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“Sexy, saucy, fun!
Jane Austen
would be proud!”
—Sophie Jordan

*Sometimes you have
to find your own
happy ending...*

Austensibly Ordinary

alyssa goodnight

Also by Alyssa Goodnight

AUSTENTATIOUS

Austensibly Ordinary

Alyssa Goodnight



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For the much-sought-after, but mysteriously elusive,
Five Ladies Bakery, who catered a launch
that would have made NASA proud.

And for Janeites everywhere.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For Sophie Jordan and Erin Blakemore, for reading this book on a crazy deadline and saying exactly the right things.

And for Rebecca Strauss, the best possible person to have in your corner.

Chapter 1



“What does it say about me that I’m jealous of the lives of fictional characters?”

I posed the question nonchalantly as I nudged my Scrabble tiles around on the stand.

“Given that you’re a high school English teacher, referring to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British lit, it says you’re glamorizing an era before indoor plumbing and takeout,” Ethan said in his calm, rational manner. He glanced up at me over the top of his tortoiseshell frames, gauging my reaction, before refocusing his concentration on his own tiles.

I smiled ruefully and supposed in some ways he had a point.

“Besides,” he continued, “what do you have to complain about?”

“Not complain, exactly. More lament.”

Prefacing his turn with an eye roll and playing off the “T” from my wildly impressive “TRAMP,” he neatly laid down all his letters to play “INTRIGUE” on a double-word score, earning him a whopping sixty-eight points to my nine. It was doubtful I could come back from this, particularly given the slew of vowels I’d just drawn, but I tried not to let it bother me. I never won against Ethan. Besides, I didn’t need the distraction, being as I was in the middle of my own pity party.

Ethan tallied his score and slid his hand into the bag of remaining tiles. “I’ll bite . . . what are you lamenting?”

“The reality that I may as well be wearing a tracking anklet, for all the excitement going on in my life. Then again,” I said, looking out into the yard at the Bradford pear tree that had stripped down to bare branches, “the FBI would never bother to issue me an anklet because I’ve ceased to be a ‘person of interest.’ Literally.”

“You either deserve the anklet or you don’t, Cate. Pick a side.”

I wasn’t particularly interested in continuing our Scrabble game, both because I was losing badly and because I was trying to make a point, so I ignored the board—and the fact that it was my turn—and focused on the pita chips I’d “borrowed” from my mom’s pantry.

“Fine. I’m lamenting the fact that my life would never make the cut in publishing. I don’t have any big moments—no cliffhangers, no happily-ever-after, no thrilling action sequence—just filler.”

I crunched a chip loudly, feeling violently frustrated. Yep, that was me: violently frustrated and taking it out on a pita chip. My shoulders slumped.

“This isn’t about *Pride and Prejudice* again, is it? Because that book is a menace.”

“We’ve already determined that you, Mr. Chavez, are jealous of Mr. Darcy, so your opinion is moot. Besides, you’re well aware that *P and P* isn’t on the district reading list this year—this year’s graduates are going to go off to college without ever experiencing the wit of Lizzy Bennet and the serious sex appeal of Mr. Darcy.” I gazed off into the distance, hamming it up for Ethan’s benefit before getting back to business. “They did substitute *Emma*, so at least we know they’re not completely uncultured.” Willing myself back from the tangent, I grabbed another chip and swiped it through the hummus I’d found in my own refrigerator.

“Are you planning to play your turn?”

I looked up at Ethan, exasperated at his inability to focus.

“Are you here for the Scrabble or the company? Because if you’re just here for the Scrabble, then maybe we should stick with the iPhone app and save ourselves the face-to-face.” I knew I was starting

to sound snippy, maybe even a little hurt, so I abruptly stopped talking.

Ethan reached for the Corona beer, sweating and forgotten, in front of him and sat back in his chair. He lifted one eyebrow in invitation for me to continue, to talk my heart out.

I stared at him, with his tousled dark hair and weekend stubble, his deep brown eyes worldly wisdom behind his glasses, and I instantly regretted my snappish words. Scrabble notwithstanding, I would hate it if I missed my Sunday evenings with Ethan. He was the yin to my yang—or more accurately, the squelch to my whine, and I needed that more often than I cared to admit.

I sipped my own beer with its tang of lime, puckered my lips, and prepared to make my point.

“Much as you’d probably hate to admit it, you’re living the male version of my life. We both worked in a high school—I teach English, you teach French and German. You live alone; I live alone, although admittedly in my mom’s backyard. You haven’t had a girlfriend for as long as I’ve known you, and you never talk about the women you’re dating. I can’t get further with a man than the first Saturday night date because you pick him apart over Scrabble on Sunday. Why I continue to confide in you is beyond me.” I stopped, letting that all sink in.

“That’s what friends do,” he said, taking another pull on his beer and keeping his tone matter-of-fact. “They warn you off unsuitable men. Men have a way of impairing your judgment—I call it the Darcy Effect. Bad manners and mediocre good looks and you think he’s a worthy specimen. Turns out he’s more like a bug. So I dissect him.”

“I’m so glad we’re friends.”

“If you’re looking to change things up a little, friends with benefits would be acceptable to me.” He grinned, a boyish, mischievous grin that convinced me he was definitely kidding. Which was a relief. Because that would be weird. So weird.

I needed to meet someone before . . .

I blinked and shook my head slightly, hoping to dislodge that train of thought.

“I need to do something,” I finally said, glossing right over his provocative suggestion.

“Dare I suggest finishing the game?” He lifted an eyebrow and tilted his head, indicating my little row of vowels.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” I said, sour-sweet.

“Okay, does that mean you’ll pay the forfeit? I’m thinking pepperoni pizza.”

“Fine. I’ll trade you the pizza for an honest answer.”

“That’s gonna depend on the question.”

I speared him with a quizzical stare. “What have you got going on in your life that has you looking so self-satisfied all the time?”

Ethan’s mouth hitched up at the corner, putting the smug out on display. “That’s pretty personal.”

“Interesting comment coming from the man who just suggested we upgrade our Scrabble match to include benefits.”

“I meant pizza,” he deadpanned.

“Evidently you’re not so much a man of mystery as a man of mystery meats.” I shook my head, biting back a smile, and looked away from him out over the darkened yard. Obviously Ethan was keeping his secrets close—assuming he had any that didn’t involve hot cheese.

Sitting here under the brightly decorated Japanese lanterns I’d convinced my mom we should string up under the oaks, the possibilities seemed endless, the world glowing—I just needed to hold on to this feeling and find a way to have a little adventure. It couldn’t be anything too risqué—one amateur videographer with a camera phone was all it took for things to get very hairy indeed. A good friend of mine had learned that the hard way. I needed a buffer, a way to keep my real, respectable, everyday life separate from a little after-hours adventure.

An alter ego would be perfect . . . sort of a secret identity. I could be the kind of girl who would

wear red lipstick and a secret smile and agree to a “friends with benefits” arrangement without batting an eye. Or maybe batting them madly . . .

“Want me to order the pizza?”

My gaze whipped back to Ethan, his face fringed in shadow as he searched his phone for the number of the pizza place. I blinked rapidly, trying to get my thought processes back on track, hoping the darkened twilight hid the flush in my cheeks and the nervous whites of my eyes.

“Knock yourself out,” I finally agreed.

As we waited for the pizza and I considered, and discarded, a number of “alternative” options, an opportunity e-mailed an invitation.

Derring-Do and Savoir Faire . . .

presented by Pop-up Culture

Join us for an evening inspired by the films of Alfred Hitchcock.

Suspense, my dears, is key, and so the evening’s menu must remain a mystery. . . .

The cast of characters: charismatic men, intriguing women, and glamorous, grown-up drinks.

When? Sunday, All Hallow’s Eve, 9:00 P.M.—midnight

Where? Location to be revealed on confirmed reservation

Entrée? \$40, suggested donation

RSVP to this e-mail address by Tuesday, October 26

Chills edged up my arms as I scrolled through each consecutive line. This was *it!* A perfect departure from my bookish, Darcy-obsessed self.

Pop-up Culture was the current business venture of my good friend/bad influence Syd Carmelo and fellow food junkies Olivia Westin and Willow Burke. It was a sort of culinary underground, hosting über-cool, invitation-only “pop-up” events all over the city. Austin was cooler than ever. I’d been on the mailing list from Day One, but had yet to make it to an event—I had either a parent conference, family commitment . . . or a long-standing Scrabble match. I ended up getting the details with the rest of the city in the paper’s Lifestyle section. Halloween was only a week away. And this time, I was going.

Not as myself, though. I was in the mood for a little “mysterious.”

Maybe I’d be a Hitchcock blonde . . . with a long, slow smile and a whiff of suggestion. The blond aspect, I had covered. The rest might require a little practice. I hurried to RSVP before I could lose my nerve. Next Sunday . . . I glanced at Ethan, who was randomly arranging tiles on the Scrabble board. Sundays were currently reserved for my “friend sans benefits.” I could either ask him to go with me or I could strike out on my own. Chances were we’d be done with Scrabble in plenty of time for me to transform myself into a blond bombshell.

I’d started to type in my RSVP, single lady attending, when car doors slammed in the front yard, signaling that the pizza had arrived. Pocketing my phone, I grinned to myself, smirked in Ethan’s direction, and nearly skipped through the gate at the side of the house. Only to stumble across my mother, holding a large white pizza box up over her head.

“Mom!” I glanced at the pizza dude, collapsing back into his tiny car, counting the bills in his

hands.

“Hi,” she said, dodging carefully around me. “I took a chance—thought maybe if I sprung for the pizza you’d let me share.”

“Sure,” I agreed, trailing along behind her. “Where have you been?” Somewhere casual, I assumed, judging by the charcoal gray track pants and raspberry polar fleece pullover she was wearing.

“Just out,” she answered, vaguely waving her free hand, seeming to encompass all the options the city had to offer for an active fiftysomething.

“Hello, Ms. Kendall,” Ethan said, politely rising to his feet while surreptitiously eyeing the pizza box currently being held out of reach. He’d been a quick study, cluing in early on to the whole “recently divorced, taking my life back” attitude my mom was projecting. As far as he was concerned, “anything goes” was a bit of a watchword when it came to my mom.

My mother smiled at him. “Final score?”

Ethan glanced over at me, leaving me to answer.

“He’s waiting for you to relinquish the price of my forfeit,” I confessed, not even the slightest bit embarrassed. “Mom paid, so you’re going to have to share,” I informed him.

“Okay if we rough it and eat straight from the box?” he said, hurriedly gathering up the Scrabble board to make room for the pizza box in the center of the table. “I’m starving.”

“A picnic under the stars—lovely,” said my mother, smiling approvingly at Ethan before turning to me to flash the twinkle in her eye. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

Honestly, I think my mom would be thrilled if I answered Ethan’s teasing booty call.

The next ten minutes were blissfully quiet as we devoured gigantic greasy triangles of pizza with single-minded determination. I noticed a few bats winging gracefully overhead, but otherwise I wasn’t distracted by the opportunity burning a hole in my pocket. Suddenly I worried that a flood of people would jump at the chance to attend a Hitchcock-inspired party and edge me out with their quick-fingered RSVPs.

“Anyone need anything from the kitchen?” I yelped, standing suddenly, my legs pushing my chair away from the table. “Napkins have become necessary.”

The pair of them eyed me quizzically, but declined my offer. But as I neared the French door leading into my mom’s kitchen, she called out, “Cate, I’ve changed my mind. Will you pour me a glass of the Cabernet on the counter?”

“Got it,” I said, stepping into the dim kitchen. The desk light in the corner was on, pooling a warm glow, and preferring to keep my little secret from the pair outside, I decided to make do without additional lighting. It seemed irrational, but I couldn’t help it; I wanted this one little secret for myself. My life wasn’t just an open book with these two, it was an interactive free-for-all. Mom had been running interference in my life long before Dad and Gemma had left two years ago, within three weeks of each other, leaving us only to breathe an anticlimactic sigh of relief.

Gemma was sixteen months older than me and had long, wavy auburn hair—twins we were not, but we’d had a whole *Parent Trap* dynamic going since early childhood. Photos scattered around the house told the story and hinted at the inevitable ending. Gemma always posed beside my father, in his lap, or on his shoulders. I, on the other hand, was my mom’s shadow. Gemma and Dad were outgoing, outdoorsy, take-a-chance, make-it-happen types, while Mom and I were crafty, bookish rule followers, taking it on faith that magic would happen precisely when it was meant to, a personality type crafted initially by fairy tales and honed by Jane Austen.

Starting her third year of grad school in North Carolina, Gemma came home as school holidays allowed. Dad was happily entrenched in his new life as owner of a Texas Hill Country zip-line outfitter, and despite being only a quick day-trip away, we rarely saw him. As for Ethan, the pair of us had hit off around the same two-year mark, glommed onto each other, and hung like sticker burrs . . .

impossible to shake. And I didn't want to shake him . . . him or my mom. I just wanted something of my own. I wanted a secret. A little desperately.

I quickly gathered up the napkins and pulled a favored wineglass down from the kitchen's open shelving. Then, with my back to the door, I made a slow effort of pouring the wine and cleaning up an imaginary spill—just in case anyone was watching. With my free hand, I texted my RSVP and credit card number and felt the thrill of derring-do ricochet through my veins.

I returned to the table, barely able to suppress a scary sort of smile—the sort where it's obvious you're hiding something particularly juicy. This subtle sneaking around felt good—liberating—but I couldn't very well flaunt it unless I wanted to risk Ethan anteing up his two cents. I was uber-conscious of their mildly curious gazes, but I stayed focused on my pizza and beer until a text came in, instantly disrupting my carefully arranged calm. I hurried to pull the phone from my pocket, my blood pounding crazily through my veins, as I urgently wondered if I'd been too late.

I hadn't. Syd was simply as psyched as I was.

So thrilled you rsvp'd! Finally! Going to be awesome! Expect a call. . . .

I smiled down at the screen, my pulse slowly returning to normal, and casually sipped my beer.

Judging by the banked look in Ethan's eyes, he could tell something was up. He no doubt assumed that it was my mother's presence that kept me from blurting my secrets.

"Do you two have any plans for the evening?" my mom quizzed, staring intently at Ethan.

Mom had been gunning for Ethan ever since I'd brought him home for our first Scrabble game a year and a half ago. She assumed that eventually one of us would realize that this thing between us could be so much more than a little word game with beer. As a romance reader, she couldn't help it—he was perfect hero material. Charismatic, clever . . . debatably sexy—it had, in fact, *been* debated with Mom talking up his finer points and me la-la-la'ing my way through.

Ethan and I caught each other's eye, simultaneously shook our heads in one quick negative, and let our gazes swivel away again.

"I've actually got a few errands to run before tomorrow. Not to mention a little work to catch up on." He stood, eyed the pizza box splayed open on the table, and looked to me with a question in his eyes.

"I got it," I told him. "Seeing as I didn't buy the pizza, I'll pay the forfeit in cleanup. Sorry to rob you of another Scrabble trouncing."

"It had its benefits," he said, winking.

I glanced at my mom, hoping she wasn't picking up on any of this.

"Thank you for dinner, Ms. Kendall. See you at school, Cate." And then he disappeared into the shadows at the edge of the house. Minutes later, all car sounds had faded and Mom and I were alone in the dark.

"Does he have a girlfriend?"

"No, and neither do I."

Mom's laser stare bored into me. I may as well have been splayed out on the table like James Bond.

"Kidding, Mom. But Ethan is just a friend."

"He could be a friend with benefits. . . ."

I turned the laser back on her, wondering for a moment if she'd been eavesdropping earlier and had merely glossed over it by paying the pizza guy.

"Where did you say you were today, Mom?" I countered.

She clammed up immediately, which, while slightly suspicious, was just fine with me at this point.

"Do you have time this week to come in after school and help me decorate the store? I'd like to g

the Halloween stuff up by Thursday at the latest.”

Mom owned a vintage clothing and jewelry store down on South Congress called Mirror, Mirror. I hated that fall retail tended to be one big blur of holidays, so she determinedly decorated for just a few days surrounding every holiday. I was always conscripted to help with window displays and ladder-top duties. Halloween, as I was now well aware thanks to my invitation to a Hitchcock soiree, was only one week away.

And I needed something to wear.

I mentally rummaged through my closet, trying to think if I had anything at all with a Hitchcock blonde vibe, and I couldn't come up with any hits. I'd have to cross my fingers that there was something in the shop I could borrow—something that wouldn't raise questions I didn't particularly want to answer. I hadn't decided quite how to play this. Spies and superheroes didn't go around outing themselves, confiding their secret identities and handing out invitations to their secret lairs. Except maybe to a sidekick.

I hadn't really considered a sidekick. Ideally there'd be one trusty soul who had my back and could save me from the laser table. But seeing as this was just a little role-playing experiment, I really didn't need a sidekick. At least not yet.

“I can do that,” I agreed, flashing back to reality. “I'll come by after school, but it might not be until Thursday—this week's busy.” I stood and started gathering up the bottles for recycling. “I'll go to work, Mom, and then I'm going to bed.”

My cell phone chirped. I glanced at the display and then took my time answering once Mom and her wineglass had moved out of earshot.

“Hey, Syd,” I said, closing the pizza box filled with crusts and wadded napkins.

“Hot damn! You're coming to my Hitchcock party!”

Here, finally, was someone who could share my secret. A smile quirked my lips as I finished clearing up. “You can bet I'll be renting *North by Northwest* this week—for research purposes.”

“Wait, are you coming as a character?” Judging by the thrill in her voice, this was more than she could get her head around.

I flipped the switch for the lanterns, now bobbing gently in the breeze, and crossed the yard to the garage and the steps up to my apartment. “I'm shooting for seductive spy girl Eve Kendall from *North by Northwest*,” I said, having decided just moments ago myself. “And I'm coming alone, so you can bet I'll be looking for a Cary Grant sort to finish out the picture.”

“Um, sweetie, if we get any men of the Cary Grant persuasion, your competition will be fierce. But good for you—way to ratchet up the sexy! Will, Oli, and I are going dressed as cat burglars à la *Catch a Thief*. Sorta . . . ninja-sexy.”

“I need something that will stamp out the ‘schoolteacher by day’ vibe coming off me in waves. I'm planning to visit the shop this week, so hopefully I'll find something perfect in my size.” Letting myself into my little apartment, I leaned backward against the door, dropped the Scrabble box on the hall table, and scanned the room's potential as a superhero/spy lair—the sunflower yellow bowl of Dum-Dum lollipops on the coffee table was way too Doris Day. Although, come to think of it, she'd been a Hitchcock blonde. . . .

“You just need to get your blond on, and you're gonna rock this party.”

My understanding of the logistics involved in that suggestion was a little vague, but as a little bit of encouragement, it was awesome. Trouble was, with a week to second-guess myself, I couldn't vouch for my confidence next Sunday night.

“It'll definitely be an adventure,” I agreed.

It was about damn time.

Chapter 2



Mirror, Mirror was in SoCo, on the edge of downtown. Mom had scored a trim little space that saw a lot of walking traffic and pulled in a mix of loyal customers and curiosity seekers. Parking was a bit of a bitch, though.

As I drove past the Trailer Park & Eatery just before the bridge over Lady Bird Lake on Thursday afternoon, I longed to detour straight to the order window of Torchy's Tacos. My stomach was already rumbling, and I was in the mood for a little spicy heat, not to mention a beer. Later, I'd told Ethan I'd meet him there at six.

After circling the block three times in search of a parking space, I was doubly in the mood for a beer. And judging from my walk up the sidewalk, it was clear that Mom had been content to wait for me before getting started. The shop window displays still held the familiar Fall Frolic montage I'd helped create a couple of weeks ago. Mannequins with sweet painted faces were layered with fabric pieces in rich autumn shades of mustard, plum, olive, ruby, and slate blue. Bare tree branches were suspended from above with piano wire, hosting the curvy little birds we'd found at the craft store. In a couple of hours, the scene would be updated with Halloween colors and simple iconic shapes.

I loved Halloween. In Texas, where the heat hung on until mid to late October, Halloween was the official kick-off of fall, a mini-season bookended by festivities, with Thanksgiving on the tail end. Costumes and masquerades were Austin's bread and butter—everyone wanted to be something they weren't.

I know I did. What I clearly *didn't* know was how to deal with the obsession. Other than keeping secrets and second-guessing myself.

I gazed at my reflection in the shop windows, remembering the moments just before the bell rang for my last class of the day.

"Why do you suppose Emma Woodhouse, the belle of Highbury, decided to befriend the common little nobody, Harriet Smith?" I'd posed the question in a rather distracted state.

I stood at the front of the classroom, propped on the edge of my desk, gazing at them from behind my black lacquer frames—my "teaching glasses." Suddenly self-conscious in front of all those staring senior eyes, I crossed my arms over my chest, marking my place in my own personal copy of *Emma*. I tipped my head down, seemingly absorbed in the world of Jane Austen, but actually assessing my outfit. Taupe menswear trousers, sea green ruffly blouse, and teal suede flats. Cary Grant wouldn't even give me a second look.

I looked back up at the class, startled to see a few hands had gone up during my "lost moments."

"Yes, Jordan?"

"She was trying to be charitable?"

"Perhaps," I allowed. "But I'm not sure I believe that."

"Alex?"

"She was bored." He sounded as if he could relate. I commiserated, but only slightly. *Emma* may be at its heart, a romance, but it is so much more than that. I'd even convinced Ethan to read it and then grudgingly admit that he'd enjoyed it—at least parts of it.

"Excellent. Why do you suppose that was?" I fiddled with the ruby glass crystal that hung from a gold chain around my neck, imagining pencil skirts and push-up bras. And heels—definitely heels.

Killer heels.

Alex assumed he still had the floor and answered quickly, almost defiantly. “She was stuck with her father at Hartfield after Miss Taylor left, and teatime and archery just weren’t doing it for her.”

I blinked at him, then narrowed my eyes slightly. I was relatively certain that Austen hadn’t mentioned archery in the text, but it had definitely featured in the Gwyneth Paltrow movie adaptation of the book.

“Very insightful,” I congratulated with a wry twist of my lips. “She needed a hobby . . . and decided to choose vicarious romance since *movies* weren’t an option.” I stared hard at Alex, but couldn’t detect even the slightest admission of guilt. “She didn’t need to marry—she was already rich. And other options . . .” I tipped my head to the side, willing them to follow the words I wasn’t saying, “weren’t available in the early nineteenth century.” They weren’t exactly lining up for me in *Weird City* either.

The bell rang and I quickly outlined the homework. We’d continue our discussion of *Emma* tomorrow, and I’d find a way to out Alex for choosing the movie over the book.

I was in a hurry to get to Mirror, Mirror and start scrounging for a dress to vamp me up a bit, but I needed to find Ethan before I left.

I found him in The Cave, the tiny room allotted for the school’s IT guru. Ethan taught French for three periods, German for two, and he filled one as our IT guy, fixer of all things PC.

“Hey, Chavez!” I called, hefting my leather tote, crammed with term papers, up higher on my shoulder. “You winning?”

He lifted his gaze a couple of inches and met mine. When he’d taken the job of IT guru, he’d rearranged the entire room to allow him to face the door, with a table of computers and networking paraphernalia in between. His explanation? He doesn’t like people sneaking up on him. Mine? He’s a gamer with a lithe, feminine avatar, and the new desk orientation gives him time to destroy the evidence should anyone swing by for a visit. It’s mostly facetious—I’ve never caught him in the act, and Ethan doesn’t strike me as a gamer. But he definitely has secrets—this could very well be one of them.

“Kendall?”

I tilted my head to the right, wanting to see more of him than a disembodied head sitting atop a computer monitor. From the waist up he was wearing a collared shirt under a deep red cranberry sweater. He looked cute . . . sexy, even. I shifted back, suddenly preferring the disembodied head. Evidently I had a very impressionable mind—one completely irrational suggestion, and I couldn’t help but imagine the what-ifs.

“Could you run some diagnostics or a virus scan—anything really—on my computer and see if you can find out why I’m not getting my e-mails? I had two voice mails today from parents asking if I’d gotten their e-mails, really hinting that I should have replied by now.” I hoisted my bag farther up on my shoulder.

“You leaving?” He glanced at his watch.

“I promised Mom I’d help her with the Halloween decorations at the shop.” And I needed to find a dress that would make me into a femme fatale. My thoughts buzzed with the reminder.

“Sure. I can do it after I finish up in here.”

“What are you doing in here?” I asked coyly, tipping myself away from the door frame and slowly sauntering around the blockade.

I saw Ethan’s finger flicker over the mouse and knew I didn’t have a prayer, but I looked anyway. The puzzle with a picture of three gray kittens. Upon further inspection, it became evident that it was the AARP daily puzzle and there were only a few more pieces left to place. I turned away from the screen to stare at him.

“This is your cover? Granny puzzles? What’s your screen saver? Teddy bears?”

He fought it, but eventually Ethan's grin was so wide that his dimple popped out. "I'll get your mail working, chica. Just as soon as the kitty gets her whiskers."

Thoroughly provoked, I swung back around the desk and headed out the door. "Don't mess with my desktop, Chavez. Physical or computer."

"You're killing me, Kendall." I glanced back, and his face looked pained.

I chuckled to myself, picturing the shirtless hardbody who now posed on my computer wallpaper. I'd switched it out on my free period, just for his benefit. Then there was the action-figure bravado playing out on my desk, with Jane Austen ninja-kicking Charles Dickens, and Shakespeare waiting his turn. Ethan was going to love that.

"Fine. Show me what you were just working on—kitties don't count—and you can have your organizational way with my desktops—both of them."

A beat of silence passed between us, and then Ethan had the grace to grin. "Your mess is safe with me, *fräulein*."

I nodded, content, but with the vaguely itchy feeling that he'd won. In other words, very Tina Fey.

The reflection of a car pulling out of the street parking space right behind me caught my attention. Well, damn! Three minutes' more banter with Ethan and that spot would have been mine.

In the middle of my frustrated growl, I had a vision for the November display. Paper-wrapped books! We could sit the mannequins on stacks of them, and even buy a bunch of cheapies from a garage sale and cut out or curl the pages into decorative designs. Maybe go for a sexy librarian look.

I smiled to myself. Hmm . . . sexy librarian . . . or high school teacher by day, foxy rogue by night.

I was grinning when I pulled open the shop door.

"Mom," I called. "I already have an idea for November's windows," I said.

"If it involves turkeys or pumpkins, I don't want to know," she grumped from behind the counter. Her laptop was open in front of her on the antique hotel desk she'd snapped up at the Round Top flea market.

"It doesn't," I said, stuffing my purse under the counter and looking at her askance. "Should I assume Halloween will be pumpkin-less too?"

"I'm skipping the orange this year, decorating in black and emerald green," she said defiantly, evidently expecting me to object.

"Look at you, Mom! Boycotting the official color of Halloween in a college town that fawns over its burnt orange!" I smiled, admiring her spunk. I glanced around. "Do I have carte blanche, or are you giving me directions?"

"Go crazy," she offered. "Everything is on the storeroom table."

"Everything" included a sparkly layer of glitter and a shimmering scatter of sequins and rhinestones. Mom had apparently gotten very crafty, cutting out frogs and witches' hats and bedazzling them with a vengeance. Too bad we weren't decorating for Valentine's Day. A little pucker and some glitzy crowns and these little guys could be frog princes. I smiled ruefully. Until Ethan squished them under his car tire. But heck, frogs got their holiday start at Halloween . . . I could make this work. I could cut some skinny ribbon curls and make them into extended frog tongues. Add a few Mardi Gras beads for shimmer and some black and green tissue paper for flair, and I'd be off the hook till the next holiday window display. There were even a couple of black masquerade masks—I could slip these on the mannequins to add a touch of flirtiness.

But first, I'd need to browse the shop for a little Halloween inspiration. There were two mannequins in the front window—I'd outfit them first and keep an eye out for something worthy of a Hitchcock blonde while I was at it.

I tucked a couple of stray curls behind my ear, wishing I'd bought the dainty jeweled headband I'd recently hearted on Etsy. Although maybe I should be looking at vintage cat's-eye glasses instead and

practicing twisting my hair into a tasteful chignon that could tumble down with the tug of a single bobby pin. . . . I shook my head to refocus and had to deal with those curls all over again. Having my hair in my eyes for the duration of this project was going to be irritating. On my way out of the storeroom, my hip accidentally bumped the pile of decorations hanging off the edge of the table and sent a flurry of frogs spiraling away behind me. As I turned, bending down to collect the escapees, my gaze caught on a shimmer of midnight blue flirting from beneath a plastic dry-cleaning bag.

I inched forward on my knees, too excited to worry over the risks to my trousers, and, using both hands, slowly raised the bag to expose more of that gorgeous, lustrous skirt.

“What on earth are you doing?”

A zip of shock tore up my spine, and I whipped my head around, caught in the incriminating—not to mention embarrassing—position of having my hands snaked up inside the plastic wrap, very near hugging this seemingly irresistible dress, my fingers skimming over the sexy sheen of brocade. And I wasn’t letting go.

“Nothing.” I attempted nonchalance, but my mother was no fool. “Just getting a quick preview of the new stock.”

Her expression shifted. Suspicion fell away, replaced by unreserved delight. “Those just came yesterday. I thought maybe—”

“Can I have this one??” I blurted, nearly as surprised with myself as she was. The bodice of the dress was still sight unseen. I was making a fool of myself over a pretty skirt and a feeling. I don’t know how I knew it, but I did. This was the dress I needed to stoke my inner femme fatale and launch my alter ego.

A curl escaped its confinement behind my ear and fell over my left eye. Desperate to hang on to the dress, I huffed out a retaliatory breath, willing it to back off. It didn’t.

My mom looked at me quizzically. “Have you even seen the whole dress?”

“Um, no. I just know I want it.”

The look she gave me confirmed that I sounded as ridiculous as I looked, kneeling before a mostly obscured, plastic-wrapped dress with an I’m-not-worthy attitude.

She stepped forward, stared down at me until, resigned, I unhandedly scooted back on my knees. As she pulled the relevant hanger off the wardrobe rack and proceeded to unveil the rest of the dress, I stood up and tried to regain my composure, distractedly dusting off the front of my trousers.

The top was just as lust-worthy as the bottom. There was a fitted, strapless satin bodice with lingerie stitching, a wide patent leather belt, and a flirty transparent chiffon wrap that tied in the front all of it deep, dark, lustrous midnight blue. It was perfect. I had no trouble imagining the cool and composed Eve Kendall from *North by Northwest* sashaying through train cars in this streamline number.

She’d always been my favorite Hitchcock blonde. Partly because we shared the same last name, partly because she was sensible and savvy, not to mention sexy enough to end up with Cary Grant.

I stared at the dress and smiled. All that was left was to wonder whether I could fit into it and fill it out. And whether my mother would let me have it.

I turned to look at her, certain there was desperation in my eyes. “So, can I have it, Mom? I’ll buy it from you.”

Her eyebrow went up and she eyed the dress she was still holding.

“I plan to invoke the ‘Thou shall not make a killing off your daughter’ commandment.”

“Huh. I hadn’t heard of that one.”

“It’s lesser known.” I was twitching, my eyes moving back and forth between the dress and my mom. I definitely wasn’t playing it cool. Closing my eyes, I took a slow breath. Opening them again,

tried to keep the pleading desperation carefully banked.

~~“You can have it. But I want to know where you’re going in it. A date? With Ethan?”~~

“No, Mom, not a date per se, and not with Ethan. Just a Halloween party—one of Syd’s things. It’s sort of a costume party. I’m going old-fashioned.”

“Okay, well, it’s yours. Consider it my contribution to the Cate Kendall Happily-Ever-After Fund.”

Nice. “Thanks, Mom. Okay, I’m just going to leave this back here and get busy on the shop. Dmitri working today?” Mom considered Dmitri one of her best finds. He was a fashion major at UT who could turn a canvas tote bag and a skein of yarn into something wonderful. Mom already had him on borrowed time.

“It’s Thursday. He teaches Pilates at that men’s spa. You’ll be on your own—at least for a little while—the computer guy is coming.”

“What computer guy?”

“The Nerd Squad or the Geek Freak . . . something.” She moved to a little vanity table she kept in the corner and used occasionally as a desk. As I watched, she pulled out her powder compact and lipstick and touched everything up.

“Uh-huh.” If I thought it odd that she felt compelled to refresh her makeup for the Geek Freak, I didn’t mention it. I chose to make my escape riding the high of mom’s largesse. And nearly barreled into someone barging in.

“Cate?” A familiar blonde blocked the door to the storeroom.

“Hey, Court!” I leaned in for a quick hug and got thumped hard on the back.

“Sorry!” She grimaced and held up the one-pound bag of Brach’s Autumn Mix in explanation, and my eyes glazed over. Courtney and I shared so much good taste.

I’d been her devoted fan since the minute I discovered she carried candy in her bag. Not Altoids—that was for amateurs. This chick packed the good stuff. For pity parties she had European chocolate bars; for gossip fests, she brought Hot Tamales; and for all-night study sessions, it was licorice. I held up the bag of candy corn and Mellowcreme pumpkins.

“Significance?”

“It’s Halloween!” She glanced at me askance, clearly baffled by my ignorance. I didn’t even bother to explain.

“What are you doing here?” I asked instead, wondering if it was too soon to bust open the bag of candy.

“I need clothes! One of the law firms is hosting a costume party at the Driskill with a Roaring Twenties theme. I was hoping your mom had something perfect for the occasion.” As the event coordinator for the Driskill Hotel in downtown Austin, Courtney was able to seamlessly mesh her two interests: party planning and ghost stories. The Driskill was certifiably haunted, with the history to prove it, but much to her chagrin and utter frustration, Courtney had yet to see a ghost.

“Hello, Courtney,” Mom said, leaning in for a cheek press and a squeeze. No doubt Courtney had gotten a whiff of Cover Girl pressed powder. Luckily Mom hadn’t bussed her cheek, or it would have been necessary for her to refresh her lipstick all over again. For the Geek Freak. “I’m sure there’s something here that would be perfect for your party—just look around. I’ll make you a deal,” she offered with a wink and a smile.

When Mom was gone, I couldn’t wait any longer and ripped a hole in the bag of Autumn Mix. I reached for an orange pumpkin and sank my teeth into the sugar rush. “I’m here for a dress too,” I confided. “For Syd’s Hitchcock event on Halloween!”

“Ooh! I wanted to go to that, and would have too, if not for this party. Which reminds me, I need to find a date.”

“You don’t have to work the party?”

She reached for a candy corn with a chocolate bottom. “Don’t think so. At least not too much. The catering company is completely professional—I’ve worked with them in the past and been very impressed. Shouldn’t be any heavy lifting.”

I nodded. “What about Ethan?”

“Your Ethan?” She shot me a look of baffled disbelief.

“What do you mean, *my* Ethan? We’re not together, nor have we ever been,” I reminded her. I reached for a classic candy corn and popped it in my mouth. “We’re not compatible like that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He and I would never work,” I insisted. “Too many quirks. Besides, he’s too bossy,” I finished grabbing a handful from the bag and offering Courtney the chocolate corn. “But I am meeting him for dinner at Torchy’s at six. Why don’t you come? Scope out his potential. I think he could pull off a little Eliot Ness. . . .”

She stared at me for a long moment and finally said, “Okay, I’m game—for Torchy’s, not for Mr. Ness just yet. It’s been a while since I’ve seen Ethan, and I need to reassess.”

“Fair enough.”

Setting the bag of candy corn down on the table and sparing a glance for the rack that held my dresses and the secrets of a few other dry-cleaning bags, I grabbed this year’s decorating supplies and nudged Courtney out of the storeroom and back into the shop.

Courtney and I browsed the racks for clothes that could be transformed into flapper couture, and if any she rejected, I pulled for the display.

“So what’s going on with you?” she asked, draping a low-cut, feather-edged, ruby silk number over herself and sizing up its potential.

I thought of my recent, inspired decision to introduce my budding alter ego to a little corner store in Austin and elected to fill her in. I bit my lip and swiveled my head to make sure Mom was still hunched over the counter in eager cahoots with the Geek Freak before confiding my big news.

“I’m planning a little masquerade.”

Courtney shot me a quizzical look, waiting for the details.

“I’m going to Syd’s Hitchcock soiree, but not as myself.”

Courtney’s gaze bounced up from the dress she was holding and her shoulders slumped in exasperated confusion. “I’m not getting any of this.”

I grinned, relishing this moment, thrilled to be sharing my pseudo secret. “Think alter ego. I’m still working out the details.”

“Wait, what?” Swiveling toward me, she lost her balance and fell sideways against a rack of clothing. We tussled for a moment to get her back upright. As it was, her hair got caught on some metallic military detailing on a black blazer.

“Basically I’m going as a modern-day femme fatale.”

Courtney blinked exactly four times before she came up with “Huh.”

My confidence faltered, just a little bit, in the face of my best friend’s dubious stare.

“What? You don’t think I can bring it?” I lifted an eyebrow and waited, an insecure wimp behind all the bravado.

Three beats of silence and she was singing like a canary.

“The idea of you as a femme fatale just doesn’t click in my mind. You’re so not that girl, Cat. You’re a wholesome schoolteacher! You believe in happily-ever-afters, not . . . sexual conquests. You accessorize with your heart on your sleeve and an artless smile, not so much a mink stole and a revolver.” Her smile, when she finally aimed it in my direction, was rueful. “Just sayin’ . . .”

“You do realize that one night as a Hitchcock blonde won’t tarnish my reputation. In the morning I’ll still be a card-carrying ‘good girl.’”

“Hmm. I suppose that’s true.” Courtney bit her lip, still considering.

“Think Eve Kendall in *North by Northwest*,” I said, anxious that she get the sort of personality I was going for here. I wanted someone to assure me that as ideas went, this one was a zinger.

Courtney narrowed her eyes, I assume remembering the curvy, no-nonsense spy girl who was savvy enough to keep her head when alternately faced with murderous foreign spies and a flirty Cary Grant in her train compartment.

Courtney’s words, when they came, quickly squelched my optimism. “It’s just that you’re so damn cute. When I look at you, it’s not glamour I’m seeing—or even moxie. I see Hayley Mills in *The Parent Trap*. Ever since we met I’ve been waiting for you to break into a musical number.”

“Well, you can bet I’m not going to ask you to help me get rid of the body I have stashed in the trunk of my car,” I said, twisting the watch on my wrist in vague irritation. “I’m going for glamour and mystery, not bitch with issues, and I think I can pull it off. It’s kind of like a dare.”

“Who dared you?”

“I did.” I shuttered my eyes closed, trying to imagine this conversation from her point of view. No doubt I sounded like a whack-job.

“Gotcha.”

“I just need a little somethin’ somethin’. My life is way too tame right now.”

“Maybe you should talk to Ethan,” she said pointedly, turning back to the rack.

“I don’t imagine he’d be at all encouraging,” I said.

“Oh, I think you’d be surprised,” she said, a smug little smile playing around her lips. “Just remember, I had a little somethin’ somethin’ too, and it turned into a whole lotta hell.”

“I remember, sweetie.” It was hard to forget—the silver-tongued, adorably dimpled little shit who had turned Courtney’s world upside down had left a lasting reminder that still occasionally surfaced on YouTube.

Deciding it was best to drop the subject for now, I left Courtney to the dressing room and got busy with my afternoon project, relieved to have already found the perfect dress and sweet-talked Mom without having to come completely clean.

Moving back and forth through the shop, I passed the counter often and caught little snatches of Mom’s curious chat with Geek Freak Brady. I had to assume that my position in the window created some sort of acoustic anomaly, because it sounded suspiciously like she was flirting with the guy.

Once I had the mannequins outfitted in ruffly georgette tank dresses, layered necklaces, and black tissue-paper turbans glammed up with sprays of cut-out bats and some sparkle, I posed them, palms up. I placed the newly 3-D frogs in their hands, attached the other ends of the ribbon tongues to the mannequin cheeks, and stepped back. I needed more color. Sparkly green tissue-paper scarves anyone?

Brady was just packing up his things as I moved past the counter on my way into the storeroom for more supplies.

“This is your personal line?” Mom was saying, eyeing his business card.

I shot a curious look in her direction, wondering why she was teasing the poor kid. Her voice had taken on a throaty, husky quality, and from the looks of him, his voice was changing too. Seeing him push his glasses up on his nose put me in mind of Clark Kent, and I gave him a closer look from the storeroom doorway, suddenly wondering if I had cause to be jealous.

“Yes, ma’am,” he told my mom, zipping up his attaché case.

“Allison,” she corrected. “I suspect I’ll be calling you.”

I was surprised she didn’t tuck the card inside her bra.

“Anytime . . . Allison. Whatever it is, I’ll work out the kinks.”

Ducking back through the doorway and out of sight, I barely stifled a fit of giggles. If this was

Superman, then I was Marlene Dietrich.

Eager to stay away from the counter while Mom was making time with the computer guy, I took my time gathering up supplies. And my gaze strayed once again to the rack of new arrivals, the source of my new dress. With Courtney closeted in the dressing room with countless outfits and accessories and Mom oddly occupied, I was on my own—and eager for a peek at what was hiding under the other dresses and cleaning bags. I checked my watch—still forty-five minutes till we needed to meet Ethan. Plenty of time to finish up the displays after a quick little reconnaissance mission.

I beelined and riffled through the plastic on the first bag to uncover a sweet little dress of gray lining with a pleated bodice, layered cap sleeves, and flap pockets under a banded waistline. It didn't exactly scream femme fatale, more efficient, albeit stylish, secretary—or English teacher. I held it up in front of me, my mind skimming through possibilities. Paired with some sexy pumps, a cleavage-dipping pendant, and some Lolita-red lipstick, it could be perfect—very *Mad Men*. As a disguise, it wouldn't fool anyone, but it would get me in the mood for a little scandalous behavior.

I unhooked the next in line and realized my luck couldn't run forever. I could see enough through the transparent wrapping to tell that this one was a bit dowdy. Taupe and cream, it was a slim skirt and crossover blouse. It screamed society matron, but I felt compelled to take a quick peek. I was rather impressed to discover the blouse was both sleeveless and backless! Add a chunky choker and a chunky bracelet, and it was deliciously Grace Kelly gone vixen. I glimpsed a firecracker red something in the back when Mom breezed through the door, humming to herself.

We both started in surprise.

“Mrs. Robinson,” I said, with a nod and a smirk.

She ignored that, eyeing my handful. “What are you doing back here? I thought you were thrilled with the blue dress.”

“I am,” I admitted, hooking the red mystery back on the rack, “but this new shipment is making me greedy. I've got the gimmes for all of them. It doesn't even matter that I haven't looked at some of them, never mind tried them on. I *crave* them.”

“Lord.” She rolled her eyes to spell out her opinion on my lunatic behavior, but then caved. “Take them home, try them on, get it out of your system. Sometimes a girl just needs to play dress-up.”

“And sometimes a girl just needs to flirt with a Geek Freak,” I teased, giving her a hug. It was clear Mom needed a date. If I gave it a few minutes' thought, I could probably come up with someone suitable—someone to keep Mrs. Robinson in check. I wasn't talking about sex—*good God, no*—I didn't want to walk in on anything on my way to borrow the guacamole, just a companion—someone to play Scrabble with, minus the benefits.

When Dad had left his orderly life of ones and zeros in the semiconductor sector for a chance to give canopy tours in the Hill Country, Mom had filled his absence with Mirror, Mirror, *Burn Notice*, and Zumba dancing at the local YMCA. She was an active woman with a great figure, a business in the heart of Austin Weird, and a lot to offer. The right man could be great for her. Maybe I'd ask Gemma to weigh in. . . . Then again, Ethan was closer, geographically speaking, and he probably already had an opinion on the matter. I shook my head, desperate to clear it. Right now, I was too distracted with my own issues; Mom's romance was going to have to wait. In fact, I needed to get busy and finish up the decorations. Candy corn could tide me over for only so long. Besides, I wanted to see if Courtney and Ethan could play nice together.

Chapter 3



“How do you feel about Eliot Ness?”

I’d snuck up behind Ethan as he stood perusing the Torchy’s menu to pose the question.

He didn’t even turn around.

“Relatively unaffected. Is this your way of announcing another ill-advised crush? Seeing as he lives in twentieth-century America and not fictional eighteenth-century Britain, I’d say definite improvement. You’ll get there.”

I elbowed him in the side. “I do not have a crush on Eliot Ness. But I kinda told Courtney that you might be her date for a 1920s-themed Halloween party at the Driskill.”

Now he turned around. I cringed ever so slightly under his blistering stare.

“Is this about you not having a full-access pass to my life? Finding a back door? Setting me up with a friend of yours with intent to snoop?” With his arms crossed over his chest, he definitely looked mad—and a little intimidating.

“Get over yourself, Chavez. If you want to keep secrets, keep ’em!” I kicked at the gravel and heard a rock ping against the metal trailer. “Courtney needed a date for her event, and you haven’t mentioned any Halloween plans, so I merely suggested you might be an option. Nobody’s locked in. You have time to make up an excuse before she gets here, let her down easy.”

“What do you mean, ‘before she gets here’?” His eyebrow winged up in disbelief.

Justifiably on the defensive, I fired back, “I invited her. She was at the shop, and I graciously included her in our plan to eat chips and salsa at picnic tables in a parking lot. If, however,” I continued, “that’s too much of an imposition, we’ll be happy to sit at a separate table. You could use the space for your ego.”

Ethan snorted, looked out over the darkening city skyline, his lips twitching alternately with frustration and amusement, and then turned back to gaze at my stubborn expression.

“No, I insist that the two of you sit at my picnic table. Drinks on me.”

I smiled, relieved. I didn’t like to fight with Ethan—it rocked my world—nothing seemed right when he and I were at odds. Luckily, it didn’t happen often.

“You’re one of the good guys, Chavez,” I said, nudging into him, haphazardly scanning the menu.

“And you, Kendall, are transparently fickle.” He elbowed me back. “In the interest of staving off all the other setups, you should know that I have plans for Halloween. Eliot Ness will have to find another reincarnation.”

My little bubble of contentment popped audibly, and I yanked my gaze away from the taco trailer and home in on Ethan all over again. “You have plans? Why didn’t you tell me you had plans? What are they?”

“He’s coppin’ out on Eliot Ness, isn’t he?” said a chipper voice from behind us.

We both swiveled and stared at a grinning Courtney. “No big deal,” she assured us. “If I don’t find a date, I’ll go alone and on the prowl.” She winked and shifted her attention to the taco menu, not seeming the least put out.

At this point I think the guy behind the counter was fed up with all of us, so we ordered quickly. Ever the gentleman, Ethan bought the drinks and the tacos, and the three of us crunched over the gravel, slipping under the fairy-lit canopy of oaks to park ourselves at picnic tables and eat.

“Why don’t you spend Halloween at the Driskill, Cate? Storm the place with a fake Tommy gun and the female half of Bonnie and Clyde,” Ethan suggested before biting into a green chile taco.

I’d been just about to take a bite of my own barbacoa taco—Torchy’s Democrat—when the question was posed, so I lowered my arms, carefully holding the overflowing taco together. “I could totally pull that off, but I too have plans,” I told him sweetly.

“Are they for public consumption?” He tipped back his beer and then waited for my answer.

“Why not? I don’t have any secrets.” *Poker face, don’t fail me now.* Normally I couldn’t really claim any secrets, but recent developments had me daydreaming of secret identities, obsessing over alter egos, even lapsing into awkward thoughts of Ethan. . . . I prayed Courtney wouldn’t give me away.

“Well, *that* needs to be remedied, my friend,” Courtney teased, sipping the dregs of her lime-doused Corona. “Every girl should have at least one really good secret.” Her cheekbones rounded in teasing amusement.

“How many do you have?” I said, remembering our little chat in Mirror, Mirror.

“Not enough,” she assured me. “And it’s not for lack of trying.” Her grin widened into a Texas-sized smile. “Just means I need to try harder. Or in different places,” she said, letting her eyes slide over and hook mine.

“What about you, Ethan?” she said, inviting him into our little girls’ club. “Got any secrets?” I looked up from my taco, wondering and curious.

For one unhurried moment, he seemed to consider while Courtney and I waited him out. Then again, he could have just been stalling, messing with the pair of us.

“None that would interest the two of you,” he finally answered.

I stared at him, considering, concocting potential Ethan-worthy secrets. Piggybacking on his neighbor’s cable signal? Occasional Internet porn? Bootlegging the *Glee* soundtrack?

The corners of my lips edged up, and I bit back a smile. Let the poor guy keep his secrets. Mirrors would probably shock the pants off him.

“Cagey . . . I like that,” Courtney said, flirting effortlessly. She was a natural-born charmer.

My eyes shifted back to Ethan to gauge his reaction to her. He seemed immune. It occurred to me that they probably knew each other too well, by virtue of being friends with me. I talked to one about the other, and gradually, curiosities were quenched and mysteries disappeared. They were probably beyond any possibility of future romance, and I had to admit to being just a little relieved. Also weird.

“Now that that’s taken care of, tell us about Halloween,” Ethan insisted, fiddling with his empty beer bottle.

“I’m going to one of Syd’s events—a Hitchcock-themed party—I couldn’t pass it up.”

“I notice you didn’t ask me to go with you,” Ethan accused, smirking good-naturedly. “Got a date?”

“I would never intrude on your private life, Chavez. I’m going alone.”

Ethan laughed out loud at that blatant untruth, and Courtney narrowly avoided spraying her final swallow of beer.

“By my count, that’s two chicks going solo. What about you, Chavez . . . you got a date?”

Courtney’s timely arrival thirty minutes ago had distracted me from that very question. I popped the rest of my taco into my mouth and waited to hear the answer.

He glanced over at me. “Afraid not,” he admitted. “No secrets, and no date.” This was hardly surprising.

Courtney offered up a “poor baby” smile. “Well, if your plans fall through . . . or you feel a little Eliot Ness coming on . . . swing by the Driskill,” she offered, climbing off the picnic bench. Taco basket in hand, she said her good-byes.

“I need to go check that a *quinceañera* is positively perfect in every way.” She batted her eyelashes

and smiled angelically. “Thanks, guys—Gate, for your help with a dress, and Ethan, for dinner. Catch you later.” She waved and was gone.

Ethan and I focused on finishing our tacos and studiously avoided any further mention of Halloween plans. I was desperate to know his, but didn’t want him probing further into mine.

Our awkward silence was broken by three guys in polos and jeans, still sporting their company name badges, wanting to share our table amid the after-work crowd. Ethan and I shifted down a couple of feet. My knee bumped the table’s leg bracket and nudged something loose.

I leaned down to peek under the table and noticed a dark shape lying in the shadows. I reached for it, careful not to bump my head on the edge of the table and curious to examine it in the fading light.

It was old, or made to look old—vintage was king these days. And it was charming, from its worn leather cover to its pretty brass hardware. It looked like a secret door.

“What’s that?” Ethan asked, eyeing my find.

My eyes, I’m sure, lit up with excitement, but almost instantly my shoulders slumped and the twinkle died. With my luck, this would be someone’s Weight Watchers journal.

“Looks like some sort of journal,” I said, nudging it onto the table in front of me, preferring the mystery to the reality, at least for the moment. I figured my curiosity would hold out maybe until I finished my tacos.

Some excited murmurings filled the trailer park, and glancing up, I caught a glimpse of a few renegade bats, likely having just emerged, right on cue, from beneath the Congress Avenue Bridge and winged back in our direction. Twilight lit the sky with sherbet colors and gave the little mammals a lovely backdrop for their nightly appearance. Luckily, we were well out of range of the rest of the little buggers and the great guano drop. Ethan had taken advantage of the distraction to bogart the find and look at the journal. Evidently, his own curiosity was a bit of a lightweight.

“What happened to ladies first, Chavez? I hope you at least used a napkin.”

He lifted both hands, displaying them palms out, then flipping them to expose the backs.

“Anything up your sleeves?” I inquired sourly. He ignored me, running curious fingers over the little key placket and knob, flipping the book onto its back for further perusal before cracking it open. I concentrated on my taco.

I glanced up when I heard the familiar “Huh.” That one noncommittal syllable expressed Ethan’s grudging curiosity.

I swirled a tortilla chip through my little cup of queso. “What?”

“Strange. There’s a flowery dedication in here that can’t have been written recently, but the rest of the book is blank.” He riffled through the pages all over again and then raised his eyebrows at me. “What’s it doing under a trailer park picnic table?” he asked, nearly swiping the leather volume through a salsa spill on the table as he moved to hand it back to me. I snatched it away from him.

“Maybe someone had just bought it, needed a taco fix, and stashed it under the table to keep it away from a sticky-fingered companion.” I speared him with a look, curling my lip ever so slightly.

Carefully wiping my hands on my napkin, I gently touched the tarnished hardware and brushed my fingers over the worn leather. It felt significant . . . substantial. As if secrets revealed inside would be held dear. I turned back the cover and read the flowery script with my bottom lip caught between my teeth.

“ . . . I dedicate to You the following Miscellaneous Morsels, convinced that if you seriously attend to them, You will derive from them very important Instructions,

with regard to your conduct in Life.”

“It looks like someone intended this as an instructional manual, but then never followed through with it.” I glanced up at Ethan, who was back to concentrating on his own taco. He shrugged in response.

But I could. I could write in this diary from the perspective of my impending alter ego, recording thrilling adventures and dispensing exciting life advice to inspire the English teacher side of me. It sounded like the perfect outlet—judging by Courtney’s reaction, my friends weren’t ready to hear about my fantasy of “going rogue.” It could be my little secret, kept safe in this little book.

“Do you think anyone’s coming back for it?”

I scrunched my nose a little and ever so slightly shook my head, going for subliminal.

Ethan’s lips twitched in amusement. “No way to tell. Why?” I frowned at him as he took a sip of beer.

“Can’t you, for once, just be my partner in crime, Chavez?” I asked, thoroughly exasperated.

The amusement disappeared, and I couldn’t interpret his long, steady gaze. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision. “Possession is nine-tenths,” he reminded me. “You’re in possession.”

I looked down at the book, wondering if I’d glossed too quickly over the possibility that anyone would come looking for it, feeling vaguely guilty that I didn’t plan on leaving it for them to find, and a little bit thrilled with my decision. I’m sure I was grinning like an idiot when I looked up again.

“So . . . do you want me to smuggle it out in my pants, or ask the taco guy for some foil so you can wrap it up to go? Because I’m all in, baby.”

My laugh sounded suspiciously like a guffaw. It was the “baby” that did it . . . and the gangster voice. I stared across the table at Ethan, his face now mostly in shadow under the string of lightbulbs hung up over the lot. Imagining myself with a secret life was one thing; imagining Ethan as anything other than a clean-cut, hardworking geek was completely laughable.

“Perhaps Eliot Ness was a miscasting. You could hit the Driskill as Al Capone . . . or Pretty Boy Chavez.” I grinned.

“I could . . . except, as I mentioned, I already have plans.”

“Right. What did you say those were again?”

“I didn’t,” he reminded me. “You ready to bust that book outta here?”

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