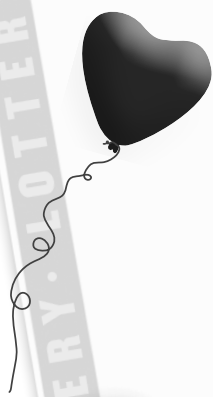


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LUCKY
IN
LOVE



KASIE WEST

Point

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CHAPTER 1

A two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew and a large bag of Reese's Pieces. This was my go-to fuel for getting through the three-hour study session that loomed at the end of the day. But this formula didn't work for everyone, so I clutched the bottle to my chest as I searched the aisle. Blaire liked anything sour. A pack of Sour Patch Watermelons would do. Elise hated candy (a fact I still didn't understand) so I picked her up a bag of pretzels and got in line with my armful of treats.

A kid in front of me was having a debate with his mother. For breakfast, he wanted to eat the candy bar he held instead of the banana she did. I sensed I was going to be here for a while. I glanced at my phone. 7:20 a.m. I hadn't scheduled in a kid tantrum, but I'd still make it to school on time.

I pushed my glasses up my nose. I wished I had some flash cards to study. Instead I was stuck staring at my surroundings. A sign by the register announced that the Powerball jackpot was up to thirty million dollars. *Thirty million dollars.* I could think of a lot of problems even one-thirtieth of that amount would solve. Possibly every problem in my life: The inevitable

foreclosure of our house. My brother's student loan debt. My upcoming college tuition.

"You ready?" the cashier asked.

"Oh." I looked around. The kid and his mom were gone. Had he gotten the candy bar or the banana?

I stepped to the counter and dropped my haul.

"Isn't it a little early for all this sugar?" the woman asked. Her name tag read *Maxine*. She was perched on a high stool behind the register. I hadn't seen her at the Mini-mart before, and I came in here at least once a week. She must have been new.

"Yep," I said. I didn't feel like explaining my weekly routine to a stranger.

She curled her lip, then asked, "You want to buy a Powerball ticket?"

"What?"

"I noticed you looking at the sign. Thirty million is a lot of money."

My eyes went to the sign again, and I tried not to laugh. "Playing the lottery is like throwing away money. And besides, I'm not eighteen yet." I would be in exactly twenty-four hours, but Maxine didn't need to know that.

"Throwing away money? Tell that to the people who win."

"Do you know the odds of winning the lottery?" I asked. "One in nearly two hundred million. *Million*."

Maxine didn't seem to think this statistic meant *next to impossible*. She stared at me, probably wondering how I knew that number. I was weird; facts just stuck in my head.

“There are higher odds of getting struck by lightning,” I added to help.

“Is that a goal of yours?”

“No. It’s just, I think I’ll put my effort into something that has much higher odds of success—like hard work.”

“Hey, it doesn’t hurt to dream.”

I wondered if that sentiment was true. Because I felt like dreaming about the impossible actually *did* cause damage. Dreaming about how life could be “if only” was a waste of time.

“Your total comes to \$5.42.”

I pulled my debit card out of my pocket and handed it to her.

“Big Friday planned?” Maxine took me in, from my dull, light-brown hair gathered up into a messy bun, to my oversized cardigan and ratty jeans, down to my holey Converse.

“School, work, and then study session with friends.” I pointed to the pile of snacks that would be eaten at said study session. I guess I’d ended up explaining my schedule to a stranger after all.

“Study session. On a Friday night? What a life.” She handed me my receipt.

We study together on Wednesdays, too, I almost said, to see how she would react. But I settled on, “It’s the best.” I knew she was being rude, so I’d stop while we were ahead.



I liked Tustin High School. I know that makes me sound like a total nerd, but I'd accepted that fact long ago. I loved nearly everything about school: the structure, the classes, the assignments, even the way the bell sounded, ringing for exactly two point five seconds. That bell meant it was time to move to the next experience, the next thing to learn.

The one aspect about school that I didn't like was the one nearly everyone else *did*—lunch. Mostly because my friends always had something going on at lunch—extra-credit work, library study time, teacher's aide duties. And when I didn't have any of those responsibilities, I was stuck either eating lunch all alone, or searching for my friends. Which was what I was doing now.

I pulled out my phone while heading toward the library and typed into a group text: *Anyone available for actual eating today?*

“Madeleine Nicole Parker!” A voice I recognized immediately as Elise's came from behind me just as I hit Send.

I turned with a smile. She did several leaps across the grass to reach me. The tips of her blond hair were dyed purple and she wore a rainbow-colored tutu.

“You dressed up for the rally,” I said.

“You didn't.”

I tugged on my cardigan. “Yeah.”

“Did I look like a ballerina when I was jumping?”

I tilted my head. “Um . . . the books clutched to your chest kind of threw off the whole vibe for me.”

“Maybe that should be my major in college.”

“What?”

“Dance.”

“Dance? I’m pretty sure college-major dancers have been dancing since they were three.”

Elise gnawed on her lip. “True.” Unlike Blaire and me, Elise didn’t have her future planned to the second, so she was constantly trying to figure out what she wanted to do. And with her less-than-stellar grades, she felt limited.

“But!” I said, not able to handle her sad face. “You shouldn’t deny yourself. Maybe you’re a natural.”

She rolled her eyes but gave me a side hug. “I could be. You never know.”

My phone chimed and I read the text from Blaire: *I’m in the library.*

Elise was attempting a pirouette so I took her by the arm and led her across the campus.

The smell of barbecue filled the air as we passed the one food truck we never ate at. Well, I didn’t eat at most of the food trucks. I brought lunch from home.

“Ugh. Why must they tease us with their fifteen-dollar sandwiches?” Elise asked, staring longingly at the truck.

“Keep your eyes straight ahead. Don’t let the smell weaken your defenses.”

She laughed and we made it safely to the library.

“Hello,” Blaire said as we joined her at a long wooden table in the middle of the main floor. She had a brown paper bag of

food next to her and her books spread out open in front of her. Three different subjects. Like somehow she could study all of them at the same time. Maybe she could. Maybe that's how she had edged me out for valedictorian. Her dark hair was pulled back into a neat bun and she wore a button-down blouse and a skirt. That was one of the areas where we differed. Blaire thought that ultimate success started with looking the part. I just dressed for comfort.

“What are you *wearing*, Elise?” Blaire asked.

“It's Tutu Friday,” Elise explained.

“What does that even mean?”

Elise shrugged and dropped her books with a crash onto the table, then cringed at the noise.

“It should be Tutu Tuesday instead,” I said. “That has a better ring to it. You should try to start that up, Elise.”

Elise smiled. “Because I have that kind of influence in this school.”

“Don't you?”

She laughed. “Speaking of people with influence, I heard that Trina is having a party tomorrow night. Do you think she did that on purpose?”

“I'm guessing that, yes, she is throwing a party on purpose,” I said, setting my backpack on the floor and sinking into a chair.

“No. I mean, do you think she's throwing a party the same night as you are on purpose? For competition or something?”

I laughed.

Blaire looked up from one of her books. “Nobody here cares about Trina’s party. She probably shouldn’t even be having a party since she got a D on her last Biology test.”

“How do you know what she got on her last test?” I asked.

“Because she tried to get me to tutor her,” Blaire replied, glancing back down at her notes.

“And you said no?”

“I said, if *tutor* means do your homework for you and let you cheat off of my tests, then no.”

“What did she say?” I asked.

“She just walked away. So obviously that’s exactly what she meant by tutor.”

Elise shook her head and said what I’d been thinking. “She probably just really wanted a tutor.”

Blaire rolled her eyes. “Just because you have popular envy, Elise, doesn’t mean Trina isn’t sinister.”

It was true. Elise did have popular envy. She was always interested in what that crowd was doing, saying, wearing. I thought being popular sounded like way too much work. But—

“Sinister? Really?” I asked.

Blaire smiled. “Trina uses people for her own gain. I think that word fits.”

“You can see this just by looking at her?” I asked.

“Whose side are you on here?” Blaire asked. “Mine or Elise’s?”

“I didn’t realize there were sides,” I said, smiling, although

I did always seem to play Switzerland between the two of them—Blaire with her no-nonsense drive and Elise with her free spirit. “But no, Elise, I don’t think Trina planned her party the same night as mine on purpose. I doubt she even knows I’m having a party. I only invited a few people.”

Elise furrowed her brow. “You did? Then why the fancy invites?” She pulled out her phone and scrolled until she held up my Evite to show me. As if I hadn’t seen it. As if I hadn’t *designed* it. Digital fireworks burst on the screen over the black lettering that spelled out the details of the party.

Blaire let out a low laugh. “You know Maddie. She doesn’t do anything halfway.”

“Hey, just because I only invited a few people doesn’t mean you guys don’t deserve a nice invitation,” I said. “Besides, they’re cute.”

“They are,” Blaire said, softly kicking my foot under the table.

“You can invite Boyfriend, Elise,” I said. “Forward him one of my pretty invites.”

“He does have a name, you know. Why do you both insist on calling him *Boyfriend*?”

“If we name him, that means we have to keep him,” Blaire said with a wink. “And you know how we feel about permanent boyfriends.”

Freshman year, the three of us had made a pact to save serious relationships for college. A pact we’d managed to mostly keep. Elise slipped now and again, but because she

claimed they weren't serious relationships, she said she hadn't broken the pact.

To me, having a boyfriend seemed like it would take up even more time than being popular. I'd never seen a case where a boy didn't become a distraction from school. And right now, I was in a committed relationship with school. *It* was my boyfriend. One more semester of loyalty to my boyfriend would surely provide me with the college scholarship I desperately needed.

I smirked. "I didn't realize Boyfriend had a name. What is it?"

Elise made a face. "Funny. You're both so funny."

"So will you? Invite him?" I asked.

"Yes."

"We don't have a test on Monday so it works out well," I said.

"Your birth was perfectly scheduled around your future test schedule, Maddie. Awesome," Elise said.

I nodded. "Fitting, right?"

Eighteen. This was a big birthday. My biggest one yet. I was excited. One more day and I'd be an official adult on my way to my meticulously planned future. I couldn't wait.