

Fade to Us

By Julia Day

Scenes from Micah's Point of View

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Chapter 6

Exaggerated Study

Scene 1

Natalie Kane had told us on her theater camp application that she had Asperger's syndrome, and that she was bad with details. So it wasn't a surprise when she forgot her lunch on the second day of camp.

It *was* a surprise that she couldn't get anyone from her family to return a text.

I offered to take her home, which meant I was spending my lunch break driving into town, with Natalie in the backseat and the camp manager riding shotgun.

As we pulled to the curb before her house, Natalie announced, "I don't have a key."

Well, okay. There was another item for my mental checklist. *Ask obvious questions before leaving the arts center.* I twisted around to look at her. "Is the house locked?"

"Probably, but someone's on the way." She slipped out of the car and ran to the porch.

"Guess I'll follow," I said and got out too.

I'd barely reached the porch when a car roared into the driveway and screeched to a stop.

Natalie paused in her pacing. "That's Brooke. She's a scary driver."

I tried not to laugh. No argument here.

Heels tapped on the sidewalk. Turning, I watched as the stepsister halted at the bottom of the steps. She would be pretty, if she weren't trying so hard *not* to be. She'd scraped her gorgeous dark hair into an ugly knot. Her makeup was too heavy. And her outfit looked like something her elderly aunt must've lent her. Ouch.

"Are you Micah?" she asked, glaring.

Whoa. What had I done to deserve that? “Yes.”

“How do you know my sister?”

Natalie snorted. “Stepsister.”

“We met at camp,” I said.

Brooke’s eyes stayed narrowed on me. “She says you aren’t a camper or a counselor.”

“All true.”

“Then why did you drive her home?”

Where was this coming from? I was doing them a favor. “It was a better plan than letting her starve.”

“Chill, Brooke,” Natalie said. “Dad gave the camp staff permission to drive me if necessary. Can you let me in the house? I need my lunch.”

The stepsister stalked up the steps and unlocked the door. Then she whirled around. “So you’re camp *staff*? How old are you?”

“Seventeen. How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

I made a deliberate sweep of her from head to toe. Still ouch. “I would’ve guessed *much* older.”

Her cheeks flushed bright red. She brushed her fingers against her neck self-consciously, then dropped her hand. “I thought camp staff were adults.” Her voice had grown huskier. Had lost some of its attitude.

“That would make me the exception.” If I didn’t look like staff, did she really think some random guy would’ve just taken off with her stepsister? The thought left me feeling...odd. Natalie would always be safe with us. “You must have a low opinion of your parks and rec department if you think they would’ve let a stranger drive your stepsister anywhere.”

Something flashed in her eyes. Embarrassment? Apology?

Before I could decide, Natalie banged out of the house.

“I’m ready. We can go.” She tore down the steps and across the yard.

“Right behind you, Natalie.” I nodded toward Brooke. “You’re welcome.”

In the car, I pulled away from the curb and jerked the wheel into a sharp U-turn.

“What happened back there?” the camp manager asked softly.

I shook my head. Not going to discuss it. Ever.

Natalie had described her stepsister as some kind of goddess from on high who had come to shower the earth with rainbows and sunshine. Brooke managed to hide those magical qualities from me today.

“Actually, Micah,” Natalie said, “I’ve never seen my stepsister act that way before. She’s nice to everybody. It must be you.”

Chapter 8

Loose and Untethered

Scene 2

Once it became clear that Natalie's meltdown wouldn't just go away, I was glad she wanted to come outside. The muttering was scary. I didn't want the other campers to witness it, for their sakes and hers.

Elena came with me but the whole thing had her seriously disturbed. So I was the one who stood near Natalie and waited.

A car raced into the parking lot and screeched to a stop at the curb. Had to be the stepsister. An adult wouldn't drive that crazily.

Footsteps drew nearer and stopped at my side. "How long has Natalie been like this?" Brooke asked softly.

"About thirty minutes."

"Slow build-up or fast?" There was a catch in her voice.

"Fast. Seemed to come from nowhere."

"Have you been able to get the reason out of her?"

"No."

"Okay. Thanks." She went past me and stepped directly into Natalie's path.

I tensed. Natalie's head was bowed. Would she bulldoze over her stepsister?

Brooke stood her ground, and Natalie stopped, practically toe-to-toe, her fists slapping hard against her thighs. After a brief whispered exchange, Natalie continued her pacing and Brooke returned to me.

"How long does it take for her to...?" I couldn't think of a polite word.

"Chill? Now that I'm here, it shouldn't be much longer."

Natalie made a sudden turn and crossed to us. "Ignoring jealous people doesn't work." Her tone was almost accusatory.

Brooke visibly flinched, then spoke to me. "What was the last thing she did before this happened?"

“They were in their small groups.”

“And before that?”

“The girls ensemble was rehearsing ‘Out of My Dreams.’”

“Is that when you have your solo, Natalie?”

At her nod, Brooke glared at me, as if the meltdown was my fault. *Why?*

She turned back to her stepsister. When she spoke again, her voice was calm and soothing. “I’m going to sit, Natalie, and you can join me, but only when you feel like it.” Brooke walked to a shady spot and sat, as if she was simply enjoying the afternoon.

Natalie stood uncertainly for a moment and then joined her stepsister on the ground. They talked—too quietly for me to hear—and then Brooke sent me a reassuring glance.

I gestured for Elena to follow me, and we ran back into the performing arts center. Elena went back to the office and I went after my mom.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“The stepsister showed up a few minutes ago and took over. It’ll be okay now.”

Mom’s eyebrow quirked. “You sure about that?”

“Yes. Honestly, she was awesome. I kind of gotten the impression from Natalie that the stepsisters hadn’t spent much time together, but I couldn’t tell out there. Brooke did everything perfectly.”

“Glad to know, but it’s still a problem. You’re too important to be taken away like that. It can’t happen again.”

Her statement gave me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Natalie was great—most of the time. She was smart and eager. She paid attention. She gave everything she had, without complaining. In other words, the ideal camper. Except this one thing. “What are you saying, Mom?”

“She and her family need to come up with a Plan B. I’d rather talk to her parents, but the stepsister will do for now.”

I nodded and turned to go.

“Micah? Tell Natalie she can leave for the day if she likes. We’ll work around her absence.”

I ran back out to the parking lot.

Natalie’s father had arrived. He was cradling her in his arms and saying, “We’ll leave now.”

“Rehearsal isn’t over,” she said, despondency in her tone.

“Natalie, your part’s done for today,” I said. “Mom will work with the principals this afternoon. Everybody else will be rehearsing the choruses or playing games in their small groups. You can skip that if you want.”

“Let’s go, Dad.” She raced toward a pickup truck parked nearby.

The man shot a tense glance at Brooke, then strode after Natalie.

What was that for? Did he blame her, even though she’d *solved* this? As she watched him go, she imploded within herself, her expression displaying guilt and something else. Longing?

That didn’t make sense. Natalie’s “goddess” of a stepsister was nothing at all like the dejected girl sitting on the ground below me.

Brooke pushed to her knees and overbalanced. I caught her by the elbow and helped her to her feet.

Her smile dazzled me. “Thanks.”

I sucked in a breath. Her eyes were a gorgeous brown. They shone with gratitude and relief.

Dragging my gaze away, I glanced toward her stepfather. Mom wanted to talk to him. “Mr. Kane,” I called.

He turned.

If I asked him to stay, would he send Natali home with Brooke?

I felt an intense reluctance to let her leave. And Mom had agreed that the stepsister would do. I nodded at Mr. Kane. “Can Brooke sign out Natalie?”

“Yes.” He circled around his truck and got in.

“Where do I sign her out?” Brooke’s voice was husky.

“Mom and I would like to talk to you first.”

Her eyes widened with alarm. “Sure.”

We returned to the lobby silently. Beside me, she trembled and took little, gasping breaths. I reached around her to hold the door, watching her closely, concerned.

Once inside, she paused. Swayed. “Just a sec,” she said in a thin, shaky voice and lunged for the closest bench.

I kept up at her side, ready to catch her if she fell, but she made it in time, nearly collapsing.

She hunched over, breathing in and out consciously. Slowly. As if willing herself to regain control of her body.

I crouched before her, checking her half-closed eyes. Her pasty skin tone. “Hey, Brooke. You okay?”

“I will be,” she mumbled.

What could I do to help? Would silence be better? Or saying something to distract?

Yeah, distraction is good. "You were great out there with her."

Her lips curved, but not quite all the way to a smile.

Was I making things worse? "Do you want to be alone?"

"No." She looked up, her gaze bewildered. "I'll be fine, if you'll give me a moment."

Okay, then. If she needed me, I was staying. I remained still and stared at the window, waiting for her to make the next move.

"I'm ready."

I rose and held out my hand. "You sure?"

"Yeah." She linked her fingers through mine and let me pull her up.

I led her to the front of the auditorium. "Mom, this is Brooke. Natalie's stepsister."

Mom nodded almost absently. "How is she?"

Brooke drank in a breath. "My stepdad is taking her home. She was almost back to normal before they left."

"Elena says you had her settled down in under five minutes."

"I've done this before."

"We enjoy having your stepsister in the show, but today was a problem." Mom glanced at me, clearly wanting me to handle the tough part.

"Natalie usually does well with her counselor," I said, "but when the problem hit, she only responded to me. That was fine for once. Since we were near lunch time, it was no trouble to adjust a few things in the schedule. But we might not be as lucky next time."

Lisa snorted. "Micah is being too nice. He was out of commission until you got here. We can't allow him to be monopolized."

Brooke's face paled in panic. "Natalie would've been okay by herself. She likes solitude."

I tried to say, "Not safe," but my mother spoke over me.

"The consequences of being wrong about that are too serious to rely on. We have to create better alternatives. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"How often does Natalie have these meltdowns?"

"It's unpredictable. There has to be a trigger."

"Do you know what triggered this one?"

“Not for sure. Another kid may have said something that hurt her feelings.”

Excuse me, what? Another kid instigated this mess? Oh, hell no. “Do you know who?”

She shook her head.

“If another cast member caused this, *I* can fix that.” And I would. Just let me find out who triggered this. “Is it always a person saying the wrong thing?”

“No.” She shuddered. “What do you plan to do?”

Mom checked her watch. “I’d rather not be the one to make that decision. We’ll have to talk with Natalie’s father. This afternoon, if possible.” She strode away and disappeared through a door at the side of the stage.

Brooke turned frightened eyes to me. “Should I have Jeff call you?”

“Sure.”

“You won’t make her quit, will you?”

I hated this part. There was no easy way to say this. No easy way to be clear without upsetting her. After all she’d done to make this better, I wished I could give her a hopeful answer. “We don’t want to, and I don’t mind doing what I can for her, but...”

“You can’t be monopolized.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

Brooke came across as a naturally happy person, but at the moment, her inner light dimmed. She gave me a pained smile and turned to walk up the aisle.

Yesterday, when she’d approached me at the family meeting, I’d been prepared for her to be smug. Superior. But she’d apologized. It might’ve been an awkwardly done apology, but it had been sincere. It had impressed me.

Today, she left her job in the middle of the day, came straight to the center, dived right into calming her stepsister, and despite the fear radiating off her, had pulled off a great save.

I was impressed again. Brooke Byers had my attention.

Chapter 15

A Hot Combination

Scene 6

Mom pushed away from the table in our rental house and collected the dishes. “Since you picked up the food, I’m on clean up duty,” she said.

“No argument here.” I stood and stretched.

“The cast needs prop gun safety training.”

“It’s on the schedule tomorrow. I’ll give it.” At the objection I could see forming on her face, I added, “We’ll bring in a professional firearms handler closer to the performances.”

“Fine.”

It wasn’t fine with her, but the schedule was my responsibility. She wouldn’t take me on about it.

Note to self: Ask Natalie about the sound of gunfire. We had two autistic guys in the theater department at the high school. One shrugged off loud noises. The other didn’t. Natalie needed a warning.

I slipped in my earbuds and headed to the back of the house and into my room. Dropping onto the bed, I took a moment to relax. I ought to key in my notes and get the Rehearsal Report mailed out soon.

A lot had happened today.

The choreography for the fight scene was awesome. I stayed in the practice room as the safety monitor. And if I tried out a few steps just to ensure their stability, that would be because I was a conscientious stage manager.

Sam took another personal call during afternoon break. After the technical crew campers arrived next week, I wouldn’t be able to sub anymore. I’d have to talk with Sam and make sure he understood this couldn’t happen again unless it was an emergency. His girlfriend being upset didn’t qualify.

I hated counseling staff.

Which brought me to Brooke.

She'd surprised me with how quickly she was ramping up her skills. Each day she got better. She'd clearly watched Oklahoma, because she knew it now. She was able to fake her way through theater-speak, and her confidence was cute.

She'd even started volunteering for crap chores. Elena said Brooke was taking over the newsletter—which had to be a good thing for everyone, because Elena sucked at it.

Tonight, when Brooke asked about my friendship with Natalie, at first it pissed me off. Then she explained and damn if I hadn't overreacted.

How much have I misjudged Brooke?

Natalie said their parents married only six months ago. Brooke seemed so invested in being sisters that I would've guessed longer.

With each new piece of information I uncovered, I found myself liking her better. Her opinion mattered. *Too* much.

I rolled into a sitting position and grabbed my laptop. Time to finish the report.

But my hands stilled on the keyboard before I'd even typed the first word.

I was going to admit it to myself. This job was harder on me than I expected, partly because the arts council was spending so much money on the production. It was the inaugural show in their new facility, and they wanted it to be amazing.

It would be, but the stress was getting to me more than usual.

This was the only time I'd been a stage manager with a production team I didn't know. I was swamped with decisions that I'd like to delegate, but I couldn't decide who to ask. Elena might be the best candidate, but she didn't like conflict. I couldn't trust Brooke with anything important. Yet.

Making everything worse, Mom missed Dad more than she ever had before. We wouldn't see him again until July 4th, and that bugged her.

I knew one of the reasons why. Once we were done for the evening, there wasn't much to distract us in this town.

Nights were quiet. And lonely.

Chapter 21

Regret and Apology

Scene 4

Brooke's footsteps approached in the hallway outside the prop room. I adjusted the chair a bit more, dusted it off, and turned. "Sit, please."

She blinked and sat.

Okay. Time to tell her how I felt. I'd practiced my speech last night and again this morning. I drew in a deep breath.

There was a shout in the hallway.

Yeah, not giving this speech with an audience. I closed the door and paused. Staring at my feet. Fumbling with my thoughts. I wanted desperately to get this right.

"Micah?"

I looked up and blurted, "I've made a decision."

"About what?"

"Us." I crossed to kneel in front of her. "I can't pretend any longer. We have to stop 'hanging out.'"

Brooke gasped in horror and pushed away.

Could I have screwed that up any worse? "Please hear me out, Brooke. I'm not giving you up. It's just that 'hanging out' isn't enough. I want *more*."

She nodded for me to go on.

"I've never done this before but..." God, this was hard. So hard. "I'd like for our dates to be real."

Her smile was instant and gorgeous. "Me too."

Hot damn. I leapt to my feet, caught her hands, and pulled her up. We were standing so close, and she was so beautiful and I wanted to be even closer. But I didn't know what to do next. Could she give me a clue?

She released my hands. "Can *more* start now?"

"I'm in." Was this an opening? Would *more* include touching? I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew what I wanted. Carefully, watching her face for any sign that I'd made the wrong choice, I slipped one arm around her waist and the other around her shoulders. She sighed and leaned in.

She felt amazing against me. And I'd read her right. Probably. Better check, though. "Hey, is something wrong?"

"Just thinking that you're only here for another nineteen days."

"You've counted?" She knew exactly how much time we had.

That meant she'd been thinking about me, too. Very good news. The nerves, the worries I'd had about being rejected completely fled. "We'll find a way to make the most of it, but no more pretending about the friendly and not-too-personal stuff."

"Agreed. Can we have our first real date tonight?"

"I hope so."

"What about tomorrow night and this weekend?"

"Tomorrow night, yes." But damn about after that. "Mom and I are going home for the weekend."

Her face fell. "When do you leave?"

"She wants to go Friday night."

Brooke's head dropped against my chest. I liked this kind of touch, too, but not its reason. I didn't want to be separated from her either. "I can talk Mom into Saturday morning."

"Could you stay?"

"I don't want to. Peter's decided to come down from DC for the weekend. Jude will come if he can get the day off, although I'm not telling Mom yet. I don't get to see my brothers very often. This might be the last chance for a while."

"Of course, you have to go." She drew away and turned toward the door. "We should get back."

I followed. "What should we do tonight?"

"Just be together."

"Sounds great."

"Micah?"

"Yeah?"

Her gaze dropped to my lips. Without warning, she rose on her toes and pressed her lips to mine.

I jerked back, shocked and happy and instantly regretting that I'd reacted so stupidly. I loved the feel of her mouth against mine. Leaning down, I bumped her nose, bit off a groan at my own lack of experience, and sought her lips, finally claiming them.

Kissing Brooke was heaven.