

1

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

– First Amendment, United States Bill of Rights

I WAS IN English when it happened.

AP Literature to be specific. Next to me was Eric Rogerman, who listened to his iPod during class and was prematurely balding, and Mary Aberfeld, who alternated between smelling like cheese and pickles, and was prematurely balding, too. Behind me sat Dara and Dana Hoebermann, identical twins with lazy eyes and a penchant for gossip. The rest of the class, more or less, was filled with people I didn't particularly care about—not in a rude way, don't get me wrong, but in the sense that my life, with or without them, would be exactly the same.

It was the third day of school. So far, we'd read scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1597) out loud while Mrs. Bloom read the stage directions in an affected British accent.

Bloom was a complete nutjob. It wouldn't surprise me to learn she was from another planet entirely; one where it was acceptable to leave your house in the morning with curlers still nestled in your hair and a necklace of baby spoons and forks strung together on mint-flavored dental floss. (I won't even try to explain that one.)

Still, there's nothing better than performing Shakespeare—even if it's not on a stage. I'd been stuck with the role of the Nurse; at first, this offended me beyond belief. The Nurse was old, and probably fat. Definitely fugly. Every time I read the play out loud

in my bedroom I was Juliet. This time around, however, the title role was being played by Marisa T. Karava, the only person I knew who actually wrote her middle initial on papers and who, if asked her name, would reply “Marisa *T.* Karava.” (I could therefore only assume the T stood for Tool.)

Marisa read Juliet’s lines with about as much enthusiasm as I had for going to the dentist (none). I almost suggested to Mrs. Bloom that she’d made a terrible casting mistake, but then I realized I sort of *liked* reading the Nurse. To spice things up in class, I spoke every other word with a cockney accent. It threw people off, which was a good thing. Jed thought I was predictable, and I despised that label. I wanted to be spontaneous. Fun. Carefree.

Here’s the scoop on Jed: two years ago, as a sophomore, he was the youngest student in Bennington’s history to be elected Student Body President. He’d held onto the title ever since. Jed excelled at the game of (high school) politics—patting the right backs, shaking the right hands, kissing the right asses.

I was the girl he could be himself around, loosen his tie around (literally, not figuratively; Jed wore ties to school everyday), even complain around. I’m not sure if it was *love*, even though we used that word with one another, but our relationship was definitely more than your typical high school fling. Jed understood me, which is what I liked most about him. Not that his father was nouveau riche or he was a Dartmouth legacy or that his wardrobe consisted almost entirely of buttery pastels or even that he ran the morning announcements, which was pretty much his own television show that aired for ten minutes during homeroom.

Fact: At the Bennington School, a disgustingly posh preparatory on the outskirts of Manhattan (and by that I mean Long Island), the morning announcements are displayed on televisions throughout the school—one per classroom—in this ridiculous sort of variety show that Jed hosts. One of the privileges of being Student Body President.

Typically, student groups write up their own messages and Jed performs them like monologues while the show films live in the video production room behind the auditorium. At Bennington, the morning announcements are a Pretty Big Deal, and Jed Brantley was a Pretty Big Deal for starring in them.

But he was an Even Bigger Deal for dating me.

Marisa had just butchered the balcony scene (*Romeo*. Pause. *Oh Rom-e-o*. *Wherefore cough art thou yawn Rom-e-o?*) when Mrs. Bloom glanced at her watch and flipped on the screen above the blackboard.

“Do you like being the center of attention? Are you blind?” Jed asked, his face nearly taking up the entire screen; he was wearing a ribbed sweater, hair swooping over his right eye in a way that made me want to brush it back. “Auditions for *The Miracle Worker* are this week and the Drama club wants YOU to be there on Friday!” Jed pointed at the camera and smirked.

I really shouldn’t let him write his own jokes.

“Now, there’s something important I have to say,” Jed said, his voice filled with its normal huskiness.

My ears perked.

“Most of you know my girlfriend, Marni.” A few kids turned around to stare at me. I shrugged, trying my best to look demure. “Short blonde hair, sort of pretty, nice gams.”

Sort of pretty? Gams? I attempted to hide my eyes behind my fingers.

“Hi Marni,” he continued, waving at me with a big smile. “I just want to say how much I’ve enjoyed dating you this past year. You’ve been a great girlfriend.”

A few girls “awwwed” even though his little speech was definitely not awwworthy; some of the guys on the opposite side of the room rolled their eyes and I silently applauded them. I had no idea what Jed was doing.

“That being said, it’s time to let you know that I’ve moved on. I’ve met someone else who’s really great, and, uh, doesn’t like her friends more than me. Sorry. I’m sure you understand.” Jed straightened a few papers on his desk and then, on a final note, said: “Hey Darcy!” before the announcements were over and the screen turned blue.

Oh.

Shit.

No one looked at me, and no one made any noise. At all. The room was so silent I could hear myself breathe. I could hear the soft hum of Eric’s iPod and the sound Mrs. Bloom’s shoes made against the floor. I could feel my arms begin to tingle and my stomach swirl like water in a toilet bowl.

“Can you believe that?” I heard Dara Hoebmann say.

“That effing *sucked*,” Dana replied. “Even more than the time I ate an orange Popsicle for breakfast and my tongue was stained orange.”

“That was *this* morning,” said Dara.

I attempted a smile. Maybe I could play this off like it was all a big joke, like I'd known Jed was going to do this. But I hadn't known. As the whispers started filling up the classroom, I could hear my own voice echoing *stupid, stupid, stupid* in my head. And I tried hard—the hardest I'd ever tried—not to break down and cry.

Slowly, after a few minutes, or what felt like minutes and were probably only seconds, the heads started to turn. I had no idea what to do, and so I dug into my purse for my cell phone and quickly texted *911!* to Clarissa, Priya, and Lili. Supposedly, if we ever received a text like that during school, we would all leave class and meet up in the faculty bathroom that no one ever used by the student parking lot. I say supposedly because it had never actually happened before. An emergency, I mean. And this was *definitely* an emergency.

I clicked Send and raised my hand. “Can I use the bathroom?” I asked, trying to sound as desperate as possible, which wasn't very difficult. “It's important.”

“He's a pig,” Priya said, wiping at her eyes with a crumpled Kleenex. “He *disgusts* me. If I wasn't on a diet that forbid eating bacon, I would totally fry him up and put him on a BLT. Like *that*.”

By the time I arrived at the bathroom, Priya, Lili, and Clarissa were waiting for me with open arms. That's what friends are for, I guess. Being there to pick you up when you're down. *Way* down.

“Thanks, Priya,” I said, trying to avoid the fact that Jed had made a mockery of me in front of the entire student body *and* that Priya was on a diet, which meant, in turn, I

would have to start one in a few days. (You can't let one of your best friends diet alone—it's inhuman.)

And the whole broken heart thing, too.

I felt completely out of control. Tears poured down my cheeks; my nose was raw and leaky; my cheeks burned and my chest throbbed with pain. Every muscle in my body was sore and weak and numb. I barely had the strength to hold a tissue.

"I'm sorry," I said, sniffing. "I just feel so awful."

Priya gave me a smile, or at least what I *thought* was a smile. Her eyes were hidden by a ginormous pair of black sunglasses that matched her hair, which was piled on top of her head like a plate of spaghetti.

"He doesn't deserve you," said Lili, rubbing small circles on my back. "You're much better off without him."

Lili was nothing at all like Priya, who was loud—life of the party—and the tiniest bit, well, dumb. Not that everyone has to be smart or anything, but while Priya had been blessed with the ability to fill out a halter-top, Lili had been blessed with brains. Her mother was born in Korea and her dad was Mexican, leaving her petite and slightly olive; there was a natural glow about her, and the result was stunning. Lili didn't seem to notice how pretty she was, though, which made her the easiest of all my friends to get along with.

"I guess," I said between sobs. Did Jed really dump me like that in front of the entire school, with no explanation or concern for my feelings? Had our relationship meant so little to him? "It sure doesn't feel that way."

I blew my nose and averted my eyes from the mirror. I had never looked worse in my entire life. I felt like a wet, unwanted, blimp. I glanced over at Clarissa, who had perched herself on the sink, the toes of her turquoise pumps dangling mid-air. Once a week, Clarissa wore an outfit that was various shades of a specific color—today she had followed in Picasso’s footsteps and declared her “blue” day, choosing a taut, navy blouse with eyelet lace and a sleek pair of low-cut jeans; a thick, iridescent ribbon framed her forehead.

There are a lot of things I could tell you about Clarissa von Dyke: she spends \$500 every month to get her hair highlighted, she used to drive a Lexus but now she drives an Audi, and when she’s bored she pokes freshmen with safety pins in the hallway. But that’s not the important stuff.

Clarissa is the kind of girl that legends are made of. That sounds ridiculous, but it’s true. She’s a modern day Helen of Troy; outrageously, insanely gorgeous—the kind of beautiful that propels boys to carry her books in the hallway and girls to pack celery and baby carrots for lunch.

It’s not just that she’s beautiful, though. Even I like to think I’m not a complete mountain troll, but I’m still no Clarissa. No one is. Because no matter how hard anybody tries, that indeterminable X-factor sets her apart from all the other students at Bennington.

Some random girls started calling us “The Diamonds” freshman year when we each bought matching diamond pendants at the mall and wore them to school. At first we used it as a joke, but then it caught on and before we knew it, that’s exactly who we were—at Bennington, anyway. *Diamonds*. Girls wanted to be us, guys wanted to date us (not

Jed, apparently), and Clarissa was our fearless leader. And while I adored Priya and Lili, Clarissa was the one person I couldn't live without, the first one I'd ask to the movies if I had two tickets, the first one I'd go to with a problem. With her, I didn't care that I was the supporting role and not the lead—I was happy to be a part of the show.

Lili cleared her throat. “Clarissa,” she murmured as if I were invisible, “say something.”

“Are you okay, Marni?” Clarissa asked.

I shook my head. Jed was my first real boyfriend, my first real kiss. Wasn't I worth an in-person breakup, or at the very least, a phone call? There were no words to describe the way I was feeling; how betrayed and dejected I felt knowing there was already someone else – Darcy, who wasn't even that pretty—in his life. How long had he been seeing her behind my back?

I started crying again. All I could muster was: “No.”

And for Clarissa, that was enough. “You're gonna be fine,” she said, slipping off the sink and holding out her hand. “I promise.”

“I just want to go home,” I slurred.

“You can't,” Clarissa said, approaching me. “You have to go to Gov.”

AP Government was our final class of the day. It was an eclectic smorgasbord of United States history with a focus on the Constitution and its amendments, the judicial system—mainly the Supreme Court—and debate. It was the most riveting class I'd ever taken, and not just because my father is a lawyer and I've been groomed to find that sort of stuff interesting. Here's the problem, though: not only were the Diamonds in the class, but so was Jed. *And* Darcy McKibbon. I felt my hands start to shake.

“No way,” I said, folding my arms. “I won’t go. I can’t.”

“You *have* to,” Clarissa said firmly. “I’m going to fix this, and we all need to be there for it.”

Fact: Clarissa had a knack for making problems disappear. Caught without a hall pass? No problem. Forget your homework? Hand it in tomorrow. She was the golden child of the Bennington School, the head of a dozen clubs, the student liaison to the Principal—a million students rolled into a single, perfect person. One smile and people bent over backwards to help her. And, to a much lesser degree, help me. It wasn’t hard being a Diamond, truth be told. It was very, very easy.

There’s always a catch, though, and mine was this: if our friendship was a poker game, my cards were on the table, facing-up, while Clarissa’s were still concealed, waiting for anyone – including myself – to call her bluff.

Clarissa looked at me with a mixture of sympathy and expertly applied mascara. “Okay?”

“What are you going to do?” Priya asked, excitement spreading across her face. Priya loved a good showdown.

“Yeah,” I added. “What’s going on?”

“You’ll see,” Clarissa said, soaking up her chance to be secretive. “Rest assured – Jed Brantley is going to regret the day he ever messed with one of the Diamonds.”

She walked over to the door and pulled on the metal handle.

“Don’t do anything crazy,” I warned, even though it was no use. Clarissa would do exactly what she wanted. She always did.

Clarissa tossed her hair like she was in a shampoo commercial. “No worries,” she replied with a smirk. “I’ve got your back.”

“Me too,” added Lili, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Yeah,” Priya said. “Ditto.”

I studied my three best friends as they stood with me in the bathroom during the middle of third period and smiled my first post-breakup smile. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t as smart as Lili or funny as Priya or beautiful as Clarissa (although truly, even now, that word doesn’t do her justice). It didn’t even matter that my boyfriend had cheated on me. We were a team. And unless something changed soon, until I left for college, this is who I would always be.

A Diamond.

Beautiful. Elegant. Unbreakable.