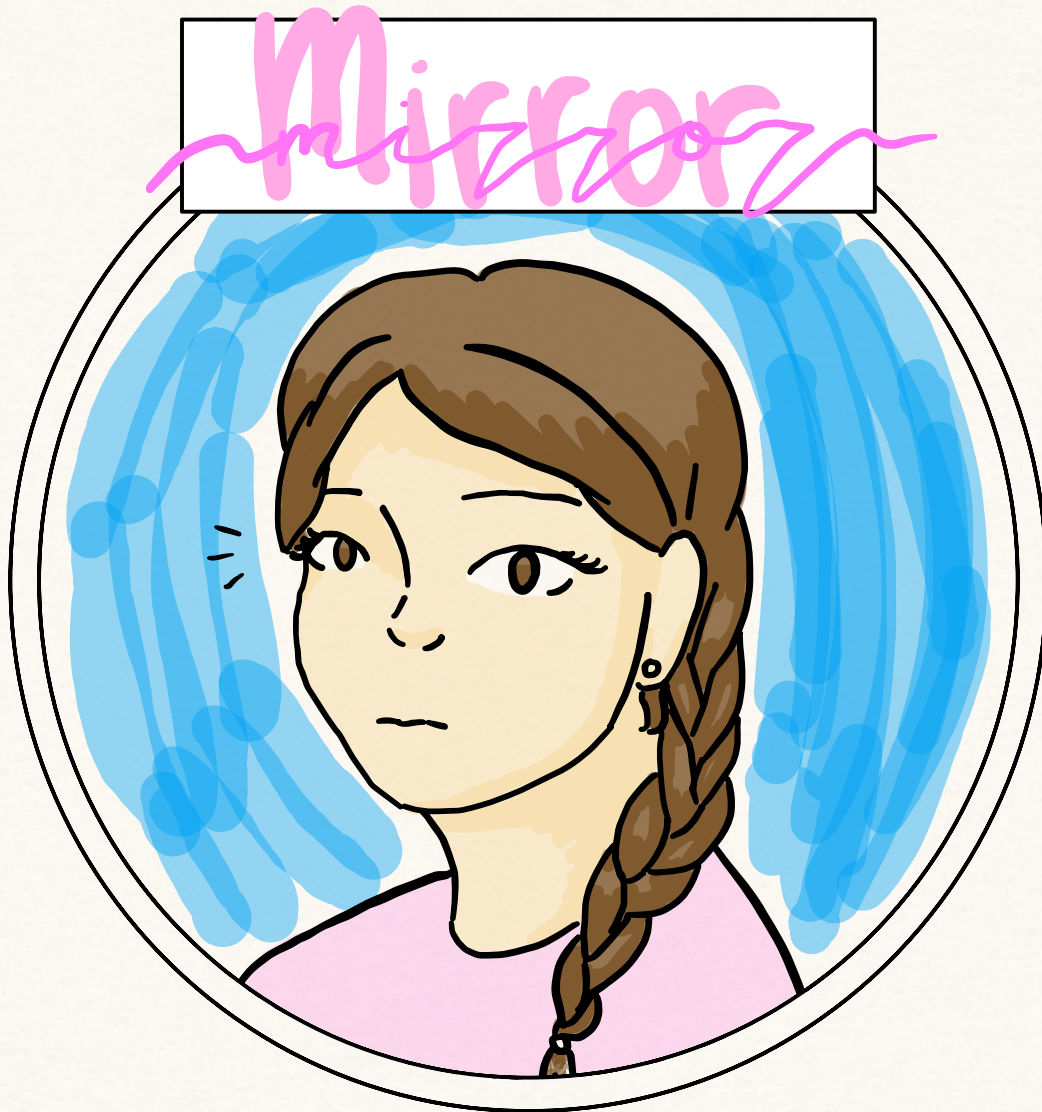


# Chapters 1, 2, + 3



how can you find  
the one if you  
can't even find  
yourself?

# Author's Note

Why is writing so hard? Two chapters takes me *three days* to write. Anyway, **IMPORTANT FOR BEFORE YOU START READING!** My viewpoints on many subjects are different than 80-90% of the people on here. Going into this, you need to understand that my viewpoints might be reflected through this work of creativity. **Don't** ask me to change anything like that!

Also, I am **ruthless** when it comes to character dynamics hehe,

Also...this is entirely a work of fiction. Any resemblance of these characters to a person in real life is coincidental.

Thank you **sososo** much for being willing to take time to read these first few chapters!

Xoxo,

Gracie (aka @girlybop13)

# Chapter One

“I am so glad my parents aren’t here,” Lora says, grabbing a blanket and flopping onto the sofa like a sack of potatoes.

“Agreed,” I declare, doing the same, though making sure not to spill the bowl of popcorn. We shuffle through our movie choices for a while, finally deciding on some cheesy rom-com that was geared more toward a 35-year-old mom than two high school girls.

Lora Jean’s parents were out of town for the week. She has an older brother, named Michael, who is seventeen and was, for some reason, considered responsible enough to watch over her. The fact that her parents thought that was wild.

I, on the other hand, am simply spending some quality time with my best friend. My parents barely noticed when I told them I was spending the night. They only really ever *notice* when I do something wrong.

“So...” I say, a cheeky tone evident in my voice as I completely ignore the movie, “how’s it going with Jack?” Since we go to different high schools now, this kind of conversation barely gets to happen. School is so busy, on one hand, and on another, Lora’s phone is usually taken away by her parents. She isn’t exactly what one would consider to be a “role model”.

“Oh, yeah,” she says, her eyes not quite meeting mine. “I broke up with him. Last night, actually. Saw that he was texting some girl. And not just *normal texting*, either.” \*\* Her voice quivered slightly. I knew she was ready to cry, so I paused the darn movie and—

“That son of a—” I start, but she cuts me off.

“Dont. He’s not even worth that word.” She pauses for a moment, seemingly deciding something. Then she spoke again, her voice more controlled. “Honestly, I saw the signs. I just chose to ignore them. But you know what? It’s all good now. He got what he deserved.” She sighed slightly.

“Okay, well...” I start to say, but I realize I didn’t really have any advice for her. Lora Jean was confident and beautiful. Blonde hair, bright blue eyes. *Gorgeous*. She stood out.

Not necessarily the smartest, but she could convince a homophobe to become gay. She just had that magic to her.

Me, on the other hand...I don’t really know. I put effort into my appearance, and I thought my features were okay. But.

*But.*

No matter how hard I try, nobody sees me as more than a friend. No more than that smart, popular girl. I act like it doesn’t bother me all the time. “I don’t need a man,” I’d joke.

It does bother me. “Well, Lora, that just shows you that you can do better,” I say simply.

‘*Shows you that you can do better?*’ I mentally curse myself. What kind of shart am I saying? I just need to stop talking sometimes, even if I haven’t started talking yet.

“I know,” she says, smiling slightly. “What about you? Have the guys *finally* come to their senses and started chasing you?”

I let out a scoff. “I don’t think they’re into short brunettes these days,” I say. I get up to go refill the popcorn that we’ve been eating. Without the movie.

“Oh, come on,” she calls from the living room. “What the hell is wrong with the guys at your school? Are they blind?”

I let out a real laugh at that. I shuffle back in, now attempting to balance the bowl with two Coke cans. Neither of us like to drink alcohol. Genetics or whatever.

“Not blind,” I say, handing her one of the Cokes and settling back into our little sofa-pillow-blanket mound.

“Welllllll...” she says, dragging on the word long enough for me to be suspicious. I raise an eyebrow, cocking my head slightly.

“What?” I ask.

“There’s this one guy I know...” she says, and she can tell I’m ready to shut her down real fast, because she speeds up her talking. “Just hear me out! He’s 5’10’, plays basketball, and seems interested. And he’s not an idiot, either. I’ve had a good amount of convos with him.”

“Lora,” I say, setting down my Coke and pursing my lips in thought, “what have I told you about scouring for potential boyfriends *for me?*”

She extends her neck slightly, jutting her chin out as she argues. “I’m *telling you*, this guy likes short girls, likes brunettes, and smart ones.” She smiles mischievously. “And it wouldn’t hurt to mention

that he's freaking *hot*."

I roll my eyes, tucking my feet underneath me as I playfully tug the popcorn bowl out of her hands. "He's hot?" I mock. "Dang, that really *seals the deal*."

She gives me a pouty face. "I'm serious. He isn't my type, personality-wise, but *oh my freaking god*." She lets out a little laugh that, if this weren't Lora speaking, would make me question her insanity. "I am begging you. Give him a shot."

I sigh in defeat. "Fine," I say.

Just to clarify...I haven't had any boyfriends. I've gone on a couple dates with guys at Lora's school. But none of them were my type. They must've felt the same way, because both times, I never bothered to call back, and neither did they.

She giggles. "Alright then," she says, smiling, and I wonder whether she truly did just forget about the conversation we had minutes earlier or if she's just pushed it away.

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Hours later, I'm staring at the ceiling, listening to the faint sound of Lora's breathing in her bed. I'm sleeping on her couch. She somehow convinced her parents to let her get rid of her desk and replace it with a freaking *couch*. In her *bedroom*.

I smile. That's her power. She can convince anyone to do anything.

I roll over onto my shoulder, only to suddenly remember that oh, yeah, I'm on a couch. I let out a slight "oof" as my body makes a thud on the floor.

I stand up to go to the bathroom. Not that I need to go. Just to do something, even though it's 3:12 in the morning.

I open the bathroom quietly as to not wake up Lora.

I stare at my reflection when I click on the light.

Hair hasn't miraculously changed. Nope. Still that same medium brown. Still bone-straight.

Eyes haven't changed, either. No surprise. Still so dark they look black.

Lips aren't any bigger than the semi-thin size they are.

I don't even want to think about other body parts.

I frown at my reflection. It's not that I don't like the way I look, it's that I don't like that I don't stand out? I don't know. I'm tired. I need to sleep.

*If only I could sleep*, I think to myself as I scour the medicine cabinet for Meletonin. I finally find some, the gum kind, then lazily read the label even though I know d@mn well how many I take. I pop them into my mouth, shut off the bathroom light, and stumble back to my sleeping spot.

# Chapter 2

Most of the day is spent lounging around Lora's house, watching movies and talking about this girl I saw at the store or this dude who thought he could call me blah, blah, blah.

At around 5:30, I remember that I have a life outside of this home-alone paradise. "Agh, shart, Lora, I've gotta go," I say, checking my phone to find a "come home" text from my mother.

"Awwwwwwww!" Lora complains, but she knows better than to try and convince me to stay.

My mom would *not* be happy.

I put my bag in my car and get in. She leans into my open window and says her *awfully long* goodbyes until I finally laugh and tell her I really gotta leave. But before I can roll up my window, her phone chimes.

She takes it out of her back pocket, takes one look, and smiles. "Well, I guess you're going on a date," she smirks. "Ben just texted me."

I'm a little confused for a moment, but then I catch on. "His name is Ben?" I repeat. She gives me his number, not that I'm actually going to text him he for we meet in person.

"Yeah, Ben Jackson," she finally says. "Let's see...he made the mistake of letting *me* choose where y'all go. Hey, don't look at me like that." She laughs and waves a dismissive hand at me as if to wipe my worried look off my face. "I'll text you two the info. Don't



worry.”

I drive home in silence because I just don't want noise while I think. I live about thirty minutes from Lora on a *good* traffic day. That's why I can't visit her all the time.

*His name is Ben, I think, and he might be interested in me.*

Emphasis on 'might'. The moment he meets me, he'll be out the door. Too basic, he'll think.

I stop myself right there. “Woah, Dani,” I tell myself, grip tightening on the wheel, “don't jump to conclusions.”

When I get home, my dad is in the kitchen, cooking. I throw my keys into the “key basket”, a basket in which we store—you guessed it—our keys. Not all of the, though. Just out car an spare house keys.

“You're home,” my dad says as I make my entrance, as if I didn't realize that myself.

“That she is,” my mom says cheerfully, walking in through the back door. Her clothes are muddy from garden work, “how are you, sweetheart?” I shrug, and she comes over go hug me, but stops at the second, remembering just how muddy she really is. “Oops, sorry, let me go get cleaned up.”

She removes her garden boots gingerly and places them by the door as not to mess with the floors. Dad's always super particular about the floors.

When my mom is upstairs, my dad looks at me, pausing his stirring

of the pasta for a second—only to start it up again. He opens his mouth to ask something, then closes it again. “Make sure you’re ready for school tomorrow,” he ends up saying. “It’s already 6:00.”

I nod, walking to the cabinet to grab a glass. “Okay,” I respond simply. I fill my glass with some water and take a small swig. An awkward silence falls over the two of us, just like always. Well, not always. A few months ago, we got in this big fight. And ever since, even though we already “made up”, nothing between us has been the same. Truly, I wouldn’t be surprised if we never had a normal conversation again.

My mom comes back downstairs, now in some new, clean clothes. My mom is so pretty. She has my same features...but for some reason, hers just *fit*. She walks over and gives me the promised hug. She then walks over to my dad and gives him a quick kiss. “Alright, you two,” she says, “start up an *actual* conversation, maybe? I can *feel* the tension.”

I roll my eyes lightly, smiling. My mom, no matter what she says, always makes me feel better. My mom catches sight of this and wags a finger at me. “Hey, don’t roll your eyes at me, young lady,” she says, though it’s more playful than a warning.

When supper is ready, we all sit down at the table. “Go get your sister,” my dad says as he places the pasta dish on the table.

I just nod. I walk up the steps, taking my sweet time. I don’t want to go back downstairs. “Kacey,” I knock on my sister’s bedroom door, my voice louder than it really needs to be. “Come downstairs. Dinner’s ready.” She doesn’t respond, so I repeat my message. This time, it’s accompanied by a couple not-so-nice words.

Kacey swings open her bedroom door before I can begin a third round. “Can you please just shut up?” She hisses before ducking under my outstretched arm and going down the stairs. I laugh menacingly.

“No, actually, I can’t,” I call down the stairs as I begin my descent.

Dinner is pretty quiet, as usual. Ever since that fight...

Mom continuously tries to get us work up a conversation, even if it’s just between my sister and me. “Girls, how were your days?” She asks, though she knows exactly how they went.

“Fine,” my sister says, looking down at her food, before reaching to take a sip from her water glass.

“It was okay,” I say, but I actually bother to give my mom a small smile. I then shoot a look at my sister, who just shrugs. Then I remember what Lora texted about the date. I *really* don’t want to have to talk about it, but I don’t have much other choice. I set down my fork gingerly, then say, “Uh, mom, dad, Im going out on Friday.”

My mom must not catch the tone of my voice, because she simply replies, “Oh, that’s nice, sweetie, where are you going?”

My dad...his expression changes. I think he can tell what I’m about to say.

“Well, uh, there’s this guy from Lora’s school. He, uh, wondered if I’d be willing to go out with him or something like that. So, uh, I have nothing else to do at the moment, so, uh, yeah...” my voice trails off when I realize how quiet my family got. Even my sister was staring at me. It’s probably because those two dates I went on were

two years ago.

“Diana?” My mom says quietly, “are you sure?”

I’m taken back. “Why wouldn’t I be?” I ask, flabbergasted.

My mom purses her lips slightly, then uses her napkin to gently wipe her mouth. She looks at my dad, who offers no help, so she sighs. “We were worried you were, uh, lesbian or something. You haven’t dated in two years.”

I’m absolutely shocked. “Why would you—” I stop myself, taking a breath to calm down. “Just because I’m not dating a guy, doesn’t mean I’m a freaking lesbian.”

“Honey, I know that—” my mom starts, but this time it’s my dad who cuts her off.

“Listen, Diana. Go on the date. We are *not* going to go into...other subjects that truly don’t matter in this conversation.” As much as I want to argue...to let myself be mad at my parents for not even bothering and just *assuming*...I don’t want to do something stupid. I take my plate and put it in the dishwasher. Before I go upstairs, I pace back to the dining room.

“I don’t appreciate that you didn’t even bother to ask.” I practically growl, then I run up the stairs, making sure not to slam my door behind me. They don’t deserve the satisfaction of knowing I’m mad.

To be honest, I’m probably making this sound worse than it is. I’m mad, and I’m a teenage girl. *Not* a good combination. I take a quick shower, throw on some pajamas, and go to the sink to brush my teeth.

As I do so, I check my reflection like I do way too often.

*Same hair, same eyes, same lips, I think as I squeeze the toothpaste onto my toothbrush, same basic girl.*

# Chapter 3

I wake up to the god-awful sound of my phone's alarm. *School*, I think.

I stumble through my morning routine. Why am I so tired? I didn't take any Meletonin last night...

Breakfast is awkward. My mom's already at work, so it's just my sister and me eating the waffles my dad cooked. Now, my dad is reading the newspaper. He checks his watch multiple times. He always drives Kacey to school since she's only in 8th grade, and her school is on his way to work. My high school is on the other side of town.

When I get to school, I go to my first class: Calculus. I hate starting the day with math. I take out my math notebooks (yes, plural) and start working some of the problems Dr. Cannon has written on the board. He then randomly picks students to demonstrate how to solve those problems. Just my luck, I get assigned the second one.

I walk up to the board reluctantly, and I pick up the dry erase marker as if it's a bomb that could go off any second. I copy my solution onto the board, right in between problems 1 and 3.

Mr. Cannon walks up and reviews each answer. Then, he smiles. "Right, wrong, right, right, right." My problem was the only one that was wrong.

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"Rough morning?" Mason asks as I sit down next to him at our lunch table.

I sigh. “Exactly,” I respond. Multiple other girls and guys come up to take their rightful spots at our table.

“Hey guys,” I say, forcing a smile. There’s probably fifteen others. We’re all “popular”, though not the snobby popular. At our school, there’s those two kinds. The “snobby pops” and the “nice pops”. Were the nice pops.

I love my lunch group—especially Mason. They)re all so fun and funny. Never a dull moment. The only thing is that many of the people in our friend group are dating: Marcia and Greg, Julia and Hawk, Grace and Johnnie...they never talk about it, though. At least, not when I’m around.

Mason can tell something’s off with me. So when our lunch group breaks up into out smaller groups as usual, he “investigates”.

“Alright, Dani,” he smiles, leaning against the brick wall under the shade of our favorite school tree, “something happened. What is it?”

Nobody bats an eye when Mason and I go around together. He’s my best guy friend. Nothing more. And I’m his best girl friend (two words, not one, people). Nobody has pressured us to date or anything for good reason.

“Well...” I start, not knowing where to begin. I lean against the trunk of our tree, playing with a lock of my *basic* hair.

He smirks. “Come on, Dani, spill it.”

I sigh. “Lora found this guy. She says he’s *the one for me* or some BS like that. She...convinced me to go on a date with him Friday.”

Something like surprise creeps over Mason's face, but he quickly hides it. "Wow," he jokes, "you're finally letting someone have a go at that tough heart of yours?"

I shake my head, smiling. "Don't even," I say playfully.

He puts his hands up, surrendering. "Alright, alright," he says.

~ ~ ~

The rest of the week is a drag. My classes have never felt longer. But by the time Friday afternoon rolls around, I realize my classes weren't nearly long enough.

Lora is making us go to Jackson's, this burger joint downtown that everyone loves. I find it funny that this Ben dude has the same last name.

I look through my closet for a descent outfit to wear on a first date.

I realize, horribly, that I don't have many options. *Mental note, go shopping for date-worthy clothes*, I think. I pause. "Bold of you to think we're getting past this first date," I mumble aloud to myself as I slip on a light pink dress and some platform sandals. I put on my makeup and head downstairs.

I try to slip out of the house unnoticed, but my mom catches me.

"Oh, honey, Jo look gorgeous," she praises as if she didn't tell my she thought I was a lezzi the other day.

"Thank you," I say, but my tone makes it obvious I don't mean it. My mom takes a visible step back, but doesn't reprimand me.



“Stay safe, hon,” she says, and before I fully shut the door, I hear her say more quietly, “and, please, don’t do something stupid.”

I drive there to the sound of faint Taylor Swift. When I drive, I usually turn my music up loud enough T that I can hear it but not loud enough for me to really think of it as more than background noise.

When I get to the restaurant, I park my car. Before I get out, I check my mascara and blush for any errors, then step out. I lock my car and walk inside.

The atmosphere of the joint is rowdy but calm, crowded but vacant. It’s everything at once. That why people like it here. I go up to the counter.

“Hi, ma’am, is Ben Jackson here? I’m meeting him.” The lady looks me up and down, and for some reason, seems to be judging. Hard.

“You’re meeting him?” She repeats. I don’t like her attitude.

“You heard what I said,” I say calmly.

“No, he’s not here yet,” she says, then tells me to wait in the “lobby” of sorts. It’s a big restaurant.

I’m busy paying attention to the decorations, so I don’t notice him come up behind me at first. I feel a tap on my shoulder, then turn around, only to take a step back. Lora was right. This guy is *tall*.

“I’m Ben Jackson?” He says, smiling, though he phrases his introduction as more of a question.

It takes me a moment to get myself together. “Uh, yeah. Im Diana Grant.” I try to smile back, but I’m speechless.

He must understand, because he helps us get our table. Like a freaking gentleman, he pulls out my seat for me. He smiles and asks me how I’ve been. Tells me about himself; the basketball, the height, and that his family actually owns this joint.

I shouldn’t have been surprised. “Really?” I ask, feeling a bit dumb. All my answers have been one or two word answers.

He nods. “Yep.” He takes a sip from his water glass. We talk a bit more, but my answer still remain short and, in reality, no that sweet. Not mean or anything, but I’m mentally cursing myself because I can’t talk right.

But how am I supposed to talk when I’m speaking to the most beautiful guy I’ve ever seen?