

Prologue



IT BEGAN WITH meatloaf.

My father and I sat silently across from each other at the dinner table while my mother fussed around us, shoveling heaps of mashed meat onto our plates. On the surface, it seemed just like any other night of the past seventeen years of my life.

Except my mother's platinum blonde hair, which was always perfectly coiffed even in the Georgia heat, showed signs of frizzing, and for the first time since I could remember, her lips were devoid of her signature Maybelline Red Revival lipstick.

I should have known something was wrong, even before she spoke.

“We’re moving to Texas?” I asked, losing control of all motor skills, and the sound of my dropped utensils reverberated throughout our tiny kitchen. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Without missing a beat, my mother picked them up off the floor and replaced them with an even shinier set from the dishwasher, as if new utensils could make everything all right again.

“Now, Lexy,” she said, her green eyes big and shiny as she continued to hover over me, waiting to add more food to my plate. “You’ll see, Preston Hills is just darling.”

I sat, unable to speak or eat, my new fork buried uselessly in a huge pile of mashed potatoes.

She gave a big sigh and fixed me with a look of concern. “Lexy? Honey?”

“You can’t be serious!” I said, my voice finally returning.

“Your father and I have decided it’s time for a change,” she said, avoiding my glare to scoop more buttery potatoes onto my father’s plate. “You know, we’re not getting any younger sweetie, please understand—”

“But this is my senior year—”

“And we’re sorry. I know this is hard on you, but you’re young. You’ll adapt. Maybe you’ll even make some new friends.”

I knew her words were supposed to be comforting, but it wasn’t just the thought of losing Pilar, my only real friend, that terrified me.

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My entire future was on the line.

“You can’t do this to me. Not after I just made editor!” I felt my face go hot. “You know how much this means to me. I didn’t spend the last three years killing myself just to give it all up now because you and Dad are having some kind of midlife crisis.”

“I told you I didn’t want you spending all your time on that silly school paper anyway,” my father said with a growl. My palms started to sweat a little. “Maybe this move will finally help you focus,” he said, the lines on his face pulled taut around his eyes.

“On what? Medicine?” I asked, crossing my arms. “Just like Michael, right?”

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt for you to follow in your brother’s footsteps,” he said. “The pre-med program at Columbia is nothing to scoff at. And at least he never complains about things around here.”

Of course he didn’t. My whole life, all I ever heard was how wonderful Michael was. Sometimes I thought my parents should’ve just cloned him instead of having a second child.

“Fine. So send him to Texas then and let me stay here,” I said, grumbling.

“Please be reasonable, Lexy,” my mother said, her pale lips pursed together in a straight line.

That’s when my blood really started to boil.

How could they ask me to give up the only thing that mattered to me?

I wasn't popular at school, not like my mother, Ms. Plant High School homecoming queen years 1972 *and* 1973, but that was okay because I had something else. Something better. And it was all coming together now that I was running the school paper. People would finally have to notice me. My parents were completely insane if they thought I was giving that up.

"I'm not moving," I said, pushing my plate away and standing as tall as I could stretch my five-foot-three frame. I even stomped one foot into the beat-up linoleum floor, just for emphasis. "You'll just have to go without me—"

"Alexandria! That's enough already." My father pushed away from the table, moving toward me until his face was just inches from mine. I could see the big purple vein in the center of his forehead standing straight out. "You need to know—"

My mother shot over to him, grabbing his shoulder. "Calvin!" she cried out, a look of panic on her face. "We agreed! Not like this!"

"No, Ellie." My father whipped his head around to look at her. "We did it your way, and it didn't work. She's not a child anymore," he turned back to me, "no matter how much she may act like one." The lines around his eyes tightened further. "You need to know that your mother is sick."

"Sick?" I asked, and something clenched in my stomach as the expression on his face darkened. "What do you mean . . . sick?"

"Your mother has cancer."

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“Cancer?” I repeated, the word sounding foreign and thick on my tongue. “There must be some kind of mistake. Mom can’t have . . . *cancer*?”

The only person I ever knew with cancer was Pilar’s grandmother, and she’d been ninety-four. My mother was only fifty-one. It wasn’t possible.

“It’s going to be okay.” Her words came out in a jumble. “The doctors caught it early, so everyone’s optimistic. They want me to start treatment right away.”

“We found a specialist near Houston,” my father said. His shoulders sagged a bit, and the vein in his face went flat again. “We’re putting the house up for sale tomorrow. You and your mother are moving down next weekend.”

A wave of apprehension ran through me. “But why does she need a specialist?” We lived in Atlanta, not the Sticks. What was so bad that she couldn’t be treated here?

“It’s just a precaution,” my mother said, moving between us. She put a soft hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “I’ve got a tricky form of cancer in my blood, but it’s going to be fine.”

Panic finally rolled in. “Oh, my God, you have cancer in your *blood*? What does that mean?”

She squeezed me tighter, steadying me. “It’s going to be fine, Lexy,” she said, her voice calm. “Everything’s fine.”

“But how can it be fine?” My throat did that thing where you’re not sure if you’re going to cry or scream, and suddenly I couldn’t get the air into my lungs fast enough. “What’s going to happen to us and—”

“Lexy, honey, look at me.” She tilted my chin up. “I promise, it will be okay.” Her face was inches from mine, reassuring.

“So they can cure it?” I asked.

“Ellie—” My father started through clenched jaw.

She didn’t take her eyes off me. “Yes. Absolutely.”

Just like that, the panic lifted away, and I could breathe again. If she said she was going to be okay, I believed her. My mother didn’t lie. I’d never even caught her stretching the truth, not even a little bit, like most people did. There’s no way she’d lie about something like this, something so critical.

“Does Michael know?” I asked, even though I already suspected the answer.

“We told him a few days ago.”

Of course they did. Michael was the oldest. The favorite. I bet he handled the news perfectly too. Probably even offered to transfer to college in Texas just to be near the family. And, naturally, he’d kept it secret from me.

“Lexy, we’re going to come through all of this stronger than ever,” she said. “We just have to be optimistic about it.”

I nodded along, because there was nothing else left to say. My mother had cancer and we were moving to Texas, and there wasn’t a single thing I could do about any of it.

One



THE FIRST THING I noticed at my new high school was that the parking lot looked a lot like a luxury car dealership.

If my beat-up hatchback didn't even fit in here, I had serious doubts that I would.

Maybe if I was good looking like Michael, things would be easier, but I wasn't. He'd inherited the best characteristics of both my parents—my mother's beautiful, thick locks and my father's tan, blemish-free complexion. I'd inherited neither. Instead, I somehow wound up with wispy, dishwater blonde hair and pasty skin. It was incredibly annoying.

I'd never been popular either. Not like Michael. He was

Plant High School homecoming king his senior year. He and my mother were like their own little homecoming court dynasty.

All around me kids were rushing from their cars into the building, decked out in designer clothes I recognized from all the glossy magazines I read. It was a far cry from my boring oxford shirt, worn-out jeans, and leather flats. Girls were giggling and hugging; boys were messing around. Everybody knew everybody else.

I closed my eyes and said a quick little prayer to be teleported back to Atlanta.

Nothing happened.

Not that I was surprised. I wasn't sure God existed anyway.

Not seeing any signs of divine intervention, I forced myself to leave the safety of the parking lot and search for my first period calculus class.

I was still bummed that I didn't get any of my first picks. I practically begged for journalism and creative writing, but the guidance counselor told my parents those classes had filled up months ago.

Of course, they had no trouble finding room for me in calculus.

Yippee.

I tried to stay positive, telling myself there was no reason I couldn't still write for the paper even if I wasn't in those classes. Never mind the fact that it only made it a zillion times harder to convince people you were any good.

There was an empty seat at the back of the classroom,

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away from everyone else, so I took it and busied myself working through the pages of my gigantic textbook. Limits. Exponentials. Logarithms. Nothing too difficult here. I probably should've taken advanced calculus like my father had wanted.

“Good morning,” someone said, breaking my concentration. “Whoa, class hasn't even started yet and you're already on problem five? Can somebody say ‘overachiever’?”

Startled, I looked up to see a boy with wavy auburn hair, olive skin, and friendly brown eyes peering over my shoulder. He was wearing a striped rugby shirt tucked neatly into a pair of crisp khaki pants. Everything was clean lines and immaculate detail, like someone ironed his entire body.

“Huh?” I asked, covering up the notebook I'd been scribbling my answers in.

“You're new.”

“Yes,” I said, unable to think of a more interesting response. Cute guys dramatically lowered my IQ.

“I'm Brian Garson.” He gave me a big smile, and I was reminded of Charlie, the sweet Labrador retriever we had when I was little.

“Hi, Brian.” I returned back to problem five. Hopefully he'd go away before I said something really dumb.

“What's your name?”

No such luck.

“I was just teasing about the overachiever thing, you know. I'm a little bit of an overachiever myself,” he said.

When I looked up again, his smile grew larger, revealing two rows of perfect, straight teeth.

“Sure, right. I’m Alexandria Quinn,” I said, making sure to keep my own mouth closed. There were two crooked molars that drove me crazy, even though no one but the dentist could see them.

“Well, Alexandria Quinn, as the official senior class president, let me be the first to welcome you to Pierce High.” He made a grand, sweeping gesture and took to one knee before taking the seat next to me.

“Thanks.” I grinned. “Everyone just calls me Lexy though.”

He watched me, an expectant look on his face, but I had nothing else to say.

I was hopeless.

“Hello, Brian.” A dark shadow fell over my desk. “Where’ve you been hiding?”

I turned away from Brian and looked up into one of the prettiest faces I’d ever seen up close. The girl had cat-like hazel eyes and tumbling dark curls that went on forever. Her beauty was marred only by the sullen expression she was wearing. She looked like the type of girl who never had a problem thinking of things to say to guys.

“I’ve been around,” Brian said, the cheerful look on his face disappeared. He threw open his own textbook, pretending to be busy just like I’d been doing moments ago.

She closed his book with a loud thud, nearly catching his fingers in the process.

“Suddenly you’re too busy for me, is that it?” She smiled, showcasing another set of perfect white teeth. Maybe there was something in the water here.

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“You’re the one who dumped me,” he said, giving her a black look.

The girl snorted. “Touchy, touchy. Whatever happened to staying friends?”

“Whatever happened to forever?” he asked.

“You’re being ridiculous.” She rolled her eyes. “Let’s sit together. I’ll let you be my study partner.”

She lunged for his textbook again but this time he beat her to it, pulling it in close to his body, just out of her reach.

“No, thanks. I already have a seat.” He slunk lower in his chair, making no move to get up.

The classroom had filled up, and the only seats left were way up in the front, right next to the teacher’s desk.

Her eyes locked on mine, and the dark look that flashed across her face made me uneasy. “I’m sure I can find a seat back here one way or another.”

The last thing I wanted was to be involved in a turf scuffle. I’d watched enough daytime soaps with my mom to know that any altercation with this girl wouldn’t end well for me.

I slammed my book closed and shot up. “You can have my seat,” I said.

Before I could even reach for the nylon backpack I’d shoved under my desk, Brian’s hands were on my shoulders, forcing me back into my seat.

“Stay where you are, Lexy,” he said. “You were here first.”

The girl’s eyes narrowed at me. “I’m Blythe,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

“I’m new,” I said, kind of half sitting, half standing. The

open spots by the chalkboard were looking better every second. The only thing keeping me in place was the force of Brian's weight still bearing down on my body.

"Obviously." She smirked. "Are you one of Brian's new projects?"

"Blythe!" Brian let go of me and gave her a sharp look.

"What?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders. "We all know you take in strays like you're the Humane Society."

"Blythe, seriously. Would it kill you to be nice to people?"

"It might." She looked down at me, wrinkling her nose. "So who are you anyway?"

"I'm Lexy. I'm a senior." I tried to look as nonthreatening as possible. I didn't have to work too hard at it. "We just moved here from Atlanta."

"You're from Georgia?" She raised a sculpted eyebrow at me. "It's hot there. Shouldn't you be tanner?"

"It's called sunscreen, Blythe. You should try it," Brian said.

Blythe gave him a sharp look. She was sporting a sun-kissed glow that must've taken hours of dedication or else tons of cash.

"It's okay. I am pretty pale," I said, hoping to soften his dig. "I hate it."

"So what's the deal?" she asked, her attention focused on me again. "I mean, who switches schools senior year?" She cocked her head, her eyes raking me from head to toe. "Though I must say, you don't look like the troublemaking type." She cocked it again, this time the other way, reminding

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me of a large bird of prey. “Although, no offense, you don’t look like the cheerleader type either.” Her tone made it clear, if her toned, size-four body in her form-fitting cheerleading uniform didn’t, that it actually was some kind of offense to not be on the squad. “So what is it? You lose first chair in the band or something and beg your parents to transfer you here so you could keep playing trombone?”

“Blythe, really,” Brian said.

“What?” she asked, her face the picture of innocence. “It’s a legitimate question. Look at her.” She lowered her head, peering closely at me. “You tell me she doesn’t look like one of those little band geeks.”

“I’m not in the band!” I said, a bit louder than I intended. “Not that there’s anything wrong with the band . . .” I added quickly, casting a nervous glance over my shoulder, hoping I wouldn’t see anyone in uniform. It would be just my luck to be sitting next to someone in the band.

“Exactly! The band’s awesome,” Brian said, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “They reinforce school spirit, and they get the crowd going at games, and they—”

“Yeah, yeah. Like I care.” She waived him off with a dismissive flick of her French-manicured hand. “Look, the bell’s about to ring, and I still need a seat.” She scanned the room again for a few seconds before her eyes settled on me once more. “So trombone, you getting up or what?”

Before I could move, I heard the screeching of metal chair against wood flooring and a girl with a messy bun and acne was running to the empty desk at the front of the room.

Oh dear. She probably *was* in the band.

“This’ll do too,” Blythe said, taking the vacant seat on the other side of Brian. She pulled out some expensive-looking, purple, fountain pens from her backpack and arranged them in neat little rows on her desk.

Brian gave me a kind smile. “So now that we’ve established that you most definitely were not in the band, what did you do back home?”

“I’m not sure what you mean?”

“You know. Like for fun?” he asked.

“Oh, right. I’m a reporter,” I said, sitting a little taller in my chair. “Actually, I was supposed to be editor of our school paper.”

“Did you actually say *reporter*?” Blythe stopped playing with her pens long enough to give me a haughty look. “We call them journalists around here, but then again, we take our writing seriously at Pierce.”

“I take it seriously, too.” I looked down, feeling a blush creep across my cheeks. “I’m dying to get on the paper.”

This earned a snort from Blythe. “It’s called *The Roundup* and it’s über exclusive. We don’t just let anyone on it.”

“That’s right, our newspaper does win lots of awards,” Brian said, an apologetic look on his face. “People apply months in advance. We’ve got really great extracurriculars here.”

“Sorry, Lori,” Blythe said. “That means no open spots for you.”

“It’s Lexy.” I corrected her automatically.

“Whatever,” Blythe said, a tiny smile spread across her

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face, and I knew she screwed up my name on purpose. “Cheer up, maybe they can find a place for you in the band instead.”

I ignored her, focusing instead on taking deep breaths, in and out, to make sure I didn’t faint, or worse, burst into tears. There was no way I could get a scholarship without a school paper. And no college scholarship, meant no journalism school. And no journalism school, meant I’d never, ever, be editor of *People* magazine. And that meant . . . well . . . that was just unthinkable.

“Don’t listen to her,” Brian said. He reached out and put a comforting hand on mine. “Maybe they can still find you a spot. It’s not like Blythe owns the paper.”

“Not yet, anyway,” Blythe said through clenched teeth, her eyes fixated on the location of Brian’s hand. “But it’s only a matter of time. You know I always get my way, Bri,” she said, an unmistakable threat in her voice, just as the bell rang.

I shivered. I had a bad feeling that she wasn’t just talking about *The Roundup* anymore. It wasn’t even eight a.m. and it already looked like I wasn’t getting on the paper or winning any popularity contests at this school.

Brian was also in my next two classes. After world history, he offered to walk me to the cafeteria for lunch. I almost said no. I didn’t know the full story between him and Blythe, but I’d seen enough to know that his attention was risky. Still, my fear of the mean girl was far outweighed by the terror of eating alone on my first day of school.

It wasn’t like I was going to marry the guy.

Brian grabbed a seat at a long table in the center of the

lunchroom and motioned for me to sit down. The other kids at the table glanced up at me with curious looks when I did, but at least they weren't openly hostile. One of them, a girl with strawberry blonde hair and honey-colored eyes even smiled at me. I liked her instantly.

I sort of stuttered hello to everyone and then turned my attention to my apple juice carton, my throat dry as I fumbled to undo the waxy container.

After I got it open, I dared another quick look around the table. Everyone was still staring at me.

"This is Lexy," Brian said. "She's new. Everyone be nice to her."

My face flushed, and I racked my brain for something awesome to say, but all those eyes on me made it difficult to focus. A few painful seconds of silence went by and they all kept looking at me expectantly until a girl with gorgeous hair the color of mahogany spoke up.

"I'm sure she's great," she said, her cornflower-blue eyes lighting up, "but what we've really been waiting for all day is for you to spill the gory details. C'mon, the suspense is killing me!"

"Kris!" The girl next to me gasped in outrage. "That's none of your business."

Kris just laughed. "You stuff it, Peyton. I want to know what happened to the Preston Hills's Princess."

"Blythe and I just weren't working out. End of story." Brian gave Kris a cross look. "And you know how much I hate that nickname."

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Kris smirked. “But it suits her so well. Princess Blythe Preston and the Royal Family.”

“Wait, you mean like Preston Hills? She’s *that* Preston?” I asked, a bit louder than I’d intended and cringed as all eyes turned toward me again.

“You haven’t heard of the Prestons?” A model-thin blonde at the end of the table practically shouted, her pouty pink lips making a big Oh.

“No.” I knew I was blushing again.

Peyton gave me a gentle smile. “Blythe’s great-grandfather was the founder of Preston Hills. The Prestons are famous around here.”

“They’re one of the oldest families—” Kris said.

“And the richest—” Peyton added.

“And the best looking,” the blonde said with a giggle. “How do you not know this already?”

Brian groaned. “The Prestons aren’t celebrities, you guys.”

“They might as well be, the way people in this town fawn all over them.” Kris snorted. “I bet Prince Ash is thrilled you guys finally broke up.”

“Ash is a jerk,” Brian said.

“Who’s Ash?” I tried to whisper to Peyton, but again, my voice carried and everyone at the table heard me.

There was a loud sigh and the blonde at the end of the table spoke up again. “Blythe’s older brother, of course! Ash Preston is absolutely gorgeous. And super popular. He’s completely brilliant too.”

“And those *eyes*,” Peyton added.

“Don’t I know it! And that body!” The blonde girl cried out again.

“Rebecca Lynn Taylor, you’re drooling!” Kris said.

Brian made a gagging noise. “I’m seriously gonna throw up my lunch.” He held his drink carton so tightly I was afraid he might crush it and shower me with apple juice.

“You’re just jealous, Garson,” Rebecca continued, giving him a knowing look. “All the guys are jealous because every girl loves Ash—”

Kris made a face. “Not every girl—”

“But it’s not like it matters,” Rebecca continued. “Ash won’t date anyone anyway. The guy’s made of ice or something.”

“He’s just so cocky. It’s ridiculous. No one’s good enough for him.” Kris’s red lips pursed together. “Or his sister, either. Who, by the way, is a total witch.”

“She’s not that bad,” Peyton said. “They’re both perfectly nice at Bible study class.”

Bible study? Back home, the kids who went to Bible study weren’t exactly part of the in-crowd, and they certainly didn’t look anything like Blythe Preston.

“You should’ve seen her this morning, Peyton. She was a total jerk to Lexy,” Brian said, scowling as he tore into his roast beef sandwich.

“Really, it wasn’t that bad,” I said, trying to sound far more casual about the encounter than I actually felt. Blythe had been unpleasant—okay, maybe more than just unpleasant—but I was hoping that it was just temporary bad luck. There

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was no point in fueling rumors that could make my bad luck permanent.

“Oh boy,” Kris said with a sharp glance at Brian, then at me. “Looks like the Princess has picked her victim for the year.”

Peyton tsked at her. “Kris, don’t scare her.”

“I’m just being honest. Everyone knows the girl loves to bully.”

“Who are you girls yapping about now?” A guy with curly auburn hair and rosy cheeks took the empty seat next to Brian. He was wearing a scarlet red T-shirt with the words *KISS ME, I PLAY LACROSSE* emblazoned across the chest.

Kris scowled. “Blythe Preston, of course.”

“Oh, right, she’s hot,” the boy said, tearing open his chocolate milk and chugging the entire thing down in one gulp. “Good choice, my man.” He patted Brian hard on the back with a meaty hand.

Peyton shook her head at him. “Nice job, Scottie. Brian and Blythe just broke up.”

Scottie squeezed the empty milk carton into a ball and burped loudly. “Yikes. Sorry, man.”

“We were just saying how terrible Blythe is for picking on poor ole Lexy here. She just moved here,” Kris explained.

I raised my chin just a fraction. “It’s fine. Really. I’m sure she’s already forgotten I even exist.”

“I highly doubt that,” Kris said, chewing on her lower lip. “But you know, as bad as she is, her brother is much worse. He’s the one you really need to watch out for. Stay out of his sights at all costs.”

“Not again. I thought we were done talking about him.” Brian said, throwing up his hands. “I swear, this whole town has Ash fever. Being St. Andrews’s quarterback doesn’t make someone God, you know.”

Rebecca giggled. “Actually, it kind of does in Texas.”

“Get a grip, Rebecca. He plays for the enemy.” Scottie gave her a cross look.

“I don’t care who he plays for. I think the boy walks on water,” she said, a dreamy look on her face like she was envisioning their wedding. “Even if he is a complete snob.”

“So this Ash guy plays football too?” I asked.

“I guess that’s one way to put it.” Brian said, looking like he was about to vomit. “Ash is the best high school quarterback St. Andrews has ever had, and it ticks me off like you wouldn’t believe. Honestly, I still can’t believe we all used to be such good friends.” He looked down at his plate and started picking apart what was left on it, which wasn’t much. “It’s gonna be weird going to homecoming alone.”

I shuddered. “Ugh, I hate dances.”

Brian and Peyton looked at me like I’d just said I hated puppies or something.

“How can you hate dances?” Peyton asked, wide-eyed.

“I just do.”

I doubted the kids at this table would understand, but back home I always wound up sitting alone on the bleachers or by the punch table, while some guy asked Pilar to dance. It didn’t exactly make for a fun night of fond high school memories.

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“You’re going to hate it here then,” Kris said, a wicked smile on her face. “We have a dance for everything. There’s even the Winter Formal where the girls ask the guys.” She licked her lips, an eager look in those cat-like eyes. “That’s my favorite, of course.”

“You mean I’d have to ask a guy out? Like on a date?” I asked. The thought made something in my chest spasm.

“Yeah! Isn’t that awesome?” Kris asked.

Naturally, a girl as gorgeous as Kris would think that. She’d have no problems getting a date.

I, on the other hand . . .

“I’m getting sick just thinking about it,” I said.

Peyton gave me a conspiratorial look and leaned down close until I could smell bubblegum and sunflowers.

“I never much liked Winter Formal either,” she whispered in my ear.

“Welcome to Texas.” Brian grinned. “We use any excuse for the girls to get decked out in a ball gown and big hair.”

“Not me,” I said, shaking my head at him. “Count me out.”

There was no way I was going to another high school dance.

Ever.