

ABLAZE

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ISBN 978-1-338-81603-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A.

40

First printing 2023

Book design by Christopher Stengel



SPARK

Heat. Pain. Burned skin.

Aly yanked her hand back from the oven and shook it. She'd gotten distracted by a crash from Rachael's room upstairs, and her knuckle had glanced the middle rack. *Careless*, she told herself. She used two wadded-up dish towels to pull the muffins out, then ran her knuckle under a cold tap. The water felt good, but the steady sting of the burn never quite went away.

“Aw, I was going to do that!” cried Mom as she came into the kitchen. She was dressed for action, Aly noticed—sweatpants, sneakers, hair pulled back.

“It’s fine. I can handle it,” said Aly. “Need a hand with Simon?”

Mom exhaled and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Actually, yeah, that would be a big help.” She shot Aly an exhausted smile. “You cool, kiddo?”

“I’m cool,” said Aly. She smiled big, her braces unabashedly on full display. These days, only a few people got that smile, and Mom was one of them.

Her hand still burned as she put a couple of muffins on a plate and brought them down the hall to Simon’s room. Sometimes, as the middle kid, she wondered if she was even here at all, if anyone actually *saw* her around the house. But you couldn’t daydream away tying someone’s shoes or bringing them breakfast.

Simon sat on his bed in his socks and pants, but had no shirt or shoes on. Aly could see by the look in his eyes that his mind was far away, playing out some long, complicated conversation. Her breath hitched in her throat; when he got like this, it always made her momentarily sick with worry, wondering what her

little brother was seeing that she couldn't. But he'd done it enough times that Aly knew he was just lost in his thoughts.

"Simon," she said, and gently waved a muffin under his nose. He came to, his nine-year-old humanity returning to his face. He took the muffin and had a bite, but she could tell he was still lost in his own head. "What's up, man?"

"What do I do about Bentley?" asked Simon softly.

Aly bit her own muffin and nodded. Bentley Moss was the kid in the grade above Simon's who'd been bothering him. She knew the right answer was to tell her brother to talk to a teacher . . . but she couldn't say it out loud and feel honest about it. Not with her own ongoing issues with Ray.

"Try to think about what he's feeling," she said. "Like, what's going on in his life to make him such a mean guy?"

"I *know* what he's feeling," said Simon. "He's just angry at everything. And I'm easy pickings."

Aly sighed. Couldn't argue with that.

"Well, look, no matter what happens with that jerk, you're going to look silly at school without a shirt

and shoes on,” she said. “So let’s get dressed, and we can think about a way to avoid Bentley Moss on the drive.”

Simon nodded absently and went to get a shirt from his dresser. Aly sat on his bed and gave him little reminders along the way—“You should double-knot that. Do you need that notebook? Remember what Mom said about that thing in the printer.” She loved him so much, but she also worried for him.

Comes with being the youngest, she thought to herself as she led her brother to the front hallway. *There’s always someone around to do stuff for you . . .*

There was the bang of a door being thrown open, and a forceful whisper of “Let’s just do this.”

And that’s what comes with being the eldest, thought Aly, exhausted.

Rachael came clomping downstairs. Aly took in the outfit—designer jeans, a cute maroon blouse, an extra-tight hoodie with ENGLAND across the chest, magenta lip gloss, shades, and crisp white high-top sneakers. It had been assembled over time, she realized, each piece an expensive birthday or Christmas gift that had apparently all led up to this Monday

morning. That was Rachael all over—obsessed with being popular, hardworking and strategic when it came to getting the coolest friends, the most followers, and the hottest reputation in school.

“Are we GOING SOON?” yelled Rachael into the house. She lowered her sunglasses and looked over them at Aly. “Can I help you, Als?”

“No,” said Aly. “You look nice.”

“That’s great, Als, except we’re late, so I might as well have worn a large cloth *sack*.” Rachael groaned. “I had this whole thing planned out, where I would be wearing this while sitting on the banister of the front steps, and *a certain someone* would *see me* as he walked into school, and it would be this perfect *vignette* that would inspire him to ask me to the April Showers Dance. But by the time we get there, what I know about that *someone’s* schedule tells me that he will probably already *be there*, so the whole thing is a *mess*.”

Your priorities are a mess, Rach, thought Aly, but she decided to consider her sister’s problem as though it were an actual problem. Calling Rachael out never got her anywhere.

“You could go for much more of a strutting-in-confidently, I-know-I-look-good kind of thing,” she said. “That always works in the movies. Like, he’s hanging with his boys, you enter in slo-mo, he notices you out of the corner of his eye—*Wow, who’s that?*”

“Classic,” said Simon.

Rachael slowly began to nod and sucked air between her teeth. “That is not a bad way to turn this around. This is why we pay you the big bucks, Als.” She smelled the air. “Did Mom make muffins? Oh my God, I’m STARVING.”

As she tromped off to the kitchen, Dad finally came downstairs, fixing his tie. “Everyone ready? Rumor is we’re in a hurry.”

“When I’m done eating!” shouted Rachael from the kitchen.

When they pulled up to school, Rachael got out of the car before Dad could even start saying goodbye. She brushed herself down, looked back at Aly, gave her a nod, and marched off toward school.

Aly looked down at her hand. Her burn from the

oven was swollen, irritated. A small white blister had formed on it.

Nobody had noticed. Not even Dad.

The front lawn of their private day school was a blur of various crews of kids chatting noisily—the lacrosse guys talking about last night’s game, doing hand gestures and then slapping five; the golden-haired horse girls giggling excitedly over a new country song they’d just heard, including Jess Gregor, who’d been Aly’s best friend before she got cool; the hunched goths with their oversized hoodies and green highlights, blasting morbid music from their phones; the junior fashionistas, looking bored in their influencer poses, Rachael among them rolling her eyes in conversation with her friend Martina.

Aly moved past them all, part of no tribe, doing her best to keep her head down. It was the only way she knew how to get by.

Be invisible, and no one even thinks to pick on you. It had done her well so far.

Well, sort of.

“Heads up, Theland!”

She barely registered the call before her foot landed on the skateboard and everything went topsy-turvy. Aly went weightless for one moment before collapsing hard on her side with a cry. All around her, the lawn echoed with kids going, “OOOOOH!”

“Are you all right?” asked Simon, bending down to try to help her up.

Aly nodded as she got to her feet; her ankle felt sore and her hip stung, but she was fine. Mostly what hurt was her pride. Her cheeks burned as she noticed how many pairs of eyes were pinned on her.

This wasn’t how she’d wanted to finally be seen.

Even she had to admit, invisibility wasn’t working.

Most of her life, she’d been able to swallow it down . . . but right now, a small part of her imagined flipping out on everyone, whipping her backpack overhead, and throwing it at the nearest window. About running across the lawn, knocking down a lacrosse boy, kicking Jess’s shin. Lately, she felt like she was going to burst, having bottled up so many of her feelings and opinions for the sake of going along, keeping the peace, staying unnoticed. Sometimes, it was like all she could hear was a harsh noise in

her head, like silverware scraping plates, until she thought she might just go sprinting through town shrieking, *Look at me. LOOK AT ME. I'M NOT NEARLY AS COOL WITH ALL THIS AS I TELL MY MOM I AM—*

“God, Theland, watch where you’re going.” Ray Westra loped in front of her and kicked the board up into his hand. He smirked at her from beneath his Supreme cap. “I let my board slip and *of course* you find a way to trip on it. Get it together.”

She watched Ray walk off, snickering and shaking his head to himself, and felt the heat in her cheeks surge. She wished she could make a meteorite come shooting out of space and crush Ray. She wished she could make a hole open up in the earth to swallow him.

“Do you know that guy?” asked Simon.

“Yeah,” mumbled Aly through the haze of her rage. “He’s my lab partner.”

The entire day, she dreaded chemistry, desperate to do anything other than relive the humiliation of the morning. But her fall in front of everyone followed her everywhere, people mumbling, *Rachael Theland’s*

sister totally ate it or Ray says she's a klutz, anyway.

When she got to the science lab after lunch, Ray was one of the people already there, setting up beakers full of various solutions. The sight of him made her stop in her tracks. She seriously considered just running away, but she forced herself to walk over to their shared table. *He's some guy in ripped jeans and a hoodie*, she told herself. *He's no one to get all upset over.*

“What do I need to set up?” she asked, trying to sound cheerful.

“My board is probably super messed up from you stomping on it today,” Ray responded loudly. Even their teacher, Mr. Chalnak, glanced up from the board and looked at them.

Aly took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. “Then you shouldn’t have let it roll out into the path—”

“You have to speak up if you’re going to talk to people,” Ray interrupted, rolling his eyes. “Must be all that metal crap in your mouth. Anyway, hope your folks are rich. That’s a custom deck.” He glared at her and smirked. “Though with what you’re wearing, I doubt that’s the case.”

Aly felt her mouth go tight as she tried to keep the crashing noises at bay. *Being angry won't help*, she told herself. *He does this EVERY DAY, and any time you get upset, he makes you out to be the jerk. Just ignore him.*

“Let me help get the test tubes in the rack,” she mumbled, and reached over for them—

Ray smacked her hand away, right on her burn.

Aly yanked her hand back, stunned, and hissed through her teeth.

Her mind was a cloud of white static. Outrage. Disbelief. *Pain.*

Had he actually slapped her hand away?

“You stick to the paperwork,” Ray said. “This morning proved you’re clumsy. You’ve ruined enough of my stuff for one day.”

But Aly couldn’t hear his words anymore. All she could hear was a great rushing noise in her mind, like a volcano inside her had erupted and was spilling white-hot lava across her entire being. She’d put up with Ray’s thinly veiled sexism and his insults about her braces and even the comments about her “hot” sister or “weird” brother, but now he’d actually touched

her; he'd actually *SLAPPED HER HAND AWAY,*
AND THAT
WAS
ENOUGH.

Ray cried out and dropped the beaker in his hand. It hit their table and shattered, sending blue liquid across the table.

The liquid was on fire.

All the fluid in all the beakers was on fire, sending jets of flame into the air, making glass shatter with their heat.

Though she was frightened, and though she could faintly hear her classmates shouting and Mr. ChalnaK screaming for the fire extinguisher, all Aly could do was look at Ray's face, open-mouthed with terror and surrounded by a halo of flames.