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ALL MY CHILDREN, January 1970:

A teenage Erica Kane longs to leave her small town and go to Hollywood. She's cautioned that Hollywood isn't all it's cracked up to be, but Erica isn't discouraged. She has big dreams, and she'll chase them no matter what anyone else tells her.

Brie was almost positive her mom didn't like her.

That wasn't to say her mom didn't *love* her. But Brie had a hard time believing that she *liked* her. For example, Brie didn't think she was the type of girl her mom would point at and go "Now *that* is a good girl" if they met elsewhere. Someone like Kennedy Bishop, on the other hand, was the quintessential good girl. Everyone's mom liked Kennedy Bishop.

Kennedy was destined to be the eighth grader chosen to crown Mary at Our Lady of Perpetual Help's annual

celebratory mass in the spring. Brie wouldn't have cared which of her classmates was chosen—really, she wouldn't have—if it hadn't been for Kelly Monaco's boobs.

Look, first of all, Kelly Monaco was Brie's favorite soap opera star, and she *also* had really great hair. Even Brie's mom thought so. They'd had an entire conversation about it while watching *General Hospital* together. "Kelly Monaco has really great hair," her mom had said.

"She has really great everything," Brie had responded—immediately turning red. Her mom hadn't noticed.

Later Brie Googled photos of Kelly Monaco's really great hair. How was she supposed to know Kelly had done *Playboy* photos and that they would be the first thing to pop up? Really it was her mom's fault, since she had brought up Kelly Monaco's hair to begin with, and honestly Brie kept looking at the photos only because she was curious.

Well, curious . . . and maybe a little flustered.

Of course that flustered moment was when her mom decided to waltz into her room, carrying Brie's laundry and lecturing her about the need to unfold socks before throwing them in the hamper. Brie's backpack was strewn on the floor, and—miracle of miracles—her mom tripped over it, stumbling just enough to shift her eyes away from Brie's computer screen. Brie—flushed and about to burst into flame—caught sight of her religion book as it slipped out of her bag. A statue of Mary with her arms outstretched beckoned from

the cover. That was the moment Brie practically shouted, “I’m going to crown Mary!”

At the time it seemed like divine intervention.

Her mom was delighted. Brie closed her browser. Crisis averted.

Well, at least *that* crisis. The bigger problem was she *hadn’t* been chosen to crown Mary. No one had. The selection wouldn’t happen for weeks, because, needless to say, the May Crowning was in May. The students of Our Lady of Perpetual Help still had fourteen weeks of regular masses to prepare for the eighth-grade event.

It was a big deal in Catholic school, or at least at Brie’s. May was the month they honored and celebrated the Mother of God by holding a special church mass during school and inviting the rest of the parishioners to attend. The eighth-grade students got all dressed up—out of their uniforms and into their Sunday best—and the rest of the school gathered in the church to watch as the chosen one went up on the altar and put a crown made of flowers on the Mary statue’s head. Since Brie had gone to OLPH since kindergarten, she’d sat through eight May Crowning masses. Now she would need to do more than sit through the ninth.

“Mrs. Dwek, I need to crown Mary,” Brie said in home-room the following Monday.

Mrs. Dwek was a small, plump woman who wore her hair piled on top of her head. Her fingers typed quickly at

her laptop's keyboard, and though she never turned away from the screen, she answered Brie swiftly. "I'm glad to hear you're taking an interest, Brie. We won't be prepping for quite some time, though."

"No, you don't understand," Brie said. "I *need* to crown Mary."

This time, Mrs. Dwek did look away from her computer screen. "You know how this works. You'll all write essays, and the best essay gets to crown Mary. I'm sure Ms. Santos will have you practice in class. I know writing isn't your strongest subject."

Brie did not, unfortunately, have a strongest subject. "I think your system is flawed. The math nerds would agree."

Mrs. Dwek sighed with her entire body, as she often did while speaking to Brie. "Whoever crowns Mary reads their essay in front of the entire school, so the system is in place for a reason. And some of our strongest math students are also our strongest writers."

Brie pouted. Kennedy Bishop was good at math *and* writing.

"Go take your seat before morning prayers," Mrs. Dwek said, dismissing her.

"I can pray from right here," Brie pointed out.

Mrs. Dwek wasn't impressed. "Take your seat anyway."

Our Lady of Perpetual Help was one of a handful of Catholic schools within driving distance to Brie's house in

New Jersey. There was always a lot of talk about Catholic schools closing down, but Brie felt as though she saw as many Catholic schools in her area as Starbucks. It seemed like there was one on every corner.

But Our Lady of Perpetual Help was the smallest, and it was much too easy to stand out in a small school. Brie's dad liked to joke that Brie was a "loud fish in a little pond." For Brie, who had started OLPH as a chatty kindergartner who enjoyed being the center of attention (show-and-tell days had always been her favorite) and had worked her way up to the eighth grader she was now, making splashes was inevitable.

Unfortunately, those splashes got her a lot of phone calls home from teachers like Mrs. Dwek, which usually went like this:

Brie's mom: "Hello?"

Mrs. Dwek (because it was almost always Mrs. Dwek): "Mrs. Hutchens? It's Mrs. Dwek. I'm calling about Brie."

Brie's mom: "What did she do this time?" (Okay, she didn't really say that. But Brie could tell by the slump of her mom's shoulders and the resigned half roll of her eyes that she was thinking it.)

Mrs. Dwek: "I think we need to have a conversation about Brie's attitude, in particular her penchant for calling out in class."

Brie just had a lot to say sometimes. She might have

flown under the radar at Bayshore, the much larger *public* middle school, but she didn't blend in much at all here.

Brie didn't want to blend in, anyway. What Mrs. Dwek and her mom didn't understand was that Brie was destined for something bigger than OLPH.

Bigger than Highlands, New Jersey.

Still, she didn't want Mrs. Dwek to make one of those calls home, so she took her seat. And just as she did, the old, dusty loudspeaker—located right above the crucifix, which was right next to the American flag—crackled to life. “Good morning, students of Our Lady of Perpetual Help!” Sister Patricia, who lived across the street in the church building and was in charge of the religious studies for their school parish, always sounded so optimistic first thing in the morning. (She faded to something more like exhaustion by the end of the day.)

She continued now, her voice muffled through the speaker: “Let us begin.”

That day, like every other school day, began with the Our Father.

And like every other school day, Brie mumbled along to the words on autopilot—*Our Father, who art in heaven*—tuning everything else out. Next to her, Wallace Hughes reached over to pull at a loose string from the hem of her uniform skirt, causing the pleats to bunch closer together. Her mom hadn't hemmed the skirt as high as Brie would

have liked, but still, it was better than letting it hang stiff and awkwardly over her knees. “Wallace!” hissed Brie.

“Wallace, do I need to move your seat?” Mrs. Dwek asked.

“No,” he responded, resting his chin on his desk. “So,” he whispered as Sister Patricia moved on to the Hail Mary. *Hail Mary, full of grace . . .*

“So what?” Brie asked.

“Are you gonna come to the game or not?”

Brie sighed. Wallace sat next to her in nearly every class because alphabetically, Hughes came right before Hutchens. He was what Brie would call a “school friend,” since they didn’t exactly make time for each other outside of classes. Wallace was currently attempting to ruin the status quo.

If Parker Pigott hadn’t thought Wallace was so cute, Brie wouldn’t have bothered, but sometimes you had to make sacrifices for your best friend.

“At seven?” Brie asked. A student took over for Sister Patricia on the loudspeaker, beginning the Pledge of Allegiance, signaling that homeroom was almost over. On autopilot again, Brie and her classmates all stood at their seats, hands over their hearts. “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.”

“Seven thirty,” Wallace said midpledge. He had an indent in his chin from resting it against the edge of the hard desk. He cocked his head, thick brown curls bouncing to the

side. “Do I need to explain hockey to you? I can do it during math. You don’t pay attention anyway.”

“I do so.”

“Did you do the homework?”

Brie groaned as they all took their seats again. No, she had not done the homework. She’d forgotten they even had homework in math. Her mom called her forgetfulness an “organization issue.”

The student on the loudspeaker began morning announcements, which never concerned Brie, since she wasn’t big on the extracurriculars. Maybe she could quickly copy Wallace’s homework. “Did you do it?”

“No,” he said, which rendered him useless. “I got home late from practice and forgot. So, can I explain hockey to you?”

“I’ll cheer when you score. I’ll boo when you don’t. I’ve got this—don’t worry.”

“Okay,” he said, and the bell rang.

Everyone in Brie’s homeroom began gathering their things. Brie grabbed her backpack, realizing it felt too light. She must have left one of her textbooks at home.

She met Parker in the hallway, like she always did.

“So?” Parker asked.

Brie rolled her eyes. “So *what?*”

“Did you tell Wallace we’re coming tonight?”

“I told him *I’m* coming.”

Parker's face turned bright red with only the smallest amount of needling. Parker was tall and skinny and pale. Brie sometimes thought they must look like spaghetti and a meatball when they walked down the hall together. "I know he's *your* friend. He's just . . . *so* cute, Brie!"

"*You're* my friend," Brie clarified. "And he's all yours. He's not my type."

Parker stopped to consider this, her ponytail waving back and forth as if she were still moving. "Well, then, what *is* your type?"

Parker's type was *boy*. Wallace or Jack Thomas or Javi Martinez or, or, or . . .

As for Brie . . . she was still trying to figure her type out.

(Which made her think of Kelly Monaco. Which made her think of the May Crowning, which made her think of her mom, which made her stomach hurt.)

"Just come on," Brie said with a roll of her eyes. "We're going to be late to English."