

# CHAPTER 1

**A** lightning strike. A shark attack. Winning the lottery.

No. I lined through all the words. Too cliché.

I tapped my pen against my lips.

*Rare*. What was rare? *Meat*, I thought with a small laugh. That would go really well in a song.

My pen drew a couple more lines, blackening the words to unrecognizable before I wrote a single word. *Love*. Now *that* was rare in my world. The romantic version, at least.

Lauren Jeffries, the girl sitting next to me, cleared her throat. It was then I noticed how quiet the classroom was, how I'd slipped into my own space again, shutting out the world around me. I had learned how to keep my head down over the years, how to handle the occasional unwanted attention. I slid my Chemistry textbook over my notebook full of everything but Chemistry notes, and slowly raised my head.

Mr. Ortega's eyes were on me.

"Welcome back to class, Lily."

Everyone laughed.

"You were writing down the answer, I'm sure," he said.

“For sure.” It was all about acting unfazed, like I had no feelings.

Mr. Ortega let it go, just as I hoped he would, and moved on to explaining the lab for the following week and what we’d need to read to prepare for it. Since he’d let me off the hook so easily, I thought I’d be able to slip out unnoticed when class ended, but after the bell rang he called out to me.

“Ms. Abbott? Give me one minute of your time.”

I tried to think of a good excuse to leave with the rest of class.

“You owe me at least one minute seeing as how the last fifty-five were definitely not spent on me.”

The last student filed out of class and I took a few steps closer. “I’m sorry, Mr. Ortega,” I said. “Chemistry and I don’t get each other.”

He sighed. “It’s a two-way street and you haven’t been doing your part.”

“I know. I’ll try.”

“Yes, you will. If I see your notebook out again in class, it’s mine.”

I held back a groan. How would I make it through fifty-five minutes of torture every day without a distraction? “But I need to take notes. Chemistry notes.” I couldn’t remember the last time I took a single Chemistry note, let alone multiple ones.

“You can have one sheet of paper, unattached to a book, that you will show me at the end of each period.”

I clutched my green-and-purple notebook to my chest. Inside it lived hundreds of ideas for songs and lyrics, half-finished verses, doodles and sketches. It was my lifeline. “This is cruel and unusual punishment.”

He gave a small laugh. “It’s my job to help you pass my class. You’ve left me no other choice.”

I could’ve offered him a list of other choices.

“I think we’ve come to an agreement.”

*Agreement* wasn’t the word I would’ve chosen. That implied we both had a say in the matter. A better word would’ve been *law, ruling . . . edict*.

“Did you have something else to say?” Mr. Ortega asked.

“What? Oh. No, I’m good. See you tomorrow.”

“Minus the notebook,” he called after me.

I waited for the door to close behind me before I opened that notebook again and wrote down the word *edict* on the corner of a page. It was a good word. Not used enough. In the process of writing, my shoulder slammed into someone, nearly sending me flying.

“Watch it, Magnet,” some senior guy I didn’t even recognize said.

Two years later and people still couldn’t let the nickname go. I didn’t react, but imagined throwing the pen in my hand like a dart at his back as he walked past.

“You look ready to kill someone,” my best friend, Isabel Gonzales, said, falling in step beside me.

“Why do people still remember that stupid little chant Cade made up?” I grumbled. A stray piece of my dark-auburn hair escaped its hair-tie prison and fell into my eyes. I tucked it behind one ear. “It barely even rhymed.”

“A chant doesn’t have to rhyme.”

“I know. I wasn’t debating his chant-writing skills. I was saying that kids shouldn’t remember it. Still. After over two years, when there’s nothing catchy about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Isabel said, linking her arm through mine.

“You don’t have to apologize for him. He’s not your boyfriend anymore. Anyway, I don’t want you to feel sorry for me.”

“Well, I do. It’s stupid and childish. I think people say it out of habit now versus really thinking about what they’re saying.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed with that, but decided to drop it. “Mr. Ortega banned my notebook from class.”

Isabel laughed. “Uh-oh. How are you going to live without one of your limbs?”

“I don’t know, and in Chemistry of all classes. How can anyone be expected to listen in there?”

“I like Chemistry.”

“Let me rephrase that. How can any *normal* person be expected to listen in there?”

“Are you calling yourself normal?”

I bowed my head, conceding her the win.

We both stopped as we reached the fork in the sidewalk

just past the B building. The pinkish rock landscape that lined the pathway looked especially dusty today. I lifted my red-sneaker-clad foot and toed a few rocks off the sidewalk.

The landscape was good for water conservation, but up close, Arizona scenery did little to inspire me. I had to observe it from a distance to find notebook-worthy lines. The thought reminded me to look up. The beige buildings and crowds of students weren't much better than the rocks.

"So, fake Mexican food for lunch today?" I asked Isabel as Lauren, Sasha, and their group of friends walked around us.

Isabel bit her lip, her expression suddenly worried. "Gabriel wants to meet me off campus today for our two-month anniversary. Is that okay? I can tell him no."

"Right, your two-month anniversary. That's today? I left your gift at home."

Isabel rolled her eyes. "What did you get me? A homemade book about why guys should never be trusted?"

I put my hand on my chest and gasped. "That doesn't sound like something I'd do at all. And the title was *How You Know He's A Selfish Pig*. But whatever."

She laughed.

"But I'd never give you a book like that for Gabriel," I added, nudging Isabel. "I really like Gabriel. You know that, right?" Gabriel was sweet and treated Isabel well. It was her last boyfriend—Cade Jennings, king of stupid chants—who inspired imaginary books.

I realized Isabel was staring at me, still worried. “Of course you can go to lunch with Gabriel,” I said. “Don’t worry about me. Have fun.”

“You could come with us if . . .”

I was tempted to make her finish that sentence. To accept her invitation just to be funny, but I put her out of her misery. “No. I don’t want to go on your anniversary lunch. Please. I have a book to write . . . *Two-Month Anniversaries Are The Start Of Forever*. Chapter One: At sixty days, you’ll know it’s real if he whisks you away from the drudgery of high school and takes you to Taco Bell.”

“We’re not going to Taco Bell.”

“Uh-oh. Only one chapter in and it’s not looking good for you.”

Isabel’s dark eyes glinted. “Joke all you want, but I think it’s romantic.”

I grabbed her hand and squeezed. “I know. It’s adorable.”

“You’ll be okay here?” She pointed across the commons. “Maybe you could hang out with Lauren and Sasha?”

I shrugged. The idea didn’t thrill me. I sat next to Lauren in Chemistry and sometimes we’d talk. Like when she’d ask what the homework assignment was or for me to scoot my backpack off of her binder. And Sasha hadn’t said even that much to me.

I looked down at my outfit. Today I was wearing an oversized button-down that I had found at a thrift store. I’d cut the sleeves to make it more like a kimono and tied a brown vintage

belt at the waist. On my feet were beat-up red high-top sneakers. My look was quirky, not trendy, and I would stand out in a group like Lauren's where they were all perfectly put together in their slim-fitting jeans and tank tops.

I held up my notebook and nodded at Isabel. "It's okay. This will be my chance to work on a new song. You know I don't get any alone time at home."

Isabel nodded. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him. And I froze.

Lucas Dunham. He was in the middle of a group of other senior guys on a bench, his hoodie zipped up, his earbuds in, staring into space. Like he was present and not present. A feeling I could relate to.

Isabel followed my gaze and sighed. "You should talk to him, you know."

I laughed, feeling my cheeks warm up. "You remember what happened last time I tried that."

"You got nervous, that's what happened."

"I couldn't say anything. Nothing at all. He and his cool hair and his hipster clothes scared me," I finished in a whisper.

Isabel tilted her head while she looked at him as if disagreeing with my assessment of his appearance. "You just need practice. Let's start with someone you haven't been pining over for the last two years."

"I have *not* been pining over Lucas . . ."

I trailed off when she leveled me with her knowing stare. She was right. I had been pining. Lucas was probably the

coolest guy I knew . . . Well, I didn't really know him, but that probably made him more cool. He was a year older than us. He wore his dark hair long and his clothes consisted of band tees or old-school polo shirts, a contrast that made me unable to put him in a category.

"Double with me and Gabriel next Friday!" Isabel announced suddenly. "I'll find you a date."

"Pass."

"Come on. It's been a while since you've been on a date."

"That's because I'm awkward and weird and it's not fun at all for me or the poor soul who agrees to go out with me."

"That's not true."

I crossed my arms.

"You just need to go out more than once . . . or twice . . . with someone so they see how fun you are," Isabel argued, adjusting her backpack straps. "You're not awkward with *me*."

"I'm totally awkward with you but you're not under pressure to eventually kiss me, so you put up with it."

Isabel laughed and shook her head. "That's not why I put up with it. I put up with it because I like you. We just have to find a guy who you can be yourself around."

I put my hand over my heart. "And on that hot fall day, Isabel started on the impossible quest of finding a suitor for her best friend. It would be a lifelong quest. One that would test both her determination and her faith. It would lead her to the brink of insanity, and—"



“Stop,” Isabel interrupted, bumping my shoulder with hers. “It’s that kind of attitude that will make this impossible.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to say.”

“No, I’m not going to accept that. You’ll see. The right guy for you is out there.”

I sighed, my gaze drifting over to Lucas again. “Iz, seriously, I’m fine. No more setups.”

“Fine, no more setups. But be open or you might miss something right in front of you.”

I flung my arms out to the sides. “Is there anyone more open than me?”

Isabel gave me a skeptical look. She started to answer when a loud voice called out from across the grass. “There she is! Happy anniversary!”

Isabel’s cheeks brightened and she turned toward Gabriel. He jogged the rest of the distance separating them, and lifted her into a hug. They looked gorgeous together—both dark-haired, dark-eyed, and olive-skinned. It was weird seeing Gabriel at our school. He went to the high school across town and I associated him with after-school and weekend events.

“Hey, Lily,” he said to me as he put Isabel down. “Are you coming with us?” His invitation seemed sincere. He really was a nice guy.

“Yeah, is that cool? I heard you were paying and I said, *I’m in.*”

Isabel laughed.

“Great,” Gabriel said.

“It was a joke, Gabe,” Isabel said.

“Oh.”

“Yes, I’m not a charity case.” I was beginning to think they thought I was.

“No, of course not. I just feel bad for not letting you know earlier,” Isabel said.

Gabriel nodded. “It was a surprise.”

“You guys are going to run out of time to actually eat if you keep coddling me. Go. Have fun. And . . . uh . . . congratulations. I recently read a book about how two-month anniversaries are the start of forever.”

“Really? Cool,” Gabe said.

Isabel just rolled her eyes and smacked my arm. “Be good.”

I stood on the path alone now, watching the groups of students around me talking and laughing. Isabel’s worry was unfounded. I was fine alone. Sometimes I preferred it that way.