

DEEPFAKE

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WILL

Okay, I admit it: I'm *that guy*. The one who's wearing a college hoodie from Stanford that screams: *I got in early and you didn't*. In my defense, my dad bought it for me two years ago, before I'd even applied, because it's his college and he's obsessed with the place. Like, seriously obsessed. Also in my defense, I'm not the only senior walking around school with a college name splashed across their chest.

My girlfriend, Dara Simons, isn't one of those people. She's waiting for me on the school steps, wearing a skirt, green tights, and boots—looking totally hot.

The girl is first in the class, beating me by a few tenths of a percent, and she just got into Johns Hopkins. But she doesn't flaunt it.

Not my Dara.

Not that I would dare call her “mine” to her face.

It's kind of what I liked about her in the first place. Her independence and the quiet way she gets the job done—while doing it ten times better than everyone else.

We've been friends since freshman year, but it wasn't until we were both counselors at Camp Terabyte this past summer that I realized I was into her.

Luckily for me, she felt the same way.

“Will!” she exclaims as I get close, her eyes bright. “Oh my god, did you get into Stanford or something? Wow, you must be soooooooooo smart!”

“Ha-ha,” I say. “Just because you’re modest doesn’t mean everyone else has to be.”

“I’m not modest,” she says. “Not all of us knew where we were going since birth. I don’t even own a Hopkins hoodie.”

“Okay, I guess I’ll have to cut you some slack.”

“I could have worn the College one my mom gave me, but *someone* got lasagna on it at MJ’s party . . .” She pokes me in the shoulder.

“Oh yeah,” I say, smiling as I think about what we were doing right after I got lasagna on it.

“Anyway, I haven’t done laundry yet,” Dara continues.

“Wouldn’t have stopped me,” I say.

She rolls her eyes. “That’s because you’re a slob.”

“I’m a slob whose dad is finally happy—at least for, like, two seconds—because his son got into his alma mater,” I say. “And now he’s nagging me to go out for a celebration dinner. I just got another text on the way here this morning asking when I can make it.

“Why is that so bad?” Dara asks. “I mean, it’s free food, right?”

“Because he also wants to bring his latest girlfriend so I can meet her.”

My parents went through a long, bitter divorce, and even though it was finalized over a year ago, things haven't improved much. Or at all. Dad's been dating all these women who are like the anti-Mom—tall where Mom's short, blonde where Mom is brunette. It makes me wonder why my parents ever got married in the first place.

"He wouldn't bring a girlfriend you haven't met to a celebration dinner, would he?" Dara asks.

I shrug. "Who knows? My dad does whatever he wants. So . . . how was EMTing last night?" I ask to change the subject.

She laughs. "EMTing? That's what we're calling it now? It was good. I helped lead a triage assessment exercise with the newbie Explorers."

"How did they do?" I ask.

"Pretty well, all things considered. But obviously that's because they had such great instruction."

"Obviously," I say.

"But back to your dad. It's just one meal. It'll be over in a few hours." She goes to touch my face and then pulls back, remembering we're in school.

I put my arms around her. "Hey, we're not a secret anymore, remember?"

Dara sighs. "I know. Did you see this morning's Rumor Has It?"

I nod. Like everyone else, I have a love-hate relationship

with Rumor Has It. I hate when they write about *me*, but I can't get enough of the posts about other people. Who knew hate-reading was a thing?

"I hope MJ isn't too upset about it," Dara continues.

"Did *you* notice her being off at her party?" I ask.

Dara scrunches up her nose as she thinks back to Saturday night. "I . . . don't . . . think so. Well, except I think the fact that we've been together since August came as a total shock to her."

"Like it did to everyone else."

"But considering how tight you and MJ have always been—I think that could account for a little, you know, off-ness."

"True," I admit. I've felt weird keeping us a secret from everyone, but I hated keeping things from MJ the most. I run a hand through my unruly hair, which refuses to stay where I want it. "I'll see if I can get a chance to talk to her before Robotics."

"Good move," Dara says. "I'd hate for her to be upset about us, especially since she and I have become better friends this year." Sighing, she lays her head against my chest. She's so short she barely hits my sternum. "Just one of the many reasons I wish we'd been able to keep things under wraps."

"I know," I say, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. "But that's not an option anymore."

Dara pulls away, grabs my hand, and starts walking into school. "I wish I knew who it was."

And . . . we're back to Rumor Has It.

“Doesn’t everyone?” I say. “Every year it’s a new mystery—and it’s one that’s never been solved.”

“Yeah,” Dara says. “But still.”

As we make our way down the hall, she says hi to Carson Taylor and his younger sister, Saffron. Their dad is engaged to her mom. I don’t know how I’ll feel if either of my parents marries someone else. But maybe in Dara’s case it’s different—her dad died in a car accident. My parents just went through the world’s worst divorce. Or at least that’s how it feels to my sister, Sadie, and me.

We get to the hallway where we have to part ways to get to our respective first-period classes.

“I’ll see you later,” Dara says, standing on tiptoe to kiss me. I tug her to me, wanting it to last longer, but after a few seconds she pulls away, her lips curved into a smile. “Hold that thought. Gotta run.”

She walks purposefully down the hallway, her dark ponytail swinging in counterpoint to the sway of her hips.

Stop gawking and get to class, Halpern!

I tear my eyes away from Dara and head to computer science, my first-period class.

“Willie H, wait up!”

My friend Amir hurries to catch up with me. He’s sporting a purple NYU hoodie, because he got in there early decision. I guess that makes us *those guys*. We should probably be embarrassed to be us.

“So . . . how does it feel to be Rumor Has It’s latest victim?”

“Ugh! Don’t remind me about that post,” I say with a sigh. “Hey, did you notice MJ being kind of off at the party?”

“Well . . . yeah, especially toward the end. I thought it was because she didn’t get into Carnegie Mellon, but . . . maybe it was about you and Dara.” Amir hesitates. “Do you think MJ has had the secret hots for you all these years?”

“Dude, *no!*” I exclaim. “You know MJ and me . . . we’re like brother and sister. There are definitely no hots involved on either side.”

“Okay, okay,” Amir says. “I was just asking!”

I roll my eyes. Like a straight guy and girl can’t be friends without it being about “hots.” “I just hope that someone else does something stupid or scandalous soon so everyone stops talking about Dara and me. Sooner rather than later.”

“Don’t worry. By tomorrow, people will be like ‘Will and Dara who?’” Amir says.

“Man, I hope you’re right. If I wanted to play out my life in the spotlight, I’d have done theater instead of track,” I say. “I definitely gotta talk to MJ before Robotics, though. It sucks to have things be weird between us.”

“Yeah, bad vibes between the two of you might give Karla the Killer deep psychological problems. We can’t afford to pay for her therapy.”

I laugh. Karla is the Robotics project we’ve all been working on for the county-wide Bot Battle Extravaganza that’s coming up at the end of January.

“We definitely don’t want that to happen,” I say. “We want Karla to kick some serious butt.”

“So fix it with MJ before school is over today,” Amir says. “Our evil creation depends on it.”

“Okay, now you’re just getting weird,” I say.

But I promise him I’ll do it anyway.