

So Much for Normal

·Cat·

Once upon a time (say, like, four months ago) the phrase *girl bonding* was a foreign concept. An expression I never expected to say, or even think, without gagging. But not only am I not choking on the delicious, gooey, calorie-laden brownie I'm currently devouring, but a goopy green mask is in place, Hello Kitty slippers are on my feet, and I totally just snorted.

Welcome to my new normal.

As my very-soon-to-be-stepmother Jenna teaches, or rather, attempts to teach my uber-conservative cousin and rhythmically challenged best friend to do the running man, I marvel at how much my life has changed. This time last year, I would've scoffed at anything girly. I'd never been kissed—or even on a date. I had major trust issues, and my best friend was my *dad*. Now, I have a hot, swoonalicious boyfriend. I have not one but two close friends. And after sixteen and a half years of Mama drama, scandal-hungry paparazzi, and bizarre time-traveling escapades (thanks to my favorite gypsy girl Reyna) it looks as though I'm finally, maybe, *hopefully* getting a taste of normalcy.

So why does it feels like the other shoe is about to drop?

The sofa cushion dips, and a *whoosh* of air fans my face, yanking me from my tilt-a-whirl thoughts. Alessandra, my sixteenth-century ancestor, blows out a breath, her freshly scrubbed cheeks pink from exhaustion. I lift my lips in a smile and accidentally crack my goopy mask in the process.

“You’ve got some moves, girlfriend,” I say, nudging her with my elbow, not surprised. While my dancing left much to be desired during my jaunt to the past, Less had skills. Evidently, that particular talent carried over when she came to the future. Lowering my voice so Jenna and Hayley won’t hear, I say, “All that complicated mumbo jumbo in packed ballrooms must’ve paid off. Too bad Austin’s not here to see you shake your groove thang.”

As with any other time I mention the boy’s name, a dopey smile zips across my cousin’s face. She’s so whipped.

“It *is* a shame he is not here, but if he were, I doubt I would be dancing.” Her dark eyes shine with humor. “I may be bolder than when I first arrived, but I’m a far cry from crazy.”

She playfully lifts a waxed eyebrow, and my mask-cracked grin widens. Alessandra’s easy use of modern lingo still amazes me. Her transition into a twenty-first-century teen has been almost effortless. Sure, she stumbled in the beginning, but now she’s in the zone. Less is in love, starring in the school play, and fending offers from Hollywood, thanks to her fabulous stint in the Shakespeare Winter Workshop. It’s as if she were born for this century, this life, and was simply biding her time in the Renaissance until a bit of gypsy magic made it all happen.

A twinge of envy pricks behind my ribs.

I’m happy for my cousin. I am. It’s just...she’s only been in my world for six weeks. She’s found her place. Maybe it’s about time I found mine.

My best friend Hayley plops onto the love seat across from me, snagging a brownie on her way down. “Must have chocolate,” she says, breaking off a large chunk. She shoves it in her mouth, and her eyes roll back in bliss. “So good,” she mumbles.

“Yeah, yeah, rub it in.” Jenna frowns at the tray of calorific goodness. “You skinny misses pig out to your heart’s content. I can take it, even if it *is* my bachelorette party.”

Today's a teacher in-service day at school, which means the students have a mini-vacay. With Jenna's wedding on the horizon, what better way to spend the day than with bachelorette-inspired girly-time makeovers?

See? I'm totally evolving.

Licking her index finger, Jenna presses it into the scattered crumbs on the plate and then lifts it to her nose. She inhales audibly before heaving a dramatic sigh. "Two more days," she proclaims, wiping her finger on a napkin. "Two more days of rabbit food so I can fit into my dress, and then I'm wolfing an entire layer of wedding cake myself. Mark my words, girls."

Hayley picks up the television remote and powers on the mounted flat screen. "Hang in there, Miss J. It'll all be worth it when you see the pictures. Your dress is flipping fabulous."

Hayley is an aspiring fashion designer, so she'd know. She's also a fellow art nerd on the fringes of Roosevelt Academy's social order, and we became friends fresh from my jaunt to the past. Her mantra of *Keep Calm, Love Fashion* has been amusing me ever since. Her stamp of approval is like a thumbs-up from the fearsome Joan and Melissa Rivers, and it's as close as Jenna will ever get, since *that* particular duo won't be weighing in.

The details of Dad's wedding are super hush-hush, with only the inner circle even knowing the date. Tabloids have speculated for months. April in Catalina or June in Malibu; I've even heard October in Paris or Rome. The paparazzi will never guess an award-winning Hollywood director and the leading party planner of Beverly Hills are getting hitched in their own backyard, with a slim guest list of fifty, on Valentine's Day weekend.

"And speaking of fabulous..." Hayley selects *The Kate Lyons Show* from the menu. "I have such a clothing crush on this woman." Hugging a throw pillow close to her chest, she settles in to watch the program, tossing Jenna a defeated look. "No chance she'll be there, huh?"

Understandably, the wedding—and its noticeable lack of invited celebs—has been the topic du jour.

Jenna shakes her head. “Nope. Inviting her or anyone else in the media would’ve been like asking vultures to camp outside our front door. Peter and I want to keep this as low-key and off the radar as possible. We’ve seen the weddings with paparazzi stalking the family, following the kids to school.” She shudders, and the smooth skin around her bright eyes tightens. “That’s not happening to Cat.”

Her tone is intense, proving what I’ve suspected all along—I’m the reason for the small wedding. True, Dad has never been into the trappings of his Hollywood status, and Jenna isn’t the attention-getter I once pegged her to be. But this is their *wedding*. Dad’s first marriage was over before it even began, and it certainly hadn’t been rooted in love. Not the kind he has with Jenna, anyway. And Jenna’s the ultimate girly-girl. If it weren’t for me, and worrying about my safety, I know she’d have wanted a grand affair.

“It’s not too late to change your mind,” I tell her, for what has to be the hundredth time. “Money makes the world go round. You can easily get a new, snazzy location if you throw enough around, and as for the camera-toting vermin, I’ve dealt with them my entire life. I can handle it.”

Jenna reaches over and takes my hand. “I know you can, Cat, but that’s not the point. The three of us are finally becoming a family. That’s what is important here, not impressing the world with glamour. For whatever reason, Caterina’s been lying low lately, and your father and I don’t want to tempt fate. Or give the media extra incentive to bother us.”

She says *us*, but she means *me*. Nodding, I squeeze her hand. I understand where she’s coming from, even if it does make me feel guilty. But Jenna is right about one thing. Caterina—

my mother—*has* been quiet lately. Uncharacteristically so. And while I should be grateful for the lack of mortification, her silence only makes me anxious. You know what they say about the calm before the storm...

Pushing to my feet, I sigh and walk toward the hallway, ready to wash the gunk off my face. By now, my skin should be officially exfoliated and smoother than a baby's butt. I've taken exactly two and a half steps when Kate Lyons's perky voice fills the room.

"Welcome back, everyone! And you're gonna be *so* glad you tuned in. My next guest has starred in tons of blockbusters such as *The Event Planner*, *Secrets and Vines*, and *No One Has to Know*."

My feet freeze.

Here comes the storm.

"And she's here today with a startling revelation," the woman continues, shooting ice down my back. "Please join me in welcoming Caterina Angeli!"

My birth mother's name attached to the phrase "startling revelation" is not a good sign.

But it's like a car wreck. I can't *not* look. I can't not turn back. I backpedal to the living room, the sound of my pounding pulse almost eclipsing the studio audience's enthusiastic applause. I fall in a heap in front of the television and watch as the woman who gave me life, the woman I haven't seen in person in more than ten years, graces the New York City soundstage. My boyfriend Lucas wonders why my first response is to push people away when there's trouble, why I'm so sure that he'll leave me one day.

This woman is the reason.

A gentle hand takes mine, and without looking, I know it's Alessandra. She must be dumbstruck. I was when I saw *her* mom back in the sixteenth century. The two women are

doppelgangers—those tend to run rampant around me—but the resemblance stops at appearance. Personality-wise, they couldn't be more different. My aunt is actually a lot like Jenna, a blessing and a curse for my cousin. I know Less is happy with her choice to stay in the future, but she misses her mother terribly. Seeing mine, as horrid as she is, must suck an egg. I squeeze back to say I'm here and tug my knees to my chest.

“Thanks so much for having me, Kate,” my mother says, trademark wide smile in place as she turns to the audience and waves.

She's as polished and beautiful as ever. Long, dark hair shining under the lights, dark smoky eyes made up to perfection. People always say we look alike. In some ways we do—we've got the same hair color and eyes, and according to Wikipedia, around the same height. But the wide smile that's launched a hundred lipsticks looks completely wrong on my smaller face. The graceful beauty Caterina Angeli is known for just isn't happening; I don't have a team of touch-up professionals at my beck and call. And as for that air of natural confidence my mother exudes, despite what people may think, all I've done is perfected the art of faking aloofness. I'm the non-airbrushed, unpolished, slightly awkward version of the temptress of Hollywood. Yay, me.

“Thank you all for such a warm welcome,” my mother says. “It really means a lot.” Manicured, clasped hands fly to her chest as her mouth closes in a gentler (though no less fake) smile. What looks to be tears rush to her eyes, and I roll mine as she says, “It feels so good to be among friends again.”

Among friends? Is she referring to the nameless sea of admiring strangers or the glamazon talk show host with dollar signs for eyes? And as for *again*, she's only been out of the

public eye for a nanosec. A couple months max. Jenna sinks beside me, her disbelieving snort hinting at thoughts aligned with mine.

Ms. Lyons leans closer in her padded chair, face pulled in concern. “Are you okay?” she asks, grabbing the nearby tissue box. I’m sure she’s thinking, *Please cry. That’ll skyrocket my ratings.*

Mommy Dearest nods, making a production of plucking several tissues from the box. “Thank you, Kate.” She takes a breath and looks back at the audience. “You know, celebrities aren’t perfect. We make mistakes. *I* make a lot of them—but you know that. You watch *TMZ*.”

She winks, like the scandals and liaisons that have haunted me my entire life are no big deal, and the dumb crowd chuckles.

Kate shakes her head. “We know most of that is exaggerated.”

“You’re right,” my mother agrees. “But no one’s ever confused me with a saint. I’ve singlehandedly kept the tabloids in print. Even they’d tell you, though, that I’ve changed. I’m getting older. And more than anything, I’d like to fix some of my past mistakes.”

Jenna’s body goes still beside me. That’s my first hint that trouble is coming.

Then Caterina looks into the camera, almost as if she can see straight through it, directly at me. My *second* warning. “I have a beautiful daughter,” she says, and the world around me ceases to exist. “She’s named after me, as everyone knows, but we’re not close. Haven’t been for some time. That’s my fault, and it’s the biggest regret of my life.”

Tears fall down her flawless, olive-toned cheeks, but I’m a statue. A hunk of emotionless marble, like the kind Lucas uses in his art. My mother, the internationally famous actress Caterina Angeli, is on television, admitting to the world how she’s failed me. And I’ve got nothing. No tears, no anger, no raining down of disbelieving curses. Nothing.

“I miss my daughter, Kate,” she says, closing her eyes as mine widen. Alessandra shifts closer and slings an arm around my back. “I have something I need to tell her. Something important that must be said in person.” She pauses to draw a breath, and in that brief moment, I just *know* my life is about to change forever.

She nods as if agreeing with my assessment and announces, “That’s why I’m attending Peter’s wedding this weekend in Beverly Hills.”

Hayley makes a noise that sounds like a teakettle on crack. Alessandra’s hold crushes my lungs. As for Jenna, if it’s possible to look both terrified and pissed at the same time, that’s her. Nostrils flared, color gone, jaw clenched and shaking. Phones immediately start ringing. Soon, those vultures will be circling our door. The cat’s out of the bag.

So much for my normal.

“Caterina Angeli does it again,” I whisper.