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Opening extract from
The Anti-Prom

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Please note that this extract has sexually explicit content.

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Bliss

He doesn't kiss me like that.

That's the first thing I think when I find Kaitlin Carter getting to second base with my boyfriend in the back of our rental limo.

Followed closely by, *Is she wearing any panties?*

And then, *Ew, ew, EW!*

I watch through the open door in a daze. Kaitlin is straddling Cameron's lap, kind of ... grinding at him, her pinned updo thwacking against the roof in time to the rap track they have playing on the pimped-out stereo. I blink. A half hour ago, we were slow-dancing inside, my cheek resting against the crisp lapel of Cameron's tux. Now, his jacket is crumpled on the seat beside them, next to her strapless bra and the stray lipstick I came back out here to collect.

I try to leave, but for some reason, I can't look away.

She's unbuttoning his shirt now, as he gropes at every available inch of flesh. And Kaitlin's dress provides plenty of it to grope. We hit every mall in a hundred-mile radius to find these dresses, but while my mom vetoed everything slit way up my thigh and down my chest, Kaitlin walked away with a clinging pink jersey thing that could probably get her arrested in some states.

Cameron sure appreciates the easy access. As I watch, his hands creep up her thighs, pushing the fabric higher, until—

I reel back, freaked.

Make that third base.

“Omigod, Bliss, where WERE you?” Nikki pounces the minute I get back inside the country club. “The DJ totally promised to play that song we love. I've been looking everywhere for you!”

I can't find the words, but I'm lucky: Nikki is too high on prom to care. Not even pausing for breath, she drags me through the gleaming marble lobby overflowing with flowers and floating balloons. “And Kaitlin totally ditched me, too! I know you guys are, like, BFFs or whatever, but this is *prom*! You should be hanging out with us. Bliss? Hey, earth to B!” She snaps her fingers in front of my face.

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” I pause. Nikki's waiting, her forehead creased in a tiny frown, and for a moment I think about telling her everything. It would be all over this place

in minutes – no, wait. The way Nikki gossips, everyone would think Kaitlin had thrown an orgy with Cameron, the limo driver, *and* the pimply freshman valet before she even has time to pull that bra on again.

But just as quickly as the thought comes, I push it down again. Winding up the biggest scandal of the night is so not on my prom agenda. “I was, umm, with Cameron,” I tell her, arranging my face into a perky grin. “You know, just getting some private time.”

“Nice!” Nikki gives me this knowing look. “But seriously, how hot do the guys look in their tuxes? They should make them, like, mandatory uniforms.”

“Right.” I even manage a giggle. “Anyway, I’m here now. Let’s party!”

Linking my arm through hers, I head into the thick of the crowd. It’s crazy out here: five hundred kids cutting loose on the dance floor in a flashing mess of formal gear and floor-length gowns. East Midlands High has always been famous for our prom, and this year is no different. The PTA started planning way back in the fall, throwing fancy dinners and auctions to raise funds, even when they didn’t need it. Half the school district is so loaded, all it takes is a couple of fat checks and a few calls and voilà! The exclusive country club is booked up for the night with uniformed waiters, armfuls of sparkling streamers, and a DJ flown in special from the East Coast by some senior’s doting dad.

Tickets sell out so fast, they make it upperclassmen only, so when junior year finally came around, you can bet we

were ready. I started looking for a dress in December, found the right shoes in March, and perfected my half-braided, tumbling hairstyle at the salon by the time Cameron finally asked me to go in May. It was going to be perfect.

It was supposed to be freaking perfect.

We finally reach the others, already staked out in prime position – in the center of things, like always. “Awesome!” Nikki cries as the DJ switches to a new song, some club hit with a sexy dance routine. The rest of them squeal as well, flushed and happy like this is everything we’ve dreamed about. Nikki turns, clutching me with glee. “Isn’t this perfect?”

“So perfect!” My cheeks hurt from forcing this smile, but I pose for the flash of someone’s camera, pretending like everything’s just fine. And it is. Kaitlin can work her way through the whole freaking *Kama Sutra* with Cameron for all I care. This is prom. And like my mom always says, you remember prom for the rest of your life.

Four songs later, I’m still trying to dance the disturbing memories right out of my mind when Courtney grabs my arm. By now, our careful outfits are beginning to come undone: her strapless turquoise dress is slipping lower, and her hair has fallen out of its bun. I watch her lips move, not able to make out a word over the deafening thump of the music. “I can’t hear you!” I yell back.

Courtney mimes something, as if she’s putting on lip gloss.

“Bathroom break?” I figure her out. “OK.”

Nikki grabs some of the other girls and breaks for the edge of the floor. I follow, numb. Maybe some air is what I need. I want to forget everything, but no matter how much I throw myself into the music, I still feel weirdly detached, like I'm not in my body anymore. I should be crying, heartbroken over Cameron somewhere, I know, but for some reason, the tears won't come. I just picture them together, frozen in that guilty scene. His hands, her little breathy moans.

I feel something sharp start to form behind my rib cage, a fierce knot of resentment.

"This is the best prom ever!" Brianna declares, pushing through the door into the gleaming cream bathroom. As a reigning senior, she would know, which is why Courtney and Nikki just make noises of agreement instead of asking if it's true that she spent the last one barfing in her pool house after getting drunk at the preparty. "Bliss, do you have that mascara?"

I silently hand it over. The others all crowd around the gilt-edged mirrors, carefully reapplying gloss and glitter, but I sink down onto the plush love seat in the corner, tired out.

"So, gossip," Brianna orders, gazing at her own reflection. "There's got to be something."

"I saw Patrick making out with Taryn," Nikki offers. Brianna wrinkles her lip. "From cheerleading?"

"No, the one with red hair. Remember, she cheated on TJ last year?"

There's a chorus of delighted "Ew!" and "Skank!" and

for the first time, I wonder if they'd even take my side. It shouldn't even be a thing. I mean, Kaitlin and Cameron are the ones lying and cheating and stabbing me in the back here. But then I think of this senior girl, Melissa. She and Luke DiGeorge were like the old married couple of our group, until she found out that he'd been texting Keisha Martin behind her back. She confronted them during lunch one day: a huge showdown in front of the whole school. At first, everyone was totally scandalized and swore they had her back, but Courtney was dating Luke's cousin, and Keisha hooked everyone up with tickets to the best events through her dad, and soon enough, she was totally forgiven. In the end, Melissa just kind of drifted out of our orbit. I don't even know if she came tonight.

I watch the girls gossip, chilled by the thought of everything I could lose. I've worked too hard to get here – get *in* – to be edged out, just because my supposed friend couldn't keep her hands (or other body parts) off my boyfriend. But what am I supposed to do now: smile and let them get away with it?

The knot twists tighter.

“You guys won't believe my after-party.” With a final dap of gloss, Brianna turns away from the mirror. “It's going to be epic, I swear.” She notices me folded in the corner. “What's up with you, B? Is Cameron off getting wasted with the rest of the guys?”

I force another grin. “No idea! He was around here somewhere...”

Luckily, before she can ask anything else, the door

swings open. “Omigod, you will not believe who I just saw!” Another senior, Jessica, bursts in. Her hair is dyed almost white-blond, and she’s straightened it into a flat sheet that hangs past her waist.

“Who? Who?” The girls crowd around.

Jessica pauses for effect and then announces, “Jolene Nelson.”

I look up.

“No. Way!” They all gasp.

“Yes way!” She snatches a lip gloss wand and touches up. “I saw her lurking in one of the side rooms, and you will not believe what she’s wearing. It’s like, pink!”

“Pink?” Nikki sneers.

“Uh-huh. It’s got ruffles and everything.”

“What is she even doing here?” Brianna whines. “I thought she was suspended. Didn’t she, like, set fire to one of the back buildings?”

Courtney bobs her head in agreement. “I heard they’re pressing charges. She’s going to go to juvie.”

“I heard it was because she slept with Mr. Milton,” Jessica says smugly. “Taylor told me that Nadine told her that Jolene totally seduced him, and then blackmailed him for five thousand dollars. He’s like, a public school teacher, so he couldn’t pay, and she ratted him out to the principal.”

“The bitch!”

“What a slut.”

“I can’t believe she showed her face.”

While the other girls rally to poor Mr. Milton’s defense, I pause, an unlikely idea sparking to life. Jolene Nelson,

here at prom? Part of me doesn't believe Jessica – I mean, that whole “pink ruffles” part? – but if it's true...

I leap up before I can change my mind. “I forgot!” I exclaim, reaching for my purse. “Cameron's waiting for me. The DJ's going to play our song.”

“Awwww!” The looks I get are the usual mixture of simpering and sheer envy.

“See you inside!” I bolt from the room. But it's not Cameron I'm looking for.

I hurry back through the maze of glossy hallways, checking the lobby and the cloakroom and even the refreshment area for any sign of her angry glare. I don't know what I'll do if I find her. I haven't thought that far ahead. I just know that for the first time since the parking lot, I feel like myself again: like I have a mission, some freaking sense of control.

“Bliss!” A group of girls from the prom committee stops me by the portrait setup, but I just wave, avoiding the flash of their digital cameras and perfect party pouts. Even when Tristan, the undisputed hottest guy in our class, catches my eye and starts to ask “What's up?” I don't even slow for a second; I just keep searching. Finally, when I'm about ready to give it up as an urban prom legend, I open the door to one of the gloomy storage rooms.

And there she is: perched up on a cluttered shelf, smoking out of the open window. That spiky bleached hair has been gelled into something sleek and almost stylish, a pink silk dress is crumpled around her knees, and a pair of gorgeous strappy sandals lie abandoned on the dusty floor.

Jolene Nelson, the baddest girl in school.

“Do you want something?” Flicking ash out the window, she looks down at me with the trademark icy stare that’s reduced freshmen to tears.

“I...” I pause, but just as I’m about to take it back and turn around, the music drifting through the open window switches to a new song. Not just any song, but ours – mine and Cameron’s. The one he put on that old-school mix CD, the one playing in his car when we went on our first date. I wasn’t lying to the girls in the bathroom: I asked the DJ to play it especially. I thought it would be a perfect romantic moment for us, something to look back on when I’m old and gray and sucking strained beets through a straw.

Instead, I get to remember his hands up someone else’s skirt, and the color of Kaitlin’s hot-pink thong panties.

I steel myself and take a couple of steps into the room. “I need your help.”