

The Senior Project

Summary blurb thing—

When Sophie cut Sean out of her life, she thought it was for good. She'd made it through almost all of high school successfully ignoring his existence, but then her teacher had to go and ruin it by assigning them to be partners for their final senior project. Suddenly their history is lurking around every corner and it's all she can do to keep the elephants in the room at bay long enough to finish this project and never see Sean Batteen again.

Sean knew he didn't deserve a second chance at friendship with Sophie, but when one came around anyway - he couldn't turn it down. He spent the past four years sitting idly by, forcing himself to forget how much she meant to him so he could bear to be around his terrible friends and mean girlfriend. Despite the complicated baggage they're trying to ignore, maybe now he'll finally be able to call Sophie Melina his friend again.

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Chapter 1

“This doesn’t need to be so hard, Sophie.”

Sophie rolled her eyes as she turned and let her body tip back onto the bed with a groan. “You think I don’t know that?”

“Well if you know it, then why are you rearranging your room for the *third time* already?”

Sophie pressed her lips into a thin line as she refused to admit to Mads, her closest friend, that she had a point. She sighed wistfully, “Why do birds fly or fish swim? It’s in my DNA, Mads, I can’t help myself.”

Mads rolled her eyes and stifled a laugh, or maybe it would have been a groan, it was hard for Sophie to tell through their video call. It had only been two days since Sophie Melina and her mom packed up everything they owned and moved two states away. The move hadn’t been a surprise, her mom had been considering getting a new job closer to her family for months so Sophie had plenty of time to prepare herself. But when moving day finally arrived, it was so much harder than she’d expected.

She’d left behind all her friends, the park she and Mads would stop at on their way home from school, her favorite dessert at the restaurant they went to every year for her birthday. She’d left everything she’d ever known behind and she was already missing it desperately.

“Hey sorry, my dad is calling me so I gotta go.” Mads said suddenly, pulling Sophie from her thoughts. “But listen, Soph, it’s going to be alright. Trust me, just leave everything where it’s at right now. And then in a few days if you hate it, you can change it again. But give it some time.”

“Yeah okay, I’ll try.” Sophie conceded after Mads gave her an impatient look. “Later, Mads.” After hanging up the call, Sophie dropped the phone next to her and stared at the ceiling while she took some deep breaths.

This is fine, everything is fine. Being in a new town and a new house is fine. Having no friends here is fine. Everything is fine. Everything will be fine.

She’d been repeating the words in her head for weeks, hoping one day she might actually believe them. So far, though, they were still just words.

After a few minutes, Sophie pulled herself off the bed to finish rearranging her room. The dresser she’d been trying to find a place for when Mads called sat in the middle of the room, testing her patience. It was old and heavy and nearly impossible to move, but Sophie was twice as stubborn and determined to finish what she started.

After several unsuccessful attempts at pushing and pulling the dresser, Sophie rolled her neck and stretched her shoulders with a huff. Pushing up her sleeves, she put her hands on the dresser and heaved but it still wouldn't budge. She fought the urge to stomp her feet in frustration when she tried, and failed, again. Lifting her glasses onto the top of her head, she ran her arm across her forehead to wipe away the beads of sweat starting to form. With narrowed eyes and hands fisted at her hips, she slowly circled the dresser as if trying not to spook a wild animal.

"Okay, we can do this. Niiiiiice and easy..." She spoke slowly under her breath as she lined up with the side of the dresser and without warning, rammed her shoulder against the side. The dresser skidded forward easily, as if it hadn't been glued to the ground a minute ago. Sophie's momentum was too much for her to stop, though, and as the dresser slid away, she came crashing to the ground behind it.

Sophie rolled over, rubbing her throbbing elbow as she let out a frustrated groan. "Uuuuuuuugh."

A few moments later, the door to her room burst open. She flinched slightly, cracking one eye open to see her mom and aunt looking frantically around her room. Her mom rushed toward her and knelt by her side, eyes frantically scanning her. "Fi, what- are you okay?"

"-m fine." Sophie mumbled, pushing herself upright. She hissed as her mom touched her arm to help. "Elbow's a little sore but the rest of me is fine."

"You're sure?" She paused long enough for Sophie to nod. "What happened?"

"Isn't it obvious, Vale?" Her aunt chimed in as she stepped inside the door and plopped down onto Sophie's bed with a warm smile. "She picked a fight with the dresser and the dresser won!" She laughed, eliciting a pained laugh from Sophie as she leaned back against her desk.

Gritting her teeth, Sophie forced herself to her feet, only swaying slightly as she regained her balance. Waving away her mom's offered hand for help, she stood up straight and stretched out. "I just wanted to finish moving it to the wall but it wouldn't budge." Shaking her head, she took a few steps toward the dresser and placed her hands on the side as if to start pushing again. It was much closer to its destination now but it still had a ways to go.

Her aunt quickly leaned forward and grabbed her wrist. "Ah ah ah, girl, what do you think you're doing?"

Sophie shrugged and gestured to the dresser, "I can't just leave it in the middle of the room." She saw her mom and aunt exchange a look between them as her mom bent to pick up Sophie's glasses that had fallen off when she fell. Her aunt's grip on her wrist tightened and Sophie narrowed her eyes. "What?"

Suddenly her aunt yanked her arm back, pulling Sophie onto the bed next to her. "Let's take a break, yeah?" She smiled warmly at Sophie, though her eyes were serious. Sophie cast her eyes back to the dresser briefly. "That thing's not going anywhere. We'll move it together later, okay? For now, let's do something fun!"

Letting out a sigh, the tension in Sophie's neck and shoulders started to release. Her aunt elbowed her a few times lightly, trying to elicit a laugh. Sophie finally elbowed back which prompted her aunt to very suddenly lean over and rest all her weight onto Sophie. She laughed and pushed her aunt back upright only for her to go boneless again. As she pushed her aunt up again, Sophie's mom set her glasses onto her desk and sat on her opposite side. Within minutes all three were laughing uncontrollably as Sophie struggled to hold up the weight of her mom and aunt sandwiching her from both sides.

"Okay, okay! Something fun." Sophie relented as she caught her breath.

With a satisfied nod between them, both women quickly stood, leaving Sophie to fall back on the bed from the sudden loss of weight against her.

"Vale?" Her aunt turned to face her mom.

"Yes, Penelope?"

"It's a pretty hot day today, no?"

"Oh yes, very hot day today, Penelope." The two smiled conspiratorily.

"I do believe it's the perfect day for lemonade, don't you?"

Sophie excitedly hopped off the bed and stood between the women, she always loved having a lemonade stand in the summer. She smiled at both of them sweetly, waiting until their guards were down to quickly poke them each in their sides before booking it out of the room. When she reached the hallway, Sophie peered over her shoulder with a laugh and called out, "Do we even *have* any lemonade?"

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"Hey Sean, can you come down here, please?"

Sean sighed and pushed himself off his bed. He'd been laying there most of the morning, only slightly bored out of his mind trying to come up with something to do. Summer break had only just started and he was already bored. After throwing on his favorite hoodie, he jogged down the stairs and found his mom looking out the living room window.

"What are you doing?" He asked, his tone reminding him too much of how his mom usually spoke to him when he was up to no good. He walked up to look out the window, "What are you lo—" He trailed off as he saw what had caught her attention. Their new neighbors were setting up a lemonade stand on the lawn between their driveways.

Sean and his mom watched as two women walked toward the house, leaving a girl with short, dark hair to finish setting up the table.

"You should go out and offer to help." His mom suggested almost absently, eyes still locked on the girl outside..

"What? No, that'd be weird." He replied dismissively, moving away from the window.

"I don't see why... It's just a lemonade stand."

“Mom, we don’t know them. I’m not gonna go invite myself to sit at her lemonade stand with her all day.” He looked as if his mom just suggested he marry the girl. “She looked like she was managing just fine on her own.”

His mom let out a frustrated breath and turned to face Sean, “She’s brand new to town, she probably could use a friend or two before school starts. Besides, I didn’t say you had to stay out there *all day*.”

“School doesn’t start for two months, Mom. I’m sure she’ll meet some people by then.” Sean replied.

“Okay fine, don’t go help her. What do I know, I’m just your mother.” She threw her hands up in surrender. Sean rolled his eyes and was halfway up the stairs when she called out, “While you’re down here, can you bring the garbage out? Please?”

“Of course, Mother. Anything for you, Mother.” He replied in a joking tone despite the truth in his words. Sean went to the kitchen and pulled out the garbage from under the sink.

“Don’t forget to put a new bag in!” His mother called, stepping away from the window.

Sean grumbled some sort of affirmative response and went out the side door that led to their driveway. As he walked to the garbage bin on their curb, he couldn’t help but glance over at his neighbor. He unconsciously slowed his pace as he watched her fussing over her table set-up. He wasn’t totally sure why he didn’t want to go help, or even just go talk to her but something inside him felt... *weird* when his mom suggested it. He wasn’t sure what it was, but it had been enough to convince him to keep his distance despite how curious he was.

Narrowly avoiding running straight into his basketball hoop, Sean watched as she moved the cups from one side of the table to the other, looked at it for a moment, then moved them right back to the original side. Her head tilted to the side as she surveyed her table and Sean followed her gaze. There was a small box and one precariously full pitcher of lemonade on the table along with two stacks of plastic cups. When Sean reached the end of the drive, he lifted the bin lid and threw the bag in; keeping his eyes on the garbage and definitely not her. As he put the lid back on, it slipped and made an embarrassingly loud clanging sound as the metal hit cement.

Sean cringed, feeling his cheeks and ears instantly grow warm. He quickly picked up the lid, securing it onto the bin with both hands. As he turned back to his house, their eyes met briefly. The girl smiled politely as he pressed his lips into a line and nodded his head before rushing inside.

The girl was sitting on a stool that hadn’t been there before when Sean peered out his bedroom window a while later. He sat back in his desk chair and looked around his room, once again trying to think of something to do. He tried reading a book, but he couldn’t go more than a page or two before his mind drifted to the girl. He couldn’t help himself... he was curious about her. Half an hour or so later, Sean finally gave up on his book and tossed it onto the bed defeatedly. A person could only reread the same page without comprehending any of it so many times before throwing in the towel.

His eyes drifted to the window and he leaned forward to peer down to the yard. She was still out there, though Sean didn't think she'd gotten any customers yet. In fact, he was sure there was the same amount of lemonade in the pitcher as before because it was filled right up to the painted line at the very top. He watched for a little while longer, waiting for someone to come to her table. A couple cars slowed as they drove past, but no one stopped and Sean was starting to feel a little bad for her.

Sean shook his head, surprised at how much he seemed to care about this complete stranger and her feelings. Not wanting to dwell on his concern for her any further, he pushed himself away from the window and went downstairs in search of a distraction. He found his twin sisters, Sasha and Claire, playing with blocks in the living room with their mom and his dad was in the basement trying to fix some kitchen gadget he'd broken the week before. Sean went to the kitchen to grab a snack and, without really meaning to, paused at the window on his way back to the living room.

"Maybe you could just go out there and say hi?" His mom said without looking up at him.

He rolled his eyes as he turned away from the window, refusing to admit he had just been considering doing that himself. "Mom, I already told you it'd be weird. And besides..." He added unconvincingly after failing to come up with an excuse, "I've got stuff to do." His mom nodded, but he knew she didn't believe him. What stuff would he have to do on a random summer Thursday anyway?

"What are you guys doing?" Sean asked as he plopped onto the couch.

"We're just playing with some blocks, aren't we?" She said in her little kid voice, each word emphasized with her tapping the blocks together so she could distract one of the girls from putting something in her mouth. It worked, of course, his mom always knew exactly what to do with them. Sean enjoyed being a big brother and he did genuinely like his sisters but he never really knew what to do with them. First of all, they were girls. And second of all, they were about ten years younger than him. What were they even supposed to do together?

Sean hung around for a while watching them play, but eventually his boredom got the better of him. He got up and made a few silly faces at Sasha and Claire, who started giggling immediately. Despite the awkwardness he felt around them sometimes, he loved that he could always get them laughing. He moved closer and tickled their sides until they were both hysterical before heading upstairs. When he got back to his room, he flipped on the little tv and game console on the shelf in the corner. As he waited for a new game to load, he fought the urge to check on *her* again.

He willed himself to stay where he was despite the impulse. Every few minutes, though, his eyes flicked to the window of their own volition. And more than once he found himself pausing the game because he thought he'd heard someone outside.

Stop Sean, it's not your business. Pay attention to the-

What was that noise?

It doesn't matter, just play your game.

Okay but that definitely was a car door closing. Finally, someone must have stopped.

He paused his game and jumped up to see what was happening. All he needed to do was confirm that she had a customer and then he'd stop wanting to check on her, or so he told himself. He peered outside only to find that the noise had been the old folks across the street getting into their car. He watched with disappointment as they backed out of their driveway and drove away. Scanning her table, he saw that the lemonade was still filled to that same painted line and felt a sympathetic pang in his stomach.

He checked his alarm clock beside the bed, she'd been out there for at least 2 hours with nothing to show for it. That was such a long time to just sit there and wait. Scrubbing his hand down his face, he looked at his game then back out the window and sighed as he made a decision. He had one foot out the door when he caught his reflection in the mirror hanging next to it.

Oh yiiiiikes

He grimaced at his reflection; he was wearing an oversized sweatshirt, he hadn't brushed his hair in days, and his shorts were covered in more stains than not. Quickly, he changed into a clean pair of shorts and a t-shirt and stuck a few dollars in his pocket. He ran his hands through his hair as he went downstairs, moving quietly through the main level of the house so he didn't have to answer any questions from his mom.

Sean walked to the grassy space between their houses and cautiously approached the table with a smile. "Hey," He said, stuffing his hands in his pockets as he walked up. "So um, are you having a good sale?"

Chapter 2

Sophie had been sitting at her stupid lemonade stand for 4 hours. She was ready to give up an hour ago but she hated quitting things. Also, she honestly wasn't sure her aunt would let her back in the house yet for fear she'd try moving that mutinous dresser again. She was busy daydreaming when she heard a noise and looked up to find the boy from next door approaching.

"Hey," She tried smiling at him without cringing too much. "So um, are you having a good sale?"

Her fake smile became twice as hard to keep on her face as he tried not to show how disappointed she was feeling. "Um not really... not many customers." She said, rubbing her hand on the back of her neck, not looking at him directly.

"Aw man, sorry that sucks." Sean said with a sympathetic look on his face. They stood there in silence for a moment, both not quite sure what to say next. He scratched the back of his head and nodded toward his house. "I'm Sean, by the way... I guess we're neighbors?"

When he turned back to the girl, he noticed the freckles peppering her nose and cheeks and took a moment to scan the rest of her face more closely. There were little marks on either side of her nose that Sean assumed came from glasses she'd been wearing earlier. Her dark hair was wavy, brushing her shoulders with half of it tied in a knot at the top of her head with a bright yellow scrunchie.

"Yeah, I guess we are... I'm Sophie." She replied smiling, though not quite making eye contact. She tucked her hair behind her ear on one side, revealing a black star earring. They stood there, neither one looking directly at the other as they tried to think of something to say.

"This road isn't really that busy, is it?" Sean clicked his tongue and turned toward the street. "You know, there's a grocery store down a few blocks, 'Ted's'..." He nodded in its direction. "They let people put up tables to sell things outside their store all the time. Maybe next time you could try setting up over there?"

She had been looking in the same direction as him, but Sophie's eyes floated back to Sean as he spoke. His brown hair seemed dense and messy, and just started to curl at the nape of his neck. He was tall for their age, she realized, though not nearly as gangly and awkward as so many of the tall kids at her school. A soft pang of emotion pulsed in her chest at the reminder that it was, in fact, her *old* school.

He had an easy, crooked smile on his face when he turned back towards her. She blinked hard, hoping he didn't notice she'd been staring.

"Oh uh, no... I think I'm done with lemonade stands for a while. I've been out here for like four hours and I didn't have a single customer."

"Woah woah hang on!" He said with a scoff, putting his arms out in front of him, acting offended. "I didn't walk *all the way* over here to not be counted as a customer." Sophie

smiled and held in a laugh as he motioned toward his house, acting as if he'd walked miles to stand in front of her.

Standing across from him, she found herself examining his eyes. They were a color she hadn't seen before; almost gray but not quite. With his head at just the right angle you could see a hundred different shades of blue that reflected the sun back at her, making it hard to look away. She cleared her throat, pretending like she hadn't just been staring into his eyes.

"Well then, by all means..." She gestured to her table and he smiled back as he took a couple steps to lean his hip against the edge of the table. "Would you like a glass of lemonade, Sean?" She asked as she folded her hands on top of the table and tilted her head to the side just a bit.

When she tilted her head, her eyes softened and the smallest dimple appeared on one side. Sean was suddenly struck with how pretty she looked. It was a thought that caught him so off guard he stumbled over his words, "I-I'd love some. Um how much?"

"Oh you don't have to pay for it, I was just about to bring it inside anyway."

"Nonsense!" He said, thankful that she didn't seem to notice his momentary stammer. "I came to buy lemonade and I'd like to buy lemonade."

"If you insist," She said, laughing just a little. "A cup is \$1."

"I'll take one please." He pulled a dollar bill out of his pocket and placed it on the table. "Thanks, Sophie" He said as she handed him the cup. Lifting the cup to his lips, their eyes met and Sophie smiled. "Cheers!" Sean flashed another quick smile and took a drink.

It. Was. Terrible.

He tried his absolute best to hide his grimace as he choked out, "Not bad." Her eyes narrowed and Sean worried she'd notice he was lying so he forced himself to take another drink, hoping to avoid making her feel any worse than she already was.

Sophie's eyes lit up as she smiled brightly at him. "Really? Oh good, we didn't have enough drink mix so I had to get a little creative."

"Sean, you out here?" They both turned toward the voice coming from Sean's house to see his dad poking his head out the side door.

"Over here!" Sean called back, grateful for the interruption and topic change. His dad stepped outside and made his way toward them.

As Sean's dad got closer, Sophie could immediately see similarities between him and Sean. They were both tall, both had the same unruly hair, and both got little crinkles in the corners of their eyes when they smiled.

"Sophie, this is my dad. Dad, this is Sophie, our new neighbor."

"Hi Sophie, nice to meet you. I-"

“Fifi, why didn’t you tell us you had our neighbors at your table so we could come meet them?” Sophie’s eyes widened and her cheeks warmed as her mom used her most embarrassing nickname. Sophie turned to see her mom and aunt approaching from the house.

Sophie cleared her throat when they reached the table, about to introduce her family when another woman carrying a toddler on each hip approached from Sean’s house and she couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, is this everyone? Because we might as well wait to do introductions if there are more people waiting inside.”

Everyone laughed as they crowded around Sophie’s lemonade stand. Handing one of the kids to Sean’s dad, the woman introduced herself with a warm smile. “I’m Natalie Batteen, Sean’s mom, and this is my husband, Paul.”

Paul smiled as he hitched the child up a little higher on his hip, “This here is Sasha, and this-” he paused to poke the girl in Natalie’s arms in the belly. “-is Claire.”

The girl on his hip put her hand on his cheek and when he turned to her she shouted, “I’m Claire!” as she pointed to herself with her other hand emphatically.

“WHAT?!” His eyes bulged as he over-dramatically looked between the girls. The girl in his arms giggled immediately as Paul pointed to the twin in Natalie’s arms and incredulously asked, “Sasha?” She giggled and nodded enthusiastically.

Sophie’s mom stepped closer and wrapped an arm around her. “It’s so nice to meet you, you have such a beautiful family! I’m Valeria Melina, but you can call me Vale. And this is my daughter, Sophie.” She squeezed tightly, eliciting a quiet grunt from Sophie. “And my sister, Penelope, is helping us get settled. She lives one town over.” Aunt Pen smiled and nodded her hellos to the group. “So, what grade are you going into?”

Sean vaguely heard someone ask a question, but he had gotten too distracted trying to figure out if the gold at the center of Sophie’s green eyes was a trick of the light. He tried to look away, he knew he *should* have looked away, but for some reason he couldn’t. He stared for a moment too long apparently, because his dad had to nudge him with his elbow.

Crap... I guess that question was for me.

He blinked and cleared his throat as he turned to Sophie’s mom and said, “Seventh. I’ll be in seventh grade in the fall.”

“Oh!” Valeria exclaimed as she brought her hands together in front of her. “Sophie is going into the seventh grade too!” She turned and smiled at Sophie, but Sophie just grimaced at Sean. He matched her almost-smile, wondering which of their parents would be the most embarrassing.

“Oh this is such great news, how fortunate that we moved right next door to someone your own age, Fifi! You’ll be friends in no time!” She turned to the Batteen’s as she clutched Sophie’s shoulders even tighter, “Sophie, here, is a little nervous about being in a new place.”

“Mooom!” Sophie grunted angrily as she turned to try and hide her cheeks turning pink.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Sophie,” Paul chimed in, smiling; “Sean doesn’t have any good friends around the neighborhood anyway, so he’d be happy to be yours.”

“Oh my- Dad!” Sean’s eyes were huge as he turned to his dad in horror. The adults all laughed as Sean and Sophie both prepared themselves to run and hide for the rest of their lives. Before they could make a break for it, one of the twins let out a long, adorable yawn catching everyone’s attention.

“Sorry to leave so quickly, but I actually came out here to grab Paul to help with nap time. Two laps are better than one when it comes to these two.” Natalie said with a warm laugh.

“Say no more!” Vale waved off her apology with a smile. “Pen and I should head inside too, there’s a stubborn dresser that needs moving.”

Soon their families were headed back to their houses, leaving Sean and Sophie alone at the table again. Sean set his cup of lemonade on the corner of the table when their parents arrived and he was staring at it warily as Sophie reached for the pitcher and a cup. Her eyes flicked to him briefly before smiling shyly and Sean's stomach dropped.

“I haven’t tried it yet... I wanted to have plenty to sell since we only had enough to make one pitcher.” Sophie was doing her best at hiding the embarrassment, pushing up her glasses and silently cursing her cheeks for always being so quick to blush. “But I guess that was kind of silly of me, huh? No reason not to have some now, though.”

Oh crap.

Sean watched with rapidly increasing panic as she poured herself a glass and lifted it to her lips. He hadn’t really given it a lot of thought when he’d told her the lemonade was good, it just seemed like the nice thing to do. Getting a cup of lemonade from your new acquaintance and then immediately telling them it was terrible didn’t really seem like a great way to make a good first impression. But now he was facing the consequences of his decision.

He acted without a thought, which seemed to be a theme for him that day, reaching out to try and take the cup out of her hand but she reacted too quickly and he ended up knocking it to the ground. As he was bringing his arm back, he thought he’d better take advantage of the situation and knocked his own cup off the table with his elbow.

“What are you doing?” She exclaimed, confused and instantly defensive.

“Sorry, I just uh..”

Think Sean, come on...

“really liked it... and uh...”

THINK!

“I wanted some more?” He replied, rather unconvincingly as he scratched the back of his head.

She pulled back a bit as her eyes narrowed. “So you tried to take mine?”

God, why did I do that?! Now she’s looking at me like I’m an idiot.

Her eyes fell onto Sean's overturned cup and grew even more defensive, "That doesn't make any sense, your cup wasn't even empty. What are you playing at?"

And she's not wrong. I AM an idiot.

"I... I just uh..." He stammered, looking around a bit, trying to come up with literally any reason for why he would try to take the glass out of her hand. Her eyes caught his and she gave him a *look*. The kind of look that could probably convince anyone to tell her their deepest, darkest secrets if she asked. He tried to look away, tried to think of something to say but his mind had gone completely blank.

"I'm sorry... I just... I lied." He admitted sheepishly with a shrug.

"What?" Disbelieving eyes scanned his face and Sean swallowed nervously. "What could you have even been lying about?"

Sean let out a small sigh, staring resolutely at the table. "I just... I didn't want to tell you that your lemonade wasn't good." He looked up at her with an apologetic grimace, "And it was *really* not good."

Her eyes widened slightly and she looked from him to the lemonade pitcher and back. She held his gaze for a long moment and it was clear she was trying to decide if he was lying or not. Flashing one more skeptical look at him, Sophie grabbed the pitcher and took a drink from it before Sean could say anything else.

"Oh my god." She sputtered as she spit the lemonade onto the grass and shivered. "Oh my god! That's the worst thing I've ever tasted!" She said as she coughed and put the pitcher down, eyeing it cautiously as if it might jump at her at any second.

"Yeah..." He inhaled through clenched teeth and shook his head. "It was not great." Letting out an awkward laugh, not sure what to say. When Sophie looked up at him, her eyes were filled with laughter and relief spread through him.

"No, no it absolutely was not."

Sophie's keen eyes scanned Sean's face briefly. "I still don't get why you didn't just tell me it was bad?"

Sean shrugged and tried to avoid her eyes. "I don't know... it just seemed nicer than telling you how bad it was after you'd already sat here for hours without a single customer."

She tilted her head in thought, "But you took a second drink, didn't you? You really did that just to not hurt my feelings?"

Sean just gave her a modest one shoulder shrug and crossed his arms, leaning his hip against the table again.

She tilted her head to the other side, "You would have drank this whole pitcher just so I wouldn't know how bad it was, wouldn't you?"

He ran his hand through his hair, feeling very shy. She watched him almost as if she were studying him, which made him all the more uncomfortable. "I mean not *all* of it... I probably would have figured out how to knock the pitcher over before it got to that point."

She continued studying him quietly, speaking only after he'd reluctantly met her eyes. "That might be one of the nicest things someone's ever done for me... Stupid!" She said as she laughed, shaking her head from side to side a couple times. "But really nice."

Sean gave her a half-smile, unsure what to say next.

She smiled back at him and let out a deep breath. "Well thank you, Sean, really! But next time, you can just let me know it's bad. I won't hold it against you." Her smile relaxed him immensely and he chuckled.

"Okay, I promise I will never lie about how bad something you make is again." Their laughter slowly faded and they were left in a comfortable, if not still a *little* awkward, silence.

Sean cleared his throat, "Well at least now we know it was probably a good thing no one came to your lemonade stand."

"Oh my god, I could have poisoned the whole neighborhood!" She exclaimed as her face mirrored the realization in her voice. It was then that Sean decided Sophie had the most interesting eyes he'd ever seen. They were a really warm shade of green with a small ring of gold around the irises that sort of spiked out into the green around it. He could never seem to pull his eyes away from hers easily, it was like they were holding his own eyes hostage, somehow.

"Well." She said, putting her hands on her hips and looking down at her table. "Better close shop before anyone else tries to buy any."

He smiled, a little grateful she broke eye contact but a little disappointed, too. "Can I help you clean up?" He asked without thinking, surprising himself with the offer after being so adamantly against it when his mother suggested it earlier that day.

"Oh no, I can handle it. It's not much." she said, waving her hand dismissively as she started gathering things together on the table.

Half of his mouth tipped up as he turned and rested his hands on the table in front of him, "Well, I know you *can* do it... but would you like some help anyway?"

She chuckled again and looked up from the table, "Um sure, I guess. I'll grab the toxic waste and empty money box." She paused when he opened his mouth to interject and somehow she knew exactly what he was going to say. "The *mostly* empty money box. Would you get the cups and tablecloth?"

He turned his head just a tiny bit to the side and scrunched his eyebrows, "Toxic waste?"

Her head and eyes very dramatically pointed towards the lemonade before grabbing it and turning towards her house. Sean laughed again, gathered everything in his arms, and followed her into the kitchen.

After they finished putting everything from the lemonade stand away, Sean stood in front of the fridge looking at the pictures they'd put up. Sophie leaned against the kitchen counter next to him, quietly watching for a moment. She couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking about, what prompted the small smile spreading across his lips as he looked from picture to picture.

“Thanks for helping me, Sean.” She said as she pushed her glasses up before crossing her arms.

“Of course, any time.” Sean said as he turned from the fridge to face her.

“And thank you, again, for trying to save me from the toxic waste. That was... very cool of you.” She had an amused smile on her face and her cheeks were turning the faintest shade of pink when her eyes finally found his.

Sean didn’t know how to respond, so he just held her gaze with a lopsided smile and nodded.

“Do you want something else to drink, so you’re not cursed with the lingering taste of hot garbage the rest of the day?” She turned to open the fridge and Sean took a few quick steps back to make room as he chuckled. “It looks like we have orange soda aaaaaaand-” She pushed a few things around before straightening up and turning toward Sean, “Yeah we only have orange soda.” Sean looked at her skeptically and she held her hands up, “Store bought. I swear.”

Sean laughed, “Well if you swear, I suppose I’ll take a chance.” Sean paused for a moment smiling at her. He joined her at the counter as she grabbed the bottle from the fridge, “I actually love orange soda.”

“Me too, it’s my favorite! I don’t understand how some people can not like it. Like my mom can’t *stand* the stuff.”

Sean laughed, “Neither can mine. I’m hoping the twins like it when they’re older because my dad refuses to get in the middle of it.”

Sophie laughed right back and asked him to grab some cups, directing him to the correct cupboard. Sean pulled two random cups from the shelf and looked them over. They had weird, transparent lines along the sides that morphed your reflection like a funhouse mirror and for some reason he kind of loved them.

“Do you want ice?”

Sean nodded and passed her the cups as Sophie pulled the tray out of the freezer, twisting it with a satisfying crack. He watched as she dropped cubes into a cup, one after another after another before he couldn’t take it anymore.

Sean clicked his tongue teasingly, “Geez, are you gonna put the whole tray in there? You only need like three.”

“Three ice cubes?!” Sophie bellowed back, “Why bother putting any in at all if you’re only putting in three? That won’t even make your drink colder - you have to use a minimum of seven cubes.”

“Seven??” Sean asked, turning to face her straight on and matching her unnecessary level of outrage perfectly. “You might as well just fill the cup halfway with water, the soda will get too watered down with that much ice.”

They both stared at each other, lips pursed and eyes narrowed, and quickly realized that neither of them were the type of person to back down from a fight. And before they knew it, they found themselves in a very, very intense staring contest.

Sean eventually conceded and blinked, he was starting to not be able to focus on anything but the gold in her eyes. She celebrated with a little fist pump at her side and a masterful look of superiority. “You’ll soon learn, Sean, that I *always* know best.”

“Now hold on... just because I blinked doesn’t mean I give in. I still think seven is way too many.”

“And three is way too few.”

“Nope, it’s actually the perfect amount.”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t like to lose.”

“Oh, and I imagine you would be such a *gracious* loser?”

“I’ll have you know...”

“Oh, would you just put in five and be done with it!”

Sophie and Sean’s heads both turned toward her mom’s voice in surprise.

“Don’t you have a plane to catch?” Sophie yelled back sarcastically prompting quiet laughter from Vale out of sight in the living room. When Sean gave Sophie a confused look, she explained, “She’s a pilot.”

“Oh cool,” Sean looked around the room, thinking. “I guess I can live with five if you can.” Sean said with a resigned click of his tongue, eyeing Sophie.

“Yeah alright, we’ll compromise.” She motioned towards the trays with a nod of her head and Sean took the hint. “But no skimping, I’m watching you!” She warned as she pointed her finger at him.

He made a big show of dropping each ice cube into the glass one at a time with a sarcastic look on his face and glanced at her, “I would never dream of shorting you, Sophie Melina.”

Her superior smile comes back in full force, “Good. It’d be foolish to even try.” And she poured the soda and handed him a cup. Sean was lifting it to his lips to take a drink when she stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Wait wait wait!”

He had a sort of dumbstruck look on his face and asked, “Why?”

“Becaaaaaaause...” She stretched the word out as if what she was about to say next was obvious, “we need straws.”

“We don’t *need* straws.” Sean said, rolling his eyes to add emphasis.

“Yes, Sean, we *do* need straws.” She reached out and opened the drawer next to her, pulling out two swirly silly-straws with a flourish and that increasingly familiar superior look on her face.

Sean let out a loud laugh, "Okay, you're absolutely right this time. We need those straws." As he reached for a straw, Sean's stomach growled so loudly he was pretty sure the whole neighborhood could hear it. He quickly clamped his hand over his abdomen and both their eyes widened as they looked up at one another in awe, he hadn't even noticed he was hungry.

"Do you want something to eat?" Sophie chuckled as she asked, as if she hadn't just heard his stomach literally roar.

"Yup... yeah apparently."

"We haven't been to the grocery store yet so I'm not sure what we have. I know I have some chips, but I doubt you'll like them."

"I survived your lemonade, Sophie, I think I deserve more credit for how high of a tolerance I have for things that taste bad."

Sophie nodded her head to agree and went to the pantry, returning with a bag of chips a few moments later.

"No way." He said in disbelief.

"I told you you weren't going to like them." Sophie said as she put the bag down on the counter and turned around so her back was leaning against it. "What have I been saying, Sean, it's easiest just to defer to my judgment. I'm-."

Sean eyed her with one eyebrow raised and snatched the bag of chips, pulling it open and shoveling a large handful in his mouth. While he was still chewing, he said, "Actually dill pickle is my favorite flavor." Though with so many chips in his mouth it sounded more like, "ack-tly bill bickle ith muh faborite fabor."

Sophie's eyes grew huge as her head tilted to the side and Sean was, once again, drawn to them; unable to look away. Something unfamiliar stirred in his chest and he had to suppress a shiver.

She really needs to stop doing that.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone else who likes these chips... actually no, I *know* I haven't!" She said incredulously.

"What can I say, I'm one of a kind, baby." He said smiling as he stuffed another handful into his mouth.

She laughed, "You won't hear any arguments here." as she threw her hands up in front of her.

"Good." He said with a satisfied nod. Then he grabbed a straw from her hand and plopped it into his cup before walking across the room to sit down at the kitchen table opposite the counter. After he was settled, he held the open end of the bag out to her, lifting his eyebrows expectantly.

Sophie had been watching him, wondering at how quickly they got along. Making friends hadn't been hard for her necessarily, but it usually took a while for her to be

comfortable enough to be herself around someone new. He was interesting, she thought, confident and surprisingly kind for someone their age. A lot of the boys at her old school were cranky and a little mean, in fact she couldn't think of a single old classmate that would have pretended to enjoy that lemonade just to spare her feelings. Well, except for Mads. It wasn't until he shook the bag to get her attention that she realized she was still standing there holding her straw in her hands.

“Right, yeah.” She snapped out of it and walked over to sit across from him. She shoved a few chips in her mouth, put her elbows on the table in front of her and leaned in, “So, what other weird things do you like?”

They spent the next few hours comparing their interests and disinterests, bonding over weird foods, retro video games, and an ever growing list of slightly-exaggerated strong opinions neither of them would ever concede.

Chapter 3

“I just don’t get it. So like, when they get to you, they have to stop for a little bit? That doesn’t make any sense?”

“NO! That’s not even remotely close.” Sean said laughing as he plopped onto the couch beside Sophie; bag of chips in one hand, TV remote in the other.

“Yeah, well, they should name it something that makes sense, then. Like ‘two and a half’. Then it’s very clear what your position is. I don’t understand how you can spend half your time playing a sport that couldn’t even be bothered to come up with logical names for the different positions. I mean, ‘*shortstop*’?... It literally doesn’t mean anything.” She bobbed her head to emphasize how ridiculous she thought it was as she spoke.

Sean stared at her for a second, unsuccessfully trying to hold back his laughter. “I don’t know how many times I have to explain it. It means you try to stop the ball short of the outfield.”

By then, Sophie was laughing too much to pay attention to what he was saying, mostly because of how ridiculous Sean looked when she goaded him on like that. She loved it when she made him laugh, and she was pleased to realize she could almost always make him laugh.

Sophie’s gaze would always find that little light in his eyes, the one that appeared only when he was laughing. She’d wondered at how it managed to brighten his entire face. Everything seemed to just sort of... elevate into something that was hard to look away from; into something that would bring a smile to her face if she happened to think about it later that day.

Quickly searching for ways to keep poking at him, Sophie’s eyes lit up with an idea. She put on her best cool smile, melodramatically looking him up and down as she said, “Hmm... Halfway. Yeah that seems like a good fit.”

That got Sean’s attention and he slowly sat upright. “What?” His tone matched the skeptical look on his face.

“Halfway.” She replied matter-of-factly with a shrug. When he returned nothing but a confused expression she rolled her eyes, “Halfway between 2nd and 3rd base. That’s the position you play, so that’s what I’m calling you from now on. It’s either that or ‘Two and a half’ but that feels too wordy...” She scrunched up her nose with her last words, fighting off the smile forming at the mild fury on Sean’s face as he gawked at her and the pride she felt knowing she just locked him into a nickname forever.

—

“Hey Halfway?”

Sean sighed heavily, not looking up from the deck of cards he was shuffling in front of him. "Are you ever going to stop calling me that?"

It had been almost two weeks since she'd donned him with his new nickname, and she had not called him by his real name since. Sean wasn't even sure why he was still fighting her on it. There was nothing wrong with the nickname, he actually thought it was kind of funny - though he could never admit that to her.

"Oh no, Halfway. The name just fits you so well, I couldn't possibly call you anything else." She smiled innocently.

His eyes narrowed, trying to think of something clever to say but he couldn't keep his mind from drifting to her eyes. She wasn't even looking at him, her attention back on the magazine she was flipping through, but he felt like he was being held hostage. He couldn't look away even if he wanted to. That was the first time Sean realized he maybe *didn't want* to.

Suddenly, Sophie jumped up from the kitchen chair she'd been in, putting her hands on her hips as she turned to face him, "Actually, tell ya what, Halfway. I'm a reasonable person. If you hate the nickname sooooo much, I'll stop using it."

Sean's eyes filled with surprise that was quickly overshadowed by skepticism. "Really?"

"There is a catch, however."

"Of course there is." Sean rolled his eyes before looking back at Sophie and nodding to tell her to go on.

"I'll stop calling you Halfway, IF..." She paused for dramatic effect because she knew it would drive him just a little bit crazy. "IF you do something for me."

He really didn't care about the nickname anymore, but he was getting nowhere trying to teach her how to shuffle cards so he played along. "And what would that be?" He asked, keeping a neutral face.

She smiled innocently again, "What I want you to do is simple, go to Ted's and get us each a bag of dill pickle chips."

His mouth fell open. "Buy two bags of chips? That's it? Just buy two bags of chips?"

He waited for her to go on but she didn't. Was she really letting him win so easily? He stood up from the kitchen table slowly, the skeptic look on his face not fading for a second. "So you just want me..." He took a few backwards steps towards the exterior door, keeping his eyes on Sophie.

"To walk to the store..." a few more steps backwards and Sophie was still holding his gaze with that confusing smile.

"And BUY..." He emphasized 'buy' in case she was trying to trick him into stealing them or something. It seemed unlikely, but he wouldn't put anything past her completely, not with that look in her eyes.

"Two bags of dill pickle chips?" He was standing at the side door, one hand on the knob.

“Yup, just go buy 2 bags of chips... oh but there is one more thing.” She called as her smile morphed into a devious look that caused his breath to hitch. He barely had time to swallow before she went on. “You have to do it in your boxers.”

His mouth fell open, his hand went slack and let go of the knob. “You want me to go to the store half-naked?”

She answered by lifting just her right shoulder and eyebrow, signaling she was not joking. Sean turned to the door and quickly thought through his choices. On one hand, ‘Halfway’ was a stupid nickname but he didn’t hate it. On the other hand, he was not one to back down from a challenge. Especially when he was as bored as he was that day. Turning back and meeting her eyes, he smiled.

“Okay.”

“You’ll do it?”

“Yup. Let’s go.”

Sophie was surprised, though really, she shouldn’t have been. She didn’t offer up the challenge thinking he’d say no. Though in truth, she didn’t offer the challenge thinking *anything*... she just sort of said it.

“Alright.” Sophie said, matching Sean’s easy demeanor. “I’ll go grab my shoes.”

The walk to the store from their houses took about fifteen minutes at a normal pace, ten if you’re in a hurry. But that day, it took them well over an hour to get to the store. Sean and Sophie kept stopping, too engrossed in what they were saying to manage walking and talking at the same time. Plus, they walked past not one but two lemonade stands, and Sean had recently decided that he would always stop at lemonade stands. Or baked goods, or scouts... it didn’t matter what they were selling. Ever since Sophie’s failed lemonade stand, he swore he’d always take the time to buy something - just in case no one else had. By the time they were a block away from the store, Sophie had actually forgotten why they were there in the first place.

It struck her as the store came into view and she started to feel a familiar twist in her stomach. Her chest began to feel hollow as her breathing became more shallow.

we shouldn't do this we shouldn't do this we shouldn't do this we shouldn't

She did her best to calm herself down. She knew logically nothing truly bad would happen but her mind was loudly unconvinced. It was just a silly prank, she tried telling herself, everything would be fine. She felt her cheeks warm and embarrassment rose in her as she thought of how ridiculous she would look to Sean if he knew she was panicking about her own dare so she did her best to deal with it silently. Her hands began to shake as she started touching each finger to her thumb, hoping to ground herself a little. Before she could even count to 10, they were next to the store and she was out of time.

Sophie grabbed Sean’s arm to stop him from rounding the corner to the front of the building. He turned partially back and said “Don’t tell me there’s more? What, do I have to sing a song while I’m doing it, too?”

Sophie forced what she thought was a convincing smile on her face. “No, I just decided you don’t have to do it anymore.”

“What?”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. The fact that you made it this far is enough, you don’t have to go in.”

“Oh no no no, you said I had to do it if I wanted to stop being called Halfway, so I’m doing it.”

Sophie started to feel queasy and her palms began to sweat. “No seriously, Sean.” The edge in her voice didn’t register with Sean as he was too focused on the task at hand. “Don’t go in there like that, they might kick you out and not let you back in. You could get into a lot of trouble because of a dumb dare. It’s fine, I’ll stop calling you Halfway. Let’s just go back.”

“Relax, Soph. They’re not going to ban me from the store. It’s a harmless joke. Heck, it’ll probably be the most entertaining thing to happen at work for them this week. I’ll be in and out in like three minutes”

Sean, who had yet to look at Sophie and still thought they were playing their silly game, began to pull his shirt off. He’d just tucked one arm inside when he finally looked at her. Everything around him froze for a quarter of a second, long enough for him to recognize the very real fear in her eyes. He didn’t know what was going on but it was obvious Sophie wasn’t okay. Her eyes were darting around and he could hear her breathing hitch.

“Sophie?” He quickly adjusted his shirt and took a cautious step toward her. He’d never seen anyone look like that before, so scared and so distant. Her breathing was getting quicker and more labored and she wouldn’t meet his eyes.

Her whole body tensed as she staggered backwards til her back was against the store wall. She slid down into a squat, holding her head in her hands and squeezing her eyes closed as tightly as possible. Sean watched helplessly, wishing she would say something. The more he tried talking to her, the further away she seemed to get. It was like she was trying to make herself fold into nothing, like she was trying to disappear.

He looked around for help but the street was deserted. He thought about running into the store but he couldn’t leave her alone, not like this. Wracking his brain, Sean remembered something his mom used to do when he was inconsolable and decided it was worth a shot.

Slowly, he knelt down in front of Sophie and firmly, but gently, took her hands in his, explaining what he was doing as he went. He honestly wasn’t sure she could hear him or if it made any difference, but it seemed like the right move and by that point Sean was acting purely on instinct.

Pulling her hands gently, he placed one over her heart and one over his own, spreading her fingers out and pressing firmly into their chests. With his hands steady as they covered hers, Sean asked her to try and breathe with him.

He started breathing in and out, making his inhales and exhales as loud and pronounced they could be.

In out.

In out.

He lifted his shoulders and chest with every inhale, lowered them on the exhales.

In, out.

In, out.

He slowed his breathing down little by little.

In. Out.

In... Out...

Eventually, he began relaxing his hold on her hands as he felt her arms release some of their tension. Sean briefly closed his eyes, relieved that it seemed to be working as Sophie's breathing started to match his.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

He had no idea how long they went on like that. It could have been a few minutes, it could have been an hour... All Sean knew was that she was coming back to herself. Making a mental note to thank his mom later, he found a new appreciation for every scraped up knee and bruised shin he hadn't been able to cope with on his own as a kid.

When it seemed like Sophie had gotten her breathing under control, he gingerly moved his hand from over her heart, and lightly squeezed her shoulder. "Sophie?"

She slowly blinked her eyes open and looked up at him, quiet as she tried to focus. Sean stayed there, his hand still holding hers to his chest as they breathed, watching her with a soft smile. Dropping onto the ground, Sophie let her legs stretch out in front of her and tipped her head back against the wall, clearly exhausted. It seemed like she had finally broken through the fog.

Sophie weakly pulled her hand from his chest and ran it through her hair as she closed her eyes, lightly this time. Sean let himself rock back so he was sitting on the ground facing her. Immense relief pulsed through him as he watched her with a tired smile.

Eventually, when the intensity of the moment seemed to dissipate and the quiet between them no longer felt essential, Sean had a thought. A grin spread across his face that quickly turned into a bubble of laughter. He clapped his hand over his mouth but not quite fast enough to hide it.

Sophie slowly opened her eyes and glared at Sean, refusing to believe she just heard him actually laughing. When her eyes adjusted to the light again, she saw that Sean was fighting to hold in more laughter and her brain jumpstarted.

“Sean Batteen, if you’re laughing at me, so help me...”

His face went serious in an instant and he cut her off before she could continue. “I wouldn’t, I’m not.” He shook his head, his eyes shining sincerity. “I would never do that.”

“Then what were you laughing at?” Sophie believed him, but she still felt wary. She didn’t understand what could possibly have made him laugh in such a heavy moment.

“Well, I was just thinking... I can live with Halfway, it’s really not that bad.” He paused as he stood up and offered her his hands with an amused smile. When she took them, he quickly leaned down, “But I’ve also decided that if I have to live with a dumb nickname, so do you.” He said with a lopsided grin that made the remaining tension in Sophie’s body finally relax.

A real smile spread across Sophie’s face and she looked at Sean fondly as he pulled her to her feet. Without a second thought, Sophie surged forward and hugged Sean tightly, eliciting a quiet *oomph*.

“Thank you.” She breathed into his shoulder before pulling back. He smiled back at her with something unfamiliar in his eyes.

“Anytime.”

As they made their way home, Sophie’s mind replayed everything. Sean helped her without hesitation. Not only had he helped her, he didn’t give up when something didn’t work. He didn’t abandon her, he kept trying until she followed him back to reality.

Sophie would never forget that Sean was, on that day, her hero.

Chapter 4

“HEY, what are you doing down there?” Sean called, sticking his head out of his bedroom window. It was one of the first warm days of spring in their seventh grade year and when he spotted Sophie sitting on a blanket in her front yard, he couldn’t resist .

Sophie looked up and shielded her eyes from the sun, “Well I *was* reading a book before I was so rudely interrupted.”

“Rudely Interrupted?!” Sean repeated, acting offended. “I won’t stand for this.” He disappeared from his window and Sophie laughed to herself, rolling her eyes. She was just returning to her book when she felt a looming presence approaching behind her.

“Rudely interrupted. *Really*, Shortstop? I try to be a good neighbor and friend and this is how you treat me??”

“Well, if it wasn’t rude before, it definitely is now!” Sophie replied, not quite successful at disguising the smile on her face. He had tried a few different nicknames on her but ‘Shortstop’ seemed to have stuck. Sean plopped down onto the blanket next to Sophie, “So, is this your plan for the day? Sit outside being mean to your neighbors?”

Sophie laughed, “Don’t be silly. I wouldn’t dream of being mean to your parents. Or Sasha and Claire for that matter.”

Sean was just about to respond when he was cut off by his mom calling him back to the house.

“Be right back.” He said to Sophie as he got up and jogged to their side door.

Sophie put her book to the side and leaned back on her hands, letting the sun shine on her face. She was grateful Sean was joining her, in fact it was a welcome intrusion. She’d been insanely bored that day and her mom wasn’t due back from her flight until dinner time.

When Sean came back to the blanket, he walked around to the other side so he was blocking the sun from Sophie’s eyes but didn’t sit down. “My parents need me to watch the twins while they run some errands.” He said somewhat defeatedly, rubbing the back of his neck. “So I have to go inside.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Sorry.” Sean said as he kicked at an acorn on the ground.

“It’s okay, you’ve got family stuff to do. I get it.” Sophie said light heartedly, not letting her disappointment show knowing how important Sean’s family was to him.

Sean just shrugged.

“Everything okay?” Sophie asked, surprised at how gloomy Sean was. She’d never seen him so visibly unhappy before.

“Yeah fine.” Sean said, “I’ll see you later.” He turned back to the house and took a few steps before whipping back around.

“Hey, you’re a girl!” Sean announced to Sophie, as if it was brand new information.

“Very good Halfway, yes I *am* a girl.” Sophie responded in a placating voice she’d usually use with Sasha and Claire.

“Ha ha. No, listen.” Sean replied, clearly not amused. “I don’t really... I’m not good at ya know like, girl stuff.”

Sophie’s eyebrows rose in surprise as she fought to keep a straight face, “Oh?”

“And I just...” He faltered and Sophie stood up.

“Sean, whatever it is, it’s fine. You’ve seen me have a full blown panic attack over literally nothing and you’re still my friend. I promise to do the same.”

When Sean didn’t seem convinced, Sophie put one hand over her heart and one up in the air like she was taking an oath and pledged, “Scout’s honor.”

Sean laughed lightly as his eyes narrowed, “You’re not a scout.”

“True.” Sophie said with a passive shrug before pointing at him with a serious face. “But don’t change the subject.”

Sean exhaled, not quite meeting her eyes as he spoke. “I don’t really know how to like... be with my sisters without our parents there. They’re just so little. I love them, but I don’t really know what to do with them, let alone how to do it. Plus they’re girls and I don’t know the first thing about what girls like.”

Sophie nodded slowly as she absorbed what Sean was saying. “No problem.” She said matter of factly.

“What?”

“I said no problem... so you don’t know how to play with little kids, no problem.” She shrugged as she started picking up and folding her blanket.

After a couple moments of confused silence, Sean was practically bursting at the seams. He threw his hands out in front of him, wide-eyed, “Aaannnnnd?”

“Aaaannnnddd,” She said, mimicking his tone, “lucky for you I babysat my neighbor two days a week almost every week last year. Aaanndd, like you so brilliantly noticed earlier; I am, in fact, a girl. I’ll help you, Halfway. So no problem.”

Sean was beyond relieved she was going to help him with the twins. It seemed like Sophie was always willing to help him, no matter how important or silly it was. A few weeks earlier, she spent her entire Sunday helping him study for a test on a book he forgot to read. And on more than one occasion she had helped him rake the leaves in his yard without being asked, just because she saw him doing it alone. They’d known each other for almost a year and it had become clear to Sean that Sophie would be there for him whenever he needed her, and when he didn’t.

“First things first. Little kids just want to have fun and for someone to pay attention to them. They really don’t care that you’re a boy, honestly they probably don’t even know there’s a difference. And besides,” She started walking towards Sean’s house. After a few

steps, Sophie turned to look at Sean where he stood, staring wide-eyed at her, and shrugged as she continued toward his house, walking backwards, “Girls and boys can like the same things, dummy.”

An hour and a half later, the twins were peacefully napping in their beds as Sean and Sophie tiredly made their way downstairs.

“Okay... two is definitely a lot more work than one.” Sophie said as she plopped onto the couch.

Sean grunted in agreement as he collapsed in the seat next to her. “I’ve never been this exhausted before.”

Sophie, Sean, and the twins had spent most of the afternoon sitting on the ground around the coffee table in Sean’s living room and drinking orange soda out of tea cups. Well, the twins had water. Sean might not know a lot about kids, but he knew better than to give them orange soda in a cup with no lid. Sophie had made them some peanut butter sandwiches and cut them into little triangles while Sean played a very long game of ‘*Chase Me*’, a game the twins made up exactly five seconds before they started playing. The rules were simple: Sean had to chase whoever said ‘chase me’ and he was not allowed to stop. Nor was he allowed to ever actually catch them, much to his disappointment. At least that’s what Sasha decreed the first time he’d caught her.

After their tea party of the century, they all went outside to relax in the sun. Though relaxing in the sun to four year olds looked much more like ‘*Chase Me 2.0: This Time it’s Outside*’ than actually relaxing. Eventually, Sophie convinced the girls it was time to go upstairs to lay down; and before Sean had even finished reading the book Claire picked out, they were fast asleep.

“I can’t believe you promised them you’d do this again next week.” Sophie said as she sat up a bit and looked over at him. “How are you gonna get out of it?”

“Get out of it? I don’t want to get out of it... today was great. I don’t know what I was so afraid of.” Sean sat up too. “And besides, I promised them and I don’t break promises.”

“Scout’s honor?” Sophie said with a smirk.

Sean laughed and put one hand on heart and one in the air, “Scout’s honor.”

After a few minutes of exhausted silence Sean looked up at Sophie again. He looked at her for a moment with a soft smile, feeling grateful for her. “Thanks for helping me.” Sophie turned her head to him and smiled back as she nodded. “Oh I told them you’d be there next week, too, so prepare yourself.”

Sophie shook her head at Sean with a scoff, but her smile only grew. She couldn’t help it, it *had* been a great day. Why wouldn’t she want to do it again?

Chapter 5

“Uuuuuugh,” Sophie groaned, “Moooooom!”

Valeria walked into the living room where Sophie had set up camp for the past couple days, just like she always did when she was sick.

“Yes, my poor, poor baby?”

“Very funny.” Sophie was clearly not amused. “Can you bring me some more tissues?” She picked up the box on her lap, flipped it over and shook it with a frown. “I’m empty.”

“I think that was our last box.” Vale said apologetically, pausing to check her watch. “But I have time to run to the store before I need to head to the airport. Do you want anything else?”

She shook her head, “Thaaaaank yooooou!” Sophie said, prompting a short coughing fit. When it subsided she croaked out, “Mmmm maybe more cough drops. I only have the gross ones left.” She said with a scrunched up nose.

Vale shook her head as she turned around “Okay, I’ll be back later. Don’t go dying on me while I’m gone.”

Sophie coughed for a while before grunting, “No promises.” She heard Vale open the back kitchen door, “Wait mom! Will you get me some chips, too?”

“We’ll see.” She called back as she closed the door behind her. Sophie fell asleep not ten minutes later.

Sean knocked on the door several times but no one answered, so he moved all the bags to his left hand and tried turning the door knob. Sean let out a frustrated sigh as the knob turned and the door swung open. The Melinas rarely locked the side door to their house and it always bothered him - what if someone tried to break in? Sophie was home alone a lot and someone could just walk right into the house. The thought gave Sean a chill he couldn’t easily shake.

He brushed the snow off his shoulders and left his boots by the door, stepping into the kitchen. He set the bags on the counter and locked the door behind him before peeking into the living room. Sophie was seemingly passed out on the couch, nearly swallowed up by what he was pretty sure was the duvet from her bed, and surrounded by piles of used tissues. Right where her mom said she’d be. The ottoman had bottles of cold medicine, nasal spray, a few mugs with just the dregs of tea left, and about fifty DVDs. Sean shook his head and returned to the kitchen with a fond smile.

After he put everything away, he went to the living room and quietly collected the old mugs. He rinsed them out and put them in the dishwasher after turning on the electric kettle. Finding some plastic gloves under the sink as he looked for a towel, he decided to wear them

to clean up all of Sophie's used tissues. By the time he returned to the kitchen, discarded his gloves, and washed his hands for good measure - the kettle started whistling.

"Moouooooom?" Sophie whined from the living room. "Can you make some tea, please?"

Sean laughed and muttered to himself, "Geez she really is a baby when she's sick." Vale had warned him she was helpless when she was sick, but he assumed she had been exaggerating. He rolled his eyes but didn't respond, grabbing two mugs and pouring them each a cup of tea. With the mugs in one hand, Sean grabbed the new box of tissues and cough drops in the other and walked into the living room.

"Am I hallucinating?" Sophie asked as she put the back of her hand to her forehead. "Weren't you my mom like five seconds ago? How many fingers am I holding up?" She held three fingers up on her left hand in front of her.

Sean laughed and walked across the room. "Three, but I think that only works if someone else does it, Shortstop. And no, I'm pretty sure I've been me the whole time."

Taking Sophie's silence as cue to explain, he handed her a mug and sat down on the chair next to the couch. "My dad and I ran into your mom at Ted's. She got a call and they needed her at the airport early, so we offered to bring her stuff back." He shrugged and put his feet up on the ottoman. "She said she was going to text you."

"Oh yup, there it is." Sophie said when she found her phone buried in her blanket and saw the message from her mom. As Sophie read her texts, she was suddenly struck with how gross her couch nest had gotten after being sick for days. She knew she could be a whiny baby when she was sick, but she couldn't help it. Feeling miserable was miserable and she didn't understand how anyone could pretend it wasn't. As Sophie looked around the living room to gauge just how gross it was, she was confused to find it decidedly less of a disaster than she remembered. "Sean...Did you clean up in here?"

"Yeah... a little. It was like walking into a biohazard in here, I thought it would be best for everyone." Sean's eyes followed hers around the room.

"Oh."

Despite knowing each other for more than a year now, Sophie still got a fluttery feeling in her stomach every time Sean went out of his way to do something for her. She wasn't really sure what it was, but it was decidedly *not* unpleasant.

"So, how are you feeling?"

Sophie answered with a coughing fit that lasted a full minute.

"That good, huh?" Sean said, answering his own question.

"I've never been better." Sophie replied sardonically as she picked up a tissue.

Sean made a face at the truly horrifying sounds of Sophie blowing her nose, waiting til she was done to ask, "Do you need anything else?"

"No, I'm fine." She said half-heartedly. "You've done more than enough, you can exit the biohazard anytime."

Sean laughed and gave a one armed shrug as he eyed the stack of DVDs, “I’m cool to stay.” He paused and looked up at Sophie, “If that’s fine with you.”

Sophie sniffed loudly, “Yeah, if you want.”

Sean nodded with a smile and blew on his tea.

“Thank you, by the way, H... for helping my mom, and me.” Sophie said with an uncharacteristically shy smile.

Choosing to ignore the warm feeling spreading through his chest, Sean narrowed his eyes at her. “H?”

“Oh leave me alone, I don’t have the energy to say the whole word.” Sophie responded in a whiny voice.

Sean just laughed, “No, I like it... it’s cleaner than ‘Halfway’. And anytime.” Sean said as he took a drink of his tea, “Although...”

Sophie raised her eyebrows and tilted her congested head a little to one side as his voice trailed off.

“I just um... well it’s just that I think you should lock your doors when your mom’s not here. It’s just kind of... I don’t know, it seems dumb not to. And I guess it makes me kind of nervous? Knowing that you’re here alone all the time with the doors unlocked.” Sean rubbed the back of his neck and lifted his eyes to hers. “I don’t want something bad to happen to you, ya know?”

Sophie tilted her head to the other side as she thought about what he said. It was starting to feel like Sean was always looking out for her. It was nice being friends with someone like that, someone who really cared about you. Even if it meant admitting that she was wrong sometimes. She let out a small sigh as she looked at him and nodded with a resigned smile.

“You’re right. It is dumb.” They sat in the quiet for a moment, neither exactly sure where to go from there. Luckily, Sophie had another coughing fit to fill the awkward silence.

When she stopped coughing, Sophie said, “You should know...” she paused to sniff again, “that if you stay, you will have to watch romcoms with me.”

Sean’s eyebrows scrunched together, “Romcoms?”

“Romantic comedies” Sophie clarified.

Sean shook his head, “You’re gonna have to give me more than that.” Sophie nodded to the stack of DVDs on the ottoman as she sipped her tea. Sean picked them up and leafed through with an intrigued look on his face.

Sophie watched him for a little while before saying, “See anything good?”

“I dunno... I’ve never even heard of most of these.”

Sophie coughed a few times and watched as he flipped through the stack, “Oh stop! That one, *The Proposal*. It’s one of my favorites.” She took a few sips of her tea as he read

the back of the dvd case. "It's a good movie, H. I promise." Sean looked up with eyebrows raised. "Scout's honor." Sophie added with raised hands and a smile.

When Sean put the movie in and got to the DVD menu, Sophie mumbled, "Tea and cough drops don't really make for very good movie snacks, do they?" as she eyed her half empty mug with a small, disappointed laugh.

Sean clapped his hands on his lap and popped up, "I'm all over it." He went to the kitchen without another word. Sophie's mind slipped back to her surroundings as she waited, vaguely aware that she did not look great. She was in an old pair of sweatpants and her mom's sweatshirt from her uni days. Try as she might, she couldn't remember the last time she'd washed her hair, or brushed it for that matter. Sophie swiped her fingers through her hair a few times, wondering if Sean would care, or even notice, but she quickly put that to rest with a shake of her head. Sean never paid any attention to how she looked, why would he?

After a few minutes, Sean came back with two bowls of dill pickle chips before going back for two cups of orange soda, complete with silly straws and five ice cubes each.

"Alright, let's get this over with." Sean said as he settled back into his chair with a sigh.

About two hours later, Sean was looking through the DVD pile for their next movie while humming along to 'Relax' by Rob Base and DJ EZ-Rock. Much to his surprise, it turned out Sean kind of loved romcoms.

Who knew?

Questions

Was there anything that felt crazy out of character for anyone? Or any glaring plot holes or inconsistencies?

Did you notice that the topic they chose for their project is never named? Is that a big let down? (cause I have not come up with an actual topic for them)

How do we feel about not knowing much of anything about Sophie's dad? Did you notice before they brought him up in the library later on?

I don't describe clothing or rooms much.. There's some description but mostly I left things vague because everyone has an idea of a living room and movie theater and grocery store aisle, etc. Is it noticeably missing though?

Is it weird that we never mention after high school plans for either of them? Sophie tells Sean to take a psychology class next year which obviously implies college/uni - but does that need to be addressed or even just mentioned a little bit more?