

# TYPES OF TRIANGLES

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## CHAPTER ONE

I'm standing thigh deep in the river the moment I realize everything is about to change.

Ava's walking next to me, and I hear a small exhale of air from her. It's the kind of noise you make when you stub your toe or bang your knee, so I turn to check she's okay.

But she hasn't hurt herself in any way. She's staring straight ahead, mesmerized.

I follow the direction of her gaze to see what has wrapped her attention up so tightly.

It's Toby. Toby, who's already dived in and just emerged from the water twenty feet in front of us, the sun turning the droplets on his skin into glistening sparkles. Toby, whose work in the weight room to improve his core strength for baseball pitching has also broadened his shoulders and defined his muscles in a way that one of those great sculptors, Michelangelo or Donatello, would have appreciated.

Something clangs inside me. My gut boils.

I've been dreading this moment since we were thirteen and Ava seemed to develop overnight. Dreading the boy/girl thing interfering with our friendship.

"Enjoying the view?" I nudge her to break her trance.

"Always, Leo, always." Ava nudges me back harder. Also known as whacking me under my ribs. But color has tracked its way into her cheeks, which is interesting, as Ava doesn't

embarrass easily. "I'm just waiting to see your matching six pack."

"You're going to be waiting a long time."

"Till the end of time," she sings. Ava turns anything into a musical if she can.

My muscles relax as she looks away from Toby.

"You guys are such wimps," Toby calls. He's standing there, waiting for us. Toby's the first in the water in any circumstance. I'm always more chicken to make the plunge. I try to delay that moment when my breath is knocked away by the cold, despite the fact it's inevitable.

The color has faded from Ava's face, and she juts her chin out before taking a step forward and diving in.

She swims through the water like an eel, breaking the surface a few feet from Toby.

He flicks water at her, which is pointless as she's already completely wet, but she laughs and splashes him back.

The feeling is back in my stomach, a nasty sloshing of bitterness and jealousy.

I finally dive into the river after Toby threatens to dunk me. The initial slap of cold soon fades and the silky water laps at my limbs. I kick back and look at the sky, which is that incredible deep, deep blue that no picture or painting ever fully captures. I think it's the sense of endlessness that's impossible to recreate.

This moment should be perfect. I'm with my best friends, the two people in the universe who know me better than anyone. It's the last day of summer vacation, but school and I go together like chocolate sauce and ice-cream, so I'm the kid who actually looks forward to the new semester.

As I float in the water, I replay Ava's face as she watched Toby. My intestines squeeze like they're caught in a clamp.

"Whatcha thinking?" Ava paddles over.

Some people let you ruminate in your own space, giving you time alone with your thoughts. Ava is not one of those people.

I sit up. The river stones kiss my knees.

“Just thinking about school.”

“I can’t wait to be a junior.” Ava lies back in the water next to me. Her hair spreads around her so she looks like one of those nymph water goddesses.

Ava has jet-black hair and large brown eyes along with cheekbones you could slice yourself on. She’s jaw-droppingly, take-a-second-look beautiful. Literally, I’ve seen strangers who’ve given themselves whiplash to look at her again.

“Only you would be thinking about school on the last weekend of summer.” Toby is in the shallows alongside us now, digging up stones to skim across the surface of the river. “I bet you can’t wait to return to your kingdom where you get to reign over us with your extreme brilliance,” he continues, throwing me a grin.

“Yep, I’ll continue my work to convert the peasants to the benefits of knowledge,” I say.

Ava straightens up, her hair streaming down her back in a dark waterfall.

“Mrs. Kimber said she’ll announce the school play first week back. I’m betting it’s *Romeo and Juliet*, so I’ll need you guys to be Romeo to help me practice.”

Toby slides me a smirk. “I’ll rock, paper and scissors you. Loser has to do the balcony scene in tights.”

Last year when Ava was Sandy in *Grease*, Toby and I worked out a deal. Because there’s a distinct possibility that ants have more musical talent than me, I did all the non-musical lines while Toby practiced the duets with her.

I have an awesome rendition of Ava and Toby singing *Summer Lovin’* on my phone. They’re in the woods behind our houses and Toby forgets the words, then overbalances off a log when he’s trying to mimic John Travolta running on the bleachers. It’s video gold, and the ultimate blackmail material,

because if the footage ever found its way to the members of the alternative rock band he's in, he'd never live it down.

But based on Ava's reaction to Toby earlier, maybe I should try to prevent them from exchanging romantic words with each other?

Ava and Toby are staring expectantly at me. I'm overthinking things, as usual. There's a reason Toby hacked into my Instagram account and replaced my profile picture with Rodin's *The Thinker* sculpture.

I take the plunge. "I'll go through lines with you if you want."

Toby's eyebrows shoot up. "Seriously? You haven't even negotiated your peanut butter cup payment yet."

"I'm trying to improve my English grade this semester. I'm sure reading Shakespeare will help."

English is the one rough area of my academic transcript. Science and math come easily to me, but English is a quagmire of trying to justify your opinion and give personal responses. I like simple, straightforward answers. Either you are right or wrong. None of this in between stuff.

Toby's eyebrows remain raised, so I look away.

Meanwhile Ava has a smug look on her face. "Thank you so much, Leo," she says formally. "It's lovely to have a true friend who will come to my aid in my time of need."

Toby snorts.

"Anytime," I say.

We climb out of the river soon after that. It's a typical lazy summer day. Swimming, sunbathing on the stones, pranking each other when we get bored. But today, there's a hum of tension under my skin I can't shake, no matter how hard I try.

When I'm stretched out on the stones next to Toby, I can't help thinking about what Ava sees when she compares the two of us. Which isn't a nice thing to contemplate. My ego definitely takes a bruising.

I'm as tall as Toby but leaner due to Toby's recently sprouted muscles. I'm paler too. Toby's mother is Italian so he's got naturally olive skin, while I've got to keep slathering on the sunscreen to keep myself from burning. Since grade school, girls have gushed about my blue eyes, which logically should be matched to blond hair but instead, on me, come in a dark-hair package.

Toby's hair is a shade or two darker than blond and it starts to curl when it gets long, while his hazel eyes are studded with flecks of green and gold. He's good looking in a laid-back California-type way, even though we actually live in Oregon. Add his musical and athletic talent to his looks, and he really is the complete package for what makes girls swoon. It's no wonder Ava finally noticed.

After soaking in the sun for a while, Toby sits up, reaching for his guitar case. He carries his guitar everywhere because it's pretty much his extra limb, and he gets separation anxiety when he's away from it for too long. He pulls it out of its case and starts to strum.

Normally I could listen to Toby sing all day, but when I see Ava coming over with an admiring smile, I feel an urge to interrupt.

"Hey, did you know there's this earthworm that can shoot fluid out of its skin up to twelve inches?" I blurt.

Yep, that about sums up my playbook with girls. Toby serenades them with his smooth voice and original lyrics, while I tell them gross facts about worms.

Toby stops singing and starts to laugh. "Seriously? That's pretty cool."

"You mean, that's seriously gross." Ava scrunches up her nose. "I don't know how you know all those random facts."

"It's because he spent about two years reading those encyclopedias," Toby says.

Ava laughs. Loudly. "I'd forgotten about that."

I haven't. I treasured those encyclopedias when I was a kid. Mr. Lopez from down the road had been throwing out his old encyclopedias, but I'd salvaged them from the trash and secreted them away to our treehouse, where I spent the next few years devouring their contents.

Of course, I never realized at age eight that the problem with encyclopedias is that they're stuck in a time warp. I had a very intense debate with our grade five teacher about the number of planets in the solar system because I trusted what was written in the weighty encyclopedias much more than what was on some flimsy website.

Lesson # 1 – There are eight 'true planets' in the solar system, from 2006 Pluto has been considered a 'dwarf planet'

Lesson #2 – Knowledge is not set in place; it is constantly evolving.

I finally agreed to throw out the encyclopedias when they grew mold and their smell overpowered even Toby's baseball socks and Ava refused to come to the treehouse unless she was armed with her spray deodorant.

Now, the memory fills me with a combination of nostalgia and shame, because I'm still stuck in my encyclopedia phase. In the last few years Toby and Ava have both found stuff they're passionate about, stuff that makes them more interesting. But I'm just dull old Leo with his weird fascination for anything science. Knowing the name of every dinosaur and bug made you cool when you were nine. At sixteen, not so much.

Ava stretches out on the stones, swatting away flies and humming the theme song to *The Greatest Showman*. She's wearing oversized aviator glasses, which I gave her for her birthday because her nickname is Aviator. I'm original like that.

We're currently arranged on the riverbank in a perfect equilateral triangle - we're the same distance away from each other and the invisible lines would slope toward each other at

exactly the same angle. Which is a good metaphor for how our friendship has always been since time began.

Worry snags through my veins again that our triangle is about to morph into another type. If Toby and Ava hook up, then I'll become the point that is further away, the smallest angle in an obtuse triangle.

I've got to stop Ava falling in love with Toby. I've got to.

But how?

As I lie there, I realize there's only one surefire way to prevent her falling in love with him.

Get her to fall in love with me instead.

## CHAPTER TWO

**M**om hovers anxiously around me at the breakfast table the next morning.

“So, first day of school. Are you excited?” She tries to inject some normality into her voice, but it softens around the edges and she says the last few words in a breathy whisper.

“Sort of.” I try to play the game too. Pretend that this is just another year, another first day of school.

But the game fizzles as soon as I look at her. She’s still in her bathrobe and her hair is a mess. The bags under her eyes have their own oversized luggage quota.

This time a year ago I’d never seen my mother in a bathrobe at breakfast. Now I’m lucky if she’s dressed by dinner.

Something clogs my throat, so I try to wash it down with a glass of orange juice. The juice tastes bitter. I’m pretty sure the expiration date on the carton is some time in the distant past.

“I’ve got to get going,” I mutter.

I try to close the door, but she follows me out onto the porch.

My cheeks flame as I stalk across the lawn to Toby’s house. Both Toby and Ava are already in Toby’s old green Honda Civic in the driveway, so they won’t be able to miss my mother in all her bathrobe glory.

I don’t know why I’m so embarrassed. We’ve always treated each other’s houses like they’re our own, never

bothering to knock. Over the years I've seen their parents in compromised positions. Toby's mom watering pot plants in her underwear is a particular low point.

I haven't talked much about how my mom has fallen apart since Dad left, but I'm sure they've seen enough to connect the dots.

"Morning." I slide into the back seat.

"Top of the morning to you," Ava says in a fake Irish accent.

Toby's eyes are on Mom, who's walking down the path to check the letterbox even though the post doesn't arrive until lunchtime at the earliest. She hasn't done her bathrobe up properly and the tie drags along the ground. He turns to look at me. "You okay?"

I nod curtly.

Toby starts the ignition. His car is well past it's prime, in fact there's a good chance that his signed Barry Bonds baseball hanging from the rearview mirror is worth more than the rest of the car combined. From the love he shows his car though, you'd think it was in the league of a Ferrari or Porsche. He keeps it immaculate, regularly vacuuming the two-tone beige upholstery and wiping down the cracked dashboard. He even has one of those air freshener things plugged into the air vent so his car smells like lemon Pledge. The funniest thing is how his car is such a complete contrast to the pit that is his bedroom.

So, I had this crazy dream last night," Ava says as Toby backs out of the driveway.

"Oh god, I've missed the dream diary update," Toby says.

"I know! You've had a whole summer without listening to the inner workings of my subconscious. How did you manage to survive?"

"You did tell us at Gavin's party about your dream where you were in the field of sunflowers and they all started singing

to you,” I say, because Toby and Ava are looking at each other and smiling, which I need to interrupt.

“See, Leo listens to me,” Ava says to Toby.

“I listen to you too,” he replies mildly.

He pulls out of our street onto the main road, and we pass the bus stop, where there are already a few freshman and sophomores staring forlornly down the road.

Technically the high school bus is supposed to be at our stop at eight o’clock, but the bus driver Mr. Burns is a retired teacher and I swear he takes delight in making everyone wait. It’s his revenge against teenagers, payback for all the smartass comments he had to endure in his career. Of course, occasionally he turns up on time just so everyone who bet on him being late ends up missing the bus.

“Suckers,” Ava says as we leave them in the distance. She glances at Toby. “Don’t you dare lose your license, I don’t want to go back to catching the bus.”

“Aren’t the two of you going to get your license this year?”

“Nah, what’s the point when I have you to chauffeur me around everywhere?” Ava grins at him as she puts a piece of chewing gum in her mouth.

“What about you Leo?” Toby’s eyes catch mine in the rearview mirror.

“Maybe,” I say.

Am I being ultra-sensitive, or does Toby want me to get my license so I’m no longer in the car and he can use the time to charm Ava? And if we’re both driving to school, who will Ava choose to ride with? Knowing Ava, she’ll probably start a big negotiation system about who will play her favorite playlist (totally sucky boy bands which Toby will hate, so I’ll have the edge there as I’m far more tolerant of *One Direction*) or who offers the best snacks (given Toby’s parents own a restaurant, he’ll own me in that category).

“Anyway, about my dream,” Ava says and the rest of the way to school we’re treated to a vivid description of her dream, which involved a giant My Little Pony attacking a village of vampires.

After half a day of classes, it feels like summer never happened. I pretty much have the same people in my Advanced Placement classes as last year. I’m in English and homeroom with Toby and gym with both Ava and Toby. Last year I would have been excited about gym, as the three of us together is always epic. But now, it probably would be better if I had gym only with Ava, because it’s the one class where I definitely don’t compare well to Toby.

I walk out to our place at lunch. The school cafeteria is a dingy hole of cliques and bad smells, but there is a scattering of picnic tables outside in the courtyard, and we’ve had the best one sewn up since sophomore year. It’s right at the edge of the courtyard next to a grassy mound.

We inherited the table from Ava’s sister Emma, who was a senior in our freshman year, and it’s hilarious to see the details of Emma’s entire relationship history on the table, with guys’ names etched into the wood then scratched out.

Today however, we use the picnic table only as a base for our food and plant ourselves on the grassy mound, which provides a great view of the courtyard.

“Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit—” Bradley, one of Ava’s drama friends, throws himself down on the grass next to her with an impressive plunge.

Ava wrinkles her nose. “That’s not from *Romeo and Juliet*, is it?”

“Nope. It’s from *Twelfth Night*. I think Mrs. Kimber should choose it this year. The gender stuff really fits in with the twenty-first century and it’s got an awesome love triangle.”

“But the main female character has to dress as a man,” Ava says. “I look better in a dress.”

“Who says you’re getting the lead role?” Bradley teases. “Apparently, Julie Gerard spent her summer at theater camp in New York.”

“What?” Ava screeches. “Are you serious?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“I’m going to help you rehearse,” I remind her. As if having me woodenly reading back lines to her makes up for six weeks of professional coaching. Luckily, I say it quietly, and my words are lost in the babble of conversation that has broken out between Bradley and Ava.

“Going to the weight room after school?” Sam, one of Toby’s baseball teammates turns up and plops himself next to Toby.

Our lunch spot is like the United Nations of the school. It’s a place where Toby’s baseball teammates and bandmates, Ava’s drama friends and my AP friends all mingle. It’s an ever-changing cast, but always with Toby, Ava and I at the center.

“I’m hungry,” Ava breaks off her conversation with Bradley and looks at Toby. “What feast did you bring to celebrate the first day back?”

“Hopefully you’ll find this acceptable enough for your delicate palate.” Toby produces a couscous salad and pulled pork tacos from his cooler bag.

The Herbert’s restaurant started out Italian, but over the last few years Mrs. Herbert has basically decided to make whatever she feels like.

“Oh, yum.” Ava grabs the bowl and attacks the salad with a fork. Toby hands me the tacos. He knows how I feel about tacos.

“Do you guys always share lunch?” Bradley asks.

Ava swallows a mouthful of couscous. “Since about—what, third grade?” she looks at Toby and me for confirmation.

“Sometime around then,” Toby agrees.

It was actually second grade, but I don’t contradict them.

“It’s because Ava used to steal Leo’s cupcakes.” Toby grins.

“I didn’t steal them,” Ava says, indignant. “I traded for them.”

“Yeah, your peanut butter sandwiches for Leo’s cupcakes. It was hardly a fair trade. Especially when you used to threaten Leo with a Chinese burn if he didn’t agree.”

“Anyway,” Ava turns back to Bradley. “Our parents decided since we were going to share lunch anyway, they might as well just take turns making lunches for all of us.”

“There was a low point in eighth grade when Ava’s mom decided that Ava was old enough to make lunches herself, and we had to survive on baloney sandwiches every third day,” Toby says.

“You forgot about the carrot sticks,” I say. “She also made carrot sticks.”

“Carrot sticks she never peeled,” Toby adds.

Ava glowers at us. “Can you stop mocking my culinary genius please?”

“Sure. What particular genius would you like us to mock instead?” Toby asks.

Ava replies with a glare that could fry flies.

“You guys are like Harry Potter, Hermione and Ron,” Sam says.

Ava perks up at this. “Who is who?”

“Leo looks the most like Harry,” Bradley points out. “Just give him green contacts and glasses and he’s Harry’s doppelganger.”

“But Hermione is the smart one, so that has got to be Leo,” Toby says.

“I have to be Harry,” Ava argues. “After all, I’ve even got the scar.” She points to the sliver on her forehead which she got at age eight after Toby and I dared her to climb on Mr. Graham’s chicken coop.

“I guess that makes me Ron,” Toby says. “That fits, always the sidekick.”

“You’re way too good looking to be Ron.” Ava reaches over to tousle his hair.

Toby gives her an affectionate grin in return.

My lungs fill with lead and my stomach wants to expel the taco I’ve just eaten. Ava’s flirting with Toby. And Toby looks like he’s enjoying it.

Thankfully the bell rings then, breaking the moment. Ava and the rest of the drama crowd start sprinting like Olympic athletes as they have drama fourth period and Mrs. Kimber was a drill sergeant in her former life.

I pack up the lunch stuff into the cooler bag and Toby leans over to help me. He slings the bag over his shoulder as we head to class.

“What have you got now?” In a few weeks we will have each other’s schedules memorized so he won’t need to ask.

“Algebra. You?”

“Music practical. See you after school.” Toby smiles at me. Is he happy because we had a chill lunchtime, and now he’s got his favorite class, or is it due to the attention Ava just gave him?

I grab my algebra stuff out of my locker and head to the class, my mind whirling, a heavy feeling in my chest. I can’t handle the thought of Toby and Ava together. I mean, this was bound to happen eventually, right? Our parents have been joking about it since we were kids, how one day Toby and I would find ourselves fighting over Ava.

I’ve never let myself think about things becoming more with Ava because I’ve never wanted stuff between us to change. But I’m sure my feelings for her could easily tip over to romantic love. After all, I’ve kissed girls before that I’ve liked way less than I like Ava.

Unease rises inside me the way heated particles rise within an air column. Because for the past year or so, I’ve had a weird

suspicion creeping up on me that my brain is wired differently to most other guys. That suspicion is tapping me on the shoulder now, trying to get my attention.

I shrug it off. There's nothing wrong with me. After all, I've just decided I want a relationship with my best friend, who happens to be a gorgeous, stunning girl.

As I take my seat in Advanced Algebra, I realize that if I'm serious about getting Ava to fall for me, I need a plan.

So, after class begins, instead of working out what  $A$  is equal to, I'm trying to rearrange the formula  $Ava + Leo = \text{friends}$  so it becomes  $Ava + Leo > \text{friends}$ .

Solving it is not as simple as rearranging normal equations though.

I know Ava well, so it should be easy to figure out. But actually, I've got no idea. How do you get someone you've been friends with forever to see you in a different light?

I need to approach this from a scientific perspective. Look at the evidence.

In the back of my notebook I make a list of all the boys I know Ava has crushed on. Matt Donovan, Jason Edger, Harrison Stacks, Liam Pearson. My heart sinks when I identify their one common factor. They're all drama or musically inclined, i.e. the polar opposite of me.

What can I do? Get singing lessons? I could try getting a role in the Shakespeare production coming up, because at least Shakespeare doesn't require singing. I'd only have to overcome my natural shyness, tendency to mumble, and pathological fear of being on stage. Which, compared to overcoming my musical deficiencies, doesn't seem that daunting.

I grind my pencil into my page, creating tiny grains of graphite.

Maybe I'm thinking about this the wrong way? Maybe Ava didn't fall for those guys because of their talents, but because she was spending lots of time with them?

But Ava and I already spend lots of time together. The crucial factor will be to spend time with Ava without Toby around.

I've already offered to help her practice her lines for the school play. But what else can I do to spend time with just her?

The other major thing that Ava's involved in is the school newspaper. It's not an exaggeration to say that I would sooner suck out my own bone marrow than spend my spare time writing.

But just as I'm mentally dismissing the school newspaper, I suddenly realize something. Something very important.

A newspaper is not all about the writing.

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"Photographer for the newspaper?" Toby screws up his nose. "Since when are you interested in photography?"

We're in the car on the way home on Tuesday, and I've just dropped my bombshell. Unfortunately, my chemistry lab ran over the bell, so I was the last to arrive. Which means I'm in the backseat, and as Toby's guitar has the prime slot, I can't see Ava's reaction to the news.

"I just thought it might be something I'd like to do."

"But you're not even artistic. Remember the cat you drew on Ava's birthday card in fourth grade that everyone thought was a guinea pig?"

Ava cracks up laughing. "I'd forgotten about that. You were so angry you drew five more cats, and they all looked like guinea pigs too."

I shrug. "You don't have to be good at drawing for photography. The technical side of photography is really just physics."

Toby's face relaxes now I've slotted back into my correct place in the universe. Leo the science nerd.

Ava turns around to face me. “It’ll be fun,” she enthuses. “We could do stories together. I’ll write the words and you take the pictures.”

“That will be great. It would be really cool if you could help show me the ropes when I’m starting out.”

“Sure. I’ll talk to Alice, make sure we’re assigned the same stories.”

I manage not to cackle like a cartoon evil genius, but it’s difficult.

My master plan is just beginning.

## CHAPTER THREE

That night I play around with the settings on my mom's old DLR camera. She's fine for me to borrow it as she hasn't picked it up in months. Photography requires an active interest in the world, which is currently not her thing.

While I'm on my laptop I can see green lights next to Ava and Toby's names that tells me they're online too. I don't message them though. Having online conversations with Ava and Toby feels like I'm cheating myself, because we could all easily be hanging out instead.

A message from Ava pops up on my screen. My adrenaline spikes but then I see she's included both Toby and me in the group chat. Like normal.

Ava: You won't believe it. Ms. Kimber has just announced on the theater Facebook group the play for this year.

Me: What is it?

Ava: It's...

Ava: Wait for it....

Ava: Keep waiting...

Toby: I think you're overestimating our anticipation for this news.

Ava: It's the Scottish Play

Toby: What? I've never heard of that.

Me: She means *Macbeth*.

Ava: You're not supposed to say the name. Now you've cursed it.

Me: That superstition only applies when you're in a theater.

Ava: Whatever. I'm not saying the name until I've at least got the part.

Me: Are you trying out for Lady Macbeth?

Ava: But of course. Are you still going to help me practice?

Me: Sure. Happy to help.

Toby: Some alien has invaded Leo's brain. You should take advantage of it, Ava, because I'm sure the real Leo will push it out soon.

Ava: I don't care if Kim Jong-un has taken over Leo's brain if it means he'll read lines with me.

Me: Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it

Ava: Did you just google the Scottish Play quotes?

Me: I might have. Or I might just have a great knowledge of Shakespeare.

Toby: I'm going with google

Ava: Me too

I'm about to get mock offended at their lack of faith when another message box pops up.

Dad: Hey

Shit. I wonder if I can quickly sign off and pretend I haven't seen his message. Parents shouldn't stalk their kids online. It's just not cool.

Dad: How are things, kiddo?

I don't think my father has ever called me kiddo in my life. But this is how our interactions have gone in the last six months. It's like he has no idea how to act now, so he's modelling himself on a TV sitcom father.

Me: Hi, Dad.

Dad: How's your first week back going?

Me: Good.

Dad: You happy with all your teachers?

Me: Yup.

Dad: Good to hear.

The thing is, Dad and I never used to do stilted. We always had one of those relationships where we could talk about anything.

Now I just think about Mom, and all the words I want to say to him dry up in my throat. Well, not all the words. I have some fun words saved up for when he finally decides to front up and do the face-to-face thing.

Dad: You want to FaceTime later?

Me: I'm pretty tired so about to head to bed. Maybe in the weekend.

Dad: Okay. Have a good sleep.

Me: Night.

Of course, now I have to shut down my laptop. I glance quickly at Toby and Ava's message thread. They've debating whether there's anything google can't tell you. It's getting intense.

I read through and can't help my small grin – I don't know why Toby thinks he'll win a debate against Ava, but he's an eternal optimist – when a new message pops up.

Toby: Leo – you there?

Me: Yeah, still here. Heading to bed now.

Ava: Anyway, if someone posts about the meaning of life on the internet, do you think they actually know? Because if they did, wouldn't they be out there living it?

Toby: See you tomorrow Leo. Ava and I might still be having this argument then.

Me: Night.

I'm reluctant to leave Ava and Toby chatting online without me, but I can't see how their discussion can morph into anything romantic. At least, I severely hope it won't. Because I don't think I can handle being shut out of my friendship with Toby and Ava, losing them slowly like I'm losing my dad.

I slump back against my pillows, my eyes falling on my collection of petrified wood that's in a display cabinet my dad made for me. It was actually Toby who gave me my first piece of fossilized wood when I was seven after his family went on a trip to Washington State. From that moment, I've been fascinated by the stuff. I even slept with the piece he gave me under my pillow for a few months.

My dad and I spent countless hours going on trips to various locations around Oregon where petrified wood is found, scouring beaches, rivers and rock outcrops to add to my collection. Petrified wood forms when the original plant cells are replaced by dissolved minerals in the water, preserving every minute detail of the original tree – knotholes, wood grain, twigs and even bark – by turning it into stone. So everything is preserved for eternity.

I think about Dad somewhere in New Hampshire, in a house I've never seen, wearing his disappointed expression after our conversation.

I imagine him turning away from his phone and talking to his new girlfriend. His new girlfriend, who I've never met, unless you count glimpsing her outside Target as a meaningful encounter. Which I don't.

But even thinking about Dad feels like a betrayal of Mom, who I know is binge-watching Netflix in the living room and is still wearing the same egg-stained top she had on two days ago.

So I go downstairs and offer to make her popcorn.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**A**ngie Basel has a back to school party on Saturday night.

Ava dresses in a short skirt and halter top with her hair piled on top of her head. She looks eighteen, minimum. As she climbs into the backseat of Toby's car, I swallow. Hard.

Toby lets out a low wolf-whistle. "Looking good."

I have a burst of anger at myself. How come Toby can be all casual and confident whereas I tie myself in knots about the right thing to say?

"You look really nice," I add quickly. Weakly.

"Thanks," Ava says, adjusting her top. "Got to show the peasants what they're missing out on."

Toby raises an eyebrow. "And who are you planning on making your king?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she says as she settles back in the seat.

I turn around to study her, trying to work out her expression. Is there someone she's interested in at the moment? Someone besides Toby?

Ava usually tells us about her crushes, but sometimes only after the fact.

"Have I got something wrong with my makeup?" Oh shit, Ava has noticed me staring.

“No,” I say. “Just admiring your immense beauty.” I add the second bit a few beats too late, so instead of being funny, it sounds creepier than poison ivy.

Luckily, Ava laughs. She has a low threshold for the things she finds funny. It’s one of the things that makes it easy to be her friend.

Toby slides me a sideways glance as he starts the car. He’s wearing a T-shirt and jeans, so I look like I’m trying too hard with my nicely pressed button-down shirt and pants. I put a hand to my hair because I spent an extraordinary amount of time trying to wrestle my cowlick into order. It was an epic battle where I was armed only with hair gel, but I emerged triumphant.

“Just checking to make sure it’s in place?” Toby asks.

My cheeks flame. Did he say that just to embarrass me in front of Ava?

“Stop hassling him. Leo’s got awesome hair,” Ava says.

I flick my eyes over to Toby. “Did you hear that? My hair is awesome.”

“You know what they say, you learn something new every day.”

Luckily, we make it to the party without me saying anything else weird.

As soon as we step in the door of Angie’s place, my stomach sinks. The music is thumping loudly, and there’s a seething mass of people everywhere I look.

I’m not good at parties. Not this kind of party, anyway. This is not the natural habitat of AP kids. We’re more likely to favor the type of parties where an intense battle of Dungeons and Dragons is being played in the basement, not where there is a keg in the kitchen, and people are playing beer pong with little red cups.

If I wasn't friends with Ava and Toby, I'm pretty sure the Dungeons and Dragons type would've been my only party experiences.

Ava is engulfed in a crowd of drama kids as soon as we're in the door, so I cut through the crowd in Toby's wake. It's difficult to make much progress as people keep coming over to say hi to him. Toby's popular. He's one of those people who is popular precisely because he doesn't care about being popular. People say hi to me too, because my close association with Toby gives me a kind of reflected popularity. Like how the moon doesn't have its own light source but just reflects the light of the sun instead.

Because Ava, Toby and I have each other, I've always regarded other friends as just the sprinkles on the top of an ice cream sundae that's already delicious.

When we reach the kitchen, Toby, like the responsible sober driver he is, grabs a coke and hands me a beer. It's funny. I can tell you the chemical formula of ethanol and all about the fermentation process used to make beer. But there's no scientific explanation for why beer is so popular when I'm pretty sure drinking my own urine would taste better.

But I swallow a few mouthfuls. It reminds me of my dad, and how when I was a kid I used to beg for the last dregs of his bottle of beer. Which I'm now sure must have been ninety percent backwash.

Toby sees me pulling a face and sidles closer.

"Not as good as Mrs. Jackman's, eh?" he says quietly as I take my next sip.

I snort and some beer bubbles out my nose. Which is as disgusting as it sounds. That's why it's perfect that Ava bounds over to us at that exact moment.

"Are you okay?" she asks. It's pretty obvious that instead of being okay, I'm a coughing, spluttering mess.

“Leo’s just snorting his beer.” Toby’s eyes crinkle with laughter.

“Toby made me laugh,” I accuse when I’ve recovered the power of speaking.

He’s still grinning. “I just asked him how the beer compared to Mrs. Jackman’s.”

Ava howls with laughter. It’s lucky that she doesn’t have a mouthful or she’d spray it all over the kitchen. “I’d forgotten about that,” she giggles.

Mrs. Jackman lives next door to Ava. One boring summer afternoon when we were nine, we played an epic game of hide and seek, and I hid in Mrs. Jackman’s garage behind a bunch of bottles of her home brew. It had bubbles in it, so I thought it was soda, and I snuck some back to give to Ava and Toby.

It turns out drunk nine-year-olds are quite conspicuous. And that was the end of the free reign of the neighborhood we had to play hide and seek.

We head back into the living room together.

“Come on.” Ava grabs Toby by the hand and drags him to the area by the speakers where people have started to dance.

I stand by the wall, watching them. I am the model for a sculpture entitled *Awkward Boy*. I can’t seem to figure out where to put my hands. I slide them in and out of my pockets a few times, trying to work out whether pockets are a fantastic invention as somewhere to stash ungainly hands, or were sadistically invented as hand prisons.

Ava’s a good dancer, of course. She moves fluidly, swaying her body to the beat. A few tendrils of her hair escape, and she tucks them behind her ears. Toby’s dancing style isn’t as showy as Ava’s, but he has good rhythm. His gaze is fixed on Ava, and his face lights up as she does an elaborate twirl in front of him.

They look good together. Such a perfect fit. A great-looking, coordinated couple. Panic grips me. What can I do? They’re basically falling in love in front of me.

Before I've registered the fact I'm moving, my feet propel me across the carpet, and I'm joining them. They both step back to make room to include me.

"Ring the Vatican, Leo's on the dance floor," Toby says.

"Watch out world," Ava chimes in.

"I think it's watch out the world's feet, actually," Toby says.

They're wearing identical grins.

Now that I'm actually on the dance floor, I have to pretend to dance. And when you can't dance, it's difficult to fake it. I shuffle my feet from side to side, keeping my arms by my side.

Luckily Ava finds my attempt to dance endearing rather than pathetic. She makes it her mission to teach me. Which is a lost cause if ever there was one, but I don't resist.

"Just move with the music," she says, resting her hands on my waist.

"I'm trying."

"Put your hands on my waist too," she instructs. "And sway like I am."

I tentatively put my hands on her waist. So now we're standing face to face, only ten inches apart. I couldn't have asked for a better set up. Well, maybe it would be better if Toby wasn't right there, watching.

Ava's hands are only lightly on my waist as she tries to coax some rhythm out of me, but my skin prickles and ignites under my shirt where her fingertips touch me. My eyes stay trained to her midriff.

"Whoa, you've got your extreme concentrating look on," Ava says.

"That's because I am concentrating," I retort.

"Come on, Leo, you need to at least look at the person you're dancing with."

I obediently raise my eyes to meet hers, and she smiles. Her eyes sparkle at me. My breath hitches. Ava is gorgeous in a way that is impossible to ignore. I smile back.

Another tendril of hair snakes its way into her eyes. Before she can do anything, I reach out and tuck it behind her ear. Ava's eyes widen.

"Your hair..." I say stupidly.

"Yeah... thanks."

"No problem."

I glance over at Toby. He's grinning. But I know all of Toby's grins by heart, and I've never come across this one before. It's a forced grin, a grin that says he's feeling the absolute opposite of what his upturned mouth is pretending to convey.

He looks away when he sees me staring, but his mouth retains the weird twist.

Shit.

I'm pretty sure Toby is interested in Ava too.

**I hope you enjoyed this sample of *Types of Triangles*.  
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