Chapter One

*Nina*

Valentine’s Day should be optional. Like, if you don’t have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, the holiday should disappear. That way, single people like me wouldn’t be subjected to frilly hearts and cherubs all over the place. Who came up with the idea that a baby in a diaper with a bow and arrow was romantic, anyway? It’s ridiculous. The whole stupid holiday was probably a marketing ploy thought up by florists, so they could sell overpriced flowers to desperate guys who were hoping to get laid.

Maybe, if I’d ever had a boyfriend on Valentine’s Day, I would feel differently. I’m sure I’m not the only seventeen- year-old girl whose favorite part of the holiday is all the chocolate that goes on sale the day after.

Which made the fact that I was balanced precariously on a ladder, trying to hang a banner for the Valentine’s Dance a little ironic. “How’s it look?” I shouted down to the other people who’d been drafted and put to work on the decorating committee.

“A little higher,” Lisa called out.

“Define a little.” I turned back to see my friend tilting her head to the right.

“Go up two inches,” she said.

I shoved the sign up a little bit higher and then pushed a thumbtack into the wall.

“We’re supposed to use tape,” she said.

I climbed down the ladder, pretending I hadn’t heard her.

“Nina, we’re going to get into trouble if we use thumbtacks.”

I sighed and turned to face her. “Unless you can magically pull tape out of your”—wait, we were still at school—“ear, then we’re going with thumbtacks because that’s all I could find.”

She glanced around and then pointed to a group of girls across the gym who were working on a giant heart made of hot pink tissue paper, red ribbon, and chicken wire. “They probably have tape.”

No way was I going to talk to the fashionistas. “If you want to go ask them, feel free.”

“Nope.” She pointed at our sign, hanging above the trophy case in the gym, which declared Cupid Is Coming. “Is it me, or does that sound like some sort of horror movie?”

I grinned. “You’re not wrong. If we didn’t need extra credit for home economics, I wouldn’t be doing this.”

“You’re the one who burned our chicken pot pie in Foods class,” she reminded me.

“The reason I’m in Foods class is because I don’t know how to cook. Therefore, I shouldn’t be penalized when the food is screwed up.”

“That’s your logic?” she asked.

“Yes, and I’m sticking to it.” I checked the time on my cell. It was quarter after three. School had of officially been over for fifteen minutes. “We’ve done our part. Let’s get out of here.”

It was Friday night, but before I could go out I had one chore to do. It was the same chore I did every day—sweep up the dog fur dust bunnies in the living room. Not that I minded, because dogs were far more agreeable than most of the people I knew. And a heck of a lot more faithful than most guys.

I was almost done when my brother, Jason, who was a year younger than me, came downstairs and dropped a bomb on my social life. I gripped the broom like a bat, and contemplated taking a swing at his head. “How could you do this to me?”

“What? I thought you wanted to go to the Valentine’s Day Dance. It’s all you’ve griped about for a week.”

How could he be so stupid? There were days when I’d swear one of us was adopted. “Wrong. I griped about the stupidity of the holiday because it makes single people feel defective.”

He scratched his head, looking genuinely confused. “Which is why I thought you’d be happier if you had a date.” The idiot’s heart was in the right place...but still. “I never asked you to play matchmaker.”

 “Cole is a nice guy. He’s willing to take you to the dance. What’s the problem?”

“You turned me into a charity case. That’s the problem.”

He shook his head. “If you don’t want to go to the dance, just say no when he asks. It’s that simple.”

 But it wasn’t that simple, not by a long shot, because Cole was a rare breed of guy—decent. Unfortunately, he fell firmly into the friend-zone category. Why? One day when I’d been sitting at the park reading *Harry Potter*, just blissing out in the sunshine, he sat down beside me and said he didn’t understand why I’d want to read on such a nice day and that he just didn’t get the big deal about *Harry Potter*. That was it. The die was cast. I couldn’t date someone who didn’t read, much less someone who didn’t understand the fabulousness that was *Harry Potter*.

“If you see him again before I do, tell him I don’t want to go to the dance.”

“Nope. If you want to turn the guy down, that’s on you.” And then my brother walked away from me.

Now what? I checked the time. Lisa was picking me up in an hour for our Friday night Nerd Girl festivities. We go to the bookstore, *ooh* and *ah* over all the books, and then pick out a precious few to buy. Afterward, we drink frothy coffee concoctions in the cafe while we discuss how book boyfriends are so much easier to deal with than guys in real life.

I put the broom and dustpan away in the kitchen pantry. Gidget lay by her dog dish looking mildly offended. I squatted down to pet her head. “I have no idea how you’re not bald.” She rolled over so I could rub her tummy. Blonde fur drifted through the air and hung there, defying gravity. “It’s a good thing we love you.”

Gidget couldn’t help the fact that she shed like a fiend. The vet said she was a yellow Lab, which for some reason meant she shed more than any other breed on the planet. She was also the sweetest dog you’d ever meet. She loved everyone. If a burglar ever broke into our house, all he’d have to do was rub her tummy and she’d happily watch him run off with all our belongings.

A knock sounded on the front door. Gidget trotted over to the front picture window and used her long nose to burrow behind the curtains so she could see who it was. The barking that followed let me know exactly who stood on my front porch. There was only one person Gidget didn’t like: West Smith, the disagreeable hottie who lived next door. He wasn’t as cranky as his father, who happened to be our landlord, but he wasn’t the friendly type either.

I opened the door. West stood on my front porch in jeans and a black leather coat, looking all sorts of hot and brooding. His artfully messy dark-blond hair hung down, partially obscuring his blue eyes, which would have been gorgeous except they were narrowed like he was irritated, which seemed to be his normal state.

Going for a casual demeanor, I leaned against the doorframe. “Hey, West. What’s up?”

Gidget continued barking. He glared in her direction. “What did I ever do to your stupid dog?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Calling her stupid isn’t going to win you any points.”

“Well, blocking my driveway isn’t going to win you any points. If you don’t move your Jeep before my dad gets home, he’ll probably have it towed.”

“First off, we pay rent, so it’s our driveway, too. And I’m not blocking your side.” I may have parked right up against the bright yellow line that West’s dad had made him paint down the middle of the shared cement strip, but I wasn’t over it.

West glared at me. “Work with me here, Nina. My dad is driving the Humvee today. If you don’t move your Jeep, he’ll probably take off your driver’s-side mirror and not even notice.”

Wrong. His dad would probably take off my mirror on purpose. He was that special kind of jerk. “People with shared driveways should drive smaller cars.”

“Feel free to explain that fact to my dad the next time you see him. For now, move your Jeep.”

At that moment, my mom pulled into the driveway and parked her car, hugging the line the same way I had. The apple obviously didn’t fall far from the tree. She climbed out of the car balancing a bunch of take-out boxes stacked up to her chin. I started across the lawn, but West was faster.

“Let me help you with those.” He grabbed several boxes off the top of the stack.

“Thank you, West.” My mom beamed at him. She seemed to be under the delusion that he was a nice young man. “China Garden had a special on shrimp fried rice. You’re welcome to join us.”

I could see the expression on West’s face. It looked like he was trying not to roll his eyes. I decided to mess with him. “You should stay for dinner. We can discuss my plan to erase the driveway line one night and move it over about six inches.”

West walked past me toward the house. “I think my father would notice that.” He stopped on the front step like he wasn’t sure if he was invited inside.

“You can put those in the kitchen,” I said.

He went into the house and veered right, toward the table, where he deposited the containers of rice. My mother followed behind him. Gidget kept her eye on West, circling the room to stand protectively between him and my mom.

“Gidget.” My mom set the rest of the food down, and then patted her on the head. “It’s okay.”

“There’s something wrong with your dog,” West said.

“She feels the same way about you,” I shot back.

“On that note, I’m leaving.”

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway had all of us turning to look out the kitchen window. Unless West’s dad had traded in his giant gas-guzzling SUV for a red Prius, someone else had just pulled up the drive to West’s house.

“Should you go see who that is?” I asked.

The way his eyebrows scrunched together told me he knew who it was, and he wasn’t happy about it.

Chapter Two

*West*

*What is Vicky doing here?* I walked over and peered out the living room window. She sat in her car, looking at her phone. My cell beeped, which meant she’d texted me. Great.

*Your car is here. I know you’re home. Come talk to me.*

“It’s Vicky, isn’t it?” Nina grinned like she knew a big secret. “Why are you hiding from your girlfriend?”

“Ex-girlfriend,” I said.

“Since when?”

“It’s been a few weeks.” Not like I was going to share the details of my dating life with her.

“I bet she’s having Valentine’s Day Dance remorse.”

“What does that mean?”

 “She probably wants to go to the dance, and getting back together with you would be way easier than finding a new guy to take her.” Nina chuckled like the situation was hilarious.

“Not funny.” Vicky had seen my car. What could I do?

“I’m texting that I’m having dinner with my neighbors.” All three of us watched as Vicky looked to the right at Nina’s house and then to the left at the empty lot that separated my house from the neighbors on the other side.

“What’s everyone watching?” Jason, Nina’s brother, asked as he came into the room. Our paths had crossed at school a few times. He was a decent guy.

“Hey, West.”

“Hello,” I said. “My ex, Vicky, stopped by. I think she’s coming over here. You should ask her to the Valentine’s Dance.”

“No thanks. I like my life drama free.” He walked over to the table, filled a plate with fried rice, and leaned back against the counter. “I’ll just stay and watch the show.”

Apparently, everyone in this house was a smart-ass. Vicky approached the front door and knocked. “Let’s all play nice,” Nina’s mom said as she walked over to open the door. “Hello, can I help you?”

 “Is West here? Can I speak to him?”

 “Sure. We were just sitting down to dinner.” Her mom stepped back so Vicky could see me. “Would you like to join us for some fried rice?”

What in the hell was her mother trying to do?

“No, thanks.” Vicky gave a polite smile. “Sorry to barge in during dinner. West, can we talk?”

There was no easy way out of this, but I had no intention of entertaining Nina’s family with my life any more than I already had. “Sure. Let’s go sit on my back patio where we’ll have some privacy.” It was barely fifty degrees outside, so that should help keep the conversation short.

“Okay.”

We went out the front door and around the side of the house. I opened the gate into the backyard and headed over to sit at the umbrella table. Since I didn’t know why she was here, I waited for her to start talking.

“I know we broke up, but my mom bought a Valentine’s dress for me, and she expects me to wear it to the dance, whether I have a date or not.” Vicky ducked her head. “Going without a date would be awkward. Not like this conversation isn’t, but I was hoping we could go as friends?” She glanced up with a hopeful look on her face.

Before I could answer, another car pulled up the driveway. “It’s like Grand Central Station around here tonight.”

“Is that Cole Harris?” Vicky asked. “What’s he doing here?”

He headed toward Nina’s front door.

“And why is Nina creeping out her back door like some sort of spy?” Vicky asked.

Nina ducked low, like she didn’t want anyone inside to see her through the back window, and then ran over to join us. “I’m going to hide over here for a while, if you two don’t mind.”

“Why are you hiding from Cole?” I asked.

“My brother told him to ask me on a date.”

“You don’t want to go out with him?” Vicky said. “Why? What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing. He’s a great guy, but he’s never read *Harry Potter*.” Nina stated this like it was a crime against humanity.

I tilted my head and studied her.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m trying to figure out if you’re Ginny or Hermione.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re Draco,” she replied.

“There you are,” Jason called from across the backyard with Cole by his side.

 “I am going to suffocate my brother in his sleep,” Nina said as she smiled and waved. I laughed.

“I’m not joking,” she said. Cole and her brother crossed the backyard to join us. “Hey, Cole. I didn’t know you were here.”

“I stopped by because I wanted to ask you something.” The poor guy looked at the small crowd of people and seemed to reconsider his mission. “Nina, can we talk over at your house, maybe?”

“Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you.” Nina pointed at Vicky. “Do you know Vicky? She and West used to date.”

Cole nodded. “Sure. Hello, Vicky.”

Vicky smiled. “Hello.”

“The Valentine’s Dance is coming up,” Nina said, “and the last I heard you weren’t seeing anyone, so I think you and Vicky should go to the dance together.”

Cole tilted his head and looked at Nina like he didn’t quite understand the situation. “You want me to ask *Vicky* to the dance?”

Nina nodded like this was a fabulous idea.

She seemed to enjoy throwing people off-balance. Maybe it was time someone did it to her.

“Since Nina and I are going to the dance, it makes sense that you’d ask Vicky.”