

The Dance

by Sarah Ettritch

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Mo glanced at the time on her comm station and resisted the urge to drum her fingers against her desk. Class should have ended five minutes ago. If she didn't get out soon, Les would give up on her and walk home by herself.

Instructor Daly lowered his pointer. "Pull up assignment two on your monitors, please."

Everyone groaned.

"Be quiet," Daly snapped. "You've only been out of the Indoctrination Academy a week and you're already behaving like spoiled children."

Mo wished she could shoot laser beams from her eyes and vaporize him. Why had she taken History, anyway? Fighter pilots didn't need History. If she'd taken Advanced Law instead, she and Les would be in the same class. Advanced Law, though—ugh. Not right after the Indoctrination Academy. She wanted to be with Les, but she had her limits.

Daly started walking around the classroom, checking monitors. Uh-oh. Mo hit the key that would bring up the assignment and scanned the screen. A five hundred-word essay on the only Preeminent Ruler ever executed. How exciting. She flipped through the history text on her desk, trying to look as if she was already thinking about what she'd write.

Daly wandered by her. "Due Friday. No excuses."

Friday! That was only two days away. As soon as she got home, she'd have to start working on the essay, get a couple of hours in before heading to the lake. She and Les had been talking about the lake for weeks; it would be their first night out in two years. No way was she skipping it for a stupid essay.

"Monitors off," Daly said. "Dismissed."

Mo flicked off her monitor, shoved the history text into her knapsack, and hustled into the corridor.

"Oh, Mo," someone called. "Wait a second."

She stopped and turned to see Patty and Evelyn walking toward her. Odd—usually they barely acknowledged her existence. She lowered her knapsack to the floor and waited.

"Are you going to the dance on Friday?" Patty asked.

Flaming Argamon, Patty wasn't going to ask her to the dance, was she? "I'm going with Les."

Patty and Evelyn exchanged glances. "Don't you think it's time you stopped being so clingy with Lesley?" Evelyn said.

"Give someone else a chance," Patty added.

Evelyn leaned forward, hands on hips. "It's not like you're Chosens. Stop acting like you are."

Out of the corner of her eye, Mo saw a third person hovering

nearby, probably enjoying the show.

"I've tried to be polite, Mo," Patty said. "But this is getting ridiculous. I'd like to take Lesley to the dance. I could have gone ahead and just asked her, but I figured I'd be nice and let you know first. And I'm sure you, being mature, will stand aside, right?"

"You know, Darren and I have been going together for a while, but we see other people," Evelyn said. "We're not Chosens. We don't pretend we are."

"It's pathetic," Patty said under her breath, but loud enough for Mo to hear.

Mo's cheeks burned. "Les has never said anything about wanting to see other people."

Patty's face softened. "Oh, Mo. Lesley's too kind to tell you."

"She doesn't want to hurt you," Evelyn said, patting Mo's arm.

"You poor thing," Patty cooed. "I know this is difficult to hear. But everyone can see she wants a change."

"Really?" Mo squeaked.

"Um, yes," Evelyn said. "Have you had your eyes checked lately?"

Mo didn't want to believe them, but it was hard not to when she had her own doubts about Les's feelings for her.

Patty crossed her arms. "Give her some space if you don't believe us. Tell her you won't be going to the dance. You'll see how quickly she goes with someone else."

"I—I don't know."

"Are you afraid of what you'll find out?" Evelyn asked.

"No."

"Yeah, sure."

The silent observer finally spoke. "She knows what she'll find out. That's why she won't do it."

Mo recognized the voice. Julia, always wanting to be in with the popular crowd. It figured that she'd side with these two airheads.

"That's not true," Mo retorted.

"Then don't be so immature," Patty said, her mouth set. "Tell her you're not going to the dance."

But she and Les liked to dance, and they'd had few opportunities to do so at the Indoctrination Academy. They were looking forward to Friday night.

Evelyn sighed and looked at Patty. "I told you not to bother talking to her."

Patty nodded. "Look, Mo, I'm asking Lesley to the dance, whether you like it or not. I'm sure she'll leap at the chance to go out with someone else for a change, instead of having little Mo following her around all the time. If you really do care about her, stop thinking

about yourself. Think of her. Let her out of her cage.” She motioned to Evelyn. “Come on, Ev. Let’s go.”

“Nice talking to you, shorty.” Evelyn patted Mo’s head as she walked past. Julia snickered and ambled after them.

Mo slung her knapsack over her shoulder and headed for the Learning Academy’s west exit. It was a longer route to Les, but she didn’t want to bump into Patty and company again. She tried to shrug off the unpleasant conversation—or rather, confrontation. Patty was obviously interested in dating Les, so nothing she said could be trusted. Of course Patty would say Les wanted a change. Of course she’d imply that dating one person exclusively was immature, even wrong. And it was no surprise that Evelyn had backed her up. If Evelyn was same-oriented, she’d probably be dating Patty, not helping her steal other people’s girlfriends.

Pushing the exit door open, Mo shielded her eyes until they’d adjusted to the sun. She set off for her and Les’s usual meeting spot, her mind still turning over the confrontation with Patty. Patty would have to find someone else to take to the dance. Let her ask Les—she’d only be humiliated. Mo was sure Les would say no. Les wouldn’t turn her back on their plans for the evening, would she?

Mo rounded a curve in the path and smiled. There was Les, sitting against a tree with her nose in a book. She stopped walking. Who was she trying to fool? Yes, she and Les had been dating for a while, but things had changed. Maybe when they’d started seeing each other, Les had been content with her plain best friend. But now . . . Les had blossomed. She was the prettiest girl at the Learning Academy. No, probably the prettiest girl in the entire sector. She was tall, and slim, and smart, and confident. Mo swallowed. She, on the other hand, had grown—what? A whole two inches in the past three years? She looked down at her chest. In some ways, not much at all. And pretty wasn’t a word anyone would use to describe her. She wasn’t ugly, but she certainly wasn’t anything special. And smart? Well, she wasn’t stupid, but she learned more through experience than she did from reading books.

Lately, she’d wondered if Les remained with her out of habit. After all, they’d known each other forever, lived next door to each other. Maybe Patty was right. Maybe Les was being kind. She could be biding her time, hoping circumstances would eventually force a breakup. They’d leave the Learning Academy in less than a year. Unless Les found the courage to stand up to her parents, she’d be off to college, not the Military Academy. Maybe that was why Les hadn’t pushed for them to see other people. In a year she’d be free, and without having to hurt anyone.

Or maybe Les was still in the relationship because she wanted to

be? Mo desperately wanted to believe that, but how could she know for sure? Everyone else seemed to think Les felt trapped and wanted their relationship to end, or at least wanted the freedom to take out other girls. Mo bit her lip. Was she totally oblivious to signals Les was giving off, signals that were clear to everyone else? Was she only seeing what she wanted to see? How could she know? *If you really do care about her, stop thinking about yourself. Tell her you're not going to the dance. You'll see how quickly she goes with someone else. . . . She knows what she'll find out. That's why she won't do it.*

No, she *would* do it. Not attending a dance together wouldn't kill them, not if their relationship still existed because they both cared. She was mature—she could handle Les going on a date with someone else. It wasn't as if they'd be spending the rest of their lives together—eventually the Chosen Council would end their relationship for them anyway. And if Les enjoyed herself at the dance and wanted to date others more often, Mo would rather know. Better to know the truth, even if it hurt, right? She squared her shoulders and resumed walking.

Les looked up from her book and smiled. Mo's heart thumped. It always did when Les beamed at her, but this time apprehension and dread were helping it along.

"I was starting to wonder where you were." Les tucked a bookmark into the book, carefully slid it into her satchel, and stood. "It'll be beautiful at the lake later. Might be a bit chilly when the sun sets, though." She brushed off her pants. "We should take a blanket."

Mo took a deep breath. "Actually, Les, I can't go."

Les stopped brushing and stared at her.

"I have to start an essay. It's due Friday."

"We're not leaving for a few hours. You can start it before we go."

"I know, but—"

"I've got homework, too. If we're pressed for time, we'll leave right after the sun's gone down. Mo, we've been talking about the lake ever since we left the Indoctrination Academy. You can spare an hour, can't you?"

Mo almost gave in. Lying next to Les at the lake watching the sun go down was right up there on her *Things I Love to Do* list, and it had been two years. But tonight it wouldn't be the same, not after Patty and Evelyn. Now she'd wonder if Les was really enjoying herself, or wishing she was somewhere else—or with someone else. "Well, you see, the thing is, I think maybe we see a little too much of each other. We're not Chosens. I mean, I like being with you, but we shouldn't be too attached to each other, you know?"

"But we *are* attached to each other." Les reached for her.

Mo stepped back. Her resolve would crumble if Les touched her.

Les stiffened and lowered her arms. "What's wrong, Mo? Did I do something wrong, say something?"

"No. As I said, I like being with you, but we're not Chosens. It would probably be better if our relationship was a little more casual."

"Our notifications are at least seven years away," Les said. "And we might be Solitaries. I hope not, but we might be."

"We can't count on being Solitaries. At least one of us probably isn't."

Les cocked her head to one side, puzzled. "Why are you suddenly concerned about it? You've never said anything before. Is it because you want to be with someone else?"

"No!"

"Then what?"

"Les, will you stop being so immature? We're not Chosens. If you—if we want to take other people to the dance on Friday, we should be able to."

Les gaped at her. "The dance? You won't go to the dance with me, either?"

"I'm not sure I'm going. So if you want to take someone else, go ahead."

"Will *you* be taking someone else?"

Not likely. Girls flirted with Les, not her. To think she'd thought for a split second that Patty was going to ask her . . . Not that she would have said yes. If she wasn't going with Les, she didn't want to go with anyone. Argamon! Was she doing the right thing, telling Les to take someone else? *If you really do care about her, you'll think of her instead of yourself. Tell her you're not going to the dance. You'll see how quickly she goes with someone else.* Right. One dance wouldn't kill them, remember? "I don't know. Like I said, I'm not sure I'm going."

"You won't go with me?"

"No."

Les stared into the distance, her lips trembling. Mo looked up at her, surprised and dismayed. Les looked like she might cry. Les hardly ever cried. The last time Mo remembered her crying was when they were eleven, when Les had fallen off her bike and ripped her knee open. "We can still see each other," she added quickly, wishing she could take back every word she'd said in the last five minutes. "But maybe we shouldn't be so clingy with each other."

"Clingy," Les echoed flatly. "I have to go." She picked up her satchel and marched away.

Mo wanted to run after her and say, "Les, I'm sorry. I want to go to the lake with you, I want to go to the dance with you, I want to be with you more than anything!" But that would only make her look

stupid. Okay, she was stupid, for listening to Patty and Evelyn, unless Les bounced back and danced Friday night away with someone else. Once Les calmed down and realized she was free to go with anyone, she'd probably jump at the chance to go with Patty. Everyone would see Les and Patty together and figure Les was available. Same-oriented girls at the academy would buzz around her, competing for her attention. Les would be on her comm unit constantly, fielding invitations. She'd quickly forget she'd ever been in a relationship. "Mo who?" she'd say, laughing with her new friends.

A sick feeling formed in the pit of Mo's stomach. She blinked back tears. If this was what mature felt like, she'd stick with immature from now on.

Lesley raised an egg sandwich to her lips, sighed, and put it back into her lunchbox. Egg sandwiches were her favourite—usually, she'd devour them and wish there were more. But usually Mo was here, too. She'd sat down at the picnic table hoping Mo would show up—a vain hope, as it turned out. She glanced at the empty place next to her and rubbed her eyes. Mo's sudden change of heart mystified her.

She'd spent the previous evening going over what had happened yesterday, replaying the day from when she'd walked with Mo to the academy to when they'd had that horrible conversation. She must have said something, done something, to upset Mo, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

Yesterday, at this very spot, they'd talked about the lake and agreed that they were looking forward to it. Mo hadn't known about the essay at the time—that is, if she'd even been assigned an essay. But even if she'd been telling the truth about her assignment, one hour at the lake wouldn't have made much difference.

And then there was the dance. On their way to the academy, they'd laughed as they'd done a couple of practice whirls on the path. "I wonder if everyone will be as rusty as we are," Mo had said, grinning. Why would she suddenly decide she didn't want to go to the dance? Well, she'd said she probably wouldn't go. She'd also made it clear that if she did go, she'd go alone or with someone else.

Lesley sighed again. Despite analyzing and re-analyzing every word they'd said yesterday, she honestly didn't think she'd said anything terrible. But she must have hurt Mo. Why else would Mo suddenly decide that she wanted their relationship to be more casual? Lesley had considered the possibility that someone else had caught Mo's eye, but that didn't make sense. Mo wasn't fickle, one of the reasons Lesley cared for her. She wouldn't toss aside a three-year relationship because someone looked cute one afternoon. If things

between them had cooled over time or they'd grown less content with each other, maybe Lesley could see Mo wanting to date others. But their relationship had seemed as strong as ever, and Mo wasn't the type to bottle up a list of grievances and pretend everything was all right. So why, then? What had happened?

A shadow fell across the picnic table. Lesley's breath quickened, but her shoulders sagged when she looked behind her.

"Mind if I join you?" Patty said.

"Go ahead," Lesley replied, hoping the disappointment she felt wasn't evident in her voice.

"No Mo today?" Patty asked as she lowered herself into Mo's spot.

"She's, uh, eating inside today. She's working on an essay. Didn't want any distractions. Including me."

"Oh."

Lesley picked at an imaginary thread on her sleeve.

"Nice day," Patty said.

"Yes."

"I hope the weather holds for tomorrow. Walking to the dance in the rain wouldn't be much fun."

"No."

"Though the train station isn't that far away. It's only a couple of minutes' walk to the academy. Less if you run," Patty added with a smile.

"True."

"But I'm not sure I'd want to risk tripping and falling into a puddle."

Lesley searched for something to say that would consist of more than one word. "You probably wouldn't trip," was all she could manage. Why did she always have to be polite? She should have told Patty to sit somewhere else.

"Are you going to the dance?" Patty asked in a higher than usual voice.

"I don't know." Mo could still change her mind.

"Do you have a date for the dance?"

Lesley hesitated. She wanted to say yes, but Mo might not change her mind—or worse, go with someone else. Saying she had a date and then not showing up for the dance would start everyone gossiping. She'd already fibbed to Patty once. Twice would be asking for trouble. "No." She briefly met Patty's eyes, then looked away.

"Do you want to go with me?" Patty asked, her voice shrill.

Lesley focused on her lunchbox. The conversation had suddenly turned awkward. Maybe she should have lied. "It's nice of you to ask, but . . .well, I wasn't completely honest before. I won't be going to the

dance." She forced herself to look at Patty. "With anyone."

Patty frowned. "If you're worried about Mo, don't be. I talked to her. She doesn't mind if we go together."

"You talked to Mo?" Now her own voice sounded shrill. "When?"

"I don't know. Yesterday, I think. Does it really matter? The point—"

"It matters to me. Did you talk to her in the morning or the afternoon?"

"After History class, I think."

History? That was Mo's last class of the day. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'Mo, do you mind if I ask Lesley to the dance?' She said, 'No, go ahead.'"

Lesley looked at her for a moment, expecting more. "That's it?"

Patty let out an exasperated sigh. "Yes."

"You must have said more than that."

"This is worse than being interrogated by the flaming military! She said she doesn't mind if we go to the dance together. That's all that matters."

Lesley snapped her lunchbox shut, struggling to control her temper. The last person she'd go to the dance with was a meddling, insensitive girl like Patty. "Well, we won't be going to the dance together. I'm sure you're a very nice girl," she said through clenched teeth, "but if I go to the dance, it'll be with Mo."

Patty's face fell, but she shrugged. "It was just a thought. We can go another time."

"No, I don't think so."

"You're as bad as she is," Patty shrieked. She jabbed a finger at Lesley. "You and Mo, acting like you're Chosens. What will you do next, show up at the Reproductive Technology Centre and tell them you want to have a baby? You're both crazy. Grow up! Stop clinging to each other!"

"You said the same thing to Mo, didn't you?"

"What if I did? It's pathetic, watching the two of you pretend you're Joined."

"Though I guess if it was me and you rather than me and Mo, that would be okay."

Patty stared at her, open-mouthed. Then she found her tongue. "Don't flatter yourself! Going to the dance with you would have been a bit of fun, nothing more." She stood and cupped Lesley's chin in her right hand. "Because you're such a pretty thing, aren't you, Lesley?" she cooed. "And a bit of fun is all pretty things are good for." Smirking, she ran her finger along Lesley's cheek, then dropped her hand and walked away.

Lesley grimaced. Next time she went to the bathroom, she'd give

her face a good wash. If she wanted to be snotty, she could go to the office and report a violation of Article 442, but the resulting stink would outweigh the benefits, and the accusation would be difficult to support. It would be her word against Patty's. She glanced around the immediate area. Nobody else had witnessed—

A familiar figure caught her eye: Mo, standing outside the nearest entrance to the academy. Lesley grabbed her lunchbox and scrambled to get her long legs out from under the picnic table. "Mo!" she called.

Mo wheeled and pulled open the academy door.

"Mo!" Lesley shouted, wincing when the corner of the table jabbed into her thigh in her haste to get around it. "Wait! I want to talk to you."

Mo disappeared into the academy. Lesley ran to the entrance and yanked the door open. Mo was already at the other end of the corridor.

"Mo!" She ran after her, almost barreling into a passing student. "Excuse me," she murmured, her eyes on Mo.

"Lesley Thompson!" a woman's voice cracked behind her.

She inwardly groaned and turned around.

Instructor Carter strode toward her. "I must have missed the announcement that running is now acceptable within the academy."

"I'm sorry."

"As you should be. What's your next class?"

"Literature of the Law."

"Which I believe is that way." Carter pointed in the direction opposite the one Mo had taken. "You can use the remaining ten minutes of your lunch period to review your notes from yesterday's class. Now go."

"I'll have to go to the common room first to pick up my notes."

Carter glared at her. "Lesley, you're testing my patience."

"I'm just asking permission to go to the common room before I go to the classroom."

Carter rolled her eyes. "Do I have to spell everything out? Go to the common room, pick up your notes, then go to your Literature of the Law classroom, which, I'll point out, is right next to the common room. Sit at a desk, open your notebook, and review your notes from yesterday's class. Breathing, swallowing, and blinking are permitted. Clear?"

Lesley nodded.

Carter pointed down the corridor again. "Then go. Now!"

Since lunch period wasn't over, the common room was empty when Lesley entered. She slid her lunchbox into an empty slot and bent down to open her satchel, stored on a shelf near the floor. Mo's

knapsack sat next to it. Perhaps she should scribble a quick note, suggest that they meet in their usual spot at the end of the day to talk things out? No, Mo might not find the note until it was too late. More importantly, handling someone's personal items without permission would be a violation of Article 366. That had never stopped them from slipping notes into each other's bags before, since they had each other's permission, but with the mood Mo was in, Lesley didn't want to risk it. She pulled her notes from her satchel and left.

Lesley took her usual spot in the front row of the empty classroom and opened her notebook, but all she could think about was Mo. They needed to talk, but when? They had a class together later, but they'd had a class together that morning and Mo had treated her like a stranger, nodding curtly to her as she sat down and collecting her things without a word when class finished. Lesley would likely receive the same treatment, or worse, later. Maybe the academy wasn't the best place to have the conversation, anyway. Carter may have done them a favour.

She could beep Mo later, after supper. No, that wouldn't work. Thursdays were *discuss an article* night, which meant supper wouldn't really be over until about nine, and then she'd have to do her homework. Normally she wouldn't mind; she enjoyed listening to her parents expound on the finer points of a selected article, especially one for which they'd successfully advocated an amendment. Having two advocates to consult when doing her Advanced Law homework didn't hurt, either. But tonight she'd find it hard to concentrate. She'd have to try, though. She wouldn't want to upset Mama.

There was no way around it. Talking to Mo would have to wait. She'd go over to Mo's tomorrow night; after all, neither of them would be going to the dance. If Mo refused to see her, she'd keep trying until Mo gave in.

Lesley had to understand why Mo had changed the rules of their relationship based on one conversation with Patty. There had to be something she didn't know, something that had made Mo receptive to Patty's poison, and she was determined to find out what it was before it destroyed their relationship. She rubbed her forehead. *If it hasn't already.*

Mo threw herself onto her bed and tried to clear her mind, but it was no use—the same terrible images monopolized her consciousness. Les and Patty at the picnic table; Patty reaching out and caressing Les's face; Les staring up at Patty, entranced. And, had she imagined it, or had Patty's fingers lingered on Les's face as they'd said good-bye? Mo rolled onto her back and buried her face in her hands. Before

her spot at the table had even been cold, Les had moved in another girl, and not just any girl—Patty. Okay, she'd figured Les would find someone else, because that was what Les wanted. But within twenty-four hours? That was all their relationship had been worth? Twenty-four flaming hours? Well, good riddance! Les could have Patty. Mo hoped they'd be very happy together.

They were probably together right now, walking arm in arm to the dance, laughing at each other's witty comments and at little Mo and her stupidity. And soon they'd be swinging around the dance floor, Patty sticking her perky breasts under Les's nose and putting her hands where she had no business putting them. So yeah, good riddance. She was better off without Les. She should celebrate; she could do all sorts of things, now that Les wasn't holding her back. Like ask others out.

So why did she feel so lousy? Why didn't she feel like doing anything? Why couldn't she get Les out of her mind? Mo squeezed her eyes shut. Because she flaming-well cared about Les, that was why. And now she'd ruined it. Sure, Les eventually would have tired of her and found another girlfriend, but they could have stayed together until that happened.

No, she was kidding herself. Patty had said Les was only staying around out of kindness, and sure enough, at the first opportunity, Les had started getting cozy with someone else. And who could blame her? Out of the blue, her girlfriend of three years had practically dumped her. Why wouldn't she move on? But would she have moved on at all if they hadn't had that conversation on Wednesday? Mo squeezed her eyes shut again. Argamon, she was so confused!

Someone tapped at the bedroom door. Mo rolled over so she was facing away from it and shouted, "Come in."

The door opened. "Are you okay?" Mama asked.

"I'm fine," Mo muttered.

"Are you sure? You didn't touch your dessert. And it's not like you to shut yourself in your room. Should I beep a physician?"

"I'm okay."

Silence, then, "Aren't you going to a dance tonight? Shouldn't you be getting ready?"

Mo's chin quivered. She'd have to explain why Les wouldn't be coming around anymore. *Les and I have decided to cool things for a bit*, she imagined herself saying, but only for an instant. She trusted Mama; she didn't like lying to her, and she didn't much like lying to herself. "Mama, I think I've done something stupid."

The door clicked shut. "You haven't committed a violation, because I would have been notified by now."

"It's nothing like that."

"You want to tell me about it?"

"Yeah."

The mattress sank as Mama sat down. A moment later her fingers brushed Mo's arm. "What did you do?"

"I told Les I didn't want to go to the dance with her. But I did want to go to the dance with her." It sounded even more stupid when she said it out loud.

"Oh." Mama paused. "Why did you tell her you didn't want to go if you really did?"

"We're not Chosens." That wasn't the only reason. It wasn't even the main reason. But it was the least embarrassing reason.

"I don't understand," Mama said.

"We shouldn't act like Chosens when we aren't."

"How have you been acting like Chosens?"

Did she have to explain everything? "We've been together for a while. And we only see each other."

"Oh, Mo." Mama rubbed Mo's arm. "So you're dating, and you only want to date each other right now. You're seventeen. If you were twenty-four I'd be concerned, but seventeen?" She squeezed Mo's shoulder and leaned over to touch her cheek to Mo's. "Don't worry about it. You're young. Enjoy yourself. Beep Lesley and tell her you'll go to the dance after all."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because she's going with someone else." Mo's face crumpled as reality hit. "She . . . another girlfriend . . . I saw them," she said between sobs.

Mama straightened and rubbed Mo's back. "What do you mean? She has another girlfriend already?"

Mo nodded, sniffing into her hands.

"When did you tell her you didn't want to go to the dance?"

"Wednesday."

"And on Friday she has a new girlfriend? That doesn't sound like Lesley."

The mattress squeaked and lifted slightly. Mo heard a drawer slide open. Mama swam into view and handed her a handkerchief. She sat down where Mo could see her this time.

Mo wiped her eyes and dabbed at her cheeks. "She's pretty, Mama. It wouldn't be hard for her to find another girlfriend."

"She's pretty, but she's not insensitive, or spiteful. Are you sure she's seeing someone else?"

Mo's hand clenched around the handkerchief. "I saw them together. Yesterday. Having lunch."

"Yesterday? That's even worse." Mama shook her head. "No, I

just can't see it. Have you talked to her about it?"

"No."

"Well, you should." Mama reached out and touched Mo's cheek. "If you don't want to beep her tonight, go see her tomorrow. Talk to her."

And apologize for not talking to her in the first place. It would be uncomfortable, but she owed Les that much. Though she'd want to crawl away and die if it turned out Les was seeing Patty, because she couldn't get Les out of her mind and wanted to be with her all the time. She cared about Les so much—perhaps too much. They weren't Chosens. Their relationship couldn't last. Someday, they would have to part. And that terrified her. She couldn't imagine life without Les. At all.

Her eyes welled up again. "Mama?"

"What?"

"If I ask you a question, will you promise not to get mad at me?"

"I won't get mad at you."

"Can you fall in love with someone who isn't your Chosen?"

Mama's forehead creased. "We're talking about Lesley, I presume?"

Mo nodded. Feeling exposed, she hid behind the handkerchief as she blew her nose.

Mama tapped Mo's nose. "See? Your Mama's brilliant."

Mo smiled through her tears. "Well, can you?"

"Of course you can. Why would I get mad at you for asking that? Level Four and Five students ask me that all the time."

"Really?" Mo would never dream of asking an indoctrinator such a personal question. She inwardly snorted. What was she doing right now? Though this indoctrinator was her mama first, an indoctrinator second. Maybe that was why it felt so personal.

"I'll tell you what I tell them," Mama said. "The Chosen Council doesn't find your only match, it finds your best match. So yes, you can fall in love with someone who isn't your Chosen." She wagged a warning finger. "But it should only happen before you're Joined. Never after. Anyone who falls in love with someone who isn't their Chosen after they're Joined is weak in the Way. And we know what happens to those weak in the Way."

"I know. I just wondered if it's possible at all."

"Most Rymellans date before their notifications, just like you're doing. So don't worry about it. Enjoy your time with Lesley. You're a long way from twenty-five," Mama said, brushing a stray hair off her face.

The Chosen ring on Mama's third finger caught the light. The names *Anderson* and *Middleton* were engraved on it. Mo hoped the

names *Middleton* and *Thompson* would be engraved on hers. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility. "Mama, I know I keep saying Les isn't my Chosen, but she could be, couldn't she?"

Mama's face darkened. "No. You don't want to start down that path, young lady. You have to trust the Chosen Council."

"I do."

"But you feel so strongly for Lesley, she must be your Chosen. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

Mo didn't answer.

"That's a mistake. Remember, the Chosen Council considers all the same-oriented girls around your age when it chooses your mate. It has the entire planet to choose from, not just those who live in our sector. And the girl it chooses won't only be the best girl for you, but for everyone, because you'll be sure to have children strong in the Way."

"I know, Mama." But there was still a minuscule chance it could be Les. She'd try not to hope it was Les, but it could be Les.

"When the Chosen Council summons you, you have to accept your Chosen." Mama playfully nudged Mo's arm. "And that's a lot easier when you don't have someone else in mind."

"I might be a Solitary." After all, two of her three older siblings were.

"That's true, and it won't be long before we find out if you are. But you're young, Mo. If it turns out you have a Chosen, you won't be summoned for at least seven years. So don't worry about your feelings for Lesley right now. A lot can happen in seven years. Beep her tomorrow, okay?"

Mo nodded. She dreaded talking to Les. Not only would she feel like a complete idiot, she wasn't sure Les cared anymore. But she'd beep her. She'd apologize, at least. And if she had to watch Les and Patty making lovey-dovey eyes at each other at the academy, that would be her punishment for listening to an airhead like Patty in the first place.

Mama leaned over and hugged Mo, then stood. "I saved your pudding for you. Why don't you come downstairs?"

"I'll come down in a few minutes." Mo rolled onto her back. "Thanks for saving it."

Mama smiled. She left, closing the door behind her.

Mo turned onto her side again and sighed. She hadn't planned to fall in love with Les. During her Level Three at the Indoctrination Academy, when the indoctrinators had first started teaching the Chosen Tradition, she'd vowed not to fall in love with anyone but her Chosen, since there didn't seem much point. But then she'd gone ahead and fallen for Les during their Level Four. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

And why Les? They'd grown up together, knew everything about each other. You'd think they would have been sick of each other. Why couldn't they have stayed friends? Then she wouldn't care about Patty, and she wouldn't care whether Les turned out to be her Chosen.

If she had a Chosen.

In ten months, she'd find out if the Chosen Council had found a match. Les would find out in five. Mo swallowed. If it turned out Les was a Solitary but she wasn't, or vice versa, they'd know for sure they were doomed. She snorted. They were already doomed—she'd seen to that. She was lying here worrying that Les wouldn't be her Chosen, and Les was probably hoping with everything she had that she wasn't!

Someone knocked on the door and opened it. Mama again. "You have a visitor."

"Who?"

"Lesley."

"She's here?" Mo sprang off the bed, her heart pounding. "Do I look okay?"

Mama studied her. "Go give your face a little wash," she said quietly, placing her hand on Mo's back and steering her into the hallway. "Then come down."

In the bathroom, Mo splashed water on her face and looked in the mirror. Who was she kidding? No amount of water would make her presentable. She looked like she'd just awakened with a bad head cold. Returning to her bedroom, she grabbed her comb from the dresser and raked it through her hair. Why was Les here? Had she stopped by on her way to the dance to gloat? Was Patty with her? Mo's hand stopped in mid-stroke. No, Mama would have mentioned that, prepared her. She tossed the comb back onto the dresser, braced herself, and headed downstairs. Maybe Les had decided not to go to the dance. Maybe she was here to talk.

Her heart fell when she reached the bottom of the stairs and caught a glimpse of Les sitting in the living room. Les was dressed for the dance, in the navy blue outfit that set off her blond hair and matched the blue eyes Mo loved staring into. And here she was—Mo looked down at herself—in an old shirt, the pants she'd worn when she painted her bike last week, threadbare socks, and her breath whistling through one stuffed-up nostril. Patty, watch out!

She hesitated outside the living room, wanting a few more seconds of believing their relationship still existed before Les opened her mouth and crushed the illusion. Then she forced herself forward.

Les looked up. Mo wanted to go to her, hug her, but an unfamiliar awkwardness hung between them. She sat at the other end of the sofa from Les and crossed her legs, trying to look relaxed. "I see you're on your way to the dance," she said, not as evenly as she

would have liked. Petty questions ran through her mind: *Did you forget who you're going with? Did you come here out of habit?* But she was smart for a change. "Why are you here?" she asked. "I mean, I'm glad you dropped in. I want to talk to you. About what happened. But I was going to do it tomorrow."

In response, Les made a show of rolling her eyes to the left. She tipped her head that way, too. Mo looked across the room. Nathan sat perched on the edge of one of the chairs, watching them. She'd been so focused on Les, she hadn't noticed him. "Nathan, go play or something."

"I don't feel like it." He swung his legs. They hit the base of the chair with a thump. He did it again. *Thump.*

"Don't you have homework?" Mo asked.

"Nope."

"Why don't you go find Andrew?"

"I don't feel like it." *Thump.*

If he didn't stop swinging his flaming legs, Mo would tear them out of their sockets. "Stop with the legs, all right? Go find Andrew. We want to be alone."

"I don't feel like it." *Thump.*

"I know why he doesn't want to leave," a voice piped up from the doorway. Andrew entered and plunked himself down on one of the other chairs.

Oh, great. "Why doesn't—"

"He wants to see you kiss." Andrew squeezed his eyes shut, puckered his lips, and smacked them loudly.

Nathan giggled, then mimicked Andrew.

"Mama!" Mo shouted. "Get these two out of here. Mama!"

Mama rushed into the living room. "What's all the—" She put her hands on her hips. "All right, that's enough. Go upstairs and play."

The smacking noises stopped. "We don't want to," Nathan said.

"Well, you can't stay in here, so if you don't want to go upstairs, you can help me cut the flowers I brought in earlier. Unless you've changed your mind about going upstairs."

"Upstairs," Andrew said, looking at Nathan. They tore from the room. Mama winked at Mo and followed them out.

Les chuckled. "I bet you wish they were back at the Indoctrination Academy."

Mo met Les's eyes and managed a weak smile. For a moment, she felt the comfortable connection that usually existed between them. But only for a moment. Les was all dressed up to go out without her. Les would dance and laugh and who knew what else, while she sat at home alone. Not that she could blame Les, who was only doing exactly what she'd told her to do. And looked so cute while doing it. "You look

nice."

"Thanks," Les said, her cheeks colouring slightly.

"Is it Patty . . . that you're taking to the dance?"

"No."

Mo was momentarily speechless. Did Les have a new girl every five minutes? No, it must be Patty. She must have heard Les wrong. "But you were having lunch together."

"No, we weren't."

"I saw you! And you looked pretty cozy."

Les's face tightened. "First of all, we didn't have lunch together. I ate alone. She showed up later. And as far as what you think you saw, did you see me doing anything?"

Mo replayed her memory. Les sitting at the picnic table. Patty reaching out and touching Les's cheek, then leaving. "Well, no," she admitted.

"I think she noticed you watching."

"Oh." Come to think of it, Patty had glanced in her direction. Mo hadn't thought anything of it at the time; she'd been so shocked at seeing Patty in her place that she hadn't been thinking at all. She'd stood paralyzed, her mind blank, until Les called her name.

"She did ask me to the dance," Les said. "But I said no. And I know she talked to you about it. She didn't tell me exactly what she said, but I gather it was something about us acting like Chosens when we aren't."

Blood rushed to Mo's face. She wanted to blurt "I hope we are," but she bit her tongue. "I'm sorry. They ambushed me after class. I didn't know what to say. I didn't agree with her, but she said she was going to ask you to the dance whether I agreed or not."

"But then you not only told me that you didn't want to go to the dance, but that you couldn't go to the lake. You made it sound as if you didn't even want to date."

"I was trying to do the right thing." Mo felt her chin trembling. "They made it sound like we were doing something wrong. And I thought . . ."

"Thought what?" Les said, an edge to her voice.

Mo couldn't—she couldn't tell Les that inside, deep inside, she was afraid she'd eventually be cast aside for someone prettier, someone taller, someone curvier, someone who looked stunning on Les's arm. How Les turned heads and she didn't. How she pretended not to notice the coy looks girls shot Les in the corridors. How invisible she felt when girls flirted with Les. About the gnawing doubt that grew every time Les smiled at another girl, stopped to talk to someone pretty, paid another girl a compliment.

"Thought what, Mo?" Les repeated.

Les looked concerned, but she was also dressed for the dance, the dance they weren't attending together. "It doesn't matter what I thought," Mo said.

"You can't mean that. It doesn't matter? Our relationship doesn't matter?"

"Les, I made a mistake, okay? I wish I could take back everything I said about the dance, about us, about everything. But it's too late."

Les's brow furrowed. "Why is it too late?"

"Well, maybe it isn't. I don't know. I guess it'll depend on whether you'll still want to talk tomorrow."

"Why can't we talk now?"

Mo swallowed. "Because you have a date waiting for you." Her chin started to tremble again. She looked at her lap.

"Mo, I'm hoping to go to the dance with you," Les said softly. "I don't want to go to the dance with anyone else. I never did."

"Really?" Mo lifted her head to study Les's face.

"Do you think I'd stop here first if I was going with someone else? You think I'm that mean?"

Mo sighed. "No. That's why I asked why you were here. Because I couldn't understand why you'd stop in."

"On the way to somewhere else?" Les frowned. "I guess I should have made my intent clear right away, but it never crossed my mind that you'd think I was going with someone else."

"I'm sorry." Mo tried to rally—Les wanted to go to the dance with her! But it was hard to feel elated when she felt like an idiot.

"It's okay. I should have said." Les stretched her arm across the back of the sofa and leaned forward slightly. "You want to meet me halfway?"

More than anything. Mo grasped Les's hand. They smiled, slid toward each other, and embraced. Mo buried her face in Les's shoulder and held her as tightly as she could. If it was up to her, she'd never let go, not until the Chosen Council forced her to.

"I want things to be right between us," Les murmured.

"Me too."

Les drew back. "But there's something you're not telling me. All of a sudden, you seem to expect the worst from me."

Not all of a sudden. Mo tried to pull Les close again, hoping she'd drop the subject, but Les wasn't having it.

"Is it something I've said or done? I've tried to figure it out, but I can't think of anything. I don't understand why you were so willing to listen to Patty. Or why you thought I'd move on to someone else so quickly." Les looked away. "It hurts . . . that you think I could do that."

"I don't. I mean, not really. I mean . . ." Mo trailed off. She'd have to tell Les. It wouldn't be fair to let Les think she'd done something wrong, nor did she want to lie to her. Maybe things would be easier if Les knew. Or maybe she'd completely embarrass herself and Les would have a change of heart about reconciling. But at least she'd have told the truth and admitted what nagged at her deep down, instead of hiding behind Patty and everyone else like her. After the mess she'd made of things, she owed Les that much. "It's not you. You haven't done anything wrong."

Les met Mo's eyes. "No?"

"No." Mo reached for Les, feeling awkward and shy. It would be easier if Les wasn't looking at her. She relaxed ever so slightly when Les didn't protest and she felt the warmth of Les's cheek against hers, but only for a second. She stared over Les's shoulder at a point on the paneling in the hallway. "Patty did say we act like Chosens, when we aren't."

"I figured. We're not doing anything wrong, you know. Our Chosen Papers are a long way off."

"I know. But that's not all she said." Mo hesitated. Once it was out, she couldn't take it back. "She said that you want to date others, but you're too kind to tell me. That I should give you some freedom, let you out of your cage."

Les shook with laughter. "Yes, Patty's an expert on what I want."

"It's not funny!"

Les started to pull back, but Mo held onto her. Fortunately, Les seemed to understand; she rested her chin on Mo's shoulder and took one of Mo's hands. "You believed her," she said, her voice tinged with surprise. "I don't understand. I'm not even friends with Patty. She hardly knows me. Why would you believe anything she says about me?"

Fleeing the room crossed Mo's mind, but it was too late for second thoughts. "Because sometimes I think the same things myself. About you wanting to date others."

Silence. Uncomfortable silence.

Mo quickly filled it. "I should have talked to you. But Patty . . . I don't know—I guess all my doubts came out and I panicked."

No response.

"You're mad at me."

"No," Les said, so softly that Mo wouldn't have heard her if Les had been farther away.

"You're awfully quiet."

"I'm thinking. Look, none of what Patty said is true. None of it." Les paused. "I couldn't care less about Patty and her lies. But these doubts—you said I haven't said or done anything wrong, but I must

have done something to make you feel the way you do.”

“You haven’t done anything.”

“Then I don’t understand!” Les’s hold on Mo’s hand tightened.

“We’re different.”

Les chuckled. “I know that.”

“Physically.”

Les sighed. “Mo, you’re not telling me anything I don’t already know. What does this have to do with anything?”

“You’re tall and slim. And you have a nice figure. Everyone thinks you’re pretty.” Mo felt Les’s smile against her cheek.

“Stop trying to distract me,” Les said. “Now, come on. Tell me what’s bothering you.”

Mo pulled back in frustration. Why was Les being so dense? She gripped Les’s arms and looked right into her eyes. “Les, you’re pretty and I’m not. You’re tall, I’m not. You have a chest. The girls like you. They flirt with you all the time. You can date anyone you want. How long before you decide you want someone who looks better on your arm than I do? I mean, when we first got together, sure, you were already taller and more graceful than me, but not to the extent that you are now. A lot has changed in three years. You’re beautiful. And I . . .” Mo let go of Les’s arms and dropped her hands to her lap. “I’m nothing special.”

“That’s what this is about?” Les hugged Mo, planted a kiss on her cheek, and hugged her again.

Mo didn’t protest. She threw her arms around Les’s neck and buried her face in Les’s shoulder, feeling vulnerable, and silly, and apprehensive.

“I want to be with *you*,” Les said, giving Mo a squeeze.

“Yeah,” Mo replied, “this is when you’ll tell me I have a great personality.”

“Well, you do! And as far as I’m concerned, you’re the best-looking girl at the academy.”

Mo snorted.

“You’re the only girl I’ve ever wanted to kiss. And touch.”

“With everyone after you, how long will that last? Someone flirts with you almost every day.”

“They’re not interested in me the way you are.”

“Yes, they are. They’d all love to be with you. They’d take my place in a second.”

“I don’t think so. I doubt they want what we have.”

“They flirt with you right under my nose!”

Les exhaled sharply. “I wish they didn’t. And they’re wasting their time.” She drew back and took Mo’s face in her hands. “I don’t know what to say. I had no idea, no idea at all. Probably because, to

me, you are, and always have been, the cutest girl I've ever seen. I like the way you fit under my arm. I like kissing the top of your head. And I like your body just the way it is. If you had big breasts, you'd look funny. You'd probably fall on your face a lot."

Mo couldn't help but smile.

"I like that smile, too," Les said, pinching Mo's cheek.

They sat grinning at each other, but then Les grew serious. "You know, assuming you know what I want because you think I'm pretty is kind of ironic." She pointed at herself. "I'm the one who was rejected because of looks, not you."

"I suppose that's true," Mo said, despite thinking that the parallel was a little shaky. She'd rejected Les because she was trying to protect herself. Les wouldn't be doing that if one of the flirty airheads managed to catch and hold her attention.

"You could try trusting me," Les said.

"I do."

"Then talk to me next time, okay? I hope there isn't a next time, but if there is, talk to me. This whole thing could have been avoided if you'd just talked to me."

"I know."

"Don't assume you know what I want."

"I won't." But a sense of futility mocked her. She couldn't talk to Les every time she felt insecure, or they'd never talk about anything else.

Les took one of Mo's hands, kissed it, and curled her fingers around Mo's. "So, you coming to the dance with me?"

"I don't know if I should."

Les's face fell.

"No, no! It's not that I don't want to go with you," Mo quickly said. "It's just that I'm not really in the mood. And no matter what you say, I look terrible right now. Don't try to deny it."

"Well, I want to spend some time with you. Do you want to do something else?"

"Sure."

"You owe me a visit to the lake," Les said, wiggling her eyebrows.

The lake sounded wonderful. "I'll change."

"What you're wearing is fine. I definitely have to change, though. So come on." Les stood and pulled Mo up from the sofa.

"Mama!" Mo called when they stepped into the hall.

Mama walked down the hallway from the kitchen, three flowers in her left hand and pruning shears in her right. "What?"

"We're going out. To sit by the lake."

"You're not going in those clothes, are you, Lesley?" Mama

asked.

"I'm changing first."

"Good. Say hello to your parents."

"I will."

"Mo, take your cloak. It might get chilly. And have a good time."

"We will, Mama," Mo said. "And thank you," she added softly, reaching for her cloak.

Mama's mouth turned up at the corners. She retraced her steps down the hallway.

As soon as Mo and Les stepped outside, Les put her arm around Mo's shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "See? You fit perfectly."

Mo slipped her arm around Les's waist and squeezed her. If every moment was like this, she'd never doubt, never wonder, never question Les's feelings. Maybe Mama was right. Maybe she shouldn't worry so much about what might happen. Even if she and Les stayed loyal to each other, the Chosen Council would eventually break them up. So what was the point of worrying about how Les saw other girls, or about what other girls might do? The Chosen Council would ultimately decide who would be the most important girl in Les's life, not Les, not her, and not other girls.

Yes, Mama was right. Mo leaned into Les and squeezed her again. She had no future with Les, so the best thing she could do was enjoy the time they did have together—at least until the next time a girl flirted with Les.