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Hope has always believed they would be more than friends, so when Parker
becomes his girlfriend, Hope views the newcomer as a rival--but Parker has
secrets, and when circumstances force the two girls together Hope realizes
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Hope

40 DAYS AWAY

T*his is it*, I tell myself.

“Are you ready?” Brady asks as he leans into me. “Although when aren’t you prepared for total world domination?”

“Precisely. It’s about time you noticed,” I reply with a flip of my hair. Brady always brings out my sassy side, and my flirty side, and my I-love-you-so-much-it-hurts-sometimes side.

Brady knows every side of me, except for that last one. How can a person be so close to somebody, literally and figuratively, yet be so painfully blind?

Maybe things will be different now. Maybe this is when everything will change.

He winks at me behind his black rectangular frames, his dark, messy hair partly obscuring his vision.

I’m always telling myself, *Maybe now. Maybe this.*

I'm always telling myself, *This is it.*

"Oh, I've been noticing that about you since, hmm, the beginning of time," Brady says. "Or at least first grade, which for all intents and purposes is the beginning of time. It was unmistakable."

"Greatness is like that," I fire back.

Brady and I face each other, him with his arms folded, me with eyes narrowed. It's a standoff to see who is going to relinquish their banter throne first. It's always like this with us, one-upping each other in ridiculousness until someone breaks.

I bite the insides of my cheeks to keep from smiling.

"Ah, guys? Can we do this?" Dan calls out from the machine. He exchanges a look with Conor. They always get annoyed when Brady and I spend the majority of our time together being . . . well, being *us*.

But, hey, it's my club and I'll flirt if I want to.

Why? a dark part of me wonders. *Why do you keep torturing yourself? Why are you so blind that you can't see that he's just—*

No.

"Saved, once again, by the siren call of Rube Goldberg," I whisper to Brady before I turn my attention to the machine that's been taunting and teasing us for weeks now. "Okay, let's do this."

Brady gives me his biggest smile, the one that melts every inch of me.

He puts his hand on my arm.

I don't think he even knows what he's doing.

Or maybe he knows exactly what he's doing.

I never know for sure.

The project. Focus on the project, I tell myself, trying to chase out the butterflies in my stomach so another species of butterfly—the kind that cares about school projects and grades and the future blah, blah, blah—can move in. There's no more avoiding the truth. This is when I find out if our countless hours and months of work have paid off.

No pressure or anything.

But here's the thing: I'm not really nervous. Okay, I'm a little worried it won't work, but I look over at Brady and know that with him by my side, I can do anything.

That's the way it's always been between us, so I have no doubt we'll succeed. Eventually.

“Do you want to do the honors?” Dan asks as he gently places a small blue-and-white marble in my hand.

We hold our collective breath as I walk up to the machine we spent the better part of last semester working on. I wish I could say I have no idea how I got involved in this, but the answer is one word, and it starts with a *B*. It's a very simple story: Brady was obsessed with Rube Goldberg machines. I was obsessed with Brady. So *voilà!* I started the club so we could work on the machines together. Emphasis, in my mind, on the word *together*.

And the weird thing is, I think that's why he went for it, too. So we could have something together. But neither of us was brave enough to admit that. We never are. *Especially* me. It's like our relationship is one of these crazy contraptions we build—one false move and the whole thing falls

apart. So you spend all your time making sure you don't knock things off course. Even if you think that maybe there might be an even better course you could be on, if only there weren't . . . obstacles.

I position the marble at the start of our contraption and say a silent prayer as I let go. The marble makes its way down a ramp. It then knocks over the first in a series of dominos in an S-shaped formation. All eight eyes in the room intently watch as each domino goes tumbling down, creating the perfect chain reaction. The last domino sets off a mousetrap, which snaps so loudly, I jump a bit. Then the string attached to the mousetrap pulls down on a lever and . . . nothing.

The machine stops. The balloon hanging at the end remains limp.

“What happened?” Conor grumbles as we examine the other side of the pulley, where a spoon's supposed to snap up, releasing a ball.

“We don't have enough momentum.” Brady leans down to look at the string, his hands behind his back to reduce the risk of knocking anything over.

“Back to the drawing board, I guess,” I reply, hiding any disappointment in my voice.

If I've learned anything in my sixteen years on this planet, it's that anything worth having takes work. Anything can be accomplished with the three Ps: Patience, Planning, and Perseverance.

That voice of hope pops back into my head. *Maybe now. Maybe this.*

“Don't give up,” Brady says.

It's hard not to take that as some sort of sign.

I'm always looking for signs.

Spotting them is easy. Reading them, though—that's the part I always seem to get wrong. It's frustrating how easily you can misinterpret something when you only want to believe in one thing.

I pull on the string. "It's still not as tight as we need it to be." I grab some glue and lift the mousetrap up. "This needs to be firmly planted down in order for the snap to work properly."

Dan comes over to help me press down on the trap while Brady and Conor watch. "I think you're right. Once this is properly secured, this will be a *snap*! Get it? *SNAP*?"

We all groan. Not only is Dan unaware that his attempts at humor are outright embarrassing, he genuinely thinks he's a comedian. We put up with it because Dan's the smartest science and math student we've got.

"We'll get this," Conor reassures us. He then puts his hands on his hips and sticks his chest out. (I think he's trying to emulate a superhero. I don't want to tell him he looks less like Superman and more like he's constipated.) "Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines, it will shine out clearer."

At least with Dan, I have some idea what he's talking about. Conor relies upon quoting from Tolkien or making Dungeons & Dragons references.

As for Brady?

Well, I'm fluent in Brady-isms. I know he'd say the same about me.