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Just Be Cool, Jenna Sakai*





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Keep It Together, Keiko Carter

Just Be Cool, Jenna Sakai^{*}

BY DEBBI MICHIKO FLORENCE



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To Lynn Bauer, anam cara,
for always being on my side

one

Heartbreak is for suckers.

Smart people protected their hearts, and I wasn't stupid. Far from it. I locked my heart in a vault and buried it where nobody could trample on it. Which was why even though Elliot Oxford dumped me right before Christmas break, my heart was still whole.

Two weeks later, I'd made it through the entire first day back at school without any mention of Elliot. My best friend, Keiko Carter, hadn't brought him up once. She'd texted me while I was at my dad's in Texas for the holidays to see if I was okay. But I didn't answer. And after several long, "meaningful" looks from her at lunch,

it looked like she'd taken the hint. Now all I had to do was avoid Elliot at newspaper club. It wasn't as if we *had* to work together. Ignoring him was going to be a piece of cake.

Unfortunately, I ran into Elliot on the way to my locker after school. And I mean literally.

I rounded a corner too quickly in my rush to get to Ms. Fontes's classroom, and Elliot and I crashed into each other. My messenger bag slipped off my shoulder and thudded to the ground. We both leaned down to reach for it at the same time and knocked heads.

"Ow!" I straightened and rubbed my forehead.

"It was an accident," Elliot said, handing me my bag. I snatched it from him. He was the last person I wanted to talk to.

His eyes traveled over me. "You cut your hair. And colored it."

"Way to state the obvious," I grumbled. I tugged the shorter turquoise strands. While I often dyed my hair when I was upset, this time I'd just wanted a fresh start: new year, new shade. Or at least that's what I'd told myself.

“Right.” Elliot pressed his mouth into a straight line.

I hefted my bag onto my shoulder as we stood there awkwardly.

“Are you heading to newspaper club?” he asked.

“Why? Did you hope I’d drop it?”

Elliot frowned. I used to think that furrow between his eyebrows was cute. Not anymore. “Why do you have to be so angry all the time?” he asked.

“Why can’t you stop judging people?”

“It’s not judgment. It’s observation. A great journalist is a great observer. You should know that.”

Oh, he was going to go there again? “A great journalist is also objective.”

“Something you can’t be if you’re shooting angry flames out of your eyes all the time.”

“That’s physically impossible,” I snapped.

“That’s called a metaphor,” Elliot said calmly.

Gah! I hated when he got all condescending. I decided to skip my locker. I pivoted and stalked to newspaper club. Alone. The way I liked it.

I swooped into the room and took a quick look around. Ms. Fontes, our sponsor, wasn’t here yet. She always ran out for a coffee after school but left the door unlocked

for the rest of us. I counted seven, so only Elliot was missing.

Passing the table I used to share with Elliot, I made my way to the opposite end of the room and sat next to Isabella Baker.

“Hey,” she said. She wore gold eye shadow that sparkled against her dark brown skin. “Oh! I love your hair!”

“Thanks.” I smiled.

“Did you have a good break?”

“Pretty good.” I’d spent the entire two weeks at my dad’s. My first Christmas away from home, without both of my parents together. At least the weather in Texas hadn’t been too different from Southern California.

“How was yours?”

“Stellar! My sister came home from college, and she helped me with my fashion designs.” Isabella’s eyes flitted behind me. “Where’s Elliot?”

Oh. I’d forgotten about this part. I’d have to actually tell people we broke up. “I’m not sure,” I said.

“There he is!”

I turned, and yep, there he was. He strolled in, and when I saw him this time, from a distance without him

right in my face, I was able to check him out. He wore a blue-and-green plaid button-down with cargo pants and Vans. His chestnut-brown hair was, as usual, a little long, but I'd liked it like that. It always smelled like coconut and was so soft. My chest tightened. I'd never touch his hair again. I quickly swung back around in my seat.

Isabella made a small sound when Elliot sat across the room at our old table.

"Are you two fighting?" she whispered.

I liked Isabella. I admired her writing style and fashion sense. We both favored T-shirts with sayings and bold graphics. Today mine was the Sandra Oh quote IT'S AN HONOR JUST TO BE ASIAN, while Isabella wore her BIG IS BEAUTIFUL shirt. Except while I paired my tees with jeans, she usually wore hers with colorful skirts.

It was better to come clean. As Keiko always said, rip that Band-Aid off.

"We broke up," I said at a normal volume.

Isabella gasped. Caitlin and Laurel at the next table glanced at me and then at Elliot. I followed their gaze. He was talking with Carlos and Thea, who usually sat with us. Him. *Sat with him*, I mentally corrected.

“What happened?” Isabella asked. She had that same concerned look Keiko had had when I told her the news the day before I’d left for my dad’s. “You two were so perfect together.”

Perfect? There was no such thing. I’d made a big mistake with Elliot, thinking our relationship would work because he was cute and we both wanted to be writers. Relationships were a waste of time. Look at my parents. They’d bragged about their meet-cute storybook romance, had a Hawaiian destination wedding, and celebrated their anniversaries with extravagant gifts. Sixteen years and a billion arguments later, they got a divorce.

Fortunately, Ms. Fontes walked into the room just then, holding her giant reusable mug of iced coffee. I was relieved not to have to continue the conversation with Isabella but also glad to have it out in the open. Maybe then nobody else would ask about Elliot.

“Good afternoon, reporters!” Ms. Fontes smiled and leaned against her desk. “Last semester you learned the aspects of putting together a newspaper. Researching, interviewing, writing, revising, and also design, layout, and production. This semester I’m going to push you out

of your comfort zones. Your first assignment will be to try out an area of journalism you haven't necessarily gravitated toward in the past. And it's due on my desk next Thursday. I know that's not a lot of time, but to put out a paper, you will need to learn to work fast. And yes, I'm aware that we aren't actually putting out a paper. This club is all about learning so when you get to high school, you'll be ready for the real thing." Ms. Fontes looked down at her notebook and started calling out assignments.

"Elliot, sports."

I held in a snicker. I definitely knew more about sports than Elliot. Most people knew more about sports than Elliot. This was going to be entertaining.

"Ben, you'll handle the Pacific Vista beat, covering school announcements. Caitlin, write an article, any topic, at least two hundred and fifty words long."

Caitlin tapped her pencil against her sketchbook. She was our resident photographer and artist.

Ms. Fontes continued. "Thea, you write great movie reviews. Try a book review or two. Brody, instead of the sports page, give me an opinion piece. And it can't be your opinion of the Super Bowl."

Everyone laughed, including Brody, who gave Ms. Fontes two thumbs-up.

“Carlos, try your hand at a profile of the new science teacher, Ms. Shah.”

Carlos, the only eighth grader in our club made up of seventh graders, scribbled in his notebook. He, Elliot, and I usually wrote feature articles. I focused on environmental and cultural issues while he and Elliot wrote mostly about local and school news.

“Jenna”—Ms. Fontes nodded at me—“I’d like to see you write a personal essay.”

A loud rushing of air filled my ears. Personal essay? I pondered the words like they were a foreign language. Personal essay. Personal. Essay. What was the point of writing something like that for a newspaper? Personal essays were all about feelings and little stories and other useless stuff. They weren’t news. And writing about feelings would mean, well, feeling them. There was no point. I was all about facts and objectivity. That’s why I wanted to be a reporter!

I was so lost in my head that I missed the rest of the assignments.

I turned to Isabella. “What did you get?” She

usually wrote about fashion, music, and pop culture.

She sighed. "Feature article, investigative piece."

That was an assignment that would have been perfect for me. "Any ideas about what you'll work on?"

Isabella shook her head, her dark curls bouncing. "You?"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't know that I've ever seen a personal essay in a newspaper."

"Sure you have. Like those Modern Love essays in the *New York Times*."

"The what?"

Isabella smiled. "My mom loves them. Essays written by everyday people about their experiences with love and hope."

I jiggled my leg. That sounded horrible and *way* too personal. But I didn't say so to Isabella. "Hmm," I said instead. "I don't think I've ever seen those."

"Look them up. Some of them are pretty amazing," she said. "Now, help me figure out what I should investigate."

I nodded. "If it were my assignment, I'd look into where the funds came from to renovate our cafeteria over the summer. I mean, have you seen it? It's super

fancy. I heard one anonymous donation covered the whole thing. It had to have been huge. And the old cafeteria was fine. I mean, why not use the money for something more important, like updating our computers or remodeling our sad library?" Or funding a real school newspaper.

"Oooh! Good idea!" Isabella scribbled on her paper, then stopped. "Except you meant that as an example."

I shrugged. "It's a good angle, and it's not like I'll get to write it. Go ahead. And if you want help..." I let the rest of the sentence go unsaid.

Isabella raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Shocking." Elliot and I had quite a reputation for being competitive and secretive about our articles. It had gotten so heated that Ms. Fontes started assigning us articles to work on together to teach us teamwork and how to cowrite.

"Okaaaaay," Isabella said, dragging out the word like she was afraid I'd take it back.

"You'll do great," I said. "Look for an original angle. Try to find out from the office staff who the donor was. Even if it was anonymous, someone has to know where the money came from."

“Thanks, Jenna! And seriously, read some of those Modern Love essays. The writing is great, and they’re from a world-renowned paper, so you know they’re the real deal.”

“Right.” I glanced at Ms. Fontes, who was engrossed in a conversation with Elliot. I still thought personal essays did not belong in a paper. It made zero sense. I would talk to her on Wednesday and get her to give me a different assignment.

I was an excellent student, and Ms. Fontes knew it. I was sure she’d totally be okay with me doing something else.

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