



MAKING
FRIENDS

WITH
ALICE
DYSSON

Poppy Nwosu



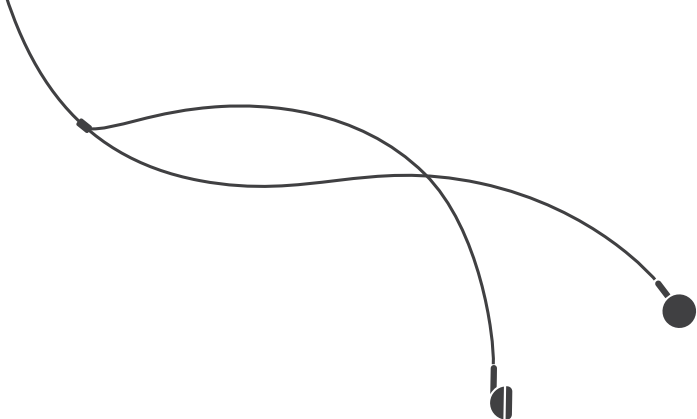
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POPPY NWOSU



WALKER BOOKS



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are either products of the author's imagination
or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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**For my lovely Gus. You are my favorite.
And for my parents, the best in this world.
And the next.**



chapter 1

ANYWHERE BUT HERE

Even before I reach the gate, it's obvious something is different.

A group of girls outside the school turns to stare, whispering as I walk inside. I glance over my shoulder as I slowly climb the building steps. What was that about?

Inside the hallway it's cool and dark, opposite to the burning sunshine outside. Our school is near the ocean, so even in the long, dark hallways, the scent of salt is strong. It invades everything, eating the gutters on the roof, biting into the teachers' cars outside. I swear even the tap water here tastes of salt.

Hushed whispers murmur from the lockers ahead.

"All she cares about is studying. It couldn't be her."

"It definitely was."

I step around the corner and the two girls shush each other, giggling. Soon they've scurried away to class, leaving me with an odd sensation blooming inside my chest.

It's not me. They weren't talking about me.

Still, I'm wary now as I unload my books into my locker. I keep glancing over my shoulder, but the hallway is empty. The bell has already rung, and suddenly it's as if I'm alone at school, the only person here. A strange feeling for me because I'm not normally late. I'm a really good student. I am usually on time and get good grades and no one ever has to reprimand me.

Except today is an odd day, nothing going as planned. Even with all the stress of rushing, though, I don't mind this feeling of being alone at school. Maybe that's why all those other kids are perpetually late. Maybe they're chasing this feeling, too.

I shrug it off and hurry to my first class, except when I open the door, a hurricane of noise drops into utter silence, a sea of faces all drawn to where I stand in the doorway.

Staring at me.

"What are you all doing?"

Startled, I jump at the irritated voice behind me.

"Stop blocking the doorway, Alice. Hurry up and sit down."

I do as Mr. Jenner says, sliding into my empty desk in the second row. I hang my head low and don't glance right or left. I don't look at anybody but still feel all of them looking at me.

Mr. Jenner starts the lesson on the history of our area, a topic I'd normally be absorbed by, but right now I'm barely listening. My cheeks burn, my gaze locked on my clasped hands on the desk. Because something is very wrong.

It *is* me.

Everyone is whispering about me.

My skin prickles, blood pounding in my ears harder and harder until I think I'll explode. A hand reaches across the aisle to stuff a small square of folded paper between my clenched fingers.

When I glance at May, she's already sitting straight and attentive at her desk again, eyes forward like nothing happened. I unfold the crumpled paper, reading the scrawled writing inside.

I need to tell you something. It's about you and Teddy Tualai.

I look at her sharply.

Teddy Tualai?

She knows what happened?

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

I glance around the room at the snickering faces and knowing smiles. Even Sophia is watching with a smirk. Sophia, who until this morning probably didn't even know I existed. Our eyes lock and she smiles even wider, until I swing back to face Mr. Jenner again, my cheeks burning hot.

I can't believe this is happening.

I didn't even do anything.

I sit agitated, feet tapping and hands clenching until finally—*finally*—the bell rings. It's chaos as everyone tries to leave, grabbing their books and yelling.

Mr. Jenner raises his voice over the mayhem. "Alice, can you stay a minute? I need to have a word with you."

I freeze while laughter and catcalls flood the room. A few

boys even slap my back as they walk past my desk on their way out.

Soon the classroom is empty, with only May still hovering in the open doorway, her face pale and pinched. Mr. Jenner sighs and waves her away. "I'm not going to bite her, May. I just want a word. You can wait outside. Go on; hurry up."

"Yes, Mr. Jenner."

May glances at me again, and then she is gone with a swish of her short dark hair, the door swinging shut behind her.

I sit still and awkward as Mr. Jenner clears his throat.

"Alice. I hope you understand, I'm not trying to embarrass you, but as your teacher and, I hope, a sort of mentor, I think it's my duty to speak with you about this."

He pauses to clear his throat again. It's pretty obvious he's feeling just as awkward as I am.

"You're consistently top of my class, and you never cause trouble. You clearly have a bright future ahead of you. This might not be my place, but I feel I should offer some guidance. And, well, you're normally so levelheaded."

He pauses and I hang my head, pulling off my glasses to rub my eyes. Hard. I can't believe I'm having this conversation with my teacher.

"I don't know what happened yesterday, and I don't want to know, but I'm aware the other kids are gossiping, and I think you should be mindful that students like Teddy Tualai are . . ."

I stiffen, waiting, but now Mr. Jenner doesn't seem to know what to say.

He coughs. “Well, I think it’s very important you surround yourself with only good influences. Especially during such an important year. Don’t you think?”

My voice is barely a whisper, skin hot and flushed. “Yes, Mr. Jenner.”

He nods. “Okay. Good chat.”

Yeah.

Great chat.

“Yes, Mr. Jenner.”

He waves his hand. “Well, I suppose you can go now. If you want.”

“Yes, Mr. Jenner.” I shove my glasses back onto my face so quickly they hang crooked over one ear. I want to tell him I didn’t actually do anything, but I also want to leave the room. Right now.

I choose the second option, and before he can say another word, I’ve grabbed my bag and am almost flying toward the door, throwing myself into the hall so quick I swear my feet don’t even hit the ground.

I smack right into May. Hard. Clearly she was listening at the door. Both of us fall to the floor in an ungraceful jumble of arms and legs. May squeals as pens and books spill into the hallway right in front of a stampede of students migrating between classes.

I’m so embarrassed I don’t know where to look. Everyone in the hall is staring at us. And whispering. About me.

I’m about to hyperventilate. I should be invisible. I don’t

talk to anyone other than May. I don't have other friends. No one gossips about me because I never do anything worth gossiping about.

And that's exactly how I like it.

"Alice. Alice?" May is helping me collect my pens, scraping them into a big pile. "I need to talk to you . . ."

Her words trail off, and my hand, which is following a stray pencil rolling across the floor, stops dead right in front of two ratty green sneakers.

My gaze follows the shoes up over long legs to a towering figure.

I stand abruptly.

Tall, black eyes, messy hair, a permanent scowl on a permanently angry face. Our school's delinquent, a waster, the kind of boy who always sits at the back of class.

The kind of boy even popular people like Sophia are afraid of.

Teddy Tualai.

I move close to hiss at him beneath my breath. "This is all your fault." I resist the urge to stab my finger into his chest. "I can't believe you told everyone about yesterday."

Sudden silence stretches over everything. I turn slowly. A small crowd has gathered around us now, milling students all listening with bated breath, desperate to hear whatever it is I'm about to say to Teddy Tualai. I look around at them all, and finally I get it.

The nerd and the delinquent. The teacher's pet and the most violent boy in school.

I explode.

“What are you all looking at? Nothing even *happened!*”

I'm so shocked at myself that for a moment I can't do anything except stand there staring. But then the moment breaks, and I turn tail and run as fast as I can down the hall, leaving my bag behind. Leaving May calling after me.

And leaving stupid Teddy Tualai.



chapter 2

SEEDS

I'm out of breath by the time I find a quiet corner in one of the library cubicles, collapsing with my head in my hands. No matter how hard I try, I can't understand how everyone found out.

Not that there's anything to find out. Because nothing happened.

The idea of going back out there terrifies me. The idea of not being invisible anymore terrifies me.

I take a deep breath. Just stay calm.

"It's Alice, right?"

The voice startles me. Sophia is sitting on the desk next to mine, appearing like a ghost out of thin air. Two other girls from her group hang back near the doorway, waiting like guards.

Sophia is clearly here to see me. Which is ridiculous.

"Y-yeah. Y-yes. That's right." I stammer like an anxious little girl. Sophia's smile only grows wider.

“You should hear the rumors about you.” She raises her brows. “What are you trying to do?”

I blink. “What do you mean?”

She holds her phone toward me as a blurry video begins to play. Two people wearing our school uniform, walking together along a boring suburban street. Completely normal. Ordinary. Except then . . . except . . .

“Dancing?” Sophia breathes. “Really?” She scrolls down the page to the comments, rolling her eyes at the sheer, mind-boggling number of them. “It’s not even that cute. Look at all these people, acting like it’s the most adorable thing ever. What a complete bunch of . . . Oh, wait—”

Her lips curl into a satisfied smile.

“Look at *this* comment. They said ‘It was probably staged by an attention-seeking schoolgirl.’” She laughs and then lifts her eyes to mine. “You know, having everyone talk about you on the internet is different from actually being popular. I’m just warning you so you know.”

She pulls the phone away, leaving me gaping.

“You should be careful.” Sophia straightens her school skirt across long legs. “I’m not trying to be a bitch. I just want to help you. You shouldn’t pretend to be something you’re not. That’s all I’m saying.”

She smiles sweetly and hops off the desk, leaving me reeling at the absurdity of it all. Her two friends follow her from the library until I’m alone. The door swings shut with a loud click.

In seconds I'm on the internet, searching for it. And it's there. It's everywhere.

The video.

I watch it with my mouth hanging open. Read the comments with my hands in my hair.

How did this happen? Who filmed it?

The sheer number of people watching and sharing makes my throat squeeze tight. Their reactions range from weirdly infatuated to downright vicious. Even though I know what happens, I still watch to the end, watch as two idiotic school kids trade goofy awkward dance moves on an empty street.

A spur of the moment impulse. An anomaly in my structured, planned-out life.

A ridiculously enormous mistake.

The video finishes with me tearing away toward the train like an absolute lunatic, leaving Teddy Tualai standing on the road outside our school, staring after me.

I decide right then and there I'm going to find the person who filmed this. I'm going to find them and then I'll . . . I'll . . .

I'll figure that out when I get there. First things first.

Teddy Tualai.



I find him lounging outside the library, leaning over the railing of the second floor as if he doesn't have a care in the world. As soon as he sees me, he straightens with a rare smile.

“Alice—”

I cut him off, grabbing his arm to drag him through the library doors to the cool darkness within. No one's inside because class is about to start, but still I propel him toward the back, dragging him into the stacks so no one coming through the front door will see us.

"Everything okay?" he splutters. "You seem a bit . . ."

His voice trails off as I whirl around to face him. This time I don't resist the urge to wave an accusing finger at his wide-eyed face.

"No, I am not okay, *Teddy Taulalai!* Have you heard what people are saying?"

He just shrugs. "Yeah, so?"

I flinch. "So? So? Everyone in the entire school has seen that stupid video, and they won't leave me alone."

He grins. "Yeah, I heard it even got on one of those news pages. You know, the homepages? Like it's actually news or something." He laughs as if he finds it all hilarious. "Harry told me it's gone viral overseas, too."

"What?"

I can't breathe. Overseas?

Everyone will harass me about this forever. I will never live it down. I think of Mr. Jenner. Will he tell my parents? The thought makes my insides twist.

"Hey, are you okay? You look kind of sick."

"This is all your fault, *Teddy Taulalai!*" This time I really do stab him in the chest with my finger. Hard.

He rubs his hand over his collarbone where I hit him. “How is this my fault? And my name’s just Teddy. You sound like a teacher.”

“It *is* your fault. You probably took the video, too. You’re trying to ruin my reputation.”

He snorts. “I didn’t take the stupid video. And also, what reputation? All you ever do is study. No one in this school even knows who you are.”

“And you have no idea how hard I worked for it to be like that, Teddy *Taualai*. And now everyone is gossiping. About me. Even the teachers are hearing it.”

“I think you’re overreacting. Besides, as soon as something more exciting happens, everyone’ll forget about it. You’ll see.”

“Don’t patronize me! You have no idea what you’re talking about. My parents will *kill* me if they find out about this.” I put my hands over my mouth as that realization slowly sinks in.

He leans against a book cart, frowning. “Really?”

Taking deep breaths, I shrug. “Well, they’re a bit intense about school stuff.”

Teddy *Taualai* nods wisely. “Yeah, I’m getting that.”

He pauses, watching me. Finally he shrugs. “Listen, like you said, nothing even happened, so who cares what people think? Everyone’ll forget about it by the end of the week. And no one is gonna tell your parents. Unless, you know, they actually use the internet.” He laughs as if he made a joke.

I scowl. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re a . . . a loser. A bad student. This isn’t going to cause any problems for you.”

“Hey, why am I a loser?” He looks offended. “And how do you know I’m a bad student?”

“Oh, come on,” I say. “Everyone knows about you. You’re practically famous for being scary.”

“Excuse me? Scary?”

He seems surprised. Like maybe he didn’t know this about himself. I frown at him, reassessing. Surely he must realize everyone at school is terrified of him. He walks around the hallways like he’s inside a storm, all dark glares and angry eyebrows. No one wants to catch his eye in case he kills them.

I pause. “You really didn’t know?”

Teddy Taulalai makes a face that turns truly fierce and demands, “When did I ever do anything scary?”

I open my mouth to answer, but he holds up a hand to stop me.

“Not rumors. Tell me, when did *you* ever see me do anything scary?”

I shut my mouth again, thinking.

He *is* kind of loud at the back of class sometimes. And when he plays sports he can be a bit rough, but then so can a lot of the guys. And he swears a lot, but then everyone does that. Except for me. My father says swearing shows a lack of intelligence and a limited vocabulary.

“Oh! I know,” I say suddenly, making him jump a little. “You gave Mr. Oliver the finger that time. When he said you’d

never amount to anything. And you left class in the middle and slammed the door.”

I’m triumphant, my point proved.

“Seriously?” Teddy Tualai stands straight, looking mad as hell, and actually he is quite terrifying. “That was nearly *three years ago*.” He gestures furiously as he speaks. “And only that one time. I can’t believe *that’s* your evidence. Weak.”

He scowls as he leans back. “Besides, that teacher was an absolute prick. What a dumb thing to say to a fourteen-year-old.”

After a long moment I lean against the book cart beside him.

Well, that’s true.

“He was a bit of a . . . prick.” I blush a little, not accustomed to calling my teachers bad names.

Teddy Tualai grins at me. Leaning over, he gently nudges me with his elbow. “Actually, just so you know, I get really good grades.”

I make a face at him. “You do not, Teddy Tualai. Don’t lie to me. Everyone knows you’re totally failing.”

He shrugs, still smiling. “I’m not, though, but whatever.”

I lean my head to the side, watching him. “Do you really not care what everyone thinks? I mean, because of the video.”

“Nah, not really.”

I bite my lip.

Interesting.

“And you really didn’t take the video, then?” I ask again, just to be sure.

“Seriously, I said I didn’t. Anyway, I’m *in* the video. How could I have filmed it?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, one of your loud friends could have done it.”

He laughs. “Yeah, I asked one of my *loud* friends to hide in the bushes and film me after school, just in case I happened to come across Alice the nerd and invite her into a freaking danceoff. Yup. That’s what happened.”

Alice the nerd?

“Hey, Teddy Tualai,” I say, offended. “I don’t know what you and your friends do for fun.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Definitely not that.”

I huff at him and start to stalk away.

“Hey, hey.” He jogs after me, grabbing my arm to stop me. “Sorry, sorry. It was a joke.” He grins, not letting go of my arm. “So what are you gonna do now?”

For a moment I just stare at him, because I have absolutely no idea. Except then I remember my resolution from earlier. “I’m going to find the person who filmed this, and I’m going to make them pay.”

Teddy Tualai rolls his eyes. “I’m sorry I asked.”

“And you’re going to help me,” I inform him, walking out the library door.

“What?”



chapter 3

QUEST

I feel a lot better after talking to Teddy Tualai. Maybe it's because I have direction now, a focus for my mortification, namely the finding and shaming of my video stalker.

With a clearer mind, I head off to my next class, not even feeling guilty about spending Chemistry hiding in the library with Teddy Tualai.

Well, not overly guilty, anyway.

I sit next to May in English. She's picked up all the stuff I left behind in the hallway because that's what best friends do. She hands me my bag, and I spread my books across the desk in readiness for class, glancing at her. I'm so grateful to have a friend like May. She's tiny and pale, with chin-length dark hair and a cute toothy smile. Not that she's smiling right now, of course. Instead she's gazing back with big haunted eyes, obviously still worried about me, and I nod to let her know I'm okay. Leaning across the space between

our desks, I whisper, “Don’t worry. I know what to do now.”

She squeaks. “What do you mean, ‘what to do?’”

“I just have to find the video stalker.” I rest my hand reassuringly on her shoulder. “The one who filmed it. Once I’ve revealed who they are, everyone will be way too busy talking about them to even remember the whole”—I wave my hand dismissively—“dancing thing.”

“Video *stalker*?” She gapes. “But there’s something I—”

Our teacher walks in and cuts her off, and I sit attentively for the next hour while May fidgets beside me. I concentrate on keeping my head held high to prove to the teacher, and every other whispering, gossipy student in class, that no stupid rumor is going to derail my focus. I am on fire, a learning machine. And mostly I’m able to concentrate on the work at hand. And I hardly ever think of Teddy Tualai at all.

As soon as the bell rings, I sweep out of class. May tries to follow, but I don’t want her dragged down by my problems, so I lose her among the whispering kids in the hallway and head outside onto the sunny oval. The fields reach right to the line of towering pine trees separating the grounds from the beach and the green, sparkling sea. It’s beneath those big, shady pines that Sophia’s group eats their lunch.

Sophia’s rosebud mouth twists down when I walk toward them, but her boyfriend, Finn, smiles. I ignore him, though, and head toward one of Sophia’s friends instead, one of the girls who stood guard in the library. She’s small and sweet-looking, with round cheeks and curly hair. She goes home

by train, too, and might have seen something. My hands are sweaty, chest tight and nervous. I force myself to smile. “Hi, Julie,” I say.

“Um, hi, Alice.” Julie glances at Sophia as if to ask for permission but receives nothing. Sophia turns her head away as I sit down beside Julie on the grass. Normally walking into this group would feel like approaching a pride of lions ready to devour me, yet somehow today I’m uncharacteristically brave. I mean, I’m still scared out of my mind, but I’m forcing myself through it.

So even though everyone is gossiping about me and apparently I’m known as “Alice the nerd,” my voice still only shakes the smallest bit when I say, “You go home on the train usually, right?”

Julie bites her lip until Sophia rolls her eyes and makes a “whatever” kind of noise, which I guess means Julie is allowed to talk to me, because then she’s really nice and tells me everything I want to know about what she might have seen, though it’s not much. Just when we’re done with our conversation, I spot Teddy Tualai way across the oval, jogging toward us. I wave at him and climb to my feet. Just as I’m about to leave, a laugh erupts, loud and derisive behind me.

Sophia. She’s lounging on the grass like a cat, her long legs tanning in the sun. “You’re not seriously hanging out with him now, are you? I thought you wanted to be popular.”

All her friends slowly turn, one by one, to watch this new game unfold. One of the other girls even joins in the giggling,

as if the idea of me being popular is hilarious. She manages to squeeze words out between her giggles. “You’ll never be popular if you hang around with Teddy. He’s a total freak.”

I blink. “Freak?”

Finn nods. Unlike the others, he isn’t smiling. “You know he nearly hit me when he first transferred here, right?”

I didn’t know that.

Sophia leans back on the grass. “Such a freak.”

Finn scowls. “I was just talking to him and then, bam, he pushed me against a locker and was about to punch my face. I’m lucky Lucas and Jamie Gorecki were there to pull him off.”

The other giggling girl I don’t know chimes in. “What a loser. They should’ve expelled him from *this* school, too.”

I stand there staring at them as Teddy bounds up, coming to a halt beside me. He glances from me to Finn, who’s smiling now like we share a secret. Teddy’s eyebrows draw close and his face turns dark. “Come on. Let’s go.”

I let him pull me away as Sophia whispers something that has the others erupting into laughter behind us.

“What was that about?” Teddy glances back at the row of pine trees.

I don’t answer at first, waiting until we’re out of earshot, until we’re nearly at the school building again. “I think Finn really hates you.”

Teddy smirks. “Yeah, well, I know that.”

I glance up at him. How can he be so calm about it? Finn

is really well liked at school, and everyone follows his lead. If he hates Teddy, everyone else will, too.

“Yeah, but *why* does he?” I probe. I’m curious now.

Teddy grins wide and shrugs. “He’s just jealous of me for being too cool.”

I stare at him. “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard, Teddy Taulai.”

“I know, right? He’s such an idiot.”

“You’re the idiot,” I mutter, rolling my eyes. But I give up asking about it. I have way more important things to worry about right now anyway.

On the video stalker front, at least, I am getting somewhere. Teddy Taulai has a friend named Harry who, he tells me, apparently also takes the train home, though I’ve never noticed him on the platform. Harry is kind of excitable. He keeps asking questions about my investigation instead of actually answering any of mine about what he may or may not have seen from the train platform at precisely 3:25 p.m. yesterday afternoon.

It turns out Harry is a little obsessed with detective shows. My situation doesn’t have much in common with any *CSI* episode I’ve ever seen though, so I’m glad when Teddy Taulai finally draws me away. The day is wearing on and I still have a lot more people to interrogate.

“Interrogate,” scoffs Teddy Taulai when I tell him. And then he just goes ahead and drapes his arm over my shoulder as he says, “You’re acting like this is serious or something.”

“Get *off* me, Teddy Taulai!” I push his arm away. “It *is* serious. This is the only way to throw everyone’s attention off me and get them to focus on something new.”

“I told you already: by the end of the week everyone’s gonna forget about it. Bet you ten bucks and an ice cream from the kiosk down the beach.”

“What?”

But he’s already pointing down the hall at Stacey Green. She’s tall and pretty with long dark hair and one of the worst reputations in school. Or at least that’s what all the boys like to whisper about her. She’s also one of the students I asked Teddy to question for me.

“Hey, Stacey!” He tears off down the hallway toward her. “Stacey, wait!”

The poor girl is terrified, standing frozen in her tracks as Teddy Taulai hurtles toward her. I smother my laugh.

Nothing about this situation is funny, after all.



Later, I climb the stairs to the school’s upper building and lug my heavy bag into an empty classroom. Teddy Taulai is already waiting inside, as arranged.

Hot afternoon sun burns bright through wide windows, yellow light flickering across the desks and floor. Teddy Taulai grins at me. “Hey, Sherlock. Whatcha find out this time?”

I drop my bag onto the floor with a thump.

“So Julie, Amy, and Theresa were all at the train platform

at 3:25 p.m. and none of them noticed anything out of the ordinary, though they all said they saw me nearly miss the train at 3:33 p.m.”

Teddy Tualai raises his eyebrows. “Pretty specific, Sherlock.”

“Stop calling me that. Anyway, your weird friend Harry and also Rhiannon reckon some girl was near the station who was maybe holding a phone, but neither remembers anything else about her, like if she was from this school or not, ’cause she wasn’t wearing a uniform.”

“Interesting.” Teddy Tualai stands and rubs his chin with a flourish. He paces back and forth like a detective from a cartoon, one arm folded behind his back. I think he looks ridiculous.

“I spoke to a few people, too, like Stacey, for instance, but she knows nothing.” He straightens. “Seriously, though, she was really unhelpful! She seems kind of . . .”

“Don’t be mean!” I cut him off before he can say it. I know what everyone thinks of her.

Slutty. Stupid. Vapid.

People have a lot of nasty things to say about Stacey Green, though I’ve never heard her say anything nasty about anyone else. I glare at him, but he just seems confused.

“I didn’t say anything, though.”

True. But beside the point.

He shrugs, pacing again. Getting into the spirit of things. He clears his throat. “But I did go back and talk to Harry

about the girl he saw, and he reckons she had short dark hair.”

“Oh!” I’m getting excited now. “And?”

“And nothing. That’s it. She had short dark hair.”

I make a face at him. “Yeah, but was it like chin-length dark hair, or was it a pixie cut? What kind of dark was it? Black or brown?”

Teddy Taulalai just stares at me. “Pixie-what? I don’t know. It was dark and short.” He gestures around his head in a completely useless way. “Oh, and Harry said she was wearing like a dress thing with a big design on the front that said *GS*. Like this.” He waves his hand in front of his chest, presumably drawing a big *GS*.

Which is weird.

Until a thought pops into my head, like a giant flashing neon sign.

“Teddy Taulalai—”

“Please stop calling me that. It’s so weird.”

I wave dismissively, deep in thought. “Tell me, what color did Harry say the girl’s dress was? Was it yellow?”

Teddy Taulalai snorts. “I’m not sure he noticed.”

“Well, he should have. How can he be into detective stuff if he doesn’t even notice details?”

Teddy Taulalai tries to protest, but I hold my hand up to silence him. I’m onto something now; I can feel it.

“I think it *was* a yellow dress,” I say. “If that’s right, then the *GS* Harry saw probably stands for *goal shooter*, which

would make it a netball uniform. And I happen to know that after school on Wednesdays, the Peninsula under-eighteen girls' team trains on our court. I think the mystery girl with the phone was a netball player.”

Teddy Tualai is suitably impressed, but already a seed of doubt is unfurling within my mind.

I know someone who plays netball every Wednesday afternoon.

And the description: Short brown hair? On the netball team? A goal shooter?

I think it actually must be—

Right on cue, the classroom door bursts open and May throws herself into the room, a whirlwind of energy and stumbling steps. Her cheeks are wet with tears. “Alice! Where have you been? I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“May! I was . . . are you okay?”

She shakes her head, short dark hair tumbled and wild. “I’ve been trying to talk to you all day.”

She hiccups, breathing heavily as she uses the heel of her hand to wipe at her eyes. She dissolves into a bout of heaving sobs and I wrap my arms around her shoulders. It only makes her cry harder. Teddy Tualai backs away toward the far wall of the classroom, as if May is a bomb about to explode.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, *so* sorry.” May buries her face in my neck. Wet. “I didn’t mean for it to be like this. I didn’t know everyone would laugh at you. I never would’ve uploaded it if I’d known. I’m so sorry, Alice. I’m sorry. Please don’t hate me.”

She looks up at me with big, watery eyes and I hesitate. It's just the sort of thing May would do, act first without thinking of consequences. She's always been like that, ever since we were kids. But her face is scrunched up and her lashes are dripping, tears streaming down her cheeks. I hug her tighter. "It's okay. I'm not going to hate you."

At my words, May's sobs subside and she grows quieter, hands loosening their grip on my school shirt.

"Really?"

I nod, drawing her close again.

Soon Teddy Taulai is brave enough to venture back from the other side of the room, hovering nearby and fidgeting. I gesture at him from behind May's back, pointing from my sniffing friend to him and then back again. It takes ages for him to catch on, and by the time he does I've been waving my arm in the air and making faces at him like a lunatic.

"Oh! Yeah. It's um . . . totally fine. No harm or whatever." His face breaks into a grin. "Actually, it was funny. I ended up having a totally interesting day."

I scowl at him as May wipes her face.

She sniffs. "Neither of you is angry?"

Maybe I should be. Everyone was laughing at me, after all.

And it's not like I'm exactly excited at having gone viral, but . . . May's been my best friend forever. Me and her. Her and me. And when a best friend makes a mistake, you forgive them.

That's how you stay best friends.

I glance at Teddy and we both shake our heads.

May's relief is palpable.

"It's fine," I say. "I'm okay. I promise."

I am a little surprised to realize it's true. I *am* okay. And I don't say it aloud because Teddy Taulai would hear, but actually it *was* kind of funny. I suppose I had an interesting day, too. A break from my normal life.

Teddy Taulai asks, "Not that it matters, but how come you put it online? I'm just curious."

May pauses, cheeks flushing pink. She glances from me to Teddy, chewing on her lip. "Well, I was coming to find Alice before practice, just to say bye, but then you started dancing, and it was . . ." She trails off, face burning. "Well, actually I thought it was really cute. And I uploaded it on my Finsta, but I didn't know that Mia follows my Finsta, and she must have shared it and then everyone was sharing it and then . . . well, you know." She glances at Teddy Taulai shyly. "But it was cute."

"May!"

"It was!"

I want to say more because Teddy Taulai and I are most definitely *not* cute, but a car horn blares from the parking lot. May launches toward the door. "My mum! She's picking me up! I forgot. Oh man, oh man . . ."

The door slams behind her, and I see two of her books still lying on the floor. I sigh, reaching down to collect them, and tuck them into my own bag for safekeeping. I swing the

whole heavy thing over my shoulder and step toward the door, turning to raise my eyebrows at Teddy Tualai before I go. “Well, see ya.”

A flash of surprise runs across his face but then he bounds over and falls into step beside me. “What will you do now? There’s no culprit for you to shame publicly.”

I nod. That’s true.

There’s no way I’m going to make May feel any worse. And besides, I’m not that upset anymore.

I glance across at Teddy. Will tomorrow be just as bad? After all, I spent the entire day with Teddy Tualai and everyone saw. Even the teachers. Maybe that was a mistake, asking him to help. Maybe I’ve just made things worse.

I frown. He’s a bit different from what I expected, though. Different from the rumors.

“Besides,” Teddy Tualai is saying, “it was only dancing. Not exactly a big deal. Oh, and you know that Sophia is having some big party at her house this weekend, right?”

I look at him in surprise. “Were you invited to that?”

He snorts. “Of course not. I just mean, next week after her party there’ll be a bunch of new gossip for everyone to talk about. This thing won’t even be a blip on their radar by Monday.” He grins. “Promise.”

I watch him for a moment, thinking he might be right. He’s kind of knowledgeable about these things, I suppose. Though *his* rumors have stuck around for nearly three years.

I shrug anyway.

“Okay, Teddy Tualai,” I concede. “I’ll trust you just this once. You may not be book smart like I am, but you seem to know a thing or two about school scandals, having had so many yourself and all.”

He rolls his eyes. “I told you, I *am* book smart. I’m going to bring my report card in tomorrow and you’re going to read it.”

I scoff. “Whatever.”

Late afternoon light spills through the empty hallways as we arrive at the main entrance of the school. Outside the clouds are tinted orange and the air carries the scent of salt. As we walk toward the train platform, Teddy smiles. “Today was fun. What do you want to do tomorrow?”

I turn and frown at him.

Maybe I do feel a tiny bit interested in Teddy Tualai and his rumors and his angry face, but tomorrow things are going back to normal. That is one thing I know for certain. I’ll go to class and study hard, and slowly I’ll become invisible again. I don’t have time for anything else.

Even if it was a very interesting day.



chapter 4

AFTERWARD, ADAPTING

Teddy Tualai is everywhere.

I don't know how he does it, but I mean literally *everywhere*.

Obviously I always knew who he was. I must have passed him in the hallways a million times since he transferred here. We've probably been on the same teams for PE, and I know I share some of my classes with him. After all, we're both in the same year.

What I didn't know is that his locker is only two over from mine, that he shares my homeroom and art classes, that he likes to arrive at school at the exact same time I do, and that I sit right next to him in math class. Literally, *right next to him*. I'm not sure how I possibly could have not noticed before.

It distracts me, him fidgeting beside me. Am I really so unobservant? Is that the kind of person I am? Or maybe, just

maybe, Teddy Tualai has started following me around since yesterday. It's possible he swapped desks, swapped lockers, swapped classes . . .

Nope.

May stands in front of my desk, shifting from foot to foot and complaining loudly about this flower-shaped clip that's gotten all knotted in her hair. Amid her whining, she tells me he was always there. She sits near the front of class in math, while my desk is closer to the back beside the windows. Despite how far away she is, even *she* noticed Teddy Tualai. Which makes me think I have an issue with my levels of observation.

As in, I have no levels.

Which is what May thinks. She says it in a nice way, but she still says it. And it's possibly true, but my good grades don't materialize out of thin air. They require focus.

I tell her this, but May doesn't care about school; she only cares about people.

Anyway, now I'm sitting beside Teddy Tualai in math class. The bell hasn't rung yet, and the teacher is nowhere to be seen. Every single person in class is shouting and going crazy. Two boys even shove each other in a sort of playful way, except it's not that playful because they manage to knock over a chair, which crashes loudly against the floor.

I'm trying to untangle May's flower hair clip while Teddy Tualai says, "Look, Alice, I brought my report card. See? I *told* you I have good grades."

I don't even look at him, but he keeps waving his paper in front of my face anyway. Until May shrieks because I've accidentally pulled too hard on her hair. Which is when Teddy's friend Harry decides to come hover over me, too, although I have only ever spoken to him once, yesterday. Even so, he stands close, like *really* close, invading my space and leaning all over my desk. He keeps offering advice on how to untangle May's hair clip, but really I think he's just trying to ogle down her shirt.

All of it makes me want to scream.

I don't, though.

Yet the feeling doesn't go away. Everything is just a little bit more overwhelming than my usual Friday routine, and suddenly I get this really odd feeling, like maybe I've opened a can of worms by dancing with Teddy Taulalai. Maybe my life will never be the same again.

Or more specifically, my life will never be *peaceful* again.

Which is a terrifying thought.

When Ms. Breannie finally arrives, I'm relieved. She strides in the door already shouting at everyone to get back to their desks, and within moments both Harry and May have scampered off. The flower clip is still stuck in May's hair, bobbing up and down as she runs. As soon as everyone is settled, Ms. Breannie starts the lesson and I begin to feel calmer, more or less happy to be in math class where no one can bother me and I can study.

Math is pretty good. I used to find it difficult, but these

days it makes sense. I like numbers and I like the finality of it. You either learn it or you don't; you know the answer or you're wrong. It's easy in that way. Math isn't mysterious. With math, I know where I stand.

I look down at my desk, ready to write notes. Except I can't because Teddy Tualai's stupid report card is sitting on top of my textbook. I turn to him in disbelief, but he's all innocent and engrossed in Ms. Breannie's lecture.

I glance back down at his report card.

I can't believe he actually brought it in.

Ridiculous. Teddy Tualai is ridiculous.

Still, I read it.



At lunch May and I sit together on the oval, basking in the shade under one of the huge pine trees that line the wire fence of the school grounds. Beyond the fence lies a small quiet road and then some scrubby sand dunes leading toward the beach. The very tops of the frothing green waves are visible breaking across the sand, in constant motion as they lap the decaying gray wood of the jetty.

A breeze blows in, salty and cool, which helps a little with the heat. It doesn't help with the grass, though, which is burned dry and yellow on the oval, crisp beneath my fingertips. On the other side of the field, a bunch of students are playing soccer, leaving me more than a little impressed. Heat like this is best experienced from the shade, but none of them seem to care.

"Everyone's forgotten about it today," May says, sipping

juice. “I’m so glad. Yesterday was awful.” Her cheeks flush a little. She’s still feeling guilty.

I nod. “Yeah, it hasn’t been that bad today. Maybe everyone is bored already.”

None of that is strictly true. But I think May has been traumatized enough already, so I don’t tell her about the two boys who shouted at me from the bus this morning. And I don’t tell her about the completely inappropriate song Lucas sang at me as I walked from math to English class. I remember Lucas was one of those boys who got involved when Finn was almost in a fistfight with Teddy outside the lockers. With Lucas’s floppy blond hair and goofy grin, I find it hard to imagine him doing anything as stupid as fighting. He did serenade me in the hallway, though, so maybe he’s just an idiot.

I also don’t tell her how odd it feels to transition overnight from a total nobody into the kind of girl boys sing to in the hallways. It’s strange to suddenly be someone everyone knows—even the people I’ve never spoken to before.

Most of all, though, it’s just plain weird to be the kind of girl that Teddy Tualai screams at from across the entire oval, “Hey Alice, I’m going to play soccer!”

Like I needed to know that.

Like I needed the entire student population on the oval to know that.

“He seems to think we’re friends now,” I explain to May as I open my sandwich, frowning as Teddy jogs across the field to join the game.

May giggles a bit before her face darkens. “Oh no. It’s Emily.”

I turn and sure enough, Emily Cooper, the school gossip, is stalking over to us.

May makes a face. “She kept asking me about the video yesterday. I bet she wants to talk to you about it, too.”

“Why?” I ask blankly.

May waves her hand dismissively. “What do you mean, *why*? It’s gossip, Alice. She wants to feel involved, that’s all.”

We both giggle a bit at that but straighten as Emily arrives, struggling to keep our faces blank. She sits down, entirely oblivious. Smiling at May, she basically ignores me. For the sake of May, I will try my best. But Emily grates my nerves. She’s talented at it.

Like right now.

Catching me glance across the oval at Teddy Tualai, her eyes widen and she says, “You should be careful. He’s really violent, you know. A total psycho. I know you think he’s nice because he danced with you, but Alice, he only did that to get into your pants. You do know that, right?”

I frown, taking a long, calming sip of my drink.

“Seriously,” she continues, her eyes bulging now, “everybody’s saying the same thing. Why *else* would he hang around with someone like you?”

I grit my teeth, but she doesn’t stop talking.

“Haven’t you heard the rumors about him? About what he did?”

Emily stops and waits expectantly, but I just continue sipping on my water bottle.

“I don’t know,” May interjects, her voice flustered. “If you actually think about it, he hasn’t really done anything bad since he transferred here.”

I nod.

Teddy Tualai has a crazy reputation. And he’s crazy. But I don’t think he’s a psycho.

“He *hurt* someone!” Emily’s mouth twists. “He totally beat them up and sent them to the hospital.” Leaning closer, she lowers her voice to a stage whisper, as if Teddy Tualai might hear her from waaaaay across the oval. “I heard it was his teacher. That’s why he was expelled from his old school.”

I roll my eyes.

“Emily, that was three years ago.” May’s still playing the mediator.

“So? He walks around looking like he wants to smack everyone. Even Finn’s afraid of him. And I hear he’s totally failing.”

At this I do speak up.

“He isn’t failing. He gets really good grades.”

Emily scowls at me. “Oh, really? And you know that how? Don’t tell me you’re friends with that psycho now.”

I glare at her, anger rising in my chest, making my throat constrict.

Five minutes ago, I probably wouldn’t have said it. Five

minutes ago, I would have denied it for all I was worth. But here and now, in the face of Emily's stupid judgmental expression, I find myself nodding, like it's not a big deal to be friends with Teddy Tualai.

I lift my chin stubbornly. "So what if I *am* friends with him?"

Emily just laughs. "Do yourself a favor, Alice; don't ruin what little shred of reputation you have by hanging around with a psycho like him."

"Emily!" May's skin is flushed pink as she tries to shush Emily, clearly aware that this conversation is about to go downhill.

But it's too late.

"What's *wrong* with Teddy Tualai?" My voice rises despite myself. "You shouldn't say stuff like that. You've probably never even talked to him."

Emily looks like I've just slapped her in the face, her mouth hanging open slackly.

A surge of triumph rushes through my chest, because it serves her right.

Except . . .

Maybe she's a little *too* shocked, a bit *too* scared.

Abruptly she stumbles to her feet, her face burning bright red. She murmurs something about buying lunch and then rushes off, almost tripping over her own feet in her hurry to get away.

Slowly I turn around.

Sure enough, Teddy Taulai stands right behind me, looming like some sort of monstrous shadow, eyebrows drawn together and black eyes burning. He blocks out the sun, his face lost in shade, an impending hurricane about to break.

May and I glance at each other.

How much of our conversation has he overheard?

Just when I think he's going to explode, Teddy Taulai throws himself down on the dry grass instead, lounging back comfortably on his elbows as if he doesn't have a care in the world. May and I share another look as he begins stuffing an apple into his mouth, crunching and sweating after his soccer match, but never saying a word.

His gaze flicks to my face and then away again, over and over, until finally May breaks the horrifying silence.

She talks about some problem she had in her math homework, her voice rambling on and on. I sit stiff and straight, commenting in all the right places, but at that moment all I want to do is hug her. She is infinitely better at dealing with people than I am; she's the type of girl who always knows what to do.

As Teddy Taulai continues to munch loudly on his stupid apple, I am just so thankful she's here. Because Teddy Taulai definitely heard.

Even so, he spends the rest of lunch sitting quietly beside me, so silently, in fact, that eventually May and I just forget he's there. Soon we talk to each other like normal, as

if Teddy Tualai didn't just hear Emily call him a psycho.

By the time lunch is over and we're walking back to our lockers, Teddy is back to his usual self, loudmouthed and overly familiar, as he chatters about his soccer game.

"Gross. You're sweaty and you stink." I glare at him, but he just shrugs.

"That's the price you gotta pay to be a soccer professional."

May giggles, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

"And anyway," he adds, "you're looking a bit sweaty yourself, Alice. Don't hate until you try to relate."

May's laughter explodes as I rub my hands over my face. "Shut up, Teddy Tualai. You are driving me crazy."

He grins at me, all close and in my face. "Yeah, but we're friends now, right? Isn't that what friends are for?" He turns to May, all innocence, with wide eyes. "That's right, isn't it?"

May nods eagerly like the traitor she is.

"Definitely," she declares. "Alice would waste away in the library if it wasn't for me. She'd seriously shrivel up and die. Friends are important for a girl like her."

"Excuse me?" I'm offended.

May reaches out and shakes Teddy's hand enthusiastically. "Welcome aboard, Teddy. It's a hard job, being Alice's friend, and I'm glad to have someone to share the burden with."

"Glad to be here, ma'am." Teddy's voice is ridiculously serious. He returns the handshake vigorously, and I roll my eyes at both of them.

When we reach our lockers, Teddy Taulai suddenly stiffens. “Oh man! Ms. Breannie!”

Both May and I jump from the sudden outburst, watching as he slams his locker open and drags books out in an explosion of paper and pens. Within seconds he sprints down the hallway, students throwing themselves against the walls to keep out of his way. As I watch him go, I wonder what’s just happened.

Apparently now I’m friends with Teddy Taulai.

“I think it’s a good thing,” declares May like she’s read my mind. “You need to open up to people. You can’t stay locked in the library studying forever.”

“It’s not forever,” I mumble. Here we go again. “It’s just until the end of the year.”

“Nuh-uh. You’ve been studying like crazy for three years now. You need change. This is our last year of high school!”

May’s constantly saying strange stuff like this lately. It’s like she’s become fixated on it. She doesn’t seem to get that the reason I’m working so hard at my studies is precisely *because* it’s our last year of high school.

She suddenly clasps her hands against her cheeks. Very dramatic. “No, *I* need to change. High school’s nearly over and I still haven’t done any of the things girls are meant to do.”

I stare at her blankly. “What things are we meant to do?”

She grabs my shoulders and shakes me. “Parties! Boys! I want my first kiss. I want to be popular!”

Popular?

That one is new.

“Why?” I ask, genuinely taken aback, but May just scowls.

She steps back from me. “This is all your fault, Alice Dyson. You never come shopping with me. You never want to go to parties. You never let me do your makeup.”

“What about the girls you play netball with? Can’t you do that stuff with them?”

She huffs at me. “No way! Those girls are really snobby.” She says it in a way that makes me think it’s May who’s snobby. But then abruptly her mouth trembles and her pretty eyes glisten. “You know, Sophia is having a party this weekend at her house. We could go.”

I am completely unmoved.

“Nope. I won’t do it. And besides, high school isn’t nearly over; it’s still the start of the year. There’s plenty of time for you to kiss some poor boy.”

“You’re like the Grinch,” she says, the cutesy act clearly finished. “But one day you’ll change your mind. You’re going to ask me for help to make you look pretty, or you’ll want me to go somewhere stupid with you and I’m going to remember this!”

I’m too busy to pay much attention to her.

I have big plans for next year, plans that I’ve been working toward for a very long time.

Nothing, and nobody, is going to get in my way.



The weekend passes by.

I spend my time working at the cinema and studying. May doesn't mention going to Sophia's party again, which, I might add, we weren't invited to anyway, but she does send some sad faces in a text on Saturday night, just to remind me that I said no. I think she's planning to wear me down with her sadness in hopes I'll go with her next time.

I won't, though.

On Monday morning, I see that Teddy Tualai was right.

When I get to school, all anyone can talk about is how Stacey Green made out with some guy at the party. There's even a photo, a big wet mess of glazed eyes and sloppy tongues, and everyone is laughing about it, whispering and pointing as Stacey walks through the halls. She hides beneath a curtain of long, dark hair, hunched over and alone, and I can't help but notice how no one seems to laugh or whisper at the boy she kissed.

No one cares that last Wednesday afternoon Teddy Tualai and I danced together after school.

No one even remembers it happened at all.



chapter 5

DISTANCE

A few weeks later, I'm in art class. I think I like it even more than math.

Which is surprising because I haven't been that interested in creative stuff over the last few years. I think it's because I don't like subjective things, yet somehow art has become one of my favorite subjects.

Maybe because it's the one subject, other than sports, that my parents don't care about me failing.

Except I'm not failing. Apparently I'm pretty good at it.

Or at least that's what Mrs. Kang says. I think she just wants to have one of those inspiring student/mentor relationships, like something out of a movie. It means I can't be sure if her encouragement is actually for me or for her to justify why she became a teacher in the first place. Because frankly, it's a pretty unforgiving job, and mostly no one listens to her at all.

Like right now.

Art class is everyone's favorite excuse to slack off. And they aren't ashamed of it, either.

Like my friends, for instance. Because apparently I have plural of those now.

We're meant to be expressing our inner selves via self-portrait, but instead Teddy Tualai's goofing around, wearing my glasses.

I don't even know how it happened, but May says Teddy looks much better in them than I do. Annoying. She also says she doesn't understand why I don't get contacts because glasses don't suit me. I glare in her general direction. I can still see her outline, her shape; it's just her features that blur. I reach toward Teddy Tualai to try to save my glasses from whatever hell he's planning next.

"Ouch! Alice, stop," he yelps. "You poked me in the eye."

I'm pretty sure I didn't.

He grabs my hand, whimpering like it's my fault he got hurt.

Infuriating.

"Give them back!"

Of course he doesn't.

He is so distracting.

It's been building up ever since the video. This feeling of almost . . .

Suffocation.

Everywhere I turn, it's always Teddy Tualai. Like there's

a *million* of him, all of them out to distract me from studying, or get me in trouble with Mr. Jenner. Or somehow make it so Sophia hates me. Two months ago, that girl didn't even know I existed, and now, because of Teddy Tualai, I think she actually wants to kill me. Me! Invisible, nerdy Alice.

It's inconceivable.

And Mr. Jenner! I remember when he told my parents I was his favorite student, but now everything is different.

And all I did was say Teddy and I are friends in front of Emily Cooper.

Which was clearly a huge mistake.

"I think you look strange when you're not wearing glasses," Teddy says in a thoughtful voice, looming with his head cocked to the side like he's assessing me.

"Give them back," I mutter. "I can't finish my picture without them. I get headaches. And class is nearly over."

But nothing I say ever gets through to him.

I sigh, annoyed that he won't give them back, annoyed that no matter what I do, I spend every single day like this, trying to fend off Teddy Tualai.

And Harry, too. Because being friends with Teddy apparently means I'm also friends with Harry Nguyen, who is currently yelling something about me being no fun. I swing around in my chair to scowl at him, too. Except when I turn back, I stiffen because Teddy has suddenly leaned really close, and whispers in a low voice, "Don't listen to him. And so you know, I don't agree with May. I think you look hot

in glasses.” He pushes them back on my face and the world flicks into focus as he grins widely at me.

Then he hops up and disappears to his own desk to finish his portrait.

My face burns after he’s gone.

He is just so distracting. And so inappropriate.

I glance down at my drawing and begin working on it again as Teddy’s voice echoes from the back of class, laughing loudly at whatever Harry just said. I swear, he never does any work. I have no idea how he gets such good grades.

I glare at him again over my shoulder for good measure.

I was always told that effort is the path to success. That’s certainly what my dad believes, anyway. He uses it as his motto, and I’ve heard him say those words more times than I could ever count.

I try to imagine Teddy Tualai meeting my father. Or my mother.

Terrifying. Absolutely terrifying. Something that can never *ever* happen.

My parents would hate him. And I should, too, considering how much trouble he’s caused me. I grit my teeth as I think back to last week, when he put a note on Sophia’s back that had a big heart with SOPHIA LOVES MR. VIRK scrawled inside. Mr. Virk is our principal, so it was clearly just stupid, but I still ended up chasing her halfway down the hall trying to get it off. And by then people were giggling at her, and of course I was standing right behind her when she found it. So Sophia

decided it was me who stuck the stupid thing there, and now I get the evil eye.

And then the week before that, I got in trouble with Mr. Jenner for making faces during class, even though Teddy Tualai totally started it, and I only did it that one time because he wouldn't stop. Infuriating.

And the week before *that*, Teddy recorded me humming while I was studying, and he changed his ringtone so whenever someone called him my voice would come bursting out sounding all whiny and off-key. It took me three days to convince him to change it back.

Excruciating!

"Alice. Hey, Alice."

It's May, waving her hands in front of my face to get my attention, snapping me awake.

"Hmm?"

She shoves her sketch onto my desk.

"What do you think?"

"Oh, it's . . . great." I'm trying to sound enthusiastic.

The corners of her mouth turn down. "What's wrong with it?"

I glance at the drawing, wondering if I can tell her it's basically a potato with hair. For some reason that thought has me on the verge of giggles. Quickly I choke them back. I must be hysterical, probably because of Teddy Tualai. My nerves are all over the place. Because he's driving me crazy.

I take a deep breath. "No, nothing. It looks really good. Is it finished?"

She glares at me. “That’s the last time I ever show you one of my masterpieces, Alice Dyson. You’re fired from being my friend!”

“I’m sorry! Really, it’s just that I was surprised.” I try to backtrack, but then Teddy is there, too, leaning in close to peer over my shoulder. Too close. It makes my body go all stiff and still.

“What is *that*?” He squints at the drawing.

May glares, but he snatches the picture out of my hand to examine it more closely.

“I dunno,” he says seriously. “It’s not bad. A bit potato-y, but not too bad, you know.”

As soon as he says it I just explode with laughter, unable to suppress it. I press my head down on my desk and cover my face with my hands.

“Alice!”

“I’m sorry,” I gasp. “I’m so sorry.”

And of course Teddy is gone, and I’m left to deal with the aftermath alone. Which basically involves apologizing over and over again to May as she huffs about quitting art class. She does forgive me eventually, but the whole thing leaves me wondering why I spend so much of my time in weird situations these days, instead of just quietly getting through my last year of school.

Mrs. Kang calls out, trying to bring the class to order, and eventually the shouting dies down enough for her to talk. She’s got a bunch of famous self-portrait examples, and she

calls Teddy, of all people, up to the front to pass them around. While he's moving around the classroom, she holds up a van Gogh print and asks us what we think.

Of course no one answers, so I raise my hand and talk about his depression and the evidence left behind of what he might have been feeling when he painted it. It's not like it's anything profound. I just read it in the textbook.

But some idiots still whisper behind me.

"Nerd alert," shouts a boy from the back.

Everybody bursts into laughter. May's head is down, eyes locked on her desk, her cheeks flushed. I just sigh and ignore them, waiting for Mrs. Kang to calm them down, which she is clearly attempting to do. Except then Teddy Taulai says really loudly, "I like smart girls."

He stands there awkwardly, like he isn't quite sure what he just said. Of course everyone just explodes, jeering and taunting him. Some kid yells, "Lame!" and everyone laughs even harder, like it's the funniest thing ever.

Stupid.

Just when all the dancing gossip has finally died down, he goes and says something like that. If he thinks he's helping me, he's an idiot.

I scowl at my picture, a half-drawn outline of a head with a load of tiny shapes escaping it. It's odd, but it's a pretty accurate representation of how Teddy Taulai is driving me crazy.

Mrs. Kang likes it, too.

She says it's "expressive," and before class finishes she

holds it up for everyone else to see, saying that it clearly shows how my thoughts are trying to free themselves from the cage of my mind.

I don't know about that, but I'm glad she likes it, even if that does mean the class just whispers about me all over again. I sigh. Maybe I am a teacher's pet.

Before we leave, Mrs. Kang reminds us about the upcoming excursion to the art gallery in the city. She hands out permission slips and tells us about how fun and informative it will be.

"Both fun *and* informative?" Harry says in a fake high-pitched voice as we all pile into the hallway. "I can't even *wait!*"

"Well, I'm not going," announces May. She's still peeved about her drawing. "It's stupid. Anyway, I've been there before, last year."

"Yeah, I probably won't go either," agrees Harry straightaway. "It does sound pretty boring."

I watch the two of them from the corner of my eye as we walk down the stairs. Harry agrees with everything May says these days. I haven't figured out yet if she likes that or not, but she doesn't say no when he offers to buy her a drink from the snack bar.



Two weeks later, nothing has changed, and the suffocation feeling has only gotten worse.

Every day at school, the gossiping gets worse.

I hear from Emily Cooper that apparently Teddy and I are

dating and we sleep at each other's houses. I hear from May, who heard from Stacey Green, that Teddy's secretly cheating on me with May, and then the next day I hear that it's actually me who's cheating on him with Harry.

Every time I hear something new I grit my teeth and feel the air growing thicker, the walls getting closer together. Like I can't breathe. I haven't studied enough, haven't spent enough time preparing for exams, and some days I haven't even managed to finish my homework on time. None of which fits into my life plan at all.

I think Teddy Tualai might be ruining me.

"Are you gonna go?" Teddy falls into step beside me after math class, pulling his bag over his shoulders and juggling a water bottle in his hands like everything is totally fine.

"Go where?" I say in monotone. I am tired and worn out.

"To the art gallery. You know, for the excursion thing. You gonna go?"

I shrug. "Probably."

"You're into all that art stuff, right? What did she say, 'expressive'?" He grins at me.

"It's not hard; that's all." My voice turns defensive.

He doesn't notice, pressing his shoulder against mine and saying something about a math assignment. I'm not really listening, because suddenly I'm wary around him. Why am I encouraging this friendship when I don't want any complications in my life?

I almost stop walking.

Should I tell him to leave me alone? Is that best?

Yes, he's super distracting and annoying, but if he wasn't here, would I be better off?

Probably. Obviously.

Teddy is completely oblivious to my discomfort. He keeps rambling on about something that happened in the morning, and it's all I can do to answer in the right places.

"Did you see what Andrew was trying to mix together in Chemistry?"

"No."

"I think it might have actually exploded if Kramer hadn't been so quick to stop him." He gestures manically with his hands, almost dropping his water bottle.

"I don't think it would have."

"You should have *seen* his face! Kramer nearly had a heart attack, poor dude."

"No, it wouldn't."

Teddy glances down at me.

"Are you even listening?" He stops suddenly and grabs both my shoulders, shaking me. "Wake up, Alice! What's going on with you?"

I pull away. Hard.

"Nothing! Nothing's wrong. I'm just going to the library to study."

I take a step backward away from him, and then I just blurt it out.

"Don't follow me, all right?" I'm breathing heavily, still

backing away. “I don’t need friends like you, Teddy Tualai. Just *stay away* from me!”

He stops, opens his mouth to say something but then just closes it again, his cheeks slowly turning pink and his body growing still. A swell of sickness twists in my gut as I back away down the hall, leaving him frozen there. None of it feels right, not how I thought it would. Which doesn’t make any sense.

The library is empty and quiet when I arrive. Which should be a good thing; it’s what I need, peace and quiet. It’s what I wanted.

But I keep thinking about Teddy Tualai and his black eyes. It wasn’t hurt I saw. It was some other thing.

I take a deep breath and pull out my books, glancing through the window to the sky outside. Already the weather is changing. It’s still warm, and the days are hot and long, but somehow there’s a new feeling in the air as winter draws nearer.



chapter 6

SAFE

The house is dark and cool when I get home from school. Empty. Cavernous. I drop my bag on a stool near our breakfast island just as my phone buzzes loudly. Fishing it from my pocket, I clear my throat. “Hi, Mum.”

“You home, hon?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good. Your father and I will be a bit late tonight.”

My belly clenches even though I already knew they would be. “Oh.”

“We told you we have that important dinner.” Her frown is almost palpable through the phone.

“I remember.” I open the fridge, searching for something to cook. Sauce. Vegetables. Pasta.

Pasta it is. Pasta for one.

I sigh. But I don’t let Mum hear it. “When will you come home?”

“Late, honey. Don’t wait up.” She sounds a little distracted, a horn honking in the distance. They’re clearly driving somewhere. Stuck in traffic. “Will you be all right on your own?”

That almost elicits a giggle. “Obviously,” is all I say. My parents are out. It isn’t the end of the world. Besides, they’re always out. “I’m used to it.”

I wish I hadn’t said it, because from her sharp intake of breath, I know immediately what’s coming next. “Alice, you know my work is important to me. And we’ve got the mortgage to pay.”

I glance around the empty open rooms of our house, the blush of sunset shining against the windowpanes. Big. Quiet. Deserted. I shut the fridge, giving up on my pasta mission. “I understand, Mum. Sorry.”

“Good, hon. Thank you.” I’m not sure if she’s talking to me or my dad, but she sounds mollified, so that’s good. “What will you do tonight?”

That question is definitely aimed at me. “Study, I guess.”

Like I always do. A big quiet house is perfect for studying. And studying is important, because it sucked back when my grades weren’t so good. It made things really difficult.

“Excellent,” Mum says. Muffled laughter comes through as she whispers to Dad, “Our daughter takes after me. Ambitious, that one.”

A small smile creeps across my lips. I like it when she says that. I like it even though it isn’t true. Not that I’ll ever tell her that.

“You alone?”

I rummage around in the pantry, pull out bread and peanut butter. “Of course.”

“Good girl.” She pauses. “You should hear what Celeste’s stepdaughter did. Apparently she vandalized school property with some boy and got a suspension.”

I cradle my phone in the crook of my shoulder, muscles straining as I quickly spread peanut butter on my bread. “Who’s Celeste again?”

Mum makes an annoyed noise, like it doesn’t matter. “A colleague. That’s not the point.”

I know what the point is.

The point is I’m the perfect daughter. And Celeste’s stepdaughter isn’t.

I never do anything wrong. And Celeste’s stepdaughter does.

I am particularly *not* the kind of girl who dances with a boy in a viral video and then struggles to get her homework done because he won’t leave her alone.

“I better go,” I breathe into the phone. “I’ve got loads of work to do.”

“Okay. Don’t stay up late. Work hard.”

She tells me she loves me. And then she clicks off.

I shove the sandwich into my mouth, eat quickly. I do have a lot of work to do. A lot of catching up. My parents want me to go to university and get a good job. If I work hard, then I think I can make them happy. And that’s all I want.

At least until school finishes.

I'm not sure how they'll feel after that.

That's why it's good I told Teddy Tualai to leave me alone.

Really good.

And it's also good I've managed to keep him away from my house. It's still a sanctuary of peace and quiet. I tell myself that, and don't even think about Teddy once, not even about how his cheeks went pink and he stopped looking at me.

Sighing, I grab a drink from the fridge and am climbing the stairs to my bedroom when the doorbell rings. I freeze, immediately thinking it must be Teddy Tualai. But then I remember he doesn't know where I live.

And he probably wouldn't want to see me now anyway.

Balancing my math textbook and glass of juice against my chest, I open the door. May stands on the doorstep, smiling brightly at me.

"I've come to visit," she announces, even though she almost never comes to my house. Before I can say anything, she bursts inside and practically runs up the stairs to my room.

"May," I yell after her. "Come back down here!"

"No!"

"I have to study," I complain loudly, but I still close the front door and follow her up the stairs. I'm secretly glad to see her. The house feels less empty now.

Upstairs I find May already sprawled out across my bed. She smiles at me, the sea breeze from the open window ruffling her hair.