

Crushing  
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# Crushing It



BY JOANNE LEVY



ALADDIN M!X

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



For my dad, Dan Levy, and in loving memory  
of my mom, Marcia Levy, two people who  
really crushed it at that parenting thing



# Chapter 1

MY STOMACH GROWLED SO LOUDLY, I WAS SURE other kids could hear it in the school hallway. It was lunchtime, and obviously I was starving, but as Olivia and I walked toward the caf, we got stopped. Again. This time it was by one of Olivia's eighth-grade dance-team friends to talk about their last rehearsal.

"You were so awesome," the girl said, looking at Olivia with wide, awestruck eyes. "You were like a *gazelle* out there."

My cousin and best friend—or "best cousin," a term we thought up when we were seven—was a *gazelle*. And apparently, everyone *loved* gazelles around this place.

In the two weeks since we'd started seventh grade, Olivia had been propelled into middle-school superstardom. She'd grown like a foot over the summer; she had long, flowing blond hair, and her beautiful clothes always seemed to check off the "cool" boxes with zero effort.

I guess I shouldn't have been too surprised about the superstardom thing. I mean, she'd always been the graceful one, the pretty and popular one, with her shiny smile and outgoing personality. Her bubbly nature and the way she got so excited about things were what everyone—including me—loved about her. So it was just a matter of time before she became seventh grade's official *it* girl.

Oh, and did I mention she'd made it onto the dance team, which seventh graders almost never get on? Because she's *a gazelle*. I hadn't even bothered trying out, because with my glasses, braces, and two left feet, I am about as graceful as a warthog. *No one* wants to see that.

I know it probably sounds like I'm all snark talking about Olivia, but it's not that way at all. She is kind

and funny, and I do love her, not just because we're family, although that's how we became friends in the first place. Our dads are brothers, and with us being almost the same age, it was like we were born to be friends. So of course we love each other, even if we haven't always had a ton of stuff in common.

It wasn't her fault she's beautiful and graceful and everything I'm not. And anyway, being her friend was sort of like being superstar-adjacent.

The eighth grader went on. "I swear, I have *never* seen anyone pick up routines so quickly! You are so talented, Olivia. There has probably *never* been anyone as good as you. Ever!"

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Because while I knew Olivia was good, she wasn't like *Dancing with the Stars* good. This fangirl was being over the top, and I was beginning to get crabby.

My stomach let out another monstrous gurgle. I needed food soon, but if Olivia didn't hurry up, we'd never get to eat before lunch period was over.

"Livvy," I said, trying to drag her away from the other girl, who was going on *and on* about dancing and

was using a bunch of French-sounding words that I didn't understand. "Can we go, please?"

Olivia smiled down at me and said, "Yeah, just a sec."

But I couldn't wait any longer. I reached into my lunch bag and pulled out the first thing I touched, which was a hard-boiled egg. An *egg*. Not even peeled.

*Sigh.*

When Dad had handed me my bag as I was leaving the house, I should have realized it was going to be bad. Since he'd started his new vet practice a few months before, we almost never saw him. When we did, he was either an exhausted zombie or scatter-brained and in a rush.

My older sister, Laura, was supposed to make lunches. But that morning, after Mom had left for work, Laura and Dad had gotten in a huge fight, and before making mine, she'd stormed off—which was getting to be standard behavior these days. So while I was in the shower, Dad had apparently grabbed some random stuff and thrown it in my bag.

I couldn't exactly peel an egg in the hallway, so I dropped it back in the bag, scared to look at what else

was in there. Olivia was going to get one more minute before I'd leave her in the hallway.

As I looked up at the clock so I could time her, I noticed a sign for our upcoming dance: the Fall Ball.

I snorted at the thought. Right. Like I'd be going to *that*. Not only did I not have a clue *how* to dance, but no one would ever ask me *to* dance, so why sign up for that kind of humiliation?

"What's so funny?" Olivia asked, coming up beside me. I guess she was done with her dance-team groupie.

I nodded toward the sign.

Olivia squealed and clapped her hands. "Oh! I was wondering when our first dance would be. Doesn't the 'Fall Ball' sound so *elegant*? I can't wait."

*Elegant?* "You're not planning on going, are you?" I asked, which was stupid, because obviously she was.

She looked at me like I had asked her the answer to a particularly difficult math problem. "What do you mean? *Of course* I'm going. Mom promised me she'd take me shopping for the perfect dress for our first dance. And I'm going to get my hair and nails done too. Aren't *you* going?"

I started walking toward the caf. “Nah, I don’t think so. But you have a good time.”

“Wait,” she said, stopping in the hallway. “You’re not coming?”

“To the Fall Ball? Not a chance,” I said with another snort.

“Why not?” Olivia asked like it was a huge shock to her that I might not want to go. Like she couldn’t possibly understand why *anyone* wouldn’t want to go.

“Can we please discuss this while we’re eating?” I asked, sure that my stomach was starting to eat some of my other organs and worried I might lose something I needed.

Olivia started walking again. “Fine. But first I need your opinion on something.”

“If it’s what to wear to the dance, I’m obviously the wrong person to ask,” I said, pointing down at my hoodie and jeans.

“It’s not that,” Olivia said as we got to the cafeteria. “Hold on. It’s too noisy to talk. Over here,” she said, pointing to a rectangular table with a few empty seats at the end. I dropped my bag on the table and sat

down across from her. She dug into her backpack for her lunch and set it on the table. Then she looked at me very intently.

“Okay, so . . . ,” I said, fidgeting because she was staring at me but not saying anything.

“Yeah,” she finally said, pulling her sandwich out of her bag and taking a bite. “I was hoping you could help me . . .”

Before she got any further, a body landed heavily in the chair next to me, scaring me half to death. No, maybe three-quarters to death. As I gasped, I turned my head to see who it was, but I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Tyler!” I scolded, although I was only sort of mad. He was my other best friend, after all.

I mean, he was *kind of* my other best friend. More like my next-door neighbor who I’d known my entire life. The person I’d always climbed trees and talked books with; my partner in annihilating zombies on Xbox.

Except we hadn’t played in a while, since he’d been away for the summer at wilderness camp. I was eager

to show him the new moves that were going to let me totally kick his butt in the game. Although the couple of times he'd invited me over, I'd been busy.

Sort of. At least, that's what I'd told him.

"Hey, Kat," he said with a smile, then looked across the table at Olivia.

"Hi, Tyler," she said in a very odd voice. I glanced over at her, and she was smiling really wide at him. Maybe she'd noticed he was different this year too. Of course she had; how could she not? He had changed so much.

They didn't know each other that well, because while Olivia and I had always gone to school together, Tyler had gone to a private academy since kindergarten. He and I played together on weekends or after school. This year was going to be totally different, though; his parents had decided to put him in public school with us, which I'd been excited about.

At first. Until he returned home from camp and I saw him for the first time and almost didn't recognize him. My stomach had started doing flip-flops because he was . . . different. I couldn't figure out exactly what

it was, but something inside me told me things were weird. Not that he was *acting* differently; just, he made me nervous. Like I wanted to be around him and *not* be around him at the same time.

“Hi, Olivia,” Tyler said politely. Then he turned to me. “So, Zombie Slashers tonight?”

“I . . .”

I wanted to, I really did, but something in me was scared to sit next to him on a couch. It mostly had to do with the fact that he’d gotten taller and tanned and his hair had grown longer and fell into his eyes, making him look a little . . . I guess “mysterious” is the right word. I’d never worried before about how I acted around him, but suddenly I couldn’t think of what I should say. I was sure I’d blurt out stupid things. Things like how his hair was mysterious.

“I can’t. I have too much homework, and if we’re starting at the shelter this weekend, I can’t fall behind this week.”

He nodded. “Good call.”

“Starting at the shelter?” Olivia asked, her eyes on Tyler.

“We’re volunteering at the animal shelter,” I said. “The one where my dad is their volunteer vet a couple of Sundays a month. We’ll be walking dogs and that kind of thing. We start this weekend.”

“Oh, that sounds amazing,” she said, and then tossed her long hair over her shoulder.

Tyler looked at her funny, but she kept smiling at him, her non-braces-covered teeth practically beaming at him. I pressed my lips together and looked down at my lunch bag, suddenly not as hungry as I had been. I pushed the bag away, not even bothering to find out what was in there.

Tyler grabbed it, opened it up, and looked inside. “What *is* this?”

I glanced over at him. He was smirking at me, his hair falling over his forehead until he pushed it back with his hand. The move made my stomach roll over. Seriously, I had to look away. What was *happening* to me?

I cleared my throat. “My dad’s culinary disaster,” I said.

“Aren’t you going to eat any of it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t even know what’s in there.”

He frowned. "Why are you talking funny?"

"I'm not," I said.

"You're not moving your lips," Olivia said helpfully. "Is there something wrong with your braces?"

So much for *not* drawing attention to my braces. To distract from my suddenly hot face, I grabbed my lunch bag and dumped the contents onto the table.

"I'm fine," I said.

Tyler reached for the oatmeal-raisin cookies and took them. He didn't even have to ask, because, unlike my father, *he* knows I hate oatmeal-raisin. And unlike me, he *loves* oatmeal-raisin. It's actually his favorite.

I took stock of the rest of my lunch and sighed, grabbing the apple and ignoring the rest. At least Dad had remembered to cut it up so I could eat it with my braces.

"Sardines?" Tyler said, grinning as he held up the square can.

I rolled my eyes. "Like I said: Dad. Help yourself to whatever else."

Tyler grabbed the egg and looked into the empty bag. "No salt?"

I shook my head.

He got up from his chair. "Right back."

He was barely away from the table when Olivia leaned toward me. "*That's* what I need your opinion on," she whispered.

"If eggs need salt?"

She gave me a *Really?* look. "No, duh. *Tyler*. You know him really well. What's the best way to ask him to the dance?"

I understood every word she was saying, but when she put them all together like that, they seemed to stall out my brain. "Huh?"

"I want to go to the dance with him."

"*Tyler*," I said, just to be sure. "*Tyler Lot?* The guy who was just sitting here."

"Yeah," she said, nodding and looking out over my shoulder. "He'll be back in a second, but . . . he got *seriously cute* over the summer. Don't you think?"

I shrugged and put a slice of apple in my mouth so I wouldn't blurt out anything about mysterious hair. "I dtho'n't know," I mumbled through apple chunks.

"He did," she said. "Trust me. He's now the most adorable guy in our grade, and with him being new

here . . . well, I'm sure you've heard all the girls talking about *the cute new guy*."

I *had* heard the other girls talking about Tyler like that. And at first I'd thought it was funny that they were all giggling and whispering about him—my next-door best friend since forever. But then I kind of hated all the attention he was getting. And now Olivia?

I chewed the apple and looked at her. She was so beautiful, with her long shiny hair and white teeth. Not to mention her pretty blue eyes and gazellelike dancing abilities. She was the whole package. Except . . .

"I'm not really sure he's your type," I said, trying to be nice about it.

She pouted. "What do you mean? You don't think he'd like me?"

"No, not that at all!" I said quickly, hating that I'd hurt her feelings. "He's just really into gaming and comics and stuff. You know that."

They didn't know each other that well, since she was more my at-school and family-event friend and he was more my weekend and *after*-school friend (until this year). But many times in the past, she'd rolled her

eyes when I'd told her I was going to play Xbox with him or we were going to a superhero movie. She'd never been interested in that stuff or asked to play with us.

She shrugged. "So? Haven't you ever heard that opposites attract?"

I sighed, having a feeling where this was going. "Yeah."

"Well," she said with wide eyes, like that was explanation enough. "How should I ask him?"

Something inside me wanted to tell her she *shouldn't* ask him. Because, honestly, I couldn't see them going to the dance together.

Or maybe secretly I didn't want him to go to the dance with *anyone* because I wouldn't be going. But she was my best cousin, and she was looking at me very seriously, and I could tell this was really important to her.

"Kat? What do you think? How should I ask him?"

I answered her truthfully. "I have no idea."

She pursed her lips and glanced behind me again. "Oh. He's coming back. Maybe you can talk to him for

me. Go play *Zombie Killers* with him tonight and get some intel.”

“*Zombie Slashers*,” I corrected.

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Just do it for me? Please? *Pretty please*? I’ll owe you huge.”

Looking at her, I knew any guy would be crazy to not want to go to the dance with her. No guy, not even my best guy friend, would ever want to go to the dance with *me*. Because guys like gazelles, not warthogs. I’d never be graceful or tall, and I still had glasses and braces and was into gaming and graphic novels. I might not have had much dating experience, but I was no dummy: Boys like girls like Olivia—girly girls who know how to dress and dance and put on makeup.

I felt my throat get dry and tight, and I looked down at the can of sardines, reading the ingredients (sardines and oil) so I wouldn’t have to look at her.

Finally, when I’d learned that there were nineteen grams of protein per can of sardines (still not reason enough to eat them), I figured at least one of us should get what she wanted. And maybe if she went to the

dance with him, things could go back to normal for Tyler and me.

“Okay. Fine,” I said. “I’ll talk to him.”

She did a tiny clap in her seat and then schooled her face. “Okay, shhhh, he’s coming back,” she said, even though I wasn’t even talking.

Tyler sat down again, dropping two salt packets on the table before grabbing the egg and starting to peel. “Geez. What kind of school is this? I had to ask, like, three lunch ladies where the salt was.”

“. . . as I was saying, your dance squad. So when’s your next practice?” I said, so Tyler wouldn’t know we’d been talking about him.

Olivia glanced over at Tyler and then back at me, obviously confused. “What?”

Tyler looked up. Now *he* was confused. “Huh?”

Oh, jeez. I turned to Tyler, realizing I needed to change the subject. Fast. “It turns out I don’t have that much homework after all. See you after dinner?”

“Yeah, cool,” he said. “That’ll be great.”

“Can’t wait,” I lied.

# Chapter 2

I'D GRABBED A SNACK WHEN I'D GOTTEN HOME from school, but if I'd known dinner was going to be so late, I would have eaten more. Like a whole pot roast or something.

"Can't we just eat?" Laura whined as she came into the kitchen.

I was sitting at the little desk working on my manga, *Hector: Ninja Cat*, based on my own cat (Hector, obviously). It had started out as an art project last year, but when I'd gotten an A on it and had shown part of it to Tyler, he'd said I should make it into a whole novel. The cat in my book did a lot more

ninja-ing and a lot less sleeping than the real one. Still, making a graphic novel about a cat with crazy ninja skills combined two of my favorite things: drawing and animals. Oh, and ninja stuff, so I guess that made it three of my favorite things.

I glanced up at my sister. As annoying as she was, I was very interested in Mom's answer, so I turned and looked over to where she was standing near the stove with her cell phone in her hand.

She let out a long breath, something she did a lot when talking to Laura these days. "Your father just texted that he is on his way. We eat dinner as a family, Laura."

"It's almost seven o'clock," Laura pointed out. I looked at the microwave clock; she was right. Whoa, later than I'd realized.

"Look," Mom said, putting her phone down, crossing her arms, and leaning back against the counter. "You both know Dad's working very hard. His practice is brand-new, and he *told* us he was going to have to work a lot to get it off the ground. He's under a lot of pressure to make that happen, so we need to be supportive."

“I would be more supportive on a full stomach,” Laura muttered.

“What’s that?” Mom said in *that* tone, which meant she’d heard every word.

“Ugh! Nothing!” Laura said, and stormed out of the room.

Mom just stared after her.

“Teenagers, huh?” I said.

Mom looked at me and gave me a little smile. “I am sorry, but . . .” She sighed again. “He should be home any minute.”

I nodded, although I wasn’t sure even *she* believed it. Because he was late *every* night. I understood he was busy and worked hard, but I also saw where Laura was coming from, because we were hungry. And sometimes it felt like when Dad *did* come home, he just complained about the vet office. The food reps this; the surgical supplier that; the vet tech called in sick; the photocopier broke. Blah. Blah. Blah.

I was about to turn back to my drawing when my cell phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out.

Tyler: *You coming over?*

Shoot. At this rate it would be bedtime before we ate, which meant I wasn't going to be able to hang out with him. Although I was kind of relieved about that, I *had* promised Olivia I would feel him out about the dance.

I turned to Mom. "How long, do you think?"

She shrugged. "Ten minutes, maybe?"

I got up out of the chair. "I promised Tyler I'd come over tonight to play *Zombie Slashers*, but I guess that's not going to happen. I'll just run over and tell him. I'll be right back."

She looked at me sideways. "You're not going to start the game and disappear are you? I want you here when we're ready to eat."

My stomach growled like *it* wanted to answer her. "Don't worry, Mom. I'll be right back."

"Okay. If Dad happens to pull up before you're back, I'll text you."

I nodded as I patted the pocket that held my phone and jogged toward the door.

# Chapter 3



**MRS. LOT OPENED THE DOOR AND SMILED AT ME.**

“Hi, Kat,” she said. “He’s down in the basement.”

“Thanks,” I said, returning her smile. I went down the hallway and made the three turns that took me to the stairs to the basement. I could hear he was playing already, but I needed a second to prepare myself. Why was my gastrointestinal system having so much trouble with the idea of being around Tyler? Is it possible to have a stomach flu just from being around one particular person?

*Stop being ridiculous, Kat,* I told myself. I took a few deep breaths and started down the stairs.

Halfway down, I was able to see him sitting there on the sofa, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. He was so focused on the screen that he didn't notice me. It gave me a second to look him over, which confirmed what my internal plumbing had already figured out: I had it for this guy. My best guy friend who I'd known forever. The guy who had gone away for the summer and had come back so cute that it almost hurt to look at him.

The guy who was currently beheading a zombie.  
Yeah, I had it for him *bad*.

But as I looked at him, I thought about Olivia and how she had it for him too. Olivia the gazelle. Kat the warthog.

He would never go for me in a million years. Sure, I was his friend, and obviously that hadn't changed over the summer, but he would never look at me *that way*. No one wants to date the warthog. Better to just get him and Olivia together, and I'd lose this stupid crush on him, which didn't even make sense to begin with.

Taking another deep breath, I got to the bottom of the stairs and waited for a break in the action.

“Hey,” I said after he had completed his move. I didn’t want him to get killed by a zombie simply because I’d distracted him at the wrong time.

He paused the game and looked over, grinning. “Hey! About time.”

“I can’t stay,” I said, walking over to the chair beside him, suddenly too nervous to even think about sitting on the couch next to him.

His smile faltered a little. “Oh. How come?”

“My dad’s not home yet. We haven’t even eaten dinner.”

“Wow. That kind of stinks.”

I nodded.

He glanced back at the TV and started up the game again. “You could have just texted me.”

“I know. But I wanted to talk to you about something.”

He paused the game and looked at me. “Sounds serious.” He frowned. “Is something wrong?”

*Yes. It’s wrong that I’m sort of freaking out and feel like I don’t know how to talk to you anymore.* “No, no,” I said, hoping I sounded more normal to him than I did in

my head. "I just wanted to ask you . . . uh . . . are you going to the dance?"

He blinked a few times, his head sort of rolling back as though that was about the last thing he'd expected me to say. I might as well have just asked him about his next trip to Mars. "I wasn't planning on it. Why?"

"Uh, no," I said, waving off the idea and laughing. "Of course you wouldn't go. Um . . . so. What do you think of Olivia? She got really tall over the summer, huh?"

He did some more blinking and frowned. "Yeah. I guess."

"It makes her a really good dancer. Being so tall, I mean. Like a gazelle," I said. Because I couldn't seem to stop babbling. This was exactly why I hadn't come over since he'd returned from camp—ugh, could I be any lamer?

"Like a *what*?"

"A gazelle. You know, like an antelope? We learned about them in that unit on African savannahs? Oh, wait, you weren't at school last year, so maybe you don't know about savannahs. I have a book on them, if you

want to borrow it. Really interesting stuff. Gazelles, I mean. And savannahs."

He scrunched up his nose. "Kat, is something wrong?"

*Yes. I like you and I can't stop talking.* "No, why?"

"Because you're acting weird, your face is red, and your voice is kind of . . . screechy."

"Is not!" I screeched.

*Sigh.* I tried again. "It's not. And I'm fine. I'm just wondering what you think of Olivia, that's all."

He shrugged and looked away. "I don't know. I've never really thought about it."

"Well, think!"

He turned his wide eyes back to me. "What?"

"Sorry," I said. "I meant, she's so beautiful, don't you think?"

"I guess so," he said, shrugging again. He turned back to the TV and started up the game. Not a good sign, but I pressed on.

"And she is sooooo popular this year already."

"So?" he asked as he stabbed a zombie in the eye with his broadsword.

"I don't know," I said. "I just thought you'd be into her."

"She's not really my type."

My heart lurched at that. He had a type? More than that, he'd *thought* about his type enough to know she wasn't it? "What's your type?"

He glanced at me for half a second and then back at the TV. "I don't know. Someone with a brain, I guess. Someone who doesn't obsess over which 'boy-band hottie' she wants to kiss most."

Uh-oh, time to do damage control. "When she did that speech in homeroom about her band boyfriend, she was doing it *ironically*," I said, hoping I was using the word right. "She didn't really mean it. She was being funny. She has a really good sense of humor."

He looked at me, and I knew he wasn't buying it.

"Anyway, she's definitely the girl you want to be with at the dance, if you know what I mean. . . ."

He paused the game again and looked at me. "What's going on here, Kat?"

I swallowed as a million thoughts whirled around

in my brain and I scrambled to sort out something to say. “Nothing, just, uh . . .”

*Thanks a lot, brain.*

“And I thought we were going to do a scavenger hunt this past weekend,” he said, scrunching up his face into a frown. “I miss those.”

I cringed and looked down at my hands. We used to do these goofy scavenger hunts where I’d climb up the tree that went right to his window and we’d exchange lists of ten items to gather—things like werewolf hair (which Hector “donated”), a hawk master’s gauntlet (one of Mrs. Lot’s rubber kitchen gloves), dragon’s blood (hummingbird-feeder nectar), and even fairy dust (Laura was *not* happy when I made it out of one of her sparkly eye shadows). Whoever collected all the items first won. The prize was usually something dumb—like getting knighted or having the loser be the winner’s servant for the day—but it never mattered. It was more about the game.

On Saturday, Tyler had texted me that he had a list ready for our first hunt of the school year, but I’d

bailed, too nervous to spend that much time with him. Even though, at the same time, I really missed doing the hunts too. We always had so much fun and laughed like crazy at what we'd come up with for the items.

I just wanted things to get back to how they were. But how could that happen when I felt like barfing every time I was around him?

"I had to do a bunch of chores," I said, still not looking at him.

"Really?" he asked, and I could tell he didn't believe me.

I hated lying to him, but what could I say? *You're too cute now and I don't know how to be your friend anymore without it being weird?*

I nodded and changed the subject. "Anyway, I just thought you'd want to talk about Olivia. You don't know her all that well, but since you're at school with us now, you're going to be spending a lot more time with her."

"Not if I can help it," he muttered as he started up the game again.

Ugh. Not a good sign.

Before I could say anything to that, my phone buzzed in my pocket. "I've got to go," I said.

"See you tomorrow," he said as he stabbed another zombie in the heart.

Which was exactly what I was going to do to Olivia.