THE THING ABOUT LEMONS

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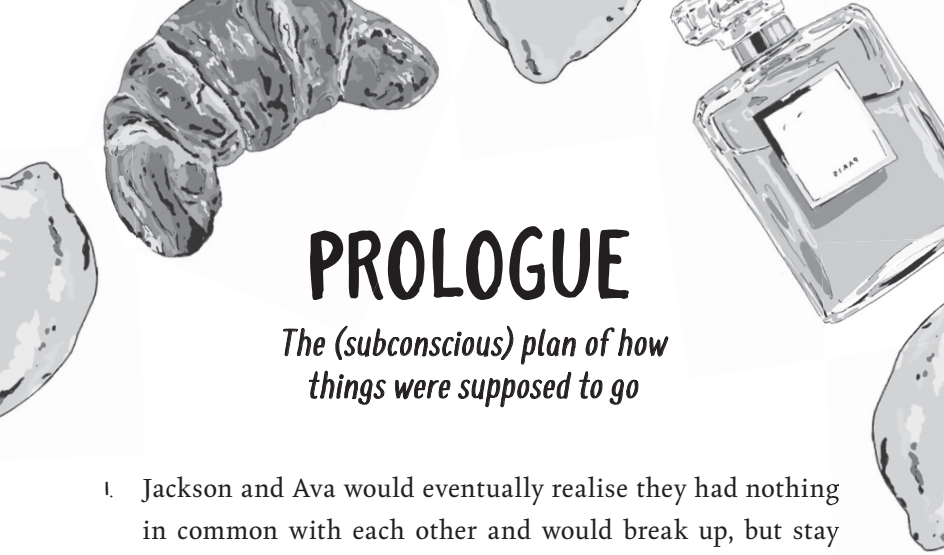
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THE THING ABOUT LEMONS

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PASS

TO ANYONE WHO'S EVER MADE
A REGRETTABLE MISTAKE . . .
YOU'RE NOT ALONE.



PROLOGUE

The (subconscious) plan of how things were supposed to go

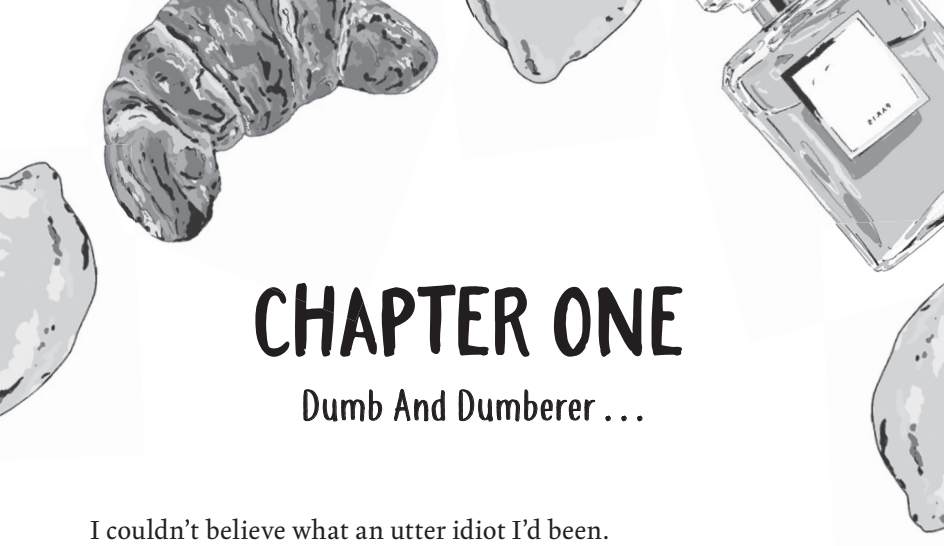
1. Jackson and Ava would eventually realise they had nothing in common with each other and would break up, but stay good friends. (They both had roaming eyes, so it was only a matter of time . . .)

2. There'd be a "cooling off period" (like a couple of months?) while everyone got used to them not being a couple anymore.

3. Me and Jackson would hang out more, becoming closer, the chemistry between us growing stronger by the day.

4. Me and Jackson would each talk to Ava in private and give her a heads-up that we were starting to have feelings for each other. (She'd really appreciate our honesty and respect.)

5. Me and Jackson would officially start seeing each other and everyone would be fine with it, and say things like, "You guys make a really cool couple." (Not in front of Ava, obviously).



CHAPTER ONE

Dumb And Dumberer . . .

I couldn't believe what an utter idiot I'd been.

Dumb was not the word. Stupid was an understatement.

If there was a medal for Spectacularly Dumbass Mistakes, I was up for a gold.

If there was a Donut of the Decade award, the chunky golden ring belonged on my mantelpiece.

Muppet of the Millennium? Hand me the Champagne.

How could I (a normally intelligent person) have done something so unbelievably stupid?

That was the realisation slowly entering my consciousness as Ava screamed in my face, a trembling blur of ringlets, false eyelashes and perfect white teeth that looked ready to take a chunk out of my arm. Jackson, biceps tightening as he gripped her by the shoulders, did his best to steer her out of my front room towards the landing while the insults poured from her snarling lips.

'You scheming, deceitful BITCH!' she yelled at me over his shoulder, spit flying in all directions. 'Get off me, Jackson! We're SO OVER!' She looked me up and down in disgust. 'Look at you all dolled up – you *never* wear crop tops and mini-skirts!'

I glanced down at myself. I *did* wear crop tops and mini-skirts, just not usually together.

'Stealing my look *and* my boyfriend!' she screamed. 'What's next – my wallet? My Instagram profile? My whole identity?'

It had all happened so quickly, I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. My body was just standing there in the front room doorway, an empty shell, while I looked down on the exploding drama from above. Meanwhile, my lips still thought they were attached to Jackson's. I needed to wake up, but I couldn't. Things were unravelling too fast.

'Where are the others?' she snapped. 'Did you tell them not to come and somehow forgot to tell me? Or did you *want* me to walk in on you?' Her eyes widened at the thought that this must've been my intention all along.

I held up my hands. 'No, oh God, it's not like that. Ravi's away, Zac couldn't make it and Daisy and Martha should be—'

'Ava, just hear me out, will you?' Jackson interrupted me. 'It's not how it looked!'

I cringed on his behalf. *That was such a cliché.*

Ava clearly agreed with me. *'Seriously?'* She shoved a curtain of ringlets out of her dark brown eyes. One of her false eyelashes had come loose and looked like she had a moth stuck to her eyelid. We'd sworn to always alert each other to any wardrobe or make-up malfunctions, and it felt almost more disloyal not to mention it than it did to kiss her boyfriend. I mean, what was *wrong* with me? Where had my morals gone?

'*Tell her, Ori,*' Jackson begged me, his gold necklace glinting in the light.

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

Tell her it wasn't what she thought? But it *was* what she thought! She'd walked in on her best friend and boyfriend snogging. We were caught red-handed. Guilty as charged. We might as well just hang our heads, admit it, apologise from the bottom of our hearts and gear up for a rough few weeks as Ava unleashed her fury on us for betraying her. This was NOT how I'd intended things to go, but if we apologised enough times, *surely* she'd forgive us eventually?

'*Ori!*' Jackson dropped his hands from Ava's shoulders and turned to face me, his gorgeous green eyes now glowering at me. 'For Christ's sake, tell her what happened.'

'She *saw* what happened,' I replied, avoiding Ava's firey gaze. Whatever we said, it would only make things worse. We had no excuse, so it was best to just own it. 'Ava, I'm so sorry . . .' I searched for the right words, but Jackson interrupted me.

'You've misunderstood the situation, babe, I promise you,' he said, combing his fingers through his perfectly scruffed-up quiff. 'I thought you'd be here already. I thought the others would be here, too. But when I arrived, it was just me on my own, and Ori said you wouldn't be here for a while, so we were just sitting, talking . . .' He gestured towards the sofa behind me, the dent of his head still visible in my mum's favourite cushion. 'And then she just . . . she just . . . kissed me! It totally took me by surprise – and that's exactly when you walked in.'

'Good job I walked in when I did, then!' Ava sneered. '. . . Given how desperately you were wriggling and squirming and fighting her off!'

'I was literally about to do ALL those things the very second you walked in.'

Er, I don't think so, Jackson. Also, that SO didn't sound convincing.

Ava rolled her eyes. 'Gimme a break, *you dick*.'

'I was caught off guard!' he shouted. 'Can't you understand? It took a few seconds for my brain to catch up with what was happening.'

I would've felt sorry for him if I hadn't felt so insulted. *Wriggling? Squirming? Fighting me off?* Those were *not* the vibes he'd been giving out – and even if, as he claimed, those vibes were nanoseconds from kicking in, the initial vibes had been totally the opposite. Admittedly he'd given off a "surprised" vibe to begin with when I'd kissed him, followed swiftly by a "confused but intrigued" vibe as I continued to kiss him. But this (and this is the important bit) was then followed by a "hell yeah I'm into this!" vibe, as he totally, one-hundred-per-cent, kissed me back! And *I know* I didn't imagine that.

All this in the space of about ten seconds. That's how long our kiss lasted – ten measly seconds. The magical moment I'd imagined for months, fantasised about daily, was over in the blink of an eye. If it wasn't for the strange taste of smoky mint from Jackson's vape pen, I might not have believed it had ever happened.

Jackson turned towards me, his normally pale face reddening. 'I don't believe this. I didn't ask for any of this. Why the hell did you do that, Ori? You *know* I'm with Ava. She's your best friend for Christ's sake! You've totally lost it.'

His anger brought my out-of-body experience to an abrupt end.

Ava's jaw softened a little. Finally he was on the right track.

'She's not my best friend any more,' she said, giving me

a death stare. 'She's *nothing* to me. She can't even look me in the eye.' That was mainly to do with the eyelash malfunction, but she had a point.

I looked to Jackson for support. Was he really not going to share any of the blame? Was he going to deny he had feelings for me? Feelings I'm *sure* he'd hinted at from time to time?

'I'm out of here!' Ava strutted down the stairs to our flat's front door.

'Wait!' Jackson grabbed her arm. 'I'm coming with you. We need to talk.'

She shrugged him off and yanked open the door, nearly knocking over a box of vintage clothes Mum was planning to sell.

'Ava, wait,' I called from the top of the stairs. 'I'm really sorry. I've been a total idiot. I never meant for this to happen.'

She cocked her head to one side. 'Didn't you?'

She stormed out the door, Jackson hot on her heels, grovelling all the way down the communal stairs and out onto the street, leaving the lingering waft of hairspray in his wake.

I closed the door behind them, praying the downstairs neighbours hadn't overheard all the shouting, and dragged myself back upstairs to the now-empty flat, where I stood on the landing, gazing at my zombie-like reflection in the mirror. I had mussed-up hair, a dazed look in my eyes, and an incriminating lipstick smudge.

'Who *are* you?' I asked myself. 'What the hell have you gone and done?'

I drifted into my room and eased myself gently down on the bed, as if I'd just climbed out of a mangled car. I was in

a state of shock. Adrenaline was pumping round my body. I tried to calm my breathing. My eyes had misted up, but the tears weren't falling. Mum wouldn't be home for another couple of hours. I was going to have to tell her what happened. It'd be a whole lot worse if she found out from someone else – which she probably would, as our social lives often encompassed different generations of the same households.

And when the rest of my friends found out what went down tonight – which would be in a matter of minutes as Daisy and Martha would probably be walking slap-bang into Jackson and Ava any second now – my life would officially be over. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. Not only had I just lost my best friend and the boy I loved in one go – I'd probably just kissed goodbye to my entire social life.

My breath caught in my throat as the realisation of what I'd just done began to sink in.

It was like I'd just woken up from sleepwalking along without a care in the world, only to find myself standing on a flimsy branch hanging over the edge of a cliff-top – just in time to hear it snap beneath my feet.

Nice work, Ori Reynolds. Take a bow.

If only I had a time machine, I could leap in, rewind a few hours, erase the moment where I lost complete control of my mental faculties, and no one would be any the wiser.

But there was no time machine, so I'd be hiding in my bedroom for the foreseeable future, losing myself in a blur of Netflix romcoms, while desperately applying to different sixth form colleges outside Brighton where no one knew me and

I could hopefully start again with a fresh slate in September.

In the meantime, prom night was off.

Camping in Cornwall was off.

Reading Festival – off.

Losing my virginity – indefinitely postponed.

My whole goddamn life was OFF.

I exhaled slowly, my heartbeat thundering in my ears.

I couldn't face telling Mum when she got in. Right now I didn't need to feel any worse than I already did. I'd tell her in the morning – depending on her mood. She was menopausal (as she liked to point out every five minutes) and flew off the handle at the tiniest things (i.e. me forgetting to put the dishwasher on, me losing a phone charger, me borrowing her eye shadow without asking). And this was not a tiny thing. This was a biggie in Mum's book, as she had strong feelings about lying and cheating. Depending on her mood, she wouldn't so much fly off the handle as launch into outer space. I could just picture her, hands on hips, trying to keep a calm voice, saying: "What the *hell* were you thinking?"

Fair question, I guess.

What the hell *was* I thinking?

That I could somehow poach my best friend's boyfriend from under her nose and everyone would be cool with it?

Oh God.

I tried to swallow but my salivary glands didn't seem to be working.

As ridiculous as it may sound, I guess that's what I *had* been thinking – although I hadn't fully realised it till now.