



Katie D. Anderson



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AMAZON CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING

IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU KNOW:

My obsession with lip gloss has officially ruined my life.



If I hadn't been so absorbed in the pale-blue UPS box delivered to my house today, I would have heard my phone chirp earlier. And if I had heard the cricket-sounding chirp, I would have seen my best friend Trina's text. And if I had seen her text, I would have read the following life-changing announcement:

**Gt 2 the pool ASAP. spin the bottle!!!**

Admission: I am fourteen and have never been kissed. But in my defense, neither has Trina.

Until about an hour ago, apparently.



"Can you go any faster?" I ask my aunt Arch as we drive down Lexington Avenue. The WELCOME TO HAYGOOD, MISSISSIPPI sign passes in a watery blur as thousands of tiny raindrops pummel the windshield like frustrated, angry tears—the kind I feel like shedding over missing my first and only chance at a real, male-to-me kiss. Ugh.

"I'm going as fast as I can, Emerson. What on earth is so important?" She is turning onto Elderberry Street, which I

know for a fact will delay our journey by at least two minutes; but we both love seeing the old homes and their incredible landscaping. So I suck it up and try to enjoy the view.

It's not working.

"Emerson?" she repeats, pulling her eyes away from the new brick house on the left. "What's so important?"

"It's nothing," I lie, rereading the stream of messages that followed Trina's first spin the bottle alert. "Trina just wants to show me something."

I don't tell her that "something" is a boy.

A boy Trina kissed.

A boy who is currently sitting in her house like a zoo exhibit just waiting for me to admire him.

And I don't tell her that I want a "something," too. Instead, I look at my watch and pray the boys are still there. Trina texted me thirty gut-wrenchingly-long minutes ago to say that she had left the pool with Luke, her neighbor Trey, and some guy named Silas and that they were headed to her house. Arch was busy at the time, so I'd bitten my nails and paced the house while waiting for her to drive me over. Since then I've been picturing Trina and the boys laughing.

And talking.

And kissing.

Without me . . .

But then, about seven minutes ago, I got this text: **Guess who's here?**

Me: **Who?**

Trina: **Vance!!!!!!!**

Translation: My beloved: Vance *His Royal Hotness* Butcher.  
**VANCE BUTCHER!**

*Oh, why did I leave my phone upstairs to look in that stupid blue box? Why!*

“There’s the McNeelys’,” Arch says cheerfully. “I just love that house.” She slows down, and I glance over at the giant white house on the corner—a two-story, southern plantation-style home with porches on both the first and second floors.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Arch says dreamily. “Let’s stop. I told Cheryl I’d drop the new catalog by.” She reaches her right arm over the backseat and fumbles around blindly while driving with her left hand.

“But it’s raining,” I say, looking at the time on my cell phone and wondering how long it takes for regular boys to get bored of kissing.

Arch weaves into the left-hand lane, still trying to get a catalog out of the box on the backseat.

“Stop,” I tell her. “This is as bad as texting. I’ll get it.” I lean over the seat and grab the new catalog. “Seriously, Arch. Trina needs me *now*. So please don’t talk forever. Okay?” My aunt Arch is the top-selling Stellar Cosmetics rep in our region, so dropping off a catalog is no more a quick-and-easy mission than flying to the moon. She can talk about products for *hours*.

“It won’t take two secs,” Arch says. “You can even do it for me.”

“Really?” I ask, suddenly relieved.

“Sure. Just run the catalog up to the door.” She pulls into the McNeelys’ driveway and lets out a satisfied “Mmm-mmm.” The object of her affection: a plump row of hydrangeas bursting with periwinkle blooms sitting proudly at the top of the driveway. “I’ll bet those are as old as Mr. Wilson.”

“I hope her son doesn’t answer the door,” I say, uninterested in the bushes.

“Who? Edwin?” Arch pulls her eyes away from the bushes and pats my leg with one hand while she collects a handful of

samples from yet another box on the floor at my feet. Then she stuffs the samples into my lap. “Don’t be silly. That boy is adorable. And such a gentleman. I saw him just last week at The Pig—The Piggly Wiggly on Brunson Street—and he asked about you.” She cocks her left eyebrow as if this bit of news will interest me.

“Ew,” I say. “He’s a band geek. What’d he say?”

“I guess it doesn’t matter what he said,” Arch replies, grinning. She’s waiting for me to beg her. She always wants to know what’s going on with me and my friends. But I don’t have time today. I need to get to Trina’s STAT. So I curl the catalog around the samples and reach for the door.

Aunt Arch can’t resist. “He asked if you were ready for the new school year,” she blurts out.

“Is that all?” I chuckle. “Arch. He was obviously just being polite to a grown-up.” Parents can be so dense sometimes.

“Mark my words.” She wags her finger at me. “That boy is going to be handsome someday. Have you seen his pores?”

I laugh, then open the door and step out onto the rain-soaked sidewalk. But I turn back to say, “Well, he might have good pores, but he hangs out with weirdos.”



The McNeelys’ house sits at the end of an antique brick sidewalk that winds across the yard like a curl of ribbon. The porches on both the upstairs and downstairs give the house that vintage southern charm, making it a must-see on the Garden Club’s annual holiday house tour.

I run through the rain to the end of the brick path and step onto the porch, where two very tall wooden doors face me. They’re flanked on both sides by iron urns the color of coffee, each supporting a tremendous fern with feathered leaves that spread out in all directions. The overall effect is stately and,

yes, beautiful. The doors, however, have these vertical glass panes in them, so I can't help but look inside the foyer, which is totally awkward. Instead, I take a step back and scan right and left for the doorbell.

No doorbell, just one of those fancy box things with a small red button. Nice. I'm going to have to announce myself. Pressing the button, I practice what I'll say. *This is Emerson Taylor?* No. Wait. I'm not coming over for tea. *Stellar delivery?* No. Too much like the UPS man. Um . . .

"Can I help you?"

I turn to the right and see Edwin McNeely at the far end of the porch reclining on a hanging swing. He has a guitar in his lap and has rolled over to face me. How weird is that? I mean, he could have said something as I was searching for the doorbell. Maybe he was asleep. He *is* wearing sweats and looks a bit disheveled.

"I, uh . . . I have makeup?" I ask, then answer my own question. "Yes. I have makeup." I lift my hands. "And a catalog."

"That you do," he says, standing up and walking toward me. "Are those for my mom?" He waves at Arch, who is sporting a Walmart-sized grin in the car. She's shameless—she's got the window down and everything.

"Yep."

He runs his hand through his brown hair, sweeping a chunk of bangs across his forehead from left to right. "*Love Struck*, huh?"

"*WHAT?*" I gasp.

"*Love Struck*," he repeats slowly, pointing at the title of the new Stellar catalog—the one I am currently holding.

"Oh. Yeah," I say, suddenly analyzing his pores.

"It's for your mom. From my aunt." I nod back at Arch again, who is staring at us like she's at a drive-in movie. "It's makeup," I add, as if the royal-blue PT Cruiser with Arch's

face on the side and the word *Stellar* isn't clear enough.

"I think we've covered that." He smiles and reaches for the samples, but there are so many tiny tubes and vials that I have to sort of dump them into his now-cupped hands.

"Oops." One of the samples falls onto the wooden porch—a tiny plastic jar of face cream. I lean down to pick it up at the same time he does, and we end up grasping each other's fingers. An electric charge shoots through me as I pull my hand away and stare at him. "Uh, sorry."

He smiles and we stand there for a second, his face so close I can almost smell his breath. It strikes me as strange that I've never been this close to a boy before and yet I'm about to go to Trina's in order to kiss one (hopefully).

Edwin barely flinches—just chuckles with his perfect pores and noticeably straight teeth. "No biggie."

"Welp, I gotta go." I turn and run through the rain toward Arch's blueberry monstrosity.

"See ya at school," he says so softly that I wonder if he whispered—or if I completely made it up.



"Let's get out of here," I say, rapidly pulling the car door shut and throwing my coat over the backseat.

Arch is trying to suppress a giggle, but I will not let Edwin McNerdy and our awkward run-in disarm me. I'm about to experience my first kiss!

After taking a right at the next corner, we turn down Trina's street. I inhale and narrow my eyes, trying to see bionically through our rainy windshield all the way *into* Trina's house. Honestly, we can't get there fast enough. But at the same time, my heart is starting to move north into choking territory, and I am wildly trying to remember the How to Kiss steps I read in my sister Piper's magazine last month.

*Step One: Make sure your breath is minty fresh.*

Check. I just brushed my teeth.

*Step Two: Loosen lips and make eye contact with your partner.*

Or was that tighten your lips? I turn away from Arch and press my lips together and then loosen them, trying to figure it out. I think it was loosen them.

*Step Three: Lean in and gently let your lips touch.*

“How do you feel about fried catfish for dinner?” Arch asks me, interrupting the more pressing matters in my mind.

I want to say, “FRIED CATFISH? FRIED CATFISH! WHO CARES ABOUT CATFISH AT A TIME LIKE THIS?” But instead I say, “Mmmm. Sounds really good.”

*What step was I on?*

Oh yeah. Four. Step four is easy: *Pucker slightly and slowly press your lips to his.*

Good. I got it.

Shifting my attention to the blue box beside me, I look through Arch’s newest shipment. There’s nothing like a little cosmetic distraction to slow a beating heart. My aunt’s name, Mary Ellen Archer, is written in black cursive across the frosted-blue label. As usual, a lip gloss catches my eye, and I pick it up and read the tiny circular sticker on the bottom of the tube. “Can I have one of these Kiss Me Kates?”

“Yes,” she says. “I ordered a few extra. But don’t tell your sister. I forgot to get that mascara she wants.”

Unscrewing the top, I slowly pull the wand through the peachy-colored gel while a Stellar-induced calm overtakes me. There’s just something magical about makeup.

I repeat the kissing steps in my mind one more time while expertly wiping the excess gloss on the rim of the tube. Then, in professional form, I flip down the mirror and smear it across my virgin lips.

*Mwah.*

The car stops. “I’ll be back in an hour to pick you up. Audrey and George are coming over for dinner,” Arch says.

“An hour? But that’s so soon.” I groan.

“Oh, come on. The Wilsons just want to spend time with you, Emerson. You and your sister never see them anymore.”

“Yes, I do,” I complain. “I pull their trash cans to the curb almost every week.”

“Shoo! That’s not the same, and you know it. They do so much for us. This is the least we can do. They love you, baby—like their own grandchild.”

I am distracted by a boy running across the street up ahead. *Could he be going to Trina’s?* My breath catches in my chest. I’ll be there in less than thirty seconds.

“What’s really going on with you, honey? You always loved to visit the Wilsons. Remember when you used to do those funny little tap dances for them?”

*Twenty-seven seconds.*

“And Piper was always wanting to wear Audrey’s jewelry around the house.”

*Twenty-four seconds.*

“Emerson? Are you even listening to me?”

“Hmm?”

“Is this about Trina? I don’t want to pry, but why does she need *a friend* so badly today?” Arch narrows her eyes like a CIA agent trying to decode a mystery.

*Fifteen seconds.*

Confession Time: After Trina’s first few texts, I went all-out Code Red, telling Arch my bestie was in dire need of a “friend” and we had to leave the house PRONTO. I was hoping that since they operate on the same radio frequency—both being

hopelessly addicted to *Oprah* reruns, *Dr. Phil*, *Dr. Oz*, and any TV show related to self-help—she'd get the idea and rush me over. But here we are almost forty-five minutes later. I've probably missed all the fun.

"Nah. I'm fine," I say. "I mean, *she's* fine. I'm sure it's just boy stuff."

*Three seconds.*

"Ahhh . . ." A knowing smile crosses my aunt's lips, and she slowly rocks her head forward and backward. Mystery solved.

I quietly rub my sweaty palms on the sides of my shorts.

"I'll pick you up after I make these deliveries. Okay?"

"Gotcha." Turning away from her eagle eye (known to detect all kinds of flaws), I pop out the door and run up to Trina's back porch. Sadly, as fate would have it, in those three seconds my shoulder-length brown hair plasters down onto my head into what must surely resemble a wet helmet.

Nice.

I let myself inside as fast as I can. The hallway mirror in the back foyer reveals lips are good, cheeks are fine, but hair is *horrible*. And now that I'm looking, I notice my eyes are red, too. Stupid contacts.

"Trina?" I yell, frantically working my fingers through my hair to install some pouf. "Where are y'all?"

"Down here!" she shouts from the basement. I grin. *It's showtime.*

Trina's father is a supersuccessful game table manufacturer, so her basement is ginormous and full of things like pinball machines, a large poker table (Luke's favorite spot), and a giant green pool table.

On the way down the steps, I can hear the boys' voices, and I'm suddenly nervous. *Is it possible to fail a kiss? What if I fail?*

*What if IT happens? Maybe kissing is a pool-only kind of thing? Or what if they are playing spin the bottle again right now, and I walk down to find Trina and Vance making out? Oh, stop it. Chill, Emerson, chill!*

I turn the corner at the bottom of the steps, and there they all are.

Doing nothing but hanging out.

No lip-lockage in sight.

I deflate a little.

Luke and Trey are playing poker, and Vance and some other guy are talking on the sofa with Trina.

“Emerson, this is Silas,” Trina says, casually pointing to the new guy. He is lounging with both arms spread out along the back of the sofa, pride oozing from every pore. He has on a long bathing suit and a T-shirt, like everyone else; but with his gold sunglasses perched up in his dark-brown hair, this Silas character looks like some kind of sexy Italian movie star. I bet he has one of those washboard stomachs under that shirt, too. It’s no surprise that Trina’s boy-crazy eyes are twinkling. Heck, they’re so bright, her toothy smile is glowing from the reflection.

“Come with me,” she says, tilting her head toward the bathroom.

“Sure.” I glance back at Silas. “Nice to meet you.”

He nods to the TV, barely acknowledging my presence.

“Ace!” Luke says from behind a perfect spread of cards, toothpick stuck in his mouth. “Glad you could make it.”

I half glare at him. It’s hard to stay mad at Luke for long, but he totally knows about my crush on Vance. He’s my next-door neighbor and as close to a brother as one can get. I can’t believe he didn’t text me when spin the bottle was suggested.

I would have so texted him if I had been the one at the pool and *he* was the one frozen in front of a baby-blue box . . . or, you know, a deadly computer game or something.

Trina grabs my arm, now violently jerking her head toward the bathroom. So I say, "I'll be back in a minute," and follow her around the corner.

"Where were you?" she asks after closing the door.

"Arch took forever. Who's the new guy?"

"Silas Martin," she says. "He goes to Saint Joseph's. Is he hot pizza or what?"

"Did you kiss him?" I ask, feeling part excited and part jealous.

"Well, duh."

"Dammit," I say. "I am *never* going to kiss a guy. This is as bad as that old movie *Love Affair*, where the beautiful girl misses her chance to get together with the man of her dreams at the top of the tower because she gets hit by a car."

"You're so drama," Trina says. "Don't worry. I'm sure we'll play again."

"Easy for you to say. You're on a smooch-induced high. You've been kissing all afternoon."

"I know!" she squeals. "It's easier than we thought, by the way."

*Ugh.*

"And I hate to say it, but Luke is an incredible kisser."

"Gross!" I say. "He's like my brother." I'm suddenly glad I wasn't there. Talk about awkward. Actually, the idea of kissing all the boys sounds a little icky, now that I think about it. But I don't tell Trina that.

Trina reaches into her pocket and retrieves a small metal box of mints and pops one into her mouth. "It was fun!"

“You’re killing me. You know that, right?” I look in the mirror over the sink and stare at my lips, feeling completely inexperienced. “Give me one of those.”

She hands me a mint, then stares me square in the eyes. “Don’t worry. I have a plan. Did you see that bottle I placed on top of the pinball machine?”

“No.”

She fans out her fingers in excitement. “You’ll see. I’m just waiting for one of them to notice it. It’ll start a new game for sure, and then they’ll think *they* came up with the idea: but really, *I* am controlling their subconscious. Cool, huh?”

“Okay, Doc,” I say. “We’ll see if *that* works.”

She rubs her hands together like a mad scientist and smiles excitedly.

*Good grief.*

I reach for the knob to go back into the room when she says, “Fix your hair.”

Sigh. More scrunching, frantic fingering, and unintentional knotting.



Three ringtones and two whopping minutes later, the whole plan falls apart. Luke, Trey, and HRH Vance suddenly have to leave for various reasons, leaving me, my still-virgin lips, and my squirrel’s-nest hairdo alone with Trina and Silas.

“Do y’all want a Coke or anything?” Trina asks. Silas and I are sitting on opposite ends of the sofa.

Raising his hand, Silas smiles.

She looks at him and grins, making me feel like a total Third Wheel.

“I’m fine,” I say, wondering if I should excuse myself to go to the bathroom again. But I don’t want him to think I’m sick or anything.

The door shuts at the top of the steps, and even with the TV on, the silence is deafening.

I look over at Silas and smile nervously. How did Trina hang out with him all day? I barely know what to say for the length of time it takes to pour a drink.

He turns to me, holding my gaze like a professional flirt, then slides over next to me on the couch. He's so slick I half expect him to roll off something Italian, or maybe French.

A pinball machine dings behind our heads, and my mind races to think of something clever to say—in English.

Nothing comes.

So I look at his eyes, trying to imagine what color eye shadow might complement them, but even that doesn't work because he's beaming them at me like laser guns. They are intensely focused, but soft—freezing me in their peculiar stare. I am so flattered and confused by his attention that I am powerless to move or even to speak. He's way out of my league, and yet he's looking at me as if he thinks I'm pretty or something. This is some kind of superhero power that I am totally unprepared for.

"I don't think we've kissed," he says, leaning toward me.

I thought I wanted a kiss. But not now. Not with Silas!

I feel my face flush and get steamy. "Silas . . .," I whisper.

"Shhh," he says before pressing his full lips against my mouth. He tilts his head slightly and brings his hand up to touch my face. It feels nice. Scary nice. This is the real thing—hands and all—but how can I kiss him when my heart belongs to Vance?

"Stop!" I say, pushing him back.

"Relax." He nudges me backward with a force that startles me momentarily and kisses me again, moving his fingers into my hair. The kiss isn't as wet and slobbery as I imagined it

might be, and I find myself analyzing it instead of fighting it like I want to. Trina was right. It's not that hard to do.

But almost immediately I start feeling feverish, and my right ear starts to buzz and hurt.

*No! I think. Not when I kiss boys, too!*

"Silas, get off me," I say.

But he isn't stopping, and it starts happening like it always does—except different. Because I've never read the mind of a boy. And suddenly I'm too curious to stop.

Now I can see them: various pieces of his past float through my mind like a film. As his lips smash hungrily against mine, I see a vision of him kissing this girl I know from another school. And I can taste his memories, too. He's excited, so his memories taste strongish, like those blood oranges Arch served at Christmas last year. But with all this movie-style making out, the painful buzzing in my ear intensifies, distracting me from both the kiss and the vision.

I've never experienced this for as long or with as much energy as I am right now. But as I attempt to pull away, his grip tightens and he pins my body down, pressing his lips harder onto mine. The pain gets epic. I inhale deeply through my nose and focus on the vision.

The girl is fading, and now I see him lighting a match. I can taste his intense anger and excitement like cinnamon. For some reason, though, I'm not scared. I feel it, but I know it has nothing to do with me—it's the emotions he had as this event took place. Then I see him set fire to the Longs' shed. Whoa! I remember when that happened. It was the talk of the town. The police knew it was arson, but they never figured out who did it. I feel my skin crawl at the realization that it was Silas—the boy whose lips are currently wrapped around mine.

“Em, your aunt’s here!” I hear Trina shout from the top of the steps.

Gasping for air, I yank my head back and wipe my lips while the disturbing visions rise in my throat like bad Indian food. I feel like a peeping Tom, ashamed of what I saw and equally horrified that I let him control me like this. Who is this guy?

“See ya later,” he says. A wicked grin eases across his face as he slides to the other end of the sofa and resumes watching TV.

I stumble off the sofa and mumble something unintelligible, then fly up the steps to safety.

Trina is standing on the landing, two Cokes in hand. “So?” she asks. “What’s the verdict?”

“About what?” I ask, confused.

“Silas,” she says. “I’m *totally* crushing. We’d make a perfect couple, don’t you think?”

“No!” I say. “He’s . . . he’s . . .” I stand there, trying not to implode from a combination of guilt over kissing her new crush and horror, but what am I supposed to say?

“Emerson?” Her head tilts to the side, and a deep crease forms in the center of her forehead.

Luckily Arch starts honking the horn, so I push past Trina and head for the back door. “I have dinner with the Wilsons!” I say. And as I walk outside, I get this awful feeling. As if my entire body is being squeezed by a serpent—constricted by a gift that no one can see or will ever understand. *I am not like other girls. I will never be able to kiss a boy again.*

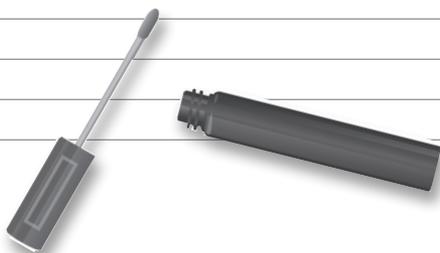
*Ever . . .*



TWO YEARS LATER

## CHAPTER ONE

# Mandarin Dream



My Spanish teacher, Mrs. Gonzalez, needs a makeover.

Pale pink isn't bright enough for her olive skin tone. I may not know the answers to the test, but I know this: she'd look great in that new coral lip tint Arch got last week. *What was it called?* I chew on the end of my pen, trying to remember the name, then find myself looking around the room. Luke is feverishly writing, probably acing this stupid thing; and Trina is, too.

Turning my head to the left, I check out Vance. Unlike Luke and Trina, Vance is leaning back in his chair, his legs stretched out long underneath his desk. They're crossed at the ankle, and his top foot is wiggling back and forth inside his shoe. *Cute.* Unaware of my stare, he reaches up and laces his fingers behind his head like he's lying out by the pool or something. I study the slight curve of his lips, wishing I wasn't cursed and hoping this boy—this blond-haired dream machine—will someday ask me out.

All of a sudden he looks up at me and smiles.

“Emerson?” Mrs. Gonzalez calls from her desk in the front of the room.

*Uh-oh.* My face flushes red, feeling twenty-four pairs of eyes all zeroed in on me.

Mrs. Gonzalez makes a peace sign with her fingers, then points them at her own eyes before forcefully pointing down at her stack of papers. “Eyes on your work!” she whisper-shouts.

I nod apologetically and drop my head to look at my test. Mandarin Dream! I think. Yes, *that’s* the lip tint: Mandarin Dream. If only I could remember these answers as easily.

Flipping back to the front of my six-page nightmare, I recheck my answers. I’m pretty sure I got the section on vocabulary right, but I’ve screwed up these verb tenses for sure. And now that I’m thinking about it, I probably bombed the history quiz this morning, too. Ugh. All together with yesterday’s chemistry monstrosity, I’m doomed.

Trying not to daydream the rest of my time away, I close my eyes and bring my thoughts back to the task at hand: Spanish. But then Mrs Gonzalez shouts, “Ten more minutes!” and I realize it’s all over. I’m out of time. It’s the last day of January, and this is my last challenge of the week. Oh, well. Ten more minutes and I’m home free.

Thank. Goodness.



Three days is all it takes for Arch to check my grades. One measly weekend without even a party to enjoy before she calls to me in her I-mean-business voice from downstairs.

“I’ll have to catch you later,” I tell Trina before hanging up the phone. “Arch has seen my test.” Ever since Arch discovered how to check my grades online, she’s been reviewing them on a weekly basis.

When I get downstairs, I find my aunt sitting at her desk in the small office area of her bedroom. She's wearing her old blue robe and her glasses. Stellar invoices litter the floor, and there's a stack of bills to the right of her desk. She has her auburn hair pulled back in a short, chunky ponytail, and her eyes are glued to her computer screen and my school's website.

"Before you get mad," I say, "I can explain." I have no idea what I'll "explain," but I'll try to think of something.

However, instead of reprimanding me like she usually does, she slowly turns to face me. For the first time in a while, I see that she isn't wearing her full face of makeup. Instead she looks pale and sickly.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"No." She takes off her little black glasses and sets them on the side of her desk, then rubs the top of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. "I'm tired, Emerson. Tired of breaking my neck so you can go to the best private school in town, only to have you get these kinds of grades." She waves her hand absentmindedly at the computer.

"Yes, ma'am." I know when to disagree with her, and this is *not* one of those times.

"I'm not sure you can stay at Haygood next year," she says. My breath catches in my throat. "What?"

"I just can't justify it anymore. It's obviously not paying off. Your first semester average was a low C. How are you going to get into those colleges we discussed with these grades?"

I lean my hand on the edge of her desk. "Did you say you were pulling me out of school?" I might collapse. *Is she crazy?* "You can't, Arch! Haygood is the only school I've ever been to! My friends . . ." A knot forms in my stomach. "I'll study! I promise!"

“Don’t argue with me, Emerson. I don’t know what else to do. It costs too much for you to get Cs all the time.”

“I’m sorry, Arch. Just give me a chance!” I shout. “One more chance. Please!”

“What’s going on?” Piper asks, rounding the corner.

“Nothing,” Arch says. “Nothing is going on. Certainly not any studying.”

## CHAPTER TWO

# Tantastic



I am a Jelly-filled Cookie.

According to the personality quiz in Trina's latest magazine, I project a straight-laced, innocent vibe on the outside. But on the inside I'm complex, exotic, and full of flavor.

I can't decide which is worse: the secret exoticism that no one can see or the boring innocence I apparently wear like a dress. I mean, do I really seem "straight-laced"? I guess I am, but can other people see it as easily as what I'm wearing? Am I clothed in the inexperienced innocence of one who has (almost) never been kissed?

Oh, who am I kidding? Of course I am.

Trina, on the other hand, is a Fortune Cookie: "a rather normal person, except extraordinarily lucky in life. People gravitate toward you in the hopes of being lucky, too!"

Figures.

"Is this supposed to cheer me up?" I ask Trina, who insisted I come over after I called her back in tears.

I should have known the study preparations she had in mind would involve quizzes of the magazine variety. Before almost every one—be it Compatibility, Personality, or even those awful Love-and-Sex ones—Trina says in her perky, we’re-about-to-get-the-keys-to-the-universe voice, “Remember, Emerson, knowledge is power.” But seriously . . . *since when is a jelly-filled cookie powerful?*

“At least Arch is letting you finish out the year,” Trina replies. “My parents would have yanked me straight out if my grades were as low as yours.”

“Thanks. That makes me feel *much better*.”

“I’m just kidding,” she teases.

Trina’s next suggestion to get my mind off things is to “help someone in need.” The disadvantaged recipient? Trina herself, of course, who’s apparently in dire need of a little color. Before I know it, I’m sitting on the lid of her toilet and shaking up a can of Arch’s miracle Tantastic tanning spray. As usual, I have one of the last cans in circulation due to end-of-the-year sales, so tanning seems like a brilliant afternoon event. According to Trina, “A little sun makes everything better.” I have to give her props. She’s right—even though the “sun” is being applied to her, not me.

“Hold still,” I instruct her from my position in front of the bathtub. “And brace yourself. I think it’s cold.”

She giggles. “Bring it on, sister!” She’s standing in her bathtub, wearing an old towel. Her long blond hair is swept up into a shower cap, but even like that she still looks pretty. It’s her eyes, I decide. They’re blue, but not your basic blue—more like gray-blue steel. A truly original shade. It doesn’t even matter that she’s fairly short and kinda curvy. It all just works.

I turn and look at myself in the mirror over the sink,

subconsciously comparing my long, brown, barely there waves and pale, white skin to hers. *Meh*. I run my hand through my hair, but it gets stuck in a tangle of dry split ends. Total Hair Fail. So I make a mental note to hit up Arch for some conditioning repair serum.

Trina insists that “tanning” is numero uno on the list of Things That Make a Girl Gorgeous; and even with frost on the grass outside, who am I to argue? This list changes as frequently as the objects of her affection, but since I am forever boyfriendless—and in possession of more makeup than Cleopatra—I tend to be available to listen. Not to mention that I come armed with everything one needs to beautify.

Trina’s tactics are no doubt taken from the article I saw thumbtacked to her bulletin board entitled “Tanned Fat IS as Good as Muscle.” While it’s not about love, I ignore these kinds of articles for one main reason: I am scared/fearful/ignorant/intimidated and/or nervous around real, flesh-and-blood boys. And all of Trina’s articles are meant to help her secure a boyfriend in some way or another. As for me, I prefer to lust after them on-screen or from afar—like across the cafeteria—or in fantasies. For example, I want to make out with Vance Butcher while leaning up against the side of my locker, or maybe on the back of a sleek, white stallion. I want to feel his hands gently resting on my face, and I want him to have my number on speed dial. But I want him to do this only *after* taking me out a few times and romancing me like that sexy Leopold guy in one of Arch’s old movies, *Kate and Leopold*.

Like I said, it’s pure fantasy. Because in reality, after the Day of Doom in the basement that summer, I swore I’d never suck-face/kiss/makeout/smooch again. But swearing off

boys for so long makes it easy to forget how to talk to them, much less flirt. And I'm getting tired of being a single, shriveled-up prune while Trina morphs into a glistening goddess of love.

I'm thinking about this very dilemma in a "What would Harry Potter do?" kind of way when Trina says "I'm hungry" and moves out of the way of my spray can. "You think it worked?"

Pushing Vance and Harry back into the attic of my mind, I decide to help out Trina by reaching my chalk-white arm toward her tan one and innocently saying, "I dunno. Let's compare."

She quickly aligns her damp, bronze arm next to mine and emits a helium balloon squeal of delight, then steps out of the bathtub and rubs herself with the dark-green towel from the bar on the wall. "Oooh! It's glittery, too!"

I look her over, and sure enough, it is. She's as sparkly as Edward Cullen. "Vampish," I say with a smile.

"It's time for popcorn. Wait for me in my room."

So now, here I sit on the small "psycho-sofa" in her room—the hugely thrilling (and way too pale) Jelly-filled Cookie.

When Trina comes back, she begins eating popcorn by the handfuls and I lie back and pretend to be her "patient." I'm tired anyway, so I close my eyes and try to relax.

"I've been thinking," she begins. "Do you remember when my mom had that breast cancer scare, and she had to get mammograms every three months?"

"Yeah."

"Well, there was this woman who asked Mom what she was going to do to improve the state of her body during the ninety days *before* the mammogram. Ya know—to boost her immune system."

I laugh, remembering well. “She made you drink beets with her!”

“Yes! She juiced all that stuff. I’ll never eat a red vegetable again.”

“You mean *drink* a reggie—that’s a red veggie, if you missed it. Ha!”

“See? You’re feeling better already. But it gives me an idea: in order to keep you in school, we should do something to boost the state of your *mind!*”

“You want me to drink superfoods?”

“No.” She walks over to her bookcase in the corner and pulls out a bright-red book with a large, yellow smiley face on the front, then holds it up and strokes its cover as if it’s Today’s Special Value at QVC. “This book says happy people are successful people.”

“And . . .” I sit up, having no idea where this is going.

“And there’s nothing that will make you happier and more successful than having a boyfriend!” Trina’s eyes are bugging out. I’ve never seen her more excited about a project in my life.

“I don’t get it.”

“Listen. I could help you study, but it would be a lot more fun with a guy, right? And *boyfriend* is a natural side effect of study partners! Not only will you have someone to help you improve your grades, but in your sheer state of love-induced bliss, serotonin and dopamine will start swimming in your bloodstream! They’re the superfoods you need to make you calm, cool, collected, and . . . drumroll, please . . . *focused!*” She exhales. “Having a *boyfriend* will solve all of your problems.”

“Hmmm . . .” I purse my lips in thought. “Sounds dope.”

She laughs. “You’re clearly not good at making connections. See if Vance will study with you! He gets good grades.”

Her brilliant idea is trickier for me than she realizes. *Should I finally tell her about the kissing thing?*

*Nope. She'll think I'm a freak show. She'll want to study me and call people from her magazines to profile me.*

She continues, "I know it's early February and all, but let's make it official. Let's set New Year's resolutions!"

I slide my tongue into the gap in my bottom side teeth and try to think of an alternative.

"Seriously," she begins, "this year we're going to have boyfriends. No more silly crushes. We're going to have real boys who call us and take us out and stuff."

I quickly lie back down, feeling dizzy. A black smudge on the ceiling catches my attention.

"Emerson," she continues, annoyed, "are you even listening to me?"

"Yes," I say. "That sounds great, but I'm not sure this will work. I can't *make* a boy ask me out."

She thinks for a minute, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Shouldn't we pick something more practical?" I offer. "Like reading more." But even as I say it, I feel the pathetic boredom of my answer. I want a boyfriend just like she does. Only I don't want to say it.

"Reading more?" she asks in disbelief. "Are you kidding? I mean, I know that's obviously necessary for general grade improvement, but I'm talking about changing the chemistry of our brains, Emerson! Our resolutions need to be *big*. As big as that frickin' fruit-and-veggie pile Mom was always juicing. Instead of beets and kale, we're going to juice up with something *fun*. Something made of snips and snails and puppy dog tails."

"Yeah. Yeah." I finish the rhyme. "That's what boys are made of."

“Exactly,” she says. “Boys . . . I am declaring this year the Year of the Boy.”

I want to laugh with her—to be excited and giddy at the prospect of having a boyfriend. But having boyfriends leads to kissing, and kissing leads to reading minds; and I know where *that* leads.

She adds, “And don’t tell me we can’t do it, because we can. I, for one, am adopting the ‘act as if’ principle.”

Propping myself up on my elbows, I look at her again. “The what?”

Her eyes flash like neon Frisbees. “I read about it in that self-help magazine *Arch* gave me last month. It’s all about being positive. You act *as if* what you want is already true.”

“So, what? You’re going to act *as if* you already have a boyfriend?” I lie back down. “That’ll be sure to make someone ask you out.”

“No, Miss Negative. I’m going to act *as if* I’m date-worthy. I’m going to seduce a hottie with unprecedented psychic positivity.”

I flinch at her mention of the word *psychic*, but maybe she has a point. Maybe I *can* finally get rid of this kissing problem. Or at least brainwash myself to believe I’m over it. Maybe there’s even a way for me to *block* the visions during a smooch. Heck, if Snape can teach Harry to block Voldemort’s memories, why can’t I do it, too?

“Can I act *as if* I’m a straight-A student?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Sadly, no”—I hear her flipping pages—“but how about another quiz?”

“No. No more quizzes. I’m still upset about being a Jelly-filled Cookie.”

“Why?” She pops another handful of popcorn into her

mouth. "It said you were exotic." She makes a moaning sound that I think is supposed to be sexy and animal-like, but in all honesty, it makes me feel worse. I've lost any ability I had to flirt, much less purr or growl. I need some mojo STAT. This no-kissing-boys thing is getting old.

"All righty then," she says. "You wanna talk about your mom?"

"No thanks." I so *don't*.

"You sure? Because, personally, I think she might be the reason you can't concentrate on school."

"She took her life, like, ten years ago. I'm okay," I say, although I know it's not true. I'll never be okay about that. Trina likes to ask me about Mama from time to time; and while I appreciate Trina's interest, I just don't know what to say about it anymore. I miss my mother. . . .

"Are you?"

I don't look at Trina, but I envision her leaning over her magazine and narrowing her eyes, looking for answers to all of my issues. "Yes," I say forcefully. "No more psycho-babble!"

She offers me some popcorn, then says, "Moving on. Let's choose a potential crush for you in the Year of the Boy. Who should it be?"

"I dunno," I say as I watch the black ceiling smudge magically morph into Vance's adorable face.

"Are you one of those girls who is afraid of boys?" Trina wildly flips more pages. "Wait. I read something about this. Yes! Here it is." Her voice gets soft, and she begins to speak as if I won't understand unless she reads at the speed of sludge. "It's called fear of intimacy, and it makes perfect sense because you never really had a father. That's it! You simply have a healthy fear of intimacy."

First my mom and now *this*? I turn my head to glare at

her. I've had it with this head shrinking, and I'll never be able to explain to her what my problem with boys *really* is. "Trinnaaaa . . ."

"Emersonnnn." She leans forward over her magazine. "You can relax. It's no big deal. All you need to do is to face your fears." She stands up and walks to the bulletin board, where the tanning article is pinned. She taps a new yellow bumper sticker with a perfectly manicured finger. "This. Read this."

I squint to read it without getting up. "'To conquer your fears, face them. At full speed!'"

It's not as if I've never heard that before, but she has a point.

"Or . . ." She pauses. "And don't take this the wrong way, because I am totally cool with it, but maybe you're gay? Maybe you need a *female* study partner? It's very chic, you know."

I sit up, laughing for the first time all day. "Please, Trina. Be serious."

She walks back to her bed and sits down. "My magazine says it's sometimes really hard to come out." She makes quote marks in the air when she says "come out."

"I'm not gay," I say, lying down. "And if I were, I'd tell you. It's just . . ." I look again at the ceiling and stare at the Vance-shaped smudge.

"It's the parent thing," I say, hoping I've covered all of my issues. "Fear of intimacy. I think you're right. You're gonna be a great doctor one day." I grin and lift my eyebrows for extra effect.

She closes her magazine and exhales a peaceful "Mmm." I wait for a "Namaste" to float out of her mouth. "That settles it. In order to improve your grades and become a happy and successful person, you *have* to secure a hot study partner. Let's get you in the tub. You've got some tanning to do."

Swinging my legs over the side of the sofa, I stand up and make my way to the bathroom with a renewed spring in my step. I'm gonna do this. I'm going to be a newer (tanner), more courageous me. But how can I fall in love with Prince Charming when his every thought will dive-bomb my brain? It's as distracting as trying to learn chemistry while sitting in Vance's lap!

Oh, let's face it. I'm not sure I'm ready for all this.