



One

“Seriously?” said Natalie. “A forty-four?”

“I think it’s pretty good,” I said.

“Delia, in what universe does forty-four out of one hundred qualify as pretty good?” she asked as we left the physics lab and headed for the cafeteria.

“Forty-four is nearly half,” I said. “So that means I got nearly half the answers right. Which is pretty good when you consider I don’t remember taking the quiz.”

Natalie tucked a strand of red hair behind one ear, perplexed. “Are you sure you weren’t adopted? Or switched at birth? Statistically, it’s highly improbable that such gifted people could produce a child so utterly lacking in scientific aptitude.”

A glance in a mirror was enough to prove I was my parents’ biological daughter: I had the standard-issue features of my mother’s East Coast family but the coloring of my Indian father. Still, Natalie had a point. It was hard to explain how two Stanford PhDs — who’d even started their own Internet company — had ended up with me. “I guess I’m a genetic mutant,” I said.



Natalie considered this with her usual gravity as we took our places in the lunch line. “A scientific black hole would be more accurate. Or differently gifted if you want to sugarcoat it.”

“Um, thanks?” I handed her a tray and took one for myself.

Prescott Day School’s resident chef was experimenting with theme-based cuisine, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. Last week there’d been Macedonian Monday, which had meant a lot of lamb and yogurt, and today was Mongolian Monday, which also seemed to mean a lot of lamb and yogurt. We both asked for grilled cheese and found seats at an empty table against the cafeteria’s far wall, where Natalie picked up right where she’d left off.

“Imagine how much better you’d have done if you’d paid attention to Dr. Penske in class,” she said, cutting her sandwich into four precise triangles. “Or gone completely wild and — brace yourself, because this is a novel concept — but imagine what might have happened if you’d studied.”

“I had other things on my mind,” I said. “Important things.”

“You managed to make plenty of time for Quinn Riley.”

“I wouldn’t call Quinn unimportant,” I said, not even trying to control the uncontrollable smile that appeared on my face when I said Quinn’s name.

Natalie didn’t bother arguing about whether Quinn was or wasn’t important — she knew how pointless that would be. She



was also one of the few people who knew what I really meant by important things, like how my mother was hiding out from evil-doers in South America, and how I'd been busy trying to make it safe for her to come home. My dad died when I was thirteen, so I was already down to one parent — as far as I was concerned, ensuring that I didn't become a total orphan took precedence over homework.

Of course, if you'd told me in August that by September my mother would be in anonymous exile in Argentina and I'd be the newest member of Prescott's junior class here in Manhattan, I would never have believed it. I'd been blissfully clueless, enjoying the last days of summer back in California and entirely unaware that my life was about to unravel.

The whole mess started when T.K. — my mother's real name is Temperance Kittredge Truesdale, but since that's a ridiculous thing to call a person, she's always gone by T.K. — anyway, it all started when she organized a research trip to Antarctica. In addition to being an Internet tycoon, my mother's a huge supporter of environmental causes.

She'd told everyone the trip was to document the impact of global warming on polar ice shelves. But she'd also suspected that illegal oil exploration was under way in a part of Antarctica called the Ross Sea, and she'd wanted to see what she could find out. So she hired a small ship, posted online for volunteers to join her, and set off from Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America.



It turned out she was right about the illegal exploration. Unfortunately, she'd also inadvertently let the evildoers who intended to profit from the oil know she was on to them, and they'd hijacked her ship, the *Polar Star*, replacing the captain and crew and volunteer researchers with their own henchmen. The only legitimate person left on board besides T.K. was a climate change specialist from Australia. His name was Mark, and according to a psychic I knew, he was my mother's new boyfriend. I was less sure about that part, but either way the two of them figured out their shipmates were arranging for them to meet with foul play, and they escaped in the middle of the night in a Zodiac.

Amazingly, they managed to land unharmed in the wilds of Chilean Patagonia, and they'd trekked north from there to Santiago before sneaking across the Argentinean border and on to Buenos Aires. The idea was that they'd be safest in a large city, buffered by millions of strangers, and while Buenos Aires was thousands of miles from the Ross Sea, it was still the closest major commercial hub and the likely base of operations for anyone trying to accomplish something illicit in the region.

So that's where they were hiding out, though chances were good the evildoers thought they were dead. After all, the odds of normal people successfully navigating an ocean's worth of polar water in a rubber boat were pretty much zero. However, chances were also good that if the truth got out, the evildoers would want to remedy the situation. Which meant we needed to



neutralize them before T.K. could come home and Mark could go back to Sydney or Melbourne or wherever.

All of which is a long way of saying that I'd had a lot to focus on besides physics lately. In fact, the last few weeks had been something of an emotional roller coaster, what with first having to worry about whether my mother was even alive — the hijackers faked the *Polar Star's* disappearance, so just about everyone thought she was dead — and then trying to piece together what really happened.

And in case that hadn't been sufficiently chaotic, I'd also been uprooted from Palo Alto and sent to New York, where my mother's sisters, Patience and Charley (whose real name is Charity, because apparently my grandparents' baby name book predated indoor plumbing), were acting as my guardians. Now I was living with Charley while Patience handled any decisions about money or school.

I had to admit, it hadn't been all bad. Charley was slightly insane but in an interesting way, and Patience was completely uptight but she'd also be a useful person to have around in a crisis, like an alien invasion or monsoon. And though Prescott was a bit *Gossip Girl*, especially in comparison to West Palo Alto High, if Patience hadn't sent me here I'd never have met Natalie. And I didn't even want to consider the possibility of never having met Quinn, who came close to single-handedly canceling out all of the other turmoil and angst.

Anyhow, we were finishing up lunch and Natalie was



outlining a multistep plan to improve my academic performance — which was hopeless unless one of those steps involved magically downloading the contents of her brain into mine — when there was a buzzing in my book bag.

“You know you’re not supposed to use your phone in school,” Natalie said, not lifting her eyes from the piece of graph paper where she was sketching a timeline to go with the performance improvement plan.

I did know, but I also couldn’t resist checking messages under the table — I was hoping for a text from Quinn. But the text was from Charley instead.

Mostly when Charley texted it was about dinner — she loves food as much as she loves clothes, and possibly more — but this was what she had to say today:

dr. p told me u flunked

starting 2nite no TV — all homework all time

I reread the message twice to make sure it really was from Charley and that she’d really meant to send it to me, but it was no mistake. She hadn’t sent a follow-up text to apologize, either, even though it wasn’t like *I* was the person in our two-person household who couldn’t get through a single evening without some form of video entertainment.

For the first time since Dr. Penske had handed back the quiz with the “44” scrawled on top, I felt panic. I’d expected tough



love from Natalie, but it hadn't occurred to me that Charley, who was as differently gifted as I was, wouldn't be sympathetic. And if this was Charley's reaction, I should probably be terrified of what Patience would do.

At least I could count on Quinn to understand. He'd help me figure out how to ward off Patience and steer Charley back onto the path of reason. And I'd see him when we had drama together at the end of the day, which meant I only had to make it through two more class periods.

Of course, every second of those two periods felt like it lasted a week, though thankfully neither Modern Western Civilizations nor precalc involved failing any more quizzes. And in spite of all the time I had to prepare, I was still overcome by a spasm of brain paralysis when I finally saw Quinn, leaning against the edge of the stage in the auditorium where our drama class met.

It wasn't just that he was a senior and godlike, with sand-colored hair and gray-green eyes that made me think of the Pacific on a cloudy morning. He also seemed to get me, and I thought I got him, too. It didn't even matter that we'd only known each other a few weeks, or that our single real date could have been construed as a research project, or that one of the two times he'd kissed me might not count since we'd been acting out the kissing scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Class started before my brain could unfreeze, so I didn't get a chance to really talk to him until after the bell rang and his



minions had dispersed (Quinn didn't consciously collect people — they were just drawn to him by his general aura of undiluted cool). But then he walked me out of the auditorium and down the corridor and through the big front doors to the steps outside, where I poured out everything about my forty-four, and Dr. Penske calling my aunts, and Charley making bizarre threats, and Natalie's tough love, and how I had no idea what Patience might do but I feared carnage.

And when I was done, here's what Quinn said:

“Why are you taking advanced physics anyway?”

Which was more of a shock than Charley's text. I mean, there I was, expecting compassion and maybe even kissing (though probably not while we were surrounded by the entire Prescott student body in the process of leaving the building). But if anything, Quinn sounded like Natalie.

So without thinking I said, “Why are you taking AP calc?”

I regretted it as soon as the words were out of my mouth. Quinn was as bad at math as I was at science, and I already knew perfectly well he was only taking calculus because his father expected him to follow in his footsteps, which involved doing something complicated in finance — that is, when he wasn't potentially plotting with the evildoers who were the reason my mother was hiding out on another continent, though I wasn't sure about that part and, for obvious reasons, hadn't mentioned it to Quinn.



Quinn's lips tightened a bit at the edges, and for a moment his eyes looked more gray than green. But the moment ended almost before it began. "Point taken," he said, his tone easy.

"Sorry," I said lamely.

"Me, too. Let's forget it happened and go to the park. We can get you an ice cream and talk about what to say to your aunts."

Quinn and ice cream were two of my favorite things, so there was pretty much nothing I'd rather do. But I had an appointment I couldn't tell Quinn about since it had to do with figuring out whether his father was, in fact, in cahoots with evildoers. "I can't today," I said. "Maybe tomorrow?"

"Can't tomorrow," said Quinn. "I have a family thing. I guess we're logistically star-crossed, Juliet."

Sometimes Quinn calls me Juliet, because of how we had to do that scene together, and whenever he does it's good for another bout of brain paralysis. So all I could manage back was "Oh."

"But I'll talk to you later, okay?" he said.

I didn't even try to say anything else but just nodded, wondering as I did what would happen next. The steps had largely emptied out by then.

But before I could do much wondering, Quinn's lips were on mine.

And this time it definitely counted.

