

JEFF GOTTESFELD

BEHIND THE MASK



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BEHIND THE MASK

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THE UNDERDOGS

UNDER THE STAIRS



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ISBN-13: 978-1-68021-142-9

ISBN-10: 1-68021-142-0

eBook: 978-1-63078-542-0

Printed in Malaysia

22 21 20 19 18 2 3 4 5 6



CHAPTER 1

I LOVE YOU

Serena Smith watched her new boyfriend. His name was Kai Lambert. Kai stood at the frozen yogurt shop's cash register. She still couldn't believe it. Kai had wanted her to be his girlfriend.

Serena was the new girl in town. Her family had moved in August. It was unexpected. Serena's grandma was sick. Her mom wanted to be close. She would take care of her. They moved one thousand miles northeast. It meant Serena had to start a new school for eighth grade. She was happy that

her grandma was cared for. But it wasn't fun to be the new girl.

It wasn't fun. But then Kai had come up to her in study hall. Tall. Long hair. A smile that could light up the night. He was popular. And the dude played a mean guitar. Everyone liked Kai.

Serena had never been anything too great at her old school. She was cute enough. Nice enough. Smart enough. But she was never a girl with any power. Now, with Kai? She had a little power. Everyone she'd invited to her upcoming Halloween party had said yes.

She was at the yogurt shop today. It was called Blizz. A bunch of new friends were with her. With Kai as her boyfriend, it wasn't hard to make friends. They came to her.

She even had a new best friend. Her name was April Frost. April slid into the seat next to her. "Omigod. Look at Kai. Paying for your yogurt. My old boyfriend never paid for me."

"Yeah." Serena grinned. Kai always bought

her frozen yogurt. He held doors open. He stood when she entered a room. It made her feel like a million bucks.

He came back and gave her the cup of frozen yogurt. He'd put nuts on it. That was just how she liked it. "Talking about the party?" he asked.

"Not yet. We were waiting on you."

"All I want to do is put on a costume. Show up," Kai said. "That's big for me. I leave the rest in your hands." He turned to his friends at the next table. "I'm right, right? The girls plan the party. Then the guys just show up. Right?"

His guy friends laughed. The girls grinned good-naturedly. Serena thought this was unfair. They'd do the work. But then the guys would have the fun. The idea of letting guys plan a party wasn't good either. They'd mess it up. Anyway, there were a few weeks until Halloween. There was plenty of time to set things up.

"What's your costume going to be?" April asked Serena.

“Serena’s going to be a baby doll,” Kai joked. Serena kicked him lightly on the shin. “Not funny.”

Troy snorted. He was Kai’s best friend.

April’s phone sounded with a text. She checked it. “It’s my mom. She wants me home.” She gave her phone a shake. “Serena, I’ll call you.”

When April left, so did the other girls. Troy and the guys took off too. Now it was just Kai and Serena. She liked it. It felt more like a date this way.

He spooned up some frozen yogurt. Then held it up. She opened her mouth. He slid the spoon in. It was such a romantic thing to do. Serena turned her head to the left. An older woman was watching them.

“Ain’t love grand?” the lady said.

Serena nodded. “It is when you have the best guy. Which I do.”

Kai put his arm around her. “You heard what she said. Love is grand.”

Serena felt herself blush. She was glad she had darker skin and hair. Her blush wouldn't show as much. Kai had never said that he loved her. They'd only been a couple for a month. They were just in eighth grade. It was pretty young to talk about love. But still.

"It sure is," she told him. She boldly took hold of his right hand.

"Did I tell you yet that I love you?" he said softly. "Since I do."

Wow!

There they were. The three magic words. *I love you*. He had spoken them.

From any guy that would mean a lot. From the coolest guy at the school? Serena felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

She knew what she had to do. She leaned toward his right ear.

"I love you too," she said softly.

Now they'd both said it. It was just three words. But those words changed things. The words

made their feelings stronger. Deeper. A couple that would last.

“Hey. You guys look so happy!”

The voice had come from behind them. Serena turned. It was a guy their age. He wore jeans and a T-shirt. He was skinny. The guy had round glasses like Harry Potter. They were cool on Harry Potter. On this guy they looked kind of silly. She wanted to be nice, though.

“Thanks,” she told him. “We are.”

The guy ignored her. He zeroed in on Kai. “Hey. It’s so good to see you. How you been? It’s been a long time.”

Kai looked at him blankly. “Do we know each other?”

“We sure do, Kai. Ollie?” said the guy. “It’s Ollie! How you doing? How’s it going?”

Huh? The new guy knew Kai. Or at least he knew his name. Who was he?

Serena looked at Kai. Waited to see what he’d say next. He could not be more blunt. “Ollie?”

I don't know an Ollie. I'm not sure I want to know an Ollie."

Serena saw the guy wince. His feelings had been hurt. Kai didn't know him. He was telling the truth. Her boyfriend did not lie.