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A SKETCHY PROPOSITION

I searched the lunchroom for some horrible creature running loose, a wild boar, maybe, with two-foot tusks. It would take something truly awful to stop Natalie in the middle of a sentence.

“Could he get any better looking?” said Natalie when she finally caught her breath.

“Who?”

“Him,” said Natalie. “Henry Harrison.”

Ah yes, now I saw. Henry Harrison was walking toward our side of the lunchroom. Hooray, hooray. Everyone knew Henry Harrison, the swimming star who went through girlfriends like Natalie went through shoes, who played bongos in the talent show, and who each morning before school was already training with the high school swim team. He was almost as big as a high school kid even at

thirteen, dark skin, broad shoulders, and a sharp high fade for a haircut.

“Is he looking here?” Natalie asked. “Oh my God. He’s looking here. He’s looking right at me.”

“Doesn’t he have a girlfriend?” I said.

“Debbie Benner, a tennis player. But nothing lasts with Henry Harrison. And tell me he’s not coming right here.”

As impossible as it sounded, Natalie was right—Henry Harrison was walking toward us. And what was more, he was looking right at Natalie. And it wasn’t just Natalie who noticed. The whole lunchroom hushed as Henry Harrison slowly made his way to our table.

“What did you do?” said Charlie Frayden in a nervous voice.

“Nothing,” said Doug. “I swear.”

“Did you hear what he did to Grimes?”

“They had to spread him with butter to get him out of the trash can.”

“And Grimes is a vegan! What did you do?”

“Got to go,” said Doug before he grabbed his tray and fled the table, his brother right behind him.

I lowered my head and let my hair drop over my eyes like a shield, as Henry Harrison walked the final few feet to our table, sat down across from Natalie, and stared at her for a moment.

I had seen him in the halls and on the talent show stage, but being this close to him was disconcerting. As I plowed my fork through my macaroni, I could feel the force field of his athleticism and popularity.

“Hey,” said Henry Harrison.

“Hey, yourself,” peeped Natalie as she put on her most charming smile. She was trying so hard I was embarrassed for her, but I understood. In Natalie’s world, to be swooped upon by a popular eighth-grade sports star was as delicious as a chocolate Pocky—and is anything more delicious than a chocolate Pocky?

“People have been talking about you,” said Henry.

“About me?” said Natalie. “Nothing bad, I hope.”

“Nothing bad at all.”

“Then maybe you’ve been talking to the wrong people.” She laughed nervously.

“I heard you’re some kind of math genius.”

“Hardly. Math’s like way down on my list, somewhere between square dancing and hang gliding.”

“Do you hang glide?”

She shook her head. “I don’t square-dance, either.”

“So, no math?”

“No math. *Pero, soy bastante bueno en Español.* And I play guitar, if that counts.”

“I’m a little confused,” said Henry. “Aren’t you Elizabeth Webster?”

“Oh, you are confused,” said Natalie, her smile disappearing bit by bit, like the sun slowly setting below the horizon. “You don’t want me. You want her.”

Henry Harrison turned his gaze from Natalie to me. “You’re Elizabeth?”

“Since I was born,” I said in a low, embarrassed mumble.

“What do your friends call you?”

“Elizabeth.”

“How about Beth?”

“How about not.”

“Okay. I’ll call you Webster. So you’re the genius I’ve been hearing all about. You’re studying ninth-grade Geometry with Mr. Pepperton, right?”

“You don’t have to be a genius to learn ninth-grade Geometry. I mean, Mr. Pepperton is teaching it.”

“I don’t know, I’m having a hard enough time with linear equations.”

“Stick with it,” I said. “I’m sure you’ll get them straightened out.”

This Henry Harrison laughed a little too loudly at my joke before drumming a bit on the table. “Here’s the story,” he said. “I’m having trouble with math, and my swim coach is giving me a hassle about my grades. I was hoping you could help me with—”

Thunk!

Henry jerked back at the sound as I turned to face Natalie, who had just smacked her head on the table.

“Are you okay?” said Henry.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” said Natalie, still facedown.

“Don’t worry about Natalie,” I said, having seen this act before. “You know that thing where you fall asleep in the middle of a conversation? Narco something?”

“Narcolepsy?”

“That’s it.”

“You have narcolepsy?”

“I wish,” said Natalie.

Henry looked at me, at Natalie, back at me. “So, Webster,”

he said, barreling on despite his confusion, “what do you think? Could you tutor me, just until I catch on to the basics? Please? I’ll pay you.”

Natalie’s head lifted from the table as if raised by the scent of money. “How much?” she asked. I turned and gave her a low growl.

“How about twenty bucks for the first session?”

“Twenty-five,” said Natalie.

“Done,” said Henry. “Do we have a deal, Webster?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“All right,” he said, flashing his famous smile. “Is tonight good?”

“Tonight?” I said.

“No time to waste. Eight at my house. We’re at the top of Orchard Lane. Two one three.”

“The pile of—”

“That’s the one,” he said quickly. “See you then,” and just as quickly as he had appeared he was gone, heading back across the lunchroom as if being chased by my regret.

What had just happened? One moment I was sitting peacefully, trying not to get sick at lunch, and the next moment I had been signed up to spend hours trying to explain linear equations to some jock who lived in a heap of stone high on a hill. We had all heard things about that house. And Henry Harrison seemed too anxious. The whole thing sounded way sketchy.

“I have got to get better at math,” said Natalie as she watched Henry walk away.

“Nice face-plant,” I said.

“Thanks. I’ve been working on it. You are so lucky.”

“What do you want, a commission?”

“I’m not talking about the money, silly.”

“It’s just tutoring,” I said.

“It’s never just tutoring, not with someone like Henry Harrison. He is totally hot.”

“And a zero at math.”

“Sometimes, Lizzie, you are just so dense.”

Maybe I was, because Natalie was right that this wasn’t about math. But it wasn’t about Henry Harrison and me, either. What it was about was a glimpse into another, terrifying world where my name was being tossed around like a basketball.