

The Accidental

BAD

GIRL



MAXINE

KAPLAN

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For Sophie Kaplan, twin and role model

PROLOGUE

IT WAS A GAME, AFTER ALL. It made sense that eventually we'd make it to the school gym.

Grant Powers pulled me down the hallway by the wrist, laughing as he hitched up the black gown pooling around his khakis. The tassel tickled my nose as his cap nearly fell off my head in the mad dash through the double doors to the bank of athletic offices high on the fifth floor of Howell.

The gym was empty. Of course it was. Grant stopped short, and I crashed into his broad back, briefly breathing in the grassy, detergent smell of him. He reached backward and pulled me into a one-armed embrace, squashing me against his chest.

He bit my ear, and I squealed.

“What now?” I asked, my voice still muffled in his gown. “Does the prom king have any last requests before he abdicates the throne, in, oh, about an hour?”

Grant spun me outward, and his cap finally did fall.

“Let me think about that,” he said with a wicked grin. Then he nodded to something over my shoulder.

I turned my head and saw the equipment cage, the chain-link enclosure in the most shadowy corner of the room.

Before I could answer he had maneuvered me into the rusted-out metal box.

The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back, my butt squeaking against the nubby, padded nylon of a gym mat. Grant was on top of me, unbuckling his belt. The sunlight pouring through the big glass windows flashed across something on his wrist, momentarily making me squint.

The sun moved, and I saw that they were cuff links. Specifically, they were 14-karat gold cuff links engraved with his initials. Etched onto the back of each were a heart and the letter *A*.

I knew that because I was there when Audrey bought them for him, as a present for his eighteenth birthday.

I pushed that thought out of my head and concentrated on Grant, arching my back, trying to lose myself in the heat from his palms on my skin.

We weren't technically having sex yet, but my underwear had been flung to the side and a condom retrieved. He went to unzip my skirt.

“Wait,” I said, lifting my head off the floor.

“What?” he asked, his voice excited, even hysterical.

I shook my head, concentrating, but it was gone. “I thought I heard something,” I told him.

“Like what?”

I looked at him, suddenly suspicious. His voice was too casual to match the glitter in his eyes. I pushed him off me and sat up, holding my half-unstrapped bra to my chest, straining to hear. The gym was empty.

Then the heavy metal doors leading from the locker rooms boomed open—and the gym was decidedly *not* empty.

The entire senior class, capped and gowned, breathless, cheeks rosy with excitement, thundered in. I stumbled to my feet, twisting my underwear around my ankles, needing this not to be happening.

But it was happening. The distracted bustle in the air could protect me for only so long, and eventually, like dominoes, their eyes fell to the equipment cage and to me, stumbling back into my clothes. And, also, to Grant, who was laughing sheepishly and buckling his pants at a leisurely pace. A boyish whoop blew through the room. Someone yelled, “Fuck, yeah, Powers!”

I couldn't speak. I couldn't think. All I could do was try not to melt, and then Grant put his mouth next to my ear. “Hey, Kendall? Don't worry,” he breathed.

“How . . . ?” I couldn't finish the query, looking wildly from person to person, identical in black and blue, and not recognizing

any of them, just the look of witness-to-a-train-wreck delight on their faces.

I finally turned to Grant. “You knew?” I squeaked. “The seniors . . .” I tried to shake some focus into my head but failed. “You knew they would be here?”

He had been grinning at his friends, but then he looked at me, affection in his eyes. “You’re really cute when you’re nervous,” he said. He bent down and kissed me on the cheek.

He sauntered away, pausing only to pick up his graduation cap, leaving me alone and unprotected in the cage.

Actually, scratch that: in high school.

CHAPTER ONE

NO ONE WAS LOOKING AT ME.

Or, more accurately, everyone was very carefully *not* looking at me.

My locker was in the basement level, the undercroft, and I had figured that if I cut in early and through the back, I’d get the chance to steel myself in the peace of an empty hallway.

Sadly, I had been mistaken. The senior class at Howell Preparatory School held enough overachievers that about fifteen kids had beaten me there. None of them were my friends, but I had known almost all of them since the fifth grade.

I stood there for a minute, idling at one end of the corridor, waiting for someone, anyone, to acknowledge my existence.

Nope. I exhaled heavily, suddenly aware that I had been holding my breath.

I had just opened my locker when the stairwell door swung open and out spilled a full-court press—including my volleyball teammates, Amy and Alexis. The summer before junior year, a few of us had gone on a couple of day trips to Long Island, so we could

practice while also relaxing on a beach. That hadn't happened this past summer. I smiled at them and waved. Amy nodded a little but then turned away to her locker. Alexis offered an almost silent "Hey" before looking away, too, embarrassed.

The full class shuffled into the corridor, and they all continued to not speak to me. I watched the door, but she—the only one I really wanted or needed to see—didn't show. I fished the glitter-edged mirror out of my backpack and stuck the magnetized back on my locker. With a touch of desperation, I applied lip gloss and mascara. I moved my hair to temporarily hide my face. "Just one more year," I mouthed at my reflection.

I redid the hopeful math I'd been doing in my head all summer—in approximately six months, or thirty-two weeks, minus winter vacation, so make that thirty and a half weeks, I'd be accepted into college and, for all intents and purposes, not here anymore.

Of course, if my plans, laid out over the long, lonely summer, came to pass, I'd escape even sooner. But I couldn't afford to get my hopes up, so I concentrated on the probable over the possible. *Thirty weeks, Kendall*, I thought hard, trying to will it into reality. *You can survive anything for thirty weeks.*

I surveyed my reflection and buttoned the top button on my cardigan. I shifted, and the lace neckline on my pastel blue camisole puckered. I had carefully selected this outfit: pale colors

and soft fabrics, nothing moody or confrontational. The outfit had been neatly folded on my desk chair for a week, like empty paper doll clothes.

I unbuttoned. Maybe no one would even care about last year.

My senior year commenced. Nobody yelled at me or laughed at me. Nobody hit me or anything like that. But every time I stepped toward someone, they stepped back. I walked up to a group of student government kids hanging out by the vending machines, and they simply evaporated around me, re-congregating by the water fountain.

Third-period English class was divided into separate tables, each seating four. Lucia, Amy, and Raisa were sitting together, and I joined them. One by one, they shouldered their backpacks and discreetly relocated.

For the whole of the morning, literally no one under the age of thirty spoke to me, and the ones who were over thirty barely did. I was too proud to force a conversation with anyone in my clique and too timid to try to initiate contact with the other kids in the class, especially since I'd pretty much ignored them for the past three years.

I just wasn't there.

As I signed out at the front desk during lunch, my spirits sinking under the pressure of being mute and incidental, I tried to look on the bright side: The school was probably too small for anyone

to get away with outright bullying. As cold as I felt when I imagined being excluded from everything that had defined my life, if this benign ostracism was all that was coming my way, in terms of teens having it rough in American high schools, I was getting off tremendously light.

I attempted to cheer myself up with more math as I bought my lunch. Two hours and forty-five minutes until I could go home. Thirty minutes left of lunch, so only three more forty-five-minute blocks of having to be where people could see me. One hundred and thirty-five minutes total.

Eat. Then count to sixty, repeat one hundred and thirty-four times, and you're done.

I hurried back down to the senior lockers—I needed to pick up my bio textbook before next period.

Crouched in front of my locker, I sensed the world go quiet behind me. I looked up and locked eyes with her. Audrey Khalil, coming right at me. I had imagined seeing her all summer, knowing that she held my fate in her hands. If Audrey—the beautiful, the benevolent, the wronged—decided to forgive me, things could go backward and be OK. If Audrey was still *my* Audrey.

I stood.

Audrey looked at me directly, her chocolate eyes harder than I'd ever seen them. Her body was relaxed and loose; she wasn't nervous to see me.

As always, Audrey looked perfect. Her beige knit skirt fit perfectly over her legs—long but not skinny or knobby. Her red sweetheart top was just bright enough to highlight the rich coppery undertone her warm brown skin had acquired in the summer. And her hair was tucked up in a simple twist, not a single strand out of place.

She looked me over coolly but without investment or engagement. There was no quirk of the mouth, no dip of the head, no wave, no flipping me off, nothing. Just that cool, hard, appraising gaze.

But still, she walked slowly in my direction, looking like she was coming for me, until, at the last second, she gave me a wide berth and slid her eyes away.

Something in me broke.

Audrey turned to the girls with her as they got to the stairwell door. And then she said, achingly lightly, “That’s our dear little slut.” There was a disdainful chuckle in her voice. “First day of school and she still can’t keep her tits to herself. Gotta love her.”

I was in rigor mortis.

Gulping for breath, I struggled to retreat, barely feeling the floor under my feet. The atmosphere in the hall felt tangible, thick and chilly, and blood pounded in my ears.

My paralysis broke, and I ran.

I made it to the bathroom, locked the first stall behind me, and

sank to the floor. I tried to cry but couldn't find the oxygen to do anything but gasp.

The worst part was the nauseous feeling that I deserved it. No one was lying about me. I *had* had sex with my best friend's boyfriend. Every chance I could for a whole week. And then I had been caught. The entire senior class saw me do it. Their descriptions of my half-naked, sweaty, shamed self on Facebook posts were all the evidence my class needed. The likes and OMG comments proved it. I *was* a slut. A few of the seniors had even taken pictures on their phones. Once I saw those, I stopped going online.

Before, I had been happy enough at Howell. I heard no evil, saw no evil, and spoke no evil. I hadn't rocked the high school boat.

Except for that one week. Grant had white teeth and pillowy lips and this way of suddenly catching me up in his arms and wrapping them around my entire body. I never saw him hug anyone else like that. Not even Audrey. Just *once* I saw something I wanted and took it without thinking.

I drew my knees up and put my head down on them, sucking as much air into my lungs as I could. I had broken the rules, and now I was alone.

The bathroom door opened, and I squeezed into myself tighter, hoping that whoever it was wouldn't notice the pathetic heap behind the stall door.

There was a weird clicking noise and then silence. Whoever it

was, they were still right at the entrance. *What are they doing?* And then I realized: Whoever it was had locked the door.

Heavy heels echoed off the tiling as the person walked slowly toward where I was sitting. Then stopped. I inched slightly away from the door and craned my neck, trying to see underneath it.

Silence.

Just when I thought I was being paranoid and some girl was only checking her makeup in the mirror, a combat boot slammed the stall door into my back, twisting the hinges and knocking me forward. I smacked my head on the ceramic toilet tank as I toppled forward into a face-plant on the linoleum floor.

CHAPTER TWO

DIZZY, FEELING LIKE MY HEAD WAS ON FIRE, I slowly lifted myself from the floor. I touched my fingers to my hairline. They came back bloody.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I scrambled to my feet, wincing as I bent my banged-up knees.

I turned, expecting to see one of Audrey’s toadies, but I was wrong. I had never seen this girl before in my life.

The girl was very tall and very thin. Everything about her was long, from her hair—pin straight and heavy—to her waist, to her legs, to her mouth, oddly made up: lined in a severe heart shape with a rich dark red, but with no lipstick filling the gaps. Even her eyes, narrow and bright blue, seemed longer than they should be.

The Long Girl smirked at me. “Sorry, Kendall,” she said in an offhand way, as if she had just tipped into me on the subway. “Didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Oh, really?” I pushed past her to get to the sink and wet some paper towels for my head. I glared at her reflection. “Are you

new?” I asked. It was always possible someone had dared a new girl to maim me.

“Yeah, no,” she said, coming up next to me and rearranging her hair. “I don’t go here.”

My head still pounding, I saw cobwebs start to make their way across my vision. I blinked, trying to shake them away.

Balancing a hand on the mirror, I took a shaky breath. “So, how do I know you?”

“I’m hoping that you don’t, actually.” She pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and held it up to her eye. “Say cheese!”

The flash of light sent me swaying.

“Cute,” she deadpanned, checking out the shot. “You’re really smizing. Hey, Kendall, are you doing OK? You’re looking a little blurry.”

My vision faded for a second, and I clutched at the sink. “How do you know me?” I mushmouthed: My tongue wasn’t working so well.

“We have mutual friends. I really think you should sit down.” The Long Girl pushed my shoulders down until I was sitting on the floor. Then she made herself comfortable, cross-legged in front of me.

“Basically, I wanted to come by and see you, to tell you in person, for both me and Mason, that this has gone far enough,” she said. “No harm done or anything. We are, as of yet, cool. But we are very soon going to run out of cool.”

I shook my head. “You have the wrong person. I don’t know anyone named Mason.”

“Kendall, please. If you’re going to lie, at least set your Facebook profile to private. Hide the photographic evidence. That’s kind of basic.”

My Facebook profile is set to private, I tried to say, but everything was going gray, like a fade to black in an old movie. The Long Girl’s face flickered in front of me like static as she tucked her phone into her back pocket. “In a nutshell, Mason is done with this, I am done with this, our friends are done with this, and you are done with this. Or the next time you hit your head, you won’t be twenty feet from a nurse’s station.”

The Long Girl hauled her arm back, and I heard a pop, as if from a distance. And then everything faded away.

A shrill alarm went off, jolting me awake. *Oh god, school starts today*. For five precious seconds, this day hadn’t happened yet. Then Nurse Keckler walked into the dim, antiseptic-smelling room to pick up her cell, and I plunged back into my body. This was reality.

“Hi,” I said weakly. “Can I have some water?”

The nurse started and clutched her hand to her chest. “You startled me! I was just calling your parents.”

Awesome. “Why? Am I in trouble?”

“Trouble? Honey, no. You slipped in the bathroom and hit your

head pretty hard. A van is coming to take you to the hospital, just to be safe. How are you feeling now?”

I swallowed, and it felt like a brick was trying to escape from my skull, Zeus-birthing-Athena style. “Totally fine. If I promise to see my family doctor as early as possible, can we call off the ambulance?”

“It’s already on its way. I’m going to try your mother again.” She left the recovery room. Without getting me any water.

I lay back down, the fluorescent ceiling light pulverizing the space between my eyes. I closed them. “Great. I’ll just lie here and screw myself.”

“Would you like some privacy?”

I didn’t open my eyes right away. It was easier to pretend that this wasn’t happening if I couldn’t actually see him lounging in the bed opposite me in the narrow room.

Michael Gilbert, commonly known as Gilly, was sprawled on the opposite bed, twirling a thermometer between his thumb and forefinger. His wiry limbs stuck out at their customary awkward angles. He was looking at me with a bemused half grin spreading across his face. A half grin was the only kind Gilly had, as far as I could tell. Normally, he was scowling.

I was hanging on to my composure by a toenail, and I did *not* want to break down in front of Gilly. I gritted my teeth.

“That would be great, thanks. See you later.”

Gilly stuck the thermometer into his mouth. “But I’m sick,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, no doubt.”

He laughed with his mouth closed, so it came out a snort.

Nurse Keckler came back into the room. “Kendall, I got a hold of your dad. He’s going to call your mother, and they’re going to meet you at the hospital, OK?”

Oh god, this is actually happening. I nodded miserably.

“Do you want me to get one of your friends excused from class to go with you in the ambulance? It should be here any second.”

I opened my mouth automatically to ask for Audrey but then remembered and shut it.

“No,” I said. “Nobody.” She went back into her office.

Gilly took the thermometer out of his mouth. “Well. Awkward.”

The pain in my head increased. “Please, stop talking.”

His mouth twisted meanly as he began whistling the theme from *Jeopardy*.

“Stop.”

Gilly paused. “Just trying to be helpful.” He was silent for a moment and then began whistling “All by Myself.”

“Goddamn it, Gilly,” I snapped, sitting up.

He sat up, too, and looked at me, eyebrows lowering. He started humming again, this time a minor chord melody I couldn’t place at first. Then he added the lyrics.

“I’ve been a bad, bad girl . . .”

Fiona Apple. “Criminal.”

That toenail slipped. Without my brain keeping track of what my limbs were doing, my arm swung back, and I slapped him hard across the face.

Gilly fell against the wall, and I fell back on the bed, dizzy from the sudden movement. Maybe I did have a concussion. What was I thinking, hitting someone like that?

I looked over at Gilly. He appeared surprised but not angry. Slowly rubbing his jaw, he cocked his head to the side and looked at me with focused, inquisitive eyes, like he was peering through a microscope at something he couldn’t quite identify.

“What?” I said. *“What?”*

“There’s really none of your friends who would go with you to the hospital?”

I hesitated and then, for no reason other than it seemed easier, decided to be honest. “I don’t think so, no.”

Gilly’s foot began to jiggle up and down. I had noticed that before: He always seemed to be in motion.

Something occurred to me. “Do you know why . . . ?”

He pulled a *dub* face.

“Right,” I sighed. Stage crew guys were practically their own ecosystem, autonomous and unconcerned. If Gilly had heard the details, my disgrace was complete.

“I’ll go to the hospital with you, if you want.”

I looked at him, surprised. He had stopped jiggling his foot and was looking at me weirdly seriously. I met his eyes and wondered if I’d ever actually made direct contact with them before. They were unusual: layered flecks of gray and silver and very, very clear.

Gilly blinked and looked away. I quickly did the same.

“You just want to get out of class,” I said. “I’ll go by myself.”

He shrugged and lay back down, still not looking at me. “Worth a shot, right?”

Nurse Keckler came in. “OK, Kendall, let’s go.”

I gathered up my bag and my body and headed for the door.

“Hey, Kendall?”

“What?” I turned around.

Gilly caught my eye for a microsecond. Half grinning again, he turned around and sprawled across the bed. “You look really pretty.”

CHAPTER THREE

“THAT ASSHOLE.” It was later that night, and I was examining my reflection in the full-length mirror hanging on my bedroom door. I was not happy.

There was a gash on my forehead, still lurid, barely scabbed over. My cheekbone was rosy and swollen. And, on top of that, the Long Girl had given me a black eye, which was swiftly turning green. I flopped onto my bed in disgust.

The Long Girl. Every time I ran through the scene in the girls’ bathroom, she got longer and longer, looming over me, all lips and lashes and legs.

I felt bad for whomever the Long Girl was really looking for, because I was pretty goddamn sure it wasn’t me. To my knowledge, I had never pissed anyone off until recently, and though someone at Howell might have been tempted to attack me in an effort to impress her, it didn’t seem likely that Audrey would conscript a total *stranger* to beat me up. I had considered it in the van on the way to the hospital but concluded that it wasn’t her style. Violence was too vulgar for Audrey, too obvious; even calling me “slut” was a little raw for her.