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Chapter 44: Girls Support Girls

The next morning, I went on my daily pilgrimage to the Co ee Bean. Matt was behind the counter again, unable to recognize me - again

"Name," he robotically said.

"Matt, I told you-"

"Matt, hey, that's my name too. Cool," he scribbled 'Matt' onto my cup.

I should seriously start collecting these.

Matt and Flora were still dating and he stilldidn't know who I am. Not to mention, I might actually be the Co ee Bean's most loyal customer.

The world instantly brightened with a cup of co ee in my hand.

No Luke, no pop quizzes, the sun was shining, and I hadn't bumped into my ex-boyfriend since semester started. I also hadn't gone to any mathlete meetings, so that was why. Small wins.

My co ee cup was empty by the time I arrived at school. I waited patiently outside the girl's bathroom. From time to time, Bianca would block the entire thing so she could b*tch someone out. Today was one of those days.

While I was in line, a girl tapped my shoulder, "Millie, is that you?"

I turned around and found Cearra (aka the 'C' in LUCKY) behind me. She was holding a palette of eye shadow that matched the floral choker she wore. She was waiting to apply her makeup in the bathroom mirror.

"Have you seen the photo?" she asked me.

Ironically, I'd never spoken to Cearra before. She became friends with Julia over the summer and was Julia's ininto the LUCKY girl gang, but Julia had never introduced us.

"What photo?"

"The one Bianca Rodriguez posted on her Instagram. You're in it." Cearra stared at me like I was living under a rock, "You should know by now. It's kind of a big deal. Have none of your friends told you?"

I tried not to laugh. I guess she hadn't gotten the memo yet. I have no friends.

The bathroom doors opened, and Bianca walked out with Oma and a couple other girls. They le someone crying in one of the stalls. The line started to move as everyone filled in.

I stood back - nervous, confused and scared. The last time a popular girl took a photo of me, it was... I shuddered at the memory.

I asked hesitatingly, "What photo did Bianca post?"

Bianca was passing by with her entourage when she heard her name. She cast me a sideways glance and smirked. Then she moved on and her entourage followed, except for Oma. Oma hung back to rummage through her purse for something. Honestly, it looked like she was waiting to see my reaction.

"You haven't seen it?" Cearra asked me incredulously. She pulled her phone out and showed me, "Look. That's you"

I leaned in.

Cearra pulled up Bianca's profile on her phone and clicked on the latest picture. It was a photo of Bianca in a yellow bikini in Chad's pool. She was posing on a pineapple floatie. And there, in the background, was me. Drinking lemonade.

Phew.

"You're not tagged, but I'm pretty sure that's you," Cearra zoomed in for me, "It's amazing. I don't know how you started hanging out with that group of seniors, but people are talking."

I stared at the photo of me sitting on a lounger next to Luke. I shuddered at the thought of he-who-will-not-be-named-again.

"Millie!" a male voice called my name.

I turned to see Jake walking through the hall towards me. At this rate, I was never getting to the bathroom.

He greeted Oma as he passed by and then a smile lit up his handsome face when he saw me.

I brightened up at seeing him too. "Jake!"

Jake was always a comforting sight. The one friend who acted like a friend and didn't care what anyone else thought. Cearra stayed next to me, too curious to leave now.

"Have you picked up the new English lit book? We're reading Taming of the Shrew now. From tragedy to comedy," he joked, referencing the time we both stuck our foot in it with our teacher, "Anyway, I picked up your copy for you."

He extended a paperback copy of the Shakespeare play towards me. I looked down at it and counted my blessings.

"Thank you," I took the book out of his hands and he stayed there.

I didn't know what he was waiting for. Did he want a parting gi ?

Now I'm an awkward person. So, I awkwardly stared at my feet and then checked to see if he was still standing there. Yep. I went back to looking at my feet.

I should clean my shoes more o en.

"Do you want to open it?" he suggested.

"Do I?" I looked up at him while my fingers dissociated themselves from my frozen brain. Thankfully at least one part of my body was working. He looked so at ease...

I cracked the book open. It had that new book smell. A rectangular shaped paper fell out of the book.

I tried to catch it but failed. It fell to the floor and I crouched down to pick it up.

"It's a ticket?" Cearra asked curiously. She was nosily leaning over me to get a better view.

"I think so," I said, still not getting it.

The ticket said: Shakespeare– Live Performance at the Rockford Theater.

Jake helped me out, since I clearly had fewer brain cells than I thought. "I scored us some theater tickets to Taming of the Shrew next week. I figured it'd be way more fun than reading the actual play. Want to go?"

"With you?"

I almost pinched myself. Obviouslywith him. What am I even saying??

Jake took it well. He smiled, still relaxed, "Yes. With me."

He said the words slowly, letting them sink in. They sunk in to Cearra behind me and Oma nearby, who both gaped in shock. Not sure it sunk in with me.

I stared awkwardly obvious. This time, Cearra pinched me.

"Yes, like a date," Jake answered. He didn't know why I wasn't acting normal.

Some girl passing by gasped. I looked into the bathroom and found every girl standing outside the stalls watching me.

No one had seen Jake ask a girl out yet. He was the hot new boy. The mysterious half-brother of Luke Dawson. So why did he choose me?

"The reviews haven't been great, but I thought we could make fun of it," Jake continued, filling the space my silence le , "Better than reading the book."

He was helping me buy time as my mind processed what was happening. Surely this couldn't be for me. Jake and I were obviously getting along but there is no way that he was interested in dating me.

My mind thought of Luke. I've been through a lot with Luke and I like him. I'll be the first to admit it. I. Like. Luke.

I was hanging on to this dream that Luke and I could maybe...

But then yesterday he said ' we barely knew each otherYesterday, he acted immature at dinner and was rude to his brother and me. Just because a guy's hot, doesn't mean he get away with being a d*ck sometimes.

And if Luke decides today that he likes me, am I meant to be fine with that? Am I meant to just live for those highs and forget the lows? Maybe we both need to mature a bit. Maybe I need to take my mind o him for a second.

I mean, a girl showed up at his house at 10PM yesterday night. I remember how my ex-boyfriend used to lie and say 'we're just friends' while he cheated on me.

I trust Luke way more than my ex-boyfriend. But the truth is that having a girl over at night is not a good look. Not if he cares about my feelings.

Especially since I vocalized it to him. I literally told him I was falling for him - and he just let me go. And invited the other girl into his house.

Cearra prodded me in the back to react.

"Are you sure this is for me?" I asked.

Jake sighed, though he remained patient with the questions. Sometimes, I can be my own enemy. I have so little confidence that the boy needed to tell me four times before I could believe it. Maybe I was standing in the way of my own happiness.

I finally got my act together. "Yes, I'm free!"

Maybe instead of chasing a roller-coaster, I should try standing still for a moment. Going to the theater with Jake doesn't have to be a lifelong commitment or anything like that. He's being polite and kind. Maybe that's not a bad thing?

When you don't have a social life, it's pretty easy to confirm without checking your calendar. I'm free.

"Sweet," his smile widened into a cheesy grin, "Cool, well I can pick you up. It's not that far from our home. This is awesome Millie, really awesome," he repeated himself, almost in disbelief, "I'm glad you said yes."

"Hey Jake," Cearra interrupted us, "this has been really sweet, but you're in line for the girls' bathroom."

"Oh, sorry."

He stepped out of the way and Cearra grabbed me, yanking me into the girl's bathroom. I had the biggest smile on my face.

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Cearra shoved me into a stall and locked the door. We were in a tight space, with a toilet in between.

Cearra was cool but I'd only spoken to her for the first time 3 minutes ago. Yet here we were, locked together in a tiny toilet. And I had no idea what she was going to say.

"A hot boy just asked you out," she summarized. "Now you need to get your act together and destroy those insecurities, girl. He asked you.He wanted you.When you go on that date, you show him what he's been missing."

I didn't know what to say. She clearly witnessed my insecurities first hand when I couldn't accept that Jake wanted a date with me.

She comforted me, "I can tell that you haven't had much experience with boys, so this is girl code right here. The boy's lucky to get a chance with you. Not the other way round. Internalize that."

I stumbled to convey my emotions. All I could say was, "Thank you, Cearra. I didn't expect this."

"You should expect it. Girls support girls. We need to have each other's backs."

She unlocked the door and held it open for me.

"Uhh," I blushed, "I actually need to use the bathroom. That's why I was in line."

"Oh yeah, of course. Stay in then," she waved goodbye.

I wanted to stay in there all day. I could hear the whispers outside my bathroom stall. I had gone from being invisible to visible. People suddenly knew my name and were nice to me.

People nodded hi to me when I passed by. It felt good to be acknowledged. To know that my existence is registered. I know it may sound silly. And if it does, it means you're lucky. It means you haven't gone through this.

And just when I thought things couldn't get any wilder, someone came up to me and said:

"Luke just found out. He heard that his brother asked you out. And he's p*ssed."

Oh frick.

A/N: Jake wants a date!! How do you think it should go??

And whats Luke going to do about it?!

Thank you @am_berxx for the beautiful poster! This chapter was all about community and support for all genders. If you want to join or support others, I've been posting anonymous true stories that people want to share, either to get advice or to help others. It's on my Instagram @NatalieInACorner. Hope we can support each other!