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Mine



He was mine first.

Sure, it wasn't like I had any real claim on him. I didn't even know his name. But that didn't matter. When he turned around in his desk to ask me what assignment had been due for Spanish that day, and I had noticed for the first time how adorable he was. His soft brown eyes almost hidden behind impossibly long lashes, his freckles speckled along his nose, his arm resting on the edge of my own desk so that I could see the muscles and veins underneath his skin, it was decided. He was mine.

It was instantaneous. I saw the two of us together, walking hand in hand through the halls so all those nasty girls on the volleyball team would see. I imagined the two of us skipping class and ducking down behind the football bleachers. I had already begun to clear room inside my head for where thoughts of him would belong. But as soon as it started, he was taken away.

The last bell of the day had rung and bodies filled the hall like swarming flies or frantic cattle. I was making my way through the

manuscripts

ruckus when I saw, past the blur of letterman jackets and neon-colored backpacks, a long blond ponytail across the hall.

“Hannah!” I called out, but she didn’t hear me.

I pressed through the current of students rushing to the buses or their cars. It was only when I was able to break apart that I realized that Hannah wasn’t alone. She was talking to him. My boy.

I saw it right away. Hannah was pulling on that blond ponytail of hers. She was twisting those golden locks round and round her finger. And though there were dozens of voices crowding around me, I could distantly make out that high-pitched laugh of hers, the one that became even squeaker the more excited she got. In my mind, I could see the expression on her face even though she was turned away. Those dimples on her cheeks were no doubt showing, and her nose was probably crinkled, just like all those times we used to lay on her trampoline talking about boys.

But it wasn’t just her. I could easily see his face from over her shoulder, and the way his eyes were focused completely on her, like they were incapable of looking away, brought me to a stop right there in the hectic high school halls. It was only when someone hit me roughly with their shoulder that I continued forward, unable to look away from Hannah and my boy.

My stomach twisted. It was obvious. It’s not like it’s that hard to tell when a boy likes a girl. He had one hand in the pocket of his jeans, the other held the door of his locker, his head inclined toward her. He was very focused, almost too attentive, hanging on every word that came out of her mouth. And then he had this lopsided smile on his face, one of those perfect smiles that a girl couldn’t resist. It was all very sickening.

As I approached, his eyes flicked in my direction, making my heart jump, but his attention immediately returned to Hannah.

“I’ll see you Monday then,” he said to her as he closed his locker.

“And if you need any help with the homework just text me or something,” Hannah squeaked.

That stupid crooked smile came back again. “And same to you.”

Hannah bounced on her heels and I knew she had to be grinning. “Good luck.”

“See you later,” he replied, making sure to give her one last heart-catching look before he was gone, disappearing into the flock of students.

By that time, I was just a few steps away so that when Hannah’s eyes trailed down the hall to follow my boy, they landed on me instead.

“Mel!” she exclaimed like I was the light of the world.

Usually I would have called back to her. Usually I would have let

her practically tackle me with one of her fierce hugs, but instead I found myself asking, "Who was he?"

A fierce blush came to her face and her dimples deepened. "That's Michael Jameson. He's my lab partner for chemistry."

Of course he is.

"He seems nice," I might have said with just a hint of bite in my voice.

But Hannah didn't notice as a bubbly smile stretched across her face. "Yeah. He is," she replied as she pulled on her ponytail.

For a moment, the chatter of the students sounded like sirens and I wanted to scream. But I took a breath and was able to push it away until the sirens became a dull buzzing in the back of my mind.

"Hey," I spoke up, "are we going to go or do you plan on just hanging around here all day?"

"Of course not." She hooked her arm through mine. "Let's go."

She grinned at me, but instead of smiling back like I usually did, I found myself looking away, trying to ignore the tightening in my chest.

When her phone buzzed again, I was close to flinging the remote at her.

"Is that him again?"

Hannah grinned, her whole face flushed. "Maybe."

I sunk deeper into her couch and jabbed at buttons on her remote, flipping through the channels without seeing what was even on. Hannah's furball of a cat hopped onto the end of the couch. She purred madly and began to nuzzle my feet, but I jerked away from her.

"Stop that!" I snapped. "I already told you I don't want to pet you! Shoo. Leave me alone."

"She just wants some attention," Hannah told me from where she sat on the floor. Her homework and textbooks spread across the coffee table. When she was finished texting, she balanced her phone on her thigh, just where I could see it from the corner of my eye if I looked hard enough.

I pulled my legs to my chest and wrapped my arms around my knees. "I don't care. She can go away."

"Then I'll pet her." Hannah started to reach out for her cat, but her phone beeped again.

I groaned loudly. "You're supposed to be studying."

"You're not studying."

"I get As in everything. I don't need to." When she picked up her

phone again, I almost smacked it out of her hands. "*Hannah*. Study."

"Just one more. I promise," she insisted, but a moment later, she gasped. "Oh gosh. Oh gosh."

I rolled my eyes. "What?"

Hannah looked up at me with a stricken expression. "He just asked me on a date...I think. I don't know. Maybe."

I jerked up. "What?"

"He just asked me if I wanted to get coffee Saturday. That's a date, right? That's what he's asking?" I grabbed her phone out of her hand and looked at it for myself, but just like she said, Michael's question was too stark, too clear for me to ignore.

"What do I do? What should I say?" Hannah asked. Her shining blue eyes were big, pleading. "You know how clueless I am."

My fingers curled around her phone. When the screen went dark, I could see my reflection staring back at me, my features distorted by smudges. "You know," I said slowly, carefully, "you really don't have to go out with him if you don't want to. It's okay. You don't need to do this if you don't think you're ready."

She smiled, her dimples deepening. "But I really want to."

And then she reached out and slipped her phone out of my grasp.

It was happening. I was losing him.

My throat started to constrict as she began to text him and I blurted out quickly before it was too late, "Then I should come with you."

Hannah stopped and looked at me.

"What?"

The idea was quickly taking shape in my mind. It was almost too easy, too perfect. "First dates are a lot of pressure, even something as low key as getting coffee. It's really easy for something to go wrong, especially since you haven't done anything like this before. So I'll come with you and everything will just be so much more casual. It'll be relaxed. And then if things go well, then, well..."

Hannah's face brightened and she grabbed my hand. "You would do that?"

I squeezed her fingers. "Anything for my bestest friend."

Hannah giggled and turned back to her phone. She was almost bouncing where she sat. "What should I say?" she asked, looking for my help like always.

Her cat started to creep back over to me, but I moved away, swinging my legs over the side of the couch so that I could read Hannah's phone over her shoulder. "Tell him that you already made plans with

your friend to get coffee that day, but that she thinks it would be fun if he came along." I grabbed her shoulder so that she met my eyes. "And just make sure he comes."

Hannah wrote what I said and then beamed up at me. "Thank you."

I grinned back at her, seeing Michael in my mind. "Of course."

I would do anything for Hannah, I kept telling myself as I put on my best skirt, the one that miraculously showed off both my stunning legs and my tiny waist. If Michael really wanted her, then I would step aside. I would give him up. I would be a martyr. As I put on lipstick, I told myself that everything I did was for Hannah's own good, and if this little crush of hers actually went anywhere, I would know in my heart that it would have been because of me, because I was a true friend. I would let Hannah have the boy if that's what they both really, really wanted. But that didn't mean I could look nice while I was being her third wheel.

But when I pushed through the door of the coffee shop, my eyes went to him immediately. He was sitting on the couch by the window, a patch of sunlight beaming right on him like a beacon. He had one arm resting along the back of the couch and he set down his coffee so that he could shield his eyes from the sharp light. And as he did so, those soft brown eyes turned to me.

My heart pounded.

I didn't even see Hannah, not until I heard her screech my name and then two arms came around me.

"Mel, you're here!"

"Yeah, I am." I hugged her back just briefly before I untangled myself. "So isn't there someone I'm supposed to meet?"

"Right, right!" Hannah bounced back over and Michael's eyes followed her. My jaw tightened, but I did my best to smile as Hannah introduced, "Michael, this is Melissa. Melissa, Michael."

Melissa and Michael. Our names even sounded perfect together.

"Hello." I slid my hair over one shoulder and I said like it had just come to me, "Hey, wait, aren't you in my Spanish class?"

Michael looked at me, really looked at me for the first time and I sent him a slow smile, just like the one I had practiced in the mirror. But not for him, of course.

"Oh, yeah." He took a drink of his coffee. "You ready for that test next week?"

"Definitely. I've gotten perfect scores on all the assignments.

And it's not like this chapter is very hard. The imperfect tense is cake, especially after learning the preterit. I just need to make sure that I'm using the right one, which really isn't that hard. And then other than that, there's only..." But I drifted off when his eyes went back to Hannah as she sat down in the armchair across from him. His attention was on her as she took a drink of her tea, and when she looked at him over the rim, he couldn't resist a smile, like a silent joke had been passed between them without me even knowing.

I noticed that the other end of the couch, the spot right next to Michael was open. I began to move toward it, stepping around the other chair where they both probably expected me to sit, but I stopped when Hannah spoke up.

"Do you know what you want to order? I'm trying their new ginger tea and it's amazing."

"Right." I glanced toward the counter. "You know, I think I'm just going to get my latte. I'll be right back." I tossed that last bit back at Michael, but he was too busy shielding his eyes from the sunlight to hear me.

My hands bunched around the end of my skirt. What was the matter with him? I know Hannah is darling. I know that better than anyone else. Who else would make me a cupcake every year on my birthday? Who else would stick notes up the slots of my locker? Who else would weave me another bracelet when I wanted one even after she had already made me ten others? But, I was great too. In some ways, a lot of ways really, I was even better than her. I got better grades than her. I have always been more athletic, being the star player on the volleyball team that made the other girls jealous. And I can watch all the gory movies that she could never stomach. Sure, I might not have her dimples, but I have practically perfect legs, legs of which I was showing off to my fullest and he hardly gave me a second look.

I glanced back at him after I had put in my order. It really wasn't fair. Why did he have to sit back like, one arm still slung over the back of the couch, in the way that was subconsciously beckoning me over. He was making my heart race faster. He was making my thoughts run out of control. If I hadn't been such a good friend, it would have been easy. If I had really wanted him, really, *really* wanted him, I could have had him wrapped around my finger. Right then even. All I had to do was distract Hannah, ask her to get something out of her car for me, it didn't matter what it was. And the once she was gone, all I would have to do was take Michael's hand and lead him down the hall to single bathroom. He might ask questions. He might mention Hannah, but all I would have to do was

put my hand on his chest and shove him into the bathroom. Then I would kiss him and Hannah's name would die between our lips.

I could feel it all even as I stood there besides the counter waiting for my latte. The wall is against my back. My hand is groping for the lock, but his arm brushes mine and he beats me to it. So instead, in the dark of the bathroom, I grab his shirt and pull him up against me. By then he is kissing me hungrily, ravenously, like he is trying to suck the air right out of my lungs and I keep opening my mouth up wider. My hands have now made it underneath his shirt and I can feel the heat of his skin, the hard muscles of his back coiling under my fingertips as his lips leave mine and make their way down my throat. I try to catch my breath, but I can't, not as he starts to trail kisses along the edge of my tank top. And then I feel his hands on my thighs, his touch sliding up, up, up past the edge of my skirt.

"Miss."

I was yanked out of the bathroom with a start.

"Sorry, miss," the barista said as she slid a mug toward me. "Your latte."

"Oh. Yes." I combed my fingers through my hair. "Thanks."

Even as I picked up my latte and tried to compose myself, I could still feel faint touches on my skin where his hands and lips had never been. My face was too warm and I knew I had to get control of myself. I couldn't do this in a public place for crying out loud. It was already bad enough that I was practically drooling over the guy Hannah had feelings for, but did I have to do it here, now?

I turned away from the counter and promised myself I would behave. I was a good friend, really. I could at least pretend to act like it. For Hannah.

But as I started back toward the couch, I stopped suddenly.

They were gone. Both of them.

They...left me?

Hannah left me?

No. Wait. Wait, this isn't right. This doesn't make sense. Hannah would never. Not to me.

Panic and hurt and anger all started to bubble to the surface until I heard Hannah call out to me. I looked over my shoulder to see that they had only moved over to a vacant table off to the side, out of the sun. I let out a breath of relief. But as I started toward them, I realized it was a table for two. There wasn't any room for me.

So I stood there in the middle of the coffee shop with a latte that I really never had a desire to drink.

Hannah and Michael were chatting about something I couldn't make out, but I heard her high-pitched laughter ring out, the laughter that I knew best. But it wasn't meant for me, not anymore.

She was able to pull herself away from the conversation just long enough to tell me to bring one of the empty chairs from the bar over so I could join them. I hesitated, feeling my stomach churn, but then I came forward. It was as I was heaving the chair over that I was able to pinpoint my mistake. I had let myself get distracted by those soft brown eyes and the light of them. I had been so focused on claiming the boy for myself that I hadn't realized that I was the one being played instead of the other way around.

I knew I should have left, made some excuse and just let them be alone like I knew they wanted. I should have just got out of there, kept some of my pride while I could, but instead I pulled my chair up close to the small table where it didn't belong and bumped my knee on the sharp corner so that an ugly blue bruise would remain days later, staying even though it wasn't wanted.

I told myself I wouldn't be there long. I would leave and put all thoughts of Hannah and Michael and Michael and Hannah together out of my mind. I would finish my latte and then I would go, but even when I set my empty cup aside, I didn't get up. I didn't leave. I listened to them talk about people and plans and past conversations that I knew nothing about. I kept trying to join in, adding in a comment here or there, and they both, at least, made an attempt to respond before they turned back to each other. All I could do was watch the two of them. Michael had his forearms on the table and he kept leaning in closer while Hannah steadily twirled her ponytail. It was like they couldn't see or hear me. I could have slipped away and they wouldn't have noticed. But I didn't leave. No, I stayed sitting there on that barstool, trying to sit comfortably in my skirt, but only knocking my knee into the corner of the table over and over again. No matter how many hints they tried to drop, I stayed and kept trying to infiltrate their conversation. I kept trying to ease my way into their private jokes by reminding Hannah of our own. Like the time I had forced her to help me TP the house of the boy who cheated on me. Or when we had bicycled clear across town just to get free pancakes from IHOP on National Pancake Day. Or when we had went to the water park and spent hours drifting round and round and round the lazy river with our inner tubes hooked together and we spent the whole time spying on the hot lifeguards or blocking the little kids who tried to splash past or talking about anything that came to mind until we were so sunburned that we were in pain for weeks. *Remember when*, I kept saying, wanting to

grab her ponytail and jerk her toward me. *Remember when, Hannah. Don't you remember?* I kept repeating it over and over again until it became a plead. Sometimes it was even an apology.

But she didn't seem to notice, not when those soft brown eyes were focused on her.

She was mine first, I wanted to say. There was so many times those words started to rise up my throat to burst out into the open, but I managed to swallow them back down even as they chimed inside my head, right along with her obnoxious laughter.

She was mine first. She had always been mine.

Instead, I just remained quiet, not moving from my awkward perch. I would often open my mouth, but anything I thought to say was quickly dismissed. But even then, I still didn't leave. I stubbornly stayed right where I was even as I watched myself become more and more insignificant until it felt like I was fading away, until the boy I had thought was mine took away what I had had to begin with.