

# Ex-mas

A LOVE/HATE STORY

BY

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# 1

NORTH VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL  
LOS ANGELES  
DECEMBER 22  
11:43 A.M.

*Mr. Geary had to be kidding.*

It was literally *moments* before the last bell was supposed to ring on the last half-day of classes—three seconds to Christmas break and the holidays and *freedom*—and the earth science teacher was handing out homework with every indication that he expected people to be paying attention. Had he finally lost it?

“He must be insane,” Lila Beckwith muttered to her lab partner, Denny. She took the handout with a heavy sigh and scanned the first page, picking out the words *global warming* and *polar ice caps* before stuffing the article into her bag. Winter break was about to start and she had far more pressing things to attend to. For example, the biggest party of the year. Which she happened to be throwing. Tonight.

Assuming earth science ever ended.

RINNNGGGGG!

*Finally!*

Lila leapt from her seat and raced for the door, getting caught up in the swell of excited kids streaming down the hallway. The lacrosse guys jostled one another outside the classroom. A pack of drama geeks linked arms and sang “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” in four-part harmony as they headed past the main office. Such was Lila’s sudden rush of vacation-induced holiday spirit that for once she didn’t even find them annoying.

The sea of laughing, happy teenagers swept through the halls and out the front door, delivering Lila into a typically perfect southern California day. The sky was blue and flawless, palm trees rustled in the slight breeze, and the sun was warm on her face. Off to the south, the Santa Monica Mountains rose in the distance, marking the barrier between the San Fernando Valley and the city of Los Angeles. The front steps of North Valley High were divided too: Seniors lounged around the upper steps in their assorted social groups, juniors took over the flat landing below them, and underclassmen occupied the lowest steps, closest to the parking lot. Lila pushed her dark hair over her shoulder with a smile. Every single one of them wanted to go to her party.

“I hope you’re ready for tonight!” Lila’s best friend, Carly, called from her usual place at the top of the wide steps, sur-

rounded by a cluster of girls. She was blond and sunny—the perfect foil to Lila’s dark brunette looks. Lila liked to think of them as yin and yang, or Serena and Blair. Together, they were the leaders of the most popular group of girls in the senior class, and thus the entirety of North Valley High.

“You know it,” Lila said with a grin, easing her way to the place reserved for her at Carly’s side. Yoon Lee and Rebecca Gans, two inseparable seniors, parted ways to make room, and Melinda Dennis, an enterprising, wide-eyed sophomore, practically polished the railing for her to lean against. Lila eased between the girls, happy to be at the center of their group. She’d worked hard to get there, after all. If she wished that it all came as effortlessly to her as it did to carefree, beautiful and beloved Carly, well, she kept that to herself.

“I can’t believe my parents are *finally* going out of town,” Lila said with a dramatic eye roll. The other girls pressed closer. Jeannine Fargo looked like she was about to keel over from the excitement—or maybe she’d eaten nothing but carrots again today. “They seriously never go anywhere. I have no idea what act of God has reversed their entire lifestyle and personal history for this weekend, but who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth?”

“Is E coming down?” Carly asked, flashing her famous, infectious grin. It had the same warming effect on everyone, including Lila. How could you not smile back?

“Absolutely,” Lila said. “He wouldn’t miss it.” *E* was Erik, Carly’s older brother and Lila’s boyfriend. They’d been dating for almost three years, and he was driving down from Stanford tonight, where he was a freshman. They’d barely seen each other all fall—he needed to get settled at school, and her parents insisted she focus on her classes and SATs—but with any luck, this would be the longest they’d ever be apart. Next year at this time, she hoped to be at Stanford alongside him. It had been her dream school since forever, and the fact that Erik went there was like an amazing two-for-one sale at Fred Segal.

“You guys are so lucky,” Melinda gushed, on cue.

Lila was not about to tell Melinda, now or ever, that luck had nothing to do with how her life had turned out. People didn’t just *end up* best friends with Carly Hollander, much less dating Erik, who was a year ahead of them and voted both Most Attractive and Most Likely to Succeed in last year’s yearbook superlatives. Lila had taken advantage of a few key opportunities—like Carly’s big falling-out with her former best friend, Jeannine—and she’d done it without acting all creepy and gushy like Melinda, thank you very much.

“I heard people are driving up from the O.C. to come tonight,” Rebecca broke in, railroading the conversation like she always did. “Michelle Reynolds said she read about it on her cousin’s Twitter, and he lives all the way down in San Juan Capistrano. It’s going to be legendary.”

Lila leaned back as the conversation swelled up around her, listening with pleasure as everyone debated the rumors they'd heard about the party she hadn't even thrown yet. Tonight was going to rock, and when it did, it would cement her reputation forevermore. No more waiting for everyone to wake up one day and realize that she was a former nobody. No more *Erik Hollander's girlfriend* or *Carly Hollander's best friend*. Oh no. She would be Lila Beckwith, all on her own.

She could hardly wait.

Her eyes fell on a single solitary figure heading toward the parking lot. He pushed his shaggy black hair off his forehead and hoisted his so-uncool-it-was-cool black canvas JanSport farther up on his back.

Beau Hodges. All alone. Of course.

Not that she felt sorry for him. Beau *chose* to be alone, just like he *chose* to embrace being a loser each and every day of his high school career. Witness his clothes: ripped-up old concert T-shirt featuring some obscure band, jeans Lila was pretty sure he'd worn back in seventh grade, and his trademark *up yours, world* slouch, which called attention to his messy dark hair and his brooding, lazy blue eyes that were always, *always* filled with way too much attitude. He was everything enraging, wrapped up in one lean, hipsterish package.

It was hard to imagine that she had ever dated him.

But the facts were the facts, and anyway, it was ancient

history at this point. Beau was her ex-boyfriend, something very few people even remembered these days, given that Lila was, well, Lila and Beau was . . . busy being Beau. They had been together all through middle school and for most of ninth grade, up until Lila started hanging out with Carly and Beau had acted like Carly was the head recruiter for the local leper colony. His loss. He had gone on to his exciting career as a teenage nonentity, and Lila was dating Erik Hollander and about to throw the biggest party of the year.

Was there really any competition?

Her Nokia buzzed and she pulled it out of her distressed leather tote. *Erik* flashed on the screen. She held up a finger to her crew before answering, as if they hadn't already heard the distinctive, Erik-only ringtone: "Sugar" by Flo Rida.

"Tell me you're already on your way," she said, watching Beau get into his beat-up Ford Escort. He pulled off his faded gray hoodie and threw it in the backseat. Erik, thank God, would never be caught dead shuffling around in public looking like he'd slept in his clothes. "Or better yet, that you made it home early."

"Hey babe," Erik replied. Lila loved his voice, so low and always sweet when he called her *babe*. She closed her eyes and pictured him: Erik was tall, with wide, football-strong shoulders and a confident swagger—a blond Californian god with the requisite surfer's body and the yummiest hazel eyes in the

world. And he was all Lila's. It was like a dream, except for the part where it was completely and deliciously real.

"I can't wait to see you," Lila murmured.

"Me either," Erik replied, a little too quickly for comfort. "But babe—I'm not going to make it down tonight. I'm really sorry."

"What do you mean?" Lila's eyes popped open, her voice squeaking despite herself. *What do you mean you're not going to make it?* she wanted to scream. But she knew she couldn't lose it. Not in public. Not with everyone watching.

From her perch at the top steps, she could see the whole school was splayed out in front of her, in descending order of social importance. For a brief second, she wished she were down on the lowest steps, where she could have a private conversation without everybody listening. She wished she were in the parking lot, even. Invisible, like Beau.

But only for a brief second.

"One of my professors sprang this take-home final on us today, out of nowhere," Erik said with a heavy sigh. "I've already been at the library for three hours, and it doesn't look like I'll finish anytime soon. It has to be in by eight a.m. tomorrow, and that means there's just no way I can get it done and still make it to L.A. . . ." He sighed again, and she imagined him making that concerned frown, with his forehead wrinkled up and his mouth pulled down, the way he always did when he was upset about something. "I'm really sorry, Lila."

“Oh, no worries,” Lila said, trying to sound understanding. Carly’s eyebrows were raised in a question mark. “I completely understand.”

“And I’ll be home before Christmas, don’t worry,” Erik continued, his tone lighter now. “Just a couple more days, I promise.”

“You just concentrate on your final,” Lila said in her sweetest, best Supportive Girlfriend voice, “and I’ll see you when I see you.”

She deserved the freaking Girlfriend of the Year Award, she thought as she hit the button to end the call. Or an Oscar.

“Oh no,” Yoon said, with what sounded like *mostly* sincere supportiveness. “What happened to Erik?”

“Don’t tell me he’s too hungover for the drive,” Carly said with a laugh.

Lila smiled breezily at her girls. “He got slammed with a surprise final,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. The crisp Los Angeles air seemed to slice right through her plaid Alice + Olivia button-down. “You should have heard how bummed he was.” She wrinkled up her nose and grinned at Carly. “Your brother is so cute!”

“I think I just threw up in my mouth,” Carly replied, and everyone laughed. She reached over and linked her arm through Lila’s.

Lila let herself lean on Carly, just a little bit. It wasn’t like Erik

was letting her down—he had exams. But her whole fantasy of cohosting a fabulous party with her perfect college boyfriend was crumbling faster than a stale Christmas cookie in January.

As her clique started moving toward the parking lot, Lila shook out her glossy, dark mane, forcing herself to regroup. Forget the pity party—she had a *real* party to plan. Her entire future depended on it.

The North Pole might be melting, but hell would freeze over before Lila Beckwith committed social suicide.

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