



*Sydney and Calvin  
Have a Baby*



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# 1

THIS IS A STORY of a guy, and a girl, and a baby. Of the three of us, it's rather possible that even the baby is better equipped to tell the story than I, considering that the infant in question possesses his mother's innate ability with the written word. Which, if we're being honest, is a pretty outstanding ability. I, on the other hand, while always having loved a decent read well enough, have never considered myself in any way skilled at writing. But as one party in this equation of ours is still, in fact, a gurgling bundle of soiled nappies, the duty of recounting this tale has fallen to me. Because, despite Sydney's skill in matters such as these, she has resolved ever more to stick solely and entirely to fictional accounts, for reasons you shall come to understand very soon.



Though her story began quite some time earlier, the train wreck of events that really got the ball rolling started in

the hallway of her high school, St. Aloysius Academy. This particular Catholic school was one of those uniform-clad institutions that might make a pass at religious instruction here or there, but you'd probably never guess it if you walked the halls. Just now, Sydney Camden's experience was about to become a case in point.

Today was the day an especially significant banner was to go up. Currently, the drama students were hanging it with painstaking care, asking their spotter whether it needed to go just a bit higher on the left, and having no idea of the tumult they were causing in the life of one poor, brilliant nerd of a seventeen-year-old girl.

The banner read, SPRING PRODUCTION: *IN THE END* — A PLAY BY SYDNEY CAMDEN. Spelled out distinctly for the entire student body to see. This banner-hanging should probably have been a triumphant moment for Sydney. But it was decidedly not.

When she had determined to go all out and write a full-length play as her English term project last semester, she had expected a typically outstanding grade, perhaps some constructive but gentle criticism if she was lucky (or the assurance that not a thing about it needed changing if she was *really* lucky—but no need for crazy dreams here). What she definitely hadn't expected, though, was for her enthusiastic English teacher to send her play straight to the drama teacher, and for these two teachers to then agree that it should be performed as the spring production. The matter had been all but decided before she'd even given them the go-ahead. And certainly they'd had no reason to suspect she would hesitate. Because an actual, real performance was every playwright's dream, was it not?

Apparently, it was not. Because, though she'd gone along with it and given consent for her play to be performed,

Sydney rightly suspected that it was going to make her social life that much more hellish. Not that she had a habit of wallowing in its hellishness, exactly. But even though she rather tended toward a general absorption in the stories she was writing and creating throughout her daily life, the hellishness of her social life was pretty hard to miss.

Let's take a peek at her backstory and see just why this was the way of things for her, shall we?

Ever since she was a small child, Sydney had had one passion in life: writing stories. She had not chosen it so much as it had chosen her. As a very little girl, she had composed stories in her head long before she could physically write them, and she had (probably quite precociously) requested her mother supply her with a voice recorder so that she would be able to compose these masterpieces of hers in appropriate privacy without the necessity of a cumbersome, kid-to-mom dictation. At age four.

Once she learned how to use a pen and paper, the tales flowed all the more. She began with simple stories of princesses and gallant heroes saving them, of fighting dragons and adventure, perhaps a few modeled after her favorite Disney movies. But it wasn't long before the quality of her writing was well beyond that typical of her age.

Her parents didn't quite know what to make of all this (we'll get to them shortly), but her aunt, her very favorite Aunt Lisa who was about to graduate college with a writing degree at the time, hopped right onto the task of getting this little prodigy published. It turned out to be a very simple task to accomplish and served to whet Sydney's appetite for success in her apparently destined field.

Being caught up in her world of stories did, of course, make it a bit difficult for Sydney to find friends at school. And her loneliness only fed her desire to write beautiful,

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moving stories of friendship and love, in a completely unconscious desire to fill the void.

Really, by mid-grade school, despite having a few friendly acquaintances here and there, she'd only ever had one friend: a girl named Kendall. But alas, this friendship was destined to come to a smashing halt after a very brief time.

Kendall and Sydney got along quite well around age eight for the span of twenty-six days at the start of the school year, until Sydney unintentionally but quite thoroughly pissed Kendall off by earning their teacher's massive praise for a short play they'd each been assigned to write. It was a wonderful moment for Sydney, as she realized how much she loved the dramatic form. But Kendall was not used to being out-shown in any area of life, and certainly not accustomed to sharing the praise of her teachers. So when Sydney's play blew Kendall's clearly out of the water, as evidenced by their teacher's truthful and enthusiastic response, Kendall had to console herself somehow. This is how she did it: "Well at least I don't have to wear glasses and have terrible frizzy hair, and at least I can have as many friends as I want since I'm not obsessed with writing stupid stories. That's like all she's good for." And in a strange way, Kendall's mean words, spoken not directly *to* Sydney but to another student quite clearly loud enough for Sydney to overhear, became a sort of prophesy, in that hearing them caused Sydney to lose what little confidence she had in her ability to make friends.

Sydney's pursuit of writing began to take on a new level of almost frantic study. For she was not the type to stand up to someone like Kendall, nor necessarily to even acknowledge that Kendall had caused her pain. But young Sydney would certainly be darned before she'd ever let anything get in the way now of what was clearly, to her, her one purpose in life.

By the time she got to middle school her social life was looking bleak, and her advanced brain power was making standard public-school classes tearfully boring. So, briefly, her mother tried a stint of homeschooling. Despite this improving the tearful boredom issue as she was now able to jump into such things as a college-level study of Shakespeare, it caused other problems. Like a massive clashing of personalities between Sydney and her mother. Her mother, never having anticipated raising such a single-minded and intense daughter, tried to micromanage Sydney into broader pursuits, including areas of social interaction that Sydney had long ago concluded were beyond her. And Sydney, for her part, had a terribly difficult time treating her mother like a teacher and instead just felt irritated at her mother's increased controllingness. So after then suffering through one more year of public junior high, Sydney was relieved to finally enter high school at St. Aloysius, a private college-preparatory academy that she assumed would be an oasis of academic challenges.

Even though by the age of fourteen she was developing a few normal-person side interests—late '90s pop music already nearly out of vogue by the year she was born, for one; and experimenting with making her hair less frizzy, for another—she was still extremely devoted to her craft of writing. The school was obviously Catholic, but at that point in her life she cared very little one way or another about such things as religion. Her main excitement at entering St. Aloysius was that she hoped to find a student body similarly interested in academia. It was just possible that she wouldn't be the lone smarty-pants anymore and might even grow in her skill from the challenge that being surrounded by intellectual equals could offer.

How wrong she was.

Not only did her childhood frenemy Kendall come along and join her there, but Sydney also met a whole slew of similarly ill-behaved teenage Catholics. The school's academics were certainly an improvement and a welcome challenge, but socially speaking, things were as bad as ever. At least initially.

Two weeks into her first semester, however, things took a promising turn in the form of one Winnie Smith. The two of them had no initial spark of friendship until their English teacher purposefully paired them for a research project on Victorian poetry. Purposefully, because Winnie was already on track to fail the class, while Sydney was running academic circles around everyone.

Winnie was a bit of a strange creature. Even in everyday life matters, Winnie was anything but a genius, though perhaps made to seem even less so in comparison to her new friend. The Watson to Sydney's Sherlock, if you will. But the strange thing was that, though Sydney was clearly Winnie's intellectual superior, Winnie had at least quite a few of the makings of a popular girl and yet chose to hang with Sydney. Whether it was gratitude for that early passing English grade or that simple but inexplicable synergy of personalities that can happen sometimes, the two of them had been bestest chums ever since that first project together.

And now, on this worst of all mornings that should have been glorious for Sydney, she was ever so grateful to have a friend like Winnie.

The two of them were presently staring at the all-important banner. But they quickly started walking away, no words needed between the two of them to discuss that their goal should be avoiding any extra attention drawn to the banner.

But that mattered little. Everyone saw it. As if to prove

this, a slew of immaturely malicious jocks were joking just loud enough for her to overhear:

“That’s her, isn’t it? Author of *In the End*?”

“Wonder what it’s about. You think like the end of her shot at a sex life?” Followed by hilarious laughter.

Sydney’s face clouded, her heart plummeted, and she fought the urge to look back at them. Fought it valiantly. Pretending the joke didn’t sicken her, she said quietly to Winnie, “It’s not even clever. Just immature.”

Winnie, having no real convictions on whether Sydney was correct or not, was all support: “Totally. They should *grow up* already,” aimed loudly in the offending jocks’ direction.

The unfortunate thing was that all this distracted Sydney enough that she didn’t see Kendall’s slyly placed foot.

Sydney went down, blushing terribly as she tried to right herself. And Kendall went straight to a look of fake pity. “Oh, poor Sydney. Must be too distracted thinking up her little stories to watch where she’s going.” Before Sydney could get about ignoring this, Kendall went on, ostentatiously announcing, “Guys, watch out! Give her room! Don’t get in her way or you’ll block her muse!”

Winnie immediately grabbed Sydney’s arm in support, snapping to Kendall, “Jealous much?”

To which Kendall responded by increasing the nasty: “Oh that’s right. I’m so jealous of all *that*.” And she subtly advanced with each word: “I’m jealous of her frizzy hair, and her zits, and her glasses. And her giant, giant brain.”

Sydney tried her darnedest to keep from reacting. In her mind and her will, Sydney was stone, as strong as any heroine she’d ever written of, from her recent work all the way back to her Disney-imitation days.

But her outward demeanor couldn't quite reach such lofty heights. As Kendall smugly backed off, Sydney couldn't help but zip away into a nearby bathroom as the only way to ensure that no one would see if she started crying despite her near-heroic efforts at sealed tear ducts. Behind her, she could hear Winnie cussing Kendall out, but it did little to hearten Sydney. She knew there was only one thing to be done to ensure she returned to her outwardly placid, unconcerned self in the matter of minutes she had until the next period.

The bathroom was mercifully empty. Sydney went inside a stall anyway. And she got out her notebook.

She put pen to paper and got started.

It wasn't so much that she was rewriting her present circumstances just then. She'd tried that in the past, somewhere around age twelve when she'd placed a character who was literally herself into a lovely and happily ended story, one in which the heroine found a perfect true love slash guy best friend and had plenty of the sort of laughs and fun and quality time that made her heart happy. And, lovely as that story had been, writing it had seriously started to mess with Sydney's head. She had quickly discovered that she could only put so much of herself into her characters before her reality started to get a little hazily intertwined with theirs. It had tripped her out, and she had learned her lesson. For the time being.

So now, instead of writing something like that, all she was doing was jotting down some details of the new plot she had been concocting. Something very Jane Austen-esque with a terribly happy ending. Even if she couldn't insert herself per se into the story, she could still immerse herself in something happy in the hope that her own life would someday take such a turn, and that hope might be more than sufficient distraction from her present strife.

It worked. As she'd known it would.

When Winnie popped in to the loo a few moments later, Sydney was more or less herself again. "Syd? Are you okay?"

"Never better," she exaggerated, shoving her notebook back into her bag and emerging from the stall.

"Big talker," Winnie said, falling in with her as they headed back to the hall.

"What bitchy tormentor? What embarrassing banner? Nothing to see here," Sydney bantered back, her spirits lifting.

"Maybe you should just like make a list. Of who I need to tell off or get back at? And I'll come up with their punishments."

"That doesn't sound creepy or Unabomber-ish at all."

They were nearly parting ways at a fork in the hall. "Text it to me in class!" Winnie said by way of goodbye.

"Very funny," Sydney called to her, because they both knew that Sydney's nerdily serious devotion to academia would never allow her to be distracted by her phone in class, while Winnie regularly made an art of it.

Winnie waved and trotted away to her classroom. Sydney continued on through the near-empty hallway toward her own, and her mood was so much improved by the combination of her story and Winnie's light, fun friendship that it rather changed her outlook on life for the moment. So much so that the bizarre and amazing event that was coming her way would feel suspiciously legitimate.

## 2

SOME RATHER DREARY BUSINESS on Sydney's end was about to get underway, though she didn't know it yet. So let's skip to something happier for a moment . . . Or perhaps my mother's deathbed.

I was sitting in a London hospital beside her, both of us still in a bit of shock that this was happening to us so quickly. We'd had a good seventeen and three quarters years together, all alone in a way, she and I. We'd had about as happy a life together as a teenage chap and his single mum could have, and we had always gotten on together quite a bit better than the average pair in our state of life might have. And now it was to come prematurely to a close. A mere seven weeks ago she'd been diagnosed with advanced uterine cancer. The doctors had given her a month, and she'd been hanging on, neither one of us quite ready to let go.

Just now, she was going on through the pain and drugs, trying to plan out the rest of my life for me. We'd had a bit of time, very small bit, to discuss it before she got to this

rather agonized point, but she was intent on making sure I was clear on the details once again now.

It seemed she had a sister. Who knew. Certainly not me, as the closest thing to extended family I'd ever encountered at this point was the old woman next door to our flat who'd been fond of giving me lollies and pinching my cheeks since the days when my cheeks had had pinchable chub. Certainly no one with our blood.

But impending death can unlock worlds of secrets, and in those odd number of days we had, between when we knew and the big *d*-day, my mother's lips became magically unsealed.

There were two of them, her sister Jem and herself. Twins, if you can believe it. I almost couldn't. You shared a womb, but have had no contact for the duration of my entire lifetime? What is wrong with you, woman? Apparently a lot.

Mum had gotten pregnant with me at seventeen. By some man she could barely speak of without a grimace. When I'd asked about him at times in the past, she had typically changed the subject and otherwise indicated that she was about as likely to take up the trapeze professionally as she was to tell me all about him. But on one rare occasion, she had indulged me with the information that he was an irresponsible sort of fellow, none too keen on the idea of my being born at all. The bugger. And that was essentially all I had ever known about him or the circumstances of my birth.

Now, loose-lipped as she was becoming, she still was veering as far away from the subject of the man as possible and was instead telling me further details that she felt were more important for my present and near future without her.

It seemed that her parents, dear Gram and Gramps, had wanted none of this business and had threatened to kick my mum out, if she didn't, er, get rid of the problem (i.e., me in her womb). Mum and Jem, close as they were, fought about it. Jem couldn't bear the thought of living with their smashingly jolly parents alone, so she begged Mum to do as they asked.

Poor woman had it coming at her from each and every side. And yet, here I am.

Growing up, I'd learned bits and pieces of all this. Very small bits. She'd kept it more or less under lock and key. It was obviously pretty painful for her, so at a certain age I'd learned to take the hint and stopped asking for the details. But now here they were, in nearly overwhelming number.

By this point in time as she lay dying, Gram and Gramps were dead or senile (can't say I remember which was which), so there was no getting them involved in the business—the business of my mother's death, that is. But Jem wasn't going to get off so easy.

Though the two of them had been quite out of touch in the years that followed my mother's "disgrace" (i.e., me), Mum had been able to piece together that Jem had married a wealthy American businessman and moved to the States at one point or another. And apparently there's nothing like impending death to break a grudge of years, because my mother actually rang her twin sister up. Now *that* was a doozy of a call. Especially the conclusion of it: "Say, now that I'm dying and all that, think you could take my son, the former cause of our decades-long separation, to live with you and your family, in your high-class American home?" I'm paraphrasing, of course. But that was her plan. And obviously, one can hardly refuse a dying sister.

Back to the present, then, as I sat by her deathbed, knowing

that it was actually about the last of our alone moments together. For this now-infamous Aunt Jem was about to descend upon us in a matter of minutes.

“I do think it’s more than possible that you’ll end up loving it there and becoming smashingly happy,” Mum was saying. Must be her drugs talking. I tried to muster an agreeing smile. But it was a task. “Promise me you’ll try.”

Deathbed and all, I could hardly refuse, as daunting a goal as it sounded. “Yes, Mum. Of course I’ll try.”

“You’ll be off to university in less than a year, so you’ll really only need to carry on with this arrangement a matter of months, you know.”

“Yes Mum. I know. Please let’s not waste time rehashing it. You’ve no need to worry about me.”

She smiled. “You’re right. Those American girls all have dreadful crushes on you dashing British men, so you’ll have no choice but to make the most of it.” My forced smile in return. “Okay, think I’ll die now.” And she closed her eyes.

I didn’t bat an eye. She wasn’t really dead. This was just her way.

She opened her eyes again. “No seriously, Calvin. Go find the priest so I can confess what a dreadful mum I’ve been to you and be on my way peacefully.”

I leaned to kiss her on the forehead before leaving. “A lovely mum.”



Well I did as she asked, and then found myself waiting outside the room during the confession, when this alleged aunt arrived.

I knew her immediately, even though the two of them

were very much not identical. Because their eyes were. Only, Aunt Jem's eyes were wrecked, saddened to their retinas, in contrast to my mum's, whose were distant but peaceful as she was basically just eager to be on her way to the next life by now.

This woman stopped a good three yards from me.

She stared at me. So I stared back.

And suddenly she burst into tears and threw her arms around my neck. I was taken aback briefly but quickly came to and started to give her little pats, a bit conscious of glances from onlookers.

"So sorry," she sniffed, trying to pull herself together. In a moment, there was no *trying* about it. She was a stiff stranger again. "I know you're Calvin. Obviously. Or I wouldn't have . . ." She made a vague gesture that was supposed to be indicative of her recent dissolvment into tears. "I stalked you on the internet. Isn't that what you kids call it?"

I cracked a small smile. "Quite so."

She glanced at the closed door. "Is she . . .?"

"Confessing."

She looked surprised. "Ah. Right. Makes sense, considering. Yes then." An awkward silence ensued. Until she pounced on it with, "You're seventeen? Just like my son, Josh."

I nodded. Something about this information struck me as strange, but only in that vague, indistinct way of something being buried under more important distractions. I could have given her some encouragement to keep talking, and maybe the point would have worked its way to the forefront of my mind, but I was hardly feeling like making the effort

to behave in the outgoing way that usually came naturally to me.

Luckily the door opened just then to save me. Father Stone popped out, motioning us in. "We're through."

Auntie sighed relief. "Splendid." And strode inside.

She stopped cold at the sight of Mum, shrunken and . . . well, dying. "Jan!" Aunt Jem gasped.

My mum smiled weakly in response. "I don't mean to sound dramatic, but I do think you've made it just in time."

Aunt Jem hurried to her side, grabbed her outstretched hand.

And to my horror, the priest started saying something that I quickly realized were last rites.

I dropped to my knees beside her bed, reached desperately for her other hand, and realized I was too far away. Well that would hardly do. I scrambled up to change sides. My dying mother caught my eye as I did so, and I swear she nearly laughed at me through her agony.

Only her. Only the two of us could share a little joke at such a time. I nearly laughed back, but choked on it with a pang, as a feeling I'd never known washed over me.

That feeling was loneliness.



We stumbled through the next few days together somehow, Aunt Jem and I. Burial arrangements, funeral planning, the will. That last one should have been pretty simple—fairly broke, one heir. But it seemed my mother was actually in possession of a couple thousand pounds in savings at the time of her death, so I now had a bit of a college fund started. Didn't I feel privileged. If only I weren't about to embark on a journey halfway across the world to live with blood-strangers.

I cringed, noticing the bitter tone of my thoughts, the lack of gratitude. I could be out on the street alone, after all. Certainly that would be worse. Well, probably that would be worse.

I was musing these all-around pleasant thoughts as Aunt Jem and I finished up the last of the packing. Mum was in the ground, all the loose ends very nearly tied, and I was placing the last of my worldly belongings into my suitcase. My room, my former room that is, was bare. Aunt Jem had taken care of donating all the furniture and my mother's now-useless things during the intervening days. And we had a flight to catch in a couple hours.

I don't consider myself to be poetic, typically speaking. I've always been much more mathematically and scientifically inclined than toward anything imaginative. And yet, as I sat there in the emptiness, I couldn't help but think it symbolic. I felt as if my very heart might start to echo.

But I stood, ready to go. Because what my mum had wanted most, in her final days and really all her life, was my happiness. And she had sounded highly convinced that this was the surest route to that end. So I would do my darnedest, as these Americans might say, to honor her hopes by giving it my all.

"Quite through, then?" Aunt Jem was asking from the doorway.

"Yes. I guess so."

"Splendid. Cab's waiting."

I ignored the part of me that wanted desperately to linger a moment, say goodbye properly to the small room in the smaller apartment that had been my one and only home. No indeed, no time for threatening tears or fears. On my way, then.



The flight from London to Seattle, where Aunt Jem lived, was ten hours long. I armed myself with music and books, and I felt fairly confident that Aunt Jem wouldn't be busying herself about trying for some bonding moments between the two of us. If the death of a dearly loved one and its aftermath can't bond two people, I would venture to think that nothing can.

Well, I was venturing to think that nothing would, then, for Aunt Jem and me. Since that brief near-hysterical hug she'd given me in the hospital, it had been all business and distance between us. Considering what I assumed was some danger of those near-hysterics starting again if ever she were to crack a little in her demeanor, I'd tried to keep my emotional distance as well. So I was surprised when, getting settled into our seats on the plane (first class, compliments of Aunt Jem's rich husband), she closed her eyes, sighed, and said to me, "I've a feeling this will all work out for the best."

I glanced sharply at her, pausing to put in my ear buds. And I admit my first instinct was angry shock: "My mother is dead, you barely got to say goodbye to your estranged sister, I'm headed halfway across the world, and I don't bloody see how this could be anything but miserable for anyone involved, no matter what you or my dead mother might think!"

I said none of this, of course. I just mustered up a tight smile in response, a little nod maybe, and was about to carry on with the ear buds, when she went on. "I mean, of course you could always come back here to London for university in a few months, if you wanted. Surely this must be hard to leave your home."

I swallowed. The truth was I hardly felt like I had any

kind of home anymore, with my dear mum gone. I was leaving friends here, of course, but no one life-alteringly special. As much as it must paint me as a terrible mum's boy to say it, the woman truly was my best friend in life. So I suspected that coming back here for university in the fall would actually just be a piling-on of presumably somewhat healed pain.

She continued, "But you've also got us as family in the States now. Not to mention that that's actually where your father was from as well. So hopefully it can come to be a home to you eventually."

Come again? She'd said it like a throwaway line. Nothing of huge consequence. "I'm sorry, what was that? My father?"

She nodded. "He was an American university student in London for a study abroad. I thought you must have known."

I shook my head abruptly. No, I certainly had not known.

I managed another tight smile in attempt to sustain her friendly turn, but she seemed through with the topic and ready to get on with her own in-flight amusements, so I carried on with the ear buds. Lots for me to think about for the next ten hours, en route to the place where my story was about to begin and my life to change radically.

I DIDN'T KNOW IT yet at this point, but Sydney was the reason my life was about to change radically.

She hadn't the foggiest notion of what was getting started in her own life, either. It started innocuously enough.

"Sydney."

She heard her named called out behind her in the school hallway but thought she must have misheard. With Winnie off to her own classroom and nearly no one about, it seemed impossible that someone was calling to her, by name no less, rather than by insult. She did pause, briefly, and glance back. But upon seeing that the only ones around were some jocks, she internally shook her head and continued on.

"Hey, wait up. It's Sydney, right?" And footsteps approached.

So she glanced back again, an instant too slowly to see a look shared among them. Instead, all she saw was Josh

Simpson trotting toward her. Josh Simpson. Momentarily, she was confused. Because Josh Simpson was a guy upon whom, in some other reality where it wouldn't have been heartbreakingly pointless, she could have developed a crush. But in this reality, she would never have dared. Because Josh Simpson was essentially a god of everything at St. Aloysius: looks, popularity, athleticism, himself. So when she heard him calling to *her*, it could only mean one thing, and her spirits were about to plummet back to the depths of the terrible morning again, in certainty of further torments. But instead he surprised her: "Wanna go out with me Saturday night?"

Sydney stared at him in shock for a moment before her blush started and she stammered, "Me?"

He flashed a charming smile. "That's the idea. We'll see a movie or something. I think number ten in that one car chase franchise just came out, right?"

Never mind that watching number ten in that one car chase franchise was not Sydney's idea of a fun night. Never mind that at all. That thought was the smallest of tiny blips on her racing brain. Because a boy was asking her out, here in the middle of a student body where she'd only ever found one friend and had long ago given up on the idea of finding a boyfriend. And it wasn't just any boy. It was freaking Josh Simpson. It almost did not compute.

Almost. Because her romantic heart was firing on all cylinders. This was a girl who'd been dreaming of princes coming to her rescue since she was three. And while a guy asking a girl out to a movie might not sound too much like the romanticism of her dreams, it was so far beyond anything she had yet encountered in life that it thrilled her. In the approximately four seconds that elapsed before she answered, she couldn't help but think that finally, at long last, her happy ending was beginning.

So she smiled back, actually feeling for once that she might have as lovely a smile as her mother liked to attest. And she nodded. "Okay."

The bell was about to ring, and both knew it. "Awesome," he called, trotting backward toward his buddies and their classroom. "Wait, let me get your number." And he trotted back toward her, phone out.

Feeling still more than a little stunned, she quickly recited her number to him. And, without even realizing she was doing it, she analyzed him with her writer's brain and chalked up his forgetting to get her number to some kind of cute excitement on his own part. The thought made her relax a little.

And as she then carried on quickly to her own classroom, she dwelled on the amazed but exhilarated feeling, barely giving her natural doubt about *why* a second thought. Because she knew why, she just knew it. That finally, a guy really and truly liked her, and she was getting her chance at love and happiness.



For the first time in her academic life, Sydney found herself distracted in class and rather tempted to try and sneak a text to her best friend like any regular high school student. Of course she didn't, but the thought entered her mind.

And immediately upon seeing Winnie after class, she spilled her news in one breath. Winnie was amazed and excited for her, but did have to express aloud her confusion: "Holy crap, where did this come from?" Sydney shrugged back dramatically but couldn't keep the smile off her face. Until Winnie said, "Hey can I watch you break the news to your parents?"

Now Sydney sighed, shut her locker. “Been stealing candy from babies lately?”

Winnie laughed. “So can your mom like still do a cart-wheel? Will she whip out the old pom-poms? Make up a cheer?”

“I think she will legitimately try to take a video.”

“Watch, he’ll lean in to kiss you, and surprise! There’s Maryanne in the back seat.”

“You are so not helping right now.”

They started walking toward their calculus class. “What about your dad?” Winnie asked.

Sydney shook her head. “He’ll say, ‘Splendid. And how are his grades in physics? Will you and Josh be studying?’”

Winnie leaned in slyly and said in a faux-sexy voice, “Each other!”

Sydney shoved her, laughing but kind of uncomfortable. “Stop.”

Winnie stopped, but said, “No seriously, just don’t even tell them then.”

“Would it be terrible if I told them I was going to your house and had him pick me up there?”

Sydney felt a twinge of guilt over the idea as she said it, but she immediately squelched it as Winnie said, “Dude, do it. Save yourself a world of hassle.”



And so, Sydney proceeded with the plan to keep this first date from her parents, convinced it was not a big deal, rationalizing that her father certainly wouldn’t care, and that her mother would make a much bigger deal of the matter than

necessary. So instead, she focused on dealing with the more pressing matter with them: her play.

Actually, she would have much preferred that they not even know about that, either. But she knew this wouldn't be the case. There was little hope they would be in the dark about it for long, since Aunt Lisa had already sent her a congratulatory text.

As a fellow writer, Lisa had assumed, naturally, that it was spectacular news. Sydney's big break, so to speak. To Sydney, though, Lisa's well-meant text only seemed to mock her even further—how in the world had Aunt Lisa managed to hear about the play? Well, Aunt Lisa was a reporter. And it seemed that her paper was set to do a profile on the talented Sydney Camden.

Wouldn't that just make Sydney's classmates giddy.

While the looming date with Josh did definitely lessen the sting of impending ridicule, she was eager to get the bothersome conversation with her parents about her mockable achievement over with.

So that day after school, despite it's being Friday afternoon, Sydney took to her preferred manner of studying, out on her front lawn at home. The gray Seattle weather didn't always permit it, but this afternoon she was happy to see not a cloud in the sky. She brought her backpack full of things out, eager to pass the time until her parents got home. She was tempted to let her mind wander, but she said to her mind, *No!* and commanded it to channel her (very much alive) father, who was brilliant and intense in a rather abnormal measure. She often used thoughts of his brilliance as a sort of pep talk to herself when it came time to focus on school, particularly on the math- and science-based pursuits that came somewhat less instantly to her than the literary ones. But the truth was that the events of the day were very

much inciting her heart toward her stories. So she sat cross-legged in her little nest of homework, with her notebook nearby for sudden bursts of inspiration.

About two and a half hours in to her nesting, if you will, a car pulled into the driveway. Sydney didn't look up, because she knew without doing so that it was only her hovering, perfect mother, arriving home right on schedule.

Maryanne Camden was one of those effervescent wonder-women who seemed quite able to do it all. She worked as a successful advertising executive, kept a picture-perfect home in a good neighborhood, had what appeared to be a top-notch marriage, and doted on her only daughter. All great news for Sydney. Especially when added to Maryanne's complete lack of awareness that Sydney often felt smothered.

Maryanne got out of her spotlessly clean high-end family sedan carrying an uncharacteristic bag of takeout.

"Oh my goodness! Sweetie! I heard the news! About your play!" she called to her daughter across the lawn.

Sydney suppressed a sigh and asked, "From Aunt Lisa?"

"No," her mom was saying as she juggled the food with some work materials and an empty coffee cup. "I heard about it from Kendall's dad. We just got an account with his company. So tell me everything, baby! This is so amazing! I even got takeout to celebrate." She waved the bag with much more exuberance than Sydney felt was called for. And went on: "What's your play called? What's it about? Are you gonna write a sequel?"

Sydney started gathering her books while trying to think of a way to avoid talking about her supposed accomplishment at all. But she was saved from answering by her dad pulling in.

Sydney's father Robert was of a different but also smashingly healthy parenting type. He was a thirty-eight-year-old nuclear physicist with high standards and what often seemed a total inability to emerge from his cold, scientific shell to show affection. To him, it was only natural that he should have a genius/prodigy as a child. It only baffled him as to why her field of excellence was so much more artistic in nature than his own.

The instant he emerged from his car: "Oh my goodness, Sydney, tell your father the exciting news!" from Maryanne.

"What news is this?" he asked in the sort of monotone that probably signified excitement. He glanced at the takeout. "Are we celebrating something?"

"Definitely! Tell him, Sydney."

Sydney reluctantly began, "Well I wrote this play for my English term project last semester—"

"And it's so good, they're performing it at school as the spring production!" her mother interrupted.

As they headed inside the house, Robert replied, "Very good. Promising news, Sydney."

Sydney paused on her way to the counter, glancing at her dad, maybe sort of hoping for a little more.

There was no more.

Robert went about removing his shoes, taking off his suit jacket, putting away his briefcase. Not even a congratulatory or approving glance toward his daughter.

So she crammed her feelings down deep inside where they seemed to belong, and she tried to laugh to herself at how closely his reaction mirrored her guess to Winnie earlier about what he'd say if she were to tell him about her date. And she set her books down, moving to join them at the table.

The three of them mumbled a quick, standard Catholic grace and began eating the Chinese. A rather stiff but typical affair. Except that Maryanne was still bubbling over with smothering excitement.

“So tell us more about it, Sydney.”

What was there to tell? Certainly not the reactions of her peers to the news. Former high school cheerleader Maryanne was concerned enough knowing that Winnie was Sydney’s only friend. No need to heighten her concern by providing any indication that Sydney’s social life was much bleaker than her mother ever suspected.

In truth, Sydney was so eager to escape giving any hint about the reality of the situation that she actually considered changing the subject with news of her date. Certainly it would set her mother’s mind at ease a bit, telling her that, oh look! Sydney might be able to find a boyfriend on her own after all.

Over the past couple years, Maryanne had been attempting, with supreme forced casualness, to get Sydney together with some nice young men who were sons of Maryanne’s work friends. And the fact that Maryanne typically dropped the news of this teenage chap attending an evening’s small dinner party along with his parents mere moments before the doorbell was rung did nothing to make it a pleasant experience for Sydney. Once the evening’s events got going, the mixture of Sydney’s nerves and inexperience, the fellow’s general unwillingness to be there at all, and their bloody parents watching their every move, always brought the whole thing to exactly naught. Sydney didn’t doubt that her mother’s intentions were fine, great even. But what is it they say about good intentions? The road to hell and all that. Well, sometimes Sydney felt as if her mother’s intentions were making her life rather hellish indeed.

So it was tempting just then to tell her mother triumphantly that a boy had asked her out. A cute, popular boy, in fact. And that—see?—she was plenty socially adjusted, not too focused on her writing, and doing just fine.

But Sydney couldn't do it. This date meant too much to her. She didn't want to chance ruining things or appearing sillier to Josh than he might already have thought her from her status at school, by having her freaking mother making a grand ta-do about the date. Eventually, Sydney reasoned, she would tell her mother, and her father too in case he cared. And she would put her mother at ease. But for now, Sydney was going to have to indulge her with information about her play, information that had nothing to do with the reaction of her classmates.

"Um, it's called *In the End*, and it's a romance that's a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, told from the daughter Miranda's point of view."

"That's great, honey! What did everyone at school say?"

She quickly recounted some details about her English teacher's enthusiastic response and how the drama teacher loved it, talking as quickly as she could to prevent her mother from jumping in with more questions.

And then Sydney took an easy out by asking her father a question about physics. She was taking AP Physics this year solely for moments like this when she needed a diversion, and she was finding the class just challenging enough that she was able to ask him for help occasionally rather than take slightly longer to figure it out herself.

Thus, though she didn't know it, Sydney began setting herself up for circumstances that would prevent her from knowing just what do when things went terribly awry.



Everything went well, to start with. Through a careful act of timing coordination the next evening, Sydney and Winnie planned things so that Sydney would come over to her house after Winnie's mom left for her night-shift work, but would still have plenty of time in which Winnie could help Sydney with a bit of hair and makeup before Josh picked her up.

So far so good. Sydney's parents were none the wiser as she set out on her first real date with the most popular guy in school.

Now, Sydney really was a sensible girl. So she acknowledged to herself, as she sat in the theater for two hours of mindless action movie, that it was possible her expectations were too high. Because Josh was pleasant, fine, but not as breathtakingly, fantastically amazing a date as she had envisioned.

He'd made some small talk in the car, mostly about the school sports he excelled in, bought the tickets and popcorn, and then draped his arm around her by halfway through the previews. This obviously thrilled her a little, briefly. But eventually it got kind of uncomfortable, and she didn't quite know how to do anything about it.

Then, she thought perhaps at least this movie would turn out to be a fun experience with him. Whenever she and Winnie went to movies, they would talk and laugh, making fun and enjoying the film together, sometimes to the irritation of the other theater patrons. But all Josh did was watch, glued to the screen, and she found herself bored at crash, after chase sequence, after crash, after hot girl appearance.

Still, she remained optimistic about the drive back to

Winnie's. Before she knew it, she was on the porch with him, anxiously anticipating her first ever goodnight kiss.

But that anticipation didn't last long, because he was shoving his mouth onto hers immediately. She tried not to gasp, or breathe, or move. And she nearly died with relief as it ended, though she could hardly even admit it to herself. He was flashing his enchanting smile at her, saying something about having had a great time and he would call her. She nodded. And went inside.

She closed the door behind her, leaned against it, and saw Winnie's eager face.

"Details, woman! Speak!"

"Well..." Sydney began, plopping onto the couch.

"How amazing was it? I saw that kiss!"

Sydney cringed a little, certain she must have messed up the kiss somehow for it to have been so lame. And she delved into a detailed overview of the whole night for Winnie.

"Don't worry, first dates always suck," Winnie reassured her when she'd finished. "Just wait, second date will be perfect."

"You really think so?"

"I know so. How could it not be?"

Sydney was mildly reassured, though not entirely. The amazing love story of her dreams would not have begun with such little spark of connection. But she decided to take Winnie's advice and see what followed. This meant, though, that the cautionary part of her continued to hold off mentioning anything to her parents. If this was all to quickly come to nothing, she reasoned there was no point in dealing with what would probably be a lot of unpleasantness.

The weekend passed with no further contact from Josh, and she was beginning to think her misgivings about their belonging together were mutual. Monday morning dawned, and she was eager for school, hoping that if nothing else her uncertainty would be ended one way or another.

What she didn't expect was to find that the entire student body seemed to be staring at her. Apparently, news had spread that she had been on a date with Josh.

Beside her, Winnie was elated. But Sydney, despite the initial excitement, was worried. "What if it goes nowhere?" she whispered to Winnie.

"Worry, worry, worry. Come on, Syd. This could be amazing for you. Maybe you'll be popular now. I think it's about time you started pulling your social status weight in our friendship, because if we're being honest you've kind of been pulling me down for years..."

Sydney was only half listening, because she spotted Josh headed her way.

"Sydney. How's it going?"

She smiled in response, conscious that everyone was staring at them. She even noticed Kendall in her peripherals, starring daggers their way.

"Wanna come hang out with me and some friends tonight at Luigi's? We're gonna order like twenty pizzas and stake out that whole back room and maybe try to study for Collins's lit test if we get ambitious."

Sydney's eyes suddenly lit up. She really was a nerd to her core, because this sounded like a much more enjoyable evening to her.

So once again without letting her parents in on it, she went out with Josh. This time, she still felt awkward and very uncertain of how she felt about him, but she had

a bunch of characteristic Sydney fun by explaining the first four chapters of *The Scarlet Letter* to a bunch of jocks. Now, some of these were the very people who often made massive fun of her, but she powered through her feelings of humiliation and bitterness, focusing on the fact that, for whatever reason right now, they were treating her like a human being. It was a lovely feeling, and so when Josh asked her out for a third date that weekend to kick off spring break, she agreed.

To her mind, all was well with the world. Because, in her innocence, she had no idea of what was lurking just beneath the surface of all this.

The bad news: You've reached the end of this free preview of *Sydney and Calvin Have a Baby*.

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