

The Revised Life of Ellie Sweet

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Stephanie Morrill, *The Revised Life of Ellie Sweet*
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For Roseanna White.

Simply put, Ellie would not have survived without you. Thank for fighting for her, even when I felt too tired to carry on, for answering my constant grammar questions, and of course, for buying that red briefcase.

Chapter One

I'm ninety-nine percent sure the only reason I'm interested in Palmer Davis is because I know without a doubt I could never have him.

"Ellie?"

I turn from the doorway—the one Palmer stands in with Diego Ortiz—and face Lucy. "Sorry, what'd you say?"

She blinks her beautiful eyes at me, as if unable to comprehend what might have drawn my attention away from her. Lucy's accustomed to being the most captivating person in the room. "Were you able to solve number four?" She glances around the Algebra classroom, searching for Ms. Purdon, I assume.

I flip my binder to the Algebra section, unclip the homework I completed two days ago, and offer the sheet to Lucy.

She snatches it from me. "You're an angel." And she gets to work copying.

Come test time she'll be screwed, but Lucy's not the type to anticipate consequences. That's more my thing. One of the many reasons why I've been labeled *boring*.

I steal another glance at Palmer, who's digging through his backpack, still blocking the doorway. And my ability to think clearly. I look away before he catches me watching.

When the new school year arrived, so did he. Kentucky born and raised, he has a charming southern drawl I've only heard in movies. We don't get many southerners here in the California valley.

Palmer and I have had exactly two conversations. They went like this:

Palmer: Where's Lucy?

Me: Bathroom.

Palmer: Oh.

Conversation number two:

Palmer: Where's Lucy?

Me: Dentist appointment.

Palmer: Ah.

It's embarrassing how many times I've relived these. Especially because Palmer Davis isn't my type at all. Not that—being only sixteen—I've had much time to develop my type, but I know he's not it. Palmer's the kind of alpha-male hero you might be drawn to in a novel, but someone you should have the smarts to avoid in real life. He's too good looking, too smooth, too funny. I'm more into the quiet, slightly nerdy guys. Who, if they took off their glasses and unbuttoned their shirt, could possibly be Superman.

Lucy turns in her seat. With her pencil, she gives my homework an impatient tap. "Seven or a nine?"

I lean to inspect. "Seven."

"For being such a brainy chick, you sure have lousy handwriting."

"Next time I'll write clearer so it'll be easier for you to shamelessly copy."

Lucy laughs and brushes away eraser dust. "Would you?"

A loud male voice breaks into our conversation. "Wait—what'd you say, Ellie Sweet?"

I turn and look into the dark eyes of Chase Cervantes. How long has he been sitting there? And why is he looking at me with that shocked expression? Surely he of all people won't judge me for letting Lucy copy. "What, Chase?"

Even with his smirk, the hard line of his jaw sends a ripple of fear through me. "Did you just say you have a crush on Palmer Davis?"

I think my heart just stopped beating.

What on earth made him say that? Please God, tell me it only *seemed* loud. Tell me no one else heard.

But the eruption of giggles that fills the classroom is evidence otherwise.

“What are you talking about?” I intend to snap this at Chase, but my voice sounds as weak and wobbly as my knees. What would make him say such a thing? “Lucy and I were just talking about math.” My voice trembles. Everyone’s looking at me. Everyone.

“Yeah.” Chase throws his ratty sneakers up on his desk. “As in you, plus Palmer, equals love.”

I shoot Lucy a look of desperation—please validate my story!—but her head is thrown back with laughter, her expensively straightened teeth gleaming. Some best friend.

I glance at Palmer, a heart-stopping vision even under the fluorescent lights. He’s still in the doorway, but he’s no longer oblivious to me. Instead, it seems he’s looking at me—really looking at me—for the first time.

I shrink in my chair as every flaw I’m sure he sees flits through my mind—my pale skin, my glasses, my T-shirt that reads FUTURE LIBRARIAN.

A normal guy in this situation would duck his head and mutter an unintelligible response. But Palmer isn’t normal. He swaggers across the classroom, all eyes on him. Just the way he likes.

I turn away and bury my burning face into my math book. Now would be a really good time for the rapture.

In my peripherals, I see faces turn my way as Palmer slides into the empty desk behind me. He leans forward, close enough that his breathing stirs my hair and spikes my heart rate. “Hey, Sweet. Or, should I say, *sweetheart*?”

More giggling. Someone even does one of those stupid, “Woo-woo,” things. Someone who I would like to personally strangle. Where is Ms. Purdon, and why isn’t she here in the classroom where she belongs?

I turn halfway over my shoulder. “Palmer, I *don’t* have a crush on you. I don’t know why he said that.” I send Chase a withering glare, but he merely chuckles and faces forward. Maddening.

Palmer clutches a hand to his heart. “Oh, sweetheart, that’s painful.”

Why can't he just shut up and let this blow over? Why does he have to inflame Chase's weird joke and make the humiliation worse? I flash Lucy another look, but she's looking past me, grinning at Palmer as if this whole thing is just so *funny*.

But I've known Lucy my whole life, and I see the shadow in her smile. I can practically read her thoughts. Normally Palmer sits in front of *her*. Normally he teases *her*.

As Ms. Purdon strolls through the door—about a minute too late in my opinion—the snickering fades. I mentally draft the email I'll write to Bronte once I get home. *You think you miss high school? Just wait until you hear what happened to me today...*

I already know how she'll respond—"use it." That's always what Bronte tells me when I talk about Lucy and my other brain-dead "friends." She tells me, "Good writers take their emotional hurts and weave them into stories."

It seems Chase Cervantes is trying to give me plenty of inspiration.

I cut him a nasty look, but he's busy listening to Ms. Purdon. Or at least pretending to do so.

I should focus too. I copy the equation Ms. Purdon has written out on the board.

There's a tap on my shoulder. I bristle, but ignore him.

Palmer inches close to my ear. "Sweetheart, can you explain this to me later? I don't understand a word she's sayin'."

"Shh," I hiss, keeping my gaze trained up front.

Someone snickers. Palmer? Diego?

Nope. It's that evil Chase Cervantes, who I will hunt down and kill when this class is over. I don't care that he towers over me, has two big brothers in jail, and has the reputation of being a thug himself. He will pay for this. Every villain in every novel I pen will have shades of Chase Cervantes.

Palmer leans close and inhales deeply. "You smell good. Like sugar and spice and everything nice."

Diego and Chase are both laughing now.

An emotion I've never experienced twists within me. It's akin to humiliation, only more. Deeper. As if I can actually feel the scars of this moment being carved on my heart.

I inhale slowly, hoping I can make the tears dissolve with sheer willpower. *I can use this*, I repeat to myself. I imagine myself sitting at my computer, my manuscript open, my fingers a blur of motion over the keyboard. *I can use this*.

Ms. Purdon turns from the board and arches her eyebrows at the silly, obnoxious children seated by me. "Something you'd like to share with us, boys?"

How will I later describe the color of red my face surely is? Poppy? Cinnabar? Cardinal?

"No thanks, ma'am." Palmer's drawl is even more pronounced, and I bet he's offering her his southern-gent smile.

But at least he decides to keep his mouth shut for the rest of the lesson.

When Ms. Purdon grants us the last ten minutes of class time to work on homework, I feel another tap on my shoulder. "Can I borrow your calculator, sweetheart?"

Lucy's giggle sounds forced as she turns in her seat to catch Palmer's eye. "Oh, Palmer, leave poor Ellie alone."

I hold my calculator over my shoulder. "Only if you stop calling me sweetheart."

"Of course." He snatches it from my grasp. "Whatever you want, darlin'."

Lucy's laugh is airy, and she flips her sheet of dark hair over her shoulder as she turns back to her homework.

I face him then, mind full of retorts. His gray eyes are alight with mischief, challenging me. As I'm debating between insults or a plea to shut up, Palmer flashes me That Smile, effectively wiping my brain of all intelligent thought.

I do an about-face before he notices my eyes have turned into throbbing cartoon hearts.

Fortunately, this is our last class together today. Which means when Palmer returns my calculator with a wink and a, "Thanks, sweetheart," it'll be the last I suffer.

What isn't so fortunate is that Chase hightails it out of the room before I have the opportunity to slap that smirk off his face.

Lucy's giggle still has an edge to it. "Well, that was a crazy class. I mean, what's the deal with Chase just pulling out of nowhere that you have a thing for Palmer? He must be trying to get tight with us."

I shrug and swing my backpack over my shoulder.

"But what a random thing to come up with." Lucy wraps a strand of chestnut hair around a finger as we head for English class. "I mean, why would he try to embarrass Palmer like that?"

Ouch—it'd be *embarrassing* for me to have a crush on him?

Lucy, oblivious as always, rushes on. "It obviously didn't work. Palmer is, like, impossible to throw off. He's so quick."

"Mm-hmm."

She appears to realize our conversation is one-sided. "Something wrong, El?"

I shift my backpack. "I just don't want to talk about this anymore."

Her eyes broadcast that she's floored by my reaction. "But *why*?"

"Why *would* I want to talk about it? That was..." The fresh wounds on my heart pulse. "It was beyond humiliating."

"Ellie, *Palmer Davis* just spent an entire class period calling you sweetheart. Any other girl in this school would kill to be you right now. *I* would kill to be you right now."

Except he was joking and we all know it. He sits by Lucy because he wants to. He sits by me to make everyone laugh.

Lucy loops her arm through mine, like best friends do on TV. With how long we've known each other, it shouldn't make me squirm inside. "*Do you like him?*"

There's that jealous edge in her voice again. What would she do if I told her the truth? I can picture her, Bianca, and Marie giggling about it over mochas. *She actually thinks she has a chance with Palmer Davis. Can you believe her?*

No, this is a secret I'm taking to the grave. It's just a little crush, anyway. It'll vanish soon. I'll make sure of it. "He's cute, I guess, but he's not exactly my type of guy."

Lucy snorts her real laugh and pulls me tighter. "Ellie Sweet, you're baffling. If you have eyes, he's your type."

Ahead of us, far enough that I'm sure he hasn't heard our conversation, I spot Palmer veering toward a classroom. Lucy notices too and waves. Palmer winks at her, but doesn't spare even a glance my direction.

Though I roll my eyes at Lucy's giggles, my chest burns with jealousy. Yep, I need to get a grip on this silly crush of mine. With a best friend like Lucy, glossy and flirtatious, I'll never be anything more than the girl on the sidelines.

* * *

The sidewalk is cluttered with clumps of Redwood High students headed for their cars, but Chase walks alone. How unfortunate for him.

I weave through the chattering cliques, a Chase-seeking missile.

"Chase!" I yell when I'm close enough to catch him if he bolts.

But Chase appears to have no desire to dash.

He turns, his expression half-bored, half-amused. "Ellie Sweet." Did he just imitate Palmer's drawl?

He's broad-shouldered, solid-chested, and a good half-foot taller than me. Even now, when he seems to be somewhat entertained, the hard planes of his face remain.

In his shadow, I realize I'm glaring at him as openly as I would my brother. That's probably a bad idea, considering Chase's reputation, but I can't seem to soften. "What *was* that today?"

He blinks slow and stupid. "What?"

Seriously? He's going to pretend he doesn't know what I'm talking about? Swell. "You know what."

"I do?"

“What you said in class.” I glance at the students streaming around us, but none have familiar faces. Good. “About me liking Palmer.”

“That bothered you?”

My fists clench and unclench, as if there’s a chance of me taking a swing at him. “You concocting a vicious lie and using it to gain attention? Yeah, that bothered me.”

Chase turns his shoulder to me. “I don’t know what ‘concocting’ means, but I get the general idea.”

Chase resumes walking, and I trot along behind him. “Feel free to apologize at any time.”

“Okay.”

I think I actually growl. I’m a yappy terrier nipping at the heels of a dog big enough to crush me with a mere swipe of a paw. But I can’t back off. “Tell me why you did it.”

We’ve apparently arrived at his car. Something old with a logo I don’t recognize. Chase gives me a wave—a kind that seems to mean “goodbye and good riddance”—and tosses his backpack into the backseat.

I plant my hands on my hips. “This isn’t the end of this discussion, you know.”

He shrugs. “Later, Ellie.” Then he shuts himself inside the car, fires up the engine, and abandons me and my outrage here on the sidewalk.

“Was that Chase?”

I startle at Lucy’s voice. She’s standing there in her blue and white cheer outfit, hair done up in a long, perky ponytail. “Where’d you come from? Why aren’t you at practice?”

“Cancelled—don’t get me started. Were you just *yelling* at Chase? He could kill you with his bare hands, El.”

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at Chase’s car, idling at a red light. “I have to know why he said what he did.”

“He’s a guy. Who knows why he does anything? Just let it go before you get hurt.” Lucy shudders. “He’s a Cervantes, after all.”

The reminder makes my insides shiver. “He wouldn’t hurt me *here*. In daylight.”

“But don’t tempt him, okay?” She takes several prancing steps down the sidewalk, toward where she typically parks her car. “And who cares why he said it? You know what they say, El—any attention is good attention.”

“No, that’s *press*. Any press is good press.”

She shrugs, waves, and bounces down the sidewalk.

Figures. Judging by how Lucy lives her life these days, she believes her false cliché. Lucy’s yet to meet attention she doesn’t like.

I, on the other hand, would be content to spend the rest of my days tucked behind my computer, dreaming up other worlds.

Chase revs his engine as the light turns green. Did he just wave to me as he sped off?

I watch his car fade from sight. Yes, I definitely prefer the worlds I create. I like it better when everyone plays by my rules.