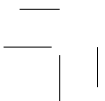
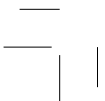
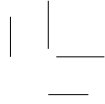




I WISH YOU WOULD





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EVA DES LAURIERS

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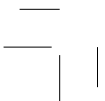
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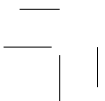


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For Justin, who loves with a love that is more than love.





CHAPTER ONE

Natalia

Prom Night, 2:08 AM

I CAN THINK OF about nineteen reasons not to follow Ethan to his room right now.

One: track practice in the morning. Two: finals study group after that. Three: the whole “avoiding these feelings at all costs” thing.

But then the corner of his mouth lifts in that half smile of his, and in a voice that’s gone gravelly from the late hour he asks, “Speaker duel?” and the reasons sputter out at three.

With everyone else crashed around us in a post-prom haze, *really*, the smart thing to do would be to go to sleep, too.

I grin and follow him up the stairs.

When I shut his door behind me, it’s finally just the two of us. My favorite thing.

Or, well, it used to be.

I look around his room for changes I’ve missed in the months I’ve avoided coming over. Nothing drastic. As usual, it’s orderly but lived in. The sky-blue walls are as familiar as my own. Stacks of books sit by the bed. Devices and cups litter his massive desk. I scan the framed photo

I gave him last year of us laughing on the beach, eyes squeezed shut, shoulders pressed together, our hair wild in the wind. His whole room is cozy and quiet and comforting. Just like Ethan.

“Here,” he says, tossing me one of his sweatshirts.

I suppress a smile. I didn’t even have to ask.

“This better be clean,” I mutter.

He rolls his eyes and stretches out on his giant bed to choose some music. All limbs and length and lean muscle honed on the basketball court.

I pull the sweatshirt that smells like him over my head, dislodging a few hairpins from my updo in the process. I adjust the strands of hair that fell down and gather the too-long sleeves into my fists.

When I turn, Ethan’s gaze is fixed on me, like he was watching me. He darts his eyes back to his phone.

I changed out of my cheap black prom dress earlier and cringed as I hung it next to Ethan’s perfectly tailored suit. I’d accepted my dress would be nothing compared to the designer outfits the rest of the school wore tonight. I’m used to that. But I didn’t expect to *feel* like nothing myself. That’s new.

Different worlds.

The words echo in my mind. The warning I haven’t told Ethan about. I haven’t told my best friend a lot of things lately.

We settle onto his bed in our usual positions, lying side by side, arm’s length apart, propped on our elbows, facing each other. Our bodies know the choreography of our friendship, even if I don’t anymore.

I grab my phone to choose something for speaker duel, which is what we call it when we race to see which one will pair with his Bluetooth speaker first. It’s silly, but it’s classic Ethan-and-Natalia-best-friend

vibes. Which is exactly what we need to ease the tension that's found a home between us lately.

"Let me guess, you're going Sad Girl Indie Album?" he asks.

My thumb pauses scrolling. That's exactly what I was going to choose. But I refuse to give him the satisfaction. "You'll have to wait until I win."

He dips his chin so we're at eye level. "You haven't been over in so long, the speaker probably won't even remember you."

He's teasing, but there's a slight . . . *something* in the way he says it. Hurt, maybe. Confusion, for sure. I sidestep it by rolling onto my stomach, crossing my ankles like a mermaid tail.

Ethan blinks at my feet once, then looks back at me. "Natalia," he says evenly, "are you wearing shoes on my bed?"

I look over my shoulder at my dangling feet. "No? Flip-flops don't count."

"Anything that brings sand in my bed counts," Ethan says, glaring at me.

"Don't be such a Virgo," I say, kicking my feet back and forth, messing with him.

"Says the control freak," he mutters, shaking his head. He pushes up on one arm. His large hands easily wrap around my bare ankles to stop my kicking. He slowly pulls off my sandals, and they land on the thick carpet with a soft thud. My stomach swoops as his fingertips drift down my legs a little before he lets go. "You're such a monster when no one is looking."

I flutter my lashes. "Part of my charm."

"I'm aware," he says affectionately.

As he settles back into position, I can't help but study the sharp lines of his jaw and cheekbones. The angles and curves I know by heart. For

the hundredth time, my fingers itch to sketch him, and I squeeze my hands into fists to suppress the urge.

Even though he's beyond embarrassed, it's no wonder he was voted prom king tonight. As a freaking junior, no less. That inky mussed hair, those piercing eyes . . . He's a dark prince fantasy come to life.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks, squinting with curiosity.

"I don't know. Like what? Shut up," I say in a rush.

"Oh . . . kay."

A soft *bloop* sounds from the speaker, indicating a phone is now paired. We wait. When a lo-fi beat comes on, I groan and Ethan gloats. Maybe he was right and his speaker doesn't remember me. That makes me sadder than it should.

"Did you know—" he starts, then stops. He clears his throat. "Never mind—it's stupid."

"I doubt it," I prompt.

Ethan never used to call himself stupid before the popular crowd started paying attention to him, and it sets my teeth on edge. I like his conversational left turns using facts and trivia and quotes. They're clues to what he's thinking about. I give him an expectant look.

"Fine . . . Did you know that *Virgo* means 'virgin' in Latin?"

"Yeah," I say, like, *duh*. Everyone has to take one year of Latin at Liberty Prep. I use my bitchy tone because it's hard enough to lock these feelings away when it isn't prom night and I'm not alone with him. But now he's looking devastating in the moonlight and talking about virginity? What's he going to bring up next? Our ridiculous pact from freshman year?

Ethan pulls on a loose thread of his T-shirt, wrapping it around his fingertip one way, then unwinding it and wrapping it the other.

“Historically it also was interchangeable with ‘maiden,’ which is messed up, since that implies it’s a status only girls can have.”

Wait.

I sit up, eyes wide. “Ethan Forrester, is this your way of telling me you had sex with someone?”

His eyes bug. “What—no!”

My relief is annoyingly palpable. I don’t want to think about Ethan with anyone like that, but I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t wondered. He’s always been beautiful, but *everyone* noticed when Gawky Ethan grew into Hot Ethan. And it’s not like I’m immune to noticing, either.

“So, you’re still a *Virgo* Virgo?” I joke.

“I mean, it depends on your definition,” he says, not looking at me. “But, yeah, technically.”

Heat creeps up my neck. “Oh. That’s . . . specific,” I manage. “When exactly did we decide this is something we talk about?”

“You literally just asked!”

Girls like you make boys do bad things. Is this one of those things? I really need to change the subject.

“Besides”—Ethan cuts his eyes to me—“we talk about everything else.”

Guilt needles my sternum. Not everything.

Ugh, what am I doing? I shouldn’t be lying beside Ethan in the middle of the night talking about our sex lives. Or lack thereof in my case. But . . . I can’t make myself move, either. I chew on my lip, every nerve in my body at attention.

“I mean, I hope you know you can tell me if you ever . . . have something to share,” he says.

The silence between us is short but charged. Like when the tide pulls back just before a thunderous wave.

“Who says I don’t?” It’s definitely just my competitive streak putting that edge in my voice.

He sits up fast, dark curls falling over his forehead that he pushes back. His usually pale skin is flushed in the dim light, and we’re close enough that I can see his pulse pick up in his neck. “Do you? Was it Tanner?”

“No,” I admit. “He wanted to, but . . . no.”

It’s why I ended up flying solo at the prom I organized. Tanner Brown dumped me at the last minute for being, and I quote: “not worth it.” Not sure if he meant his time, the prom ticket, or the fact that I didn’t want to get a hotel room with him after. But we had only been together three weeks. I wasn’t about to lose my virginity with someone who hadn’t even outlasted my most recent tank of gas. No matter how curious I am about the whole thing.

Ethan flops back on the pillow beside me, obviously relieved. “Good. I can’t believe you ever went out with that guy.”

Honestly, I can’t, either. But no one else asked me to prom, and it would be pathetic if the president-elect showed up alone. Which it was. So, you know, beggars and choosers and all that.

“We don’t all have them busting down our doors the way you do,” I say.

Ethan rolls his eyes as if he isn’t constantly fielding texts. He got asked to prom by *three* different girls. He said he turned them down because he could tell they only asked him because of his dad. It’s possible, but it’s equally as possible they like him. Everyone does now.

“That doesn’t mean you should go for just anyone. Tanner’s such a dick. You deserve so much better.”

“Like who?”

Ethan nudges me with his shoulder. “I would’ve taken you.”

“Pity date? No thanks,” I say. Shoving the *feelings* away, away, away.

He frowns a little. “You were down freshman year.”

I push the sleeves of the sweatshirt above my elbows because I’m warming up now. “What’re you talking about?”

“Don’t you remember? Our pact,” he says, finally meeting my eyes.

He really went there. The canvas in my mind flushes in pinks. Blooming and vibrant and rosy.

“I remember,” I say carefully.

As if I could forget. At the time, we pinkie swore to be each other’s firsts if we were still virgins by senior year because I didn’t want to lose my virginity to a jerk, and Ethan was so terrified of girls he figured he’d die a virgin otherwise.

“But I was also the only member of your Waluigi Appreciation Club. I wasn’t exactly making great choices.” I keep making jokes to quell the tingly feeling in my stomach.

He stares off into the middle distance, his expression pensive. “If you can’t love me at my Waluigi, you don’t deserve me at my prom king.”

I laugh and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. His gaze follows the motion.

“I still can’t believe it. I don’t think a junior has ever won before,” I say.

He returns his attention to the ceiling, his thick eyebrows coming together. “It was probably rigged.”

“Rude. I counted those votes personally.” In a tone like I’m breaking bad news, I say, “You’re going to have to accept that you cornered the ironic emo vote.”

He laughs, but I can tell the whole thing makes him uncomfortable. The only bright lights Ethan likes are the glow of his gaming PC and his reading light. He’s shy and doesn’t get why anyone would pay attention to him other than the fact that his jerk dad is just a *wee bit* famous. He has no idea how cool he is in his own right.

A sharp breeze brings the briny scent of the ocean through the window, and I close my eyes and inhale deeply. Warm fingertips start tracing a lazy path up and down my forearm. I'm not sure if Ethan knows that he does this when he's thinking, but I've always loved it. His touch leaves a trail of goose bumps in its wake. On a sigh, I settle deeper into the bed.

We lie like that awhile in contemplative silence. The plush blue bedspread is so cozy, fatigue pulls on me. Ethan tracing my arm, my eyes getting heavier.

I'm almost asleep when he says, "I think you're my favorite person, Natalia."

My eyes flutter open, and our gazes lock.

I *hate* how badly I want to kiss him.

I can't believe what I'm saying, but the words fly out of my mouth anyway. "What if we did it? Our pact."

Ethan's hand freezes. "What?"

"I mean. Why not? We're almost seniors, we're both single, we care about each other. You're not—you know, *horrible* to look at."

"Thanks?"

"I'll never feel comfortable with some random guy the way I do with you."

Whenever guys start to get to know me, they all say versions of the same thing: I'm too intense; I stress them out; I need to relax. They think they're getting the girl I pretend to be. Nice. Confident. Happy. No one wants the real me—the wreck I am inside.

Hello, dumped before prom night.

But here is my best friend who's . . . prismatic. Light shines through him, and he creates color for me. It's the way he's exactly himself. The

way he lets me be exactly who *I* am. No armor, no fake smiles. And I'm his favorite person. And he's mine.

His expression is unreadable. "You're messing with me."

I sit up, the idea gaining momentum in my mind. "I'm not. I know it's . . . kinda awkward . . ."

"Uh, yeah, *kinda*," he says, a flush dusting his cheeks. "We're just friends."

I ignore the unexpected twist in my gut. "I know—I'm not, like, proposing marriage. It would just be to try. The whole point of the pact was to learn what it's like with someone . . . familiar, right?"

I tell myself if we do it this way, our friendship will survive it. We'll get whatever *this* is out of our systems and be friends like before. No more feelings. Everything will be okay again. *We'll* be okay again.

"I mean, you brought it up. And it *is* prom night," I say.

"Wait, you mean *tonight*? Like right now?" His voice gets higher.

I shrug, my heart racing. "No? Maybe? What do you think?"

"Um. This is a, um, very surprising turn of events."

The more nervous Ethan gets, the more formal he becomes. It makes me pause. In that pause I hear everything I just said from his perspective and I kind of want to die.

"Totally. Never mind. This is clearly my worst idea yet."

He fights a smile. "No, that title still goes to Lobster Day."

I bury my face in my hands. "Oh god. Don't remind me."

"Hey, if it wasn't for you, I'd never know just *how* allergic I am to shellfish."

When I peek at him over my hands, we both crack up. I assume that's the end of this weird conversation where I was obviously possessed by a sex-crazed Demon Natalia who was ready to get naked with the same

guy she shot up with an EpiPen last summer after challenging him to a lobster-roll-eating contest.

But as I lie back against his pillows, Ethan starts tracing again. My arm. Then my collarbone, which is new territory. Our eyes meet. And then everything shifts when he curls his hand around my waist and brings me closer to him. He's propped on his elbow, looking down at me, searching my face. The music's stopped. The only sound is our breath, picking up faster and faster.

"Would you . . . really want to do this?" he asks.

Never one to follow, I pull both the sweatshirt and my shirt over my head with trembling hands. His eyes widen as he takes in my bare torso. I'm still wearing a bra, but I can't help but blush under his look.

I force my voice to sound calm when I say, "C'mon. We've seen each other in less at the beach."

"This is different," he says.

I swallow. "I know." I can tell by the way his gaze is lighting my skin on fire that it is. "It's okay if you don't want to."

"No, I—" His voice breaks, and he clears his throat. "I do."

Then in one smooth motion, he pulls off his shirt and drops it in a heap on the floor. I thought I could handle it, seeing him like this. But when the guy you feel safest with in the world is beautiful and his bare skin brushes against yours, apparently it unlocks . . . everything.

"Do you have condoms?" I ask.

His throat bobs with a swallow, and he nods.

Girls like you . . .

But the warning falls away when he nudges close. Resting his forehead against my shoulder, his breath hot on my neck, he murmurs, "I can't believe this is happening."

"I can't believe you're talking," I say dryly.

His chest shakes with laughter, and I smile into his hair. Hesitantly, I reach up and slowly twine my fingers through it. I can feel him tremble. He pulls back to look at me, his hazel eyes holding mine.
“God, Natalia,” he whispers.
Then my best friend leans in and kisses me.