

The Unlikely Debut
of
Ellie Sweet

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Stephanie Morrill, *The Unlikely Debut of Ellie Sweet*
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Chapter One

I drove here specifically to buy this book, only now I've stood here for ten minutes asking myself if I should.

"Can I help you find something, miss?"

I turn to the smiling bookstore employee. "No, thank you."

She shuffles on, and I return to staring at *Fire Eyes* by Bronte Harrington. I lift the book from the shelf and run my thumb over the texture of the title, of Bronte's name. When I flip it over, Bronte smiles up at me. So different than the way she looked on that last morning of the writer's conference, when she stormed out of the hotel lobby.

Someone is behind me again. I turn, prepared to dismiss yet another employee, only to find myself staring at Lucy Shears.

"Oh." Bronte's book slips from my grasp and makes a muted *thunk* when it falls to the ground. I grab it and clutch it to my chest while I grapple for a more appropriate greeting for my former best friend. "Uh, hi. What are you doing here?"

Lucy smiles in a cautious way. "I'm visiting my aunt. She's getting her hair done."

"So you came to shop for books?" The only books Lucy has ever shown an interest in are her mother's bodice-rippers.

Lucy shrugs, then nods at the book in my arms. "Is that one good?"

I glance at it. I bent the cover—great. Guess I'll be buying this one. "Yeah, it is. Real good."

Lucy pulls a copy off the shelf and examines the cover, then flips it over. Her skin is a deeper tan and her chestnut hair longer, but otherwise she looks just like her old self.

I clear my throat. “Thank you for the letter you sent me. Back in the spring.”

Lucy arches her well-defined brows at me. “You never responded.”

“No. I’ve been...busy.”

Lucy smirks, and I don’t blame her for doubting me. Surely she remembers me as Ellie Sweet, the girl with no life. The girl who finished all her weekend homework on Friday nights.

“That’s what I hear.” Lucy shelves Bronte’s book. “So I’m Lady Lucia?”

My ability for intelligent thought seems to vanish. When three silent months passed after the newspaper article came out about *Invisibly Yours* winning the Great Debut contest, I assumed the fact that I had written Lucy into my historical novel somehow hadn’t reached her in SoCal.

“I...” My heart stammers a fierce beat.

“Relax, El. I think it’s kinda cool, actually.” Lucy shrugs. “I mean, how many people get to be in a book?”

But she won’t think so when she reads it. My mind ticks through insulting scenes, like when Rafe calls Lucia an ice princess with a pig snout. And when Domenico refers to her as overrated, and tells Lady Gabrielle that Lucia could never be anything compared to her.

Lucy fingers her long necklace. “Bianca seemed to take it as some sort of personal attack that you didn’t make *her* the main character. But what else would you expect from her?”

“Yeah, she wasn’t too pleased with me.” I wrap a curly strand around my finger. For a full week after Bianca and Marie chucked my stuff in Mill Creek, I swear my hair reeked of creek water.

“You doing anything now?” Lucy pulls her phone from her back pocket and checks the time. “I still have an hour before Mindy’s done. Want to grab coffee?”

My stomach muscles tighten. Having known Lucy all my life, I shouldn’t feel so nervous about spending time together. “Sure, but...” I swallow. “James is down there.”

“Well in *that* case...” Lucy makes a show of withdrawing a tube of lip gloss from her purse as we head toward the coffee bar. “Although with him around, you won’t be able to give me the skinny on your boyfriends.” Lucy drags the S out like a hissing snake.

My laugh sounds fake—*har har har*. “Not sure who you’ve been getting your info from, but—”

“Marie.”

“Well, Marie doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

Lucy looks at me over her shoulder as we ride down the escalator. “She told me you and Chase are quasi-dating, and that she often sees you and Palmer together too.”

A fairer assessment than I would have thought Marie capable of, given the way she scowls at me whenever we pass each other on campus. “Chase and I are still figuring out what dating looks like for us, and Palmer and I are just friends.”

“Oh, puh-lease.” Lucy rolls her big, dark eyes. “Palmer Davis doesn’t know how to be ‘just friends’ with a girl.”

“Six months ago, I would’ve agreed. But he really is just friendly with me, nothing more.” I rub my thumb along the cut pages of Bronte’s book, and the sound soothes me. “And I can tell because Chase doesn’t look like he wants to stomp him into the ground whenever our paths cross. They can even talk without growling.”

Lucy twists the ends of her long hair between her fingertips. “Impressive.”

“We haven’t talked about you at all yet. How are your parents? Have you learned how to surf?”

Lucy steps off the escalator with a heavy sigh. “Mom and Dad are fine, I guess. They’re striving for this to be the ‘healthiest divorce possible’ so they have all these rules in place about not grumbling about the other to me and Caitlin, or not making us choose between them.” She straightens the straps of her tank top, and the store lights glint on her rainbow-colored nails. Lucy’s been bored.

As we round a bookshelf, James comes into view. He’s exactly where I left him, in one of the coffee bar chairs that’s intentionally uncomfortable, hunched over his fat economics textbook.

“Well, it’s nice to know there are some things I can count on,” Lucy says to me on a sigh. “Like James Sweet being as handsome as ever.”

James must hear my snort of laughter because he looks up. Surprise registers on his face as he takes in Lucy. “I thought you were just here to get a book, El.”

“That’s our Ellie.” Lucy links her arm through mine. “Always overachieving.”

“We won’t disturb you, James. We’ll just grab coffee and sit—”

James closes his textbook with a loud *smack*. “No, have a seat. I could use a break.”

I purse my lips to hide my grin. “I seem to recall you telling me not to come bother you for at least an hour.”

James’s laugh registers a touch higher than normal. “Can’t you take a joke, Sis?”

Okay, it had most definitely *not* been a joke when James snarled at me that he had to study for his test, and that even if I came back to the coffee bar to read, I wasn’t to disturb him.

Lucy glides into the chair on one side of James. “So you’re in town for the summer?”

“Yeah, how about you?” My brother crosses his arms on the table, and I’m pretty sure it’s because he knows it makes him look more muscular.

“Just the week to visit my aunt. It’s nice to be back.”

James nods. “Isn’t it? I like D.C. a lot, but it’s not home.”

“Exactly.” Lucy beams at James as if this was some kind of profound statement. “I feel the same way about San Diego. Great city and all, just not where my heart beats for.”

James draws his arms even tighter together. “What a great way to phrase it.”

How nice that Lucy and I could log this quality time together.

I clear my throat. “I’m gonna get iced tea. Lucy, you want anything?”

“I’ll come with you.”

As Lucy and I weave through tables to the register, I glance over my shoulder. James fusses with the collar of his T-shirt, then with his hair that’s too short to be mussed. Groan. Do I really have to sit here and watch my brother and childhood BFF flirt with each other? What’s wrong with Lucy, anyway? Has she totally forgotten that James used to pick his nose and chase us with his boogies?

I order an iced tea, feeling a pang for my aunt Karen and the pitchers of tea we used to drink on her front porch during the summer.

The barista gestures to me. “Can I ring up that book for you as well?”

“Oh.” I draw Bronte’s book away from my chest. I had forgotten about it. “Yeah, sure. I thought you could only do coffee here.”

“*Fire Eyes*,” he reads as he scans the barcode. “Haven’t heard of this one.”

Do I take the opportunity to talk up Bronte? A few months ago, I definitely would have. But now...

“She’s an author, you know.” Lucy nods at me, then leans against the counter, her dark hair falling fluidly over her shoulder. “Her name’s Ellie Sweet.”

My face feels as though Lucy just set fire to it.

The barista gives me a dubious look. Probably because with my flat chest, I look like I’m about thirteen. “You’re an author?”

“Yeah...”

“Like self-published?”

“No, I’m with Blue Door.” I tug at the collar of my shirt. Why’s it so hot in here?

“Never heard of ’em.” He rips off my receipt and hands it to me with my change.

“They do a lot of young adult books. Like for teens.” I look beyond him, to the other barista who’s putting together my tea. Why’s that taking so long?

“So, what’s your book about?”

My thirty second explanation—the one I memorized to pitch to agents and editors at the conference—just vanished. “Um, well. It’s about—”

From my back pocket, my cell phone bursts into song. I’ve never loved the sound of Jack Johnson’s voice quite so much. I leap away from the counter to answer my mom’s call.

“Thank God you picked up.” Traffic blares in the background, and Mom’s breath comes in huffs. “Grandmom broke her hip.”

I stare at a package of overpriced biscotti, trying to make sense of her words. “She broke her hip?”

“Getting out of the car, yes. I’m on my way to the hospital now.”

“Oh. Should James and I meet you there?”

“There’s no urgency. It’ll probably be a couple days before she can have replacement surgery, and then she’ll be in a rehab facility for most of the summer, until she can walk. At

least that's what happened when Grandpa Sweet broke his hip." Mom's ignition turns, and talk radio blares for a moment before going silent. "So there's no point in you or James coming to the hospital just yet. Tonight after dinner, a visit might be nice."

My stomach pitches with the thought. I don't know what it is about hospitals, but I always feel so awkward inside their walls. Like I'm going to laugh too loud or accidentally flip some vital, life-giving switch. "Okay."

"I'll call you when I know more."

Mom hangs up without a goodbye. I slide my phone into my back pocket, my gaze still fixed on the biscotti.

The characteristic honk of Lucy's laughter awakens me from my trance. She's back in her seat next to James, her cheeks pink and her smile wide. Both have their elbows on the table, leaning into each other. It's a good thing she lives in San Diego and he in D.C. or I might truly have to be worried about the awkwardness of them dating.

* * *

The unexpected sight of Chase's car parked outside the church building makes my heart thump faster. By now, I had assumed he'd never come. For months he's said, "Maybe this Sunday morning," or, "Maybe the next youth group event," only to no-show.

Chase climbs out of his car at the same time as me. For a moment, we just look at each other.

"You came."

Chase shrugs and squints into the late afternoon sunlight. "I like movies."

Our youth group is comprised of three members, me and twin boys from another high school who are living, breathing geek clichés. Because we vote on what to show for movie

nights, my suggestion of *Sense and Sensibility* is typically beat out by something with “Star” in the title.

I nudge my door closed. “You don’t really seem like a *Star Wars* guy to me.”

Chase’s mouth ticks with a smile. “Mysterious am I.”
Indeed.

I glance at the two other cars in the parking lot. One belongs to the youth pastor, one to the twins. “Well...should we go in?”

Chase’s nod lacks enthusiasm. “Okay.”
“Okay.”

I lock my car and pivot toward the church, which—I’m suddenly aware—was built in the 60s and hasn’t seen much of an update since. The heat of my face intensifies as I recall bathrooms labeled “Adam” and “Eve,” fliers about potlucks, and posters that read *Where Will You Go When You Die?*

“Ellie?”

I look up and find Chase watching me. Apparently I’ve just been standing here.

“We don’t have to go in if you don’t want.” Chase’s words come out so fast it’s like they’re tripping over each other. “I mean, if you want to just grab something to eat, we can.”

And while that *does* sound preferable... “I told my parents I was coming to the movie night. And, well, that *was* our bargain. That before we started”—the word *dating* lodges in my throat, and I have to force it out—“dating, you would try.”

“I remember.” Chase’s words are gruff. “It’s why I’m here.”

I look away and bite my lower lip to hold in an apology. Giving church a try was Chase’s suggestion last spring, not mine. I’m not going to apologize for holding him to it.

Inside the church, we find the rest of the meager youth group in the sanctuary. Kevin, the college student who has filled in as youth pastor since my aunt moved last fall, is bent

over a tangle of cords, muttering to himself. The Rushford twins have positioned themselves in the front row, along with several friends of theirs who also sport awkward haircuts.

Chase looks around as we settle into a middle row. “So. This is church.”

“Yep, this is it.”

With the dark paneled walls, brown carpet, and wooden beams overhead, I’ve always thought the architect must have been going for a Noah’s ark feel in his design. Karen says her church in Scottsdale meets in an elementary school gymnasium. My grandmother informed her that sounded rather shady.

“It’s not too bad.” Chase shifts a bit in his chair. “No candles, though.”

I frown. “Should we have candles?”

“Ours does.” He turns to meet my gaze. “Catholic.”

“You are?”

“Yep.”

I stare at his face, which resembles a man’s more than a boy’s. Chase smirks, as if he knows I’m trying to picture him shined up for Sunday mass.

“Ellie, who’s your friend?” Kevin leans against a nearby chair and smiles at Chase in the welcoming way they must teach at seminary.

“This is Chase. Chase, Kevin.”

Kevin sticks out a hand, and Chase pulls his from his pocket to shake. “Glad you could join us, Chase. There’s cookies and milk on the back table if you want any.”

Cookies and milk—great. Like we’re in preschool.

I shake it off. Who doesn’t love cookies and milk? I’m not going to be embarrassed about the snack.

Kevin starts the movie rolling, then shuts off the lights. When the title blazes on the screen, the guys in the front row whoop as if Beyoncé just strutted onto the stage.

I roll my eyes at Chase, which makes him grin. Something brushes my hand—Chase’s fingers weaving between mine.

My blood thrums in my veins with the realization that life has changed for me. I’m no longer just, “Lucy’s best friend,” or, “That girl who sits in the front row.” I’m carving out my own place in the world, and I get to choose what it looks like and who I’ll bring with me.

I squeeze Chase’s hand and tune in to the movie.