

Twenty

I hated thinking about things that I had no control over.

I really hated thinking about things that I had no control over after midnight, because while everyone I cared about slept,

I was still at work in Goldeen's, suffering through my mental anguish alone at my podium, staring out the front window and waiting in vain for customers that never showed up on Sunday nights.

Time machines didn't exist (yet). I couldn't change what had happened and my brain refused to let it go, replaying the photo shoot over and over. It had been great at first, talking to Dallas, who had decided to forsake his living puzzle-box ways, and then it got awkward. Outside, Dallas hadn't said anything to me. Clearly mad, but again unwilling to tell me why.

Had it been the photo shoot?

Me recoiling when he tried to touch me? Shelley assuming we were dating?

Oh, he really didn't like that last one. What stuck out the most and replayed in vivid Technicolor with nary a way to change the channel? The way he had said, "No."

Sure, if someone had rudely assumed I had started dating some- one, I'd get upset, too, if it wasn't true. On some level that made sense to the rational parts of my brain, but those parts had been regulated to the corner, nose against the wall, the same way Sam tried to discipline the kids she watched.

Because boys like Dallas didn't date fat girls. For a second there, I had truly lost my romantic mind. No matter what my mom said or might say in the future, it would never erase what I'd seen firsthand at school.

Valentine's Day: War in the Time of Commercial Romance.

A certain population of people had become notorious for sending fake proposals through the school-sanctioned flower-giving spectacle.

Meet me after school behind the gym. . . .

I've had a crush on you forever. . . .

Text me, please. I want to get to know you. . . .

The innocent carnations with cards attached had been used as humiliating weapons of mass emotional and romantic destruction. No one could be trusted. I had made it out unscathed. Not a single fake flower had ever been sent to me.

But one of my friends had gotten one. Two years in a row.

That had been my initial thought when Dallas had volunteered—it was for a joke. But I'd dismissed it quickly because I at least trusted him enough to not be *that* kind of douchebag.

But more to the point, according to Nadiya, who heard it from Michelle, who heard it from Megan, who saw a text from Lacey, Dallas didn't date Black girls. Which, okay, hurt. A lot. A special kind of hurt right in my metaphysical jugular that I didn't want to poke at or examine too closely. Admittedly, that rumor was a few years old now, and people could change, but.

I'd already lived through that in school, too, and the opposite:



whenever someone transferred, there would be literally zero point in getting a crush.

It started like this: “Oh. They’re really cute.”

And then common sense donkey-kicked its way through the front door: “He probably doesn’t like Black girls.”

Again, the rational part of my brain knew everyone couldn’t possibly think like that, but man. Hear it enough, see it enough on the internet, and that stuff starts to sink in after a while. Rom-coms were fantasy—the real dating playing field was sloped and ravaged by weeds, doubt, stereotypes, and unavoidable Eurocentric beauty standards.

But it was cool. Whatever. I’d meet a lot of different kinds of people with different mind-sets in college.

Hopefully.

I’d be happy if Dallas wanted to be friends. I *wanted* to have that with him. Funny. Snarky. Kind. Perceptive. Nice to look at, which probably shouldn’t be on this list, but whatever, here we are.

A car pulled into Goldeen’s parking lot, the engine roaring even as it idled before the driver cut it. Standing up, I stretched to wake up and shake myself out of my brain fog of escalating and borderline irrational worry.

You would think watching Dallas get out of the car, walk toward the door, enter the diner, and make his way to the podium would be enough time for me to prepare some kind of witty greeting to counteract the obscene levels of surprise pelting my brain cells. But no it wasn’t.

I stared at him. That’s all. Didn’t move. Didn’t speak. Just stared.