



A
STORY
OF
NOW



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At some point, Claire has been dancing so long she's worried she's never going to find her land legs again. It's not long after that they completely run out of steam and depart the dance floor in search of air and somewhere to sit.

Mia finds a vacant armchair, a decadent, beige monstrosity lodged between the front door area and the edge of the dance floor. It's covered in discarded jackets and coats. Mia squashes up to one side, with her knees pulled to her chest, and pats the cushion next to her. Claire backs in, flops down, tucks the bottle in between them, and puts the glasses on the arm. They are so close to the dance floor that Claire could nearly reach out and touch the wall of moving bodies if she wanted. Instead, she turns inward a little, toward Mia, and leans her head against the back of the chair, spent and sweaty.

She stares across the room while she catches her breath. She spots Robbie near the wall on the other side of the door talking to a redheaded girl, his hand on her arm. It must be Megan, the model. She's super tall and skinny, but she doesn't look that pretty. The best models never seem to. Claire's learned that from the embarrassing amount of *Next Top Model* she's consumed over the years.

The weird looking ones always win. They are all gawky and awkward and then turn beautiful in front of a camera.

Mia pours them another shot each. They throw it back in unison and tuck the bottle back into the sofa cushions between them. Too exhausted and now too drunk to get up, they stay put, snuggled around the bottle.

“So, what would you be doing if you were here with those old friends you used to party with?” Mia asks, playing with her shot glass.

Claire looks out at the swell of bodies around them and shrugs. She tries to recall all those parties through the fog of distance and drunkenness. She doesn’t remember much, just a sameness shaped by routine rounds of drinking and dancing and gossip—gossip about things that seemed so vital at the time and are so forgettable now.

“Same as everyone else, I guess.” She notices a girl on the dance floor looking at them. She turns and says something to the one next to her. The other girl glances at them briefly and nods. “I’d probably be wondering why those two weirdos are perched on top of a pile of coats on that chair in the corner.”

Mia laughs and leans back against the seat. “I think I prefer to be the weirdo.”

“What would you be doing tonight?” Claire asks, curious. “If you weren’t here?”

“Maybe watching movies with Pete and his housemate like they were planning before I dragged them here. Or studying for exams.”

She tips her empty glass against Mia's. "Well, I, for one, am glad you're here suffering with me instead of toiling over your books or watching sci-fi movies."

"You're not suffering. I saw you on the dance floor."

Claire laughs. She hasn't really been suffering at all.

Mia pokes her in the leg. "And sci-fi movies? What makes you think that? Just putting us firmly in your science-geek box and shutting the lid?"

"Maybe. What would you be watching?"

Mia rolls her eyes. "Probably some really niche indie film or an undiscovered gem of a famous director. Pete's housemate is a total film freak."

"So, still geeky then?"

Mia ignores her jibe. "I'm glad you're here. I probably would have left pretty soon if you weren't." She corrects herself. "Actually, I know I would have. No fun following Robbie around at these things."

"Thanks for staying on my behalf, Mia." But it's only a part joke because it does, sadly, warm her that she's deemed worthy of sticking around for.

"I couldn't leave you on your lonesome with these people." Mia gives her a smart-ass grin. "You might have been re-infected."

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I kind of needed this—weird as this party is."

"Me too."

They smile at each other, slow smiles of recognition and something else, something like mutual sympathy. With

that, Mia pours them another shot, and they drink it down with sober ceremony.

They debate dancing again, but the music has taken a turn for the worse. Instead, they share random memories and fill the huge gaps in their knowledge of each other. Then, as they dissolve into tequila drunkenness, they play a game. Taking it in turns, one of them picks someone from around the room, and the other one has to make up a story about him, to invent dramas, or concoct secret fears and habits. It's dumb and pointless, and they are just drunk enough to get a complete stupid kick out of it.

After Mia finishes telling her all about the random middle-aged man who just walked in, and his penchant for the feet of young girls, it's Claire's turn to make something up.

"Pick someone!" She slaps Mia leg.

"Ow, okay. No need to brutalise!" Mia winces and rubs her thigh. She scans the room. Finally, she finds what she's looking for. "Them." Mia leans her head sideways on the back of the chair. Her hair tickles the side of Claire's face as she points through the dance floor to a couple standing by the food table, inspecting the contents.

For a fleeting moment, Claire wishes she hadn't drunk so much and felt like taking advantage of the free food, because it looks really good from here. The couple have their backs to her, and there are twenty people dancing between their chair and them, so it's difficult to get an idea of what they're like, except they look basically the same as

everyone in the room—brand-named, moneyed, and boring. Eventually, the girl plucks a carrot stick from the array of food and turns slowly to look over the room. Claire is about to tell Mia how she will be off to the bathroom in minutes to purge the carrot stick, when she gets a look at her face.

It's Kate.

"Oh shit," Claire moans. She turns her head quickly toward Mia and buries her face into the back of the chair.

"What's wrong?"

"Girl I went to high school with," Claire mumbles. She swings her head back and forth, veering wildly between wanting to hide her face and wanting to see where Kate is, in case she comes anywhere near their private armchair kingdom. "I have never, ever seen her alone, without the other two." Claire catches another glimpse as Kate closes in on the snack table again. "It's like seeing a guinea pig in the wild. I mean, you only ever see them in cages. I've never seen one in the wild."

Mia laughs and pokes her clumsily in the arm. "I'm not sure that it's completely owing to my state of drunkenness that I have no idea what you are talking about right now."

Claire watches Kate accept a glass of champagne from the guy she came in with, a wide, tall guy with curly hair. She gives him a simpering smile of thanks. Claire just stares. She cannot believe Kate has turned up here, a completely unexpected and irritating intruder in what has turned out to be the most random of fun nights.

“See, I knew it was that kind of party,” she moans and presses her face against the sofa as Kate eyes the room again.

“That kind of party?” Mia laughs. “You make it sound totally sinister. Like we’re going to be injected with drugs against our will in darkened rooms and induced to perform bizarre sexual acts.” Still, she’s clearly sympathetic because she pours them each another shot, which they slug quickly. Then she picks up a jacket and holds it in front of Claire’s face.

Claire giggles. “Thanks.” She positions her head right in front of the jacket. “No, I just mean full of boring vapid idiots like her.”

“That’s okay then.” Mia looks over at the couple and then turns back to Claire, her brown eyes shining. “You want me to make up a story about her? Will that make you feel better?”

“Sure.” Claire settles into the chair behind her protective shield.

And Mia, with a surprisingly evil glint in her eye, goes off in a long-winded tale of debauchery and punishment, where nothing good has ever happened to Kate and her date. Sadly, it actually does make Claire feel a little better. Well, at least it makes her laugh.

And the game continues, accompanied by more shots of tequila and even more hysterical, face-numbing laughter. Claire shakes her head at her mental image of them in their corner. Who knew the highlight of her night would be

stuck behind a jacket in a corner on top of a pile of coats? The game escalates and the stories grow stupider, with more laughing than actual storytelling. It's as if the whole night is this deeply funny joke, and they are the only ones in the room who get it.

Then it happens. She has no idea *how* it happens or who started it. In fact, if she were questioned in a court of law, she's not sure she could answer truthfully. And when she looks back at it the next day, via the lens of her mind-blowing hangover, it looks like a series of grainy jump shots from one moment to the next. There is no necessary cause and effect, no incident and consequence. One minute they are downing another shot and laughing hysterically, Mia's elbow resting on Claire's knee as she continues to hold up the jacket to hide her. Then, for a split second, they just look at each other. And then, mere seconds later, in a clash of hot breath, lips, tequila and tongue, they are kissing.

It's not a long kiss, but long enough for the jacket to be dropped and hands to start grabbing for leverage. And it ends when Mia accidentally pulls at her hair, and Claire is yanked back to reality. She snaps her head back, eyes wide. And staring straight back at her is Mia, her eyes equally wide.

Then suddenly Mia begins to laugh as she pulls herself up to sit on the arm of the chair. "Umm..." Mia folds her arms over her chest and pulls an *EEK* face. And before Claire can say anything, Mia grins. She leans down close and points at her. "So, inappropriate, drunken make outs

are generally a solid cue for me that it's well over time to go home. Which means I am out." She sighs and hands Claire her glass. "See you."

Claire takes the glass and nods, still too speechless to respond.

Mia swings her long legs over the side of the chair, picks out her coat from the pile, and disappears into the crowd by the door.

Stunned by both the impromptu kiss and the rapid departure, Claire stays nailed to her seat, both the glasses clutched in her hands. She has many, *many* questions.

Her most pressing being, what the hell just happened?

But she knows no one can tell her because she was right here, and she has no idea.

The second question is does that mean she should leave too? Claire's done plenty of inappropriate kissing in her time. It's part of the fun of parties like these, being messy. Never with a girl, though. That part's definitely new. Maybe it *is* time to go home. Claire nods to herself. She must be very, very drunk.

Third, how did that even happen? Who the hell started it? She shakes her head, rests her cheek on her hand, and frowns.

And fourth, did it really mean that Mia had to bolt like that? Did she have to leave her stranded on a chair, a Claire-shaped pile of stunned and drunk? That's no fun. Surely they could have just gotten over the awkwardness and gone back to the dance floor and forgotten about it?

She sighs. How the hell did a night that started out so lame and then turned so freaking fun, catapult itself somehow to outright bizarre?

But before she can get any further along in her stunned and somewhat circular self-interrogation, a body flies over the arm of the chair and lands in her lap. It's Robbie.

"Where have you been? I need tequila."

Claire blinks at him for a second. He clearly didn't see what happened. "I've been right here," she grumbles as she reaches under his legs for the bottle. "And you're sitting on it."

He snatches the bottle and the proffered glasses. "Shall we drink?"

Claire shrugs. She might as well, right?

"Where's Mia?" Robbie asks, unsteadily pouring tequila into the glasses. He hands one to her.

"Gone home."

"Boo. Want to dance?"

"Why not?" Claire snatches the glass and throws back the shot. Might as well carry the night all the way to ruin.

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