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I turned to Jenna, eyes wide. “Oh yeah? What?”

“Wait!” Audrey leapt out in front of us, holding up her hand. “First, the Theme!”

My best friends swiveled to me. Every year, I set up a theme for us. Like the Year of Stickers, when we’d collected and traded stickers in third grade. Last year was Hayao Miyazaki, when we’d watched as many Miyazaki films as we could and collected figurines. I loved *My Neighbor Totoro*, Jenna was all about *Princess Mononoke*, and Audrey was in love with *Kiki’s Delivery Service*.

“Well, this year we’re turning thirteen,” I started.

“We know this,” Audrey said.

“Let Keiko finish,” Jenna said, missing the glare Audrey threw her.

I cleared my throat. “Now that we’re in seventh grade, we can join any clubs and activities we want.” As sixth graders, we had only been allowed to do sixth-grade activities. “This year, the Theme is Experience! We will each pick one club, and the rest of us will join. We’ll be in three activities together, and more importantly, experience them together! We’ll have new adventures!”

“Cool,” Jenna said.

“Hold up!” Audrey waved her hands.

Jenna and I looked at Audrey.

“I love your Theme of Experience idea,” Audrey said. “And having adventures together. But I know something that’s more exciting than clubs and activities.”

“What?” I asked.

“Boyfriends!” Audrey pressed her hands to her heart.

I blinked at Audrey, not knowing what to say.

“What kind of theme is that?” Jenna asked. “Besides, Keiko’s the one who comes up with our themes, and hers is perfectly good.”

Audrey dropped her hands and frowned.

“No, no,” I said, standing up next to Audrey. She’d finally warmed back up to Jenna, and I wasn’t going to let that change. “That’s fine! That’s a great theme.”

“Oh really?” Jenna asked.

“Just think,” I said to Jenna. “All three of us with our first boyfriends. Together!” I was starting to like Audrey’s idea. “We could triple date! Imagine getting ready for our dates together, picking out our outfits, and then later rehashing everything. Just like Audrey’s magazine articles talk about!”

Audrey looped her arm through mine. “See? Keiko’s on board!”

Audrey’s always been boy-obsessed. I’d lost count of all the boys she’d crushed on since fifth grade. It wasn’t until this summer, though, that I started noticing boys in a way that made me feel jittery inside, like I’d eaten too much chocolate. There had been a super cute guy who worked at the Heart & Seoul food truck this summer. Audrey had asked him where he went to school, saying she wanted to help me get to know him. I had been mortified, then disappointed when he said he was only visiting for the summer from Seattle.

So, the idea of a boyfriend made me feel like melted

chocolate, all gooey and warm. Jenna was going to be resistant. She was the practical one, the unemotional one, the good student. I tensed, waiting for Jenna's protests, but she only shrugged.

"We can still sign up for all the same clubs," I said as a concession.

"The world is our oyster!" Audrey announced, making me laugh. I glanced at Jenna, who quirked her lips in a small smile.

Last year in the language arts class Audrey and I were in together, our teacher campaigned against clichés so enthusiastically that Audrey started using them on purpose. But not in front of our teacher.

"Now that the Theme is decided, let's move on to more important things! What did you do all summer?" I asked Jenna.

"Not much."

"You missed out," Audrey said quickly. "Conner and his friends went camping a couple of times, so Keiko and I had the whole house to ourselves. Four nights in a row of sleepovers twice this summer! Like we were sisters." Audrey smiled at me. "I would trade Conner in for you any day."

I grinned. “And now we’re all together again! This will be our best year yet!”

“Ooooh!” Audrey exclaimed, tugging us along with her up the walkway. “I just got a great idea! Let’s go look at dresses.”

“I’m good for clothes,” Jenna said.

Audrey stared at Jenna. “*You* went shopping?”

Of the three of us, Jenna was the least interested in fashion.

“Dad couldn’t stop spending money on me,” Jenna said, lifting her messenger bag over her shoulder. “As if new clothes and a laptop were going to replace having him at home.”

It was rare for Jenna to talk about her parents’ divorce, and when she did, I never knew what to say. I didn’t like seeing her so sad.

“You got a new laptop, *too*?” Audrey’s voice was soaked in envy. She had an unlimited budget on most things, but that didn’t include getting her own computer.

“Well, it doesn’t matter, because this isn’t for school. Not really.” Audrey snapped her fingers. “Follow me.”

Jenna and I trailed after Audrey, who stopped in front of a little boutique called Whispers. In the window, headless mannequins wore sequined gowns that looked more for our moms than for us.

“Come on,” Audrey said with a grin as she stepped into the store.

A little bell tinkled, and a blast of chilled air hit us as we walked in the door. Audrey started going through a rack of dresses.

I turned to Jenna, who was shifting her bag from shoulder to shoulder. “So, you wanted to tell us something?”

Jenna smiled and nodded.

“What do you think of *these*?” Audrey asked, holding up several dresses that looked way too fancy for anything I’d ever go to. One dress had sparkly beads and looked heavy.

“Um, they’re nice?” I had no clue what Audrey’s plan was.

“Come on. Let’s try these on!” Audrey led us to the biggest dressing room after getting a nod from the saleslady at the counter.

“What are we doing here?” I asked as she closed the

curtain behind us. “Please don’t tell me this is what you think we should be wearing in seventh grade.”

“Two words,” Audrey said. “Fall Ball!”

PV Middle had two dances a year for the seventh and eighth graders, Fall Ball and Spring Fling. Both were fund-raisers for the school, raising money for things like library books or basketball uniforms.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “These are Fall Ball dresses we’re trying on?”

Audrey nodded.

“Shouldn’t we get dates first?” I gave Jenna a side-long glance, expecting her to back me up, but instead, she was looking at the two dresses closest to her.

“Yes! Totally!” Audrey said. “This is part of the plan, Cake!”

“Don’t call me that,” I said, frowning.

“I gave you that nickname!”

“In the first grade.” I used to love my nickname. Audrey shortened Keiko to Cake because she said I was sweet, but last year, her stupid brother ruined it when he started calling me things like Flatty Cake, Mud Cake, and Betty Crocker.

“Okay, you’re right,” Audrey said. “Shedding our

childish ways! All for the great life as teenagers we're about to have. When we *get* boyfriends, we're going to go to Fall Ball!"

"But what if we don't get boyfriends immediately?" I asked. "Shouldn't we have a plan? Like maybe in September, we could scope out possibilities. Then in October and November, get to know a possible boyfriend. And if all goes well, an actual boyfriend by the end of the year. Maybe we should shoot for Spring Fling, instead." That sounded way more manageable.

"I'm not wasting the entire year without a boyfriend," Audrey said. "Just try the dresses on, Keiko. For fun!"

I turned to Jenna for support, but she was already tugging off her shirt and jeans.

"Those sports bras only make you look flatter," Audrey said to Jenna. She probably would have gone on, but Jenna's look silenced her.

I faced the wall as I slipped off my hoodie and whipped on the closest dress in one fluid motion. I'd had a lot of practice in the locker room. I tried to zip the dress, but the zipper wouldn't go up all the way. I looked in the mirror. The light blue contrasted nicely with my dark brown hair. I kind of liked the sparkly

beads after all. Even in a store for grown-ups, Audrey had good taste. But the spaghetti straps made me feel naked. Even with the snug fit, when I leaned over, the front of the dress gaped to reveal not only my twelve-dollar girls' department bra, but the bra gaped, too, and I got a good flash of my own skin.

I put my hand over the front. Jenna was already out of the first dress, something black and slinky, and zipping up the second. But the sweetheart neckline did nothing for her athletic figure. Her eyes met mine in the mirror, and her lips twitched. I held in a giggle.

Audrey turned to us, dressed in a pale pink dress that clung to her. She looked like a ballerina.

"Oh, Audrey," I said. "That's pretty on you. How much is it?"

Audrey glanced at the price tag and gasped. "Five hundred!"

"Dollars?" Jenna squeaked. She slowly removed her dress, like she was afraid she'd rip it. I didn't blame her. I followed her lead, peeling mine off in slow motion.

As I hung up the dress, I heard Audrey sniffle.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We have plenty of time. First, we get boyfriends, then we’ll find the perfect dresses for the dance.”

We left Whispers and their overpriced, too-fancy dresses and walked to the big fountain with the comfy lounge chairs. Audrey and I sat on a wicker couch under a green-and-blue umbrella. But as soon as my butt hit the navy-striped cushion, I regretted our choice. Jenna stood by three orange chairs with her arms crossed.

I waved her over and said, “I want to sit in the shade.”

I scooted over and Jenna sat down next to me. It was a little tight. In the past, the three of us had always sat in those three chairs right in front of the fountain. But this summer Audrey and I started sitting on this couch, and I now realized that it didn’t fit three comfortably. I hoped Audrey wouldn’t complain. I didn’t want Jenna to feel left out.

“Did you get to see any movies this summer?” I asked Jenna, moving my arm carefully onto my lap so I didn’t keep jabbing her with my elbow. It was hard to turn my head to face her, so all three of us stared out at the walkway.

I felt Jenna shrug. “Not really. You guys?”

Audrey leaned forward and made a little more room. “We saw a ton, especially if you count the movies we watched at my house,” Audrey said to Jenna. “You know how Cake, sorry, I mean Keiko, was all into those boring old black-and-white movies? I got her to watch better retro movies, from the eighties.”

“Like what?” Jenna asked.

“Movies by some guy named John Hughes. *The Breakfast Club* was totally great, but I think Keiko liked *Pretty in Pink*.”

“Never heard of them,” Jenna said quietly.

“We can watch them again with you,” I said. “Or watch others. We didn’t see all of them.”

I still loved those old black-and-white movies, even if Audrey said they were boring. But I also liked the ones we’d watched over the summer. Audrey was right. *Pretty in Pink* was the best. Andie, the main character, had two boys who liked her: her best friend, Duckie, who was kind of weird but funny, and this rich guy Blane, who hung out in a snobby clique. After Blane snubbed her and hurt her feelings because of his stupid friends, he realized he’d made a mistake. It was

romantic how at the school dance, he apologized and told her he loved her. They had the perfect kiss at the end of the movie.

That's what I wanted. If Audrey's plan worked out this year, I wanted a romantic boyfriend and a perfect first kiss.