

Chapter 2

Aberdeen Memorial School's seventh grade is big enough to be split into two classes. Thankfully, Dallas and I ended up together. They must have learned that we come as a package deal after my mother asked for me to be switched into Dallas's class last year. The school said Dallas and I should branch out, meet new people, and socialize more. However, my mom argued that they should be fostering strong, stable, and healthy relationships. She won.

We even sit together in every class, except English and science. Mrs. Bayley, our English teacher, assigned seating at random and refuses to let anyone change seats. So Dallas sits at the front of the classroom by the door, and I'm stuck in the last row by the windows.

It wouldn't be so bad if someone other than Stevie Morgan sat beside me.

"Ha," Stevie murmurs.

She's always on her phone, and she makes reaction noises to whatever texts she gets, like snickers, giggles, and scoffs. And then she must flip her hair over her shoulder every two minutes, as if someone could forget she's blond now.

Like, we get it already—you have long, beautiful blond hair! You learned how to use makeup in fifth grade! You 're Popula1'.

"What are you looking at?" Stevie hisses when she notices me watching. I can't help but stick my tongue out in response.

She's never been outwardly mean to me, so I'm not sure why she irks me so much. But I remember a time when she was just Stevie Morgan, star soccer player: fearless, ruthless, and strong. She gave two girls bloody noses before third grade. Stevie claimed they were accidents, but who really knows? She was fierce on the field, totally focused and determined to win.

Then Tessa St. James decided Stevie was above all that.

A single summer passed, and Stevie came back in fifth grade with highlights, a new wardrobe, and a new attitude. She quit soccer and learned how to put on fake nails. Sometimes she watches makeup and hair tutorials on her phone in class. Those days make me want to throw it across the room. It's totally rude.

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Today her hair flipping is on another level, not to mention the buzzing of her text messages. The blatant disrespect for Mrs. Bayley has me on edge. Sure, English isn't everyone's favorite subject, and some people find it harder than others, but I've seen the 90s come back on Stevie's book reports. She's great at English, so it's not a far reach that she might actually enjoy it too. If I were her, I would be soaking in the lessons and .

I realize I'm not her, and I'm not paying attention to Mrs. Bayley myself. At the very least, Stevie could stop being so distracting. She's tapping out messages so fast it makes me wonder if she ever stops.

I glance across the room to see Tessa typing just as fiercely. Doesn't Mrs. Bayley notice them texting?

I wish I could share a look with Dallas. He'd know how I feel, and he'd sympathize.

I narrow my eyes and stare at the back of his head. Maybe he'll somehow hear the silent screaming in my brain and turn around. It sucks when he doesn't get the message and continues writing notes. Maybe he's drawing me a little lizard-he likes to do that sometimes.

Giving up on the mind reading, I lean back in my chair and try to concentrate.

Stevie goes still, finally, and yet ... I can't stop stealing glances at her. She starts to make herself smaller, ducking her head so her hair covers part of her face. Her phone is blowing up with messages, but she's stopped typing out quick responses. Could Tessa St. James's sidekick finally be paying attention?

I try not to focus too much on Stevie, but rather on Mrs. Bayley sketching something out on the chalkboard. She never uses the SMART Board, even though they installed it two years ago. I think she enjoys the chalk's feel in her hand, because she plays with it even when she's not using it.

"Stevie?" Mrs. Bayley says, and I'm sure she asked a question before that, but I have no idea what it was.

I shrink a little in my seat, just in case she's looking for other people to call on.

Stevie lifts her head, and her face has lost all its color. Some of her lip

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gloss is smudged. She nudges her phone inside the desk, and I watch it light up again, the messages piling in.

I'm not close enough to read them, but the number of notifications is giving me anxiety.

"Sorry," Stevie says, her voice cracking. She tries again. "Could you repeat the question?"

Mrs. Bayley does, and Stevie begins to stammer through an answer. She usually has a straightforward, no-nonsense tone, but right now she sounds small.

Her eyebrows come together as she concentrates on her answer. I cringe, wishing I could help her, but it's too late.

Mrs. Bayley sighs. "That's not the answer I was hoping for, Miss Morgan. Please try to pay attention from now on. Can anyone give me a different answer?"

Tessa's hand shoots up in the air, and she tosses a snotty look in our direction.

Stevie drops her head to scroll through her notifications. She locks the screen, shoves her phone back into the desk, and meets my eyes.

"What are you looking at, Jude?"

My lips part. For all the ugly that comes with being part of the Popular Pack, Stevie doesn't deadname me. I came back the September of sixth grade as Jude, and she's never used it against me. Some people had a hard time adjusting to it-especially the teachers-but most switched easily and didn't look back. I didn't broadcast the reason why; that feels private, for those who are worthy of knowing me.

I shake my head, unsure how to ask if she's okay. I don't even know if I want to know the answer anyway.

She turns her attention back to the front of the class, and her eyes don't wander anymore. Stevie doesn't flip her hair or check her phone. Instead, she sits stiffly and scribbles down the odd note here and there.

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to have learned by the end of class, but I notice that before leaving, Stevie shoves her phone into her pocket without checking it. She darts out of the room without acknowledging anyone.

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Things are definitely weird with Stevie, but now that I have the freedom of lunch, I'm not sure I care.

I fall in step with Dallas in the hallway and ask, "So, what'd you draw for me today? A lizard shopping for yogurt? Or maybe wearing a bandanna from the nineties?"

Dallas laughs and shakes his head. "Actually, I was taking notes. I need all the help I can get for the test next week and—"

"Oh no." I put my hand on his arm. "Can I copy your notes? I couldn't pay attention at all."

"Having a foggy day?"

Dallas knows I struggle to keep my ADHD in check, even with the medications I'm on. Getting diagnosed two years ago was both a pain and a gift—mostly, though, it allowed me to have a name for the things that feel out of my control. Like spending the entire class fixated on Stevie instead of listening to Mrs. Bayley. Having foggy days where things don't make sense or I can't follow what's being said—that's an ADHD thing. It's weird not being able to control my brain, but it feels better with a reason. Before I just felt lost and confused a lot.

"Something like that," I answer. There's no way I'm going to tell him I was fixated on Stevie. He'll tease me for having a crush on her or something, and I really don't. Stevie is everything I never want to be.

"I'm going to the bathroom first," Dallas says, before dipping into the boys' bathroom.

"Oh-kay," I say to myself, pushing open a cafeteria door. I make my way to our usual seats.

Everything seems fine until Dallas comes to the table looking sick.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"You're never going to believe what I just overheard."

And he's right—I almost don't believe him.