

## **Kate Corell: NEVER BE MY DATE**

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### **Never Be My Date**

Age: 16+ | 352 pages | 978-3-646-60894-6 | pub date: January 2023



### **ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION**

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manuscript.

*Be brave, follow your dreams, say f\*ck you to everybody and fight for what you believe in.* - Jared Leto -

PLAYLIST

A BEAUTIFUL LIE - THIRTY SECONDS TO MARS

AMERICAN OXYGEN - RIHANNA

UNCOVER - ZARA LARSSON

LITTLE LOVE - JAMES SMITH

TAKE MY HAND - PICTURE THIS

DON'T GIVE IN - SNOW PATROL

COLDEST WATER - WALKING ON CARS

MY LOVE - JESS GLYNNE (ACOUSTIC VERSION)

SOMEONE TO HOLD - PICTURE THIS, CXLOE

ZOMBIE - CXLOE (TRIPLE J LIKE A VERSION)

GHOST - ZOE WEES

FADING INTO GREY - BILLY LOCKETT

BLACK HOLE - GRIFF

LIGHTING MATCHES - TOM GRENNAN

FRIENDSHIPS (LOST MY LOVE) - PASCAL LETOUBLON, LEONY

IF YOU WANNA BE LOVED - PICTURE THIS (JOHN GIBBONS REMIX)

THE STORY - THIRTY SECONDS TO MARS

DON'T BREAK THE HEART - TOM GRENNAN

SOMEBODY - DAGNY (ACOUSTIC VERSION)

DANCING IN THE DIRT - GLOCKENBACH, MOUGLETA

(I JUST) DIED IN YOUR ARMS - BASTILLE

ALL WE ARE - JONAH

STAY - THIRTY SECONDS TO MARS

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' - SIA

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE - THE POLICE

KEEP YOU DRY - JUKE ROSS

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## PROLOGUE

Cameron

## PREVIOUSLY IN CINCINNATI, OHIO

How hard can it actually be to manoeuvre a tray through the crowded hall of a luxury villa?

Fifteen. That is the exact number of glasses on the white lacquered, round monstrosity that I balance on my palm. Every time I have to dodge someone, they wobble suspiciously and bring beads of sweat to my forehead.

My gaze wanders to the clock on the wall above the swinging door that leads into the kitchen. Two more hours and then I can finally go home. It's not that I don't enjoy the job. Surprisingly, I do, but I've been on my feet for sixteen hours and by now my legs feel heavy as lead.

The kitchen is bustling as I enter, but I immediately notice the guy who has no business being here. He's talking to one of the waitresses, who lets out an amused giggle as he wraps a strand of her hair around his index finger. I roll my eyes in annoyance. I hope she's not so naïve as to think that the sweet talker will turn her into a high-society princess.

"May I?", I ask curtly, because the two of them are blocking the access to the bubbly supply.

When the guy looks in my direction, revealing his face, I stare for a moment. He grins, while I am more than confused. In front of me is a souped-up version of myself. It's as if I'm looking into a mirror that shows how it would be to be on the other side of society. What the hell...

"Hey." From the way he's eyeing me, that detail hasn't escaped him either.

The blonde snorts contemptuously as he withdraws his attention from her and devotes it exclusively to me. For a moment I stare at him, stunned, because my brain is unable to realise what is happening.

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"I'm Jasper. And you are?"

"Not interested in a conversation," I reply as the wheels in my head finally start turning again and I try to appear as unimpressed as possible. Jasper - the name alone sounds like a lot of money and his British accent seems exaggerated. As if he wanted to enhance his personality with it.

His gaze wanders to the metal sign pinned to my chest. Crap! "Cameron," he reads off it. I wish this encounter would amuse me half as much as it amuses him. At the moment it makes me nervous and I have absolutely no idea why. Besides, I'm tired. Incredibly tired. Exhausted.

"Take off your glasses," he demands, seriously reaching out to do it himself. Before he gets too close to me, I bat his hand away.

"I have to work," I press out and stumble as he cuts me off. "Cut the crap!", I yell at him and push him roughly aside.

Everyone in this world has at least one doppelganger. There are countless statistics on this. However, I never expected mine to stand in front of me in the flesh and grin at me stupidly.

"Wait a minute!" he calls after me as I walk through the swinging door back to the party. Damn it, I have forgotten the bubbly. The Rich Kid steps next to me and awkwardly carries a full tray in front of him. Wordlessly, I take it from him.

"Okay, Cam, let's face it. You look like me. Granted, you're the less handsome version. The dark circles under your eyes give any panda a run for his money. But it's really amazing how much you look like me. It's like you're my lost twin. Were you adopted, by any chance?"

Did he seriously just call me Cam? There are exactly three people in my life who are allowed to call me that. He is clearly not one of them.

I clutch the tray tighter so as not to accidentally hurl it into his overpriced face.

"Yes, it's really amazing when you think that every person has about seven doppelgangers," I reply as unimpressed as possible. I don't know why he's got me in such a rage, but I can't help it. In truth, he has done nothing to me that would justify my

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behaviour towards him. However, I tend to take a defensive stance in unpleasant situations or to run away in order not to have to face them. Not necessarily my best quality, but I'm working on it. In a way, anyway.

"Indeed, but how likely is it to meet one of them? I would say fate is playing into my hands. You could be useful to me."

Is he actually listening to himself? Useful? What am I, a household appliance?

With the tray in my hand, I meander through the guests. Jasper follows me like a lapdog while he talks to me incessantly.

"What are they paying you here?"

Really? Like I'm gonna stick it to him. I don't even know the guy. Annoyed, I turn to him and pull up an eyebrow. A gesture that tells him: Shut up already, you're getting on my nerves.

"Fifteen to twenty dollars an hour? That's a joke. The champagne you serve costs five times that."

The slightly biting undertone in his voice makes me curious. I take a moment to take a closer look at him, after all. His tuxedo looks a lot more casual than those of the other male guests. His dark hair also looks as if he has invested little time in styling it. His brown eyes look at me at least as intensely as my blue eyes look at him. At least there is something that obviously distinguishes us from each other.

"I need the money. So it would be nice if you would just let me do my job and get on someone else's nerves," I reply, turn around and bump into a party guest.

Completely overtired and much too hastily, I try to balance the tray. This is the moment when I lose my balance. Staggering backwards, I break through the barrier and fall into the pyramid of filled champagne glasses set up on a flat platform.

All this happens so quickly that I don't even cry out when splintered glass bores into my palms. Shit! I carefully remove the coarse glass fragments and then wipe the blood on my trousers. Then I take a look at the mess. Double shit. Little

streams of champagne are making their way across the marble floor. Some guests dab at their designer clothes with napkins to prevent any major damage. "Sorry," a blond guy mumbles, looking at me apologetically. Is that Paxton Wright, the Hollywood actor? *Road Explosion* is one of my favourite movies. If I wasn't sitting on my ass like a moron in this moment, I'd ask him for an autograph or a picture.

A glance over my shoulder tells me that two thirds of the pyramid have fallen victim to the impact. Damn, that will be expensive if I have to pay for it. Then I look at Jasper. With a visibly distressed expression, he holds out a hand to help me up. And then, for reasons that are completely inexplicable to me, I laugh out loud. Probably because this scenario could end in no other way than him looking down on me.

"What happened here?" my boss wants to know, suddenly appearing next to Jasper out of nowhere.

"A modern version of can toss. He's definitely the winner."

If I weren't the one drenched in champagne sitting in the middle of a pile of broken glass, I would actually find the Rich Kid's response funny.

"Cameron, a word!" my boss hisses.

I immediately get to my feet and follow him into the kitchen to get a telling off and probably my termination.

"Such behaviour is absolutely inappropriate," he rages as soon as the swinging door closes behind us.

"I didn't clear the pyramid on purpose, someone bumped into me," I reply in my defence.

"First you chat unabashedly with the guests instead of working. The glasses, the champagne, the guests' clothes - I don't even want to think about the amount of damage you've done at the moment. This is a disaster. And to make matters worse, you're laughing at the mess you've made."

"Well ... I ..." I break off in the middle of the sentence, because that's exactly what happened. And as it looks at the moment, I can't get my neck out of the noose anyway. That's it, he is kicking me out.

"You can go. I'll deduct the damage from your wages."

Once again I let out a laugh. This time out of the conviction that I am definitely screwed. Deduct? With the measly hourly wage, I'll probably end up paying him. Mentally, I add the costs to the list of things I still have to pay. My ex-boss's face turns deep red. What an evening. It can't get worse.

Exhausted, I peel myself out of the soaked waiter's waistcoat and throw it onto the work surface to my right. My gaze falls on one of the bottles of bubbly. Deciding quickly, I reach for it, even though I will never drink it. It is pure frustration. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Put it on the bill," I tell him and leave the kitchen with the bottle. I leave the villa through the back door and suck in the clear night air, but above all the silence.

"Respect. I wouldn't have taken you for a thief" Jasper's voice comes from the darkness.

I turn to him. In the dim light of his phone, he is sitting on the Hollywood swing. "I've been fired. If that's not a reason to celebrate," I sneer and solemnly hold the bottle in the air.

"That's what I suspected. After all, you're leaving before the party's over and you've bagged a hundred-dollar bottle."

A hundred bucks! Wow, I hope this stuff is worth the money. Without answering, I walk down the few steps into the garden.

"What now?" Jasper calls after me.

"What now?" I reply, because I have no idea where he's going with this. I look over my shoulder in his direction, waiting.

"What are you going to do, Cam? I thought you needed the money," he says and gets up from the swing.

"Now I'm looking for another job to pay for the damage I caused tonight."

Sighing, I shake my head. In order to be able to pay the pile of open bills, a miracle has to happen anyway.

"Then it's a good thing, I have a job for you. And I swear it's better paid than this nonsense." Light-footed, he hops down the stairs. With a few steps he stands in front of me and grins at me victoriously.

1.

Aspen

EARLY SEPTEMBER IN WATERBURY, CONNECTICUT

The car comes to a halt in front of the gigantic iron gate of the college. I sceptically fold my arms on the steering wheel, tilt my head to the side and look through the windscreen at what lies ahead. So this is it, the boundless freedom. Our home for the next three years. Somehow I imagined it differently. Less scary.

The euphoria with which I left for this adventure a few hours ago has just been dampened. I wanted to study at NYU and would have preferred to stay in New York. Then my plans changed. Home is the last place I want to be right now. However, I didn't think my path would lead me to Waterbury instead. And yet here I am, standing in front of a mansion that could have come out of an Alfred Hitchcock film. The cloudy sky adds to the bleakness of the setting.

"Have we arrived?", Abbie wants to know. Unlike me, she is here out of complete conviction.

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"Yes," I reply curtly and hear myself sounding disappointed. Abbie also leans forward a little to take a closer look at the gate, which is emblazoned with the words *Waterbury College* in gold letters.

"It looks nice. It has that British charm you know from old movies. Kind of romantic," she sums up. That's one thing to call it.

We cry out in surprise as someone knocks on the window. A guy in a dark blue uniform with the college emblem on his chest looks into the car, waiting.

Hesitantly, I lower the window.

"Welcome. May I ask for your registration papers?"

Abbie grabs her handbag from the back seat and digs out the documents. I lean over to her and take mine out of the glove compartment.

After the guard has checked everything, the gate swings open with a squeak.

"Please follow the road past the buildings on the right and take the second exit at the roundabout. Your accommodation is the last bungalow at the end of the road on the right-hand side," he instructs us.

"Okay, thanks," I reply, flabbergasted. Hastily, I start the engine again and drive at walking pace onto the grounds.

"Dion texted. She's already there and she's bored." Ever since I can remember, Abbie and Dion have been my best friends. Starting with kindergarten, we mastered all the important stages of life together. More or less successfully. So far, I had never hidden anything from them and had assumed that I never would. They had wondered about my spontaneous change of mind regarding my choice of college, but had swallowed my argument that I would miss them terribly. Best friends forever. Our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers already went to college together. To the one right in front of me. So we follow the old family tradition of the Hills, Carmichaels and Westings. Which is more than paradoxical, considering that I landed here to escape my family, not to follow their traditions.

Unlike a normal campus, there are neither fraternity houses nor dormitories here, but lots of small bungalows for one or up to three people. They exude no holiday camp charm, no, more of a luxury resort feeling. At least, if I can believe my dad's stories, because his credibility has been severely damaged in recent months.

The official homepage of the college does not have much to offer, apart from a few unapparent pictures. The privacy of the students is a top priority here. That's what it says in bold letters on the homepage on the internet. Waterbury is an existing myth. Everyone knows it exists, but what happens there stays there. Which is amazing in the age of social media. As if this place were an almost white spot on the digital map. Does anyone control what gets out and what doesn't? That would be a bit crazy ...

Dion steps through the door just as we get out of the car in front of bungalow number 27.

"Oh my God. Daddy bought you that Porsche." Yeah, he did, but I didn't ask him to. It's his way of keeping me quiet so I can keep up pretence of the Hills. I took it without comment. Robert Hill does not tolerate insubordination. I swallowed the resentment and behaved as I was expected to. Grateful.

With the flat of her hand, Dion reverently strokes the yellow paint of the car that was parked in our driveway this morning with a red bow on top. As soon as we get out, she pulls out her phone and takes a selfie with the Porsche in the background. "My followers will love it," she croons and begins to type eagerly. Dion's big dream: to become an influencer. She has the quality of being likeably pushy, which will definitely make her a success. However, it is quite possible that she will have to postpone her breakthrough until after college, should someone really pull the digital strings here and control the students' content so that not too much gets out.

Dion puts her phone in the back pocket of her jeans. "It's totally amazing, you guys have to see this."

I wish her enthusiasm would spill over to me, but instead an oppressive feeling spreads through me. My gaze wanders to the surrounding houses. Reddish-brown brick facades overgrown with ivy as far as the eye can see. Well-kept lawns, trimmed hedges and colourfully planted flower beds. Pretty, cosy and not as well-designed as Manhattan. The area looks like one of those old suburban neighbourhoods where the children play in the streets and the neighbours engage in conversation over the garden fence. Yet it exudes an aura of mystery. Idyllic and extremely far from what I had hoped for my time at college. This looks like a place for board game evenings rather than exuberant parties and a true college feeling.

"Aspen," Abbie calls, who is already standing on the doorstep with her suitcase in her hand. I quickly approach her so that we can look around the house together. Unlike what it looks like from the outside, the interior is modern, generously proportioned and impresses with its immaculate décor. A comfortable kitchen with white lacquered fronts adjoins an open-plan living area with a fireplace and a huge leather couch. The floor-to-ceiling windows offer a fantastic view of the nearby woodland. There is even a small terrace with lounge furniture and a Jacuzzi. The bathroom is a dream and has a freestanding bathtub, a shower and double sinks, all done in white and grey tones. The three bedrooms are the same size and identical, but furnished in a functional way. Double bed, wardrobe, shelf and desk. The rest is left to the students' taste and imagination. With just a few simple adjustments, it's quite comfortable here.

Abbie has already put her suitcases in one of the rooms. However, Dion does not agree with her decision. In her opinion, it has the best view. I know from experience that it's better not to get into a discussion between the two of them. So I choose the room that is not included in their debate. To be honest, I don't

see any qualitative difference between the bedrooms. Neither in the furnishings nor in the view from the window.

While the two squabblers call on the assistance of Rock-Paper-Scissors, I get my travel bag out of the boot. I only packed the essentials and left the rest behind in New York. Most of it feels wrong on my body now because I chose very little of it myself, my mom did. So far, I've always listened to her advice, but by now I'm wondering how much weight her statements have even had over the years. How often did she manipulate me without me noticing?

As I re-enter the bungalow, my gaze is caught by the college's dark blue emblem, trimmed with gold, which is depicted on the house rules. In the middle of the circle is a firebird that appears to be watching me. It's creepy. To make sure it is not overlooked, someone has demonstratively placed the brochure on the sideboard in the hallway. An information flyer about this year's finals project lies right next to it. *Be My Date* is written in curved letters.

A dating game? What a nonsense.

First I reach for the house rules and take a closer look at them. Waterbury has strict curfew hours. You can't enter or leave the grounds after midnight because the iron gate we just drove through is locked and there is no further access to the grounds. Ridiculous. This is college. The best three years of my life should not be dominated by curfews, alcohol bans and page eight, paragraph three.

Because that one says: no parties on campus grounds or in the buildings attached to the Waterbury College. That includes the residential bungalows. This is absolute bullshit!

"What are you reading?", Abbie wants to know when she spots me in the hallway with the brochure.

"How they want to spoil our fun," I reply, handing her the house rules with a loud sigh. Dion, who is half a head taller than Abbie, glances over her shoulder and looks at the brochure. "Alcohol prohibition? They do know how it works in Manhattan, don't they?"

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"You'll like point one", I mention with a grin.

Abbie flips to the first page. "The distribution of private visual material showing individual parts of the campus or its inhabitants is prohibited in any form. In exceptional cases, permission must be granted by the College. This includes social media services and personal blogs", Abbie reads aloud.

"They can't be serious. What is this, Fort Knox?" Cursing, Dion disappears into the kitchen.

"A repeated offence will result in expulsion from the college", Abbie continues.

"Okay, ladies, let's get rid of these before someone finds out I've been smuggling booze in my Prada bag." Dion conspiratorially holds up two bottles of champagne, which I'm sure she stole from her parents' liquor cabinet. I immediately grab one and pop the cork. The liquid bubbles out and spreads on the marble tiles. Abbie hurries away and immediately returns with glasses.

"Here's to freedom," I sneer and toast with my friends. At least I'm not stuck here alone. Because the suspicion creeps up on me that college might not be as exciting as the three of us had hoped.

2.

Cameron

TWO WEEKS LATER IN WATERBURY, CONNECTICUT

What the hell am I doing here?

Indecisively I stare at the twenty steps of the massive stone staircase in front of me, while people stream past me to the right and left into the building. My gaze glides up the immaculate brick façade and lingers on the golden letters.

"Waterbury College. Connecticut. Since 1875", I read.

"Welcome to the future elite and rulers of our society," I sneer softly. To get involved in this is madness. I should turn around, get in the car and fuck off.

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Instead, I sigh and put one foot in front of the other and climb the few steps that separate me from my uncertain adventure.

As soon as I step through the ornate entrance door, I stop moving and scan the surroundings. The marble tiles at my feet are polished to such a high shine that I can almost see my own reflection. A few steps away from me, a dark, magnificent wooden staircase leads upwards. The walls are lined with paintings framed in gold. Being subtle is obviously not the order of the day here. Ostentatious is more accurate, because at this moment my gaze catches the crystal chandelier attached to the dome-shaped ceiling.

"Wow," I say in shock. I had a vague idea of what to expect, but this dusty chic of past centuries almost overwhelms me.

As I watch in fascination how the sunlight falling through the glass dome catches in the chandelier and creates a rainbow in the huge entrance hall, someone bumps into me. The now lukewarm coffee in my hand develops a life of its own and a nanosecond later spreads on my cream-coloured jumper. Fuck! This is getting off to a great start. I have a brief déjà vu and find myself sitting on the floor between litres of champagne. If this is supposed to be some kind of running gag, I'll laugh later.

"Shit!", I curse indignantly as I look down at myself and see the full extent of it. A nervous-sounding "sorry" coming from my right catches my attention. My head shoots around and fixes on the brunette with a short haircut who is frantically rummaging in her handbag. When she finds what she's looking for, she looks at me apologetically. "Here. I'm sorry. I didn't see you." She hands me a handkerchief.

"It's okay, no big deal." I roughly remove the mess.

"Are you crazy? This is cashmere, you can't rub it as if it were cotton." She hasn't finished saying the words yet when she has already snatched the cellulose from my hand and is carefully dabbing it on my chest. Stunned, I stare at her. The brunette certainly has no fear of contact.

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"I can handle it. Thank you." To emphasise my statement, I put some distance between us.

"Oh," she replies, her cheeks turning bright red under the blush as she realises she has groped me.

"Sorry again." Her eyes dart towards the stairs. Mine follow hers. "Aspen, Dion?" she calls so loudly it rings in my ears. Then she hurries away without another word.

A blonde and a black-haired woman with green streaks look in my direction. My guess is that these are her girlfriends with the help of which she plans to escape from this uncomfortable situation without much drama. And I don't mind her running away. Being social and getting to know people is pretty much the opposite of what I have planned for the next few months.

The blonde, whose hair ends on her shoulders, stares at me too intensely for a moment. Her red-painted lips twist into a grin that I don't know how to interpret. Is she amused because I'm standing in the lobby with a coffee stain on my overpriced jumper or because I look like a complete idiot?

I suppress the urge to run my fingers through my hair to get back some of my usual self-confidence. I will probably take some time until I am used to the new look. Jasper's styling team did a great job. It's absurd. I'm a perfect copy of him in chinos, an ironed shirt under a cashmere jumper, straightened hair and, thanks to contact lenses, brown eyes and no glasses.

As soon as the brunette has fought her way to her friends, the blonde averts her eyes from me. Suddenly I have the feeling I don't know what to do with myself. Which reminds me that I really have no idea where exactly my class is.

I only arrived in Waterbury last night to embark on this daring venture, which means I missed the introductory events and the first two weeks of classes. I haven't even had time to look around the campus. This morning I just followed the flow of students and made a quick stop at the campus coffee shop.

The preparations for this charade took more time than we originally thought. Jasper had even tried to teach me his British accent. But since I sound like a bad caricature of a Brit and would be exposed faster than I can count to three, I am not even going to try to get away with it. Instead, I'll just rely on his statement that nobody knows him personally anyway. So my strategy for the next few months is to keep my mouth shut and attract as little attention as possible.

I fish the folded course plan out of my pocket to check where exactly my presence is expected. Seminar room 38. The selection of courses to choose from is pretty straightforward. All of them seem to be designed to pave the students' way into business or politics. The whole thing is spiced up by a handful of artistic offerings, which, however, have more of an entertainment character than an educational one, if you take a closer look at the focal points.

Where Jasper sees his future is hard to say. Besides the compulsory courses, his selection is a colourful mix of all fields. Unfortunately for me, he has chosen neither *Introduction to Architecture* nor *Contemporary History*. Instead, he tortures me with *Modern Drama* and *Sports*. For that alone I should demand compensation.

"*The genius of tomorrow*", I read from the paper. Who the hell names a course like that?

I look around aimlessly in the building, which doesn't look anything like a college, but more like an old mansion. Only the four corridors that lead from the entrance hall give an idea of how huge the main building really is and that the homely charm is only a camouflage. Basically, Waterbury is not what I expected. I mean, someone has built a huge wall around the grounds, as if there were a secret CIA base here, far away from any civilisation. We are so far away from the city centre that I was afraid the navigation system of the Mustang, which Jasper provided me with, wanted to take the piss out of me.



An information board on room occupancy would be helpful, but it doesn't exist. So I approach a passing group. "Hey, can you help me? I have no idea where *The Genius of Tomorrow* is taking place."

"Ah, Professor Henson, a real weirdo," one of the guys confirms my suspicion that the guy has to have a screw loose somewhere.

A chime, followed by another, clangs through the entrance hall. Startled, I look around as suddenly mighty movement comes into the sluggish bunch of students who had previously been creeping through the corridors.

"The room is on the second floor on the right-hand side. You can't miss it. There's a picture of Einstein on the door," the guy says again.

Well, that's just great. Can it get any sillier?

"Are you going to be OK?" the guy asks, raising one of his blond eyebrows. His friends have already ducked out so as not to be late for their classes.

"Um ... yes. Thanks." Before I start moving, I peel myself out of the jumper and stow it in my shoulder bag, emblazoned with a Gucci logo. With the money Jasper spent on it, my family could probably fill the fridge for a month. It's crazy when money doesn't matter. The floral pattern shirt, now in its full glory, would be a hit at any costume party. I wish Jasper had a less outlandish style and that I hadn't blindly trusted him when he showed up at my door with the suitcases already packed. What twenty-year-old guy dresses like that without feeling stupid?

When a bell chimes again, sounding like a final warning, I hurry up the stairs and keep to the right. The moment I pull open the door, I know why there is a picture of Einstein stuck to it. Professor Henson is at least as perfect a copy of the genius as I am of Jasper.

"Oh, a latecomer to our illustrious society," he says when he spots me motionless in the doorway. His white hair is sticking up wildly from his head, as if he had reached into a power socket just a few seconds before. "You haven't got the wrong course, have you?" he asks, because I'm just staring at him.

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How the fuck did I end up here?

When a worried expression appears on his wrinkled face, I clear my throat. "No, the Einstein at the door did a first-class job," I reply, and in an imaginary gesture smack myself against the forehead. *You fool!*

A murmur goes through the room and catches my attention. My gaze wanders through the rows and lingers on red lips that have twisted into an inconspicuous smirk.

"A little joke from the graduating class. And you, my young friend, are?"

My head snaps back to Einstein ... er, Professor Henson. So much for *staying under the radar*. Again I look around the room and catch a lot of questioning faces. *Yeah, who's the guy making an ass of himself here?*

"Jasper Maxwell Anderson," I reply flatly.

"Well, well, Mr Anderson, why don't you find a free seat so that I can tease the genius out of you, too." The undertone in Einstein's voice, which resembles an acoustic grin, reveals that he is amused by the situation.

With a quick glance, I scan the rows for a seat and briefly falter when I spot the empty chair next to the blonde. In the row in front of her sits the Brunette and to her right I spot green strands in coal-black hair.

The moment Blondie looks up and catches me staring, that smile appears again that can mean everything and nothing. It is as frightening as it is fascinating. But maybe that's only because of the bright red lipstick on her otherwise rather discreetly made-up face. The shade is so eye-catching that it could pass for a warning. And it works, because I tear my gaze away from her and purposefully take a different direction. Visually, she's exactly my type, and that calls for complications. Under no circumstances must I lose sight of my goal. We need the money. I owe it to Granny El, Kaden and Cassie not to lose their home because of this. We've all lost too much already.

A guy with pale red hair raises his hand before pointing to the empty seat next to him. Clearly the better choice and completely safe.

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"Hey, I'm William, but you can call me Will."

"Jasper," I reply curtly and turn my gaze to the front. Meanwhile, Professor Henson has continued his lesson and is handing out a stack of books.

What the hell possessed me to get involved in this crap? I don't have any acting talent, nor am I particularly good at lying through my teeth. No one is less suited for this doppelganger act than I am. Still, fifty thousand dollars is a hell of an incentive to at least try.

3.

Aspen

With an outstretched arm, I tap Dion, who is sitting in the row in front of me.

"Hey, genius," I whisper just loud enough for her to hear me. She leans back in her chair and looks curiously over her shoulder. Abbie turns to me as well. "Do you know which Andersons he belongs to?", I want her to tell me. If anyone knows the high society kids, it's my best friend. While I rather casually pick up the gossip, Dion confidently distributes it to all who want to hear it.

To my astonishment, she shrugs her shoulders cluelessly. "His dad is the real estate shark who is flattening the socially deprived areas to build luxury flats instead," answers Abbie, who obviously knows exactly who the guy in the floral shirt is. And indeed, something rings a bell. Anderson leaves no stone unturned in the outskirts of New York. Unlike my dad, who supports countless charitable projects in these areas. The good Samaritan with a perfect family. Except we are anything but. My dad proved that impressively a few months ago.

He and Anderson have been clashing with each other for years because they have different views on many things. But to be honest, I don't know much about their disputes or the party in conflict. These things have never been relevant to me and have not particularly interested me. Until three minutes ago, I didn't even know that the Andersons had a son, even though his family is a

regular topic in the Hill household. I was more busy with growing up and letting myself be pushed into a mould. There had been a plan for me, and I had never doubted until now that the direction I was being pushed in was the right one. However, that was before the trust in my dad was shaken to its foundations. Now I'm up in the air about my future.

I swallow my budding rage and let my gaze dart to our newcomer, who is staring straight ahead and looks extremely tense. Why is he only showing up now? The courses have already started a fortnight ago.

"And what do we know about him?" With a discreet nod, I point in the direction of the guy who has introduced himself as Jasper, causing a murmur among everyone in the room.

"Not much. My mom meets with his on a regular basis because of the foundation. She told me how surprised she was when Miss Anderson suddenly introduced her son Jasper to her at a recent event in Cincinnati. His parents had shipped him off to an English boarding school and emigrated to the States without him. Anyway, that's the story she told my mom. The rest are rumours," Abbie answers matter-of-factly, as if she were an investigating officer. English, then. Interesting.

While Dion could fill any gossip column, Abbie is clearly at home in the conspiracy theory department. Nowadays I clearly fall into the category of *believe only what you see and hear for yourself, not what others want you to believe*. I have learned a lot from my previous naivety.

"Hogwash. There's usually something to rumours," Dion says, shaking her head vehemently.

"Really? So you're actually dating Hastings?", Abbie shoots back.

Snorting, Dion lets out a breath. I stifle a grin because this topic is one of the few that drive her up the wall. "Does Hastings have a platincard?" she taunts.

No, he certainly doesn't. He probably doesn't have more than a bonus card from his parents' diner. They keep him on a tight leash financially, so he doesn't stand a chance with Dion. She loves to spend money and her dream man should share this passion or at least have the means to do so.

A clearing of the throat makes us raise our heads almost simultaneously.

"Ladies, would you like to share your conversation with us? It seems I am boring you with Marxist economic theory."

"We were just discussing the extent to which loans have already influenced capitalism in the nineteenth century," Dion answers sweetly, as if she had seriously been listening to him. My best friend and Karl Marx would certainly never have been friends. Unlike him, she has no problem at all with her family's wealth growing and growing at the expense of their employees. The main thing for her is that all her credit cards are covered. Yes, that's very shallow thinking, but can you really blame her? If you grew up in the Carmichael house, one of the most powerful fashion houses of our time, you tend to not realise the suffering of others.

Professor Henson looks thoughtful for a moment before actually responding to her words. Dion and Abbie look forward again and join the debate on capitalism and its impact on our society.

Again I look at Jasper, who grins mischievously to himself as he catches me watching him. For a blink of an eye, he withstands my curious gaze. Then he turns his attention to the lively conversation going on around us. Mine, on the other hand, belongs exclusively to him for the next ninety minutes. And I don't even know exactly why. Maybe because he belongs to the family that mine can't stand? I wonder how my dad would react if I showed up at home with the Anderson scion of all people? A tempting thought.

As soon as the class is over, Jasper hurries out of the room with his head down, as if he wants to prevent anyone from engaging him in conversation or even looking at him. Strange.

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"Aspen?"

I look thoughtfully at the open door through which he has just disappeared.

"Don't you think it's strange that he doesn't have a British accent, even though he grew up in England?"

Abbie grins at me, amused. "I know that look." I raise an eyebrow questioningly.

"What are you talking about?"

"She means you've smelt a rat and the poor guy is going to fall victim to you,"

Dion replies. She might be right about that. The guy doesn't seem *very British*, and that actually awakens my curiosity.

\* \* \*

"Is that Jasper you're staring at?"

Startled, I tear myself away from the picture, which shows Jasper staring straight into the camera. To his right and left are his parents. While his dad radiates pure authority, his mum smiles kindly. I look over my shoulder at Abbie.

"I'm not staring at him, I'm doing research," I protest. After spending the entire morning thinking about him, I decided in the afternoon to find out more about him so that he would no longer dominate my thoughts. However, the question mark has become bigger rather than smaller. Because I can find almost nothing about him. Either the guy doesn't exist or he's been largely erased. It's all more than strange. There are no recent pictures or anything that points to his whereabouts.

"And why you do that?" she asks. Sighing, I put the tablet down on the dining table. Abbie pulls up a chair before she takes a seat and looks at me curiously.

"The guy doesn't even have a social media account," I remark, dodging her question. Because I don't have an all-encompassing answer to the why.

It was curiosity that I followed, and it's something else that now won't let me go.

Playing like a song in an endless loop in my head. Who is this guy? Actually, I

was aiming for the exact opposite. Instead of calming my mental carousel, I fed it further by entering Jaspers name into the search engine.

Almost mechanically, I worked my way through various articles about his family. Soaking up every piece of information. While his dad slides from one scandal to the next, Jasper is not mentioned at all in connection with the Andersons. Basically, I'm just as smart as I was before. And it's frustrating. It's as if he's been hidden away somewhere and has unexpectedly crawled out of the thicket.

"There are supposed to be people who don't care about social media," Abbie snaps me out of my thoughts.

"But not at our age. Everyone has an account," I reply almost appalled, as if it were a crime not to share one's life with the world. Which, of course, it isn't, but I would have liked to know who I was dealing with in order to get some answers to my questions.

"Maybe he has one under a different name," Abbie interjects, and rightly so. I haven't even thought of that yet. However, I don't know anyone in our circles who does not use his name as a figurehead. It's practically good manners to present yourself publicly and to network with each other. The name is your brand.

Just at this moment I feel the urgent need to change my own account name and take off the Hill label. Maybe it's the same with Jasper and he doesn't have much to do with his family? That would be conceivable and would explain his high-society abstinence. But my instinct tell me there's more to it than that.

"Mmh", I grumble annoyed, because this result does not satisfy me. But what did I expect? That I would enter his name, and poof, his secrets open up to me? Yes. Basically, that's exactly what I was hoping for. After all, the internet doesn't forget. But that doesn't seem to be the case with Jasper Anderson.

Because I can't sit still while I think, I start pacing up and down the kitchen.

"Wait, you like Jasper," Abbie suddenly squeals, almost scaring me to death. My friend never squeals. She is not loud or impulsive. Quiet and deliberate is her way. Waterbury obviously tickles another Abbie out of her.

"No, I'm just curious," I contradict.

"So curious that you're stalking him?" She giggles softly. Okay, was the real Abbie abducted by aliens?

"Jesus. I typed his name into Google and didn't call the CIA on him," I defend myself.

"Who did you call the CIA on?" a voice sounds from the hallway at that very moment. Dion's unbeatable talent of always appearing on the scene when you need it least. Her heels click across the tiled floor, announcing her entrance. And it truly is an entrance. She is wearing a pink jacket, made of countless plush threads, and underneath a cropped, sequined top. Skin-tight white trousers that shine gold when Dion moves, changing the way the light falls on the garment. Blinking, I stare at her. Abbie gives a horrified "Wow". The handbag dangles in the crook of Dion's arm as she taps away on her phone, then she looks up. No offence, but she looks like she's been crossed with a flamingo.

"Are you OK? You look like you missed the sale at Dior."

Blindly, I grope for the fridge on my right because I can't get away from the sight of her. When I reach for nothing, I turn to the built-in cupboard to open it. After a quick glance, I reach for the milk carton. I take a sip and puff out my cheeks. Disgusted, I bend over the sink and spit out whatever is in my mouth.

"Serves you right. Someone invented glasses and cups for a reason," says Dion seriously.

"This stuff is disgusting, what's in it?"

"Vinegar."

"You put vinegar in the milk? Why?" I ask in horror. Where does she come up with such nonsense? Is this one of those new beauty tips? I can hardly imagine anyone swallowing that voluntarily.

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"So you don't drink out of the carton anymore."

"Did you know our friend is so vicious?", I turn to Abbie, who hides her grin behind her hand. "So it's a conspiracy." Since we moved into this bungalow together, the two of them have already complained several times about some of my habits, and I have promised improvement. In vain. There are things that are difficult to get rid of when you have acquired them over the years. This is now an attempt to beat it out of me with a crowbar.

"Yes, and if you continue to leave your shoes in the hallway, I will tie the laces together."

"You sound like my mum," I joke.

"That's how I feel too. Have you always been this messy and I just didn't notice it until now?"

"I'm afraid they've tried to cover it up with the help of house staff," I confess with a grin.

Dion sits down at the dining table shaking her head. "You're a lost cause. So who did you call the CIA on?" she repeats her question.

"No one," I reply. I open the fridge again, reach for the Coke bottle and unscrew it. Dion gives me a warning look when I don't make an effort to get a glass.

"What, you two don't even drink the sweet stuff." Annoyed, I let out my breath, but take a glass anyway.

"Is someone going to enlighten me or do I have to guess?" she asks. My eyes dart to Abbie. She won't tell on me, but Dion will keep probing until she has all the answers.

"I googled Jasper and Abbie caught me at it, that's all."

"I knew it, you like weird guys."

"I don't at all!", I protest. My interest in Jasper certainly does not stem from the fact that I find him attractive. My inner Sherlock senses that something is wrong with the guy. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Yes, you do. You were the only one in high school who liked Grayson. His ears sticking out was an imposition." Dion wasn't a fan of Grayson for various reasons, and it wasn't because of his ears.

"I thought they were cute," I reply with a grin. Admittedly, Grayson did not conform to the common ideal of beauty, but he was polite, courteous and had absolutely no problem with me drinking directly from his bottle.

"Is that why you broke up with him after he had his ears pinned back?" No, but because he had suddenly developed an extroverted self and thought himself irresistible. His new ears had been like an upgrade to the upper class of attractiveness. Suddenly he was receiving attention from all sides. He enjoyed the female attention a little too much. He didn't even bother to hide the fact that he was cheating on me.

"Yes," I reply.

"What was the name of that guy you dated in tenth grade? The one with the black eyeliner and the painted fingernails?", Dion keeps rubbing my strange taste in men in my face.

"Smoke. At least that's what he wanted to be called." Great, now loyal Abbie is stabbing me in the back too.

Dion snorts. So that's what you call best friends.

"Or the one whose mom sat two tables away on your first date. And remember Paul, the passionate pleat lover?"

"Okay, got it." I roll my eyes in annoyance, but can't help grinning as it dawns on me that Dion is right. I have a thing for weird guys. Jasper, however, is more mysterious than weird. There must be something about the guy somewhere. This cluelessness really pisses me off. When I type my name into Google, it fills entire pages. With Dion, the search engine spits out twice as much. There can't be nothing about him. What is he, a phantom?

"It's similar with Christmas trees, by the way. You manage to find the ugliest one every year. Don't even think about putting up such a monstrosity here in

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December." Dion takes the wind out of my sails before I can even think about continuing the tradition in Waterbury.

I love this family tradition. Growing up in a world where so much emphasis is placed on beauty, it's even more important to love the imperfect things as much as the seemingly perfect ones. Giving a crippled Christmas tree a home seems like a good start to me.

This year, however, things will be different because I don't plan on spending Christmas with my parents.

"And with best friends," I shoot back jokingly and tug at Dion's fringed jacket.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"I just had the worst date ever," she replies, peeling herself out of the pink frock. Together with Abbie, I burst out laughing. When did she ever not?

4.

Aspen

On Friday, we are sitting in the dining hall at lunchtime talking about the finals project when I spot Jasper in the far corner, alone at one of the tables.

"When exactly is the info session for this dating thing, next Wednesday or Thursday?" asks Dion. Abbie answers her, but I'm already not listening to either of them because my focus is on the guy who looks like he wants to go as unnoticed as possible.

"Make it even more obvious and I'll hang a sign with 'interested' around the neck," Dion says completely dryly and bites into her tofu sandwich unimpressed. Abbie giggles softly and tries to hide it by shoving a spoonful of porridge into her mouth. She promptly chokes.

"Serves you right." I stick my tongue out at her so she knows I don't mean the words.

My gaze had wandered through the dining hall for no particular reason and finally lingered on Jasper's back. The penetrating batik pattern of his shirt is hard to miss. Since Dion basically misses nothing, she naturally noticed me setting my sights on him. She didn't even look up from her food. This gift is among her most annoying traits. To deny it would only end in a fundamental discussion about how she knows me better than I know myself. And she is absolutely right about that. As soon as I get lost in a dead end, caught in my whirlpool of thoughts, Dion nudges me in the right direction before I completely lose track.

"Don't you think he's strange?" I ask. My gaze is automatically fixed on Jasper again.

"Then you make the perfect couple. You're weird too," Dion remarks. For this comment, she receives a playful punch against her shoulder from me. "What, did you look at his shirt? Who wears something like that, please? To be honest, that applies to your jeans too. Where did you even get those?"

"Secondhand," I answer proudly. In my mind I count backwards from three. It takes that long for Dion to look up and fan herself in a dramatic gesture.

"Someone wore that before you?" she asks, and I laugh out loud because I've never seen my best friend so horrified.

Before Dion faints, I enlighten her. "It's from my mum. I found a box of clothes in the attic that had been sorted out. She said she wore these jeans when she was about my age, before she met my dad." I don't even know why I packed this thing in the first place. But for some reason, I like it. Maybe because I wonder what kind of person my mom was before she got with my dad.

"So bad taste really can be inherited," the fashion expert sighs, shaking her head uncomprehendingly.

"I like your jeans, and also the shirt Jasper is wearing," Abbie agrees with me.

While Dion throws words around unchecked, she is always friendly. Sometimes even a little too much.

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"Thanks, my ego can really use that after Dion's scathing verdict." Quite automatically, my gaze follows Jasper again, who is currently walking across the dining hall towards the exit. Whenever I've seen him on campus in the past few days, he's been on his own. In general, it doesn't seem as if he is particularly interested in making contacts. For a moment he looks in my direction as he passes our table.

"Why do you think he didn't show up in Waterbury on time for the start of class?", I ask as soon as he has disappeared from my sight. There is probably a plausible explanation, but nevertheless the question keeps bothering me.

"Jetlag," Dion suggests as a possible reason.

"Jetlag, seriously?" I shake my head in disbelief. Only she could come up with something like that.

"There are supposed to be people who have massive problems with the different time zones," she adds as an argument.

"Maybe he was on holiday or sick?" Abbie's theory is more plausible. But something tells me there's something else behind it. I glance fleetingly at the clock.

"Damn it! I'm late for class." Hastily, I put my half eaten bowl of cereal on the tray and jump up from the chair. Just as I'm about to clear the dishes, Abbie pulls the serving tray towards her.

"I'll do it for you," she says.

"Merci. You are a treasure." Because the dish return is at the other end of the dining hall. And I really am late.

When you are pressed for time, the endless and labyrinthine corridors of Waterbury College are not exactly helpful in getting where you want to go quickly. There are no informative signs, so the construct of corridors and doors resembles a labyrinth inside old walls. However, the subject-related paintings on the walls give clues as to which wing one is currently in.

With quick steps I pass the part where the science courses take place and turn left into the artists' wing. I breathe a sigh of relief when I discover a small gathering of people in front of the room that is also my destination. Fortunately, Professor Simmons is late, which gives me some time to take a breath and arrive in peace.

My gaze wanders over the small crowd and gets stuck straight on a patterned shirt. Jasper is leaning against the wall a little away from the group and doesn't look particularly enthusiastic. As if he had noticed me, he looks over at me. Immediately his brow furrows as he looks at me as curiously as I look at him. A few seconds pass in which we look at each other. Then he lowers his head, ending the eye contact. *Okay, who are you, Jasper Anderson?*

Before I realise it, I have overcome the distance between us and am standing next to him. A barely audible sigh escapes him, which is difficult to interpret. If I had to guess, I would say he is annoyed.

"Hey." I carefully nudge him with my elbow. His head whips around and I try a friendly smile. Dion claims no matter how hard I try, it's never possible to tell if the contortions of my lips are a smile or a challenge to my counterpart. And from the way his eyebrow moves up, he's not sure either. "Jasper, right?" I try to get a conversation going.

Very slightly, his lips part. Just when I think I'm about to get an answer, he pushes himself off the wall and leaves me standing there. Wow, no one has ever turned me down so quickly. And this despite the fact that I wasn't even trying to flirt with him, but merely intended to tease some information out of him.

"Go, go, my flock, Shakespeare awaits," Professor Simmons' clear voice rings out. She stands at the open door and shoos the rest of the students together. As soon as I enter the sparsely lit theatre space, I look around for the guy who turned me down in such an uncharming way. Even though I hate to admit it, it really does scratch my ego a bit. I just asked him for his name and didn't ask him out. Unlike the other seminar rooms, there are no rows of seats and tables here,

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but colourful seat cushions that seem to be scattered wildly on the floor. In the middle of the room, a golden sound bowl is lying on a cushion, waiting to be used. Countless green plants stand in the corners, and the scent of incense sticks is in the air, completing the hippie ensemble. In the front area there is a small stage with heavy red velvet curtains. The blinds on the windows are closed, and the only light is coming from the yellowish spotlights, which are mounted on a rod above the stage.

All in all, the whole thing has a cosy but thoroughly esoteric feel. Professor Simmons reflects one hundred percent of the flair that one finds here. Ankle-length yellow-orange batik dress, braided pigtails and jewellery with so many delicate individual parts that one has the feeling it is playing a melody as soon as her wrists move and a tinkling sound is heard.

"Aspen, have you booked a standing ticket today or will you be joining us?"

As if stuck, I stand between a palm-like plant and a golden Buddha statue, while I am still thinking about giving the course a miss after the encounter with Jasper. With a feather-light hand movement, as if she were playing with the air, the professor points to a free seat cushion. To my misery, Jasper sits on the cushion next to it and looks sceptically in my direction. Before I comply with her request, because escape is definitely no longer an option, I take a deep breath and swallow my resentment. Under no circumstances will I let on that the guy has offended me with his ignorant manner.

Once I have taken a seat next to Jasper, Professor Simmons continues. "Before we return to Shakespeare's epic work *Romeo and Juliet*, we open our minds and connect them to the environment."

Next to me, Jasper makes a snorting sound. The spiritual side of the woman in the hippie dress is obviously not to his taste.

With a mallet, she gently strikes the sound bowl. It emits a soft sound that spreads like waves through the room. "Close your eyes. Breathe deeply into your innermost being, open your mind and release all your fears and doubts. Take in

the vibrations of your surroundings and fill your consciousness with positive energy."

Another annoyed snort to my left prevents me from continuing to follow her instructions. Instead, I look at Jasper. He has narrowed his eyes and twisted his lips into a crooked grin. I take the opportunity to look at him more closely. A single strand of his dark brown hair hangs in his forehead and I feel the sudden impulse to move it back into place. There are a handful of freckles on the bridge of his nose, giving him a cheeky look. I feel like he is cheeky, but that he is trying to hide it. But I have yet to find out the reason for that. He has a surprisingly pretty jawline. Not so prominent that his face looks square, more feminine, almost gentle. I mentally trace Jasper's contour with my index finger to memorise it.

His full eyebrows draw together, creating a steep crease between them.

"Are you done staring at me then?" he whispers.

"No," I reply a touch too loudly. "I'm not at all. In fact, I'm just starting to take a closer look at you."

My clumsy reply brings an amused smirk to his perfectly curved lips. Crap! A few moments ago, my offended ego was giving him the middle finger and now it's happily unwrapping the pom-poms for him. This doesn't happen to me. I don't get weak just because a guy grins at me. Not ever. It takes a little more than that. Jasper leans a little closer to me, opens his eyes very slowly and catches me cold. Without warning, I plunge into a seemingly endless black-brown, reminiscent of liquid bittersweet chocolate, and am drawn into the depths that lurk within. It is almost impossible to escape the pull that holds me like a hostage and whispers promises to never let me go. The dim light gives this moment the necessary magical touch.



"Hey," he whispers barely audible and the rough tone of his voice makes every fibre of my body vibrate. Holy shit, what's happening right now? When he gives me a radiant but audacious smile, I return it because I just can't help it.

"Hey," I whisper back.

The smile turns into a broad grin, exposing a deep dimple on his right cheek that is to die for. And so the inevitable happens: The guy in the tie-dyed shirt has just turned my curiosity in a completely different direction.