches a lesson that spans a whole week, he'll definitely give you a unit quiz. I told you, he's Adolf Hitler on crack."

"Why haven't I noticed that before?" I cried. Maybe it was because I hadn't paid attention in class. Well, I'd tried to, but I just hadn't been able to do it. "Hearing about the unit quiz makes me feel like I'm being shot! Thank you so much, T-now I have to spend the whole day agonizing about this."

"It's a good thing that I gave you a reminder, though," he said. I looked at him with a raised eyebrow and noticed that he was smirking.

"Yeah, yeah," I answered.

"Well, you can borrow some of my notes. They're complete..."

My eyes lit up. "What?"

"If you want to." He locked his eyes on mine for two seconds before looking away and brushing his head as if he felt edgy.

I simply gaped at him, confused. Wait-Tristan was being nice again, too nice. One time I'd tested him to see how far he would go with his Mr. Nice Guy image by spilling Coke on his shirt in the cafeteria, but he'd kept everything cool and told me it had just been an accident. Also there was the time when I'd smacked his face and told him there'd been a fly, even though there really hadn't been, and he hadn't even gotten mad or anything. That was strange.

Is he changing...or is it something else?

But as for the change, I pushed away all the negative thoughts in my head and said, "Yeah, sure. But...what about you?"

"I can handle it myself."

We stopped walking, and as though eager, he quickly pulled a notebook from his backpack and handed it to me. I flipped through the pages, and my mouth dropped. It wasn't because his handwriting could have been mistaken for the work of a Neanderthal man, but because his notes were fully detailed in comparison to Julianne's. Of all the guys I'd known so far, Tristan was the only one who would bother taking all the lessons down.

Just as I'd thought-this guy had a hidden nerdy ego!

"Gee, Tristan, are you a nerd?" I blurted out. "Taking down all the notes on the board, seriously? One simply does not have time for that."

"Hmm," he said. "If you think I'm a nerd, then I bet I'd at least be in the hot category." He winked.

I gave him a weird look. So I guess the cocky attitude was still stuck in him.

"Yeah, whatever."

When I was about to take a step ahead of him, he touched my arm.

"Kylie, uh..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "How about we go home together after school?"

"Why? Don't you have any dates for the day?" I joked.

"I'm not dating any girls now," he said. "In fact, I never look to other girls anymore."

Well, that had been one heck of a weird statement. I'd never thought it would come from a well-known player's mouth.

But... was he really a player?

I was starting to have doubts about him. I'd never heard the girls he'd broken up with say bad things about him or hold bitterness against him; it was like he was still being true, even though he was playing around...

I raised my eyebrow at him.

"Because there's one girl who's already gotten me."

Silence.

I let out a small laugh. "Whoa, that's so deep, T. I didn't know you could say stuff like that," I kidded, since I figured he was pulling my leg. He was Tristan, remember? He was one of the worst goons I knew.

But the firm set of his jaw, the sweat rolling down his forehead, the pink glow in his cheeks, and the way he looked at me showed that he was completely serious about it.

Is it real this time? Is he not actually playing around?

"Oh! I see... okay," I stammered, forcing a grin.

He took a step towards me. I snapped my mouth shut and swallowed a lump in my throat.

"So... what do you think?" he asked.

"W-what?" My lips barely moved. Was he referring about the girl?

"I... I mean, about going home together."

Oh. "I'll consider that if-if you stop looking at me like that, you nerd waffle!" I exclaimed.

He grinned. "Your face is red."

I wouldn't have realized that I was already steaming if he hadn't mentioned that. I had to take a step back before I could pass out. I was too stunned to speak, and we just stood there in silence for a while. Just thinking about Tristan and I being so close like this, with a bunch of students around, made the situation even more awkward.

Finally, I couldn't bear the proximity and blurted out, "Okay! I'll go home together with you. But the last one to reach the lockers treats the winner to vanilla pudding later!" and made a mad dash. From a distance, I could hear him laughing aloud.

I knew what he was thinking-this was exactly those bets we'd made when we were kids, and now we were doing it again. Just like we used to.

I sprinted to my seat and dropped my exhausted body onto the desk; my backpack making a soft thud as it hit the floor.

"Kylie, you do realize you're early for the next period, don't you?" Julianne said, not bothering to look up from her book.

I looked at the wall clock on top of the board. Crap-it was seven minutes after the bell had rung. But when I looked around and noticed that the others weren't in their seats yet, I sighed in relief.

"At least the teacher isn't here yet," I reasoned.

"Lucky for you, then."

My throat felt like sandpaper after all that running. I asked her, "Did you bring water?"

Julianne finally looked up from her book to scrutinize me before bending over, pulling out her water bottle, and handing it to me. I drank the tepid liquid and let out a loud gasp.

"You already look exhausted, and it's only morning," she observed. "What happened?" She pointed to her upper lip, and I quickly wiped off my water mustache with my hand.

"Ah, it's because Tristan and I had a race." I made a fist pump. "Good thing I beat him—that guy owes me a vanilla pudding."

Julianne slammed her book shut and leaned over my desk, as if what I'd said had fascinated her.

I gaped at her in confusion. "What?"

"So Tristan's wonderful, isn't he?" Her smile was starting to scare me again.

I grunted. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You said some time ago that you were testing his patience, so how's that going?" she asked giddily. "Any reports?"

"The same as ever. He's still the villain I know, and I solemnly swear he's up to no good."

She raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

I finally gave up with a sigh. I couldn't deny it anymore, since she was making her own observations, and I knew she wouldn't stop me until I said the right thing.

"I know that's not the answer you wanted to hear," I muttered. "All right! He's.. I don't know. He suddenly got this nice side-he's helping me out and showing real concern for my problems... Tristan's pretty weird, isn't he? Turns out he's not as evil as I thought he was." My voice dropped on the last sentence.

Wow. I couldn't believe I'd been completely honest about Tristan, and because of it, my cheeks heated up.

Julianne's grin widened.

"Stop staring at me like that, Jules." I tried to avoid her eyes. "Really, it's making me feel guilty."

"Ooh, you like that side of Tristan, huh?" She wiggled her eyebrows.

I almost choked on the water I'd just drunk. "Wha-m-me?" I stuttered, waving my hands. "Like him? That's not it!"

She slapped the table a couple of times, almost having a mental breakdown because she was laughing too hard. "I see now," she choked out between her snorts.

"You see what?"

"You don't like him, Kylie. You looove him."

"Shh, Julianne!"

"Omigosh. So it's true then?"

"Oh, shut up, Jules. It's not. I'm not."

"Admit it already!"

"I said no, dammit!" I cried. She was losing her mind again; I wondered what she'd eaten that morning. "Stop saying ridiculous things, Julianne! That's not even it, okay? Well, he... he may have that popular 'princely' appearance, b-but he's completely different from my ideal!"

"Hmm...?"

"And don't even think about stuff that's so ridiculous. It's giving me weird vibes all over, seriously."

"Then why are you blushing and overreacting, huh?"

"Says who?" I huffed. "Your eyes might just be tricking you, jeez. And I'm not overreacting, I'm just reasoning out things in a cool way." I scowled before burying my blistering face in my arms on top of the desk. I wanted this class to be over already.

"You know, the day Tristan forgets his inflated ego will be the day I think he's in love, and not a day sooner," Julianne said like a know-it-all.

"What?" I didn't have a clue how on earth she was able to say things like that about him. I mean, they weren't even related-maybe Julianne really had a mind like an encyclopedia.

"Well, just saying."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

It seemed that my luck wasn't working once again.

-Tristan-

As I was heading to my homeroom, I came across Clark, and we fist-bumped each other.

her before we proceeding down the hallway.

"So have you heard the guys' plan?" he asked. "They're going to Jack's again after school—you in?"

"Nah, I'll pass. Got something planned already," I said, smiling.

"It's Kylie, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I owe her something." She'd been extremely happy when she'd creamed me in that race, but she hadn't known that I'd actually lost on purpose. I'd run so slowly that I'd finished after her, which meant having to be around her for another few hours or so.

"You know your chances are unfortunately slim," said Clark.

My smile dropped, and my face stiffened. "I know."

"So you're just gonna keep at it, even though you're aware of that?"

"Yeah. I've been aware of it for a long time. But it didn't stop me then, and I won't stop now, especially when we're finally on good terms."

"You're definitely determined, huh?" He elbowed me in the side.

"Course."

"Why?"

Just when I was about to speak up, a girl with a dark hair came up to me with a huge smile and instantly said, "Oh hey, Tristan! You know I tried to call you yesterday, but you didn't pick up."

I brushed my head. I didn't have any memories on what she was talking about. I d

idn't even know who she was. "Oh, I'm sorry?" I said instead, just to be nice.

"S'all right," she slurred, smiling a little. She cleared her throat. "But, um, I'm just wondering if you wanna come with us later at lunch?" She motioned to her friends at the lockers, who were stifling giggles. "We're eating out. Well, you can invite your friends if you want to!"

I quickly shook my head. "No, we can't. We're kinda busy today."

Clark automatically hissed, "Y-yeah. We are," when I nudged him afterwards.

The girl dropped her gaze to her sandals and bit her lip. "Oh, shucks. I'm sorry I have such bad timing. It's okay, maybe I'll try next time." Then she rushed to her friends in the most dramatic manner possible, and I caught a bit of their conversation before I turned away from them; what she'd done had only been a dare from her friends. Huh.

"Dude, can you explain what I just saw?" Clark said as we continued on our way. "You completely turned down a girl! I mean, it's totally not like you-"

"Got no time to play around anymore, Clark."

He shook his head. "T, you're whipped."

"What can I say? I love Kylie."

"Whoa-wait, what? Are you serious?"

I shrugged. "I say what I mean, and I mean what I say."

Clark raised his arms to stop me, looking at me in surprise. "Look, Tristan, I think you have the belief that if you try hard enough and wait long enough for her, she'll agree to finally give you a chance. But let's face it-it's not happening."

I glared at him, and he raised both of his hands in mock surrender.

"Okay, okay, I didn't mean it as a bad thing. I do appreciate that you care about her. I'm just giving you a warning, man-there's too much to lose, you know."

"So that also explains why you're losing her?"

Clark shut his mouth, knowing the meaning behind the word her. "I know it's my fault. I think I didn't try hard enough."

"Well, in that case, get Lacey a pet. Either a puppy or a kitten, just as long as it fits in her mailbox." I laughed at my own joke, and then realized it was kinda lame for serious times like these.

He grunted, which I took as a small laugh. "I don't know."

"Ask her out, then."

"It's not that easy."

Then what he'd said hit me-I was giving him advice that I couldn't even follow myself. Yeah, it wasn't that easy, it had never been that easy. Clark's case wasn't that bad, though, since he could still please Lacey because of her flexibility.

What about Kylie, though? She was the total opposite. She was still completely unaware no matter how obvious I could get. Then again, I couldn't blame her. She may have come across as hard to get, perhaps because she'd been through a few things, seen a few things, been there and done that. And there were three factors that contributed to that: her father's death, Erik, and me playing around with other girls, which was something I completely regretted. The first factor was understandable, but the second one wasn't and never would be.

Why?

It was because I knew Erik Taylor was a huge liar.

"But despite of that, I've already done something," Clark said, distracting me from my thoughts.

"What?"

He opened his mouth, and then shut it as though he was trying to reconstruct his answer. Sometimes I got the feeling that Clark had a trick up his sleeve, and I was about to ask him again when someone slung his arms around our shoulders.

"'Sup, dudes? We're too early for Calculus, you know?" Will said with a laugh. "Why don't we try being late for a change?"

"Cross is always later than us anyway," I said, shrugging, and pushed the door off our homeroom open. "We won't get caught."

We stopped halfway when we realized that everyone else in the class had spun their heads in our direction, staring as if we were carrying a dead body. Silence whizzed around them, and Mr. Cross, who was already in front, cleared his throat, much to our horror.

"Hartford, Reed, Young," he said indignantly, looking at his wristwatch. "Fifteen minutes late. Detention after school."

Crap.

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~~Finding Cinderella (29)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella-29 ♡

-Tristan-

I spent the whole morning determined that everything would go fine over the rest of the day.

Not only would it be the highlight of my day, but also my start to shape things up for the better, but I guess I could never keep plans without something happening or some other person being a huge killjoy (aka. Mr. Cross).

Three periods I'd used up contemplating whether I should cancel it or not, because if I canceled it, everything would blow up. I didn't want to get Kylie's hopes down, especially when she kept nagging me about it during English and all the way until lunch break.

"You're not getting out of this, T," she said, pointing two fingers at her eyes and then at mine. "The bet, remember that."

"Kylie, you've repeated that for the nth time already," I said with a snicker. "Are you really that excited?" But I couldn't blame her - she'd been wanting to sink her teeth into her favorite pudding more than a killer whale wants to despicably consume a baby walrus, I'd tell you that.

"Well, I'm just giving you a reminder because you might ditch me again, like you did a long while back."

"Oh, you mean what happened that summer at the beach? When we both had a contest to see who could swim the fastest?" I grinned at the memory.

"Yes, that one!"

"Wow. That happened, like, five years ago, and you still can't get over it?" I couldn't believe my ears. After all that time, I hadn't thought she'd still recall that. I rubbed my head, saying, "Gee, thanks for reminding me how much I sucked at swimming back then."

She cracked up loud enough for people look at her like she'd just lost her mind.

"Oh yeah! Speaking of which, I remember you could barely dog paddle in the water," she said between gasps. "And - and also that time when a huge wave knocked you down, and you started screaming, 'Help! I'm dying! I'm dying!' That was hilarious, T!" She slapped my back, still in hysterics. "If I had a video of that, I bet it would be a hit on YouTube!"

"That's so funny I forgot to laugh," I deadpanned. That was the only problem with her remembering my preteen years - she'd always make fun of them and spread stories around to others whenever she wanted. "I nearly lost my life in that incident, you know that?"

"Jeez, the water level was the same as the one in the kiddie pools. How can you drown in that?"

"Stop it already, Kyles, I'm trying to forget that traumatic event. And I know how to swim now, so ease up, okay?"

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say."

"Anyway, listen - uh, I think I might be a little late after school, 'cause I've got something to do," I faltered. "So...let's just meet up at Crest? Swear I won't go anywhere." I gave her an apologetic smile.

"Crest? Like, the one we went to some time ago?" She obviously didn't know I had detention. "Then I'll invite Lacey, Julianne, her little siblings because I know they love that place, and hmm, maybe a couple of my classmates from PE, and one from Calculus, and-"

"What!" I exclaimed. Was she planning to bring the whole community to this? This was supposed to be the only the two of us, like a date, not some class reunion or something, for Pete's sake. But I guess the word date hadn't even crossed her mind.

"Huh?" she asked.

"You can't bring them! What are you even thinking?"

"So only Lacey and Julianne, then."

"No, I mean-" I gulped. "I only have enough cash for two people."

She frowned. "Jeez, it's just cheap snack, that's all. What else do you wanna pay for? Besides, they say the more, the merrier!"

Mental face-palm.

"No."

"Why?"

"Don't even ask."

"Why?"

"It's no, Kylie. No."

"Why?"

"Do you have words to say other than why?"

Her mocking grin widened. "No, why?"

With an exasperated sigh, I finally gave up because I knew this would take ages.
"Fine, suit yourself. Bring whoever you want, I don't care."

She snapped her fingers with success. "That's the answer I was looking for."

I rubbed my forehead. Kylie always loved to pick arguments with me for no good reason because she knew she'd win. Her crazy, witty, and dense nature was already killing me, but I couldn't do anything about it.

Great, there's no opportunity for me to be alone with her.

Laughing, Kylie began to step away from me. "See you later, sucker!" And she went back to her usual table.

She didn't know I was a complete sucker for her.

-Kylie-

As I spun away from him, I put my hand on my irregularly beating chest and let out a huge sigh of relief.

Change of plans success!

I'd finally convinced him to let the two girls join us. Did he even realize what people would think of us? We were already teenagers, not grade-schoolers, and people would think the worst if they saw just the two of us together. Now having another two people join us would mean less awkwardness and fewer catastrophes later.

I slid into an empty seat in front of Lacey and Julianne and gave them a huge smile. "So, guys, what do you think of hanging out at Crest after school?"

Lacey looked up from her chicken salad. "Where's that?"

"Have you seen that antique-looking coffee shop at Hazy Embers?"

"Oh, that. Okay, sounds good to me," she answered and continued chewing.

"I think this is the first time I've heard you being enthusiastic about going out. I know you always go straight home and sulk in your room," Julianne remarked.

I shrugged casually. "Well, I just wanted to have some fun with you guys. You know, for high school memories and all that jazz?"

"That sounds nostalgic," Lacey remarked.

"No. She's just saying that because she doesn't want to be alone with Tristan," Julianne said matter-of-factly.

I thought I'd almost died from her unconcerned words.

Lacey peered at me as if I'd just dropped a bomb. "So it's actually a date? That's totally adorable!" she cried in the high-pitched, singsong whisper she'd been saving for life's most exciting moments. "Why didn't you tell me about that? Now I'm taking back what I said. I'm so not coming with you, Kylie."

"A date with him? Are you serious? No way in a million years would that happen. Even if he's the last man on Earth, it's still hell no. Definitely no way," I cried. "Both of you know that I won a bet against him and he's supposed to-hey, what's with that look?"

Both of them exchanged glances, and I frowned. Julianne pulled a grin while Lacey still looked somewhat oblivious.

"What?"

Julianne laughed. "Oh, Kylie, you know Lacey and I are just kidding around. Course we'll go with you. I haven't had the chance to go to that place in quite a long time, anyway, so I guess it's time for a break from school and all." She wiggled her eyebrows.

"But what about their-" uttered Lacey, but she was cut off when the table jerked. "Err - okay."

"Ah, thank goodness. I'm so glad you finally agreed, guys," I said, almost crying tears of joy. I'd been only a step away from failure, but thankfully, Julianne understood, though her words could make me pass out sometimes.

Someone cleared her throat loudly, and we three turned to the source. Clad in Broadway Heights' violet and white cheerleader uniform, Ronnie stood beside the table, and with a tray in her hands, I knew what she was about to ask.

"Um, I know this might surprise you girls, along with a bunch of other people on campus, since I rarely do this kind of stuff," she said rapidly. "But do you mi

nd if I sit with you three just this once?"

I exchanged glances with the other two. Julianne looked away while slurping her juice, and Lacey blinked a couple of times before she shrugged, probably considering the request.

I glanced at Fiona's table but quickly looked away when I caught her cold eyes staring in my direction. Ronnie had unofficially become her nemesis, and about half of the student population might have had the same feelings. Letting her sit with us would be like signing an agreement for war, but seeing the miserable look on her face, I felt bad for her and blurted out, "Sure. We really don't mind."

"Finally, gosh, thanks. You're so nice." Relief whooshed across her face as she sat in the space beside me, and I presumed she was afraid to have another person reject her.

"No problem."

We stayed in silence for a while. Lacey busied herself with the rest of her salad, while Julianne was still pretending she didn't see the newcomer. The usual atmosphere was changing, and it was mostly because of Ronnie and her debonair cheerleader presence.

Tossed salad and a Diet Coke was the only food on her tray, and I wondered where the rest of her lunch was.

"Do you want some?" Ronnie offered, and I shook my head. My tray was nearly full of junk food. She continued eating her lunch in a very selective way. Pick. Watch. Munch. Pick. Watch. Munch.

Minutes later, Lacey burped aloud, breaking the silence, and she quickly shut her mouth. "Oh, sorry," she mumbled, flushing. That was what she'd always do at home - Mom would always scold her for such a gesture, and I supposed she was still in the process of getting over it.

Ronnie snorted. "Don't worry about it, girl. I swear I can do much louder than that. Real talk."

Lacey's eyes went wide in awe. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me. I thought I had it the worst! Oh, by the way, I love your earrings."

"Thanks, they're Arabella. I love your dress."

"Thank you. Forever 21."

"I know, right? I have that one in my closet."

Seeing them exchanging compliments on their branded clothes and accessories, I gazed down at my own and wondered what I would say if I ever had a conversation like that with someone. I think it would be like, "Thanks. I got this from a yard sale."

Crap, I was almost eighteen and needed to earn a life already.

"Okay, now don't blink because I'm about to show you something. And tell me who has it worse between us two." Ronnie signaled for us to wait, and eventually she let out a very strong belch, one that sounded like a mixture of a fat man snoring and Godzilla roaring. Jesus, how was she able to do that? And she did the whole thing while pulling a scary face!

The rest of us cracked up. Julianne snorted out Coke through her nose as she suddenly went into hysterics, and I roared with laughter at her reaction.

"That's so amazeballs!" Lacey managed to say between knee-slapping guffaws; her eyes were close to tears.

Ronnie continued to let out her alien-like talent, trying not to make herself laugh.

"That's it, call the exorcist!" Julianne cried, almost dying as her hands waved for Ronnie to stop.

"See?" Ronnie said coolly as if that was what she always did in her daily life. "But my best don't even come close to that one. I do some pretty horrible ones after a fizzy drink or two - they're so bad, even my girlfriends are like, 'oh my gosh, girl, we swear we can hear you several streets away'." She rolled her eyes. "Though I know they're just exaggerating."

"Gee, I bet you've won way too many burping contests already," Julianne teased, or at least I thought she was teasing.

"Like, yeah," Ronnie said in a duh tone. "Did you see the contest last year?"

"Was there a contest?"

"Uh-huh. It was Max McAllister versus Gary Stewart versus Nancy Adams versus Peter Parker versus me. Even if it was just for fun, it was like a huge gathering, since a lot of people had seen this of thing around here. You probably had to be there, but I'm telling you, it was super funny! And people were, like, cheering for me."

"Wow, that's... like a huge burping feast," I said. So I guess people had officially witnessed the weird side of this school. Now I wondered how the place had smelled like after.

"Wait - Peter? You know him?" Julianne asked incredulously, and when Ronnie nodded slightly, she nearly lunged at her. "Oh! Oh! Tell me more about it!" And there she was, going insane over her crush again - her reactions included gasping, squealing, and fierce head shaking as if she were in the midst of a seizure.

Lastly, Lacey joined the chat, and they babbled about everything from celebrity crushes and their worst hair experiences to their plans for the upcoming prom next month. I simply sat there, feeling a little out-of-place, but Ronnie would occasionally ask me about Tristan, which was a subject I always drew away from.

I couldn't do anything but smile. The vibe was changing, and it was good to see them talking almost naturally. Who would've thought that the cheerleader, whom we first thought of as a mean girl, would actually have fun with us?

There's certainly more to a person than meets the eye.

As I grabbed Tristan's notes and slammed the locker shut, I saw Erik passing by, who looked so gothic with his all-black getup.

"Hey," he greeted me. "Heading to class now?"

"Yeah." My chest was increasing its beating every second.

He scrutinized me with a smile. "You seem pretty nervous, huh?"

"Very much so." I grinned helplessly, since that was the only thing I could do. "I mean, who wouldn't be? Cross is about to give one of the worst tests of the year, and I don't know if I'll survive this one. My brain automatically shuts itself down whenever I see a math problem."

"You should buy a switch for it, then."

"That's a huge help to me, Erik," I said sarcastically. "Thanks."

He laughed. "But really, I know you can do it, Kylie. Just chill out."

I took a deep breath and sighed. "Yes, I can do this." I clenched my fists against my chest, trying to feel determined. I really hoped what I'd said would come true. I'd studied Tristan's notes, like, almost every period, and I'd paid so much attention to them that I'd barely been able to concentrate in any lectures. Maybe that would help me somehow.

"Yeah, that's the spirit."

Something suddenly popped into my head, and I said, "Hey, do you wanna come with us after school to Crest?"

I had almost forgotten about him. He was also a friend, so he should have been invited, too.

"Uh, I'd like to, but I don't think I can make it." He shook his head. "Got stuff to do after school, and unfortunately, I can't get away from it."

"Oh, I understand. It's cool, though," I said, trying not to sound disappointed.

"But I will next time, I promise." He raised his hands, grinning. "Look, I'm even using both of my hands to make a pact."

Snorting, I rolled my eyes. "Okay, okay, I get it."

"So who's coming with you, anyway?"

"Well, it's just Lacey, Julianne, and Tristan..." I trailed off as I came to a sudden realization. Tristan didn't want Erik to be around, and if Erik did agree to come with us, it would most likely result in another heated dispute between them.

I should have been thinking more carefully.

"Then I guess you'll have a great time with them." Erik's smile still didn't fade. "Oh yeah, speaking of your sister, I bet you still keep a tight leash on her, huh?"

"No..." I paused. "Not really..." I said hesitantly, rubbing my head.

"I know you, Kylie - you always scare off any guy who tries to approach her, even the nicest ones."

"Well, my sister may have the face and body of a Victoria's Secret model, but I'll tell you, she still has the attitude and the mind of a little kid. I don't want her running around with some unknown guy because she's so outgoing."

"Gee, Kylie, give her a break. She's sixteen, mature enough to recognize a nice, decent guy when she sees one, and you also know she's not the type to run around with some random dude."

"But she's had so little experience..." I protested in a small voice. I even might not have that much experience myself, but I knew teenage boys could be pretty reckless these days. I was simply trying to guard my sister from those asshats.

"How can she have any experience when you don't even want her to hang out with a guy unless you personally know his whole family tree?" Erik said with a shrug.

Ouch. That one was pretty sharp. But he had a point, anyway.

"Hmm, I'll think about it," I said at last.

"I'll hold you to that, Kylie." He started to jog away when we reached my room.
"Good luck!"

After all this time, that guy was still shrouded in mystery to me, I'd tell you that.

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~~Finding Cinderella (30)~~

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∞ Finding Cinderella- 30 ∞

-Kylie-

As soon as I rushed into class, Mr. Cross began to pass around the test questionnaires, and everyone in the class began to lament.

The big problem was that Mr. Cross had threatened to phone the parents or, even worse, the college admission committees if a student got a failing grade. I couldn't tell if he'd been serious or had just wanted to keep the senior students in line, but there was no way I would let some despot teacher ruin my chances of getting into med school.

The questionnaire reached my table, and Mr. Cross gave me a look as he passed by me as if to say, good luck, Harris. Last time I'd managed to get a miraculous C -oh the joy-and if I could get a C+ or, if I was lucky, a B this time...I would probably cry a bucket of tears out of pure happiness.

My eyes scanned the questions and - good grief! What the hell was this? Where on Earth were we supposed to get the answers for these bizarre problems?

Someone started to complain about it, but Mr. Cross casually interjected, "What's the problem, Mr. Oliver? The test just covers what we've lectured on weeks ago. If you've paid attention in class, you'll know the answer to every question."

"Psh. I can't even remember what I did yesterday," a girl muttered at my side. She was possibly the only person who was more clueless about this subject than I was, since all she did was texting under her desk during lectures.

Sweat rolled down my forehead. I skimmed the questions again, trying to recall what was written in Tristan's notes as thoroughly as I could. Finally, I clicked my pen, started to jot down my answers, and hoped for the best.

-Tristan-

A couple of hours later, Clark, Will, and I found ourselves sitting in the same room again. There was another person sitting beside us - a brunette who was chewing her nails endlessly, scanning the room as if she were trying to find a miracle at the last minute.

Mr. Cross never gave us a simple task during detention. He wouldn't assign us an essay to write, or just let us sit and stare in silence for an hour or so; rather, he would give us a problem set that we had to solve, or else we'd stay in the room until the school closed.

That was why no one ever wanted to undergo detention with this old teacher.

"As soon as you finish answering, just put your answer sheet on the table and you may leave the room," he said and went out of the room when another teacher called him.

Clark cursed under his breath as he glanced at the questions. "How the hell do you answer this?"

I started to write down my answers without breaking a sweat, since half of the problems had been stuff we'd already lectured about and the other half my Dad had taught me in advance. Yeah, he was that awesome.

Several minutes later, someone threw a piece of balled-up paper at me.

"Dude, make your writing bigger. I can't see it," Will hissed.

"Did I say you could copy mine?" I asked without spinning around to face him, still rapidly scribbling down answers.

"T, come on. I have to get out of this fast because my girlfriend might get tired of waiting!"

"Do you have the answer to number four?" I heard Clark ask.

"Google that shit, dude. Jeez, don't even ask me. Look, my paper's like a whiteboard," Will shot back. "C'mon, T. Share your blessings."

"We're all in this together, Tristan," Clark added.

"Go back to the sewer, you dilholes." I spread out the crumpled paper and wrote a few equations for them as a clue, then threw it at them. They scrambled out of their seats to catch it and eventually settled back down, laughing their asses off.

Moments later, I stood up from my seat, satisfied with my answers.

"You're finished already? We're still on number seven!" Will exclaimed. "Damn. What kind of magic trick is that?"

"It's just simple." I smirked, shrugging, and the girl behind them covered her mouth while looking my way, her eyes growing as wide as saucers.

"Yeah, for you," said Clark, struggling over his paper, but I knew that he knew he'd still get a good grade in the end.

Mr. Cross entered the room, and when he saw me out of my seat, he signaled for me to give him my answer sheet. His eyes scrutinized the paper, and his head nodded in approval. Grinning, I quickly grabbed my backpack from my seat.

"What's the rush?" Will asked quietly.

And before I hurried out of the room, I heard Clark's response: "He's got a date."

As soon as I'd entered the Crest Coffee shop, I saw Lacey waving her hands in the air at the table in the corner. I approached them, hoping this would go well.

"He's here, Kylie!" Julianne said as if she was excited about something, and Kylie glared, looking slightly annoyed.

Lacey and Julianne were already occupying the other seats, and they signaled for me to sit beside Kylie. I couldn't help but pull a wide grin - these girls were such evil geniuses, they knew exactly what to do to help me.

I settled down and placed my elbows on the table, trying to look as cool as possible. Kylie inched away, trying not to make contact even with the fabric of my sleeve, and she didn't turn around when I said, "Hey."

"Isn't it sort of strange to see you arrive late to plans like this, T?" Julianne wriggled her eyebrows like she was trying to reveal something.

"Sorry, I had some business to finish, you see."

"Hmm, forty-five minutes late spells detention already."

That was what caught Kylie's attention, and she looked like she didn't believe it.

"You went to detention?" Lacey asked like it was her first time hearing such a thing. The last time I'd had detention had been last year in Spanish class, and the reason had been the same - I'd come late, but only because Fiona and I had had a fight. I hadn't gotten detention since then until now, and that must have been the reason why they were so shocked.

"Where did you get the news?" I asked Julianne.

"From Walter."

"You talk to him?"

"Duh. Can't I?"

"I mean, I thought you two disliked each other."

"Where'd you get that idea? Okay, even though we call each other names sometimes, we're still on good terms with each other. At least that's what I think. I guess that's how we roll." She gave me a laid-back shrug. "Hey, before I forget, ask that freakazoid friend of yours if he's always on crack. He needs to be shut down for a moment at least, 'cause he's been dragging me into his problems. I was unfortunately paired with him in Bio for the rest of the school year! Imagine that."

"Grey has the energy of an engine, you can't stop him that easily," I told her.

"Right. Now you said that, I'm starting to think he legitimately came from a family of chimpanzees."

"Whatever you say, Julianne. So anyway, what do you girls want to have?" I looked at the three of them.

"Hmm..." Lacey looked at the menu posted on top of the counter.

"I'll have... Oh, wait!" Julianne suddenly cried, looking at her wristwatch. "I totally forgot about the time! I have to fetch my brother from school! Sorry, guys, but I really have to get going." She swiftly stood up, slinging her bag over

her shoulder.

"Wha-? You can have your little bro to come over!" Kylie said, sounding slightly alarmed.

"We'd love to, but - uh, you see, as a big sister I should help him with his homework right after school," chanted Julianne indifferently.

"What? Since when are you concerned with his-"

"See you tomorrow, guys! Have fun, especially you, Kylie!" Julianne blew her goodbye kisses, and with that, she rushed out of the shop, not even waiting for Kylie's protest.

All of a sudden, Lacey also stood up from her seat, saying, "Oh, I have to leave now, too!"

"And where do you think you're going?" Kylie's face was already pale. I didn't know what to do; I just stared at the girls, wondering what had gotten into them.

"Home."

"We can go home together, Lacey."

"But I already hear chores calling my name." She nodded with certainty, but Kylie didn't seem to agree. "So yeah... Bye!" She fluttered her fingers, giggling as she went out, leaving Kylie and I in awkward silence.

I let out a soft whistle. "Well, seems like they're in a rush today."

Kylie didn't answer.

"So, uh..." I cleared my throat.

Damn, why did I feel so nervous? I'd been on so many dates before, but this one was the most nerve-wracking. Okay, I guess I couldn't call this a date, since this was already coming so close to disaster - Kylie didn't seem to be enjoying anything right now, probably because her sister and her best friend had just ditched her. Still, I couldn't keep my cool. Perhaps it was different when it came to a special person.

"Yo, man! Great to see you again here." A tall, dark-haired dude with a white apron around his waist appeared next to our table.

"Hey, Drew. How's everything going?" I asked him.

"Pretty cool. Got a truckload of stuff to wrap up in college, but I'm glad I'm able to get away from them a little while and work here. You know I love hanging out in this place." His brown eyes scrutinized Kylie. "So you brought your girlfriend again, huh? I'd seen you two outside and-"

"Drew," I cut him off, trying not to sound rude.

"Huh?" Kylie turned to him in confusion.

"No, it's not what you think," I said. "She's - she's not my girlfriend." Not yet, I wanted to say, but Kylie would definitely storm her way out of this place if I said so.

She nodded to agree with me.

Drew chuckled. "Are you guys kidding me? Come on. Cut the denial you two. There's no need to be shy to admit it."

"Uh, no!" Kylie frantically shook her head; her face was all pink. "We're not a couple. We're just friends. That's all!"

I nodded miserably, not knowing what words to say.

I didn't know if she was just saying that to make Drew believe us or if she really meant it for a lifetime. But either way, it still sucked, and it seemed like I was heading to the zone that no guy ever wanted to be stuck in.

"Hmm, well, this is quite interesting," Drew said. He leaned down closer to my ear and whispered, "From the way she said that, I think perhaps you two are afraid to ruin your friendship by telling each other that you want to be more than this."

"Uh, can you...can you repeat that again?" I said, even though his words were clear. I just wanted him to put it another way.

"That girl is pretty much special to you, isn't she? I can see it in your eyes, T." He kept flashing glances at her, but fortunately, Kylie seemed unaware.

"Listen, here's an advice: snap it shut, dude," I whispered, though I knew that he could be right.

At times, I was scared to imagine what would happen if I ever tried to tell her how I felt about her. I was scared because she might think that I was taking advantage of her and our friendship. I was struggling between the two opposing decisions because the outcome was so unpredictable.

Man, this was getting harder than I'd thought.

"Here's my advice: grow a pair of balls man," Drew said amusedly, shaking his head as he straightened his back.

"We're just friends," said Kylie again with finality, and I slammed my palm against my face in frustration.

"All right, girlie, I think I cannot argue anymore," he said with laughter. "So what do you want to have today?"

I raised my eyebrow at her but couldn't bear keeping eye-to-eye contact with her for more than two seconds. My eyes dropped and saw the small chain around her neck, which never failed to piss me off.

Kylie's shoulders heaved as she breathed with relief, apparently glad that the topic was finally over. She pulled a small smile and said, "Just a vanilla pudding."

"Is that all?" I asked. It was kinda surprising to hear her order a small quantity of food. For the most part, she liked getting things that would be enough for one-year consumption, but maybe what had happened earlier had changed her appetite.

She nodded. "I'll eat it on my way home, anyway."

"Well, what about you, Tristan?" Drew asked, and I shook my head. I didn't feel like having anything now.

As he was about to leave, I told him, "Drew. Here's another advice: take your advice first and go talk to that girl."

He smirked as he headed to the counter.

"Girl? Who?" Kylie asked.

I nodded at the far away table near the windows. "Do you see that redhead girl over there? The one who's looking at the window? That's the girl he's crushing on." I ran my fingers through my hair, struggling to look calm. Talking to her alone at this table was more difficult than talking elsewhere.

"Really? Wow, she's pretty. Is she a regular customer here?"

"Guess so. I always spot her there whenever I go here."

"What's her name?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Drew wants to know her name as well, but the dude doesn't have the guts to talk to her."

Kylie's face softened, as if she was saddened at the thought. "So...he's just looking at her from afar?"

"Yeah... all the time."

Come to think of it. It seemed like I was having the same status with Drew. We were just here, looking at the girls we adored, waiting for the right time to tell what we felt for them.

"I bet the girl likes him, too," Kylie remarked, still looking at the girl.

"How can you tell?"

She shrugged. "I just feel it."

She could feel and notice somebody else's feelings, but not mine? That irony.

We fell into a momentary silence. I found myself tongue-tied again. I had so many things I wanted to express, but I didn't know where to start.

Drew marched, with a tray on his hands, towards the redhead girl, and settled two milkshakes on her table. We always wondered for whom the other milkshake was, because after all this time, no one had ever come up to join her. Drew was looking flustered as she said, "thank you," and after that, he just sauntered back to the counter.

"What a shy guy," Kylie said with a small laughter. "He can't even look straight to her."

"Yeah, I'm also like that," I blurted out without thinking.

She frowned. "Wait... do you mean..."

Holy shit. That had been like a dead giveaway. Did she get what I was trying to say? Was she finally having the clue?

"No way. You mean, you also like that girl?" she asked after a moment, her eyes wide.

I nearly hit my face with my palm. Of course, she was that naïve.

"No, Kylie. I mean-ah. Never mind," I muttered. I must've given her the wrong impression.

Drew came and handed the pudding to Kylie with his usual wide smile. After I gave him the cash, I signaled him to get the girl already, in spite of the irony. He grimaced, but I knew he was considering it.

We went out of the shop and headed to my car. As I drove, I kept glancing at her taking small bites of pudding and looking giddy like a kid. An idea popped into my mind, and I quickly revolved the wheel to the left.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she looked through the window.

"Relax. I'm not going to do something bad to you. We're just going to a place we used to hang out."

"What place are you talking about?"

I just smiled weakly. She really had forgotten about it.

A moment later, we found ourselves parking at the side of a riverbank. The clear water looked calm and low; and it glowed as the afternoon sun hit it. From afar was a bridge where a few small vehicles were passing through.

Kylie narrowed her eyes as she scanned the place.

"This place rings a bell..." she mumbled.

I picked a pebble from the grass and tossed it over the water. The pebble skipped three times before it stopped. That was something I'd been trying to master when I'd been young.

"Oh yeah? I told you we used to hang out here. Catching frogs and insects, tossing stones, running around..."

"...those were our weekend routines, and we used to pack food and later eat them here," she supplied.

I stared at her, and she laughed. I loved the sound of it.

"You... remember," I uttered in surprise as I watched her stretching her arms up and inhaling in the cool air.

She shrugged, sat on the grass, and continued to eat her pudding. "I won't remember if you didn't tell me first."

Smiling, I sat two feet away from her and gazed at the water. Memories ran around my mind. I just wanted her to remember that we used to be friends and that we had shared those moments that I'd thought had been trivial before. I didn't want her to forget.

"And when you said that," she mumbled, "I remember them now like it was yesterday." There was wistfulness in her tone and in her eyes as she gazed to the red and orange sky.

Seeing her like that gave me a craving to come closer to her, brush her hair that was touching her lips, or even hold her hand. But I was above that. I didn't want to blow up this moment because of these selfish urges inside me.

"Ah, I almost forgot," she said to break the growing silence. "Thanks for the notes, by the way. They really helped me a lot. I'll return them to you later."

"You can have it a little longer if you want," I said.

She shook her head. "No, it's cool. I already copied some of the lessons I missed."

"So how was the test? Did you pass?"

She licked her lips, and I closed my eyes for a brief moment, trying to control myself. Doesn't she know that can drive me insane? Sighing, I then opened my eyes and tried to act casual.

"I can't tell exactly, but I answered all of the questions." She chuckled softly. "Isn't it surprising to think that I managed to do that?"

"Not for me." A smile crossed my face. It felt so good to be able to carry on a casual conversation with her now. "I always knew you could do it, Kylie."

Her eyes dropped. "Uh, but I don't know if half of my answers are even right, so don't get too excited."

"Just believe in yourself. You're Kylie Almighty - I know you never back down."

"Jeez, what's with that nickname? Did you get that from under your bed or something?"

"But don't you think it sounded poetic? All hail Kylie Almighty," I said, mimicking a booming announcer's voice.

Our eyes locked with each other, and we both exploded into laughter.

"You're the worst mimic I ever heard," she said, rolling her eyes. "Listen, even though it's hard for me to believe in myself, and even though I wish it was as easy as you say it, I just wanna say... thanks. I admit; it's good to hear that from you, although you are the greatest cheesehead I know. "

"Cool, uh, no problem," I responded sheepishly. Oh, hell yeah, plus points for me. I should say that kind of thing more often.

Her smile broadened, which lit up her whole face - so tantalizing. My mouth dropped slowly, and I was unable to avert my gaze as I stared into her bright eyes, since all the desires in me were boiling up.

"Is there something on my face?" She quickly wiped her mouth with her hand.

"Kylie, can you do me a simple favor?"

"Hmm?"

"Can you..." I exhaled. "Can you not show that kind of smile to any other guys?" The moment I blurted it out, I realized how selfish I sounded.

"Why?" she asked and frowned. "You think it looks creepy, right?"

No, her smiles had never been creepy. I was simply afraid the other guys might be attracted to her once they saw that rare, beautiful smile of hers. I definitely wouldn't hesitate to punch their noses in if they did. Even when I thought of someone else being with her... it bothered me a lot.

"No, I..." I couldn't say all of it. "Okay, I know I don't make any sense now, but ut..." I looked straight to her eyes, to her soul, and whispered, "Please?"

I wonder why is it that everyone else around knows that you love someone, but that someone doesn't know she is the one.

When will she realize that?

-Kylie-

Why is he saying such a thing?

The way he looked at me sent awful shivers down my toes. A frog croaked faintly, and I snapped back to reality.

Tristan blinked a couple of times. I didn't know if I was simply imagining stuff, but I saw scarlet color leaked all over his face. He turned away, and muttered

, "Sorry if I'm requesting you such weird thing."

"Um." I gulped and let out an anxious, cringe-worthy cackle. "You know, what you said didn't really make sense, but whatever you say," I murmured and gobbled up the rest of my pudding, trying to hide my embarrassment.

The feeling of mortification I'd had back in Crest wasn't fading away, and it had gotten even worse now that Tristan and I were alone in this place.

It's been so long since it was just the two of us... I don't know what I'm supposed to do when this happens.

I groaned silently.

It had been Lacey and Julianne's fault! How could they? We'd been having so much fun picking our favorite coffees, and the next thing I knew, they'd disappeared like bubbles. I could imagine them laughing manically at their success in ditching me, but they'd surely see madness once they saw me coming.

"Good." His face was blank, like he wasn't even bothered by the strange stuff he was saying. "Because the last thing I want is competition from others."

"What competition?"

"Never mind."

I grunted. "You're really weird, T, you know that?"

He just shook his head amusedly in response.

"Kylie?"

"Yeah?" I began to twirl a grass around my finger.

"Don't get mad about this, okay?"

My head bobbed.

"Are you and Erik dating?"

I choked on my spit and coughed a couple times before saying, "Why'd you ask?"

"Well, it's because I always see you two hanging out together... and yeah. I'm just wondering." He said it as though he were either completely uncomfortable or trying to sound irritated. I wasn't sure, though; maybe it was just me.

"No, we're just hanging out as friends," I quickly answered. Even if Erik had said that he liked me, I hadn't responded to it, and thankfully, he was cool with it. No pressure, no problem. We still got together as if everything were completely normal like before.

"Friends?"

"Uh-huh."

"You serious?"

"Jeez, T, do I need to repeat it a million times before you get it?"

"He was the one who gave you that necklace, right?" Tristan added, and my hand automatically flew to my chest, touching the pendant. It wasn't like it was his identification necklace or something. It was just a gift, and that's what I'd told him.

He nodded, the frown on his face gradually fading away. My inquisitiveness was starting to kill me, so I said, "Wait, wait. What's with all these questions, Tristan? You sounded like an FBI agent or something."

"Doesn't a fellow have the right to ask when he doesn't understand something?" He smirked. "That's what they taught me in class."

"Oh, please," I muttered. "But seriously, what's it got to do with you?"

His eyes fell, like he was thinking about what he should say. "Look, Kylie," he began, finally looking up. Then a series of words tumbled rapidly from his mouth, coming so fast that I couldn't understand any of them.

"Sorry, come again?"

He sighed. "I know we're not together or anything, but no one else is allowed to date you, okay?" he stated slowly, as if every word were very significant to him.

My stomach did wild cartwheels again, and I tried to shrug it off by laughing, even though I most likely sounded like I had the hiccups.

"You know, I never thought you'd say weird, random stuff like that, Tristan. I thought I was only the one." But seeing his grim face, I stopped laughing and said in an even voice, "Okay, I so don't get you right now. But if you're, uh - if you're that serious, shouldn't you be saying that kind of thing to the girl you.. you know, to the one who got you, like what you said this morning?"

And eventually, he said the words that could possibly be the death of me:

"But I just did, Kylie."

Even though I knew it sounded weird and just plain crazy, the moment he spoke those five little words, an electric charge materialized in my skin, slammed my heart into my ribcage, and made my whole body tingle.

"Uh... I, um..." I swallowed and looked away. "I want to go home now."

"Kylie-"

I immediately stood up, and tapped my pants. "Look, i-it's getting dark already, and I'm... starting to get itches and cold," I stammered, trying to pull up a c

asual grin and hugging myself.

He nodded without looking at me. "Okay. Let's go home," he said in a small voice

I couldn't stop myself from fidgeting in my seat as we went along the way. I took a sneak glance at him and thought of those memories back in that summer. Sometimes, being friends with him scared me. History repeats itself, right? What if he'd leave me behind, just like what he had done before?

But the way he looked back at me now told me otherwise.

I wished it was easy to believe.

Finally, after a seemingly long while of driving in silence, I bolted to my house without looking back and without saying a word to him.

Lacey was having a gabfest with someone on the phone, and I stopped in front of her.

"Lacey-

"Kylie? Come here and have some snacks," Mom called from the kitchen.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm full now. Thanks anyway." I faced my sister again. She covered the phone as she turned to me with an expectant grin on her lips. I lifted a finger, trying to catch my breath. "Lacey, you better explain what happened back there, okay?"

"Uh-oh." She went back to the phone and whispered, "Julianne, she's here, and I think we should call nine-one-one because she's freaking out pretty bad."

"And tell that to her, too!"

Since I didn't feel like talking any longer, I went straight to my bedroom, tossed my bag onto the chair, pulled the blinds as closed as possible, and finally s

urrendered myself to the bed. English, economics, and math assignments could wait. I had a bigger issue than those.

"...if you're that serious, shouldn't you be saying that kind of thing to the girl you... you know, to the one who got you..."

"But I just did, Kylie."

The memory kept playing over and over again.

I pressed my palm on my chest. My heart felt like it was going to explode inside and kill me.

Why... why am I feeling like this?

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~~Finding Cinderella (31)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- 31 ♡

-Kylie-

By the time I got to my homeroom the next day, Julianne was waiting outside, leaning her back against the wall and looking enthusiastic about something.

"Oh, great. You finally arrived!" She followed me as I entered the room. "Now-you've got to tell me everything from beginning to end. Make sure not to leave anything out!"

"What the heck are you talking about?" I slumped in my seat, glaring at her.

Settling down on her seat, she shook her head. "Um, hel-lo? Have you forgotten about what happened at the Crest? You and Tristan and stuff?"

I turned to face the blackboard and rested my chin on my hand.

"Kylie, come on! Spill it already. It's killing me!" She shook my shoulders, but I just remained silent. "Did something happen after we left you two?"

"I'm sorry, but there's really nothing to tell," I said with a shrug.

"But Lacey said you were flipping out so much she thought you'd break your house down—"

Straightening my back, I glared at her. "Who do you even think wouldn't flip out? Both of you just freaking ditched the hell out when I believed you wouldn't," I exclaimed. "You guys should be sued for such disloyalty."

"Whatever! So didn't you enjoy every second of it?"

"Enjoy?" I pressed my lips, hesitating a bit, but then continued, "Okay, I did enjoy it. Happy?"

She nearly let out a loud scream. "Oh! So then? What happened next? Tell me the whole story!" she squealed.

"We just talked some random stuff. That's just it. I told you there's really nothing to tell."

She hooted as if she'd just cracked an overwhelming puzzle of the century. "Ooh, evasive much? Tell me, did you guys finally hook up or something?"

Just the mere thought of it nearly cut off the oxygen in my brain. "God, Julianna, what the hell? Why in the heaven's name would you think of that?" I slapped my face.

"Jeez, don't get your knickers in a twist, Kylie... Why are you being so defensive about it, unless - wait!" She sprang up from her seat, mouth forming in a huge O. "Oh, my God! So it's true then, and you didn't tell me?"

It felt like her exaggerated assumption just slapped me across the face with an iron pipe or something.

"Oh for the love of pineapples, that's enough, Julianne! Seriously, I think you need to stop watching chick flick films because it seems you've already overdosed yourself with romantic crap. Nothing happened, all right?" I uttered, my palm sweating, eyes shifting everywhere.

"Really?"

"I told you we just talked about stuff, like school. That's all and nothing more. What else do you wanna hear?"

Her naughty grin widened, and her arms crossed over her chest. "The truth."

Was she a mind reader or something? Or was it because I was easy to read because of my expression?

"You're making something out of nothing, Jules," I said instead, shaking my head, hoping to convince her and as well as myself for the last time.

"Oh, I see it now." She giggled, as she was the only person who positively knew what she was talking about. "You are still not ready."

"Not ready for what? What do you mean?"

"You'll know it soon." She nodded assuredly.

"Why won't you just tell it to me now?"

She sat back in her seat, rested her arms on the table, and shrugged casually, saying, "Can't. I think it's better if you'll be the one to know that."

I tried to laugh, but didn't quite make it. What she was saying was making me tense to the core. "Wow. Then I guess I might take ten long years before I know it."

"Well, maybe. Maybe not. It's always out there, you know. All you have to do is to open this and this."

And when she pointed right at her chest and her head, I then realized that it was one of the hardest things for me to do.

Why?

Because that would mean ruining something that I worked so hard to keep

I didn't want to come across him this day, because I hadn't still recovered from my freaking out yesterday.

Sadly, when I got to the English class, he was right there in his seat; his earphones were plugged in his ear as if he could drown in his own world. I then knew I had no choice. I couldn't skip the class just because I couldn't man up and face him. That would be ridiculous, right?

So I took a deep breath, forced a neutral expression, and headed slowly toward my seat, avoiding the bags blocking my path. Tristan had been ducking over his book; his hair fell shyly over his eyes, his head faintly bobbing while his mouth silently spoke some words I assumed were song lyrics.

When I slid onto my chair, I immediately retrieved my notebook, book and pen from my bag and fumbled some papers with my sweaty palms, pretending I was busy. I didn't realize that my fingers were so shaky my pen slipped out of my hand.

I bent down to get it, and when I was about to come back up, I stopped halfway when I recognized he was singing under his breath some earsplitting Linkin Park song.

Hearing his deep singing voice made me drift back to the time he picked a guitar

and sang an apology song to me. That memory was included in my tracks that kept on replaying in my thoughts, no matter how hard I tried to shake them off.

I didn't know how long I'd been paralyzed in that position until he turned to me, and pulled out his earphones.

"What?" he asked.

My jaw clenched and I quickly straightened up myself, avoiding his stare.

"Nothing." I shook my head fiercely.

He inserted his earphones back and bobbed his head again while reading his book. I noticed that he wasn't smiling the whole time, and I pressed my palms on my lap.

Why did it seem like I was the only one in this room being so edgy and all? Chewing my bottom lip, I busied by doodling on the back of my notebook.

Unfortunately, I couldn't even seem to last for long time pretending to be relaxed since I eventually turned to him and started to say, "I, about... you know, yesterday, uh-" and then I lowered my head and muttered, "Thank you for the treat."

He didn't speak up.

"And thank you for bringing me into that place once again. I enjoyed it. Really," I added loudly.

No response. He still had his poker face on. Why was he still giving me a cold shoulder when I was already being honest here?

"Oy." I poked my finger on his shoulder. "Are you listening?"

He spun around. "I'm listening."

"So why aren't you answering me? Are you mad or something?"

"I'm not," he said. And then slowly... he smiled with his eyes. "I'm just surprised you told me that. I thought you were upset or anything. What you just said made me happy, Kylie."

My heart tugged.

Taking a deep breath, I mumbled, "Okay."

Poof-conversation ended. We didn't speak any more words until the class began.

I placed my cheek on my palm, yawning over the boring, repetitive lessons about literature and stuff. Even though I was committed to not glancing to him, when he did a little shuffle in his seat, for like every ten seconds, I couldn't help but look.

This heavy feeling floating inside my chest had been making me restless ever since.

I didn't know exactly how to describe it, but the feeling made me nervous, frustrated, and mad at the same time that thinking of it was making my throat tight and my eyes sting.

I couldn't fully describe it.

Am I currently suffering from a severe paranoia or what?

Erase. Erase. Erase.

Wasn't it funny to think that some people didn't even understand themselves? It included me, of course. And that made me wonder if there was a syndrome in Yahoo! Health for whatever it was that's wrong with me.

Or with him.

Whatever.

When the class was over, I nearly sprinted off my seat just to escape the room, doing the awkward penguin run because my bag kept on bouncing on my back. Julianne tagged along, her eyes fixed on a teen magazine she was holding.

"What do you think, Kylie? Should I go to the salon and have my hair permanently straightened or not?" she asked.

I looked at her disbelievingly. Didn't she know I suck at giving advices when it comes to that kind of girly-girl stuff? But I tried to give my best relevant answer, anyway. "Don't you think it costs too much? And I thought you love your natural curls."

"Well, I think it cost around a hundred or more around here, but I know someone got hers done for like, eighty, I guess, and it was pretty gorgeous. And no, I do don't love them when they start to frizz up and knot. I can't tame them any longer. They've even broken up a couple of hair combs."

"It's not a bad thing, you know. With that thick mass of hair, you can wear all pink and people will see you as Strawberry Shortcake."

She finally lifted her face off the magazine and glowered. "That is so cute, Ky."
"

I shrugged. "People like shortcakes."

Shaking her head, she rolled her eyes. "Oh forget it. I'm gonna talk with Mom and hopefully she won't freak out this whole thing."

"Well, just wait for her to be in a good mood before asking her about something. Take my advice; I rarely use it, anyway."

"I know, right?"

"Why are you suddenly planning that stuff, hmm? Is there a special occasion or something?" I paused, thinking about some possible upcoming events. "Oh, it's for the prom, right? It's only a month away."

"It wasn't the main thing I was thinking, but... yeah. I wanna look my best for that, anyway. You know it's the last dance for this year..."

"God, another dance event..." I muttered, my mind wandering back at the Valentine ball. That whole thing was a complete disaster that I never wished to happen in my life.

What if it hadn't happened, though? Maybe I would still have been stuck in the house alone, eating popcorn and watching movies instead of panicking and freaking out about the dress and the dance. Maybe I wouldn't have got the chance to dance with those two completely different guys. Maybe I would still be mad at Tristan, wishing for his death. Maybe he would still irritate me to the core. Maybe we wouldn't be friends.

And maybe I wouldn't be as glad as I was now.

That event had become as one of my life's climaxes, to tell it frankly. Looking back, I realized there were so many things that had changed because of it.

"...so that's mainly the reason why I wanna have my hair straightened," Julianne said, pulling me away from my thoughts.

"You were saying what?" I asked.

"I've just read in this-" she circled her finger over the page of her magazine "-that most boys prefer girls with her long hair down, so I was like wondering what Pete thinks."

I peered over the magazine with my face scrunching up in skepticism.

"Wait, from whom did you get this magazine, anyway?" I inquired. "I've never seen this one in your collection."

She always read stuff like this when she's bored, and the last time I checked, she had about thirty issues of Seventeen and a whole lot of other magazines.

"Oh, you know, from Ronnie. I'm planning to hunt this copy down in a bookstore when I have time."

I stared at her in shock. "Whoa - so you and Ronnie are like friends now? I thought you didn't like her."

"I would, if she hadn't started that barfing thingy and showed her weird side. Guess my first impression towards her was all wrong." She flipped the next page. "And tell you what, we're both in love with Damon Salvatore, so we thought we had a connection."

"Damon? Who's he?"

"He's from The Vampire Diaries! Duh."

Psh. Some girly girl stuff I couldn't even relate to.

Julianne left the magazine with me when she entered the ladies' room to freshen up her makeup, so I was left alone in the hallway. Since my curiosity strikes again, I flipped through a couple of pages until I was drawn to the pictures.

Those girls on the magazines were so blessed to have so pretty faces they put me to shame. Maybe I had been sleeping the entire time when God showered beauty to people.

I turned to the next page and found the article Julianne was talking about.

"Boys like girls with long hair!" It said on an interview, and it even said it made the girls look more gorgeous. I stared at the page, dumbfounded. Like, seriously?

I couldn't help but look at my own and wonder what's wrong in having a short hair. What's it like to have a hair that slipped right through your fingers? That sort of hair that actually grows down and doesn't escalate like a ball of frizz-

"Ah!"

Something cold suddenly had touched my left cheek, and I jumped back with my eyes growing in shock.

"Tristan! Y-you!"

He was standing few feet away from me, holding a frosty can of Dr. Pepper in his hand. "Yes, me."

"Jeez, I almost died!" I exclaimed, wiping my wet cheek with the sleeve of my shirt. "You startled the crap outta me."

He looked away, covering his mouth with his hand as if he's trying to hide his laughter. "Such a scaredy-cat."

"Who wouldn't? You just came out of freaking nowhere. How long have you been standing there, anyway?"

"Not too long. I just passed by here a couple of minutes ago, and it seemed like you were very interested in your reading, so I thought it's good if I give you a little scare..." That mischievous smile of his broadened.

I was taken off guard about what he said. I never realized he was watching me behind while I was sinking in my own thoughts until now. That was somewhat weird of him.

"Right. Genius Tristan strikes again! Giving me a surprise attack by putting a cold can on my cheek was very nice," I scoffed. "Thanks."

Shaking his head, he took a step closer. He tossed the Dr. Pepper can on his hand before extending it to me and said, "Here."

I simply gawked at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You're giving it to me for real?"

He sighed. "Ah, never mind. Seems like you don't want it."

"No, no! Lemme have that." I held the magazine under my armpit, and eagerly grabbed the can from him. "Thanks. I was just feeling thirsty, anyway, and - AHH, THE FUDGE!" I screamed; squeezing my eyes shut.

When I had pushed the cap open, the soda had suddenly spurting out of the can and even squirted on my face, darn it. The wasted soda was dripping on the floor.

Tristan cracked up so loud, and it sounded more like an evil laughter than an expression of amusement. "Y-you should have seen your face, Kylie."

"HARTFORD! You monkey-faced hoodlum!" I thundered. "You did that on purpose!"

He must've shaken the can so hard before giving it to me. Now both of my hands were drenched in soda that made them sticky and smelly. As well as my face, too. "Great! Now I'll smell like dried prune for the rest of the day."

He was still laughing manically until he was only gasping for air. I blinked several times. Even though I was totally pissed off because of what he did, I couldn't help but be flabbergasted. It's been a very long time since I'd seen him laugh his heart out like that. He hardly ever did that, actually.

"C-Christ, I can't breathe." He kept on snorting. "That reaction was priceless."

"Crazy!" I shook my hands at a time in an attempt to get the soda off.

Tristan pulled out his dark blue handkerchief out of his pockets and grabbed my free hand. I tried to flinch away, but I couldn't do so since he already began wiping my hand clean. The amusement in his face was still visible as if he was enjoying what he was doing. My mouth zipped itself up; I was completely stunned by his sudden kind gesture that I went speechless.

Maybe I don't really know Tristan that much as I thought I did.

When he caught me staring at him, he slapped his handkerchief on my face all of a sudden and looked away. "Clean yourself up. I'm not your parent," he barked, his eyebrows drawn together.

The way he acted made me chuckle under my breath. He looked so amusing when he did that.

Maybe there's still a side of him I haven't come to know of yet.

I began wiping my face and sniffed when I caught a scent. Wow, his hankie smelled so nice, it had the trace of his usual cologne...

No! What am I doing? I'm not supposed to think of something like that! He's Tristan!

Erase! Erase! Erase!

"Take a picture. It'll last longer," he said, smirking.

I blinked. "What!" The nerve of this guy! "Well, for your information, I was just amazed on how ugly a person could be," I snapped back, my face warming up. Grimacing just to hide my embarrassment, I took his hankie and used it to wipe the soda off my shirt.

"Gee, you don't have to give me that annoyed look, you know." He brushed at the tip of his nose, lifting his eyes away again. "Idiot. I brought you that drink just to wipe off that solemn face of yours. How long are you going to have that?"

I simply couldn't believe his words. So that's why he gave me Dr. Pepper...

I couldn't help but snort a laugh. "Here-" I stretched my mouth into a very wide grin "-I'm smiling now. The solemn face is gone. Happy?"

"That smile looks worse than Joker's."

I dropped it.

"Joking." He grinned. "Just keep on smiling, Kylie."

There goes my chest again...

"Listen, I have to get going now." He pointed his thumb at his back. "Are you coming to the cafeteria?"

"I'll head on later. I have to wait for Julianne to finish," I answered. I swear that girl was taking ten thousand years before she could be satisfied putting up coloring materials on her face.

"All right then." He brushed at the top of my head, nodding, before he walked away.

I sipped up the rest of the soda when he turned his head back to my direction.

"Kylie."

"Yeah?"

"Keep yours short," he called out with a smile. "You may not know it, but it actually suits you better."

I slightly tilted my head to the side. "Ah? What short?"

"Turn to page sixteen. Bye."

Before I could speak up, he already disappeared in a corner. It took several seconds before I finally got what he meant by page sixteen. He was referring to the

magazine I was holding!

My heart kicked into overdrive. With clammy hands, I turned it to the page number and bit my bottom lip to prevent myself from smiling so hard.

He meant he liked my hair short.

#####

~~Finding Cinderella (32)~~

#####

♡ Finding Cinderella- 32 ♡

-Tristan-

"Someone's in a good mood today, huh?" Grey said when I finally reached the table. "Any reports?"

I settled in the empty space beside Justin and said disbelievingly, "I feel like I'm close-effin' close, man. I think I just need a little push to get her."

I was still stoked over the fact that Kylie had actually enjoyed yesterday. I'd made her happy somehow-I couldn't believe it-and she made me the happiest I'd been in a while. And take note, she'd been the first one to break the silence and say admit what she'd felt, which had taken me by surprise, since she hardly ever did that. I'd thought she would be tremendously furious because of the last thing we'd talked about yesterday. Today, though, she still seemed to have been as naïve as ever.

God, I wanna know what she thinks.

"Yeah? How can you say that?" Grey asked.

A smirk slowly spread across my face. "She's getting apprehensive on a whole new level," I replied, my vision growing distant as I recalled her strange reactions these days. Maybe it was something. "So I guess you can say things are getting

quite serious."

"And you're getting delusional," Justin mocked, throwing a piece of fry at my head, which I quickly evaded.

"Boy, that's gotta be one hell of a bad omen," Ryo supplied, who was busy slurping his weird-looking, jelly-like, green-colored drink or whatever it was. I swore this guy always brought the strangest crap to school.

I glared at them. "That isn't a bad thing, is it?"

"Yeah, it is," Ryo hooted. "She doesn't dish out, which means you're never gonna date her or get shit. Have fun in the friendzone, brother." For the record, Ryo, who was known as the most oddball person in the group, had said something mature and at least shown some sense, even though it ignited a little bit of my annoyance.

"I think Ryo's right, T," Justin added. "In spite of all your efforts to the contrary, it actually seems like you've become a complete non-sexual entity in her eyes, like a friend or a lamp."

"Look, what you just said is offensive to Kylie, Justin. Kylie doesn't think in that kind of way, got it? And neither do I towards her," I said; exasperation was clear in my tone. "Call that the friendzone or any other frickin' misogynistic term you guys use, but I'm not gonna back down on this one."

Reaching her someday was a thing I'd sworn to myself.

And they say, "With great power comes great responsibility". Hopefully she will, one day, be my responsibility.

"That's the Tristan I know." Grey beamed. "What's life without a little risk, yeah? Am right?"

No one reacted to him. Justin and Ryo merely exchanged looks.

"Don't say we didn't warn you. That zone really sucks, man," Ryo said, shaking his head miserably. It was kinda frightening to see him unusually dramatic like that.

hat, like an actual love-drunk person. "You know how unfair it is, even if Ronnie looks like she's after you-I don't know. I still like her."

"And her watermelons," Grey supplied, nodding enthusiastically as if he had the best feeling in the world.

"Mmm, yeah. That wonderful category of fruit."

Poor guy. Ryo had been extra friendly to Ronnie in previous exchanges-treating her to lunch, letting her copy his assignments and all that-in hopes of getting a chance with her someday. Unfortunately, that day had never come.

"Oh, suck it up and move on with your life," said Grey, slapping him on the back.

However, Justin seemed to be the only one who still wasn't convinced by my answer. Jeez, what was up with this guy?

"Dude, there are a lot of girls out there who are so into you. Your world shouldn't revolve just around her. She's not even that attractive or anything," he told me with a frown.

Huh, no one will ever know...

I took a deep breath. "There's something about her that I can't ignore, that keeps me hanging on," I answered unhesitatingly. "And the other girls don't have that-at-that thing." I shook my head. "I don't know if that makes sense."

"That is so deep, man," Ryo breathed.

All of a sudden, Clark appeared at our sides, looking all hyperactive and flushed. "Guys, guys! Listen," he exclaimed, his huge eyes shifting everywhere. "I can't believe I just did it."

"Did what?" I asked.

He was practically bouncing on his feet, throwing his fist in the air with a wide grin plastered on his face. It had been a long time since I'd seen him looking as overjoyed as he was now.

"I finally asked her out," he responded breathlessly. "And she said yes, dude! A freakin' yes! Can you believe that?"

"Ooh," the others chorused and began congratulating him, giving him the usual fist-bumps.

Whoa. My mind had been blown by that statement. That guy had really done it, huh?

A smile started to form on my face as Kylie's image manifested in my mind once again.

I could totally see her reaction to this surprise.

-Kylie-

"YOU SAID WHAT!" My hands slammed on the table, making every plate and plastic cup jump into the air. Julianne had to hold her strawberry shake in place before I could knock it flying.

"Sis-"

"Clark Young asked you out?"

"Kylie-"

"Without running to me first?"

Lacey sunk down in her seat, her eyes glistening as if she were about to burst out crying. My blood was boiling at the top of my head, and I bet it would erupt any minute now. But who could blame me? I'd just heard something completely unexpected! It was driving me insane!

"Julianne..." She turned to her side, begging for support from the redhead.

Julianne's arms encircled my sister. "Shh, Lacey. Everything's gonna be fine, girl," she said sympathetically. "It's not our fault your sister's so cruel."

"It's just a date, Kylie. You need to stop reacting like that," Ronnie said after sophisticatedly slurping her tea. And yeah, I wasn't kidding - she was here at our table again. "Besides, you should totally consider Lacey a lucky girl. Others would probably die just for that chance, you know. I mean, who wouldn't date a complete cutie like him?" She giggled.

"Maybe she's looking for Nicholas Hoult." Julianne grinned at Lacey.

I let out a grunt, making my expression as flat as possible. That wasn't the answer I'd been looking for.

"When did he ask you out?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Like, thirty-five minutes ago," Lacey mumbled, her lips forming a pout.

"A long time ago, actually," Julianne muttered, and Lacey quickly nudged her, shooting a glare.

I slumped down in the space beside Ronnie with a heavy sigh. The shock brought by the news was giving me so many headaches.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Lacey," I said.

"Huh? No!" she wailed.

"Oh, ouch," Ronnie remarked.

"Don't bring that subject back up, Ky," said Julianne, since she knew the rule I'd set with Lacey.

"You can't stop it anymore, Kylie," Lacey persisted. "I already said yes to him."
"

And that statement was a bomb.

My hand automatically pressed against my chest as I pushed myself away from the table. "Why didn't I know that? Why didn't you tell me first?" I cried out, my nostrils flaring with incredulity. "And you said yes without thinking twice about it? That was fast!"

"I've actually thought about it dozens of times, Kylie."

"Lacey, you barely know the guy."

"But he's really nice!"

"How do you know he's a nice guy?" I asked. "You don't know his family or anything about him except that he's popular around here and is a friend of Tristan. Those aren't very good qualifications."

Ronnie and Julianne's gazes kept shifting between us; they might have been feeling the growing tension as well.

"Clark and I have been friends since I entered high school, and although we're not hanging out that much, I still can tell that...he just is! And anyway, I'm going out with him, not with his family."

I raised my eyebrows at her. I wasn't trying to be mean, honestly; doubts were still circling in my mind. That was all.

"It's not like I picked him up on a street corner someplace." Lacey stared at me with a flash of determination in her eyes, something I seldom saw in her. "He's

not the type that smokes around or throws beer cans in the street. I know he's a nice guy, Kylie. Besides, isn't the main point of dating to get to know more about each other?"

Well, she'd somehow been right on that one, but I didn't give any reaction.

She sighed and lowered her head. "You just don't want me to have any fun," she mumbled.

"No! It's not like that. I am eager for you to have a good time, it's just that—" I paused, trying to find the right words to explain it. "You know, I-I just—"

"I can handle myself," Lacey said defiantly, answering the question I hadn't even asked yet.

I face-palmed. As she'd said that, so many what-ifs had suddenly run through my mind. For example, what if some bad guy came across her path and Clark couldn't be there to save her? He may have shared a name with Superman, but he definitely wasn't a hero! If I were in that situation, I would simply kick the bad guy in the nuts and smack him in the face with a sledgehammer or something. But this was Lacey, and I highly doubted she could fight anyone. She couldn't even kill cockroaches at home!

Yet seeing her set expression, as if her mind was screaming, "You have to let me go", I couldn't help but think twice about my decision. After all, she was sixteen already, and the small talk I'd had with Erik a while back flashed through my mind. He'd certainly had a point there.

Lacey was mature enough to know a nice guy when she saw one.

I cared for her safety, but I admitted that I also didn't want her to be isolated from the others, like, you know, Rapunzel, who'd been trapped in a high tower.
..

Oh, my God. I'd just realized that I'd been like the wicked witch around my sister all along.

"When will it be?" I asked, trying to tone down the sharpness in my voice.

"Um, this Saturday." She bit her lip.

I sighed. "So you have one day left to prepare yourself."

Her eyes lit up upon hearing my words, and she automatically sprang up out of her seat. "Really? For real?"

"Stop asking me that before I change my mind."

Her lips broke into a wide grin. "Oh, my gosh! Thank you! Thank you!" Lacey leaned across the table, and I had to pull away before she squeezed me in a tight bear hug.

"Whoa, calm down," I said, trying to prevent myself from laughing. "You're forgetting one thing, Lacey—you have to inform Mom, okay? She has to know about this."

"Definitely will!" And there she was, getting giggly and excited for her great day. All the worries on her face had disappeared and been replaced by pure joy.

"Finally, that settles it," Ronnie chirped.

"I somehow knew from the start that Lacey would win." Julianne shook her head with a smile. "And wow, I can't believe I managed to stay quiet for that long."

Lacey stopped doing her happy dance, and her face slowly began to fall as if a sudden realization had just entered her thoughts. "Oh, no..." she gasped. "What am I supposed to wear that day?"

I snorted. Was that really a huge issue? "Lacey, you have a closet full of clothes, like, more than a lot of girls in our neighborhood."

"Well, that's the sort of thing I'd expect to hear from Mom," she answered.

"But it's true! Look, why don't you put on that pale blue dress you always wear

outdoors? You said it's your favorite."

"Definitely not. It's an old thing, and besides, Clark has seen it already."

I frowned. "How about that new pink dress you bought two weeks ago, then? He definitely hasn't seen that one."

"It won't do, either. It's too dressy," she said with a blasé shrug.

I couldn't take any more debate over this girly stuff, knowing I would be beaten in the end, since this wasn't exactly my field.

Lacey bit her nails. "Oh no, and somehow I need to lose five pounds and get a microdermabrasion."

The hell was that?

Ronnie gasped. "Oh. This is a huge emergency, then!" Worry was clouding her and Julianne's eyes.

I looked at them curiously. "What emergency?"

They glowered at me. "It's a fashion 911, Kylie," they said in unison, annoyed that I couldn't join in on their fun.

I raised my hands. "Jeez, don't get hard on me. I'm not a very fashionable person, as you can see. I don't even know what microorganism is, or whatever you call that thing."

"It's microdermabrasion, Ky. Like, exfoliating your skin or something," Lacey said with a small smile, rolling her eyes.

"Whatever," I said. "But I don't think you have to spend too much cash on this, you know. It's just for one event, right?"

Ronnie nodded. "Kylie's right. You don't have to waste money on a completely new wardrobe, Lacey," she said, and then snapped her fingers. "Oh, I have an idea. Listen, how about if I lend you my dress? I bought it for myself, like, last Sunday. I haven't worn it yet. Tags still on and everything."

Lacey's mouth hung open. "Really? You will? Is...is that okay?"

"Uh-huh, but I'm not sure if it fits you, so...why don't you come over my house and try it on?"

"What about your parents?"

"Oh, don't worry, they won't mind. So, my place after school? Oh, after my cheer leading practice, I mean."

I didn't know what had come over her or why she was being the ultimate nice person to us on a completely new level, but since she was helping Lacey with her dilemma, I just shrugged it off. As long as Lacey was happy with it, that was all that mattered.

Lacey looked at Julianne and I, pleading for us to come with her. My eyes turned to my best friend, and she simply shrugged, smiling her approval. And that was how it was decided.

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~~Finding Cinderella (33)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- 33 ♡

-Kylie-

A couple hours later, we'd finally arrived at Ronnie's house, a comfortable, two-story, white-stoned dwelling with a wide lawn surrounded by red begonias. The three of us had been very apprehensive—our palms had sweated, our throats had gone dry, and our bodies had been so frozen, we hadn't been able to touch a single piece of furniture — since it was our first time being in a house owned by a person

son we barely hung out with.

Not to mention a very popular girl at school and Fiona's ex-crony.

Now here I was, sitting on a beanbag, fingers tapping in my lap. I'd spent so much time looking at Ronnie's room that I'd practically memorized everything inside it. It was what you'd expect from a girl like her—every object screamed pink, from her walls and curtains to her accessory collections. In all fairness, though, her room was much tidier and more fragrant than mine was. My room was in a complete muddle.

"Is it too loose? Or too tight?" I heard Ronnie say from her massive walk-in closet. I swear they'd said they would be finished after fifteen minutes, but the time had doubled, and they were still in there. My back and feet already had cramps from waiting.

"It's okay now, I guess..." Lacey said.

Ronnie and Julianne finally stepped out of the closet, puffing out air.

"She's all set," Julianne said as she went to my side.

"But, uh, guys..." Lacey poked her head out, looking nervous. "Th-this is..."

"Come out now, and we'll have a little fashion show!" Ronnie extended arms, and that was when Lacey finally stepped out, revealing her true glory.

The dark blue dress hugged her soft features perfectly, and its lacy white edges draped a couple of inches above her knees. There was a silk band at top, lining the top of the bust, and the dress was strapless, which showed off her collarbones and petite shoulders. She could transform any simple outfit into something elegant whenever she wore it.

"Sorry, Ronnie... it's cute, but—" Lacey mumbled, covering her chest with both hands awkwardly. "This might be a little different from what I had in mind..."

"Hello, how can you not like it?" Julianne cried. "It's so cute, and it suits you!"

Lacey cast down her red face. "I said I like it, but doesn't this have a cover-up? Like a cardigan or something? I can't do something like expose my... chest in front of other people. And it's too short for me. It's embarrassing."

"What do you want to wear, a nun outfit? Girl, puh-lease. It's totally fine!" Ronnie exclaimed. "You have a slender figure, good chest, and nice legs. Have some confidence, kid."

"Yeah, and you're lucky to be a C-cup. Mine are borderline non-existent," Julianne said, pointing at her chest. "If I don't stuff chest enhancement pads, I'm mistaken for a middle-school student! You've gotta work what you've got, girl. That's the essence of being a woman!" She turned to me. "Right, Kylie?"

My lips curled in a frown, and she nodded eagerly, saying, "Yup, just as I expected."

"All right. If you guys say so... then I think I can handle this." Lacey sighed, falling on the bed, her shoulders dropped. "My date is forty-eight hours from now, and I'm already nervous about the whole thing. I don't know what to do. What if I mess up everything?"

"First date?" asked Ronnie.

"Not just my first date with him, my first date ever. Would he be weirded out if I told him that?"

"It's Clark. I think he'd be cool with it, probably joke about the pressure." Ronnie reclined on the bed. "Ah, so it's your first, huh? It's natural to be nervous and all. Been there, done that," she said proudly, as she was more experienced than any of us.

"So can you describe your first date?"

"I wish I could. I've been on way too many first dates to actually remember where or who's the first one was." A huge grin appeared on Ronnie's face.

Julianne flashed me a "told-you-so" look, and I quickly shot her a "keep-it-quiet"

t" one in return.

"Come on, I'm sure you have one you can share," Lacey begged, looking eager to listen. Apparently, she hadn't heard the rumors about Ronnie, since she wasn't exactly the gossip-girl type.

Ronnie rolled her eyes dramatically. "Okay, I'll pick from the list." She pondered for a bit. "Oh, freshman year. Greyson Walter."

Julianne's eyes went as huge as saucers. "You've dated Grey Walter? The one who looks greasy and always smells like pot?" She'd described him like he lived on a sidewalk or something, but that was just Julianne.

"What?" Ronnie raised both of her hands and shrugged. "Well, he may be a bad boy and the quarterback, but he isn't my type. Plus, that date wasn't serious or anything. It was just a silly dare and not even fancy at all. Hardly worth remembering, just like the others. I doubt he even remembers it."

That earned her a snort of amusement from the redhead.

"I've had a lot of awkward and totally weird dates, though," Ronnie continued, "like ditching the guy halfway, doing strange things, being not really tired, and not caring about anything at all."

Lacey's face went ghostly pale. "What if mine turns out worse than yours? Like, what if our conversation is even more horrible than awkward silence? I don't want to look like a dork in front of him."

"It can't be that bad. Look, just do whatever you want. Be yourself most of the time, Lace," Ronnie said, "keep your head up, and don't let your tiara fall. Don't be cheap, and don't bring up topics that'll bore him to death, like the weather forecast. Trust me, girl, zip it on that front. Copy?"

"Paste." Lacey laughed, her voice still quavering.

"Good girl."

"And when the date ends, hopefully having gone well, he'll ask you out to prom f

or sure," Julianne said brightly.

Ronnie sprang up from the bed all of a sudden. "Oh, speaking of prom, I want to show you guys something." She rushed to her closet with surprising excitement.

The rest of us swapped looks. I wondered if this was how all the popular girls in school hung out with each other, talking about boys, clothes, and dates. It was kinda unexciting for me, though, especially when I had nothing to share at all.

Now I felt like a creeper in this room.

Ronnie came back with a huge box in her hands. She put it on the bed, lifted the cover, and revealed a white ball gown with glittering, intricate designs - the kind of dress you could usually see in fairy tales or city shop windows.

As she shook it out, something flashed in my mind.

"Tada! What do you think?" She beamed.

Julianne bobbed her head. "It looks fabulous... and a piggy bank breaker."

"I know, right? I've been saving part of my allowance for a month just for this one."

There was an unexplainable look on Lacey's face as she scrutinized the dress. "Oh, wow. That dress looks slightly familiar, you know. I think I might have seen it somewhere..."

"Oh, you may be finding it similar to the one the girl used at the ball. You know, the anonymous girl they made the Queen. Oh, speaking of her, I wonder if she will appear at prom-"

"No, I won't!"

Their eyes turned to me like they were surprised to see me still breathing. My m

outh automatically snapped shut. Crap, I'd said my thoughts out loud! It had been my first contribution to the conversation, but it hadn't been the opening I'd anticipated. The gears in my mind turned, and I tried to come up with a diversion as fast as possible.

I cleared my throat. "I-I mean, I won't assume that girl will be at prom." I nodded, faking a casual grin. "Yep, that's definitely it."

Lacey pulled a bemused look.

Ronnie frowned. "How can you say that so surely? Have you ever talked to her?"

I melted on the beanbag from her penetrating gaze. This spelled trouble with a capital T.

Scratching my head feebly, I stammered, "Uh, not all that much, you know. Ha-ha. .. we just-" think fast! "-well, we talked, like, only twice. I barely know her. She's like, um, a friend of a friend of another friend. Yup! And her name is Anna."

Nailed it!

Okay, that last one had just slipped off my tongue, but what the heck. At least it sounded believable... hopefully.

Ronnie raised an eyebrow. "Wait, Anna?"

"I dunno know her surname," I quickly replied.

She deliberated over it for a moment as I silently said my prayers. The last thing I wanted right now was for her to know about it.

Before long, the frown on her face was wiped out, and a smile snuck back again. I breathed a sigh of relief. Oh God, that had been another near-death experience for me!

While she looked at herself and tested the gown, Julianne leaned in closer to my ear. "Nice one, Anna."

"Shut up," I hissed.

"So you purposely bought a dress that's a little similar to the one at the ball?" Lacey asked slowly, sounding as if she were trying to figure it out.

Ronnie lifted her head and nodded fervently. "Uh-huh, and I had to reserve this before anyone else could snatch it."

"Why is that so?" I asked, smelling something fishy going on. This situation had both my curiosity and my attention.

"Honestly, I so don't like this kind of fashion because it's too simple and not that appealing. Well, mostly for me. I'd rather pick a sexier one than this." She lowered the dress and began to fold it back up. "But when that girl grabbed everyone's attention, I couldn't help but wonder if that was the latest thing."

Ah, of course - she liked the spotlight. However, that answer didn't feed my curiosity enough.

"Then why did you ask whether she would appear at prom or not? I don't think she's that big of an issue." I gulped, twiddling my fingers in my lap and waiting for her answer. I had to know more information, no matter how disturbing it might be, and so far, it had been very disturbing indeed.

"I... don't even know myself." A sigh came from her, and I detected a trace of cattiness as she continued: "Well, okay, it's just that she made me a little curious, because that night, I saw her and Tristan dancing and he was, like, so into her. And I was all, 'What? Why?' I mean, no one knows her. Okay, maybe a few people, but still-" she shrugged, forcing a grin "-why, right? He totally went for her."

I wanted to jump off a bridge, for crying out loud!

"But when you said that she wouldn't come, well, thank you for that," she mumbled and pressed the dress back into the box. Then she looked at me, tilting her head. "Was she pretty?"

"Wh-what?"

"You said you've talked to her. So was she pretty up close? Was she nice?"

"Uh, I really couldn't tell," I muttered. For the love of pancakes, talking about yourself in third person is as awful as hearing your mother talk to other people about you behind your back.

She tucked her hair behind her ear as she heaved another sigh. Why was she being so worked up about this? Wait, was she thinking of that made-up girl as a threat? Oh no, I hope not!

Lacey glanced at me and then back at her. "Why are you so interested in her?"

"Well, I was just wondering about the type of girl that Tristan likes."

"Oh, God. Not again," I heard Julianne droned under her breath.

"And also the style the girl wears. I mean, does he go for the feminine, the boyish, or the cute type?"

I snorted a laugh. "Huh, I bet he's too busy thinking about his own style to even remember what the girl wears."

Ronnie flashed a smile. "Cute. Very cute. I like that trait of his." She paused and leaned closer to me. "Tell me more about him."

I blinked a couple of times before getting what she'd said. "Uh, like what?"

"You know, the basics. Like, his favorite color, birthday, hobbies and all that jazz?"

I bit my lip, trying to find the words. This was very awkward for me to answer, but I couldn't do anything about it.

"Oh, like in the slam book, huh?" My laughter sounded brittle. "If you really wanna know, then uh... well, he was born on the 28th of August. His favorite color is blue, sometimes gray. His preferred combination is peanut butter and jelly. He inherited his father's eyes and dimples; that's what his mom told me. And, uh, what else - hobbies? I don't really know. Solving crossword puzzles, maybe?" And pissing me off all the time, I wanted to add, but that was already a once-upon-a-long-time-ago story. I contemplated for a moment. "He does random stuff. Oh, and he may not show this to others, but he can actually play the guitar."

"Ooh, new discoveries. And that last one is so adorable." Ronnie sighed dreamily, and I gave her a weird stare. Wow, she was really that into him. "Go on, Ky," she said excitedly.

I brushed my head, looking away. "So, uh, he's the type that likes to be all over the place or whatever," I said. "He may act stupid most of the time, but in truth, he's actually really smart, especially when it comes to serious cases. I even called him a nerd once. He gets this scary expression when he's thinking deeply." I snickered at the memory.

Ronnie chuckled as well.

"And, if... if Tristan wants something really badly, he ignores everything else and goes straight for it," I continued, getting a little wistful. "He'll make sure that nothing and no one gets in his way. He'll do anything to get it, no matter what the cost." I paused, sighing; there was something heavy forming in my chest. "Just like the other guys, he can be as cocky and immature as long he likes. He enjoys arguing about anything but lets you win in the end anyway. When he's mad, he's extremely creepy. I - I admit, I got scared once - only once, because I got over it the next day. But he can be nice, and when he's like that, he's - he is..." I couldn't find the word I wanted to say. "He's, well...just nice."

My mind had been drifting off to somewhere else. Then I snapped back to reality when I noticed that the three of them had been watching me the whole time. My eyes widened when I also realized that I had been smiling unconsciously. Oh, no.

"So, uh, anyway, he's just like a devil trapped in an angel form. Huh, you can't deny the fact that there's still a little evil spirit inside him." I forced an onchalant smile, but deep inside I was slapping myself hard.

"Now that you've said that, I must say that he's a great guy. A keeper," Ronnie remarked. That dreamy smile never escaped her lips. "He really is, right?"

My eyes dropped to my pressed-together palms. "Well, uh..." I faltered, but finally gave in. "Y-yeah..."

Her eyes lit up. "You know, you can be, like, my source of information."

"What?"

"Be my adviser, Kylie."

Lacey, who had been sitting anxiously, shot a look her way, though Ronnie didn't seem to notice it because she was too engrossed in her request.

And all I could do was stare at her, frozen.

After a couple of turns around the neighborhood, Ronnie finally pulled up to my house. Her place wasn't that far from mine, but she'd insisted on driving us home. I stepped out of the front seat while Lacey struggled with the tiny little bags containing her dress and some accessories she'd borrowed.

I smiled. "Thanks, Ron."

She didn't seem to hear what I'd said. Her attention was fixated on the lawn next to mine, as if she were hoping for Tristan to come out of his house. Finally, she turned to me.

"No, thank you," she said. "You and the other two."

"Why? I mean, you're the one who-"

"Today was fun. Although the three of you have such different personalities, I'm comfortable being around you guys. And it's been a while..." She smiled and tipped her head. "Stay awesome, girls." And with that, she bid us goodbye and drove away.

Tucking the bags under her arms, Lacey came closer. "I think she's kinda strange ."

"Yeah, it seems a little like that, doesn't it?"

"Maybe she just needs some friends. It's hard keeping up a flawless image around people like her clique. It's like turning yourself into a Barbie doll, perfect and plastic."

"That's how it works with them, Lacey."

"For some reason, you can't hate her. You just pity her."

I nodded and turned towards the doorstep.

"Kylie?" Lacey asked behind me. "Why did you decline Ronnie's request?"

I stopped but didn't look at her. "Wouldn't you feel bad if you found out a person was giving info about you to someone else? It's all about privacy, and I don't want to get in any trouble. Besides, I don't think I'm the right person for the job."

She exhaled. "I'm glad to hear that," she said, then mumbled something.

I spun around. "What are you murmuring about?"

"Nothing." She cackled. "That's so weird, because I remember the time when you babbled to everyone about some terrifying childhood experience of his. That got you into trouble, but you only laughed at it."

I snuck my tongue out. "Bleh, whatever. He deserved it," I said with a laugh.

"But did you know what he said afterwards?"

"What was it?"

"He said that even though it was humiliating for him, at least it made you very happy."

My smile dropped. I tried to find a sarcastic comeback, but all I could come up with was, "Eh? H-he really said that?" I couldn't believe what I'd heard, and it was making me woozy.

She waved her hand. "Pfft, kidding. He said that you're crazy and should be in a mental facility. That's what he actually told me."

A joke. Ha!

I pursed my lips. "Huh, right. Of course," I deadpanned. Darn, I'd almost fallen for that. "I wish I could go back in time and yell, 'In your face, Tristan!'"

Lacey turned her head to the side and gasped. "Oh hey, T. How are you?"

Upon hearing that, I instantly jumped back, getting into a fighting stance. "What? He's here?" I screamed.

I frantically looked around, expecting to meet a haughty smile and a sarcastic greeting. But there was only empty space.

Lacey clapped her hands as she roared with laughter. "Made you look, made you look!"

"Gah! Enough, Lacey. Let's get inside," I growled, my warm face contorted into a frown.

"What's with that flustered look, Kylie? You've actually been looking forward to see him, haven't you?"

"Shut up!"

"Ooh! I knew it! Yeeee, Kylieeee." She began to tickle my sides.

"No, no!" I cried, half laughing. Tears began to pool in my eyes as I tried to evade her attacks as I could. "Ah! It's not what you think, dammit!"

"Oh, yeah?"

"For the last time, it's not. I'm not! And stop tickling me already."

"Then why are you overreacting if it's not, huh?"

"Whatever."

"Are you angry?"

"Just drop it. Ah! It's getting on my nerves."

She giggled as her only response. I scowled.

It wasn't because I was mad at her. Lacey would pull childish pranks and tease me every so often, and they always took advantage of my jumpy nature and short-temperament; still, I managed to live with it.

It was just because I hated the fact that recently, my heart always dropped to my feet whenever it came to him. And whenever I closed my eyes, the image of the same person would always come up-

Ugh. I think I needed a therapy.

"Kylie," Lacey called. "What do you think of him?"

I blinked a couple of times, taken off guard. Her question had sunk in my thoughts. But I simply shrugged, half smiling, and said:

"Some guy."

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~~Finding Cinderella (34)~~

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∞ Finding Cinderella- 34 ∞

-Kylie-

The next day, I had to endure Lacey's qualms about her date with Clark. Her concern list had gotten much longer than I'd expected; she couldn't stop talking about it every night and couldn't even eat normally, since she feared she might gain more weight. Ronnie and Julianne had to assure her bazillions of times that everything was going to be fine while I merely sat in the corner and watched them arguing, having uncertainties of my own.

Saturday came in a flash, and I thought my sister was going to have a nervous breakdown.

A bloodcurdling scream erupted upstairs. I shot up from the couch, ripping my eyes off the TV and dashing to her bedroom. "Lacey! What's happening?" I called at the top of my lungs.

I thought she had injured herself or something, but when I opened the door, I found her staring at herself critically in the mirror.

I sighed. "Thank God, you're okay. What's-"

"I'm so not okay!" she cried, stomping her feet like a kid. She pointed to her forehead. "Look, look! I got a freaking pimple on my freaking forehead, and I have a freaking date in less than two hours!"

I leaned on the doorframe, crossing my arms casually. "You stayed up until midnight worrying about things. Now look what you've got."

"Don't be mean, Kylie. Really, I'm in the middle of a full-blown crisis here." She was close to tears; her self-esteem had fallen below sea level again. "This is a major turn-off for guys, you know. I bet Clark will make fun of me."

"Lacey, I know that looks do matter a bit, but if that guy likes you - really likes you, like, a lot - he wouldn't care about a little imperfection, even if you look like a horrifically disfigured person."

She blinked the worries in her eyes away and smiled. "That's nice to hear from you, sis."

I shrugged, returning a smile. "Just tryin' to help."

Her eyes lit up. "Ah! I think I know what to do with this." She went over to her drawer and pulled out a small case, then began to apply cream to the blemish thoroughly.

"Is everything all right, girls?" Mom called from downstairs.

"Yeah! We're perfectly fine," I said, turning toward the door and then back at Lacey. "I'm outta here. Call me if you need help."

"Hold on." She raised a hand and rummaged through her closet. Lifting up two cardigans, she asked me, "What do you think? Should I choose the yellow one or the white one?"

I cocked my head to the side, clueless about fashion as usual. "Uh, choose the pink one."

She pulled a flat face and dropped her shoulders in dismay. "You obviously know that I don't have a pink one. C'mon, sis, I need your opinion. Which do you think goes best with the blue dress?"

I rubbed my chin and squinted. "The white one looks--"

"All right, white, then," she cut me off, pressing her chosen cardigan onto the bed after tossing the other away.

I scratched my head as I watched her dashing all over the place like a hurricane. Lacey would always get more hyperactive than a caffeine addict would whenever she was nervous to the max.

"Oh no. I can't find my makeup kit," she exclaimed, her eyes rapidly roaming around. "Ugh. Where on earth did I put it?"

"You mean that one?" I pointed to the sleek, black case lying on the floor next to a disorganized pile of clothes.

She hurriedly picked it up. "Thank God. I swear this is the last thing I want to lose right now. How did this get here, anyway?"

I snorted, glancing around. "Huh, with all these messes of yours... you definitely beat a person struck by a storm."

She sighed. "This is what you call tension, Ky. Tension."

"Take a deep breath, then."

She sat in front of the mirror, and with a few taps of the brush on her makeup, she began to apply it painstakingly.

Even though there was some part of me that still hadn't agreed with their date, I let myself be carried away by her fervor and decided to approach her. I picked up a hairbrush and started to comb her waist-length hair until it fell in silken columns. Lacey's reflection grinned, and she continued doing her job with a surprisingly calm hand.

Finally, she turned to me and said, "How does it look? Is it okay, or did I put on too much?"

Her eyes had become larger because of the few pink smudges around her eyes and her mascaraed lashes. A sweep of rose-colored blush accented her cheeks, and her lipstick was just enough to brighten her lips. I wondered how she'd learned all the techniques to make herself a living Barbie.

"Looks fine," I said. "He won't be able to take his eyes off you."

She shook her head, smiling reservedly, and went to her closet again. She pulled out the dress that she'd been spending a long time smoothing just to make sure it'd look neat and perfect. Then she took off her pink robe, and I helped her by pulling the stretchy dress over her head. It fell easily into place. And for the finishing touch, she put on her cardigan, white heels, and some accessories.

We turned back to the mirror, beaming at the result.

"Thanks a ton, sis," Lacey said, satisfaction visible on her face.

"I haven't done anything major."

"Kylie Harris not taking credit on something?" She turned to me with a raised eyebrow. "There must be a new world order."

"Very funny, Lacey."

She studied me for a bit. "You look as nervous as I am, huh?"

I sighed. "I still can't get over the fact that this is happening."

"You make it sound like this is the start of the world apocalypse," she said, amused.

I put my hands on her shoulders and gazed straight into her eyes. "Listen, Lacey," I said gravely. "If he ever ditches you, makes you cry, or breaks your heart, don't hesitate to punch him in the guts."

She went aghast.

"Seriously, I'm giving you a tip. Just punch him in the guts and get yourself some ice cream, okay?"

"That's so brutal..."

"Do it for your dignity."

"Uh, o-okay," she mumbled, scratching her head.

We went downstairs afterwards, and Lacey looked around with her eyes squinting, as if she were studying the living room critically. The place was perfectly organized; no object was out of place. Mom was arranging a bowl of fresh irises on the coffee table.

"Well, how about it, honey?" she asked happily. "Does everything pass inspection?"

"Mom, please," pleaded Lacey, "just this once, try to keep your jokes to a minimum."

We both knew that Mom could be a huge comedian sometimes, especially when it came to visitors. She said it was her way of providing "entertainment", though we believed her jokes were only effective on the family and not so much on others.

Curiosity came over me once again, and I leaned closer to Lacey's ear. "Do you know where you two are going?"

"I have no idea, but he said he already has a plan."

At exactly three o'clock, we heard someone coming up the front steps and the doorbell ringing. Lacey's cold hand automatically gripped my arm before she cleared her throat and walked bravely to the door.

Then I thought she'd pass out the moment he breathed out, "Lacey."

There stood Clark with his pleasant aura. His hair was gelled up in messy spikes, and it actually suited him rather than made him look like a thug; he was wearing a comfortable-looking dark plaid shirt and jeans. His manner no longer seemed as relaxed and easy as it always had. Now he appeared serious, maybe even a little nervous, what with the set of his jaw and the beads of sweat rolling down his rosy face. As he entered, I noticed that his yearning eyes were busy ogling my sister up and down.

I kept staring at him closely.

"H-hi, ma'am," he faltered weakly.

Well, this was an amusing scene to watch. His charisma had flitted away the moment he'd faced my mother.

Even though I wanted to burst out laughing, I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to look superior. Lacey shot a disapproving look at me, but I continued to shoot daggers at the guy. When no one was looking, I quickly raised two fingers to my eyes and then pointed to his, denoting that I would watch his moves no matter what.

He gulped and quickly forced a casual smile at my mom.

So far so good, in spite of the awkward conversation they had started. I excused myself and rushed straight to my bedroom, then took a deep breath.

Now was my time to take action.

I dug my phone out from underneath the bed sheets and looked for Julianne's number. It rang twice before she finally picked up.

"Jules!" I screeched.

"Jeez, Kylie, learn to lower your voice for once," she snapped. "What do you want?"

"Are you free? Can you come over right now?"

"Can't, sorry. Mom and I have an appointment at the hairdresser's right now. She didn't freak out over my decision last night 'cause she also wants hers cut. Talk about luck." She laughed. "Isn't it fantastic? Brace yourself, Kylie. You will see a new me next week."

I groaned. "Can you cancel it and move it to some other time?"

"Oh, no way, Jose. I've been waiting for this chance to come!" A pause. "Hey, what's going on? You sound like you're out of breath... are you okay?"

"Obviously not. Clark is here right now, Jules, and for the next few minutes, he and Lacey—"

"Will be out, go to some places, spend time with each other, bippidy-blah-blah. I see it now. You just want us to go after them like freakin' spy kids." I could picture her rolling her eyes as she spoke.

I gasped. "How do you know my plan?"

"I'm a psychic. I mean, I think I might be E.T. or something."

"Hilarious. I'm peeing my pants," I grumbled.

"Pfft. Please, your mind is always packed with unsettling ideas, Kylie. Why, are you mad? It's your sister's date, and in case you didn't know, a date is for two. No space for a freaking third party!" she yelled so loud that I had to pull my ear away.

"Jules, come on!" I cried. "I'm just worried—"

There was a noise on the other line, and it sounded like her mother's voice. Julianne called something to her before returning to me. "Oops, I have to scoot now."
."

"Julianne!"

"Look, Kylie, your plan is obviously bad on so many levels, but if you really want to..." She sighed. "Then I'm not stopping you. Do whatever you want. Just find someone else to go with you 'cause I have to get going now."

"Yeah, yeah," I said in dismay and paused. "Oh, before I forget."

"Hmm?"

"Don't go to Georgina's Salon, because the last time I went there, they made me look like a squirrel."

"Noted." She giggled. "Bye, Kylie. Make sure your head is still intact when you go out."

"Hey, what's that supposed to-?"

She hung up. I pressed the off button and sighed - there was no hope for her. I tiptoed downstairs to check on the couple. They were gone now, and only Mom was left in the living room.

"Clark seemed like a very nice boy, don't you think?" she remarked with a smile and went into the kitchen.

The funny feeling in my stomach intensified, and I knew it wouldn't disappear as long as Clark was still with her. I felt worse every second because of the random thoughts swarming in my head. Why did I have to be so worried?

I shook my head. I just wanted her to be safe, and I had to see her, even if it was just the tip of her hair.

Putting my hand under my chin, I paced back and forth across the living room. Hmm... there was only one person I had to approach. Plus, he might also know where Clark was going to take Lacey!

"Mom, I'm going out for a while!" I said and dashed my way over to the next household.

Arthur and Lois were busy gardening in front of their yard - the sort of thing they would always do on lazy weekends. Walking up slowly to their lawn, I cleared my throat and greeted the both of them.

Lois turned to me while wiping her forehead with a towel. "Oh, Kylie. What brings you here today?"

"Uh, well, I just wanna know if Tristan's in right now."

"He is, but I'm afraid he's still asleep," she said with an apologetic smile.

My jaw dropped. "What? I-I mean, until now? But it's already afternoon."

"I guess he went back to sleep. That boy must be very exhausted after a long week."

So he's sleeping, huh?

Something popped into my head that made me grin evilly. "Let me handle that, mama," I said brightly. "I know just what to do to wake him up."

I went back into my house and searched my room for something I'd been keeping for a while. At last, I found it underneath my bed - a rubber mask I'd bought last year for Halloween, and thankfully, it was still okay and just as scary-looking as ever. Its row of long, jagged, fang-like teeth and its bloody eyes still spooked people out. To complete my inventory, I grabbed a feather from my pencil holder.

I ran back to his house again, hiding the things behind my back.

"What's that, Kylie?" his mother asked.

"Just... something." I grinned. "I'll be going inside now."

Before I could shut the door, I saw Arthur shook his bald head with an amused expression. "Very mysterious, the ways of the young," he said before continuing his digging.

Tristan's house was huge; one might even say it was a mansion. But I'd practically memorized its every corner, since I came here every so often.

I'm such an evil genius! I thought to myself and cackled as I headed upstairs, then slowly opened his bedroom door. I always knew that this guy never bothered locking his door, and that was why I could access his room so easily.

I tiptoed to the side of his bed and froze. Although he was sleeping, he still had that serious expression on his face. His eyebrows were knit together, and his lips were slightly parted, puffing out air. Tristan sure slept like a log, but I knew how to take care of this.

Kneeling down closer to his side, I fastened the strips behind my head and fixed the mask until it covered my face perfectly. Then, with the feather, I began to tickle his ear, which was his weakest spot, and snickered. It took a few attempts for me to finally make him move and scratch his ear. He moaned, and the moment his eyelids fluttered up...

"Boo!"

"Aaaaaahhh!"

His earsplitting scream could possibly be heard all over the state. Tristan scrambled out of his bed, throwing pillows at me in the process, before he landed on the other side with a loud thud.

"Aw, crap!" He rubbed his swollen head.

I clapped my hands as I howled with laughter.

"Jesus Christ, Kylie!" he shrieked. He was breathing profoundly; face going vampire-pale all over. "You still have that - that thing?"

My eyes were welling up with tears, and my stomach began to ache from me laughing so hard. Priceless! So priceless!

"T-Tristan, y-your face," I choked out. "I can't - I can't even-" And there I went again, snorting until I was out of breath.

He slapped his forehead and groaned out loud. "Gah! Is that the right way to wake up a person? Really, Kyles, I almost had a heart attack right there! Don't do that again or I'll-"

Pulling the mask off my face, I stood up and put my hands on my hips. "It's your fault that you sleep past noon."

Still frowning, he pulled himself up and brushed his hair. "It's just because I want to. There's nothing to do around here."

"Lazybones."

He yawned, and his eyes went half-shut as he looked at me. "Ah, so you came here just to ruin my sleep?" He smiled for a second. "Nice try, Kylie. I'm going back now. Good night in advance."

Before he could collapse on his bed, I quickly grabbed him by the shirt. "Hell no!" I exclaimed. "Don't you dare go back to sleep after all that effort!"

"Seriously?"

I nodded firmly. "Stay up, T."

He sighed and faced me. "Fine. What do you want? I know you're up to something."

"Go out with me."

His eyes widened in surprise. My jaw dropped, and my face heated up with embarrassment. I couldn't look straight at him. Oh, no - what I'd said had sounded so desperate and utterly wrong!

"Kylie, wait... do you-?"

"No, shoot! That's not what I meant!" I frantically waved my hands. "What I'm trying to say is that, I-I want you to come with me and do some undercover work! Yeah, that's it. And... not the other thing. I know what you're thinking, so just erase it! It's all wrong." I urged myself not to turn around and cover my face, or else it'd make things much more uncomfortable. I forced a grin instead.

Tristan put his hand over his mouth and looked away. Then he cleared his throat. "I... I thought you were serious about that," he muttered.

"Huh? B-but it's not - I mean, wh-what are you saying-?" I sucked my breath in for I didn't know how long, feeling the stiffness in the atmosphere. Wooh, calm down, Kylie.

To my surprise, his face turned slightly red. "Ah, forget it." He rubbed at the back of his neck uncomfortably while frowning. "What undercover work are you talking about, anyway?"

Well, his reaction had been weird, but I quickly pushed the thoughts away. It didn't matter that much - I'd come here on a mission.

"Well..." I said after I'd composed myself. "You can do this. This is for the sake of your sister. I just want to find out what's happening to Lacey and Clark right at this moment."

He chuckled. "You mean you want to stalk them?"

"Wow, that's a strong word. I'm just doing some intensive analysis on a certain person."

"It's still the same thing, dummy. But hey, don't you think that's bad? Snooping around someone's date?"

"Puh-lease, like I'm the only person in the world who does that." I groaned, rolling my eyes. "Come on. The clock's ticking, and fear's eating me out already."

"You shouldn't worry too much 'bout that. Clark completely knows how—"

"I don't care about what Clark knows or whatever. I just wanna see Lacey, like, now." I pressed my hands together in front of me. "Come on. It'll be quick, I swear!"

He didn't say a word for the next few seconds, and I figured he was thinking about it. Then he rubbed his temples and said, "Okay, okay. You know what, Kylie, I wouldn't agree to this if I wasn't in lo—" He prolonged the word as if he was thinking twice about it, then stopped.

I stared at him, bewildered. "You're not what?"

"Never mind." He shook his head, grabbing his red sweatshirt from the chair and putting it on over his dirty white shirt. "You sure you wanna do this?"

I clenched my fists. "I'm all fuelled up."

"As always," he said with a snort.

"Oh wait, T, do you know where they're gonna hang out?"

"Well, Clark talked to me about his plans yesterday, so I think I might have an idea. They'll just be here in the city, anyway..."

I thrust my fist in the air. "Awesome!"

He stared at me for a few seconds before shaking his head.

As he grabbed his car keys from his table, I motioned him to stop. "Forget it. We're not using your car."

"Why not?"

"Your car always sticks out like a sore thumb, and I don't want them to spot us. I think it's better if we use our bicycles."

"What?" He attempted to disagree, but as I crossed my arms and gave him a grim look, he sighed in defeat. "Yeah. It's not like I can argue with you any longer."

Several minutes later, we found ourselves all geared up - helmets, kneepads, and elbow pads on. Now this was what I called adventure time. I opened the front door, put my hands on my hips, and laughed at the top of my lungs as if I owned the place.

"Wow, that laughter. You need to be quarantined," Tristan muttered behind me.

His parents were looking at me as if I'd finally turned into a complete psycho, but I didn't care. Adrenaline was surging inside me, and I couldn't stop myself from being restless and thrilled...

...until I realized that my bike had a flat tire and a broken handbrake.

"Oh, goddammit," I cursed. Why had I forgotten to fix this thing?

Tristan came up behind me while dragging his mountain bike alongside him. "We can share mine."

I gasped. "We?"

"No, my parents," he shot back, bored. Grr, this guy...

I crossed my arms and scoffed, "I'd rather walk than share that with you, thank you very much..."

I remembered some of the chick-flick movies I'd watched. You know those ones where a boy and a girl would go biking in a field and a love song started to play,

then you'd bawl your eyes out after that because of the drama. And that would be totally embarrassing in my case!

Tristan turned his back to me and yawned. "Bye, I'm going back to sleep now."

I yanked his bike back and sighed with exasperation. I didn't want this plan to fail epically! This was for the sake of Lacey, so I had to suck it up and be brave like I always had.

"All right! I give up," I uttered.

Smirking in triumph, he climbed up on his bike and waited for me. Grumbling, I lazily sat on the top tube in front. My mind was preoccupied with some sneaky strategies to catch Lacey and Clark, but it began to swirl when Tristan's sturdy arms wrapped around me to reach the handlebars.

"Ready?" he whispered, and his warm breath brushed the nape of my neck, sending tingles down my spine.

I squeezed my eyes shut and bit my tongue hard, preventing myself from letting out a deathly scream.

Just what am I doing right now?

He chuckled and started to propel the bike smoothly.

I opened my eyes and tried to pull as casual of a look as I could. There was no time to agonize about these silly little things, like how my heart was beating so badly at the thought of him so close to me, or how his body heat and spicy scent were circulating all over, making me extremely edgy and uncomfortably hot.

As I'd said, this would be quick. Everything would be over in a jiffy and would be back to normal.

"Hurry up, Tristan! We're gonna be late!" I slammed my hands on the handlebar stem and yanked it a couple of times forcefully, making the bike move in zigzags.

"Jeez, Kyles, will you please calm down?" Tristan exclaimed as he tried to control the handlebars. "I can't bike straight! Do you want us to die?"

I chose to ignore him and shouted instead, "Ride 'em, cowboy!"

Let the spying operation begin.

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~~Finding Cinderella (35)~~

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ღ Finding Cinderella- 35 ღ

-Kylie-

"There they are!"

Tristan and I were peeping through an artificial bush while catching glances at one another through the plastic shrubbery as we stalked our prey. The mall was pretty crowded since there was a sale on. So there was a fat chance Lacey or Clark could spot us.

Those two lovebirds had surely been enjoying their day. Lacey was practically skipping in her step as Clark dragged her to each store... while holding her hand! I couldn't believe it, my eyes felt cheated.

Okay, so maybe getting Tristan to spy on her with me was a bit of an overreaction, but I only wanted to make sure my sister was safe.

As they rounded another corner, I quickly spun around to Tristan, who looked exhausted, and grabbed his sleeve. "Hurry, before we lose them!"

We dashed into yet another secretive corner and poked our heads out cautiously.

Several teenagers were walking around, texting on their phones, obstructing my sight so I had to concentrate on the target's location. Clark was ordering an ice cream in a booth, and Lacey was smiling gratefully at him. Her actions had been awkward and panicky at first, but as time went by, she'd become more relaxed as if she'd finally found some courage.

The whole idea sounded unnatural when I thought about it, though as long as Lacey was happy, I couldn't really complain.

"Can't believe my baby sister is finally growing up," I said reminiscently. It hadn't been that long ago since Mom and I had had a terrible time getting her out of grass-stained play clothes and sneakers.

"Yeah," murmured Tristan. "Why don't you try it yourself?"

I elbowed him punishingly but with a bizarre affection that felt almost brotherly. "Shut up, T."

Clark could be seen handing an ice cream to Lacey before they made their exit from the food court. I chanced a curious look and stepped out from our hiding place. At that moment Lacey suddenly turned, her eyes pointed in my direction. I automatically sprang back and the back of my head hit something hard. I cursed, as did Tristan.

"Ow!" he exclaimed.

Brushing my swollen cranium, I inspected the object I'd head-butted.

"God, Kylie. First my feet, now my nose." His face scrunched up in pain as he pressed the bridge of his nose. "I think it's broken."

"What? Come on. I barely touched you."

He leaned closer. "Well you fractured it or something, look."

I blinked a couple of times and gulped. Crap, he was doing it again, wearing that particular smile that thawed out my frozen heart. The shy, boyish look he rarely

ly made was teasing me, intimidating me. And before I knew it I was magnetizing toward him with no control over my hands; or lips...

"Hey, get lost you nosy brats! Go find your parents."

I snapped up in alert to the sound of Tristan's voice. Refocusing my eyes, I saw a pair of kids stood watching the once intimate scene, giggling at the sight of what must have resembled "a couple" to them. Oh God...

My face burned with shame as they ran off into the crowd. What had just happened? Had we almost... No, it couldn't be. I shook my head, trying to erase the distressing and confusing thoughts.

Tristan heaved a sigh and faced me again. "Stupid kids," he muttered, shaking his head in frustration. "You okay?" he checked with me as if those two twelve-year-olds had posed some kind of threat.

I couldn't look straight at him.

"Uh... yeah. I'm fine," I mumbled, brushing the hair out of my face. Then I realized how much precious time we've just wasted. "Darn, we've lost Lacey!" I exclaimed, disheartened by this unexpected turn of events.

Tristan shook his head. "Really, I thought we were taking a break due to injuries."

"Huh, that's what you think. Believe me; I won't rest until I find peace of mind."

"You're not gonna get any of that if you keep following her around, learn to let go."

"Whatever! Come on."

I dashed in the direction they'd last been sighted with Tristan traipsing behind like a sulking child. He was kinda cute in that-blah, blah, blah, eeesh Macarena! Stop thinking like that about him!

It took us several minutes to find them sitting beside the fountain, talking and laughing with each other like they were already married.

"Seriously, did you think you could hold her back forever?" Tristan asked behind me. "A bird's gotta leave the nest at some point, right?"

"Shh! Stop distracting me."

He let out a small laugh. Its succulent tones infected me and even I began to lose the enthusiasm, which had felt so strong half an hour ago.

"You're right," I said in defeat. "I don't know. I... I just wish that the three of us could always stick together. Lacey's like the peacemaker of the group. I don't want her to leave me or Julianne."

"Who said anything about leaving?" Tristan demanded. "Sure you might not hang out as often but it's not like she'll disappear from your lives."

I smiled. "I hope so. I wonder if they'll ever get together. Now what would that be like?"

We fell into a momentary silence as the rhetorical question washed over Tristan.

A long time later, I heard him clear his throat. "Um... Kylie?"

"Yeah?"

I was still looking ahead, at Lacey. I made the difficult decision not to go after her as they popped their dimes in the fountain and made their wishes before fading away into the pressing mob of bustling pedestrians.

It was then when Tristan's hand wrapped around mine. He looked serious, but as he swallowed, I could tell that he was trying to hide his anxiety. The fact that his fingers were intertwined with mine was undoubtedly going to make me faint. I gave him a questioning look but he ignored it, squeezing my hand tighter.

"Are you ready to tell me the real reason you're so worked up about Lacey having a boyfriend?" he began to say, running his spare hand through the tufts of his hair.

I was trapped in a speechless loop, stupefied in horror.

"You don't have to hide it you know, everyone gets lonely."

What was he doing? What did he think was going on? Was I about to pay for my one moment of weakness?

"So... I've been thinking about, uh- well, actually I-I've wanted this to say to you for a while... I know this might surprise you, but well..." He gulped; his eyes couldn't look straight to me. "Kylie... will you-will you-?"

"Kylie, Tristan... hi!" called a familiar voice.

Through the front door of a gourmet store walked Ronnie. She's with a tall and gorgeous brunette whom I assumed was her older sister. Both of them carried huge shopping bags.

Ronnie's smile slowly faded when her eyes fell crestfallen, on our hands. I thought I heard Tristan mutter something furiously under his breath but couldn't be sure. I quickly tugged my hand away and forced a grin.

"Hey, good to see you around here, Ron," I said, trying to sound as casual as possible. "And...?"

"Mackenzie," said the other girl with an aristocratic smile playing on her glossy lips. I noticed that her jade eyes were gazing intently at Tristan as she spoke.

Gag me.

"So..." Ronnie said in a superficial cheerful tone. "I didn't know that you two were dating, huh? Why am I always the last to know these things?"

Uh-oh.

"Oh no! Tristan and I aren't dating or anything like that." Crap, why did it have to be this time? Such ridiculously bad timing. "We're just friends right, T?" I nudged him in desperation, praying that he would agree.

"Actually..." was his answer before he trailed off, perhaps sensing the warning in my beaming expression.

Damn, I needed to get out of this situation as fast as I could.

"Oh." Ronnie gave a vain smile. "That's okay; I don't wanna force you guys into anything."

I forced a laugh and slapped Tristan's back hard. He shot me a look, which I ignored. "Ha-ha, why? There's nothing there to force. I mean, we were just shopping."

"Right..." Mackenzie crooned. "What for?"

I quickly looked around for inspiration. Let's see, chemists, florists or hardware store? Tampons, roses or handsaws? Well didn't I pick the wrong part of the mall for ideas?

"Flowers!" I blurted out.

Both of the girls exchanged weird looks. "Really?"

"Yeah, you know, as-as a gift!" More weird looks... "Oh! But not for each other. They're, they're for our Moms because um, Mother's day is right around the corner and all. Ha-ha!" I felt like such a goon. "So! Can't be lollygagging around all day, come on Tristan." I stressed a fleeting grin, grabbed Tristan's arm and waved a lofty goodbye.

Before we could get out of earshot, I heard Mackenzie say to Ronnie: "There's no

way that weird girl could be his girlfriend."

Well, I guess that's how it seems... That's the way it should be, right?

I was grinding my teeth for the whole ten minutes we messed around pretending to look at dandelions while we waited for the girls to get tired of the repetitive hiss of the fountain and finally leave.

Once out of their sight, we cut the charade to a slightly confused cashier and made our escape in the opposite direction.

"Really, Tristan," I snarled. "Thanks for being so cooperative back there. Couldn't you have just kept your mouth shut? Now Ronnie's gonna get the wrong idea. I'll be a walking target next time I see her."

"Sorry, I just want to make it clear that I'm not interested in her, or in any other girls," he replied, glaring at me.

I crossed my arms. Leave it to Tristan for attracting dozens of girls even by just standing there and doing nothing.

"Then why do you hang around with me?" I wanted to know. "When there are so many girls coming up and talk to you..." I glanced at him and looked away, frowning. "Don't you think it's embarrassing to have me beside you?"

He heaved a sigh. "Why are you saying something like that? Listen Kylie... if I had thought of that, I would've gone a long time ago."

Time slowed to a glacial drip inside the mall. The people froze in their stances, everything ground to a halt. All I could see was this moment stretching on forever.

"What-?" I murmured, barely audible. My heartbeat was racing. "You... Did you mean that?"

I couldn't keep up with the frown anymore. I opened my mouth, shut it, and did it all over again, not knowing what else to say. I was completely flabbergasted when he nodded timidly.

A smile slowly spread across my face.

"I need a drink," I said flatly, trying to take the edge off the situation.

"Kylie..."

"Really, my throat feels like sandpaper. Stop with the drama and let's go already! You can buy me a drink."

I took his hand and dragged him to a booth that sold all kinds of beverages. He rolled his eyes at my indecision when I was confronted with endless choice.

He had that tired look again, that unguarded, vulnerable look that only made my smile grow wider.

As time gradually returned to normal speed, I discovered a new feeling forming inside me. It was a feeling of insanity, worry, bliss—I didn't know how to describe it perfectly, but it felt amazing.

Sometime later when I'd well and truly robbed Tristan of his wallet's contents he was left checking his wristwatch, telling me that we'd been here for a whole two and a half hours. Wow, hadn't time flown?

"So..." I said quietly, "I guess it's time to go home, huh?"

Tristan looked uncertain. "Well..."

"What?"

"May I ask... what are you going to do after this?"

"Oh, well, not much really. Why?"

There he went looking awkward and edgy again, which never failed to make me amused.

He's really the most confusing person I've ever known.

"I was wondering if we could stay a bit longer." He rubbed at the back of his neck nervously. "Like, what do you say-uh-wanna go somewhere else?"

He's starting to make me melt just like ice.

I grinned. "Sure. I'd love to."

The words had rapidly come out, but whatever.

Maybe I need to start believing... He's the one who always keeps me on my toes, the one who makes me happy and nervous at the same time.

What happened to me saying no? Why is it so hard to deny him this time? Why do these conflicting feelings blossom every time I think of him?

And more importantly...

...how am I okay with it?

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~~Finding Cinderella (36)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- 36 ♡

-Tristan-

"What, the amusement park?"

With a pallid face, I stared at the Ferris wheel and at the other daunting stomach-churning rides. The air was filled with the aroma of popcorn and grilled food. The din of the crowd was rowdy, and everyone's faces were plastered with smiles.

Boy, it had been a long time since I went to this place.

"You could've picked anywhere, anywhere. And you pick this?" I complained.

"Well, beggars can't be choosers. Besides, you asked for it," she said with a sinister smile.

"Oh heck no, Kylie. Let's just go someplace else." I turned away, but she quickly grabbed my arm. I didn't know how many times she'd touched me today (or vice versa), but what the hell. It felt good, anyway, in spite of the torture she'd inflicted on me along the way.

She eventually released me and roared with laughter. "Ooh, come to think of it, didn't you get lost here when you were a kid? Yeah... and a clown brought you back to your parents in tears!"

"Shut up." I gritted my teeth at the repressed memory. She'd reminded me countless times, thanks to my mother thoughtlessly tattling on without realizing the damage it could cause. "That guy was just getting in the way of me getting back to my parents on my own!"

"I bet your face back then was just the same as now," she went on, pointing and laughing at me, "You look purple all over like Barney!"

"Kylie," I warned.

"But do you really still have a fear of clowns?" she went on persistently.

"Huh," I sneered. "Not anymore."

"But why are you backing away? Huh? Huh?" She wriggled her eyebrows.

"No. Look, I just don't feel like going in this place. Maybe some other time, but not now," I ventured, turning away with a frown.

"Tristan Hartford, you wuss," she taunted.

I turned to her again. She wouldn't dare. "Says who?" I snapped.

"Ooh, looks like you're gonna throw up."

"Jeez, fine! I'm going now." I marched back to the place, not having any other choice. It's not like I could disagree to her any longer. "I'm gonna show you that I'd already gotten over that pathetic thing."

This place held my worst childhood experience, so I hadn't been here for ten years. That memory was still fresh in my head—I could even draw that clown in full detail. His mascot had irreversibly disturbed my seven-year-old self, and the fact that I didn't know who'd been behind that mask made it even scarier, at least for me. Ever since that had happened, I kept having these recurring nightmares and I'd sworn to myself that I wouldn't return to this place ever again...

...until she'd insisted me to do it now.

Still laughing, Kylie skipped along with me and watched the sights giddily. I merely looked at her and sighed.

If it only wasn't for her...

"Over here, Tristan!" She waved from afar and pointed at her back. "Look, there's a clown show over there. Why don't we watch it? It looks awesome!"

I grimaced. No, even until now, I wanted to stay the hell away from that thing. "Nah, that show's corny. Can't even see any fun in that one."

"Killjoy. Fine, let's roam around."

A smile struck my lips, and I followed her like a satellite whenever she went. She was practically bouncing her way from booth to booth, looking at the cool displays. All I could do was staring at her.

She's really enjoying this, and her broad smile was something I'd looked forward to after all this time. Little did she know that I'd stolen a date from her.

"Let's ride the Merry-Go-Round!" she exclaimed.

"But it's for kids," I objected.

"So? No matter how old I get, I won't get enough of riding one."

In the end, to my shame, we did. She had that thrilled look as the carousel went around, like a little kid on her first time riding one. I was sitting behind her, on the verge of laughing as I watched her childlike frenzy.

Then next to that, she dragged me to the ghost train. And during the ride, her voice was the only thing I heard above the noise.

After yet another go on those rides, we ended up grabbing some bites to fill our empty stomachs.

"Vanilla pudding!" she gasped as I went to her with a plastic bag.

Sitting on the bench beside her, I frowned. "I know you're starving to death now, but too bad I only bought this for me."

"Just as I thought," she muttered, glaring at me and curling her lips. "You bought that just to make me drool."

I pulled out the plastic container from the bag, opened up the lid, and sniffed

the sweet scent. "Hmm, well, this smells heavenly," I said, throwing her an evil grin just to make her jealous.

She crossed her arms in despise, and then a loud grumbling noise from her stomach came. Her cheeks went deep pink in an instant.

I throw my head back, roaring a laugh.

"Shut up!" she exclaimed.

I took a scoop using a plastic spoon. "You want some?"

I knew she couldn't resist herself just to watch me eating her favorite snack in front of her, and since the monster in her stomach was already complaining in hunger, she didn't have a choice but nod at my question.

"All right, since I'm a man of good heart," I said with a smirk, "I'll share this with you... as long as I will be the one to feed you."

Her mouth fell. "Tristan!"

I lifted up the spoon to her face. "Little Kylie, say aaahhhh," I teased.

"T, what the hell! I'm not a kid anymore!"

"Open up your mouth, the train is coming." I flew the spoon in the air in a zigzag motion. "Choo, choo!"

The gooey, white substance and the vanilla scent were surely teasing her so badly. Cheeks heating up even more, she grudgingly opened her mouth and slightly leaned forward. At the same time, someone called not too far.

"Hey, you guys!"

It was Drew, and together with him was a pretty redhead girl in a simple peach dress. I immediately went speechless as I recognized the girl. Kylie took the chance to grab the spoon from my hand and stuff it in her mouth.

After Drew and I did a high-five, he pointed the girl, saying, "Meet my girlfriend Eliana."

Eliana's green eyes twinkled as she smiled.

I motioned him to follow me away from the girls, who were staring at us in confusion, and whispered to him, "Dude, is that girl...?"

"Yeah, she's the girl in the coffee shop," he said with a wide grin.

"Whoa. Really? That's cool, man," I remarked, shaking my head in awe. "You finally have the balls to ask her out! Congratulations."

"Yeah. Well, it took me several days before I finally asked her out. I thought she was going to turn me down, but it turned out she was completely into it." Drew laughed. "Anyway, congratulations, too, T."

"What?" I asked. Then I looked at Kylie who was talking with Eliana, and back at Drew. "No, Kylie and I were just going out as... friends. She doesn't even know I've stolen a date from her."

"That's very sneaky, man." He shook his head. "Wait... friends? But I thought you and her were finally an item now, seeing you two were going all intimate over a food just a while ago..."

"Don't ask. It's one of my moves to get closer to her."

Drew sputtered a loud laugh and tapped me on the back. "Good luck, T. You better do what you gotta do before some guy could snatch her."

We went back to the girls and had a small talk together for a short while. After that, the couple bid goodbye.

"They look so adorable," Kylie said dreamily behind me. "Eliana is nice. Shy, but very nice."

I stared at them swinging their hands playfully. "Yeah, Drew finally did it. Lucky guy." I turned around and spotted Kylie already gobbling up the pudding.

Her eyebrows knitted. "What?" she asked while munching.

I snorted a laugh. "You look cute when you bloat your cheeks like that."

Blinking, she stopped munching, apparently surprised by that.

"But did you know the original meaning of cute is small and ugly?" I joked.

"Really," she said blandly. "Ha-ha, hilarious."

Chuckling, I stuffed my hands in my pockets. "You're just an exception," I said and turned away, leaving her baffled again. "Let's go now, Kyles."

We walked together in silence as we went along with the flow of people until we ended up watching some magic tricks along the way. Kylie, together with the other audiences, looked at the performer with amazement, while I tried to keep my uneasiness in me.

The performer had thick white makeup, a mass of red hair, and beady dark eyes that reminded me of the horror movie *It*, which was also another thing that gave me nightmares.

"Tristan, he's pointing at you," Kylie hissed, nudging me at the side.

I blinked. "What?"

Then I realized that everyone was looking at me. I found a hand wrapped in a white glove extending towards me, and I almost stumbled back when the performer gave me his Cheshire cat smile and said in a squeaky tone, "Sir, would you like to

be a volunteer?"

Volunteer for what, a sacrificial ritual?

I opened my mouth to decline, but Kylie pushed me hard until I staggered my way in front. Everyone clapped at me, while all I could do was to force a smile, shot punishing looks at Kylie, and think "I'm so screwed" as I paraded in front of the crowd.

I swallowed as I faced the thing that had given me so many traumas. Time to face your fears, Tristan.

He gave me instructions, which I followed without saying any word, and later he started to do his tricks. I wasn't paying attention to whatever he was doing since random thoughts occupied my mind to help me calm.

Kylie was staring at me with another of her sinister smiles again. I smiled back, and she blinked, stunned, and shifted her attention away.

Afterwards, the show was over. I had no idea what I did during the performance, but I gave a court nod when the crowd cheered. Several girls swarmed around me, asking for my name and my number, but I didn't give them even half of my attention.

My eyes scanned for Kylie, but she was nowhere to be found.

I ran from place to place, gasping deeply for air. But crap, I hadn't found her in this massive, overcrowded place. Where was she? Is this one of her jokes again? Now I felt like I was experiencing that traumatic childhood experience all over again, though I didn't know who was the helpless lost child this time - her or me?

What if she's actually in trouble?

I knew that Kylie was the type that didn't let her guard down whenever she's in danger. She could kick anyone's ass as if she wanted to. But even though she might be the female version of Bruce Lee, still she's a girl, and of course, she had her limits.

I had to find her.

"Hey!"

Everything around went like blur as I revolved around to the beckoning voice. Kylie stood a couple of meters away from me. She cocked her head slightly to the side and studied me.

"You okay?" she asked.

I trudged towards her, gritting my teeth. "Where did you go?"

"Well, I just-"

"I thought you'd left me for dead back there."

She squirmed, but still stood on her ground and frowned slightly. "Jeez, I'm sorry. I thought I found someone familiar, so I followed him," she explained in a mumble. "But when I came back, you were already gone, so I looked for you."

I sighed exasperatedly. "I've been looking all over for you for God knows how long," I bellowed. "Do you even know how I feel? You made me sick with worry, Kylie. What were you thinking? What if something happened to you?"

I didn't realize that I'd been too frank about my feelings until just now.

Her mouth dropped, and she quickly shut it and raised both her hands. "Relax, jeez. I told you I'm not a freaking damsel in distress, T. I know how to handle myself, okay?"

"Don't be stubborn, Kylie." I took a deep breath again. Pushing my hands in my pockets, I turned away to hide my inflamed face. "Just... just don't leave me like that."

"Gee, all right. I'm sorry. Look, I already said that twice."

I glanced at her and noticed that she was bloating her cheeks again. Her whole face turned rosy, and her eyes narrowed as she was on the brink of smiling. Eventually, she did break a smile... it lightened up her whole face again.

I was stunned. It seemed like I couldn't take up the angry façade any longer.

"Wh-what's funny?" I stammered.

She glanced away, snickering. "Nothing."

An idea popped in my head. Smiling menacingly, I said, "So Kylie, since you pulled that little stunt and ditched me, I think it's my turn to get my own back..."

"Hey, I didn't say I ditched you! It was a complete mix up. It wasn't intentional, got that?"

"How about in that show? You pushed me, and I know you did that on purpose."

"W-well, I just-" she stuttered, "I just wanna teach you how to face your fear!"

I grinned. She'd finally fallen on my trap. "Ah, that's cool. So now's my time to teach you how to face your fear."

"What!"

"Well, that's just a little payback I want from you." I turned around. "Follow me, and don't you dare leave."

Finally, we had arrived on the only place in the park she's never dared to go on: the Ferris wheel.

"Two tickets, please," I said to the person behind the booth.

"No! Hell no, Tristan!" Kylie cried. "I don't want to ride in that freaking thing ever. Just looking at it makes me wanna throw up! I swear I'll never do anything like that again. Just please, don't make me ride."

I turned to her and raised the tickets. "Too late."

"Nooooo!"

She hugged the admission post as if her life depended on it, while wailing words of prayer hysterically. I tried to pull her in, but she was completely glued on the thing. Her shouts had already attracted many people, and some of them were whispering that we were such a sweet couple. I could only laugh on that. They didn't know how damn hard it'd been to get this one girl.

"It's time to face your fear, Kylie," I teased.

"Aargh! You-you're despicable!"

"At the count of five, you have to get off the post, or else I have to carry you inside." I stepped forward. "One--"

"Shaddap!"

I extended my arms around her. "Two--"

"I said no, no, no! Can't you understand simple English?"

"Five!"

"What!"

With full force, I quickly yanked her away successfully and laughed. She kept on growling as she stomped her feet in the car. She somehow reminded me King Kong on the loose.

"That's unfair, Tristan! Where did the rest of the numbers go?" She crossed her arms as she sank on the seat.

Still laughing, I sat beside her and said, "On the way to your heart."

She punched my shoulder. "Very funny."

Her whole face was white and red all over. She was already very nervous, and we hadn't even started yet.

"Calm down, Kylie. This ride isn't scary at all," I comforted.

"It's your fault if I pass out."

"I'm here, don't worry."

There was a jolt and the ride started. Kylie straightened her back and tightened her grip around the handle.

"Oh darn, it's moving," she mumbled and squeezed her eyes shut. I noticed that her knees were shaking as the wheel took us slowly up and up, higher and higher.

I gazed intently at her. She looked so funny yet cute when she's like that. The wind brushed through, and a strand of her hair fell gently on her face. It gave my heart a little tug.

This was the perfect time and place to tell her how I feel. This was my chance. But my lips cluttered, and the words that I wanted to say just wouldn't be said.

"Kylie, open your eyes."

She shook her head and pursed her lips.

"Trust me, if you won't open your eyes, you'll miss something beautiful."

At last, she slowly opened her eyes and gasped. Her hand automatically wrapped around mine. We were at the highest point, and the wheel seemed to be as high as a ten-story building. From here, we could see the whole park, and everyone below us looked like ants. The sun was setting, the sky was painted in an array of red and gray, and the pale glow of the moon was starting to show.

Kylie was completely absorbed by the scenery. The sparkle in her eyes had shown it all.

"Wow... it really is beautiful," she breathed.

"You are, too," I said and tangled my fingers with hers. The way your hair flows, the glow of your smile, the grace of your awkwardness...

Her cheeks became crimson as she smiled.

And she didn't know how it kept me hanging on every moment.

We were biking under the night stars. Kylie was sitting on the front again, and I could smell the vanilla scent on her hair.

The tiring day was over. Yet it was too perfect I didn't want it to end. I probably should thank Clark and Lacey for a job well done, because if it wasn't for them, this might not have even happened.

I pulled the brakes as we finally reached her house. She hopped down, and I swung off.

"Are you happy?" I asked.

"With what?" she chirped.

"Everything." I shrugged. "You know, this day and all."

"Of course! Don't be silly." She laughed. "Do I look like I'm crying?"

"You were practically crying back at the Ferris wheel."

She made a face. "And you looked like you were gonna be sick back in that magic show."

"It was a win-win situation then. We've both faced our fears, so let's stop arguing with that."

"All right. But... what's with that question, anyway? Why'd you asked me if I was happy?"

"Nothing. Just wanna know." I mentally made a fist pump for success. Ha! Plus points for me!

She shook her head. "Hmm, I wonder if Lacey's already back from her date... Oh well, I hope everything turned out well for her." She yawned and stretched her body. "Ah! I'm so tired, I should go inside now." Her eyes met mine. "So... uh see ya tomorrow, I guess? Thanks for the ride."

She bid me a goodbye and turned towards the porch.

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

"I-I just wanna say-"

I didn't want to end this perfect day just as simple as this. My mind and my head

rt were stuck on her tonight and no one else. I wanted to say that I loved her, but in the end, I merely sighed and said, "Goodnight, Kylie."

I was just trying to be considerate. I'd said that word instead, since saying 'I love you' would mean some falling.

And she was afraid of heights.

"Oh... okay." She gave me a nod and turned away.

I dragged my bike alongside as I walked towards my house. But then, I heard thumping noises coming behind me. Spinning around, I saw Kylie running towards me with her head lowered. I was about to ask what's wrong, but when she stopped beside me, I snapped my mouth shut.

To my surprise, she lifted on her toes and kissed me on the cheek.

"Goodnight, Tristan."

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~~Finding Cinderella (37)~~

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∞ Finding Cinderella- 37 ∞

-Kylie-

I rested my head on the door and clutched my chest. My heart was beating so loud and fast I could barely breathe.

I'd kissed Tristan...

...on the cheek!

My hands automatically covered my scorching hot face, and I quickly bit my tongue after a soft scream escaped my lips.

I couldn't believe I'd done that! The feeling had been uncontrollable-it had gotten into my head and taken over my body without my accord. Tristan's reaction had been something I couldn't draw: his mouth agape, eyes wide, and whole body frozen. That was why I'd quickly run away after realizing what I'd done. I hadn't been able to look at him for another second and hear what he would say next.

Right now, he had to have been thinking how crazy I was.

I couldn't help but squeal my brains out. No matter how I tried to shut it out, the scene kept replaying in my head like a broken record.

I kissed him... I kissed him... I kissed him...

I never had done that to a boy before. The only guy in my life who I'd ever kissed on the cheek had been my Dad back when I'd been a kid. And because of my completely out-of-my-mind gesture from a while ago, Tristan was now the second guy.

How am I supposed to face him over the next few days?

Before I could think of a plan, I heard shuffling noises outside, which made me stop. There were familiar voices, and I figured they were coming from Lacey and Clark. It seemed that they were whispering intimately to each other, since I couldn't hear anything for the next few seconds. My curiosity was itching again, but I decided to give them a little bit of privacy.

I was about to proceed to the stairs when the door opened. Lacey entered, and then shut it behind her with a dreamy sigh. Her eyes flicked to me, and she smiled broadly.

"Hi."

I pulled a thin smile. "Hey, so how was everything?"

"Perfect," she answered breathlessly, turning her head to the window. "That was the best date ever. Clark was so nice, even though I was so awkward about everything."

"At least you had a good time and it ended well."

"Yeah." She turned back to me. "So, how was your day? Did you enjoy your date too?"

"Huh? What date?"

She rolled her eyes. "Please, like I don't know any better. Don't play innocent, sis. Clark and I saw you and Tristan around the mall this afternoon, and you two looked like you were enjoying your day."

My jaw dropped. So they had noticed us back there. But from the oblivious look on Lacey's face, I knew she hadn't realized we'd been spying on them. I couldn't just confess to her, so I tried opposing her assumption instead; all I could do was stutter, though, since... well, for me, what had happened back at the amusement park had sort of been a date...?

I mentally slapped myself.

"Don't deny it. It's written all over your face," Lacey said with a soft laugh.

I merely scowled at her. What else could I say? The idea machine I called my brain had malfunctioned from all the stuff that had been happening.

"Girls?" Mom's voice called from upstairs.

"Yes?" we both chorused.

Mom descended into the living room in her bathrobe. "Did you two have fun?"

"Yup," was Lacey's automatic response just as I muttered, "No."

Lacey cocked her head towards me with a disapproving look. I shrugged as if I were oblivious, though I knew this day counted as one of the best days in my life.

Mom turned to me. "Oh, I thought you did."

"Trust me, Mom, she did," Lacey mumbled and I elbowed her.

Mom didn't seem to hear her. "Lois told me you went out with Tristan this afternoon. I wish you had told me about it sooner. I could have prepared some pretty clothes for you, not..." Her eyes raked me up and down, taking in my ragged outfit. "...that shabby attire... Oh, honey, how many times do I need to tell you to dress more nicely, like a woman?"

"Mom, please don't bring that up again. You know I only dress up when there's a funeral," I groaned. "And come on, I don't have to do that stuff. Seriously, Tristan and I weren't doing anything. We were just...just strolling around the neighborhood--"

Not.

"And then they went to the mall and I totally saw Tristan giving her a drink and they walked around like a lovely couple," Lacey prattled on, "and I asked Clark if you two were dating or not and he was like, 'yeah, I already saw that coming' and--"

"Lacey!" I screeched. A blush crept onto my face again, but thank goodness, the room was slightly dark so they couldn't see it.

Mom grinned and clasped her hands in front of her chest. "That's good to hear. I told you, dear, Tristan is a very pleasant boy. I know you two will get along just fine in the end. So, did he ask you on another date?"

I couldn't take this any longer. Their smiles were silently killing me.

"It wasn't-ugh." I dropped my shoulders in defeat. "No."

"Not yet?" Lacey grinned menacingly.

I bit my lip and sighed. "Whatever. I'm heading to bed now. Just spare me the details about your date for some other time." I quickly marched upstairs before they could respond with another set of embarrassing ideas.

A couple minutes later, I pulled my hair into a tiny bun and relaxed in a nice, hot bubble bath. I reflected on my thoughts as I watched steam rise from the water's surface. A lot of things about the day came back to me, especially Tristan's naughty and playful smile. It was the same smile he had when he was teasing me and when he told me he'd missed me.

I lifted my knees up and buried my face in them.

I was starting to explore this terrifying, yet wonderful little thing inside me. It was something that I hadn't felt towards Erik, and I'd never thought it would appear in me at this time. I always tried not to think about it, but here I was, and there he was.

The moment I stepped into the locker area, I took one look at the girl beside me and went, "Whoa, wait, what the-?"

"Kylie!" she chirped.

I scanned Julianne up and down and noticed that her typical look had changed—she was wearing a denim jacket, a skirt, and ballet flats. She rarely wore those kinds of outfits to school. Her hair was now like the models' in those shampoo commercials; long and silky straight, it showed no trace of her previous thick mass of curls. The most bizarre thing, though, was that she looked like a mini Ronnie Sullivan.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" I asked, shocked.

"It's me, really." She laughed. "And close your mouth before a fly goes in."

"I can't believe it. Last week you looked like a gypsy, and now..." I raised a h

and, trying to muffle my laughter. "Seriously, what kind of ghost possessed you today?"

She made a face; thank goodness, that hadn't changed. "Oh, please. If I was a gypsy back then, try to look at yourself. You're practically wearing a burka." I gazed down at my oversized hoodie, trying to figure out what burka meant as she continued with a shrug: "I'm just trying something new for a change, Ky."

"Just as I thought. You underwent metamorphosis this weekend." I shook my head, still smiling. "But jokes aside, you look really pretty, Jules."

Her eyebrows rose.

"Really, cross my heart." I nodded, chuckling. "It suits you very well, though I'll definitely miss those bird's nest curls you had."

"Thanks." She tilted her head to the side, studying my face, then just shook her head.

We made our way through the mob. I started humming a song I'd heard over the radio earlier this morning; it was very catchy, and it hadn't stopped echoing in my mind since then.

I felt Julianne's eyes on me. I turned to her and gave her a "what?" look.

"Hmm, someone's cheerful today, huh?" she said meaningfully. "You and Me?"

"You and Me what?"

"The title of the song you're humming. It's You and Me by Lifehouse."

"Oh, is it? It's really cute." My mind drifted, and I continued to hum in a happy glow.

Julianne stepped in front of me with her arms crossed. I stopped and stared at her.

"Aha! I knew it," she cried, snapping her fingers. "So that's why you've been so strange these past few days. Wow, Kylie, it's great to see you in a new light. Tell me, what kind of charm did he use on you?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Something happened, right?" she went on. "I rarely see you cheerful like this, not to mention humming a love song, because as far as I know, you don't like that kind of music. I've never... I've never seen you inspired like this before. Seriously, Kylie, what happened?"

"Um..." I gazed down at my sneakers.

To my surprise, she pulled me into a corner where people couldn't hear our conversation. "You asked Tristan to come with you on your little scheme last Saturday, right? Right? So how did things turn out?" she insisted. "I know something major happened to you guys."

"Jeez, calm the heck down. It wasn't anything-"

"Stop. Don't even try to deny it. With that look on your face and the way you're acting, it's obvious. Come on, tell me all the juicy details, like, right away, because if you don't, I swear I'm going to haunt you even in your dreams."

I heaved a sigh, brushing my hair back anxiously. "All right, just relax, Julianne. I know I can't stop you from pushing me anymore, so okay, here goes..."

Then I told her everything that had happened. Well, almost everything-I didn't tell her one thing, since if I did, I might have another mental breakdown. I'd been so anxious about how would things turn out afterwards that I hadn't been able to sleep or eat yesterday.

However, Julianne kept giving me the look-brows raised, lips smirked in suspicion.

"That's it?" she said. "You just told each other goodbye and then the end?" She snorted. "Sheesh, that's boring."

"Uh-huh."

"Not! Like hell I would believe that. Seriously, I know there's something else that happened after that. What was it?"

I sucked my breath in as I tried to form the words in my head. I had no choice but to tell her; otherwise, this would go on forever. I sighed exasperatedly, and much to my shame, I finally said, "I kissed him."

Her hands flew to her mouth after she let out a small squeal.

"But on the cheek, okay? On the cheek. Don't think anything weird about it. It was just... a friendly one," I mumbled, closing my eyes. My face was steaming hot once again. I peeked at her and noticed that she was smiling so wide I thought her face would be cut in half. "What's with that look?" I grumbled.

She poked me. "Yeee. You bashful cat, I can't believe you had the nerve to do that!"

"Neither do I." I wanted to crawl into a hole so badly. "You don't know how many times I've kept telling myself how insane it was."

"But Kylie, I'm so proud of you!" Julianne exclaimed, shaking my shoulders as if to wake me up.

"W-why?"

"You're starting to embrace what you really feel!"

What I really feel... I didn't speak up.

"For the last and zillionth time, Kylie... tell me." She locked her gaze on mine, trying to get me to be serious with this one, trying to get my final answer this time. "Do you like Tristan?"

The moment I heard his name, thousands of thoughts about him flashed through my mind, increasing by the second. I opened my mouth, bit my lip, and opened my eyes again; Julianne was patiently waiting for me to answer.

"I... I..." I sighed. "Forget it, let's go to class."

"What? Come on, Kylie!" Julianne cried. "It'll just take a second to say yes or no!"

"Enough of it. We're so late to class already."

Hours later, English class came. I couldn't keep my composed look up any further when I caught Tristan talking with his friends the moment I reached the room.

"Ooh la la," Julianne crooned. She nudged me and gave a not-so-subtle nod in his direction. "Check him out, Kylie, he's so charming, don't you think?" She'd been teasing me about him so much today, and her pestering had gotten even worse than before.

Flushed, I stomped my way out of the room, and she followed me. "Julianne, shut up," I hissed through clenched teeth. "Seriously, shut up. Stop teasing!"

"Teasing? Who's teasing?" she said innocently.

"Just zip your lips. Don't you dare mention anything we've talked about. Better yet, just forget everything!" I waved my hands like a mad witch.

She sighed absentmindedly like she hadn't heard what I'd said. "So baaaby I'm alright... Just a kiss goodnight..."

"Julianne!" I sighed exasperatedly. "I told you it wasn't anything serious! Give it a rest already. Try to spill one word about it and I'll mess up your hair in no time."

"Shhh, relax. I got it, I got it, okay?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Swear?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah."

I wasn't so sure if she meant it, but I sighed and nodded. Giggling, she followed me as I entered the room again. In a snap, a couple girls surrounded Julianne and they began to talk with her about her hair and stuff.

Tristan was still chatting with Grey and Clark in the corner. I tried to calm myself down as I began breathing exercises in my seat. Now, if he just didn't notice that I was-

"Hey." He smiled, slipping into his seat seconds after the bell rang, though the teacher wasn't in yet.

Oh Jesus.

I just nodded like he was a mailman or police officer, hoping that I appeared casual. Hoping to hide the fact that it kept replaying in my head, practically tattooed all over my brain.

We remained in silence, and it made me edgy. I peeked at him; he was staring back. I tried to frown when I said, "What?"

"You okay?"

"Yeah, of course. Everything's fine and dandy," I stammered.

Smiling, he turned to the front and straightened his back. "So I've heard..."

My mind stopped. Oh, crap, crap! Please don't tell me someone heard the conversation back then and told him about it-

"...Old Cross is about to pile us with Calculus this week," he said casually. "Some kid from his other class told me he's started shoving test papers and assignments in their faces."

"Oh!" I exclaimed as relief surged through me. Thank God! He gave me a surprised look, and I put up a forced smile. "I-I mean, oh crap! Really? Welcome to hell week, then."

So Tristan wasn't thinking about everything that had happened that night. He had probably already forgotten about it-guys didn't care about such things-and was cool with it.

I might as well stop thinking about it... I sighed silently.

"So, uh, d'you wanna hang out at my place?" he asked, hesitating a little bit. "I mean, for, you know, uh... If you're having any troubles in this subject and since finals are fast approaching, maybe I can tutor you or something like that.. I swear I won't mess around with you."

This was so a-w-k-w-a-r-d...

I took a deep breath and said, "Okay."

Eyes widening, he turned to me. "What?"

"I said I'll go," I said a little louder, nodding my head. If I refuse him now, there will probably be no second chance, third chance, or any chances at all. "Mom asked me to, actually," I mumbled.

Yes, that was another reason why I'd agreed. She'd figured out I had a hard time following the lesson, so she'd told me-no, it was more like forced me-yesterday to seek help from him, and I couldn't decline. Oh, she strikes again...

Tristan's face relaxed and he muttered something like "yes" under his breath. "That's great," he said, turning to me, "because apart from that, I have something important to tell you."

Our gazes locked on each other, and I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. Why did I feel so excited and anxious about this?

Just then, Mrs. Cox entered the room, and everyone returned to their seats. Afterwards, Ronnie came; it was just natural for her to be late. And before she slid into her seat, I noticed that she was glaring at me, the cold kind of glare that gave me shudders for a moment. I wondered what was wrong with her.

The strange thing was that after class ended, she was back in a pleasant mood again. She linked arms with me for the first time as we left the room.

"Later, Kyles." Tristan passed beside me, giving me a salute before jogging towards his friends.

Ronnie was staring at him with her eyebrows slightly puckered and her lips tightened into a thin line. But when she faced me, her expression changed. "Oh, Kylie, come with me for a moment," she chirped and tugged on my arm.

"Why?"

Her grip around my arm tightened—sharp fingers dug into my skin that hurt a bit—but a casual smile was still on her face. "Well, I just feel like hanging out with you right now. Alone. Please, Ky? Just this once?" she implored. "I also want to have a girl talk with you."

I looked at Julianne, who was at my side, and she gave me a nod and walked ahead of us.

"Yeah, that's more like it," Ronnie cheered.

I was getting a bad feeling about this, but I had to know what was going on with her.

Ronnie set a cup of caramel coffee down in front of me. I glanced up at her as s

he sat in the space at my side.

"What?" she asked, amused. She lifted the lid of her cup and smelled the enticing brew of coffee. Noticing that I hadn't touched mine yet, she rolled her eyes and said, "It's my treat. Duh. Don't you like it?"

"No, I-I was just surprised," I stammered. "Thanks." The beverage burned my tongue, but I let the liquid run down my dry throat.

We just stayed there in silence, but I could still hear the distant noises of the crowds and the harsh blowing of the wind through blossoming trees. Ronnie kept sipping her drink; her eyes looked distant. Eventually, she put her cup down.

"Kylie, have you ever had that moment when you've worked your ass off just to get something you really wanted?" she said vaguely. I noticed spitefulness in her tone, though I knew she was trying to hide it. "But in the end, someone else takes that something, and you just mope in a corner and think of all your wasted efforts? That feeling of frustration you get..."

I gulped. "Huh-?"

She laughed humorlessly. "Life is so unfair, isn't it?"

I didn't know where she was going with this topic, but I didn't dare question her about it.

Cocking her head to the side, Ronnie squinted at me and leaned closer. I pulled away, slightly alarmed; her hand reached in front of my neck and grasped the necklace.

"So pretty," she said, examining it. "Who gave you this?"

"A friend." Seriously, what was with her sudden mood swings?

"You mean boyfriend?"

I shook my head. "No, he's just a friend."

She nodded her head and scooted away. "Ah, so the person is a he indeed," she said. "I was right."

My mouth hung open. Well, I hadn't been expecting that.

"What's his name?"

I twitched. Seeing my reaction, she shook her head, giggling. "Come on, don't be shy. I'm just asking for his name. I swear I won't snatch him from you or anything. I just wanna know."

"Erik," I mumbled. "His name is Erik."

She frowned. "With a 'k'? Erik Taylor?" When I bobbed my head, she turned her head away as if she were pondering over it. "Hmm. He sounds familiar."

"Maybe he's in one of your classes, but you just haven't noticed him."

She shrugged. "Well, maybe. I don't know. I'm not that interested in knowing every person in my classes, anyway. But I must've heard his name somewhere, like when Fiona and the others were talking about boys in the restroom and I think they mentioned his name, blah-blah..." She waved her hands. "Oh, whatever. Forget it." Then she tugged her lips into a sly smile. "So anyway, he must be so charming, right? Seeing as he gave you such a beautiful item, something most girls totally dream of."

"Well--"

"You're special to him, aren't you?"

I brushed my head. A feeling of worry suddenly wrapped around me as I remembered what Erik had said that night when we'd been alone in the park. It had been something that I hadn't still settled with him yet, but I didn't know where to start or how to tell him my thoughts.

I merely shrugged at Ronnie's question.

"Oh denial, denial," she crooned and started to play with the lid of the cup, looking bored. "I bet it's a great feeling to know that there are two gorgeous guys flocking around you, right, Kylie?"

"What?" I tried to keep the annoyance out of my tone, but I guessed I failed. My jaw clenched as beads of sweat rolled down my neck. What was that supposed to mean?

She tilted her head to the side and said, "Him and Tristan?" in a suddenly cold tone.

"Wh-what... I don't get you. What are you trying to say? What's this got to do with T so suddenly?"

"What's this got to do with him? Ha! A lot of things, silly." Ronnie stood up from the bench and cracked her knuckles; her eyes looked distant again. "Tristan and I were actually close friends in middle school," she said monotonously. "We belonged to a tight group of friends, and we were always together everywhere we went."

I blinked a couple times before I got what she'd said.

She snorted. "Yeah, I know, I know it's hard to believe. He never mentioned anything about that to you, did he?"

"If... if you guys were really close friends," I said uncertainly, "then you know things about him."

She raised her eyebrows. "Apparently."

"But why'd you ask me things about him that one time?"

"Ah, you still remember our little chit-chat from my house, huh? Well, I'm not surprised." She crossed her arms and raised her head. "I was simply testing you, Kylie, to see how well you know him. And you certainly know more about him than

I do. I applaud you for that."

Testing me? I stared at her incredulously.

"Anyway, back to my story. You know, I always looked up to him, Kylie, if that isn't obvious. I would do anything, anything, just to reach him. So close yet so far, as others would say, right? But it's already in the past. The closeness is gone now. Gone!" She hit her palm on the wooden table so hard it sent shivers through me. "I did get what I wanted. From being a girl with no type at all, I became the Head Cheerleader. I became popular. I was proud of myself, but it wasn't enough! He still didn't look my way. In fact, he hates me now. Rejecting me a shitload of times..." Brittle laughter escaped from her mouth. "I'm so special, am I not?"

I noticed that her eyes were starting to glisten with tears, but she swallowed as if she were trying to hold them back.

"I wondered what I did wrong. I thought maybe it was because of the rumors about me sleeping with other guys, that that was why he didn't like me. Fiona started those, actually—that bitch backstabbed me, spreading lies to everyone since she knows I like him. I didn't even know until someone told me last week," she spat, venom in her tone. "She doesn't even know him, but she knows how to play guys like they're all just a fucking set of cards."

That was news to me. I should have been angry with her, but after hearing her story, I didn't know... I couldn't even speak or react. The tension was growing between us, and I stiffened in place.

"But in spite of that, I kept hoping that one day, he'd be mine. But recently I figured out there was this one problem hindering my success all along..." Her eyes pierced me, and I melted in my seat. "You know, Kylie, if... if I had looked more closely, I would have seen it a long time ago." She bit her lip like she was hesitating, then continued in a low, cracking voice: "Seems like Tristan is a different person when he's with you, different from how he is with me or other girls. Back at the mall when I saw you two together, I-I'd never seen that kind of expression on him before. What did you do to him?"

I stood up, trying to reach out to her, but she quickly dodged me. "B-but I didn't—"

"Seriously, what did you do?!"

"No! Ronnie, listen to me, I don't know wha-

"See? It's unfair, it's fucking unfair!" she shouted; tears began to stream down her red cheeks. "You didn't do anything to get his attention! You're always fighting with him, you're always arguing with him, but why? Why does he keep coming back to you? I'm the popular one, and you're just ordinary. I mean, look at you! He's way out of your league! But why?" She gasped. "What does he see in you that he doesn't see in me?"

The color in my face had drained, and I was trembling badly. This was the first time someone had slapped those words in my face. The friendship that Ronnie and I had formed for even a short while had only been a lie. She thought of me as a threat after all—a huge, uninsurable disaster waiting to happen. And here was the disaster now.

Ronnie wiped her tears away with her hand and studied me. "You were that unknown girl back at the Valentine ball, right?" she asked; her voice was surprisingly stable now. She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Ha-ha. Right. It all makes sense now. I knew you were lying when I asked you about it, but I just let it slip away."

"I'm sorry," was all I could whisper. I didn't know what else to say. Everything that had happened felt like bricks slamming into my head.

"Don't. After what you've heard, don't you ever feel pity for me. I hate it when someone looks down on me as if I'm incapable of doing something." Her fists clenched at her sides, and she turned her back on me with one swift move. "I'm still going to get him, whatever it takes, Kylie," she said coldly. "Just watch me."

A gust of wind blew through as I watched her walking away.

Veronica Sullivan had just declared war against me.

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~~Finding Cinderella (38)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- 38 ♡

-Kylie-

Never in my life had I thought that I'd be stuck in this kind of situation, and just the thought of Ronnie's hostility towards me made me feel nervous and doubtful.

I stared at the floor as I walked, but because I wasn't paying attention, I soon bumped into someone.

"Searching for something down there?"

I lifted my head and found Erik smiling at me.

"Long time no see, Kylie," he said, and then peered at me closely. "Are you okay? Seems like you're in a bad mood."

I forced a smile and rubbed my temples. "Oh, no, I was just thinking of something." I shrugged.

"You always think too much. Is it about school stuff?"

"Not particularly. So anyway, what've you been doing these past few days? I don't see you around that much."

"Ah, well..." He rubbed at the back of his neck, diverting his eyes from me. "Life gets in the way. There's been lots of stuff happening lately, mostly at home, so... I can barely get away from my family without a hassle." He chuckled. "Sucks, right?"

Erik seemingly didn't want to talk about what was happening, probably for personal reasons, so I laughed with him instead and joked, "Really? You couldn't? Well, that's odd. Here I was thinking you were free all this time because I thought it was you I saw at the amusement park last Saturday."

His eyes expanded as I spoke. I didn't know if it was just me, but I noticed the color of his face draining slightly; he must have been pretty shocked.

I continued to laugh. "Must be your doppelgänger."

"Yeah, that would be impossible. I don't go to amusement parks alone," he said. "Besides, I was at my aunt's house around that time, trying to babysit my cousins."

"Cool. You babysit."

"Only as a desperate measure. Right now, I'm strapped for cash, and I can't ask Dad for any more money. But hey, if I finally get some spare time, maybe we can, you know, go out again? I found this really cool place to the south, not far from here, and I want to take you there."

I gulped. "Erik--"

A noise cut me off. I turned and saw his friends calling for him in the distance, then turned back to see Erik waving at them; soon he glanced back at me again.

"Gotta bounce. It was nice talking to you, Ky. Sorry I can't stay longer." He smiled apologetically.

I nodded. "It's okay. No problem."

"Kylie?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm still waiting."

An electrical feeling carved through my chest. I didn't know how long I stared at him as he waved goodbye before blending into the crowd.

My knees were wobbling as I made my way to the cafeteria. There were three people occupying our usual table, but instead of Ronnie being present, Clark was there.

e, sitting beside Lacey with an arm around her shoulder. Normally I would have threatened to cut his fingers off for that kind of behavior, but now I wasn't even surprised. In fact, I couldn't have cared less - my thoughts were kinda messed up at the moment.

The shrill sound of their laughter was suddenly cut short when I came up to them and sat beside Julianne without a word.

"Oh, she's late," Clark remarked, slowly removing his arm from Lacey the second he saw me.

"Hey, so you came..." Julianne said cheerfully before noticing my glum look. "What's going on with you? Where's Ronnie? I thought she was with you a while ago."

I looked at her and forced a smile. "Well, uh, she said she was going to pass that time-" and probably every other time from now on "-and I'm fine. Yeah."

Lacey leaned over the table, wide-eyed. "Have you eaten yet? Here, you can have my sandwich." She pushed the plate towards me. "I'm already full, and I haven't even touched it."

I nodded but didn't have the appetite to take it.

Clark cleared his throat as though he were uncomfortable. "Uh, I think I should leave you girls now." He stood up, and Lacey's eyes followed him. "I'll call you later, Lacey. Bye." Smiling, he gave a small salute, then took off.

"You better get rid of that murderous look, Ky," Julianne said. "People are starting to get creeped out."

Lacey looked closely at me. "Are you really okay?"

"Yeah, just peachy, actually." I laughed without humor. "I'm just, uh-" I looked around anxiously. "Clark's gone, right? Will he come back?"

Lacey shook her head. "I don't think so. Why...?"

"Tristan! What about him? Is he around? He won't turn up here, will he?"

"No-"

"What about Ronnie or Erik? They aren't here, right?"

"Yes, they're not even around, jeez. I wonder what you ate today," Julianne exclaimed. "What's with all the panic?"

I let out a sigh of relief. Licking my chapped lips, I pressed my hands into my lap and stared at them. "Listen, I... This may sound a little weird for me to be saying, since I rarely do this kind of thing, but bear with me, guys, just this once," I muttered quickly. "I wanna ask for some advice."

I lifted my gaze and saw Julianne put her chin in her hands; her lips were turned up into a crafty smile while Lacey's mouth hung open with surprise. Oh, darn, why am I doing this? But I couldn't stop now-lots of questions I couldn't answer were brimming in my head.

"Hmm... Interesting," said the redhead.

"Yeah. So what was it you wanted advice about?"

My cheeks flamed up as I played with my fingers. "Well, you see, guys, I've got this friend..."

Julianne's eyebrows knit together. "Please don't tell me it's me," she muttered and shook her head.

I scowled. "Calm your ponies, Jules. I'm not talking about you, it's just-" I flapped my hand over my head "-I mean, she's a friend from grade school. We talked, like, just a while ago about her crisis," I said, hoping it sounded convincing, even though that strategy had already failed me several times.

They exchanged looks and said, "Oh-kay..."

"And I wanted to help her, which is why I'm asking for advice - I know that you two are the best with this stuff," I added and cleared my throat. "Anyway, she's stuck between these two guys, and, uh, sh-she's confused who she's gonna choose. You know, like in a typical teen show with all the cliché..."

"Don't stress yourself out too much over that." Lacey chuckled. "Just go out with the one you like more!"

I panicked, sweat rolling rapidly down my face. "N-no! You're wrong!" I shrieked. "It's not about me! We're talking about my friend here!"

Julianne clapped her hands and hooted with laughter.

"Oh? Ah, right! I forgot," Lacey said and pressed her lips together, trying her best to contain her laughter. "I'm sorry; she sounded just like you, so..."

I glowered. "Lacey."

"Okay, okay, back to your friend's story. What next?"

"Well, what you said about going out with the one you like might be more of a good option," I murmured. "But another problem is that... I'm - I mean, she's afraid to admit to herself what she really feels, and...yeah."

"I think she's the type of girl that can't really express herself, that can't show that special person that she's interested, that she cares and all," Julianne stated matter-of-factly. "Instead, she does the opposite - she pushes people away. It's probably because she's afraid to be deeply attached to the other person."
"

My eyes widened. That had almost given me a bloody nose. Her statement had been a bomb (so typical of her), but an epiphany had slammed into me shortly after I'd heard it.

Julianne whistled under her breath. "Wow, I didn't know you'd be that shocked."

"But... isn't that scary? I mean, getting too close to someone will most likely

lead you to opening up, and just the thought of letting that person know your thoughts, moves, and things you keep inside you, and allowing your happiness and everything to depend on that person, is...is frightening." I swallowed a lump in my throat. "I'm just saying that because I...I honestly think that if they knew about everything...they wouldn't stick around. They'd drop you. Then you'd lose the safe balance you'd created for yourself."

That perplexing feeling you got when someone made you feel special and you weren't sure whether you'd believe it or not...

I couldn't believe those words had come from my mouth.

"You know, I agree with Julianne. And I think another reason why she hides her feelings from him is the fear that the feeling isn't mutual." Lacey put her hand on mine and smiled. "But who says everything is easy? There's always a big risk, sis, but maybe it'll all be worth it in the end."

Dumbfounded, I let my jaw drop. My face probably resembled the carvings on totem poles by now. Hearing that from my gullible sister had made me think that she just might be braver than I was.

"Lacey, th-that's-!" I stumbled.

"What?"

"Aaand eureka. She's just starting to figure out what you said, Lace," Julianne said, nodding to her. "You know Kylie's head - it's even harder than a macadamia nut to crack."

I elbowed her.

"What? It's true. But hey, it's a good thing that you're starting to open up your mind on this matter. You're finally growing up, girl." She patted me on the back.

"Ugh, talking about this with you guys..." I groaned, burying my face in my palms. The funny thing was that we three had seemingly forgotten about that "friend" I'd made up, and I was the subject of conversation now. But whatever. I didn't care about that anymore, since it had already been way too obvious.

"I actually like having talks like this with you, Ky," Julianne said. "Seeing your flushed expression is way hilarious and definitely one of a kind. Why don't we talk like this more often, what do you say?"

"Nope." I looked up and shook my head. "You guys were going Dr. Phil on me again, and I've had enough for the day. This is embarrassing enough already."

Resting her head on her hand, Lacey stared at me with a smile that had thousands of meanings in it.

"He's the one who's making you like this, isn't he?" she said.

I was so nervous; I couldn't look straight at them. Instead, I gazed down at the sandwich in front of me; before I knew it, I was already scarfing it down while guzzling the extra water in Julianne's bottle. I felt their eyes penetrating me, and I couldn't help but look at them. They were grinning ear to ear - and with that look on their faces, they knew exactly what the answer was.

-Tristan-

Kylie arrived right after dinner, just as we'd planned that afternoon. She had an unhappy look on her face that had replaced the smile she'd worn all morning. That was weird. I wondered what had happened to her, but didn't ask because I knew she wouldn't want to talk about it.

Mom hugged her as if they hadn't seen each other for centuries and began to make small talk. When Kylie wasn't watching, she gave me the look-her parental look, as Dad liked to call it-and I raised my hands and shrugged, conveying that everything had been covered. She nodded before heading to the movie playing in the living room with Dad, almost as thankful for avoiding that awkward conversation as I was.

Dad's study room upstairs was well-lit, noiseless, and spacious, and large bookshelves lined the area. The desk was littered with drafts and papers, and I could

n't tidy any of it up, so we had to work on the coffee table instead.

Kylie sprawled on the floor, put her books on top of the table, and began to flip through the pages she'd brought. I sat on the other side of the table, putting down two cans of soda and a couple bags of chips.

"Okay, tell me what parts you don't understand," I said, peering at her notes.

"Um, from here to probably up here-" she said, pointing out the spots on the pages. "I kind of get this part, but I'm not entirely sure about it. Oh, and this was on the previous test."

"I see..." I frowned. "Hey, how can you understand your notes when all you can see are, what are these, tornadoes?" I pointed at the scribbles all over her notebook.

"Those are basically the things that keep me interested during class," she groaned. "And since finals are coming, everything makes me wanna derive myself off a cliff."

I laughed. "Nice pun you made there, Ky. Why don't we start now so we can finish early?" I grabbed her book and looked through the pages. "I think it'll be much better if we focus on the parts you need to work on. Is that okay?"

"Perfect, but I need to work on almost everything. Look at these integrals I can't solve."

"Should I teach you step by step, then?"

"That's actually what I want. Not the general style of teaching like Mr. Cross does, where he doesn't explain the magical shit behind his answers." She held my gaze for a moment and shook her head. "Sorry for the cussing, I just hate it."

"I know," I said, "I'm actually one of the rare people that enjoy this subject, but this shit also hurts my brain."

She smiled and raised an eyebrow suspiciously. "No way. You always act like this is easy as pi."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't tell me that was another pun. They say math puns are the first sign of nerdy-ness and madness." I smirked, shaking my head.

She covered her ears with her hands. "Gah," she cried, "I'm reaching my limit! S hoot, there I go again. Sorry, sorry. I just need to shut up."

"Get ahold of yourself. We haven't even started." I leaned over to her side and pointed to a diagram with my pen. "Okay, so... here, let's try this problem. It's pretty easy."

Then we began. I gave her a review of the basics before we moved on to the problem. As I continued reading her notes and scribbling calculations on the paper, I sensed her sneaking glances at me the whole time.

"...since f has no vertical asymptotes, you evaluate it at root of three over three and at negative one and five..." I muttered. When I glanced at Kylie, her eyes quickly shifted downward—she'd really been staring at me. I sighed.

"What?" she asked, now focusing on the notes as if they were the most fascinating thing on Earth.

I shook my head, grabbed an extra piece of paper, and wrote: $9x-7i > 3(3x-7u)$. Sliding the paper over to her, I said, "Here, simplify this."

She studied it a bit. "Wait, this wasn't included in the notes. This is just basic algebra."

I shrugged as if oblivious. "I'm just trying to refresh your mind, that's all."

Kylie started to scrawl calculations underneath it, and my grin widened. A few seconds later, her eyes popped out and her jaw dropped. She pushed the paper back without saying a word.

I glanced at her answer: $i < 3u$.

"This is really sweet, Kylie."

She threw a notebook at my head, which I quickly evaded. "You-you tricked me! This is the first time in my life that I've been serious studying this subject, and now you keep messing around," she roared, red-faced.

I laughed manically. "I'm not messing around, I swear. I just noticed that you weren't quite focused on the lesson, so I thought of something to turn your attention back to the lesson and away from my face." I crossed my arms over the table. "Daydreaming about me?"

"Hell, no, I don't do that!" she snapped.

I snorted. "Sure, you don't." A book soared through the air and successfully hit my skull. I hissed with pain. "Aw, that hurts. Hey, cut it out, stop throwing things at me."

"Then stop fooling around," she said, scowling. "Continue the lecture, mister."

Still rubbing my swollen head, I asked, "Where did we stop?"

"Here, the endpoints," she said, pointing at the problem. "Oh jeez, math is even scarier than *The Exorcist*," she added in a mumble.

"There's something therapeutic about doing math exercises. It's really calming, you know."

Her lips pulled into a mischievous smile. "Sure. Your famous last words?"

We started to work in a serious way after that. No jokes, no bickering, no more pointless conversations; instead, I explained everything to her as thoroughly as I could. She would nod at some parts and persistently ask questions, which would lead us into little arguments. But I'd always win those, anyway.

I smiled as I watched her solving the problems on her own. She was really trying her best for this.

-Kylie-

He was staring at me.

I could tell it without averting my gaze from the paper. These variables and derivatives were overflowing so horribly in my head; they could turn me insane if I kept going.

I took a quick peek at him. Crap, he was still looking.

"Uh, um..." I swallowed. This situation was making me uncomfortable.

"What?" He paused for a moment. "Ah, I guess you can't work when I'm watching?"

"Y-yeah," I said.

He shrugged. "Right, sorry. I can't concentrate on work when someone's watching me, either." He opened a pack of Ruffles and a can of Coke and began to eat them as he read the book. How did he manage to look so calm while studying that stuff? Then again, every atom in his body apparently knew how to solve this thing.

I returned to my task and started to wiggle the pen in my fingers.

Ahh, I need to concentrate! Tristan just taught me about this, so I should know it!

It felt like eras after I finally-and hopefully-got the answers. Puffing out air, I looked up, satisfied. Tristan was still reading intently. He paused for a moment, ran his fingers through his messy hair before flipping another page. His eyes were starting to close slowly as he blinked. I figured he must have been exhausted by now. As I watched him, I was starting to think that I was-

Suddenly, he looked up with a smile. "You done?"

My heart leaped into my throat, and my face burned. "Ah, well, I'm-um-"

"Was it too hard?"

I waved my shaky hands. "No. Actually, I'm finished."

He took my answer sheet and examined it. "Hmm..." he said, nodding as if he were really taking the role of a teacher. Then he turned to me with a wide grin. "That is great. You're improving, Ky. You should watch out for your signs, though. Just a little more practice, and you should be good to go."

I grabbed a handful of chips, lowered my stiff back onto the carpeted floor, and popped some chips into my mouth. I wondered how long I'd been working on those problem sets for me to be so mentally and physically drained, but it was good to hear from him that I was improving. Hallelujah! Tribal dance!

"Are there books that can make you smarter if you eat them?" I asked, still munching as I stared at the dirty, white ceiling.

"If they even existed, who do you think would dare to eat them?"

"Bookworms."

"You have a way of twisting things, Kylie."

With a last gulp, I pulled myself up and rubbed my throbbing head. Something beneath the coffee table caught my attention. A pile of old albums was stacked below, and I carefully pulled one out, blowing the dust off before I opened it.

Inside were Tristan's photos from when he'd been a kid. Most of them had been taken while he'd been playing with the telephone, sucking his thumb on the couch, or playing in an inflatable pool. I roared with laughter when I saw a photo of him in the bathtub, his chubby little face contorted with shock at the sight of the camera.

"Wow, T, is this you?" I snickered. "I've never seen you so ecstatic when taking a bath."

Confused, he came over to my side, and his eyes widened at the sight of the photos. "Hey, who told you to look at those?" he exclaimed through gritted teeth, clearly embarrassed that I'd seen his half-naked little self. "I was four at the time, and I didn't even know that Mom was taking pictures in the bathroom. Now give that back!"

"I'm not done yet!"

"Let go of it!"

"No!"

We began to have a tug of war over the album, but because Tristan had more strength than I did, he eventually won.

"Party pooper," I muttered, glowering at him.

"This is highly personal. Just find something else." He pulled himself up and put the album on top of a shelf as if I were a midget that couldn't reach it.

I pulled out another album, but it was smaller compared to the first one. It contained Tristan's middle school photos—when he'd won first place in a math competition, when he'd been at summer camp with Grey and Clark, him on a basketball team, him on a family outing, and so much more. His smiles in every photo were almost the same: thin and laid-back, as if he'd been too cool to smile. There was no difference between him in the past and him now. He'd still been magazine-cover material back then; I bet every girl in his class had swooned over this little devil.

I skimmed through a few pages and stopped at a group shot. The people in the photo looked maybe fourteen, and they all sat around a campfire. I could recognize some of the kids included, and as I kept scrutinizing their faces, the girl sitting beside Tristan caught my attention. It was Ronnie, and I had to say, her looks had definitely improved over the years. Her hair back then had been a pixie cut, and she wore a big grin as she showed her flaming marshmallows to the camera. She and Tristan looked comfortable with each other.

"That was taken out in the front yard, two weeks before you moved here."

I jumped, and Tristan's laughter rang behind me.

"So... you and Ronnie were friends back then," I said hesitantly.

"Yes." His voice was barely above a whisper.

Everything Ronnie had said that afternoon rushed back to me, making me wordless.

I turned another page and paused. Photos of Tristan and I were pasted all over, and most of them had been taken the summer before ninth grade. Those good old memories came back to the surface as I stared at them. I knew Lacey had been the one who'd taken most of these pictures.

We spent the next few moments looking at the photographs and went into hysterics over our candid shots. For a second, I realized that there were too many memories that I hadn't held on to long enough. And when we were like this, it was as if we were traveling back in time into the photographs.

My whole body stiffened when I sensed Tristan came up closer behind me. Then he leaned over my shoulder until there were only a couple inches between the sides of our faces. My heart pounded as he extended his arm...

...and removed a photograph from the album.

"Hey, how much do you want to pay for this?" he asked and scooted away.

I turned to him, totally forgetting that my face was pure red. "What's that? Lem me see it!" I reached for the picture, but he just pulled it away playfully.

"Ah, just rare proof that a little tomboy like you can wear something so girly." His teasing grin broadened as he showed me the image. "Kylie wearing a two-piece swimsuit."

It was really me, wearing a frilly, yellow swimsuit with tiny, flowery designs o

n it. I had a wide grin in the picture that showed off my braces as I posed beside a sandcastle. Tristan, who was wearing nothing but swimming trunks and a towel around his neck, was on the other side.

Now it was my turn to be embarrassed by a photo. I'd completely forgotten that I'd worn that silly outfit, which Mom had forced me to wear to the beach. But that had been the very last time I'd ever worn that kind of suit.

"This is so nostalgic." He chuckled, waving the photo back and forth. "You were so excited for the reward for our swimming contest that you caught a cold afterwards, since you didn't dry yourself off. That was divine punishment, I tell you."
"

I made a face. "Aha, so that's why I got sick. It was because you were really praying for it."

"I took care of you, don't you remember?" he said. I snapped my mouth shut, and he looked away. "I mean, I helped your Mom and Lacey take care of you. You were worse than Cookie Monster when you were sick. Asking for heaps of food you couldn't even eat..."

"Hello, it was because I was sick! Sick people are always hungry," I shot back. "Now give me that photo so I can burn it."

"What? Come on, you can't do that. This is the only existing proof that you can wear a swimsuit."

"Yes, I can. That picture is really humiliating, and I wanna puke on it."

He looked at it. "I think it looked really cute on you."

I continued to wriggle the photo out of his grip, ignoring the fact that I'd almost died from what he'd said. "No? Then you're gonna take the consequence, monkey-face!" I cried and moved to bite his arm.

"Hey, no biting!" He struggled to free his arm from my hands.

Eventually, I found myself fastened to him by my own arms as he tackled me, and

before I knew it, he was all around me, his arms encircling my waist. The picture fell lifelessly to the floor. My breathing hitched, and I stopped moving.

"T-Tristan?"

He rested his chin on my shoulder and whispered, "Can we...stay like this for a moment?"

He didn't wait for an answer as his embrace tightened, entrapping me in never-ending warmth. I didn't know how to respond, so I just let him. For the record, I didn't want him to stop; my heart was pounding so loud, I bet he could also hear it.

"Kylie... do you remember that Valentine's Day prank I pulled on you back in ninth grade?"

"When you put that freaking tarantula in my locker?" I laughed softly. "You have no idea how many times it's replayed in my brain."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I knew I shouldn't have done it, but I still did. I was such a douche back then, and I had no idea how to act."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm just saying that people can do really stupid things when they're desperate and that regret comes last. I wanted to ask you out that day, but when... when I heard from someone that you liked another guy, I-I lost it. I was so angry; I didn't know what to do with myself. I became reckless with you. I'm sorry."

It felt like a glass had shattered in a silent room. Realization dawned on me, making me stunned and completely breathless. Tears were starting to pool in my eyes, and my vision went a little blurry. There it was again, that feeling I couldn't erase. Why did I have to be so scared?

"He's the one who's making you like this, isn't he?"

My mom used to tell me that when I'd been a kid, I would always fall down, no matter how slowly I walked. I still fell, but in different ways...and those ways w

ere terrifying me.

"It's okay," I mumbled. "It's all in the past now. Everything has changed, T."

"But there's one thing that's stayed the same, Ky."

I lifted my gaze and met those dark eyes of his, making my head spin round and round. His eyes dropped to my lips, then back to my eyes; my heart throbbed, and I felt as if I were about to suffocate, though I still wanted to remain in that exact spot. Slowly he leaned closer, and I unconsciously closed my eyes-

Knock. Knock.

"Kids?" It was Tristan's mother.

We both opened our eyes and, as though realizing what we'd been about to do, jumped away from each other. Our faces were burning so badly, we couldn't look each other in the eye.

Tristan cleared his throat and went outside to talk with her. With shuddering feet, I moved back to the coffee table and began to gather my things.

The door clicked shut behind Tristan, who was just entering the room again.

"Your mom called. She said you need to go home now," he said quietly.

I glanced at the wall clock. It was already a quarter to ten. "Yeah, it's almost my curfew. Wait, I'll just fix these," I added, beginning to collect the photos scattered on the floor and return them to the album.

"No, don't bother. Just leave it to me."

"Oh, all right, then."

Tristan led me outside. We walked side by side without saying a word until we reached the porch, where I faced him and smiled. Shadows loomed over his face, so I couldn't see his expression clearly. "Thanks for the lessons, T. They really helped a lot. I think I can do this by myself now," I said.

"It's cool. You're welcome."

I turned towards the door, but when he caught my hand, I looked back at him, drawing in a breath.

"Wait. You may hate me for this, but I can't help myself."

He pulled me closer, much to my surprise, and bent his face over mine. Our noses bumped, but our lips met tenderly, clumsily, and all the sounds of the world went silent except for the loud beating of our hearts. From the pressure of his hands around my arms, I could tell he was nervous as I was. I didn't even know what to do. I had never imagined in my life that this guy would be the one to steal my first kiss. But... I found myself giving in as his soft lips continued to press on mine with great urgency.

Then slowly, almost teasingly, he pulled away and rested his forehead on mine.

"Sorry for waiting until now, Kylie," he said. "I love you."

As I went to sleep, I repeated those words over and over in my head, as if I had never heard them before and my life now depended on remembering them.

#####

~~Finding Cinderella (39)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- 39 ♡

-Kylie-

It only started on his confession that night that I came to get excited about wa

king up early each day.

As I saw Lacey walked past my bedroom door from the bathroom, I pulled her in and asked for her help in choosing my shirt.

"Lace, what do you think? The blue or the black one?" I held up two different shirts for her to see.

"Wow, it's a miracle you've woke up early."

"Whatever. Just help me pick one of these two."

"Don't you have other options other than those? Some... better ones?"

I dropped my shoulders in dismay. The last time I had my new clothes was two months ago, and they weren't even the chic type or anything. They were more like what a mobster would wear. I had picked them myself and now I admit I regretted it.

Lacey curled her lips as she eyed the clothes and added, "No offense, dear sis, but you really need to learn the art of shopping someday."

I sighed. "I know I suck, but you don't have to rub it in Lacey. Now come on, which of these? Time's running out."

She tilted her head. "Hmm, the blue one?" I tossed the other away and was just about to take my bathrobe off before she said, "Actually no, go with the black instead."

I frowned. "What really?"

"I guess the black one fits you better. I am being serious."

I grabbed the shirt from the bed and threw away the other. As I was getting dressed, I noticed that her eyes were squinting as if she was studying me. Hunting for the comb in my drawer and stepping in front of the mirror to brush my hair ca

refully when she went, "Just one question, Kylie."

"Yeah?"

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" I kept on brushing my hair, hoping the wind outside wouldn't mess it up and make me look like Chewbacca.

"I mean, this whole shirt crisis, the panic state. Not to mention revamping your self for the first time ever. You're wearing skinny jeans and flats instead of your usual ragged ones. It's like you've just raided Hayley Williams' closet! Has the world turned upside down or something?"

"Jeez, relax. Don't freak out," I said, grabbing some of my ancient bobby pins from the deepest of my drawer and inexpertly pushed them on the sides of my head in place.

"I'm not freaking out. I'm just-shocked, that's all. Just look what you're doing now." She leaned on the doorframe. Through the reflection on the mirror, I saw her smiled. "What's with you today, huh?"

"Nothing. Everything's fine, normal - just like always," I said with a snort and continued to check myself in the mirror.

"Yeah, right. Like you waking up early and debating about clothes is 'normal'," she said, drawing air quotes. "I can read your actions so I know something's up. You can't stop me from guessing."

Rolling my eyes, I turned to her with a smirk. "Save your little speeches for Union address. School is going to start within twenty minutes so get ready. Scoot now, chick!" I walked towards her and pushed her out of the door. "Thanks for the help, by the way."

"Don't mention it. It's pretty cool to see the tables have turned now. That only means one thing."

"Oh yeah? What?"

She cackled as she hopped downstairs. "Oh, someone's in looove!" she sang.

"Oh shut up!" I shouted, completely embarrassed. But then it sent me butterflies and laughter bubbles up in my throat just at the thought of it.

I hummed happily, as I thought back over the days that had passed. It had been a great week so far. Not counting those instances where Ronnie would glare at me like some sort of assassin however.

Much to my surprise, Tristan was starting to do things I'd never thought he'd do. It marveled me several times a day when I saw him standing outside the room, waiting for my class to be over so we could go home together. Memories floated through my mind. His grayish eyes beaming down at me as he inclined against my locker, or sat beside me on the front steps of the school and the brush of his hand against mine in the packed hallway.

Yup, it had been a great week.

Everything had come out unexpectedly, but I thought this was how it was supposed to be. It was so crazy. It was funny to think that he would be the one to give a silly smile on my face that would last all day.

He was like a dream- and a nightmare coming true.

It was already the end of the month, and every bulletin board in school must be updated for the upcoming activities of the next month. Out of all the people around here, Julianne was apparently the only one who was eager to do the job, and since it was our free time, I'd decided to help her. She had given me the weird look as we worked on the posters, but hadn't spoken a word. I knew that she already knew why, so she stayed quiet, apparently amused because of the smile showing on her face.

My eyes fell on a poster, which had glided out from the rest when I fumbled them. I knelt down to pick it up. It was about the prom to be held in an exclusive hotel in the city on Friday night, just two weeks away. The words Once Upon A Time were adorned with some cool blue and white design.

"A fairy tale-themed prom?" I snorted as I showed the poster to Julianne. "This is so overdone."

She shrugged and tucked pin on the board. "I think it really fits for spring and is way better than the other ideas that were suggested to the student council."

"What ideas?"

"Crap-tastic ones. Children's party theme, a zombie apocalypse, or even a chemical warfare, like gas masks and radiation suits are the best accessories. Who on earth came up with those?"

"Hoo boy. I wish they had thought of something creative. Something like this school hasn't done before. Say, Alice in Wonderland theme?" I paused. "Or it'd be cooler if it is a Great Gatsby type. Lots of white tables, flashy clothes, stylish decor. Classy but not too tacky..."

"Ooh, how about an I-Prom? And we could dress up an Apple costume or some awesome gadgets made from cardboard boxes," she teased, laughing. "That's unique, okay?"

I laughed as well. "Right. Like we haven't had enough I-Things already."

"Anyhow, why do you seem so interested about the prom? Been thinking about whether to go or not?" She picked another poster from the box. "You look definitely reflective these days."

"Huh, must be the result of global warming," I said sheepishly. Things that happened recently were taking me over, and I didn't know they would have this kind of effect on me.

"Oh, please."

"Okay, well, I actually am being kind of bipolar in that question." I groaned. "But I'm more on the no side. I'm too lazy about the effort I'll have to put into getting ready, you know."

"Of course, your famous inspirational words." She sighed, rolling her eyes. "What if someone ask you out? Will you go?"

At the second she said that, an image of Tristan flashed before me and my perspective shifted. When a boy sees a girl every day, hangs out often with her, and treats her extra nicely than before, was there a greater chance that he would ask her to go to the prom? Darn. I wasn't so good when it came to this. Tristan and I weren't like together-together or anything, considering that I couldn't make up my mind for the realization was still ironically incomprehensible, plus I needed to settle something to this one other guy, so...

I opened my mouth to say, but was abruptly stopped by someone saying, "You girls must have put a lot of effort to get all these posters up, yeah?"

I spun around and almost tripped myself.

Ack-it's him! Right on cue!

"Um, yeah, but we're not the only ones doing the job," I said, trying to act casual. "There are lots of people helping for this thing up, since there are only two weeks left for, you know..." I shrugged. "The big night and all."

Tristan scoffed, still eyeing the poster. "Yeah, it is where the food tastes like crap, girls will go crying in the bathroom, and the DJ plays the Hokey Pokey song. Cool."

"Nice description you have made there, Hartford," Julianne said sarcastically as she put a hand on her hip.

He shrugged. "They said last year's prom sucked, which apparently made sense because it's prom. And prom really sucks. I bet the game night would kick ass better than that."

Boys...

"Hey, how can you say that? Just because it sucked last year doesn't mean it'll still be the same for this year. I think the current committee is much better than the last one. Remember the Valentine ball? It was a blast!"

"It sure was." Tristan grinned at me—so teasingly attractive that made my insides do somersaults. "Anyway, I have to go and pick up a reserved book in the library before my next class starts. Later, Ky!" He brushed my hair playfully before making his way through the crowd, seemingly in a rush.

Julianne put a hand on her lips and crooned, "My, oh my."

"What?"

"I can sense a huge development here," Julianne said as she turned to the board. "And I was like two seconds away from incinerating you because you were frozen up so bad."

How could I not? I had been hanging on every word he had said, waiting for him to ask something—anything—to me about the dance. But it turned out completely disappointing. Had he been even thinking of what he had said earlier?

Okay, so maybe I was being bipolar to this issue once again—I didn't want to go, but I honestly wanted to. Still...

That afternoon on the way home from Crest, I waited for Tristan to mention the prom. He was strangely talkative and told me mostly about school and some other stuff.

"Wanna hear a story, Kyles?" he said after a minute of silence.

"Yeah, sure. As long as it won't disturb the crap out of me," I said sarcastically.

"This is not a creepy campfire tale, Kylie. You really are watching way too much late-night horror shows." He laughed. "I think you'll find this cute. So anyway, there was this fourth-grader in the library," he began. "While she was drawing stuff on her paper, a boy came to her and asked if he could borrow a pencil. They became best friends because of that, but then the boy moved away when they entered the seventh grade."

"The end," I filled in and laughed.

"Nope. This is where the story gets interesting." He cleared his throat and continued, "Fast forward, a couple of years later. The girl was finally in college. While she was studying in the library, a guy came to her and said, 'Hey, can I borrow a pencil?'"

"Then the girl looked up and saw the boy in her childhood, and they'd been dating ever since," I continued and smiled at him. "I knew from the start they're gonna end up together."

"Well, the story doesn't end there," he said, swiveling the wheel. "Scratch the dating part because it never happened. They remained friends, actually. The girl didn't admit that she loved the boy because of the fear of ruining their friendship."

I kept quiet.

"Years later, while the guy was on his way to deliver a soup and medicine for the girl's cold, he unfortunately met a car accident and died," he carried on; his voice was beginning to lower down and it slowly made my heart sink. "Found in his car was also a bouquet of roses and a card that read: you're my best friend for the last seven years. Now, I want to make you as my wife for the next fifty."

I waited for him to add something, but when he didn't, I mumbled, "Th-that's... it?"

"Yeah. The end." He shrugged as if he wasn't moved by that.

"What! Come on! That's-that was disheartening to hear!" I cried. "Change the ending, T."

"I didn't know you can be a sucker for happy endings," he said amusedly.

"But that's just... ugh." I sighed. "I just can't accept it. I've watched Titanic and The Notebook, but that one was really tragic. Wait... was that a real-life story?"

"I was just writing fiction with my mouth, Kyles." He smirked. "But hey, it's close to reality. It can happen in real life. It even might have happened in some part of the world."

"Aw..."

"If I would change its ending, the moral lesson of the story would lose its meaning."

"What moral lesson?"

"When you love a person, don't be hesitant to tell and show your true feelings," he said. "Because no one knows what will happen next."

I snapped my mouth shut as his words knocked my chest.

A few minutes later in deafening silence, he parked his car in front of the house and turned to me, arm resting on the steering wheel. "Hey, can I ask you something?" he said.

Oh, my goat. Maybe he was going to say it. The heaviness in his gaze and the set of his jaw sent me into seizures.

I gulped. "Sure. Ask away!"

"I've been meaning to tell you this earlier, but I seem to forget..."

"It's okay."

"So anyway, would you-"

I mentally danced on the spot. Don't look too eager, I told myself. Don't get excited. Don't accept it right away. Don't-

"Really? Yes! Oh, yes! You bet!" I cried.

He looked puzzled. "Uh, about what?"

I stopped and blinked several times. "Eh...? I-I thought... What were you going to ask?"

"Well, would you mind if I couldn't pick you up tomorrow after school? See, we've got something important to do after class and must wrap everything up before deadline."

My smile froze open. He must have many things to do right now, seeing that he seemed to be occupied with something these days; so, of course, he wasn't thinking about the prom. And I couldn't press that to him either.

Yay, Kylie, way to look like an idiot.

"Oh?" I tried to hide the disappointed tone. "Yeah. It's fine. I know you couldn't get away from it so I really don't mind." Then I forced a laugh, sounding like a retarded donkey.

Relief crossed his face and the smile returned. "Thanks. I thought you would. Anyway, what were you getting so excited about? Wait... Are you up to something?"

Crap. I couldn't just tell him because that would be embarrassing.

"Uh-it's nothing! Nothing. Just forget it," I quickly said and unbuckled the seatbelt.

Before I could get out, he took my hand and I shivered. He hastily pulled me without notice and leaned closer at the second I turned to him. His lips crashed at the corner my lips, and my heartbeat stopped. I quickly pulled away, hands flying on my mouth, eyes widening in surprise.

"I love you, Kylie."

His wicked grin made my blush darken. I suddenly felt light-headed.

"I-Idiot!" I blurted out and stumbled my all way out of the car until I reached my bedroom.

I should be mad at him for stealing a kiss-the second freaking kiss-from me, but in the end, I couldn't do anything but bounced on my bed and squealed on my pillows. My heart was beating abnormally once again.

He got me right there!

I'd never been so happy to see him every single day. We were having a great time with each other, and each time, I felt another piece of me falling for him. Hell, I was completely unaware that those crazy pranks we'd done would turn out like this! And it's like I was falling... I was falling in love...

But I was not.

Well, not entirely.

My emotions were volatile and indecisive. I was still trying to know myself first. I was worried that something inside me wasn't good enough-that something at the core of me was inflexibly... bad. Moreover, there were still issues to settle and subjects to discuss while I was trying to make sense of whatever the heck was going on between us.

I wondered what Tristan was thinking by now. Probably he was stressing out but trying to hide it in any possible way and pulling up an optimistic smile instead.

The only thing that was keeping me away from any deeper affection was doubt. I was falling with the way he made me feel and his personality, but I wasn't falling entirely. I could see all those things being a possibility. Just not yet.

Moments later, I was (surprisingly) cramming with my notes on the study table when my phone buzzed. I was kind of hoping it would be him, but when I lifted it up, it wasn't.

"Kylie, guess what happened back at school," Julianne said after I answered. "Grey asked me out to the prom."

"Really? Wow, that's great, Jules!" I was genuinely happy for her. Imagine after numerous dances and parties that had past these years, a guy finally had the spirit to ask her out!

She breathed. "Huh, right."

"You don't sound as eager as I thought."

"Hello, it's Grey Walter, the moronic meat head!" She was in an obvious state of disinterest. I couldn't help to laugh at her choice of words. "He was like, 'Hey, Julie, how would you like to be with the starting quarterback?' and he sounded like a drunk person like he always is."

"That proves that the charm of your new hairstyle is working," I kidded. "Just like in commercials."

"God if it keeps up, I'm going to shave my head and be like Lord Voldemort but with a nose."

"Harsh. So what'd you say to him? Wait, I guess you gave him a no."

"You can say that again."

"Really, you've already been stressing out about your prom date even before school started and now you just turned down a guy who asked you out for the first time? I mean, are you okay?"

"I just don't want to go with him, jeez. Besides, I'm waiting for this certain someone to ask me out, that's why," she answered.

"Oh, okay. Him. The carrot-top guy." I paused, thinking about it. "Probably Pete hasn't gotten around it yet. I mean, maybe he's taking it for granted or something."

"Maybe. That's how guys are, right?"

"Ah! And maybe he's currently busy saving New York City from Doctor Octopus. Because, you know, he's Peter Parker. The Amazing Spider-Man."

"Kylie!" she shrieked. "I told you not to make fun of his name!"

"I just can't help it!" I cracked up. "Okay, I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Ugh. Like hell it won't. So by the way, have you made up your mind about the prom?"

"Well... I'm not sure," I said reluctantly.

"You are going. Right? Right?"

"Darn it, fine."

"Sweet. So I suppose you're going out with T. Has he already asked you?"

"Uh, no."

"Oh, same status as well, huh? He'll surely get to it soon. You have been seeing him frequently."

"Well..." Gladly we were talking through the phone, or she would have seen the blush rising up on my cheeks.

"It's not like I was surprised. And of course, when I say 'seeing', it doesn't mean the usual friendship type but, you know, like, seeing in a special kind of way," she prattled rapidly that I barely could hang on to her words.

"Oh, uh, so... I guess it's kind of, like, um-"

She sighed dreamily. "You guys make such an adorable couple."

"Gee, you sound like a grandma," I said, smiling. A smile that could mean anything.

"And you two would totally have such wonderful babies."

"Holy fudge on a stick."

"Peace out! Just kidding." She laughed. "Okay, back to the topic. Probably Tristan's still trying to get away from, you know, Fiona and her creepy 'he's-off-limits' commandment, like what she'd done to him back in the Ball. But on the bright side, I've heard that she has found a new target-some guy she met through text. Hopefully that guy would finally be the one who can keep her in a cage."

"Speaking of her, have you notice that she's a no-show lately?"

"Uh-huh, and this is good news."

"You really don't want to see her."

"FYI, me and half of the population in school doesn't want to see her, like, ever. Just who likes to deal with the Drama Queen? Well, maybe just those people who also have personality issues like her. In any case, don't you like it? I mean, you're finally going to have the best night of your life without having a stuck-up witch who's trying to scare the wits out of you during the event."

"Actually, I don't have an issue with Fiona because I always steer clear from her. We're cool, I guess."

"Don't be assured of that. I think the reason why she doesn't bother you at all is that you've got Tristan by your side. Fiona can press her Mega B with an itch button to whomever and whenever she likes. It's better to be very careful."

From her and Ronnie, too, I thought, but didn't voice it out since I knew she would turn this talk into some kind of a radio drama.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. "Still, if all else fails, I'm going to prom with a cardboard cutout of Lelouch because screw people."

"Oh, may Jesus take your wheel," she muttered.

It wasn't until Calculus class the next day I made up my mind that I couldn't stand the indecision any longer. Back at lunch and at the restroom a while ago, two girls from another class had asked me if I was going with Tristan. I had simply smiled and said nothing. I realized this situation was getting a bit complicated. I really couldn't say I was going with him and neither could I say that I wasn't. Aside from Julianne and Lacey, I couldn't admit to anyone that I hadn't been asked.

As Mr. Cross was writing test questions on the board, I decided that when I would have the chance to see him later, I'd bring up about the topic and find out whether I had a date or not. I got this feeling that maybe he'd decided not to ask me out to any dances anymore after that whole pre-Valentine ball incident where we had a wild goose chase in the city after he'd forced me to go with him. But it had happened too long ago, and it wouldn't be the same now. I'd still give a shot in asking him in spite of that. And maybe... just maybe... I would finally have the courage to admit what I really feel.

Satisfied that I had at least made a decision, I eagerly clicked my pen on and focused on the test.

An hour of sitting and thinking over my most hated subject felt like one millennium. Yet for the first time ever, I didn't have a frustrated feeling of ripping my hair out while answering. I felt confident as I passed my paper to Mr. Cross, and he raised an eyebrow at me but didn't say a word. Undoubtedly, it was a great achievement in my lifetime so far.

Screw this-I would survive!

Feeling a bit woozy and warmly euphoric, I went out of the room and hoped to see him anytime soon. As I rounded a corner, I heard distant familiar voices that made me take a quick stop. They seemed to be having an argument.

"You should stop it, man, seriously."

"Why would I?" A laughter. "Too bad, I already have started, and it got me hooked."

"But that's-that's not the part of the deal! I just said-"

They stopped as I stepped out. My mouth hung open when I realized that the voices belonged to Clark and Erik. Their eyes expanded as they noticed me, and silence then proceeded.

What is happening?

"Oh hey, guys," I greeted them in confusion, breaking the ice. "Sorry, I... didn't mean to interrupt you two."

"Hey, Kylie. Don't worry, it's totally cool," Erik said, smiling, contrasting the dark glare on Clark's face.

"So what are you guys up to?" I kept on shifting my glances between them.

"Ah, just talking about something. Not important, though."

Clark was looking at Erik as if he was about to whack him with a baseball bat. That somehow bothered me. I'd never seen that kind of expression on Clark, and I supposed there was something going on with him. Did it have something to do with Lacey? Were they having a fight or something? But Lacey was being herself all day—all bubbly, not having any sign of misery on her face or anything. Surely, she didn't have any problem with him, because if there was, I knew she'd talk about it immediately.

So what is with Clark today? And what does this have to do with Erik?

Millions of questions were running in my mind. I was about to ask Clark but he walked away without saying a word.

"Don't mind him, Ky. I know that guy. He can deal with whatever issues he is having and get over them sooner."

Oh, well. Tristan and the others can probably handle him better. I sighed and turned to Erik.

"Anyway, I'm glad to have you around here," he continued. "Can I have you for a moment? I wanted to tell you something."

I pulled up a small smile, nodding. "Sure. I have something to tell you, too."

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~~Finding Cinderella (40)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- 40 ♡

-Tristan-

"Hey, T, why didn't you come to the party last night?" Justin asked as I came to our table in the cafeteria.

"What party?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"We were texting you about it yesterday."

The memory popped in my head, and I sighed, "Ah, right. I remember it now, sorry."

"You missed the brawl at Devlin's place!" Grey exclaimed, slapping me on the back. "Man, you should've seen Jacob's face caked with Flynn's throws after he saw him making out with his girlfriend. I heard the poor guy has a broken rib now."

I shrugged. "I wouldn't have wanted to go, anyway," I said, ignoring Grey's prattles.

"Whoa, that's a little odd, coming from you. You're known as the social penguin, but you've been missing at parties these days," Justin observed, drawing his eyebrows.

"Yeah," chimed Ryo. "The party sucked ass, though, since you couldn't make it. Everyone was, like, waiting for you to come."

Justin shot him an incredulous look. "Wow, you're saying that like you were ever been there."

"It was just something I could imagine."

"Mind you, Ryo, you can't go to parties since you're the one who's doing our homework," said Grey coolly, and took a bite from his burger as we snickered about his remark.

It was actually true—Ryo would never get invited to parties since he said himself that he would rather sit at home all night, do his assignments or play on Xbox live, than get wasted.

"Kutabare," Ryo swore under his breath. "You pricks seriously owe me."

While the others were trying to figure out what the heck he meant by that unfamiliar word, Justin faced me and said, "Actually he's right. Everybody asked us thousands of times about you. They were expecting for you to pop out."

"I've been busy."

A chuckle slipped from his mouth as he shook his head. "You don't say, T," he said. "With what?"

"Ah," I breathed. "Well, some stuff."

I wanted to surprise Kylie with something important, so I'd actually been organizing all the things I needed for it. After I dropped her home yesterday, I took another drive downtown to buy all the necessary materials so that I could start with them after school today.

I had to make sure everything would go the way I planned it. Hell, I couldn't even sleep straight last night because of the considerable amount of ideas flowing in my head. And just thinking of Kylie's reaction once she sees the surprise made me even more fired up to start.

"By that, you mean with Kylie? You spend most of your time with her," he pointed out.

I frowned and asked, "Where are you going with this?"

"We're your best buds, T, but you rarely hang out with us with us anymore."

"You mean, you think I'm neglecting you guys?" I said amusedly. "C'mon, I'm not like that. It's just..." I paused, slowly feeling guilty. Somehow, he was right. I always tend to forget everything and everyone else whenever I'm with Kylie. "Never mind. It's hard to explain," I said instead, "but let me clear this up - I'm not ignoring any of you. Okay?"

"Gosh, T, I'm so touched," Grey said in a saccharine voice, dramatically pressing his hands on his chest.

Ryo punched Grey's arm lightly and fell into stitches of laughter. "So gay, man."

Smirking, Justin bobbed his at me and said, "Hey, looking at things now, it seems like you're changing too, bro."

"Huh?"

"Where was that proud and aristocratic ego you've always had, huh, 'prince'?" He nudged me on the side.

To be honest, that title I used to live with and be proud of sounded so foreign to my ears now. I guess he was right. I hadn't noticed that I was slowly, changing day by day. In this last year alone, my life had turned upside down, and it was because of her. Kylie had been right after all; it's plain stupid to care about the social image everyone else sees. What's the use of this so-called "prince"-like aura, if I barely reach the girl I love?

A smile snuck on my face. "No one cares, right?" I answered, shrugging.

"I still can't believe that you, you who have always had that kind of issue, wouldn't be troubled over that anymore."

I noticed that all eyes were on me, and they all felt sincere and welcoming for the first time.

Grey patted me on the back and said, "Welcome back, Tristan."

"Hand over the glue," I said, shaking my damp hair away from my eyes. Clark grabbed the small plastic bottle beside him and handed it to me. "Thanks, man. Sorry if I dragged you into this job. I know you've got the whole afternoon with Lacey, but I don't think I can finish all of this ahead of time, just by myself."

"Nah. S'all right, Tris. I told her I would be helping you with some stuff, and she said it's okay," he said. He was working on the letters that were traced on red construction papers. Currently, he was outlining the letters M and O with knowhow.

"So, have you thought of taking her to the prom? I think it'd be cool if we guys can have a double date and then ditch the dance later on."

"Nope. Haven't made a move or anything yet."

"Jeez, what are you waiting for? Christmas? I say you ask her straightaway. She'll say yes, absolutely. I mean, she's your girlfriend, right? So quit slacking."

He let out a small chuckle. "Well, look who's talking."

I snapped my mouth shut and heaved a sigh. "Oh damn, sorry. I'm being such a hypocrite now. Okay I know I've been slacking these past few days, and that I've just dived into this task last minute, but that's why I'm working my ass off over this, so it's finished before this week ends."

"Don't worry bro. We've got your back. There are only a few things left to polish up and then we're done." He bent down a little over the table, and began to slice the letters.

"I hope Cox will allow me to use the room this Friday," I muttered, as I wiped the excess glue away from the Styrofoam's edges. Hmm, not bad for a masterpiece. There were a few fingerprints and dark smudges on the pink wrapper, but what the hell. No one could blame me if I sucked at arts and crafts. It's the thought that counts, right?

"Wow, you're really making this very special for Kylie, huh?"

"Of course!" I grinned. "If I ask her like this, which I don't think she'll expect, there are fewer chances of her saying no. Then I'll win the date. How's that for a strategy?"

He shook his head in amusement. "Dude, the evil is strong with that one."

I nudged him. "Cut me some slack, will you? I just don't want to blow everything again like the incident before the ball."

"Ah, I heard about that from Grey. He said she smacked your head off after you sneaked into her bedroom in the middle of the night, just so you could ask her out?"

I stared incredulously at him. "What? That's what he said? Grey-that friggin' idiot. He's making up versions of his own." I shook my head. "No, really. It was a long and very different story. I pushed her to go with me; she ran away. The whole plan was just a prank actually, and she figured out... so yeah. Bad move."

"Okay... But this time you're still, like, pushing her to go with you. She'll see the effort you've made and she'll have no choice but to say yes. Even if she might, you know, not like it deep inside," he said. My eyes flashed and he laughed, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Fine. I'm an ass already."

I grunted and went back to my work. "At least I'm asking her out in the right way," I replied. "And it's not because I have to, but because I want to."

"All the little things you do for her..."

"I just want to see her smile."

We spent a couple of minutes working in silence. I checked my wristwatch. It was already quarter to four. We'd been working for an hour now, but we were almost done. And Kylie's probably gone home by now.

"So I guess you and her are now an item, huh?" Clark asked after a moment.

"Not yet." I turned to him. "I mean, almost but, not quite. We're heading on to that now, I know." Boy, I had truly been in seventh heaven when I'd finally confessed to her, that I barely managed to not dive up, punch the air, and charge around the place with my jacket over my head screaming Yesss!

"Man, I still remember those times when you two would be at each other's throat over insignificant things, and now the vibe is changing..."

"Yeah." I laughed. "We're getting along better than ever now, so I guess you could say I won my pass to the next stage."

"Oh yeah?"

A smile spread across my face. I couldn't seem to find the perfect words to describe the days when I was with her. I was always trying to make her happy, surprising her from time to time, and locking my hands with hers whenever I could. Yes, I knew she still had her insecurities. We all do, right? But that wasn't going to stop me from being with her.

There was only one more leap left to take before I could finally reach her, and make my goal come true. All I had to do was make her mine on the same day I ask her to go with me to Prom, and that would make it official.

Clark smiled, though he seemed to be hesitant. "Good luck, bro." He patted me on the back.

I peered at him, slightly quizzical. "Thanks-I really need that."

He lowered his head and exhaled deeply after a short while. "Tris, I don't know how to say this to you," he muttered and paused. "But... I'm sorry, man."

"About what? What do you-?"

Ryo burst in the room at the second. He was sweating and panting all over, as if he had spent the whole time running. His dark, almond-shaped eyes flicked to my direction.

"T! I finally found you!" he exclaimed. "I've been searching room to room just to find you-" His voice faded as he scanned the messy place. "What are you guys doing? What's with all this junk?"

"Ah, it seems like I have a lot of explaining to do, huh?" I said, grinning. "Well, this is actually the stuff I've been doing. We're making a sign for-"

"Save it. There's no time for explanation. You should get outta here and face Ronnie outside."

"What?"

"I ran into her few moments ago. She's fuming, T. I had to step away before she could tear me to pieces. She demanded me to look for you."

I frowned. "She's like that these days. What does she want?"

"I dunno. Maybe it's insanely important. You really need to go now and calm her down before she could literally blow up the whole school!"

"Jeez, Ryo, you watch too many cartoons," I said, shaking my head. "Fine, if tha

t's what she wants." I turned towards the door. "Clark?"

He nodded, giving a thumbs-up. "Yeah, I can handle this, T."

"Cool. I'll settle this real quick."

I found Ronnie sitting alone on one of the benches. I had expected her to face me with anger and start bitching at me but, when I went to her side, she lifted her head up and I saw hesitance clouding her eyes, as if meeting up with me was a mistake.

I didn't want to snap at her, seeing how she was right now, so I said in a casual voice, "Veronica."

"Tristan," she said quietly. "You came."

"Ryo said you wanted to talk to me." I sat beside her, leaving a wide space between us. "And I know you've been trying to tell me something for a quite long while now. So... what is it?"

"You sound uncertain." She tried to smile, yet it was more a look of contempt than an expression of amusement. Her eyes weren't focused on me as she said, "If you don't want to know, then you don't have to. It seems like I'm bothering you a lot, right?"

I exhaled. "I just wasn't expecting this. Look, I'm here already. Why don't you cut the chase and tell me whatever this is all about? I'll try and listen."

The rustling of the wind against the trees was the only sound I could hear when silence settled between us. I stayed rooted in my seat as I patiently waited for her to say something. Her eyes were strangely puffy these days; even her make-up couldn't cover the circles around them, and she looked pale, too. Had she been crying or what?

I couldn't help to be troubled, and when I was about to ask her, she said, "It's ... about stuff happening around recently." She forced another smile again as she

e faced me. "Looking at things now, I wonder why I didn't notice how much you and Kylie suited each other from the beginning."

Ah, so that was what she'd been thinking over these past days; I should've expected that. I didn't know if she meant what she'd said as a compliment, or if she was just mocking the whole thing. It was kind of hard to tell from her expression.

I simply smiled at her remark as I looked into the distance.

"Do you really love her?" she asked softly, reluctance evident in her tone.

"I would be lying if I say no."

Then after a moment, I heard her taking long deep breaths. Alarmed, I turned to her. A tear slipped from her eye, and she quickly wiped it away with her hand. Ronnie's face was completely red, worse than the face of someone with a high fever.

I tried to touch her shoulder, but she recoiled.

"Ronnie... why are you crying?"

"Why? You're asking why?" she choked between her sobs. "Are you really that dense when it comes to my feelings?"

Crap, I was dealing with this kind of issue again.

"Listen, if you'd just tell me what this was all about, then I could--"

"Tell? No, T, I've been showing you what this was all about!" she exclaimed; her fists balled on her lap. She was breathing heavily as tears started to pool around her eyes once again. "I'm in love with you, Tristan."

Blinking my eyes, I was speechless.

"All I wanted was for you to understand that! Is that too much to ask for?" She hiccupped. "I've been in love with you since we were young. And it's been years, Tristan! Years! I tried to erase it, I tried to forget it. But I'm still trapped." She buried her face in her hands. "I'm trapped...."

I gulped, feeling a little nauseous because of this unexpected turn of events. "Ron, you know, I..." I paused, took a deep breath, and continued: "I-I've been aware of that ever since."

"You were?" She bit her bottom lip. "I-If that was the case, then why? Why didn't you love me back? I could have - would have done anything for it to work out. Even after you make me feel like nothing by ignoring me, I still love you more than I can put it into words, and I can't stop."

"You asked me why," I said in a calm voice, "The truth is, I liked you." She looked straight in my eyes, and I carried on: "I did like you, Ron. But you changed a lot. If truth be told, I don't... I don't like the way you treat me or other people now. You used to be better than that. What happened? Where was that Veronica I used to know?"

Her jaw clenched as though she was trying to hold back her tears. "You know, Tristan," she spoke, voice cracking. "You could change so many times, but I would still want you." She pressed her lips. "But I guess that doesn't apply to everyone, right? Oh God... I thought everything I did back then was right. Turns out, I've been screwing up my chances, by being a huge bitch towards other people. Yeah, I... I could've done it better..."

I pushed a thin smile for reassurance. I was glad that she had admitted it herself. Perhaps it was a good start.

"If I go back to being my old self, T, will you... finally love me back?"

I looked down on the ground. I'm sorry, were the words I wanted to say, but I didn't know how to without hurting her.

As if seeing my expression, a soft, impassive laughter came from her lips. "I knew it. You can never learn to love me, can you?"

"Have you ever known someone who can teach a heart how to beat?" I continued to smile sympathetically. "None, right? It simply means that you can't teach someone

e or something to love the other. It would be called forcing otherwise." I shrugged. "I honestly don't know much about this myself. The only thing I'm sure about is: love is something natural-an immense thing, which doesn't have a straight answer."

"Seems like I still have a lot to learn." She gazed down her lap. "About Kylie-who is she to you?"

My smile widened as images of Kylie floated through my head. "She's the girl who kills me every day, yet the one who keeps me alive."

Ronnie only kept on smiling in melancholy as silence came again.

"I lost," she whispered after a moment. I raised an eyebrow at her, and she shook her head. "Never mind."

I said cheerfully, "There are lots of other good guys out there, Ron-"

"But they're not as good as you."

Whoa, easy.

I raked my fingers through my hair. "Well, uh-I mean-"

She snorted, rolling her eyes. "I know what you meant, T. But no, not now. I still have to get my shit together."

"Okay. I understand."

"Thanks." She smiled again; sadness still lingered in her eyes. "Can you do me a favor, Tristan? I know this whole drama irritates you like hell already, and I'm sorry for that. This would be the last time I'd bother you about this. And I won't be a huge pain between you and Kylie anymore. Never again. I'll leave you guys alone, I promise that." She raised a hand. "Cross my heart, hope to die. Just do me this one last thing."

Can I trust her? I asked myself. After all the things she'd done, there was only a pinch left of my trust for her. Yet, seeing the way she looked at me right now, the way she spoke the words - it made me sympathize for her more. She was probably trying to change for the better now, so I think I should give her a chance. Besides, I wanted to know what the favor she was asking me for.

I nodded. "Yeah? What is it?"

"Kiss me."

-Kylie-

"What?" Blood rushed to my cheeks as I went completely stiff on the spot. I was shaking so badly that I could barely hold the hamburger and the cup of Coke in my hands.

"I said, how about going to the Prom with me?" Erik uttered again. He laughed as he brushed his hair. "I'm sorry if I spoke too fast. I was just too anxious, see."

I had been so absorbed in Tristan that it hadn't struck me Erik might ask me to go to the event. I had never expected something like this would happen. Not today. This was such a terrible situation!

"E-Erik..."

"Please don't think this is a sort of a joke or whatever. I'm asking you out for real."

"So... you've gone treating me these" -I motioned the snacks like an eight-year-old kid in McDonalds- "just to ask that... question?"

"Gee, uh, yeah? You know, just to make an impression." He rubbed the back of his neck, looking away. "Damn, I'm not good at this," he muttered to himself.

We'd been spending the whole time strolling around the whole school, joking and laughing, talking about whatever came to our minds. Neither of us had immediately jumped into the real talk, as if we'd been secretly trying to figure out what the other should say first. I'd still been trying to think of a way to say my thoughts to Erik, without making him feel bad. Maybe he had been with his own thoughts himself, too, and he had only mustered up the courage to say so just now, here in this empty place on the back of the school premises.

I began to pace away. The snacks he'd treated me to were starting to get cold, but I suddenly didn't have the appetite to eat them now.

Erik followed behind. "So... what do you think?" There was a note of pleading in his voice.

Oh no, I had to choose my words carefully. How would I say that I wasn't up for it, without sounding mean and making him feel bad? Ugh, no, scratch that. Even if I tried declining him in the politest manner, he naturally would still feel bad. But I couldn't just walk around here like he wasn't there. I had to say something.

I stopped and faced him. "I'm-I'm sorry, Erik," I finally said. "I can't. I... I already have a date." And I almost told myself that I did.

Erik blinked. His face was completely pale. "Oh. I see..." he said hesitantly. "With Tristan, right? I should have known; I'm sorry."

I bit my lip. He knew that I didn't want to go with him. He must even know that I didn't really have a date. We just stood there, facing one another in silence. I lowered my bloodshot face and stared at my sneakers.

"So I guess I don't stand a chance with you anymore, huh? This is what you wanted to tell me, isn't it?"

My head shot up. He was staring at the field. I was ashamed of hurting Erik's feelings, and I knew he was embarrassed to have his feelings hurt: he sounded uncertain about what he had said. I wanted to speak, but I couldn't. My lips were sealed for the moment.

Seeing a trash bin nearby, I went to it and dumped the half-eaten snacks. My shaky palms were sweating so I brushed them on my jeans. I took a deep breath, before I faced Erik and started, "You see, Erik-"

Just then, the wind breeze through and I heard voices. Familiar voices. Curious, I followed them, heart starting to pound loudly in my chest, as I was getting closer. And there on the benches were two figures. They were so close with each other and—and I just realized they were kissing.

I knew it was rude to stare, but I just couldn't help to do so.

The scene was near perfect. It was like watching a fairy tale.

Her hand gripped on his shoulder, while he just sat there, face unreadable. His eyes were open, staring at the girl. I couldn't tell if the kiss was passionate, or genuine, or... whatever. I couldn't even tell if I was looking at an illusion or not. My heartbeat thundered in my ears, as I held my breath and reality smacked into my chest.

There were two things that awoke me that time:

The guy was Tristan.

And the girl was Ronnie.

A hand wrapped softly around my arm from behind. I turned to Erik, forcing a smile, and started to walk away.

"Kylie, wait," he called. "Do you want me to drive you home?" As much as I wanted to, I knew he was trying to avoid the question about what we had just seen.

I shook my head. "No, t-thank you. I can go home by myself."

"Kylie—"

I turned him with a smile still plastered on my face. "I'm okay, Erik. Don't worry. Everything's fine!" I waved my hand in the air.

And when I looked away, the road blurred as my eyes filled with tears.

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~~Finding Cinderella (41)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- 41 ♡

-Kylie-

The clock ticked slowly, I began to count down the seconds before I could walk out of the room. The students all sat at the edge of their seats with their books neatly stacked, ready to lift off. The bell clanged and everyone walked out of the room within seconds.

Tristan stood up and went to Mrs. Cox to talk. I quickly stacked my books in my bag and went to Julianne's table.

"Let's go, Jules," I said as I failed to add an eager tone but managed to pull up a thin smile.

Julianne raised her eyebrows and shrugged. "Okay. Wait a sec." She fixed her notepads and pushed them into her bag.

"So how was it, Tristan?" I heard Ronnie asking him. Although I wasn't facing them, I could see her giving him a wide smile.

"Got it all covered," Tristan said.

"Great! Wish you luck, then."

"They're sure getting along just fine now, huh..." Julianne observed them. "I just noticed ever since yesterday."

"Yeah," I muttered. "Maybe just like always before."

When Julianne was about to ask me, I turned away and met Tristan's bright eyes. I slightly bent my head down and passed beside him. Julianne followed behind me in a hurry.

"Kylie, Julianne!" his voice, together with the thumps of his shoes, echoed through the hall. He managed to catch up with us, and with a huff he said, "What's the rush, guys? Can't wait for lunch?" He laughed.

Not a hint of amusement was visible on my face. Julianne shifted her eyes back and forth between us, as if it were a tennis match, before hesitantly speaking, "I have to go to the restroom real quick. You guys go ahead," she spoke as she slowly backed away soon she disappeared in the crowd, leaving us standing awkwardly.

It felt uncomfortable, as the only sound was silence and growing uneasiness in the air. Silently the two of us made our way through the pack of students towards the cafeteria.

"Oh, hey, guess what, Ky? I'm almost done with my work now, so I think I can drive you home today," Tristan said after a while, "but... say, want to come with me to the city before that? I've got something to-"

I shook my head. "I have to go straight home after school, I have homework to finish."

"You can do it some other time. Come on, Ky, come with me?"

"No, thanks," I deadpanned, still without looking at him. "Just invite one of your friends to come with you. Or with-" I shrugged "-Ronnie, I guess?"

Before I went ahead of him, I couldn't help giving him one look. His expression changed from excitement to bafflement.

What am I doing? But it was all so awfully obvious! Tristan had a right to choose a girl like Ronnie because... he wasn't... we're not even....

I didn't know what we were anymore.

Time became treasured when I was with him, and I had been so sure everything was falling into their right places... but I had no right to be that sure. It didn't always go in that kind of way. Everything would always have its twists and turns.

If only I had known this would happen. If only I had thought things over and over again. I got my hopes up just because we'd had a great few times with another.

In spite of that, I admit I couldn't come to hate him. It wasn't his fault I was so foolish when it came to this. I could not-maybe even never-face him boldly like before. Maybe it would be better if I would avoid him... if I could. A few good times, and one amazing week, and now that was just it.

That noon I didn't proceed to the cafeteria but sat instead, under the shade of a tree outside the school building and chewed at an apple I had brought from home. From a distance, I saw Erik with his friends. When he spotted me, he bid good bye at them and walked over.

He grinned. "Hey. What are you doing alone here?"

"I'm just getting some fresh air," I said evasively.

"Do you mind if I steal a patch of grass?"

I wanted to be alone with my thoughts right now, actually. However, I found myself gesturing on the space beside me, saying, "No. Feel free."

He sat and rested his head on the tree, looking up on the blue sky. "Nice place isn't it; really cozy in here."

"Yeah, cozy." I smiled and stared at the sky, too, "the wind makes me want to doze off."

"You can lay your head on my shoulder and sleep, if you really want to," he said and as I looked back at him. "I think there's still an hour left before class."

Don't worry, I won't run off or anything. Come on."

"An hour wouldn't cut it. I might oversleep for twelve hours, and you wouldn't be able to wake me up easily during that time. Thanks, anyway." Besides, I didn't want to sleep on his side because that would be awkward. There were several people around who might see.

"You're just like the person I knew, Kylie."

For a few moments, he casually talked and laughed about stuff. I knew that he knew what I was thinking, and I silently thanked him for making an effort to make me feel better. Still I couldn't keep the thoughts away from my mind, because the more I tried to shove them away, the more they came.

I couldn't get that scene off my head. It kept on swirling around; making me confused and unsettled even more. I didn't understand why Tristan had done that with Ronnie in secrecy.

Is he... playing with me?

I shut my eyes tight. I didn't want to imagine that.

I'd been trying to figure it out myself, but I couldn't come up with the surest answer. I wanted to know why, yet at the same time, I didn't want to hear the reason because it might turn out to be something I never ever wanted to hear.

Darn it.

I put my chin on my crossed arms and stared blankly at the field.

"Kylie?"

I raised my head and span to face Erik.

He was staring straight to me, so close I could clearly see the freckles spread across his nose bridge and the dark specks on his huge blue eyes. I gazed back a

t him, stuck on the spot. The way he looked at me began to make me have flashbacks of what had happened to these previous days with Tristan.

"Yes?" I whispered.

He didn't move. He just stayed in that position. "You suddenly fell silent. I thought you dozed off with your eyes open."

Shaking my head, I squeezed my eyes to snap me into reality. "Ah, darn. I was spaced out. Sorry. So... you were saying?" I said.

"What's wrong?" he asked after a moment.

I shook my head. "N-nothing. Everything is okay."

"Yeah, that's what you seem to say all this time."

I swallowed, getting insecure because of the proximity. Erik took a short move forward, and I quickly pulled up myself away; heart beating up so fast.

"Look at the time! I... I think we should go back inside," I stammered, tapping the dusts off my pants. "The bell's gonna ring for a few minutes." I grabbed my bag from the ground and slung it on my shoulder.

"You know what, Kylie?" he said, not looking at me. He grabbed a pebble from the grass and lazily threw it away. "It would be a waste of time over thinking about that guy." He turned to me with a smile and a heavy gaze. "Listen, if he doesn't treat you right, I will."

Stunned, I stood there, blinking.

"Erik..." I started to say, but I couldn't seem to find the right words to say. So after a moment, I said instead, "Thanks."

Then I left.

The lessons of Mr. Cross that I should have been devoting on seemed to be wasted now. I stared blankly at the board while he wrote equations with a squeaking chalk. Before I knew it, the bell finally brought the period to a close. I quickly scribbled the next day's assignment before he could erase them.

Afterwards, I grabbed my bag and started to walk out, but took a quick pause when Mr. Cross said, "Your grades are starting to pull up, Miss Harris. Good job, and always keep it up."

A little joy fluttered in my chest. "Yes, Sir. Thank you." I nodded with a smile before leaving.

I looked at both different directions of the hallway, checking if Tristan was around. I wished I could tell him the good news about my grades, but I knew I couldn't bear to face him. When it was clear, I went to the right where the exit was

.

I came across with Grey outside. While passing by, he waved his hand. "Hey, Kylie. Going home now?" he called. "If you're looking for your boyfriend, he's right over--"

"He's not my boyfriend!" I blurted out, and honestly, they were not at all the words I had meant to speak.

Moving fast, I didn't dare to look back since I might see Tristan right there. I had a feeling he was just at a distance, watching.

The moment I reached my house after all that walking and running, I threw my bag on the desk and rolled on the bed in exhaustion. It isn't really easy to avoid someone... A few moments later, my cellphone buzzed. Pulling it out from my pocket, I lifted it up, and my throat went dry when I saw the messenger's name.

Him: Hey.

I put down my cellphone and covered my eyes with my arm, trying to get some rest. My cellphone buzzed again after several minutes.

Him: Are you in your place already? Why didn't you wait for me?

And then...

Him: Kylie, is there something wrong? You're acting kinda weird today.

Him: Come on, Kyles, reply...

Him: Uh... is anyone there?

Him: I'm a huge bother right now, am I not? Ha-ha...

Him: Kylie?

I rolled to the other side of the bed, scrolling down the phone's screen, my chest tightening. A yawn got out from my mouth, and after some time, I fell asleep with my phone still buzzing because of his messages.

-Tristan-

It's somewhat strange, wasn't it?

How all of a sudden, somebody just woke up and decided never to talk to you again. The worst part was that, every time you wanted to talk to that person, the conversation just quickly sapped down to a silence and then it would leave you hanging.

Thousands of thoughts filled my head as I observed Kylie these days, and I couldn't help but feel like she was slowly drifting away. She was changing routes whenever I was there, as if she was trying to keep herself from running into me. I was ready for this Friday to come that I couldn't stop myself from being too eager,

but seeing things now, it seemed like the plan was going to be blown away.

The thought of that and of everything else that would possibly happen after both ended me to no end.

I kept on tapping my fingers on the table as I waited for Kylie to arrive. Julianne was munching on her sandwich in silence, but I knew she'd been watching me. Lacey and Clark, who were on the other side of the table, were talking quietly with each other.

I stopped tapping and sighed. "Where the heck is she?"

Julianne shrugged. "I don't know. She just went out in a rush after class. This is like the third time she's not here during lunch."

"Yeah." I flipped my phone up. I'd been waiting to see her reply even just a word, but she never did.

"T, are you and her in a fight or something?" Lacey asked. "I notice she's sort of acting differently. I mean, she doesn't talk too much right now and it's so not her..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes lifted up.

We all turned around and saw Kylie. All of my skepticisms faded on the second I saw her smiling at last. Readily, she sat to the other side of the seat, squeezing Julianne between us, and began to chatter about whatever was on her mind, like the usual. I thought everything was back in place now.

But it was only just a thought.

The time flew by, and yet she acted like I wasn't there, no matter how many shots I took to make her notice me. Yeah, I was lucky enough to keep a conversation with her longer than a few sentences. And the conversation wasn't even carefree and entertaining anymore. My words were short and hers sometimes held resentment to them.

What's going on?

The bell rang through the noisy crowd and the four of us began to grab our things

s. Clark, Lacey, and Julianne headed on to the same direction upstairs since the ir next class was on the same floor. The only ones left were Kylie and me, and w e walked alongside each other without talking. I noticed the distance between us became wide again.

I stole a glance at her. She was staring straight ahead.

Grey came into view and jogged towards me. But he took a quick pause and a step back when he passed her. "Oh hey, Ky. About what happened the day before yesterd ay...?"

"What?"

"Uh... I didn't really mean to say that," he said, raising his hands on his ches t like a shield. "It was a joke. But see, I just thought you-"

"Oh, that. Just drop it. It doesn't matter," she said, shrugging, and entered th e classroom.

Staggered, Grey turned back to me. "Oh, my God, Tristan, I thought she was going to rip my legs off," he said with a shudder. "What's up with her being so crabb y?"

"I don't know," I said, shrugging. "She's been quiet these days."

"Aha, that's probably her PMS, Pissed at Men Syndrome." Grey guffawed, slapping my shoulder. "Be afraid, T. She'll breathe fire with multiple explosions in the background."

I elbowed him. "Jeez, that's not an effective excuse you pissed her off."

"Oh, I'm sorry I never thought she wasn't going to take it as a joke," he mocked and shook his head. "She could've perhaps appeared shy about it. But instead sh e all went like the Incredible Hulk and fled away."

I didn't speak up as we moved along towards our room. Grey could have a point. I had seen the whole scenario and thought-I really thought she would be embarrass ed about what he had said to her. But she had only yelled: "He's not my boyfrien

d!"

Ouch.

It would have been easier to bear if she laughed it off and made faces, because that was how she always reacted. I had never expected she would scream and storm off like that over a little thing; not at any time nowadays, because come on, she knew that I loved her and we're already heading-

Wait.

She knew that I loved her... but the question was that: did she really believe it?

You see, every time I told her those three words, she would always just say "idiot" and nothing else.

Maybe I was still frightening her.

Maybe she still couldn't hold the fact that I was being real.

Catching the sight of my serious look, Grey tapped my back reassuringly. "Don't let it take over you, dude. Maybe she's just in her moody phase right now. You know now women would always be ticked off easily when their hormones go fucking crazy." He snickered. "It'll pass real soon, T."

Yeah, it could be that I was just going over the top now. I hope he was right about what he'd said.

I nodded, my mouth pulling up a lazy smile.

"Oh, by the way," Grey said, "were you able to watch the game last night? Boy, it was intense, wasn't it? No one scored until the last minute and..."

We started to discuss the football game, and it managed to pull my thoughts from the real concern at the present. Sometimes, I wished I could live in Grey's head.

d. I swear it must be very peaceful there.

Friday—the day I'd been waiting for finally came.

Unfortunately, all of my plans fell through at the last moment.

"What do you mean you can't?" Ryo exclaimed.

I flew my hands up in frustration. "I blew it off. It's over. I can't do it because I know it's going to be pointless."

"Pointless? Then why did you make this all in up in the first place? You should've finished what you've started," Justin stated matter-of-factly as he twirled the basketball on his finger.

"It's just..." I sighed, pressing my nose bridge. "Ah. It's kind of hard to explain, man. For all I know, my enthusiasm was winding down now."

"That sucked ass, T," Ryo remarked.

"Yeah, tell me about it."

Putting the ball down, Justin reclined in his seat. He crossed his hands on the back of his head and said, "So... anything else you have in mind, like a plan B or something?"

"Actually I was so confident with this that I even forgot to have a backup plan," I said with a dull laughter. "I don't know. I guess I should just see how everything turns out. Kylie's being so complicated right now, and I don't know what to do with her."

Justin looked at me. "Say, Tristan... I'll give you ten bucks to let me kiss your girl," he said, grinning cockily.

My eyes suddenly flared, and I pushed him away. "What the hell, dude? Do you seriously think I would let you do that?" I bellowed. Jeez, why did he come up with that kind of deal? Where did he get that idea? "Even if you'll give me your fortune, I wouldn't let you."

Justin hugged his stomach as he fell into fits of laughter. "I-I was just pulling your leg, T, to see how you'd react! Ha! That... that was downright wicked," he said breathlessly.

Ryo, who had his mouth hanging for too long, said in disbelief, "Boy, I thought you were serious about that!"

I grimaced. "Damn you, Justin Case."

"Loosen up, man." He took a deep breath to stop himself from laughing, before adding, "You really do care about her. Then if that's it and you don't know what else to do, why won't you chase her now?"

The whole point of his joke struck me eventually. I sighed, nodding. "Yeah... yeah maybe I should," I said. Chase her, huh. Just like what I'd been doing since that first night we danced. Are we going down? It seems like I'm back to square one. "But before that, I have to find the answer to a question I'm stuck with."

Later that day, however, when I suddenly had the urge to "chase" her, as what Justin had said, I'd seen something that rose up my anger. I was in the school building, and through the window, I saw her and Erik down below. My fists clenched on my sides so hard until I felt the pain. But this pain was nothing compared to how I felt looking at them together.

So that's why...

Just when I thought it was all over days and weeks ago, the complication was starting to come back once again, and somehow I felt like it was getting worse.

Seeing Kylie with someone else, who was beginning to take my place, destroyed me. How was it possible for her to play around and be emotionless towards me so ea

sily?

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~~Finding Cinderella (42)~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- 42 ♡

-Kylie-

"I'm off now, girls. I'm running late already." Mom hurriedly grabbed her baguette bag from the coffee table before kissing us on the forehead. "I posted the diner's number on the fridge so you can call me if there's an emergency."

Lacey nodded. "Okay. Have fun at the party."

"Oh, and don't leave the door unlocked before going upstairs, okay? Bye, girls," Mom said as she made her way out.

While Lacey began searching through our DVD collections, I picked up the remote control and switched between the channels. Unfortunately, all I could see were a bunch of newscasts and sport shows that couldn't entertain me for the night.

"So! What do you like to watch?" She flipped up some DVD's and looked at them. "Hmm... here's Sydney White, The Prince and Me, Ella Enchanted... um, Beastly, or Ever After? We rarely watch those."

"All rom-com flicks?" I asked pointedly.

She puffed out, raising her eyebrows as she arranged back the DVD's. "Oops, wrong choices. Someone seems a little bitter about romances right now..." she mumbled nonchalantly.

"I heard that."

"But it's true... isn't it? I feel like there's something wrong going on. What happened?"

I pursed my lips and diverted my gaze from her.

"I knew it! Tell me," she begged. She grabbed the remote from the table and turned the TV off. "Come on, I can't stand the suspense any longer!"

Having no choice, I dejectedly poured out the story.

Lacey's eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped. She was silent as if she was contemplating what she'd just heard.

"Oh, my gosh. You're... you're not kidding me, are you?" she said at last. "I'm so sorry, that's awful."

I shrugged.

"Don't let it bother you," she said. "Maybe—there was reason behind it."

I raised an eyebrow at her skeptically.

"A valid one?" Lacey added hesitantly.

"And what do you think is the valid reason?" I couldn't stop myself from being a loof.

Lacey opened her mouth, and then shut it like she was uncertain. "He's probably just-ugh... I don't know." Biting her lip, she shook her head. "I can't answer that myself. Tristan's the only one who can respond to that, Kylie. Talk to him."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I just feel that I can't. I don't even want to talk to him. Not now, at least."

"I wish you could tell him. Things would be much easier if you were brave enough to say something. Are you scared? Is that why?"

A lump started to grow in my throat. I gulped, shaking my head. "I think I should go to my room now," I said quietly.

She pushed herself from the couch. "Why? Are you upset? It's because of me, right?" she cried. "Oh, sis. I'm really sorry for being so intrusive."

I snorted a laugh. "No, I'm not." I began to walk away from the couch, and she quickly grabbed the hem of my shirt.

"Then why are you leaving? Wait, wait, we can watch Stars Wars or anything with guns and explosives instead of chick-flicks! You like that right?" She followed me, still gripping my shirt, as I climbed upstairs. "I swear I won't ask any more questions."

I tried to tug her hands off. "Lacey, let go. You're going to rip my shirt," I said with a sigh. "I'm just going to study, okay?"

"But it's Friday night! You can do that on Sunday. Aw, you really are upset. I'm sorry."

"I said I'm not." I forced myself to smile as I faced her.

Her grip finally softened. "Really?" she asked, surprised.

"Yeah, yeah." I stopped in my track. "Lacey?"

"Yes?"

"Don't tell Tristan, okay?"

She tried to object, but in the end, she nodded and went back downstairs. I shut the door behind me and rubbed my temples. Taking a deep breath, I went to my desk and pulled out my textbooks, several sheets of paper, and a pen. Then I pulled up a chair and said, "All right, Kylie. This is a good chance to do a lot of studying. Pull up your terrible grades if you want to be accepted into Imperial."

I began reading my notes. I should put Tristan and all the drama out of my mind and devote my time to my studies. Mr. Cross had said that I should keep up. No more C's or B's for me; I would get A's from now on, and Aunt Jacque and mom would be proud of me.

After a while, I looked up from my notes. The moment I saw a red string tied around the pencil holder, fresh fragments from the previous weeks surged through my mind.

"Kylie, I want to give you something," Tristan said as he sat on the bench beside me.

"And what is that?" I asked.

"Close your eyes first."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Hmm... nope." He rolled his eyes and I laughed, saying, "Fine. Just don't try messing with me, or I'll claw your skin out."

I closed my eyes and felt him lifting up my right hand. Something soft wrapped my wrist. When he said, "Done" I opened my eyes to see the Fate string from the ball. Oh, I almost forgot about this!

I lifted my head and gave him a curious look. "How did this get to you?"

"Take a wild guess." He winked.

I punched his shoulder lightly. "Sheesh. You can just tell me right away, mister ."

He laughed. "Lacey," he answered. "Lacey was the one who gave me that. That thing was a clue for me, Kylie."

"Oh. She never told me that," I uttered in disbelief. A clue for him, huh? I remembered those times when he had been going frantic about that mysterious girl-Cinderella, what a weird name he and his friends had used-who had been just me all along. I bit my lip, laughing inwardly.

"What's funny?"

I cleared my throat. "Oh, nothing. You were saying?"

"Well, of course Lacey would never tell you. She was afraid you might hate her once you know she broke her promise."

I sighed. "Yeah, I really would but... it won't last long. I'd forgive her easily because she's my sister, and I could never bear to hate her for too long." A smile started to sneak in my lips as a memory came. "This string had started it all," I said distantly.

"Yeah." Tristan clasped my hand. "And that string of Fate led me to you."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I shook my head and slapped my cheeks, trying to erase the increasing thoughts that were drifting through my mind.

Don't fall, Kylie. Don't fall for it...

A strong feeling started to drown me once again. I went out of the room and tiptoed down the kitchen to get some water. The Stars Wars film was playing on the TV, while Lacey was sleeping silently on the couch. I grabbed a blanket from her room, draped it over her, and turned the TV off. Something glowed and buzzed on the table. It was my cellphone-I'd forgotten to bring it up.

As I went back to my room, I clicked on the message I had received.

Him: Can we talk?

I took a deep breath and closed it. A few seconds later, the cellphone rang. It was him.

Should I answer it?

Before I could have a final answer to that, curiosity won, and I found myself clicking the button and lifting the cellphone up to my ear.

"Look through your window," he said.

My brain was objecting, but something inside me was pushing me to go on. I moved the curtain aside and my breathing stopped for a second. Tristan stood at his window, his hand gripping his cellphone tightly to his ear. I couldn't see his face clearly but I could imagine his look. He was dead serious.

"Kylie," he said with a slur. "I'm... I'm glad you picked up."

"What's wrong with your voice?" I asked hesitantly.

"What? Nothing... nothing's wrong with my voice. Why d'you say that?" He spoke rapidly. "Listen, Ky, I know I'm disturbing you right now, but please... don't hang up on me."

"Okay," I whispered.

We stayed there for a moment looking at each other. His breathing was loud through the receiver. I suddenly got the chills creeping through my skin and a sickening feeling twisted in the pit of my stomach.

"You... You've been so quiet lately," he began to say. "So I feel like something is wrong, and I'd like to know what."

I didn't speak.

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "It's me, isn't it? Listen, I know it's still hard for you to open up, but just for this time, tell me Kylie. Am I doing something wrong?"

I don't know if it's because of you or because of me... I just don't want to say anything.

"Kylie? Come on. Do you even wanna talk to me?" He said, raising his voice. "You send me short replies like you don't even bother to talk these days. You wouldn't even bat an eye in my direction. Do I annoy you or something? Because if I do, I'll stop." He took a deep breath. "I'll stop myself trying to get you."

"Then go." My voice cracked as I said it, like there was a knot in my throat.

"W-what? Kylie-"

I walked away from the window and pressed my back against the cold wall. I didn't want him to see me like this. I didn't want to see him like that either. "I know the time will come for you to say that. And I... I respect that. If you want to find another girl, there's no reason why you shouldn't," I mumbled.

A cold laugh escaped from my lips. "It's really okay, T. I was used of being left behind you. I was used of looking at you from afar, wishing that one day I would be able to reach you. That was me before. That was me when I was with you that summer. But it's fine now. You've made your choice. I know the girl you'd choose would be prettier and not as messed up as I am. So please..." I choked. Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry... "Don't-"

"Kylie, don't say things that you don't mean!"

"Don't settle for me." I bit my lip and breathed in, holding back my tears that were threatening to fall.

There was something wrong with me, and I didn't know how to make it right. Besides, how could I trust him, how could I let him stay with all this doubt and flaw in me?

"Why do you think that way?" His voice was shaking. "Why, Kylie?"

"Please, T. Just-just don't."

Because I might let you down.

He sighed in frustration. I heard something bounce and figured he must have sat on his bed. I could imagine his head bent down and his free hand covering his face. Just by the thought of it, I felt like there were thousands of daggers thrusting into my chest.

"Kylie?" He said after a moment. "I-I've been trying to ask you this for the quite long time now. It's something I-no, we have to know, but at the same time, something that is hard to say. Please, answer me-" he gulped and I clutched my phone tight "-do you feel the same way I do?"

I closed my eyes. Not all the words I wanted to say would come out, because each time I tried, in the end they would just turn to tears.

"Silence means yes," he murmured.

"But sometimes it turns out as no." I just can't say it.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me!"

It's all bottled up inside me. "Tristan-"

"No, no! This is all fucked up, Kylie! Are you trying to say that after all this time you're still into that-?"

"Tristan!" I nearly screamed. He paused, and I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Stop. T-that's enough."

"Ah, shit," he said exasperatedly. "I didn't mean to yell at you. My head's just aching. I-I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"You're tired, I know. Let's just stop this. It's too late already."

"No! I will stay up the whole night until I make sure you don't mean any of this."
."

I opened my mouth, and although there was a part of me that was pulling back, the words irrepressibly came out: "I do."

I turned off my phone and just like that, it was over. The whole room went quiet again.

Numb, I went back to my study table and just sat there for a moment. My chest kept on constricting. Am I losing my mind? Maybe I was. I had never invested real feelings and thoughts into somebody else until now.

This was how it was supposed to feel. I knew it. Falling for someone was one of the worse feelings in the entire world. It put me in the scariest, weakest position I could ever be in.

I clenched my fists. "Dammit. Dammit!"

Why didn't I just hold it in? I should have just stubbornly denied it.

A loud clicking noise stopped me. I whipped around and sprang up from my seat as I saw Tristan up in the tree, trying to push the window open. It had been a long time since he last did that. He succeeded, and with a quick move, he jumped in to my room.

"Tristan! What are you-?"

My words abruptly ended when he dashed to me, cupped my face with his warm hands and lifted my head up without my permission. The moment his lips touched mine... if only I could describe it.

He smelled of something strong-I didn't know what, but it made me dizzy somehow. No wait-is it alcohol? Tristan put his hand on my lower back and pressed me closer. My mind was whirling. Part of me wanted to push him away but part of me wanted

ted nothing more than for him to stay.

My breath came in short, rapid gasps that left me nauseated when he pulled himself away.

"Sometimes, I come to the point of dying just to be him... you know that?" He said, panting. Sweat kept on streaming down his face. "It's fucking messed up, isn't it Kylie?"

"Tristan... are you drunk?" I whispered in shock.

"No, no. Don't try to change the subject, Kylie." He hiccupped and heaved a sigh. His eyes were moist and bloodshot as if he was going to cry.

I ripped my gaze off him. I didn't want to see his face.

"You're pushing me away again," he said. "If-if that's what you really want... if that's what makes you happy, then I think there's nothing I could do but to follow what you said."

I looked back to him.

"I'll let go, Kylie," he said and clenched his jaw. He started to take small steps back. "But before I walk out, I just want to let you know that everything I said to you was real. I love you, Kylie. I undeniably, helplessly do. And I don't know what else to do to make you believe me."

My hand flew to my mouth as I watched Tristan climbed down the window. Tears finally trickled out of my eyes. I collapsed on my bed—all of my energy had been drained. I just wanted to roll over and sleep.

Why am I such an idiot for letting that happen? Just... just what am I doing?

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~~Finding Cinderella (43)~~

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Finding Cinderella- 43

-Tristan-

I woke up with my temples pounding hard, still a bit out of whack after the few shots of beer I'd had back in some guy's party last night. I'd only stayed in there for a few hours actually, just to sidetrack myself from the shitty reality even for once in a while.

Although my thoughts were somewhat blurred by a few pictures of dark lights, people I'd partied with, the loud sounds, still they couldn't hide even the smallest details of what had happened after I'd gotten home.

Even though I had already seen the signs way before-man, it was hard to believe that everything I'd been hoping for had crashed down like this. That talk with her over the phone last night-ah, fuck. If only I could rewind it, change it, or even erase it. I wish all of these things would just go back to how they had been before.

It made me unbelievably terrified that she didn't feel the same way. She didn't, did she? I'd been trying to figure it out, but... she hadn't spoken up.

Maybe she really didn't. Maybe she'd been just forcing herself all along. Maybe it had been just all in my head.

I'd told her I'd let her go, because I thought she needed to figure out herself first, to see what she wanted to see, and all that stuff. At this moment, though, I was still confused and fucked up; my brain was practically everywhere. My life suddenly turned like a huge black fucking hole.

What else I could do? I'd already done it.

But did I do the right thing?

"T, don't view yourself as a huge loser, okay?" Julianne told me.

The two of us, together with Lacey and Clark, were sitting on the front steps of the school building. Kylie wasn't around with them, of course. I knew she didn't want to face me as much as I wanted to as well, so I'd taken the opportunity to talk with her friends even just for a short while.

"Sometimes, there are things that you can't do anything about it no matter how hard you wanted to strive for it," she continued and sighed. "Gosh, you two are seriously turning me into a therapist once again."

"Because that's always been your role, Julianne," I said and let out a quiet chuckle despite of what I was feeling.

"Next time, I better charge the both of you for my talent fee. Five dollars per session seems just reasonable."

"Huh, that is," I replied, picking up a pebble from the ground, "if there's a next time," then threw it at a distance.

Lacey faced me with her face getting all worried. "You mean, you're giving up already?" she said in a gasp.

"I--"

"If she doesn't feel the same way, forget her, man," Clark spoke, shaking his head.

"Clark!" Lacey cried, "You can't say something like that." She turned to me again. "Don't give up, Tristan, because... because she does care about you, too! She's so freakin' close! All you have to do is-is to man up and take her!"

She got a point.

"You know, Lace, there are some things that are beyond your reach no matter how close they seem," Clark expressed casually. "It's just the same as what Julianne said."

He also got a point.

"But--"

"Besides, your sister must've accepted and be happy with it by now." He shrugged. "So, T has to learn to give up at some point of his life, because he just has to."

"What? Happy? Clark--"

"Yeah, because that's what they say. You'll want that person you love to be happy even if it's not with you. It makes a sense, right?"

Lacey stood up in front of us. "No! If you really love that person, you won't allow them to be happy with anyone but you," she exclaimed.

My mouth fell open. The two of them were staring intensely at each other, ready to exchange another set of arguments on a topic that didn't really have an exact answer. They seemed to forget that Julianne and I were still here at their backs. What had blown me the most was that, though--Lacey was starting to stand firmly on her ground.

I glanced at the redhead, raising my eyebrow.

"Oh, my God, Tristan, don't even try to ask me. Please," she said, raising her hands in surrender. "This thing has already gone way beyond my capacity."

"Hey, you two," I called, and when Clark and Lacey looked at me, I pointed my two fingers at them. "Don't blame me if you ever break up just because of this, okay?"

Clark laughed, while Lacey bit her bottom lip. Her face was flushed; I couldn't tell if she was trying to stop herself from crying or laughing.

"Nah, it won't happen." Clark lifted a hand and pulled Lacey back to his side.

"I'm sorry," Lacey muttered, pulling up an apologetic smile to us. "I think I should just stop talking now. I'm not supposed to make any more judgments."

I gave a small smile back. "It's cool, Lace," I said.

"Nothing is final, T. It will be okay, no matter what."

I was about to speak when I spotted her passing in front of us. She turned her head in my direction, and even though our eyes locked with each other for only just a second, I felt my mind spinning out of control.

Lacey perked up and waved her hand in the air. "Kylie!" She ran and pulled her towards us. "Kylie, come here."

I widened my eyes. Was Lacey trying to—?

"Come on, you guys need to make up already," she implored and tugged Kylie's arm.

Kylie tried to pull away herself, avoiding my eyes. "Lacey, please, I have to get going," she said in a rather small voice.

"Just for a second, just try to talk with him—"

"Lacey."

Taking a deep breath, I stood up from the steps. "I gotta go," I muttered and went inside the building before anyone of them could speak up.

Kylie had made her decision. Maybe for her, there was no going back. I just had to suck it up all right. Maybe it was for the best.

-Kylie-

I'd thought he'd be the last person on Earth who would make me feel this way, but I was wrong.

Ever since I let myself feel and cry over him, it had been hard to be around him. Yeah, I had managed it before, but it was different now. That moment when you were trying to ignore someone but that person kept on appearing anywhere really sucked.

There were some occasions that both of us would have an accidental eye contact in the hallways and during English classes, and every time it happened, we'd both turn away and continue with our lives.

Sometimes, I couldn't help to look at him.

Only to see he wasn't looking back.

And I hated myself for doing that, since it wasn't my place to do so anymore. I had to remind myself that every time.

Tristan seemed to be doing better on his own. He was hanging out with his friends and with everybody else, doing the usual stuff, and whatsoever, just like what he had always been doing before. So I just pretended I didn't care-although it affected me inside.

I hated doing this. I really did. But I had to learn to deal with this kind of feeling and forget about it.

"You know, it's really sad," Lacey began to speak up distantly, spinning the spoon in her soup.

Julianne looked up from her pocketbook and glanced at her. "I've been hearing th

at opening line from you for the nth time of the week already, Lacey," she said and took a bite from her mash potato.

"Just voicing out my thoughts," she said, shooting a meaningful glance at me.

I slowed my munching and observed Lacey, knitting my eyebrows. "What?"

"Well, it's kinda sad that some people don't know what they got 'til it's gone. It's the same thing like people have to lose something or someone for them to realize they mean a lot to them so much," she said.

That was so deep. But her words had hit me in the bull's eye, honestly.

And for a second, I found myself glancing at Tristan on a distance again. I shook my head, looking back at my lunch.

"Right?" Lacey pressed.

I heaved a sigh. "Hmm, but it doesn't matter anymore," I mumbled warily. "I'm done. It's just a bunch of hooplahs."

"What does that even mean?"

"I dunno. Just something I made up."

Lacey rolled her eyes and said, "Okay, whatever, Kylie. You still are not really good at lying with your feelings, okay?"

"Huh, that's just her," said Julianne, smirking.

And I went, "I'm on the verge of forgetting, okay? I was ignoring it already." Like the "um, hey T, excuse me, but I'm trying to get over here. Could you stop making me fall for you? That'd be great. Thanks"-type of forgetting/ignoring.

"Ignorance is a passive-aggressive treatment that is absolutely childish," she pointed out. "And if you're still going to do it, as your best friend, I swear I'm going to slap you in hopes of waking your senses up."

"I think I finally need that now."

Julianne put down her pocket book and sighed. "Come here, you dummy." She leaned across the table and pulled me into a tight hug. "You know what, no matter how pigheaded and silly you can be, I will always love you, Kylie."

Grinning, I tapped her back softly. "Okay, okay. Ditto," I said gladly. "Release me now, girl. I can't... I can't breathe!"

"Ditto, too! Yay, group hug!" Lacey threw her arms around me as well.

"Aw, my neck! Hey, easy you guys!"

Although they had already squeezed me between them, so tight I was already gasping for air, loud laughter still bubbled up my throat. I was glad I'd been stuck with these girls all throughout my high school life. They were pretty much the only persons who could help me get from the crappiest mood to feeling pretty okay

.

A few hours later, as I was heading to my final class, I came across with Erik, and he tried to catch up with me.

"Hey," he said.

"Oh, hi," I mumbled. Ever since that call, I suddenly felt uncomfortable hanging around with Erik, for no apparent reason.

"So how are you and Tristan now?" he asked out of the blue.

I lowered my head down. Out of all the questions, why had he asked that?

"We're uh... we're just," I muttered and sighed. "We're just cool," I finally said with a small, impassive smile.

"Cool, huh," he said. I snapped my head to him and noticed that the corners of his lips were pulled up into a seemingly furtive smile. He looked down at me. "It's all right, Kylie. Don't be so worked up about it, yeah?"

What?

It was a strange answer coming from him. I thought he would be at least sympathetic about it, but the nonchalant tone of his voice had told me that he wasn't.

What is he thinking right now?

As if reading my look, he playfully brushed my head. "He's just finally learning his lessons," he said, grinning.

I blinked several times, surprised. What was that supposed to mean? Whatever the reason was that, though, it somehow gave me sudden chills, as if my guts were telling me something wrong had been going on around. No, not just between Tristan and me, but... something that was much more.

I stopped in front of him.

"Erik, I..." I began to say. I wanted to ask him about everything, but my words were stuck in my throat, and all I came up with was, "I have to go now." With that, I walked ahead of him.

I had to pull my shit together and figure everything out.

-Tristan-

I spent a couple of days trying to suck everything up no matter how bad they'd been. Hitting a few night parties and road trips with the guys, working out, studying my ass off, and all that other stuff.

But after doing all those things, at the end of the day, I knew I could and would never.

"Are you thinking about giving up on her?" Grey asked.

"I've been trying, man," I told him and shook my head. "And because of that, I couldn't sleep. My mind was telling me it was a downright stupid thing to do."

Ryo looked up from his waffles, which he had been building into a tower, and frowned at us. "Gee, why are you guys talking like this?" he asked, unaware about his thing like always. We ignored him.

Grey reclined on the seat. "Well, the thing between you, Kylie, and that Erik dude is kinda complicated. I think you're already done with your part now." He tapped me on the back. "At least you've tried your best. Cheer up, man."

I laughed silently. "Yeah."

So this is how everything ends, huh.

"Grey-" I heard Monique say, but Justin cut her off.

"It sucks to be you, T," he said, cracking up.

I was about to knock his head with my knuckles when he blocked it. "Oh, get lost, Case," I snapped.

Monique drew away from Will's arms and leaned across the table. "Grey!"

"What?" the guy asked.

"Can you repeat what you just said to Tristan?"

Grey lifted his eyebrows. "Uh... Tristan tried his best and he should cheer up?"

"No, before that. You mentioned the name Erik. You're referring to Erik Taylor, aren't you?" she asked. When Grey nodded, she mumbled "strange" and faced me. "What do you mean that there's a thing going on between the three of you?"

"It was a long story, Nic," I said evasively.

"Why are you asking them about that?" Will asked his girlfriend.

"Well, it's just kinda weird because..." Monique shrugged. "Why would Erik be included among them when he is dating Fiona in the first place?"

At that moment, my mind blocked all the sounds around, and in its place were Monique's words that kept on echoing all over. I stared through the distance, and everything that had happened days and weeks before flashed through my eyes.

"What did you just say?" I acidly.

"Um, I said that Erik and Fiona were dating," Monique explained slowly, "And I think it's been like almost a month... oh!" Her hand flew to her lips like she just realized something. Then she giggled. "Gee, I shouldn't be saying that to anyone, but I just did! Oh, well..."

"Holy shit..." Grey mumbled.

Will's jaw dropped. "Y-you're not joking?"

"Why would I joke about that? It's real talk!" She nodded, smiling eagerly. "I'm friends with Fiona, so I know. I was even the one who gave Cla-wait, why are yo

u guys staring at me like that? Am I saying something wrong?"

All of my blood boiled to its peak. I banged my fist on the table and everyone around looked at me in a snap; I didn't care about it as anger began to cloud my vision. My guess was right-that damn bastard had been feeding lies to Kylie after all this time!

I stormed away before anyone could stop me, and searched for every damn corner of the school building to find him. I hadn't had any luck at the start-he was nowhere to be found-until I rounded a corner and came across with someone.

"You." I grinded out the words through my clenched teeth. "You're friends with Erik Taylor, right?"

The ginger dude took a few steps backward. "Y-yeah," he stuttered.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know..."

"Are you fucking kidding me? I said, 'where is he?'" I pressed again. "You better tell me, Parker!"

"He... he left me for almost an hour ago," he stumbled, sweating in bullets. "But I-I think he's in the greenhouse right now. He always goes there. Jeez, Hartford. Seriously, calm the fuck down. You're starting to scare me."

I stalked out, leaving him baffled. As soon as I reached the greenhouse, I saw two figures inside. They were so close with each other, and I could've sworn they were making out. Fury racing through my body, I burst into the place and grabbed Fiona's shoulder, yanking her away from Erik.

My fists convulsed, and before the bastard could open his mouth, I socked him squarely on the cheek. He staggered back, hitting the potted plants.

At the same time, Fiona cried, "Oh, my God, Tristan! Stop! This is not what you think-"

I spun to her, pointing my finger sharply on her terrified face. "This isn't about you, Fiona, so get outta here now!" I yelled, and she scrambled her feet away from the place.

I faced Erik back. He wiped his jaw as he stood up straightly.

"Shit, what's with all this, Tristan?" he uttered impassively. "I was having a great session with that chick, okay?"

I grabbed his shirt and pulled him. "Don't play innocent, you fucktard," I hissed. "You're lying and cheating with Kylie all this time!"

"Cheating? With her?" He snorted brazenly. "I never even like the girl in the first place."

With that, all of my memories back in the ninth grade surged at me once again. His words were as the same as what I had overheard from him at that time: "I don't like her. She's not even my type at all. She's way too weird and unattractive."

That had been it. That had been the one of the main reasons for my suspicions about him. Now he was bringing it back.

My mouth curled in disgust as I shoved him away. "And then what—you just played with her feelings? Showed her lies? Treated her as an option when you get bored?" I spat the words. "I knew from the start you're a huge shameless asshole, Taylor. You'll get so fucking sorry you took her away from me!"

"Who gave you the right to say that to me, huh?" His voice was tinged with menace. "I'm just getting the payback for what you did three years ago. Vengeance is sweet, indeed."

"What?"

He laughed scornfully.

"Now look who's playing innocent right now," he said and narrowed his eyes. "You fucking stole Cyrene from me, Tristan, don't you remember? We were happy with each other until you came and ruined everything!" he shouted. "She broke up with me because of you. Then guess what? You played and dumped her eventually. She's the very first of your collections. She cried over a goddamn jerk like you!"

"Bullshit! Who do you think you're even kidding?" I snapped. "I never played with her. And the main reason why Cyrene left you because you treated her like crap!"

He gritted his teeth. "No! You think I'm falling for that? I loved her; tried to get over her. But I've never forgotten what you did," he continued, mouth contorting grotesquely. "So I came back here to steal Kylie from you, to give what you deserved."

I lunged at him. "You son of a--"

My fist was about to hit him when he blocked it with his hand like a speed of light. Before I knew it, a blow jerked me back. Pain shot all over my face as my back collided with the clay pots, which sent loud crashing sound on the floor. My body shook frenziedly; I could taste blood in my mouth.

"Now... do you know how it fucking feels like, huh?" Erik panted bitterly, walking towards me. "Payback's a bitch, isn't it?"

"Damn you!" I bolted to him, lifting my fist.

He blocked my attack. Then in a flash, I kicked his gut and sent him flying from one side of the area to the other. Before he could recover, I grasped his collar shirt and pinned him on the floor. He hissed; the veins in his neck were protruding out in ridges.

"You know what you are, huh? Erik? Aside from being an asshole, you're also a sick coward!" I squeezed my grip. Harsh gasps were escaping out of my pained mouth. "Instead of facing me right away, you dragged a faultless person into your fucked up plan!"

He fought back to escape, but I kept on restraining him with all of my strength. Thumping noises were getting louder from the outside. The door screeched open, and three guys rushed around us. Strong hands caught my shoulder and dragged me away from Erik.

"Jesus, Tristan! Get a hang of yourself!" Grey screamed as I struggled with him.

Will raced between us, spreading out his arms agitatedly.

"This won't be the only thing you'll get from me if you won't stay away from her," I jeered, looking venomously at Erik. "Kylie's mine, got that?"

Parker helped him to pull up. Erik shoved him away, wiping his mouth with his arm. His bruised lips stretched into that deceitful smirk once again.

"Ah, finally, your friends are here." He stuck out his chin defiantly. "Where's that other guy, though? The swimmer, Clark Young?" he asked in a tone like he didn't give a shit. "I forgot to say thank you to him, since he was the one who set the trap for me."

I swallowed.

Clark... Clark was also behind this? He was with him? Why-?

Ryo and Justin darted through the door, and their faces immediately turned pale and tight at the sight of the damages.

"Both of you are seriously in a deep shit," Justin muttered, shaking his head.

At the same time, Coach Condor came; behind him was Fiona with her face smeared with tears and mascara.

"Hartford, Taylor! Enough!" Coach's voice thundered throughout the place. The monstrous glare on his face was something I'd never seen on him before. "Come with me to the office right now and explain yourselves!"

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~~Finding Cinderella (44)~~

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☞ Finding Cinderella- 44 ☞

-Tristan-

It had been a long time since I'd let out my other side and kicked someone's ass hard. Two years ago, to be exact, and the last had just been some crazy, pathetic incident that had been hardly worth mentioning; but the poor dude still came out of it with a bad condition. It may sound like something but I wasn't proud of it as it had earned me a week's suspension, and because of that week of hell, I hadn't been in a fight since.

Until just now.

I was sitting in the principal's office, facing the disappointed look on Mr. Henderson's face once again. Ms. Ritchie was behind him, shaking her head at us. Beside me was none other than Erik Taylor. There was a purple bruise and a small cut on his cheek, and his shirt was full of sweat and dirt. Our condition was the almost same-only I'd gotten a sore nose and a scrape on the corner of my mouth.

Anger was still flaming up on us, and as long as we were still facing each other, I didn't think it would die down anytime soon.

We received a long lecture from Mr. Henderson, but neither of us was willing to listen or even to speak up. And because that, the old man just let out an irritated sigh and said, "You two should take pride in the fact that you're all knuckleheads to work out a problem or avoid the person all together!"

That point, though.

Both of us faced two consequences: a two-week suspension or a compensation for the damages in the greenhouse. Dad was seriously going to kill me if I'd undergo suspension again, so I decided to choose the latter, even if (aside from the compensation) it would mean spending my free school hours repairing the greenhouse myself.

I didn't know about Erik, since he stalked out as soon as we were over without even speaking. The prick.

The news about the fight had circulated all throughout the campus, as expected. Now, everyone was looking at me with shock in their eyes as I walked on the grounds. I couldn't care less.

The moment I met up with the guys, they'd immediately gone buzzing.

"Your face, dude..." Justin murmured.

"I think that fight was way better than Mortal Kombat even," said Ryo, staring at me with wide eyes. Grey shoved him.

"It's my fault. I'm really sorry. I never... I never should've asked that question," Monique said, her eyes were glistening. Will encircled his arms around her for comfort.

"No, if it wasn't for that, I wouldn't have known the truth," I said to her and grabbed my bag from the seat.

"You're going home already?" Grey asked.

I nodded. I was too knackered to deal with anyone right now.

As I turned around, Clark and Lacey came running. Lacey flew her hand to her mouth after a soft gasp escaped her lips.

"T-Tristan, oh my gosh..." she whispered.

Clark just stood there, frozen, with his eyes on me. He gulped and opened his mouth as if he was trying to explain something. I only glared at him and walked out, hitting his shoulder in the process.

He was one of my greatest friends I'd ever had. He'd been dragging my ass and helping me at any times of trouble. But remembering Erik's words "he was the one who set the trap for me" gave me a twinge of betrayal. Clark had helped Erik to lure Kylie to him.

Had he done something even more apart from that?

Whatever they'd been, however, it was evident that he had backstabbed me. And I was done.

-Kylie-

I stared blankly at the space, what with all these hundreds of thoughts coursing in my head. The words Tristan and Erik got into a fight that I'd heard not only from Lacey, but from the others back at school as well, made me staggered like this.

A sickening twist in my stomach formed as I tried to imagine Tristan. Had he lost control of himself and exposed his violent side once again? Oh, no...

"Sis!" Lacey called and I blinked. "You've been frozen there for a minute. Are you going to eat that or what?"

I stared down at my vanilla pudding. "No, I'm not," I mumbled and closed the lid.

"Well, that's strange. I thought you like that," said Mom.

"I'm not up for any desserts."

Mom's eyebrows furrowed as she studied me. "Is there something bothering you, Kylie?"

"Yeah, it's the same old thing," Lacey answered and smiled softly. "Love."

"Lacey," I said, my heart pounding unsteadily. I pulled away from the table, saying, "Excuse me. I'm going to my room now," and went upstairs.

I glanced at Tristan's window; there was only a weak light through the curtain. Sighing, I laid down on the bed with my hand on the back of my head. I picked up my phone and began to debate with myself whether I should at least send him a message or not, ask if he was all right. In the end, I just put it down.

There was a knock on the door, and then Mom entered with a small smile on her pastel lips. She sat on the bed as I pulled myself up and sat crossed-legged.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

I shrugged, trying to pull up a casual smile. "Well, here, just... fine."

"That is what everyone answers when they have problems." She ran her fingers through my hair. "Have you tried talking to Tristan?" she asked after a moment.

I just blinked at that.

How did she know this was all about him?

Ah, right. Mom had had this some kind of a sixth sense, causing her to know this had been coming even before I had realized my bottled-up feelings for him.

I shook my head and curled my legs up. "He's probably angry with me now," I mumbled and sighed. "It's my fault."

"Maybe the both of you just saw a part of each other's side that you two couldn't understand."

I looked at her, before dropping my head. I felt kinda weird talking with her about something like this, because I'd never done this before. Still, I carried on: "Maybe you're right, mom. Maybe I didn't understand something to his side. I.. I should've listened." I paused. "But... I don't think everything will work out just fine now," I murmured.

"Listen, honey, sometimes there are some things that don't work out just fine; don't go the way you want. But there's nothing wrong if you try to work them out,

at least." She smiled distantly. "Just like me and your Dad. You know how many times we fought with each other, even to the extent of wanting to rip each other's heads off-" she laughed quietly "-but since we love each other, we tried to work things out. Luckily they did, and we were happy again."

My eyes were starting to become blurry with tears. I blinked them away and smiled. "I miss Dad," I said.

"We all do. And if he's here, he's surely going to tell you the same thing like I do."

I rolled my eyes. "I know. I know, because he's your sidekick," I said amusedly. "But thanks, Mom."

She put her hand on mine, and the warmth gave me a calming feeling. "It'll be hard for either of you to compensate and narrow things down, but you've got to do something before regret comes. You have to face your fears and insecurities inside, because that's the real courage, Kylie," she said.

It hit me.

All my life I'd been trying not to run from any encounters, trying to look and act tough in front of everyone, and all that. I'd thought I was brave. But when Mom had said what real courage was, now I knew I was wrong. Now I finally knew what I'd been battling with.

Myself.

Seeing the astonished look on my face, she laughed and tapped my nose with her finger playfully. "So now, how does the cool and brave Kylie Harris behave when everything is falling apart between her and the boy she likes?"

I bit my lip as heat rushed to my cheeks.

Mom stood up and leaned to kiss my forehead. "It's never too late, okay?" she whispered.

"Okay."

When I was finally alone, I was filled with a great feeling of relief.

"When you love a person, don't be hesitant to tell and show your true feelings, because no one knows what will happen next."

Those words... His words...

I just got to do what I got to do.

"Nooooooooo!"

Good thing I was sitting across the table and had my earphones on. Otherwise, the scream that had escaped from Julianne's mouth might have broken my eardrums to pieces.

"Gaah!" she continued to cry. She was practically ripping her hair off.

I pulled out my earphones. "You've been wailing like a dying seal for nearly an hour, Jules. What gives?"

She looked at me. "Have you ever liked someone so much, and you just know they're not going to like you back? And then you can do nothing but only be like..." She covered her pink face with her hands. "Oh, this just stinks on so many levels."

"What are you talking about?"

"Pete asked a girl to the prom!" she exclaimed. "I thought it would be me since he's been texting me about his plans. I've never been so excited about something it even made me sleepless!" She sighed loudly and muttered, "Turns out it wasn't me all along, but a different girl."

"Ouch." I tried to sound sympathetic, but then I ended up bursting into laughter. "Y-your face, Julianne. It's like you're about to chew a tree!"

She rolled her eyes. "Ha-ha. Right. What a great friend you are. Whatever," she said and crossed her arms bitterly. "Their night will surely suck, anyway."

A figure walked past out of the corner of my eye. I twisted around to see more clearly, and it was the person I'd been waiting for the whole time. She was laughing with her co-cheerleaders while heading to the gym.

"Jules, just wait here," I said.

"Where are you going?" Her eyes flicked to the person. "Whoa wait, don't tell me you're going to Ronnie?" she asked, flabbergasted. I nodded, and then she said, "Are you going to talk to her about-about... you know?"

"Uh-huh." That was exactly what I would do.

"Oh. Good luck."

Julianne's face was pale, as if it was saying, "all hell is going to break loose". My insides began to do crazy somersaults as I strutted towards Ronnie. I didn't know if this was the right thing or the wrong thing to do, but I already had decided I should do this in any case.

Time waits for no one. Screw all the what-if's. A little bit of luck and confidence was all I needed.

Even if I wanted to barf and all, when I poked Ronnie's shoulder that made her turn to me, and remembered what my Mom had told me that night, I did something totally outrageous probably in the whole history of Broadway Heights:

"Ronnie," I began to say candidly, "you're may be gorgeous, popular, confident, and pretty much the opposite of me that I know I can never be any better than you... but listen to this."

I let it sink for a moment. A wave of surprise passed through Ronnie's face.

"Since I'm the kind of person who always does absolutely awkward and stupid things at the wrong place and at the wrong time, I might as well make the best of it and tell you that despite of all these imperfections in me, I will still fight back," I said louder, stronger. My fist clenched at my sides. "I will- I will never back down against you no matter what happens. Yeah, you know him like almost a lifetime, but I'll do whatever it takes to get him back, because.... Because I've always known Tristan belongs to me!"

My heart was banging feverishly in my chest. Ronnie's clique was staring at me as if I was a lunatic on crack, and I needed to take a loose screw back into my head. I bet my face was as red as ketchup now. But-nah. I couldn't care less. In fact, I was starting to feel good, because I had finally let out some of the stuff I'd been rehearsing all night from my tight chest.

Silence prevailed for a minute until someone from the back whooped. Then another... and another... and another, until the whole place exploded with applause. Others went like, "Whoa, cool!", "You go, girl!", "Wohoo! I love this shit!", "No, she did not just say that!", and insanely much more.

Oh, my freaking glob.

Everyone has heard! Just how loud my mouth was?

Ronnie glared at me as she crossed her arms. "Wow. What a nice little stunt you're pulling, Kylie," she said in a bored way and rolled her eyes. "I heard you, and oh, so you totally agree, huh? That I'm more gorgeous, popular, and confident than you are. Jeez, it's not like I can help it... okay, I'm sounding like a total beeyotch now. But, anyway..." The frown on her face steadily vanished, and it was replaced by a smile, which made me feel a little less like fainting. It didn't even seem sarcastic or threatening, either.

"I can never be any luckier than you, you know," she said, sounding gentler this time. "Because you have him as he has you. I can never compete with that any longer. Besides, a deal's a deal."

"Uh... deal? What deal?" I asked.

She laughed. "Never mind, Kylie," she said and held out a hand.

I stared at it for a moment before I finally knew what she meant by that. She was calling a truce!

Whoa.

Relief crossed my chest. I beamed and held her hand. She smirked, and then, to my surprise, she came closer to my ear.

"You better keep him, or you'll sleep with your one eye open for I'm going to hunt you down," Ronnie hissed.

I didn't know what I should feel about that.

She pulled away, chuckling. "Just kidding! See ya around, Kylie." She flipped a finger up to her troop. "Let's go, girls. We still have practice." With that, they disappeared from my sight.

Julianne dashed to me, bouncing on her toes. "Oh my God, Kylie," she cried, tugging my arm. "What you did was so awesome! You creamed her without making any cat fights!"

"That would be totally uncalled for if we did," I said, grinning with pleasure.

"Yeah." Laughing, she encircled her arms around my shoulders and we began to walk through the stream of students. "I'm so proud of you, Kylie. I knew it. I knew you could prove yourself one day. Finally, you did! And with that, I think that calls for celebration!" She waggled her eyebrows.

I pulled away from her. "There's no celebration yet," I said. "I still have to make up with T."

"Oh." Julianne's eyes soften. "Right. You should make the most of your time, now."

"Hey, Kylie!" I heard Grey's voice called through the mob. He strode towards us with a huge grin. "I was just passing by to get my gloves from the locker when I saw you facing Ronnie. Man, that was badass!"

I only laughed at that. "Anyway, Grey, have you seen...uh, Tristan somewhere?" I asked meekly.

Julianne nudged me teasingly and I nudged her back, glaring.

He brushed his hair and shrugged. "I haven't seen him ever since lunch, but I think he's at the greenhouse right now. Repairing the damages and all as his penalty," he answered.

Repairing the damages as his penalty. Boy, Tristan surely had made devastation in that place. Erik's favorite place... Speaking of that guy, I should confront him as well soon.

"Thanks, Grey. I gotta go now," I said.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Julianne asked.

My eyes shifted at the two of them. Then a crafty smile slowly shaped on my face .

"Nah, I got this, Jules. Thanks," I said. "By the way, Grey, you're practicing right now, yeah?" He nodded uncertainly, and I continued, "Great! Listen, Jules, why don't you come with him instead? Then you know, help him, like, offering him water or wiping his sweat or something? Because I'm sure Grey needs a personal cheerleader to boost his energy."

The guy coughed.

Julianne's jaw practically hit the floor. "Kylie! What the heck does that-?"

Laughing like a maniac, I dashed away. "Byeeee!"

After I grabbed some stuffs from the clinic, I started to head out of the school building with a big smile on my face. But then I cut short when I saw Lacey peeing on a corner. I tapped her back softly, and she turned to me with a sad smile, before turning her head away.

I craned my neck to see what she was looking at, and my heart thudded when I saw Tristan. He seemed upset while talking to... Clark.

"...I'm sorry, man. But I didn't know he got other plans! I swear!" Clark exclaimed.

He? Are they talking about Erik?

"How should I know you're telling the truth, huh? I'm sick of all the bullshit, Clark," Tristan countered.

"Jeez, I am already telling the truth, T! I had no idea about the rest of the history, about his payback, his plans, motives, and all that shit, for God's sake! And listen, I asked him to convince Kylie to let me date her sister, since the only thing I knew between them was that they were friends!"

Oh, my God.

I remembered what Erik had told me some time ago, about me giving a break to Lacey and let her date whomever she liked. I thought Erik had been saying that on his own, but it turned out as a fraud all along! Clark had used him!

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard, Clark," Tristan said, "You know you can do better than that!"

"I know, T, I know. And I'm sorry. Something was telling me it was a bad idea, but I still did it because I thought it was the shortest way to help me get to Lacey." Clark's voice was desperate, as though he was about to cry. "That girl means a lot to me, T. You know that."

I turned away and rested my head on the wall. My chest constricted. I felt bad for Clark, actually. His feelings for Lacey were so strong that they had gotten over his head and made him do things he'd normally think through and not do. For him, it was probably worth it in the end. But he didn't know it would affect the others, and that was a sad thing.

"It was supposed to be you, at first, T. It was supposed to be you instead of Erik," Clark explained, breathing heavily. "Yet seeing you and Kylie getting on each other's nerves, I didn't do it. I didn't want to create any problems between you guys. But things changed, and I told myself I made the wrong move. Erik was starting to do things that were completely out of the plan. I tried to make him stop, but he didn't!"

Lacey sat on the floor and curled her legs up. Her lips were sealed tight, and there was already red color on the rims of her eyes, as if she was trying to hold back her tears.

"What about Fiona and Erik? Monique told me you've also got something to do with them."

Fiona and Erik?

"I... Y-yeah," Clark mumbled I barely could hear him. I leaned closer. "Erik asked me to help him get to Fiona as an exchange for my bid. Then... then I asked Monique to help me."

"God, Clark, what have you done? You even dragged Monique into this?"

"I thought-I thought I was helping, man. You wanted to get rid of Fiona, right? So I agreed with him." There was a weighty pause, and then Clark sighed exasperatedly. "If only I knew he was going to do all of these, I wouldn't have agreed, I swear to God, man. I'm really sorry."

A nauseating chill crept through my skin. I gulped; my throat was completely dry. My head was spinning with all those words that had come out from Clark's mouth.

I couldn't believe it.

I'd spent such a long time labeling Tristan as a liar, a player, a heartless guy, that Erik was way better than him, but it turned out everything was completely reversed. My eyes had been shaded with lies and tricks all along.

I trusted the wrong person.

Those sincere smiles on Erik's face had been just a façade.

They had been more likely sinister ones.

And I had fallen for them.

I peeked at them again. Tristan had already walked away. Clark turned, and when he saw me, he tried to look away.

"So you girls heard, huh?" he said quietly and sat in front of Lacey, who now was having her head buried in her crossed arms. "I'm sorry, Lacey. I wasn't thinking." Then he brushed her head gently and gazed up at me. "I guess I can officially earn a bitch slap from you now, huh? It's cool; I deserved it for being such a douche."

"Oh, yeah?" I snapped, and then raised my hand. Just when he was about to prepare for a massive impact, I merely tapped him on the back.

He blinked.

"I should not be the one to do that to you. Yeah, I'm upset about what you did, but... well, I think I can forgive you if and only if she will let you off first," I said, glancing at Lacey. "Boy, love can surely bring out one's inner stupidity." I shook my head.

Clark snorted in amusement. "Nice words, Kylie."

"You know what, I should just leave you guys to talk." I tugged my backpack on my shoulder and began to stride away. "I'm going to talk with someone as well."

"Kylie."

I turned around.

Clark smiled. "Thanks."

I took a long, deep breath and exhaled.

Relax. It's just Tristan. Don't freak out, Kylie, or you'll screw up everything.

There was a loud dull sound inside, followed by a series of muttered curses. Quickly, I entered the greenhouse, and saw Tristan blowing his swollen thumb and shaking his hand. Sighing, I went to him and rummaged in my bag for the bandage I got from the clinic.

"Kylie. What are you doing here?" he asked, dropping the hammer on the floor.

"Give me your hand," I said.

"What?"

I grabbed his hand. There were several cuts on the skin aside from the dirty smudges, clearly showing that he really had been working hard for this for hours. Tristan observed me as I carefully wrapped the bandage around his hands.

"That takes care of that," I said after I was done.

"Thanks," he muttered, clenching his hands.

We just sat there staring at each other in silence. I brushed my head, looking away, hoping that my face wouldn't go as red as ketchup again. This was so awkward. I didn't know where to start talking. All of my mental preparations faded away as soon as I had stepped into this place.

"So..." we both chorused all of a sudden.

Tristan glanced away. I fiddled with my fingers.

"You talk first," we chorused again.

Oh, jeez.

I bit my lip as I tried not to laugh. I knew he was trying to hide his amusement as well, but his dimples were a dead giveaway. How ironic. Although we'd been getting into some very crappy moments, we still managed to find this whole scene comical.

We were definitely crazy.

"You're working alone here?" I immediately blurted out.

"Yeah," he said and sighed, relieved that the uncomfortable silence was broken. "There were supposed to be the two of us, but Erik has most likely chosen suspension instead of working with me for a full week," he added, making the Erik name sound like a chicken pox. "No big deal. I can handle this job with myself." He picked up the hammer and began to work with a half-made wooden stand. "Besides, a two-week suspension will probably give him enough time to think about how far he has surpassed the stages of being a loser and an asshole."

There was a moment of silence again.

I frowned at him and said, "I hate you."

"I know. I'm also an ass, still fucked up." He stopped hammering and looked at me with a small smile. "You know what, Kylie, I've been thinking—"

"I hate you," I said again. My heart was drowning with tension. "And I hate it—I totally hate whenever we cross each other's path, because it always makes me see the way your eyes light up when they meet mine, and the way you walk, talk, and act like you're just so cool. You wanna know why?" I gulped. "They're the reasons I... I still...." I buried my burning face in my palms. "I still... Oh, darn it."

His hands wrapped around my wrists lightly. He was so close; I could smell his cologne mixed with sweat.

"Kylie, look at me," he whispered.

"I-I still care about you. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for not listening to you. I'm sorry for not believing you. I'm sorry for not telling you the truth. And... and all those little things you did to me have made me realize that I was slowly falling in love with you." I looked straight into his eyes. "Do you... do you get what I'm saying?"

He blinked a couple of times. "Huh? What-?"

"Seriously?" I knocked his head with my knuckles in disbelief. "I love you, you idiot!" I exclaimed and grabbed my bag. "Jeez, I'm outta here!"

I marched out of the place with my head burning all over.

He didn't get what I was trying to say? What an idiot. Or maybe he was just playing dumb and was trying to make me repeat all of them? Gah! I thought this would be easy for me. What a little-

I stopped in my tracks as something dawned on me. Then I felt my face turn as white as the clouds.

Holy cow. Did I... Did I just blurt out to him that I...?

I wanted to tear around the school screaming my lungs out. But I just bit my lip and skipped my way home. My trial was over! I should get myself some ice cream! Yeah, I might have done all the awkward and ridiculous things at the wrong time -I was always that kind of person, anyway-but at least everything had turned out just fine.

"Yeah, fine," I said to myself.

And I mean it, finally.

-Tristan-

It might have been a couple of seconds before I finally blinked from my daze. A wide grin uncontrollably grew on my face as Kylie's three words kept on echoing in my head.

She loves me!

And to think I'd believed I never had a chance with her anymore!

I perkily fished my phone from my pocket and searched for Grey's number.

"Hey man, listen, this might be a short notice but I need your help," I said directly after he picked up. "Tell the others to come at my place later. We gotta prepare something important for tonight."

This ought to do it.

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~~Finding Cinderella (45)~~

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Hello there, lovely reader. Thanks for reading the sample/draft chapters of Part II! Please read the ANNOUNCEMENT at the end book for information. Thank you!

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~~Epilogue~~

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♡ Finding Cinderella- Epilogue ♡

-Tristan-

It seemed no time at all until the prom night came.

I spent an hour fixing myself, pressing my black tuxedo, pouring almost the entire bottle of perfume, and eating breath mints. I wanted to look presentable in front of Kylie. My hands were sweating as I went to her house.

Clark, who was all set, greeted me as I entered, and we bumped our fists. We talked for a little while, until my mom emerged from upstairs, escorting Lacey down. Clark stood up, mouth hanging in awe as he stared at the girl in a short lilac dress. Her tousled hair was side-swept, giving her a doll-like look.

"Hello, guys," Lacey greeted at us and grinned at him. "How do I look?"

It took several seconds for Clark to answer breathlessly, "Gorgeous. Very gorgeous."

"You did a great job, Mom," I said.

She smiled gratefully. "That's not even my full expertise, yet," she said. "Just wait and see Kylie."

"I'm here."

I looked up and saw the girl I'd fallen in love with. My first love. The hem of her white dress flowed on the stairs as she carefully went down. Her bangs were curled on the side of her face, and the rest of her hair was pulled up in a small bun pinned with tiny white flowers. She was even lovelier compared to what she had been back at the Valentine Ball, because this time, she wasn't wearing any disguise.

"Damn," I mumbled, couldn't take my eyes off her.

She frowned amusedly. "What?"

"You look hideous," I teased.

She smacked my shoulder. "You're way more hideous you even make Shrek look handsome."

"Hey, both of you. Stop flirting with each other, and let's go already," Clark said, chuckling.

Emilie and Mom were beaming, and they hadn't stopped taking pictures of us. Kylie and Lacey went to them to express their gratitude with a kiss, before we headed outside the cold night. Clark led Lacey to his car, and they drove first, whereas Kylie and I stayed for a little while in my car.

I took her hand, got the corsage from my pocket, and slid it around her wrist.

"To the girl who can make my world the most beautiful," I said.

Then she smiled and answered, "Thank you."

I parked my car at the side of the hotel and went around to help her out. There was a huge, noisy crowd gathered in the lounge, and as soon as we'd stepped inside, they welcomed us. I noticed that there were only a few lowerclassmen that had been asked out to the prom.

"Hey, everyone," I greeted back, giving them a nod. Kylie was smiling happily beside me, her hand gripping around my arm.

"Kylieeeeeee!" a voice screamed.

We turned around and saw Julianne in a fairy-like olive dress charging towards Kylie, and they began to chatter nonstop. Behind Julianne was Grey, and I was completely shocked to see them together. I had never seen that coming!

"Tristan, lookin' swell, huh?" he said.

"Dude, hey." I gave him a high-five. When the girls were out of earshot, I asked him, "Are you and Julianne dating or what? Am I missing something?"

He shook his head. "Nope. We're not dating. We are just together as friends, because that's what she said," he said in a tone like he wasn't convinced by that.

I clicked my tongue, shaking my head, and gave him a reassuring tap on the back.

A few minutes later, the other guys came with their dates. The only dateless dude in the group was Ryo, since he had never asked any girl. We didn't know what was wrong with him, but surely, he'd brought his PSP with him to occupy himself throughout the night.

Julianne suddenly squealed, "Guys! Since everybody's here, let's take a group picture!" She tapped a random girl passing by and asked her to take the shot.

I squeezed Kylie's hand as we posed for the camera. I looked down at her, and then she grinned broadly, as the camera flashed. It was great to be with her once more. I'd make sure this night would be unforgettable for her.

We all went to the great hall where the program was held. While Kylie was busy collecting all the foods served on the table, Grey came to me with a drink in his hand and said, "T, you ready to bag the Prom King's crown to home?"

I snorted. "Nah, I don't think that'll happen."

"Who are you kidding?" he scoffed. "Dude, everyone will vote you. And that's even a fact."

I only grinned and said, "There's a change of plans."

"This year's title of Broadway Heights Prom Queen goes to..." Ms. Ritchie said through the microphone, opened the card, and looked before the crowd. "Our very own, Veronica Sullivan!"

Everyone cheered as Ronnie sashayed through the parted mob.

Grey nudged me. "Dude, is that Fiona?"

I turned around.

Fiona was at the corner of the room, lurking in the shadows. The glare on her face was really creepy; it might even give Freddy Kreuger nightmares. Having her former best friend grabbing the crown and title was a huge slap on her face.

"She looks as if Hancock just smashed the shit out of her," Grey remarked. I snickered at that.

Fiona saw us staring, and she twisted her dark lips into a scowl. "What are you looking at?" she mouthed like a witch casting a curse.

Grey and I pushed ourselves away. She seriously looked as scary as fuck.

Ms. Ritchie put the crown on Ronnie. The Prom Queen mouthed "thank you" to her and gave a picture-perfect smile to the crowd. The noise dissipated as microphone cracked and Ms. Ritchie announced, "And now, the title of Prom King goes to no other than Tri-"

Steven marched on the stage and whispered to her, handing a card. The corner of my mouth pulled up. My plan was working.

Ms. Ritchie nodded, mumbling, "Oh, is that so? What a turn of events." Then as Steven left, she held the microphone up with a smile. "This year's Prom King title goes to.... Ryo Knight!"

The five of us guys exploded into cheers and began to push Ryo wildly.

"Nande kuso?" he snarled at us, tugging his tuxedo in place.

Justin was laughing hysterically he could barely say, "Man! We're so proud of you!"

"Kono kuso-ttare," Ryo muttered. His face was starting to get pale. "T, what's the meaning of this?" he cried. "You're supposed to be the one—"

I pushed him, nodding. "Enough cursing and get your ass outta here. Don't you wanna dance with the girl of your dreams?"

Everyone clapped and whistled as he went up the stage like a robot. Ronnie gave him a bewildered look, and he waved at her awkwardly.

"Mr. Knight, do you have something to say?" Ms. Ritchie asked him after she put the crown on his head.

Scratching his head, Ryo stammered, "I really have no idea what I'm doing here."

The crowd cracked up.

A smooth song slowly arose from the amplifiers, and everyone cleared the center for the Prom King and Queen. I looked behind, expecting to meet Kylie's eyes, but she was gone.

"Guys, have you seen Kylie?" I asked them in a loud voice, but they all just shook their heads and returned to watching.

I craned my head up as I walked through the mob. Julianne and Lacey were talking at a table, and I asked them if she was with them. They said they'd seen her getting a drink. However, when I went to the catering area, she wasn't there.

As I continued to search, I felt like I was having a déjà vu.

Did Kylie run away from me again?

-Kylie-

"What the heck are you doing here?" My voice was almost a whisper as I stared in credulously at Erik.

Yes, the guy was really in front of me. He was wearing casual clothes, meaning he hadn't planned to attend the event, and his only aim was to talk to me. In this garden where no one could see us.

"Look, Kylie, I..." He gulped, not looking at me. "I'm sorry."

I frowned. Some apology.

"I'm sorry for making you upset. I did a really stupid thing, okay?" He lifted his head up firmly. "Will you give me a chance?"

I couldn't believe my ears. He had filled my head with lies ever since the ninth grade. Pulled my leg by telling me he liked me. Used Clark for his stupid revenge. Hooked up with Fiona behind everyone's back. Fought with Tristan and wrecked the poor greenhouse. Now he expected me to give him a chance?

"Listen, Erik, I'm really not upset about what you did, okay?" I said. "I just feel bad for you, since you have made yourself as a two-faced person. I don't know if I can trust you anymore. Oh, I almost forgot to give you one thing." I opened my purse and took the necklace he'd given to me back in our "date". "Here, return this to your Mom and explain to her why it came back and how you have become as the scumbag of the year." I threw the thing to him and he caught it.

"Uh, to be honest..." he said. "This doesn't belong to Mom. I actually bought this for my ex-girlfriend, but got it back when we broke up. And no, it's not Cyrene, okay? It's... another girl."

I gave him a bewildered look. He'd given the necklace to me together with his oh-so-charming words "I should give it to the girl I like" that had made me sleepless for a night, but now- God, what the heck? Could he get any worse?

"Wow. I'm impressed," I said, raising my eyebrows. "I've never met such a brilliant storyteller like you before. If there was a Noble prize in Dishonesty, your shelf would be full of awards."

"Kylie, I'm sorry."

I raised my palm. "Talk to the hand."

"Come on. I was apologizing already," he said and sighed. "Don't you believe in second chances?"

"I do believe in second chances, Erik."

"So why won't you give me, at least? Everyone deserves a second chance!"

"But it depends if the person is deserving enough." I smiled and waved a hand. "Bye, Erik. Nice talking to you! If you have any clarifications, please don't hesitate to consult my two middle fingers."

I could hear him grumbling loudly behind. Then I walked back to him and said casually, "Oh, Erik? Before you leave, I would like to give you one precious gift that you will surely remember for a lifetime."

Then I whacked his face with my fist.

I pulled my dress up as I walked through the garden. There was a silhouette figure outlined by the lamp's golden light, roaming around the fountain area. My chest drummed as I recognized the person.

"Tristan."

He turned in a snap and dashed towards me.

"Kylie! God, I've been looking all over for you," he said fretfully, grasping my arms. "What are you doing alone here?"

"Well, I just faced the person who I had considered as my knight in shining armor, only to be a douchebag wrapped in an aluminum foil," I answered.

"You mean, Erik was here? Did he do something to you?" His wide eyes were shaking.

I stifled a laugh. "Nope. Actually, I was the one who did something to him. Gee, his face was really thick; my knuckles are still numb because of the impact." I shook my hand.

The tension broke as he laughed. He possibly figured out what I had done to the guy. His arm rounded my shoulder. "You need to be handled with care, Kylie," he said. "Come on; let's sit here by the fountain for a while. It's too hot inside there."

My smile was my answer, and we sat down. My feet were hurting so badly, so I took off my sandals and massaged my heel. I suddenly shivered as the cold wind blew. Tristan took off his coat and covered my shoulders and back with it.

"Thanks. Hey, I forgot to congratulate you for being the Prom King," I said, clutching his coat tightly for warmth.

"I'm not the Prom King, Kylie. I gave the title to Ryo."

I cocked an eyebrow. "What? Why?"

"As a sign of gratitude. That guy's great. He's, like, the 'tension breaker' who never trouble meets the gang. Among us guys, he's the least noticeable, so I think he deserves some recognition," he responded. "Besides, I'm giving him a chance to be with Ronnie at least for a little while. He's such a sucker for her."

"Well, what you did for him was cool. I'm sure he's really happy by now."

"Yeah." He sprawled his hands on the marble seat and lifted his head up to the sky. "I regret nothing, because I don't want titles anymore."

We shared a comfortable silence. The full moon in its splendid light lit up the night and sent silver sparkles on the waters of the fountain. The only sounds around were the trickles of water, the croaks of the frogs, and the muffled romantic music inside the hotel. The place was very peaceful like it was lulling me to sleep.

Just by quietly gazing at the infinity of the universe and knowing he was here beside me gave me happiness.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled the fresh air.

"Kylie."

My eyelids flew up. "Yeah?"

"Do you want to dance?"

I blinked several times, surprised by his sudden request.

He sat straight and shook his head. "No, wrong approach." Clearing his throat, he stood up and bowed courteously in front of me. "Are you willing to dance under the stars with me, my beautiful lady?"

Smiling, I got up barefooted; the stone floor felt so chilly in my feet. I curtsied, saying, "Well played, sir. Well played."

I took his hand and put my other hand on his back. He snaked his arm around my waist, and as we began to take a smooth gliding motion, I asked him, "T, why did you ask me to wear this dress again?"

"It's because I want to bring back our first dance and make it a good one. Remember at the Valentine Ball? It was a disaster because you ran away," he replied. The corners of his eyes were crinkling in amusement. "You didn't tell me the rea

son why."

"Ah well, a-actually it was because... uh, never mind, Tristan. Just forget it," I mumbled. I simply couldn't bear to tell him the reason. It would be so embarrassing to say!

"All right, my lady. But this time-" he pulled me closer to him "-don't try to run away from me again, okay? I'll still chase you."

"Rest assured, sir. My hands are already infinitely locked in the palm of yours."
"

We stopped moving. Tristan took something from his pocket and lifted my right hand. Silently, he slipped the thing around my wrist. It was a bracelet made out of a red cord, and a silver ring connected both of its ends.

"Sorry if it's plain. I made it just by myself," he said.

I smiled gratefully. "It's pretty."

"I have one, too." He rolled up his sleeve and showed a matching black one around his right wrist. He then took my hand. "Do you know what this means?"

"Yeah."

He pressed his forehead on mine. "We are going steady."

I nodded. The warmth of his breath was brushing on the top of my lips.

He lifted my chin. "You make me very happy, Kylie. I hope I make you happy, too," he whispered. "I love you."

"That's very cheesy, Tristan."

"But that's what makes you fall in love with me, isn't it?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know what, even if you can manage to get on every single nerve in me sometimes," I said and grinned, "You make me very happy as well. I love you, idiot."

He laughed, and when he kissed me slowly, my heart practically exploded with rainbows.

If I had imagined this moment way back the old times, I would have been very appalled. But things change, feelings change, we change. And we really don't know what life will give us, where it will push us.

Sometimes, the things we least expect happens.

In my case, I'd never expected that a simple dance would put me in a rollercoaster relationship with this "prince" in front of me. I had been hesitant at first, but then I'd taken that "leap of faith", because I'd learned that sometimes, all it takes to fall in love is the guts to try.

And that love gave us a fairy tale once in a while, right in the middle of our ordinary lives.

Our hearts perfectly fitted each other. Just like Cinderella and her glass slipper.

Well, I couldn't say this was the end of our story, because if I would say the end, it meant that everything was completely over, and our story was not.

We still had a long way to go, many different people to meet, more detours to take, heaps of problems to face. But we knew-we always knew we could make it through. We just had to believe in ourselves and with each other.

This was only just the beginning of our journey to happily ever after.

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~~♪ Playlist & FAQs~~

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♪ Finding Cinderella Playlist ♪

Addicted- Simple Plan

Anywhere But Here- Mayday Parade

Baby Blue Eyes- A Rocket To The Moon

Come Back To Me- David Cook

Everywhere Everything- This Century

Falling- Secrets in Stereo

Falling for You- Colbie Calliat

Far Away- Nickelback

Far From Perfect- The OverUnder

Find That Girl- The Boy Band Project

Get Over It- Avril Lavigne

Go Get Her- This Century

Hanging By a Moment- Lifehouse

Happily Ever After- He Is We

Heart Skips a Beat- Lenka

I'd Lie- Taylor Swift

If I'm Gonna Fall In Love- A Rocket To The Moon

I'm Falling- Tyler Ward feat. Alex G.

I Miss You- Blink 182

I'm Yours- Jason Mraz

It Ends Tonight- The All American Rejects

Just So You Know- Jesse McCartney

Just The Girl- Click Five

Life After You- Daughtry

Lightning- Alex Goot

Like We Used To- A Rocket To the Moon

Man I Think I Love Her- Stereo Skyline

Missing You- Letters and Lights

Never Seen Nothing Like You- Nate Highfield

Nothing- The Script

Only One- Yellowcard

Out Of My League- Stephen Speaks

Popular Song- Ariana Grande feat. MIKA

Realize- Colbie Caillat (Boyce Avenue cover)

Right Girl- The Maine

Say You Like Me- We The Kings

She (for Liz) - Parachute

She's Killing Me- A Rocket To The Moon

Sorry- Daughtry

Sugar We're Going Down- Fall Out Boy

Take My Heart- SoKo

Terrified- Katharine McPhee and Zachary Levi

The Way I Loved You- Taylor Swift (Julia Sheer and Tyler Ward cover)

To Love and Back- This Century

Tongue Tied- Faber Drive

Trouble- Nevershoutnever

True Love- Pink feat. Lily Allen

What Are You Waiting For- Miranda Cosgrove

Where Is She- Justin Roman and Natalie Soluna

Who Are You Know- Sleeping With Sirens

Without You- Struan Shields

Wonderwall- Oasis

You and Me- Lifehouse

You Got Me- Colbie Caillat

You'll Never Know- Lawson

The songs are available on 8tracks; just click the external link. Feel free to add your own playlist! I might check out some of them. ;)

Q1: Will there be a sequel?

A: Sorry if this is going to break your heart or whatever, but my answer is no. I'm not going to make any sequels. Why? It's because I want you to make your own conclusions. Besides, I'm not really a huge fan of sequels. There's a PREQUEL, though: Once Upon a Summer.

ps: I have an on-going story: Like Sweet Serendipity. It has a new set of characters and plot (nope, FC characters won't appear there, sorry), and I hope you guys will check it out . :3

Q2: Make a story about the supporting characters (JulianGrey/LaceyClark/RyoxRonnie)?

A: UPDATE as of Nov. 8, 2013: I did make a spin-off about RyoxRonnie. Just visit my profile and find The Art of Getting Her. I hope you all will check it out!!

Q3: Publish this book?

A: Kindly read the announcement >>

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~~ANNOUNCEMENT (PLEASE READ)~~

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Hello, guys!

(Please read everything thoroughly)

The book has been divided into TWO PARTS, and they're now published under SUMMIT POP FICTION (a publishing company in the Philippines). Each costs 195.00 php and is available to all leading bookstores nationwide.

The book version contains a little more scenes/lines, full-colored illustrations of Tristan and Kylie, and a bookmark. (On the side is the book cover teaser of Part I and Part II!)

To those who are living outside the country and want to buy the physical book, kindly contact/email: Ulyssis Javier (ulyssis.javier@summitmedia.com.ph).

That is, if you are willing to pay the shipping fee. But if not (I know the shipping fee is kinda costly), yet still want to read the book, rest assured 'cause the ebook version is out now! You can purchase it by downloading the Buqo App on your iPad, iPhones, iThings, Android (only supports 4.0 Ice Cream Sandwich and higher), etc. Or you can visit Buqo's website (www.buqo.ph).

For more info, kindly visit Pop Fiction's FB page (link on the side). If you have questions, don't hesitate to put them down on the comment section; I'll make sure to answer them. :)

I know you guys have been hearing this a lot but THANK YOU, THANK YOU SO MUCH for supporting this book. You guys made one of my dreams come true! I<3u all.

PS: Don't give up on your dreams, too. :)

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~~FC Fan Art Contest (CLOSED)~~

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If you love drawing, creating art in photoshop, sketching, and all that stuff, why don't you showcase your God-given talent by making a fan art for this book? ;)

Criteria for the contest:

- 1.) Should be eye-catching, artistic, and unique.
- 2.) Should be relevant to the book (your favorite characters, scenes, lines, what)

tever floats your boat).

3.) May be hand-drawn (like watercolored stuff, pencil sketches, anime drawings, etc.) or made by any computer software (Photoshop, deviantart, etc.). You can make a collage, if you want to! (For the drawings: If you want a basis on how the main characters look like, look at the pic on the side).

DEADLINE: APRIL 13, 2014.

I'll choose THREE mind-blowing arts and they shall be FEATURED in Pop Fiction's first-ever magazine! Not only that, I'll send those three winners a signed copy of Finding Cinderella! How does it sound to you, guys? -winky winky-

Kindly send your fan arts to my email (kiatembrevilla@gmail.com) together with your name, Wattpad username, and the country you're living in, and the subject: FC Fan Art. (For the hand-drawn works, you can scan or take a picture of them and attach it to your email). NO spamming, please. Thank you. If you have questions, put them down and I'll be sure to answer them. :)