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PARROT STEW

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CHAPTER 1

“It’s not you, it’s me.”

I studied my reflection in the filthy window of the local Pic-a-Pet store near my house. My wooly eyebrows had merged into one uber-long caterpillar and my overbite seemed unusually prominent.

“Parastoo?” Gavin stared at me. “Did you hear me?”

I zeroed in on the juicy, red pimple on the tip of my bumpy nose that’d reared its ugly head that morning.

Yup.

It was *definitely* me.

“Please, Parastoo. Say something. Say *anything*.”

I stared longingly at my boyfriend (nay, ex-boyfriend’s) acne-ridden chin and whispered, “I even loved your pimples...”

“What was that?” Gavin’s black-rimmed glasses, perpetually smudged, were even more smudgy today.

“Never mind,” I muttered.

As if things couldn’t get any worse, Trent Bimbaum, this short, red-headed kid who’d literally been tormenting me since I brought fesenjoon—a brown Iranian stew with poop-like consistency—to cultural day in the second grade, strolled out of the pet store carrying a bag full of live crickets.

“Well, well, well,” Trent smirked. “Look who it is—Gavin Witherspoon and Parastoo Ighani—aka Gavaacne and Parrot Stew.” He smirked, again. “What’s wrong guys? Trouble in loversville?”

Gavin clenched his fists. “Shut up, Trent.”

“*What* did you just say?” Trent’s face real close to Gavin’s, fogging up his smudgy glasses.

“I said shut up, Trent.” Gavin’s voice was several octaves lower. Poor guy looked positively terrified.

“Listen, pimple-head. I don’t care what kind of problems you’re having with your lame girlfriend, you will *never* disrespect me again.” He held up the bag of crickets. “Or else I’ll shove one of these bad boys down your throat.”

Gavin took a step back.

The guy wasn’t a coward, but he also wasn’t stupid.

“That’s what I thought.” Trent turned to me. “Looks like your knight in shining armor isn’t as brave as you thought, huh, Parrot Stew?” He laughed. “I swear—between your parrot beak and his nasty pimples, you guys would make the ugliest kids in the world.” And walked away, whistling.

Gavin moved toward me. “Don’t listen to that moron. You’re beautiful.”

I turned my back to him and wiped my wet eyes. Ordinarily, a sweet comment like that would’ve made my week. But since the so-called love of my life just gave me the, ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ speech right before we were supposed to spend an amazing summer together getting frozen yogurt and going to the comic book store, it shattered my heart into a billion pieces.

“Parastoo?”

“I gotta go,” I mumbled, and started the long, trudge home.

“*Wait!*” Gavin yelled from behind. “Don’t you want to talk?”

I shook my head, tears streaming down my face, and continued to trudge down the street like my puppy just expired.

“Call me if you wanna talk!” He called out.

What was there to talk about? I literally wanted a boyfriend since forever and Gavin was the *only* guy who ever liked me.

My destiny was cemented:

I was gonna be a parrot-beaked, scraggily-browed old maid for the rest of my life.



I trudged into the kitchen where my mom, a petite Iranian woman sporting the perfect bob haircut and a Peter Pan-collared shirt, stood at the counter cutting Persian cucumbers like Edward Scissorhands. If there was ever a reality show for cutting vegetables, we’d be billionaires.

I bet Gavin Witherspoon would come crawling back to me if I was a billionaire...

“You are home early, Parastoo jon.” Chop, chop, chop. “Did you have a nice last day of seventh grade?”

“Uh-huh...”

More like the *worst* last day of seventh grade.

I opened the refrigerator and surveyed the contents. Unlike regular households that had normal snacks to munch on, our fridge was stock-piled with Tupperware containing heavy meat, stews, and other meals you had to warm up on the stove. Besides normal snacks, mom also banned a microwave from entering our house.

“Parastoo?”

Gavin’s mom, Dr. Witherspoon, always had yummy fruit snacks and popcorn in the pantry. Guess I’d never be seeing those snacks again...

“Parastoo jon?”

Maybe Gavin would realize he made the biggest mistake of his life and ask me out again...Then I’d be invited back in the Witherspoon household to dine on their all-American snacks...Ugh, who was I kidding? I was meant to gorge on heavy stew meat and lima bean rice for the rest of my life...

“PARASTOO IGHANI!”

“Huh?” I turned around to find mom’s hands cupped to her mouth.

“Did you not hear me calling you, azizam?”

“No...Uh, sorry, Mom.”

“Daydreaming about your sweet boyfriend again?” She smiled and resumed cutting cucumbers.

Double ugh.

I closed the refrigerator and plunked down on a stool at the counter.

“Anyway, do not ruin your appetite, Parastoo jon—I have prepared a feast for dinner. Maman Sheefteh is joining us tonight and she has a little surprise for you and your sister.”

“Hopefully it’s better than those hideous penny loafers she got me for Nourooz...”

Maman Sheefteh was dad’s mom, and her and mom were as similar as a cow and a penguin. As much as mom was a devoted wife and mother, aka ran our lives down to ironing every last undie, Maman Sheefteh was wild and rambunctious and refused to take her grandmotherly duties like your average, everyday run-of-the-mill Iranian grandmother.