

# Bliss

*He doesn't kiss me like that.*

That's the first thing I think when I find Kaitlin Carter getting to second base with my boyfriend in the back of our rental limo.

Followed closely by, *Is she wearing any panties?*

And then, *Ew, ew, EW!*

I watch through the open door in a daze. Kaitlin is straddling Cameron's lap, kind of . . . grinding at him, her pinned updo thwacking against the roof in time to the rap track they have playing on the pimped-out stereo. I blink. A half hour ago, we were slow-dancing inside, my cheek resting against the crisp lapel of Cameron's tux. Now, his jacket is crumpled on the seat beside them, next to her strapless bra and the stray lipstick I came back out here to collect.

I try to leave, but for some reason, I can't look away.

She's unbuttoning his shirt now, as he gropes at every available inch of flesh. And Kaitlin's dress provides plenty of it to grope. We hit every mall in a hundred-mile radius to find these dresses, but while my mom vetoed everything slit way up my thigh and down my chest, Kaitlin walked away with a clinging pink jersey thing that could probably get her arrested in some states.

Cameron sure appreciates the easy access. As I watch, his hands creep up her thighs, pushing the fabric higher, until—

I reel back, freaked.

Make that third base.

“Omigod, Bliss, where WERE you?” Nikki pounces the minute I get back inside the country club. “The DJ totally promised to play that song we love. I've been looking everywhere for you!”

I can't find the words, but I'm lucky: Nikki is too high on prom to care. Not even pausing for breath, she drags me through the gleaming marble lobby overflowing with flowers and floating balloons. “And Kaitlin totally ditched me, too! I know you guys are, like, BFFs or whatever, but this is *prom*! You should be hanging out with us. Bliss? Hey, earth to B!” She snaps her fingers in front of my face.

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” I pause. Nikki's waiting, her forehead creased in a tiny frown, and for a moment I think about telling her everything. It would be all over this place

in minutes—no, wait. The way Nikki gossips, everyone would think Kaitlin had thrown an orgy with Cameron, the limo driver, *and* the pimply freshman valet before she even has time to pull that bra on again.

But just as quickly as the thought comes, I push it down again. Winding up the biggest scandal of the night is so not on my prom agenda. “I was, umm, with Cameron,” I tell her, arranging my face into a perky grin. “You know, just getting some private time.”

“Nice!” Nikki gives me this knowing look. “But seriously, how hot do the guys look in their tuxes? They should make them, like, mandatory uniforms.”

“Right.” I even manage a giggle. “Anyway, I’m here now. Let’s party!”

Linking my arm through hers, I head into the thick of the crowd. It’s crazy out here: five hundred kids cutting loose on the dance floor in a flashing mess of formal gear and floor-length gowns. East Midlands High has always been famous for our prom, and this year is no different. The PTA started planning way back in the fall, throwing fancy dinners and auctions to raise funds, even when they didn’t need it. Half the school district is so loaded, all it takes is a couple of fat checks and a few calls and voilà! The exclusive country club is booked up for the night with uniformed waiters, armfuls of sparkling streamers, and a DJ flown in special from the East Coast by some senior’s dotting dad.

Tickets sell out so fast, they make it upperclassmen only, so when junior year finally came around, you can bet

we were ready. I started looking for a dress in December, found the right shoes in March, and perfected my half-braided, tumbling hairstyle at the salon by the time Cameron finally asked me to go in May. It was going to be perfect.

It was supposed to be freaking perfect.

We finally reach the others, already staked out in prime position—in the center of things, like always. “Awesome!” Nikki cries as the DJ switches to a new song, some club hit with a sexy dance routine. The rest of them squeal as well, flushed and happy like this is everything we’ve dreamed about. Nikki turns, clutching me with glee. “Isn’t this perfect?”

“So perfect!” My cheeks hurt from forcing this smile, but I pose for the flash of someone’s camera, pretending like everything’s just fine. And it is. Kaitlin can work her way through the whole freaking *Kama Sutra* with Cameron for all I care. This is prom. And like my mom always says, you remember prom for the rest of your life.

Four songs later, I’m still trying to dance the disturbing memories right out of my mind when Courtney grabs my arm. By now, our careful outfits are beginning to come undone: her strapless turquoise dress is slipping lower, and her hair has fallen out of its bun. I watch her lips move, not able to make out a word over the deafening thump of the music. “I can’t hear you!” I yell back.

Courtney mimes something, as if she’s putting on lip gloss.

“Bathroom break?” I figure her out. “OK.”

Nikki grabs some of the other girls and breaks for the edge of the floor. I follow, numb. Maybe some air is what I need. I want to forget everything, but no matter how much I throw myself into the music, I still feel weirdly detached, like I'm not in my body anymore. I should be crying, heartbroken over Cameron somewhere, I know, but for some reason, the tears won't come. I just picture them together, frozen in that guilty scene. His hands, her little breathy moans.

I feel something sharp start to form behind my rib cage, a fierce knot of resentment.

"This is the best prom ever!" Brianna declares, pushing through the door into the gleaming cream bathroom. As a reigning senior, she would know, which is why Courtney and Nikki just make noises of agreement instead of asking if it's true that she spent the last one barfing in her pool house after getting drunk at the preparty. "Bliss, do you have that mascara?"

I silently hand it over. The others all crowd around the gilt-edged mirrors, carefully reapplying gloss and glitter, but I sink down onto the plush love seat in the corner, tired out.

"So, gossip," Brianna orders, gazing at her own reflection. "There's got to be something."

"I saw Patrick making out with Taryn," Nikki offers. Brianna wrinkles her lip. "From cheerleading?"

"No, the one with red hair. Remember, she cheated on TJ last year?"

There's a chorus of delighted "Ew!" and "Skank!" and for the first time, I wonder if they'd even take my side. It

shouldn't even be a thing. I mean, Kaitlin and Cameron are the ones lying and cheating and stabbing me in the back here. But then I think of this senior girl, Melissa. She and Luke DiGeorge were like the old married couple of our group, until she found out that he'd been texting Keisha Martin behind her back. She confronted them during lunch one day: a huge showdown in front of the whole school. At first, everyone was totally scandalized and swore they had her back, but Courtney was dating Luke's cousin, and Keisha hooked everyone up with tickets to the best events through her dad, and soon enough, she was totally forgiven. In the end, Melissa just kind of drifted out of our orbit. I don't even know if she came tonight.

I watch the girls gossip, chilled by the thought of everything I could lose. I've worked too hard to get here—get *in*—to be edged out, just because my supposed friend couldn't keep her hands (or other body parts) off my boyfriend. But what am I supposed to do now: smile and let them get away with it?

The knot twists tighter.

“You guys won't believe my after-party.” With a final dap of gloss, Brianna turns away from the mirror. “It's going to be epic, I swear.” She notices me folded in the corner. “What's up with you, B? Is Cameron off getting wasted with the rest of the guys?”

I force another grin. “No idea! He was around here somewhere. . . .”

Luckily, before she can ask anything else, the door swings open. “Omigod, you will not believe who I just

saw!” Another senior, Jessica, bursts in. Her hair is dyed almost white-blond, and she’s straightened it into a flat sheet that hangs past her waist.

“Who? Who?” The girls crowd around.

Jessica pauses for effect and then announces, “Jolene Nelson.”

I look up.

“No. Way!” They all gasp.

“Yes way!” She snatches a lip gloss wand and touches up. “I saw her lurking in one of the side rooms, and you will not believe what she’s wearing. It’s like, pink!”

“Pink?” Nikki sneers.

“Uh-huh. It’s got ruffles and everything.”

“What is she even doing here?” Brianna whines. “I thought she was suspended. Didn’t she, like, set fire to one of the back buildings?”

Courtney bobs her head in agreement. “I heard they’re pressing charges. She’s going to go to juvie.”

“I heard it was because she slept with Mr. Milton,” Jessica says smugly. “Taylor told me that Nadine told her that Jolene totally seduced him, and then blackmailed him for five thousand dollars. He’s like, a public school teacher, so he couldn’t pay, and she ratted him out to the principal.”

“The bitch!”

“What a slut.”

“I can’t believe she showed her face.”

While the other girls rally to poor Mr. Milton’s defense, I pause, an unlikely idea sparking to life. Jolene Nelson,

here at prom? Part of me doesn't believe Jessica—I mean, that whole “pink ruffles” part?—but if it's true . . .

I leap up before I can change my mind. “I forgot!” I exclaim, reaching for my purse. “Cameron's waiting for me. The DJ's going to play our song.”

“Awwww!” The looks I get are the usual mixture of simpering and sheer envy.

“See you inside!” I bolt from the room. But it's not Cameron I'm looking for.

I hurry back through the maze of glossy hallways, checking the lobby and the cloakroom and even the refreshment area for any sign of her angry glare. I don't know what I'll do if I find her. I haven't thought that far ahead. I just know that for the first time since the parking lot, I feel like myself again: like I have a mission, some freaking sense of control.

“Bliss!” A group of girls from the prom committee stops me by the portrait setup, but I just wave, avoiding the flash of their digital cameras and perfect party pouts. Even when Tristan, the undisputed hottest guy in our class, catches my eye and starts to ask “What's up?” I don't even slow for a second; I just keep searching. Finally, when I'm about ready to give it up as an urban prom legend, I open the door to one of the gloomy storage rooms.

And there she is: perched up on a cluttered shelf, smoking out of the open window. That spiky bleached hair has been gelled into something sleek and almost stylish, a pink silk dress is crumpled around her knees, and a pair of gorgeous strappy sandals lie abandoned on the dusty floor.

Jolene Nelson, the baddest girl in school.



“Do you want something?” Flicking ash out the window, she looks down at me with the trademark icy stare that’s reduced freshmen to tears.

“I . . .” I pause, but just as I’m about to take it back and turn around, the music drifting through the open window switches to a new song. Not just any song, but ours—mine and Cameron’s. The one he put on that old-school mix CD, the one playing in his car when we went on our first date. I wasn’t lying to the girls in the bathroom: I asked the DJ to play it especially. I thought it would be a perfect romantic moment for us, something to look back on when I’m old and gray and sucking strained beets through a straw.

Instead, I get to remember his hands up someone else’s skirt, and the color of Kaitlin’s hot-pink thong panties.

I steel myself and take a couple of steps into the room. “I need your help.”

# JOLENE

According to my ex–algebra teacher (who, despite what everyone thinks, I didn’t seduce, blackmail, and leave penniless working as a fry cook at a roadside diner in Idaho), the only real impossibilities are mathematical. You know, two plus two equaling five, or a triangle not adding up to 180 degrees. Everything else, even gravity failing or Miley Cyrus releasing a death-metal album, is just improbable—wait around long enough, and they might just come true.

I’m beginning to get what he means. Because right now:

1. I, Jolene Roseanne Nelson, am at the East Midlands prom.
2. Wearing a stupid pink dress.
3. And Bliss Merino is asking for my help.

Thanks a lot, Mr. Milton.

“Say it again?” Taking a slow drag, I look down from my vantage point atop the shelf of cleaning supplies. Bliss looks plastic and perfect as ever, a white floaty dress taped to her perky chest, almost glowing against the silver heels and tumble of black hair. She looks totally out of place in the messy supply closet, but then again, I can hardly judge.

Freaking ruffles.

“Will you help me?” Bliss edges closer, her face lit up in this hopeful expression, and I can feel my prospects of peace and solitude disappear right out that window with the last of my cigarette smoke.

So much for staying under the radar. A half hour more was all I was going to give this thing, and I figured I could avoid the hyper, squealing drama that long at least. But I can already hear, “You look so cute!” “No, YOU look so cute!” drifting in, and guitar from that stupid, soft-rock slow jam echoing from the ballroom.

“Help with what?” I finally ask when I get over the fact that she’s actually looking me in the eye, let alone asking for a favor. “Wait, don’t tell me . . .” I wouldn’t have figured this one for a raver, but hey, I’d need to be out of my mind to tolerate her friends and their in-depth debate over the merits of Sparkle Sheen versus Juicy Glow lip gloss. “I’m not holding. Try Miles Parsons,” I suggest, icy. “I saw him with some pills out on the back terrace.”

“What?” Bliss looks confused. “No, that’s no it!”

“Then what?” I smush out the cigarette, wondering how much of my lung capacity I’ve just killed. It’s a crappy habit, I know, but it calms me down, and God knows I

need calming in this getup. Every time I glance down, there they are: enough ruffles to smother a small child, erupting from my chest like a foul wave of pink taffeta, out to drown every ounce of credibility I've got.

"I . . ." Bliss takes a breath. "I want to destroy Kaitlin Carter."

"Rebellion in the social ranks, how thrilling." I roll my eyes. "So, don't sit with her at lunch. I'm sure it'll be like, OMG, the biggest scandal!"

"That's not what I mean." She shakes her pretty little head. "I'm serious. I want to tear her life apart."

I pause. It is, after all, either this or braving the main ballroom again to watch the dry-humping Olympics. Raising an eyebrow, I ask, "What happened—did she wear the same color eye shadow as you?"

Bliss folds her arms. "Nope, she's actually fooling around with my boyfriend in the back of our limo right about now."

I let out a snort of laughter. Bliss, of course, looks wounded.

"Come on." I hop down from the shelf, my feet bare on the dusty floor. "Weren't you dating that football frat dude? I weep for your loss."

"Cameron," Bliss replies, her voice thin. "And he needs to pay as well."

"OK, so she's a bitch and he's a slut." I shrug. "Tell me something I don't know." I begin to strap myself back in those heels, trying not to wince at the pain. I thought about coming in my boots, but our deal was all or nothing: him in a cummerbund and flashy suit, me with the

full *Seventeen* prom extravaganza. We laughed at the time, like it would be the biggest joke to crash their party, but I guess the joke's on me. I haven't heard from Dante in months, but I still trussed myself up like an idiot, hoping he'd come.

I make to leave, but to my surprise, Bliss blocks the door.

I glare.

"Look, I get it," she protests hurriedly, backing off. "You don't like me. And that's just fine. But I want revenge, and I can make it worth your while."

My jaw drops.

"You have *got* to be kidding me." Just when I think these girls couldn't get any more entitled. "What's next—paying someone to wipe your ass?"

"Stop, Jolene—"

"I'm not one of your little groupies." I fix her with a deathly stare. "Get one of them to do your grunt work."

I head down the hallway as fast as these perilous heels will take me. Groups of glitzy students litter every room, but I cut through the crowds, fuming at Bliss's nerve. She and the rest of that clique are all the same. I see them every day; we all do—fawning over each other's preppy designer clothes in the cafeteria, strutting down the halls like they own them. Sometimes, they even swing by the Dairy Queen, so I can serve them milkshakes and clean up the mess they always leave behind.

I used to let it slide, like everyone else. Petty social games—they're a high-school fact of life, right? That's what everyone thinks, anyway, but it's a lie. You can quit,

it's simple. You just walk away. Let mindless dolls like Bliss Merino tie themselves up trying to be perfect and popular—I got the hell out. They think I'm white trash anyway, so I may as well live up to my damn name. It didn't take much, in the end: some big boots, a pair of headphones. Turn up late, fight back, carve some desks, get suspended. The rumors started up, and just like that, *they* get out of the way for *me* in the hallways. I've got four more days until graduation, two months until I start college, and most of them are smart (or scared) enough to leave me well alone until then.

Except Bliss. I'm swiping some pastry shells from the refreshment area when I hear the *tip-tap* of heels approaching. Sure enough, Bambi bounds up beside me, her white dress swishing around like she's got a personal wind machine trailing her. And who knows—on Daddy's budget, maybe she does.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think," she insists like we never stopped talking. "I don't mean it like I'm better than you. I just thought you'd want some kind of . . . incentive."

I turn my back on her. Crab filling? Awesome.

"Please"—Bliss keeps at me—"would you just—"

"Jolene? Yoo-hooo, Jolene Nelson? There you are!"

I freeze. A perky-looking woman is bearing down on us, marked with the bright red pin of official chaperones. I scan the room, but it's too late. There's no escape.

"Look at you! That dress is so cute!" she gushes, enveloping me in a hug. Immediately, I choke for air, smothered by a heavy cloud of floral perfume. "When your mom said

you were coming, I couldn't believe it, but here you are, looking like your old self!"

My mom? I pause, alert for danger. "Uh, hi . . ."

"Can I get a photo of you and your friend?" She waves a digital camera at me. "I know your mom would love some pics."

"Sure," I say weakly. "Come on, *friend*." I give Bliss a look. Luckily, those girls take classes in being a camera whore. Throwing her arms around me, she grins maniacally at the woman.

"Everybody say *prom!*" Bliss squeals.

"Fab!" The camera flashes away a couple of times, and then the woman beams. "So glad I caught you! I have to go back on patrol now. Did you know some kids are sneaking out to *get drunk?*" She drops her voice to whisper the last words.

"No!" Bliss gasps, almost sarcastic.

She nods. "You girls have fun. Be good!" And then at last, the woman sweeps away in a blur of gold beading. I let out a sigh of relief. Pure oxygen, the joy.

"Well?"

When I look up, Bliss is staring at me, smug.

"Thanks," I mumble. I didn't expect her to play along, but it's still not as if I owe her or anything.

"Don't go OTT."

"Whatever." I'm done humoring her, but just as I'm about to tell Bliss exactly where she can take her fake smiles and vast reserve of entitlement, I catch a flash of something in her expression. For a moment, the smile

strains at the edge of her lips, and her eyes are full of anger. Then it's gone, and that careful mask flips back into place.

I pause, softening just a tiny bit. Anger, I know. Damn, I could write an epic novel on that. I know how it burns at you, hardening inside until you've got nothing but a metal lump in your gut that won't shift, not for anything.

At least, I didn't think there was anything . . .

"You really want them to go down?" I ask, suddenly curious. This is about more than just a wrecked prom, I can tell, and if Bambi here wants it bad enough, then perhaps she could be useful to me, after all.

Bliss nods, her face even again. "I said before," she answers, almost flippant. "I want revenge, and I want you to teach me how."

Yup. Tonight is definitely the night of impossibilities.

Suddenly, the room is invaded by a crowd of girls, chattering in that high-pitched whine about how freaking awesome the DJ is and how freaking cute Sam looks in his tux and how freaking uh-MAY-zing their photos will look online. They swarm around me, filling plates with tiny, calorie-free snacks and shrieking about what might get stuck in their teeth.

"Jolene?" Bliss is still pestering me, so I check my phone. Forty minutes late. There's no way Dante's going to show now. He probably doesn't even remember our deal, and even if he does . . . Well, the way things went down the last time I saw him wouldn't exactly make me leap at the chance to hang out again, prom or no prom.



“And Mellie said that SHE saw this dress first, but I was like, no way, and anyway, she has blond hair, and everyone knows blond and silver, like, so don’t go, and . . .”

What the hell.

Checking that the coast is clear of gushing chaperones, I take a handful of stuffed mushrooms and head toward the back of the room. Just as I thought, there’s a dark hallway, so the staff can bring out those fancy trays without the prized partygoers even having to glance at the help. The sign out front says NO GUESTS ALLOWED in big black lettering. I push it aside.

“Where are you going?” Bambi is still trotting after me. I don’t bother to turn.

“Anywhere but here. You in?”

“Seriously?” she gasps. “Yes! I’m so in.”

I lead her into the labyrinth of hallways, but once we’re out of sight, I pause. “If we’re going to do this, we do it my way,” I warn, hands on hips. “You do what the hell I say, when I say it.” Bliss nods eagerly. “And don’t even think about paying me,” I add, glaring. “You cover the cost of materials, and unexpected expenses, and that’s it.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “Unexpected . . . ?”

I roll my eyes. “Bribes, bail, you know.”

“Umm, sure.”

I spot a waiter coming toward us. He’s still looking down at the heavy tray of glasses, but any minute now . . . “Quick,” I whisper, “hide!”

We duck into a side room. “Umm, I know this might be

a stupid question,” Bliss whispers, crammed next to me in the dark. “But why don’t we just walk out the front?”

I sigh. “Because we need an alibi. You saw that woman before?” Bliss nods. “She’s friends with my mom,” I explain. “If anything goes wrong with this revenge plan, there are hundreds of people like her stationed all over the place, ready to report they saw us leave together.”

“Hundreds.” Bliss giggles, so I elbow her. She falls silent for a moment. But just a moment. “If you don’t want to be here, why did you even come?”

“I’m not allowed?” I snap back.

“That’s not what I said.” I can feel Bliss studying me. “You’re really touchy, you know that?”

“No,” I drawl, sarcastic. “My therapist didn’t mention it.” I crack the door and peer out. The waiter has stopped about ten feet away and is chatting to another staff member. She’s young and pretty, and by the adoring look on his face, we’ll be here all night.

I close the door again. Bliss is still watching me. “So, why did you come?”

I exhale loudly. “You ask too many questions, you know that?”

Bliss grins. “Maybe you should give me that therapist’s number.”

Touché.

I check again, but our escape route is still blocked; meanwhile, Bliss is studying me with that perky head-tilt of expectation, utterly unswayed by my acerbic replies. I think I preferred it when she thought I was a loser drug-dealer.

“It was either this or boot camp,” I finally declare. Like I’m going to tell her the truth.

“What?” It gets the reaction I want: Bliss widens her eyes and takes a tiny step away from me.

“This summer,” I elaborate. I’ve already got a reputation, but there’s no harm in striking some fear into her before we get things started. “I don’t turn eighteen until September, so my mom said that if I didn’t follow her rules again, she’d ship me off to boot camp.” I give a shrug. “This place out in Arizona where they make you hike twenty miles through the desert and live on soya and psychotherapy.”

“Wow,” Bliss breathes.

My mom’s not that hardcore yet, but I’m pushing her, I know. She’s already confiscated the keys to my hard-earned junkyard car, grounded me from everything except work and school, and sworn to call the admissions board and have them rescind my acceptance if I don’t stop scaring her with the smoking, late nights, skeezy boyfriends, and occasional (and completely unjustified) arrests. Tonight was an olive branch, of sorts: for one night, I’d be a normal teenage girl again. No felonies, graffiti, or fights, I promised.

Guess that’s not going to work out.

Bliss peers out the doorway again. “Wait, I think he’s gone!”

The coast is clear. “Stay close,” I tell her, creeping back down the hallway. I can see the lights of the emergency exit winking in the distance. The promised land. “And when you hear the alarm, run.”

“Alarm?” she repeats, wide-eyed, just as I pull open the door. An ear-splitting wail rings out.

I grab her skinny, corsage-wearing wrist with one hand and hike up my skirt.

“RUN!”