

Chapter 2

Sometimes I wish I had a cute story to tell about my first encounter with Jay. We could have brushed hands reaching for the half-and-half at the library espresso stand. Or been seat partners in a quiz section. But nope. All I remember is rapping on the door jamb outside his common room as Jay yells at

Simon:

“If you keep bringing girls back to our room, I’m never getting into the Computer Science department!”

Never have I been so thankful to live off-campus with Thuy in a badly-needing-remodeling, but spacious condo in Fremont, where at least we had our own bedrooms. Not to say we didn't have our fair share of roommate fights. I glance at the Facebook message on my phone to verify I'm in the right place, then scan the doors for "the one with the Elton John poster." Just as I spot my intended destination, a shirtless Simon lets out a guffaw and shouts back to Jay:

"Dashing over the mountains to visit Maya every weekend is why you're not getting in, not your goddamn monitor! Why mess with jailbait when you've got college ladies around?"

"For the last fucking time, she turned eighteen in October!" Jay finally catches sight of me tiptoeing past him. "Hey. Are you looking for someone?"

My cheeks warm at his piercing stare. It suddenly occurs to me that my (gay and proud) friend lives in a men's dormitory. Meaning other (heterosexual) boys would present. Shit! I should have chosen my outfit more intentionally. Now I remember the tiny hole near the crotch seam of my hot pink leggings; and my University of Washington sweatshirt is more ivory than white, thanks to weekly tumbles in the dryer since purchasing it last Fall.

"Sorry." I take a step backwards, feeling like a hobbit in comparison to the lanky dark-haired guy that's staring me down like I stole the One Ring. "Zach and I were supposed to get bubble tea? He said to stop by after 4."

"Zach flew to Cabo with his sugar daddy. He won't be back until Friday." Simon (or as I had dubbed him, Thai Boxing Dude) gives me a once-over, flashing me a smirk and a full view of his

six-pack because all he's wearing is a pair of shiny red shorts embroidered with a golden dragon. I blink in admiration. How many hours did he spend doing ab crunches to get that toned stomach? Also, why does his face look so familiar? I quickly shrug away the thought. Given the University of Washington is home to 20,000 students, it's entirely possible we were in a 600-person lecture hall together. "And I'll slurp your boba anytime, baby girl."

And any potential attraction I have to Simon evaporates into thin air. "Did you seriously say what I think you said?"

Simon winks back. "Got your attention, didn't it?"

"Ignore him," Jay admonishes, before turning back to Simon. "In case you forgot, my application is due Friday! Can't you and Norah fool around in her room instead of ours?"

"Just hire someone off Craigslist to write it. What would it cost, a few hundred bucks?"

"That's a lot of money for some of us! Also, incredibly dishonest!"

And off they go again, bickering like an old married couple. I observe at a distance, wondering if I should head to the library to wait for the next bus to Fremont; or chime in about the various tutoring centers on campus, designed to help students with their writing assignments.

"Um, excuse me! I have an idea!" Except when Jay blasts me again with those intense green eyes of his, my throat goes dry. Then I notice the cowlick of his hair, which I have the weirdest urge to reach over and touch. It's as if someone took the Dream Guy list I wrote in my journal at sixteen and

sculpted it into reality. Does he like 90s R&B music? Is Capricorn his zodiac sign? If the answer to both questions is yes, I would eagerly give up my soul just for a chance to have adorable babies with him.

Thankfully, rejection has taught me that there are things you never say out loud to a crush—honesty is the best policy is terrible advice for a lovesick teenage girl. Instead, I focus on solving the problem at hand: that no one should be this stressed out over writing, ever.

“On Tuesday and Thursday nights, I work as a tutor, over at Mary Gates Hall. Normally I’d suggest you make an appointment, or drop in. But since I’m already here and you’re on a tight deadline—” I flash Jay a smile, “—maybe I can help you get started?”

Even though my brain is screaming at me that getting close to a guy with a girlfriend is only a recipe for heartbreak, I can’t help but feel a spark of *something* as a kaleidoscope of emotions cross Jay’s face: Surprise, amusement, and finally a lopsided grin that makes my knees go weak. I stumble against the wall for support as he crosses the space between us.

“That would be awesome.” Jay extends out a wrist for a shake. It’s only with his undivided attention on me that I notice how tall he is—at least a foot over my 5’1 frame. “And unless you want me calling you ‘baby girl’, you should probably tell me your name.”

Our eyes lock. I suck in a shallow breath, losing myself in the swirling flecks of turquoise in his pupils. My stomach flutters as Jay stares back, like we’re playing a game of chicken to see who will look away first. *Is he flirting with me?*

“Vivian.” It finally occurs to me that I should stop squeezing his hand so hard. I reluctantly release my fingers. “And you are?”

“Jay.” Jay jerks his head towards Simon, who’s currently mixing up a protein shake in a blender jar. “And that asshole over there is Simon.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Jay and I are walking down University Avenue, known to students as The Ave. Like the United Nations in food court format, The Ave. was a place you could get burgers, gyros, or teriyaki for less than \$10 a portion. Living in one of the most expensive cities in the nation, this is a bargain of a deal—if you’re willing to risk food poisoning.

But despite my boldness earlier, I can’t bring myself to make small talk as we stroll past the Gospel-singing man jingling his change cup to the beat, clipboard-wielding petition gatherers, and sadly, a growing population of homeless people. My mom regularly texts me crime reports and forbids me to walk the streets alone, especially before my evening shifts at the writing center. But The Ave is also where the bubble tea shops were located, and the least Jay can do is buy me a taro milk tea in exchange for my help.

But I notice when Jay swaps positions so he’s walking on the outer edge of the sidewalk. My skin tingles when he places his hand on my shoulder as we stride past the drug dealers loitering in front of the Rite Aid. I know it’s all in the name of safety; that it’s in Jay’s interest to make sure a petty criminal doesn’t stab me for the five \$20 dollar bills in my wallet because he has an application deadline

to meet. But still. If this is how he protects someone he recently met, how does he act towards someone he really cared about? I get a secret thrill knowing that if any hoodlum tries to accost me, Jay can disarm them. On first glance, he looks like all legs and torso. But when he holds open the door to the bubble tea shop, I glimpse the sleeve of his camp shirt pulling against the shadow of a bicep. Holy hell. It's a shame Jay wasn't the one walking around the common room shirtless.

Once inside, we make our way past students huddled over biology textbooks, quizzing their friends with flashcards in a mixture of Mandarin and English. Workers in black aprons dash behind the counter, blending drinks and shaking cups before setting them on the counter with colorful oversized straws. I briefly wonder how Jay sleeps at night when he asks for a coffee milk tea with extra tapioca pearls—isn't it a little late for a caffeinated beverage? When he gestures for me to order, I catch another glimpse of his eyes. Now they're a clear light green, and I'm wondering if it's a trick of the light as they dull to gray again, and he produces a debit card to pay.

“So how do you know Zach?” Jay asks once we grab our drinks from the pickup counter and scope out a table. He asks to switch seats so he's facing the entrance (“Better situational awareness,” he explains as we shuffle chairs)—as I flip my hair over my shoulder and answer:

“Funnily enough, from the writing center.” Even though I'm still annoyed at Zach for ditching me, he's the type of person you feel you've known all your life after one conversation. We became fast friends after discovering our mutual shared interests: *The Bachelor*, bubble tea, and bitching about our overbearing Asian-Catholic moms. “It's not every day someone comes in with an essay on the rise of dating-centric reality television shows in the early 2000s.”

“Why did I even ask?” The expression that crosses Jay’s face is so tormented, I can’t help but let out a giggle. “Let me guess: You’re a *Bachelor* fan too.”

“Obviously! What better way to spend a Monday night than watching twenty-five women fight for the love and affection of one man?” I banter back, crossing my ankles under the table like Anne Hathaway taught me to do in *The Princess Diaries*. “Well. Unless it involves a Target run.”

“I can think of plenty of things. Like getting a root canal.” Jay ducks down, unsnapping the buckles of his Timbuktu messenger bag to take out his laptop, placing the sleeve on the table. “It’d be one thing if it was real. But they always break up after their contractually obligated six weeks.”

“Not true! Trista and Ryan are still together. And they just had a baby!” I place my hands on my hips, mock glaring at Jay. “Are you done judging Zach and I for our taste in television? Because he got an A on that paper, and you still have a personal statement to write.”

“What I really could use some help with is this website I’m working on for a client. They want to talk tomorrow, and the copy could use some work.” After opening the laptop, Jay pulls up a browser tab of the WordPress admin panel, before navigating to what looks like a chiropractor’s website. “What do you think about that headline?”

It’s as if Jay knows any girl would look into those green eyes and give up their left kidney if he asked. The longer he bewitches me with his gaze, the more my heart sinks. This isn’t the first time a boy asked me for extra help on their homework, before proclaiming I was the “little sister they never had.”

Then again, I've come a long way from my purple-bracketed-braces-and-training bra days. So I scoot my chair closer, scanning the text on the screen. *Crack your back and feel better*. I let out a hiss of outrage. "You should fire whoever wrote that."

"That would be me."

"Hopefully you program better than you write." I reach over to access the keyboard, making no effort to avoid brushing his arm. But then his knee bumps against mine, resulting in a bone-chilling tingle down my spine. It's one thing for me to flirt based on the advice I picked up from reading *Cosmopolitan*. But he's the one with a girlfriend. Why is he still sitting so close to me?

"Now you can wake up in the morning without back pain," Jay reads aloud. If he moved his head two inches closer, his forehead would press against mine and who knows what would happen after that? I'd probably drag him under the table or something. "A little long, don't you think?"

It's amazing I can formulate sentences at all, with how close he is to me. I force myself to take an inhale, nearly drugging myself on what I would come to know as his familiar scent: Coffee, clove from his chewing gum, and his Old Spice body wash. "Just thinking about the last time my dad went to a chiropractor. But he might not be the clinic's target persona. The more specific you can be about the problem they're solving, the better."

"Right," Jay says, frowning in thought. "What's your rate?"

My chair jerks back in surprise. "My...what?"

“What do you charge? Because clients ask me to help them with marketing and website content all the time. And considering I barely have enough time for an essay...” While Jay’s futzing with his laptop, I glimpse a prom photo featuring Jay and a petite brunette in a sequin formal gown. So this was the girlfriend, who may have been 18, but could easily slip unnoticed into a 21-and-over nightclub with her ample cleavage and bronzed skin. I bet she waves pom-poms at half-time, got nominated for Homecoming court, and dumped her star quarterback boyfriend to date a college guy. Fuck my life.

“Cute photo,” I say through clenched teeth, because even though I hate her, they look like a lovely couple. “That’s sweet you visit her every weekend.”

“Yeah, well, it’d be nice if she appreciated it.” I wait for Jay to elaborate further. Instead, he fidgets with the plastic straw wrapper on the table, tying it into a knot. “So...maybe \$15 an hour?”

I do my best not to gasp out loud at his offer. \$15 an hour was over double what I made at the writing center. This job gave me an excuse to spend more time with Jay, who sounds like he’s on the rocks with his girlfriend. But it also means explaining to my parents why I need money when they already cover my books, rent, and tuition. Plus, what happens if Jay really is my Dream Guy and we fall in love? When does their rule of “Study now, date later” expire—when I’m done with law school? Am I even allowed to date a white guy? Considering the drama that ensued when my brother Henry introduced the family to his Hot Import Model girlfriend; maybe I’m better off following the same policy as gays in the military: Don’t ask, don’t tell until I’m of acceptable marrying age.

\$20,” I fire back. If Jay thinks his Jess-from-Gilmore-Girls-vibe will keep me from negotiating, then he’s dead wrong. I’m smitten, but I’m also Vietnamese, the daughter of a small business owner, and a future law student. It’s practically in my blood to haggle.

“\$17.” Jay grabs my half-empty cup, giving it an experimental jiggle. “And every week, I’ll buy you one of these purple bubble teas.”

Damn. He got me there.

“What flavor is this again?”

“Taro. It’s like a purple potato,” I say as Jay puts his lips to the straw and makes a face.

“Interesting. I’ll stick with my usual.” Jay sets down the cup and cocks his head. “So. When can you start?”

Now Jay’s the one who looks nervous as I take a long swig of my bubble tea, chew my tapioca pearls, and offer what I hope is a demure smile. “Essay first, and then we’ll talk.”