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MONDAY, DINNERTIME. LASAGNA NIGHT. THE cheese oozed bright orange from the block of pasta and meat on my plate and pooled around it like a lake. The grease visibly floating in the cheese. The sick thing about it was that it tasted pretty good. I dipped my fork into the cheese lake and pulled it out, a thin string connecting fork with plate.

The dining hall was one of my least favorite places in the known universe. It defined you almost more than anything else at school—where you sat, how you walked, how you wore your school clothes (or worse: your real clothes on the weekend), what kind of food you picked out to eat, what people you talked to. Every movement you made was fair game in the dining hall. And whereas at a normal school you could get around the lunchroom, at boarding school, that was not an option. Even if you skipped breakfast or cut lunch short, you couldn't stop eating entirely. To stay alive, you had to deal with the dining hall. You had to walk in there every day and face the noise and the chaos, armed only with a tray of food.

And of course, if you were a girl, you couldn't eat any of the stuff you actually wanted to eat—like, forget about loading your plate with lasagna or pizza or anything deep-fried. You had to get the salad option if you weren't a pig. Always. Occasionally, you could get away with the baked potato as a side (without the butter)—but generally speaking, if you were trying to be taken seriously as a girl by the girls that mattered, you had to do your eating on the sly.

I always ate the wrong meal. Because fuck it. I'd be damned if I ate salad all day with my life already sucking as much as it did.

“Hey!”

I looked up from my lasagna. It was Wade Scholfield. He was holding his tray, standing on the other side of my table.

“I had a dream about you last night,” he went on. “You were about three hundred pounds and you were getting onto a Greyhound bus. You might have been Australian too. That part I can't really remember, but I think you said something with an Australian accent.” He shrugged quickly when I didn't reply. “I don't know what that means. Probably nothing. But . . . just thought I'd mention it.”

I had no idea what to say, so instead, I nodded and flicked a piece of imaginary dirt off the table.

“Anyway, how was your weekend?” he asked.

“Um . . . shit, I guess.”

He smiled a little. “What a coincidence—so was mine. Twenty-seven school rules, times thirty, is eight hundred and ten. I copied out eight hundred and ten rules. And some of those are about a paragraph long.”

“Oh. Right.”

I looked back at the table, hoping he would evaporate. He didn't.

“So, are you ready to clean this place after dinner?” he asked.

“I guess.”

He stood there a moment longer. “Can I sit down?” he asked.

My stomach turned. I straightened up in my seat, suddenly terrified. “Oh shit. I don’t know. I usually sit by myself,” I said.

“So . . . yea or nay?”

*He is actually going to make me say it*, I thought. Why would he do that? He continued to stand there with his tray and the bright innocence in his stupid eyes, waiting for me to be a cunt.

“Nay,” I said, instantly feeling weird about having used the word *nay*. “I’d rather you just sit somewhere else. Or if you want to sit here, I can leave too. I’m pretty much done.”

“No, don’t do that. It’s okay. I’ll sit somewhere else. I’ll see you later anyway.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, see you in a bit,” he said. He scanned the room for a second and then walked off.

*It’s his own fault for not taking a hint*, I told myself. I had made it perfectly clear that we were not going to be a team. I was certain I had been repellent enough to make that apparent. If he couldn’t take a hint, then he’d have to deal with the consequences. I wasn’t about to feel terrible about any of it. Only, I did. I watched him amble hesitantly into the ocean of tables, and I felt like turning myself off. I just needed to stop being me for any of this to be palatable. Unfortunately, that wasn’t possible. I grabbed my tray and made my way to the trash.

“Do you know how bad that combo of gluten and dairy is?” a girl asked, suddenly standing next to me with her tray.

She was looking at the remnants of my food dripping into the trash can.

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“Those are literally the two most inflammatory foods that exist.”

“Okay, thanks for the info.”

*What a jackass*, I thought, although I knew she was probably right.

An hour later, the dining hall had cleared out, and it was just Wade and me standing in a wasteland of splattered food, questionable liquids, and the general smell of a deep-fried sock. We could hear the kitchen staff clattering around in the kitchen, listening to terrible music. They had set us up with the cleaning supplies. Wade was holding a bucket in one hand and an assortment of rags and a bottle of industrial all-purpose cleaner in his other arm. I was holding the mop.

“I’ll mop if you want,” Wade said. “You can do the tables.”

Mopping was generally considered to be the raw end of the stick.

“It’s fine. I can mop,” I said.

“I know you can, but I’m saying I’ll switch.”

“I can do it.”

“Just give me the mop, will you?” he said, holding out his hand.

“Fine.”

I gave him the mop and took his supplies in return. Clearly, I should have been the one to mop. I really could have used that speck of redemption, but he wouldn’t let me have it. He took the mop and then pushed the large bucket with the wheels off to fill it with water. I thought he might say something else, or linger, or make a joke. Or anything. But he said nothing more. Perhaps he was pissed off. I certainly hoped so.

“No half-assing it, all right, folks?” I heard one of the

kitchen ladies call to us. She was holding open the door to the kitchen and leaning out. “None of that smearing the food all over the table with the sponge. I’m not signing anything off unless the place is clean. And you’d better believe it.”

“Roger that,” Wade called back.

I walked slowly over to the farthest corner of the room and sprayed a grease-covered table with the industrial cleaner. The chemicals landed in droplets, and I watched them eat into the grease. Then I pushed a wet sponge over the surface. All I seemed to accomplish with this was smearing the grease across the table just like the kitchen lady had predicted. There were jellylike lumps all over. I tried to remember who had sat there earlier.

Wade Scholfield and I didn’t talk the entire time. I went over all the tables, methodically covering each one in chemicals and then scrubbing off the grease and food. I never looked up to see what he was doing. When we were done, we put away the cleaning supplies and went our separate ways.