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For Carrie, my only love

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CHAPTER 1

Ephraim Scott sat at the bar and swirled the ice cubes in his glass. He wondered why he always ended up alone at parties, even when he had a date. This was a big night for him and Jena, but so far she had spent most of their senior prom hanging out with friends.

“Quarter for your thoughts.”

Ephraim jumped at the voice behind him. Grapefruit juice splashed on his hand, and an ice cube clattered on the bar top. He twisted around on the stool and faced the large eye of a camera lens, with Nathan Mackenzie behind it. Its screen cast an eerie glow on his best friend’s pale face and reflected off his glasses, obscuring his eyes.

“Nervous?” Nathan asked.

Ephraim put the glass down and wiped his hand dry with a napkin.

“You just surprised me,” Ephraim said.

“That’s a great shot for the video,” Nathan said. He perched on an adjacent stool and fiddled with the camera controls. He tilted the screen toward Ephraim.

“*Quarter for your thoughts?*” Nathan repeated onscreen. Ephraim watched himself leap a foot off his seat, accompanied by a small geyser of ice and juice. He smiled despite himself. Nathan had the uncanny ability to capture Ephraim at his worst moments.

“Thanks for that,” Ephraim said.

“Wait. Here.” Nathan played the footage back in slow motion, which looked even more comical. “This one’s gonna go viral. I can feel it.”

“That’s what you said about the last twenty videos.” Ephraim cleared his throat. “What did you mean by that comment, anyway?” he asked.

“Which?” Nathan was panning his camera over the dance floor, getting one of those directorial wide shots he liked so much.

“Quarter for your thoughts?” He swallowed the last of the grapefruit juice and winced at the bitterness. He’d never told Nathan about the strange quarter he’d found last year that had whisked him off to a series of parallel universes each time he’d flipped it. He watched his friend carefully to make sure he was really the Nathan he’d grown up with.

“It’s just something people say,” Nathan said. He held the camera at arm’s length and tested the limits of the zoom function to get a better shot of Leah Donner’s shimmying butt on the dance floor. That footage was more likely to go viral than anything else he’d shot.

“No, they don’t. Nobody says that.” Ephraim tugged at his bowtie to loosen it. He sighed when it unraveled completely. It had taken him half an hour to get it right. He’d wanted to wear the clip-on, but his mother insisted that if she was paying for the tuxedo rental, he was at least going to learn to tie the real thing. “People say ‘*penny* for your thoughts.’”

“I adjusted for inflation. You can’t get anything for a penny these days. A quarter doesn’t buy much either, for that matter. Remember those little juices we’d buy in junior high? My favorite was the blue one. It actually tasted like *blue*, you know?”

“So you didn’t mean anything in particular by it?” Ephraim asked.

“What’s the big deal, Eph?”

The big deal was that Ephraim had been thinking about a particular quarter a lot lately, and Nathan’s choice of words had triggered paranoia that he had never quite rid himself of. The coin he had was now inert, and it was the only one of its kind as far as he knew. But if there were others out there, any of his friends could be replaced at any moment, or he could be swapped into another universe and another life, powerless to do anything about it.

“Nothing. Never mind,” Ephraim said.

“Everything okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Is everything okay with you and Jena, I mean?” Nathan asked. “The plan’s still in effect?”

“Yeah. Of course.” Ephraim gave Nathan a sidelong look. “Why? Have you heard anything?”

“No one tells me anything, dude. But I have five eyes, and I haven’t seen you two together much tonight.”

“Five?”

Nathan pointed his camera at Ephraim and grinned.

“Jena went to the bathroom,” Ephraim said. He glanced at the clock above the bar. “Thirteen minutes and forty-five seconds ago. Not that I’ve been keeping track, because that would be weird.”

“Right,” Nathan said. “Was Shelley with her?”

“Naturally,” Ephraim said. “And Mary. I’ve barely had five minutes alone with my girlfriend all evening.”

“You and Jena danced that once,” Nathan said.

Ephraim groaned. “Those were the five minutes. Please tell me you didn’t get that on video.” He hadn’t danced with Jena so much as moved erratically in her vicinity in an approximation of rhythm.

“It’s my job to get embarrassing footage of you. I’m building a catalog of your failures, to keep you ever humble. And to blackmail you with them when you become rich and powerful. Besides, I didn’t think you were that bad.”

“*You* wouldn’t. I stepped on her toes. Twice.”

Even after surviving a trip to a dangerous and twisted version of his own universe last summer, dating Jena was still the most amazing thing that had ever happened to him. Part of him had been waiting for their relationship to end, like some marvelous dream. Even Dorothy eventually returned to Kansas.

“Could you put that camera down for just a minute?” Ephraim asked. “I feel like I’m talking to a teenage cyborg in a bad suit,” he said.

“I. Do. Not. Want. To. Miss. Anything,” Nathan said in a robotic monotone. “What’s wrong with my suit?”

“Purple hasn’t been in since . . . ever. And I hate to disappoint you, but a giant monster is not going to attack Summerside during prom.”

“But you can’t know that for sure.” Nathan reluctantly put the camera down on the bar, pointed toward the mirror behind it. He studied his reflection, smoothed back his gelled blond hair, and adjusted his glasses, then gave Ephraim his full attention. The camera had left a vertical red crease down his cheek that looked like a scar.

“Odds aren’t good, in any case. The only things rampaging tonight are teenage hormones,” Ephraim said.

“I already have plenty of footage of that. The MPAA might up the rating on this production to R,” Nathan said. “Anyway, you don’t have anything to worry about with Jena. She loved that necklace you gave her, whatever it’s supposed to be. I’m sure that if she’s in the bathroom, she hasn’t dumped you, she’s just taking a—”

“*Thank you,*” Ephraim said. “No, really. It’s such a relief that you—”

Nathan giggled.

Ephraim sighed. “Relief?”

Nathan nodded, still laughing. He wiped tears from the corners of his eyes.

“When are you going to grow up?” Ephraim asked.

“Toilet humor never gets old,” Nathan said.

“But it always stinks.”

“Nice,” Nathan said.

Ephraim’s stomach flip-flopped, and he pressed his hand to his cummerbund. Just when he thought he was going to be sick, the queasiness disappeared just as quickly as it had come.

What was that? The pang had felt almost like the first time he had crossed over to a parallel universe. But the quarter that had taken him there and back again didn’t work anymore, and he didn’t even have it with him.

“Uh. You okay?” Nathan asked.

Ephraim stood and looked around the room wildly, trying to spot

any changes. Had that banner been blue before, or had it been lavender?

“What were we just talking about?” Ephraim asked.

“We were engaging in some scatological repartee,” Nathan said. “Seriously. What’s wrong?”

Ephraim was worried that he’d shifted into another universe again—or been bumped by someone else—but Nathan remembered the conversation they’d been having. He hadn’t seemed to change, and everything else looked the same as it had a moment ago.

“You don’t look so hot. Or actually, you look a little too hot,” Nathan said. “In the literal, not colloquial, sense, though objectively speaking, as a guy, I recognize that your appearance is not entirely unappealing. No doubt thanks to exceptional genes from your mother, who also looks exceptional in jeans.”

“I’m okay now,” Ephraim said.

“No, you aren’t. You didn’t even react to my remark about Maddy.”

“I’ve given up on discouraging your bizarre crush on my mother.”

“Oh, there she is,” Nathan said.

“My mom?” Ephraim asked.

“Your date.” Nathan grabbed his camera from the bar and pointed it over Ephraim’s shoulder. “And . . . action!”

Ephraim swiveled around on his stool. Jena was at the entrance to the ballroom, looking around the room. She had changed into a tank top and denim shorts. She looked frantic.

“Where’s her dress?” Nathan asked.

Jena’s prom dress had been a very pleasant surprise, considering her wardrobe favored unrevealing T-shirts and jeans. The crimson sleeveless gown pushed up her breasts, though she’d kept tugging at it self-consciously to keep too much from showing. She had crossed her arms for the whole limo ride, annoyed at Nathan’s insistence on documenting it. Now that Ephraim thought about it, maybe her avoidance of him all night had more to do with Nathan’s constant surveillance.

“Something’s wrong.” Ephraim headed for Jena, with Nathan trailing close behind, whispering stage cues.

“You haven’t seen her in a long time. You’ve been pining for her,” Nathan prompted him.

“It’s been fifteen minutes,” Ephraim said.

“*Pining*. I want a tearful reunion. How good are you at crying on demand?”

“Nathan. Quit it. This isn’t the time.”

A smile spread across Jena’s face as Ephraim approached. In fact, she looked happier than she had all night. She ran toward him, dodging couples on the dance floor. What had gotten into her?

They met in the middle of the dance floor. She hesitantly placed a hand on his arm, as though not quite sure he was real. Then she held on more tightly. Her face was flushed, and she was breathing heavily. Sweat plastered her short dark hair to her forehead. A strand clung to the back of her neck.

“Ephraim?” Jena said. There was something odd about her eyes. They were bright, shining. She looked at him so intensely, he was abruptly at a loss for words. She’d had that effect on him since the second grade, until they finally got to know each other last summer.

“You missed her,” Nathan murmured softly, so only Ephraim could hear him.

“I missed you,” Ephraim said. “Are you—”

She cut him off with a kiss. He stopped thinking about anything except how soft her lips were.

Jena was not into PDA. She was barely comfortable with him in private, which always made him worry whether he was doing something wrong. But this kiss was different. All of her was in it.

It wasn’t a new feeling though, it was an *old* one.

Panic seized Ephraim. He had the sudden impression that this was wrong. It shouldn’t be happening. *Couldn’t* be happening.

He pulled away and stared at her.

She sighed dreamily and opened her eyes. Her clear *blue* eyes. They widened as she saw his expression change.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Jena’s eyes were brown.

She hadn’t changed her dress. *She* had changed.

“Zoe,” he whispered.

Now he noticed the tiny indentation above Zoe’s right nostril, from the nose ring she’d been wearing the last time he saw her. And he should have noticed immediately that she wasn’t wearing the necklace he’d just given Jena, which was suddenly a very important detail.

“You thought I was someone else,” Zoe said. She backed away.

“Zoe, how did you get here?” he asked.

“Oh, crap,” she said. “Ephraim?” Her voice was raw.

“How—no, why are you here?” Ephraim asked. His voice rose. He ran a hand through his hair, coating his fingers in sweat and sticky hair gel.

She looked around, as if seeing where she was for the first time. “I don’t belong here.”

“No, you don’t,” he said. His voice came out harsher than he’d meant it to.

That snapped her out of her daze. She grabbed his hand. “I know you have questions, but you have to come back with me. Right away.”

“What? I can’t.” He looked around. “It’s *prom*.”

“Do you still have the coin?” Her voice was urgent.

At mention of the coin, Ephraim’s hand went cold, and he jerked it out of her grasp. He looked her over. There it was: a clamshell-style cell phone tucked into her right front pocket. But he knew that it wasn’t a phone, just like the coin wasn’t actually a coin. The device Zoe carried was a controller, which worked in tandem with the coin to shift from one reality to another. Now he knew how she’d gotten back to his universe.

“What the hell?” Nathan asked. Ephraim and Zoe turned to see Nathan pointing his camera at them. Ephraim had forgotten he’d been standing there the whole time. “Is this some kind of kinky role-playing you guys do? I have to say, I didn’t expect it from you, Jena, but I fully approve.”

“Dammit, Nathan. Turn that thing off,” Ephraim said.

Zoe swiped at her eyes with the back of one hand. “How can you associate with that creep after what he did?”

“This is *Nathan*. He had nothing to do with all that,” Ephraim said.

“But he’s capable of it,” Zoe said.

The same thought had occurred to Ephraim, which was why he’d decided not to involve Nathan in anything having to do with the coin or tell him about what had really happened with *bis* double Nate last year. Things seemed simpler that way. Easier. But that whole experience was coming back to haunt him now. It would be hard to explain who Zoe was. He had to get her out of here before more people saw her.

“Zoe, I thought I’d never see you again,” he said.

“Obviously,” she said. Her eyes were focused on something behind him. She clenched her jaw.

“That’s weird,” Nathan said, aiming his camera in the same direction.

With a sick sense of dread, Ephraim turned around. He felt like he was moving in slow motion, caught in another bad moment in one of Nathan’s videos.

Jena stood in front of the bathroom entrance, staring at him and Zoe. She had put her glasses back on, vivid red secretary frames that matched her prom dress. Aside from her outfit, Jena was as identical to Zoe as the twin Morales sisters were to each other; Mary and Shelley stood on either side of Jena, openly shocked by the sight of their best friend’s double.

“Crap,” Ephraim said. “Um. How long has she been watching us?”

Judging from Jena’s stormy expression, she’d been there long enough.

“I’ll distract her. You run for it,” Nathan said.

Ephraim shook his head. “She’s faster than me, even in a dress.”

“In that case, any last wishes?” Nathan asked, shoving the camera in his face.

Ephraim sighed. “Wishes got me into this mess in the first place.”