

*Bully Down*

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The first morning of spring semester did not kick off right. I stood at the base of the climbing wall in Phys. Ed., removing my helmet to have my static-y hair stand on end, making me look like a terrified porcupine. Greta Phillips, star forward on our basketball team, pointed at me shouting, “Hair Emergency!”

A surefire way to get prom-worthy hook ups, right?

Not.

My best friend Kayla didn’t even bother to defend me. She just fiddled with her harness like she couldn’t get the lead line loose. Way to take action there, Kayla.

That little incident led to a long string of wishing-I-could-disappear moments that forced me to declare a State of Emergency during the first half of my junior year and one particular moment that was a true 9-1-1.

When I posted pictures of my new pooch, Roady, on Facebook, Greta wrote, “Hey look, everybody, Emma and her dog have the same hair-do!” Did I get a “Back off, Greta” from anyone in my friends list? Nope. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if my ‘friends’ were among the 172 likes Greta got for that comment.

A month later, I landed the role of Helena in the school production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and figured I might have a chance to rescue my reputation. That is until I got to the first dress rehearsal and Greta handed me the donkey’s head saying, “You might as well put this on – there’s no way hair and makeup can fix you. Helena material, you are not.” That left me alone on the stage with plenty of laughter and an empty head in my hands.

Last month, in fifth period American Lit, she handed me a copy of *InStyle* and said, “Clearly, you need this way more than me.” Cue the peals of laughter, the snickering, and the zinging sound of my reputation plummeting to the center of the earth. A date for the prom was definitely not in my future.

I wished my life would do a 180 and go right for a change. I didn’t expect that change to happen in just one moment.

What was that moment like? Well, picture this...

I'm standing on the front quad, listening to the sound of the flag being lashed against the pole above me, *snap, snap, snap*. As I watch Greta stalk across the icy quad in her could-kill-a-cockroach-high-heels, I think, just let one of them snap. I'd love to see that bully go down *hard*.

She came so close to me that I could've done the snapping myself. I practically heard her breathe out as I watched an icy cloud billow in front of her.

Just as I heard a *snap* over my head – time stretched out like the flag above me – Greta hitting ice, her left foot shooting out in front of her, her arms windmilling to regain her balance – the spectacle of it popping a laugh over my lips as she started to go down – the terror of it twisting her face – catching me off guard with a pull of sympathy – I started into a stooping catch, but her head collided with the base of the flagpole with a sickening cracked-pumpkin thud before I could get myself in place to catch her.

Crumpled on the ground, her blood spreading faster than spilled water, Greta looked so broken and distant. I froze in place, half-standing, half-leaning, doing nothing to help her.

Screams didn't shake me. Running feet didn't rattle me. Mr. Shepard, the vice-principal, took me by the shoulders as Coach Vetter bent over Greta.

"Emma, what happened?" Mr. Shepard asked, but I couldn't find any words. I just stared at Greta bleeding on the ground.

Someone yelled, "Just get her away from here."

I was led to the front office, stumbling while a blur of faces, words, ringing phones, and sirens washed over me. I sat in a chair against the wall, waiting for feeling to return to my limbs. Was that Mrs. Penshaw, the school counselor, talking to me? What was she saying? I could see her lips moving, but no sound reached my ears.

Is it Greta? Is she trying to tell me about Greta? *Is she going to be okay?*

Then I saw my dad, face white, but not with cold. He looked scared. What was he doing here?

"Emma?" I could feel him gripping my arm, shaking me. When did my joints start to hurt?

I looked past him – out the open door of the office, saw the outer door swing open, the white, icy expanse of the quad, then that pool of freezing blood at the base of the flag pole. I felt as if I'd been dragged to the far end of a tunnel.

I felt forced to stand there and wonder, *how did I let it happen?*

She fell right in front of me and I did nothing.

Greta had finally turned me into the ugly, useless idiot she'd been trying to make me into all year long and now it would cost her.

I looked up and asked, "Is she dead?"

Dad hugged me so hard I think he dislocated a shoulder. "She's at the hospital. They're checking her out. She'll be all right. Are you?"

Neither of us were all right.

Greta – the girl with the perfect hair – had to have her head shaved for surgery. She came out with a bald patch and a nasty jagged scar. No memory of the fall. No memory of her crash into the flag pole; no memory of the entire school year. The last thing she remembered was summer training. She forgot her address. Her cell phone number. The foods she liked to eat. The first time I visited her in the hospital, she pulled a cup of chocolate pudding to the edge of her tray then looked up at me with the big eyes of a little girl, "Do I like this?"

I shrugged. I didn't have a clue what Greta liked. I just knew she *didn't* like me.

But I went to see her every day after school – we're talking a literal guilt trip. The doc said things might come back to her with a little help and it seemed like I owed her all the help I could give. We worked on homework, reviewing everything we'd already learned that year. I fell a little behind in my classes, but I didn't care.

One day, I brought sodas and our yearbook so she could reacquaint herself with the kids at school. She'd tap a photo and say, "She looks familiar. Do I have class with her?" or "He's hot. Do you think he's into me?"

Then she turned a page – the theater club. She stared at it for the longest time. I figured she was trying to remember what it was like to be Hermia, but then she rubbed the photo and looked at me, "Man, I wish I had your looks."

"Huh?" I asked, coughing down the sip I'd just taken.

She shrugged, then laughed. "Come on, Emma. I may have a few blank spots, but I remember how the guys used to stare at you in study hall, at the games. If I had half your curls or better yet, if you had half of my pimples..." She burst out laughing. "Listen to me, sounding like an idiot."

Talk about an idiot.

I figured Greta hated me. Couldn't stand the sight of me. In the end, I really *was* the Helena to her Hermia – two pretty girls lost in the woods. I sat down on the bed next to her, pointed to my sprayed in place hair in the cast photo, and said, “If I pull on any one of those curls, all of my hair lifts up like a helmet.”

She laughed. I laughed with her. And we turned the page.