

SIX MONTHS LATER

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For my Dad and David.
Thank you for believing.



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ONE

I'M SITTING NEXT TO THE FIRE ALARM, AND MY BEST friend is going down in flames. Irony or divine intervention? I can practically feel the metal handle under my fingers. It might as well be whispering my name.

Tempting. One strategic arm stretch and I could send this whole school into an evacuation frenzy.

I could end Maggie's nightmare *right* now.

At the front of the classroom, she swallows hard. She is as pale and shaky as the paper in her hands.

"The social p-pressures and isolation encountered b-by male n-n—"

I can't let her suffer like this.

Maggie shakes her head and tries to shrug it off with a sheepish grin. "S-sorry."

"It's all right," Mrs. Corwin says, playing with the cat pendant around her neck. "There's no reason to be scared."

She thinks stuttering is a fear problem? Aren't teachers supposed

to know about speech issues and all that crap? Then again, what can I expect from a woman who has professionally framed pictures of her beloved Siamese, Mr. Whiskers, on her desk?

Maggie takes a breath. “The p-pressures and isolation encountered by male n-nurses in a predominantly f-female occupation is a compelling argument f-f-f—” She trails off, going crimson.

Someone snickers from the front.

“Go on, Maggie,” Mrs. Corwin says. Again.

I’m going to do it.

Beside me, Blake Tanner shifts in his chair. I know this partly because I have good peripheral vision, but mostly because I have freakishly sensitive Blake radar. I hesitate, breathing in the clean hint of his cologne, watching him softly drum a thumb on his desktop.

My face goes hot. I can’t do this with him sitting here. I’m completely invisible to this guy. And now I’m finally going to get his attention by, what? By pulling a fire alarm? Yes, I’m sure that will send a great message. To the guy who’s been on the student council since the eighth grade.

Maggie tosses her hair back, forging on. “It’s a compelling argument f-for s-s-sexism against men. In most modern contexts, concerns about s-s-s-s—”

Maggie goes pink and then red. Tyler and Shannon laugh in the back, and my eyes start to well up. Screw it. I can’t sit here for one more second of one more minute.

I sink down as far as I can in my chair and start sliding my arm back along the wall. I reach up, but I'm grasping blind. It kind of hurts. I touch something cool and metal. Bingo. Two seconds and this misery is over.

Blake clears his throat and I bite my lip. Is he watching me?

What's wrong with me? Of course he's not watching me. I'm invisible.

I turn my head because I'm sure I feel someone's eyes on me. I do.

Adam Reed. He's slouched low in his seat, his dark hair in desperate need of the business end of a pair of scissors.

Adam arches one of his brows at me. The half smile on his lips asks me what I'm waiting for. I don't really have an answer, so I curl my fingers over the alarm handle and pull hard. And then I kiss my detention-free junior year goodbye.

Maggie is waiting outside the principal's office. She's got a couple of notebooks clutched in her arms and a pencil securing her strawberry blond waves into a bun.

The office door is barely closed when she starts in on me. "What were you thinking? You c-could have been expelled."

I sling my backpack over my shoulder and offer our school secretary, Mrs. Love, a wave. Maggie takes the cue and follows me briskly back into the hallway. Students are slamming locker doors and texting madly in the few minutes between periods.

Someone whistles, and across the hall, Connor holds two thumbs up. “Let’s hear it for fire safety!”

The hallway bursts into a smattering of applause and wolf calls. I blush but give a little bow with a flourish of my hand.

We make our way to the stairs, climbing them two at a time.

“So what happened, Chloe? How b-bad is it?”

“I got a week of detention and a lecture about applying my interest in psychology to evaluating my episodes of acting out.”

Maggie looks away, and I can tell she’s biting her tongue.

I know that look. It means she’s working hard to say something in a way that won’t offend the hell out of me.

“Spit it out. You’re obviously dying to insert commentary.”

She sighs. “Look, I know you w-wanted to help me, but you’ve got to start thinking about yourself, Chloe. Sometimes it’s like you’re running away from everything you want.”

I try not to look as hurt as I feel. “It’s not like I’m afraid of being good, Mags.”

She just laughs and takes my arm. “You jumped off the Third Street Bridge on a *dare*, which proves you’re not afraid of anything. It also proves you’re insane.”

“Watch it.”

I take a breath as we pass the drinking fountains, heading close to the last stretch of lockers in the hall. An otherwise unremarkable place in this building except for the fact that it’s the Blake Zone.

As if on cue, he closes his locker door and appears, the tall,

popular king of this lonely hallway. He laughs at a joke I don't hear. It's a perfect laugh that matches his perfect teeth and his perfect everything else.

I sigh. "Did Blake seem...disappointed?"

She blows out an impatient breath and rolls her eyes at me. "I didn't really think to dissect Blake's expression in the chaos and p-panic of the fire evacuation."

Blake laughs again, and I turn away, my cheeks burning. "Right. Sorry."

She gives me a sly grin. "Want me to go ask him?"

I slump back against the wall with a sigh. "How is it that I'm not the one who talks to boys? I'm the bridge jumper, the alarm puller—"

"The stalker," Maggie adds.

"That was one time! And technically, I was in my undies, but yes. How is it that you, High Queen of the Honor Roll, are better at this than me?"

"The stutter makes me a wild card," she says, winking. "No one ever sees me coming. And you talk t-to plenty of guys."

My gaze lingers on the stretch of Blake's polo across his shoulders, the ends of his hair curling over his collar. "Yeah, well. Not that one."

"I've got to g-get to class," Maggie says. "Speaking of which, did you remember to pick up your GPA at the office this morning?"

I feign a big, carefree smile. "Gosh, I must have completely

forgotten. But I totally signed up for the SAT study group you told me about.”

“And somehow forgot t-to ask for your GPA?” she asks, clearly unconvinced.

“Oh, who cares about a GPA anyway?”

She blinks at me, arms crossed. “Uh, every college you’ll be applying to.”

“Right. Well, finals aren’t until next week. I can fix it.”

Her eyes go dark. “Fix it? How bad is it?”

“Um, I—” The warning bell rings, saving me from another lie. “Gotta dash. Study hall and all. Yep, that’s me. Study, study, study.”

I slip inside the door and hear her calling after me. “You’re running out of time, Chloe!”

She’s got a point. I have exactly six days left of my junior year to turn my GPA into something that won’t doom me to serving bad eggs at Trixie’s Diner for the rest of my life. The urgency should inspire me to use every minute of my study hall period. It *really* should.

I pick up my biology notes, but it’s all *cellular* this and *genetic* that, and my eyelids feel heavy after two lines. Why can’t I get my act together?

Everyone around me is in full-force cram mode. Of course they are. Even Alexis, who spent the whole year reading *Vogue* behind her textbooks, is flipping through a stack of note cards. I’m officially the last slacker standing.

Maybe I could make a waitressing gig awesome. Except I don't want a waitressing gig. I only want one gig, and it doesn't involve rushing baskets of fries to hungry truckers.

It involves a doctorate degree in psychology.

How am I going to get through twelve years of college if I can't even stay awake in study hall?

Too bad I can't make a career out of sleeping in class undetected. I could tutor people in *that*. It's all about the posture. Chin in palm says bored. Chin on knuckles says deeply in thought.

And that sunbeam drifting through the window next to my desk? It says, *Go to sleep, Chloe*.

I tilt my head, watching the late May sunshine stroke my arms with soft, golden fingers. I do have all weekend to study. And I've got that stupid study group tonight, so I'm taking steps in the right direction. How much harm could one *teeny* little catnap do?

I give into the warmth and let my eyes slip closed. I'll worry about my lack of self-discipline after the bell rings.

But the bell doesn't ring.

There's no sound at all to wake me, just a cold sinking feeling in my middle. The hair on the back of my neck prickles, and my heart changes rhythm. Skips one beat. Then another.

And I know something is horribly wrong.