

Magical Mutations

Chapter 9

Bayville High buzzed with the usual pre-lunch commotion. Every corridor was jammed with jocks, goths, band kids, and a dozen other groups, all of them ducking and weaving between each other with years of practiced choreography. Harry stood at his locker, twirling the dial and trying to remember the combination. His mind was already wandering and chewing over Storm's words from the previous day. It was a warning to pick his own side rather than just go along with everyone else.

Harry jammed his book into his locker and stepped back when someone slammed into his back. He spun, half expecting a football goon, but it was Kurt. The other boy toothily grinned. His skin looked peachy, and his hair was black. It was all thanks to the holographic projector Professor Xavier had insisted he wear. "Mein Gott, you nearly broke my nose!" Kurt said, rubbing his face and giggling.

Harry snorted. "I didn't hear you coming, mate. What's got you so worked up?"

Kurt quickly glanced over each shoulder. "Downstairs, by the freshmen lockers. Jean and her boyfriend are ... how do you say it ... going nuclear." He mimed an explosion with his hands, then let his arms go limp. "You should see it. It is better than TV."

Harry heard a clatter of shouts and laughter from the stairwell. Harry slammed the locker closed and followed Kurt. They slipped through a group of cheerleaders and barreled down the next flight. At the landing, Harry spotted the crowd. They gathered in a half-ring around the lockers. There was Duncan flexing his jaw as he sneered at Jean.

Jean had him cornered. She stood straight, feet planted and hands on her hips. She looked ready to smack him right across the head. Her red hair was perfectly braided, and a red flush had crept into her cheeks. Harry could see her clench and unclench her fists. She shouted, "You don't get to talk to people that way. You don't get to be a jackass just because you can throw a ball fifty yards."

Duncan shrugged, rolling his eyes. "Don't be so dramatic, Jean. So what if I roughed up that kid? He had it coming." He jerked a thumb at the floor, where a freshman nursed a bloody nose and tried to look invisible.

"Bullshit!" Jean's voice snapped back. "You're just an asshole, Duncan, and I'm done pretending you're anything but." She moved closer, lowering her voice, but Harry still caught every syllable. "Either you apologize and grow up, or we're finished. For real this time."

Duncan laughed loudly. He looked around to see who was watching, then leaned in. "Go ahead. Break up with me. I was gonna dump you next week anyway." He smiled smarmily. "You think I don't have options? Hell, I'm already talking to someone who doesn't bitch every five minutes."

Jean's jaw clicked shut, and her breath hissed between her teeth. Every muscle in her arms went rigid. "You're lying," she whispered, but her hands trembled.

"Try me," Duncan said, not flinching.

A sound started at the end of the row. It was a soft rattle, and then every locker on the wall began to shake. The metal doors began to rattle loudly against their frames, and the floor vibrated beneath their feet. A cheerleader shrieked, and then there were three dozen kids stampeding for the stairwell, yelling that it was an earthquake. Harry watched as a Coke can wobbled off a ledge and bounced, spraying foam everywhere.

Kurt whistled. "She is pissed," he said, tugging Harry's sleeve. "You should talk to her before she melts the school."

"She can handle herself. But I'll step in if it looks like she's losing control," Harry replied. But as he said it, Duncan squared up and gripped Jean's arm, trying to shove her aside. Her eyes narrowed in a way that told Harry she was none too pleased.

The vibration doubled, and lockers were now buckling inwards with a tortured metallic shriek. Fluorescent bulbs overhead popped, one after the other. Duncan let go and staggered, suddenly afraid. Jean raised her voice, but it was shaky. "You lay a finger on me again, and I'll make sure your next team photo is taken through a hospital window."

Duncan tried to look tough, but he had nothing left. He shouldered past, barking "Freak!" as he went. Jean stood there frozen, her chest heaving.

Harry walked up, ignoring the few kids still watching from the shadows. "Are you alright?"

She jerked her head up, and for a second, Harry thought she'd deck him. But luckily, her eyes softened, and her fists loosened. "I almost lost it," she said in a barely audible voice.

He glanced at the nearest locker. The metal was warped in a perfect fist-sized dent, right at head level. "You didn't, though. That's what counts." He smiled. "Do you want to get out of here?"

Jean nodded, her entire body trembling. She tried to say something else, but the words failed to come out. He put a hand on her shoulder, steering her away from the ruined lockers and into a side corridor. The vibration was fading, but Harry could still feel it under his skin. They ducked into an empty classroom, and the door shut behind them.

“Sit,” Harry said, pulling out a chair. She collapsed into it and put her face in her hands. Harry didn’t bother with a pep talk. He just stood beside her until her breathing evened out.

She spoke first, still not looking up. “I was going to kill him. Not on purpose, but ...” Her voice cracked. “He made me so angry. I couldn’t control it.”

Harry crouched so they were eye level. “You controlled it enough. You stopped yourself from hurting anyone, and that’s all that matters.”

She shook her head, not buying it. “He’s not worth it,” she finally said, and the last bit of tension bled out of her posture. “He never was.”

A crash echoed from down the hall, probably a teacher opening a stuck door. Sirens started up outside, and the building’s fire alarm wailed to life. Harry rubbed her arm. “We should go,” he said. Jean looked up, and a single tear ran down the edge of her cheek. Harry wiped it away with his thumb. “Let’s get you home,” he said.

She nodded, rising to her feet. “Can you do that teleport thing?” Her voice was a little wobbly, but steady enough.

“Yeah. Just hang on.” He took her hand, and she threaded her fingers through his. They vanished in a ball of fire, leaving behind a bunch of confused and scared people

They appeared in the room with a burst of fire. Jean’s bedroom was lit by golden late-morning sun and smelled faintly of the perfume she was wearing. Harry nearly tripped over a pair of running shoes on the floor, and Jean sagged forward, still holding his hand.

She let go and stumbled to the bed, collapsing in a messy heap. “Never again,” she muttered, her voice muffled by the pillow. “I’m never going back to that hellhole.”

Harry chuckled and stood by the window, watching her. He knew she didn’t really mean that. She would likely be back in class by tomorrow. A calm voice filled his head, startling him. “Jean. Harry. I would appreciate an explanation.” Xavier’s psychic touch was polite, but it left a cold residue behind. Jean groaned.

Harry turned to her. “Do you want me to ...?”

“No,” she cut in, her voice shaking. “I’ll do it.”

She closed her eyes. Harry guessed she was projecting, because a second later, Xavier’s mental voice returned, gentler this time. “Thank you for being honest, Jean. No harm was done. I’ll make a donation to the school to fix any damage, and I’ll erase the memories of anyone who saw more than they should have. Take the rest of the day to recover.” The link faded, and for a second, the only sound was the air conditioner clicking on.

Jean rolled onto her back, stared at the ceiling, and groaned again. "I'm an idiot."

He sat at the edge of her bed and looked at her. "You're not. Duncan's a sack of garbage, and everyone knows it." He shrugged with a small smile on his lips. "You could have cracked his skull, but you didn't."

Jean dragged a hand over her face, wiping at her eyes. "I nearly broke the hallway in half." Her voice was small but surprisingly loud. "What if I'd gone off on him for real?"

Harry shook his head and patted her jean-clad thigh. "If anyone had it coming, it was him."

She let out a weird half-laugh, half-sob. "That's not how it's supposed to work."

He looked at her, waiting for the rest. Jean finally rolled over and met his eyes. Her face was a little pale, but she had a fierce look in her eyes. "I could have fried every circuit in his brain. I saw it happening in my head. For a second, I wanted it to happen."

Harry didn't flinch. "But you didn't. That's the difference. And if you had gone overboard, I was there to help bring you back to reality." Jean looked at him, smiled softly, and nodded. "You want to go for a walk?" he asked.

Jean looked like she might say no, but instead, she nodded. "Yeah. It's better than rotting up here." She sat up and wiped her nose, then gave him a thin smile.

They walked out the back of the mansion and down a stone path toward the lake. There were birds chirping, and every breeze set off a million tiny ripples on the water. Jean walked with her arms crossed and her head down, but Harry made sure to keep pace at her side.

They hit the little dock at the water's edge, and Jean stopped, stared at the sun-lit surface, and let out a long, shaky sigh. "I can't stop thinking about it," she said. "Sometimes I think I'm better than everyone, and sometimes I feel like a freak. Duncan made me like both were true."

Harry hooked his thumbs in his pockets. "He's a loser. Why'd you ever put up with him?"

Jean shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe I thought I was supposed to. I'm the most popular girl, and he's the most popular guy." She rolled her eyes at her own words. "I know that's pretty shallow."

Harry squinted at the lake. "I suppose so," he said. "But at least you now know what kind of a guy he really is." He gently nudged her with his shoulder.

There was a lull as the wind ticked through the reeds. Harry watched a dragonfly land on Jean's shoe, and she stared at it for a moment before it flew away. After a minute, Harry broke the quiet. "You want to forget about Duncan for a while?"

Jean looked over, wary but curious. "And do what?"

He grinned. "Go swimming?"

Jean blinked in confusion, then laughed. "Are you serious?"

Harry kicked off his shoes, already at the edge. "Why not?"

Jean rolled her eyes, then peeled off her sweatshirt. Underneath, her arms and shoulders looked strong and steady again. She kicked her sneakers into the grass, then stood at the edge of the dock. "It's cold," she warned.

He looked at her. "Don't tell me you're scared?"

"Of course not."

"Go, then."

She jumped first, her arms flailing. Harry followed half a second later. The water was icy, and Harry gasped when he popped back up to the surface of the water. Jean came up sputtering with her hair slicked back and her mouth wide open in surprise. She shrieked, "You maniac! It's like the Arctic!"

Harry laughed so hard he swallowed some of the water. She splashed him, and he splashed her back, until both were breathless and raw-throated from laughing and yelling.

They swam until their fingers went numb. They climbed out, shivering, and sat side by side on the dock, dripping wet and happy. Harry waved his hand, and their clothes and bodies were instantly dry with a puff of steam. Jean shuddered from the sudden warmth. Jean leaned into him, her cheek against his arm. "Thanks for being there for me," she said.

"Anytime," he told her, wrapping an arm around her back.

They sat there talking for a while before Jean stretched her arms overhead and looked at him with a bright, devilish grin. "I'm starving. I'll race you to the kitchen?"

Harry stood with a smile. "Loser cleans up."

Jean didn't bother answering. She sprinted up the path, her hair flying behind her, and Harry ran to catch her. Harry grabbed her around the waist and pulled her behind him. Jean cried foul and jammed her hand into his back pocket, refusing to let him gain a further lead.

Magical Mutations

The next morning at Bayville High, Harry watched everything play out with an amused detachment. The school was back to its usual chaos. The locker hallway where Jean nearly dented Duncan's head had already been hammered straight by maintenance. The freshman who took Duncan's punch was now threatening a civil lawsuit against the bully and his friends, which had Duncan feeling extra salty.

Jean was different, too. She greeted Harry with a fierce hug that morning, and from that moment, she stuck so close to him that people thought they were glued together. In every class they shared, Jean picked the desk right next to him, which made all the whisperers and gawkers go into a frenzy. She didn't care, though. Harry certainly didn't either. He liked the way she leaned her elbow on his desk during boring lectures, or the way she passed him notes with sarcastic jokes written in blue gel pen.

Kitty sat with them at lunch, eating from a Tupperware container and making nervous small talk, but by the end of the period, she was giggling and tossing tater tots at Harry's head. It was turning into a full social circle that Harry was really starting to enjoy.

It was a pleasant day until the last bell rang. The halls went ballistic, and the student body stampeded for the exits like the entire building had gone up in flames. Harry, Jean, and Kitty made it out ahead of the crowd, walking the path toward the back lot. Harry carried his backpack over one shoulder, and Jean had her arm threaded through his. Kitty, who was still new to Bayville High, couldn't stop jabbering about all the new people she had met.

They rounded the bend and entered the lot, where the sun gleamed off a sea of windshields and dusty car paint. There were already dozens of students loitering around, trying to look cool or kill time before they could escape.

That's when Harry spotted it. Duncan's convertible Mustang was gleaming in the sun as if it were posing for a glamour shot. The top was down, the leather seats were oiled, and the paint was heavily waxed. Even the dashboard looked like it had been cleaned that morning. Harry's lips split into an evil smile. He dropped Jean's arm and clapped Kitty on the back. "Give me a second," he said. "I have to water the roses."

Kitty blinked in confusion, not quite catching the idiom. Jean's lips pursed, and she shook her head, but her eyes sparkled with anticipation. "Harry, don't ..." she said, but he was already gone, striding across the lot with a relaxed swagger. He walked right up to Duncan's car and stood near the driver's side door.

Kitty turned to Jean with wide, disbelieving eyes. "Is he really ...?"

“He is,” Jean replied, grinning despite herself. She shook her head again, this time with genuine amusement.

Harry scanned the lot for any witnesses. Two freshmen were playing hacky sack near the dumpster. Three cheerleaders argued by the curb, their phones glued to their hands. Duncan and his friends were nowhere in sight. Perfect.

Harry unzipped, glanced left and right, and let loose into the open driver’s side. The arc was impressive. He hit the seat, the wheel, the stereo, and even got a little splash on the air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror. He shook out the last few drops, zipped up, and hustled back to the girls before anyone noticed.

He barely made it back before the giggling started. Jean had her hands on her hips, and she huffed loudly, but the slight smile on her pretty face betrayed her. Kitty just gaped with her hand over her mouth to try to stifle the giggles.

“Did you really just ...” Kitty tried to finish the sentence, but broke off in a fit of snickers.

Jean shook her head at him. “You’re the world’s biggest child, you know that?” she said, but she didn’t sound angry.

Harry shrugged with a smirk. “He had it coming for what he did to you. Besides, everyone else is too scared of him to put him in his place, and the teachers never do anything to stop him.”

Kitty wiped her eyes, still breathless. “You’re such an idiot,” she said and then burst into giggles again.

They crossed to the curb and waited for Scott, who was always slow coming out of the science building. Jean glanced at Harry and rested her butt against the fender of Scott’s car. She shook her head for the third time. “You know, you’re just lucky I think you’re cute.”

He chuckled and stood in front of her. “Is that why you keep following me around?”

She bopped him on the shoulder with the back of her hand. “Maybe.”

Across the lot, the door to the gym swung open, and a clump of athletes appeared. Duncan led the pack, followed by his goons. His walk was the exaggerated swagger of someone desperate to impress, but it was hard to look cool in a letterman jacket that didn’t fit right. Over the day, Harry had been using his powers to make the jacket smaller and smaller every time he was near Duncan. By the end of the day, the sleeves were above his wrists. He didn’t see Harry or the girls as he headed straight for his car.

The girls watched and waited. Harry pretended to be looking through his backpack, but he kept his peripheral vision locked on the Mustang.

Duncan tossed his gym bag into the back seat. He slid into the driver's seat and froze. For a second, nothing happened. Then he yanked his hands off the wheel and stared at them, horrified. They were dripping wet. He bent down and sniffed the seat, then jerked up so fast he hit his head on the visor.

Duncan's face twisted in horror and rage. "WHAT THE FUCK! IT HAPPENED AGAIN!" he screamed, loud enough to set off a ripple of laughter through the lot. His friends crowded around to see. When the realization dawned, they all began to howl with laughter. Even the freshmen at the dumpster caught on, and someone in the crowd shouted, "The Pissing Bandit strikes again!"

Kitty started giggling so hard she nearly fell over. Jean lost her composure and laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks. She gripped Harry's sleeve for support, wheezing out, "You're terrible, you know that? You're an absolute heathen."

Harry chortled in amusement. "All in a day's work, ladies."

Duncan, now beet-red and dripping urine onto the parking lot, launched into a screaming fit. He pounded the seat, cursed, and threatened murder on whoever did it. One of the cheerleaders pulled out her phone and started taking pictures of the tantrum.

Scott finally showed up, scanning the scene with his usual unreadable calm. He slid up next to the trio and nodded at Harry. "Again?" he asked, with a perfectly straight face.

Harry smirked. "He deserved it."

"No doubt," Scott chuckled.

Jean wiped her eyes and grinned at Scott. "We're ready to go whenever you are."

Kitty, still trembling with laughter, managed to ask, "Is this, like, a regular thing for you guys?"

Jean, with a mischievous gleam, answered. "It's fast becoming a tradition."

The four of them got into Scott's car. Harry held the door for the girls, then slid into the back seat. As they pulled away, the last thing he saw was Duncan's friends still laughing at him as he threatened everyone around him. Duncan, finally losing the last of his sanity, screamed and kicked the door of his car, leaving a huge dent in it. Harry laughed as they drove away.