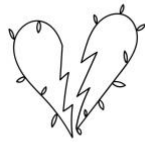


THIS HIDEOUS HEART



Kate Pawson Studer

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KATE PAWSON STUDER

*To everyone who's ever supported my writing,
even for a minute.*

THIS HIDEOUS HEART

Chapter One

I'm not a suspicious person by nature. Sure, I've been wrong about things before, but I don't typically jump to conclusions. I'm an observer. A rationalist. And this thing, I knew to be true. I watched it happen; saw it deepen right before my very eyes. Real love. *Passionate love*. It's like an itch demanding to be scratched, impossible to ignore. Especially when it's happening to your boyfriend—and the object of his affection isn't you.

I remember sitting across from her in the cafeteria, about a month before the end of junior year. We'd sat together for lunch almost every day since our very first at Fraser High School. No—even longer. We'd been sitting together for lunch almost every day forever. Alden and I had been best friends since she spilled fruit punch all over my beautiful, brand new, embroidered unicorn pencil case in the second grade.

She cried. I forgave her. A friendship was forged.

There wasn't anything different or spectacular about that particular day in the cafeteria. I was eating a salad, as I often did at lunch because my mom thinks salads were sent by god or something, and Alden was eating a sandwich and talking. Mostly talking. She'd been the victim of a Chemistry pop quiz earlier that morning; as in, it hadn't gone well. At least, according to her. I knew she'd aced it because Alden always aced things. She was quick. She was clever. She had a knack for just about anything and everything under the sun.

I might not have immediately noticed Malcolm entering the room except Alden abruptly stopped talking. Her eyes lifted, then widened, her pretty lips curling slightly at the corners. I followed her gaze all the way to my boyfriend, who was grabbing a tray and joining the line for hot food. Hamburger and fries. Malcolm was a creature of habit too.

Alden quickly returned to the subject at hand, but there wasn't much else to say. Pop quiz. She panicked. End of story. A few minutes later, Malcolm slid into the seat next to mine. His dark hair was mussed and he looked tired. He cracked open his can of soda and downed the first half in one go.

Alden looked amused. "Thirsty?"

Malcolm finished his long gulp and swallowed, apparently in no hurry to answer. Satiated, he audibly exhaled, then brought the can down hard against the table.

"Not anymore." He grinned.

I laughed, but he barely looked at me. That was beginning to feel normal. There was a time when he'd always greeted me with a kiss, as good boyfriends do, and Malcolm had always been a good boyfriend. A model boyfriend even. But just then? Not so much. *He barely looked at me.* I couldn't remember exactly when things started to change, but anything can start to feel normal after a while. You adapt. You learn to accept things, even if they aren't quite right.

"What did you think of that pop quiz?" Alden asked him.

Right. He was in that class too.

Malcolm raised a hand and wobbled it uncertainly before starting in on his fries.

Alden continued. "Yeah, I was just telling Ginny I was completely blindsided." She flipped a band of shiny, honey blonde hair over her shoulder. Alden had always been beautiful. She was the kind of girl guys were guaranteed to fall for, with dazzling blue eyes and an easy smile. She looked just as good in a pair of ratty, old jeans as she did in a hot, form-fitting little dress. I certainly couldn't blame anyone—not even Malcolm—for finding her attractive. As her sworn BFF, I'd fallen for her once too, in a way.

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“That’s why they call it a pop quiz, ya dummy.” Malcolm quickly redirected the fry that’d been en route to his mouth, tossing it in Alden’s direction. She jerked backward in her chair, intercepting the greasy projectile with her hand before it could slip down the front of her scoop-neck tee. Boys. They always aim for the cleavage.

Alden quickly threw it back, but her haste hindered her aim and the thing sailed straight past Malcolm’s head, landing on the floor behind him.

“Okay, children, that’s enough,” I said, trying to sound breezy, but there was an edge to my voice I couldn’t suppress.

Alden smiled, a playful laugh on her lips. “He started it!”

“We’re just messin’ around, babe.” But then Malcolm threw another fry. And this time, he stuck the landing.

It wasn’t a fully formed thought at the time, but in retrospect, yeah, that was the moment I knew. Cause really, your typical hetero dude doesn’t playfully throw food at a girl unless he likes her. It’s flirting masquerading as antagonism. It’s foreplay. It’s my boyfriend hoping to get a rise out of my best friend for all the wrong reasons, like wanting her to have to reach down the front of her shirt to retrieve the fry he’d landed. Which she did, pulling the fabric away from the curve of her breasts so she could fish the damn thing out from the gore of her bra.

There was something infuriatingly intimate about the act—the show of it aside. Something he’d been holding was now lodged between her breasts. It crossed a line I should have drawn then and there, but I bit my tongue because nobody wants to be the nagging, suspicious girlfriend. Besides, it wouldn’t have changed anything. It was already too late. They’d been teasing each other for weeks.

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Malcolm made a face like he was innocent, and then put his arm around me, an act I later decided was just another calculated move to gauge Alden's reaction. Was she uncomfortable with our affection? Jealous? Cause if she was...

To Alden's credit, she didn't return fire. Instead, she sat back and ran a hand through her hair before picking up her sandwich.

I rested my head on Malcolm's shoulder and he lightly played with the collar of my shirt.

"We still on for the movies this weekend?" Alden asked.

For a moment, I didn't answer, her question catching me off guard. But then I remembered that yeah, we'd made plans before this irritation took hold, and I nodded.

"Should be fun," Malcolm said. I looked at him and his mouth spread into a wide, impish grin.

In what fucked up former life had I thought the three of us going to the movies together was a good idea?

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Chapter Two

There's an obstinate duality to realizing your boyfriend is in love with someone else. On the one hand, you shouldn't want to be with a guy who isn't committed to you, but still. *Still*. I loved him. I really loved him. And knowing he was falling for her didn't make that less true. It didn't make me no longer want him. It didn't make me more willing to let go.

My instinct was to fight for him. For us. Because even though things looked bad, there was always a chance, even a slight one, that I could make him want me again. At least, that's what I convinced myself of at the time.

I'd known Malcolm since middle school, but it wasn't until sophomore year that I developed a crush on him. He sat behind me in math class and honestly, I couldn't tell you exactly how it happened. One day, he was some kid I knew from school and the next? I felt like I couldn't breathe when I saw him. My pulse raced every time he spoke in class, or accidentally brushed the back of my hair with the pages of his textbook. I could *feel* him sitting behind me to the point of distraction, and I was desperate for any excuse to turn around.

Then one day, the jackass in the next desk over was trying to get my attention while the teacher wrote our assignment on the board. Though everyone at school calls me Ginny, my full name is Virginia, and this guy thought it would be hilarious to call me *Vagina*. (I know, I know. You're probably wondering how I managed not to fall for *him* instead...) I did my best to ignore him, forcing myself to focus on scribbling the homework into my notebook, but he just wouldn't stop with the *Vaginas*.

Then I heard Malcolm hiss at him. "Dude, leave her alone."

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I swear my heart stopped beating. Had that even just happened? I turned around and Malcolm's eyes locked with mine. I mouthed the words *thank you* and he smiled. It was like the most brilliant sunrise I'd ever seen.

After that, nothing happened until about a week later, when Malcolm didn't show up for class. That night, I received a follow request from him online, then a message explaining that he'd been out sick and wondered if I had the homework. When I saw his words pop up on my screen, I tried really hard not to get my hopes up, but part of me knew this was unusual. Exceptional. Important. He had friends in that class, far better friends than me, and yet he'd reached out to ask about the assignment. I briefly agonized over how to word my reply—how could I work in something clever or cute? Ultimately, I decided to provide him with the info he'd requested, along with a line about hoping he felt better soon, followed by a carefully selected thumbs up emoji that has almost been a wink. The word *lame* flashed through my brain as I hit send, but it was too late. I sat and stared at the screen. *Two seconds. Three. Four. Five. Six...*

And then came his reply. A thank you, and then more. He wasn't sure if he'd be back the next day or not. I promised that if he wasn't, I'd get the homework for him. And then he kept the conversation going. And going. And then somewhere down the thread of messages, spanning his dislike of string cheese (minus ten points), to his heartbreak over his dad abandoning him and his mom when he was young (plus all the points), he asked me if I wanted to see a movie sometime. I read that message about five times before leaping from my chair and running a victory lap around my room. A week after that, he kissed me outside the theatre. And then again outside my door. In the rain. His lips deliciously warm against the cold. And everything that followed was the story of Malcolm and Ginny: the couple.

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For well over a year, we continued to click. Our chemistry was effortless, and our relationship ranked a perfect score on every *How hot a couple are you?* compatibility quiz to cross my path. We always talked as though we were really in it. All in. It was one of those relationships where you didn't have to make plans with each other because plans were a given. He came over to my place every Fridays after school, and there were specific times during the week when we had standing dates to call or chat. We weren't just dating, we were an institution. When people invited us places, they knew we were a package deal. Malcolm and Ginny. Ginny and Malcolm. In a high school full of revolving door relationships, we were the constant.

I remember how excited Alden had been for me in the beginning. She'd seemed supportive; she knew what a big deal it was for me have a boyfriend because I didn't date much. She didn't either, but she'd clocked more hours than I had. Guys were always asking her out. Still, I never would've guessed she'd be a factor in our downfall.

But there we were, nearly a-year-and-a-half later, and I was dreading the thought of returning to that same theatre where Malcolm and I'd had our first date. Alden had joined us at the movies before and we'd always made a point of making it a friend night instead of a date with a third wheel. But this time, it felt different. It felt like a bad idea.

It felt like *I* was the third wheel.

If the war had begun, I was going to dress for battle: short, flouncy red skirt and a lacy black blouse with the top two—no, *three*—buttons left undone. I curled my hair and played up my lips more than my eyes. I'd come to learn what turned on Malcolm the most. I planned to flirt the way we used to, be charming, remind him of all the reasons he fell for me in the first place.

It was going to be magical, dammit.

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I sat on the couch with my twelve-year-old sister, Martha, half-watching some dumb tween drama she was obsessed with, waiting for Malcolm's text that he was on his way. When the message didn't come, I texted him instead, worried about how late it was getting. Our local theatre didn't have reserved seating and he knew I hated to show up right before the movie started.

Where are you?

His reply was brief: *Driving*

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. I jumped up and grabbed my bag before calling out to my parents to say I was leaving. When I opened the door, Malcolm was standing on the front porch, looking impatient.

"Hey." I smiled and waited for him to comment on how good I knew I looked.

"Hey. Come on. Let's go." He hurried down the steps toward the old VW Rabbit he'd saved up all year to buy, which was idling in the driveway.

It wasn't even that he hadn't looked at me, it was that he didn't seem to care. I shook off my disappointment and walked toward the passenger side of the car, coming within a few feet before I noticed Alden already sitting inside. She rushed to undo her seatbelt and then stepped out of the car.

"Hey," she said. "I'll move to the back." She pushed the passenger seat forward and climbed into the backseat. I waited for her to get settled, then shoved the seat back into position before getting in myself.

"I didn't know you were picking up Alden first," I said to Malcolm as we got settled in the front. It seemed the safest way to make the accusation.

Malcolm shrugged and shifted the car into reverse. "Yeah, she was on the way."

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I could feel my irritation rising like a fever, hot and uncomfortable. “Okay, well, you usually get me first, so I just assumed you would this time too.”

“Okay. Well, I didn’t.” Malcolm glared at me briefly before returning his eyes to the road.

We drove the rest of the way in silence, Alden finally speaking again when we pulled into the parking lot at the theatre.

“I like your hair, Gin.”

“Thanks,” I grumbled, feeling super frustrated. It was like I was trying to scale a wall and just kept crashing headfirst into it instead. The night, which was supposed to be magical—which was supposed to reignite the flame between Malcolm and me—was already off to a terrible start. And it only got worse from there.

The theatre was mostly full when we entered, but we managed to find several empty seats down near the front. I made a point of arranging us so that I sat between Alden and Malcolm, but then Alden got up to get popcorn.

The lights dimmed and the previews came on. I watched Malcolm as he stared at the screen, the palette of a formulaic rom-com flashing across his face. I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He turned and smiled at me briefly before returning his attention to the screen. I reached out and grabbed his hand, lacing my fingers through his. He let me take it, but didn’t otherwise acknowledge it. There was a pain in my chest. Somewhere beneath my ribs, my heart started to crack.

When Alden returned a few minutes later, Malcolm stole his hand away from mine and put a foot up against the seatback in front of him, teasingly preventing her from returning to her seat on the other side of me.

Alden played up her impatience and kicked him lightly with her foot. “Hey, move it,” she said, but Malcolm just smirked and kept his foot planted where it was. He was acting so unlike his usual self, I wanted to scream.

“Ha ha. Malcolm, let her get by,” I said, but my words were mostly drowned out by the sound of gunfire on the screen.

Alden tried to step over his leg, but he raised it slightly so she couldn’t make it. She pretended to be annoyed, but she was smiling, so I knew she wasn’t really annoyed. *I was* annoyed. But the absolute last thing I wanted to do was make a big scene. Jilted or not, I’d never let myself be *that* girlfriend.

I started to repeat myself, but then the animation for the feature presentation came on and Malcolm said, “You’d better sit, Al, or the people behind us are gonna start throwing popcorn at you.”

“Fine,” Alden said, sitting in the empty seat next to Malcolm in a huff, but her grin betrayed her. She was elated.

I tried to shake it off. I tried so damn hard to pretend I was imagining things. Or overreacting. But then the whispering started. He’d lean toward her and make some comment, she’d giggle, and when I asked him what they were laughing about, he’d shush me and claim he’d fill me in later.

He might as well have slapped me in the face.

Oh my god. This is really happening.

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Chapter Three

In the weeks that followed, I became hyper-aware of every little exchange between my boyfriend and my best friend—how often they interacted, where they sat in relation to one another, and most glaringly, how much they openly flirted with one another right in front of me.

A few days before we were set to take our final exams, we were hanging out in the school hallway between classes, and Malcolm kept slipping books out of Alden's locker and hiding them behind his back. The barfy game of keep-away that ensued was enough to cause me to slam my locker shut and head to class without a word. But the worst part came later, when I saw Malcolm again, and he didn't bother to ask me what was wrong.

That afternoon, Alden and I were holed up in the library, preparing for our History final. I was so annoyed with the whole Malcolm situation I'd almost bailed on our study session, but at the same time, I desperately wanted everything to go back to normal. I figured the best way to get there was to pretend everything already was.

It didn't last.

Alden's phone was lying face down on the table between us. The first few times it buzzed, she checked it and put it back. But it kept buzzing, and then she picked it up and stifled a laugh. This time, she typed a reply.

"What's up?" I asked. I put my highlighter down so it was perfectly parallel to my pencil.

"Oh, it's nothing," Alden said, her fingers moving swiftly across the screen. She replaced the phone and returned her attention to the book she'd been reading.

Then her phone buzzed again.

She grabbed it, and upon glancing at the screen, her face broke into a huge smile. She quickly typed another reply.

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That right there was a perfect snapshot of Alden—beautiful, spirited, popular. She wasn't outwardly the most social butterfly at our school, but people gravitated toward her. I certainly had. There was just something about her. Always had been. And whatever it was made you want to be part of her world at any cost. Ever since that day we'd first become friends, when I forgave her for ruining my pencil case, I'd found it difficult to stay mad at her for any length of time. Irritated? Sure. Sometimes I even found myself getting snippy with her. But I was never confrontational. Because like I said, there was just something about Alden, and even there in the library, as my annoyance ramped up—with good reason—I still felt my loyalty to her tugging at my heart.

She laughed as another incoming text appeared to interrupt her train of thought.

“Making plans?” I asked.

What are you hiding, Alden?

“What?” Alden looked up from her phone. “Oh, no. It's just Malcolm—he's asking me about this show I recommended.”

“Show?” *I don't understand what's happening. We're supposed to be friends.* “A funny show?”

“It's just this British comedy. Kinda offbeat. New season just dropped.” She finished her reply and put the phone back on the table between us. “It's nothing.”

“Okay,” I said, but it didn't sound like nothing to me.

The phone buzzed again and I glanced down to see the screen was facing up this time. Another text from Malcolm.

No, I don't think she does, it said.

She? Me? I don't think she does what?

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Then another message stacked on top, but I didn't get a chance to read it before Alden snatched up her phone and tossed it in her bag.

"Sorry," she said. "That's distracting. How about no more phones?"

I glared at her, this awful, unspoken thing between us, probably the first in our entire friendship. Did she know I was on to her? Did she know my heart was breaking? How could she know and be so okay with it?

"Sure," I said. "No more phones."

I picked up my textbook and started reading again, but I kept scanning the same sentence over and over, the words never fully sinking in.

I hate this. I hate this. Why is this happening?

Alden's phone buzzed from inside her bag and I looked up. She was chewing the tip of her pen as her eyes roamed over the page in front of her.

Another buzz. She didn't even glance at her bag.

Buzz

I scanned the room. Surely other people could hear it.

Buzz buzz

This was unbelievable. And so disruptive. And rude! The librarian was watching us. She looked down at something on her desk, but I could tell she was still keeping tabs from the corner of her eye.

Buzz

"Maybe you should just get that," I said.

Alden looked up. "No, it's fine. We're studying."

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As though the vibrating phone wasn't enough of a bother, it was far more irritating to realize why she could afford to ignore it: Malcolm would wait for her. He wanted her. I was the one who had to hustle. I was the one who had something to lose.

Then she reached into her bag, and for a moment, I thought she'd changed her mind. She was going to reply.

I have to see that phone!

But instead, she pulled out a pink tube of lip gloss and started slathering it on.

Really, Alden? Pink lip gloss in the library? Is that absolutely necessary?

I stared back at my book and all the words swirled together, a black on white blur of events that shaped the earth. Then I pictured Malcolm kissing her soft, pink mouth, his hands cupping her face as she giggled against his lips.

Oh god. What if it's too late?

Though I usually preferred to avoid drama like the plague, I couldn't go on like that. I knew what I had to do. I had to confront one of them. I just really didn't want to.

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I turned my face into his neck and inhaled. Sigh. Malcolm smell. The problem with confronting him was that it would potentially—no, almost definitely—mean the beginning of the end, and I really, really didn't want that.