

PROLOGUE

I was five years old when my parents first forgot me at home. To this day they still argue over the details of that morning; whose fault it was – who dropped the ball. I suspect we'll never know for sure. A quarter of a century later, the event has grown hazy in everyone's mind, even mine. I only remember waking up to a silent house, aware that something was amiss, but not quite sure what. After checking every room twice and establishing that I was, in fact, alone, I spent the day watching cartoons and eating peanut butter straight from the jar.

My mother sobbed – sobbed profusely – when she discovered me in my Jiffy-smearing pajamas later that afternoon. “I’m terrible,” she kept whimpering as she gripped me tightly to her chest. “Horrible.”

I got a week of coddling and double desserts. My father got a week of the silent treatment.

To their credit, life was hectic then. In a last minute decision, my parents had uprooted the family, me and my four older brothers, and moved from the city to the suburbs so Dad could pastor full time. There were new neighbors to get to know, new schools to which to acclimate, an entire congregation to Shepard. Not to mention Mom's fledgling catering business. Something was bound to fall through the cracks. It's only natural that that something was me.

I've always had an uncanny ability to disappear into the world around me. Some people were born to stand out. I was born to blend in. Dark-haired with dime-a-dozen

brown eyes and a cookie-cutter build, I was mousy and average in every way.

Exceptionally unexceptional, that was me. I knew it, though no one ever said it, and I accepted the truth with a quiet, yet awkward grace.

I was in middle school the next time I woke up to find myself home alone in a deserted house. It wasn't as dramatic as it had been the first time. I was older, able to get myself dressed and on a bus in time to make it to home room before the bell rang. Mom even managed a slight chuckle about it at the dinner table that night.

Invisible Isabelle, my brothers had teased, mercilessly mocking my meekness in their nasally, sing-songy voices. The moniker eventually stuck. I didn't care. I liked flying under the radar. I liked being invisible. Being invisible meant I was safe. If people couldn't see me, they couldn't scrutinize me, they couldn't criticize or frown or disapprove. Invisibility was my one gift, my one power.

The only way to make it through unscathed was to make it through unnoticed. I clung to that theory like a drowning man clings to a life raft. I repeated it day in and day out like a mantra, year after year and it worked. I survived the dog-eat-dog jungle of adolescence in one, emotionally sound piece.

Middle school gave way to high school and high school to college, where I met my two best friends Cameron and Oliver.

Cam pulled my name from a Petri dish the first day of freshman Chem, sealing our fates as lab partners for the rest of the semester. She was loud and eclectic, vivacious and disarmingly magnetic. She was also beautiful with pore-less honeysuckle skin; wide set brown eyes that flickered hazel in just the right kind of light; a narrow nose that

sloped elegantly into an adorable rounded tip; ripe, seductive lips and a naturally long, thick mane of lustrous curls. Her perky bust sat above a size four waist and was matched with an equally perky backside, which was, of course, attached to legs that went on for weeks, not days.

Short of being a Hollywood starlet, she was as visible as a person could get, which suited her because she craved the limelight. Attention was attention to Cameron. It didn't matter if it was good or bad as long as it was completely focused on her. Needless to say, our friendship was a process. She was everything I'd worked to avoid, her lifestyle the kind I dreaded most. But beneath the flare and panache, the mini-skirts and sheer halter-tops, the blithe giggles and flirtatious swiveling hips was a bona fide sweetheart.

In his own way, Oliver was also an attention magnet. He was a tireless crusader of all things just – all things right. If there was a rally to push the administration for more funding for minority organizations or a petition circulating to furnish the campus with recycling bins, Olly was probably behind it. He was popular, known first and foremost for his undeniable good looks and secondly for his unswayable moral compass. (Though I'm sure, if he had his druthers, the order of those definers would've been the other way around.)

Ruggedly handsome, Oliver was rarely seen without his sleeves rolled up past his elbows and stubble shadowing his chiseled jaw. He had smoldering eyes that were framed with thick lashes and a cocked, boyish grin. His stance was broad, his swagger confident, his presence unmistakable. He was the kind of guy who could've easily been

spotted on a bus or in a mall by a talent scout, cleaned up, dusted off and turned into a Calvin Klein underwear model.

We met our sophomore year at a “Toys for Tots” volunteer meeting. I came in late and he gave me his seat, forcing me to parry the outraged stares of the surrounding gaggle of girls who’d no doubt jockeyed to get near him. Everyone was asked to sign up for one of two jobs; to sort through the toys and arrange them into gift boxes or to deliver the gift boxes to the list of expectant underprivileged kids. Oliver and I wound up being the only two who volunteered to sort through the toys. We spent the weekend bonding over Tonka trucks and Barbie dolls. And just like that a friendship was forged.

The three of us, me, Cam and Olly were an odd trio. Cameron was the wild crowd pleaser. Oliver was the heartthrob activist and I was the quiet loner. We were, by our own admission, each others’ polar opposites. But somehow, in our own lovingly dysfunctional way, we worked.

Our college years zipped by in a flash. We all eventually settled in Chicago where Cameron snagged a glitzy PR position with Snyder & Smith, ensuring her ample doses of her two favorite past times: partying and after partying. Oliver went on to finish law school and then settled in with a small civil rights firm. And I opened up a cozy used bookstore in Lincoln Park.

We shifted into adulthood with uncharacteristic ease, our respective roles in tact. Life was good, things were simple and I was satisfied.

Then, without warning, everything changed. I’d assumed, if ever our delightful dynamic were to be disrupted, our bond tested and our world’s taken for a spin, it would

be Cameron's doing or under an unlikely set of extreme circumstances, Oliver's. But never mine.

Only it was me. I was the one who stumbled out of formation and unwittingly bucked the system that had served us so faithfully throughout the years.

It was my fault, one hundred percent, my doing, and it all started the day that I, mousy, invisible, exceptionally unexceptional Isabelle Mackenzie accidentally turned into gorgeous, sultry, irresistible, Bella.