

Chapter 10 (Leave stitches on holder)

At noon on Monday, Scottie strode into the school cafeteria feeling ravenous. But not for the Seitan Joes on the menu.

Definitely *not for the Seitan Joes*, Scottie thought, sticking her tongue out and grimacing.

Seitan Joes, aka, sloppy joes made out of wheat gluten, aka Satan Burgers, were the brain child of Principal Heath, she of the cleansing breaths. They were on the cafeteria blackboard every third day, alternating with tofurkey loaf and soy dogs. All three were pretty disgusting, but Seitan Joes were definitely the grossest.

They were also, in Scottie's opinion, total overkill. Even before Dr. Heath's arrival, Stark had been ridiculously progressive. There was a multi-culti mural in just about every hallway. Dissection of fetal pigs, frogs, and even roundworms had been abolished after vociferous protests by the student body. And the classrooms on the top floor were all heated and cooled by solar energy.

Which would be great, Scottie thought, shaking her head, *if not for the fact that we live in Chicago and between November and April, the sun pretty much goes into hibernation. I have two classes on the top floor this year and I'm already knitting up fingerless gloves and nose-warmers to get me through them without freezing to death.*

Now, the Stark students had to deal with a daily diet of soy and Seitan, too.

If the cold doesn't kill us, Scottie thought with a rueful laugh, *all the meat-substitute-based methane might!*

If lunchtime wasn't the food-fest that it used to be, it was still prime time for gossip. And *that's* what Scottie was hungry for today. She and Amanda had played phone tag all day on Sunday so Scottie still hadn't heard about Jamison's party.

She also had some dirt of her own to dish.

When she got to the Chicks regular table, only Tay and John were there. Lunch seemed to interest John as little as it did Scottie. He only had a taste for Tay's *neck*.

Scottie loudly scraped her chair out from under the table and cleared her throat a few times for good measure. Tay sprang away from her neck-nuzzling boyfriend and glanced at Scottie sheepishly. As a rule, Tay never blushed, but right now, she definitely looked a little pink.

"Holy PDA, you guys!" Scottie squawked with a big grin.

Tay glowered at her.

"Like you haven't done worse," she grumbled.

"It's my fault," John blurted, his grin even bigger than Scottie's. "I couldn't help myself. This is the first time I've seen Tay-Tay since she got back from Milwaukee."

"I told you not to say the M-word," Tay complained.

"And," John added, ignoring Tay's protest, "she just smells so *good*. Smell her, Scottie!"

"No way!" Tay and Scottie yelled simultaneously.

While Tay rearranged her shirt collar to make her neck a little less accessible to her swoony b.f., Scottie pulled her knitting and a carton of leftover Kung Pao chicken out of her backpack.

“So I guess the rest of the weekend wasn’t so great either?” she asked Tay with a cringe.

“Let’s just say I broke my promise to Mr. A,” Tay said, slumping down in her chair. “My iPod buds stayed in my ears all day Sunday—even after the battery died.”

“Ouch,” Scottie said.

“Let’s just forget about it,” Tay said, waving away Scottie’s sympathy. “Until I have to go back up there, I’m just going to forget Milwaukee *and* my dad exist.”

“Oh, *that’s* healthy!”

That was Bella, who had just arrived at their table with a cafeteria tray clutched in her hands. She was looking indignantly at Tay.

Tay eyed the roast beef sandwich and Fritos resting on her own brown bag. John’s lunch was even more junky—a slab of deep-dish pizza and a twin-pack of Twinkies. Tay shrugged.

“Bella,” she sighed, “I know you love the Satan burgers, but I’ve told you a hundred times—I don’t eat meat made of wheat. You’re just gonna have to learn to live with my ugly habit of eating food that tastes *good*.”

“I wasn’t talking about that,” Bella said, fluttering into the chair next to Scottie and clunking her tray—and its musty-smelling mound of Seitan—down on the table.

“Tay,” she began to lecture, “avoiding your dad isn’t going to help you guys heal. I mean, yes, the whole Porsche episode was yucky, but you could also see it as an opportunity to really talk about your relationship.”

“Hello?” John said. “Tay and I swap spit daily and *we* don’t talk about our relationship. You really think she’s gonna get all chatty with her *dad*?”

“*And that’s* TMI twice in five minutes,” Tay said. She covered John’s mouth with her hand and shook her head at him. “Don’t *make* me send you over to sit with your basketball buddies.”

John just grabbed Tay’s hand away and laughed. He didn’t, Scottie noticed, let Tay’s hand go when the moment was over.

This made Scottie smiley and wistful all at once. John and Tay were In Love—not obsessed with each other and not merely hot for each other, but truly, sweetly, in-for-the-long-haul in love.

Scottie wished she could ask Tay about the whole Love thing. What did it feel like? How had Tay known when she’d officially fallen? How often did they say it to each other?

But she knew Tay would take to *that* conversation as enthusiastically as she was going to go to Milwaukee twice a month. So Scottie decided to focus on the opposite-of-love: war.

“So,” she said as she flipped open her Chinese food carton and pulled a pair of disposable chopsticks out of her lunch sack, “*guess* who I saw at Joe yesterday?”

Scottie had gone to the coffeehouse for the afternoon to do her homework away from her dad’s constant college questions.

“David Schwimmer again?” Tay said with a yawn. “Scottie, you’ve spotted him like half a dozen times. Face it. The guy’s from here and he’s chronically unemployed, so of *course* he’s always hanging out in Chicago coffee shops. As celebrity sightings go, he’s a dud.”

“Not him,” Scottie said. “It was a *them*. Four of them, to be exact. The Babes with Batting!”

“The quilters?” Bella said between bites of Seitan Joe. “Who are they? Did you say hi?”

“Did I say *hi*?” Scottie blustered. “Bella, those girls don’t want to exchange *pleasantries* with us! They want to replace us! Now that I know who they are, I’m even more sure of that. It’s Emma Duncan, Grier D’abruzzo, and Lissie Goldblatt. You know them. Each one is snootier than the last. And then there’s Ilana Cross. I’m pretty sure she’s the ringleader. *She’s* hated me ever since the fourth grade.”

“Why?” Bella squeaked.

“Oh it’s so dumb,” Scottie scoffed. “We were at some slumber party and I kinda outed Ilana as the one who farted during the *séance*.”

“And she’s still holding a grudge?” John guffawed. “Man, if guys got all huffy every time one of us cut one, we’d have no friends left.”

“Especially now that you’re all eating Satan burgers,” Tay rified.

“Ew,” Scottie said with a giggle. “Anyway, Ilana and Co. were sitting in *our* spots on the couch near the fireplace. They were stitching on this quilt spread across all of their laps and gossiping so hard, I seriously thought they were gonna start spitting acid.”

“Oh, like *you’re* above gossiping,” Tay said. “You’re doing it right now!”

“Not like this,” Scottie insisted. “They were making a list of all the Stark girls they suspect of having boob jobs. Then came the ones with nose jobs. *Then* they started speculating about *dyed hair*. Since when is that even notable, much less gossip-worthy?”

“Especially coming from Lissie Goldblatt,” Tay said, “who clearly has a chin implant.”

Scottie almost choked on her Kung Pao she laughed so hard. But she sobered up quickly when she said, “The thing is, before the ‘babes’ got on the subject of surgery? I’m *sure* they were talking about us. The minute I sat down near them, they did that thing where they all looked over at me then started shushing each other. Then they wagged their eyebrows at each other and giggled. Finally, Grier was all, ‘Better change the subject, you guys!’ I mean, how obvious can you get?”

“I guess that depends on how overactive your imagination is,” Tay said, raising one eyebrow.

“What are you saying?” Scottie said.

“I’m just not so sure the Babes with Batting are out to get us,” Tay said. “Don’t you you’re being just a *leetle* bit paranoid?”

“What?!” Scottie squeaked. She spun to face Bella.

“Do you think that, too?”

Bella cringed through her mouthful of Seitan Joe.

“Well,” she wheedled, “I’ve never heard of *quilters* being so, y’know, combative.”

Scottie was about to retort when Amanda flounced up.

“Hi guys,” she said, plopping a white paper bag onto the table. Her hair looked windblown and her cheeks were rosy, which made her look more stunning than ever.

Or maybe, Scottie mused, Amanda looks pretty because of that gleam in her eye. That crushy gleam.

Amanda sat down and pulled her bag open hungrily.

“I was having a major falafel craving so I dashed down the street,” she explained. She pulled a foil-wrapped pita out of the bag, along with a paper pouch of curly fries.

A fully deep-fried lunch? Scottie observed. Well that clinches it. When Amanda’s single, she’s a salad bar girl. But being in like makes her crave all things full-fat—yet still lose weight from all the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

“So,” Scottie announced, “clearly things went well after you left the party with Mister . . . hey, what is Jamison’s last name?”

Amanda paused, chewed her lip for a moment, then mumbled something.

“What was that?” Tay said.

“I said Steele,” Amanda blurted, giving Scottie a defensive look. “His last name is Steele.”

“*Jamison Steele?*” Scottie hooted. “You’ve got to be kidding. Wait a minute, don’t tell me he’s heir to a romance novel empire.”

“*No,*” Amanda pouted. Then her voice dropped again and she rasped, “It’s a chalk empire.”

“Chalk?” Bella said, looking utterly confused.

Amanda blew a wisp of dark hair out of her eyes and blurted, “His family owns a company that sells chalk to basically every school in the country, okay?”

“That’s a lot of chalk,” Scottie said, trying not to laugh. “The Steeles—chalk kings of Chicago.”

“Hey, chalk is cooler than toilet paper,” Amanda grumbled.

“That *is* true,” Scottie said. Then she angled her head and looked hard at Amanda’s flushed face; at the way she was breaking her French fries into little pieces but not eating them; at the slightly off-center, dreamy cast in her eyes.

“Wow,” she said quietly. “So you really like him, huh?”

Amanda looked at her sheepishly.

“Yeah,” she admitted. “I know it makes me look like a total hypocrite, crushing on one of *them*. But Scottie, I was right. Jamison *is* different.”

“So tell us about the party!” Bella said. “Scottie IM’d me and Tay about it yesterday.”

“Oh my God,” Amanda gushed, unwrapping her falafel. “It was *such* a scene. I felt like I was already in New York! I mean, everybody was dressed in these amazing DIY duds, or they were wearing dresses by really cool local designers. And the DJ *was* amazing. I’d never heard of half the bands he played. Jamison and I danced for *hours*. And when we weren’t dancing, we were talking to the wildest people—and dissing the deb thing the whole time. Jamison had some WASP jokes that made *me* blush. I mean, I thought *I* hated debbing. . . .”

“Well, I don’t know why.”

Scottie jumped as a chilly voice floated into the Chicks’ midst.

“Being a debutante,” the girl lurking behind Scottie went on, “is no more lame than, say, *knitting*.”

Scottie turned to find herself gazing up at the surgically-altered chin of Lissie Goldblatt. Ilana Cross was at her side and behind them stood Emma and Grier, each posing like a supermodel. All of them wore the same sour, condescending smiles.

Once they had the Chicks' attention, Ilana turned to Lissie and announced, "I *knew* I smelled something barnyardy. I thought it was the Satan burgers, but now I realize it was all that wool."

"Whew," Emma said eagerly, waving a hand in front of her face and wrinkling her nose.

"Well, you would know a lot about gross smells, wouldn't you Ilana," Tay said, fixing Ilana with a wide smile.

Scottie slapped a hand over her mouth to keep from shrieking with laughter, a move that Ilana caught. Ilana blanched for a split second—before getting surlier than ever.

"I know some other things, too," she said, "like that you might get a little surprise when you show up for your so-called 'stitch 'n bitch' tomorrow."

Tay's face went from light to dark in an instant.

"What do you mean?" she growled.

"Here's the thing," Grier blurted, stepping to the front of the quilters' pack. She shifted her wad of gum to her cheek and started prattling, ticking her items of business off on her fingers as she went.

"I just got a major part in Stark's production of *The Vagina Monologues*, which means I have rehearsals on Wednesdays and Fridays. On Thursdays, Lissie has a standing appointment at Nail Bar and Emma has her SAT class because she totally bombed the PSATS."

"Okay, *that's* not the point, *Grier*," Emma said, huffing impatiently.

Grier covered her mouth with a limp hand.

“Whoops, I forgot. That was supposed to be a secret, wasn’t it.”

She cocked her head, shot Emma a faux-apologetic smile, then turned back to the Chicks.

“So where was I?” she said, gazing at the ceiling and giving her gum a chomp.

“Monday,” Ilana said.

“Oh, right,” Grier said. She pocketed her gum again and went on. “On *Mondays*, I have to take my sister to her Suzuki class, Lissie has private skiing lessons to prep for Christmas in Steamboat, and Ilana goes shopping with her mom.”

“You go shopping *every* Monday?” Amanda demanded of Ilana, her mouth hanging open.

Ilana straightened her pleated miniskirt, then smoothed down the waistband of her sparkly, jersey T-shirt.

“I don’t make my own clothes,” she said. “Some of us aren’t that, y’know, *homespun*.”

Bella fingered the fuzzy, bell-shaped sleeve of her hand-knitted sweater and frowned. But Amanda merely rolled her eyes and said, “Here’s what I really want to know. Why on *earth* should we care about your schedules?”

“Because,” Ilana said, examining one of her polished fingernails distractedly, “of Tuesdays.”

“What’s happening on Tuesdays?” Scottie wondered.

“Nothing,” Ilana declared. “That’s the point. It’s the only day all four of us are free. Which means the Babes with Batting will be switching our bees at Joe from Wednesdays to Tuesdays.”

Ilana dragged her eyes lazily from her hand to Scottie's burning face.

"Starting tomorrow," she added.

"Oh, no you *won't!*" Scottie yelled. She completely forgot to assume the tone of casual weariness all of them had been using for this little face-off. "*Never Mind the Frogs* has been meeting on Tuesdays for *two years*. That's our day and you know it."

"Um, *excuse* me, but I don't believe I ever saw an official roster at Joe," Lissie said, grinning catlike at her friends. "I mean, are you *allowed* to just claim a day there?"

"No," Grier said, playing along. She chomped her gum with extra vigor and smiled at the Chicks malevolently. "I don't think you are."

"Whatever," Tay scoffed. "Frogs has as many as twenty people knitting every Tuesday now. There'll be no room for you and your little, *tiny* needles. End of story."

"Or it'll be the other way around," Ilana said calmly. "I mean, it's first come, first served, right? And we have at least a dozen quilters who have study periods for their last class. Which means we can get to Joe a full hour before school ends. So . . . if there's no room for you *frogs* when you get there? Oh well!"

Scottie gasped and looked at her friends in outrage.

"No way," she whispered. "They can't do that, can they?"

For the first time, Tay looked alarmed.

"What're we gonna do?" she whispered back. "Pick 'em up and throw them out?"

Scottie gripped the edge of the table, at a complete loss for a clever comeback for the Babes. Finally, after an embarrassingly long pause, she stuck out her chin and glared up at Ilana.

“Here’s the thing about knitters,” she said. “We have way more tricks up our sleeves than you can ever imagine.”

“Oh, like knit *two*, purl *two* instead of knit one, purl one?” Ilana replied, sarcasm making her voice brittle. “Whoa, that’s impressive! What other tricks have you got— knit, knit, purl, purl? Or the ever-popular purl, purl, knit, knit?”

Scottie’s cheeks flamed. Clearly, she didn’t have Ilana’s talent for making mean.

Which I guess I should feel good about? she thought woefully.

With nothing else to say, Scottie made a desperate attempt at sneery body language. She clamped her mouth shut, twisted in her seat, and turned her stiff, straight back to the Babes. Then she scooped up her chopsticks and began poking around in her Chinese food carton with intense interest. The other Chicks used the same “just ignore them” tactic.

After a long moment of disdainful silence, the Babes finally skulked away, exchanging cackles and high-fives as they went. When they were out of ear shot, Scottie exhaled loudly and slumped over the table, her head in her hands.

“This is horrible,” she groaned. “*Horrible!* It’s a coup!”

“Well, maybe it’s not *quite* as serious as overthrowing a government,” Bella suggested gently.

“But it *is* pretty aggressive,” Tay had to admit. “Those Babes are evil.”

“Yeah,” John agreed. “Man, it’s hard being a girl. Guys just throw a punch and get it over with. The way girls do things is much more subversive. Underhanded. Dangerous, even! Which is a kind of a turn-on, now that I think about it. . . .”

He laughed and gave Tay’s waist a pinch.

“You are *so* weird,” Tay said. “Why don’t you go knit or something?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” John said. He popped the last of his Twinkie into his mouth, then pulled a burgundy-and-blue striped cap-in-progress out of his messenger bag. He spaced his stitches neatly around his circular needle and began knitting with a swift, jerky rhythm. John had been knitting for about a year and he was actually getting pretty good at it.

“Well, I think John is wrong,” Amanda announced, taking a big chomp out of her pita. “The Babes might be dangerous if they could actually pull this off, but I don’t believe they can for a minute. They’re totally bluffing.”

“Really?” Scottie squeaked.

“Really,” Amanda declared confidently. “And if they *do* make some weak attempt to infiltrate Frogs, we’ll just keep ignoring them.”

“Yeah,” Bella piped. “We definitely shouldn’t engage them. Why should we compete over whether quilting is better than knitting?”

“Right,” Tay said. “We *know* knitting’s better.”

“Yeah-huh!” Scottie cried, pumping her fist.

“You guys,” Amanda said. “This isn’t a game of Go to the Head of the Craft. This is a meaningless turf war, pure and simple. And like Scottie said—we’ve had Tuesdays at Joe for two years now and we’re gonna keep on having Tuesdays at Joe. This is a blip.”

Amanda sounded so confident that Scottie was almost convinced. She decided not to panic—yet. She even attempted some bravado.

“Those girls *so* went about this the wrong way,” she said. “If they’d just *asked* us to switch days instead of poaching, maybe we would have considered it. I mean, I’d love

to bring Nina to Frogs, since I've totally infected her with the knitting bug. But I only see her on Wednesdays and Fridays."

"And I rarely have deb duty on Fridays," Amanda piped up, "so that day would work for me, too."

"But now," Scottie glowered, "they're *never* getting our Tuesdays."

"Damn straight," John agreed. He held up his hand, inviting Scottie to high-five him. Scottie looked around sheepishly, then shrugged and gave his hand a slap. High fives weren't really the Chicks' thing, but John was sweet for trying.

"Hey," Bella said, "if you guys are looking for something to do with your Fridays, you should come paint the French fry bus with me!"

"Um, I don't think Amanda needs any more French fries," Tay joked, swiping a curly fry from Amanda's lunch and popping it into her mouth.

"Oh, that's just my nickname for it," Bella said. "It's this bus that's going to travel across the country to let the world know about the importance of alternative fuels! The thing's gonna run on nothing but leftover French fry oil from fast food restaurants! Isn't that cool?!"

"Wow, Bella," Scottie said, shooting Amanda and Tay sidelong glances. "I had no idea you were so . . . passionate about alternative fuels. So GreenLeaves is branching out from endangered species and stuff?"

"Oh, GreenLeaves," Bella scoffed. "I got really disenchanted with them. I mean, it seems like everybody who worked there smoked clove cigarettes! *When* they weren't composing beat poetry about whales and stuff. It was like being environmental activists was just one little part of their hipster identities. And smoking cloves? How is *that* good

for the environment? No, the Alternative Fuel Consortium is much more me. Not only do they *not* pollute the air, but the exhaust from the French fry bus smells really yummy! Kinda like hush puppies.”

Scottie guffawed.

“Bella, you’re going crazy!” she said. “How many different service projects are you gonna wrack up before graduation?”

“I’m just looking for the right fit,” Bella defended herself. She’d finished her Seitan Joe and was moving onto her dessert, another Dr. Heath creation called Granougat, an *extremely* chewy granola bar. “Not everybody can be as lucky as you, Scottie. Sounds like things are going great with Nina.”

“They are, amazing as it sounds,” Scottie said with a happy shrug. “Just dumb luck, I guess. *And* the fact that Nina’s an amazing kid. She’s so sweet, but she’s cool, too. And she totally gets the knitting thing. She’s already almost finished her first scarf. She says it’s a fabulous way to block out the racket of all her little sisters and brothers.”

She turned to Bella, who was working very hard to sink her teeth into her Granougat.

“Don’t worry,” she assured her. “I’m sure a Bella-ready project is out there for you. Maybe the French fry bus will be a match.”

“And if it isn’t,” Bella shrugged between gnaws on her dessert, “at least it’ll look good on my college apps. Schools love to see that you’re well-rounded and up for trying lots of different things.”

Scottie froze. She felt like she’d been kicked in the stomach.

And here I thought it was a good thing, that things are going so well with Nina, she brooded. *Turns out, it just makes me a one-note Jane.*

Scottie shook her head hard. She didn't want to think about that. Not when there was so much else to occupy her mind, from the new development in Amanda's love life, to battling the Babes with Batting, to her next activity with Nina.

Which, hello, I'm doing for her, Scottie reminded herself with just a hint of self-righteousness. *Not for the sake of some application. I can't imagine what could be wrong about that.*

Scottie cast a shifty glance at Bella, who'd finally given up on her granougat and begun knitting and studying her notes for her next class. Scottie wondered what Bella would say if she voiced her skepticism out loud.

But the bell was just a couple minutes away.

What's more, Scottie thought with a shrug, *college applications are months away.*

So she filed the question away for another day, some time—Scottie didn't know exactly when—in the future.