

IZABELLA LISSON

MILLIE MATHEWS

ON THE RUN ACROSS TIME

CHAPTER ONE

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

The students of Edward Brown Academy, an elite institution in Michigan renowned for preparing its students for the most prestigious universities in the country, could easily be described as every teacher's dream. Only the most gifted young minds earn the privilege of attending this academy, and naturally, they wear that honor with visible pride.

One of these students is Millie Mathews, a tall and slender girl with dark brown hair tied back in a thick ponytail. Behind her large, thin-framed glasses, her sharp, gray-colored eyes gleam with intelligence. Millie is the type of student who reminds teachers to check homework and assign new tasks, though this is rarely necessary at Edward Brown Academy. She is also the principal's right hand, something she has more than earned.

Her dedication was rewarded one day when the esteemed principal appointed her as the temporary “Principal’s Assistant,” a role that became available after his secretary went on maternity leave. The principal, an older man who struggles with technology, relies heavily on Millie for support. Tasks like answering emails, printing documents, and booking venues for school trips pose no challenge for her, and she is always eager to lend a hand.

THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 2026

It was meant to be a peaceful day. Almost the entire school was going on a field trip to Wayne State University, allowing students to explore their options for continuing their education after graduation. This left Millie in charge of those who remained behind for various reasons. She took immense pride in her role, wearing a badge on her crimson school uniform blazer that read “Principal’s Assistant.” This badge was simply a laminated piece of paper with a safety pin on the back attached by hot glue.

Exactly five students, not including Millie, stayed behind during the outing. They spent most of the day in the computer lab, where their task was straightforward: after completing their homework, they could use the school computers, read a book, play a board game of their choice, or enjoy a game of chess. The day was progressing smoothly until just before lunch when Millie glanced out the window and spotted a boy riding a skateboard outside. He was performing tricks on the railings at the main entrance of the school, capturing her attention.

Millie dashed out of the classroom, pushing her large glasses

back up the bridge of her nose. After a moment, she reached the main entrance and stepped outside, visibly irritated.

“Excuse me,” she called out. “Hello?”

The boy kept riding his skateboard, completely ignoring her.

“HEY!” she shouted, her face flushing with frustration.

This time he reacted. He stopped, turned, and looked at her with a puzzled expression. Now Millie could clearly see his face. He looked to be around her age, though slightly shorter than she was. The sunlight reflected off his short blond hair. He stood out with his disheveled appearance: a dark gray T-shirt full of holes and light-colored, dirty shorts.

He pulled out his headphones and finally spoke.

“Hey there.”

“Yes, good morning,” Millie replied stiffly. “You probably don’t know”—she paused to clear her throat—“and I’m sure there are *a lot* of things you don’t,” she added quickly, “but I must inform you that you are on the grounds of a private school. Since you are clearly not a student here, I would like to ask you to leave the property of this educational institution immediately.”

“Uhm what now?” he replied, looking completely disoriented.

Then he noticed her badge. A wide, goofy grin spread across his face.

“Well, well. An honor to be addressed by the principal’s assistant herself,” he said, dripping with sarcasm.

“Are you mocking me?” she asked.

“Absolutely not! I would never dare make fun of someone as important as you,” he replied, still grinning.

Millie felt a surge of frustration but fought to maintain her composure. She glanced at the ground for a moment, then back at him. “Do your parents know you’re absent from class?”

The boy raised his eyebrows. “Where did you get the idea that I’m skipping school from? Huh?” he asked, pretending to be offended.

“Well, once I call your school, I will find out. You’re a student at Edgewood Middle School, the one just two blocks away, is that correct?”

The boy’s eyes widened. “How did you—”

“Your backpack, genius,” she said, pointing to the black bag lying on the steps in front of the entrance. “It has your school’s logo on it.”

Panic flickered across his face as he scrambled for an excuse. Millie smiled triumphantly.

“Well, I have to admit, you’re good,” he said after a moment.

“Everyone says that,” she replied, lifting her chin.

The boy chuckled. “I’m Alex. Alex McLean,” he said, extending his hand toward her.

“Very well, Mr. McLean,” she said, shaking his hand. “I hate to repeat myself, but I’m going to ask you to leave the school grounds again, or I’ll be forced to call the police,” she pulled her phone out of her pocket.

“Okay, okay, fine.” He quickly gathered his belongings. “I hope to see you again,” he said, winking at her.

This short-circuited Millie’s brain entirely, leaving her frozen with a blank stare.

“See you around,” Alex said as he walked away.

“Goodbye, Mr. McLean,” Millie replied, her tone

unmistakably unfriendly.

On her way back to the computer lab, she was still seething. “What a fool! How dare he flirt with me? Has he lost his mind? Who does this guy think he is?” Those thoughts swirled in her head.

* * *

An hour passed, and Millie gradually calmed down, almost forgetting about the intruder. While arranging books in the library, she received a notification on her phone. It was a message from her mother:

(JULIETTE): Hey, sweetie, I had to leave and won't be back until tomorrow afternoon. Aunt Bella will pick you up from school and take you home. Dinner is in the oven. Don't forget to lock the door and don't open it for anyone. Take care! Love you!

Millie's mother, Professor Juliette Mathews, was a respected scientist and lecturer in theoretical physics at Wayne State University.

Millie wasn't thrilled after reading that message. She didn't have an issue with her Aunt Bella; it was her cousin Melanie whom she preferred not to see and had been avoiding for years or at least tried. They often encountered each other at family gatherings and holidays, but their conversations always ended with a curt greeting or a “How are you?” Melanie had

persistently tried to reconcile, but to this day, she had never succeeded.

After thinking for a moment, Millie began to type her reply:

(MILLIE): Hey Mom, I don't understand. Where are you going?

Her phone vibrated almost immediately.

(JULIETTE): I had to go to an out-of-state university. I was spontaneously invited to give a lecture on String Theory this evening. I'm so sorry to leave you like this, but you're not little anymore, and I'm sure you both can handle it. Miss Pawlett will check in on you from time to time. If anything happens, just contact her. I will see you tomorrow. Bye sweetie!

Millie was puzzled by the word 'both.' "What did Mom mean? She must have meant Miss Pawlett," she thought.

Miss Pawlett was Millie's neighbor across the street. An older, single woman who valued good manners and enjoyed playing chess with Millie. They often sipped tea together while discussing the books they were reading.

Millie quickly replied to her mother, assuring her she could handle everything and that she shouldn't worry. She also wished her a safe journey and good luck with the lecture.

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

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At 3 p.m., Millie finished her school day. As she walked toward the parking lot, she immediately recognized the red sports car belonging to her Uncle Allen, Aunt Bella's husband. She approached the vehicle and opened the door.

Inside were three people. Her Uncle Allen Anderson sat in the driver's seat—a tall, slightly muscular man in his mid-thirties with short brown hair and rectangular sunglasses perched on his nose. He wore a plain black sweatshirt and jeans. In the passenger seat sat Aunt Bella, a beautiful, slim woman in her early thirties with long strawberry-blonde hair. She wore a pink blouse and purple shorts. In the back seat sat a girl about Millie's age—her cousin, Melanie. She was slightly shorter, with short copper-red hair, an orange zippered hoodie over a purple shirt, and loose jeans.

After greeting them, Millie got inside and sat next to her cousin. The car started moving as soon as she fastened her seatbelt.

"Hi, Millie!" Melanie said, grinning widely.

"Salutations, Melanie," Millie replied hesitantly, pulling a thick book from her backpack. She opened it and began reading.

Seconds later, Melanie pulled a small box of chewing gum from her pocket. She took out a piece and extended the box toward Millie.

"Gum?" Melanie asked, holding it close to Millie's face.

"No, thank you. I'm good," she answered, not looking up from her book.

Melanie's mother exchanged a look with her husband and frowned. The unspoken tension between the cousins hung heavy in the car.

Melanie's phone buzzed. As she read the message, a wide smile spread across her face.

"Hey, Millie, don't you go to that Emmet Brown school or something?" she asked.

"It's Edward Brown Academy," Millie corrected, a hint of annoyance in her voice. "And, yes. Why do you ask?" She still didn't raise her eyes from the page.

"Because my friend Alex just told me that he met some weirdo there today who chased him away. She claimed to be the principal's assistant and even made a badge. Do you actually have freaks like that at your school?"

Melanie glanced sideways at Millie—just in time to see her cousin's face flush with anger. Her eyes dropped and immediately spotted the "Principal's Assistant" badge pinned to Millie's blazer.

"In his defense," Melanie added with a nervous laugh, "he thinks you're cute and wants to hang out with you."

"Tell your *friend* Alex that I'm not interested in spending time with hooligans," Millie snapped, returning to her book.

The awkward silence that followed made the ride feel like a long road trip.

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They finally arrived at Millie's house—a large, modern white building with huge windows connected to a spacious garage. A

perfectly manicured lawn stretched across the front yard, with small bushes lining the walkway up to the front door.

Millie stepped out of the car, thanking her aunt and uncle. As she walked toward the entrance, she heard the rest of the Anderson family getting out as well. Confused, she turned to see Uncle Allen pulling a large suitcase and a backpack from the trunk while Aunt Bella lectured Melanie.

“Yes, Mom,” Melanie grumbled, staring at the ground.

“And remember, don’t make a fuss, and listen to Millie and your aunt when she comes back tomorrow. Do you understand?”

“I know, Mom. Just tell Grandma I said hi,” Melanie sighed.

Uncle Allen set the luggage next to her. “Okay, girls, we’re heading out. You two have fun.”

“I... I don’t think I understand,” Millie said, completely confused by her uncle’s words.

“Didn’t your mother tell you?” Aunt Bella asked, surprised. “We have to go to Toronto. Melanie’s grandma sprained her leg and needs someone to care for her for two weeks. That’s why Melanie has to stay with you.” She turned briefly to her daughter. “She’s already missed enough school this year,” she added pointedly.

“But... but...” Millie stammered.

“Take care, girls. And Melanie—behave.”

“Mom!” Melanie groaned.

Uncle Allen and Aunt Bella got back into the car. They waved at them as they drove away.

“Fantastic,” Millie muttered sarcastically while watching the vehicle leave. She started walking towards the front door.

“So... what are we going to do now?” Melanie asked, dragging her suitcase behind her.

“Nothing,” Millie replied flatly, unlocking the door.

They stepped inside.

“Come on, you’re not still mad at me, right? It’s been ages,” Melanie said, hauling her stuff in.

The interior was as clean and orderly as the outside. A white marble floor stretched across the hallway into the large living room. On the right, a glass staircase with a black banister curved upward; on the left, an archway led into the kitchen.

“I have no intention of forgiving you in the foreseeable future, Melanie,” Millie said.

“Well... maybe we can at least try to get along... you know, while I’m here. Whether we like it or not, I have to stay, and I don’t want to fight.”

Millie looked at her with mild disdain, considering it.

“All right,” she said finally. “For old times’ sake, I’ll try to be hospitable and speak to you normally while you’re here. Is that acceptable?”

She extended her hand for Melanie to shake. Melanie took it, and they shook.

Millie sighed loudly. “Listen, Mr. Morales will be here in half an hour to drop off his son, James. I tutor him, and I’d appreciate it if you could be quiet and not disturb us while I work with him.”

“Fine,” Melanie said. “Wait—you tutor? You know... children?”

“Precisely. Why is that surprising?”

“I don’t know... I find it hard to believe any child could like

you.”

Millie stared at her, offended. “Elaborate.”

“You’re always so... know-it-all professor-y.”

“Uh-huh...” Millie replied coldly. She took off her school blazer and walked away.

“That’s it? You’re not going to respond?”

“Exactly. I refuse to dignify that with an answer.” She hung her blazer on the coat rack and stepped into the kitchen.

“All right...?” Melanie said, unsure what to do, as she followed.

“Listen, I was thinking maybe we could—”

“No,” Millie said sharply.

“But you don’t even know what I was going to say!”

“I don’t need to. You said *‘we’* and that was enough.”

Melanie’s eyes suddenly lit up mischievously.

“Then maybe *you and I* could...”

Millie gave her a look that would have vaporized her on the spot if it could.

“I’m just going to stop talking now,” Melanie said quickly.

“Finally,” Millie sighed in relief.

* * *

Twenty-five minutes later, the doorbell rang. Millie opened the door to find a tall man standing behind a small boy bouncing excitedly with a huge backpack on his back. The boy, around eight years old, held a sheet of paper in his hands. The man, dressed in fast-food work clothes, smiled at her.

“Millie! Millie! Millie! Look!” the boy exclaimed, thrusting

the paper toward her.

Millie took the note and looked it over. “Ohhhh, you got an A! Well done, James!”

“I only have you to thank for that, Millie!” he beamed.

“The boy’s right,” Mr. Morales said. “Millie, could I talk to you in private?”

“All right, James, go inside and get ready. I’ll be there soon.”

James obeyed and rushed in.

“Thank you for helping him,” Mr. Morales said quietly. “Since Marta got sick, the overtime I’ve had to do... I don’t know how I’d manage without you.”

“It’s no trouble, sir. How’s James handling everything?”

“He’s optimistic. He gets it from her. I just hope he can stay that way... even if the worst happens. Raising him alone... it won’t be easy.”

His eyes glistened with tears, which he quickly wiped away. “So... uhm... I’ll pick him up in two hours. Thank you again.”

“It’s nothing, sir. James is a great kid.”

He gave a faint smile. “He really is, yes. See you later, Millie.”

“Goodbye,” Millie said kindly.

She walked into the living room. James was already at the table with his pencil case, notebook, and math book neatly laid out.

“Would you like something to drink before we start, James?”

“No, thank you, Millie.”

“I would like something,” a voice called from the sofa—Melanie, lounging with her phone.

“Then get it yourself. He’s a guest,” Millie snapped.

“So am I,” Melanie shot back.

“Just go!”

“Okay, okay, jeez...”

Melanie went to the kitchen. She poured herself orange juice into a tall, colorful glass. Then she noticed a plate on the island with a neatly sliced apple on it.

Five minutes later, Millie walked in. Melanie sat scrolling her phone. The glass was empty. The plate, once holding James’ snack, was completely bare.

Millie’s eyes flashed. “Did you just eat the apple I prepared for James?”

“It was for him?” Melanie asked.

“No... I just slice apples for fun and leave them here as decoration so you can eat them!” Millie snapped. “Of course it was his snack!”

“Sorry—I really didn’t know—”

“Just forget it.”

Millie grabbed a fresh apple from the fruit basket and took a knife from the drawer.

“Millie, I’m done! Wanna take a look?” James called from the living room.

“I’ll be right there,” she replied warmly. She glanced at Melanie. “Next time, ask first.”

She finished slicing the apple and left the kitchen.

* * *

Later that evening, a while after James was picked up by his father, Millie had already changed into her dark blue silk pajamas. After brushing her teeth and finishing her nightly

routine, she headed to her room. She let out a quiet sigh of relief as she closed the door behind her.

In her room, shelves lined the walls, filled with books, Blu-ray movies, and an array of Marvel superhero figures. A globe rested among her treasures, and in the corner, a desk housed a large computer screen beside a microscope. A thin LED TV hung on the wall, and large windows opened onto the balcony. Dark panels adorned the floor, while a plush purple carpet lay in the center. Family photos and various certificates, including her black belt in karate, decorated the walls.

When she turned around, Millie saw Melanie sitting casually on her bed.

“I haven’t been in your room in years. It changed so much since the last time I was here,” Melanie said, looking around.

“May I ask what you are even doing in here?” Millie asked angrily.

“I just wanted to see your room,” Melanie replied.

“Well, you’ve seen it. Now leave,” Millie growled.

Melanie acted as if she hadn’t heard her at all. She walked over to a shelf where a figurine stood and picked it up to examine it more closely. “I see Iron Man is still your favorite.”

“Don’t touch that!” Millie exploded. She snatched the figurine from Melanie’s hands. “It belonged to my dad, okay?” she said, putting it back in its place.

Melanie lowered her hand, the smile slipping from her face.

“Oh... sorry. I didn’t know.”

Millie let out a long breath. “It’s fine,” she said, not looking at her.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Millie answered, though her voice didn’t sound convincing.

“We used to play in here all the time,” Melanie said quietly.

“Yes. We used to,” Millie replied. “What do you actually want, Melanie?” Her irritation was unmistakable.

“I just wanted to talk to you... you know, like we used to. Maybe even have a little pajama party in your room?”

“Melanie, no offense, but I have absolutely no interest in that. You have the entire guest bedroom to yourself. Go use it.”

“Okay, but can we at least talk about your birthday? It’s next Saturday.”

“You know I don’t celebrate my birthday. And you know exactly why.”

“Well... maybe it’s time to change that,” Melanie said hopefully.

“I don’t think so,” Millie scoffed.

“Oh, come on. Your dad wouldn’t want you to never celebrate your birthday again.”

“Oh really? Did you ask him that?”

Melanie fell silent. The smile vanished from her face.

“Exactly,” Millie said. “We don’t know what my dad would or wouldn’t have wanted. So please just leave me alone and let me sleep. Or at least let me try to sleep. All right?”

“I really didn’t mean—”

“I don’t care,” Millie cut in. “Just go.”

Melanie hesitated, then headed for the door.

“Goodnight,” she said softly before stepping out and closing it behind her, leaving Millie alone.

In their separate rooms, they both rolled onto their sides,

facing the wall. Years ago, they would have talked until they fell asleep. Tonight, they lay awake, wishing things hadn't changed.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BLACK VAN

FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2026

In the early morning light, Millie woke up despite having endured a long, sleepless night. She was already dressed in her school uniform. In the kitchen, she prepared breakfast for herself and her cousin. A basket of fruit rested on the table beside a plate overflowing with pastries and sweet rolls, and next to all of this stood a glass carafe of freshly squeezed orange juice.

Millie fried eggs and crispy bacon on the induction cooktop. Moments later, Melanie sauntered into the kitchen. Unlike Millie, she was still in her pajamas, her hair a chaotic mess as if she had just emerged from a hurricane. The girls exchanged awkward glances, both feeling slightly foolish about the previous night.

“Hey,” Melanie finally said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Good morning, Melanie,” Millie replied, trying to keep the atmosphere light.

“You know, you could have woken me up earlier. I would have helped with breakfast.”

“Yes, I am aware. Don’t worry about it.”

“Listen, I wanted to apologize for yesterday. I really didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” Melanie blurted, taking a few steps closer.

“No, Melanie, *I* owe you an apology,” Millie said, flipping an egg with a spatula.

Melanie’s mouth fell open.

“Don’t make that face. I know you were just trying to make me happy. But my birthday marks the anniversary of my dad’s death, and I really don’t want to celebrate it. Let’s just forget about it, okay?”

“Absolutely!” Melanie smiled brightly and sat down, admiring the variety of food displayed on the table. “By the way, how are we getting to school anyway?” she asked.

“My principal is nice enough to give us a ride,” Millie replied.

“Right, I should’ve guessed,” Melanie said, grabbing one of the sweet rolls.

“Have your parents checked in yet?” Millie asked.

“Yeah, they picked up Grandma from the hospital. She doesn’t seem to want to listen to her doctor. She keeps trying to get out of bed.”

“Oh yes, I remember your grandma—such a stubborn woman,” Millie chuckled softly. “I’m certain your parents will manage just fine,” she said, placing a fried egg and bacon onto Melanie’s plate. “Now hurry up. My principal really values

punctuality.”

The girls enjoyed their breakfast—though Melanie enjoyed it a little too much, taking so long that she barely had time to change, fix her hair, and pack her things.

After rushing to finish getting ready, Millie and Melanie left the house. Once Millie made sure the front door was locked, the two girls walked to the sidewalk and waited.

Across the street, a black van was parked. Inside sat two men. One was tall with a short beard, while the other was older by at least twenty years, somewhat overweight, with a thinning bald spot. Both were watching Millie and Melanie as they stood by the curb, completely unaware they were being observed. Between them sat a listening device, which they used to eavesdrop on the girls’ conversation.

“Does the agency really think we’ll get any useful information from that kid?” the tall one asked.

“Does it matter, Frank?” the older man replied in a gravelly voice. “They’re paying us, so keep quiet,” he added, sipping coffee from a thermos.

“Why can’t we just arrest her mother? We know she downloaded some old plans from our systems and then deleted them,” Frank said.

“Juliette Mathews isn’t stupid,” the man answered, taking a deep breath. “It took us six years to trace the breach. Right now, she thinks she covered her tracks. And without proof that she still has those plans, no judge will do anything.”

“Let’s just arrest her when she gets back home and search the house and workplace until we find something,” Frank grumbled.

“The problem is we’ve been ordered to lay low and gather intel until we receive further instructions,” the older man said firmly. “Do you understand?”

“...Yeah. Whatever you say, Derek.”

Meanwhile, Millie and Melanie remained completely unaware that they were being watched.

“Did your mom message you? When will she be back?” Melanie asked.

“She texted me half an hour ago that she’s on her way home and should arrive around five. I don’t know what made her drive so many miles just to give a lecture. She could’ve done it over video conference, right?” Millie said indignantly, crossing her arms.

“Well... maybe she wanted to give the students a treat and show up in person? After all, your mom is a well-known scientist, isn’t she?”

“I suppose that does make sense,” Millie admitted.

At that moment a blue car pulled up. It was Millie’s principal. He rolled down the window and greeted the girls with a warm smile.

“Good morning!” Millie replied, returning the smile.

“Ah, you must be Millie’s cousin,” he said, looking at Melanie as she got in.

“Y... yes, I’m Melanie,” she said shyly.

Just before climbing into the car, Millie noticed the black van parked farther down the street. A strange sense of unease washed over her. She couldn’t see inside through the tinted windows, but she was certain someone was watching. She froze by the open door until Melanie called her name.

THE BLACK VAN

“Are you getting in or not?” Melanie asked. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah... everything’s fine,” Millie said uncertainly, climbing in.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Melanie joked.

“Did you see anyone in that van?” Millie asked, worry evident in her voice.

Melanie stared blankly at her. “What van?”

“Never mind,” Millie muttered.

During the drive, Millie kept glancing back to make sure the van wasn’t following them. Melanie repeatedly asked what she was looking for, but Millie snapped each time. Melanie eventually gave up and listened to her music, ignoring her cousin’s strange behavior.

They dropped Melanie off at her school before continuing to Edward Brown Academy.

By the start of her first class, Millie had calmed down, and thoughts of the van faded from her mind.

* * *

During lunch, Millie sat with her two best friends, Aria Harris and Flynn Watson. Aria had short curly hair, dark brown skin, and black eyes. Flynn was tall, wore thin-framed glasses, and used far too much hair gel.

“It’s too bad you didn’t come to check out the university with us yesterday. It was wonderful, right, Flynn?” Aria said.

“Yes, it was very interesting,” Flynn replied in his usual robotic tone.

He took a bite of his sandwich—stacked absurdly high with meat. Aria grimaced.

“You know I don’t like it when you eat innocent animals.”

“I shouldn’t have to remind you that you’ve only been vegan for two weeks,” Flynn said.

“So what?” Aria snapped.

“It doesn’t exactly give you the right to judge us, considering three weeks ago you were eating hamburgers.”

“Just be quiet,” Aria hissed.

“Okay,” Flynn muttered.

“Anyway, why didn’t you come with us?” Aria asked Millie.

“To the university where my mom is giving lectures? I’ve been there hundreds of times. And the principal needed me here,” Millie replied. “Besides, I would never want to study somewhere my mom is a professor. People would think she favors me.”

“Speaking of which, we didn’t see your mom yesterday,” Aria said. “Where was she?”

“She went to give a lecture at another university out of state,” Millie said.

“I wonder if those men got in touch with her,” Flynn said.

“What men?” Millie asked.

“Two guys in black suits and ties. They asked about your mom while the headmaster of the university was explaining the history of the building. He told them she had the day off, and they just left,” Aria said.

“I suspect they were FBI agents,” Flynn added.

Both girls stared at him.

“Why would the FBI be looking for my mom?” Millie

demanded.

“Just a thought. Option one, maybe they need her help since she’s a well-known scientist. Option two, maybe she broke the law,” Flynn said flatly.

“Don’t listen to him,” Aria said sharply. “Your mom is the nicest, most sensible person. She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Flynn cleared his throat. “Right. The likelihood that your mom has broken any laws that would interest the FBI is very low. Essentially nonexistent. Based on what we know about her of course.”

“Nicely put, Flynn,” Aria said sarcastically.

“T... thank you,” he said, unsure whether she meant it.

“Anyway—new topic!” Aria exclaimed. “It’s Friday, which means D&D! And you’re the Dungeon Master today, Millie.”

“S... sure,” Millie stammered.

But she couldn’t feel excited. Her mind raced with questions about her mother and the van. She didn’t dare mention it. Flynn would probably come up with even more dramatic theories.

* * *

Meanwhile, Melanie wasn’t having a pleasant day at school either. In first period, her math teacher announced an unplanned quiz. Unsurprisingly, she failed and the teacher called her parents.

During break, her phone rang. Melanie sat alone on a vandalized cafeteria bench. She ignored the call twice before finally answering.

“Hey, Dad,” she said nervously.

“Hey, sweetheart. Do you maybe have something to tell me?” he said sternly.

“You know about my math grade, right?”

“Yeah. Listen, I don’t want you repeating a year. I struggled in school too, but I finished.”

“I know, Dad,” she said quietly.

After a pause, he continued, “Maybe it’s worth thinking about your future a little? Eh?”

“Maybe I don’t like thinking about the future,” she muttered.

“Nobody does, sweetie. Nobody.” He sighed. “I convinced your teacher to give you a chance to improve that grade. Next Friday, after school, you can retake the quiz. Talk to Millie; she’ll help you.”

“Alright, Dad. I’ll do my best.”

“Study hard. I’m rooting for you. Take care.”

“Bye, Dad.”

Moments later, Alex joined her on the bench.

“Can you believe that quiz? What a blow,” he complained. “She ruined our whole weekend.”

“Did she call your parents too?” Melanie asked.

“No. I got a D, so it’s not that terrible,” he shrugged.

“Well, great. I guess I’m the only one who did so poorly,” she muttered.

* * *

Later, at Edward Brown Academy, Millie browsed the shelves of the grand library. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the same black van parked outside. A jolt of fear hit her.

She approached the window, pulled out her phone, and hit record.

She zoomed in.

The tinted window rolled down.

A man lifted binoculars and stared straight at her camera... then lowered them and looked directly at her.

Millie's breath caught. She stumbled backward in panic—and bumped into someone. Her phone slipped from her hands.

“Hey, watch where you're going,” a familiar voice said.

It was Melanie, rubbing her shoulder.

“Melanie? What are you doing here?” Millie asked surprised, fixing her glasses.

“I had my last classes canceled. A teacher told me you'd be here. I need your house keys,” Melanie said.

Alex appeared behind her. Millie's expression darkened.

“Hey,” Alex said with a grin.

“And why did you bring him here?” Millie muttered, kneeling to grab her phone.

“We were looking for you, and his mom wants to drive us to your house. We want to practice the guitar. If you don't mind,” Melanie said.

“Wait, wait, wait. You don't think I'm letting you two be alone together,” Millie said.

“Why not?” Melanie snapped. “Alex is a good guy.”

“Oh, I'm sure he is,” Millie replied sarcastically.

“What's your problem?” Melanie demanded.

“I don't want you two getting any silly ideas.”

Melanie and Alex exchanged a look—then burst into laughter.

“You seriously think that me and him—?” Melanie wheezed.

“What is so funny to both of you?” Millie exclaimed.

“Well, let’s just say he’s not really my type,” Melanie said through laughter.

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” Millie said.

“My dear cousin,” Melanie said, teasingly placing a hand on her shoulder. “I appreciate your concerns. But I play for a different team.”

“What are you ta—oh.” Millie blinked slowly. “I see.”

“So,” Melanie said, extending her hand, “am I getting those keys or not?”

Millie glanced out the window—the van was gone.

She hesitated, unsure whether to show Melanie the recording. She didn’t want to worry her. The men were clearly after her, not Melanie.

“Earth to Millie?” Melanie said, still waiting.

“Okay, but is his mom really driving you straight home?” Millie asked.

“Yes,” Melanie said.

“As soon as you get inside, lock the door and turn the keys. Don’t open it for anyone. I’ll be back in two hours. I’ll call when I’m at the door,” Millie said, handing her the keys.

Melanie frowned. “Uhm... okay. Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” Millie lied.

“Come on, Mel, my mom’s waiting,” Alex said.

“See you later, Millie,” Melanie called.

“Was nice seeing you again, Millie,” Alex added.

“For you, it’s Miss Mathews,” Millie snapped.

“I’d prefer ‘future Mrs. McLean,’” he said, winking as he

walked out.

Millie stood frozen, cheeks burning with anger.

* * *

Two hours later, Millie was dropped off at home by her principal. She braced herself for chaos inside—but the house was silent.

She immediately called Melanie. The phone rang once.

“You’re here already? Wait, I’ll open the door,” Melanie said.

Ten seconds later, the door swung open.

Melanie stood there, perfectly fine. Millie exhaled quietly before stepping inside.

In the living room, Alex held a guitar. Another guitar rested beside him. On the table, a laptop displayed a paused guitar lesson.

Alex greeted her. Millie responded politely but distracted, scanning the room for any damage.

“Fascinating,” she muttered.

“What?” Melanie asked.

“The house... it’s still standing.”

“Very funny,” Melanie said with a huff.

“So you actually learned guitar? And managed not to destroy anything?”

“Why would you worry we’d destroy something?” Melanie asked, crossing her arms.

“Well, I wasn’t just worried—I was fully expecting it,” Millie admitted with a small laugh.

“Whatever. Our parents signed us up for lessons. We start in

three weeks, so we're practicing the basics," Melanie said.

"Well, I'm glad you're doing something that enhances your creativity and helps your brain develop while doing something you enjoy."

"You make it sound lame," Melanie complained.

A knock at the door interrupted them. Melanie went to open it, but Millie rushed forward.

"DON'T OPEN IT!" Millie yelled.

Melanie blinked at her like she was insane, then walked past her and opened it anyway.

Standing outside was an older woman Melanie had never seen. She wore a thick fur coat over a green dress with white polka dots and low yellow heels. In her hands was a box.

"Hello. Can I help you?" Melanie asked.

"Miss Pawlett?" Millie exclaimed.

"Hello, Millie," the woman said kindly. She turned to Melanie. "And you must be her cousin. Juliette told me you'd be staying for a while here."

"She told you... but not her own daughter," Millie said under her breath.

"What was that, dear?" Miss Pawlett asked.

"Nothing," Millie said quickly.

"I baked cookies and brought some for you," Miss Pawlett said, handing her the box. "Help yourselves but leave some for your mom."

"Awesome! Thank you!" Melanie exclaimed, snatching the box and running inside.

"Thank you very much, have a good day," Millie said, then closed the door and locked it.

In the living room, Melanie and Alex had already opened the box.

“These cookies taste weird,” Melanie said.

“What are you talking about?” Millie asked, taking one.

“They’re not sweet at all.”

“I assume it’s because they’re made with carrots”

Melanie immediately spat hers out.

“Ew! No wonder you didn’t want me to open the door!”

“Gosh, you’re so immature,” Millie sighed. She glanced at Alex, expecting him to do the same, but he was happily eating his cookie.

“They’re not bad, Mel,” he said.

“You actually like them? You’re weird... You’re BOTH weird.”

At that moment, Millie’s phone rang. It was Aunt Bella. Millie answered.

“Hey, Auntie... Uh-huh... She got an F... Uh-huh... No, she didn’t tell me... Of course I’ll help her study... Yes... Goodbye.”

Melanie grew more annoyed with each word.

When the call ended, Millie raised an eyebrow at her.

“Weren’t you supposed to tell me something?”

“I know, I know... but you just got back from school, and I didn’t want to bother you. Besides... don’t you also have something to tell me?”

“What do you mean by that?” Millie asked.

“You’ve been acting jumpy all day. Like you think someone’s going to break in and kill us.”

Millie glanced at Alex, who was watching curiously.

She sighed. “I need to show you something.”

A moment later, they entered Millie’s room.

“Why are you being so mysterious?” Melanie asked, closing the door.

“Because I want this to stay between us,” Millie said.

She pulled up the recording she had made in the library. They watched as the camera zoomed in on the black van. The window rolled down. A man stared through binoculars, then lowered them and looked straight at the camera—straight at Millie.

Melanie’s face went blank.

“Right after that, I bumped into you,” Millie said quietly.

“Why didn’t you tell me then?” Melanie demanded.

“I didn’t want to worry you. Besides... they’re watching me. Not you.”

“Okay, but what could they want from you?”

“I don’t know. They’re watching my mom too. Flynn thinks they might be FBI.”

“Who’s Flynn? You know what, never mind. Maybe they want to get rid of your mom because she discovered something that helps people, but the government doesn’t want that. They do that all the time.”

Millie’s brow furrowed.

“I was just joking,” Melanie said quickly.

Millie snapped out of her thoughts and laughed nervously. “Yeah... yeah, I know. I’ll talk to my mom. I’m sure everything is fine.”

Melanie didn’t seem convinced.

“And about your retake,” Millie continued, “we’ll start studying tomorrow. My friends are coming over to play D&D

today.”

“Awesome!” Melanie said. Then, with a grin: “Wait... you have friends?”

They left the room together.