

A SILVERWOOD HIGH NOVEL

Nothing COMPARES



ANASTASIA LAYNE

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Author's Note

Dear reader, thank you for taking a chance on this book!

While this book is written with a young adult audience in mind, it does address some deeper topics that are, well, *real*. These include: underage drinking, discussions around drunk driving, body image insecurities, death of a parent, mild swearing, bullying, and discussions around sex, intimacy, and boundaries. There are also a few steamier moments between the main characters. The 'spice' level would likely be considered PG-13 by most readers.

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Dylan

MY CHOPSTICKS HELPLESSLY STAB into my carton of Vegetable Lo Mein, desperate to gain some traction on the slippery noodles.

I am 100% team fork when it comes to Chinese food, simply because I lack the dexterity—coordination?—to control chopsticks. Hats off to anyone who can successfully operate these contraptions. Seriously. I am good at a lot of things, but this is not one of them.

My mittens lay at my feet where I abandoned them earlier, despite the freezing temperature, in an attempt to wrangle my food into my mouth. That plan backfired, because now my fingers are frozen to the point that I can barely more them, let alone navigate the intricacies of chopstick operation. Do you know what allows you to keep your mittens *on* while eating? Forks. It doesn't help that my friends are navigating their respective dishes with ease. Tess, because she only ordered egg rolls which are basically finger food, and Carla and Marnie, because they are just *that* skilled with chopsticks. Apparently, even after years of friendship, I can still learn something new about them.

This difficulty in eating my dinner is bad enough, but the fact that there are additional witnesses to my struggle outside the immediate group of my friends makes it even worse.

Because my best friend, Marnie has decided to invite Mr. Popular McLadykiller.

AKA Zachary Morgan.

AKA her boyfriend.

And he, in turn, invited two of his ‘cool crowd’ friends, Ellis and Justin. All three of whom I was not aware would be joining us until I arrived.

But my thoughts aren’t on his entourage. Nope. They are on Zac himself, whose warm brown eyes I’ve felt on me more than a few times in the hour I’ve been here.

Who, even now, is staring at me. I intentionally keep my eyes locked on my food, only taking notice of him in my periphery. Maybe I’ve dropped some of my food on my coat. Which, if I’m being realistic, is *not* out of the realm of possibility. See: my aforementioned aversion to chopsticks.

To be on the safe side, I do a quick perusal of my body. Nope, no unwanted stains or splashes.

So... why is he looking at me?

Unless he’s just so appalled by my outfit that he can’t look away?

Which is... fair.

I can best describe my aesthetic tonight as *hodgepodge practical winter caveman*. The fleece-lined leggings beneath my plain skinny jeans only serve to add unflattering bulk to my lower half, while my brother’s old boots that I swiped for the evening add a nice touch of manliness. Top that off with my oversized hoodie and the thick Carhart coat that my dad favored a decade ago and I’m ready for a week in the wilderness. Practicality and comfort over beauty is my motto and tonight is no different.

Unfortunately.

Again, I was *not* aware of the cute boys who would be joining us when I chose my outfit. Had I been, I would have at the very least chosen to wear all *women’s* clothing.

I continue to feel the laser beams that are Zac's eyes on me and a flutter of what I can only presume to be annoyance stirs in my chest.

Why can't he focus on someone else?

No one has commented on my unusual clothes, though Justin gave me an unimpressed once-over upon my arrival. But from him that is about as good as I could hope for. At least he didn't offer any snide remarks and draw attention to how out of place I look, sitting next to my immaculately dressed best friend.

Because Marnie went all out for tonight. Actually, that's an exaggeration. She always looks good. Put together and beautiful. Tonight, she's rocking a 'ski bunny' vibe with her white puffy vest over a slim fitting long-sleeve shirt, tight black leggings, and fur-trimmed Sorel boots. She has straightened her brown hair and thrown it into a perfectly elegant high ponytail.

She wouldn't be out of place on a ski hill, or maybe leaning against a fancy lodge posing for some affluent travel magazine.

"Sorry again, Dyl," she says from her folding lawn chair. "I swear, I asked them to throw plastic forks in the bag."

The smile I give her is more of a grimace as I turn back to my food. As nice as her apology is, it does nothing to change the simple fact that I am cold and hungry and look like a fool trying to coax these ridiculous noodles into my mouth—

Aha! Finally, I catch a slice of carrot. I raise it in victory just as a gust of wind blows a large section of my hair into my mouth. With a sharp *puff* and a series of sputters, I blow it out, only to watch the carrot slide back into the container with a *plop*.

Marnie turns back to her own carton of food, expertly popping a piece of broccoli between her teeth while keeping her starry eyes locked on Zac. It's impressive, really.

Growing ever more frustrated, I pull off my hat and yank my curls into a bun at the top of my head. This is one of the

only ways I can tame them, especially with the falling wet snow. Sure, my neck and ears might be cold now, but at least I don't have to worry about frizz and static taking over once we enter the movie theater.

Because that's our plan for the night. The seven of us, along with a couple dozen other movie goers, are waiting patiently outside of the only movie theater in town to purchase tickets to tonight's midnight showing of some new superhero movie.

Our small village of Silverwood is located along the 3,200 miles of shoreline that Michigan boasts. It's your typical coastal town—kitschy little shops selling nautical themed trinkets, more ice cream shops and bed and breakfasts than any other type of establishment combined, and a spattering of miniature golf courses with themes ranging from '*safari*' to '*pirates*.' It has a total population of under 1,000 year-round residents and on any given off-season night there is *nothing* to do.

Especially in winter when the beaches are closed.

Unless, of course, you are an avid ice fisherman—which I am not.

Don't get me wrong, I love our little village. And if I weren't stuck here year-round, I would probably even find it adorable. But again, nothing. To. Do.

Hence why it was so easy for my friends to coax me out of my warm, comfortable house to join them for a midnight movie premiere that I don't care even the tiniest bit about. It's a spinoff of the sequel of a superhero movie I've never seen. I think this is the fifth or sixth installment in this franchise and at this point, I am so behind on the canons it would take a huge effort that I am not willing to put in to catch up.

Tonight's little outing was Carla's idea, as most of our adventures are. If our friend group is out doing something, you can bet it was Carla who organized it. Corn mazes, haunted houses, sleepovers, trips to the mall, and, apparently, midnight movie premieres.

With a final huff, I close the lid to my takeout container and set it on the ground.

“Are you going to finish that?” Ellis pops his head between Marnie and me, making me startle.

“Oh, um, no?”

“Mind if I...”

“No, go ahead!” I retrieve the carton and hand it over to him with more enthusiasm than is warranted. His request just took me by surprise. Or, maybe not so much his request, but that he is addressing me directly at all. Still, better he eats my noodles than have them go to waste.

Ellis is like a golden retriever. No, a golden retriever *puppy*. And not just because his floppy, honey-gold hair makes him *look* like one. He is one of those naturally happy people. His big blue eyes scream innocence, but hide a hint of mischief. He’s a ball of sunshine and even if he had asked for my food while I *was* still eating it, I probably would have handed it over just to avoid disappointing him.

He plops back into his own chair across from me in our little circle and, *shocker*, finishes off my food with ease.

Am I the only person who’s never been taught to use chopsticks?

I don’t even have a chance to wallow in self-pity for long before that prickly sensation on the back of my neck returns. I’m being watched. Sure enough, I turn my head and find Zac staring in my direction. *Again*.

What. The. Heck?

Hmm, maybe he had the same idea as Ellis and was waiting for me to give up on my food. It would explain why he had been scoping me out earlier. Just waiting for me to throw in the towel—like a vulture lurking in the air, circling its next meal. The random thought makes me smile to myself and to my utter and complete disbelief, Zac smiles back.

Zac thought I was smiling at him. *And he smiled back.*

Oooh. I hate that a little flutter of... *something* bursts in my chest.

It's annoyance, Dylan.

Right. And I've got every right *to* be annoyed. I firmly believe that.

A moment later, Zac is reabsorbed in his conversation, calm and collected as always, while I'm left reeling from something as small and insignificant as a *smile*.

I've known boys who make a show of being the cool, confident guy. But they're playing a part. Their attempts at carefree smirks come off as forced and their swagger, desperate. Zac... isn't. He's just *like this*. All the time. Like the ingredients to make the world's most irresistible man are flowing through his bloodstream.

And he's always been this way. Even back in elementary school. He didn't even hit that awkward *welcome to puberty* phase that the rest of us mere mortals had to suffer through. Nope, Zachary Morgan just coasted along from adorable child straight to attractive man. My own journey was... clunkier with plenty of pit stops along the way. Each one more awkward and uncomfortable than the last.

He is jovial with a touch of devil-may-care, making him alluring enough to constantly have people around him, but also intimidating enough to keep them at a distance.

In my opinion, Zac's personality also toes the line between confidence and arrogance, making me immune to his charms.

Except... that isn't true at all.

His confidence is something I wish I had more of. If only it were possible for him to share some with me. Like if I could just breathe in his delicious cologne, I could absorb some confidence osmosis style. Lord knows he's got plenty to spare.

Really, his downfall is his reputation as a womanizer. A serial dater. He is notorious for his ability to go out with girls while never falling into the label of boyfriend and girlfriend. Girls from our school, other schools, *colleges*—it doesn't matter. He's not picky.

That isn't to say he doesn't have a type. He does. Flawless, perky, outgoing... in short, not me.

Still, he'll flirt with anyone, regardless of appearance or personality: it's only the *really* special girls who get to take things further.

Okay, Yuck. A shudder crawls up my spine at the thought.

Apparently, all it took was my best friend to break his pattern of promiscuity by somehow convincing Zac to fully commit to her rather than keeping things *casual*.

Giving credit where credit is due, he has stayed loyal to Marnie. But that doesn't mean that I like them for each other. Especially given my suspicions about their relationship...

My bleak outlook aside, maybe tonight won't be a total waste. I should make the most of the situation. That's what my mom and all of her 'self-improvement' books would recommend, anyway. I have front-row access to observe Zac and Marnie, which means I can feel out if my theory about their relationship is correct.

And so, I watch. In a way that I pray is subtle and draws no attention from anyone—

"They're so cute together, right?" Carla throws herself over Tess's lap to whisper the question to me, not even ten seconds into my observing.

So much for subtlety.

"Yeah, they are." It's not a lie. As much as something inside me screams that they don't belong together, on the outside they sure look like they do.

Marnie doesn't require much observation. She is leaning into Zac, gazing up at him with cartoon hearts bursting from her eyes. She is head over heels for him. She looks *happy*.

But that thought does nothing to settle the uneasy sensation in my gut. Because the real person who needs my attention is the subject of *her* attention.

Zachary Morgan.

His hand is thrown around her shoulder casually, his fingers brushing the sleeve of her shirt. It's a familiar stance that I've seen him take countless times with probably a dozen girls. Although his attention is on Ellis, the slow stroking of his fingers against her arm shows that he hasn't completely forgotten about Marnie. It appears affectionate. And looking at them from a distance, they look like a couple. Not only a couple, but a couple who truly cares about each other. Yet I can't shake the feeling that that's just not true.

Because my theory? Is that while Marnie is in love with Zac, he is *not* in love with her. Not even close. I haven't mentioned my concerns to my friends. The last thing I want to do is start drama, and accusing my best friend's boyfriend of using her would stir up a whole mess of it.

As I watch, Zac stretches his arms above his head, pulls off his forest green beanie, and gives his dark floppy hair a shake. The action is completely unnecessary considering he just shoves the beanie right back on his head, but the motion is mesmerizing nonetheless.

Dark jeans hug the muscles of his legs perfectly and even his boots and plain black jacket are attractive. Don't get me started on those warm, laughing eyes, and carefree smile. He is what Carla calls 'eye candy,' and I can't argue.

Though, now that I think about it, my own outfit choice more closely mirrors Zac's than Marnie's. Or any of the other females present.

Awesome.

Zac reaches over and places his hand just above Marnie's knee, throwing his head back to laugh at something Ellis said. A pit forms in the bottom of my stomach, growing larger and heavier as he inches his hand slowly upward along Marnie's thigh. Not indecently high, but enough to make me uncomfortable.

Ugh, I hate feeling jealous.

Whoa, no. I'm *not* jealous.

I brush the thought aside before it takes root even in the smallest corner of my brain. Because it's ridiculous. I'm *not* jealous. Angry, maybe. Full of righteous indignation on behalf of my best friend who has been duped into thinking that her 'boyfriend' actually cares about her.

Still, I shouldn't be angry. Seeing my best friend happy should make *me* happy, right? Yet that knowledge doesn't change the fact that every time Marnie looks up at him or he playfully knocks his boot against hers, a heavy sensation of dread blankets me. As much as Marnie tries to convince me that she's not just another notch in Zac's bedpost, I can't find it in me to believe it.

So, yeah. That's all this emotion is. Not jealousy. It's anger.

Because jealousy would imply that I feel something for Zac beyond annoyance and a rueful—purely *physical*—attraction. And, just to be clear, it isn't a *good* kind of attraction either. It's the kind of physical attraction that I have no say in. I don't *want* to find him good looking.

“Hey, girl. Are you ok?”

The soft timbre of Tess's voice breaks me from my anger-induced trance, and I whip my gaze away from Zac and Marnie as quickly as possible in an attempt to cover up my prolonged staring.

“Yeah, I'm fine.” I force a tight smile. The sudden movement in my face making me realize that my jaw is aching.

Have I been clenching it that hard?

“Sure...” drawls Tess, skeptical of the level of honesty in my response.

If Marnie is my best friend, then Tess is a close second. Only gaining on Marnie in the race to the 'best friend' position over the past few months. More specifically, now that Marnie is dating Zac and drifting away from me.

Now, I can't exactly *prove* that Zac is the one causing Marnie to change, but it is certainly easier for me to place the

blame on her lady-killer boyfriend than accept that Marnie and I are growing apart. And the timeline does seem to point in that direction, her attitude shifting around the same time they got together.

Correlation does not equal causation; the voice of my Psychology teacher sings in my mind.

Changing is a part of growing up, I *know* that. But it feels like Marnie is leaving me behind these days. Changing without me, and not for the better. Partying, drinking, the whole nine yards. I'd always thought that her confident, extroverted nature was the perfect complement to my more reserved one. But now... I fear she's outgrown me. If it weren't for Marnie's mother's close friendship with my mom, Tess probably would have swooped in and stolen the best friend title already, if only by default.

Tess has always reminded me of a Dr. Seuss character. Not in that she's strange looking, the opposite, actually. She is like some button cute Cindy Lou Who—trusting, open, and friendly to a fault. Though small in stature, she's got a big heart. She is honest, never acts with ulterior motives, and is the type of person you would want to talk to at the end of a rough day. A ray of sunshine. The comparison holds especially true tonight with her pale pink earmuffs, matching jacket, and rosy cheeks.

We watch as more people dressed as various superheroes show up to join the line, some of whom I am almost positive are not even a part of this franchise. It really is good that my friends nabbed our spot so early. At least we will be among the first people allowed into the warmth of the theater.

To my surprise, conversation carries with ease around our group. Zac's friends, on any other day, outrank mine on the social ladder. Based on this alone I assumed they would be arrogant, but so far that hasn't been the case.

Even Tess, who is easily the quietest of us, joins in quite frequently.

Justin reaches up and pulls his shoulder-length blonde hair back into a man bun type thing. I firmly ascribe to the belief

that most men *cannot* pull off a man bun. But Justin *can*. If anything, his natural scowl and ‘above everyone else’ attitude only helps him wear it better. It’s easy to overlook how outwardly attractive he is because of the lacking personality beneath.

Justin gives off an overall scorned and angry aura. Which is fitting since he’s easily the most pompous and cocky of the three. Something about him rubs me wrong. Maybe it’s the way he barges through life not caring about a single person or thing. Or the way he talks down to people he sees as beneath him. Or even the way his facial muscles are incapable of forming a simple smile. Typical bully profile, really.

I might not be a fan of Zac’s, but it’s hard for even me to understand how someone as charming as Zac can be friends with someone so, well, *not* charming.

“Party at my place next weekend to kick off winter break. Who’s in?” Even when inviting the group to a *party* Justin manages to appear annoyed.

I glance around at my friends. Tess’s cheeks tint, but she keeps her gaze locked on the sleeve of her jacket rather than answering.

“Nah,” says Ellis easily, “hanging with my girl.” His grin is positively dopey as Zac playfully punches him in the arm. Okay, so Ellis is happily in love. Noted.

Justin scoffs, “How about you, Carla, you in?”

“Of course.” She doesn’t so much as peek up from her phone while answering. “But aren’t you having one this weekend?”

“Yeah, so? How about you, Marnie?”

“Sure!” she answers brightly. “Zac and I will be there.”

Zac’s brows furrow at Marnie’s response on his behalf. Obviously, he plans to go—he always goes—yet he appears irritated at Marnie’s answer.

Interesting.

The topic changes without anyone directly asking me or Tess what our plans are. They must assume—correctly—that I have no interest in partying with them. Nope, what I am doing at this very moment is about as wild as I get.

Still... it would have been nice to be asked.

Eventually, the seven of us congregate on blankets we laid out on the cold, hard pavement to play cards. I'm not skilled at many card games, so I'm relieved when Ellis suggests *Go Fish*, citing that he is too cold and tired for anything more challenging. I find myself seated cross legged between Zac and Ellis. Two *very* charming guys. Attractive people make me nervous. If my cheeks weren't flushed from the cold already, they would most certainly be rosy now.

"Dylan, got any threes?" Ellis asks with a friendly, open smile.

"Go Fish." He grabs from the pile. Now it's my turn.

"Zac, do you have any sevens?" I ask, keeping my eyes on my cards. I *may* have peeked over at his hand earlier when he was distracted by Marnie, so I happen to know that he does, in fact, have a seven.

He's quiet for a beat, making me glance up to be sure that he heard me. He did. His eyes narrow and he remains silent as our eyes meet.

We sit there for a moment, large, light flakes of snow falling and accumulating on top of his beanie and catching on his long lashes.

"Go Fish," he says, a devious smile playing on his lips.

"W-what?" I sputter, failing to hide my surprise. I *know* he has the card I want.

"Go Fish, Park," he repeats in challenge. "I don't have any sevens."

Unable to call him out, for risk of revealing my own *slight* cheat, I draw a card from the pile in the middle. He goes on to take his turn, and once the attention is off us, he leans into my space.

“I saw you look at my cards, Dylan. Cheating is unbecoming.”

Shivers skate down my spine as his warm breath meets my chilled cheek. “Interesting,” I say, keeping my eyes on my cards as if trying to formulate my next move. “By not giving me your sevens, you were *also* cheating.”

A deep chuckle erupts from his throat, and I chance a glance his way. There is a dimple showing on one of his cheeks, softening his otherwise sharp jawline and cheekbones. This small indent transports me back to my childhood. Back when we were nearly inseparable as friends. That darn dimple was constantly on display in a way that it is only when his smile meets his eyes. A not so small part of me feels satisfaction that I played even a small role in putting it there now.

My shoulders stiffen as I sense him lean the slightest bit closer to me to speak again. “Yeah. But I never claimed to play by the rules.”

Dylan

I'M BLASTED WITH THE scent of buttery popcorn as my booted feet thud across the creaking wooden floors of the ancient building. At the same time, a wave of heat washes over me, the contrast from the frigid air outside causing beads of sweat to dampen my skin. Quickly, I shed my scarf and mittens, stuffing them unceremoniously into my large bag.

The theater only has two screens, one on the lower level and one on the upper, with the lower being the larger of the two. For tonight's showing, both rooms will be projecting the same movie since the demand for the tickets was so high.

After purchasing our tickets, we head directly to the snack line.

"Hey, man!" Zac says to the worker behind the glass counter.

"Zac, fancy seeing you here," Graham, another member of Zac's posse, says from his station behind the counter. He's nice. *Too* nice to be hanging around the likes of Zac, I would argue. "What'll you have?"

"I'll do the double duo." Zac looks to Marnie. "Are you good to share?"

The 'Double Duo' is the package that every couple gets at the theater because it's the best deal. Two drinks and an extra-

large popcorn, with unlimited refills, all for the price of one large drink and one large popcorn. The only catch is that you have to share it with someone. A single person can't just order it for themselves. It's a silly rule, I know, but Tess claims that her uncle is a stickler about it. Maybe he hopes it will encourage people to bring their dates to up ticket sales, if only to save money at the concession stand.

Marnie wrinkles her nose at Zac's offer. "No. I'll have water."

That is another thing that has changed about Marnie. Before senior year started, she would be the first one to suggest a late-night milkshake run or be up for splurging on fast food for dinner.

Lately, though, she has been on some weird health kick. She hasn't talked about changing her diet or expressed a desire to lose weight, but it's easy to notice that she's been more picky with her food choices. This is one area, try as I might, that I can't blame on Zac. He isn't pressuring or shaming her into watching her figure or anything—as evidenced by his offer of salty, greasy popcorn and a soft drink—so I'm not sure where it's coming from.

Zac purses his lips with a groan.

"Well... I'll let you two figure out what you want," Graham offers cautiously, trying to avoid the minefield that is his best friend's date. "Dylan, anything for you?" he asks, directing his attention to me, just as antsy to get away from the heated, whispered discussion happening between our respective best friends as I am.

"Large popcorn please," I respond eagerly, credit card already in hand and goofy smile pasted on my face. I *really* like movie theater popcorn.

"Why don't you and Zac just get the double duo? You'll have to split the popcorn, but you get free refills on it anyway. It'll be a boat load cheaper than you each getting your own," Graham suggests practically.

“Sounds good,” Zac accepts, rejoining the conversation, staring down at me smugly.

“Zac, you don’t have to—”

“No worries.” His smile is genuine as he hands a handful of cash over to Graham.

“At least let me pay for half.”

“No chance. I was going to order it anyway so I’m not out anything.”

Marnie glances between the two of us skeptically as Graham hands her a sad bottle of water. He turns to the popcorn machine and loads up a large bucket, dumping some salt and a squirt of butter on top. The three of us then head into the theater to find our friends.

We file down the row, and since Zac and I will be sharing popcorn, we end up seated next to each other with Marnie on his other side and the aisle on mine. Meaning that I am struck with the choice of either sharing an armrest with his muscular forearms or hugging the armrest near the aisle.

I opt for the latter option, obviously.

I hate this spot. It leaves me with no one to talk to or interact with as my only neighbor is Zac who will presumably be engaged with Marnie throughout the film.

And then I’m hit with a thought so anxiety inducing that it causes my palms to break out in sweat. They won’t start making out, *right?*

I’m not a prude, or anything. At least, I don’t think I am? I did have a boyfriend up until a few weeks ago. But that doesn’t mean that I want to see my best friend locking lips with the school player for the next two hours.

Come to think of it, more than just my palms are sweating. Maybe I hadn’t fully thought out my multiple-layers strategy for tonight. We’ve been in the theater all of ten minutes and I’m already uncomfortable. I shuck off my jacket the moment I reach my seat, but that does nothing to help my lower half.

And I'm not confident enough to strip off a layer of pants, even with the extra leggings layered beneath.

But it's fine. I'll just view the extra fabric as a bonus layer of protection from the boy next to me. Like a form of body armor. Not that I anticipate any form of armor to be necessary.

Soon after we settle into our seats the movie starts with an explosion of sound as a car bursts into flames on screen, so my thoughts are cut short as I try to concentrate on the plot.

Which, for the record, is not easy. My stomach does a flip that I wish I can say is unfamiliar each time Zac's gruff laugh tickles my ears or when I get a whiff of his yummy scent. With every small movement, the cocktail of sandalwood, mint, and something simply *manly* washes over me in fresh waves, making it impossible to concentrate on anything other than him.

Only a few minutes in I give up on following along. Clearly, not seeing any of the prior movies in this series isn't doing me any favors. At the same time, I decide it is socially acceptable to dive into the popcorn. If it were just me, I would have finished off half the carton by the time the previews were over. Especially since my dinner was cut short thanks to my pesky utensil issue.

But since I am sharing with Zac, I don't need any additional judgment. Therefore, I figured it was best to wait until the movie actually started.

My hand reaches in at the same time his does, because *of course* it does, our fingers brushing gently and sending a strong nervous flutter to my stomach.

"Oh, sorry," he mumbles.

Both of us whip our hands away from the popcorn carton and my face heats.

This shouldn't be weird, right?

Friends share popcorn all the time.

But that's the thing. Zac and I *aren't* friends. Haven't been for years. In fact, his very presence here tonight irritates me.

This was supposed to be an opportunity for me to hang out with my friends. Lately, those opportunities have been few and far between now that Marnie's traded in my company for that of the insufferable boy seated beside me. It feels cruel that I'm having to share my favorite snack with him.

By the time we are an hour in, I come to terms with the sad reality that it is pointless for me to be here. Not only did I not get quality time with my friends, but all my energy has been spent trying to ignore Zac.

How is it possible that even his *breathing* is distracting? And that intoxicating scent...

Nope. I'm not concentrating on his fresh smell.

I'm not suppressing the tingles that shoot up my arm each time he accidentally brushes against me on our shared arm rest.

And I'm *definitely* not hyper-analyzing the timing of when his hand is going to reach into the popcorn carton in an attempt to avoid his touch.

This is Marnie's boyfriend. The *opposite* of what I am looking for in a guy.

I like nice boys. Like my ex, Dex.

In fact, I never fully understood the appeal of so-called 'bad boys.' Not that Zac necessarily falls into this category, but he is certainly... *risky*.

My eyes are locked on the screen, staring aimlessly at a heavily CGI motorcycle chase, when I am pelted in the side of my face. At first, I ignore it. But then the same sensation hits lower on my cheek. This one is accompanied by the smallest puff of laughter. Still, I ignore. It isn't until the third piece of popcorn taps my forehead that I shoot my attention to Zac.

"Did you need something?"

"I'm bored."

"Well, I'm trying to watch a movie." I nod toward the screen.

Zac leans over my armrest and his lips graze my ear as he whispers, “No, you’re not. You’ve been in a daze this whole time.”

Thank you, Captain Obvious.

“If you’ve been watching me close enough to realize that, you must not be paying much attention either.”

“For some reason,” he gestures to Marnie, who is dozing soundly on his shoulder, “I can’t get comfortable.”

Rolling my eyes, I turn back to the movie.

It comes as no surprise at all when I am hit with yet another piece of popcorn. Unfortunately, this one misses its target and gets stuck in the few wild curls that escaped their elastic prison and now frame my face. The kernel just sits there, the copious amount of butter I doused the bucket in earlier acting as some sort of glue to hold it firmly in place. Judging by the strangled coughs coming from the seat next to me, Zac is very aware of this lingering kernel.

I shake my head to try to free it with no luck. Zac lets loose an honest to goodness *giggle*. Finally, I glance over at him. The mock fury in my eyes is too much for him to handle as his strangled laughter turns into a full-on—albeit, silent—coughing fit. His whole upper body is convulsing as he tries, unsuccessfully, to get a hold of himself.

I pluck the kernel from my hair and flick it at him. Though my aim is far less impressive than his, because the piece promptly bounces off the bald head of the man seated in the row in front of us.

That’s all it takes for Zac to crack. An unstifled laugh bursts from him, causing Marnie to startle from her slumber. She shoots him an unimpressed glare before promptly falling back to sleep.

And I, well, I find myself biting my cheek to prevent my own laughter from breaking free. Laughter is contagious—as is the gleeful expression that Zac wears—and that giggle was certainly no exception. But then I remember that I am *not* his

friend and will therefore not be partaking in any of his movie theater shenanigans.

By the time the final credits roll it is nearly two in the morning and I am exhausted. We say our goodbyes and head our separate ways in the parking lot. School starts in six hours. Tomorrow—ugh, *today*—is Friday, which should make things easier. But I am the type of girl who needs a solid eight hours of sleep to function. In fact, I am so predictable my parents don't even give me a curfew. They know that aside from the rare occasion, I am out cold by ten p.m.

Thanks to the December air, my car is cold when I shuffle inside. Luckily it roars to life on the first try and the heat cranks on with no issue—both of which are practical miracles on their own. My car is old. And not in a 'cool, vintage, classic car' type of way. It's just old.

The dim headlights of my 1980s era Chevy light the path in front of me as I turn out of the parking lot onto the near empty streets. There is something creepy yet calming about driving home so late. All alone. The single traffic light in town has turned to a blinking yellow and red, and there isn't a single other car on the road once I get out of the immediate vicinity of the theater. The streetlights, building signs, and houses strewn with Christmas lights reflect off the rain slicks caused by the salt melted snow that are left on the pavement. It is like something out of a dream.

Or, maybe it only feels that way because of the exhaustion slowly overtaking me.

Zac

MARNIE SLIDES INTO THE passenger seat of my truck. I offered to drive her to the movie tonight. I may not have been in a real relationship before, but it is a boyfriendly thing to do. I think.

Immediately I am assaulted by her perfume—a mix of artificial flowers, chemicals, and sunscreen. Not exactly *pleasant*.

“What was that about?” She pins me with a pointed glare.

“Huh?” The truck roars to life and the heat kicks on almost instantly. I love my truck. It’s roomy, new, and clean. It runs flawlessly and honestly, getting into it at the end of each school day is always a highlight for me.

Oddly enough, I don’t enjoy it nearly as much when there are other people in it with me. Namely, Marnie.

“In the theater, with you and Dylan.”

“What? With the popcorn?”

“Uhhh, yeah,” she snarks. As if it’s obvious. I hate being expected to be a mind reader.

“Whatever you’re trying to say, just spit it out, Marn.”

“Nothing. It just seemed like you were flirting.” She turns her head to stare out the window, feigning nonchalance.

My teeth grind together as I grip the steering wheel a bit more tightly.

Dylan, while attractive, isn't the type of girl that you casually *flirt* with.

Dylan and I have known each other for years, and over that time she... grew into herself. The gangly limbs, braces, and frizzy hair from Junior High have been replaced with a tall, slim body and a mane of dirty blonde curls that only serve to draw attention to the delicate features of her face. She's got the same sweet personality I've always appreciated when we were kids, only it's in different packaging now.

Yeah, she's hot. That is an objective fact. She is the type of girl who *should* easily stand out, yet always fades to the background, a character trait which I suspect is intentional on her part.

All of this is to say that she is definitely my type, except for the fact that she is very much a 'relationship' kind of girl. Marriage material, if you will. I, on the other hand, am more of a no strings attached type of guy. *Wham, bam, thank you ma'am*. That alone disqualifies her from the realm of my interest.

Well, that's not true. The interest is there. But the *compatibility* is not.

“Marnie,” I groan on an exhale. “I wasn't flirting. I was bored. Not to mention my *girlfriend* had fallen asleep.”

She loves it when I call her that. My girlfriend. It's a get out of jail free card. Just remind her that we're 'official' and I'm golden.

My past relationships, if you could call them that, were casual. No labels, no attachment, just fun. I hate to use the term friends with benefits, because it sounds scuzzy, but the girls and I were *friends* and there certainly were *benefits*...

“Yeah. Sorry about that.” Marnie reaches over and grabs my hand from the gear shift, pulling it onto the center console

and clenching it between her cold, thin fingers. “And look, I know you weren’t flirting with Dylan. I guess I can get a bit jealous.”

She’s lost weight over the last few months. And that is saying something, because she was extremely thin to begin with. She’s tall, similar to Dylan, but has straight, dark hair and a face that I can only describe as being *pointier* than her best friend’s. Marnie is also athletic, a quality that we were initially able to bond over.

“Soooo...” she trails off seductively, running a finger up my arm. “My parents are still away until tomorrow night. Do you want to come to my place?”

My eyes narrow in surprise. Or maybe it’s suspicion. Because it’s *late* and we have school in like, five hours. Then again, this *is* one of the perks of dating Marnie. Her parents always seem to be out of town and as long as I let her claim me as hers, we get *alone time* quite frequently.

Marnie lives in the same neighborhood as Dylan. In fact, we pass Dylan’s house on our way to Marnie’s. Dylan’s old car is already parked in the driveway and the kitchen light is on as we roll by.

Good. She made it home. There is something comforting about that, and I can’t help but wonder what she is doing the rest of the night.

Sleeping, idiot. It’s 3 a.m.

THREE HOURS IS NOT enough sleep, I think as I zombie-walk out of Marnie’s front door before the sun even rises. I’m surprised that Marnie didn’t want to go to school today. Sure, she had only gotten as much sleep as I had, but she is the more studious of the two of us.

Although, with her parents being out of town, I can’t fault the logic of her decision. Parents away? Good grades? End of semester? Yeah, if I were her, I guess I wouldn’t go in either.

The frost-covered ground crunches under my feet as I make my way from her oversized front door to my truck which

is parked in the U-drive directly in front of the main entrance. The engine roars to life and I rub my hands together to escape the chill that is quickly seeping in. *Five-thirty*. I should have gone right home last night. Or even slept in longer here. Because despite crashing the minute we walked through the door, I'm still severely sleep deprived.

While the main streets in town boast Victorian style street lanterns placed closely together, these side roads have only a few streetlights every other block or so to cut through the blackness. Not that they are needed for security or anything. This neighborhood—this whole town, really—is almost crime free.

Unable to help myself, I peek at Dylan's house as I make my way home. There is only a dim light coming from the kitchen.

I wonder if Dylan is up already?

Nah. It's probably just her parents.

My house, on the other hand, is still dark when I pull up the gravel drive, which is no surprise. The only person who would ever wake up this early is Mom, and she worked the night shift last night and won't be home for over an hour. Our house might not be the same caliber as the fancy behemoth that Marnie calls home, but I love it. It's warm and cozy and full of love and memories. Mom pours her entire soul into providing for us and her presence alone makes my old house far more valuable than Marnie's.

After microwaving myself a cup of leftover coffee, scarfing down a few bowls of cereal, and taking a shower, I slowly come back to life.

A quick glance at the stove clock shows that it is already seven, so I opt to head to school a bit early. I know that some of the guys on the basketball team arrive early for weightlifting, so I certainly won't be the first person to show up.

As expected, I see the familiar vehicles of a few of my friends parked in the lot. What is surprising, however, is that

Dylan is also here, exiting from a newer model minivan when I know for a fact, she drives some old clunker car.

I park my truck next to her, planning to ask her about that, when I get a good look at her. Hair disheveled, ashen skin, and red, swollen eyes that are framed by dark circles.

She does not look good.

“Dylan?” I question cautiously, emerging from my truck.

Her head snaps up in the direction of my voice, continuing to shove what could be an entire notebook of crumpled loose-leaf paper into her messenger bag.

“Hey, Zac.” Yeah. Something’s up. She doesn’t even add the normal level of disdain to her voice when addressing me.

“Are you... okay?” I approach her tentatively, afraid that she might attack me in her feral state. Something about seeing someone normally so collected falling apart compels me to help her.

“No, Zac, I’m not,” she huffs, sarcasm heavy in her tone.

She has finished shoving her papers in her bag, and is moving to toss it over her shoulder, when I stick my hand out and grab it from her, throwing it over my own.

When she reaches to take it back from me, I hold up my hand to stop her. “I got this, Dylan.”

“Thanks,” she mutters, accepting my help. She reaches back into the vehicle and grabs a travel mug of what I assume is coffee, judging by how frazzled she is.

“Do you want to talk about whatever has you out of sorts?”

She lets out a humorless laugh before delving into her explanation.

“Well, I spent all night studying for a Geography exam that I had forgotten about, didn’t have a chance to shower because I fell asleep at my desk and overslept my alarm, spilled water all over my Chem notebook and had to dry it off with my hairdryer”—she gestures to the bag which now holds the crumpled pages of said notebook—“and then my car wouldn’t

start so I had to drive my mom's minivan." She points to the vehicle now behind us.

"Oh." It's all I manage to get out. Honestly, her night sounds awful. Far worse than mine, anyway.

"Yeah, 'oh.' Thanks, Zac. I'm going to freshen up in the locker room." And with that she grabs her bag back from my shoulder and heads to the entrance to the girl's locker room, leaving me to head through the main student entrance on my own.

"Whoa, Zac? What are you doing here?" A far too cheery Graham and West greet me.

Weston has a twin brother, Easton. Both of whom are outlandishly friendly and outgoing. It is my guess that their mother was on way too much pain medication when she had decided to name her identical twin boys East and West. They are both seniors, like me. Good-looking and athletic to boot.

Graham, on the other hand, is a junior. Yet is always hanging out in the senior hallway. Apparently, he can't stand anyone in his year, so he opts to tag along with us instead.

Not that I mind, he's a cool guy. Easily one of my closest friends.

"Had an early morning. Figured I might as well come to school." Shrugging, I open my locker—which is right next to West's—and toss my bag inside. They carry on with their conversation as if I'm not here.

"I think Dylan is planning to drive again, but I don't know who is going to make it with finals and this crappy weather," Graham grumbles.

My ears perk up at the mention of my girlfriend's best friend.

Where is Dylan driving?

"That sucks. It's always more fun when we have a crowd." West sounds genuinely bummed.

"I know. Especially since we're playing Clifton."

“Seriously. Everyone’s saying that Dex got even better over the summer.”

Dex? As in Dylan’s *ex-boyfriend*?

Consider me doubly intrigued.

“What are you guys talking about?” I ask casually as I make a show of scrolling on my phone.

“The game tonight,” Graham explains. “It doesn’t sound like we’ll have much of a crowd. I’m surprised they didn’t cancel it, to be honest. There is no way the rickety old school bus the team is stuck riding was made to handle a blizzard. Dylan usually drives whoever else wants to go to all the away games. But so far everyone we’ve talked to is opting not to come.”

Ah, basketball.

I attend most of the home games, only because a lot of my friends are on the team. Marnie mentioned some weird plan she had with Dylan to go to all the games their senior year, but I guess didn’t realize that was still going on. I also wasn’t aware that Dylan is playing chauffeur to anyone else who wants to go.

“Why isn’t anyone else going?”

“They’re calling for a storm tonight,” Graham says.

“And most people are planning on cramming for finals,” West adds.

“*And*, the game is over an hour away,” Graham finishes. “Cliffton is supposed to be crazy good this year, so it would’ve been nice to have at least a few familiar faces in the crowd.” He shrugs it off, but I can tell that it bothers him. He’s outgoing, but deep down there are some insecurities buried.

“I’ll go,” I blurt before I register what I’ve agreed to. Sure, going to the game to support West, East, Ellis, and Graham would be fun. But the timing of it isn’t ideal. As West pointed out, we do have finals all next week and I am one of the students who *should* be spending the entire weekend with his nose in a book.

My grades are not great.

Okay, they are abysmal. I have zero wiggle room going forward if I want to graduate with the rest of my class this spring. Never mind trying to get admitted to a college. Meaning that spending the night at some basketball game instead of barricading myself in my room with only books to keep me company is probably *not* a good plan.

But then I see Graham's reaction—his deep green eyes light up like one of my mom's overly decorated Christmas trees—and I'm all the more confident in my decision.

“Seriously, dude? You'll come?”

“Uh, yeah. Of course.”

“Dyl!” Graham shouts over my head. “You got room for Zac tonight?”

Whoa, we're doing this now?

I whirl around and find Dylan standing at her locker on the opposite side of the hall.

“Oh, um, yeah. I guess?” She responds, confusion dancing in her eyes.

I don't know what magic she worked in that locker room, but the girl who stands before us now is *not* the same one that I saw in the parking lot this morning.

Her hair is clean, curls tamed and pulled into a loose ponytail. The redness in her eyes is calmed and the dark circles completely gone. If I didn't know otherwise, I would have guessed that she got a full ten hours of sleep last night and spent a good hour getting ready this morning instead of the reality of no sleep and spending only 20 minutes in the girls' locker room to remedy whatever had been going on with her appearance earlier.

It's almost enough to take my breath away. And just like that, my little journey tonight is looking a whole lot brighter.

Dylan

I TRY MY BEST to remain pleasant. Not to scowl, growl, or show any other outward signs of hostility toward Zac.

When Graham asked me this morning if I had room to drive Zac to the game tonight, I must have been—no, *was*—half asleep when I agreed. If my brain had been functioning properly, I would have just told them that I decided not to go, like *literally* everyone else.

But, since I was running on coffee and a dwindling amount of adrenaline, my mouth had a mind of its own. There are worse things than being stuck alone with Zac Morgan in a confined space for hours at a time. None come to mind at the moment, but I am sure there are.

Never mind my fury at him for using my best friend. At the moment, the bigger issue is how inadequate and ridiculously nervous Zac makes me feel. Nervous driving? Probably frowned upon.

Typically, I love loading up my car with my friends or anyone else who needs a ride and driving off to an away game. But since my usual passengers decided not to come to the game tonight, I am left alone with the charming Mr. Morgan to journey out into the impending storm without a buffer.

But I wasn't giving up without a fight. Nope, I pulled on my navy cotton shorts, silver knee-high socks, and *Silverwood High* hoodie and begrudgingly waited for Zac to meet me in our school parking lot to carpool. I even applied extra glitter to my hair tonight—although my usual amount might be considered excessive by some people—in an effort to brighten my mood.

And it worked. For a while. Until *he* showed up.

From the moment Zac entered the vehicle the air shifted; my senses heightened by whatever that scent is that seems to follow him. I recognize it from the movie theater last night and it has the infuriating ability to make all my nerve endings tingle while blanketing me in warmth simultaneously.

Now we're here. Me driving my family's minivan with Zac riding shotgun, looking out the windshield with a smug grin permanently plastered on his face, as if he *knows* that his presence is grating on me. So far the ride has been filled with an awkward tension. Probably because we have very little in common and therefore very little to discuss.

"So... why did you want to come to this game?" I ask, glancing over at him. Historically, he hasn't tried to attend away games, so I'm doubting that school spirit is his motivator. He also made it perfectly clear years ago that I'm not someone he would choose to spend his time around. So why offer to be stuck in a vehicle with only me for hours?

Zac taps out a beat on his arm rest before speaking, still staring out the windshield. "It was important to Graham. He wanted some support tonight and I have nothing better to do."

I chew on the inside of my cheek at that revelation, *mildly* guilty for my bitter tone. I hadn't pinned Zac as the type to go out of his way to emotionally support a friend, especially when he could so easily have used the excuse the rest of our classmates did and opt out of going without a second thought.

"Although... the better question would be why *you're* going to the game," he says, directing the conversation back to me. "You and Dex broke up, what, a week ago?"

“Three and a half,” I mumble. I don’t need him to elaborate. My ex is on the opposing team and, in all honesty, I don’t really have a good reason to be going to the game tonight. Everyone else skipped, and I probably should have, too.

Yet there is a tiny part of me that wants to see Dex again, if only for closure and to verify that he is moving on with his life.

I was the one to pull the plug on our relationship, and although he didn’t show it, I could tell he was hurt. But us being together just wasn’t right. So I had to take the leap and call it quits. Dex had been hinting at a future, trying to make plans for us to go off to college together. Even though he had originally chosen a university out of state, he was willing to follow me to wherever I wanted to go.

Coincidentally, the night I ended things with him was the same night that I officially submitted my application to the college of my dreams. All in all, a pretty productive day.

In hindsight I probably shouldn’t have dumped Dex on the same night I applied to Heathwood. I guess it was one of those things where you check one big ticket item from your to-do list and move right onto another. It makes me wonder if I put some bad mumbo-jumbo into the universe, though. Cursing my chances of being admitted. Breaking a nice guy’s heart? That has to have some bad karma, right? But what’s done is done, and I haven’t regretted ending things with Dex for a single moment since it happened.

Today will be the first time I see him in person since the breakup. Things may have ended amicably, but there is still something inherently *awkward* about seeing an ex.

All of that aside, the original reason I was going to this game is the agreement I have with Marnie.

“Marnie and I planned to go to all of the games this year,” I say it with all the confidence I possess, but it still earns me a look of pity from Zac. And I can’t fault him. My admission only makes me come off as sad and pathetic since Marnie so

frequently opts to spend time with other *people*, doing other *activities*, than with me at a wholesome basketball game.

If anything, Zac's lack of snark at my admission only serves to humanize him. Or it would, if *he* wasn't the person I'm so often ditched for.

Senior year was supposed to be *our* year. Marnie and I were going to go all out with the school spirit stuff, join a few new clubs, be attached at the hip and make memories together before we go our separate ways to college. And while my plans haven't changed in that respect, Marnie's clearly have. She's all but given up on our original plan. Opting instead to focus on cultivating her public image. But that doesn't change the fact that I *am* still going to the game. Even if it's a misplaced sense of loyalty to my friend, that is driving me.

"I haven't missed a game yet," I say simply. "I might as well finish out the season."

"Even though Marnie isn't with you?"

His question rubs me the wrong way. It is bad enough to be ditched by a friend, having to explain it to another person only makes it more embarrassing.

"Yeah," I say, "just because Marnie isn't up for it doesn't mean my plan has changed."

Finally, Zac looks away from me. Maybe not a fan of the change of topic to his girlfriend?

"What's going on with you two, anyway? Still going strong?" I ask.

He is quiet. I clench my jaw.

Chill, Dylan.

"We're good," he clips, still avoiding my gaze.

I can't help but press the matter further. Marnie and I might not be as close as we once were, but she is still one of my oldest friends and it is driving me crazy watching her skip around like a lovesick puppy while Zac couldn't care less.

"But... do you really *like* her?" I press.

“Sure,” he says with a shrug, “What’s not to like?”

“You know what I mean. She really cares about you, but...”

“But what, Dylan?”

I groan, plucking up the courage to spit it out. I’m not big on confrontation, but it’s not like I can continue these passive-aggressive confrontations indefinitely.

“*But... why are you dating Marnie?*” I hate how uncertain my question sounds as it leaves my lips. Like I’m afraid to ask it. And I kind of am. What if I’ve been misreading their whole situation? *What if he is in love with her?*

“That’s an intrusive question, don’t you think?” When I only shrug, he continues. “We have fun together. We have an... understanding.” My brows raise of their own volition. Yes, it’s a judgy look. And unfortunately, Zac notices, his voice growing frustrated.

“Look, Dylan, most people aren’t on a search for their soulmate in high school. They don’t expect, or even want, to fall in love. So if that’s what you’re looking for, if you’ve got all these fairytale romances floating around your head, then you’re just naïve. Honestly, it’s not surprising that your first relationship ended already.”

The force of his words is like a throat punch. The only consolation is that Zac appears to regret what he said almost instantly.

He lets out a long huff and his shoulders sag. “Dylan, I—”

“No. Whatever. It’s fine. I don’t expect you to *love* Marnie. But it seems like you don’t even *like* her. She’s clearly in love with you, yet you barely even acknowledge her at school. You don’t shut down any of the things that people say about her, and, I don’t know, if you really cared for her you would watch out for her more.”

It’s true. I hate that my bestie’s reputation got tarnished merely from her association with Zac.

He continues glaring at me. “Is that why you’ve been cold to me lately? You think I’m using Marnie?”

Now it is my turn to glare at *him*—as much as I can while driving, anyway.

Although Zac and I have known each other our entire lives, we haven’t been close since we were about ten. Or eleven I guess for Zac, because even though we are in the same grade he is a year older than me. When we were in Elementary school, our moms were good friends. By default, my brother, Gray, and I would often have play dates with Zac and his younger brother, Alex. But right before Junior High all of that came to an end. Zac ditched me to spend more time with his other friends, and our moms, consequently, drifted apart. No more family dinners, holiday parties, or trips to the lake. All of it just *stopped*.

By the time we entered seventh grade he was the kid that everyone envied, and I had been left behind. If it weren’t for Marnie’s family stepping in to take the place of the Morgans, I would have felt completely abandoned.

Not that Zac’s rejection of me years ago had some monumental impact on my life and how I view myself, or anything.

Probably.

Today we still run in vastly different circles. I’m not what would traditionally be considered a ‘loser,’ but I fall more mid-pack where Zac is right at the top. Sure, I’m liked well enough, and it’s likely due to my own sense of inadequacy that I sympathize with the kids who are lower on the totem pole. It’s incredible what a confidence boost you can get from receiving kind word from someone else, so I make sure to offer that kindness whenever possible.

Zac has all but ignored my existence until a few months ago when he had taken an interest in Marnie and our friend groups grew close to each other.

Of course, I’ve kept tabs on Zac over the years—it would have been impossible not to, he’s everywhere. But it wasn’t on

a personal level. Everything I've known about him lately has been second or third hand. So yeah, for Zac to pretend I'm suddenly 'cold' toward him is laughable.

"Don't act so surprised," he says. "You're still as nice as ever but you're obviously irritated with me."

"I didn't realize we were close enough for you to be able to get a read on me," I respond with an unnecessary level of snark.

He pauses for a beat, then leans over the gap between our seats. He's so close to me that his gravelly whisper tickles my cheek. "You seem pretty upset on behalf of your friend."

"I am."

And that's what I tell myself. That I hold this anger toward Zac solely on behalf of Marnie. Because he isn't the boyfriend that she deserves. It has nothing to do with the demented butterflies that are, even now, swooping around in my stomach with Zac's nearness.

He lingers long enough for a slow grin to spread across his face before plopping back in his seat and letting loose a laugh. "Yeah, I'm sure that's all it is."

AS WE WALK UP to Clifton High, I find Marnie's parents' SUV parked in the lot already, which isn't surprising as Marnie's younger brother, Reed, is on the Junior Varsity team. At least we won't be the only people in our fan section tonight.

We walk in the main door of the school, and I stop in my tracks.

Crap! Crap, Crap, Crap, Crap, CRAP!

The familiar flame of orange hair behind the ticket table causes my entire body to seize up.

Dex's mom.

How did I not know that she helped at these things?

Even though her son is on the team, Dex never mentioned that his mom was involved with the school's athletic boosters,

and he certainly never mentioned that she worked at the admission table. And yet here she is. Helping the elderly couple a few people ahead of us purchase their tickets for the game. And here I am, walking in with another boy, only weeks after dumping her son.

Dex is the poster child for a Mama's boy. The two have a close relationship and while she never overstepped during the short time we dated; I had gotten the impression that she certainly *could* have. She always seemed to like me well enough, but there was something bubbling right below the surface. As if she could sense that I wasn't good enough for her son.

I guess she wasn't wrong since we did end up separating. Still, I'm certain that she will be less than impressed with my new companion.

Grabbing Zac's arm, I spin him around so he faces me, while also blocking me from Tina's view.

"That's Dex's mom," I whisper-shout to him urgently.

I don't know what my plan is, but again, confrontation is not my strong suit. It took me weeks to work up the courage to break up with her son in the first place. I could slip Zac some cash and have him buy the ticket for me, or even just hide back until someone else takes over to sell tickets. *She won't want to miss seeing her son once the game starts, right?* She will have to go into the gym.

But my decision is made for me. Because as Zac looks at me, his eyes sparkling with amusement, mouthing an exaggerated, '*Oh, no.*' I see Tina glaring at me from across the small foyer.

With a huff, I walk up to the table, Zac standing closer to my side than necessary. Uncomfortably close. Close enough to send a shiver dancing down my spine.

"Hi, Mrs. Lockhart—"

"Two please," Zac interrupts with a dimpled smirk, handing over a few bills.

What is he doing? Doesn't he know he's making this so much more awkward?

Unless that's his intention, which, knowing Zac, it probably is.

Dex was my first and only boyfriend and I his first girlfriend. We were good for each other during the few months we dated. We helped one another enter into the world of dating without any overwhelming awkwardness. I don't want to rub salt in any wounds by giving Mrs. Lockhart the impression that I have already moved on.

But then Zac's arm snakes around my waist and he pulls me closer to him. I tense in panic.

Lips pursed, Tina silently passes us a strip with two tickets. Zac takes them, mercifully removing his arm from my waist, rips one off, and passes it to me. As we turn to head in the gym she calls out a sickeningly sweet, "Oh, Dylan?"

"Yeah?" I turn, hoping my nerves don't show.

"Good to see that you are doing so... *well.*"

Her eyes bounce between Zac and I, her face growing more disgusted with each pass.

So that went great.

Heat rises up my neck as Zac loops his arm around my waist once more, guiding me the rest of the way into the gym.

As soon as we are through the doors his arm drops. Of course, it does. Marnie's parents are here and he wouldn't want to be seen openly touching another girl, no matter how innocently.

We find Lorna and Ethan Jacobs sitting court side, second bleacher from the bottom, and as we approach Mr. Jacobs extends a hand up in greeting. I can't help but smile as I wave back. When picturing a jovial police officer, his exact figure comes to mind. Fluffy walrus mustache, full head of graying hair slicked back in a way that is professional without being stuffy, and a physique that says he enjoys the occasional donut

but could also run five miles if needed. His eyes light up as Zac and I approach them.

“It’s good to see you both!” he calls out, standing and walking down to ground level to shake Zac’s hand and give me a brief side hug. “The Silverwood side of the crowd is a bit slim tonight,” he observes, glancing back over his shoulder to the spattering fans behind him.

“That’s why we’re here,” Zac says, “had to make sure our school was represented.”

It’s all I can do to fight the temptation to roll my eyes at Zac’s attempt at school spirit. The memory that he *does* claim to be here to support some of his friends helps me to tamp down my sass.

“Dylan,” Lorna calls to me, not making to move from her seat, “doesn’t your boyfriend play for Clifton?”

“Ex.” Both Lorna and I shift our gaze to Zac at his response to the question so obviously directed to me. “They broke up a few weeks ago.”

Lorna makes a show of tutting, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, “That’s right, I remember your mother mentioning something about that to me. Anyway, I hope you both enjoy the game.” And with that we are dismissed.

Or, so I think, but then she speaks again. “Zac, you know you’re welcome to sit with us! I’m sure Reed would love to talk with you after his game.”

“You too, Dylan,” Mr. Jacobs quickly adds, not noticing—or disregarding—his wife’s intentional exclusion of my name from her invitation.

“No, thanks,” Zac says politely. “I’m sure Reed would rather watch the Varsity game with the rest of his team, anyway.”

A wave of relief rushes over me. Zac is choosing to sit with me over his girlfriend’s parents. It’s pathetic that that is all it takes to make me all warm inside.

After our brief encounter with the Jacobs, we make ourselves comfortable in the designated ‘student section’ on the other end of the bleachers. The handful of people present are siblings of the players, whose parents had also come, but still.

It’s weird to admit, but hanging out with Zac one-on-one isn’t all that bad. Granted, it’s been all of two hours. But I would almost say I’m having *fun*. I shouldn’t be surprised. After all, people like him for a reason. What really shocks me, though, is that he appears to be enjoying my company as well.

As the teams come out and begin their warm-ups, our cheerleaders stand in front of our measly student section and do a few crowd cheers, which Zac and I proudly participate in, before taking position on the sidelines. We must look pitiful to Clifton, whose bleachers are packed full, but the ridiculousness of having only twenty people on our half, including parents, makes this even more fun.

Both teams line up for the National Anthem, and then the starting players are introduced. I try not to focus too much on the opposing team during this process, but my eyes can’t help but home in on a particular auburn-haired boy. Or, rather, on the back of his head. Dex has yet to look in my direction and I sense that it is intentional. He likely doesn’t know that I am here tonight, so I’m probably just being paranoid.

At last, there is no avoiding it as his name is announced by the booming voice over the gymnasium’s speaker system, “*Dexter Lockhart!*”

My breath hitches as Dex jogs through the human tunnel formed by his teammates out onto the court. He gives knuckle touches to his coach and our team’s, before standing with his fellow starters in a line. I don’t feel anything romantic for him anymore, but he *is* still attractive. And watching his confidence as he moves around the court has an effect on me.

Ugh, coming here was *such* a bad idea. It’s now that he chooses to glance in my direction, his eyes immediately meeting mine as if he knew exactly where I was sitting this entire time.

I want so desperately to be able to send him a smile, but my face is stuck in an uncomfortable half grin. After a few agonizing seconds where my brain scurries, trying to determine how best to react to his attention, Dex's lips tip up the slightest bit and he offers me a head nod. At his motion, I lift a shy hand in a wave and am finally able to offer a smile of my own.

It's only after the game starts that I realize that Zac had been closely observing the whole, awkward exchange.

Fantastic.

Shortly after tip off, the JV team joins the crowd to watch, not only doubling our numbers but also taking some of Zac's attention from me and the remarks I know he wants to make about me seeing my ex.

The game is, admittedly, uneventful. Or what is happening *on court* is. I, however, am electrified. Because despite the ample room on the bleachers, Zac is still sitting *right next to me*. Each time he touches me, no matter how inadvertently, a shock shoots through my system. And it's not a welcome one, either. It reminds me of when we were kids and someone would offer a stick of gum, only for me to realize too late that it was one of those evil shock toys.

I swear, he's doing it on purpose, too.

Zac keeps his jean clad leg pressed against the bare skin of my thigh uncovered by my shorts throughout the *entire* game. That, combined with the frequent nudges of his arm against mine to point out things happening on court and the deep boom of his laughter, is almost too much to handle. Although my brain is fully aware that I am not a fan of Zac's, my body didn't get the memo. It's even worse than last night at the theater; without my layers of clothing as protection everything is infinitely more potent.

Despite my efforts to concentrate on the game as a whole rather than Dex specifically, I can't help but notice when he is playing. And he is playing *a lot*. Dex is tall, about the same height as Zac. But Zac is slightly more muscular, years of football and weightlifting give him that advantage, I suppose.

Dex is also *exceptionally* good at basketball. Well, normally he is. Tonight, he is *off*. Don't get me wrong, he is still by far the best player on his team—on either team, actually. But not as good as I know he can be from what I had seen in the pre-season and over the summer when he would invite me to his scrimmages.

Before I can ponder it further, the final buzzer sounds and we rush back to the vehicle, hoping to still beat the storm.

“SO, HOW FAR HAVE you and Dex gone?” Zac asks with *way* too much nonchalance for such an intrusive line of questioning. We've only been on the road a few minutes and *this* is what he wants to talk about?

“Excuse me?” I shoot back, utter disbelief tinting my tone as my face heats at the forward question.

Sure, guys have asked me things like that before. Especially boys like Justin, people who are just looking to mess around and tease me about my innocence or whatever. But Zac was always the one there to shut them down and tell them they were being idiots. While more than happy to make a fool of himself regarding other girls, for some reason Zac had always stood up for me. I used to think it was because we grew up together and that gave us some type of implicit bond, or maybe because he respected me. But based on him so blatantly asking now, I'm wondering if maybe I've imagined his past chivalry.

“Come on, don't be a prude,” he pushes. “Second Base?” He cocks a brow.

When I am silent, he keeps going. “Third?”

Still silent. Although the urge to slap him right across his pretty face is growing stronger with every word that comes from his mouth.

“Don't tell me you only got to first,” he says, making a ‘tsk’ sound and shaking his head incredulously.

“Zac, just... *stop*,” I plead, my voice weak.

Hearing that what he is saying is bothering me beyond simple joking makes him falter. But I can't have him thinking he's affecting me, so I continue. "I'm not telling you anything. That's between me and Dex and is absolutely none of your business."

"Fine," he says as he leans back into the headrest, regaining some of his swagger. "Guess I'll just have to use my imagination."

Zac

I DON'T WANT TO use my imagination. Frankly, I don't even want to know the answer to my own question. It was stupid for me to ask, and even stupider for me to be pushing Dylan on it.

I can't be sure what possessed me to even pose the question in the first place. Maybe it was seeing the way she kept looking at Dex during the game. Or the way Dex kept looking at *Dylan*. He was distracted. It may have been because of how closely Dylan and I were sitting together. Okay, and I *may* have made a point to give Dylan a few more—*completely innocent*—touches than were necessary. They had started as a way to see how Dex would react, then became more frequent as I found I *really* liked the way it felt to have Dylan so close to me.

Clearly, there are still some feelings between the former lovebirds and I can't help but hope that they are one-sided. On his end. But what is even more infuriating is that I even *care*. Dylan isn't my girl and her love life is none of my business. She is just someone that I grew up with, someone whose family decided they wanted nothing to do with mine years ago. The best friend of my girlfriend. A quiet, sweet, and wickedly smart girl.

Maybe her air of innocence is why the thought of Dex having his hands on her makes me want to punch out the window in this dumb minivan. Sure, he is a good guy. Really, he is. Honest, reliable, smart in a techy sort of way, and in the few interactions I've witnessed when our friend groups would hang out, he treated her right. A real prince charming. But that knowledge does nothing to dampen the rage boiling in my chest.

Truthfully, I was surprised to hear that they had broken up at all. From the way Marnie spoke about them, Dex and Dylan were the real deal.

That is one of the downsides of dating Marnie—I get frequent updates on the lives of her friends. Specifically, Dylan. And by extension, Dylan's love life. I can only stand to hear how *great* Dex is and how *perfect* he is for Dylan so many times before I have the overwhelming urge to chuck something against a wall.

Even after their breakup Marnie was quick to assure me that it would 'only be temporary,' and that Dylan would 'come to her senses.' As if I had some vested interest in them staying together and was personally devastated by the demise of the relationship.

Hah. If only she knew.

"Why did you two break up, anyway?" I can't stop myself from prying further into her love life because apparently, I am a glutton for pain. It really doesn't make sense. On paper, they are the perfect couple. And if Dex's distracted performance tonight is any indication, he wasn't the one to initiate the demise of their relationship.

"It's hard to explain," she says, keeping her gaze locked firmly out the windshield. "I guess I just wasn't feeling it anymore, if that makes sense?"

The immature part of me can't help what comes out of my mouth next. "And by 'it' you mean..." I let my eyes shift to my lap and back to her face. Shooting her a playful smile, I attempt to break through some of the tension I sense forming between us. She glances at me, and from the way her cheeks

tint, I know she catches my drift. The corners of her lips tug up as she shakes her head, feigning annoyance with my childishness.

“*It* as in our relationship. There wasn’t a spark,” she explains simply.

Good.

It sounds like a cop-out, but I’ll take it. For now. Dylan is too good for him anyway.

It isn’t until she reiterated that she and Dex will be strictly friends going forward—no chance to rekindle their romance—that I realize how tense the conversation had made me.

On a long exhale I release my firm grip on the arm rests, remembering that for once in my life I have my own girlfriend. Someone who *isn’t* the beautiful blonde sitting next to me. I let my mind wander back to Marnie and I try to envision her with her ex, some tourist guy that she briefly dated over the summer. It only takes a few moments for me to realize that the thought of Marnie with someone else gives me absolutely no reaction at all.

Deep down I wonder if I really *am* attached to Marnie. If she were to leave me tomorrow and completely ghost me, I would be indifferent. My pride might be wounded, but nothing else would be. Certainly not my heart. Maybe I’m an even bigger jerk than I thought.

Dylan’s question from earlier plays through my mind again.

Why *am I* dating Marnie? It’s simple, I guess. *She* wanted to date *me*. Claimed that we would have fun together during our senior year with no attachment and I could focus on school instead of chasing girls. Was it a bonus that I got to spend more time with her friends? Yes. But the fact that it is one *specific* friend that I am fixated on sparks a twinge of guilt.

Yeah, I’m definitely a jerk.

Dylan

A SHORT WHILE LATER, I turn off the road and pull in to a gas station. The light from pumps and the large highway sign cut through the darkness of the night, illuminating the steady falling snow.

As soon as the van is in park Zac runs into the convenience store attached to the gas station, leaving me to stand in the cold pumping fuel into the van. I shove my hands in my coat pockets and hop from foot to foot to stay warm. Most of the people fueling their vehicles at the other pumps have retreated to their cars for warmth. But I refuse to sit back in the van. I'm not sure if it is a rule, but I was always told to stay outside by your gas pump—so that is what I do, regardless of weather.

Sometimes being a rule follower has its disadvantages.

Once the machine clicks to a stop, I hastily shove the handle back into the pump, swipe the receipt, and go to climb back in the warm van. My hand pauses on the handle when I see Zac jogging from the store, waving his hands in the air at me.

“Nope!” he says, shaking his head. “I’ll drive the rest of the way.”

It’s my parents’ vehicle that we’re driving, so I’m hesitant.

“Is my driving that bad?” I tease.

He comes to a stop directly in front of me outside the driver's side door, so close that he has to look down to speak to me.

“Come on, Dylan, you're tired, let me get us home,” he says, his voice so tender that I can't help but agree. And yeah, running on no sleep is steadily draining me.

Begrudgingly, I make my way into the passenger seat. I use the lever underneath my seat to adjust it forward at the same time Zac adjusts his back. We both chuckle at the motion. Although he is only a few inches taller than me, Zac requires much more legroom than I do.

He passes me one of the two coffees in his hand, and when I take it, he holds out his hands for the key, which I happily turn over to him. Turns out I am more exhausted than I thought.

I WAKE WITH A jolt. We are still driving, but I don't recognize where we are through the flurry of snow flying at the windshield.

“Shoot, sorry Zac!” I say, rubbing my eyes. “I didn't mean to fall asleep.”

He peeks over at me with that stupid cocky smirk and shrugs his shoulders.

“Told you it was a good idea to have me drive.”

I pick up my coffee, previously abandoned in the center console cup holder. Where it was too hot to even sip before, it's now a comfortable temperature.

The remainder of the drive goes by quickly. Zac turns on the radio, and it occurs to me that I hadn't missed the background noise that the radio usually provides. For some reason simply being with Zac is enough. He tries to find an appropriate station that we can both agree on, but I quickly take over the dial, flipping through the stations until I arrive at the one I am searching for.

“Seriously, Dyl?” He glances over at me, faux judgment in his eyes.

“Sorry. My car, my pick of the radio station.”

Zac raises up a finger. “Firstly, this isn’t your car.” He lifts another finger. “Secondly, isn’t it supposed to be driver’s choice?”

I shrug, settling into my seat, allowing the soothing tones of Bing Crosby envelop me. “Take it or leave it, Morgan.”

Accepting my *fantastic* choice, we listen to Christmas music for the last half hour of our journey. I swear I even hear him singing along to a few of the songs under his breath.

It is just after midnight when we pull back into our school’s parking lot. Immediately, I leap out and run over to the driver’s side. As much as I appreciate Zac driving the rest of the way, my eyelids are heavy and my skull is pulsing from sleep deprivation. I want to get home, curl up in my bed, and sleep for the next two days straight.

Zac climbs out, thanks me for driving, and makes his way toward his truck. After closing my door, I check my phone for any missed messages.

Nothing.

I can’t say I’m surprised. My parents don’t have any issues trusting me to get myself home. Sure, they worry as much as any other parents, I suppose, but they believe in the “good girl” persona as much as everyone else. And even I have to admit that it’s accurate, as much as I hate the label.

It’s not so much that I *try* to be the good girl as much as it is a default setting for me. I *like* doing things that fall into the stereotypical ‘good girl’ category. I get a rush from turning in papers on time and receiving a good grade back, I prefer to keep to myself instead of spending time in big crowds, I would rather stay in than go out and—perhaps most incriminating—I enjoy spending time with my parents. *Gasp.*

As a result, I’ve got the freedom that most kids my age would kill for. And no desire to use it.

A sharp tapping on my window startles me, and my hand instinctively flies to my heart. When I see Zac's face, his features defined by the stark shadows created by the streetlights in the parking lot, I roll down the window.

"Yeah?" I ask, trying to mask my erratic breathing.

"I, uh, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry..." He trails off, eyes focused on my steering wheel. Is it possible that he actually looks... awkward? Dare I say, *ashamed*?

"For..." I lead, confused.

"For asking about you and Dex. You're right, it's your business and it was a jerk move on my part."

A fuzzy warmth spreads through my body. *Relief*. Before he apologized, I hadn't realized how much his questions bothered me. Maybe he does respect me, after all.

And that thought awakens another flock of butterflies.

He runs his hand through his hair, looking uncomfortable as he waits in the falling snow for me to respond.

"Oh... no worries."

He nods in farewell, then turns and walks back to his truck without another word.

THE REST OF THE weekend I spend shut away in my room doing homework and catching up on sleep from the last two nights.

On Sunday I take some time to scroll through my phone. There was a party last night. A party that, although Carla invited me to, I had once again opted not to attend.

Most of my classmates, however, *were* in attendance. And being less than smart about it, based on the pictures they posted.

A groan spills from my throat as I flop back on my bed. Most people in the photos are my friends, or at least people that I know from school, and they're being, quite frankly, *stupid*. The girls sport an excess of make up and a shortage of

clothing. Everyone's got a drink in their hand and while they take care to cover up the labels in most of the shots, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that they're not drinking Pepsi.

Would the cops around here care much? Nope. But it's still a dumb move. Especially when so many of them are waiting to hear back from colleges. Everyone knows that college recruiters pay extra close attention to anything that is posted online. Over the years we've heard more than a few horror stories of people being rejected from their dream schools or having scholarships ripped away for something inappropriate they posted.

I pause when I see a video of a group of girls dancing on the bed of a truck. Marnie is among them, arms swaying above her head with a bottle clasped loosely in her hand, hips swinging. None of this was her scene until she set her sights on Zac. Then suddenly she became your typical party girl, fitting the mold of exactly the type of woman Zac usually focused his attention on.

The video plays on. Marnie stumbles a little, then reaches for a thin object that someone hands to her. She raises it to her mouth and blows out a puff of smoke before breaking into giggles and passing it on to someone else. I could cry. That wasn't a cigarette. I try not to judge others. I know people smoke plenty of things. *But Marnie doesn't.* And I don't know if I'm more saddened that she's chosen this path, or that the path she was on, with me, wasn't good enough for her.

She resumes dancing again, stumbles into another girl, and nearly falls from the bed of the truck. *Where the heck is Zac?* Hot anger rises within me. He's dating her. She's in *love* with him. He's supposed to watch out for her.

Then again, when does he ever give her a second thought?

Maybe I should be giving him the benefit of the doubt. He could be right off screen for all I know, keeping a watchful eye on her from a distance.

Throwing my phone aside in frustration, I spend the rest of the day hiding out in my room. Even working on essays and

studying for finals isn't enough to distract me from the emotions storming through my veins.

Zac

“ABOUT TIME YOU JOINED us,” Justin snarks as I set down my Styrofoam tray on the table on Monday at lunch. I roll my eyes. This morning has been crammed with end of semester exams and to say that I am not in the mood for his BS is a gross understatement.

Of my friends, Justin is my least favorite. Yet somehow, he is the one I know the most about and spend the most time with.

Talk about a contradiction.

I guess he’s more like a brother at this point. Whether I like it or not, I’m stuck with him. Arrogance and all.

His parents are divorced. The former Mrs. Barnes ran off with some dude and moved across the state years ago and while Mr. Barnes is a good guy, he is a bit of a workaholic and is often out of town, leaving Justin to fend for himself more often than not. My mom, being the saint that she is, pities him and doesn’t hesitate to invite him over for dinner.

And breakfast.

And holidays.

He’s practically lived at our house for all of senior year so far and shows no signs of leaving anytime soon. He even took

over Mom's old office and transformed it into a makeshift bedroom.

Justin may be a jerk, but like most bullies, it's because he's going through a tough time. Not that that excuses his behavior, but it does earn him some sympathy points from me.

"They finally let the SPED kids out?" Justin hits me with a cocky smirk. He knows that by using the derogatory term, favored by the pretentious jerks of our school to refer to the kids in Special Education, he's getting under my skin.

I don't have special needs, not by a long shot, but I do struggle in school and am mildly dyslexic. A fact that, despite the additional help I receive in school, I have thus far successfully concealed from everyone aside from my immediate family. As my mother diplomatically puts it, I am "educationally disadvantaged." Because of my *disadvantage*, I have the option to go to a separate classroom for exams so that I have fewer distractions and an unlimited amount of time to complete the test. I always take advantage of this. Not only because the school would inform my mom if I didn't, but because I don't have it in me to disappoint her any more than I already have.

Both she and my dad were exceptional students, and it appears that my brother is following in their footsteps. I, on the other hand, am not keeping up with their stellar records. I'm not even crawling behind them. More like being dragged along like a clueless puppy.

I even quit the football team this year to have an extra couple of hours a day to dedicate to homework. This is another thing that I keep close to the vest. No one knows the real reason I quit the team, not even my family. I played it off as simply being over it, like I was too cool for organized team sports. It's not like I was going to be offered any athletic scholarships, anyway. Our football team hasn't been good for decades—not since my dad played for Silverwood, actually. But it still killed me to sit with Marnie and her friends on those bleachers on Friday nights, watching my teammates play without me.

Difficult though it was, my sacrifice is paying off. As of last week, I am a solid B student. Exams will determine if that holds true for the semester, but either way I am pretty stinking proud of myself.

“Shut up, Justin,” Graham supplies, smacking Justin on the back of the head. “Like you have room to talk.”

He has a point. Justin’s grades are even worse than mine. But he doesn’t take the time to put any effort into his work, and he certainly isn’t going to open himself up to criticism by joining me and the other *SPED* kids.

“What are we talking about?” West asks cheerfully as he gives Justin’s man bun a flick before sliding into his usual seat. This causes Justin to scowl, but makes me irrationally happy. While I keep my hair decently long—long enough for the ladies to grab onto, but not long enough to *look* like a lady—Justin’s is grown out as a result of pure laziness rather than actual effort. And I hate how well he can pull it off.

“Exams,” Graham tells him.

I do not want to talk about exams. Or school. So I’m grateful when East cuts our conversation short. “Look who’s here,” he says, staring off over my shoulder.

I turn my head to find that I’m not at all excited to see Marnie sashaying into the cafeteria. I guess I don’t want to talk about her either.

This is becoming my reaction more frequently each time I see my girlfriend—indifference. If she is around, great, if not, that’s great too.

My friends aren’t sold on the idea of me dating Marnie. Never have been. Initially, I waved off their concerns, assuming that they were only skeptical of the relationship because they didn’t trust me to stick with one girl for an extended period of time. They insisted that Marnie would get attached and our casual relationship would turn... toxic.

Oddly enough, their concerns are echoed by Marnie’s friends. At least Dylan. Which leads me to believe that maybe I should have taken them more seriously.

I'll admit, when we first started dating, I was at least happy to see Marnie. But honestly, I'm not that entranced by her any longer. Maybe Dylan is onto something. Maybe this thing with Marnie has run its course.

Thinking of Dylan, I can't stop my eyes from roaming the area around Marnie searching for her. The two of them spend what I would consider to be an unhealthy amount of time together. Or, they *used* to. And I feel bad at the possibility of *me* being the reason for that being past tense.

As though summoned by my thoughts, Dylan appears, flanking Marnie's right side. My palms break out in a sweat as she turns in our direction and offers me a small smile.

I smile back.

The group makes their way to the vacant table next to ours. Sure, Marnie and I acknowledge each other at school, but no more than a surface level greeting and the occasional hug for the obligatory PDA. In my mind my arrangement with Marnie is purely a matter of exclusivity. Meaning that our relationship is more about exclusivity than it is any feelings that go beyond surface level. How she views it, I'm not so sure anymore. Especially after what Dylan told me on Friday night about how serious Marnie is about us.

Yeah, we are going to need to talk. And it isn't a conversation I am looking forward to.

The girls dump their bags, notebooks, and whatever else they have with them on the table before bouncing off and joining the lunch line. Except for Dylan, who packed her lunch and settles into the blue plastic chair directly behind my own.

I hadn't noticed before, but since sitting near her at the movies and our hours long adventure to Clifton, I can now recognize the sweet smell of her shampoo—coconut and sunshine. Even as the room fills with the scent of pizza and nachos, I can still pick up on it. Marnie's signature scent also features coconut, but where hers is a generous spray of whatever designer perfume she chooses to bathe herself in every morning, Dylan's is lighter. Less suffocating.

“Hey, Dylan,” Graham calls, turning his chair slightly to face her more directly. “Do you happen to have the notes from Psychology?”

“Yeah.” She perks up. “Do you need copies?”

“That would be great, if you don’t mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll get them to you later.” She shoots him a small smile and turns back to her container of salad, which she shakes vigorously to spread the dressing over the leaves.

Graham must notice me watching their conversation, because as he turns his chair back to our table he elaborates. “Mr. Carter went through the final study guide for the exam today and I couldn’t write fast enough to keep up. Dylan was typing everything out on her laptop. I figured she picked up on most of what he was saying.” Graham shrugs and dives into his pizza.

I sometimes forget that Graham is actually really smart. You wouldn’t guess it hanging around him. He doesn’t spend an excessive amount of time studying or anything. He plays sports, hangs out with friends, plays video games, has a part-time job, but is still able to get exceptional grades and take senior level classes even though he is only a junior.

I, an actual senior, could never even dream of getting into the Advanced Psychology class that he has with Dylan.

Nodding, I take a bite of my Spanish rice. Of course, I am happy that my friend does well in school. But I can’t deny the pang of jealousy that stabs me because of it.

Dylan

“SO, THE MOVIE FOR tonight. What is it?” Carla asks, flipping through the case of DVDs we keep on the TV stand.

Carla, Tess, and I are congregated in my living room atop layers of air mattresses, sleeping bags, pillows, and blankets for our monthly sleepover. Or, it *was* monthly. This is only the second time we’ve been able to schedule one since school began. Although it’s fitting that we are able to have one to kick off winter break.

Carla is a relatively new addition to our sleepovers, having joined in on the tradition over the last year or so. Truly, she’s more Marnie’s friend than mine or Tess’, but I don’t mind that she tags along. She certainly livens things up.

“Sorry I’m late!” Marnie’s voice calls from the foyer at the same time I hear the front door fly open and slam sharply. Her bags *thud* as she tosses them on the pile already started by my other friends in the hallway.

The sound of an engine comes from outside and I peer out the window in time to see a black SUV drive away.

“Did your mom drop you off?” I ask Marnie.

“Yep. She is on her way to the salon. She wanted to get a blow out for our parents’ double date tonight.” She rolls her eyes.

Our parents have had a standing dinner date night once a month for years, and typically arrive home in varying states of drunkenness. My parents turn into goofy lovebirds after drinking. It's kind of cute. Or it would be if they weren't my parents. They love each other and they're not afraid of a little PDA.

Marnie settles in beside me on the couch and crawls under the blanket as Carla brings our attention back to the matter at hand.

“Right. So, movie?”

It's ridiculous, really, with all the streaming services available that she insists on us watching one of the same twenty DVDs each time we have a sleepover. Most of them are movies that are at least ten years old, some even older. Like, for example, the disc she flicks out of the case and holds up to us.

“*Titanic*?” asks Marnie, “I was more in the mood for a rom-com.”

“We've got *The Notebook*,” Carla offers.

“Ehh, I could never get into that one.” Tess winces at her own complaint.

“*Les Miserables*?”

“Carla, that's a bigger tragedy than *Titanic*,” I point out.

We go back and forth for a few minutes before deciding on *Titanic* after Carla promises that someone else gets to pick the next movie. And yeah, once the movie gets going, I am reminded what a heart throb Leo DiCaprio was in the nineties. He's still a hunk, but his reputation for preferring girls only a few years older than me puts me off a bit. The movie is merely background noise to our conversation, anyway.

“Sooo...” Carla drawls, “how are things with you and the beautiful Mr. Morgan?” she asks Marnie.

A smile graces Marnie's face and she sets down the piece of pizza she has been picking at. “Good. Really good, actually.

He invited me on his family's trip across the state for Christmas."

"Whoa," Tess says, wide-eyed, "Things that serious?"

Marnie shrugs. "I guess. It's too bad I can't make it with all my own family's Christmas stuff." She picks at her nails.

She's lying.

Part of having a best friend for nearly a decade means that you pick up on their cues. And when Marnie is lying, she picks at her fingers. It is the only time she risks messing up her French tips.

Which begs the question...what is she lying about? Did Zac really ask her to go on what is essentially a family vacation with him? If so, he is disregarding my advice about not leading Marnie on. Unless... he decided he *does* care about her?

The thought twists my stomach into knots.

"You've only been together a few months, right?" I pose the question in the friendliest tone possible.

"Sure. But things with Zac are just...good. You know?"

But I don't know, actually. I guess my relationship with Dex had never been that 'good.' At least in the sense that I felt that we were serious or in love. Sure, we would hang out on the weekends and always got along great, but there was never any urgency with us. No 'I need to see you right now or else I might combust' mentality. And I certainly never had any desire to crash his family's holiday parties. Even the initial excitement of having a new relationship wore off more quickly than I had expected it to.

No, my relationship with Dex was *not* serious. And based on talking with Zac I hadn't gotten the impression that Marnie's was, either.

Instead of voicing my concerns I simply smile and nod along. After all, I'm not a part of their relationship and therefore shouldn't interfere.

The conversation moves on to finals and some of the parties happening over break. Bored, I find myself gazing off, getting caught up in the movie. It's the part where Jack is meeting up with Rose for dinner with the rest of the first-class passengers. He's all done up in his fancy tuxedo, looking at Rose like she's the only person in the world. *Oh, Jack. You poor, adorable, sweet—*

"Dylan?" The sound of my name stops me from completely swooning over a fictional character.

"Huh?"

"I asked if you had your sights on anyone now that you and Dex are over?" It's Carla. Still nosing into everyone's relationships, as usual.

I consider her question and my stomach plummets as my thoughts subconsciously stray to a certain dark-haired boy.

Why am I thinking of Zac?

He probably popped into my head because we were talking about him with Marnie.

Yep. That must be it.

I was *not* imagining him taking Jack's spot in that fancy tux...

Outwardly, I blush at my internal monologue.

"Oooh, there is someone!" Marnie jumps on the sight of my crimson face.

"N—no. There's no one." My voice doesn't even convince me. "My breakup with Dex is still fresh, you know? It's only been a couple of weeks and I don't want to jump into anything," I finish lamely.

My friends all nod in agreement.

"Well, if anyone does come into the picture, I'm sure you'll let us know." As Marnie shoots me a wink and elbows my side under the blanket an undeniable sense of guilt crawls up my spine.

We spend the next few hours snacking and trying out some new pore clearing mask that Carla had found online.

Shocker—my sensitive, acne prone skin is *not* thanking her. With any luck my now inflamed face will calm down by morning. But I am happy that there isn't anyone I am hoping to impress tonight.

The moment the thought crosses my mind a familiar trilling sounds from Marnie's phone, indicating an outgoing facetime call. And if Marnie is facetimeing someone other than those in this room that means it must be—

“Hey, Zac!” she purrs.

“Uh, hi?” There is some muffled rustling in the background of the call before his voice comes through again, “What's up, Marnie?”

“Just wanted you to say hi to the girls!”

Oh no, she wouldn't...

Yes, she would.

She holds the phone up and pans it across the room, giving Zac a shot of each of our faces. I pull my blanket up to my chin and can only pray that the loose strands of my hair cover up enough of the rest of my face to make the redness unnoticeable.

“Uh, hey, guys,” Zac mutters with a wave, visibly uncomfortable even through the dark, grainy screen.

And if I can see him, that means he can see *me*. *Fantastic*.

“Zac!” Carla calls, grabbing the phone from Marnie, “We're trying to think of someone to set Dylan up with. Any suggestions?”

Annd, we're back to this.

My face heats for reasons entirely unrelated to the failed mask. Do I *really* want to hear the type of boy Zac thinks would be a good match for me? Somehow, I know I will find his suggestion insulting.

A throat clearing sounds through the speaker. “Oh, um, I— I don’t—”

“Carla, that you?” Another male voice comes through the phone. Whoever it is must have taken the device from Zac, and Carla excuses herself to the kitchen to carry on a conversation with the new guy.

Crisis averted.

My parents come through the door a while later from their double date, giggling and holding each other closer than they normally would. They’ve had a few drinks but are only marginally tipsy tonight and shouldn’t do anything too embarrassing in front of my friends.

Mom saunters into the living room and sets down a box of donuts on the coffee table, waving her hand as if presenting us with a prize. “Picked these up on the way home. Thought you girls might like a midnight snack.”

Our local bakery is open all night on the weekends and their claim to fame is specialty donuts.

“Thanks Mrs. P!” Carla calls out, jumping for a red velvet and downing it in three bites.

“How was dinner?” I ask politely.

“Oh, it was just *wonderful!*” Mom exclaims, her exaggerated words a direct result of her alcohol consumption. “And Lorna surprised us with tickets to the university’s play! What was it dear?” She looks to my father to fill in the blanks.

He rolls his eyes playfully and chuckles at her question. “*A Christmas Carol*, sweetie,” he says, placing a kiss on her forehead.

“Ah, that’s right!” Mom says, snapping her fingers.

I glance to Marnie to gauge her reaction. Although our parents were out together, I can *absolutely* not imagine her mother letting loose like mine is right now.

For the most part, Mom and Lorna’s friendship makes sense, I guess. They’re both driven, hard working women who are fully dedicated to their families. The only difference is

how they go about it. Mom is always sporting a smile, even when dressed in a crisp business suit and heels that could kill. Lorna takes the *'I'm above you'* approach in dealing with people and has more of an ice-queen vibe.

But it's in moments like this one, where my mom is acting downright goofy, that I can't reconcile the two of them. Because there is no scenario where I can picture Mrs. Jacobs as carefree as Mom. Twinkling eyes, rosy cheeks, loose hair, and uncontrollable giggling.

Marnie doesn't react, though, beyond a polite smile.

My parents bid us goodnight and I listen to their steps as they make their way up the stairs, my friends quietly snickering over their theatrics.

When I wake the following morning, everyone is still strewn across the room where they had been last night. Tess awkwardly on the recliner, Marnie and I tangled on the couch, and Carla spread across the air mattress.

Hobbling into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee, I catch my reflection in the hallway mirror.

Yikes.

My blonde curls stick out of the bun on top of my head in all directions, mascara is smudged around my eyes, and my skin still holds an unnatural pink hue from Carla's attempt to beautify my face.

I *did* remember to remove my contacts, though. Small victories.

I poke tentatively at the tight skin on my still tender cheek with my forefinger, noting no immediate pain, which is an improvement. I make a note to apply extra lotion. And to avoid testing skin care products Carla finds on TikTok.

As I enter the kitchen I find Mom already there, nestled into the breakfast nook with a cup of tea. She is very much a coffee drinker but insists that she prefers to, "take it easy" on the weekends and only drink tea. It's still caffeine, but in her eyes, it is the calmer of the two beverages.

Although it is Saturday, she is dressed in black pants and a flowy blouse, hair tied back and makeup perfected. It's her standard look these days.

My parents? Total rockstars. The absolute best. Especially Mom. She lives for her family and does anything she can for me and Gray to make sure we know that we're respected and loved. Truthfully, I love talking to her. Sometimes even more than my friends.

"Good morning, sweetie," she greets me warmly, smiling up from the iPad she is reading. "Breakfast is being kept warm in the oven, whenever you girls get hungry. I'm going to duck into my office to wrap up a few things for work."

Her role as Vice President at Silverwood Bank & Trust is a surprisingly demanding position for a small, local bank. She has a flexible schedule and gets to work from home on occasion, which is great because it means that she never misses anything Gray and I have going on. But it also means that she is often playing catchup on the weekends.

"Thanks, Mom." She stands, and I give her a quick side hug before she moves beside me to shuffle down the hall to her home office.

Slowly, my friends emerge from the living room, and we pull breakfast from the oven. Mom always goes all out when she has a chance to cook for guests—pancakes, potatoes, eggs, hot chocolate, bacon, cereal, yogurt, and fruit are set out on the dining room table and we dig in.

After breakfast, we huddle on my front porch for a quick goodbye hug. I'm wearing only my sleep shorts and the winter jacket my brother hangs readily on the hook by the door. Not exactly attire appropriate for the weather, but it will work for the few moments it takes to send off my friends. Carla and Tess hustle to their cars, leaving me alone with Marnie.

I had assumed that Marnie's mom would be picking her up, but to my surprise, A familiar black pickup truck waits on the road in front of my house.

“Hey, babe!” Marnie sings out, waving to Zac, who is leaning against his passenger door, tugging it open for Marnie as she picks up her bag. She wraps her arm around my neck and pulls me in for another tight hug. “Thanks for a great night, we really needed this time together!”

“Absolutely. We’ll have to do it again.” My voice is muffled by her fluffy ski jacket.

As I watch, Marnie bounces over to Zac’s idling vehicle and closes the door behind her. Zac grabs her duffel bag, giving me a wave as he tosses it into the back seat. “See ya around, Park!” he calls before hopping in his truck and driving away.

Zac

HOW CAN A SPACE so bright and open be so suffocating?

This isn't the first time this thought has crossed my mind as I lounge on the pristine, crisp white sofa in the Jacobs' living room. The house is gorgeous. Clean and open with white *everything*. I get totally pretentious vibes from it, though.

I find myself wondering, not for the first time, *how* Marnie's family can afford this. Her mom works at a local university and volunteers—way too often, in my opinion—at our school and her dad is the chief of police. As far as I know police officers aren't paid exorbitant amounts.

But who am I to judge? For all I know Lorna Jacobs could be an heiress. Actually, that thought probably isn't too far off. It would explain her need to have her family in line and always dressed like they are about to attend some type of gala.

“Are you ready for your trip tomorrow?” Marnie asks me from across the couch. We have been here all of ten minutes, watching reruns of *Modern Family*, Marnie's feet draped across my lap where I rub them absently.

It's a loaded question, and I don't want to upset Marnie more than I fear I already have today. Turns out picking her up from her little sleepover at Dylan's probably wasn't a good

idea. Or I suppose picking her up was fine, it was my wandering eyes that were the issue.

Because when I noticed Dylan standing beside Marnie on the front porch, it sent me reeling.

I know I should feel guilty for checking out my girlfriend's best friend. But in my defense, how could I *not*? For a few seconds there, I was genuinely convinced that she wasn't wearing *pants*.

Dylan just stood on her porch as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Meanwhile, I couldn't even manage to suck in a full breath. Until she lifted her arms to hug Marnie—a motion that revealed that she was, in fact, wearing shorts—I had been genuinely convinced that she was half naked. Sure, they were possibly the shortest shorts in the history of the world. But they did still—*technically*—count as pants.

Not wanting to be caught leering, I shot my gaze back to her face, which was... red? Maybe from the cold. My face would probably flush, too if I were wearing *nothing*.

Before I could go down *that* rabbit hole, Marnie was bounding my way. I yanked my gaze from Dylan to avoid another jealously fueled conversation with my girlfriend.

But wouldn't you know it, Marnie *had* noticed my gawking. Or maybe she only suspected there had been some. I swear, my gaze couldn't have lingered more than a few seconds.

I received the silent treatment during our drive to her house, which is why I've done my best to avoid the topic of my family's trip. It's Christmastime, and it would be nice for things to just be peaceful.

"Of course." I shrug. "I love getting to spend time with my family."

My brother, Mom, and I plan to spend Christmas with her family across the state. We will be gone for five days, and as crummy as it is to admit, I am looking forward to the time away from Marnie. Because she will *not* be attending this family trip.

It isn't for her lack of trying, though.

She has been hinting for weeks that she is free over Christmas break and fears that it will be too boring at her house. Finally, I had to lie outright and say that my aunt only has a few guest rooms, so no extras can come.

To my dismay, Marnie then suggested that she and I *share a room*.

That wouldn't go over too well with my Grandma Jean—or literally *anyone else* in my family.

“And you're sure there's no way I can tag along?” She pins me with what I can only assume are meant to be puppy dog eyes.

“Sorry, Marn.” I'm not, actually.

Marnie nods, her straight hair falling over her shoulders. As we continue staring at the screen, I can hear her nails tapping on her phone. She has those professionally done ones that are extra-long and impractical, making her incessant tapping all the more irritating.

“Switch,” she calls out before I can ask her to stop with the fidgeting. As is part of our routine, Marnie tosses her legs out of my lap and mine go onto hers where she begins rubbing them gently. I guess this is her way of working out some of her anxiety.

Because it's obvious she is experiencing some. When we first started dating, she was confident and put together. That is part of what drew me to her. She was tough and wasn't looking for a guy to coddle her or offer platitudes.

Marnie had been low maintenance in the ‘emotional dependency’ department, a perfect candidate for my first girlfriend. A ‘starter’ girlfriend if you will. We would have fun, no one would get attached, and things would end amicably whenever one of us wanted out.

But going with Dylan to that away game last week has me contemplating things, seeing them through a different lens. And once I started this little exercise of self-reflection I couldn't stop. Little warning signals began popping up

everywhere and, in the end, I was met with a glaring discovery.

I don't know my girlfriend.

I first picked up on this about a week ago, when I asked where she wanted to eat. Without even considering it, the name of my favorite restaurant flew from her lips. Had that happened a month ago I would have been psyched that the girl I was committing myself to for the time being had such great taste in food, yet another thing we could bond over.

But now, it's a red flag.

I continued to test my theory over the few days, letting her choose where to go on our dates, pick the music when we drove, decide which movie we would see. Every time, without fail, she chose the option that I would have chosen.

What's the problem, you ask?

Simple. Marnie is only doing what *I* want to do. She has been faking—probably our entire relationship—to get me to be drawn to her. To *stay* with her.

And I'll admit, initially it worked. Obviously—since I *did* ask her to go out with me. I could see myself spending time with a laid-back girl who I seemingly had everything in common with. It only took Dylan's observations to shatter the illusion.

To a degree, Dylan is probably right. Not about the love part, but Marnie is certainly invested. And she is taking it too far. Morphing into someone just to fit the profile of some guy you have a crush on? Not cool. And very *Grease*—which, for the record, is a movie I never understood the hype about. Even I can see the obvious issues with the premise of the movie. In the end the nice girl decides to completely change herself to impress the guy? Nah.

What kind of self-absorbed jerk would be okay with a girl doing that for him, anyway?

My issues with the classic movie aside, there is no denying that somehow my life is mirroring it. Marnie is changing

herself to be who she thinks I want her to be, desperate to *please* me.

And that isn't okay.

The worst part of all of this is that I'm not sure of Marnie's motives. There seems to be little she likes more than claiming me as her boyfriend, yet I can't help but wonder if she actually likes *me*, or if she just likes my *reputation*. That she can revel in my popularity and the fact that I chose to be with her.

So, while Dylan thinks that Marnie has some deeply held feelings for me—and I guess I can see where she's coming from—I'm not convinced.

In public Marnie *does* appear enamored. She puts on a show and talks our relationship up to her friends, or anyone who will listen. Yet I've been getting the sense lately that I'm more of a prize for her. A show pony that she only wants so no one else can have.

Again, I've got no evidence to back this up, it's just a feeling. And if I actually was infatuated with Marnie the realization might hurt. But as it stands now, I'm unbothered.

Ever since Dylan tried to set me straight, I can't un-notice what I've been seeing. Marnie has been different these last few weeks. Not necessarily fishing for compliments, but clinging to them more than usual. There is also a bit of a mean streak coming out. Mostly in the form of jealousy and never directed toward me, but that doesn't mean that I don't notice.

Behind us, the front door opens and closes, followed by heavy footsteps.

"Oh, hi there, Zac," Mr. Jacobs greets as he swoops into the room and gives Marnie a quick peck on the top of her head. "I didn't know you were coming over today. Is your mom around?" He directs this question to Marnie.

"No, I think she has a meeting or something. She should be home soon, though."

And that's my cue to leave.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that I only hang out with Marnie when we're alone. I like her dad just fine. I wouldn't go so far as to say that he's a father figure to me, but he is friendly enough and truly cares about his family. And her brother, Reed, is cool too.

Lorna, however, is another story. Her mere presence in a room brings a chill, snuffing out whatever happiness was glowing there. She is stiff and calculated. She offers smiles, but they are always rehearsed, fake. Like some Disney villain trying to lure you into a false sense of security before stepping in to steal your happily ever after.

Well, I'm not going to fall for that. While I would love to talk with Mr. Jacobs about any happenings at the police station—believe me, even the things he's allowed to discuss are crazy, so I can only imagine what he has to keep private—I know it's best to head out.

But apparently luck isn't on my side, because the moment I swing my legs off the couch to stand the door opens yet again and in comes the clicking heels of whichever obnoxiously expensive shoes Lorna has chosen for the day.

Marnie bristles at her mother's arrival. She tries to hide it, but I don't miss it. It's the same way she reacts most times she sees her mother, muscles tensing the smallest bit, spine stiffening, overall posture becoming more rigid and *proper*. This reaction speaks volumes as to the state of their relationship.

As quickly as it happened, Marnie relaxes again, her whole being lighting up at Lorna's arrival. It is the appropriate reaction for someone to have when seeing a parent, but it still seems *off* for anyone to react to Lorna that way.

“Marnie, I've got your new dress for the faculty dinner for you to try on and I picked up—Oh, hello, Zac.” Her face splits into one of her shrewd grins, covering her initial surprise at seeing me in her home.

She clicks her way over the tile floor to where we are congregated, eyes roaming over the three of us. “I got ahold of

Cheryl, she had a last-minute cancellation and can squeeze you in to touch up your hair this evening,” she says to Marnie.

Marnie beams. *This* is not the Marnie I knew months ago. This Marnie is a minion of her mother. One who would rather spend the evening getting pampered for the sake of superficiality than interacting with people. Even me.

“How’s your mother doing, Zachary? I saw her at the grocery store the other day.” Lorna’s voice positively drips with pity and superiority. Her face is contorted in what her robot mind must think concern looks like, but I can read it for what it is. Condescension.

“She’s doing well,” I manage to clip out. “I have to get going,” I say, finally standing from the couch, desperate to make my escape. Sometimes I catch glimpses of the fun Marnie I had originally been interested in. But at times like these, when she is putting on a show or trying to impress people, even her mother, her presence is almost unbearable.

Dylan

“UGH, DYLAN, HAVE YOU been listening to a thing I’ve been saying?” I shoot my gaze back to her from my phone and find a flustered Marnie staring back at me.

“Sure,” I mumble.

I haven’t been listening.

Today is the first day back at school after Christmas break—the first day of the new semester.

And the day that official acceptance letters for Heathwood University are to be issued.

I find myself refreshing my email constantly. Heathwood is old school, and from what I hear, they typically send out the hard copy acceptance packets before emailing students. But that doesn’t stop me from getting my hopes up.

As far as I know, no one from my class is planning on attending Heathwood University. Not even Marnie, whose mother works part-time in administration there. While it might deter most people to be going to a college where you know nobody, it is actually an incentive for me.

Honestly, I have been growing tired seeing the same people every single day for the past twelve years. Since we go to such a small school, almost all of us have been together

since kindergarten, except for a few new students who joined our class throughout the years. I appreciate getting to form these close bonds, but I am ready to move on. And it seems like my friends are too. Marnie, now that she has found herself in with the cool crowd, and Carla who has always been more of a drifter when it comes to friend groups. Tess is my only constant right now.

Marnie rolls her eyes and places a hand on her hip, leaning against the row of lockers before starting her story from the top.

“You’re going to the game Wednesday, *right?*” She eyes me knowingly.

“Oh, yeah. Of course. I can’t wait.”

“Can you keep an eye on Zac for me?”

That grabs my attention. Why does Zac need a babysitter? And, more importantly, why does it have to be *me*?

“What do you mean?”

“I have to go to some networking event at the college with my mom that night. Some type of faculty dinner or something.” She swats her hands around, as if trying to brush the thought of attending a dinner that I would give my left leg to attend away. Marnie’s mom not only does administrative work for the university, but also happens to be on the scholarship committee, so Marnie having to attend some networking events is nothing new.

A twinge of longing hits me when I am reminded that she has the opportunity to suck up to the very people who are deciding my fate at the university of my dreams.

“Anyway, I probably won’t make it to the game until later, if at all,” she finishes.

“But why would Zac need a babysitter?” I ask again, this time aloud.

Zac isn’t the cheating type. Does he hit on every girl with a pulse? Sure. But he’s shown no indication of being unfaithful to Marnie.

Marnie lets out an exhale. Her earlier annoyance with my lack of attention gone and replaced with a tinge of sadness.

“I heard he’s been hanging out with Aspen...” she says quietly.

Aspen is a year younger than us, a junior, and has a reputation for dating. A lot. If the rumors are to be believed, she could give Zac a run for his money in terms of how many partners she has had in the last year.

But Aspen also isn’t the type to go for a guy who is in a relationship, and it’s unlikely that the two would hook up while Zac is publicly seeing someone else. Honestly, from the limited exposure I’ve had to her, Aspen is a nice girl.

“Marn.” I grab her hand, trying to calm whatever spiral she’s about to go down. She’s always been confident, so this uncertainty is unsettling to see. “You have nothing to worry about. Zac may have a... *history*, but he’s not a cheater. And I don’t think Aspen is either. Don’t they have a few classes together? I’m sure whatever reason they have for hanging out—if they’re hanging out at all—is completely platonic.”

She doesn’t look convinced. “Just promise me you’ll keep an eye on him, Dylan.”

The desperation in her eyes makes it impossible for me to deny her request, no matter how uncomfortable it makes me. “Sure.”

“Thanks, babe.” She squeezes my hand reassuringly before pulling hers away. “It makes me feel so much better that you will be with him.” Momentarily a surge of pride swells at her praise. That is, until she finishes her thought. “Let’s be honest. There’s no *way* he would pull anything with someone like you.”

Ouch.

I bite back the sting from her backhanded compliment and shoot her a tight smile as she turns and prances down the hallway. I’m left staring after her, wondering how our friendship got to the sad state it is in now.

A year ago, this type of remark from Marnie would have completely blindsided me. But Senior Year Marnie is different. Snarky, even *mean* at times. Where is the Marnie that I used to know? Who helped me navigate through those awkward middle school years, always staying by my side and sticking up for me? She never would have said something like that to anyone.

Apparently, that isn't the case anymore.

I try not to take it personally and remind myself that she's going through... *something*. I think. Though I'm not sure what. She's been acting unsettled lately. On edge. As if she's prepared for the ground to crumble beneath her feet. I suspect this is why she's been snappier than usual. But truly, I can't pinpoint anything that is going on in her life to make her feel this way. She's the envy of half the girls in school because of who her boyfriend is, she's got money and stunning good looks. She's smart, headed to a good college, and has a stable family.

Well... I'm not sure I can in good faith consider *Lorna* stable, but prickly mother aside, Marnie's got it made.

Any discomfort I've been feeling from my apparently unavoidable attraction to Zac evaporates with Marnie's reminder. Because she's right. Zac *isn't* the type of boy to spare someone like me a second glance. Meaning that any acknowledgment I've gotten from him recently is only him being nice to me because of my friendship with his girlfriend.

And that realization leaves me feeling hollow.

Zac

ENGLISH IS ONE OF my least favorite subjects. Granted, I am bad at pretty much all of them, but English is especially terrible. It is all about reading and grammar and other junk that I am sure is super important, but that I suck at, nonetheless.

Although it is only the first day back after the winter recess, my teachers have been ruthless.

Today, our English teacher, Mrs. Colby, is having us go around the room, each reading a paragraph of some story in our thick Literature book. I say ‘some story’ because I have absolutely no clue which story it is or what said story is about. I counted the students in my row and calculated which paragraph I would have to read, so when it is finally my turn, I won’t look completely incompetent as I try to fumble through the words.

Sure, most kids hate reading aloud in class. Or, I assume they do. But those kids *can* read. Without any issues. I’m not illiterate, but when under pressure my otherwise nonexistent anxiety combines with my slight dyslexia, and it’s a disaster.

Four people are in my row, with me being the fifth. *Perfect*. My calculations are spot on so far. It was a welcome relief when I realized that the paragraph assigned to me was significantly shorter than the rest. I even skimmed through the

one after it in case Mrs. Colby decided to have me read two to make up for the shortcomings of my own.

I totally have this.

The murmur of voices carries on in a blur. Two people in front of me now, East and Dylan. Right as East is about to open his mouth to read, a ping signaling an announcement comes over the intercom.

“Easton Jones, please come to the office. Easton Jones, to the office.”

All eyes shoot to him, and a chorus of, *“Ooohs,”* rings out.

East scoops up his things as Mrs. Colby dismisses him with a wave of her hand. Simultaneously, dismissing any sense of confidence I had just built up.

This throws off the reading order.

Dylan will read the paragraph meant for East, and *I* will have to read her paragraph. A paragraph that I have *not* been religiously memorizing for the last fifteen minutes, one roughly three times the length I had originally prepared for.

My palms grow sweaty as I frantically scan the page, trying to get up to speed on my newly assigned reading as Dylan begins reading East’s portion.

Breathe, Zac.

Man, how pathetic is it that this *tiny* disturbance can throw off my whole mindset?

My eyes run over the words again and again, but nothing registers. The letters shift in their lines, blurring into a slurry of nonsense.

Okay. My panic is clearly preventing me from absorbing any of the words on this page. They are fuzzy and jumbled and not even English. I shouldn’t care so much about what people think of me. But I have a reputation to live up to. Carefree, confident, Zac Morgan. Sure, he isn’t great at school and might get a little bit of help, but he isn’t *that bad* either.

Taking a few deep inhaleds to slow my thudding heart and erratic breathing, I attempt to focus on the paragraph again. Even if I am going to royally screw this up, there is no way I am going to let my nerves show by having a trembling voice.

No luck. My face is heating now as I wipe my sweaty palms against my jeans, the panic fully setting in.

Dylan is still talking, though. I have time. *I can do this.*

“Oh, Ms. Park,” Mrs. Colby cuts her off mid-sentence. “That is actually the next paragraph. Mr. Morgan is set to read it.”

My heart seizes in my chest.

Dylan had started reading her original paragraph, the one now assigned to me, as well as the one that was previously East’s?

“Oh!” Dylan exclaims, showing far more shock than necessary. She isn’t a good actress. She’s not surprised, and Mrs. Colby’s revelation isn’t new information to her. *Dylan knows that she was reading more than her assigned portion.* “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.” Her eyes widen even further to really drive her performance home. If I wasn’t paralyzed with fear, I would laugh. Good thing acting isn’t a required course at our school, or Dylan would see a significant drop in her GPA. “I can just finish it out, since I’ve already started it. If that’s okay with Zac?”

She shoots me an innocent glance, as if asking for permission. But I see the tiny smile. My eyes narrow at her skeptically. “Sure, that’s fine.”

I mouth a silent, ‘Thank you’ to her and watch as her face erupts into a full grin, acknowledging my thanks with a nod before finishing the paragraph.

Dylan intentionally read East’s portion, *and* her own.

She knew that I didn’t want to take her paragraph. She must have known that I had prepared to read my own. Did she also know that I nearly had a panic attack when East was called away?

I don't have time to ponder it any further, as it is my turn to read. I don't recite the words nearly as eloquently as Dylan had, but it is still exponentially smoother than it would have been if she hadn't helped me.

For some reason, her thoughtfulness has my heart pounding faster than it had been even moments ago.

Dylan

“THANKS, DYLAN.” I LOOK up to find Zac’s imposing form standing in front of my desk. He rubs his hand on the nape of his neck sheepishly.

Class has just ended, and I am gathering my things, making sure my supplies are perfectly organized before tucking them away in my shoulder bag.

“No problem.”

“How’d you know?” he asks after pausing for a beat, vulnerability swimming in his eyes.

I shrug. Should I tell him the truth? That I know he struggles in school? That I see how hard he tries? That he was paler than a ghost when he saw Easton leave? That it gutted me to see someone normally so carefree and confident paralyzed with fear?

I decide to tell him a version of the truth, as I don’t want Zac to think I pity him.

“I saw you reading your paragraph earlier. You were moving your lips along to the words as you looked them over. You were prepared for that particular part. I didn’t want you to have the rug torn out from under you.”

He eyes me up, mouth pinching to the side, considering me.

“You’re pretty cool, Dylan,” he comments, rapping his knuckles twice on my desk in farewell before turning and leaving the classroom.

I watch him leave, smiling as Easton joins him in the hallway outside of the classroom door. He is back to his normal self—seemingly without a care in the world.

I don’t have long to bask in his appreciation, though, because as I throw my bag over my shoulder, my phone vibrates in my boot where I tucked it earlier.

Typically, I don’t bring my phone to class for fear of getting called out by a teacher. But as I am still—not so—patiently waiting for a certain acceptance email, I kept it on me today. You know, so I could be in a constant state of terror with each notification that comes through.

I glance around and, realizing I am the only one left in the room, reach into my boot for my phone.

A text message.

The university would *call*.

The anxiousness that I originally experienced is immediately multiplied when I see *who* the message is from.

Dex.

What could he possibly want? We may have split on good terms, but that was over a month ago. During which time he hasn’t reached out to me once.

Dex-the-ex

Hey, Dylan. Just wanted to see how you were doing.

Carla changed his name in my phone, and I can still hear her voice in my head as she did it.

“If you don’t want to get dumped, don’t have ‘ex’ in your name.”

Seemed a bit harsh, but since she originally wanted to delete him from my contacts completely, and the chances of him ever seeing his new moniker in my phone were slim, I allowed for her modification. Just as I finish reading his initial message, another one comes through.

Dex-the-ex

I saw you at the game the other week. Did you have a good time?

Weird.

I can probably get away with not replying for a few hours. He knows I'm not one to break rules and keep my phone on me during the day. I tuck it back into my boot to put off responding. I don't want to send him mixed messages by appearing too eager and lead him to believe there is a chance we might get back together.

By the time the the final bell of the day rings, dismissing me from History, my phone is burning a hole in my boot and my nerves are frayed. After grabbing my things from my locker, I make my way to the art room. Ms. Owen, our art teacher, had requested that we pick up all our projects before last semester ended, but I hadn't had a chance to swing by the art room and collect mine.

And they are also so terrible that I would have rather abandoned them on the dusty shelves of the art room's storage closet to be forgotten.

I love art. But that doesn't mean I'm any good at it. Specifically, I suck at pottery—the only art class that fit into my fall semester schedule. As Ms. Owen had sent me a reminder email over break to pick up my “*unique pieces*,” I know I won't be able to ignore them much longer. I should've asked Marnie to grab them after her art class. Maybe she would have tossed them in the dumpster for me, too.

My eyes scan the dark, deserted classroom as I enter, seeing that it is already practically cleared out. I must be the

only person to procrastinate picking up my work. Likely because the other students actually *liked* their projects.

I load my monstrosities—er, *artwork*—into a tote bag that I brought with me. I am prepared to make a hasty exit, but as I approach the door to leave, a soft *thud* comes from the back room where the pottery kiln is.

And since I can't help but check on it, I turn toward the closed door.

My footsteps echo ominously across the tile floor with each step. Once at the door, I jiggle the handle, but, of course, it's locked. Instead, I peek in through the small window and my heart sinks to my feet.

Marnie is in there. With Zac.

Kissing.

Making out.

She's backed up against one of the metal racks where projects yet to be fired are resting. One of Zac's hands is on her hip while the other is bracing his body against the shelving. I can just make out Marnie's hand grabbing at the hair on the back of his head.

After standing there for a few moments, frozen between shock and horror, I pull myself away from the window. I pinch my eyes shut and will away the image now burned into my retinas, but it's no use.

Tears prick the back of my eyes and bile rises up my throat. That void that opens in my stomach when seeing the two of them has nothing on what I am experiencing now. This is worse. *So much worse.* I am getting punched in the gut, the air being ripped from my lungs.

Why am I surprised by what I saw? But more importantly, *why do I care?*

I know that they are dating, obviously. I also know that they kiss regularly. Heck, I know that they do a *lot more* than make out.

But there is something about seeing it with my own eyes that absolutely destroys me. And as much as I might want to convince myself that this is only justified anger burning beneath my skin, I can't. Because this emotional explosion isn't the result of some ill-fated attempt at being a good friend and wanting to protect Marnie's heart. No, this is rooted in something much more sinister.

Scooping up my bag I run from the room, my projects clanging together as I sprint through the exit door, uncaring if they survive my hasty escape.

Before I let myself ponder my reaction any further, I make a beeline to my car and speed out of the parking lot.

THAT NIGHT, AFTER A dinner of veggie spaghetti—recipe provided to my mother by none other than Lorna Jacobs—I pluck up the courage to finally respond to Dex.

I am already in a cruddy mood after what I witnessed in the art room, so why not see if this can make it worse.

Dylan

I'm good. The game was fun.

There. Straightforward and simple. No room for any misinterpretation on his part.

His response comes almost immediately.

And since I just responded, he knows I have my phone by me and likely expects a conversation.

Dex-the-ex

Things are going well. Excited for the new semester. Ours starts next week. Yours?

Dylan

We started already.

Hmm, that sounds rude. I send off another text to soften the edges.

Dylan

Today was our first day back after break. It's cool that you guys have an extra week.

Is that too much information? Why am I so worried about this conversation? Even if he does get it in his head that there might be lingering feelings between us, there is no way we will be rekindling anything.

Dex-the-Ex

Yeah. It's nice.

Wow. This conversation is going nowhere. Was this what it was like when we were dating? No wonder I wasn't feeling it.

Dex-the-ex

Who were you with at the game?

Oh. Didn't expect him to ask that.

Dylan

Marnie's boyfriend, Zac.

I am tempted to remind him that he has, in fact, met Zac. A few times. When Zac and Marnie first got together it was common for us all to hang out. Sometimes Zac would even drag Justin along. In the end, I decide not to remind Dex of

this because it would be counterproductive to reminisce to a time when he and I were still an item.

Dex-the-Ex

Oh. Right.

Dylan

It was nice to hear from you. Glad you're doing well. I've got some studying to do so I guess I'll talk to you later!

I send my message but receive an incoming message at the same time.

Dex-the-ex

I miss you.

Ooooh...

Well, *crap*.

What do I say to that? Truth is, I don't miss him. Not even as a friend. He is one of those people who float into your life, stay for a while, and then leave. Not so much as leaving a mark, good, bad, or otherwise. He *is* a good guy though. I would never want to hurt his feelings.

Thankfully, another text comes through before I can ponder it further.

Dex-the-ex

Yeah, ok. I've got some stuff to work on too. Talk later, Dylan.

Phew.

I throw my phone onto the small love seat under my window and flop on to my bed, the air *wooshing* from my

lungs, and stare at my light blue ceiling.

My room is done in soft blues, lavenders, and creams. Crisp, white furniture adds to the clean look. Desk, Headboard, dressers, and even a vanity—which I currently use to store the overflow of books from my bookshelf since I rarely wear a lick of makeup more than mascara and eyeliner—are all carefully color coordinated.

The rest of the house follows a similar color palette. Over the past few years, it's been Mom's goal to make our house positively color neutral. Pastels, whites, and earth tones are the only options. I love my room. And the rest of the house is fine too. The color scheme helps clear my mind and gives the whole house a sense of calm. The part that I'm *not* a huge fan of is that I suspect it was Lorna Jacobs who gave Mom the neutral idea in the first place.

Years ago, our house was an explosion of color. Artwork created by my brother, Gray and me, family photos, certificates and awards, all proudly displayed on nearly every surface.

Now it is reminiscent of a spa waiting room. Which, again, not a bad thing. Just... different.

Recently, Mom has developed a mild obsession with 'Cultivating a Great Family.' At least, that's what the title of one of her thick books calls it. Mom takes her role as, well, *Mom*, seriously. Reading parenting books and implementing all the ideas? Check. Organized bedrooms? Check. Peaceful living spaces? Check. Outings with the kids one-on-one? Check, check, check.

As much as Gray and I enjoy poking fun at her strategy, I can't deny that it works. Both of us have good relationships with our parents and neither has gone through a particularly rebellious phase. I look forward to the mother-daughter 'dates' Mom schedules for us and although Gray would never admit it, I know he enjoys having time with only Dad.

The book in question was a gift to her from Marnie's mom. Kind of a backhanded compliment, if you ask me. A '*hey*,

looks like your family might need a little help keeping it together' kind of gift.

I assume that Lorna also subscribes to the practices in the book, but the execution is vastly different between the women. While my mom smothers Gray and I with love, Lorna has more of a crushing approach for her own children.

Lately I've been beginning to wonder just how much sway Lorna has over my mother's choices. Whether intentionally or not, I suspect it is a *lot*. Mrs. Jacobs is always striving to have the picture-perfect *everything*. A put together family, a clean house with modern décor, and kids who keep up the image of a respectable, proper upbringing are important to her. In a way, I think my mom idolizes Lorna. Like she and the Jacobs are the standard to which we, and all other families, are judged against and should strive for.

Which is, in my opinion, ridiculous.

My room is tidy and organized, just as I like it. My desk, in my humble opinion, is a work of art. Notebooks, planners, and schoolbooks all organized by subject. Pencils and pens grouped by color. Post-it notes stacked neatly on a pile.

The most unorganized part of my room is the collage of photos I keep on a cork board by my bed. There are pictures of my family and I, Tess, Marnie, and even Dex.

Is it weird that I haven't destroyed the photos of Dex that I have? In the movies the heroine always tears up and burns any pictures of her ex. I guess I don't have any urge to destroy them. Don't *care* enough to. So they stay.

There are also a couple of pictures from when I was younger. My favorite actually includes Zac. We are standing on a dock and must have been around eight or nine years old. Well, I use the word 'standing' loosely. Zac, Gray, and Zac's brother are standing. I am falling into the lake as Zac stands next to me pretending that he doesn't notice.

He more than noticed.

He had pushed me in.

After the picture was taken, my brother got crazy defensive of me and went to push Zac in as well. I had already surfaced from the water and had a front row view as Zac dodged Gray's advances and intentionally jumped in himself, before holding onto the side of the dock and offering me a hand to help me back up.

Does Zac remember that?

Probably not, as I am sure he doesn't keep a photograph of the moment beside his bed. Is it weird that *I* keep it there? Before I can decide against it, I reach down and shove it into my nightstand drawer.

My eyes home in on the banner from Heathwood University that hangs on the wall opposite my bed. Next to the banner there are a few framed photos of me standing in front of the football stadium at Heathwood when my dad had taken Gray and I to a game there a few years ago.

Thinking about college again makes my stomach churn. Even though I had kept my phone on me all day, checking it constantly, the only activity was from Dex. Not a peep from my dream school.

Deep breaths. I'll just have to wait for a letter in the mail. Yes. Everything will be fine.

Dylan

EVERYTHING WILL *not* be fine. I feel beyond foolish. Utterly and completely stupid. I was *so sure* I would get into Heathwood. I could picture the moment I got my acceptance letter—the excitement and pride. Now? It’s like a cruel joke and I’m already experiencing premature embarrassment. How could I not have seen this coming?

Worst case scenario, I go to community college. There’s no shame in that. If anyone asks, I just decided to save money—wanted to get a feel for college before going to a big university. That’s believable, right?

Except I *really* want to go to Heathwood. The ancient trees, stone buildings, even the old, creaky dorms designated for freshmen—all of it creates a longing in my chest so strong that it’s almost painful.

My palms press into my eye sockets, attempting to relieve some of the pressure there. I’ve been staring at this computer screen for nearly two hours now, my eyes weak and gritty from the constant glow.

Three more applications—done.

It is Tuesday afternoon and all day there has been no sign of a letter, email, call, *or* text from Heathwood. I shouldn’t be

panicking, I know that, but although I try to convince myself that it will be fine, the nerves are still getting to me.

The last thing I want to have to do is admit to everyone who assumed I had my future completely figured out, that I thought so highly of my high school accomplishments that I only applied to a single school. A school that rejected me. That realization sits like a rock in my stomach.

I'm being silly. My letter will probably come within the next week. After all, I can't expect to hear from them the first day—or week—that they begin reaching out to prospective students. I may not have received an acceptance, but I *also* didn't receive a rejection.

Regardless, for the first time since I had originally decided to apply to Heathwood, I am faced with the realization that it is possible that I might *not* make it into my first-choice school.

Better to accept this sooner than later.

So, after school I headed straight for the library to plug through a few more college applications and scholarship forms. Deadlines are approaching, but I haven't missed many. Which is fortunate for me, as having put all of my eggs into one basket with HU, I hadn't finished any of my other applications. Which means that I have a lot of forms to fill out and essays to complete.

Bright sunlight streams through the floor to ceiling windows, warming up the cavernous room. It's been recently renovated, and all the furnishings are modernized. Normally, I prefer a more antique-traditional style, especially for places as sacred as libraries—dark wood, dim lighting, old, dusty books—but somehow this more modern feel makes the space even cozier.

There are a few individual seating areas spread out in front of the windows, and a handful of private study rooms and desks where students can work in semi-privacy. Right in the middle of the room sits a row of computers, which is where I am currently set up to work.

I hit submit on my final application for the day, add a note to my planner to ask a few of my teachers for letters of recommendation, then meticulously pack up my bag before pushing out of the sunny room into the chilly hallway.

Since the nearest exit to the parking lot from the library is through the women's locker room, I head in the direction of the gym.

A thick darkness overwhelms me as I push through the heavy fire doors. I guess all practices for the day have wrapped up already. In fact, the only light that can be seen is a dim glow from the large windows in the weight room that look out into the gym.

Using that soft light to guide me, I make my way into the room. The clanging of weights and muffled beats of music hits my ears, a sure sign that someone is in there.

As I walk by, I instinctively peek in the large window. It isn't *really* creeping, since the windows are floor to ceiling—probably so the coaches or teachers can see if there is anything dangerous going on. Sure enough, East, West, and Justin are lifting weights. Thankfully, their backs are to me, and I can go unnoticed. Plus, they're illuminated where I can hide safely in the shadows.

Again, I am holding onto my belief that I am *not* a stalker. But that doesn't mean that they would share my feelings if I were discovered. I can only imagine what crass comment Justin would have for me if he were to notice me lurking in the shadows.

I am about to turn away when my eyes catch on a fourth body doing pull-ups in the corner. He's facing the side, mirror-covered wall, his gaze locked firmly in front of him watching his form. He also has earbuds in, further distracting him from me.

My eyes stick to his body, wandering over the flex and pull of muscle with each rep. The movements are hypnotic. Not only is he doing more pull-ups than I would have thought humanly possible, but he is doing said pull-ups *shirtless*.

Which, although against the school's dress policy, I'm not mad about.

Not. At. *All*.

I'm not at all invested in high school sports, and certainly not in our lackluster football team. But if I were, I would have been fuming that Zachary Morgan, the star running back, threw in the towel only two weeks into preseason practices. That being said, his body shows no indication of him *not* being an athlete. I suppose there is something to be said for the way he keeps up his physique despite opting out of playing any sports his senior year. It shows dedication, if not to his team, then at least to his own health.

I know that Zac is in shape, everyone knows that, but I didn't realize *how* in shape he is. He is lean and tall, so part of me just assumed that he was skinny. *Not* that he had a body worthy of carving in marble. And no, that's not an exaggeration. There is a definite six pack that he's been keeping hidden beneath his practical tees and hoodies.

I wouldn't call him beefy, or brawny, but certainly toned.

With each pull-up I watch as the muscles in his abs and arms ripple, causing my own stomach to do a fluttery flip-flop.

His dark hair hangs down over his forehead clinging to it with sweat, the exertion of each rep making him exhale a sharp puff of air.

Two small moles—or maybe they are freckles—dot his lower abdomen and a lone bead of sweat drips from his face, leaving a path down his torso as it moves lower, trailing between them.

It's sweat. On its own, it isn't at all alluring. But the sculpted muscles it's siding over make it positively entrancing.

I want to lick that bead of sweat.

In the recesses of my mind tires screech to a stop. Gears grind to a halt, horns and sirens sound, and there is a sputtering reminiscent of the sound my car enjoys making on occasion.

No. You most certainly do not!

The thought is so absurd, so jarring, that I choke back a laugh.

But it's also... true.

The air leaves my body in a slow, long drag. Zac is *not* single, making ogling him the last thing I should be doing.

Still, I can't look away...

Without warning Zac drops from the bar with a huff, startling me from my peepshow. Tiptoeing, I sneak past the window then sprint through the locker room and out the door to the parking lot where the frigid air smacks me in the face.

It's not until I'm in my car that I can fully think straight again. The cool air soothes an ache in my lungs and brings me back to reality from the fuzzy haze I had been in. It's fine. So what if I had an urge to lick Zac's abs? That's normal. A purely natural reaction, one I am sure any female would also have. Just because I like his *body* doesn't mean I like *him*.

I do *not* have a crush on my best friend's boyfriend.

Yep. Everything. Is. Fine.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I avoid Marnie at school. How can I look her in the eye knowing full well I was analyzing her boyfriend's impressive abdominals fewer than twenty-four hours ago?

Simple, I can't. She'll know something is up and she won't stop pestering me about it until she finds out what it is.

It's not until after school that I come face-to-face with her. While everyone else is scrambling to leave the building, she is still in front of Zac's open locker, twirling one of her light brown strands of hair around her finger in a flirty way that I could only dream of pulling off. Her pristine white backpack is thrown over her shoulder, her head tipped back to stare into Zac's eyes.

While Marnie's focus is solely on her boyfriend, Zac appears distracted, his eyes darting around as if looking for an out of the conversation.

Biting back an angry groan, I grab my bag from my own locker with much more force than necessary.

"Aren't you a ball of sunshine today," Carla says, leaning against the locker next to mine.

"Yeah, sorry. Just... stressed or something."

Or something is right.

"Still no word from Heathwood?"

Well, that *hadn't* been what I was worrying about, turns out watching the couple across the hall is a decent distraction in that respect. But now I *am* thinking about the letter of admission that seems likely to never arrive, putting an even bigger damper on my mood.

"Nothing," I admit, deflating even more.

"You'll get in," Marnie supplies, joining our huddle. A brief glance over my shoulder tells me that Zac has abandoned his post by his locker and is walking down the hall among a crowd of students.

"Thanks," I grumble.

"So, you really can't make it to the game tonight?" Carla asks Marnie.

"Nope. You know how my mom can get with these things. She needs the whole family there to look good in front of her stuffy colleagues."

"That's too bad, it's never the same without you."

Marnie lets out a puff of air, blowing a stray strand of hair back over her shoulder.

"I know, I'm bummed I have to miss out. Reed gets to play in his game and skip the dinner, leaving me to be stuck with a bunch of college professors three times my age who talk around in circles about literally nothing."

“You should try to shock them tonight,” Carla recommends. “Strike up a conversation about all the downsides of higher education or something. Really stir the pot.”

We each let loose a pained laugh. As funny as it would be to watch Marnie upend Lorna’s plan for the evening, we all know it would never happen. Lorna would likely end up locking Marnie in her bedroom—evil stepmother style—for such an offense.

“Well, I have to go, guys. Zac is driving me home and I don’t want to keep him waiting.” For the first time maybe ever, Marnie’s face dulls at the mention of Zac. My gaze flits to Carla to see if she picked up on Marnie’s mood, but she’s already typing away on her phone, oblivious to us.

A LONG, BLARING BUZZER sounds, echoing through the gymnasium. It’s halftime, we are down by thirty, and it’s obvious we won’t be making a comeback. It’s disappointing. And a tad embarrassing. My mood hadn’t improved much all day and I had been banking on some excitement tonight to lift my spirits.

I shoot Marnie a text letting her know that it might not be worth it for her to rush to the game, to which she responds with a simple thumbs up emoji.

The players clear the court and head into the locker rooms for what will have to be a *doozy* of a peptalk to bring them back from *that*. Hopping from the bleachers, I head to the ladies’ room, content in the knowledge that I am going to miss the cheerleader’s halftime routine—no real loss there. With any luck Zac will be mesmerized by the scantily clad girls doing their choreographed dance and I’ll be relieved of my nannying duties for a few minutes.

I managed to pick a seat only a couple of rows behind Zac, giving me an optimal vantage point for my spying. Though truthfully, there has been nothing noteworthy to report. He’s surrounded by people vying for his attention but aside from the occasional person approaching him to say hello, he hasn’t

spoken much. He does look happy, though. He laughs often. A sound that, despite the loud and crowded gym, tickles my ears and makes my heart flutter.

It's overwhelming, which is why I opt to use the bathrooms further down the side hall rather than those right off the gymnasium. Was this a good idea? Judging solely from the darkness of the hallway, no. No, it was not. The blackness is cut only by a couple of strategically placed emergency lights, and I try not to get paranoid as I walk through the silent hall.

After doing my business and emerging from the bright bathroom, the darkness is even more imposing. *Denser*. The well-lit main hallway in front of me calls to me like a beacon. Despite knowing this is a safe school, I can't tamp down my nerves or stop the tingling sensation skating over my skin.

So, when a hand grabs my arm and another wraps over my mouth, I'm already on high alert. A yelp squeaks from me and the next thing I know, I'm standing in the janitor's closet, the solid door closing with a *thud* behind me.

My captor releases their hold on me, and I instinctively shove them off. My hands meet firm muscles. Definitely a man.

"What are you—" I sputter, still unable to make out the identity of my abductor in the complete darkness.

A deep laugh cuts me off, followed by a "Chill, Dylan."

My fear is promptly traded for irritation.

"What are you *doing*? You can't just grab women and drag them wherever you want, Zac!" I exclaim.

A teasing grin splits his face. "Usually, they come with me willingly."

Ewww.

"Zac!"

"Sorry?"

I huff. "What do you want?"

“To talk,” he says flippantly, as if it’s obvious. Because sure, that is what anyone who gets pulled into a broom closet would assume their captor wanted. *A conversation.*

I let out a long sigh. “Talk about what? I don’t want to miss the game.”

At this, he laughs. Then pins me with a look sharp with skepticism. “You don’t care about the game.”

He must have put me under some type of hypnosis. Because all of a sudden, I *don’t* care about the game. Zac takes a step closer—a movement that I can *feel* rather than see—and my heart rate spikes again. This time having nothing to do with the adrenaline of being kidnapped.

“Actually, you being away might give them some luck. Maybe I’ll keep you here for a while.” His breath fans against the side of my face.

Okay, so he’s closer than I realized.

At last, his shadowed features come into focus, my eyes adjusting to the dimness of the space aided by a remarkably dingy nightlight plugged into a wall outlet.

There isn’t much to see, though. Zac’s eyes are darker than usual, and there are stark high and low lights shown on the planes of his face across his nose and cheekbones. He belongs in some type of film noir with this lighting.

And it suits him.

His lips tug up into a confident smirk as I take in his features. Ugh, that cocky expression. It really isn’t fair for him to look this good. Even in near darkness.

My mind skips back to the last time I saw him in a dark, closeted space. Of course, then it was Marnie he was with. The memory is enough to zap away the goosebumps that had erupted across my skin.

“Seriously Zac, what do you want?” I demand again with extra force in my voice to overcompensate for my shaky breathing.

“I broke up with Marnie. Earlier this afternoon.” He pulls back, gauging my reaction.

“Wait... Really?” The words sputter from my mouth. A weight lifts from my chest and I’m suddenly lighter than I have been in weeks. *Months*. And all the anger that had been holding me down today? That is gone too.

Poof.

Vanished.

I’m not sure what I expected when he pulled me into this smelly closet, but this was not it. And why was he compelled to break this news to me in a closet, anyway? Which, by the way, *definitely* required him to follow me out of the gym.

He nods. “You were right. She was way more invested in our relationship than I was—more invested than I could ever be. You got me thinking and I decided it was best to call it quits.”

A sense of dread crawls through my veins, because oh *no*. *Did he listen to what I said weeks ago in the minivan?* Not only listen, but *act* on it?

I just sabotaged my best friend’s relationship. Not intentionally. But how would it sound to Marnie if she were to hear that I planted the seed that led to her getting dumped?

“You... you did this because of me?” I ask, suddenly panicked.

“Hey”—his voice softens, thumb stroking my arm reassuringly—“if anything, you spared her heartache. We both know it would have hurt her more if we kept up whatever we were doing. Honestly, you only encouraged me to take a deeper look at what was going on, and I didn’t like it.”

He’s right, of course, but I still feel a bit slimy about the role I played. My mind spins through the repercussions of this development and I lose track of the boy in front of me. Before I can register what is happening, one of Zac’s warm hands is stroking my bare forearm, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

“Well, good. I guess?” I peek up at him, his gentle touch doing *nothing* to help my thought clarity. Starting from my feet, his eyes roam over my body with a confident easiness before finally settling on my face.

Instinctively, I turn away from him. I’ve never been good at eye contact and am particularly bad at it with gorgeous people. You know, like the brown-eyed beauty towering over me.

“Yeah, it is good,” he whispers, his breath tickling my neck and the tiniest bit of rough scruff dancing against my cheek as he moves in closer to me yet again.

Alarm bells sound in my head. *Too close! Zac is much* too close. One of his hands moves up my arm until I feel his fingers coast along my neck.

Gulp.

“Zac?” I flatten myself against the door to create more space between our bodies. I’m not sure if I am more taken aback by the fact that someone as outwardly beautiful as Zac could seriously be considering kissing me, or the fact that the beautiful person in question *just* broke my best friend’s heart earlier that afternoon.

But that’s what he is doing, right? You don’t crowd a girl, touch her arm all seductive like, lean in, and then *not* kiss her. Does he even realize the signals that he’s putting out, or is he so used to flirting that it has become a default setting that he isn’t able to turn it off?

Subtly, I sniff the air around his mouth, searching for some indication on his breath that he is drunk or high or otherwise impaired. But all I come up with is the cleaning solution stored in the closet and the musty scent of wet mops and sponges. I guess these fumes could have gotten to him.

“Yeah?” His voice is a hoarse whisper.

“Why am I in a closet?”

He pauses, as if considering for the first time *why* he dragged me into this tiny, damp room.

“I wanted to talk to you. Alone.”

“I don’t think—” my words are cut off when he shifts yet closer again, this time moving so our bodies are pressed firmly together. Legs, torsos, arms—yep, all touching. There is *too much touching!*

“Don’t think what, Dylan?” he prompts, minty breath washing over me. Okay, *no alcohol there.*

“I think we need to go back to the game.” My earlier excuse comes out again, but much weaker this time.

A stillness passes between us, the distant thudding of a basketball and the occasional referee whistle drowning out the sound of my thumping heart. I truly have no idea what is going on right now and don’t want to be the end of some joke. Though, the deep burning in his eyes and his stuttered breathing tells me that he is serious about whatever is happening.

Yet, of all the girls I’ve heard of him being with in the past, none of them were like *me*. Like he mentioned earlier, there are plenty of girls who would eagerly jump at the chance at a few minutes alone with Zac in a dark closet. *So why me?*

This, comparing myself to his past flings, is sobering and serves as a necessary reminder to keep up my guard. But when Zac moves his hand upward, fingers now toying with the end of my ponytail, it’s just... it’s too much. Too confusing. *What. Is. Happening?*

I’ve realized long ago that I am not immune to Zac’s charm, although I only recently accepted that fate. If my reaction to seeing him shirtless just yesterday is any indication, I find him attractive. In fact, I might even admit to having the *smallest* crush on him. But never did I imagine that the situation would arise when I would have to resist it.

What would it be like to kiss Zac Morgan?

I’m sure he is a great kisser. He’s had enough practice, anyway. Me, on the other hand... let’s just say that I’m lacking in that department.

It would be easy, too. His face is inches from my own, maybe only centimeters, his nose already brushing against mine. All I would need to do is raise up slightly onto my toes and my lips would connect with his.

But then reality hits, a bucket of ice water being poured over my head.

“What’s happening here?” I demand.

He pulls back. “Huh?”

“You... what are you trying to pull? You dumped my best friend and you think that I would... *now*... with *you*?”

“Dylan, I—”

—“And before her you hopped from girl to girl like some kind of... frisky... *kangaroo*!”

The cringe on his face at my odd analogy matches my own. Thankfully, he doesn’t dwell on it.

Zac heaves out a deep sigh before taking a small step back. “Look. It sounds bad when you put it like that—”

“How else can I put it? Sorry, but it’s hard to spin your track record and show you in a good light.”

“I don’t know what you want from me! I’m a teenage guy. We... get around. It happens. I wasn’t intentionally trying to hurt anyone.” He runs his hand through his hair, mussing it up more and, frustratingly, looking even better.

“Believe it or not, not all teenagers are hormone-fueled narcissists.” On that note, I turn the handle and step out the door. I’ll just run to the ladies’ room to hide and—

“Is that really what you think of me?”

I pull up short, Zac’s soft tone catching me off guard. “I...” *No. I don’t think that. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that!* “I should go,” I mumble.

I scurry out the door like a scared rabbit—*dang it!* That would have been a much better analogy than *kangaroo*—then hustle back into the ladies’ room, leaving no possibility of him following me to continue with his ridiculous conversation.

Zac wanted to kiss me. He *could've* kissed me. That thought shouldn't flatter me. If anything, it should be a warning. A big, colossal red flag that shows Zac for who he really is. A player. The type of guy to jump from one girl to the next, in the *same day*, without batting an eye. No emotional connection. Just fun.

But what does it say about me that I just as easily could have given into him? Because that's what would have happened. If I had closed my mind to the circumstances and surrendered myself to the sensations and emotions of being with Zac then it is entirely possible that we would still be closed in that small room together doing much more than talking.

And that thought terrifies me.

Dylan

“HE’S A TOOL, MARN, don’t even waste your time thinking about him.” Tess is rubbing her hand along Marnie’s back in soothing circles as I approach my friends in front of our lockers on Thursday morning. Marnie’s face is puffy, as if she’s been crying. But more than sad, she looks furious.

Alright, so we’re addressing this first thing. It’s probably for the best. There is a part of me that feels bad for any part I had played in the demise of their relationship. As toxic and one-sided as it was, Marnie had been happy. Even if she was isolated in her own little world—and possibly even delusional. But a bigger part of me knows it was the right thing to do. As Zac said, Marnie would be hurt far more in the long run if she kept being dragged along by him.

“That shouldn’t be a problem. Apparently, I didn’t mean anything to him, anyway.” Marnie responds, her voice tight.

“Are you doing okay?” I tentatively approach her, praying that Zac didn’t mention that I basically convinced him to call it quits with her.

Or that he tried to *kiss me*. His lips never made contact but that was where his touches were headed. I didn’t imagine it—of that, I am sure.

“Yeah. Zac and I broke up.”

Okay. I'm not sensing any hostility. At least, none directed toward me. I'm in the clear there.

"I'm sorry, Marnie."

"Thanks, I don't know where we went wrong, you know?" Utter defeat shows on her weary face, and I can't blame her. She idolized—was obsessed with?—Zac.

"Yeah. I thought you guys were the real deal." This from Carla, who has now joined our huddle.

Our pity party is interrupted by the arrival of none other than Zac himself, swaggering through the doors surrounded by his usual crew.

Tess and Carla stare daggers at him, while Marnie suddenly becomes preoccupied with a scuff on her black leather booties. Timidly, I lift my gaze up to meet Zac's and see that he is keeping his eyes on me, his expression unreadable. At the last minute, he shoots me a quick smile before turning to his locker. All I can do is hope he won't spill my secret and make me out to be the villain.

The rest of the day proceeds as usual, with the exception of Marnie now actively avoiding Zac. By the end of the afternoon, I am growing increasingly comfortable that Zac isn't going to leak our conversation to Marnie, seeing as how the two appear as though they are never going to speak again. But that doesn't mean I am off the hook entirely. Zac can tell *anybody* at school and they would be more than happy to pass the information to Marnie solely for the purpose of creating drama.

It isn't until the end of the day that I see Zac again, and unfortunately it is under less-than-ideal circumstances.

I just finished meeting with the guidance counselor to discuss college and scholarship applications. Since I have yet to hear from Heathwood—yes, anxiety concerning my four-day late letter is still in full force—I decided that maybe it was time to call in reinforcements and see where Mrs. Squib thought I stood in the grand scheme of things.

Thankfully, I have the grades and test scores to get in almost anywhere I want, which hopefully will still include Heathwood. The only question is how much I can manage to scrape up in scholarships.

My family isn't hurting financially, but that doesn't mean that we can afford to shell out over forty thousand dollars or more annually for the school I had imagined since I even knew that college existed. Of course, there are student loans, but I have yet to hear any positive firsthand accounts concerning those, so I will be staying away if possible.

As I open the door to head into the parking lot I am met with the familiar gust of chilled air. It's still January, making the current frigid temperatures acceptable, but they are growing old. I could go for a nice sixty-degree day. Pulling my scarf up to cover more of my face I do an awkward jog-walk across the frozen pavement to my car.

After using the manual key to unlock and open the driver side door, I plop into the seat and toss my bag to the passenger side with a sigh. I rub my hands together to create some semblance of warmth and take a few calming breaths. This whole *college* thing is stressing me out. What I had thought was a sure thing weeks ago is now haunting me. As is my decision not to consider the possibility that I may need a backup school. I was presumptuous and am paying for it now.

Regaining some composure, I shove the key into the ignition. But as I turn the key, instead of the steady rumbling that typically greets me, I am instead met with a high-pitched squealing. An indication of my engine's fruitless attempt to turn over. After a few more tries I drop my forehead to the steering wheel with a soft *thud* and let out a self-deprecating laugh.

Of course, my car won't start.

It isn't a rare occurrence by any stretch of the imagination, though I can't deny that it is becoming more and more frequent. This is another cost I will have to factor into my college budget. After all, I can't go to school away from home with a car that prefers to rest more often than *move*.

It's an old car, I get that. It's worn out from a lifetime of driving and deserves a break. Retirement. Unfortunately for both of us, though, it is going to have to putter on a few months longer.

It's just after three thirty and a quick glance around the parking lot tells me that the only cars still here are those of athletes who would be at practice for at least another hour. Both of my parents are still at work and most of my friends are long gone.

I let my head fall to the padded steering wheel again, this time not bothering to lift it up. Instead, I growl.

Just as I surrender hope and move to grab my bag to head back into the building, a loud honking next to me forces my head to jerk up. Idling next to my small gray-blue car is Zac's black truck, his passenger window rolled down as he signals from the driver side for me to roll down my window as well. Which I reluctantly do.

“Car troubles, Park?”

“Yeah...” I say, “It won't turn over.”

“Hop in.” Zac leans over his center console and pops the passenger door open for me. Not in any position to turn down a ride, I sling my bag over my shoulder and hop into his truck. Though I still glance around to make sure nobody can see me fraternizing with *Enemy Number One*, as Carla has branded him.

She's not someone you want to get on the bad side of.

I slam the door behind me as Zac cranks up the heat. I appreciate both the warmth and the background noise of the fan. Zac doesn't waste any time before addressing the very topic I was hoping he would forget.

“I'm sorry about the closet yesterday. It—*I*— was out of line.”

Oh. “Thanks.”

“Seriously, I didn't mean it. You're a great girl, Dylan. Too good for any of the losers at this school. Myself included. I

shouldn't have come on to you like that. I was in a weird place after breaking up with Marnie and I know you'd never be interested in me," he finishes.

I'm not sure how to feel about that. Honestly, his words sound like what you tell someone you're brushing off. *You're great, but...*

Also, I don't particularly care for the self-deprecating sentiment that he tacked on at the end. *'I know you'd never be interested in me.'* What does he mean by that? Is it just a way to turn it on me, like he shouldn't have come on to me because I wouldn't be attracted instead of the opposite?

Rather than dissect every word that comes from Zac's mouth, I do what I do best—brush it off and deflect.

"Don't worry about it. You flirt with everyone. I probably would have been more offended if you didn't try to pull something." The words ring true, and they sound empty as I speak them.

"Exactly." He shoots a wink my way. "I gotta get back out there and play the field."

Okay, that stings. Even though I know the type of guy he is, it still hurts to be reduced to merely another potential hookup. Yet even as he jokes, there is something beneath the surface of his usually playful tone. As if he isn't enjoying where our conversation has gone.

"You can't be mad with me, you know," he says after a few minutes of quiet. "You basically *told* me to end things with Marnie."

He's right. I shouldn't fault him ending their sham of a relationship. Yet irritation still stabs at me. *Why? Why am I still so frustrated with Zac?*

My lack of response only causes Zac to push the issue as he tries to puzzle it out for himself.

"Really, it doesn't even make sense. You weren't happy when I dated her, and now you're angry with me for breaking up with her? I don't get it. You never get angry at *anyone*. And really, I don't think I'm such a terrible person. So why are you

mad at me, Dylan? Why are you so peeved at me for dumping ___”

I snap.

“I’m not mad at you for *dumping* Marnie! I’m mad at you for dating her in the first place!”

My body tenses at the admission. Zac gasps as he slowly turns to me, eyes occasionally flicking back to the road.

Why would you be mad at me for that, Dylan? his face says.

“Because it opened the door for you to hurt her,” I quickly amend. He’s still skeptical, but mercifully, lets it slide.

“And I’m sorry for that.” He lets out a sigh and rubs one hand down his face in frustration, keeping the other firmly on the wheel. And why is even his frustration adorable? “I swear, I really thought the two of us were on the same page in terms of what our relationship was. Can you just maybe... I don’t know. *Try* not to be pissed at me?”

Wait. Is Zachary Morgan actually affected by my anger toward him? Since when does he care about what *I* think?

He goes quiet again, his whispered words hanging between us. It’s his openness that I blame for what I say next.

“I can try not to be mad at you.” I offer a shadow of a smile. “We can’t be friendly in public, though. My friends would never forgive me if they thought I was taking your side.”

“You’re saying we can’t be friendly in public, but can we be friendly in *private*?”

The look I give him could have melted steel. He must sense it, too, because his hands fly up in surrender, taking them off the wheel in the process. “I didn’t mean that sexually, I swear.” He crosses his heart.

“Hands on the wheel!” I screech.

With an irritating smile and a slow shake of his head he places his hands firmly back on the leather, making a show of

gripping it firmly. My eyes roll.

“I’m not going to say anything. About you suggesting that I break up with Marnie, that is. Like I said yesterday, it wasn’t your fault. It was going to happen. I should have seen the signs earlier. It just took you telling it to me straight to realize it.”

“Thank you,” I say. Just hearing him say that makes me warm up to him significantly. It’s like he could sense the anxiety I’ve been drowning under because of this.

He lets out a deep breath and we both stare out the windshield.

“I try to be a good guy,” he whispers. I don’t know how to respond to that level of depth coming from Zac. So, I simply don’t acknowledge it.

He pulls up in front of my house and I scramble out of the vehicle. As quickly as I slam my door shut, I hear the window rolling down and Zac calling out to me.

“For the record, if you *did* decide you wanted to kiss me, I wouldn’t turn you down.”

That cocky smile is back on his face, and I can’t hide my own as I jog into my house, careful to avoid any of the ice patches scattered up our walkway.

THE REMAINDER OF THE week passes in a similar fashion. My friends and I avoid Zac and any conversation that even touches on his relationship with Marnie.

Both Thursday and Friday evenings Marnie and her mother come over after working hours to sulk and commiserate with my mother and me. They make themselves present over the weekend as well. On Thursday, I was happy to support Marnie—to be a source of comfort for her. On Friday, I was feeling a bit useless. But now, on Sunday, these unending girls’ nights are becoming excessive.

Lorna’s near constant presence in my home also serves as a permanent reminder that I have yet to hear from Heathwood. You know, where she *works*.

It's almost cruel on her part. Her position at the university gives her insider knowledge. She likely knows if I was accepted or not. I am sure she could easily look up the information in a database or something and put me out of my misery. But she won't. I think she thrives on watching people squirm.

Still, her involvement with the university is yet another reason to keep on her good side and away from Zac. There's no denying that the Jacobs are powerful and influential people. Mr. Jacobs as the Police Chief and Mrs. Jacobs, who has her fingers in a bit of everything.

Apparently, Marnie has decided that the only way to mend her broken heart is with girl time—and lots of it. Between my mother, Marnie, and her mother, Zac has been thoroughly bashed and called every name under the sun.

By everyone but me.

I can't manage to get on the bandwagon. I am in the unique position of having heard the ins and outs of the relationship from both Marnie and Zac's perspectives, and while Marnie might feel scorned, I *know* that Zac hadn't set out to be a bad guy, to hurt anyone. It just... happened that way.

Sure, Zac may be cocky, but I can't bring myself to call him anything worse than that. On most occasions I just nod along in agreement with any complaints Marnie and our mothers offer about him, unable to add any of my own comments for fear of letting my real thoughts about Zac slip.

The four of us are huddled around the dining room table. The whirr of my mother's blender mixing up margaritas—virgin and traditional—the only respite I have from the complaining of the women around me.

My dad and brother had planned on joining us, as Sundays are usually pizza night in the Park household, but have learned to make themselves scarce in the evenings unless they want to be sucked into our drama.

“I knew that boy had issues, his father was the same way when we were younger, rest his soul.” Lorna says it scornfully, and my mother makes the sign of the cross after the blatant insult. Zac’s father died in a car accident when Zac was four, and it is no secret that back in his high school days he was a womanizer. That is, until he met and fell in love with Zac’s mom.

It makes me wish I could have met Mr. Morgan. I guess I *had* met him. But I have no memory of him. I would have liked to see his dynamic with Zac’s mom. She has yet to remarry, and rumor has it that she is still grieving the loss of the love of her life.

Zac also looks eerily similar to his father at his age from the pictures that I have seen, and I can imagine that the constant comparisons between the two don’t help Zac to make the best decisions. Mom and Lorna aren’t the only people who have the preset notion that he is destined to be just like his father in the *reckless decisions and women* departments.

It’s an angle I hadn’t considered before when analyzing Zac. *He doesn’t have a dad.* I can’t imagine what that would be like.

“Oh Bette, just be thankful that your Dylan didn’t fall into any of this nonsense. Dex was a good one, never would’ve gone around behaving like this.” Lorna’s hand flutters around. It would seem she isn’t the type of person to get happier after a few drinks. If anything, she’s only gotten more bitter since arriving.

“Yes, Dex is a good kid,” my mother responds wistfully, her eyes already slightly unfocused from the alcohol. “We’re lucky that they separated on such good terms and have been able to remain friends.”

Sure, we ended on decent terms for the situation, but ‘friends’ is a stretch. I haven’t heard from Dex in the weeks leading up to his impromptu text messages earlier this week, and I’m certainly not going to reach out to give him any false hope.

“Do you think you two will get back together, Dylan?” Marnie asks me.

I cough around the straw of my virgin margarita. This is the first time a question has been directed my way all evening, and it is one that I feel oddly nervous answering.

All eyes are on me now as I continue coughing, taking another sip to clear my throat, and begin coughing again.

“I think it would be lovely if they did, Marnie,” Mom responds on my behalf.

So much for being able to add to the conversation.

“It is too bad... Zac’s behavior, and all,” Lorna continues, redirecting the conversation away from me and back to her own daughter. “His father may have gotten around quite a bit—among some of the other bad decisions he’s made in his lifetime,” she and Mom share a strange look, as if they’re in on some secret, “but at least he did well for himself academically. I guess it’s too much on Stella to see that her boys are well educated *and* well behaved.”

“Maybe,” Mom agrees softly. “It was nice that my kids got to spend time with their family when they were younger, but I’m glad the relationship fizzled out before they could be influenced by Zac and Alex’s bad decisions.”

I can’t help it anymore and send my mom a look that is pure spite. How can she assume that Alex and Zac are such terrible kids? And what is even more offensive, even if they *were* terrible people, how could she assume that Gray and I would have been influenced?

Unfortunately, she isn’t paying me any attention, so she misses the daggers I shoot at her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I pull it out to discreetly check my messages, not even hoping to hear from Heathwood at the moment. Literally just welcoming any distraction at all from this conversation.

Zac

Hey, It's Zac.

Well, what a coincidence.

Also, what the *heck*?

Do Zac and I text now? Is that a thing? Last I remember, I told him that I would try not to hate him. I didn't give him the green light to be buddy-buddy.

But you did say you could be friends outside of the public eye.

And texting would certainly be considered more private than an actual conversation.

Well played, Mr. Morgan. Well played.

Zac

Just wanted to see if you still had my number.

Dylan

Sure do!

Well *that* was peppier than necessary. A few more minutes go by, and I worry I should have something more interesting. I contemplate putting my phone away as I've likely killed the conversation. But for some reason I can't seem to get my hands to slip it back into my pocket.

Zac

So, are you busy?

Cue the butterflies. Nerves? I don't even know what this buzzing in my belly is.

Dylan

Yeah. Sorry, hanging with Marnie.

And our mothers.

Zac

Gotcha.

Zac

I feel weird asking, but have I come up in the conversation at all?

Of course, he has. He's been the *only* topic of conversation. A conversation which, despite my inattention, continues around me. I don't say that, though. I go for the lighter approach.

Dylan

Don't flatter yourself ;)

Zac

So that's a yes.

Zac

I'm guessing nothing good is being said?

Dylan

Not sure if I should say. You know, for confidentiality.

Dylan

Sorry.

And I really am. I feel... *icky* even hearing the constant beratement of Zac's character. But maybe if I make light of it, Zac will too.

Zac

Feel free to put in a good word for me.

Zac

You know, if it won't get you in trouble for treason.

Funny he should mention treason, because with the way Lorna is glaring at me now, likely having noticed my phone, I would have to have a death wish to offer Zac any praise to these ladies.

Dylan

That might not be a great idea. 'Know your audience,' and all.

Zac

Right.

Zac

I'll leave you alone. Wouldn't want you to get caught fraternizing with the enemy. Enjoy your night.

Any warmth I felt seeing his name light up my phone is quickly snuffed out. This isn't a playful text. While dismissive, it also sounds like he is hurting. As I go to slip my phone back

in my pocket it goes off once more. Naturally, I check it immediately.

Zac

Oh, and Dylan?

Dylan

Yeah?

Zac

Please don't let her get to you.

Zac

I promise I'm not all bad.

My chest tightens. I have to slip my phone back into the pocket of my jeans to prevent myself from rereading the words that have my heart melting for him.

At around eleven Marnie and Lorna leave, much to my relief. I love Marnie, but there is only so much complaining that I can stand to hear before wanting to rip my ears off and shove them in the blender that my mother has been using all too frequently this evening.

“Are they gone?” Gray calls out as I walk past his open bedroom door. Although it's late, he's still wide awake, the blue light from his computer illuminating his face.

“Just left,” I say. “You don't have to hide, they're not that bad.”

He scoffs, looks back to the computer screen, and resumes typing. “You're kidding, right?”

Yeah... they are that bad. If I could have gotten away with it, the thought of hiding away in my room would have sounded

preferable to the whining I had to endure. Oddly enough, most of it wasn't even coming from Marnie, but her mother.

“How's ol' Lorna-Doodle doing?” Gray asks, as if sensing that my thoughts had gone to her.

I try to stifle the smile at the nickname. It suits her.

“She's fine. Upset on Marnie's behalf.”

Gray stalls his typing and makes eye contact with me for the first time since our conversation started.

“Is Marnie really that upset?”

I shrug. She is, right? “I think so. Why?”

“Just seems a little dramatic to me. I mean, sure, she got dumped. Whoop-dee-do. Were they that serious? I don't know them that well, but I got the feeling that Marnie's bitterness might be a result of wounded pride rather than a broken heart.”

All the interactions between Marnie and Zac that I witnessed over the past few months filter through my mind. The way she would gaze up at Zac or become wistful when she spoke of him, how she defended their relationship to her mother when they first started dating, how she was willing to go out of her way to spend time with him, even going as far as pushing me to the side, and, of course, the possessiveness with which she claimed him.

“She was really into their relationship. I've never seen her so hung up on a guy before.”

“I still think she's being dramatic,” Gray mumbles, directing his attention back to the glow of his screen, effectively dismissing me from his room.

Zac

THE GOOD THING ABOUT never slapping the ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ label on my past flings? I never had to deal with the fall out of a huge breakup. But, since I tried to be a decent guy and did the whole ‘long term relationship’ thing with Marnie, I now find myself on the receiving end of endless evil glares from Marnie’s friends. And let me tell you, there isn’t much scarier than a tiny, sweet girl like Tess staring at you in a way that makes it clear she isn’t above throttling you.

The only thing worse than Tess’ murder eyes is the expression Dylan sports whenever she sees me. Pity. Which is not great for my ego. I don’t need *pity*. What I need is for everyone to forget that Marnie and I ever dated in the first place.

I could have handled the whole breakup better. I’ll own that. But honestly, I didn’t know *how* to break up with someone. Blame that on my lack of relationship experience, but it’s true.

Case in point, less than forty-eight hours before I finally pulled the trigger on our relationship, I kissed Marnie. She cornered me in a vacant art room under the guise of “talking”—which I was all for. I had mentally prepared myself to end things right then and there. To explain that things had

run their course and that we were better off as friends. You know, all the cliché ways of letting someone down easily.

But then she jumped me. Literally threw herself into my arms and kissed me with more enthusiasm than she ever had. Instinctively, I kissed her back. There is a reason I'm not known for my impulse control. I knew it was wrong, and that the whole ordeal was probably only some last-ditch effort on her part to save our relationship, but I gave into temptation and only succeeded in dragging out the inevitable and looking like more of a jerk when I did finally cut the cord.

So yeah, the daggers being shot my way by her group are probably warranted.

Regardless of whether or not Marnie truly 'loved' me—which I highly suspect she *didn't*—I could have managed everything better.

Messy breakup aside, let's not forget how lately my mind's been more occupied by my girlfriend's *best friend* than my actual girlfriend. Not a sign of a healthy relationship.

Almost kissing Dylan when I confessed to ending things with Marnie was just the cherry on top of my crap-decision sundae. Usually, I am much smoother than that. More calculated. I shouldn't have made a move on her, having just dumped her friend and all. But after I spoke with Marnie I just felt... *excited*. Energized. Ready to jump into something. And in that moment I realized that Dylan and I were both single. *At the same time*.

The worst part is that I have no excuse for my ill-timed seduction attempt aside from the sad fact that being alone with Dylan must have turned me into a lovesick fool.

I had to play it off for Dylan, but I would be lying if I said that there was anything I wanted more that night than to press her against the door and kiss her. And I fear my failed attempt only damaged Dylan's opinion of me even further. It's bad enough that she thinks I was using her best friend, but making a pass at her only compounds the problem.

I've enjoyed the other girls I've been with. We didn't exactly have any deep, earth-shattering conversations or connections, but for the most part they were cool. We had fun, but it was all surface level. They weren't looking for anything serious, and neither was I. But they never made me feel... special. Worthy? Like a *person*? I can't describe it. I was always some conquest, a prize they could claim. I thought having Marnie as a legitimate girlfriend might break that cycle. But nope, she was using me too. Whether to feel better about herself or prove something or increase her social status, I have no idea.

The irony isn't lost on me, either. Everyone assumes that the girls are *my* conquests—and don't get me wrong, I love the chase—but it leaves me feeling almost *used*.

I don't get that sensation from Dylan, though. She is the type of girl that you only advance on if you *are* serious. The type of girl that you would bring home to Mom and plan a future with. She screams commitment. For these reasons, none of the guys at our school would dare approach her. They know better than to get their hopes up.

But apparently, I don't.

What was I thinking, that the second I ended things with Marnie, her closest friend would jump into my arms?

Yep, that is exactly what you were thinking.

My plan didn't work—shocking, I know.

I hate not being able to talk to Dylan. We hadn't really spoken much before I dated and broke up with Marnie, but the option was always there. There wasn't any reason that we *couldn't* talk, or that she couldn't be seen with me. But now that door has closed. She is firmly *team Marnie* and won't be risking her friendship to show any grace toward me. Not that I fault her.

I would also be lying if I said that I am okay with Dylan and her friends bad-mouthing me for the past week. Sure, I get it, they are loyal to Marnie. And I don't care if all the girls in our class think I'm a total tool.

I *am* a tool. But it *does* bother me that Dylan has a part in it. That she wouldn't come to my defense.

She doesn't have a choice. If she wasn't so close to Marnie, she wouldn't be judging you.

But it still stings. What right do I have to expect her to stand up for me and risk her friends alienating her?

Dylan and I only have two classes together this semester—English and History—both of which don't allow for much free time for me to discreetly chat. Which is why I find myself taking every opportunity that arises to interact with Dylan.

Like today at lunch. My friends and I are already seated at our lunch table and I've been staring at Dylan like a stalker from across the cafeteria for what feels like an hour. The rest of her friends are already at their table, unloading various containers from their respective lunch bags. But Dylan stopped to talk to a table of underclassmen on her way in. Finally, she extracts herself from the conversation with a wave and wanders toward the lunch line.

I jump from my seat to follow her, desperate to—

“Morgan!” Graham calls out from behind me. “What are you doing?” His brow is furrowed, eyes narrowed with skepticism. He waves his arms in front of our table, gesturing to my half-full lunch tray still sitting at my spot.

“I want seconds, don't want them to run out before I get more.” It's not a great excuse, but it's the only thing I can think of. Our lunch ladies do make a *mean* mac and cheese. Graham rolls his eyes but drops the topic and turns back to his basketball discussion with Ellis.

With no more distractions I turn and continue to follow Dylan. Unfortunately, in the few seconds my attention was pulled from my target a couple of sophomores hopped behind her in line.

Can't have that.

Without batting an eye, I step in front of them, directly behind Dylan. She's wearing a hoodie with tight-fitting jeans and tennis shoes. Always so practically dressed, it's refreshing.

“What are you doing?” The words are practically spat from her mouth as she rounds on me, her gaze switching from me to the two wide-eyed sophomores now standing behind me.

“Getting lunch,” I say with an air of ease.

“You can’t just cut Tyler and Ryan.” Of course, she knows their names.

“There’s plenty of food for everyone, Dyl, they will still get some. And you guys don’t mind waiting an extra thirty seconds for your lunch, do you?” My attention turns to the boys behind me, eyes only *slightly* threatening.

“N-no, it’s fine,” one of them squeaks out.

“See? It’s fine,” I say to Dylan, plastering on my most charming smile.

She isn’t having it.

“No. Back of the line.” She points to a spot that is now about ten people from where we currently are standing.

Ugh. Well, that would screw up the entire purpose of me even being in this maddening line.

Finally, as a last-ditch attempt, I turn to the boys behind me. “Guys, I’m sorry I cut you. I was really hoping to have *this spot* in line. Would you mind if I stood in front of you? I apologize for the inconvenience.” The placating words are dirt in my mouth, but it’s worth it to see the satisfied grin playing on Dylan’s lips.

“It’s fine, Zac. Really, we don’t mind,” the other boy reassures us.

Now I turn my attention fully back to Dylan who is standing cockily with her arms folded in front of her chest.

“Was that so hard?” she asks in an overtly condescending tone.

“Practically killed me,” I deadpan. Dylan throws her head back in laughter and I can’t help but focus on the curve of her neck.

“So, what, the food you already had wasn’t good enough?” Dylan nods her head in the direction of my table as she takes a step forward in sync with the slowly moving line.

Figures she would notice that I had already gotten a tray. “What can I say? I wanted more.” Again, my lame excuse. When did everyone around here get so observant?

“What’s really on your mind, Morgan?” Dylan questions as we enter through the doorway leading into the kitchen portion of the cafeteria where the food is served. She picks up one of the red plastic trays and slides it along the metal tray shelf, waiting for the skinny kid in front of her to give his order to the middle-aged woman behind the counter.

“Nothing.” The look she shoots me from over her shoulder makes it clear she isn’t buying my story. Wow, this is a waste of time. Maybe I should have come up with some talking points. Conversation starters. “Fine. Maybe I wanted to talk to you. Is that a crime?”

“Not at all.” She picks up a pudding cup and sets it in the corner of her tray. “Well, maybe, considering our current ‘hostile’ relationship. But you still could have just said that.”

True. Apparently, honesty is the best route with Dylan. Noted.

“Hi, Miss Park.” The lady behind the counter turns her attention from the boy she was serving and directs it fully toward Dylan. “I was expecting you today!” she chirps cheerfully, scooping a hearty serving of Macaroni and Cheese onto a Styrofoam tray behind the counter. Her scoop is substantially larger than the one given to me on my earlier pass through the line, I notice.

“You know I can’t pass up mac and cheese day,” Dylan responds as she takes the tray from the lady, setting it on top of her red plastic one. “Thanks, Mrs. Keller,” she adds as she continues down the line adding a bowl of salad to her tray.

Without even a smile, Mrs. Keller hands me my own tray of pasta. Like earlier, it is half of the portion that Dylan received. I shoot her one of my smiles that would typically

have the ladies—even older lunch ladies—melting at my feet in hopes of earning a return smile. But no dice. My grin quickly fades into something tighter, more forced, as I continue to follow Dylan to the cash register where the younger boy in front of Dylan is talking with the woman manning the station.

“Sorry, Luke. We can’t let your account go any more negative.” The woman behind the register speaks quietly as she gives this news.

“I swear, my mom dropped off a check to fill up my account this morning. Maybe if you call down to the office—” The young boy is desperate, his cheeks tinged pink from embarrassment. Now that I look at him longer, his jeans *do* seem thin, as if they have been well worn, and have holes that were not intentionally added by the manufacturer.

“Lunch accounts are updated as soon as the funds are received. I’m sorry, but there’s nothing I can do.” At least the employee has the decency to keep her voice down to avoid a scene.

A few students have started to observe the predicament. Not only the ones waiting impatiently behind us in the line, but also those seated at nearby tables. They’re freshmen. Probably the kid’s classmates. The poor guy lets out a sigh and slides his tray over to the woman, fully prepared to surrender over his lunch.

“For crying out loud,” I grumble, shoving my tray into Dylan’s chest, forcing her to balance her own in one hand and mine in the other. I reach into my pocket, grab a twenty, and slide it discreetly to the lunch lady.

Three sets of wide eyes stare at me, their owners’ mouths hanging open.

My own eyes roll. Geez, is this really so surprising?

Thankfully, the woman behind the register recovers from her shock as she swipes up the bill and puts it into the machine.

I take my tray back from Dylan as Luke takes his own tray and walks away to a waiting table of his classmates who greet him happily. Good. They must not have noticed our little scene.

Dylan enters her code into the keypad, charging her lunch to her account and I step forward to do the same with mine.

“That was big of you, Mr. Morgan,” the woman comments.

I only nod and offer a shoulder shrug. Because truthfully, it *wasn't*. It was a decent thing to do. In fact, it was something I had witnessed Dylan doing on more than one occasion.

Speaking of Dylan, she's already back sitting with her friends. I groan. Fine, maybe this wasn't the best plan.

Did I need another tray of food? No.

But did I get to have a deep meaningful conversation with the girl who currently holds my interest? Also, no.

And I am now out twenty bucks.

But the look on Dylan's face before she walked away, the small smile and eyes that danced with... pride?

Yeah, maybe it was worth it after all.

THE FOLLOWING DAY I am met with yet another opportunity to get Dylan to warm up to me. Mr. Ellison, our History teacher, stands at his wooden podium that he keeps in front of his classroom and announces that we will be beginning the *Walls of History* project.

“You will each be assigned a partner. Alphabetically, by last name. The two of you will need to choose a historical figure or figures to write a twenty-page report on.” Groans sound out around the classroom as the rules are laid out. “You will have the majority of the semester to work on this project, so I don't want to hear any complaints or excuses. At the beginning of May, you and your partner will be tasked with turning in your report. You may also present your project—in full costume—to the class at the end of the semester for extra credit.”

The class silences as he paces around the room, his leather loafers thumping on the carpeted floor as he lists off the assigned partners. Suddenly, I forget the alphabet. Morgan and Park. M is close to P, right? I'm pretty sure it is.

Peeking in Dylan's direction, I see the tiniest smirk playing on the corner of her mouth. She has *not* forgotten the alphabet and has figured out who she'll be paired with. Is she smiling because it's me? Or because it isn't?

"Marnie, you'll be working with Tyler." Drones Mr. Ellison. A wave of relief crashes over me. Even if I'm not paired with Dylan I won't be forced to work with Marnie. We have been split for weeks but she still looks as though she is liable to either burst into tears or stab me in the chest at any moment.

Mr. Ellison continues to list off names and I mentally tick off people, analyzing who remains. There are only six people left when the words I had been hoping to hear meet my ears in a tone far melancholier than the news deserves.

"Dylan, you're with Zac."

I couldn't suppress my smile even if I tried.

Instinctively, my gaze shifts to where she is seated in the front row—I know, nerd—and from the looks of it, she can't hide her smile either.

Or the slight blush that now covers the back of her neck and the side of her cheeks.

There is a half hour left of class, and since it is the last period of the day, Mr. Ellison lets us off early to meet with our partners and get a jump on the project.

Although, apparently, he forgot what it's like to be a teenager, because as soon as we are dismissed the class flees into the parking lot quicker than ants evacuating a flooding anthill. But not me. I walk up to Dylan and gently grab her arm to slow the ferocity with which she is stuffing binders, notebooks, and pencils into her bag.

"Should we get started?" I flash her a smile.

She stills. “Since when do you care about class projects?”

She has a point. In the past I wasn’t big on projects. And group projects? I was more than happy to pass off the work to some other poor sap if they were willing. Now if I were in a group of slackers of course I would give it my all, no need for my grades to suffer any more than they already were. But had I gotten partnered with a straight A student a year ago I would have quickly made it clear that they would be doing the work while I would get to share the credit.

As a matter of fact, I had done exactly that to Dylan the last time we were paired together. Her surprise at my willingness to contribute is warranted.

“Just... trying to be a decent person.”

It is the only response I can think of. At least it makes me sound less pathetic than if I told the truth.

I want to spend time with you. Talk to you. It hurts that you bash me with your friends, even if I deserve it.

Yeah, no thank you. That’s pathetic.

“Sure.” She tosses her bag over her head. “Want to head to the library?”

Heading to the library is the last thing I want to do. But suggesting doing anything else would give away my game, so I agree.

Dylan

SOMETHING IS UP. ZAC doesn't do group projects. I wrote an entire ten-page English paper on *The Importance of Being Earnest* for him last year, the most recent time we had gotten paired up for a project. That instance, the only communication between the two of us was a text conversation that still lives on in my phone.

Zac

You got this paper, right?

Dylan

Yes, don't worry about it. I can send it to you to look over when it's done.

Zac

LMFAO, good one. Thanks.

Zac must sense my suspicion as we take our seats at one of the square tables in the library. I have my laptop open, googling historical American figures. I know that people have

always gone for the well-known people for this project in the past—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Pocahontas—so I want to pick someone new. Someone that will even have Mr. Ellison learning a thing or two from our report. Zac, on the other hand, is seated across from me leaning back so that his chair rests on its hind legs, staring down at his phone. Presumably *not* using it for research.

After sitting in silence for a few minutes, his tennis shoe bumps into my boot. “How’s Marnie?” he asks, his words causing my eyes to pull away from the screen in front of me.

“Do you really care?” I sigh.

He pauses, considering my question for a moment before answering.

“Honestly, no.”

“Then she’s fine.” I roll my eyes, then go back to typing. When Mr. Ellison had announced that Zac and I would be working together I’ll admit, there was an initial stirring of excitement in my belly. Which was frustrating. Because although I want to spend more time with Zac, I don’t *want to* want to spend more time with him.

Add to that the fact that I will likely be the sole one in this partnership doing any work, and I am a little bitter.

“But I am tired of all of the girls in this school acting all angry at me,” he adds when he realizes he lost my attention.

Ah, that makes more sense.

“So, you’re only mad that girls aren’t throwing themselves at you?” I conclude.

At this he laughs. For what I would consider an unreasonably long amount of time.

“Oh, Dylan.” He wipes a tear from his eye and gestures to his body. “The ladies still want a piece of this, even if they are peeved at me.”

I puff out a loud breath of air. “Well then I don’t see the problem.” Now that his cockiness is back it is easy to cold shoulder him.

With a thump, he drops his chair to the floor and sets his defined forearms down on the table, seriousness taking over. “You said you’d try.”

“Huh?”

“To not be angry with me. You said you’d try.”

“I... am trying,” I defend. He cocks a brow. “I mean it. I’m not mad about Marnie.” *At the moment.*

“Then what’s with all the eyerolls and huffing?”

“Huffing?”

Exaggerating the motion, he puffs out a series of long exhales, rolling his eyes and sighing dramatically with each one.

“That’s not what I’m doing,” I say flatly.

His brow raises higher in skepticism. I roll my eyes. Then, realizing I’m playing into his caricature of me, stop mid eye roll. Which leaves me staring mindlessly at the ceiling. Zac snickers. I glare at him.

“If you must know, I’m not super psyched to be tasked with completing a project this big *by myself* so close to graduation.”

He pulls back. “You aren’t. I’m your partner.”

Now it’s my turn to raise my eyebrows all skeptical like.

Wordlessly, he slides his phone across the table to me. A browser is open to a Wikipedia page listing American presidents.

And don’t I feel like a snob.

“I meant what I said,” Zac says, reaching across the table to retrieve his phone. “I’m trying to change. To do better.”

“What does that mean?” I ask. “Why do you care so much *now*?”

A woosh of air escapes his mouth and he throws himself back into his chair. “I don’t know. I just got thinking one day. I’m eighteen. An *adult* with one year left of high school and I

feel, like, irresponsible. I want to live up to who my parents would want me to be, you know?"

That answer shocks me silent. But it *also* leads me to believe that he is being more genuine than I realized. I almost pity Zac. He is good at playing things cool, brushing them off as though nothing affects him. But I am seeing a crack in his facade. Now that he is initiating this odd friendship between us, I can no longer ignore the hurt boy that I know lives underneath his mask.

We can be civil, I remind myself. Just keep your guard up and don't fall under his spell.

"Truce?" He offers his hand to me.

"Truce."

IT'S NINE PM AND I pull my last tray of cookies out of the oven. This is one of my favorite ways to spend a Friday night. Add in a mug of Earl Grey tea and a cheesy Hallmark movie and I'm golden.

Maybe I'll even send a dozen over to Mrs. Kyle up the street. She is a sweet old lady in her seventies and never turns down a baked good.

As I press the button on the stove to shut the oven off, there's a knock on the door and I jump in surprise. Thankfully my mom is home, so I won't have to deal with whoever this late-night visitor is alone.

My relief is short-lived, though, when I see the gang congregated on my front porch.

Carla is in front waving frantically at me through the small window in the door. Behind her I can make out the faces of Marnie and Mae, a sophomore at our school, in the porch light.

Groaning and slapping on a fake smile, I open the door.

"Girl!" shouts Carla, far louder than necessary. "I thought you were out of town tonight?"

That's right. I told her that I might be going out of town for the weekend when they invited me to a party at Justin's house. I figured they would be too distracted by said party to call my bluff. The party also explains Carla's obnoxiously loud voice and why Mae and Marnie can't seem to stop giggling behind her. They must've been there already before deciding to swing by my house and see if I was home to drag me along as well.

"Turns out we're not leaving until tomorrow." It's not a great excuse but is the only one I can think of on the spot to cover my earlier lie. It doesn't matter, anyway. By the state of my friends, they won't be able to tell if I'm lying even with my terrible poker face.

"Awesome! Come out with us!" Carla urges.

"I don't know guys; I was about to head for bed." This part is true. My makeup-less face, messy bun, and oversized T-shirt prove it.

"No worries, we'll help you get ready!" Marnie chimes in from the background as Mae swerves on her feet and falls into Marnie's shoulder. The two of them immediately break out in a renewed fit of laughter as Marnie works to steady Mae.

Yep. They've definitely been drinking already.

"Who's here, Dylan?" my mom asks, entering the kitchen entryway. "Oh, hi girls!" Her tone immediately brightens.

"Hi, Mrs. Park!" Carla exclaims, pushing around me. "We are here to pick Dylan up. We're hoping we could hang out for a while at Justin's."

Good. Carla is still showing her current state of intoxication, which means that my mother will back me up—

"Sounds great, girls! I'm heading to bed. Dylan, just let me know when you get home, please."

My eyes bug out of my head and my jaw hits the floor.

What was *that*?

I'd never tried to go out late to a party, but had always assumed—incorrectly, apparently—that my mom might be a little stricter about it. Or, at the very least, ask a few more

questions. Like, for instance, why isn't Mae able to support her own weight?

But nope. Mom only smiles down at me reassuringly, head nodding like a bobble head. What is happening? This must be something she learned from her parenting books. Socializing your kids, or promoting independence, or presenting opportunities for good decision making. That's the only explanation.

"Great, thanks Mrs. P!" shouts Mae. The three of them are far too giddy as they hound me into my room and begin their transformation.

A half hour later I am being ushered from my warm cookie-scented house and into Marnie's Ford Taurus. While the rest of my entourage is sporting cropped sweaters that barely cover their chests, I opted for a more practical mock neck sweater. Because it's January.

And barely forty degrees out.

And I would much rather be warm and comfortable than show off a few extra inches of skin.

The girls had quickly straightened my hair and thrown it up in a high ponytail and allowed me to toss on some skinny jeans with a pair of booties.

One area I wasn't given a say in was my makeup. Carla took over and gave me a dramatic look with a smoky eye and even lipstick. Yeah, eyeshadow and lip color are not in my typical beauty regime solely because I tend to forget I am wearing them and end up smearing them all over my face.

Well, that, and that I have no clue how to apply the products.

But I have to admit, I look *good*. This *confident-tough-girl* vibe is opposite to the *quiet-girl-who-wants-to-be-your-friend* energy I typically radiate. It's a mask. And since I will undoubtedly be out of my element tonight, I'm okay with some camouflage.

Once my appearance is deemed acceptable I am rushed out of my house and into the waiting car.

I push my way to the driver's seat, because no way am I going to let any of these girls drive the few miles to Justin's. He may live on a dirt road but that doesn't mean that accidents can't happen. Especially if alcohol is involved. How the three of them managed to navigate here unscathed is beyond me.

Rather than sitting next to me on the passenger seat, the three cackling girls pile in the back. Before we even pull out of my driveway, they have the windows rolled down and are rocking out to some new rap song that I'm not at all familiar with, lost in their own excitement and oblivious to my discomfort.

This is *not* going to be fun.

Minutes later I pull the car into Justin's large driveway and park it in one of the few available spots in his front yard.

His house is big. Huge, really. And his father's property extends at least five acres. His dad is rich. In fact, he is just as rich as Dex's father. They work at the same company together. I think it has something to do with technology, which explains why Dex was always fiddling with his computer and trying to write code while we were dating. His bedroom was decked out with all kinds of monitors and devices, most of which I couldn't even recognize.

Maybe Justin has a thing for tech, too. It seems unlikely. If he did, I am sure he would have tried to hack into the school's system by now and give his grades a boost.

Before I even get the car in park the girls are spilling out of the backseat. I follow them to the backyard, led by beats of music and booming laughter. There is definite chill in the air and after being outside for mere seconds I am already thankful my bulky sweater.

Most of the guests are either scattered outside around the bonfire, or in the large metal shed. Overall, it is what I had expected a party out in the middle of nowhere to be. Tables of beer pong, the twang of country music, and girls wearing booty shorts and skin tight leggings dancing on the bed of a pickup truck I recognize from countless Instagram videos. Nothing I haven't seen in every cringy high school movie.

What I hadn't been expecting, and probably should have, is that there are also guys dancing. Or rather, holding a drink in their hands as a girl wiggles her hips against them. Hands are roaming and lips are locking and I'm uncomfortable enough that I make a real effort to avert my eyes.

A heavy sense of inadequacy fills me as I take in the girls around me. I stand out, and not in a way that is likely to garner attention. Yet even though I made a practical choice with my weather-appropriate outfit, I wonder if maybe I should have gone for a different, edgier, look.

The increasing sound of thumping bass and shouted conversations ratchet up my nerves a couple more notches. *I don't belong here.*

Marnie grabs my elbow and pulls me toward the heated shed where there a makeshift bar is assembled as Carla and Mae shoot off toward the beer pong table.

"Ladies!" Justin calls as he catches sight of us, his arms spreading wide in welcome. When his eyes find me they widen in disbelief. "And Dylan! Fancy seeing you here. Looking good." He shoots a wink which I answer with a forced smile.

Guess he gets cheerful when drinking.

"What can I get you to drink?" he asks, leaning over the bar close enough for me to smell stale beer on his breath.

Marnie requests some type of pomegranate something-or-other as I look around, pretending to be entranced by the various neon beer signs that Mr. Barnes must deem as appropriate decor for his shed.

I really don't want to drink, but what am I supposed to do? I never thought I would succumb to peer pressure but being in this unfamiliar territory makes me uneasy. Everyone I've seen so far has a drink in their hand.

In their hand.

I can do that. *Hold* a drink.

Maybe I can bust up my good girl reputation a bit in the process. Seeing as I don't know the first thing about alcohol or what I would like, I ask for the same thing that Marnie ordered.

Justin hands us our drinks and Marnie immediately downs half of hers as we walk off to mingle.

Honestly, being here isn't the worst. I appear to be the only sober person on the premises, and it seems to be easier to talk to people when they don't have all their wits about them. It makes me more comfortable, less judged.

Most people do a double take when they see me clutching the chilled bottle in my fist. It isn't any secret that I never attend parties. We are almost done with our senior year of high school, and this is my first.

We end up near the bonfire talking to a handful of people from some of the neighboring schools that Marnie knows. She hasn't left my side once since we arrived, which I am grateful for. It's easier to take on this crowd with back up.

One of the boys—Cody, I think his name is?—has developed a particular interest in me. Based on the way his glassy gaze lingers on me longer than it should, it's my guess that he's been here a while. As conversation flows through our group, his body inches closer to mine through a series of poorly disguised shuffles of his feet.

He dives into a story about one of his football games last fall—something that is meant to impress us, or me, specifically. Though his smiles are friendly, he is starting to make me feel on edge. I am without a doubt the most fully clothed and sober woman here, shouldn't that eliminate me from the radar of, well, everyone?

Typically, I have a knack for blending into the background without even trying. I'm not used to fending off unwanted advances, nor am I accustomed to being the focus of anyone's attention. But apparently my natural gift of invisibility doesn't apply to those who have consumed alcohol. Having male attention usually gives me a shot of confidence, as I don't tend

to get it all that frequently. Yet for some reason my brain can't find anything at all attractive about Cody.

He's fine, I guess, looks wise anyway. Light brown hair, about my height, average build. Nothing particularly intimidating or outright attractive about him. But there is something about his personality that screams *stay away*. He edges closer to me, stepping around one of his other buddies so that we're brushing elbows.

"I'm digging the sweater," Cody says, pinching the fabric of my sleeve between his thumb and forefinger.

I smile, the scream in my head grows louder. He's not even touching me. Not *really*, anyway.

"Do you want to get out of here?" he asks, leaning in even closer.

Yeah, no. It's laughable how much I *don't* want to do that.

I'm about to politely decline when Marnie tenses beside me. I follow her gaze, noticing that her eyes are focused on a dark-haired boy making his way toward our group. *His* eyes, however, are locked on me, a determined set in his jaw.

"I need another drink," Marnie mutters before downing the rest of her current bottle and walking back to the bar. Leaving me alone with a group of guys that I've met only minutes before.

Thanks, Marn.

I hold my breath as Zac approaches, watching as his face tenses against the flickering flames of the bonfire the longer he stares at the boy next to me.

At last, he reaches our group. There isn't an ounce of subtlety as he shoulders his way between me and Cody so that his body forms a barrier between us. He's close enough that my body warms from the heat radiating from him.

Cody, meanwhile, steps back in a dazed sort of way before turning to his friends.

"Hey, Dylan," Zac greets. The way he shoves his hands into his pockets is casual, yet the stiff set of his shoulders and

tight jaw says that he is feeling anything but. This is a different look on him. His usual relaxed self-assuredness is never artificial. This... *is*.

Although Zac speaks to me, his eyes flick back frequently to glare at Cody. There is something possessive and protective in that glare. And I like it. Way more than the *creepy*-possessive way Cody had been staring at me earlier.

Zac, like most of the guys here tonight, is sporting a simple jeans and hoodie combo. Yet, unlike everyone else, it looks good on him.

Too good.

Good in a way that makes it easy to see why he doesn't struggle to find female companions.

"Hey," I offer.

A heavy tension settles over us. I can't tell why I feel awkward talking to Zac now. Maybe because this is the first time we're interacting outside the boundaries of a school event in almost a decade. That must be it.

At least, that's what I tell myself in a vain attempt to muffle the buzz of electricity coursing through me. I take the first sip of my drink to break up the thickness in the air. The fruity liquid washes over my taste buds as an unfamiliar warmth erupts in my stomach. Instantly, my cheeks heat from the alcohol. It's not *that bad*, I suppose.

Zac's eyes move from shooting lasers at Cody to honing in on the drink in my hand before jumping back up to my face.

"You're drinking."

While everyone else we had come across so far was also surprised at my drink, they quickly laughed it off and moved on. Zac is the first person who seems... *annoyed* by it?

"Yeah. When in Rome, I guess." I give my shoulders a shrug, trying to make light of it. But even I have to admit that it feels foreign.

Zac continues to glance between my face and the drink I am holding in silence. His lips twist, biting on the inside of his

cheek, trying to keep himself from saying something. As I raise the bottle for another sip, the rest of the guys who had been loitering near us slowly scatter. Probably sensing the *back off* vibes emanating from Zac.

I gulp.

To my relief, a tipsy Carla chooses this moment to bump into my side and break through whatever had been hanging in the air between Zac and me.

“Morgan! You’re not trying to date another one of my friends, are you?” she teases Zac, shooting him a wink.

“Hello, Carla,” he drawls, undeniably annoyed with her presence. “Did you bring Dylan tonight?”

“Sure did! And if you don’t mind, I’m going to steal her away!” Her hand grabs the crook of my elbow, and she starts dragging me toward the beer pong table where Marnie and Mae are hugging in celebration. But not before she bends back and gives Zac’s butt a quick slap. Carla giggles and I turn around to gauge Zac’s reaction. He isn’t amused.

“Actually, I do mind. Do you have a minute?” His voice is pure venom as he addresses Carla. She must sense it, too, because all humor fades.

Grabbing her arm, Zac pulls her to what he must think is a safe distance away from me to prevent eavesdropping. It’s not. And since it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that they’re talking about me, I listen in.

“You were drinking.”

“So?” Carla says.

“You picked up Dylan and drove her here *after* you were already drinking! Do you have any idea how stupid and dangerous that is?”

“Chill, Zac. It was the only way we could get her to come out.”

“Then you should have let her stay home!” This comes out as a roar more than civil conversation. It also attracts the attention of more than just me.

Zac is *mad*.

He lowers his voice again, but it holds no less of a threat. “You shouldn’t have put her in danger like that.”

Put who in danger? *Me*?

“Dylan drove us back! She wasn’t in any danger. Come on, Morgan. You know you wanted her here.”

Hold on. He wanted *me* here? My heart leaps in my throat at the possibility and I turn to the sky, playing it cool.

“Not like this,” he hisses. Then storms away.

As the night wears on I find myself going through a single drink. It became my shield. Something to do to alleviate my constant sense of being out of place. Awkward lull in conversation? Take a sip. Trying to ignore someone? Take a sip. Need an excuse not to dance with the handsy guy who’s been trying to grab my attention? Take a sip. Unfortunately, my strategy leaves me feeling more than a little buzzed.

Score one for peer pressure, I guess.

By eleven o’clock Marnie and Mae are three sheets to the wind—not that it is too shocking, considering the state that they were in when they picked me up—and Carla is nowhere to be found.

They won’t be capable of getting me home.

Since most of the people have gone into the shed for warmth, I’m left alone with the other stragglers around the slowly dying fire, making a point to keep out of frame of any phones. As far as the internet is concerned, I was never here. My brain started to feel fuzzy from the alcohol a while ago, so I’ve given up on sipping the fresh bottle Marnie foisted upon me. My abandoned drink is clutched firmly in my fist, now warmed thanks to my tight grip on it, observing the gaggle of girls who are *still* dancing on the truck bed. Watching my classmates bump and grind on each other is not my idea of fun.

And I’m not positive that they’re all having fun, either. Half of them are striking sultry poses as they snap pictures and

videos to share online. But the moment the phone lowers they become reabsorbed in the screen. The other half do, admittedly, appear to be enjoying themselves.

My phone offers a good distraction as I mindlessly scroll through social media, contemplating how in the world I am going to get home.

Most of the people I would typically turn to are already here. I could call my mom, but I would hate to bother her so late at night. Even though she did throw me into this mess to begin with...

“Hey.” My head raises at the gruff voice behind me.

Zac makes his way over and takes a seat beside me on the wooden bench.

“Hi,” I offer, tucking my phone back into my pocket and focusing on the galloping flames to avoid having to look at his face.

“So... Carla brought you here.” He knows this.

“Yeah. Along with Marnie and Mae.”

We glance over at the three of them—Carla having resurfaced to join—who have found some boys willing to join in on their dancing.

“I don’t think they’ll be able to take you home,” he states the obvious, staring into the fire with me.

“Yeah, I figured that.”

“You want to get out of here?”

Seriously? Is that the line for tonight? Though I suspect Zac doesn’t mean it as a creepy pick-up line in the same way Cody did.

“Are you offering me a ride?” I turn to face him.

“Nope,” he responds, popping the “P”. “I walked here. Besides, I probably shouldn’t be driving.”

So... what *is* he suggesting.

“But you’re welcome to come back to my place,” he adds. The implication of his words contrasts with the genuine, almost vulnerable expression he sports. It’s enough to have me considering his offer. Until the underlying meaning sinks in.

“Wait, are you hitting on me? *Again?*” I scoff. “I’m sure I’ll be able to find someone else to give me a ride.” The flirtatious teasing I’m getting from Zac is growing old fast and though I shrug off his offer, I *am* beginning to worry about my prospects.

Most of the remaining partygoers are at a state that makes driving out of the question. Heck, even I probably shouldn’t be getting behind a wheel right now even if I were able to commandeer Marnie’s car.

“Nah. Not hitting on you.” Zac surveys remaining attendees. “Everyone still here is going to be staying the night. You can either come with me back to my place or hope there’s an available couch that hasn’t been fornicated on for you to crash on.”

His confident smirk irritates me. What is worse is that his cursed dimple it brings out, giving him a look of innocence. Carefree and happy.

“Flirting or not, you’ve got to be out of your mind if you think I am going to stay the night at your house.” My response comes out swiftly and strongly. Mentally, I pat myself on the back, turning away before his boyish charm makes me agree to something I will later regret.

“Not stay the night. Although, I wouldn’t be opposed to that idea.” He wiggles his eyebrows and shoots me a wink. I school my features to appear unaffected. But I know he can see the smile that traitorously spreads across my face.

“We’ll go, sober up, and then I’ll drive you home,” he continues.

I am about to ask why we can’t just stay here to sober up when he adds, “I’m tired of being around these morons.”

Well, okay then.

Our eyes lock as I truly size up his offer. Tentatively, he slides closer to me, wrapping an arm around my waist and tugging me incrementally closer to him.

“Zachary,” I warn.

“Magdalene,” he counters.

And oh, he wins. Hearing my full name, a name I rarely use, come from his lips in that rich, gravelly tone is enough to convince me to do just about anything he asks.

Even if it wasn't, Zac's next words seal my fate.

“Please come with me.” There is a heaviness to his voice that has the fuzz clouding my brain clearing instantly. “I'm not comfortable leaving you here. I don't *want* to leave you here.”

Gulp.

“Fine. We can wait it out at your place. But then you're taking me home.”

Thankfully Zac and Justin are neighbors. At least by the country definition. Which only means that they live on the same mile of unpaved back road.

The two of us make our way along the gravel as I attempt to downplay my shivers. Still, after turning on my finest acting skills it only takes a minute for Zac to notice and pull his hoodie over his head, silently offering it to me.

Normally I would be too proud to take it. But it *is* cold. And I am beginning to think that myth about alcohol warming you up isn't true after all, so I hastily grab the sweater and shove it over my head.

The thick fabric smells of cedar and sandalwood and *him*. His scent, combined with the alcohol I consumed, envelopes me in a content haze. I'm warm and secure and *happy*. I grin like a maniac as I continue to huff in subtle sniffs.

We approach his house and it hits me that this is the first time I'm seeing it in years. From the exterior it's exactly as I remember—an old, white farmhouse. Two stories with a front porch and gravel driveway.

Though Zac surprises me by heading not up the steps to the front door, but into the backyard.

What stuns me even more is when he starts unfastening his belt buckle as we walk.

“Uhh, what are you doing?” My feet skid to a stop. I don’t want to sound dumb or naive or whatever, but this is weird, right? And it’s not just some hallucination that my brain conjured up, either. *Zac is taking off his pants.*

“Hot tub.” He gestures to the steaming hot tub that I am only now noticing. He walks up to it and flicks a switch, turning on the jets and illuminating the tub with blue underwater lights. There is also a mini fridge next to it and a clear storage tote with a stack of towels inside. Not a bad setup.

“We’re not going in the hot tub,” I protest confidently.

“I don’t care what you do. But I am.”

“I don’t have a suit.”

“Neither do I.”

He pulls his T-shirt over his head and slips his jeans down his firm legs while kicking off his shoes. His entire undressing takes only a few seconds, preventing me from embarrassing myself by staring too long anywhere I shouldn’t.

Thankfully that is where his disrobing ends. I don’t even want to imagine how I would handle seeing him fully nude. Can you actually *die* of embarrassment?

“Why are you going in the hot tub?” I ask, sounding much more collected than I am.

“Helps you sober up faster.” Zac gracefully leaps over the edge, landing in the water with barely a splash, showing no reaction to the hot water.

“I don’t think that’s true.” I stuff my arms in the pocket of the hoodie, holding my ground.

Firstly, because I really *don’t* think that a stint in a hot tub will help with our sobriety issue at all. And secondly, and

perhaps most importantly, I can't remember what underwear I'm wearing.

While I'm not embarrassed of my body, I've never quite felt comfortable in my own skin. One sure fire way to ignite my insecurities? Hearing Zac's assessment of my body or clothes.

"Ugh, just come in!" he urges, throwing his head back over the side of the tub in exasperation.

Should I? Standing out here in the cold *is* making me a little jealous of Zac resting in the warm water.

Screw it. It's no different than my bathing suit, which Zac—and everyone else in town—has seen me in dozens of times thanks to our close proximity to the lake.

"Fine," I relent.

His head shoots up from its relaxed position on the side of the tub.

Hah. It feels good to catch him off guard.

I guess we're doing this.

Zac

FUN FACT: I HAVE no idea if hot tubs, or any change in temperature, have any effect whatsoever on sobriety. And I can tell that Dylan knows my claim is bull.

Then again, maybe it *is* true, it's not something I've looked into. But that doesn't change the fact that she decided to get in anyway.

I can't even be sure why I suggested it in the first place. But when we approached my house, it felt odd to invite her inside. Intimate, even. Not that Dylan doesn't *deserve* to be invited inside. Of course, she does. Yet the thought of having her in my house, in the middle of the night, alone, makes me feel oddly exposed.

Yes, I am aware that getting in a hot tub is far more intimate and exposing than inviting someone into my living room but try telling my buzzed brain that.

Plus, I would be lying if I said I wasn't curious about how Dylan would look without all her usual layers. That alone probably makes me a creep.

Yet she didn't look away when I shed my clothes and hopped in. And, even more shocking, she doesn't ask me to look away when *she* strips down, either. Sure, I will get to see

her in the tub, but there is nothing like a good old fashioned strip tease.

Yikes. Yep, definitely giving off creeper vibes. I'm going to have to keep my mental filter working at top notch tonight if I don't want to scare the poor girl.

Dylan takes off my hoodie first, grabbing it by the hem and pulling it over her head with ease. Then she folds it neatly and sets it on top of the mini fridge. I half expect her to start collecting my clothes from the ground as well.

She doesn't.

Instead she moves on to the soft turtleneck sweater thing that—despite its excessive modesty—stole my breath away the instant I saw her.

The moment her fingers grip the hem of the sweater, though, I'm struck with a sudden bout of chivalry. My gaze shoots up to the stars. I'm not sure where the gentlemanly move came from, but it feels necessary. It isn't until I hear her step into the water that I chance a glance at her.

It's then that, like the suave man I am, I choke. On my own saliva. And proceed to cough violently.

Though I try not to be too obvious with my leering, I'm pretty sure that ship has sailed. Coughing fit aside, the way her entire face erupts in a pink hue tells me I've been caught. She doesn't call me on it, though, which I take as a good sign. She may be on the shyer side, but Dylan isn't one to let you get away with something.

With a shiver, she slides into the steaming water. It's not clear if she is shivering from the cold or if she is *that* nervous, but I have a hunch that it's the latter. And while I find it oddly endearing, it also makes something in my chest twist at the thought that she might be uncomfortable around me.

So I keep my lips firmly locked, afraid that I might say something to remind Dylan that this probably isn't a great idea. Maybe this whole thing *was* a bad call on my part. I should've told her to hop in fully clothed...

“You’re beautiful.” The words slip from my mouth before my brain has a chance to run them through that pesky broken filter.

I do manage to keep my eyes on her face while saying this. That’s a plus.

Her blush deepens.

Or maybe her skin is just heating from the warm water now that she is fully immersed.

Dylan shakes her head, running her lips through her teeth to contain her smile, before tying her long blonde hair into some type of knot-bun thing on the top of her head.

Needing to do *something*, I reach for the mini fridge behind me, pull out a beer, and take a quick sip, desperate to remove some of the charged tension in the air.

“Zac!” Dylan shouts, throwing her arms into the air. “What is wrong with you?”

“What do you mean?” I’m sure there is plenty that people would say is wrong with me. None are things I would like to hash out in this moment, though.

“Isn’t the whole point of this hot tub stunt to sober up?” She gestures to the drink in my hand, annoyed. It’s adorable. But she does have a point. I totally forgot the pretense of why I suggested the hot tub in the first place.

Oops.

“Well, I’ll just finish up this one. I’ve got some fruity girly stuff in here too if you want something. Might as well, since I’ll be the one driving you home and now, we have a bit longer to kill.”

She sends daggers my way, not amused. Quickly, I shove the fruity seltzer drink back into the fridge and swap it out for a bottle of water, doing the same with my own drink.

“Thanks,” she mutters, holding her hand out to grab the bottle. Dylan takes a sip, already appearing more comfortable than she was at Justin’s. I know she isn’t one to bend the rules and chose not to comment on her drinking tonight because I

didn't want to make her feel any pressure or need to defend her decision.

But that doesn't mean I liked it.

And watching other guys eyeing her up? Yeah, that didn't sit right with me either. Once I realized that Dylan had come out tonight, I spent all my time at the party with my eyes locked firmly on her, scaring off any males who even gave her a second glance. *Not on my watch, scum bags.*

And fine. I *may* have asked Carla if Dylan was going to be showing at the party. But that didn't mean I wanted her forcefully dragged there.

I was beyond relieved when she relented and came home with me. I trust everyone from Silverwood who was at that party. But there were plenty of people from other schools present. People who I would not at all be comfortable leaving a tipsy Dylan with.

And she definitely falls into the tipsy category. You wouldn't notice it just looking at her, but she grinned at me the duration of our walk to my house, and after I gave her my sweatshirt, she couldn't stop giggling. I don't even think she realized she was doing it. Which is adorable. Because there is no way Dylan on a regular day would give me that treatment.

The two of us sit quietly, the soft roar of the bubbles in the tub providing white noise. The air around us is still and silent, any outside noises muffled by the snow that covers the ground in a thin layer. Even the music from Justin's is muffled. Things must be winding down there. Or, at least, moving indoors.

"Sooo, that was your first party?"

She nods, watching her hands as they skim over the surface of the bubbly water.

Dylan is breathtaking with her face illuminated by the LED lights beneath the water. The few pieces of hair that fell from her updo stick to her cheeks and are already beginning to return to their natural, curly state after having been straightened for the party.

“Did you meet anyone who, uh, you’re interested in?” I find myself holding my breath as I wait for her answer. I swear, if she says she’s interested in that loser Cody I’ll—

She huffs out a laugh. “No. Not even close. Did you?” The apprehension in her voice sends hope surging through me.

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

“In the most platonic way possible.” Her voice, though soft, holds a note of irritation.

“What did you think of it?” I ask.

“The party? It was fun.”

Right. Except... she’s lying.

I kept an eye on her—a very close eye—and her mannerisms told me that she was *not* having a good time. At best, she was mildly uncomfortable. Though I’m not sure why. It’s possible for someone to have said or done something to make her uneasy, but I think I would have noticed. Like I said, very. Close. Eye.

“I don’t believe you,” I say.

She huffs. “Fine, what do you want me to say, Zac? That I felt out of place? That being around gorgeous girls who dress like models and dance all... *sexy* made me feel insecure? That I only drank so I had something to do to cut through the awkwardness? It was *weird*, okay? It felt *weird* for me to be there, and I’d rather not analyze why.”

Shaking away an extraordinarily inappropriate mental image of Dylan dancing, I slide closer to her, ensuring she can hear me clearly over the jets.

And fine, maybe I want to be next to her. “I didn’t think it was weird.”

Slowly, she lifts her gaze to meet mine. Seeing the hope and relief brimming in her eyes, I have to clench my hands into fists to stop myself from reaching out to her.

“Really?”

“I liked having you there.”

“You... did?”

I nod. Although I suppose it is more that I like having her by *me* than it is having her at a party. “It was refreshing. A girl I could hold a conversation with without worrying about being groped or propositioned.”

A flash of dejection flickers over her face. Shoot, maybe that wasn't the best way to phrase that. It wasn't supposed to be an insult.

“Not that I wouldn't *want* you to do those things to me...”
Wow. That's worse. So. Much. *Worse*. Now her eyes are wide. Maybe in shock. Probably in horror.

“I mean—” I let out a breath to collect myself before I continue. “I only mean that you're not trying to get something from me. You don't see me as some piece of meat. I can talk to you and know that you won't be trying to come up with a plan to seduce me the whole time.”

Her lips tug up. “Well, lucky for you Zachary Morgan, I make a terrible seductress.”

I don't believe that for a second.

Dylan

“YOU DATE A LOT of girls,” I say, leaning my head back against the back of the hot tub and breaking the silence that has fallen over us, closing my eyes. “Why?” I peek an eye open to judge his reaction to my intrusive question.

I blame my newfound bluntness on my earlier drink.

It is a decidedly personal question that has been buzzing around in my brain for a while now. Truly, I don’t understand it. Maybe it’s my naivety speaking, but I can’t fathom why, or how, someone could be comfortable with meaningless hookups rather than forming a real connection.

Zac leans back, relaxed, and shrugs his shoulders, “You don’t date anyone... well, with the exception of Dex, of course,” he says smugly. “Why?”

Oooh, he turned it back on me. Nicely played.

Although in truth, I should have seen that coming. I’m tempted to insist that I asked first, and therefore he should answer my question before I answer his, but I’m not sure I *want* to hear his answer. Especially since it will likely be some crass reasoning that will undoubtedly make me uncomfortable.

“I’m just... not good at putting myself out there, you know? Or opening myself up and being vulnerable. Besides, I’m not really the type of girl that guys go for.”

“What does that mean? You’re not the *type of girl that guys go for?*”

“What kind of a question is that? You spend enough time... *entertaining* women; you should know what I’m talking about.”

“Entertaining?” He chuckles.

“Oh, just forget it.”

“No, tell me.”

I am, admittedly, not a confident person. This is a character flaw that Zac is about to become *extremely* familiar with if he continues to probe into my psyche.

“I’m not outgoing. *Fun*. Someone who likes to go out on Friday nights and dance and wear clothes that aren’t weather-appropriate. I prefer to keep to myself.”

“You think that those are the only types of girls that guys are interested in?”

“What, fun, pretty, and confident? Yes, I do think they tend to attract more dating prospects.”

“Well, I think you’re wrong.”

“You think that those types of people *don’t* date more? Because I’m pretty sure there have even been studies done that prove that when looking for a partner there are certain qualities that—”

“I’m not saying that people aren’t drawn to others who have those qualities. I’m saying that you’re wrong to assume that you *don’t*.” Zac’s eyes bore into me.

I shake my head at the irony of it.

“I wasn’t enough for you when we were kids, Zac. Don’t pretend to suddenly find me someone worth spending time with.” Curse my soft voice!

He reels back at my comment. “What do you mean? Our families did literally everything together when we were kids.”

“Yeah... Until we *didn’t*.”

He pauses, waiting for me to elaborate.

“You ditched me when we were like, ten. Even back then I wasn’t the type of person you chose to spend time with. I haven’t changed that much over the years.”

“Hold on, back up. I *ditched* you? Dylan, I never ditched you.”

“Look, Zac, I get it. There are no hard feelings or anything. You would have rather hung around the guys, or whatever. I’m only saying that... well, I don’t know what I’m saying. Just that we’re different.”

“No, just... stop talking for a minute. I never wanted to stop hanging out with you. That was a long time ago, but the way I remember it, it was you guys who were done with *us*. I loved being with you.”

His admission jolts me. Because there’s *no way* that’s the truth. I would remember if I intentionally cut Zac out of my life.

Unless... it wasn’t intentional? Had we somehow *accidentally* shifted apart?

Could Zac be right? Had I imagined the whole separation between us? My insecurities skewing the reality, making it out to be some huge groundbreaking event when in reality it was just two kids growing up?

For some reason that explanation doesn’t sit right with me. But with the earnest expression on his face right now, I also can’t believe that he is lying. If he were, I would be able to see it—a twinge of guilt for abandoning me, a flinch, *something*. But there’s nothing.

Zac didn’t ditch me.

This revelation spreads over me like a balm, healing something within me that I hadn’t realized was hurting.

Even so, his admission doesn’t change the present and the glaring fact that I’m not the type for most boys.

“Regardless of why we grew apart as kids, my answer is still the same. People like me don’t draw all that much

attention.”

At this he laughs. And not a gentle chuckle either, but a full body belly shaking laugh. Or his belly would be shaking if he had an ounce of fat on his body *to* shake. Which, for the record, he doesn't.

“What?” I demand, annoyed that he has the nerve to *laugh* at my insecurities.

“You. You really think that you're not good enough? That you couldn't snag any guy you wanted?” he asks incredulously.

“Never mind. Of course, it wouldn't make sense to someone like *you*.” Just because he can approach any woman and be confident that she would be into him doesn't mean that that is how it works for most people.

“Someone like me?”

“Would you stop pretending that you don't know what I'm talking about?” I throw my words at him, now completely infuriated that he's playing dumb. “Someone confident, sure of himself, attractive,” I whisper the last word. No need to inflate his ego even more. “Can we just talk about something else, Zac? I'm just not good at dating. Let's leave it at that.”

“And you think *I* am?” Now his grin is more self-deprecating than it is smug. I can deal with that. At least he's no longer laughing at me.

“Fine, maybe you're not good at *dating*. Though technically you've only “dated” one girl and she fell for your tricks easily enough. But you're good at the other stuff.”

“The other stuff?”

“The flirting, the banter, the, you know... *other stuff*.”

This is embarrassing. Only for me, though. I don't think I've ever seen Zac smugger than he is right now, leaning back next to me like a king among women.

“*Other stuff?*” he repeats the words, this time in a tone that oozes seduction.

“Can we drop it?” My throat tightens, which doesn’t make any sense. This isn’t even an emotional conversation. Although this *is* the first time I’ve voiced any of these insecurities aloud.

Instead of focusing on his intimidatingly chiseled face, I follow a line of condensation as it trails down my water bottle resting on the side of the tub, forming a small puddle around its bottom.

I hate this—getting emotional in front of anyone, and I have no idea why my body is betraying me and acting like it’s okay to open up completely to Zac. I absolutely detest crying in front of people. It shows weakness. A flaw. Vulnerability. Nope, time to bottle that right back up.

I look out into the darkness, trying to make out the silhouettes of the trees against the inky black backdrop of the sky. Still, I can sense his eyes on me.

“Dylan.” His voice comes out in a hoarse, raspy whisper.

I don’t turn to him.

“Dylan, look at me.”

I shake my head. I never have deep conversations like this with anyone. Even with Dex; the only deep conversations we had—which, if I am being honest, were about as shallow as a splash pad kiddie pool—were done over text. Where I could hide my face. Hide my vulnerability. It was safe.

“Please?” Zac’s firm fingers find my chin and he guides my face toward him. My breath catches at his touch.

His eyes roam my face as if absorbing it, committing it to memory. It feels like he is dissecting every flaw that is showcased by the bright lighting shining from beneath the water’s surface. My nose, which is slightly too big. The few lingering pimples that I tried desperately to cover with makeup, but still make me nervous. My eyebrows which could use a touch-up plucking.

But I can’t bring myself to look back at him.

“Why do you do that?” Zac asks me, his brows furrowed.

“Do... what?”

“You never look me in the eyes for more than a few seconds,” he says.

His direct question prompts me to gaze up into his dark brown eyes, if only to prove his statement wrong.

Bad idea.

Zac is enough to handle without eye contact. But with it I truly doubt I will ever be able to willingly pull away.

They're a deep brown. I've always known that. But there's a lighter spark in them. Specks of gold and even some green.

“I don't know,” I start, stuck in his trance. “I guess maybe it's that whole ‘eyes are the window to the soul’ thing?”

Zac tilts his head, “And you don't want to see into my soul?” he guesses.

I pause, still focused on those deep eyes. And for some reason, I tell him the truth. A truth that I wasn't even sure I knew myself until this moment.

“I'm afraid of anyone else seeing into mine. Especially you.” The last bit is mumbled and I'm hoping he can't hear it. I may not have any deep, dark secrets, but oftentimes I'm certain that the constant inadequacy I feel is stamped across my forehead.

“Why?” he asks, confused now more than before. I turn away again, pulling my face out of his hand.

“It makes me feel exposed? Like people can see my flaws?” I say, I keep my eyes trained everywhere but on his. I look at his mouth, the side of the hot tub, his chest.

Okay, looking at his defined torso is not a good decision being so close...

“But why would you want to hide from *me*?”

“Because... because, I don't know. You make me nervous,” I finish lamely.

I thought he'd grow cocky at my admission and shoot me one of his signature dimpled smirks. But he doesn't. In fact, he looks disappointed. Almost *hurt*.

"I'm sorry," I mutter.

"Why do I make you nervous?"

I'm surprised I even have to spell it out for him. He must know the vibes that he puts out. And how starkly those contrast to the vibes *I* put out.

And yet, the confusion in his face makes it clear that I'm going to have to walk him through my feelings.

How to explain it. Because he is absolutely gorgeous? The most confident guy I've ever met? Because he has a laugh that could bring you to your knees and a body that makes you want to stay there? Or maybe because the butterflies that are present in my stomach every time he is near threaten to turn into hornets when I look directly at him.

"You're just... better than me." There, that is a less pathetic way to put it, right?

"What?" Zac pushes away, now standing and towering over me. He is as surprised with his abrupt movement as I am but shakes it off quickly. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Sorry, that was rude of me to say, but it's true. It's stupid. People aren't just better than others because they're more outgoing, or 'hotter,' or whatever weird metric you're using to judge your self-worth." He lets out a long exhale. "You need to stop comparing yourself to other people, Dyl. Just because people act and dress differently than you doesn't make them *better*." He's so sincere right now I could *really* cry.

He softens and runs a hand through his tousled hair, dampening it the slightest bit.

My eyes follow the motion, watching as a few droplets of water slide down from his face to his strong shoulders to the muscles of his chest and stomach. My gaze continues moving downward. I can make out the line of hair that trails down to his shorts and...

Nope. Don't even go there, Dylan!

My eyes zip back up to Zac's face.

I guess that is one way to get me to look at him.

Although there is no way I can comfortably make eye contact now. Especially since the grin splitting his face tells me that he is very aware that I was checking him out.

And my nervousness? Yeah, that's still here.

I shift my gaze back to my drink in a pathetic attempt to pretend that the last few moments hadn't happened.

Zac slips back into the water and slides close to me again. His knee touches mine, and a jolt of electricity shoots through my body from where our skin makes contact. As he leans in closer, all the muscles in my stomach clench simultaneously.

“Do you really not realize how amazing you are? I mean sure, you had that awkward phase—”

I send him a scathing glare. *I know I went through an awkward phase. Well, an awkward-er phase. I still haven't fully grown out of it—probably never will. But that doesn't mean that I want to be reminded that other people also realized that I was going through it.*

Braces, pimples, frizzy hair and a changing body that didn't quite fill out any of my clothes right. Not to mention that I hit my growth spurt before all my friends, meaning that I grew into my five-foot ten height long before anyone else. Including the boys.

“But really, Dyl,” he continues, “you've got *nothing* to be insecure about.”

My breathing quickens at his words. I truly wasn't fishing for compliments, but it *is* nice to hear someone like Zac saying all the right things.

“For the record? I hate that you think that you have to hide from me. You do know that everyone's got insecurities, right? No one is as confident as they seem. *No one.*”

I can't help the small scoff that escapes me. Is Zac trying to convince me that *he's* insecure about himself? The boy who can throw on a smile and bat his pretty lashes and get anything he wants?

"What do *you* have to be insecure about?" Okay, that question held far more snark than I intended it to.

He pulls back. "Seriously?"

I remain frozen. I've hit a nerve. But I've already laid out my baggage. It's only fair I get his in return. Rather than backtracking, I double down. "Yeah."

"Okay," he says, picking up steam. "I can barely freaking *read*, Dyl. If I don't kill my classes this semester, I'll have to go to summer school if I want to graduate. I'm almost positive that half of the people in my life are only using me for my popularity or reputation or whatever. And to top it all off? My mom thinks I'm a disappointment. No matter what I do, I can't *not* screw up." He lets out a long exhale, swallowing hard. "No matter how hard I try, how much I give up, it's not enough." Then a whisper. "I quit the football team so I could focus on school and not be a complete failure and I'm still barely scraping by."

The admission jolts me. Zac gave up football for *school*? Here I thought he was just being selfish and leaving his team hanging.

"Why didn't you ask for help?"

"Uh, because it's *embarrassing*. No one else has any problem playing sports and getting good grades and leading a successful and balanced life. I *do*. It's not something I want to broadcast."

"You could have asked me for help."

"Still embarrassing." His gaze flicks up to mine. The openness there breaks me. He cares about my opinion of him. "It's my own fault for only doing what was required to stay eligible during football season. I should have tried harder the past few years so that this year wouldn't be hell. But it is what

it is. How's that for insecurities?" A humorless laugh punctuates his confession.

I feel like an absolute brat. I'd never even considered that his less than stellar academics would be weighing on him. And to think that everyone in his life is either using him or disappointed in him? That's a heavy burden to carry.

"Oh, *Zac*," I breathe, "I'm... sorry. I didn't think. It was dumb of me to assume."

"It's fine." His shoulders relax. "You saw what I wanted you to see. I don't broadcast my failures, but that doesn't mean they're not there. I just, I don't want you thinking that you're the only one who feels like they're not good enough." He softens and I have the inescapable urge to comfort him.

"Hey." My hand finds his knee, momentarily forgetting about the lack of clothing. We both still at my forward touch, our eyes locked. "Thanks."

"Yeah."

But I don't remove my hand. And did we get closer? Yes, our legs are *definitely* making more contact now.

"Dylan," *Zac* whispers, a question in his eye.

He doesn't need to ask it. We're already leaning closer, our foreheads almost touching.

My chest lifts in shallow breaths as one of *Zac's* hands moves to my hip. The other trails a lazy path from my thigh, up my stomach and over the side of my ribcage, before cupping my face.

For the second time in less than a month I seriously consider what it might be like to kiss *Zac Morgan*.

Releasing a shuddering breath, I let my eyes fall closed, my body relishing the gentle touch from *Zac's* rough hands. I could blame it on how relaxed I feel in the warm water, or even how—inexplicably—I am starting to feel comfortable around *Zac*, but my own hand reaches up to cup *Zac's* face, mirroring his actions. He has the slightest bit of scruff and I

like the way it feels against my fingertips. Aimlessly, my thumb brushes against it, reveling in the soft prickliness.

We sit there for a moment, breathing each other's air.

Until Zac leans in closer still, his lips brushing against mine so lightly that I'm almost not sure it happened.

It hits me all at once, a sudden, unexpected and unwelcome wave of desire.

I want him to kiss me.

Zac Morgan.

My childhood best friend.

Confident, Cocky, *beautiful* Zac.

I. Want. Him. To. Kiss. Me.

I shouldn't want him to kiss me.

But it turns out I don't need to battle with my internal voice of reason.

A door slams in the background and we fly apart from each other just as a light flicks on in the house.

Zac groans out a furious curse, shaking his head. "That'll be Alex. We should go."

And we do. Neither of us speaking a word the whole ride back to my house.

Dylan

IF I HAD BEEN expecting my attendance at a party to be big news in the halls of Silverwood High, I would have been disappointed. It wasn't. At school on Monday everything is the same as any other Monday.

Oh, except, you know, for that small little fact that Zachary Morgan almost kissed me over the weekend.

Zachary Morgan *almost. Kissed. Me!*

For real. The last time, back in the supply closet, I could rationalize it away. There had been no actual lip contact and the only reason we were so close to each other is that we were forced to be due to the confined space.

But in the hot tub... well, there wasn't any reason for us to be that close. Oh, and let's not forget that *teeny* tiny bit of lip contact.

What did he think of it, though? He hadn't texted all weekend, which is fine. Really. It is. Has he been replaying the moment in his head like I have? Do guys even do that? Fantasize about things as trivial as *almost* kissing girls when they could easily be *doing* plenty more with someone else?

While there wasn't much talk of the party, people *did* notice that Zac and I left together. Any discussions or speculations about the two of us were swiftly shut down by

Zac, who insisted that he gave me a ride home because everyone else was “*drunk off their asses.*”

His words, not mine.

Speaking of Zac, he has been giving me the cold shoulder today. As if he is trying harder than usual to prove that we aren't friends. The few times I did see him throughout the day he made a point to ignore me. Not even a head nod or a wave. If it wasn't for the way that he was *deliberately* avoiding me, I would think I had imagined the whole thing.

And I can't ignore the disappointment that sinks in whenever I think about it.

It's clear he regrets what *almost* happened, further cementing in my mind the idea that I am undesirable to the opposite sex.

I mean, come on, I can't even get Zac freaking Morgan to put the moves on me? I've seen him flirt with our librarian and she's easily pushing seventy.

That day in History class, Mr. Ellison informs us that we will be given two days a week in class (Tuesdays and Thursdays) to work on our group project, and any additional work would need to be completed outside of the classroom.

Having learned from his previous mistake of dismissing the class early to work on the assignment—I am confident in assuming that Zac and I were the only two to actually use the time—he instead reserved the library and all five of its study rooms for us to be able to spread out and work on our projects.

The final bell rings and as usual there is a mad dash to the door, including Mr. Ellison. I toss my textbook into my bag, but as I swing it over my shoulder the strap unclasps, and all of my belongings are thrown across the floor in a chorus of clatters and thuds.

Great.

The classroom has already cleared out so there is no danger of someone accidentally stepping on, or kicking around, any of my things.

Growling, I kneel to scoop up my loose pencils. But before I can shove them into my bag a shadow descends over me. I look up, though it's unnecessary. I already know who it is before I see him.

Zac.

Of course, he would be the only person to stay back to help me.

"Thanks," I clip out as he hands me a stack of notebooks and crumpled papers. In my standard fashion, I am successfully able to avoid eye contact. Because, apparently, that's still the only way I can handle Zac.

"Can we talk?" His voice is full of apprehension. He kneels next to me and scoops up a few highlighters, fingers brushing mine as he hands them to me.

Darn it!

If my nerve endings could realize that they are *not* supposed to react to the infuriating boy in front of me, that would be wonderful.

"I don't think there's anything to talk about." The remainder of my items are shoved into my bag sloppily, my usual organizational system ruined.

I get to my feet and book it out of the room at what I am sure is a comical speed. Leaving Zac on one knee behind me.

The following day passes in much the same way. The only difference being that now I am also actively avoiding Zac. It isn't that I *want* to not speak to him, it is more of an issue of pride. He doesn't think I am worth seeking out in public? *Fine*. Two can play that game. For the first time since his dumping of Marnie I actually participate in the scathing looks, not feeling even an ounce of remorse.

And if I had any delusions that Zac had been stewing over our late-night hot tub *whatever* it was, they are effectively shattered. Today alone I saw him laughing—and probably flirting—with three girls. *Three*. That is more than the number of guys I have flirted with *ever*.

This avoidance game between us lasts only until Tuesday afternoon, when we are forced to work together on our project.

To my surprise, Zac managed to get to the library early to secure us one of the private study rooms. I had assumed he would want to avoid any private conversation between the two of us. But then again, maybe it is just the public confrontation he is hoping to avoid.

Zac peeks up from his laptop as I open the door to the small space, his dark eyes instantly finding my blue ones.

“Hey,” he offers as the door closes with a soft *snick* behind me. We are in one of the most secluded study rooms, tucked into a back corner. Though it does have a line of windows along the exterior wall and another row facing the library.

I appreciate the visibility. We get light from outside, and I also don’t have to be overly suffocated by Zac’s presence.

“Hey.” I take the seat across from him, tucking my legs beneath my chair and wrapping my feet around the metal legs to prevent any accidental touching.

“Look, Dylan, I’m sorry if Friday night made things weird. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable around me.”

“I don’t. Feel uncomfortable, that is.” It isn’t until I say it out loud that I realize how true it is. Does he make my palms sweat, my breath catch, and my heart race? Absolutely. But as perfect as he is, I wouldn’t describe what he makes me feel as *uncomfortable*.

“I know you were drinking, and you don’t normally. I don’t know what I was thinking... I guess what I’m trying to say is that if you thought that I was trying to take advantage of you, or... whatever, I wasn’t.”

Now he is the one who can’t seem to meet my eye. A slow blush creeps up his face as he rubs the back of his neck. He’s really torn up over this. My heart softens faster than the snow outside is melting. Without a second thought my hand reaches out to grab his forearm that is resting on the table.

“I never thought that,” I whisper. He glances up and our eyes meet. I smile. And then he smiles.

Then, of course, I quickly yank my hand away from his warm skin and turn back to my work, making him chuckle.

“You seemed mad at me these past couple of days,” he comments casually after we had been working separately for a while, making lists of historical people we deem interesting enough to write a twenty-page report on.

“I could say the same for you. It felt like you were ignoring me. Like you didn’t want to be seen talking to me.”

“That’s because I didn’t,” he tells me, as if his reasoning obvious.

“Care to explain why?”

“Well, you kind of told me specifically that we couldn’t be seen being friendly together in public... you wanted to keep the facade of being team Marnie.” He shrugs. “Plus, a lot of people saw us leave together on Friday. I didn’t want to add fuel to any gossip.”

Of course.

How could I be so stupid? I had all but asked him to leave me alone in public, and then thought that after our almost kiss he would know that I wanted him to talk to me in front of people? It was good forethought on his part, too, taking into consideration the potential for rumors.

“Crap, I’m sorry.” I much prefer honesty over mind games and feel bad that, even accidentally, I had been playing with his mind.

To this, he holds out his hand.

“So, we’re good?” he offers.

“We’re good.”

Zac

I AM STARTING TO look forward to History class. *Who would have thought?* I am also pretty proud of myself for thinking to grab one of the private study rooms for Dylan and me to work in. Not only does everyone else in our class distract me when I am trying to get anything done, but talking with Dylan is one of the highlights of my day.

It is during one of these library sessions in the middle of January when Dylan's phone buzzes on the table. She flips it up quickly, but then lets out a small groan before promptly flipping it back over.

Color me intrigued.

"Who was that?"

It is absolutely none of my business and I deserve the irritated scowl she sends me. But that doesn't make me any less curious.

"Dex," she mumbles.

That makes my stomach sour a little. Which it shouldn't, especially seeing as she is less than enthused about him reaching out.

Does that happen often? Do they still text?

He was her first boyfriend. Was she his first girlfriend? What other firsts had they shared? Once my brain opens up the line of questioning, I can't reign it in. How often had Dex gotten to hold her? Kiss her? Do *more* with her? Did she love him? Does she *still* love him?

You don't care.

Right. Of course I don't.

But what if I *do*? What if I really, *really* do?

Rather than letting loose the growl in my throat, I instead offer an unenthusiastic '*hmmm.*' No need to look like a maniac.

Dylan goes back to her work while I try to refrain from grinding my molars together.

Not ten minutes later, she lets out a squeal that could rival that of my mom's old tea kettle.

Guess I didn't have to worry about *me* being the one to look like a maniac.

"What?" I demand. My first thought is that she deleted all of the work we had done on the project so far. Which is ridiculous since I'm sure she has it backed up in at least three different locations. We had decided that we would use Bud Abbott and Lou Costello for our report. Their names sounded vaguely familiar, but Dylan quickly pulled up a clip of their '*Who's on First*' bit on her computer. I tried to bite back my grin but couldn't help but laugh. For 1940s era comedians, they're pretty clever. In a clean, wholesome, ridiculous type of way. Not unlike Dylan.

"I got in!" she squeals.

"In?"

"To Heathwood!"

"No way!" My eyes widen. I hadn't even known that she was trying for that school. While the university is local, only about an hour away, it is one of the most prestigious universities in the country and historically there have only been a handful of kids from our high school to get admitted.

“That’s freaking incredible, Dyl! So that’s where you’re going?”

“It is now!”

Her eyes scan her computer screen, reading what I’m assuming is an email containing the details of her acceptance.

“No way,” she whispers, “no way, no way, no way! They’re offering me a scholarship.” Her wide eyes meet mine. “Full tuition. It doesn’t cover room and board, but this is an incredible amount of money.”

Her smile is huge and I can physically feel the excitement radiating from her. It’s infectious. Suddenly I’m also buzzing with anticipation. The urge to lunge across the table and throw my arms around her is pulsing through my veins, making my fingers twitch at my inaction.

I want to kiss Dylan. I want to pick her up and spin her around and kiss her until she can’t differentiate between the excitement she feels because of her acceptance and the feelings she has for me.

It sounds scientific. Like some psychological, Pavlovian thing, right? If I kiss her when she is happy then she will forever associate kissing me with happiness. Science.

Tears form in the corners of her eyes.

“Dyl?”

“I’m sorry, I’m just so relieved…” her voice trails off as she stares at the screen, dumbstruck. “I didn’t think I got in… I was expecting to hear from them weeks ago.”

The smile on my face doesn’t falter as I watch the absolute joy on this girl’s face. Cheeks flushed, curls messy from the numerous times she’s run her hand through them in an attempt to calm herself over the last few seconds, and that *smile*.

Pure, uninhibited happiness isn’t a look I see on Dylan all that often, I’m realizing. And it’s a *very* good look on her.

She’s in awe, and I can’t blame her. Even I know that tuition alone costs more than my new truck, and I had to save

years of money working odd jobs, plus a sizable contribution from Mom, to afford.

“I have to call my mom. Is that ok?”

Is she seriously asking me for permission to share this news with her family?

“Of course.”

Beaming, she pulls her phone out of her pocket and moves to the corner of the room. Presumably for privacy, although the room can't be larger than a ten by ten-foot square.

There is a quick conversation that primarily consists only of giddy squeals and delighted giggles. How girls can communicate like this, I will likely never understand. I have to give it to Dylan, though, she must have an amazing relationship with her mom.

Don't get me wrong, my mom and I get along great. But we're not at the point of telecommunication like Dylan and Mrs. Park seem to be.

“Sorry about that, where were we?” Dylan asks, brushing her palms over her jeans and sitting back down, trying to compose herself.

“We're celebrating,” I say, closing my laptop and shoving my books into my bag.

“What? But class—”

“Dyl. There are less than fifteen minutes left. Mr. Ellison ducked out for a meeting a half hour ago and the aide “watching us” has been reading a magazine in that corner without glancing at anyone from our class. No one will know if we duck out early.”

“I don't know, I'm not really a *skipping class* type of person...”

“You are today.” Before she can stop me, I sweep her supplies into her bag, knowing full well that she's got some crazy organization system, but quite frankly, I don't care. “Because we're leaving.”

Dylan

ZAC'S REACTION TO MY college acceptance is... surprising. Honestly, I didn't think that he would care. At all. I'm not sure that he plans on attending *any* college. So the grin that spread across his face and the pride in his eyes? Yeah, that felt good.

Although I had been anxious about leaving class early, it was for nothing. The teacher's aide, who is barely out of college herself, paid us no attention as we walked out the door of the library.

"Where are we going?" We are already seated in his truck, but I can't help but whisper my question, still in 'sneak' mode. Even though we're out of the building, I can't risk anyone seeing that Zac and I are friends. Or, you know, that I'm *skipping school*. Seriously, who *am* I?

Do I feel like a total jerk not wanting to be seen in public with Zac? Yes. Yes, I do. At first it didn't seem like a big deal. I was bitter and convinced myself that he deserved to be ostracized.

But now? Now putting on a mask and pretending not to care about him leaves a sour taste in my mouth and a pit in my stomach.

“Don’t worry, Park. Not taking you anywhere we will be spotted together.” He plays it off with humor. It feels like a gut punch.

“No... that’s not what I—”

“Yes, it is what you meant.” His smiles shows that he is okay with my hesitancy to be out in public with him. “We’re just going to swing by my house quickly first.”

His house? I haven’t been there in years. Late-night hot-tubbing escapade aside.

Will his mom be home? She was always the sweetest person. But I am not sure where we stand now that our families aren’t exactly *friendly* any longer.

Does she even like me anymore?

We manage to take off down the road before the rest of the student body even makes it to the parking lot, and before I know it Zac is parking in front of his house.

I hadn’t been able to fully take in its appearance the last time we were here, seeing as how it was nearly pitch black that night and we stayed outside. But in the daylight, seeing it floods me with warmth. Although the house itself is old, bits and pieces of the interior were remodeled. The kitchen, for instance. I remember when they got new appliances when I was maybe eight because the refrigerator came with a built-in water spicket and ice dispenser that we thought was the epitome of technology that summer.

The last time I had been *inside* the house was almost exactly seven years ago for a Christmas party. Stella Morgan has always been big on holidays and decorating, with every surface covered in lights, garland, angels, nutcrackers—

Oh my gosh, the *nutcrackers*.

“Does your mom still collect nutcrackers?” There is a bubbling excitement in my voice as we walk up the crunchy gravel drive. Part of it is residual energy from my acceptance, but there is a big part that is truly excited to see Zac’s house again, curious what, if anything, has changed.

Zac's head turns to me, a shy smile playing on his lips. "You remember that?"

I nod in response as he pulls open the screen storm door with a loud *squeak*, shoving in the main door. We are standing in a mudroom where we remove our shoes and head into the kitchen.

My eyes are assaulted with a literal Christmas Wonderland. It is... *magnificent*. Even better than I remember. Christmas, just, *everywhere*. More lights, more trees, more animatronic Santas... just more everything.

And yes. Mrs. Morgan *does* still have her nutcracker collection. Which also appears to have grown over the years. Nearly every flat surface is covered with a different nutcracker. Tables, counters, even the floor in some places. Some dressed in hunting garb, elves, *Elvis*, a chef, firemen, cowboys, and even *Harry Potter* characters. My eyes catch on one in the center of the fireplace mantle. It isn't anything special compared to the rest. About eight inches tall and well worn.

Except that it is one that Zac and I had picked out for her when I was ten. That was the last Christmas I got to spend with the Morgans.

It is just a traditional nutcracker—it's missing a foot and one of his arms dangles awkwardly at the elbow, as if broken—and seeing it in a place of honor makes my heart burst.

The house is full of the scent of garlic and tomato. As we wander further into the kitchen, I find Mrs. Morgan standing in front of the stove in a simple pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She wipes her hands on a towel hanging off the stove as she turns to us.

"Dylan." My name leaves her mouth on a breath, her face pales, as if she's seeing a ghost.

"Mrs. Morgan?" I try to hide the hesitancy that tinges my voice. I tense awkwardly, not sure where to look.

"Oh, how wonderful to see you!" The petite woman wraps me in a bone crushing hug. "How have you been?"

“Good,” I gasp, still stuck in her thin arms. She pulls back, keeping her hands planted on my biceps to hold me in place.

“Oh, you’re as beautiful as ever.” Mrs. Morgan lets out a sigh as her eyes roam over my body.

I’ve never been good at accepting compliments, so I stand there like a dope and hope my smile doesn’t look too forced.

Zac clears his throat. “We were actually going to head out and grab something to eat.”

Her face deflates. “Oh, of course. I have some pasta on the stove for everyone, but if you’ve already got plans that’s fine too.” She turns back to the stove, stirring some type of sauce.

Zac reaches over and grabs his wallet off the counter.

So that’s what he came back for.

I am going to give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that he had his license with him and *hadn’t* just been breaking the law by driving over here without it.

Zac steps toward the door, but my feet are stuck. I glance between him and his mom a few times. Zac, Stella, Zac, Stella, Zac...

“Or maybe we could eat here?” What compels me to suggest this, I can’t say for sure. I could blame it on the delicious smells coming from the stove, but it’s probably because Stella looked so disheartened when Zac told her we were leaving.

At once, they both whip around to me. Stella beaming, and Zac with a mixture of surprise and horror.

“Dyl, we don’t have to—” Zac starts.

He is interrupted as Stella clasps her hands together, exclaiming, “What a wonderful idea!”

Zac is staring at me now, and would you look at that. A flicker of gratitude joins the cocktail of emotions playing on his face. I shrug and go to the sink to wash my hands, offering to help.

The three of us spend the next few minutes getting things together before sitting down at the table.

“Alex and Justin are staying after school today for weightlifting and track practice, so it will only be the three of us,” Stella explains.

“Good,” Zac mumbles around a bite of pasta.

Stella keeps up the conversation, asking me questions about school, my family, and hobbies. She really is as nice as I remember, if not more so. It’s hard to believe that I missed out on spending time with her all these years. In a way, it feels like my mom tried to replace Stella with Lorna. But the two are opposites. Stella a warm, sweet chocolate chip cookie and Lorna a mug of cold, bitter coffee.

When we finish eating, Zac surprises me by getting up and clearing the table. Not only his plate, but everything. He even puts the leftovers in Tupperware in the fridge as his mom stays seated, talking with me over a cup of tea.

She’s not surprised by his actions, indicating that this isn’t something new.

Zac helps his mom around the house.

Who would have thought?

My attention is pulled away from Zac when his mom places her hand on mine. “It really is good to see you again, Dylan. And to have another female in this house for once.”

“What, you mean none of the three teenage boys you have living here bring girls home?” I play it off as a joke, because *of course* they bring girls here, right? But part of me is genuinely curious if they do. More specifically, if *Zac* does.

“Not that I am aware of, and certainly none that I’ve met. Although, I do work evenings and nights quite often, so it’s possible that they bring people over that I don’t know about.” As she speaks, I keep the smile on my face. But it no longer meets my eyes. As if she can tell I am disappointed in her response, she quietly adds, “Honestly, Dylan, I don’t think so. They’re teenage boys. If there was something going on in my

house I would notice. They're not as sneaky as they think they are." She gives me a knowing wink.

Okay, so maybe she can see that I'm nursing a teeny crush on her son.

I never claimed to be a good actress.

Yet I can't help but relax at her words. The thought of Zac bringing girls here shouldn't bother me. I *know* he hooks up with girls. But knowing that I am the only girl to come to his house in recent years gives me the sense that I matter to him, at least in some respect.

Mrs. Morgan leaves an hour later to get to her shift at the hospital, leaving Zac and I alone. I fear that the two of us being alone here would be awkward. And I would rather not run into Justin or his brother. Before I can suggest we head out, Zac beats me to the chase by grabbing his keys.

"You ready to go?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

After we pull back into the school parking lot, Zac waits by my car, making sure it starts before he drives off. It's an unfortunate necessity, and the fact that Zac realizes this—that he pays close enough attention to me to notice my dysfunctional vehicle—well, it's *nice*.

My phone pings with a message before pulls away.

Zac

Thanks for staying for dinner. You didn't have to, and it meant a lot to my mom.

Glancing up, I find him still parked beside my car, looking back at me.

Dylan

Of course. I had a good time.

Zac

I know I promised you a celebration. I'll make it up to you.

Dylan

Don't worry about it. Really, I was happy to catch up with your mom. She is such a sweet person.

Zac

Not sure what happened to her eldest son ;)

With that message, he drives off.

Dylan

“THAT IS FU— *freaking* unacceptable!” Zac bolts upright from his reclined position in the wooden library chair.

I bite back my smile. I mean, I agree with him. But seeing him so impassioned about a short story makes my insides all gooey.

He’s standing now. “No, you know what? I had it right the first time. Fu—”

“Zac,” I interrupt. As much as him caring enough to drop multiple f-bombs about the content of a piece of assigned reading, it is a *tad* unnecessary.

“Sorry, Dylan. Cover your delicate ears. Mrs. Colby expects us to answer these questions,” he picks up his paper, thrashing it around, “without cursing? I don’t think so. Like, what the hell? And the lady’s husband is just *cool* with that? Where’s the chivalry? The *decency*?” The rant continues, Zac remaining utterly bewildered that the main character’s husband wouldn’t defend his wife. I only grin.

“Actually, no,” he says, throwing the book onto the table. “I need space from this idiotic story, I’m too wound up. I’ll work through the worksheet at home.” He begins rooting through his backpack and I laugh.

Zac and I just read *The Lottery* together, which is the short story we were assigned to read today for English. The ending made me irrationally angry the first time I read it, too. But I think Zac's reaction has me beat.

Thanks to my working ahead on our history report, we have been using our allocated library study room time to work through other assignments. Sometimes we end up just talking the entire class period. And fine, spending time with Zac isn't exactly a hardship.

Over the past few weeks, things have shifted between us. Significantly. And it took me by surprise. I've come to crave that single hour, twice a week, that we have carved out for ourselves in the library. Being with Zac in our own little bubble, it's like being transported to a different world. One where we're on equal playing fields.

And he makes me laugh. *So much*. Sometimes it's from something childish he says, or a story he tells, but usually it's just from being *near* him. Like his energy fills up the tiny room, transferring to me, and I can't help but absorb it.

During the times we do actually hunker down to accomplish something, I will often look up to find Zac staring at me. And usually? He doesn't look away. Just keeps those warm eyes on me and smiles like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Let's just say, if this is the kind of stuff he pulled with Marnie, I'm not surprised she fell head over heels for him.

Zac's eagerness to work on homework also took me by surprise. Not only does he focus, but he often goes beyond what is necessary and asks me for help on his assignments. He doesn't simply want me to do the work for him, either. He has me read the lengthier stories or questions aloud to him and then talk through what specifically the text is saying so he can get a firm grasp on the subject matter.

The boy made *flash cards* to study for our English quiz, for crying out loud. Zac is truly trying to understand the material and knowing that he is making an effort is, well, *hot*.

That isn't to say he is all business. Zac, ever the social butterfly, has a way of striking up conversations that you can't help but get sucked into. A few sessions ago, he started peppering me with the most bizarre questions. They ranged from purely random to more personal and everything in between.

You'll never guess what Justin did at his party last weekend. Answer: Streaked. Butt Naked.

What's your favorite dinosaur? Answer: Pterodactyl, duh.

Do you prefer beaches or mountains? Answer: Beaches

Why did you and Dex break up again? Answer: None of your business.

Were the two of you serious? Answer: We dated for nine months, what do you think?

That's another thing he's been doing more often—probing into my relationship with Dex. Part of me, the *tiny* part that holds out hope that maybe Zac is interested in me beyond platonic friendship, wants to ask him why he is so fascinated with my love life. But the bigger part of me that accepts that Zac could never be *seriously* interested in me, convinces me to simply change topics whenever Dex comes up.

“Alright.” Zac plops himself back into his seat after thoroughly tearing apart his backpack. He slaps a fashion magazine down on the table and shoots me a knowing grin. “Quiz time.”

I roll my eyes.

The quizzes started a week or two ago when he ran out of randomly peculiar questions to ask me. Not wanting to work, he grabbed a copy of a teen fashion magazine from the rack in the main library area and we started filling out all the quizzes we could find. Now, he has taken to keeping one or two tucked in his bag, just in case.

I'll be honest, it says a lot about Zac's masculinity that he is comfortable enough to carry around a bright pink women's fashion magazine.

Today's issue is decorated in reds and pinks with hearts of varying sizes stamped across the cover. Zac flips through it, looking for the quiz section.

If I have to guess, this issue will be packed with questions that are romantic in nature, cashing in on the impending Valentine's Day holiday. Which, for the record, isn't one that I entirely hate despite always being single on February 14th. This year is no different and it appears that I will be spending it the same way I have every other year: at home with my mom.

Each year she gets me a stuffed animal to commemorate the holiday and the two of us have dinner together featuring the takeout of my choosing, brownies, and a movie. I have to give her credit. She's willing to sacrifice a date night with my dad to spend time with me to help me feel better about being single. And while I'm sure it is something that she read in one of her parenting books, I still appreciate the effort.

"Alright, Dylan," Zac says with a smile as he pulls out a pen as obnoxiously pink as the magazine. "Let's find out the first letter of your soulmate's name."

His expression is so intense that for a moment, I question whether he is kidding or not.

"I'm not joking. This is serious!" he exclaims, waving around the bright pen. "Imagine how much time you will save on dating if you already know the letter that your *lover's* name starts with?" The smile that forms on his full lips tells me that he is, in fact, joking.

Regardless, I have nothing else to work on at the moment, so I humor him and answer the questions as accurately as I can.

Cats or Dogs? Dogs.

Breakfast or Dinner food? Breakfast.

Summer or Winter? Winter.

"What? Winter?"

Shrugging, I defend my answer. “The tourists show up in the summer. At least in the winter it’s a little more *normal*.”

“Ok, so if we lived somewhere that tourists didn’t flock to, what would you say?”

Reluctantly, I give in. “Summer. I like the hot weather,” I mutter.

“Knew it.” His cocky smirk is back as he directs his attention back to the quiz.

“Chopsticks or fork?”

I pause. There’s no *way* that is an actual question.

Zac’s face is neutral as he stares innocently at the paper, ready to note my response. That is, until his mouth slowly tugs up into a grin and he raises his eyes to meet mine, his teeth biting down on his lip to quell his laughter.

Fine. He realized I’m no good with chopsticks. It isn’t *that* embarrassing.

In fact, it only reinforces my suspicions that he was watching me that night in the movie theater. And that realization sends my stomach flopping around.

“Fork,” I deadpan, not giving him the reaction I’m sure he is hoping for.

He nods and scribbles something down. We go through about a dozen more questions, all of which are completely irrelevant to finding my soulmate, before he starts a drum roll with a couple of pencils on the table.

“Alright, Dylan Park. Your soulmate’s first name starts with the letter... Z!”

My stomach caves in on itself. “What? No, let me see that!” I throw myself over the table to grab the quiz from his hands. There is *no way* that can be right.

After skimming it over, I roll it up and swat him playfully on the arm. “*Or* D, A, G, and H,” I correct. Because apparently the quiz offers five letters for your possible soulmate.

“Yeah... but I have a hunch Z is right for you.” He winks playfully at me.

“Or ‘D’,” I counter, “Of all the letters suggested I’ve only dated someone whose name begins with ‘D’”.

“So far, you mean. And let’s not forget that you are no longer with him.” Zac holds my gaze and I feel my pulse quicken.

He’s right, but what do I say to that?

“And how about you, would you like to complete the quiz to cut down on the number of ladies you need to get with to find the love of your life?”

“Nah,” he pushes the magazine aside, turning back to his English worksheet, “I already have a good idea who mine is.”

ZAC AND I PUSH through the double doors of the library into the hall together after school, laughing. We’re never in much of a hurry to pack up, making us usually the last people from our class to leave. Sometimes we even hang around an hour or so after school.

“Dylan!” calls out a voice from behind us. Whirling around, I find Aspen barreling down the hall, a glittery purple folder tucked in the crook of one arm and waving a piece of paper at me frantically with the other. Her eyes skirt between Zac and me.

“Phew, glad I caught you! You’re the only person from the senior class that we are missing for the *Matched* survey.”

The cheerleaders at our school hold a fundraiser every year on Valentine’s Day where students fill out questionnaires and then some company prints out reports for everyone that show who their “matches” are for both romantic interests and platonic friendship. It is complete bologna for the most part, but still fun. And since Aspen cheers for basketball season, it makes sense for her to be coordinating this little activity.

“Thanks, Aspen.” I shoot her a smile which she eagerly returns. There’s no denying that Aspen is gorgeous. She’s got

wavy brown hair with matching eyes and the cutest speckling of freckles across her nose. She is the ultimate cheerleader. Peppy, fun, and bubbly. But unlike how they are portrayed in the movies, Aspen is kind to everyone. She's someone you would want to hang out with, just genuinely happy, and it shows.

Zac, ever the flirt, gives her a wink and a nod before she passes the questionnaire to me.

That small action sends me reeling. I know I assured Marnie that she had nothing to worry about concerning Zac and Aspen, and I stand by that. But that's not to say that there isn't a chance that they have been... *involved* in the past.

Or that they won't be in the future.

I have absolutely no claim on Zac. None at all. So the prickliness I'm suddenly feeling toward Aspen is unwarranted. Unsettling.

I take the questionnaire from her hand and set it against the bumpy cinder block wall to quickly scribble my answers in—too distracted by the interaction of the couple next to me to pay any attention at all to the redundant questions—before handing it back.

“All set.”

“Awesome, thanks Dylan. Are you hoping to match with anyone in particular?” Her brows raise knowingly.

“No, not really.” I shrug.

She deflates at my response. Or maybe it's my nonexistent love life that is disappointing her. Hers certainly puts mine to shame.

“Oh. I thought...” She trails off in thought, her eyes flicking to Zac in a near imperceptible motion. I experience a sudden urge to defend myself.

“Dex and I broke up not too long ago. I guess I'm not ready to jump back into the whole dating game right now,” I add.

“Oh, of course. I completely understand.” I don’t miss the dejection flitting across her features, “Well, thanks again.” She shakes my completed questionnaire at me and bounces back down the hall.

Zac

“WHAT’S UP WITH YOU and Dylan? Is there something going on there?”

It’s Friday and Justin and I are leaving our last class of the day, heading toward the gym for weight lifting. Unfortunately, this idiot and I not only share a house together these days, but we are also stuck with each other during *and* after school.

“What? No.” I brush off his accusation easily enough. If any of my other friends had directly called me out like that, it would have been much harder for me to tell a convincing lie.

But it’s not really a lie, is it.

There *is* nothing going on between us. Aside from our *scandalous* friendship, that is.

Still, I’ll be darned if I can’t get that blonde puff of curls out of my mind. She’s like a ghost, haunting me. In the halls when I sense her presence, at home when Mom not so subtly asks questions about her, even if I’m driving and hear a particularly sputtery old car. *Everything* reminds me of Dylan.

And why would Justin get the impression that there is something between us, anyway? We’re virtual opposites. She’s got so much going for her right now—good grades, access to the best college, a crazy supportive family—and I’ve got, well, *Justin*. Who at this moment is dedicated to ruining my good

mood. Oh, and the dozen or so girls who have a habit of pawing at me only for the sake of saying that I went out with them.

“Why would you think that?” I press casually.

He shrugs. “Haven’t seen you trying for any other girls since you dumped Marnie. That’s unusual for you. I figured that since Dylan is the only girl you are spending time with these days you had to be tapping that.”

My grip tightens on the strap of my backpack. I’m not sure if I’m angry that Justin even dares ask the question, or that his assumption is incorrect. “No,” I say through clenched teeth.

“But she’s been to the house, right?”

“For school stuff,” my robotic voice recites. Dylan has been to my house a grand total of three times in the past two months. Once to use the hot tub, once for an impromptu dinner with Mom, and once when I had missed a day of school, sick, and she stopped by to bring me my work from the day.

That last visit was above and beyond what she needed to do, as I have not only a younger brother, but also Justin who could have just as easily brought me my work. And, you know, *email* exists. Although unnecessary, her visit certainly wasn’t unwelcome. Because it heavily indicated that Dylan might be searching just as hard for excuses to see me as I am to see her.

The only downfall was that during this particular instance Justin was also home. He couldn’t resist making a show of looking Dylan over with a hungry expression that nearly earned him a black eye.

“Too bad, I bet she’s crazy in bed,” he says flippantly.

“What?” I nearly stop in my tracks.

Scratch that, I do stop.

As does Justin when he realizes that we are no longer walking together. Traffic continues to flow around us. Even in the haste to escape the school day people are wary enough of the two of us to slow down and swerve around the human

barricade that our bodies create rather than risk rubbing into us.

“Yeah, you know what they say, ‘*Lady in the streets, freak in the sheets*’ and all that.” He laughs it off, as if it isn’t completely inappropriate for him to talk about Dylan, or *any girl*, that way.

Meanwhile, my brain is slowly short circuiting. Because there’s *no way* he just said that.

“Don’t,” I growl. “Don’t talk about her like that.”

“Whoa. Okay, dude.” His hands fly up in surrender. “So... why don’t you hook up with her?” Wow, he *really* doesn’t know when to shut up.

“Because A: she’s a nice girl, not exactly one to do random hookups. And B: I literally just dumped one of her closest friends.” I try my best to keep up the quickly fading facade that this conversation isn’t affecting me, that there *isn’t* anything between Dylan and me.

But as much as we try to ignore it, I know that we feel something for each other. Or, at least, I feel something for her. Have for a while. The jury is still out on if those feelings are reciprocated. So far, she has shut down any of my attempts to get physically closer to her. Granted, they were always poorly executed and at the most inappropriate moments...

“Marnie is a nice girl too. It hasn’t stopped you before.” I deflate at his words and resume walking again, much to the relief of the few underclassmen who were forming a small traffic jam behind us.

He’s right. Marnie *is* a nice girl. And now, thanks to me, she’s got a bad rep and is out doing who knows what every weekend.

“Dylan’s different, dude. You know that. She’s not someone you mess around with.” It is the only retort I can come up with that doesn’t proclaim my intense desire for her.

“I suppose you’re right.” Justin tosses his books in his locker and grabs his keys. “I’m still going to ask Dex about

her, though.” He shoots me a wink as if we’re in on some weird secret.

We aren’t, and now I’m fuming. I do not want to be having this conversation. Not now. Not ever. Definitely not with my pseudo-roomie. It’s frustrating that I feel any jealousy at all toward Dylan’s wanna be basketball star ex boyfriend. But... I do.

It’s unwarranted. There’s no reason for me to have these macho protective urges. The same ones that are kicking in now and telling me that the best course of action is to grab Justin by his cute little man bun and forbid him from ever speaking Dylan’s name again.

But that’s extreme. So I simply grind my molars and nod along.

More than anything, I’m mad at myself. It’s my own fault. I didn’t recognize how amazing Dylan was before it was too late. Someone else recognized that in her first. *Dex*.

I rip open my locker door, growing more irritated by the second, and shove a few textbooks into my bag. I don’t even know if I need these specific books for tonight. But I do know that it feels good to be doing something with my hands.

“Wait, I thought you and Dex hated each other?” The realization hits me, sparking a surge of hope to life in my chest. They’ve had some weird feud going on for years. Even though the two of them go to different schools and live in different towns, their dads work together at the same corporation. I have no idea how their feud began, but I do know that it exists. It was hard to miss when all last semester Justin and Dex would be shooting daggers and spewing not so subtle insults back and forth whenever we hung out with Marnie and Dylan.

You would think that Justin and I would be closer friends because of our shared hatred of Dylan’s ex. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*. But nope. I dislike them both. Dex for dating Dylan, and Justin for being a total jerkwad almost exclusively.

Justin throws his head back in laughter. “We do. Which is why me asking him would be so great! A: it would piss him off, and B: he would feel threatened.”

Unable to hear any more nonsense from Justin, I mumble some excuse to him about needing to get home and abandon him at our lockers.

But it must not be my day because as I am about to exit the building, I crash into something. Or rather, someone.

“Oh! Zac, hi. I didn’t see you,” Lexi purrs, tucking a piece of her straight blonde hair behind her ear and fluttering her eyes an unnecessary number of times.

“Yeah, hey, Lexi. I’m on my way out.”

“What’s the hurry?”

Flirting. She’s flirting, isn’t she.

And ‘*what’s the hurry?*’ School let out. Who wants to just loiter in the halls?

“I have places to be.”

“I heard about you and Marnie...” She places a hand on my forearm, making me involuntarily clutch my backpack strap tighter. *Obviously*, she heard about our breakup, she and Marnie have been pretty chummy. I’ve picked up on how Marnie has been favoring talking to Lexi at school lately over Dylan. “If you ever want to talk about it or anything, just know that I’m here.”

I let out a puff of air, about to explain how incredibly uninterested in her proposition I am, when another voice speaks.

“Excuse me, guys,” Dylan mutters, pushing past us.

Crap. Lexi cornered me right in front of the door. Most people have already left the building, but apparently not Dylan. Meaning she gets a front-row seat to this embarrassing flirtation.

“Dyl—” I call, but she’s long gone. I stare as she makes her way through the parking lot. Her hair is loose today and

flies freely in the wind. It's beautiful. Hypnotic. She swings into her car. The engine whines a few times before it roars to life, then she peels out onto the road.

“So... what do you say?”

Oh, right. Lexi's still here.

“I have to go to the weight room. See you around.” And with that, I turn back into the school and make my way to the gym.

I had expected the fury and irritation from the day to subside after a workout, but two hours later when I push through our screechy front door into the mudroom I am still fuming. Kicking off my shoes, I plow into the kitchen, grateful that no one else is home. I don't stop my stomping until I reach the fridge to pull out a protein shake.

Except, I don't open the fridge. Because my eyes catch on a single sheet of white paper amongst the hodgepodge of items tacked to our refrigerator door. Immediately I recognize the scrawl of red ink on the page. Heck, I've spent enough time staring at that paper in the two days since receiving it back from Mrs. Colby that I can probably recite from memory where each and every wrinkle is on the page.

‘Great work, Zac! I'm proud of the time and effort you've put into studying for this test. Keep it up!’

She had even rounded her praise off with a doodled smiley face next to the eighty-nine percent grade she had scribbled on the top of the page.

Mom hung up my test. It is something she has done for Alex plenty of times. But me? Well, let's just say that no one proudly displays a seventy-two percent.

But this... Mom is proud of this. *I'm* proud of this. I've never felt that I didn't have the unconditional love and support from my mother, that she wasn't proud of me as a person, but academically... yeah, there was something lacking.

A swell of emotions rises inside me, and I quickly tug open the door and pull out a shake before I turn into a total wuss.

Because *Dylan* helped me study for that test. It was all my work, of course, but she took the time to explain things to me so the material could click in my brain. I've been trying all year to get my grades up on my own, but all it took was letting go of a little bit of pride and asking for help to finally have success. Having Dylan as a friend is a *good thing*. And our friendship is one area of my life I refuse to screw up.

Dylan

THE AIR BUZZES WITH a happy energy. Tonight is game night. Friday. And I am more than a little excited. Marnie and I stayed after school to get ready for the basketball game together in the locker room. *This* is what our senior year was supposed to be. The two of us together, laughing and joking as we get pumped up to cheer on our team. *Not* whatever the past few months have been, where I've had to force my interactions with her and compete for her attention.

“Are you sure you've got enough glitter?” Marnie asks on a cough, waving her hand through the aerosol cloud my canister of spray glitter created.

“Yep. That should do it.” I add a final spritz for good measure.

She tosses her head back in a laugh. “I swear, Dyl, you've got too much pep. Maybe you should have joined the cheer team this year.”

“Eh, that's not really my thing. I'd rather be in the stands with you.”

“Good answer.” She shoots me a wink before spraying down the ringlets she has pulled in her ponytail with a stream of regular hair spray, keeping the brown locks perfectly in

place. “You could totally pull off the uniform, though. Your legs in that skirt.” A playful whistle. I roll my eyes.

There is a pounding on the locker room door that leads to the parking lot just as Marnie’s phone chimes. “That’s Tess. She’s at the door.” She skips over to let a sodden Tess in, her curls flying in every direction.

“So... the weather’s not great,” Tess huffs, throwing a duffle bag down onto the bench that runs the length of the room.

The weather is stuck in that awkward stage between winter and spring. The snow melting one day, causing the roads and sidewalks to be covered in muddy slush, and the next having a veritable blizzard. Tonight’s mix appears to be rain and snow, topped off with gusting wind.

We laugh and Marnie goes to work trying to wrangle Tess’s hair into submission.

“So, what do you guys know about Lexi?” I ask with what I hope appears to be casual curiosity rather than jealous bitterness.

“Lexi? Lexi Stevens?” Tess clarifies.

“Yeah.”

“Why?” Marnie chimes in.

It’s a valid question. *Why*. Lexi is a junior and falls cleanly into the ‘cool’ category, right next to Zac and his friends. So why do I care that I saw Lexi touching Zac? Logically, it makes sense for her to be the next girl to cling onto him.

But for weeks Zac hasn’t even flirted with another girl. At least, not that I noticed—and believe me, I would have noticed. The realization that he is moving on unsettles me.

It’s not that he’s moving on, but that he’s not moving on with you.

And since when have I started openly accepting that? That I want more than a secret friendship with Zac?

“Never mind,” I mutter. It was dumb to bring it up anyway with Marnie here. If I mention Zac, she will either become angry and hurt, or skeptical of my motives.

The subject drops and the three of us bound to the stands to watch the Junior Varsity game wrap up in anticipation of the Varsity game.

We are each wearing our standard game day outfits of knee-high socks, blue cotton shorts, and navy and silver ribbons in our hair. Marnie wears a low-cut V-neck T-shirt, while Tess and I have gone more conservative with plain T-shirts. I have a hoodie over mine as well because—*hello*, winter.

It isn't until we push into the gym and I spot the familiar gold and black jerseys that my good mood begins to shrivel. My steps stutter, and then so does my breathing. Because there is Dex, sitting on the bleachers across the room in his long sleeve basketball warm up shirt and tear away sweats.

I forgot we were playing Clifton tonight.

We play them twice a year—once away, and once at home—and I *forgot*.

Marnie has her arm hooked through my elbow, which is the only reason I keep my forward momentum toward our bleachers. Gosh, it's wild how severe my reaction still is to my ex. Sure, it's probably more the surprise element today, but knowing he is playing tonight dampens my mood significantly and throws me off-kilter.

The three of us find our seats and I try to blend into the crowd as much as possible to prevent Dex from spotting me. It's pointless, though, since I'm literally shimmering with all of the glitter in my hair and on my shirt. Sure enough, his eyes lock with mine across the bleachers and his lips tug up in a smile.

As the JV game winds down, the stands swell with spectators, our side an ocean of blue and silver in support of the Silverwood Panthers. The season is almost over and the pressure to win is getting the crowds rowdier than usual as

playoffs approach. The teams are only warming up and already there are chants breaking out among fans.

Despite knowing that Dex is here, excitement thrums through me, the adrenaline of anticipation hitting my veins. We watch the game intently throughout the first quarter. The boys are matching each other basket for basket and more than a handful of fouls have been called. Even Ellis, the most docile player on our team, is racking up penalties. Neither team can get more than a four-point lead and the crowd is here for it, jumping and chanting along to the cheers led by the cheerleaders with more enthusiasm than usual.

That is, with the exception of a few guys sitting behind us, Justin included.

“Yeah, shake it Marn!” he calls out after we stand to cheer for a particularly impressive basket made by Graham. “I can see why Zac kept you around for so long.”

Marnie and I turn. The look she gives him could have killed, but all Justin does is wiggle his eyebrows and continue to let his sleazy eyes roam over her form. “Chill, Dylan,” he adds, addressing me for the first time in this exchange. “No one’s checking you out. You can put the claws away. Couldn’t even keep your boring ex happy enough for him to keep you around.”

“Dylan broke up with Dex, not the other way around,” Marnie corrects sternly.

“Well, she probably shouldn’t have done that. Looks like he’s got plenty of other options,” he waves in the direction of the opposing team’s stands where there are close to a dozen signs with Dex’s name and jersey number on them, “not sure the same is true for Dylan.”

The guys around Justin—who don’t even go to our school, I might add—laugh.

“Oh, I don’t know, Barnes. I might give her a shot. I bet I could teach her a few things,” one of his friends says. More laughter.

“Don’t waste your time. She’s not worth it.” Justin’s remark is the final nail in my coffin. Blood rushes to my face, making it heat. Tears prickle behind my eyes and I divert them back to the court to hide my discomfort.

Long, slow blinks. Deep breaths. It will be fine.

Why am I letting what he says get to me? *I* broke up with Dex. He never thought I was boring...

Justin’s opinions don’t matter. He doesn’t even know me.

Yet those reminders don’t replace my earlier happiness that has effectively been siphoned from my soul. The roar of the crowd continues to surround me, cheers of delight and clapping. But I’m frozen.

Because what Justin said spoke to my inner thoughts.

I’m *not* pretty enough. Not willing to wear provocative clothes and put myself out there. I am *stay in with a cup of tea on Friday nights, never skip class, and focus on college*. Safe... Boring. I can’t compare to Marnie, and certainly not Lexi.

“Not cool,” Marnie shoots back at Justin, giving him a small shove on his shoulder. “You wish you could get someone as good as Dylan to give you the time of day.” At least I have Marnie on my side.

“No thanks, I have certain... *standards* for my girls. But I wouldn’t turn down some time alone with *you*.” Justin grabs Marnie’s wrist and runs the pointer finger of his opposite hand along Marnie’s jaw line, which she abruptly swats away.

“You have ten seconds to get the *hell* out of here, Barnes.” The thunderous—and quite frankly, *terrifying*—voice comes from near the court. It catches all our attention, heads turning in sync.

Zac is clutching a bag of popcorn in one hand and nachos in the other as he gives Justin a look that is pure fury.

Justin’s hands raise in mock surrender. “No worries, man. I was just talking to the ladies. Come on guys—” he motions to

the gang around him—“let’s get out of here and see if we can find something fun to do with our Friday night.”

My throat is tight as I try to swallow around the lump lodged there. I know the waterworks are going to start and I need to get out of here.

Now.

“I gotta pee,” I murmur to Marnie and Tess, keeping my voice quiet to not give away the emptiness in my stomach.

My legs carry me down the plastic bleachers and along the sideline of the court. The game is on a time-out, so I won’t be disrupting any game play. Unfortunately, my path takes me directly past the Clifton huddle. Dex’s gaze meets mine over the heads of his teammates. His eyes are narrowed in confusion. He knows how much I like attending games. I shake my head and his eyes shift to something behind me. His lips turn down in a frown but I don’t have the time or energy to analyze his emotions. The squeak of my tennis shoes on the shiny floor follows me as I speed into the locker room and let the door swing shut behind me. But instead of using the restroom, I push out the back door into the parking lot.

The cold wind strikes my face first, and next I am pelted with the flurry of snow-rain. I am grateful for my hoodie, but not so much for my skimpy shorts, which expose nearly all my bare thighs.

Although it is a short walk to my car, the wet snowflakes have managed to dampen my hair considerably, causing the straight strands that fell out of my ponytail around my face to curl.

Slamming my door shut behind me, I cup my hands over my mouth and heave a few deep breaths into my palms to warm them. And to calm myself down. The last thing I need is to have to explain my running eye makeup to my nosy family when I get home if the tears begin to fall.

I thrust the key into the ignition and sigh in relief when it roars to life with no further coaxing needed from me.

See, everything is fine.

I'm fine.

Who cares if a group of bullies made some mildly offensive comments about me? I'll. Be. Fine.

I crank the heat. My car has been here maybe two hours and already the sleet has created a thick layer of ice on the windshield. I'm rooting around in my backseat for the scraper when the familiar groan of surrender sounds from my engine.

“Noooo, come on baby!” I run my hand lovingly over the steering wheel, trying to coax it back to life. “Come on, come on, *come on!*” With a final whine, it falls silent.

I slump back in my seat and close my eyes as a single tear trails down my cheek.

Tap, tap, tap.

I nearly jump out of my skin at the sound against my window. Zac is standing in the freezing snow-rain-ice mixture, hands shoved in the pockets of his jacket and shoulders hunched up, as if trying to get some shelter. I crank down the window slowly, not super eager to hear what he has to say.

One perk of an old car? Crank windows. Which work without the car operating. It makes me wonder if the manufacturer was aware of just how unreliable this machine would turn out to be. Not that it's the *car's* fault—it runs as well as can be expected for a thirty plus year old vehicle. But still.

“You heading out?” he asks, shifting from foot to foot.

“Was, but my car won't start. Guess I'll be sticking around for a while longer.”

“Na, hop in, I'll give you a ride.”

So, this is our thing now? Zac being my knight in shining armor, coming to my rescue. Although, in my twisted story it is my noble steed that I need rescuing from.

Truly, I don't want to accept his invitation.

He saw and heard everything that happened and *absolutely* knows that is why I fled the gymnasium. It's embarrassing,

especially because after the confession of my insecurities that night in the hot tub he likely picked up on how close to home Justin's words hit.

But I want to go back inside the building even less.

Yes, Justin may have left, but Marnie and Tess will still be there, ready to fuss and coo over me to make sure my pride isn't wounded. The thought of facing everyone again makes me physically ill, so I mumble out a halfhearted, "Thanks," before throwing myself from my car.

Zac grabs my hand and we run through the lot, trying to dodge the weather. Without my permission, a snort of laughter bursts free. Then my foot splashes through a pothole of muddy slush and I laugh even harder. It's that freeing feeling you get running through a warm rain drizzle. Though this is the polar opposite—emphasis on the *polar*—it has the same effect.

Zac, in turn, also lets loose a deep chuckle. He yanks open the passenger side door of his truck and helps shove me inside. I like Zac's truck. It is new and huge. Its crew cab allows for a ton of legroom in the front and the back. Not to mention that he keeps it impeccably clean and it smells like laundry detergent, peppermint, and Zac. Or whatever delicious cologne or body wash Zac is always wearing.

The engine roars to life and the blasting heat warms the cab almost immediately. Perks of having a vehicle manufactured subsequent to 1987.

"Tacos?" he asks with a smile, shaking out the water droplets from his hair.

"What?"

"Tacos. You want some? The Shore has tacos tonight." He must notice my confusion because he adds, "I didn't get to eat my nachos *or* popcorn because some idiot was insulting my bestie. I'm starved."

"Oh, sure, tacos sound good." And they do. I ignore his '*bestie*' remark. I'm not sure how I feel about Zac considering me a close friend now.

Oh, who am I kidding. I love it.

The Shore is our local food truck. In the summer they are open almost 24/7 serving tacos, burgers, mac and cheese, and a rotation of other food truck staples. But in the off-season when there aren't tourists, they are only open a day or two a week and have a rotating, limited menu. The only way to keep track of them is with the updates on their social media pages. According to Zac, tonight they are parked at the beach public access.

As we take off, my attention falls to my soaked tennis shoes. They're uncomfortable and are dripping all over the pristine carpeting and floor mats. Would it be impolite to take off my shoes? It seems impolite. Definitely something that you would do only with someone you're comfortable with.

Am I that comfortable with Zac?

A chuckle bounces through the vehicle. "Kick your shoes off, Park."

With a shy smile I do just that, setting them on the center of the rubber mat to prevent any damage to the carpeting. I then tuck one of my feet onto the seat.

Zac and I drive the short distance to the beach, me apologizing profusely for dripping all over his truck and him brushing me off. I feel guilty that he is having to miss the end of the game to drive around with me. But, then again, I didn't ask him to follow me out of the gym.

Even though I am more grateful for the act than he will ever know.

In the background of our conversation the summer tones of Jimmy Buffet's '*Margaritaville*' stream through the radio in stark contrast to the Wintery slurry that surrounds us.

When we reach the beach Zac parks to the side of one of the streetlights in the public access lot and instructs me to remain in the truck. Before I can shout my order to him, he's gone. Since the weather is terrible tonight, we are the only ones here. Zac gets under the protection of the bright green awning of the food truck with no issues and is back in his

truck within a few short minutes, carrying two bags and a tray of slushies.

“I didn’t tell you what I wanted,” I blurt. Yes, I realize how extremely ungrateful I sound to the boy who bought me dinner and braved the sleet, which is now coming down sideways.

“Don’t worry, Dylan.” He offers me one of those adorable smiles, rolling his eyes, “Veggie tacos—for both of us.” He pulls out a Styrofoam container from the plastic bag and slides it to me. Trying to be discreet I peek inside and see a hastily scribbled ‘VEG’ on the taco wrappers in a black marker. He really did get me veggie tacos.

My heart dances.

I’m blushing. And smiling. Big time.

“Thanks. I didn’t know if you remembered...”

“You’re the only vegetarian I know. I wouldn’t forget that.”

Be still my heart.

Most people forget that about me. Even my family. But more than that, I only removed meat from my diet a year or two ago. Which means that Zac paid enough attention to me during that time to pick up on it.

Rather than try to drive while eating, we opt to dig into our food in the parking lot.

Delicious.

The tacos and the slushies.

And *maybe* the boy next to me.

The combination of it all makes me almost forget about Justin and his rude comments.

Almost.

We finish our food and sit sipping our slushies, making light conversation while dancing around any topics related to the game and Zac’s so-called friend, or anything that he may or may not think of me. Try as I might, I can’t shake the heavy

blanket of defeat that hangs over my chest. My smiles are halfhearted, and I can tell that Zac notices even though he doesn't mention anything.

A short while later a figure emerges from the food truck and closes the awning, fighting with the wind, before running back inside its warmth. The truck's engine then roars to life and drives off into the darkness. I guess the weather is too bad for the truck to justify staying open any longer. Which, from the looks of the deserted parking lot, is a good business decision.

I hear the cackling final slurp of Zac's slushie as he downs the last few dregs of it, tossing it into our empty taco bag. My cup, abandoned in the door's cupholder, is still half-full. It has melted already and I'm not a fan of warm slushies. They always taste so much sweeter after the ice is melted, and the sugar makes my teeth ache.

Zac reaches over to flip the middle console up. He turns to face me, tucking one ankle beneath the opposite knee, mimicking my own pose. He is still on his side of the truck, but suddenly, without the partition between us, he feels so much closer.

The air in the cab shifts, becoming heavier. Or maybe thinner? Either way, there certainly isn't enough oxygen for both of us and I'm struggling to take a full breath.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry about Justin," Zac says, casually leaning his right shoulder on the back of his seat. "He's... a mess. That doesn't excuse his behavior, what he said was way out of line, but he's going through some stuff."

"It's fine," I say with a shrug. I was hoping that he wouldn't bring it up. No need to show Zac how much a few words can hurt me. Not that I'm fooling him with my attempt at nonchalance.

"No, it's not fine," Zac says, sitting up straighter in his seat. He runs a hand through his hair and focuses on the ceiling. "He had no right to speak that way to you. No one does."

I shrug again, staring back out the window at the accumulating snow on the windshield. I can't argue with that. Even if, deep down, I believe what Justin had said is true, he still shouldn't have *said* it.

"Dylan." Zac's stern tone draws my focus back to him. He is meeting my eyes, reading my thoughts. I fight the urge to look away. I let him see what I'm feeling—vulnerabilities and all. "You *know* he was lying, right?"

"What?" I sputter, so caught up in the magnetic pull of his eyes to fully comprehend his words. His attention has my face heating and the throatiness in his voice right now... it's doing things to me.

"You're worth it," Zac says, refuting Justin's earlier claim. "You're kind and sweet and fun and gorgeous. He knows that. Everyone knows that." Each word from his mouth leaves me more and more lightheaded.

I swallow audibly. "Everyone?" I don't know why I ask; my tone makes it obvious that I am *specifically* asking about the only other person in this conversation. It sounds pathetic, even to my own ears. Am I looking for rejection? To appear desperate?

Maybe my subconscious thinks that I haven't lost quite enough of my pride already this evening.

Zac doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he takes a few seconds to catalog my face.

"Yeah." He lets out a gentle laugh. "Everyone."

Oh.

He slides closer to me and places his hand on my leg, his fingers playing with the cuff of my knee-high sock where it meets my bare skin. Absent-mindedly, he slips his forefinger beneath the band and slides it back and forth.

I turn to mush.

There is absolutely nothing inappropriate about his touch. It's not indecent or intimate or sexual in any way. Except it totally feels like it is.

We freeze until slowly, Zac's thumb draws circles against my thigh, right above my knee.

"Zac," I say on a breath, not sure what I plan to say after. His gaze slides leisurely up my body until our eyes meet.

And I don't look away. Instead, I take the opportunity to really see his face. I take in his thick brows, the deep brown of his eyes, his nose, which has the slightest crook. Zac is beautiful, and he is looking at me like I am too.

My breathing comes out in quiet gasps that I hope he doesn't notice despite knowing that with how close he is to me, he *absolutely* notices. My heart threatens to pound out of my chest. My hands, at least, are still. Though I'm not entirely sure if that is a good or bad thing. More like they just don't know what they should be doing in this moment, so they opt to not move at all.

Zac's hand is shaking as it slides away from my knee and up my thigh and—

Wait, shaking?

Is he nervous?

Yet *again* I find myself wondering if Zac is going to kiss me. But unlike the previous times, my senses aren't skewed by alcohol and my mind isn't clouded with a desire to remain loyal to my friend.

This time my head is clear.

This time I know that I don't want to push him away.

I'm not *going* to push him away.

It's just me and Zac.

I'm not thinking about anyone or anything else as his hand slides up my arm, eventually engulfing the side of my face in his warm palm.

My mind goes blank as his fingers weave through my hair.

And the entire world fades away when he gently tips my head toward him.

He leans in closer until his lips are shadowing my own and I can almost taste him.

Zac pauses for a few heartbeats, allowing his breath to fan across my face. “If you don’t want to do this, tell me, Dylan.” His voice is barely a whisper as his lips brush against mine.

I want this, whatever *this* is. Just a kiss? The start of something more? At this point, my belly is swirling with so much anticipation that I don’t care what label this has. But the way Zac is looking at me, vulnerability and desire deep in his dark eyes, I also can’t find any words to tell him how very okay I am with this.

He remains still for a few more moments, only his thumb rubbing softly against my cheek, waiting for me to tell him no.

“Zac?”

“Yeah?”

“Just kiss me.”

Dylan

ZAC'S SMILE GROWS AGAINST my lips as he closes the minuscule distance between us and guides my mouth to his.

And *holy moly*.

If I had any expectations about what it would feel like to kiss Zac—which, to be clear, I *did*—they are shattered.

Zac's lips are gentle and soft and carry a slight chill from his frozen drink.

It takes less than a second for it to click. My body taking over from my mind and fully melting into the sensations of this kiss. My hands reach up, grabbing ahold of his shirt, desperate to have something to cling onto.

His lips move against mine. Slowly, teasing. Mine follow suit as he leads me. With a hand on the back of my neck, he angles himself to deepen the kiss. And I am here. For. It. I get swept up in him, like a current pulling me out to sea. And as much as I'm unable to restrain myself, Zac is having an even more difficult time.

He reaches an arm around my waist and pulls me closer to him as his mouth becomes more desperate. I feel his hand at the hem of my shirt, where he pauses before gently slipping it under the fabric.

My breath hitches at the delicate sensation of his touch on my sensitive skin, his thumb sliding against my bare stomach. That tiny gasp gives Zac pause. His movements slow on my hip as he tries to decipher if my reaction was one of panic or enjoyment. In response I reach my arms up to his shoulders and curl my fingers into his hair, pulling him closer.

Taking my actions as a good sign, he moves his thumb against my skin again, slowly inching closer to my belly button.

What is he doing to me?

I've never lost control like this. Is this what kissing is always like for other people? Like sparks and fireworks and nerves and excitement all tangled up into a delicious knot? Because I never felt this out of control when kissing Dex. Not even close.

We are closer still. Whether Zac's doing or my own, I can't be sure. Although I have a hunch I was to blame.

One of my hands decides to do some exploring of its own, making its way down his chest. Outside of his shirt, of course. I'm nowhere near bold enough to touch his bare skin. Still, I relish the feeling of his firm muscles through the thin fabric. With both hands tangled in his hair I pull him closer to me.

What I do next can only be explained by hormone-fueled insanity, because as Zac continues to kiss me in a frenzied way that I've never experienced before, I crawl into his lap.

Yep.

Me.

Dylan Park.

Straddling *Zachary Morgan* while making out with him furiously. And not caring *at all*.

Zac's answering groan has me smiling as he places both of his hands on my hips and pulls me closer to him.

Oh. My. Goodness.

The weirdest part? Nothing about this *feels* weird. There's no awkward fumbling or tentative touching. This kiss is fueled by pure want and instinct. No hesitation, only feelings.

And oh, does it feel good.

How does this feel so good? I am already sitting on his lap, Zac's hands holding my body firmly against his, and all I can think is how much closer I want to get.

His hands slide down the bare skin of my thighs, the heat radiating from his palms contrasting the chill of my skin, as he gently moves them up and down along my legs. They wander to the top of my shorts, his thumbs gently toying with the band. His touch, barely there, sends electricity through my entire body.

Abruptly, I break away. I need *air*. I've been so absorbed with kissing—*making out with!*—Zac that I forgot to breathe. Zac's chest heaves, as winded as I am. I'm hit with a sense of relief that maybe my reaction isn't simply my inexperience shining through.

"You okay?" He tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear and just the feel of his knuckles brushing against my cheek causes a full body shiver.

It's as I suck in breath after needy breath of cool air that the haze in my brain clears and all the reasons—or, one reason, I guess—why I've been staying away from Zac come rushing back.

Marnie.

"We have to stop," I say breathlessly.

"What? Why?" He jerks back, his face a mask of confusion and fear. "Wait, did I take things too far? Dylan, I'm sorry. I got caught up in the moment. I didn't mean to push you—"

This sputtering, apologizing boy is so unlike the confident, cocky guy I know Zac to be. *Inconsiderate playboy my butt*. Things may have gotten heated, but I trust him. I knew that Zac wouldn't try to take things any further. And right now, he

looks truly fearful. I silence him by putting my index finger against his lips, still swollen from our kisses.

“No,” I whisper, unable to hold back my smile. “I liked kissing you. A lot,” I add for emphasis. “But do you think we should be doing this?”

“Um, yeah. I mean, I thought I made my thoughts about *this* clear.” He rubs his thumb along my bottom lip to drive his point home. The touch makes me crave more, and I have to shake my head to stay on task.

“I mean... what about Marnie?” I’ve successfully avoided thinking about her so far, but there is no denying that their history is a complication. There is a distance between us. We had fun tonight. It felt like old times. Yet it also created a desire within me to rekindle whatever there is that is left of our friendship. Starting something with Zac? Yeah, I can’t think of a quicker way to torpedo that.

“What about her?”

“She’s my friend. And you guys dated.”

His face scrunches in confusion. “Yeah... and we’ve been broken up for a month.”

“Right, but you’re still her ex.” *Whom she despises.*

“Does that matter?” he asks.

I nod. “Think about it. Would you feel okay dating one of your friend’s exes?”

His reply comes swiftly, without a moment of hesitation. “I would be more than okay if I liked her as much as I like you.”

Well that’s just... smooth. And now my brain is getting clouded by sweet words.

“I mean it. If I had known that being with Marnie would end my chances of ever getting to be with you, I never would have done it!” His voice rises in exasperation.

“Really?” I cringe at how hopeful my voice squeaks out.

Zac cups my face again, my legs still on either side of his lap. His voice comes out gently now.

“I like you, Dylan. *Really* like you. And I don’t want to stop this because of what Marnie, or anyone, may or may not think.”

I think I’ve forgotten how to breathe again.

We stare at each other, our faces only illuminated by the soft beam of the streetlamp outside and the green glow coming from his dashboard.

“People are going to talk...” I say at last.

The air whooshes from his lungs before he continues cautiously. “I don’t care what people think, Dylan. But if it bothers you to be with me, then I get that. I do. I have a reputation and I don’t want you to be uncomfortable. But can you honestly tell me that you don’t feel anything for me?”

I can’t. I do feel things for him. More than I ever wanted to. Heck, I am *sitting on him!* Obviously, there is chemistry here.

Seconds tick by as we sit there, our foreheads pressed together.

“What are you thinking?”

“I—I’m not sure. This would be complicated.”

“It’s only as complicated as we make it. Please, Dyl. Give me a chance.” His words are whispered pleas. There is no way I can refuse him.

“We have to keep it a secret, Zac. If we want to do... *this* again, Marnie can’t know. Nobody can know.”

“Should I be offended that you don’t want to be seen with me?” Zac quirks a brow.

“What? No! I just... we can’t...” *Crap*. Did I hurt his feelings?

Great job, Dylan.

“Dylan, it’s fine. I totally get it. I didn’t mean to freak you out.” He chuckles and relief washes over me.

“Thanks. It’s... I can’t lose my best friend.”

Zac goes quiet again. “I get it. You’re not going to hear any complaints from me. But are you sure you’re up for this? Keeping a secret, I mean?”

“What? Of course!”

“It means lying. Often. To people you care about.” This statement makes me lose some of my bravado. “Dylan, you’re not... *great*, at pretending,” he adds, face softening. He’s not trying to tease me or get under my skin. He’s right. “And I think it might drive you crazy having to keep us buried.”

I mull it over in my head. I don’t like lying and I won’t be winning any awards for my acting, either. But seeing him now, hair still tousled from my hands, eyes begging me to give this a shot even though his words are saying otherwise, I want him so badly.

“It’ll be fine,” I whisper. “It will.” This comes with more *oomph* behind it. And it must be enough to convince Zac because his face splits into a grin.

“Okay. Let’s do this, then,” he announces. “Secret relationships are seriously hot, anyway.”

I shove his chest playfully, and we erupt in a giddy bout of laughter.

AFTER I EFFECTIVELY KILLED the mood of our make-out session by bringing up his ex-girlfriend, Zac drives me back home, the air heavy with excited hope.

The moment I untangled myself from Zac and made my way back to my side of the truck, he reached over and took my hand, lacing our fingers together. Throughout the duration of the drive Zac rubbed his thumb over my knuckles.

I liked it.

I liked it a lot.

I tried to suppress the smile that was threatening to burst across my face and was thankful that it was dark enough that Zac couldn’t see the ever-permanent blush on my cheeks.

He pulls into my driveway. Nobody will think twice about him dropping me off after a basketball game. My car is less than reliable, and I find myself hitching rides with my classmates frequently.

I take my time unbuckling, zipping up my jacket, and grabbing my purse. This is new territory for me. Do I go in for a hug? A *kiss*? What's the protocol?

Zac isn't making any type of move. Although he does turn his body slightly to face me. Does that mean I should lean in? He's still buckled. If he planned to kiss me again, he would have unclasped it by now.

"Uh, thanks again... for tonight," I say lamely.

I turn to grab the handle, fully prepared to end this date with whatever awkward tension has filtered into the truck, when I sense movement from Zac's side of the cab.

"Wait," he says at the same time he throws off his seat belt. I turn back to him just in time for his lips to descend on mine once again. This kiss is short, sweet, yet still sends tingles straight to my toes and my heart soaring right out of my body. "Have a good night, Dyl," his whisper is full of gravel and has me grinning as he pulls back.

"You too," I answer, biting on my lips in a failed attempt to hide my absolute delight.

As I move to leave the truck yet again, another thought strikes me.

"You ordered veggie tacos tonight."

A shy smile plays along his face. "Yeah. I did."

"Is that what you usually get?"

"No."

I wait a few moments longer to see if he elaborates on his response.

"I just... didn't know how serious you were about the whole vegetarian thing." He shrugs, trying to play it off, but

his darkening cheeks tell me he is at least a little embarrassed at his explanation.

My brows furrow. Does he think I only hang out with people who don't eat meat? No, he knows that none of my friends are vegetarians. So why does he care, then?

When I still say nothing, he continues shyly, glancing around his truck and avoiding my eye. "I didn't know if you would kiss someone who, you know, had just eaten meat. I didn't know if it made you uncomfortable or would be a turn off, or whatever."

If his earlier kiss made my heart soar, this sentiment sends it flying through the fancy sunroof in this truck. He seriously wanted to kiss me bad enough that he would think about his *food* choices? So far in advance?

"So... you knew we were going to kiss tonight?"

"It was more wishful thinking. I had no idea if you'd even be into it." His boyish shyness is almost too much for me.

"Good night," I respond, leaving the truck. Before he pulls away, I tap on the window, similarly to how he had done to me earlier tonight. He rolls it down.

"And Zac?"

"Yeah?"

"In case it wasn't obvious, I was definitely into it."

If I could, I would capture his smile to keep locked in my mind forever. I never want to see him without it.

"I know."

And then we're laughing again.

I try to play it cool as I speed walk through the front door, say a hasty good night to my parents, and proceed to take the steps two at a time to my room. The moment I shut the door I throw myself onto my bed and scream into my pillow like some sappy teenage girl whose crush just acknowledged her.

Which, I guess, is exactly what had happened.

IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT the rest of my weekend starts out painfully dull in comparison to Friday night. My dad helped me get my car on Saturday morning. We dropped it at my Uncle Roy's shop to see if he could encourage it to, you know, *drive* once in a while.

The rest of Saturday was spent staring blankly at a computer screen, trying to get my brain to function properly to study, while pretending not to be distracted by text messages.

Or rather, *lack* of messages. From Zac.

Yes, I am *that girl* now. Debating how soon is too soon to text a guy, waiting for him to send me some sign that I hadn't imagined last night. I *know* I didn't. Still, there is an unignorable niggling of doubt in the back of my mind

By noon I decided to check social media for any sign of Zac, and by five in the evening I resigned myself to checking my email. Who knows, maybe he's more of an email type of guy?

I know. And he's decidedly *not* an email type of guy.

I'm getting desperate. As hard as I try to avoid looking at my screen I inevitably get pulled back into its orbit.

Finally, at eight o'clock, I give in and decide to get it over with and reach out to him.

It shouldn't make me nervous. We have been texting over the past few weeks that we've been working on our history project. But this feels different. Like last night had shifted something between us.

Understatement of the year.

Dylan

How was your day?

Nope, too girlfriendy. I'm not his girlfriend.

Am I?

Actually, I better be. I'm not about to pull any of Zac's 'keeping it casual' nonsense. And I suspect he knows that.

Still... I don't want to sound too presumptuous.

Dylan

What's up?

No, trying too hard to be casual.

Dylan

I had fun last night.

It seems weird to send that now, a full twenty-four hours later.

Dylan

Hey!!

Too excited?

Dylan

Hey :)

There, that's a safe message if I've ever seen one. I hit send before I can overthink it and toss my phone aside as if the plastic of the case burned my skin. It's not like I expect a response anytime soon, anyway.

But to my surprise, there is the tell-tale *ding* of an incoming message before my phone even hits my mattress.

I would like to say that being the calm, collected person that I am, I definitely *don't* throw myself on top of the mattress to grab my phone. And my phone doesn't, as a result, fly off said mattress and onto the floor with a stomach dropping *thud*. But, unfortunately, it appears that Zac has managed to suck any functioning brain cells out of my body with his kiss—like how a dementor might suck out your soul. Or, at least, he numbed my brain into a state of uselessness.

Scrambling off my bed, I slide to the floor on my stomach and reach for my phone.

The message is from Zac.

Zac

You free?

Zac

I'M STANDING OUTSIDE DYLAN'S window. Yes, I know which window is hers. No, that doesn't make me a creep. Her light is on, so I know she's inside, even though she hasn't responded to the message I sent a few minutes ago when I was leaving my house.

After not hearing from her all day, I decided to take matters into my own hands. Sure, I could have just sent her a text. But honestly, I was dying to see her.

Talk to her.

Put my hands on her.

She does something to me. Makes me feel... *different.*

Dylan Park is my girlfriend.

It sounds right. Any time I called Marnie my girlfriend, it didn't fit. Like I was using a word to describe something incorrectly. Like calling a bird a fish. But Dylan? She's my girlfriend.

That is the correct term.

The thought has been running through my mind from the moment I left her house last night. Which, admittedly, made it difficult to focus on anything today. Even something as simple

as a conversation. There I would be, listening to Mom talk about work, when out of the blue it would pop up.

Dylan Park is my girlfriend.

The only person who knows why I am smiling like a fool at random intervals is Alex. But he seems to enjoy his little piece of secret knowledge enough not to rat me out.

Because, yeah, he called me out the minute I got home yesterday.

Alex was playing video games in the living room when I walked through the door. Which made me realize that Dylan and I must have been out longer than I thought if he was home from the game already.

“Hey, bro,” he called out after a loud belch. “You left the game early, where’d you go?”

“Had to give someone a lift home.” I turned to hang up my keys on the rack, hiding my face so as not to give anything away.

“That’s all? Who?” he pried, taking another long pull from whatever drink he had in the plastic cup in front of him.

“Yes, that’s all.” I ignored the last part of his question and turned down the hallway toward my bedroom.

But he couldn’t make it that easy on me.

“Oh, dude!” Alex said, not bothering to take his eyes off the screen. “You’ve got a bit of glitter...”

“Where?”

He barked out a laugh, shaking his head in exasperation. “Literally freaking everywhere, man.”

I rolled my eyes and resumed walking before he could realize what I was actually doing and who I was doing it with.

“Zac,” he called again, not taking the hint. Yet I, being an attentive big brother, turned to him again. “I think we both know who the only girl at that game covered in glitter was.”

For the first time in our conversation, he peeled his eyes away from his game for this comment. A smug smile plastered on his face as he waited to see my reaction.

I gave him a shrug, no longer even trying to hide the grin that cut my face in half.

I was giddy.

Actually, freakin' giddy.

And I had the sudden urge to skip like some character out of a Disney movie.

Back in reality, standing on the ice-crusting grass in front of Dylan's family's house, I'm still riding the high. I contemplate my best course of action.

A tall tree stands outside her room and a few of the branches conveniently sprawl out near her window. It looks like a hazard. One strong gust of wind is liable to blow the whole thing over. Her room would be the first to go.

Climbing the tree and tapping on her window is certainly an option. But, really, cliché much?

There is also an old metal cable tower running up the side of her house near her window, presumably from when television still required antennas. Scaling this would afford me the same result as climbing the tree—arriving at her window. But again, cliché.

Maybe there's a stone or something laying around that I can toss... no, that's *crazy* cliché. Not to mention the potential for property damage.

The last option is to call her. But I'm here already. I'm going to make this grand entrance, darn it!

In the end, I settle for my original plan of climbing the tree. Because I'm a sap like that.

Conquering the trunk is by far the most difficult part as there is still a light sheen of ice on the scaly bark. Even so, it only takes a few moments for me to be at her window. I guess you could say I'm motivated.

The curtains are pulled open. So, as any guy who's just scaled a tree to peek in a girl's window would do, I take a minute to watch her in her natural habitat. She appears to be ready for bed, wearing a huge, oversized T-shirt with an image of the original *Scooby-Doo* gang along with the tiniest black shorts that are peeking out of the bottom hem of her shirt. Her curly blonde hair is thrown up into some type of messy knot on the top of her head, a style which I'm coming to realize is standard for her, and she has on big glasses that I've never seen before.

Dylan sits on her bed crisscross applesauce, with her laptop open and propped in front of her and phone clutched firmly in hand.

At last, I rap on the window gently with my knuckles, causing her head to shoot in my direction. She relaxes as she runs to the window and slides up the glass pane.

"What are you doing here?" she gasps in amusement.

"Came to see you. Care to let me in?" The screen is still in my way.

"Shoot, Zac, the window screen doesn't open. I guess it does come out, for fires and whatever, but it's a hassle—"

"What?"

She laughs at the disappointment stamped on my face. "No one else is here, you can use the front door."

"You had me at 'no one is here.' Give me five minutes."

It turns out five minutes was an overestimate. I've never moved so quickly in my life. I slide down the slippery trunk of the tree, my hands getting torn up from the bark, and hear the crispy, ice-covered grass crunch under my feet with each step as I round the house and make my way up the steps of the front porch, only slipping a handful of times.

I whip open the front door and take my shoes off—because I'm not a complete animal—and carry them with me up the stairs, so as not to give my presence away if someone comes home.

Dylan is sitting on her bed against the headboard, legs extended across the mattress and crossed at the ankles, when I burst through the door.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hi.”

“So, we’re alone.” I mean it to be seductive and playful, but since I’m gasping for air from my brief sprint, the effect falls flat.

Dylan giggles. “Don’t get any ideas, Morgan.”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of ideas...” I raise and lower my brows, making her laugh harder as I walk over and scoop her into a hug.

“Geez, Zac, you’re freezing!” Dylan pulls back from me, and I realize she’s right.

I guess wearing a jacket would have been a smart move.

Oops.

“Guess you better help warm me up.” I add a playful wink this time, you know, to be extra seductive. All I get in return is an eye roll, a swat to the chest, and a fleece blanket thrown at my face.

“Why are you here again?” she asks for the second time, scooting back to the headboard. “Not that I’m not happy to see you,” she adds quickly.

“I told you, I wanted to see you again.” Wrapping the blanket around myself—because, yes, I am freezing cold—I slide up next to her.

We both sit there staring at each other, the soft ticking of an analog clock on the wall the only sound. Then burst out laughing.

Under my usual MO, I would be trying to make a move by now. There would definitely be a lot more touching going on, that’s for sure. But I don’t want to do that with Dylan. I mean, I *do* want to, but I also want to simply *be* with her. To sit with her and hang out. No ulterior motives.

And I'm nervous. I honestly can't remember the last time I was this nervous to be around a girl. My first kiss, maybe? But since then, I hadn't been invested in the girls I was spending time with. I had nothing to lose.

And I am finding that with Dylan, I might have a lot to lose.

"Movie?" Dylan asks, already pulling up a streaming app on her laptop. After a few clicks, the screen dims as a black-and-white film starts playing.

I let out a chuckle disguised as a groan.

"Seriously, Park? We're doing homework?"

She's grinning like a loon, focused on the screen. "Don't think of it as homework. These movies are good. Plus, it wouldn't kill you to familiarize yourself with the people we are doing a report on." She looks at me, brows raised, before tapping the spacebar to resume the movie.

Bud Abbott and Lou Costello in Hold that Ghost appears on the opening credits. I shake my head, smiling. I got tricked into studying.

A short while later, Dylan heads downstairs to get us snacks, and I take a few moments to scan her room.

It is tidy, as I had expected. Her books are neatly stacked on her bookshelf and on some type of vanity counter, while neat piles of office supplies lay on her desk. She also has some memorabilia from Heathwood University tacked on the wall and I can't help but grin knowing that she is able to go to a school she adores. And she really does. Dylan brings it up in passing frequently, asking my opinion on which type of dorm she should choose, sharing various pieces of HU trivia with me, and even giving me a lesson on the history of the campus. I can tell she doesn't want to bore me with her college excitement, but I find it endearing.

Dylan comes back with a breakfast tray holding a large bowl of popcorn, with extra butter, she informs me, and two steaming mugs of hot cocoa. She sets the tray on her nightstand and passes me one of the mugs.

I down mine quickly and return the empty mug back to the tray.

Dylan takes slow sips of her own drink, cradling the mug in both of her hands, which makes it impossible for me to reach out and hold one the way I so desperately want to.

Is that her plan? Maybe she doesn't want to hold hands with me, and she is using her mug as a silent excuse.

She starts up the show on her computer and settles against her soft headboard in the same position once again.

Great, now I look awkward with nothing to do with my own hands. I try clasping them in my lap, but that just looks strange. I'm also not in a good position to shove them into my pants pockets with the way we are sitting. I need to man up and put my arm around her shoulder.

But what if she rejects you?

She won't reject me, right? After all, we kissed for a *substantial* amount of time only yesterday. Surely that means something to her.

A small snort of laughter sounds from beside me. I glance over and find Dylan's sparkling eyes on me. She sets her mug down and then reaches over to grab my wrist, pulling my arm over her shoulder.

The slight touch of her soft hand against my skin is enough to send tingles dancing up my arm, and having my arm draped over her shoulder spreads warmth throughout my whole body.

Dylan leans over and rests her head against my chest while I remain perfectly still, afraid that if I move even a millimeter it will break whatever is happening between us.

"This isn't weird, is it?" she questions, continuing to stare at the screen.

"No," I rasp. "Not at all."

She relaxes further into me and my own body relaxes as well, content that I won't scare her off. We continue to watch the computer in the darkness of her bedroom.

“I’ve wanted to do this for a while,” I say absently, stroking her arm.

This gets her attention, as she cranes her neck to peer up at me. “You have?”

I nod and plant a brief kiss on the top of her head. “Yeah.”

She ponders that for a moment and turns back to the screen. “How long?” she asks, trying to act casual—like she really isn’t all that interested in my answer. Her eyes don’t break away from the computer.

“A year?” I respond. Yeah. That sounds about right. Although Dylan has always been on the outskirts of my everyday life there was no denying that last year she came to the forefront of my mind.

In fact, I can remember the exact moment I started to *see* her again for the first time since we were kids.

It took a gym class dodgeball game, of all things, to put Dylan back on my radar. Nothing special. We were on the same team but due to a misstep on my part, I was out almost immediately. Since the rest of the players on our team were freshmen and had the coordination of baby ducks, Dylan was quickly left on her own. At that moment, although it was only a friendly game, I actually started to feel concern for her. Heart rate spiking, palms sweating, I wanted to help her. Not just so we could win, but because I wanted to be out there to *defend* her.

She looked so small standing there by herself. Wide-eyed and innocent and surrounded by ten dudes who had shown no mercy to the rest of us. But then something shifted. Her face took on a competitive grin. My panic morphed into excitement and I became mesmerized by her movements.

She didn’t win. But I think everyone was surprised when she single-handedly wiped out most of the team, only getting out herself when there were two players left. Watching her out there, throwing and dodging and laughing like some sort of action hero, the pride in her eyes as she triumphantly walked

to join us on the sidelines to a chorus of applause, reminded me that there was a spark beneath her calm exterior.

After that day I noticed Dylan and the things she did more often. The way she carried around a separate pencil case of pens and mechanical pencils to give to anyone who had forgotten one, often handing it over discreetly so that the teacher wouldn't notice.

How she would stand up for the younger kids or kids who were seen as "weird" in the hallways with no thought for how the teasing could be redirected toward her.

How loyal she is to her friends and the people she cares about.

Dylan is an overall good person. She has grit, and spunk, and the type of personality that draws you in. I suspect that this is why she was voted Homecoming queen. I know that in movies the Homecoming queen is usually the most "popular" girl, a complete snob, but Dylan obliterated that stereotype. That's the thing about her, *everyone* likes her. She harbors all of these unwarranted insecurities that give her this false impression of herself. Like somehow she is unworthy of positive attention from her peers. Even after literally being crowned Queen by them and she still can't see how incredible she is.

For anyone else, it would have been a hefty ego boost. It sure was for me when I won King. Though I'm sure I was only awarded that accolade because people thought that I fit the mold rather than my peers believing I was a good person.

"A year? But... you dated Marnie. And... others..." she trails off, not so subtly referring to my past. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"If I had asked you out a year ago, when we were both single, would you have said yes?"

Her hesitation alone gives me my answer. As much as I would love to think that Dylan would have jumped at the chance to go out with me, I know that she wouldn't have. All things Marnie aside, Dylan wouldn't have put up with my

nonsense back then. Heck, she might have even been *afraid* of me back then. Afraid that I would hurt her, or that I was using her. Actually, if there is one thing to have come out of my relationship with Marnie it's that it showed Dylan that I am capable of something long term. Of being faithful and loyal to a single girl for longer than a week.

I shrug. "You were too good for me," I say. "And then when I thought I was ready to tell you, you were already dating Dex. So, I kept on doing what I always had been." That had been a tough pill to swallow. To realize that I could have missed out on my chance with Dylan and that she was blissfully happy with someone else.

She goes quiet, and I wonder if this is the end of the conversation.

"You didn't say anything when I was with Dex," she observes.

"I didn't want to intrude on you guys. You seemed happy with him and I didn't want to tell you I had feelings and to complicate things between the two of you." It's the truth. While I may have a reputation as a not-so-great guy, I wasn't going to try to steal a girl from someone else. If Dylan wanted to be with me, I wanted her to realize it on her own.

"Thank you for letting us figure it out on our own. That was big of you," she responds. "Although in hindsight, I could have done without you dating Marnie."

I tilt her chin up, angling her face toward me. "That wasn't my best decision. I promise, I didn't expect that to go on so long and to make things so complicated." That earns me a small smile.

We sit in comfortable silence, sharing the blanket she offered me earlier. At some point I had removed my arm from her shoulder and our hands are now intertwined between us.

I can't concentrate on what we're watching. And it's not even the movie's fault. No. My distraction stems wholly from the blonde girl next to me and those shorts that are going to haunt me. In the best way possible, of course.

Eventually, I move our joined hands to her thigh because some primal caveman in me can't stand not touching her soft skin for another moment. She peeks over and sends me a small smile, squeezing my hand, before turning her attention back to the screen.

I wonder if she is as distracted by me as I am by her. If she is, she is doing a *great* job of hiding it.

"You wear glasses," I say. It isn't a question, because it's obvious that she does, in fact, wear glasses. "I forgot that."

She peeks at me again, subconsciously adjusting her frames. "Yeah, since I was ten. But I've worn contacts since I was eleven, so few people get the pleasure of seeing the full extent of my nerdiness."

"Good," I grumble possessively, making her laugh.

Her head falls against my shoulder as she grows tired.

At around ten Dylan receives a text from her parents letting her know they are on their way home. I sneak out of the house using the front door. We kiss, the first and only one of the night. It's barely a peck. Yet even as I drive home I know that tiny kiss is going to replay in my dreams.

Dylan

MONDAY MORNING ARRIVES IN a burst of sunshine. The gray clouds that had plagued the sky in the last few weeks have taken a break, at least for today, and the sun is streaming through my window. It is fitting, really. The weather outside mirroring my internal thoughts.

As happy as I am about how things are going with Zac, there is no denying the nerves that attack when I imagine how things between us will be at school. As I stand by my locker with Marnie and Tess before first period, waiting for the school day to officially start, my heart rate picks up.

“Are you ok?” Tess asks me, placing a tentative hand on one of my arms that is currently folded tightly in front of my chest, clutching my binder in a death grip. “You seem a bit... off.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine.” I shoot her a smile that I hope appears reassuring and *normal*.

“Okayyy.” Yeah, she doesn’t buy it.

At last, Zac pushes through the glass double doors that lead to the parking lot. He and Ellis are mid conversation, each sporting large grins, while Justin lags behind, brooding. Zac appears normal. Well, normal for him. Compared to everyone else he looks like a king.

Wow, Dylan. Get it together!

He gives our group a brief nod, which is returned with a scowl from Marnie. I gave him a small smile, and Tess waves. Actually *waves*.

This has to be a good sign, right? Maybe the Zac-hating days are almost over.

It's physically painful to ignore Zac at school all day. I'm able to sneak a few glances at him when I am sure no one else is watching, but that almost makes not talking to him more difficult. The only thing making it tolerable are the occasions when I look at Zac and catch him already staring at me. He always whips his head around to not be too obvious, but even from the back I know he's smiling.

It's a strange sensation, this all-consuming desire to be near someone else. Dex and I did the long-distance thing. Or, as long-distance as fifty seven miles is. And sure, I looked forward to seeing him on the weekends, but I never *longed* for him. Craved him.

As the week goes on Zac appears to be having the same issues keeping apart as I am. His fleeting glances become far more frequent and he even goes so far as to 'accidentally' brush against me. His hand skimming my lower back as we cross paths in the hallway, his shoulder bumping into mine whenever we find ourselves near each other in class, his hand lingering a little *too long* on mine when helping me pick up a pencil. Without fail, each touch causes jolts of electricity in the area where he made contact, followed by a devious smirk from Zac.

It is also during this week that I realize that keeping our relationship a secret will be more difficult than anticipated. For one, we both live at home with our families, which means that spending time at each other's houses is risky as we could be easily discovered.

Don't get me wrong, Mom and I may be close, but she is still anti-Zac and one hundred percent team Marnie. Even she wouldn't approve of our relationship.

Secondly, we can't be seen being too friendly at school, or at any school event, as the whole purpose of keeping it a secret is so that our classmates won't know.

All of this is to say that our opportunities to interact don't extend far beyond texting, the occasional phone call, and the bi-weekly sessions in the library study room. Which means that there is no hand holding, no hugging, and no kissing. And honestly? I really, *really* want to kiss Zac Morgan again.

Even the time we have in our study room is on public display thanks to the windows I had earlier been so appreciative of.

Turns out, I hate them now.

On Friday, though, I receive a gift in the form of my petite, bouncy haired friend. Tess approaches me timidly, eyes skirting around like she is afraid to speak.

"What's up, Tess?" I close my locker, having pulled out my books for my next class.

"I was wondering if, maybe, if... you could do me a huge favor?" Um, *what?* "I need you to go on a double date with me... with Zac."

I repeat. *What?*

She mistakes my confusion for anger and quickly adds, "I know you don't like Zac." Her hands raise up in surrender. "But it's just, I like this guy from East Lake, and I need someone to go with me because... well... I would feel more comfortable if I went with other people." Her word vomit makes me feel bad for insinuating that I might be angry. "And Marnie is out of town on that college tour for the weekend, so she won't have to know that we're hanging out with Zac. If she asks, you can blame me," she hastily adds.

That's a lot to unpack. First, she's interested in someone? This is news. And someone from *East Lake*? East lake is a town on the other side of the bay, the *east* side of the *lake*, as it were. And if property values around Silverwood are considered high—which, they are—East Lake's are

astronomical. It's the town where all the uber rich flock. No tourists there. Just plenty of wealthy year-round residents.

As for her wanting to turn this into a double date, I can understand that. She isn't one to put herself out there. But why does *Zac* specifically need to be a part of it?

I turn to Zac. I can only see his profile, but from his stance, the way his body is slightly angled in our direction, it's obvious that he is eavesdropping from across the hall. And he's smiling. *Smiling.*

He set this up.

"Tess. It's fine." I place a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Of course, I can go with you." She relaxes at my words. "So... who's the guy?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood and alleviate some of her nerves.

"Zac's cousin, actually. I mentioned to Zac a few weeks ago that I thought his cousin was cute and he convinced him to go out with me tonight."

So, *that's* why Tess has been cordial to Zac lately. He was setting her up with his cousin.

"Zac suggested that you come. Well, he suggested he come with, and that I pick a good friend to be his date. And of course, I chose you!" Okay, that makes my heart glow.

Zac has a plan. I don't know what it is, but I suspect I will like it.

Dylan

TESS PICKS ME UP in her black Audi at four thirty on the dot. We are going to be meeting the guys at five at Fritz's.

Fritz's is an establishment a couple of towns over and is essentially a big arcade for teens and adults. There is laser tag, bowling, bumper cars, and all your classic arcade games. They also serve food, and alcohol for adults, but due to their extensive screening process I doubt even Zac will be able to convince them to serve him anything stronger than a root beer.

"Wow, you look cute!" she exclaims as I slip into the passenger side of her car. She's right, I did put effort into tonight's outfit. A black skater skirt with sheer black tights and a fitted tank top with a long, gray cardigan. It's not extravagant. But it does make my legs look even longer than usual.

"Thanks. It is a *date*, right?" I wink at her, trying to play off the fact that this is an *actual* date for me and not only a favor that I am doing a friend. As far as she knows, Zac is my least favorite person on the planet. And while Tess also knows that I can't help but be civil to everyone, I still have to try not to be too friendly with Zac this evening, at least in front of Tess. That reality makes me feel empty inside.

Tess continues to snap the spearmint gum that she's been chewing on during the entirety of the twenty-minute drive.

She's nervous.

We park in the crowded lot in front of the massive brick building. After taking a few deep breaths, she slips out her phone and sends a text.

“Okay. They said they are waiting for us inside the first doors in the entrance.” Tess lets out another woosh of air and wipes her hands on her jeans for probably the thirtieth time in the last few minutes.

Grabbing her hand, I look her in the eyes. “Hey. It's going to be great. If he doesn't see how awesome you are, then it's his loss.” I offer what I hope is a reassuring smile. She nods, then opens her door and we head into the large building.

We enter through the glass outer doors and are hit with a wave of warmth tinted with the scent of fried food and pizza. I see them before they see us. Zac is standing there in a button-down gray shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and the top button undone for a fancy-casual vibe. Dark wash jeans hug his muscular legs and he even combed his hair for once. As I take him in it hits me:

He put an effort into this 'fake' date, too.

My heart skips a beat at the realization and I can't stifle the smile that stretches across my face. Thankfully, Tess is too locked on her own date to notice my gawking. And *holy impressive genetics*. Zac is, in my mind, near perfection in the looks department. Top notch, really. But the genetics in this family must be extraordinary because Brandon is *this close* to edging Zac out for that top spot.

Suddenly Tess's earlier nerves make a lot more sense.

As we approach the boys their conversation halts, and they turn to us. Zac's eyes roam up and down my body in a way that sets me ablaze. He bites on his lip in an adorable attempt to suppress his own grin.

Tess and I stop in front of them, and Zac finally breaks out of his trance to make introductions. “Brandon, this is Tess. Tess, Brandon.” He gestures between the two of them. “And this is Dylan, my—” He cuts off. My eyes widen.

Was he about to introduce me as his girlfriend?

Oooh, that wakes up the butterflies.

“My date for the evening.” He recovers quickly enough that no one notices anything. I silently mouth a ‘*nice save*’ as we walk through the main doors into the restaurant area. He nods stiffly, shaken from his near misstep.

We follow the hostess to a four-top table. Tess and Brandon seat themselves but instead of following Brandon to the other side of the table, Zac pulls out my chair for me, his hand grazing my back as he rounds the table to his seat across from mine.

Ugh, if he keeps up the chivalry I will melt into a puddle before this night is over. Our friends are already skimming over their menus, so they miss the intimate gesture.

I read over the menu, decide what I want to eat, then use the restroom before we get too far into our evening.

After doing my business, I examine myself in the mirror. My curls and makeup are cooperating tonight, and I’m just... *happy*. The brightness in my eyes and the rosy tint to my cheeks radiates pure joy.

I am about to head back to our table when my phone pings in my purse. I whip it out as I push through the restroom door and stop in my tracks. It’s a text. *From Dex*.

Immediately my stomach ties up in knots.

Dex-the-ex

Hey, Dylan.

Seriously? Dex wants to talk *now*? He hasn’t reached out for a couple of weeks, and I had assumed that he took the hint that I wasn’t interested in striking up any conversations. After a mini surge of panic, I decide to will deal with him later. With any luck I will be able to forget about my ex and spend time with my current boyfriend.

Back at our booth our drinks have already arrived. A short while later the waiter is back and we order our food. A basketball game tonight is being broadcast on all the gargantuan televisions around the restaurant and bar area. Brandon and Zac both watch during lulls in conversations, but Brandon appears more invested in the outcome than Zac.

It's soon after our food arrives that I feel something brushing against my leg, making me jump. Zac, who was about to shovel a handful of fries into his mouth, grins mischievously at me from across the table.

It takes a moment for it to click in my brain, but when it does my stomach does a small somersault.

Is he trying to play footsie?

My brows narrow in suspicion as his raise in challenge.

I've never played footsie with someone before, so I don't *really* know what I'm doing. Deciding to just go for it, I kick off my right shoe. Subtly, I tuck it under my left leg and run my foot along Zac's calf in a slow stroke, sipping on the paper straw in my glass of iced tea to try and play it cool.

The moment my foot touches Zac's jean clad leg his eyes widen and he leaps up, his knee banging on the underside of the table in the process.

"You good, dude?" Brandon asks.

"Oh, uh, yeah. I just... leg cramp."

"Really?" Brandon questions, "You should be drinking more water. Have you tried eating more bananas. Potassium is great for that kind of stuff."

I roll my lips between my teeth to stifle my laughter as Brandon continues laying out a detailed diet and stretching regime for Zac to implement.

Tess and Brandon return to their food and Zac shakes his head in mock warning, a smile playing on his lips.

After we finish dinner, the boys pay our tabs, and we head over to the arcade portion of the building.

“Where to first?” Zac whispers in my ear. Even with his close proximity it is difficult to hear him over the constant chimes and ringing that sounds out from the games around us. The flashing, colorful lights that are attached to every game only add to the commotion and overwhelming stimulation.

My eyes skate around the large room trying to find any game that stands out. Then I see a large table in one of the corners. “Air hockey?” I suggest.

“Yes!” Brandon shouts his approval. “Guys against girls?”

We make our way over to the oversized table and each grab a handle. It’s fun. Far more fun than I had expected. As the game continues, we are evenly matched in terms of scoring, but about halfway through the game I notice that both Tess and Zac are standing off to the side, watching rather than playing.

“You guys aren’t playing?” I ask Zac from across the table.

Tess laughs and Zac joins in. “I think you two are a bit too... intense for us,” Tess answers.

Brandon and I glance at each other, and I notice the competitive, crazed glint in his eye. It’s almost scary. Do I look the same? I know I’m competitive, but I’m not *that* bad, right?

“Don’t let us stop you,” Zac says. “Seriously, watching you two is way more fun than actually playing.” I turn to Tess who is nodding in agreement. Brandon and I wrap up the game, with him coming out ahead by one point in the end.

He extends his hand out to me in a truce. Before offering my own hand, I pretend to lick it, causing Brandon to quickly withdraw and Zac to laugh.

Next the boys decide to challenge each other to a game that requires them to stomp on light up spiders while Tess and I observe. Zac may be a smooth talker, but that poise doesn’t translate to spider stomping. An image of one of those flailing tube men from outside of car dealerships comes to mind.

After Brandon bumps the game up to its highest difficulty level, Zac nearly flies off the machine and then instructs Tess

to take his place. He ushers me to the other side of the room as Brandon continues laughing at my boyfriend's expense.

We continue in a similar manner for another hour, switching up partners for different games. I don't think I've had this much fun since I was a kid.

"Dylan." Tess tugs gently on my sleeve, pulling my attention from the Skee-Ball table where the boys are battling it out. My hackles immediately rise when I notice how uncomfortable she looks. Had I missed something? Did Brandon do something to make her upset?

"Tess, what's wrong?"

"N—nothing. Can we talk somewhere else?"

I nod and she leads me back to the hallway where the restrooms are located. It is much quieter back here than in the main room.

"What's up?" I prod again.

"I was hoping you could do me another favor..." Her face scrunches up at her ask, visibly cringing.

"What is it, Tess?" I ask lightly, trying to ease her nerves.

"Do... do you think maybe you could get a ride home with Zac?"

My eyebrows shoot into my hairline. "Uhh, probably? Any reason why?"

"It's just, Brandon and I were hoping to spend a little more time together... one-on-one." A deep blush rises up her face. "And, you know, since you and I rode here together and Brandon and Zac came together, I thought that maybe we could switch passengers?"

"Tess Green, are you ditching me for some guy?" I smile as I say it, trying to hide my disbelief. The ever-deepening red tint to her cheeks tells me that yes, in fact, that is exactly what she is saying.

I take a few moments to soak in her face. She really is into him. It's sweet.

Then a thought flutters into my mind. *What if Brandon only asked her to hang out more because Zac asked him to? So that Zac and I could have some alone time?*

If that is true, if they cooked up some elaborate plan that would get Tess hurt in the process, that is *not* okay.

The growing grin slips from my face as quickly as it appeared. “Hold that thought, I’ll be right back.” I feel guilty ditching her in a hallway by herself after she opened up to me, but I need to make sure that she won’t get hurt.

Practically sprinting through the aisles between ping-pong games, I round on Zac who is still in the throes of Skee-Ball. Hooking my arm into his elbow, I tug him behind me in the opposite direction of the restrooms where I left Tess.

“What did you do?” I push him against a bare wall in an empty corner of the room.

“Whoa, I know I’m irresistible, but I hardly think this is the place.” He sports that cocky grin of his, glancing around as if to remind me that there may be onlookers.

“Zac, did you tell Brandon to ride home with Tess?” My tone makes it clear that this isn’t some joke.

The smirk drops from his face, suddenly serious. “What? No. I didn’t tell him anything. Well, other than telling him he should come on this double date with us in the first place—”

Not waiting to hear any more of his explanation I push off back to where I left Tess.

She looks out of place and confused standing alone in the bright hallway.

“Ok. I’ll ride with Zac.” I’m practically wheezing from my brief running stints.

Her face lightens immediately as she wraps me in a hug. “Thank you so much, Dylan. I know things are probably still tense with you and Zac with all the Marnie business, but it means so much to me.”

With that, she prances down the hallway to rejoin the guys.

I am starting to really like Tess' favors.

By the time I make my way back to our group, Brandon and Tess are standing close to each other—not holding hands, but *almost*—talking between themselves. Zac is standing nearby, off to the side, checking his phone.

“We’re going to take off,” Brandon announces, grabbing Tess’ hand and leading her away.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” she whispers as she passes me.

I reassure her and they head out. At which point Zac bursts into laughter. “Did we seriously just get ditched?”

“Looks like it.”

“You really thought that I told Brandon to go make-out with Tess just so I could get you alone for a few minutes?” he asks.

When he puts it that way it does sound far-fetched. And a bit presumptuous of me to assume that he is as desperate to kiss me again as I am to kiss him. I try to keep the smile on my face, but he can see it fading.

“Hey,” Zac commands, tilting my face toward his. “I wish I *would* have thought of that. I was only hoping to sneak a quick peck while the love birds fumbled through an awkward goodbye.” His voice turns into a raspy whisper as he leans into my ear “Trust me, I like this turn of events *much* better.”

Zac

I AM A BIG fan of this newfound alone time. I was honest with Dylan—when I planned this whole thing, I never imagined that I would get her to myself. Would I take an opportunity if it presented itself? Sure. But I didn't scheme anything.

That was before I saw Dylan for the first time tonight, though. Dylan is gorgeous, of course I know that, but watching her and Tess stride through the entrance doors literally sucked the air from my body. Dylan's skirt danced around her legs with each step, while the wind swept her hair over her shoulders and made her natural curls bounce lightly. Suddenly I was fighting the urge to run my fingers through it.

After almost screwing up our whole plan by nearly introducing her to Brandon as my girlfriend, I messed up once again by guiding Dylan all sensually into her seat. Brandon didn't notice my slip up—probably nervous about his own date—but Tess shot me a curious look that I simply ignored.

Yeah, for someone whose claim to fame is *not* doing relationships I sure seem eager to make it known to the world that I am in one.

Maybe us being forbidden to be near each other in school is a good thing. Otherwise I'd be dragging her back into that supply closet and this time, I would kiss her senseless. You

know, since I lose all impulse control whenever Dylan is within ten feet of me.

Brandon wanting some more time with Tess couldn't have worked out better for Dylan and me, as we get to spend more time together without causing suspicion.

Unfortunately, this unexpected turn of events means that I don't have time to plan for what Dylan and I will do after the 'double date.'

As we watch Tess and Brandon's retreating forms I skim the area, searching for an idea. Then I see it in the form of two bright, neon words.

Laser Tag.

Grabbing Dylan's hand, I pull her toward the large black door beneath the sign.

"Laser tag?" she asks, voice almost *too* excited.

It only occurs to me now that laser tag might not be the best place for someone as ultra-competitive as Dylan.

"Yep," I reply. I mean, it's got dark spaces, we get to work as a team, and the potential for me to defend her? I don't see a downside here.

We file through the door into a black room, the only light coming from the glowing designs on the carpeting under the black light and the rows of vests and equipment lining the walls.

There is a less than enthused employee standing by the supplies who greets us and instructs us how to suit up. We both choose to be on the red team, and the worker directs us through a door to the right where there is a pod of other patrons also wearing glowing red vests.

A different employee pops in shortly after, explaining to us the rules of the game.

Through the instructions, Dylan is buzzing with energy beside me, smiling ferociously as she nods at every word from the man's mouth. She *really* likes rules. Either that, or she is planning to dominate this game.

Already, I am happy with my choice of activity.

At the sound of a buzzer the door to the course opens and we are off. Red vested teammates scatter through the blackness to hide behind obstacles, some sticking near the door to guard our home base and others taking a more proactive approach and charging the enemy.

It is as I am observing the tactics of the other players that I realize I've lost sight of Dylan.

Great.

A robotic voice counts down through the speaker system attached to our chests and I stick behind a half wall right before the game starts.

For a while, I go unnoticed, the *pew, pew* of guns sound from around me. There are the occasional yelps of surprise when someone's hiding spot is discovered and rolls of laughter and smatterings of giggles. But I don't hear the one person I am searching for.

Until I do.

It's more of a high-pitched *EEK* than anything else, yet I still recognize it as my Dylan.

I also realize she gave up her position to more people than only me. Nonetheless, I search her out. She's standing behind a tall wall with a tiny cut out for a window. Every few seconds she peeks her head out before pulling back to take cover, snickering.

Her back stays to me the entire time, though, so she has no idea I am approaching her until I am pressing against her, my front to her back.

"You should really try to be more inconspicuous," I whisper against her neck. Dylan's body shakes with a shiver and I bask in the effect I have on her.

Fine, the room also has insane amounts of air conditioning. I'm choosing to believe that her body's reaction was to my presence and not the cold air.

“Not to toot my own horn, but I’m doing pretty well for myself.” Her whisper is breathy.

Yep, I’m affecting her.

Or she’s winded from running.

Again, choosing to believe it is because of me.

“You ditched me,” I comment, reaching forward and tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. It bounces right back out, but this time I *know* that her little gasp was because of me.

“You can’t invite me to play laser tag then expect me *not* to go all out for the win.”

The moment she finishes speaking a series of ‘*pews*’ sound out, this time much closer than before, and are followed by a loud, “Ha! Got you both!”

The kid speed walks away, knees bent in an overly serious crouch as both my and Dylan’s vests let out a sound I’ve only heard when losing a game of Pac-Man. Both of our vests go dark, indicating that we’re disabled for the next thirty seconds.

“Look what you did!” Dylan jokingly scolds, finally turning to face me.

“Hmm,” I mumble, crowding her against the wall even more, “Seems like I just bought us some time away from prying eyes.” Even in the virtual darkness I see her smile.

All too soon a series of techno chimes sound off in each of our vests, bringing us back to life, and the game is back on.

After ten minutes of laser tag, we are led back out the door to hang up our equipment. Dylan is laughing, stray strands of hair sticking to her face with sweat, face red from the exertion and smiling.

“Number fourteen, Zac!” she says, pointing to the large television screen hanging in the wall projecting the scores.

Sure enough, number fourteen is in first place. Dylan won.

I came in at number eight. Which really isn’t that bad when you consider that I stuck with Dylan the whole game and

she took out every opponent we came across before I had the chance. *And* sacrificed me as a human shield way too often for her not to feel guilty about it.

My eyes roll and I wrap my arm around her shoulders to bring her closer to me. “Nice job, babe.” I bring my lips down to meet the top of her head. When I pull back, she rolls her eyes at me. But I don’t miss the satisfaction sparkling there.

“Zac?” The familiar voice catches me off guard, and I do something rash. And by *rash*, I mean that I unceremoniously toss Dylan through the door that leads back to the main room of the arcade before turning to the person speaking, praying that she has the good sense to stay out of sight.

Turns out, she doesn’t.

“Hey, Reed!” she grins as she reemerges through the door, sending me a questioning look.

“Oh, hey, Dylan,” Reed says.

And okay, *why* is Dylan so calm. She does realize that if her goal is to keep our relationship a secret from Marnie, having her *brother* know that we are out on a date isn’t the best strategy.

“I didn’t know you guys were into laser tag,” he observes, eyes bouncing between us.

“We were here with Tess and Zac’s cousin, as wingmen for their first date. But... they ditched us. We figured we might as well make the most of being in an arcade.”

“Right, cool. Great job out there by the way, Dylan. You’re number fourteen, right?”

Dylan gloats a bit more, then they both laugh at my score since Reed came in at the number four spot, before Reed takes off with a group of kids I don’t recognize.

“What was that?” I hiss at Dylan.

“What?”

“You basically outed us to Reed.”

Dylan's eyes narrow. "Zac, he saw that the two of us happened to be in the same building playing laser tag. That's hardly an admission of love." Her cheeks tint at the mention of the 'L' word, but she recovers quickly. "I just stuck with the story. We are here to help our friends on their first date. If Reed mentions anything to Marnie, Tess already said she would cover for us. If anything, it was more conspicuous for you to *throw me out a door.*"

Her voice is laced with teasing and artificial anger. Fine, she's right. My strategy probably hadn't been the best. Still, as we head out of the building into the chilled air, I can't help but feel uneasy about the whole interaction.

Light flurries of snow had fallen while we were inside, and the parking lot is now covered in slush and puddles cover the parking lot. Before we step off the sidewalk into the muddy mess, I stop in front of Dylan.

"Hop on," I say, gesturing to my back.

"What?"

"Come on, Park. Let me be a gentleman and carry you to the truck." A grin spreads across her face as she places her hands on my shoulders and jumps onto my back. Her arms wrap around my neck as my arms go beneath her legs, holding her up.

This close, I can smell her shampoo and hear her laugh rumble in my ears as I slowly jog through the lot. Part of me wants to get into the truck and out of this weather as quickly as possible, but another part is relishing the closeness between us and is reluctant to put her down.

Unfortunately, we do eventually reach the truck and I set her down to open the passenger side door for her before rounding the front and hopping into the driver's seat.

"So... what now?" Dylan asks as she clicks her seat belt into place and adjusts the air vents so that the warm air is blowing directly on her face.

My brain shifts into overdrive as I try to think of something that we can do without drawing attention to us as a

couple.

“Ice cream?” I suggest. I know it’s a long shot. After all, what girl—no, what *person*—wants ice cream when it is below freezing outside? Marnie certainly wouldn’t have gone for it. Which is why I am all the more delighted when Dylan perks up in excitement.

“Ooh, yes!” she exclaims before diving into a one-sided conversation with herself about which flavor she should choose.

We pull up to the local bakery in town. The large picture windows in the storefront tell us that there are no other customers inside, so we decide it is probably safe for us both to go in without risk of being spotted together.

“Eskimo kisses. Medium. In a waffle cup,” Dylan happily chirps, bouncing on the balls of her feet as we approach the woman standing behind the counter. *Miss Sally* her name tag reads. She has violent blue hair and appears to be not a day under seventy-five. However, with the way she scoops the ice cream, her arm strength rivals my own.

“And for you, handsome?” She winks at me while handing Dylan her obnoxiously large cup. Dylan’s eyes widen with lust as she takes in the frozen treat in front of her.

Yeah. Dylan is absolutely adorable.

“Um, I’ll just have chocolate. In a regular cup,” I say. Miss Sally gives me a salute and begins to scoop my ice cream.

“It’s so nice to see such a good-looking young couple out for a date,” she comments as she continues to shovel ice cream into the small plastic bowl. Winking at me once again. “It makes me wish I could turn back time to be young again.”

After a brief synopsis of her favorite past dates, a few more suggestive looks, and a handful of salacious remarks, I hand Miss Sally a few bills and she gives us our change.

“Now you two have fun tonight!” she calls as we walk through the door. “But not too much fun!” She shouts even louder, as if she worries that we won’t hear her.

As soon as we are in the truck Dylan breaks out into laughter. “I think Miss Sally has a crush on you,” she says.

I roll my eyes. “I mean, I’ve been told I’m a stud,” I say, regurgitating some of the tamer of Miss Sally’s words that were offered as we waited for her to add up our total. Dylan laughs again.

“Whatever you have to tell yourself,” she says.

“Wait. You don’t think I’m attractive?” I question, feigning offense.

“Of course, I do!” she says quickly. “Why do you think I’m dating you?” Now it’s Dylan’s turn to wink at me. I don’t even try to hide my smile.

“So, Eskimo kisses. What are they, anyway?” I ask between scoops of ice cream.

“Oh! It’s really good. There’s like coconut, dark chocolate —”

“Not the ice cream.” I laugh. “I mean literally.”

Dylan pauses, spoon midway to her mouth, a mischievous grin spreads across her face.

“Zachary Morgan, have you never been Eskimo kissed before?”

“Is that actually a verb?” I ask, trying to derail the conversation. Dylan is far too excited and there’s a glint in her eye that I’ve never seen before. It’s unnerving.

“Sure. Probably. It doesn’t matter, just answer the question.”

“Okay, no. I guess I haven’t.”

Delicately, Dylan sets her cup on the dash, then grabs my cup and sets it next to hers.

“Alright, lean in and hold completely still.”

I cock a skeptical brow but do as I am told. Dylan only smiles wider before biting her lip.

“Hold still,” she whispers, leaning in until our faces are inches from each other.

When I instinctively tilt my head, she cuts me off with a, “Nuh-uh,” before gently clasping my chin, holding it still with her thumb and forefinger.

That simple touch of my face has the power to make my entire body freeze—heart, lungs, limbs, *brain*—nope, nothing is working.

And I think she knows it.

Dylan closes the rest of the distance between us, until her nose brushes mine.

With a pace so excruciatingly slow, she drags the tip of her nose along the side of mine. I cringe at the shuttered breath that slips from me. *Get a grip, Zac!* Your girlfriend is touching your *nose*. Let’s calm down here.

Oblivious to my visceral reaction, Dylan proceeds to brush her nose up and back down the other side, before pulling back millimeters so only the tips of our noses are touching. Gently, she nuzzles against me, her eyes falling shut.

By now I’ve realized that I have, in fact, heard of Eskimo kisses. Ellis has an annoying habit of sending gifs of innocent fluffy animals rubbing noses to our group chat. Usually to irritate Justin. And I’ll admit, the gifs are adorable.

But this, what Dylan is doing and the reaction it spurs from me, cannot by any definition be considered cute or innocent.

It sets my skin on fire, steals all my oxygen, and leaves me nearly gasping for air. It is hot and seductive and makes me want nothing more than to grab her and pull our faces the remaining distance together for a deep kiss.

But instead, just as slowly as she leaned in, she pulls away, releasing my chin as she backs off.

“So that is an Eskimo kiss,” she breathes.

The only consolation of not getting to fully kiss Dylan on the lips is that she appears just as affected by what happened between us as I am.

It takes every iota of my self-restraint not to lurch forward and connect our mouths. We haven't kissed—Eskimo kisses excluded—since that first night we became more than friends, and I'm not sure if that is intentional on Dylan's part. So, I will be taking things slower, letting her lead.

Yet she is *right there*. Her eyes darting to my lips as often as mine are hers. I reach my hand up to cup the side of her face and pull her back to me when a beam of light floods the vehicle. Headlights. Another car. And the possibility that someone might recognize us. It's shocking how quickly the moment is killed.

We end up driving around with no destination for the next hour, eating our ice cream and laughing. I had never spent this much time with a girl just *talking* before. In fact, by this time of the night with most of my dates I would have taken them back to Dune Road, the local hookup spot. But not Dylan. I really am gone for this girl.

Dylan

BY THE TIME ZAC drops me off at home it is nearing eleven, but I decide to text Tess to make sure she made it home alright. After all, I did let her take off with some guy that I had only just met.

Dylan

Did you make it home alright?

Not thirty seconds later my phone rings. Tess.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dylan. Yeah, I made it home.” Through the phone I can hear the smile in her voice. She called to talk about how incredible the rest of her night went, then.

“How did it go with Brandon?”

“Great. *Really* great.” She delves into a play-by-play synopsis of the evening starting from the minute they left us at the arcade. In summary there was driving, talking, and plenty of kissing.

“Sorry again for leaving you with Zac. Did he get you home without being too much of jerk?”

Now it's my turn to try to hide the smile from my voice.
"Yeah. No issues."

"Thanks again for everything tonight, Dyl, I really owe you one."

"No problem, Tess. I'm just glad you had a good time."

"I did. I really did. It was awkward at first, but by the time we were finished eating and got into the arcade, everything started to flow, you know?"

I make an *mm-hmm* noise in agreement.

"You know," she starts before trailing off, "It didn't seem like it was very awkward for you and Zac. Almost like you guys had some familiarity, or something..."

Wait, no. She can't be on to us.

Think, Dylan, think!

"Oh, I don't know." *That's right, Dylan, play it cool.*
"Maybe it only seemed that way because it wasn't an actual date for us so there weren't any nervous expectations or anything."

"Right. Right," she agrees. I exhale, planning what to say next. She doesn't seem to hate Zac. On the contrary, they were quite friendly tonight. Which is why I personally didn't feel obligated to make a show of disliking him.

"Yeah. You know, Zac isn't so bad," I say, sizing up her opinion of him. At my words her tone lightens.

"He's really not! Look, I know Marnie's got this grudge against him. And it's totally justified and everything," she hastily adds, "But... I don't know. I... I think he might be a good guy."

"Maybe you're right," I mutter, trying to contain my excitement that Tess could be on my side whenever Zac and I decide to go public with our relationship.

We say goodnight and I hang up, feeling lighter than I had anticipated.

THE SMELL OF CINNAMON and sugar greets me as I pad down the stairs the following morning. Gray is already perched on a barstool at the kitchen island shoveling down forkfuls of scrambled eggs as Mom sets down a pan of fresh cinnamon rolls on the stove.

“You’re up!” she says, noticing my presence, “How was the date last night?”

“Date?” Gray puts his fork down long enough to pose the question before swallowing a swig of orange juice. “Is that whose truck I saw pull up last night?”

I had been under the impression that Gray was already asleep, along with my parents, when I arrived home, so his observation makes me falter.

My cover story was... decent. And almost entirely true. Tess had a date. As a safety precaution and buffer, I and her date’s cousin would be tagging along.

No parent could argue with that. Well, I guess they *could*, but mine didn’t.

“Tess drives a truck?” Mom asks, “You rode with her, right?”

Geez, for a family who doesn’t think my actions even warrant a curfew they sure are giving me the third degree this morning. And rightly so, seeing as I am primarily speaking in half-truths lately.

“Yeah, Tess picked me up yesterday afternoon.” *See, not a lie!*

“And what about the boys, were they nice?” It’s my mother’s not so subtle way of asking if they behaved as gentlemen.

“Yes, very. We all got along well. It was fun.” All truths!

Mom focuses her attention on moving the cinnamon rolls from the pan, plating one each for my brother and me before sliding them over to us.

“Was it strange, being on a date with someone who isn’t Dex?” she prods.

“Alright, I’m out of here,” Gray mumbles over a mouthful of food, not caring for the change in conversation. He grabs his plate and scurries to the living room where a chorus of canned laughter sounds from the TV.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” I say, and I hadn’t. While it was technically my first date with Zac, it felt far different than any dates I had in the past with Dex. “I wouldn’t say it was strange. Just... different.”

“And this new boy, is he anyone I need to worry about?” she questions with a teasing glint sparkling in her eye.

I make a show of chewing my cinnamon roll, carefully choosing my words before responding. “No, no one to worry about.”

That much is wholly true. I believe with all my heart that there is no reason to *worry* about Zac. It may be a bit presumptuous on my part, seeing as we only just started dating, but already I trust him in a way that I never trusted Dex.

“You know you can always talk to me about this stuff, right?” Mom asks, her face vulnerable.

“Of course... what brought all this on?” Can she tell that I’m not being completely truthful with her? No. She’s good, but not *that* good. Yet my heart still skips a beat at the prospect of being found out already.

“I am feeling a bit guilty, I guess. We spent so much time with Marnie after her relationship ended, I hadn’t even considered that I hadn’t dedicated nearly that much time to you when you broke it off with Dex. I want to make sure you know that I’m always here to talk, that I’m here for you.”

“Thanks, Mom. And I know. I think maybe I’m not the type to want to talk about emotions or to dwell on things like that too much. Anyway, the fact that I didn’t feel the need to rehash things probably just reinforces that I never was all that invested in Dex.”

She nods in agreement. “Well, going forward, know that I’m here for you.” After shooting me one of her sweet smiles

she turns back to the sink to wash dishes, leaving me to swallow down the guilt threatening to claw its way up my throat.

Dylan

THE NEXT WEEK BRINGS Valentine's Day, which means that the hallways are covered in the light pink envelopes containing our matchmaker results. Each locker has its own envelope with the owner's name on it, and students are happily tearing into them to see who their 'match' is.

Well, the girls are anyway, most of the guys appear overall uninterested. Or, at least they pretend not to care in an effort to avoid teasing from the other guys.

I approach my own locker and pluck off the envelope. When I flip it over to open it, I notice a smaller white envelope taped to the back with my name written in a familiar scrawl.

A smile splits my face, as I dig into the smaller envelope first. There are four pieces of paper inside. The first is a small Valentine's Day card with two cartoon hearts holding hands underneath a scripted "Will you be my valentine?"

The second two appear to be tickets of some sort, and the third is a brief note, scrawled in a blocky, messy hand.

Roses are Red, Miss Sally's hair is blue,

I'm ready for a date, how about you?

These tickets are for the Drive-In tonight. Hope you didn't already have plans, because they're nonrefundable (and I

don't want to be out nine bucks). I'll pick you up at 7. Look for the white Jeep.

-Z

PS: I apologize for the poem. In case you haven't noticed, words are not exactly my forte.

Reading Zac's words sends a giddy smile to my face. He really is wonderful. And I feel a twinge of guilt at how surprised I am at the notion.

"Hey, Dylan!" A cheery voice sounds from behind me, breaking my deliriously happy stupor. Marnie walks up looking much more pleasant these days than she has for the past few weeks. Or months, if I am being realistic. It appears she is finally starting to get over Zac.

"Hey, Marn. What's up?" Hastily, I shove the white envelope into my back pocket, hoping that she hasn't noticed it and won't ask questions.

"Oh, nothing really. Did you see your Matched results?"

I hold up my official results, still sealed in the envelope.

"Nice! You know, last year Zac was my number one match." She throws the comment out with an air of nonchalance, yet it's obvious she is going somewhere with this.

"Oh, neat." I feign interest, tossing my jacket over my shoulders and throwing my beanie over my head.

"So... Reed mentioned that he saw you and Zac Friday night. Something about a date?"

The blood runs cold in my veins. Maybe Zac was right. Maybe I should have gone with his plan and stayed out of sight.

Too late to change that now, though. So, I improvise. "Um, yeah. Tess was on a date with Zac's cousin, Brandon. She wanted me there as a buffer and I guess Zac was there to round out the group."

“Right!” The tightness in her face fades, her relief at my words unmistakable. “Tess did mention something to me about a date on Friday. Was it weird? Spending time with Zac after everything he put me through?”

“A little,” I mumble, hoping to pull all attention from me.

She releases another puff of air. “For a minute there, I thought there might be something going on between you two.” She lets out a laugh that is an octave too high to be natural as she finishes grabbing her things from her locker.

Okay. So maybe she’s not over Zac.

I wait for her as she slams her locker shut, then we proceed to walk to our cars together as we do most days. There is a palpable tension between us. From the outside I am sure we appear completely normal—smiles plastered on our faces as we stroll out of school together—but from the inside things are... *off*.

It is just as I am about to climb into my car that she calls out from over the roof of her own vehicle.

“Dylan. You’d tell me if there was something going on, right?”

Her statement catches me off guard. I don’t answer immediately, which she takes as a sign of my agreement. Before I can respond she pulls out of the lot and I am quick to follow behind.

THE BUTTERFLIES EVER PRESENT in my stomach when I think about Zac have morphed into buzzing bees that are constantly humming.

I am nervous. So nervous that my hands are shaking as I apply my mascara and nausea settles over me.

Zac and I have been alone together, and we even had a ‘kind of’ date with Tess and Brandon last week. But this is the first time that he has actually asked me out, and we are intentionally going on a date by ourselves.

A half hour before Zac said he would pick me up I am ready to go. I find myself sitting on the edge of my bed aimlessly staring at my phone, opening and closing apps with no purpose. A few minutes later I begin picking at my nails, the nerves getting to me.

This is ridiculous.

Grabbing my coat, I head downstairs to wait for Zac in the kitchen when my phone chimes from within my pocket. Without hesitation I whip it out of my pocket, expecting to see a message from Zac.

Dex-the-ex

Hey Dylan, can we talk sometime?

An uncomfortable heaviness settles in my chest. I've been ignoring his messages, and he doesn't deserve that. Dex saw me when no one else did. When my face was speckled with acne and my teeth were cloaked in braces. I suppose if what Zac said is true, then Zac *also* noticed me. But he didn't act on it. Dex *did*. He marched right up to me after a basketball game last year and asked for my number. We talked casually for a month or so before officially dating. He is a good guy and he made a good boyfriend. But I've come to realize that I want more than just *good*. I want heart pounding, breath stopping, stomach swirling desire. I want what I have with Zac.

Yet I can't help but take pity on him and respond.

Dylan

Hey, Dex. Sorry, I'm a little busy these days. Maybe some other time we can catch up :)

And with that I tuck my phone away, ready for my date.

Zac

I PARK THE BORROWED Jeep in front of Dylan's house at five minutes to seven, knowing that Dylan is always a punctual person. We have our spot reserved at the drive-in for the seven-thirty show, so we don't need to get there early to get a spot or anything.

I am about to send Dylan a message to let her know I am here, when her front door opens and light streams through it onto the front porch, slicing through the darkness that is already setting in. Not knowing for sure that it is Dylan, I keep my head tucked down so as not to be recognized by any of her other family members.

When I glance up again, I see that it is, in fact, my girlfriend. Her blonde, curly hair is down today and falls to her mid-back. Similar to our 'not date' last week, she is wearing a skirt with tights. However, her top is covered by a long pea coat, so I can't make out what is underneath as she strides across the yard to reach me.

I give her a wave and motion for her to get in. She smiles as she pulls her door open.

"What's with the Jeep?" she questions before her butt even hits the seat.

“Didn’t want anyone to recognize my truck at the drive-in, so I borrowed this baby for the night,” I respond, patting the dashboard affectionately.

She stares at me, eyes wide. “You... borrowed a car? Just so no one would see us?”

“Well... it’s Brandon’s. He was happy to lend it to me for the night since I went on that double date with him. Shall we go?” I send her a crooked smile and she blushes again. It is adorable.

I love Date Night Dylan.

No, wait.

I love *Dylan*.

The thought doesn’t even phase me. Because, *duh*. Contrary to the public’s perception of me, it isn’t hard for me to love. My mom, brother, friends, heck, I’d even go as far to say that I love Justin. Can’t stand the guy sometimes, but I still love him. I never thought I would be the kind of sap to fall for a girl so quickly, though.

Obviously, what I feel for Dylan differs—*greatly*—from what I feel for Justin. But still.

And I can’t even tell Dylan how I feel because we are *one week* into our relationship. Dylan is a smart girl with a healthy amount of skepticism. There is no way she’ll believe that my motives are pure. She’ll either think that I’m only saying it because I feel obligated to, or as an attempt to push her to turn our relationship into one of a more *physical* nature. Neither of which are true, nor are they the impression I want to give Dylan.

It’s bad enough that I’m taking her to a drive-in—a spot notorious for hooking up—on our first real date. I don’t need anything I say to reinforce my reputation.

Though if the way her face reddened when she opened my Valentines card is any indication, she isn’t *unhappy* about the location of our date. I had planned to catch Dylan after school to hash out the details for tonight, but she was cornered by Marnie and rushed away before I had the chance.

But now, as I watch Dylan steal glances at me from her side of the car, I am okay with not having been able to talk to her after school. It adds to the anticipation. I reach over and grab her hands to still her fiddling fingers, her warmth shoots straight to my chest.

The drive-in is packed, likely because of Valentine's Day. We find our spot without issue and I get the speakers all hooked up for the movie. Dylan shrugs out of her jacket revealing a tight-fitting long-sleeve shirt underneath.

A curse sounds in my thoughts. Why does she always look so good? Even without showing an inch of skin she makes me flustered.

Needing to clear my head, I walk over to the concession stand to get us some drinks and snacks. I wasn't about to ruin our date by making any cheesy moves or saying anything inappropriate. As much as I am dying to hold and kiss Dylan, I needed her to know that there is more to whatever relationship we have than just the physical aspects.

As I walk toward the small building that holds the concession stand, I scan the parked cars around us, noting that none of them appear familiar. Good. Hopefully we won't have anyone recognize us.

After getting us popcorn and a drink each, I make my way back to the Jeep. I am only a car away when a familiar voice cuts through the air.

"Zac?" Graham comes strutting up beside me, his hair bouncing with each step and hands carrying two oversized Styrofoam cups. "What are you doing here?"

Crap. How did I not think to come up with a cover story?

Easy, you were so arrogant you assumed nobody would spot you.

"Just here for the movie," I say in a tone that I hope portrays indifference.

"Cool, cool." Graham nods. "Who are you with?" he gestures to the two cups in my hand.

“Uhh, my cousin,” I blurt. It is the first thing that comes to mind. Probably because I have his car.

Graham’s eyes narrow, heavy with skepticism. I can’t blame him. “Okay,” he says after a few agonizing seconds of him analyzing my face. “Where’s your truck?”

“We brought his Jeep.” Subtly, I tip my head back to where the vehicle is parked, praying that Graham can’t see who is currently seated in my passenger seat. I trust Graham. Probably more than anyone else outside of my family, aside from Dylan, but I know Dylan’s not ready to expose our relationship to the outside world yet.

Graham cranes his neck around, trying to peer into the Jeep from over my shoulder. At this distance I know it is unlikely that he will be able to make out anything more than a shadow, but I can still feel sweat start to form on my palms and the back of my neck.

“Mind if I say hello?” he asks with a smile that is far too arrogant painted across his face.

He knows.

No. He can’t know.

I’m sure he suspects I am with a girl, but he has no way of knowing *which* girl.

After all, what guy takes their male cousin to a drive-in theater on Valentine’s Day?

“Uh, he’s not in there. He said he was going to the bathroom or something.”

Graham laughs at my explanation. Full-on throws his head back and barks out the most obnoxious laugh I have ever heard come from his mouth. “Sure, dude. Well, I guess I’ll leave you to it.”

Graham backs away, but his gaze doesn’t leave me. Probably hoping I will give something away.

My head nods in ‘farewell’ repeatedly, before I turn to hustle back to the Jeep, still hoping beyond hope that our secret is safe. But to my surprise, when I peer through the

window, I don't see Dylan there. *Would* she have gone to the bathroom or something? Or maybe she saw Graham and decided to hide?

Just as I am about to pull my phone out to text her, her head pops up from the back seat, poking between the front seats.

"What are you doing?" I ask with a chuckle as I climb in the driver's seat and set the drinks in the cup holder.

She bites down on her bottom lip.

"I thought... maybe..."

"Maybe... what?"

"Maybe we could watch the movie from the back seat?" Her blush is growing deeper by the second. Is she saying what I think she's saying?

"It's just... the console is in the way in the front. It would be between us the whole time—"

Before she finishes her thought, I throw myself over the seat, far from gracefully, I might add, landing on top of her as she lets out a playful squeal.

"I like the way you think, Miss Park." My voice is gruff, my face close to hers. She lays there for a minute, chewing adorably on her lip. I should probably get off her. Just because she wanted us together in the back seat doesn't mean she wants to—

Oh, no, she does.

Her arm wraps around my neck, fingers sliding through my hair, and she pulls my face down until our lips smash together.

My face freezes in surprise. I didn't expect her to make the first move or initiate a kiss, well, *ever*. She's usually more reserved than that. But there's no denying that her boldness does something to me.

Her lips move against mine slowly in uncertain, testing movements. Still stuck in my state of shock I don't move mine

back against hers right away. I just enjoy the sensation of her lips brushing softly against mine.

Come on Zac, get it together.

If I don't do something soon, she's going to stop. She'll feel rejected and pull away. A soft nip on my bottom lip yanks me from my thoughts. And just like that, I'm kissing her back, the weight of my body pushing her into the SUV's fancy leather.

My hands wind into her long strands of hair to hold her in place as I take control of the kiss. The small gasp she releases makes me smile into her lips. Dylan's hands roam up my chest, fingers gliding over the outline of my muscles outside of my shirt, taking her time exploring.

Her hands settle near the waistband of my pants before her fingers hook into my belt loops, pulling our hips together. There is no suppressing the groan that escapes my lips as our kiss turns even more frantic.

I want to feel more of her. My fingers are itching to touch her soft skin. I move my hands along her side, down to her legs, desperately trying to find even an inch of bare skin to run my hands over, before remembering her tights.

Tights are the worst.

My new least favorite thing.

I *hate* tights.

"You're never wearing tights again," I groan into our kiss.

Dylan

ALTHOUGH I WAS INITIALLY self-conscious, that—and any other thoughts or insecurities—quickly fly from my mind as Zac’s mouth slants over mine. His hands are in my hair. Then running down my arms and the side of my torso, slowly moving along my thighs.

“*You’re never wearing tights again.*” His words make me laugh. He wants to feel my skin. When I chose my outfit for tonight, I hadn’t considered, you know, *touching*. I just thought it was cute. But in hindsight, this probably isn’t the best look for someone interested in physical contact.

If only Zac knew this top was a bodysuit.

The realization only makes me laugh harder, to the point where Zac has to lean back off of me to avoid getting head butted by my hysterics. And then it dawns on me how surreal this whole situation is. I’m *kissing* Zac Morgan. In the back seat of someone’s car. And it’s *hot*. Or it was before I started laughing like a lunatic.

“Something funny, Park?” he questions, feigning seriousness.

“I’m sorry.” I wipe a tear of laughter from under my eye. “I was just... I was—I can’t—” there’s no way I can get out a

coherent thought through my laughter. Why can't I *stop* laughing?

"Take them off." Zac's voice is a growl in my ear, sobering me instantly.

"What?" I'm not sure why I am surprised at his request, after all, he has a reputation. But I still can't keep the crushing defeat from my voice. Surely, he doesn't expect... *that* tonight.

Or... anytime soon.

"Please." His tone softens, assuming—correctly—that I'm getting freaked out. "Only if you're comfortable with it. I just need to feel more of you. I promise, I'm not trying to pull anything."

I consider it for a moment. Before I have a chance to say anything, though, Zac speaks again.

"Hey, never mind. Pretend I never said that..."

"No," I whisper. "It's fine." I give him a reassuring smile. He sits back and I shimmy my tights down my legs. I wait for the nerves to kick in. The anxious unease.

But it doesn't.

The boy staring down at me with admiration in his eyes isn't the selfish womanizer I've painted him as. He's never done anything or pushed for anything that I wasn't comfortable with.

After tossing the pesky tights aside, Zac is back on me in an instant. One hand lacing into my hair as he kisses me, the other stroking leisurely along my thigh, making sure to not let his hands stray under my skirt. Who would have thought he could be such a gentleman?

Slowly, his hand creeps the tiniest bit higher. "You okay?" he whispers through our kiss.

"Mm-hmm."

He pauses his hand. Really, his touch is almost modest, barely an inch above my knee, and his thumb begins to make

circles there. And you know what? I'm starting to agree with Zac's opinion of tights. After all, they are kind of itchy.

Annoying to put on.

They rip too easily.

I hate tights, too.

I am never going to wear tights again. Especially if they keep me from feeling like *this*.

Zac shifts us, moving into a sitting position and pulling me on his lap, his hands on my hips tugging me even closer to him.

Suddenly I can understand his irritation with the amount of skin I had covered. After all, he has even more of his hidden. My hands slide up his shirt and undo the remaining buttons. A frustrated groan escapes me when I realize that he is wearing a white undershirt beneath his dress shirt. Yet another layer I have to get through.

Sensing my frustration, Zac grins. "Sorry, babe," he adds with a chuckle. It's not the first time he's used the term of endearment for me. It is one I've always found *beyond* cringy. But coming from Zac, and it being directed at *me*, sends tingles down my spine every time.

Undeterred, I slowly slide my hands under the hem of his shirt, gently skimming my fingertips along his abdomen. With each brush of my fingers against his skin his muscles tighten beneath them.

He lets out a groan so small that it's almost a whimper. No one has ever reacted to me this way before. Not even Dex. Not that comparing Zac to Dex is fair, they are on two completely different plains.

Zac mimics my motions, only, thanks to my bodysuit, his hands are forced to remain above my clothing. Again, asking if what he is doing was okay. I gave him the affirmative and he continues gliding his hands over me.

It occurs to me that while Zac makes sure to always check with me to ensure that I am comfortable, I haven't. He seems

to like it, but I should make sure, right?

My hands pause on his chest. “Are *you* okay with this?” I whisper. It probably isn’t the best time to ask this, seeing as how my hands had been pawing at him for the better half of an hour, but still.

“Dyl, you can do whatever you want to me,” he says. Leaning into my ear, he quietly adds, “I trust you.”

After almost an hour of constant lip locking where the remainder of our clothes remain firmly intact, we crawl back to the front seat. In the light from the large screen, we can take in our appearances. Our eyes roam over each other intensely before we both start laughing.

I thought the whole ‘*I-can-tell-you-were-hooking-up-with-someone-because-you-look-disheveled*’ concept existed only in movies. But if someone were to peek in the windows right now there would be no questioning what we were up to.

“You look like you were mauled by a bear!” I exclaim, covering my mouth to muffle my laughter. And he does. His hair sticking up in every direction, face flushed and lips swollen. There are even nail marks on his neck and his previously pressed shirt is now wrinkled.

Zac’s eyes roam over me steadily as a mischievous grin settles on his face. “You might not want to look in the mirror then.”

My eyes widen as he sends me another wink.

“HOW IS MARNIE DOING, sweetie?” my mother asks as she passes me the heaping bowl of mashed redskin potatoes. “Lorna’s been busy these past few weeks and I haven’t had a chance to check in lately.”

Taking the bowl from my mom, I shovel scoops of the creamy mash onto my plate. I love my mom’s potatoes. She adds garlic and rosemary and they are superb. But even my love of the food doesn’t justify the mountain that I am currently piling onto my plate. I have to do something to

occupy myself while trying to come up with an answer to her question, though.

A familiar pang of guilt stabs in my chest the same way it does whenever my mom brings up Marnie. Or whenever I see Marnie, for that matter. Zac and I aren't technically doing anything wrong. Though, I suppose keeping our relationship a secret could be seen as '*doing something wrong*,' but at the end of the day it's our business. There is no rule that says that we need to disclose our relationship. So, I am going to go with that.

I take a sip of my ice water and clear my throat before answering. "She's doing well, I think. We actually haven't had too much time to talk lately, either." That isn't a lie. Aside from seeing her at a few basketball games, which aren't ideal for having intimate conversations, our paths haven't crossed often.

"Hmm," my mom muses between bites of her steamed asparagus. "We should have her and Lorna over for dinner again. It's been a while." I can practically see her mind working, planning the perfect menu to please Lorna.

A long groan sounds out from the other side of the table and I stifle a chuckle as I glance over to where my father and brother are seated. Their theatrics attract Mom's attention as well.

"You boys know you don't have to join us." She sets her fork down as she addresses them. "We'll have another girls' night." Her smile reaches her eyes as she clasps her hand over mine. As hard as I try to muster up a genuine smile to return to her, I find that I just can't.

The thought of sitting in proximity with Marnie, Lorna, and my mother having a *girls' night* where there will undoubtedly be more critiques of Zac's character is enough to make me lose my appetite. And honestly? I'm beginning to take it personally, which I know is ridiculous. It's not as though Mom knows that Zac and I are an item, so she's not intentionally criticizing my boyfriend, but it still feels that

way. Suddenly the mountain of potatoes on my plate is much less appealing.

“And, of course, we missed our Valentine’s date this year!” she adds, her full attention on me. “I’m glad you had fun out with the girls, or whatever you were up to, but I missed our one-on-one time.”

After our date at the drive-in Zac dropped me off at home. My parents had both been off on their own date, so there hadn’t been any prying questions. When asked what I was doing, I just said I was out with friends. This... was less than a half truth. I was out with *a* friend.

Singular.

And he also happens to be far *more* than a friend.

Spending time alone with my mother is much more palatable than also including Marnie and Lorna. However, my dinner is already ruined by the guilt cocktail spinning in my gut.

Excusing myself from the table, citing a headache, I make my way back up to my room and shut myself inside for the rest of the night.

Zac

AFTER MY DATE WITH Dylan I am deliriously cheerful. So much so that both Alex and Justin have commented on my irritating grins and on the few occasions I had contact with Mom, she offered lingering, knowing smiles.

It's times like these that I wish I could talk about Dylan with my friends. Sure, we hackle each other to no end, especially about girls, but when it comes down to it, they'd be there for me. Ellis, for one, would be a great sounding board. He's been with his girl for almost a year and is *stupid* in love. Even Graham, who I've got a hunch is on the lookout for "The One" could offer me some solid relationship advice. But as it is, I'm on my own. Truthfully, Dylan probably prefers that I *don't* get relationship advice from my friends. It makes me more genuine, more *honest*, if our interactions are from my own mind. She prefers me as I am.

And I freakin' *love* that.

If it's difficult for me not to talk to the guys about her, it must be killing Dylan. Girls are all about talking and gossip and all that, right?

Fine, that's an over generalization and a stereotype. But it's only natural to want to talk to other people about the big things that happen in life. Especially things that make you so beyond happy. I hate that we can't do that.

Dylan and I have been texting nonstop this weekend. It's Sunday, and her parents are out of town for some finance conference for Mrs. Park's job and her brother is at a friend's house. Meaning that Dylan and I have her whole house to ourselves for a few hours. That's right, it's been fewer than *two days* since I saw her at school and I am already deprived.

I park my truck outside of one of Dylan's neighbor's houses and hop out. Since I still can't park at Dylan's house and don't want to draw attention to myself coming and going, I have been switching up where I park. Each time I am in the neighborhood I choose a different spot so no one gets suspicious and calls the neighborhood watch or something.

That's right, I'm pretty clever.

Unfortunately for me, I am too caught up in my thoughts today to realize where I have inadvertently parked until a feminine voice scratches against my ears.

"Zac?"

No.

Marnie.

Running my palm down my face I hazard a look around. Sure enough, I parked in front of Marnie's house today. And not just on the edge of her property, but smack dab, directly, right in front of her house. *How stupid am I?*

"What are you doing here?"

Marnie is walking toward me from her mailbox wrapped in some fancy blanket shawl type thing and yoga pants.

"I, uh..." think Zac, *think*. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Really?" She's as surprised as I am.

"Yeah, um. I wanted to make sure we were okay." Alright, where am I going with this?

"You wanted to make sure we were... *okay?*" She mimics my words skeptically.

"That's right. Look, I know we've been avoiding each other for weeks now, and I need you to know that I never

meant to hurt you. Things got away from us.” I let out a deep sigh and continue. “Honestly, we probably should never have dated in the first place.”

Marnie stares at me, both of us standing outside of the driver’s side door of my truck.

“You think that makes me feel better?” she hisses. “To have you admit that you never should have dated me? That I essentially wasted *months* of my life on you?”

“No... I guess I didn’t think it would make you feel better...” Well, this is awkward. “Marnie, we both knew what our relationship was. It had an expiration date. And I’m sorry if I led you to believe that we were something more.”

She huffs, shaking her head, clearly pissed.

“How can I make this better?” I ask. Although I didn’t plan on coming here to talk to Marnie, I am glad that we are hashing it out at last. Maybe this little chat will help her lose some of her hostility toward me.

“I want to hit you,” she states definitively.

“Uh... what?”

“Yeah... yeah, I want to hit you. Slap you, punch you, *something*.” It’s like she’s trying to talk herself into it, and unfortunately for me, she seems to have succeeded.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah. You can hit me.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yes. Seriously. Just... try to keep it above the belt, alright?” Marnie is quite petite, so whatever she throws at me can’t hurt *that* much. And if it will make life even the tiniest bit easier for Dylan, I am willing to take it.

Before I can register what is happening, she takes a step forward to steady herself and get momentum for her punch. Yes, her fisted hand and trajectory of her swing indicates that she is, in fact, planning on punching me in the face. But what

she doesn't realize is that there is a small patch of ice directly in her path, which causes her to slip. Her eyes widen as she starts to fall backward.

Instinctively, I reach out and grab for her. My arms catch her in what would be a crazy romantic dip if the situation were different. I let out a sigh of relief, the small adrenaline rush leaving me.

We stand there for a minute, catching our breath. Marnie steadies herself before bursting out in laughter. I don't know if it's the shock of her reaction or the fear that she will fall again, but I keep my hands firmly planted on her hips as she continues to giggle.

For a *long* time.

"I'll take a rain check on that punch, Morgan. It's not worth dying over." She's still laughing, which I take as a good sign. Finally regaining control of herself, she turns and walks back to her house. I hop back in my truck. I can't keep it parked here now. Marnie will be more than suspicious.

Before I pull away, I send Dylan a quick text telling her I will be later than expected. Her reply comes before I am even able to tuck my phone back into my jacket pocket.

Dylan

Don't worry about it, something came up.

What does that mean? Are her parents staying home after all? Is her brother still home?

Zac

???

Dylan

MY HEART IS SPLINTERING and tears sting in the back of my eyes. I feel sick as I slam my front door closed behind me. I grab my scarf and struggle with unwinding it from around my neck before throwing it on the hook.

Zac was planning on coming over this afternoon, but before he arrived, I had gotten a call from Mrs. Kyle up the street. Her porch was iced over, and she was hoping I could help her shovel it so she could get to her car.

It was while I was sprinkling a final layer of salt over her freshly shoveled walkway that I saw Zac's pickup drive by and park up the street.

At Marnie's house.

He sat inside for a while, and when he finally opened the door and stepped out, Marnie was running toward him.

They stood outside of his truck, closer together than I would like, and although I knew I probably shouldn't peep at whatever they were doing, I couldn't help it. I couldn't make out their expressions or hear what they were saying, but I could see enough to tell that they were talking.

Marnie went to take a step closer to him and it looked like she lost her footing. Zac grabbed her and pulled her back up. Which was fine. He was making sure she didn't fall.

But what really got me was that *he didn't let go*. They were standing, talking, and laughing. And Zac *still* had his hands firmly on her hips.

Five seconds.

Ten.

Twenty.

After thirty seconds of watching them cuddling up to each other I forced myself to turn away, leaving my heart on the porch behind me as I sprinted home. A few minutes later I get a text.

Zac

Hey. Running late. I'll try to get to your place as soon as I can.

Running late?

Oh my gosh, he is going to keep hanging out with Marnie, isn't he?

I thought they hated each other.

Wait. He hasn't been casually hooking up with her even after they broke up, right?

No. That's ridiculous. It's obvious from the way that they act towards each other that there is nothing going on. And I trust Zac. I do. But that doesn't stop the sudden sense of suffocation pressing on me.

Dylan

Don't worry about it, something came up.

I shuck out of my thick winter jacket and kick my boots in the corner, making my way into the kitchen to scarf down a few of the brownies that mom and I had made last night. I am a stress eater. Sue me.

Just as I finish my third one, there is a knock on the door. Cautiously, I peek through the kitchen window that faces the front yard.

Zac.

Did he not see my message?

Maybe if I ignore him, he will just go away.

“Dylan, I know you’re there! I saw you turn the light on in the kitchen when I came up.”

Crap.

I yank the door open, planting on the most uninterested face I can manage.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah. I came to hang out with my girlfriend.”

“Didn’t you see my text?”

“Sure did, but it was garbage, so I came over anyway.” He pushes past me, letting himself into my house. “What’s really going on, Dylan?” He sits on the couch after kicking off his shoes.

“Nothing,” I respond, like the very mature person I am.

“Nothing?” he repeats. “Then what was your text about?”

“I... I just didn’t feel like hanging out anymore.”

Zac sees right through my facade. Not that it takes much effort on his part.

“Try again.”

I say nothing.

“Dylan,” he chides, brows raised. “Come on, talk to me.”

“Fine. I saw you with Marnie. Happy?” I huff out, throwing up my arms.

“What?” His surprise is genuine. “When?”

“Literally ten minutes ago! Or have you forgotten already?”

“Dyl, I wasn’t *with* Marnie. She caught me when I was parking to come see you. I had to talk to her, or it would be suspicious.”

“Oh, she just ‘caught’ you as you were parking *right in front of her house!*” My voice grows louder, and I can’t stop it.

“Yes!” He is defensive. “There was nothing even remotely friendly going on between us. In fact, she was about to punch me.”

“What?” Confusion overtakes my anger.

“She slipped before she got a chance to follow through, but yeah. I thought if she could take out some of her anger toward me then maybe, eventually, we wouldn’t have to hide everything from her.” His eyes sheepishly lower to his feet now, and I know he is telling the truth.

“So, you holding her and laughing...?”

“I was only steadying her. The last thing I needed was for her to fall over again and embarrass herself. That would make her hate me more. As for the laughter? I have no idea why she couldn’t pull herself together.”

We are locked in a stare off for a few minutes. Me still standing, in a position of power, and Zac sitting on our floral couch.

“Are we good?” he finally breaks the silence.

I sit next to him, which he takes as a good sign, because he wraps his arm around my shoulders. Both of us staring forward.

“Can I ask you a question?” I mutter. Not sure what has possessed me to broach this topic *now*.

“Of course.”

“How many girls have you... gone out with?” He is silent for a few minutes.

“You really want to know?” He is giving me an out. I should probably take it.

Do I want to know?

“Yes.”

“And you promise you won’t be mad?” Alright, I’m getting worried now. *How many are there?*

“Of course I won’t be mad.”

“Probably a little more than a dozen.”

“A *dozen?*” My voice is a whisper as I am hit by the sheer force of the number. That... is more than I thought. Suddenly I’m feeling insignificant. Like no more than a blip on his dating timeline. Zac expects me to believe that he is choosing me over a dozen, *or more*, other options? A chill runs up my spine—and not the good, electric kind, either. Suddenly the weight of his arm on my shoulder makes me cringe and the unshed tears and nausea from earlier are back in full force. I swallow, repeatedly, trying to will the tears away as I shake my head.

What are we even doing? Zac isn’t the type of boy I date. *I’m* not the type of girl Zac dates. We don’t make sense.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” My voice is so quiet and scratchy I would be surprised if he can even hear me. But apparently, he does because the next moment his hands are on my shoulders, and he turns me around to face him.

Zac’s hands slide up to cup my face, his own a mask of genuine panic. “Dylan, what do you mean?” His voice is even smaller than mine.

The tears start to flow and I look at the ceiling, covering my mouth with one of my hands. “I can’t compete with all of those other girls.”

“It’s no competition—”

I raise my hand to silence him. “It is to me. It always will be. I’ll always be comparing myself to all the other girls you’ve gone out with, whether I know them or not. I’ll be jealous. Afraid that someone will come along who is better than me. I can’t live like that, Zac.”

“You said you wouldn’t be mad.” He’s right. I did promise that.

“I’m not mad. I don’t fault you for your past. Really. I’m...” *What am I?* “I don’t know. I feel like I’ve been kicked in the stomach.”

“You knew this about me before. What’s changed now?” His voice is still a whisper, but steady.

“Seeing you and Marnie, I guess. If even that little misunderstanding could drive me over the edge, how much worse can things get? I—I don’t fit. I don’t party. I’m not confident in crowds. I’m an introvert and I like to keep to myself.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to change for me. I *don’t* expect you to.”

“Maybe not now. But what about in a week? A month? Eventually you’ll want someone more compatible with your lifestyle. With your tastes. With *you!* All this sneaking around has kept things exciting, sure. But what about when that thrill wears off? It won’t work. You’ll get bored of me. And that scares me.”

We’re quiet for a long time. Too long. As the silence stretches on, I can feel myself pulling further away. Falling into resignation.

Then, Zac speaks again, his tone firm and confident, “No.”

“What?”

“I said no. That’s not fair, Dylan. Have you ever thought that maybe you are my ‘taste?’ That I like you for who you are and that I don’t only fall into whatever lifestyle you have me pegged with? Maybe I enjoy more than just partying. Honestly, I’d rather spend a night in with you than be out trying to impress people. When I saw you holding that drink at Justin’s party... I hated it. I wanted to grab it out of your hand and chuck it across the yard. I wish I could have taken you away from there before you even had a drop of alcohol, because it’s not you. And I *don’t* want you to change.”

Tears glisten in my eyes again as I continue to listen to his speech. His tone still borders on indignant, but his words are anything but.

“You can be scared, that’s fine. You can be jealous. If anything, it’s flattering that you care enough about me *to be* jealous. But you can’t call it quits on us only because of what you think might happen in the future, or that you might not be good enough for me. Your feelings aren’t one-sided. Have you ever thought about how this is for me? You say you’re worried about me getting bored, but what about the other way? What about when you realize that there are dozens of guys out there who are better than me? You’re going off to *college*, Dylan, where you’re going to live in the dorms with hundreds of other guys. You’ll be surrounded by people who share your interests and who you’ll likely have more in common with than me. Does that mean I should just call it quits on us?”

My mouth opens, but no response comes out.

“Of course it doesn’t! We just have to suck it up. Talk to each other and be honest. Because we’re worth it. Yes, I have a past. Everyone does. But there’s a reason why I’m not with anyone else. I’m all in with you, Dylan. All. In.”

His impassioned speech leaves me breathless. I sit there, stunned, until Zac speaks again. Quieter, shier this time.

“Just... please stop doing this, Dylan.”

Whoa, *what*? He’s turning this on me?

“Doing what, exactly?”

“This. Comparing yourself to others. Not believing that you’re good enough.”

Hah, easy for him to say. Before I can shut down his suggestion, he pins me with eyes flooded with sincerity. I know I struggle with comparing myself to others, and it makes me feel exposed to know that Zac also realizes this.

I want to argue his statement, but I can’t. And I’ve also got the sudden urge to hold him. My arms wrap around his neck in a hug and I breathe him in, calming instantly.

“Okay. I’ll try,” I mumble into his skin.

He pulls me away from him so he can look directly into my eyes. “No one compares to you, Dylan. Not for me,

anyway. *Please* remember that.” He pauses so I can see the sincerity oozing from him. “Are we good?”

“We’re good.”

Zac

DYLAN AND I REMAIN seated on her couch, my arms wrapped firmly around her, keeping her pressed tightly against my chest. I don't think I could have pulled away even if I wanted to.

What just happened? Did she almost... break up with me? Obviously, she didn't want to, but still, *it almost happened*.

Does she really think that there is even a chance that I'm not all in with her? That she would ever have to try to be someone that she isn't in order to fit into my life? Apparently, that is exactly what she thought.

And the way she looked at me after I had shared how many girls I've dated... that was the worst. What was I thinking, expecting her not to be upset? I left her with the only choice of feeling insecure. I would take an angry, fiery Dylan any day over one who feels inadequate because of my past.

"I know it's not easy. But you can't let other people control how you see yourself. You're not the only one who does it, everyone does. But... please don't let it be the reason we don't work. You've always been enough for me. You always *will be*."

"I'm sorry I freaked out earlier. It's just... I don't know. I always feel like I'm insignificant, you know?"

I want to tell her how ridiculous that is. That she was never insignificant and she never could be. But I know that would just be me repeating myself. So instead of telling her with my words, I decided to tell her with my actions.

“Never again, Dyl,” I whisper into her lips before pulling her in for a kiss.

“WELL?” I IMPLORE DYLAN, anxiously awaiting her response.

“Well, Mr. Morgan,” she drones in a professional tone. “It appears that your true age is... wait for iiiittt... eighteen.” Her hands fly up and she does some strange version of jazz hands.

“Give me that.” My hand reaches out for the magazine as I roll my eyes. Sure enough, according to this quiz my ‘true’ age is eighteen. The same as my actual age.

How incredibly exciting.

“It’s better than being forty-two!” Dylan retorts.

Yes, my lovely seventeen-year-old girlfriend had a true age of forty-two. At least, according to the fine writers of the fashion magazine I brought for today’s stint in the study room.

“Does that make you a cougar?” I ask, simply to get a rise out of her.

“Eww, no! Don’t make it weird.” She laughs.

We have been officially together for a few weeks and things are going great. Even after the small argument we had a couple of weeks ago when I had accidentally talked with Marnie. Things only seem to be getting better with us. I sense some lingering insecurities on her end. Almost like she can’t understand why I would choose to be with her over some other girl. And I suppose her concern makes sense, given my reputation. But I wish she could see how much she means to me.

I can talk to Dylan with ease. In a way I’m unable to with anyone else. She isn’t dating me for popularity or using me.

She is with me because she actually likes to spend time with me. The real me.

And I can't wait for the time when Dylan decides to expose our relationship.

If Dylan decides to expose our relationship.

That thought makes my stomach churn. I know I told her that I was fine being her dirty little secret, or whatever, and at the time I was. I *am*. I understand that she doesn't want to step on anyone's toes. But it's been *weeks*.

And I'm growing antsy.

Dylan begins thumbing through a stack of post-it notes nervously.

"You know," she starts, her tone turning more serious. "You never answered my question that night in the hot tub." Dylan keeps her gaze locked on the computer in front of her.

I know exactly what question she is talking about. "*You date a lot of girls. Why?*"

"I thought you forgot about that." I try to play it off, not wanting to get serious yet.

"Sorry. I guess I'm curious."

"I don't think you're going to like my answer."

"Try me."

I swallow, then dive in. "It was fun. I never had the desire to stick with one girl. I liked meeting new people, dating, flirting, all of it. I never had any reason not to keep things casual." Dylan nods along, waiting for me to continue. I blow out a puff of air, deciding to tell her the full truth, even if it is cheesy as heck. "It was... a way to hide, I guess. I didn't have to get attached to anyone, didn't *want* to. And honestly, I didn't think anyone would want to stick around once they got to really know me. So, I made sure to keep things casual. I always figured I'd find someone serious someday, but was never in any rush to open that door while in high school."

"Seriously?" Dylan questions with skepticism in her eyes.

“Yeah.” I feel the blush rising up my neck. Again, *embarrassing*. Dylan bites down on her lip, suddenly fixated on tracing her finger over the woodgrain of the tabletop.

“And... now?” she prods gently. “You’re okay with something serious?”

My hand reaches across the table and intertwines with hers. “Without a doubt.”

She’s blushing. I love it. I revel in the moment for only a few seconds longer before pressing my luck with a question.

“You’ve never answered my question, either,” I say, peeking up from the top of my computer screen. I’ve been asking her the same question almost weekly, and it’s wearing on me not knowing the answer.

She glances over at me, feigning confusion. She knows what question I’m talking about, it’s the same one I’ve been pestering her with for weeks. But I can’t seem to help myself. “Your question?”

“What made you break up with Dex?”

Dylan

“*WHAT MADE YOU BREAK up with Dex?*” Zac had questioned my motives for ending my relationship with Dex many times in the past few months, and I always either avoided it altogether or answered as vaguely as possible. But he is relentless.

Almost like he already knows the answer.

Deciding to finally rip off the band-aid and tell him the whole truth, I meet his eye and come clean.

“You.”

Homecoming in Silverwood is a big deal. The whole *town* shows up for the parade and football game, and local businesses throw money at the school to sponsor it. By extension, the students voted Homecoming Queen and King are just as big a deal. At least for one night.

When Zac was announced as king at halftime, it was no surprise to anyone. When I was announced as queen, I was so shocked I could have collapsed in laughter, my brain was unable to properly process the information. Because *I'm* not the type of girl who wins Homecoming Queen. But now, every moment of that night is permanently etched in my mind. Every word spoken, touch felt, and emotion experienced.

My crisis didn't begin with the crowning at halftime, though, but at the dance. Because although I had brought Dex with me, as Homecoming Queen, my first dance of the night would be with the King. Zac.

It started innocently enough. Zac approached me where I was waiting with the rest of the court members and asked if I was ready to dance with him. I gave him a shrug and ignored the goosebumps that erupted across my skin as his deep voice washed over me.

Then the DJ announced the court members, ending with us.

“And your Homecoming royalty, Zachary Morgan and Magdalene Park!”

Zac clasped his hand in mine and raised our joined arms above our heads in triumph. Normally I wouldn't have been into that kind of showboating, but I was too stunned by the electricity coursing through our joined hands and the goosebumps that erupted *everywhere* to notice any trace of self-consciousness I was harboring.

A slower country sound echoed through the speakers and Zac placed his hands on my waist. Instinctively, mine found his shoulders. Some girls wrapped their arms tightly around the neck of their dance partners, but I wasn't comfortable enough to be that close to Zac. The move was far too intimate for our nonexistent relationship.

But even at the seemingly safe distance I was keeping between us, it wasn't enough. As we started to sway together, Zac's cologne washed over me, making my breath catch and my heart stutter.

“You're breathtaking tonight,” he whispered on the edge of my ear. My face heated instantly.

I returned the compliment. Truthfully, I thought he looked far better than I did. His dress shirt was rolled up to his elbows and it fit him snugly. His tie was already loose around his neck, as if he had been tugging on it, even though we had been there all of fifteen minutes. The dark strands of his hair were

styled back impeccably in a loose side part with only a few falling onto his forehead.

I was desperate to avoid his gaze, so I concentrated on the couples dancing around us. Most of them were having fun with the dance, exaggerating their movements or keeping a comically large distance between their bodies. But not Zac and me. It was as if he actually wanted to dance this slow dance with me with how firmly he kept me tucked in his arms.

As the song went on, his hands crept along my sides and joined together at the small of my back, pulling me even closer to him. I can still remember how quickly my heart beat and the furious butterflies took flight in my stomach.

My arms moved of their own volition, wrapping snugly around his neck for support as I feared that my legs would give out from his gentle caresses alone.

Zac's thumb moved in circles on my back. "*You okay, Dylan?*" his gruff voice was in my ear again, making me shiver.

I had only been able to hum out a response.

The song ended and we pulled back, a blush crept up my face again at how close we had gotten. How close I had pulled us.

I cleared my throat and tried to play it cool. "*See you around, Morgan.*"

"*Yeah, see you, Park.*"

That eye contact seared into my soul as we went our separate ways.

The rest of the dance went by like any other. I hung out with Dex and my friends and we danced for most of the night.

It wasn't until another slow song came on that my night fell apart. I joined Dex on the dance floor and noticed that Marnie and Zac were also among the couples swaying back and forth.

I expected to have a similar reaction to dancing with Dex as I had with Zac—the butterflies, the jolt of exhilaration. But

with Dex I felt... nothing. No excitement, no electricity, just... blah.

I remember looking into his eyes, desperate for a spark, a jolt, a tiny flutter of a wing, *anything*, for the boy standing before me. Even a *sliver* of the spark that I felt with Zac.

Dex gazed down at me with pure adoration and a smile on his face. I was begging the butterflies that had gone dormant in my stomach to erupt to life again, but no luck.

At that moment, a jarring thought flashed in my mind.

Had I *ever* felt anything?

Certainly nothing like what I had felt dancing with Zac.

As if my thoughts conjured him, Zac and Marnie showed up on our side. I was about to reach over to tap Marnie on the shoulder to say hello, when Zac's head lowered toward hers. Marnie tipped her chin up and slowly, so *excruciatingly* slowly, their lips met in a kiss that I felt in my bones.

After seeing Zac kiss Marnie, I felt so sick that Dex took me home. As he kissed me briefly goodnight, I knew that things wouldn't work with him.

"I know I told you that I broke up with Dex because I just wasn't feeling it anymore, and that is true, but I guess I only realized that after I saw you with Marnie at the Homecoming Dance," I summarize.

"You left early from the dance," he says, staring forward as if trying to recall the events of that night. "You weren't feeling well."

I nod and a humorless laugh escapes my lips. "Yeah. I was pretty nauseous after watching you and Marnie kiss." Even saying the words out loud leaves a bitter after taste in my mouth. "Seeing you with her... I don't know. It sparked this anger within me. Like a tight ball in my gut that I couldn't shake. And then I guess I realized that the spark that I was missing with Dex was so much stronger with you, even before we were anything to each other."

Zac is frozen at my revelation, and I continue while I have him studded in a stupor.

“We were together for what, maybe a total of twenty minutes that night?” A humorless laugh escapes me. “Every time you touched me, when you held me close to dance, it felt so right. *Perfect*. I knew then that Dex and I weren’t right for each other. Even when we had first started dating, I didn’t feel for him what I felt dancing with you.” Sure, there was the occasional flurry of butterflies at the thought of Dex in the early days of our relationship, but they were nothing compared to the hummingbirds that took flight around Zac.

“But seeing you with Marnie made me want to stick it out with Dex. I thought that if I could appear unaffected by your disinterest in me that I could move on, maybe grow something real with him. But after a couple of weeks the ball of anger lodged in my chest only grew. And I realized that I wasn’t meant to be with Dex. Not that I ever imagined myself with you at the time, but I knew that I needed to be with someone else.” I shake my head, tears welling up behind my eyes.

“I hated you with her,” I finally admit. “At the time I told everyone, myself included, that it was just you that I hated because you were using Marnie. But that was a lie and as deep as I tried to bury it, I knew the truth.”

Zac gapes at me, dumbfounded. “Jealous?” he croaks. “You were jealous? Way back then?”

I nod. It’s hard to admit that what I had been feeling all these months—the anger and hollowness—was something as petty as jealousy.

“When you suggested I break up with Marnie...” he leads.

Darn it, we’ve gotten to *that* part of the story.

“Honestly, I don’t know, Zac. I know I told you that it was for her own good that you needed to let her go, but I can’t be sure that my motivations were completely selfless.” The last part comes out in a whisper. I’m embarrassed. Ashamed.

“That’s why you stuck by her so adamantly afterwards, you felt guilty.”

I nod my head again.

“Dyl, whether your advice was given from a place of good intentions or not, it was still good advice. Marnie wasn’t happy, not really, and neither was I. She deserves someone who genuinely cares about her. *Loves* her. And that wasn’t me. It never would be.”

“You know, even if I had told you to break up with her for my own benefit, you have to believe that I had no intention of ever pursuing you. I swear, I really tried to keep away from you—”

“Yeah, except for the obvious flaw,” Zac interrupts with a smirk. “I couldn’t stay away from *you*.” He reaches out and clasps my hands in his. “And for the record? I don’t think I’ll ever be able to.”

Dylan

EDGAR ALLAN POE HAS always intrigued me. His writing, although incredibly dark, holds a charm. I am attracted to it in the same way I occasionally enjoy a Tim Burton movie. They're both creepy, but in a beautiful sort of way.

The Tell-Tale Heart was written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1843 and although I've read it countless times for enjoyment, it was never as impactful to me as right now.

It is a tale about a man who murders another man, and without getting into all the gore of it, the victim's heart ends up buried beneath the narrator's floorboards. A constant thumping sound heard by the narrator, which he believes to be emanating from the dismembered heart, slowly eats away at the man's conscience, driving him mad from guilt.

Marnie is the heart in my floorboards.

Okay, that's way more morbid than it needs to be. But much like the heart in the story was a reminder to the narrator of what he had done, seeing Marnie is a reminder of my own deceit.

While I used to look forward to spending time with my friend, now I dread it. Each time I see her I am reminded of the secret I am keeping. What is worse is that the secret makes

me so extremely happy, and my best friend is the very person I *want* to share it with.

“So, we’re supposed to be finding themes hidden in the story,” East reads from the handout Mrs. Colby had passed out.

Today in English we are divided into groups to dive deeper into *The Tell-Tale Heart*. While dissecting this story is pretty high on the list of things I *don’t* want to do right now, having to be grouped with both Marnie and Zac to do it is even worse.

“Obviously, guilt,” Marnie supplies, eyes scanning the members of our group. “The narrator did something bad and he knows it. He’s guilty.”

Did her eyes meet mine when she said that last bit?

No. That’s ridiculous. I’m being paranoid.

East scribbles the word *Guilt* onto the worksheet. “Anything else?” he asks.

“It seems like he’s trying to justify killing the guy,” Zac adds. “Like, he knows he did something wrong but he’s trying to make himself feel better about it. Could that be something?”

“Sure.” East writes, *Justify your actions*, next on the worksheet.

Sweat forms on the back of my neck. Isn’t that what I’ve been doing the past few weeks? Justifying my decision to keep my relationship with Zac a secret? And why did hearing Zac say that aloud cause even more panic to swell up within me?

“Well,” Marnie chimes in as she flips through the pages of the book, “Clearly his attempts to justify his actions didn’t work. He ends up going crazy anyway.”

“When you’re feeling guilty about something I think it is a natural response to try to rationalize your actions to alleviate some of the guilt,” East contributes. “I would also argue that feeling guilty at all means that even deep down you’re a somewhat decent person.”

“That’s a stretch,” scoffs Marnie. “If you’ve done something to feel guilty about and you do nothing to remedy

it, you're definitely not a *decent* person."

I must be going crazy. There's no way she is staring at me *again*.

Deep breaths, Dylan. She's not talking about you. *No one* is talking about you. They're talking about a fictional murderer in a story written over one hundred and fifty years ago.

But then, why are my hands so clammy?

"Take Dylan, for example." Marnie continues, gesturing to me and directing the attention of both Zac and East my way. My heart stops. "If she were feeling guilty about something it would eat her alive and she would fix whatever it was. Because she's a decent person."

She must know. There is no other explanation. She explicitly called me out in this example.

She's just participating in the discussion. There are only four people in this group, of course she would look at me occasionally.

Zac's eyes ping pong between the two of us. "Okay. I think we have themes covered. What's the next question, East?" I've never been so thankful for a change of topic.

AS SOON AS THE bell rings I fly from the classroom, fully trusting East to turn in our assignment.

"Dylan!" Zac calls from behind me as the halls swell with students. I ignore him.

"Don't do that, Dylan." He grabs my arm, turning me to face him.

"Do what?"

"You're comparing yourself to a murderer," he states blankly.

I pull my arm out of his grasp and glance around the halls to make sure that no one is witnessing our closeness. "No, I'm not," I defend, my voice lacking any conviction.

Zac scans the halls as well before pulling me into a darkened classroom. “We’re not doing anything wrong, okay? So, we are keeping our relationship a secret, but isn’t everyone allowed to keep their personal matters... well, personal? You shouldn’t feel guilty for that.”

“But... Marnie—”

“No,” he cuts me off. “Honestly, Dylan? I know you and Marnie were close for a long time, but can you really say that in the past few months she has been a good friend to you? I don’t want to overstep, but Marnie should be supporting you, supporting *us*. Because that’s what friends do. They put aside their pride and encourage each other.”

His words stun me into silence and my mouth opens and closes like a trout. I’m unable to formulate words and find myself thinking back over the past few months and my interactions with Marnie.

She hasn’t come to my house lately, aside from when our moms were supporting her through her breakup with Zac. We only have one class together this semester and she usually spends the whole period talking to Lexi, one of the ‘popular’ girls who sits behind her. At lunch I find myself talking to Tess more frequently while Marnie and Carla gossip. Heck, I can’t even remember the last time we spoke on the phone or texted when she didn’t need something from me.

Things aren’t good between us. I noticed this a while ago, but having Zac point it out makes it that much more real.

What is worse is that I can’t even pinpoint when things began to change. Initially, I tried to pin the blame on Zac, but that is obviously not the case. There is no *way* the boy I have grown to know over the past few weeks could have had a negative influence over her.

Which begs the question, where is the Marnie I grew up with? We used to stay up all night talking. About our families, shows we were watching, *boys*. But now I struggle to recall our last deep conversation. Or, one that went beyond her detailing who did what at most recent parties. Once she and Zac got together, she wouldn’t even talk to me about their

relationship. Which, looking back now, I'm grateful for. I don't *want* to know how they spent their time together. But in the moment, Marnie telling me that I 'wouldn't understand' her stories because I 'haven't experienced all the... *perks*, of a romantic relationship,' cut deep.

Could Zac be onto something? Is Marnie not as good a friend as I had previously believed?

No. I refuse to accept that. She might be going through a rough patch right now but I'm not ready to throw in the towel on our friendship yet.

"We're both busy. Stressed. I'm sure after graduation we will get back on track." Zac's expression is filled with thinly veiled pity as I speak, clearly believing my words far less than I do. Thankfully, he lets it go with a nod and we turn away from each other to head to our next class.

The rest of the afternoon I think about what Zac had said, the implications reeling in my mind.

When had Marnie made our friendship so one-sided?

What if Marnie and I don't get close again?

Have we ever been that close?

What else have I been oblivious to?

Should I feel guilty about what Zac and I have together?

The more I think about it, the more I realize that no, I shouldn't. We are happy. Zac is less stressed about school and I am less stressed about, well, everything else. Surely something this good shouldn't be causing me anxiety.

Zac

DYLAN RUNS OUT OF school before I get a chance to talk with her again. She was feeling guilty earlier today and while completely unwarranted, I don't want to see her stuck in her head. The last thing our secret relationship needs is for her to feel guilty about it. About *me*.

In the parking lot I see her manually unlock her car and slide inside. Thankfully, it takes a few tries before the old thing starts, giving me time to run up and tap on the passenger side window.

"Open the door," I say. Quickly, she reaches over and disengages the lock, allowing me to heave open the door and plop down beside her.

"Someone could have seen that," she scolds, scanning the lot.

"I'm sure people are more focused on leaving than on who is hitching a ride home with you."

"You're hitching a ride with me?"

"Well, I guess not. My truck's here. And I'm meeting the guys for weightlifting. But I want to talk to you. Want to drive around?"

She shrugs and tells me to buckle up before pulling out onto the road.

“Does this thing have airbags?” Analyzing the dash of the monstrosity that Dylan calls a vehicle, there *definitely* doesn’t appear to be enough room for an airbag.

“Not that I’m aware of.” Dylan peeks over at me, a smug smile playing on her lips. “Just be thankful it has seat belts.”

I pull the chest strap away from my body and examine the worn, frayed fabric. Yeah. That is not reassuring. Taking a moment, I scan the shoddy interior of the vehicle, which appears to have the structural integrity of a soup can.

“How have you never ridden in my car before?” she asks, smiling at my discomfort.

“Uh, easy. The thing never seems to actually *work* when I’m around.” And isn’t that the truth. Seriously, I was starting to think that I had some sort of power over this contraption that made it stall out by my mere presence.

Dylan laughs.

“Are you okay? About earlier today?”

She nods her head. “Yes. I think I’m going to be fine. Sorry about that. It was a shock, you know? To have someone else point out that maybe Marnie is drifting away from me.”

“I’m sure you will work it out,” I offer, not fully believing it.

We drive down Main Street, most of the businesses are still closed until Summer, so the whole stretch gives off ghost town vibes. When we come to a stop at the only stoplight in town I reach for one of her hands, intertwining our fingers.

When the light turns green, we take off again, but everything on the dash shuts off. The needles on the speedometer and fuel gauge falling so that they are pointing directly down and the clock turning blank.

Dylan lets out a groan and then pounds three times on the dash, causing it to roar back to life.

Right. So we'll never be driving *this* car again. I've just made an executive decision.

“HOW DO YOU KNOW when the time is right to tell a girl you love her?”

My question is, understandably, met by silence. Aside from the old country music blaring from the stereo in the corner of the locker room. But even that is shut down when East yanks the power cord from the wall.

Three pairs of wide eyes stare back at me. I *thought* I had asked my question quietly enough that only Ellis, the only of my friends in a relationship that reached the point of ‘*I love you,*’ could hear. But apparently when Zac Morgan starts asking about love, it's noticeable.

“You and Tatum,” I clarify. “How did you know you loved her?”

Ellis grins in an utterly loony way, his eyes sparkling. He's not embarrassed of his girlfriend at all. He doesn't even mind that we take every opportunity to rib him about how whipped he is. The guy rarely even hangs out with us on the weekends anymore because he's always out of town visiting Tatum.

“Insta love, dude.”

“That's not a real thing,” West counters, snapping out of the initial stunned stupor.

We just wrapped up our weightlifting for the day and my brain, high on the endorphins, decided that *now* would be a great time to ask for relationship advice from my only friend *in* a relationship.

“What do you mean?” Ellis scoffs at West.

“I mean, it's not real. It's fake. Made up. Sure, there is *insta lust*. An instant attraction. But not love. That's something romance novels came up with.”

Ellis shrugs, undeterred, and speaks to me again. “It was *insta love*. Don't listen to this cynic.”

“And you just... told her you loved her?”

“Pretty much.”

I believe him. Ellis is a very ‘go with the flow’ type of person. If he loved Tatum, I am positive he just spat it out.

“And... she knew you meant it? She believed you?”

East closes his locker slowly, analyzing me like he’s never seen my face before. “What’s going on with you, Zac? Why all the love questions?”

I busy myself by shoving dirty clothes into my duffel bag. I really should clean my gym locker out more frequently. “Nothing. Just making conversation.”

“Dude,” West says, demanding my attention. “Tell me this *isn’t* about Marnie. You’re not hung up on her, are you? I thought you guys were just messing around.” He’s horrified at the prospect of me being in love with Marnie. My friends were never her biggest fans and they warned me—almost daily—that starting anything with her was a bad idea.

“I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that this has nothing to do with Marnie.” Satisfied with my assurance, they go back to their insta love versus insta lust debate.

I think I’m off the hook, when Ellis grabs my arm as we head out into the parking lot. “Zac.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s not about Marnie, but it *is* about *someone*.”

He waits for me to confirm his suspicions.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Good for you, man.”

His confidence in me loosens something in my chest. He didn’t laugh or scoff at the idea of me being in love. He didn’t tell me that it wasn’t possible because he doesn’t think I’m wired that way or even second guess me. Knowing that I have his support makes me feel lighter. The only issue is that I am still no closer to knowing how to confess my feelings to Dylan.

Dylan

BEING WITH ZAC FEELS like walking on a cloud. Or maybe *living* in one. I am light, relaxed, and so happy that I'm floating through life. The days have flown by in a swirl of stolen kisses, hidden laughter, and gentle touching.

While we haven't told anyone about our relationship, these last few weeks have been possibly the best in my life. But as fun as it is to have our own secret, I also want to do normal couple things. I want him to hold my hand as we walk through the school, go on dates where we don't have to hide, and go to dances.

Specifically, prom, which is in less than two months.

We haven't touched on how we are going to handle that. Are we going to go with different dates to keep our secret? Go on our own and maybe try to sneak a dance together? Skip it all together? I push the thoughts out of my head. We will cross that bridge in a few weeks. Although, I do have a gorgeous dress saved in my online shopping cart... it would be a shame to miss out.

Inevitably, thoughts of prom only lead to thoughts about our future. You know, how I will be dozens of miles away from Silverwood once classes start at Heathwood. It was one thing for Dex to be an hour away, but to have Zac at that distance? The thought gives me a stomachache.

A good distractor, though, are our plans for this evening.

Since today is Friday, Alex and Mrs. Morgan are out of town for the night for Alex's track meet. Justin is leaving early tomorrow morning with his dad to go to orientation for college, so he will be staying at his own house for once, meaning Zac and I have the Morgan residence to ourselves for the night.

Well, not the *whole* night. I won't be staying over. Our relationship isn't in *that* place yet. But it is reassuring to know that there aren't any time constraints and that we can relax and enjoy each other's company without looking over our shoulders.

As we are leaving our last class of the day, a hand grazes my lower back, lingering for a few seconds longer than is necessary for a courtesy 'passing by you' signal. I turn to find Zac peering down at me, an innocent smile playing on his face. We maintain eye contact for what could only have been three seconds, but then Zac's eyes widen, realizing that maybe even a couple of seconds is too long.

We both swing our heads around in search of prying eyes and just as I think we are in the clear, Zac's attention homes in on his best friend. Graham is standing directly behind us, eyes twinkling and brows raised. The three of us stand there for a moment, frozen. Because maybe if we don't move then he won't see us?

At last, Graham lets out a sound somewhere between a scoff and a chuckle, before muttering a mocking, "Kids," under his breath and turning away. I don't miss the knowing grin on his face or the way that Zac appears completely comfortable with the fact that we have been outed to his friend.

Zac gives me a ride to his house after school, leaving my car in the parking lot. I told my parents that I was going to be hanging out with Tess this evening. Thankfully, Tess didn't ask too many questions when I asked her to cover for me. In her mind she still owed me for tagging along on her date. I decide

it is probably best not to mention that I had enjoyed that date as much as she had.

When we arrive, Zac runs to the garage to grab a couple bottles of water and I wait for him in the kitchen. The realization that this is the first time we have been in his house *alone* suddenly crashes into me. Zac may have snuck into my house a few times, but aside from the first instance, we had never been *truly* alone.

This time, though, it's only us. But I'm not panicking. Nope. I'm so calm I can completely ignore my fluttering heartbeat as I take my time *calmly* exploring the items on display around the room.

Stella Morgan's love for her family is evidenced by these walls, which are adorned with various newspaper clippings that mention her children, school pictures dating back to preschool, and even a couple of pictures of the whole family together before Zac's father died. Alex had only been one at the time, and the thought breaks my heart.

The cozy atmosphere full of nostalgia is a painful reminder of what my kitchen used to look like, pre-Lorna. But after Mom adopted the cold woman's more minimalist style, the common areas of my home are increasingly like an empty shell.

One picture in particular catches my eye. It is hanging on the wall near the dining room table and features Zac's whole family on a boat—Zac and Alex wearing life jackets that overtake their small frames. Zac is holding a popsicle and squinting up at the camera, streaks of sunscreen covering his face.

He looks happy. *So happy*. His face radiates the pure joy that only comes from the innocence of childhood.

“That was the last picture of us.” Zac's voice startles me. I peel my gaze away from the photo and turn to him, now standing directly behind me. We haven't touched on the topic of his Dad much. I don't even know how he feels about it all. Sad? Cheated? Angry?

“I don’t think I remember him, Dylan,” he says, eyes on the photo. “Sometimes I think I might remember something about him, or something that we did together. But I’m almost positive they’re all fake memories. Something my mind created from pictures I saw, or stories people told me. My mom still misses him.”

What do I say to that? I’ve been lucky enough so far in life to not have lost someone close to me, let alone a parent. And to not be able to remember them?

He finally looks back at me and at the risk of sounding like a psychiatrist, I ask how that makes him feel.

“Not sure.” He shrugs it off. “Honestly, it sucks that I didn’t get to have a dad. Well, I *did* have a dad, but I didn’t really get to know him. My mom gave us everything we could have ever wanted. If anything, it hurts more that she never got to grow old with him. That she never met anyone else who made her as happy as he did. I know I look a lot like him. So does Alex. I think it’s more guilt that I experience than anything. Like, people expect me to be mourning him, or something, and I don’t even have enough memories to create a person *to* mourn. I’m his son, the one who is supposed to carry on his legacy. There’s this pressure to be like him.”

His words trigger something, and it occurs to me how strange it is that while my mother and Lorna had used his dad’s behavior as an example of a negative trait, something terrible that Zac is surely an extension of, Zac sees his father in an opposite light.

Sure, Zac knows his dad wasn’t perfect—that he also had a reputation in his younger years—but he also knows that those actions are only a small portion of his life. There were so many other great things that his dad had been. He was an athlete—to this day, a lot of his records still stand at Silverwood High—a good student, an amazing husband, and an even better father. At least for the tragically short time he was afforded the opportunity.

Now I have to make sure that Zac realizes that he is just as worthy of admiration as his father. So what if Zac isn’t the best

student? He is still an incredible person.

My hand snakes up, thumb finding his cheek and rubbing gently while my fingers skim over the hair on the back of his neck.

“Zac, you’re your own person. If your dad was here today do you truly think he would want you to be like him? Would you want your son to be just like you?”

At this he laughs out loud.

“Heck no. Although, I was able to convince a perfect girl like you to give me the time of day, so I can’t be a total screwup.”

It’s a cheesy line, but the deep, slow voice that he uses to deliver it has me flushing.

Zac’s hands find my hips as his gaze heats, his smile turning into a smirk that makes my heart stutter. And just like that, tension seeps into the minimal space between us.

My arms find their way around his neck as he pulls my body flush with his, lowering his head so our foreheads rest on each other, our noses touching.

“You’re a good person, Zac,” I whisper into his mouth. He isn’t a screwup, and he isn’t even a jerk like I had originally had him pegged. He’s great. Someone who cares deeply about his family and his friends, who wants so desperately to do the right thing and become someone worthy of admiration.

“I’m really glad you think so,” he whispers back before slowly lowering his lips to mine.

By now we’ve kissed nearly a dozen times, but this one is different. Slower, yet more urgent. His lips move against mine with purpose as he walks me backward. After a few steps he mutters a frustrated, “Screw this,” before pulling back and picking me up, honeymoon style.

I giggle in surprise as he carries me down the hallway. Suddenly I become self-conscious. Zac is strong, but not, like, *bulging muscles* strong. Am I too heavy? I tighten my arms

around his neck so he isn't supporting the entirety of my weight solely on his arms.

At the end of the hall, Zac pushes open a door with his foot that obviously leads to his bedroom. He puts me down to stand on the floor at the foot of the bed.

I take a few seconds to absorb his space. It's not exactly clean, but it's not messy either. There are clothes thrown about, but most of the dirty ones are accumulated in a hamper. His desk is cluttered, like it has been a long while since it's seen any actual studying. An outdated calendar hangs on the wall above it, stuck in fall. There are various knickknacks—a video game controller, yo-yo, a few dusty framed pictures, and his Homecoming king crown and sash—resting atop the old wood of the desk.

It's a time capsule.

The room is comfortable. Soft carpeting, old wood paneling on the walls, a worn navy comforter, and large windows that let the soft afternoon light in. My attention drifts back to Zac and I find a vulnerability there, as if he is awaiting my opinion of his space.

"I like your room," I say. "It's cozy."

And that's all it takes for his confidence to return fully.

Firm hands find my waist again as he takes a step, pressing me close. "I don't let people into my room." He trails kisses down my neck, pausing to linger on my collar bone.

Not knowing what to say to this, and not even sure if I can remember how to formulate words with what his mouth is doing to me, I finally manage to mutter out a small, "Okay," drawing a chuckle from him.

Zac's lips skim up along my neck, taking their time kissing along my jaw, before they fuse with mine, more frantically now. He walks me backward until the back of my knees meet his bed. I'm slowly lowered onto my back and his body covers mine as he kisses me long and slow.

I am utterly breathless as we shift so we are fully on the bed. Zac moves leisurely, his body, hands, mouth, *everything*.

The sensation is overwhelming. *He's* overwhelming. But then he smiles into our kiss, instantly putting me at ease and making me grin in return.

My hand slides down his chest. I pause when my fingertips graze the exposed sliver of skin where the hem of his shirt had ridden up. I take a leap and run my fingers along the firm muscles of his stomach, savoring the way they feel under my fingertips. Zac's body shudders at my touch and we break our kiss just long enough for him to pull his cotton T-shirt off in one swift move.

Oooh. I don't mind that view one bit.

But before I can fully appreciate it, he's back on me, covering me completely with his warm body, cutting short my ogling.

No worries, I'm sure I'll get another opportunity for *that*.

Heat swirls in my lower belly as one of his hands that had been bracing his body above me roams down my side, brushing against my rib cage and settling at my waistband.

Before I fully register what is happening, his wrist twists as he effortlessly pops the button on my jeans.

Uh-oh.

Now is probably a *great* time to break this kiss.

"Zac."

"Yeah." He pulls back instantly, concern wrinkling his brow. "You okay?"

I clear my throat, open my mouth to speak, then close it again. I swallow, then open it once more. Ugh, I *so* don't want to kill the mood. Because this, *all* of this, is *so good*. But the mature part of me knows that I have to.

"Dex and I... we... I—I've never done... *anything*."

Hah. Way to go, Dyl. That's a concise statement.

We've never actually had this conversation before, but only because I haven't felt that we needed to. There has always been an invisible line that we had a silent agreement

not to cross. But today feels different. This *moment* feels different. More intense, like even the oxygen we are breathing is charged.

Okay. And we are in Zac's bedroom for the first time, *alone*, and there are obvious inherent implications there.

He freezes and stares at me, face devoid of emotion. *Is he mad?* He shouldn't be mad. Maybe he only likes experienced girls? That would make sense... given his track record. And then my stomach sinks and curdles. What if that was his plan for tonight? What if that's why he brought me here and I've just blindsided him? I mean, I'm not ready for this step and I plan on firmly holding to that. But if he wants to end things between us because of it? I'd be crushed.

It's as I'm mentally preparing myself for the worst, willing myself not to cry, when Zac lets out a shuddering breath. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Dyl." He huffs out a soft curse. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Why didn't I tell him sooner?

"I don't know. We've never talked about *that*, and it felt weird to throw it into a regular conversation. I was... embarrassed. I know you've got more experience than I do and I didn't want you to treat me any differently than any other girls or think there was something wrong with me." I shrug, trying to play off my nerves as indifference.

"Hey. There is absolutely *nothing* wrong with you. And of course, I am going to treat you differently," he says, pulling back fully from me. My heart drops. This is exactly what I didn't want to happen—for him to see me as boring or treat me with kid gloves.

My dejection must show on my face because he is quick to lower himself back over me.

"Not because you're inexperienced," he adds reassuringly. "That is... honestly, that's great, like the rest of you. It probably makes me sound possessive or whatever. Maybe it's

my jealousy, but.... yeah, that's cool. Not that it would matter if you *were* experienced. That'd be cool, too. I um," he lets out another soft curse, "I'm not saying any of this right. Dylan... I think I'm in—"

"Okay," I whisper, holding back tears and cutting short his endearing rambling.

To my dismay, he takes my tears to be from sadness. Maybe even fear, because he quickly backpedals, pulls away further from me and—*gasp*—*tugs his shirt back on*.

"Wait. We're moving too fast, aren't we? We should just go watch a movie. Do you want to watch a movie?"

"No!" It comes out as a shout. "No," I add more calmly, not to sound too desperate.

Zac's answering grin is so full of relief that it makes my heart melt a little.

"I—" my thoughts are cut off when he pounces back on top of me, lips hungrily crashing to mine for a brief kiss before pulling back.

"Don't worry," he whispers into my neck. "There's no rush, we'll go as slow as you want. You tell me if anything is ever too much, got it? Please don't feel embarrassed around me. About anything. Just be open with me."

I nod. The relief and emotions I'm experiencing shouldn't be this powerful, but they're enough to steal my words.

"Talk to me. Please," he begs. "I don't want to overstep. Ever. I need to know you're comfortable."

"I am, Zac. I promise, I'll talk to you."

With a smile, his mouth lowers to mine again, pulling me into a deep kiss. It turns out whatever fears I had about killing the mood were unwarranted. If anything, my heart has only grown during this conversation and it seems that Zac's has, too.

My breath quickens, my pulse is beating so erratically I fear Zac will be able to hear it. A spark of satisfaction fills me when I cup his jaw and my fingers brush against the pulse

point on his neck and I discover that his heart is beating as quickly as mine. Suddenly, he rolls us over so I am straddling him.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says, separating our mouths but keeping his hands so they cradle my face. “You know how much I care about you, right? You mean so much to me, Dylan. *Everything.*”

I nod, swallowing over the tightness in my throat. Maybe this lump is a good thing. It means I can’t speak. Can’t blurt out something that will have Zac running for the hills.

I love you.

I’m positive he can see those words flashing in my eyes, but before I can voice any of my thoughts, we’re kissing again. His hands on my hips are slowly inching up the thin fabric of my shirt. His thumbs make those yummy circles on my hip bones as his long fingers continue their exploration upward. I can’t suppress the violent shiver that shoots up my body.

“Is this okay?” he whispers through our kiss.

I smile into his mouth. I love it when he checks in on me, makes sure I am completely comfortable. My heart beats faster. And it’s not because of nerves this time, but because I am so entirely *gone* for this boy.

And maybe it’s those three life changing words floating around in my mind, or the intense emotions swirling through me, or maybe only a surge of rebellion, but I pull away from Zac again. Leaning back, I grab the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head.

His eyes lock on my face, his entire body stills. That makes me chuckle and cuts through the tension in the air. He is trying so hard to be considerate that he’s turned into some type of stiff, awkward robot.

“Dylan...” he whispers hoarsely. And his expression is too much for me. I smile. And then start to giggle again. It’s only a moment later that Zac’s face twists into a smile of his own and he snorts out a huff of laughter. That’s when I really lose it and

let out a snort-laugh so obnoxious that there's no hope of either of us keeping our composure.

Zac pulls me down to him and our lips meet in a kiss that is more broken smiles and laughter than it is actual kissing.

“Dylan?”

“Hmm?”

We should probably stop kissing if he's trying to have a conversation. But neither of us can pull our lips apart long enough for him to get more than a few words out.

“If you keep laughing—” *kiss* “at me when I'm kissing you—” *kiss* “you're going to give me a complex.”

I only laugh harder, realizing that yes, I do have a habit of laughing at some point during each of his advances. In my defense, so does he.

“I'm sorry,” I say, still grinning, though now with a touch of seriousness. “I'm just... I'm really happy, Zac.”

He smooths the hair away from my face. “I'm happy too, Dylan. So incredibly happy.”

Zac

I'VE NEVER LAUGHED SO much in my life. It's a bizarre statement considering the laughter is occurring while my girlfriend is in bed with me. *Topless*. Or, *shirtless*. Whatever.

Did I expect things to progress as quickly as they have? Not at all.

Even though I knew that we were going to be alone, and there was always a *possibility* of things going a bit further than they had in the past, I hadn't realized how quickly I would lose control. And yeah, that's on me. *What was I thinking, going for her jeans?* I *always* ask for permission. The last thing I want is for a girl to feel uncomfortable or pressured with me. Which is why the moment Dylan pulled away felt like a sucker punch. She panicked and it was *my fault*. That I slipped up even for a moment with her had an unpleasant combination of fear and disgust settling over me. I'm lucky that she didn't smack me in the face and storm out of the house.

It did get us talking, though, which I am happy about.

Dylan opened up to me. This whole afternoon has been an exercise in vulnerability and trust. *She trusts me*.

It is the most intimate I've ever been with another person. I've done things that are certainly *classified* as far more

intimate with other girls, but it lacked the authenticity and realness that I have with Dylan.

I was only partially kidding earlier; nonstop laughter *does* kill the mood of a deep make out sesh. Fortunately, it's *extremely* welcome in the world of cuddling. So that's what we do. I give Dylan one of my old football hoodies—because I've been dying to see how she would look in my clothes—and I order us a pizza.

Before we leave my room, I watch as Dylan tosses a few stray socks into my hamper and switches my calendar, previously stuck in November, for one with the correct year and month.

She can't help herself.

We're snuggled on the couch together when my phone chimes.

Graham

Hey, you want to hang tonight?

Hah, not at all, dude.

Zac

Can't. Busy.

Graham

With your cousin?

Graham

;))

Zac

Shut it.

Zac

Also, keep it on the DL.

Graham

Don't worry, man. Dylan's cool. She's good for you.

Darn right she is. I grin as I reread the message. It's only as I replay his words in my mind that I realize he never said *I* was good for *Dylan*.

Dylan

MONDAY MARKS THE START of mid-term exam week and it kicks off with the usual nervous excitement that I always experience about exams. I am a good test taker, so much so that a part of me looks forward to them.

Not that I will ever admit that out loud.

Yet with every exam I complete the euphoria and lightness that typically follows is nowhere to be found. Actually, with each passing day a growing sense of dread weighs down on me. Which is the opposite of how I should be feeling on the cusp of Spring Break. A break that I will spend an abundance of time with my boyfriend since the rest of my family is going out of town for my brother's robotics competition. By the time Friday rolls around, the last day of classes before break, I am filled with a strange sense of foreboding. It's been gnawing at me since I left Zac's house last week. Something is just... *off*.

And I seem to be the only one sensing it. All my classmates are giddy, sitting on the edges of their seats for that final bell to ring to excuse us from school for the next week.

Outwardly, everything is normal. Zac and I keep up our limited contact in school, and Marnie is finally, genuinely, getting over Zac. At least to the point where she is no longer actively hostile toward him. I guess that almost punch helped.

Yet there is no shaking the queasy sensation that has been swirling in my gut. I can feel the fine walls of my own bubble of happiness slowly expanding, thinning out and preparing to pop.

It isn't until the end of the day that my hunches come to fruition and my world implodes.

There is less than a half hour left of my final class when the low buzz of a phone vibration sounds from the back row, followed by a sharp gasp, sending my world spiraling. Call it premonition, or whatever, but I know it has something to do with me.

Then there are whispers, a few other generic phone chimes, my heart rate picking up at each of them.

For once, I regret keeping my phone in my locker. By the time the final bell rings I am itching to get out of the classroom, only to burst into the hall where the *dings* and whispers increase in volume.

I keep my gaze on my shoes the entire way to my locker, feeling the eyes of my friends and classmates on me the whole way.

Yeah, whatever message is being sent through the school is definitely about me and, judging by the wide-eyed expressions on the faces I catch glimpses of, it's nothing good. Which doesn't make sense. My life is, by all accounts, *dull*. There's nothing scandalous *to* spread around.

Get to your locker and get out of here.

The plan keeps running through my mind, serving to only help calm me the tiniest bit.

By the time I finally reach my locker my palms are so sweaty that it is an effort to twist the combination in to open it. I feel like throwing up before I even glance at my phone. And once I do, it only intensifies.

An anonymous number has sent out a text. It must have been only to a few people at first, but what had started as a trickle quickly turned into a flood. Already the message has been forwarded to me by a handful of people, most people

accompanying the original message with some creative emojis of their own. My stomach drops as if I am trapped on a free-falling elevator.

There are no words in the text blast, only two pictures. Both of Zac and me. Both taken last Friday when we were together in his room. Both of us topless.

Cold sweat erupts on my skin and the blood rushes to my face so quickly I become lightheaded. My breaths come out in a series of short, quick gasps as I struggle not to pass out.

Am I hyperventilating? Maybe having a panic attack.

The first photo shows Zac laying on his bed, me on top of him. I am staring down at him, the soft curls that had fallen out of my ponytail obscure my face slightly. They're not enough to hide my identity, though. It is a completely vulnerable and embarrassing position. Nothing explicit is visible, largely thanks to my fancy little bra, but the implication is clear.

The second is Zac laying over me. Our foreheads are pressed together and we're laughing. The beads of sweat on both of our faces make it clear that there is *something* going on.

But what makes the photos detrimental is the way they are cropped. Whoever sent them had made sure that they were taken from the waist up, and without the evidence of our pants—which had remained firmly in place, thank you very much—it appears that we are doing far more than we had.

At least, I *thought* the cropping was the worst part. That is until I notice the background and see the calendar.

November.

Scrawled in bold, orange letters. Unmistakable.

Not only does it look like Zac and I are... *together*. But it looks like it happened in *November*:

When Zac and Marnie were still together.

When Dex and I were still together.

Silently, I pray that everyone will overlook that small detail. But I know I won't be so lucky. Even if my peers realize that not all teenagers update their calendars, they will still rather feed into gossip than spread the truth.

I slam my locker shut and try to run to the exit door to my car. But my legs won't move. I'm dizzy and need to brace myself against my locker to keep my footing.

My bottom lip quivers so violently that I have to bite down on it to keep up any sense of composure. Just as my knees are about to give out, a pair of arms swoop around my back and press me into a hard torso against a protective hug.

“You're okay, Dylan, breathe. I've got you.”

Graham?

I pull back from him to make sure I'm not imagining things. Yep. It's Graham.

While I am thankful to have someone to support me—*literally*—I can't help but wonder where Zac is. He wouldn't have sent out the pictures. *Right?* I have been sensing that he is getting sick of sneaking around. He's never said as much, but it's obvious in his demeanor. But outing us like this?

I feel immediately guilty for even letting that thought cross my mind. It's ridiculous. He isn't a malicious person. There is no way this is his doing. Something else must be holding him up from coming to me.

Graham keeps his tanned arm wrapped firmly around my waist, guiding me to the door, when Marnie appears at the end of the hallway.

She approaches us with a fire in her eyes I have never seen. Before I can register what is happening, she slaps my phone out of my hand with enough force to send it skittering across the floor.

A chorus of, “Ooohs,” and gasps erupts from onlookers.

“*Marnie,*” Graham scolds, pulling me closer to his chest. She ignores him, staring at me with angry tears in her eyes.

“*November?*” she roars, “Don’t you dare talk to me, you cheating, lying, evil little... what, have you been hooking up with him all this time? Laughing behind my back?”

Too stunned to say anything and too busy trying to keep my own tears from falling, I take her assault.

“You know. Everyone’s always joked that you were a prude. But I thought that if anything *did* happen you would at least tell me! Was our whole friendship a joke? This whole time...” She freezes. Then her face morphs into pure anger. “You were the reason we broke up.” Her statement is accusatory and sharp.

Unfortunately, I *am* the reason they broke up. Not in the nefarious way that she is thinking, but I still played a part.

“Marnie, it’s not what you’re thinking... I—”

“No, Dylan. No. Tell me honestly, did you convince Zac to dump me?”

“I... I didn’t want you to get hurt.” It’s all I can squeak out.

She shakes her head. With a final look of utter disgust that hurts more than any slap ever could, she turns and walks away.

“What are you looking at?” Graham roars to the crowd, pulling me into a strong embrace once again. “Get the *hell* out of here!”

And they do. I always knew I liked Graham.

I SIT IN THE passenger seat of Graham’s SUV, him on the driver’s side, talking on the phone with Zac. Apparently, he had been on the other side of the building when the photos were leaked with his phone off, in a meeting with his academic advisor, and he missed the initial outrage.

Graham hangs up and glances over at me.

“You okay, Park? *Crap*. You’re shaking.”

He reaches into the back seat, grabs a blanket, and throws it over my shoulders.

I hold out my hand and, what do you know, I *am* shaking.

“Eat this.” He thrusts some type of protein bar from his gym bag into my hand. “You’re pale and Morgan will kill me if he finds you passed out in my car.”

I try to laugh, but all that comes out is a sob. Looks like the dam is open, the tears that I’ve been trying to hold back from falling. I can’t help it anymore. I wrap the blanket tighter around myself and ugly cry, as Graham watches in horror. His reaction would have been comical if the situation wasn’t so screwed up.

At that moment my door opens and I am yanked out into the comforting scent of sandalwood. I cling to Zac’s torso. My legs wrapped around his waist and my arms around his neck like a koala, continuing to hyperventilate into the crook of his neck as he rubs his hand soothingly on my back.

Zac drives me home. I don’t remember the ride at all. I keep myself curled in Graham’s blanket even as Zac carries me up to my bedroom.

“Babe, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened.” We are sitting on my bed, him behind me with my back to his chest. Zac’s arms are wrapped around me tightly, as if he thinks I will crumble if he lets me go.

And he isn’t wrong.

I tell him about the reaction people gave me in the hallway. Especially Marnie’s. I can’t blame her for her anger, though. She thought we got together in November. She will cool off once she has time to process, right?

Zac and I sit together in silence until our trance is broken by a soft knocking on the front door. We glance at each other before Zac pushes up from the bed and heads down the hall to check who it was.

“It’s Tess.” The confusion on his face mirrors my own. “Should I let her in?”

Should he? On the one hand, she is one of my closest friends. Or I hope she still is. Even if she hates me, it would be good to get any more slaps out of the way now rather than

waiting for an inevitable confrontation. On the other hand, I want to stay in my own protective bubble that is Zac's arms and not get any interruptions from the outside world.

In the end I decide it is best to get it over with and let her in.

I expect her to be seething mad. To call me a cheater, a liar, and a whole slew of other names.

What I don't expect is for her to charge into my room and give me a soul soothing hug.

"Are you okay?" she asks, pulling away to gauge my emotions.

I consider telling her that I am fine, as I always do. But one look at me would make it clear that nothing could be farther from the truth.

"No," I croak.

She hugs me again and the two of us sit there for a moment while Zac waits patiently in the doorway.

"You're not mad at me?" I whisper once we pull apart.

"Dyl. You and Zac have been sneaking looks at each other for weeks. I'm not surprised there was something going on."

"Tess, I swear, we didn't cheat. That picture was taken a week ago, not in November."

"I believe you. You wouldn't do that. And let's be honest. Zac may be an immature playboy—"

"Thanks for that," Zac interjects from his post at the door.

"—but even he isn't a cheater."

"Marnie hates me."

"She'll get over it."

"How do you know?"

"She's reacting on impulse. She hasn't had time to think everything through—to process. But she will, and it'll all work out."

The three of us sit in silence as Tess pulls out her phone. Zac and I shut ours off earlier. Him tired of getting questions about ‘*how I was in bed*’ and crude compliments congratulating him for “scoring” with me, and me sick of the spiteful messages from girls and propositions from guys.

“Wait a minute,” Zac accuses Tess, walking up behind her to peek over her shoulder, “Are you looking at the pictures *right now*?”

“What?” I stutter, peering over at Tess’s screen.

“Guys. *Chill*. Just trying to assess the damage.” She stares at them for a few moments longer, failing to hide the smirk that is filling her face.

“What is it?” I demand as her smile continues to grow.

“I have to admit, you guys look *darn* good. At least your hater didn’t photoshop rashes or something on you. I always heard that real life sex tapes or whatever look awkward. But this is almost... cute.”

Zac grabs the phone to see for himself. He studies the screen for a minute before his own stupid grin erupts on his face.

“Babe, seriously, we’re looking good.” He drags out the ‘good’ and wiggles his brows at me.

“This is serious, Zac. What are we going to do?”

“I’m thinking we blow these suckers up. Make them poster sized. I don’t know about you, but I’ve got an empty wall that is begging for some erotic art.” I can’t tell if Zac is serious, or if he is trying to make me feel better. Probably both.

Either way, Tess and I burst out laughing, and I can’t stop. I am sure it’s the emotions and adrenaline from the day, but I laugh so hard that the tears streaming down my cheeks are no longer from sadness.

Zac

LEAVING DYLAN PUTS A bad taste in my mouth. Knowing that Tess is staying the night with her makes it marginally better, but I would be lying if I said that it hurt that she didn't want *me* to stay. I know she wants to take things slow, which of course I am totally cool with, but with these pictures leaking a part of me was hoping that she would depend on me for comfort.

The moment I get into my truck the urge to do something is overwhelming. I want to yell, hit something, kick something. Preferably the bonehead who took those pictures.

On my drive home my mind cycles through viable suspects. Sure, there are plenty of people who might have had a grudge against me—and yes, I ruled out that anyone was doing this to hurt Dylan—but someone who hated me enough to not only take pictures of Dylan and me, but to actually distribute them?

When it comes to idiotic actions, the first person who comes to mind is Justin. Would I put some stunt like this past him? I'm honestly not sure. It seems like something he might do, especially if he had a few drinks, or other *substances*, in him. But he was ruled out immediately.

I had been in a meeting with Mrs. Squib—I know, unfortunate name—the guidance counselor, because she had

wanted to discuss my plans for after graduation. Namely, college and how I could get my grades and resume up to par. Spoiler alert, I can't. At least not without some serious schmoozing and sucking up to recruiters. But that didn't stop her from holding me hostage for the last period of the day to go over different scenarios of what I could do for my future. Community College—here I come. If I'm lucky.

Clayton Community College, the community college nearest Heathwood, has standards that are apparently above me. I thought that community colleges let anyone in. And, for the most part, they do. It's only that not-so-small matter of money, and the fact that I don't have any, holding me back. Suddenly, investing my savings in my new truck feels beyond stupid.

Justin had been in a meeting with the principal at the same time, also discussing his abysmal grades, oddly enough, and we were walking together back to our lockers when both of our phones pinged with the message.

The way his skin paled as he took in the images made it clear that it wasn't him. The horror I felt in my bones was mirrored on his face. He could have scheduled the blast, but he was genuinely shocked by what he was seeing.

He didn't send it.

So, who does that leave? My friends are the only ones who know the layout of my house well enough to know which window to peep through if they wanted to find my bedroom. I would trust any of my friends with my life, especially Graham. East and West were both out of town at the same track meet my brother was, and Ellis was visiting his own girlfriend, as he is nearly every weekend. Besides, none of them would do this.

Although I had been telling Dylan the truth when I told her that no other girl had been in my room, that doesn't mean that one of my past flings isn't crazy enough to survey the place and figure out which one is mine. But would any of them be that vindictive? To not only violate my own privacy but another innocent person's?

I don't think so. None of my theories sit right and I dismiss them as soon as they enter my mind. Only to have them immediately rejoin my carousel of possibilities.

Who does that leave me with as a viable suspect?

No one.

I am going to need help figuring this out.

“ZAC! IS THAT YOU?” My mom calls out as I close the front door and toss my keys on the table we keep near the entrance.

“Yeah, Mom.” Even trying to play it cool, my voice sounds tense. And exhausted.

When I round the corner into the kitchen, I see my mother standing in front of the stove, pouring herself a cup of tea from her steaming kettle. “How did your meeting with Kimberly go?”

Right. Mom knows Mrs. Squib. *Kimberly.*

She turns to face me, a smile gracing her youthful face. That is, until she takes a good look at me. At which point her smile drops and a furrow forms between her brows. “Zac, what’s wrong, did something happen?”

Guess I’m not as good at camouflaging my emotions as I thought. It is at this moment that my less than observant brother saunters through the front door, calling out loudly, “Dude! Zac! What’s with those pictures?”

My palm hits my face and I slowly drag it down. Clearly, he didn’t realize that mom was home already. She’s been working evenings and nights so often it is hard to remember that she gets a few days off a week.

“Pictures?” Her gaze snaps from my face to Alex’s. “What do you mean?”

His mouth forms a surprised ‘O’ and he shoots me an ‘*I’m sorry I outed your girlfriend’s crap situation to mom*’ expression. “I’ll... I’ll let Zac talk to you about it.” And he sprints out of the room like the coward he is.

“Zac?” she coaxes gently.

She takes a seat at the island and I throw myself into the bar stool next to her. We’ve always gotten along and been open with each other, but my brain can’t form the words to fully describe what happened. So, I simply pull out my phone and slide it over to her, the message with the pictures still on the screen.

“Oh, my word.” One hand flies to cover her mouth and the other to clutch her imaginary pearls. Tears form in her eyes.

Okay, that’s an extreme reaction.

“Zac... you didn’t... you didn’t hurt her?” She is speaking to me, but her unblinking eyes haven’t broken away from the phone.

“What? No! I didn’t do anything. Aside from making out with my girlfriend...” What does she think I did? “We were just kissing. I guess we lost our shirts. But someone must have taken those pictures of us, and they sent them to the whole school.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Huh?”

“Dylan. You called her your girlfriend.” A sweet smile tugs on her lips.

This is what she wants to focus on right now?

“Yeah. She is.”

Mom’s eyes meet mine and she grabs my hand. “Good for you, Zac.” The earnestness and pride in her voice has my eyes stinging.

You will not cry!

“How’s Dylan?” Mom asks.

A cruel laugh escapes my throat. “Not great.”

“You’re not with her?”

“Just came from her house. Her family is away this weekend, a friend is staying over with her.”

From the look on my mom's face, I can tell she wants to press further. Maybe ask why Dylan didn't want *me* to stay over. I'm wondering the same thing. But instead, she places her hand over mine and gives it a small squeeze. She offers to call Dylan's mom to talk through it with her—and that is saying something, since Bette Park hasn't spoken to my mom in seven years—but I persuade her not to. They're out of town, so my guess is that they don't even know what is going on. Hopefully Dylan will be able to talk to her parents soon. I might not know them personally, but I do know that Dylan has a great relationship with her family.

Justin finds his way to the house shortly after our talk, and he looks even worse than I do. Although, I'm sure his state of disarray has more to do with his copious amount of alcohol consumption than it does my Dylan situation.

As we sit, Mom continues to mutter about 'calling the school' and 'getting to the bottom of this nonsense.' I can't help but smile at her dedication.

Dylan

MY FAMILY IS GOING to be gone all week. Originally, Marnie's family was scheduled to check in on me while mine is away, but with the recent turn of events I don't expect any social calls from the Jacobs anytime soon. As Saturday turns into Sunday, I find that my assumption is correct.

Tess stayed with me Friday and Saturday night, running home only to grab a few changes of clothes. It was good to get some one-on-one time with her. Now that I think about it, I don't think I ever had. Even when we would have sleepovers it was always a group thing.

This is easily the least fun break from school ever. Sure, Zac and Tess stop by on occasion, but it's difficult to really enjoy their company with everything weighing on me.

"Are you ready for school on Monday?" Tess asks on Friday between mouthfuls of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. She coaxed me out of my house last night and convinced me to stay over at her place, where we are presently enjoying a breakfast of cold, sugary cereal.

Am I? Usually, I would say yes. I enjoy going to school. But the knowledge that the entire student body has seen me half naked makes the prospect far less appealing.

“I’m not sure,” I answer honestly. “It’s hard to know how things will be now that everyone knows about Zac and me.”

She nods her head in understanding. “At least we had a week off. Hopefully everything will calm down and people will forget about the pictures.”

While I appreciate her attempt to console me, I’m not optimistic. Even exciting trips to Cancun and the Bahamas won’t be able to wipe my classmates’ memories clean.

I stay at Tess’ until that Friday afternoon, deciding that I should probably make sure my own house is in decent condition for when my family returns tomorrow.

When I arrive home, the first thing I do is check the mailbox. With the rest of my family having been away for the week and my less than diligent mail retrieval, it has piled up substantially.

Throwing my duffle bag on the floor, I begin sifting through the pile of unread mail.

Most of it is bills and junk mail. I skim over a few more letters and my heart stops when I notice one from Heathwood University marked with a deep red *URGENT* stamp. I have already received my acceptance letter, as well as all my scholarship documentation and welcome packet, meaning that whatever is in this envelope can’t be good news.

Holding my breath, I grab the letter opener from the counter and rip open the seal, frantically scanning the letter’s contents. I am in a daze as my eyes rake over it, picking up on key points.

Dear Ms. Park,

We regret to inform you that the scholarship previously awarded to you is now under review due to recent events that have been brought to our attention. Upon these revelations, our board has been forced to reevaluate your application before we can, in good conscience, award you a scholarship.

There will be a hearing on the 12th of April when we will make our final decision. You are invited to be present and to plead your case. Until this final hearing, please consider your

scholarship revoked. Please note that your acceptance to Heathwood University is still effective. If there are any questions in the meantime, please contact Lorna Jacobs at...

I don't need to read anymore.

The board must have found out about the leaked photos of Zac and me. No doubt through interference by Marnie's mom.

She knows that there is no way I can afford my dream school without my scholarship.

Sure, I can understand her being upset on behalf of her daughter. But would she go so far as to have my scholarship revoked? My acceptance might still be intact, but that might as well have been swiped away, too. There's no way I can afford the tuition on my own.

And now any hopes I have of my family not finding out about Zac and me, or the photos, are shot. I will have to let them know that I no longer have a scholarship, and they will inevitably be told why.

I nearly choke on the irony. As cautious and rule following as I am, I'm now *that* girl. The one teachers and parents will be warning their kids about. A cautionary tale.

As I set the paper down on the table, hands shaking as I fumble with it, a familiar tingle starts in my nose.

Great. I'm going to cry. Again.

And I do. I make it up to my room, throw myself onto the middle of my bed, and sob.

Over the next day I receive countless texts. Mainly from Zac and Tess. Thankfully most of my classmates have gotten over the initial thrill of harassing me after the pictures were released and no longer actively seek me out.

I don't respond to any of their messages, though. In fact, the only reason I keep my phone on is in case my parents try to contact me.

I feel nauseous constantly, and consequently haven't eaten more than a couple of granola bars. On Saturday evening I finally trudge to the kitchen and make myself a frozen pizza.

It is just as the oven beeps, indicating that it is up to temperature, that my family bursts through the doors in a flurry of winter coats and snowflakes.

Huh, guess it started snowing?

I am pulled into the arms of my cheerful parents in strong hugs as they ask me questions about my break. All of which are answered with unenthusiastic, one-word responses from me. They don't notice my lack of energy until my dad glances at the pile of mail on the table, finding my discarded letter.

My heart plummets as I watch him read it, Mom still obliviously chatting in the background as the crease in Dad's forehead becomes more and more pronounced.

"What is this?" he asks me from across the room, cutting off Mom's ramblings about the food at the resort where the robotics convention had been held.

"Oh, what are you on about, Steve?" She waves at him dismissively as she snatches the letter from his outstretched hand and reads it herself.

"*Scholarship revoked? Recent events?*' What does this mean? What happened? Obviously, there is some mistake. Here, I'll give Lorna a call right now and clear this up."

"Shoot," Gray mutters, pale as a ghost.

He knows.

He must have heard about the pictures. I'm not sure why I'm surprised. We go to the same high school and I am certain there isn't a single person who hasn't seen or heard about the scandal. I can only hope that he hasn't actually seen them. Because what is more embarrassing than your little brother seeing you in such a compromising position?

"Mom... it's not a mistake," I whisper, gripping the counter in an effort not to fall over. I am terrified to admit to my parents what happened.

My dad, seeing my now tear stricken face, leads me to a kitchen chair to sit down.

“What happened?” My mother’s voice is still soft as she repeats her earlier question, but with an edge of apprehension.

“Zac and I are together.” My voice is still barely audible as I start to retell the events, maintaining eye contact with the saltshaker in the center of the table, unable to look at my parents.

“I don’t understand,” Mom says before I can even get into my tale. “You and Zac are *together*?”

She looks confused. Like her brain is malfunctioning, struggling to get a grasp on even the simplest of sentences.

“Yeah,” I say.

“You didn’t tell us.” The hurt in her voice is almost more painful than anything that’s happened in the last week.

I don’t know how to answer that. Not without crying, at least.

At my silence, she continues to puzzle through our situation, growing visibly frustrated and overwhelmed.

“Okay. You’re together. That’s no reason for you to lose your scholarship,” Mom huffs, cutting me off and gathering herself together. She appears irritated at the news, which is no surprise seeing as how she has spent the last few weeks tearing apart Zac’s character.

And that’s not even the worst part.

“Pictures of us were sent to everyone at school.”

“Again, that’s no reason for you to lose your scholarship. So, what if there is photographic evidence that you two are dating or... *whatever*—”

“Mom.” It’s my turn to cut her off now, voice firm. “Pictures of us *together*.”

The sound of glass shattering pierces the silence of the room as my dad’s grip slips from the tumbler he was holding. No one makes a move to pick up the shards of glass.

Both of my parents stare at me, their faces as white as the fresh snow falling outside, as my brother slips out of the room.

No doubt eavesdropping from the living room.

“I don’t understand... how?” My mother takes the seat across from me at the table.

“We don’t know.” My voice is back to its quiet timbre. “Someone took pictures of us a couple of weeks ago and sent them to everyone—”

“No, Dylan. I mean how could *you* do this? You know what Marnie went through with that boy. He broke her heart, *destroyed* her confidence. We’ve been warning you girls about him for weeks. *Years*. And you... what? You thought it might be fun to have some fling? To go behind our backs? How could you not talk to me about *any* of this?” I can’t even stand to face Mom right now. I’ve never seen her so distraught. “What are we supposed to do now? I thought you were smarter than this, Dylan. I thought we could *trust* you! And now you don’t have a scholarship. Was it worth it?” I feel each stab in my soul as she fires away.

“Mom... no... I...” My voice is a croak.

“Go, Dylan. To your room.”

“Mom—”

“NOW!”

I leap out of my chair and dash up the stairs, slamming my bedroom door behind me.

Although I had expected the conversation with my family to be awkward, even embarrassing, I didn’t expect it to unfold like *this*. Especially my *mom’s* reaction. *How can she be mad at me?* We have always been so close. We tell each other everything. Even as I had navigated through my awkward preteen and early teen years there was never any time that I was uncomfortable talking to her, and there was nothing I wouldn’t tell her. We were open books.

Until you decided to hide your relationship with the first boy you’ve ever loved from her.

Yeah, that maybe wasn’t my best choice. Had I come to her earlier maybe she would have been understanding. It might

have taken time for her to adjust to the idea, but we could have made it work.

But now? She shut me out. And I'm not sure whether she is more upset that I'm with Zac, that I hid it from her, or because the relationship could upset Lorna. And that there is even a possibility that her anger might be because of Lorna's reaction rather than my own well-being *hurts*.

At a time when I am extremely vulnerable and broken, she can't take a second to see things from my perspective. A few more tears slip down my face, thinking about the confrontation. *Weird. I thought I would be cried out by now.*

At least there are no more secrets between my family and me. They may have only gotten the version of the story that makes me sound terrible, but that means that it can only go up from here.

I hear the mumble of voices from downstairs, followed by the front door slamming. A few moments later there is a light knocking on my door.

I don't acknowledge it.

"Dyl, can I talk to you for a second?"

Gray

"Come in, it's open."

I pull myself up into a sitting position by my headboard, my knees tucked under my chin and a throw pillow clutched tightly to my chest.

Gray enters cautiously and takes a seat at the foot of my bed.

"You saw the pictures," I say, my voice muffled by the pillow I'm speaking into.

"Yeah..." He trails off before continuing. "Did Zac do it? Send the pictures out, I mean."

"What? No... no!" I'm surprised that he would even ask that.

His sigh of relief is audible. "Thank God."

“Why?” I can’t hide the upturn of my lips at his reaction.

“Because I’m going to have to beat the crap out of whoever sent those pictures and honestly? I don’t think I can take Zac in a fight.”

I actually let out a giggle at his candor.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Gray.”

“What happened Dylan? I thought you hated Zac?”

I shake my head, still sporting a small smile thinking of the boy in question.

“We’ve been dating for a few weeks. Didn’t want to tell anyone and risk the wrath of Marnie and her mom... and our mom, apparently, if it came out. Not that it ended up making a difference. They hate me now *and* I probably won’t be able to get into Heathwood.”

“We’ll figure it out, Dyl. And mom will calm down. Dad is pissed at how she reacted. He’s in the basement trying to cool off.”

“And mom?”

“She went to talk to Lorna.”

“Gotcha.”

Gray stands and walks to the door.

“For what it’s worth, I *would* still try to take on Zac for touching my sister—”

“But you’re too afraid that he would wipe the floor with you?” I smirk, completing his thought for him.

“Nah.” He shakes his head, smiling. “I mean, he would totally destroy me. But the reason I’m not going to go after him is because I saw Zac in the pictures.”

“That makes no sense, little bro,” I chide.

He rolls his eyes, sighing, like it is physically painful for him to complete his thought. “I saw the way Zac *looked* at you in the pictures. He wasn’t some guy just out for a quick lay. He looked at you like you were the most important thing in the

world. In complete awe...” His voice trails off and he knocks on the door frame twice. “Anyway, that’s enough sappy crap. I gotta go chop wood or eat some beef jerky or something to keep my man-card.” With that he turns and leaves.

I’m still grinning when I finally buck up the courage to check my phone. Immediately I go to the message chain from Zac, which has around two dozen unread messages over the past day.

Zac

You make it home ok?

Zac

Seriously, you good?

Zac

Give me something, Dylan. Please.

Zac

I miss you.

Zac

Are you avoiding me?

Zac

Please, Dylan. I’m so sorry for what happened. We’ll get through this. I won’t let anyone mess with you. You know that.

Those came in on Friday night and into this morning. But there are quite a few that are more recent.

Zac

If you're avoiding me, you're not going to be able to at school on Monday.

Zac

Crap. I shouldn't have said that. You better not skip school on Monday to avoid me!

Zac

Dylan...

The last message came fifteen minutes ago.

Zac

I'm coming over.

Zac

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'm thinking, driving to Dylan's house at ten at night on Saturday. But as I pull up and see the house glowing with warm lights, I know that there is at least one person awake inside. As much as I want to climb up to Dylan's window and only talk with her, it's probably best to face her family head on. The cat is out of the bag, anyway.

I park my truck out in front of the house and make my way up the icy walk to their front porch. Snow in March—stupid.

Taking a few deep breaths to compose myself, I raise my fist to knock. But the door is ripped open before I get the chance, bringing me face-to-face with Dylan's father.

"Mr. Park," I squeak out. And yes, I mean squeak. Even I have the common sense to be fearful when confronting the father of the girl whose reputation I've recently defiled.

"Ah, Zachary. It's been a few years. Didn't think we'd be seeing each other under these... *circumstances*." He gives nothing away from his face. But the fact that he hasn't invited me into his home isn't promising.

"Is Dylan home? I was hoping I could talk to her. She hasn't been answering any of my texts—"

"Then it would appear that she isn't interested in talking, wouldn't it?" He raises an eyebrow. "Besides, I think you've

done quite enough, Mr. Morgan.”

“Sir... I’m really sorry this happened, but I need to talk to Dylan. I thought she was doing okay, but she’s been silent the past couple of days. I just need to see her.”

He holds his arm out to me, a letter clasped in his hand.

Tentatively, I reach out and take it.

As my eyes skim over the wording on the expensive cream cardstock my anger builds. Ironically, making it more difficult for me to read, but I get the gist of it.

“That’s bull!” I must speak louder than I mean to, because Dylan’s little brother pokes his head into the background, trying to see what the commotion is about.

“It is. But you know what else is?” Mr. Morgan looks smug. And angry. And... tired. “Some punk sleeping with my daughter.”

Before I can register what is happening, the heavy oak door slams in my face.

Scraping up my pride, I raise my fist to knock again. This time I get a few raps in before the door is whipped open.

“Hey there, buddy.” Dylan’s brother stands in front of me, leaning against the door frame as if he doesn’t have a care in the world.

“Can I come in?”

“No can do.”

“Seriously? I can’t even talk to your sister?”

“Correct.”

This kid is way too cocky for his fourteen years.

“Come on. Is she really that mad at me?” My tone displays my desperation. It doesn’t make sense for her to be angry with me, but maybe she is back inside her head.

He thinks about this for a moment before responding.

“Nah, I don’t think she’s mad at you. She’s angry at the situation, but not you.”

I wait for him to step aside to let me into the house, since clearly Dylan isn't the one who doesn't want me here.

“So... can I come in?”

“I don't like seeing pictures of my sister half naked with some tool,” he deadpans.

Seriously. The nerve of this kid.

“Look. I didn't take the pictures, send them to anyone, *or* intentionally your sister. You really think I want every moron with eyes seeing her like that?”

He eyes me up for a minute. What is going through his head, I have no idea.

“You have a reputation, dude.” Is his only response.

I run my hand through my hair in exasperation, letting out a frustrated sigh as I pace the porch.

He lets me stew for a while before speaking again, “So you didn't...?”

“No,” I rasp out.

“But everyone says—”

“I would never hurt your sister,” I bark, tired of the implication that I'm some selfish loser with no consideration for the feelings of others. “Ugh,” I groan, throwing my arms up in surrender. “*Dude*. Come on,” I'm begging now and even I have to admit I sound pathetic.

“Let him in, Gray. If Dylan doesn't want to see him, she can kick him out.” Mr. Park's voice comes from behind Gray. He heard everything and decided to take pity on me.

See, *pathetic*.

Dylan's brother points two fingers at his eyes, and then at me, in an *I'm watching you* gesture.

I roll my eyes and push my way through the door. Before I can ask where Dylan is, I see her slim form standing at the top of the stairs, smirking at me. As I head up the stairs, she turns

around and opens a door in the upstairs hallway, silently leading me into her room.

Dylan closes the door behind us with a soft *click*, not breaking eye contact with me. I pull her to me in a deep hug before leaving a trail of kisses along her jaw until my lips meet hers. The smallest whimper escapes from her as I press against her and deepen our kiss. Unfortunately, as abruptly as it started, we are breaking apart.

“Zac,” she says, her palms pressed against my chest. “You know, someone is probably going to come up and check on us since the door is shut.”

Reluctantly, I pull myself away from her and plop down on her bed. My eyes are drawn to the cork board posted to the wall. Although I had noticed it during my past visits to her room, I hadn’t paid much mind to its presence, or the pictures posted there. This time, it only makes me angry.

I hate that there are no pictures of us.

I hate it even more that the only picture of us together is currently being spread around like some sleazy celebrity sex tape.

Dylan sits on the bed next to me. One leg tucked beneath the other.

“Your dad showed me the letter about your scholarship.”

“Yeah, my mom is talking to Marnie’s mom now. Not sure if she’s going to make it better or worse.” Her voice is muffled.

“You okay?” My hand reaches out and rests on top of hers.

“Trying to be.”

A few moments later Dylan’s father calls us down for dinner. Although I had already eaten dinner about five hours ago like a normal person, I’m not going to pass up an opportunity to hang with my girl.

The four of us, Dylan, her father, Gray, and I scarf down pizza and talk about her family’s trip. I stay as Gray pulls out a deck of Uno cards, and after a few games it is already

approaching midnight. Not wanting to overstay my welcome, I excuse myself.

Not that I care *at all* about how late it is, but it makes a better impression if I at least appear to.

It doesn't escape my notice that Dylan's mother is still not back from Marnie's. Which I can't take as a good sign.

Dylan walks me to the door, silently closing it behind her as the two of us stand on the front porch. She threw a bulky gray cardigan over her T-shirt and has only her socks on her feet. They're already growing wet from the ice and slush melting beneath her.

I cup her face and gaze into her deep blue eyes.

I love that she is still making eye contact with me.

"Are we good?" I ask, not hiding the fear from my voice.

She reaches up and places her hands over my own before nodding and whispering a faint, "we're good."

And that's enough for me.

I SHOULD FEEL BETTER after talking with Dylan. Finally. But any relief is overshadowed by my guilt for screwing up everything in the first place. I didn't do anything wrong. I know that. But that doesn't change the fact that everything Dylan is going through is partially my fault. I should have shut the blinds in my room, been more attentive and noticed someone with a death wish outside my window with a camera, *left her alone in the first place.*

I mean, the photos themselves are not incriminating. Dylan and I were no more revealed in those photos than if we were in bathing suits. What really kills us are our poses and positions in the shot.

Geez, it looks bad.

And if there was anyone willing to give us the benefit of the doubt, my presence in the photos alone is enough to shut it

down. Because if I'm seen cozying up to a girl the immediate assumption is that we are doing far more than cuddling.

Then there is the fact that while her life is crumbling, mine hasn't changed. If anything, our relationship has only upped my street cred, making me *more* popular for "corrupting the good girl." But I'm not going to concentrate on that now.

What I *am* going to focus on is hunting down the moron who thought it would be fun to sneak a peep show and ruin my girl.

"Jamie," I bark into my phone on my drive home, "you find out anything?"

Jamie is a friend of Graham's, and a junior this year. He is a total nerd, the absolute smartest guy in his grade, and a shoo-in for Valedictorian. He's also good looking, which feels unfair. In this instance, though, I'm grateful for his brains, because they mean that he has an in with some of the *other* smartest people in school. If anyone can trace the photos, it's him.

"I don't know, Zac. So far, the phone has been a dead end. I've got the whole IT club working on trying to trace it, but it looks like the pictures were sent from a burner. Could've been purchased anywhere, and whoever did it probably tossed it by now. But whoever did send them knows what they're doing. There was definitely some encryption used to disguise the origination of the photos. As for the picture. It was just taken from a phone, probably an iPhone." Jamie rattles off this information, most of it we've already guessed.

"Can't you like, I don't know, trace the pixels or something? Follow them to an IP address?"

He is quiet for a beat. "Do you have any idea what you're even talking about?"

No. No I do not. But it sounds techy, so I gave it a shot.

"Anyway," he continues, "you do realize that we're only high schoolers, right? Not tech moguls or expert hackers."

I only grunt in acknowledgement.

“Whoever took the picture must have known that Dylan and I were together. And they must have some grudge against one or both of us. How they knew we would be at my house when we were, I don’t know.”

“Unless they followed you,” Jamie offers.

A groan of frustration escapes my lips. “I gotta go, Jamie. Thanks, really.”

Without waiting for his response, I disconnect the call and toss my phone onto my passenger seat as a foreign sense of helplessness crawls over me.

Dylan

SEEING ZAC YESTERDAY, GETTING to spend a ‘normal’ night with him, my dad, and my brother, makes me feel much better about, well, everything.

I still have Zac.

My family doesn’t hate me or treat me like a pariah.

A *majority* of my family, anyway. I didn’t hear my mom’s car pull up until sometime after midnight, so I haven’t gotten to speak with her after her visit with Lorna.

Unfortunately, both my dad and Gray are going to be gone today for their monthly ‘father-son’ brunch, which leaves me to deal with the wrath of my mother alone.

By the time I crawl out of bed and drag myself downstairs, it is nearly eleven. The events of last night exhausted me and I hadn’t been able to fall asleep until the early morning.

My mother is sitting in her typical spot at the kitchen table, impeccably dressed in a pair of dress pants and a flowing peach top. Her blonde hair pulled back into some type of chignon, with a cup of coffee in her hand. The overall aura of ‘put togetherness’ a stark contrast to my current mess.

“Good morning,” I manage to croak out, keeping my head down.

“Good morning, Dylan.” Despite everything, she’s cheery today. “I spoke with Lorna last night.”

She pauses her monologue, waiting for my response.

“Right,” I mutter, pouring myself a cup of coffee.

“Marnie wasn’t there, so unfortunately I didn’t have the opportunity to apologize to her.”

I don’t respond and make my way to the fridge to find some milk for my cereal.

“Anyway.” She brushes off my lack of reaction. “After consoling Lorna and assuring her that we are all incredibly sorry, I think we came to a solution that will work for everyone.”

My ears perk up. Yet there is a prickling on the back of my neck telling me that whatever this so-called ‘solution’ is, it isn’t going to be something I will like. I turn to her. “A solution about my scholarship?”

“Yes, dear. Since Lorna is on the committee and has known you for so long, she has offered to be a character witness and vouch for you.” She shrugs, sipping her coffee, still seated.

“How did you get her to agree to that?” I am leaning against the counter, my cereal abandoned along with my coffee. It’s nearly impossible that Lorna would go along with this, especially considering I am ninety percent sure she is the one who recommended the revocation of my scholarship in the first place.

“Oh, easy.” My mother stands, dumping the remnants of her mug into the kitchen sink. “Lorna agreed that since you won’t be seeing Zac anymore that you are clearly exhibiting good judgment, and she would be happy to attest to that. She has offered to play the whole situation off to show you as more of a victim, too.”

What?

No, seriously. What in the actual he—*heck* is she saying?

Huh, Zac was right. I had it right the first time. What in the actual *hell* is she saying?

I'm not seeing Zac anymore?

And does Lorna, and my *mother*, actually see *me* as the villain in this story?

“Won’t be seeing Zac anymore?” I parrot her words back at her, not hiding the anger that is spreading throughout my body.

“Of course! It’s a perfectly good arrangement, since you obviously wouldn’t want to spend any more time with him anyway after this whole... incident.” She waves her hands, gesturing to me. As if *I am* the incident.

“Why would anything that happened make me not want to see Zac?” I try to tame my rising voice.

Tone it down Dylan, it’s all over if you lose your cool.

“Because.” Her tone is sharp. “You weren’t supposed to be *seeing* him in the first place.” She lets out a long exhale and softens. “Really, Dylan, I don’t think it’s good for you to be spending time with Zac. Or any of the Morgans.” She only mumbles the last jab, but it unsettles me.

She doesn’t think it is good for me to be spending time with *any* of the Morgans? I’ve *never* heard that from her. When we were kids, she *pushed* us to spend time with them.

Until she didn’t.

That... is something to unpack another time.

Deep breath in.

Deep breath out.

It’s not worth it to correct her. To tell her that Zac isn’t as bad as she thinks and that he was never Marnie’s.

“So, that’s a stipulation? Lorna won’t be a character witness for me unless I stop seeing Zac?”

“Yes.” She appears surprised that I need clarification. Then her voice and face soften. “Dylan, it’s for the best. For you,

your future...”

So that’s it. For Lorna to tell the committee that I’m not some sex-crazed teenager who likes sharing risqué pictures, to tell the *truth*, I have to end things with Zac.

I genuinely can’t comprehend what is happening. This isn’t my mom saying these words. Yes, she does always try to stay on Lorna’s good side. But would she do it at the expense of her daughter? Before last night, I would never have thought so. But after all that she said this morning, it is looking that way.

And that realization is perhaps even more crushing than anything that has happened in the last week.

I run toward the front door, slip on my shoes and jacket, and go outside, not caring that it is barely above freezing and that I am still in my thin sleep shorts.

Hopping in my car, which thankfully starts without issue, I speed off toward the one place where I hopefully won’t feel like collapsing.

Zac

MY COFFEE IS EXTRA rich this morning. Justin made it, and he has a particular dislike for actually measuring the water *or* coffee grounds when he makes a pot.

Since mom is working still, it is just Alex—who is still sleeping soundly—Justin, and me.

I'm perched at the kitchen counter in only my flannel pajama pants, and Justin is across from me wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Although he is dressed in street clothes, I have no illusions that he is ready to seize the day. Where I spent last night having wholesome family fun with the Parks, it appears that Justin went on some type of self-destructive bender and decided to sleep in the same clothes he had gone out in.

"This coffee is disgusting," he mutters sleepily, dumping the contents of his mug down the drain. I don't point out that he made it, for fear that the job will be allocated to me in the future. Most of the pots of coffee he makes are notably bad, but occasionally he gets the ratio right and we are in for a treat. Not being sure which version I will get adds a bit of excitement to my mornings. Kind of like a tamer version of Russian Roulette.

Shaking my head, I down the rest of my cup. Turns out there is a good quarter inch of grounds at the bottom of my mug. I swallow them down, unable to hide the disgust on my

face, while Justin laughs. His cackling is interrupted by a knock on the door.

We lock gazes across the counter before he pushes away with a roll of his eyes to answer it.

“Whoa, you okay, babe?” His disoriented voice carries down the hallway.

Babe? I swear, if Justin invited some girl over to disrupt our lazy Sunday—

“Is Zac here?”

“Dylan?” I am pushing off my chair the moment her sweet voice reaches me.

When I reach the doorway, I see her. It looks like she’s just woken up. Hair piled on top of her head, no makeup, glasses on, and... is she wearing *shorts*?

“Get in here, you’ve got to be freezing!” My eyes meet Justin’s, silently scolding him for not inviting her in immediately.

“I don’t want to intrude, or anything...” Her voice trails off.

“Never,” I’m quick to assure her. “What’s going on?”

We settle on the couch in the living room while Justin tidies up the mess in the kitchen from breakfast.

“I just... I had to get out of the house. My mom and I had a... fight this morning.”

“Really?” Everything seemed fine when I left last night. Then again, her mom wasn’t there. “About the picture?”

“That...” she trails off, picking at the fringe of the throw blanket hanging over the back of the couch. “And that we are together at all.” She’s not meeting my eyes. “She’s siding with Marnie and Lorna. She thinks it’s my fault.”

“What? Why would she think that?” My voice is a growl. Still, I give myself top marks for self-restraint, as I remain seated next to Dylan.

“I don’t know. Like by being involved with you I invited it upon myself?”

She looks defeated. I hate it. I want to scream at her mother for making her feel like this. I thought they were close. Closer than her and Marnie, even. And to have them both turn against her?

Maybe Dylan needs to reevaluate the guidelines from which she chooses her friends.

Gently, I grab her hands in mine, recognizing instantly that something is off. Her hands aren’t squeezing mine as they should be. A warring expression flitters over her face, like she is having some type of internal conflict.

My heart sinks.

Whatever is causing her this distress is about me. I get the overwhelming sense that my world is about to end.

“Dylan...” My hand comes up to tilt her face toward mine. A single tear runs down her cheek. “Dylan, are we okay?” I know I asked her this same question last night, but right now I’m scared. Terrified that maybe we *aren’t*.

She swallows, her eyes mapping every inch of my face. I stop breathing, waiting for her to find me lacking. But then gives me a nod and smile. “Yeah. We’re good.” Her voice is a whisper, and I almost don’t believe what she is saying. Because although her words *say* we’re good, the expression on her face tells another story.

“Morning all!” Comes my brother’s chipper tone as he struts past us into the kitchen, clearly not reading the room.

“It’s past noon, Al.” Justin chides, slapping him on the back of the head.

“Hey, Dylan.” Alex shoots a nod her way, not at all surprised by her presence. “Coffee?” he offers, holding the carafe in her direction, blissfully unaware of the disaster that was awaiting him in that pot.

“No!” Justin and I shout simultaneously, both trying to save Dylan from the monstrosity that is awaiting her amongst

the dregs of the remaining coffee. Dylan smiles between us curiously.

“Anyway,” she continues, clearing her throat, “I just wanted to get out of the house for a while. You were the first place I thought of.” She tilts her head up to face me. For the first time since Dylan arrived this morning a genuine smile graces my face.

We spend the day with Alex—Justin skittering off to wherever he spends the time that he isn’t here—sitting on the couch and playing video games. Dylan isn’t into Alex’s typical genre of shooting, scantily clad women, and general destruction, so my brother switches over to our old Nintendo for a game of Mario Kart. And honestly? I haven’t had so much fun playing video games since I was twelve.

Dylan is competitive. I’m incredibly aware of this. But Mario Kart Dylan is a whole other level. So much so that after a couple of rounds I tap out and let her and Alex duke it out.

She changed into one of my hoodies and a pair of my sweatpants that she needed to roll up approximately seventeen times. Her small frame is swimming in the material and in my own humble opinion, she has never looked better.

I sit back on the reclining chair in our living room watching the two of them jumping around and arguing, my heart could almost burst. Yes, that is undoubtedly the sappiest thing I have ever thought. But I love that they’re getting along.

And to think I had originally thought that she came over this morning to break up with me.

Dylan

“IT’S ALWAYS THE QUIET ones.”

“Looking good, Park!”

“I’d be into her.”

“She must be good in bed if she’s keeping Zac’s attention.”

“You think they’d let me join them?”

The whispers are not only annoying, but they are also not subtle. Everyone is still talking about Zac and I and our little “sex tape,” as most people have taken to calling it. Although we were neither having sex, nor was it a tape. But who needs facts?

If there is any silver lining to those embarrassing pictures being released, it is that our relationship is out in the open at last and we no longer have to hide at school.

I hate running late. But since I’m dreading this entire day already, it seems only fitting that I would spend an extra thirty minutes dissecting my outfit before leaving for school. Which is ridiculous. I’m not a different person, so why should I dress differently?

Unfortunately, my tardiness means that I don’t have a chance to swing by my locker to get a boost of confidence from my boyfriend. Thankfully, I have Tess by my side in first

period. She is more than happy to act as a human shield from the daggers that Marnie is throwing my way.

The bell rings after an hour of me mindlessly scribbling circles on my notebook. It's almost the end of the year anyway. I'm sure I didn't miss anything that important. I rush back to my locker, hoping that Zac might have arrived by now and be waiting for me.

When I approach the senior hallway, a foreign stillness falls around me. Aside from small murmurs, there is silence. Everyone's attention is, you guessed it, on *my* locker. Oh, and Zac is there alright. His simple navy shirt is covered in splotches of soap and water. Sweat drips down his face and his hair beautifully mussed.

Sensing my approach, he turns to me, his expression a mixture of horror and pity. It is at this point that I realize what he is doing.

Scrubbing my locker.

I pull my eyes from his, and chance a look at my locker where there is a less-than-nice word painted in bright blue paint. From Zac's state of dishevelment, he has been scrubbing for a while, probably the last hour, and there isn't much to show for his efforts.

The scene is so unexpected that I almost miss Justin standing beside him, looking just as unkempt and out of sorts as my boyfriend. Absent is his usual elastic, and his hair flies freely around his face.

Collecting myself, I take a deep breath and walk over to Zac, planting a quick peck on his cheek and opening my locker, pretending nothing is out of the ordinary.

And my plan would have worked, too. If not for my leaky eyes.

"Dylan..." Zac grabs both of my arms in his hands and leans his forehead against mine. "You don't have to put up with this," he grumbles.

"It's fine Zac. It'll be fine..." I'm not sure if I'm trying to convince him or me.

He brushes his thumbs under my eyes and wipes my tears before turning to address the crowd that has formed.

“Hey!” Zac calls, tucking me firmly under his arm, letting my face nuzzle and hide in his shirt. I still peek, though. I can’t help it. “I’m going to say this one time, so get it through your heads. Some creep took pictures of us and decided to distribute them. Yes, Dylan and I are together. No, neither of us have ever cheated on anyone. And *this*,” he gestures to my locker, “is uncalled for. If you can’t find anything better to—” Zac pauses mid thought and lets out a deep sigh. “Put your hand down, Roberts. This isn’t a press conference. We’re not going to be taking questions.”

Slowly, Jonah Roberts, basketball team captain, lowers his arm.

I bite back a snort of laughter when one of Johan’s friends smacks the back of his head. Zac, however, has lost some of his steam. Or his train of thought. With a parting scoff, he begins to guide me away, but then falters.

“And for future reference? My locker is over there,” Zac tells the crowd at large, gesturing angrily across the hall to his own locker. “Next time you decide to bully and slut-shame someone, maybe don’t be sexist about it and be sure to include the guy, too.”

Absolute silence.

Until the door to the main office swings open and Mr. Hampton, our principal, stomps out. Seeing Zac and I, he lets out a long sigh before gesturing to us to follow him inside.

WHAT’S MORE EMBARRASSING THAN having your locker publicly defiled by jerks? Sitting at a conference table while your principal and an obligatory female teacher assure you that the school district is ‘*doing everything in their power*’ to address your ‘*situation*.’ All while adamantly avoiding making direct eye contact.

With a thoroughly uncomfortable shoulder pat that I am sure is meant to be comforting, the adults excuse Zac and I to

our next class.

To my surprise, the rest of the day goes smoothly. There are still the occasional glances and pitying looks, but I haven't picked up on anything hostile. Aside from whoever defaced my locker—who likely had intended to be malicious—everyone else has almost been *too* friendly.

Take, for example, Aspen, who caused me to nearly jump out of my skin when her soft hand grabs onto my arm as I'm getting ready to leave for the day.

Truthfully, for half a second, I had hoped that it was Marnie reaching out to me. Apologizing, perhaps? Extending an olive branch? The disappointment at realizing it isn't my estranged best friend is outweighed by my shock, though.

“Oh, my goodness! I didn't mean to scare you, Dylan.”

“It's fine. Um, what's up?” I can count on one hand the number of conversations I've had with Aspen over the last year, all of which were only done in passing.

“I just wanted to say that it sucks about those pictures. Like, it was a really disgusting thing for someone to do. I'm sorry you have to deal with it. Gossip really is the worst.”

Despite Aspen's popularity, she is also commonly the center of the gossip mill at Silverwood High. Although I'm sure my scandal is giving her a nice reprieve, she does appear to genuinely feel for me.

“Thanks, Aspen. That really means a lot.”

“And about your locker... try not to worry about it. It was a stupid stunt for them to pull. They saw an opportunity to act like idiots, and they took it. Nobody thinks that about you. Seriously, this will all blow over. No one thinks less of you.”

I nod and swallow over the lump in my throat.

Someone calls her name. “If you need anything, or just want to talk, let me know.” With a final squeeze of my arm, she turns and heads toward where her friends are huddled at the end of the hall.

Maybe Aspen's right. Maybe a majority of my peers don't see me any differently than they had a couple of weeks ago.

But the silent minority sure is loud.

Zac follows me home after school and he joins me in the kitchen to work on some homework. He really is taking his schoolwork more seriously lately and his grades are steadily improving. It is too bad that there are only a couple of months left of senior year.

We had just made some popcorn to snack on when the front door slams open against the wall with a *bang*. My eyes meet with Zac's, mirroring each other's confusion. No one else is supposed to be home yet. Mom and Dad both work for a couple more hours and Gray has robotics club after school.

"Whatever, Mom!" Gray shouts as he runs up the stairs.

Gray's home? And, apparently, Mom.

Mom enters the kitchen with a huff, still dressed professionally. She fills up her travel mug with cold coffee leftover from this morning before she turns around and leaves the house. The door slams again at her exit.

Well, that was super weird.

"Should we ask Gray what's going on?" Zac muses.

My brain lags. "Oh... uh... yeah. Yeah, we probably should." Do I think Gray will give me any answers? No. We aren't the super 'lovey-dovey-share-all-your-problems' type of siblings. But it's worth a try.

We walk up the stairs and approach Gray's slightly open door. Glancing in, I see him laying on his back on his bed.

"What?" he groans, having heard our approach.

"What was that all about?" I ask.

"Nothing," Gray mumbles, throwing his arm over his face.

Zac is quiet, staring at Gray, before he finally speaks. "Gray. What the hell?"

He sounds... angry?

“Zac, it’s nothing.” Gray emphasizes. Zac storms into Gray’s room and pulls his arm from his face. I gasp.

“What happened?” I whisper.

Gray is sporting a black eye and a cut on his lip that has yet to scab over, along with a few bruises on his arm, which must have been what alerted Zac to his current state.

With a roll of his eyes and an exasperated sigh, Gray finally decides to explain. “I got in a fight. Got suspended for the rest of the week. Mom had to come pick me up from school to talk to the principal. She wasn’t too thrilled, as I am sure you gathered by her attitude when she dropped me off.”

“Why would you get in a fight?” My angry-sister-voice is out now. He’s never been in a fight before. In fact, for a teenage boy, he is an extremely level-headed person.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, Gray, it does!” I implore.

“Some idiots were running their mouths, okay?” Gray roars, finally sitting up from his prone position on the bed. “They were saying crap about you, and I couldn’t take it anymore... and they *might* have been the ones who messed with your locker.”

“Tell me exactly what happened.” Zac’s tone is cold, hollow.

Gray, clearly irritated with our probing and insistence, lets out an annoyed groan before caving. “It was in gym last hour. A few juniors were saying things about you in the locker room—don’t ask me to repeat it, because I think I’ll puke if I talk about my sister that way—and I just got tired of it. I snapped.”

“Who was it?” Zac’s icy tone cuts into the story.

“Carter and Murphy.”

Miles Carter and Ralph Murphy. Both are huge and are the last people you would want to challenge to whatever type of duel Gray got himself into.

“What happened to them?” My gentle voice is a stark contrast to Zac’s volatile tone.

“Don’t know.” Gray shrugs. “They got sent to the nurse and then were being held in an empty room in the office until their parents could pick them up.”

“Two guys?” Zac continues his line of questioning. I don’t miss the uptick of his lips. He’s impressed.

“Well, Jamie was there too.” Gray leans against the headboard.

“Wait... Jamie was talking about Dylan?” Zac demands.

My stomach drops. Jamie is a nice guy. A *good* guy. He is really smart, so we’ve shared quite a few senior level classes.

“What? No.” My brother says, confused. His tone quickly turns to amusement. “He took down Carter.” A full-on grin splits his face.

“*Jamie* took down Carter?” Zac is the stunned one now. Carter is easily the biggest guy in school, and it’s practically all muscle. The guy takes football *very* seriously and is built like a tank as a result. Gray laughs.

“Yeah, dude, you should have seen it. Carter and Murphy were being their idiotic selves, trying to bait me in the locker room. Jamie just walked straight in the door from the gym as things were getting heated and decked Carter in the face. Dude dropped like a bag of rocks. He recovered quickly, but I swear he was out for a few seconds. Never would’ve thought Jamie had it in him.”

Go Jamie!

“You shouldn’t have gotten in a fight, Gray.” Proud as I am to have a little brother who is willing to stand up for me, it still doesn’t sit well that he was in trouble on my behalf.

“I can’t just sit around and let people bad mouth my sister!” Gray bursts.

“You did good,” Zac says, offering Gray a smile and a knuckle touch. “Do I need to pay those jerks a follow-up visit?”

“Nah.” Gray chuckles. “I think getting beat up by a freshman and a nerd was enough to destroy their egos. Even if they don’t get suspended, everyone at school still knows what happened.”

With that, Zac and I head back to the kitchen, but not before I give Gray a hug with a whispered, “Thank you.”

Zac

AFTER ALL THE ACTION on Monday, things start to blow over at school. I suspected they would. People genuinely like Dylan and seeing her suffering or feeling embarrassed doesn't sit right with them. Apart from a couple of juniors, of course, who have been ostracized from their lunch table for the past week. I'll have to thank Aspen, as I'm sure she's the one who gave Carter and Murphy the boot. Like putting a couple of toddlers in time out to think about what they've done.

In fact, Dylan and I are enjoying acting as a normal couple in public. Holding hands, sneaking kisses in the halls, sitting together at lunch—I never thought I would be into all of that. But I can't deny that I love it.

Dylan had been worried that our relationship would fizzle out once the excitement of sneaking around wore off. She was wrong. Because what I'm feeling right now, being able to be with Dylan *all the time*? It's infinitely better than any cheap thrill that we had earlier. Seriously, I finally understand what all the hype over relationships is about. I swear my heart grows every time Dylan slides her hand into mine, looking up at me with that sweet smile.

One area of Dylan's life where things are far from fine, however, is at home. Specifically, with her mom. It has been almost three weeks since the pictures were leaked, and Mrs.

Park has still frozen Dylan out. How their relationship could flip so quickly is beyond me.

Which is why on a Thursday at the beginning of April, instead of going to weightlifting, I decide to pay her mother a visit at home. I know that Dylan is staying after school to work on some applications for other schools and scholarships, now that hers with Heathwood is up in the air.

It is nice to be able to park in her driveway instead of hiding my truck down the block. I run up the front porch steps and confidently knock on the door. While I had nearly soiled my pants the first time I came to face Dylan's family after the pictures were leaked, I really don't give a damn about what Mrs. Park thinks about me. Sure, I will try to keep it civil for Dylan's sake, but all I care about is that she stops treating her daughter like a pariah.

"You've got some nerve, coming here," Mrs. Park says by way of greeting as she opens the door.

A surge of resentment sparks in my chest directed at the woman in front of me. Yet even though she is currently making Dylan's life more difficult, I know this anger has no place being there. This is Dylan's *mom*. One of the people who is closest to and knows Dylan more than anyone else in the world.

If anything, I should be trying to get on her good side. And while my brain knows that, my heart can't help but get protective of my girlfriend even when she isn't present. In short, my attempt at politeness more than likely falls flat.

"Mrs. Park, I'm really sorry about the pictures. And Dylan's scholarship—" I blurt. Apologizing is probably my best bet to get her to drop some of the hostility that is currently rolling off her in waves.

"Then why are you still with her?" She cuts me off.

Um, what? I'm a little confused.

"What do you mean?"

"You claim to care about my daughter, yet when she had a chance to get her scholarship reinstated you couldn't take a

step back.”

Okay. Make that *very* confused.

“Get her scholarship reinstated?”

Mrs. Park glares at me for a moment before continuing.

“Yes, *Zachary*. I’m sure Dylan mentioned it to you since you are both so... *close* now. Lorna offered to talk to the committee about having her scholarship reinstated, on the condition that Dylan separates herself from you. But Dylan is a good person, *Zac*. She was probably too afraid to hurt your feelings, even at the risk of losing everything she’s worked for.” With every word she clips out, new waves of dread wash over me.

Dylan could have gotten her scholarship back? Why wouldn’t she have told me? Why wouldn’t she have *dumped* me? I asked myself these questions, but deep down I already know the answer.

Her mom is right. Dylan *is* too good a person. But is she so good that she would sacrifice her dreams to spare my feelings?

Apparently, her mother isn’t done scolding me yet. “You’re not good for her. I wish I could say that I’m surprised that you are so selfish that you can’t let her go, but I’m truly not.” She shakes her head. “Goodbye, *Zac*.”

My instincts must be dulled by the bomb that has been dropped on me, because before I can speak any further, the door is closed in my face.

Dylan

WHEN I ARRIVE HOME from the library on Thursday evening, I'm not surprised to see the door to my mom's office tightly shut. Each time I see a sign that she is further distancing herself from me a piece of my heart crumbles. What I wouldn't give for one of her huge hugs right about now. Heck, I would be happy with her even acknowledging my existence at this point. But it's as if the more time I spend with Zac, the further apart Mom and I grow. There have been a couple of occasions where I thought Mom was about to approach me, to strike up a topic deeper than what I wanted for dinner or if I needed anything from the store. But nope. Either it was all in my head, or she backed out at the last second.

Once I shut myself in my room, I take out my books to work on some homework. Since all my time at the library was spent emailing the various campus recruiters whom I had previously turned down, I have a large amount of actual schoolwork to catch up on.

I keep my phone face up on my desk as I work, expecting to see messages from Zac. It is already six and so far, there is nothing.

Weird.

He is usually done with weightlifting by five, five-thirty at the latest, and he always calls or texts me right after. Maybe he is doing something with the guys?

Dylan

Hey. Text me when you're free. I miss you.

I send the text to Zac before I can second guess it. Even though we have been together for weeks now, I am still afraid of being too vulnerable and wearing my feelings on my sleeve. While I don't want to seem too clingy with the '*I miss you,*' I really do miss him. Even though we saw each other a few hours ago at school.

I go back to my homework, and it is past ten by the time I decide to call it a night. I check my phone again. No new messages.

This is out of character for Zac. Maybe his phone died? Or maybe he just didn't see my text come through.

Tamping down the surge of concern, I decide to call him. After five rings all I get is his voicemail message. I check social media, thinking that maybe one of his friends would have posted something of them together if Zac were with them.

Nothing.

I shouldn't be worried, right? If something had happened to him someone would have told me *something*.

Deciding to make one final attempt I send him another text.

Dylan

Just want to make sure you're okay. I haven't heard from you since we got out of school.

His reply comes almost immediately.

Zac

I'm fine.

Zac

Let's talk tomorrow.

And with that short text the tears start to prickle behind my eyes. Because in all of the time I've known him, even before we were friends, he has never sent me such short messages. So devoid of emotion.

SLEEP DOESN'T COME EASILY, and even when I am finally able to drift off, I find myself tossing and turning, woken occasionally by nightmares that I immediately forget upon waking. Finally, at five-thirty I give up on sleeping and decide to take a shower and get up for the day.

The face that greets me in the mirror after I wipe away the steam from the shower is that of a zombie. Pale, dark circles frame my eyes, and my eyelids are heavy with exhaustion.

Thank goodness I have extra time this morning to apply makeup.

And to figure out *how* to apply makeup.

I spend an hour in my room trying to keep myself busy to avoid having to go downstairs and face Mom. What has our relationship come to in the span of a few weeks that we are now actively avoiding each other?

When I hear the front door slamming, indicating that my parents have both left for work, I make my way downstairs and head to school.

Zac avoids me at school. He doesn't do it super obviously, but it is in the subtle things. For instance, when I first entered the school in the morning, he said a hasty goodbye to Ellis and practically sprinted the opposite way. In all of the classes we

have together he suddenly became mesmerized by the words of his textbook or by what the teacher is saying or writing on the board. This behavior wouldn't have been out of character for someone like me, but for Zac? Warning bells are ringing.

I even try to catch him after classes, but he is too quick. After school I try again but before I can catch him at his locker, he darts off to the locker room.

So much for his promise to '*talk tomorrow.*'

Rather than crawl back home and wait for him to eventually decide to talk to me, I make my way to the small courtyard outside of the school. It's a nice space with a couple of flowering trees and a few stone benches lining the perimeter of the main circle of brick pavers. There are also a few short paths that were paved with commemorative bricks. Most were donated by graduating classes—the engraving on them indicates as much.

This spot is nice. Peaceful. But more importantly it has a direct view of the door that leads from the men's locker room to the parking lot. The same door that Zac will be using whenever he leaves the building. And I am fully prepared to ambush him to make him talk to me.

I pull out my Literature book and try to read a few pages to keep me distracted. My eyes skim over the pages, reading the same paragraphs repeatedly and not retaining a word. After who knows how long of this, I deem my efforts useless and find myself staring at flowers that have blown off the trees, scattering across the bricks at my feet.

“Dylan?”

Zac's detached voice grabs my attention. Something is wrong. He looks sad. And nervous. I must have been so caught up in my own thoughts that I didn't realize he was approaching. *How long have I even been sitting here?*

“Hey.” I gesture to the bench and he takes a seat beside me. I can't keep the concern from my face. The sense of dread building deep in my stomach grows stronger with each passing second.

“I’ve been thinking, and... maybe we need to take a step back...”

“What?” My words are frail, my heart drops.

He wants to *take a step back*? Isn’t that just code for breaking up? My mind has been running on pure worry and panic for the past twenty four hours, but somehow, I never took the idea that he might want to end things seriously.

I stand, feeling too vulnerable sitting beside him. He follows my example and stands as well, which only aggravates me.

We are good. Great. Or so I thought... what could have happened in the past day to make Zac think that we shouldn’t be together anymore?

Zac bites on the inside of his cheek, his gaze locked on the bench beside us. “I think that us dating might not work in the long run. Might hurt us more than anything.”

Okay, hearing that hurts. But then a slowly creeping realization overcomes me. We were fine when we were in our study room for History. He held and kissed me after school. But then I went to the library instead of going home and he said he was going to weightlifting. But did he?

“You talked to my mom.” It’s a statement, not a question. As much as it pains me, I know it’s the truth. No good could come from a conversation between Zac and my mother. I stare out into the parking lot, focusing on nothing.

Zac lets out a defeated exhale. “Dylan, I can’t let you give up your scholarship, everything you’ve dreamed about your future, for me. I’m not worth it.”

Before I know what is happening, my hands are pressed against his solid chest, shoving him away from me. And either there was more force behind it than I expected, or my actions caught Zac by surprise, because he falters and stumbles back a few steps before catching himself.

Immediately I pull back, hands flying to my mouth in shock.

I've never let my emotions take over like that. To the point of physically, *intentionally* pushing someone.

If he didn't want to dump you before, he does now.

But I'm angry.

So angry.

He is the one person who I thought I had in my corner. The one person who I am in sync with. How can he just decide to end what we have so easily? Doesn't our relationship mean anything to him? Don't *I*?

He's not even surprised that I shoved him. And I am too far gone to even apologize.

"How *dare* you, Zachary Morgan!" I roar, "No. You want to break up with me? Fine! But don't be a coward. Don't you *dare* pretend that you're doing it for my own good! Don't think that you know better than I do what is good for me. You think I can't make this decision for myself? If Heathwood is the type of place to revoke my scholarship for something that was no fault of my own, that I was a *victim* of, then I want nothing to do with that school. I will take my chances with the committee, and if they decide against me then so be it. It's my scholarship that is at stake and *I* will decide what to do about it. Not you."

Zac stares at me, his mouth gaping, but he doesn't say anything. I continue.

"When my mom told me about the ultimatum that Lorna gave her, I didn't consider it. Not even for a second. In fact, the thought of taking it seriously, of not choosing you, was *laughable*."

Zac shakes his head. "Dylan, this is too good an opportunity. You can't pass it up. *I'm not worth risking your future for.*"

His words scrape against my insides like knives. As angry as I am at him right now, he's hurting too. *Gah!* How can he have the power to make my heart melt while I'm so *furios* with him. "Do you know *why* I didn't consider it?" I fling the words at him, all but ignoring his statement.

He shakes his head again. Tentatively, cautiously, unsure of what I am going to do next.

“Because when I thought about not going to my dream school, it bummed me out. It threw a wrench in my plans, and it *sucked*. But when I thought about not being with you? Having to give you up for some stupid scholarship? It completely *gutted* me.” My voice breaks on a soft sob. Seconds later a warm body is wrapped around me. “I can’t lose you, Zac,” I whisper into his shoulder.

Zac’s strong arms hold me so close, so suffocatingly tight, that I can physically feel the stress leave my body.

And I am sobbing. Frustrated with my mother’s manipulation and Zac’s attempt to throw away everything we have because of what he *thinks* is best for me. Embarrassed that I completely went off on Zac and that he thought I would be okay with letting him go in the first place.

We stand there, hugging and gently swaying, the occasional drops of spring rain slipping down from the trees above us, creating a comforting chorus of *taps* on the bricks. My head is tucked into the crook of his neck, putting on a show for whoever happens to walk by. But I don’t care.

“Thank you,” he croaks out in a rough whisper.

I don’t have to ask him what for. He is thanking me for staying. For not giving up on him. For showing him that he is worth it.

For loving him.

Zac

“DO YOU THINK THAT sounds okay?” Dylan asks.

“It sounds great. Seriously, you’re going to be awesome.”

The next week is spent preparing Dylan for her ‘trial’ in front of the scholarship committee. Overall, she is a good public speaker. But the stakes have never been this high for her before, and she is visibly nervous.

Together we have written a short speech that she will be reciting in front of the committee, trying to defend herself.

Honestly, it is ridiculous to me. The situation, not the speech. The speech is gold. How anyone can see Dylan as the bad person in this scenario is beyond me. But clearly the stuffed shirts at the university don’t see it my way, so here we are practicing religiously every afternoon after school, preparing for the meeting on Friday.

Mr. Park pops in occasionally to see if we need any help. His visits serve a dual purpose of making sure we keep our hands to ourselves, but I appreciate his offer of assistance even with the ulterior motive.

Mrs. Park, on the other hand, does her best to stay out of the house most days. Or, maybe she’s always worked such long hours. Though I suspect my former assumption is correct. On the odd nights that she is home, she makes it a point to

lock herself in the office and ignore the rest of her family.
How she can be so mad is a mystery to me.

*Does she really hate me so much that she won't even help
her daughter?*

Dylan

FRIDAY AFTERNOON ARRIVES MUCH faster than I would have liked. It all comes down to this. If I can't convince the committee to restore my scholarship tonight, I will have to completely reevaluate my plans.

I stare into the hall mirror. My black pencil skirt falls just below my knees. Black tights, black flats, and a flowy white button-down shirt, tucked neatly into my skirt, give me the appearance of a collected togetherness that I don't feel. Even my blonde curls are cooperating, having been pulled back into a French twist.

I look put together. Professional.

Dad offered to drive me. Even though he won't be allowed into the meeting room, having him there for support is still comforting.

Zac, on the other hand, has a meeting with a college recruiter tonight at our high school, so he won't be able to come with us. The community college up the road from Heathwood University is still accepting applications for the upcoming school year and Zac has his sights set on it. I didn't want to assume that he was considering the school only to be close to me at Heathwood, but when I asked him what other schools he was looking into, he laughed in my face. Saying that he wanted to be close to his girl. When I pointed out that

there is a very real chance that I won't even be attending Heathwood, he brushed me off, because *'of course I'll be going to Heathwood.'* His thoughts, not mine.

Mom is another passenger who will be absent from our vehicle tonight. She hasn't come home from work yet, citing a Zoom meeting that is running longer than expected. Though, I doubt she would have wanted to come along anyway.

As we are about to head out the door, the doorbell rings. I answer it without a second thought but am suddenly fighting back tears.

Zac stands in front of me, holding a colorful bouquet of flowers. It's huge and beautiful and I am suddenly overcome with emotion.

"For you." He extends it out to me. I want to cry. Probably due to the nerves. Maybe because of the flowers. It could just be because of how incredibly handsome Zac looks standing before me. He's wearing a pair of dark wash jeans with a light gray button-down shirt, dark gray tie, and a black blazer. His hair combed to the side instead of in its natural disheveled state.

"Ah, Zac." My dad comes up behind me, extending his hand for Zac to shake as I take the flowers. "Glad you could join us tonight."

"Absolutely, Mr. Park." Zac shakes Dad's outstretched hand, giving him a smile.

"You're... coming with us?" My voice is a surprised whisper.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Zac plants a quick peck on my cheek.

"But... your meeting?"

"Some things are more important than silly college recruiter meetings." He shrugs, but must see the horror on my face because he quickly adds, "Don't worry, babe. I called them last night to reschedule it for next week."

I can breathe again. I won't have Zac screwing up his future for me. I set the flowers in a vase of water and the three of us head out to the van.

OUR MEETING IS BEING held in one of the administrative buildings on Heathwood's historic campus. It is one of the older buildings. Based on the signage outside, there appear to only be offices in this building, no classrooms or lecture halls. It's large, made of brick with ivy crawling up the front and over the main entrance. It is beautiful, and I wish I wasn't so nervous so that I could actually appreciate it.

My dad takes the lead and we follow him up the stone stairs through the heavy wooden door to the elevator, which we take up to the third floor. I am grateful that he opted not to take the stairs. My breathing is already coming out in short gasps from my nerves, the last thing I need is to add 'sweaty' to my list of adjectives for this evening.

In the elevator, Zac grabs my hand, squeezing it in reassurance, and sends a calming smile my way, not even flinching at my clammy palms.

With a soft ding, the doors slide open. As it is after five o'clock, most of the staff and students have cleared out already. The hall is eerily silent, most of the lights off. Honestly, it gives off horror movie vibes.

Not a great omen.

Our footsteps echo through the hall as we approach the only door with a glow escaping the crack beneath it.

The sign on the outside of the door reads "*Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid.*"

"Guess this is it, kids," my dad says, his attempt at cheeriness helps the tiniest bit.

He pushes open the door to the office and we are immediately greeted by a woman who appears to be in her forties dressed immaculately in a black pant-suit. She has a stern, yet friendly, face and dark brown hair that is cut into a bob at her shoulders.

“Hello,” she greets politely, “My name is Linda Hayes, I am the chairwoman of the scholarship committee here at Heathwood University. I take it you are Ms. Magdalene Park?” She raises an eyebrow, extending her hand out to me.

“Y—yes,” I stutter, extending my own clammy hand to meet hers.

Sensing my nervousness, she offers me a warm smile. “Right this way, the rest of the committee is in the boardroom. I know it is a bit before your scheduled start time, but since we are all here, we can begin immediately if you are ready?”

Nodding, I follow her down a carpeted hallway that leads to a windowless wooden door.

“We’ll be right out here, sweetheart,” Dad offers, gesturing to a few chairs that are placed outside of the room.

“Oh,” Linda jumps in, “You’re both welcome to join us if you would like to sit in on the hearing. We only ask that you refrain from making any commentary or disrupting the proceedings.”

Dad and Zac look to each other, then Zac glances at me, searching for what I want.

“Please,” I whisper to Zac. His face lightens.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he says. “We would love to join.”

With that, she ushers us into the room.

Zac

THE CONFERENCE ROOM IS big. Much bigger than is necessary to accommodate the board members and our small group. Mr. Park and I sit down in the creaky wooden chairs placed near the door, and Chairwoman Hayes ushers Dylan to a seat in the center of the table. There is no one sitting on her side of the oval table. Instead, the board members are sitting across from her. I can already see the judgment in their eyes.

This isn't a true hearing. This is a formality. A box that they can check so that they can revoke her scholarship and be able to say that they went through due process to do it.

Dylan takes a seat and reaches for the water bottle that has been placed in front of her, her hand visibly shaking.

There are a total of five committee members, including Linda. A woman who appears to be in her late twenties, a slim man—maybe in his fifties? — who has probably the most obvious toupée ever created planted on his head, a man who bears a striking resemblance to Santa Claus, and of course, Marnie's mom. All of whom are dressed in coordinating pantsuits

Out of all the committee members, Lorna Jacobs is the one who steals my attention. I have no doubts that she is the one responsible for this whole ordeal. Her black hair falls down to

her mid-back, face pinched as though she had spent the last hour sucking on a lemon, looking more a villain than ever.

A throat clearing brings my attention away from Lorna and back to the group.

“Miss Park.” It is Santa Claus speaking, “As you were informed in the letter previously sent to you, the status of your scholarship is under consideration due to the inappropriate images that are now circulating, which depict you in a less-than-ideal light. These photographs were brought to our attention last month, and the members of the committee and I have had a chance to examine them and found the contents of the images to be disturbing.”

The thought of this sleazeball, and these other entitled suits, seeing Dylan makes my blood boil. My fists clench on the leather padded armrests of the chair and I grind my teeth.

“Excuse me,” Toupée interrupts Santa’s speech and glares in my direction. “Would you mind not... *growling?*”

Oops, had I made a noise?

“I apologize. Won’t happen again,” I mutter. Mr. Park is shaking next to me. I turn to him—you know, to make sure he isn’t having some type of panic attack—but find that he is covering his face. Barely able to contain his laughter at my scolding. Though he kept up a veil of cheerfulness thus far, his face held a tightness that revealed just how anxious he was about this evening. If I can provide him some comedic relief, so be it.

“As I was saying,” Santa continues, “This university does not condone such behavior, and as such, we cannot justify awarding such a prestigious scholarship to a student who does not exhibit exemplary behavior and morals.”

Dylan sits there, taking the berating speech from this old man. Marnie’s mom appears to have finally gotten rid of the pucker in her face, and it stretches into a sinister smile.

“However,” the youngest person on the board speaks up, “it is in the bylaws that any student or potential student can plead their case in an effort to maintain their position at the

university, or to retain their scholarship. That is why we are here this evening, Ms. Park. To hear you out. Now, I will warn you, it is quite unprecedented for an individual who has had their funding revoked to be granted it back, as there must be unanimous consensus by the board to do so. But you have the chance to try and convince us nonetheless.” She gestures for Dylan to begin speaking.

This isn’t good. It means that even if the rest of the board agrees with Dylan and wants to give her the scholarship back, all it will take is for Marnie’s witch of a mother to vote to revoke her scholarship and it is game over.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Dylan clasps her hands together on the table and speaks.

“Thank you. I understand that you are all doing what you feel is best for the university.” She looks directly at Lorna when she says this.

Go Dylan.

“As you are all already aware, there were a couple of photos of myself and my boyfriend in a compromising position released publicly last month. I can assure you that neither of us were aware that the photographs were being taken, and neither of us would ever release such pictures publicly. We were more surprised than anyone when we received the text messages containing the photos.

“I can understand that this university wouldn’t want its name associated with a scandal, and certainly wouldn’t want one of its students releasing any form of inappropriate content. However, as I was unaware of the photography or its distribution, Mr. Morgan and I were mere victims rather than perpetrators. Which leads me to wonder why this committee is so quick to discredit my years of academics and extracurricular activities for one unfortunate event that has harmed me more than anyone else? If it was simply for being intimate with someone, I can assure you that you would need to reevaluate all of your scholarship recipients this year, as well as most of your current student body.”

Dylan falls silent and she reaches for the water bottle again to calm her nerves. Her hand still trembling as she lifts it to her lips. She delivered her message flawlessly, but she is still shaken.

The committee is quiet, and they glance between themselves. Minutes pass, a clock ticking from *somewhere* in the room is the only indication that time is still moving. Dylan finally looks our way. The silence is making her as uncomfortable as it is us.

“Miss Park.” The chairwoman’s voice pierces through the veil of silence. “Certainly no one on this board, or at this university, is looking to shame you for your private relationships. We were, however, under the impression that the release of the photographs was consensual on your part—”

“What?” What I meant to be a whisper comes out as a roar, instead. “Sorry,” I say, holding my hand up to Toupée who appears overly eager to scold me again.

The chairwoman turns her attention back to Dylan. “In light of this revelation, the board and I will need a moment to discuss our actions going forward—”

“Excuse me,” interjects Lorna, “I have a few questions of my own, if I may?”

“Oh, of course.” The chairwoman gives her permission to proceed.

“Miss Park, could you tell the board how long you and Mr. Morgan have been in a relationship?”

“Umm, a couple of months now?”

Dylan’s voice is thin, confused. Clearly thrown off by Lorna’s line of questioning.

“You don’t seem very sure of the timeline,” Lorna continues.

“I mean, yeah, it’s only been a couple of months. We got together around Valentine’s Day,” Dylan finishes more confidently.

“Interesting,” Lorna says, rifling through her gaudy Coach bag for something. Finding it, she whips it out. An envelope with the pictures.

I rub my hand slowly down my face. The last thing I want Dylan to have to go through is to have these people dissecting the most vulnerable moment of her life right in front of her.

“As you can all clearly see, there is a calendar clearly visible in the background, indicating that the photos were taken in November.”

For the love of...

That’s it, I’m burning that stupid calendar the moment I get home. Why on Earth is my laziness and lack of diligence in flipping my calendar evidence here?

The board members lean over, some nodding their heads in acknowledgment that they see the date. *Where is she going with this?*

“Miss Park. Were either you or the other individual pictured in these photographs in a relationship with *someone else* in November?”

“I... yes. Both Zac and I were seeing different people in November, but—”

“And were those other relationships that you were in exclusive? Meaning that your significant others were not aware that you were being *intimate* with other people?”

“They were exclusive, but—”

“Based on the timeline presented to us, it would appear that you were unfaithful. That you broke a commitment. Not only that, but your actions indicate that you were also comfortable with leading Mr. Morgan to be unfaithful as well.”

“I... no... I wouldn’t—”

“Fellow members of the committee, whether or not the leaking of these photographs was consensual or not, they help to create a timeline that still evidences Miss Park’s poor character and lack of moral judgment—”

“Let her talk!” *Crap*. I spoke again. Well, *shouted* might be a better descriptor.

“Excuse me!” Santa Claus shoots at me. “Sir, I am going to have to ask you to excuse yourself from the room.”

Reluctantly, I pull myself up from my chair, staring daggers at Lorna as I stomp through the door like a disgruntled toddler. Lorna looks back at me with a smug, satisfied smile on her face. As much as I want to stay in the stuffy room and shout at the suits who are questioning Dylan, I know that disobeying their request would do far more harm than good.

Dylan

A PIECE OF ME leaves the room with Zac. Thankfully, it's not my confidence that is gone. Nope, Lorna's lies have fueled my own anger. Before she can start leveling more accusations, I begin to speak. Much firmer than I had previously.

“With all due respect, members of the board, I would never cheat on anyone, nor would I encourage anyone else to. Mrs. Jacobs is right, to do so would be in poor character and highly immoral. Yes, the calendar says November. But that is in no way proof of what month it actually was. Do all of you keep your planners up to date? Your calendars?” It's a bold move to turn a question back on them, but there is no way Zac is the only person who slacked off changing his physical calendar. Everything is electronic now, anyway.

I also consider throwing out the fact that Lorna's daughter is the girlfriend that Zac would have allegedly cheated on to further discredit her statement. But I want to win this on my own. On principal. I did nothing wrong and I need to stick to that.

“Thank you, Miss Park,” the older gentleman with an unfortunate toupée says, “If you and your father will please wait outside with your other guest, the board will now take a few moments to deliberate.”

On weak legs I pull myself up from my chair and make my way over to the door that my dad is holding open for me.

The moment we step into the hallway, I find Zac pacing back and forth on the tiled floors. “Dyl, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say anything. They just wouldn’t listen and it was so frustrating. If anything I said—”

I walk up to him and wrap my arms around his waist for a quick hug to silence him. But he pulls me in tighter with his arms around my shoulders.

“Honestly? I loved your outbursts,” I say into his shirt, “They made me remember there was at least one person on my side.”

“Two.” My dad chimes in from behind us, probably feeling left out.

We sit outside the solid oak door for close to a half hour before we are summoned back inside by the chairwoman. I take my seat back at the table while Zac and Dad stay back by the door. I am grateful that they allowed Zac back into the room. Regardless of the verdict, I need him.

“Miss Park,” the chairwoman stands and addresses the room, “We are terribly sorry.”

Oh no.

My heart not only sinks, but stops beating altogether, drops onto the floor and slowly shrivels up. Already there are tears building in the back of my eyes and a ball forming in my throat.

This is it. It’s all over.

They are taking away my scholarship.

“Based on our full knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the photograph, as well as your relationship with Mr. Morgan”—she nods to where Zac is seated, and he offers her a quick wave of acknowledgment—“This hearing was unnecessary. While we have the authority to revoke scholarships for legitimate reasons, including immorality, we are not in the business of judging private relationships. You

will be receiving your scholarship funds in full. We look forward to having you on campus next year and again, we truly apologize for any inconvenience this has caused you.”

What?

She is apologizing for making us come here today. Not for taking away my scholarship.

I get to keep my scholarship.

I will be coming here next year.

My hands fly over my mouth in relief, tears break free and stream down my face.

“Thank you so, *so* much. You won’t regret it.”

“Well, there’s not much to thank us for. You shouldn’t have been summoned here in the first place.” The old man with the long white beard speaks now. “It appears that this particular scenario hit a little too close to home for one of our board members, and she had to be removed before the vote.”

Sure enough, glancing around I notice for the first time that Lorna is no longer at the table. I must have been too nervous earlier to notice her absence.

The old man smiles and stands to extend his hand to me. “Congratulations, Miss Park, we look forward to seeing you on campus next year.”

WE WALK OUT OF the ancient building and I do my best to remain calm. But as soon as the heavy wooden doors slam behind us, all bets are off. I let out a squeal so high-pitched I’m sure only dogs can hear it.

“We did it!” I squeak, tugging on Zac’s sleeve in excitement.

“We did it, babe,” Zac says, sneaking a quick kiss on my forehead.

“Celebratory ice cream, anyone?” Dad offers.

The three of us pile into the minivan and stop at a local ice cream joint where we each get obnoxiously large treats to enjoy on the ride home.

I am still riding on the high when we pull into the driveway. Mom's car is here.

She's home.

Did Lorna tell her about what happened?

"I think it might be time for you to head home, son," Dad says to Zac as we pile out of the van, also noticing mom's vehicle.

Zac turns to me, cupping my face in his hands. "You good?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

He kisses me quickly on the forehead again before waving to Dad and taking off in his truck.

Time to face my mother.

Dylan

“OH, DYLAN!” MOM EXCLAIMS as we walk through the front door. “How did it go?”

She pushes into the entry hall wearing her lounge clothes. It’s just before ten o’clock, late for her, so I suspect she has been waiting up for us.

Her face is pale, and she appears genuinely concerned about my answer to her question, but I still can’t help but eye her skeptically. None of her actions in the past month would lead me to believe that she *really* cares about my future. At least, not as much as she cares about her relationship with Lorna.

Initially, it was a hard pill to swallow. To accept that my mom, who had always been my go-to person, was more concerned about her image than her own daughter. But knowing that I still had my dad in my corner meant a lot.

“I’m in the clear. Got my scholarship back. The committee said it never should have been revoked in the first place. Apparently, whoever shared the pictures with them left out some crucial pieces of information.” My voice is monotone. Robotic. Almost *bored*.

Telling her this should make me ecstatic. That her dear friend wasn’t able to derail my future plans.

“All of this you would know if you had been able to join us this evening,” Dad clips at her, clearly meaning to be hurtful.

“I know, sweetie, I am so sorry.” She approaches me and gently reaches for my arms. “At least you were able to have your father there to support you.”

“And Zac,” I retort in my same monotone voice.

“And... Zac?” Surprise washes over her face.

“Yes, Bette. Zac was willing to rearrange his schedule this evening to be there for Dylan.” Dad’s tone is still short, not hiding his irritation with her. “He must have realized how important this was.”

On that note, he turns and leaves the room. Mom’s eyes fill with tears, and although I am angry with her, it still hurts my heart to see her cry.

“Dylan, can we talk for a moment?” she asks, her voice no more than a whispered croak. I can’t help but agree. I’m still running on adrenaline from earlier, so I’m not that tired anyway.

Mom leads me into her office and sets me down next to her on the couch there. After exhaling a long breath, she speaks.

“Dylan, love, I am so sorry for how I have been acting lately. I was upset, and I took things out on you. It wasn’t fair, and I know that.” Tears still glisten in her eyes.

“But that’s what I don’t get, Mom. Why were you upset with me? Because I was with Zac? Because you thought I was trying to hurt Marnie? Trying to ruin your relationship with Lorna and mess up your ‘perfect’ family?”

She reaches over and grabs my arm, almost frantically. “Oh, no, Dylan, did you really think that? That I was mad because of some image thing? Because things were tense with Lorna?”

I nod, because, yeah, that is what I thought. Although from her reaction I’m starting to feel a little foolish for that

assumption.

Mom lets out another long exhale before continuing. “Oh, my sweet girl, what I was feeling had nothing to do with Lorna. At all. I was blindsided. When I found out about you and Zac, I reacted from a place of hurt rather than a place of love, and I’m sorry. You didn’t tell me about him. I thought... I thought we were better than this, you and me. I thought you would come to me with this type of thing.” The way she chokes on her words nearly kills me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “But would it have made any difference? If I did tell you the truth? It wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“Oh, Dylan, it would have changed *everything*. You kept your romantic relationship a secret from me, from *everyone*, for *weeks*. When I found out, I was shattered. Because my Dylan doesn’t keep things from me. *Ever*. But knowing that you do? Especially something of this magnitude? It shattered the trust I had in you. I know,” she continues as I open my mouth to speak, “one incident shouldn’t have affected me so deeply. But it’s just... Zac wasn’t someone I wanted you getting close to.” This part of her explanation is whispered.

She shakes her head and focuses her attention on her hand, still clutching my arm. “Do you remember when you were younger? When we used to spend a lot of time with Zac and his family?”

“Of course.”

Is she finally going to tell me why we abandoned them? Because after all the time I spent with Zac and his family, it’s clear that it wasn’t *their* doing.

“And do you remember when we stopped?”

“Yes...”

“You were about ten, and Marnie’s family had just moved into the neighborhood. You and Marnie had always been close but having them live right down the road opened the door for us to all get closer. Stella had started picking up more and more shifts at the hospital and I was spending more time with

Lorna. Her husband was the newly appointed police chief at the time.”

I do remember that. Marnie thought it was so cool that her dad was a cop, and once he became the chief, he would come in on occasion to give presentations to classrooms. Instead of being embarrassed of her parents like most of us were, she was beyond proud of him.

“When he was installed, the department began reviewing some old cases. One of them was Zac’s dad’s accident.”

What?

Why would they review the case of a car accident that was over five years old at the time? Sure, there had been a fatality, and a couple of other people hospitalized, but wouldn’t they have resolved anything that was amiss at the time?

“Apparently there were a few things that didn’t quite add up. Although a police report was filed, and there was an investigation both by the police department and the insurance companies, there was never an actual resolution.”

She pauses, whether to collect her thoughts or for dramatic effect, I can’t be sure.

“Zac’s father was drinking at the time of the accident.”

The meaning of her words slam into me. Zac’s dad was drunk driving? The man that Zac has been looking up to his entire life, the man he’s been trying to live up to, *died* because he was driving while intoxicated.

Does Zac know? He can’t. There’s no way he would still idolize him. Although, it would explain why he reacted so extremely to finding out that the girls were drinking when they brought me to that party all those weeks ago...

Maybe I shouldn’t tell him. Is it really my place? To destroy his image of his father, the one person he’s looked up to for his entire life? It will crush him. And I can’t do that. Maybe sometimes ignorance really is bliss.

Unaware of my own internal crisis, Mom goes on. “It cost not only his own life, but it upturned the lives of so many

others. The people in the vehicle that he hit, who had to be hospitalized, his wife, who was now a widow with two small boys, and of course, the lives of his children, who never got to have a real father.”

Mom looks at me, as though this clears everything up.

“I don’t understand,” I say when she doesn’t continue. “What does this have to do with anything that’s happened the past couple of months?” *Or why she would abandon Stella.*

She shakes her head, looking anywhere but at me.

“When Officer Jacobs confided in us about the drunk driving, I panicked. Zac was only eleven at the time that I found out, but I could already see so much of his father in him. We all grew up together, you know? He had the same adventurous spirit. They looked almost *identical*. I was scared, Dylan. I thought that he would follow the same path as his father. I didn’t want my kids anywhere near that kind of spiral —”

Her words hit me like a train.

So, it really *wasn’t* Zac who had abandoned me, but *my mother* who had abandoned Stella, separating us as children as a result.

“So... we stopped seeing them? You left Stella? Because of something that her husband *might* have done nearly a decade earlier?”

“We had been growing apart at the time, anyway. She was busy with work, her boys entering the phase where they would rather hang out with other boys than you. I thought it would be a natural transition. You and Marnie were already close, and Lorna and I had been friends, although a bit distantly, since high school. It worked out. And as you kids grew up, I couldn’t have been happier with my decision to separate you as kids.” She’s back pedaling, trying to defend her actions.

“What?” I stand from the couch, shock and anger simmering beneath my skin. “You don’t even regret it?”

Mom shakes her head. “Dylan, I kept an eye on Zac, heard the rumors. Saw who he was becoming. He was getting a

reputation. Not only was he following in his father's footsteps, but he was *worse*. I couldn't bear to have you around that behavior."

Sitting back down, I let her words sink in. She pulled us away from our closest childhood friends because there was a *slight* chance that one of them might turn out like their father? Mr. Morgan may not have been a saint when he was younger, but that shouldn't be what defined him as a person. Not even his cause of death should make a difference. Overall, Zac's dad was a *good* man.

"I didn't want you to get hurt, Dylan. Not your heart, and not physically. Every time I saw you and Zac together as kids after I found out, I kept visualizing how he could cause you pain. I couldn't stand by and let it happen. All I've ever wanted to do is to watch out for you and your brother. To keep my family together and happy."

Mom continues to talk through her rationalization, the logic behind her actions, but as she speaks, I only become angrier. How *dare* she make those judgments about Zac? He was only a *kid*.

"When the pictures came out with you and Zac, and then Lorna mentioned they were taken while Marnie and him were together, I lost it. It appeared that even though I had tried my best to keep you apart, he had still managed to get to you. To convince you to hurt your best friend. I thought that I had lost my little girl. Lorna, of course, was livid."

"Obviously," I mumble.

Mom lets out a small chuckle at this. "I pushed you away in my anger, and by extension, sided with Marnie and Lorna. It was wrong that I didn't listen to you. That I drew my own assumptions about what happened, listened to what Lorna told me, rather than asking you. The narrative that Lorna created, that I so easily believed, fit the expectations I already had for Zac. That he was bad for you and would hurt you. Especially after everything I had heard from Lorna and Marnie after Zac broke up with her, it was just... well, you were there. His actions didn't earn him a stellar recommendation."

She looks up at me. I inherited her eyes, so watching her sadness is almost like watching myself cry. “I was wrong. So, so wrong.”

“When Lorna mentioned that you could keep your scholarship if you kept away from Zac, it seemed like a win-win. You would get to keep your scholarship and I would get to keep my little girl. I never dreamed that you would turn down her offer.”

“It was a pretty crummy offer.”

“And that you refused it only made me angrier. Because in my mind you weren’t thinking logically. Zac had corrupted you, and for what? I truly didn’t realize how much you felt for him. You’re so strong, Dylan.” Her palm cups the side of my face gently. “You stuck to your guns, even when it could have sidetracked your future. I’m sorry I didn’t stand up for you.”

The familiar sting of tears behind my eyes makes itself known again. Although I am still furious about how she handled everything, I can’t completely wall off my emotions like I want to. Years of closeness will do that to you, I guess.

“It was hard, Mom,” I whisper, still trying to keep my tears at bay. Even after her apologies I’m not comfortable being completely vulnerable in front of her. She’s burned that bridge and I have no idea how long it will take to rebuild. “Having those pictures out for everyone to see. Hearing what they said in the halls. Behind my back and to my face. And to know that my mom wasn’t even there for me?” I meet her eyes again, unable to keep the tears at bay any longer. “I wish I had you there.”

Mom shakes her head slowly, pain etched into her features. “I’m sorry, Dylan. I spent so much time calling the school, even talking with Mr. Jacobs, trying to figure out how those photos got circulated and how to make sure who was responsible would pay. Please know I didn’t entirely abandon you during all of this. It’s not enough to make up for my lack of support. I know I should have been kinder to you, but I wasn’t, and I can’t say enough how disappointed I am in myself for caring more about my own pride than your feelings.

I should have known that Zac was a good person when he stuck by your side after all of that,” Mom says. “But I was so caught up in trying to keep you two apart that I was blind to what was right in front of me.”

“He is a good guy, Mom.” There is no stopping the smile that spreads across my face whenever I get to talk about Zac.

“I know. And I promise, sweetie, from now on I’ll be there for you.”

We hug. It’s possibly the most awkward hug we’ve shared, but it’s a start. And while I’m not able to forgive her completely just yet, I feel a small piece of my life click back into place. Mom was trying to protect me. While she went about it terribly, her intentions, at least, were good.

As hard as the last month has been, I am finally getting some closure.

Zac

IT IS ALMOST ELEVEN by the time I get back home, and the house is dark. Mom has another night shift, and I'm sure Alex and Justin are at whatever party is going on since it's a Friday.

Kicking off my boots, I flick on the light and find Justin's phone on the kitchen counter, plugged into a charger. He's always leaving his phone, more than happy to mooch off someone else if he needs to make a call, so I don't think much of it. Until I see it lighting up with an incoming message.

While I'm not one to snoop through someone else's phone, I have nothing against peeking at the lock screen to see who Justin might be in contact with these days.

What I see makes my blood run cold.

Dexter freaking Lockhart

I'm not confessing to anything.

My mind spins. Why is Dex texting Justin? Why is *Justin* texting *Dex*? And, most importantly, what does Justin want Dex to confess to?

Unless...

Frantically, I try to remember Justin's lock code.

His birthday.

Idiot.

Immediately I scroll through their message thread. As far as I know, Dex and Justin have always hated each other. I don't know much about it, I assume it is some macho workplace rivalry thing with their dads, but I do know that Justin and Dex never miss an opportunity to go up against each other.

My thumb keeps scrolling until I find the first message in the thread, and I see red.

There it is.

What must have been the original pictures of Dylan and me. Sent by Justin to Dex. It's clear they're the originals because the date that the pictures were sent is a full week before they were released to the rest of the world. In fact, they were sent *that night*. The night that the pictures were taken.

Justin took the pictures.

Justin

Looks like you couldn't keep your girl satisfied ;)

Dexter freaking Lockhart

I don't buy it. You photoshopped this.

Justin

You don't have to take it from me. Think about it. Haven't you noticed the chemistry between Dylan and Zac?

Justin

That's what I thought. Sorry, dude. Guess you weren't man enough for your girl.

There are a few more messages exchanged between the two of them for the next week, mostly insults of varying severity and name calling. Until the day that the pictures were released.

Justin

DUDE! What the HELL did you do?

Dexter freaking Lockhart

Thought the world deserves to see them for who they really are.

Justin

DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU JUST DID?!?!

Dexter freaking Lockhart

As far as anyone will know, I didn't do anything. No one can prove it was me.

Justin

Nice plan. Except I'll tell Zac. He'll tear you apart.

Dexter freaking Lockhart

You won't tell him anything. You're the creep who took the pictures in the first place. He'll blame you.

Well, Dex wasn't wrong about that. I will definitely have to deal with Justin. But right now, my fury is wholly directed toward the imbecile who thought he could not only date Dylan, but also ruin her reputation.

Justin

You are completely insane. And I'm pretty sure this is **ILLEGAL**. Didn't you care for Dylan at all? This will destroy her!

Dexter freaking Lockhart

If she doesn't care for me, why should I care about her? We dated for months, and I didn't get anything. But then she hooks up with Zac and puts out right away?

I can't read anymore. Not that it matters, I've seen all that I need to. Justin must have figured out that there was something going on between Dylan and me and took pictures to taunt Dex. Scummy move? Absolutely.

Dex, on the other hand, sent the pictures to *everyone*. Upturning Dylan's life and making her vulnerable. Without an ounce of remorse. And why? Because he didn't get laid? That, in my books, is unforgivable.

My mind is focused on calculating my next move when a door slams in the kitchen behind me, followed by muffled footsteps and a touch of stumbling. Whirring around, phone still in hand, I see Justin standing in the doorway.

His eyes trace a path from his phone up to my face, and back again. He must see the anger in my eyes because his hands immediately go up in surrender.

“Dude... I’m sorry... I didn’t think he would lose it like that...”

My fist connects with his face before I can even register what is happening. And to my surprise, he takes it. Moving his jaw back and forth, he rubs his jawline with his palm.

“You saw Dylan’s life fall apart. Saw me trying to find who released those pictures. Who *took* the pictures!” I roar, my face inches from his.

“I know. I screwed up!” he shouts, defeated.

Taking a step back I stare at him. As good as punching him felt, it wasn’t enough. There’s too much anger bubbling below my skin. And it’s not toward the deflating man standing in front of me.

“Zac, man, just hit me again. I know you want to. I deserve it. I took my rivalry with Dex too far.”

“Damn right, you did!” I throw his phone at him. “What, your life was such a mess that you had to screw up ours, too?”

It takes approximately two seconds for me to realize I’ve overstepped. His home situation is a touchy subject. For that reason, I never comment on it. I certainly have never thrown it in his face to make him feel inferior. Until now.

Justin scoffs, shaking his head in disbelief. “Low blow, man. But you’re right. My life *is* a mess. I haven’t seen my mom in months and am lucky if I see Dad every other week. I’ve got no college or job prospects. I’m living on the floor of your mom’s home office! I’m not trying to make excuses. What I did was dumb and wrong and a jerk move considering how good you’ve been to me. So come on,” he opens his arms, “hit me.”

“I’m not going to hit you again.”

“You’re... not?”

“No. But you’re coming with me to see Dylan tomorrow. You’re going to come clean.” I’m about to storm to my room when another thought occurs to me.

“How did you even get the picture?” I ask, “You were supposed to be out of town.”

“Forgot my bag. I stopped by to pick it up. I, uh, heard you guys and went outside to take a few pics. It wasn’t a surprise to find Dylan over... I swear, it was all supposed to be harmless. I never meant to take things so far.”

“Dude, there’s nothing *harmless* about invading someone’s privacy like that, even if you didn’t plan to show anyone. And what do you mean you thought I might have Dylan over?”

Justin rolls his eyes at me. “You’re not as sneaky as you think,” he says simply. When I only continue to stare at him, he continues. “You hadn’t been seen with another girl for weeks after you and Marnie broke up, you nearly punched me out when I insulted Dylan at that basketball game, and you’ve been sharing *disgusting* looks with her in school. A couple of lovesick puppies is what you two were. If anything, Dex did us all a favor by outing you guys so the rest of us wouldn’t have to suffer watching you two trying to sneak around.”

Sensing that his attempt at humor fell flat, Justin turns and proceeds to grab an ice pack from the freezer, placing it promptly on his face, and turns to head to his temporary room.

Dylan

THE SMELL OF PANCAKES greets my nose as I wake up on Saturday morning. As the events of yesterday come rushing back to me, I smile.

Mom and I are okay.

Zac and I are *great*.

I have my scholarship.

Things are finally working out.

Making my way down the stairs I can hear voices. There is Mom's, which isn't a surprise, but then I also hear a familiar gruff tone that sends zaps of excitement dancing across my skin.

Zac?

Picking up my pace I fly into the kitchen and see Mom pouring Zac a cup of coffee.

Okay...

What is more surprising is that Justin is sitting next to Zac on a barstool, looking more than a little uncomfortable.

"Dylan! Good morning!" Mom's voice comes off chipper. *Too* chipper. She is dressed professionally with a blazer and

slim fitted pants. “I’m off to brunch with the ladies. I’ll see you all later.”

She grabs her purse and bounds out the door.

Zac gives Justin a not-so-gentle nudge in the arm. “Now,” he commands in a tone that warrants no arguments.

“Dylan—” Justin starts, avoiding looking at me. “It was me.” His voice is quiet, and I know exactly what he means.

“The pictures—”

He cuts me off, nodding. “But I didn’t send them to everyone!” he quickly amends.

“What... Zac, what’s going on?”

“In a nutshell? This sicko,” he points his thumb to Justin, “turned out to be a peeping Tom. He decided to take pictures of us, and send them to the one man he knew they would wreck—”

“Dex,” I whisper, the dots finally connecting. Suddenly I can’t breathe. “Dex sent them? Why?” Why would Dex do that? We ended on good terms. No big fight. He was someone I trusted...

“It’s stupid, don’t worry about it...” Justin mumbles.

“No,” I insist, “If you know, tell me.” I turn to Zac now. “*Tell me.*”

“He was mad... mad that you put out for Zac and not him...” Justin finishes his thought, still unable to meet my eyes. I’ve never seen him so embarrassed.

Zac, on the other hand, is looking at me with such open admiration that I find myself wondering how I could have ever wasted a moment of my time on someone like Dex.

Justin hands over his phone and lets me read through a text message thread. From the few that I read it’s obvious that Justin was horrified when he realized that Dex sent the pictures. Dex, on the other hand, comes across as vile and vindictive. And yeah, what he says about me? Truly terrible. When we were together he had never pressured me in any way

to take things further physically, so seeing him so ticked off about it is jarring. The room is silent as I take it all in.

“So... what do you want to do?” Zac asks me.

“Do?”

“About Dex,” He clarifies.

“Well... we have proof in these messages that Dex sent the pictures. Could we report him, maybe to his school?”

“We could.” It’s Justin that answers.

“But that would also incriminate Justin.” Zac finishes. “Not that I give a damn about him. As far as I am concerned, he deserves whatever he gets.”

“Agreed,” concurs Justin. “I was an idiot. I hurt you, Dylan, and I’m sorry. Dex has to pay for what he did.”

“It’s up to you, babe. What do you want to do?”

I think about it. Dex is clearly working through something. He caused a lot of hurt, not only to me, but to my family, and deserves to have some repercussions. Still, I don’t feel an ounce of regret with my decision.

“Nothing.”

The two boys stare at me, dumbfounded.

“You want to do... nothing?” It’s Justin who breaks the silence.

“That’s right.”

They glance between each other, and thankfully let it drop. We finish our breakfast, and Zac unceremoniously kicks Justin out.

Dylan

THE MELODIC SOUND OF our doorbell chimes through the house. With a groan, I pull my mouth away from Zac's and climb off his lap.

"We could pretend nobody's home," he suggests with a raspy voice.

"Tempting. But that's a picture window," I gesture to the living room window that points directly at the couch we are curled up on. "And my guess is that whoever is at the door won't hesitate to peek in."

"Then they'll get a show." Zac reaches for my waist to tug me back to him.

I lightly smack Zac's arm away and walk to the door. I open it and freeze.

Marnie stands before me, her gaze is locked firmly on her crisp, white tennis shoes, and she's clutching the largest basket of muffins I've ever laid eyes on.

"Hi?" The word comes out as a question, and it breaks her from her trance.

"Oh! Dylan. Hey?" She jumps at my greeting as if surprised to see me.

"What's up?"

“I thought... maybe... we should talk?”

With a wave of my arm, I usher her inside, where we are left standing in a stilted silence. Oh man, this is uncomfortable.

“Is anyone else home?” she asks timidly, peeking around me.

“Yeah. Zac’s in the living room.” I cringe when I mention his name, though I shouldn’t.

“Hey, Marnie,” Zac calls from the neighboring room, raising an awkward hand in greeting. Surprisingly, she returns it with a wave before turning her attention to me.

“Maybe we can talk on the porch?” she suggests.

Wordlessly, we make our way back out the door, muffin basket in tow. On an exhale Marnie sets the basket on the ground, plops her butt down onto the center of the outdoor loveseat and buries her face in her hands. “I’m sorry, Dylan, I am a total brat.”

“You’re... sorry?”

She nods. “I should have talked to you when the pictures came out. Listened to your side of the story. *Been there for you.* That must have been terrible.”

“Thanks, Marn. I appreciate you saying that.” And I do. A lot. Although I am still wary of her motives.

“And I swear, I didn’t know anything about what my mom did. With your scholarship, I mean. I only found out about it yesterday when she said you got your scholarship back. That... that was messed up.”

I nod in agreement. “It was. But it’s all sorted out now.”

“Can you tell me what happened? From the beginning?”

Sensing my apprehension, she quickly adds, “I’m not accusing you of anything. I know Zac didn’t cheat on me with you. Or anyone else. But I’ll be honest, I’m not really sure what happened...” She trails off, and I dive into the story. About how Zac and I grew closer after they had broken up and

how I probably had feelings for him even when they were together.

Okay, so I definitely had feelings for him then, but I'm still not ready to fully admit that bit—no need to rub salt in any wounds.

I even come clean about suggesting to Zac that he break up with her in the first place. To my surprise, she isn't angry. She just sits there, her face impassive.

Knowing that the worst, at least as far as it will hurt her, is over, I delve into the circumstances surrounding the pictures. How someone took them, Dex sent them, and *everyone* saw them. Most importantly, I clear up the timeline. Although, I don't have it in me to tell her *who* took the photos. Her dad *is* the police chief. If she had that information, she would almost be required to report it, right?

Nope, best I keep that bit to myself.

After spewing my word vomit of an explanation, I feel lighter, finally letting go of a weight that I didn't even know that I was holding.

"Can I ask you something, Marnie?" I ask cautiously. I don't want to push her and derail our reformed friendship.

"Of course."

"Are *you* okay? All year you've been... different. At first, I thought it was because of Zac but I think it started before you and him got together."

She lets out a sigh. "Yeah... I don't know, I guess I've been under a lot of pressure. It seemed like nothing could go right for me and finding out that you were dating my ex-boyfriend was the icing on the craptastic cake."

"What do you mean?"

Marnie drops her head into her palms. "I think I've been jealous of you all year, Dyl. And not just a *little* jealous, but so jealous that I started to hate everything you did. Our whole lives we were equals, evenly matched. But then this year, I don't know. I felt inferior. You got into Heathwood, which is

awesome! I applied there too, actually. But didn't get in. Not that I even wanted to go—that was all my mom. You won Homecoming queen. Again, I was happy for you, but it was still something that you won over me. And the entire time I was with Zac I knew that he wasn't all in. Gosh, he would ask about you all the time... and then you *did* end up getting Zac. It was all too much for me and clearly, I didn't cope well."

"I didn't realize..." And I hadn't. "If it makes you feel any better, I was jealous of you the whole time you and Zac were together too."

She turns to me, and our eyes meet. Before either of us can help it, we burst into laughter.

"Boys are dumb," she says, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Agreed. But everything else is okay? Boys aside."

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Mom's been putting more pressure on me than usual this year, so there's been added stress there. You know, trying to mold me into her 'perfect' daughter. Honestly, it's exhausting. I mean, I like spending time with her, but she takes everything too far. I'm only sorry I ruined our senior year. I spent the whole year obsessing over my image and trying to make Mom happy that I forgot to enjoy it, you know?"

I can't imagine what it must be like for Marnie. To have the crushing pressure of her mom hanging over everything she does. It's surprising she didn't crack earlier.

"And I'm sorry that I didn't talk to you about Zac earlier."

She laughs at this. "Honestly, I don't think I would have handled the news any better if you had. Although, it would have been nice to hear it from you directly, it hurt that you didn't think you could talk to me. Though I understand why you felt you couldn't." She eyes up the basket of baked goods. "Soo, can we dig into this bad boy?" she questions in a sheepish tone.

"Thought you would never ask." I don't try to hide my grin as she dives in and pulls out a double chocolate muffin, taking a large bite and groaning.

And just like that, my best friend is back.

“So... you and Zac?” Marnie asks between bites, wagging her brows.

“Yeah.” My voice is a whisper as I try to bite back my grin to stifle the pure happiness streaming from me. “I’m really sorry, Marnie. I didn’t mean for it to happen. I didn’t want to feel anything for him. That’s why we kept it a secret at first. I didn’t want to screw up our friendship. Not that our plan worked...”

She holds her hand up to stop my rambling. “Dyl, it’s fine. Really. Watching you with him these past few weeks... even I had to admit that there was something real there. You were right. Zac and I weren’t meant to be. It was better it ended before I got in even deeper.”

We talk for a while longer, until a chill sets in and Marnie stands to leave.

I walk her to her car, but before she closes her door, she offers a final thought.

“You and Zac are good together,” she says out of the blue, “And he’s a good guy. I hate that I’ve been saying such terrible things about him. The way he looks at you...” she trails off shaking her head. “Well, he never looked at me like that. He’s never looked at *anyone* like that.”

“I think we’re good together too.” It makes me giddy to say this out loud. I would prefer to shout it from the rooftops, but this calm conversation is fine, too.

Marnie gazes off at the house behind me, eyes unfocused, lost in thought. “I think he loves you,” she whispers.

Her words stun me. I mean, I might be in love with *him*, but I wouldn’t expect Zac to jump on that band wagon so soon.

“What? No, we’re not... he doesn’t...”

“Of course I love you.” My head whips around.

Zac stands on the porch in his socks. His hands are tucked in his front jean pockets, and a shy, boyish smirk graces his

handsome face.

In that moment, the world fades away. The roar of Marnie's motor growing fainter in the background is the only indication I have that she has left. Slowly, Zac walks toward me. When we are toe to toe, his hands reach up to my face, thumbs rubbing under my eyes.

Great. I'm crying. *Again.*

I swear, I've shed more tears in the last three months than in the last ten years combined.

Zac lowers his forehead to mine. "I'm so stupidly in love with you, Dylan. Have been for weeks. And I'm so, *so* sorry for everything that you've gone through because of that."

It takes a solid few seconds for my voice to work. Finally, I squeak out an "okay." Zac laughs nervously at my less than enthused response, and I take the time to memorize his face. He's so open. And vulnerable. And the tenderness in his eyes as he looks at me is enough to turn my legs to jelly. Jolted into action, I throw my arms around his neck in a hug. "I love you too."

Zac

“ I love you too.”

She loves me.

Dylan Park *loves me.*

She pulls back from our embrace, cupping my face and rubbing her thumbs under my eyes as I had done to her earlier.

Am I crying?

“Yeah, you are.” She giggles through a few tears of her own.

Oops. I asked that out loud?

“Yeah, you did.” Dylan laughs harder now.

“Well, crap.”

We both break into a fit of laughter right there on her front lawn. I’ll own it. It wasn’t the most romantic of love confessions. But the opportunity presented itself, so I took advantage. What was I supposed to do, let Dylan stand there, doubting how deeply my feelings ran for her?

Absolutely not. I’d do anything for this girl and I hope she knows that.

Dylan

“ARE YOU SURE YOU want to do this?” Marnie asks as we pull up in front of the familiar two-story brick house.

“No.” I don’t *want* to do this. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t *have* to.

“Do you want me to come in with you?”

I shake my head, the nerves lodging a ball in my throat that is impossible to speak over. This is something I have to do alone.

“I’m right here if you need me. Just call.” She reaches over and places a reassuring hand over mine, and for the first time in months I am transported back to what things used to be like with Marnie. Someone I can trust, share my secrets with.

“Same here!” Tess pokes her head from the back seat, making me laugh.

“You sure you just want to talk?” asks Carla, who gives the excessively large package of toilet paper resting on the seat beside her a hefty pat. She was hoping for a more... vengeful outing. Specifically, in the form of TP’ing the elaborately trimmed hedges that span the lawn in front of us.

While I’m not sure where Carla and I stand in terms of our friendship, though I do appreciate that she chose to come and

support me today. Her absence lately wasn't shocking. She is flighty by nature, which only made her distancing herself from me and Marnie and all the related drama almost expected. Though, her support would have been even more appreciated a few weeks ago.

“Thanks, guys. Really.”

Before I can procrastinate any longer, I unclip my seatbelt and shove out of Marnie's car.

I have never been uncomfortable in this house, but that was before everything changed. Today I'm terrified.

With a shaky arm I lift my finger to the doorbell.

After a few short moments the door swings open. The person behind it drops the ceramic mug that he had been holding onto the cement stoop and the handle cracks off instantly.

“Hey, Dex. I think we need to talk.”

IF I FEEL LIKE a wreck, Dex looks it. We're talking serious destruction here. The stubble on his face and bags under his eyes suggest that he hasn't shaved or slept in days. He still has the natural good looks that his height and physique afford him, but that is where the appeal ends.

Actually, now that I have a chance to take him in, he is significantly skinnier than I remember. Almost sickly thin.

“Are you surprised to see me?” What a ridiculous question for me to ask. Obviously, he is surprised. He dropped one of his mother's fancy mugs mere seconds ago.

He lets out a laugh that I'm shocked to hear is genuine. “Honestly? I expected Morgan to show up Friday night. At least, that was when Justin told me that I was outed.”

Dex is right. Storming over to Dex's house in a blaze of fury is something that Zac would have done. The old Zac. The new Zac let me decide how to handle Dex and I am grateful for that.

“You haven’t punched me yet,” Dex observes. “Did you want to come inside?” There is an air of caution surrounding his question, as there should be. Dex should be terrified of me right now. Not that I would ever hurt him, but I certainly have the power to in this moment.

“No. Why did you do it, Dex?” There’s no need to beat around the bush.

With a long exhale he tugs on his hair with both hands. “I don’t have an excuse, Dylan. I’m so incredibly sorry. And I know that my apology probably means less than nothing to you.”

I continue to stare at him, needing a *far* better explanation.

“I don’t know. Justin sent me those pictures and I spiraled. I was so mad and I wasn’t thinking. I vented to people who gave me terrible advice. I was jealous and bitter and I did something so stupid that I regretted almost immediately. Honestly, at some point I just became so consumed with jealousy that I was convinced you cheated on me.”

My jaw drops. *He thought I was a cheater?*

“I know that my thoughts were way off!” He quickly adds, throwing up his hands in surrender. “But I was... hurt and I wanted to hurt you, too. And Zac.”

Dex puffs out a few more breaths and gives his hair another good tug. “I never told you, Dylan, but... I was in love with you. When you broke up with me you tore out my heart and stomped it into dust. I played it cool because I thought that maybe with time you would realize how great we were together. But that never happened...”

I gulp. How do I respond to that?

“You never loved me, Dex. You don’t do this to people you love.” My voice is robotic, devoid of emotion. Because I really don’t have any. I am so over being angry with him. And his explanation only makes him sound insane. I, of all people, know what jealousy can do to a person. Watching Zac and Marnie together had proven just how mad it could drive you. “Jealousy and anger don’t excuse what you did. You made

your own choices. Nobody made you do this. This was all on you. *You hurt me.*”

He lets out another deep exhale, letting his head fall into the door jamb with a loud *thump*. “I know. I’m a piece of trash. Absolute garbage. Dylan, please let me know if there is anything I can do to fix this. It’s been eating me alive.”

I take in his appearance once more. The bloodshot eyes, bony figure, overgrown greasy hair, gray skin. This has been going on for longer than a few days, when he first realized that Zac and I knew what he had done. No, He has been feeling guilty for *weeks*.

Then it hits me. *I am* the heart under Dex’s floorboards. The guilt of what he has done really has driven him to near madness.

“I could turn you in. To your school. To the *police*,” I emphasize the point to make sure it sticks. “I *should* turn you in.”

His skin goes paler, if that is even possible. “I know,” he croaks. “And I would deserve it. I mean it, Dylan. Whatever you need to do to fix this, please do it. Even if it means screwing up my future. I deserve it.” Yet there is genuine remorse in his eyes. They are very much like windows, in that they bare his soul to everyone who sees them, whether he wants them to or not. And right now, they are showing me that he is hurting because of the pain he caused me.

What do I do now? I really could turn him in to the authorities. But as he mentioned, that would completely derail his future. One could argue that he derailed his own future by sending out the pictures, but is a lapse in judgment enough to sentence someone to a potentially bleak life? In some cases, yes. But in Dex’s? I’m not so sure. Until all of this he really *had* been a good guy. Straitlaced, polite, friendly. If it weren’t for the gaunt figure standing before me, I still wouldn’t believe him capable of it.

Then there is Justin to think about. If I report Dex, he will get dragged through everything as well. He may be rougher around the edges than Dex, but below the surface I sense there

is pain there. Something he needs to work through. Justin is redeemable.

How would I feel if I turned them in and their futures were forever derailed because of it? Simple—terrible. I would feel terrible. It wouldn't matter if their punishment matched their crime, it would eat me alive.

If I were tasked with this decision a few weeks ago, when there were still whispers in the halls, or even a few days ago, when my own future was still up in the air, I probably would come to a different conclusion. But now, after the gossip has died and I have secured my place at Heathwood, I am at peace with my final choice.

“I'm not going to turn you in, Dex. You know that you hurt me, and things could have turned out much worse.” He nearly collapses with relief. “But I'll be keeping tabs on you, and I swear if you ever pull something like this again or hurt another girl, you'll regret it.” It is the most threatening I have ever sounded, and I have to pat myself on the back, because internally I am shaking.

The moment I say the words a weight lifts from me. I hadn't realized how cathartic this conversation would be, but it truly helped to calm me even further.

“I was such an idiot. Am *still* such an idiot. I never deserved you, Dylan. Not that I think Morgan is any better. But I'm sorry. I know I've said it already, but I need you to know that I mean it. I'm not asking for your forgiveness, but please know this apology is genuine.”

I do know that. But he is also right in assuming that I won't be forgiving him anytime soon. One day, maybe, but for now I am happy to try to forget and move past it.

As I turn to leave another thought occurs to me, forcing me back to Dex.

“What is this feud between you and Justin, anyway?”

It's a question that Zac, the person Justin is closest to, doesn't even know the answer to. Yet after all the pain their petty arguments have caused me, I feel entitled to the answer.

Dex must agree with my unspoken thought process because after only a few seconds of consideration I see his face deflate.

“Justin thinks I ruined his life.”

“What?”

Dex nods. “That’s why he started hating me years ago, because in his eyes if it weren’t for me his parents would still be together. They’d have a happy little family, or whatever. Over the years it’s morphed into the rivalry it is today, but... yeah, that’s how it started.”

That... is not the answer I was suspecting. In my mind it was always a fight over a girl or some other teenage hormone fueled angst. What could a preteen boy at the time have possibly done to cause a married couple to split?

Actually, it’s none of my business. And truly, I don’t care enough to dig into this right now. So I leave it at that and head back to the waiting car.

Zac

IT'S THURSDAY AND DYLAN and I are in our typical study room 'wrapping up our assignment.' We finished that puppy weeks ago, but as far as Mr. Ellison is concerned, we need this last day to work out the final kinks.

This past week has been great. Dylan and I are publicly together with nothing over our heads. No glaring gazes in the halls, no revocation of scholarships, and no angry family members. Even Marnie has been friendly toward us since our talks over the weekend. But as Dylan sits across from me in our small study room, I get the sense that something is bothering her.

"Is something wrong, Dyl?" I probe cautiously as she lays out her pens.

"Huh? No, I'm fine."

She's not fine.

"Seriously." My hand reaches out to take a hold of hers. "What's up?"

Dylan bites on her bottom lip in an action that I find adorable, but the tapping of her foot shows her nerves.

"Well... it's just... I was wondering about prom," she spits out at last.

“Prom? What about it?”

“Are we going?” She focuses on our intertwined hands, her voice barely a whisper.

Didn’t she see my note?

“Uh, Of course we are,” I say. Though, now that I think about it, I don’t remember her actually giving me a response to my *excellent* proposal. “Why would you think we aren’t?”

“It’s just that you never actually *asked*. I wasn’t sure if you had something more important that you were going to do that night.” She shrugs it off and turns sheepishly away from me.

I look her dead in the eyes before responding. “Dylan, there is nothing more important to me than you. Didn’t you see my note?”

“Note?”

“In your *Matched* report. I was your top match, right?”

Her eyes widen, and she begins rummaging around in her bag with such vigor that her precise organization system is shot to hell.

“I never opened it!” she exclaims, flipping through a binder. “There was just so much going on that day I must have forgotten.”

At last, she pulls out the pink envelope. Even after being shoved in her bag for almost two months, it appears as pristine as the day they were tacked on our lockers.

She slices open the seal and rips out the papers, her eyes moving so quickly back and forth across that page that I am surprised she is comprehending anything that she is reading.

Dylan’s hand flies to her mouth and I can see the smile in her eyes. She found it.

Part of the fun of the whole *Matched* game is that you can write an anonymous note to whoever ends up being your number one match. Most people use this note to write more information about themselves. Hobbies, favorite foods, pet

peeves, etc. But since I knew my top match would be Dylan, I took the opportunity to be a little more creative.

Her hand shakes as she reads my note aloud, and a blush of embarrassment creeps up my cheeks. “*Dylan, will you do me the honor of attending prom with me?*” Short, sweet, and to the point. “But... how?” she sputters.

“How what?”

“We filled these out before we were even together. How did you know you would want to ask me?” Her eyes widen again. “Wait! How did you know we would even match?”

A smirk plays on my face. “Dyl, even if we weren’t together, I had every intention of asking you to prom. Should my earlier advances have failed, at least I would have had a chance to woo you on prom night.” I give her a wink and she leans over the table to give my arm a playful slap.

“As for how I knew we would match... Didn’t any of the questions on the *Matched* survey look familiar to you?” She shakes her head, but then slows as realization falls over her.

“Oh my GOSH! Your stupid quizzes?”

I rub my neck. “Only the first one,” I admit. Because yeah, I totally bribed Aspen to give me an advanced copy of the surveys, which I then stole questions from and slipped them—very stealthily, I might add—into the initial quiz I gave Dylan so that I could learn her responses.

I know that Dylan loves me, but I’m not sure if she will be mad at me for not playing by the rules of the game. It’s not like I *copied* her, though. Which was my other plan.

“But... we did quizzes after Valentine’s Day. After the surveys were turned in.”

I lift a shoulder. “Oh, those were all real. I thought they were fun.”

She leans back in her chair, visibly relaxed, as a content smile plays on her face “That’s... a lot of effort,” she says at last. “And really sweet.”

My face flushes and I clear my throat to feel less awkward about my—apparently, *not* excellent?—promposal. “Sooo... will you?”

“Of course I’ll go to prom with you, Zac!” she squeals. “Do you mind if I call my mom? I’ve got a lot of details to take care of.”

“Go ahead.”

And just like the day she got her acceptance and scholarship notification; she huddles in the corner for some semblance of privacy. Through the squeals and laughter, I hear on both ends I can’t help but roll my eyes. I love that my girl and her mom have made up, but start to grow wary as their conversation turns to dress styles and corsages.

I haven’t seen Dylan smile so big in weeks. And I’m the reason for it. Nothing compares to that feeling.

Epilogue

Zac

THE FIRM SOLES OF my black leather dress shoes thump up the wooden steps of Dylan's front porch. My hands are sweaty and the plastic case containing the corsage starts to slip out of my grip. I am nervous. Taking a deep inhale at the front door, I gave it a few sharp knocks and step back for it to be opened.

In the movies, it's always the girl's parents who open the door to let the date in. They call down for their daughter, who pauses at the top of a large staircase in a gown that renders the man speechless. Eventually the girl makes her way dramatically down the stairs and after a few sputtered pleasantries, they are off.

I have never technically taken a girl to a formal dance, so this is the scene that I am expecting.

Actually, in my mental scenario it is *Gray* who would open the door. He would probably scan over my fancy suit and offer some backhanded compliment before forcing me to plow past him to barge my way into his house to see his sister.

Much to my surprise, it isn't either of these scenarios who greet me at the door, but Dylan's beaming smile. And boy, am I glad I stepped back earlier because she is gorgeous.

We're talking jaw-on-the-ground, heart-stoppingly gorgeous.

Her dress has spaghetti straps and a plunging neckline with some type of sparkly mesh that keeps it modest. The skirt is light and full with a slit that runs up her leg.

Nothing indecent, of course, but *stunning*.

And then I take in her face. Dylan wears the slightest dusting of makeup, similar to what she always wears, but she has a certain glow today. Her curls are swept back into a loose bun, looking formal but effortless.

My tongue is glued to the top of my mouth.

"You look good, Zac." I have been so focused on taking in my adorable girlfriend that I hadn't noticed that she was sizing me up as well. Her hand reaches up and rubs down my tie.

Wow. That feels nice.

Wait. I haven't complimented her yet.

"Dylan. You look—"

"Pictures!" chirps a cheerful Bette from the top of the stairs. She makes her way down the steps with a large camera dangling from the strap around her neck.

In front of me, Dylan rolls her eyes dramatically as she reaches down to grab my hand.

The past few weeks we have all been on much better terms. I can't be sure if Bette is trying to overcompensate for being so hard on me earlier, or if she is just genuinely happy that I am with her daughter, but either way she is certainly warmer towards me. In fact, *she* is usually the one to invite me over to the house for dinner or game nights. I actually found myself having to check with Dylan that it was okay for me to be around that much so that she wouldn't get tired of me.

After the obligatory photos I help Dylan into my truck and we are off.

Dylan

A LOCAL BANQUET HALL has been rented out for our Senior Prom. The theme: a night at the movies. There are oversized film reels and deep red velvet draped along the walls. It is classy and elegantly done, like 1940s Hollywood. Each place setting has a champagne flute etched with the date and sophisticated dinnerware.

After taking a few pictures at the entrance, Zac and I make our way to the table where Marnie is already seated with Tess and Brandon. The last time I spoke to Tess, she told me that she planned to come alone, so seeing her with a date is surprising. And if the expression on Zac's face is anything to go by, his cousin hadn't informed him that he would be attending, either.

We spend the next hour talking, eating, and taking goofy pictures. Then the DJ starts playing a few group dance songs to get everyone warmed up.

A short while later a slow song streams through the room. And to my joy and relief, it doesn't carry the droll of country music. I turn to the dance floor and gasp. Because heading toward me with a beautiful smile and an outstretched hand is Zac.

"Want to dance?" he whispers in my ear. With a nod of my head, he whisks me out onto the dance floor.

It has been six months and twenty-five days since I last danced with Zac, which in itself feels like a crime. But being here with him now makes it worth the wait.

As soon as we hit the edge of the wooden dance floor his arms wrap around me, gathering at the small of my back and

pulling our bodies flush. My hands move up over his shoulders and wrap easily around his neck.

Unlike when we danced at Homecoming, there is no awkwardness here. I am so entranced by the handsome boy in front of me I don't even look at the other couples on the dance floor.

We sway together in silence and my head falls to rest on his chest, right over his heart. I can hear it beating even through the thick suit jacket. Zac pulls me closer and ducks his head so that his cheek is resting on top of mine.

"I like dancing with you," I whisper.

Zac pulls back to gaze down into my eyes, his thumbs making small circles along my back.

"Me too."

We sway together silently, but I sense a shift in Zac.

"Is something bothering you?"

"Huh? Oh, I... I wanted to talk to you about me going to Clayton Community College. Following you to Heathwood. Is that something you're still hoping for?"

My heart sinks. *He didn't get in.*

"Oh. I mean, it would have been a blast, but really Zac, we can make anything work—"

"Dylan, I got in. Found out right before I picked you up tonight, actually." He chuckles.

I pull back and take in the excitement on his face. Zac is *never* excited about anything academic related. This is a huge deal.

"Of course you did!" I say.

He laughs. "Got myself a scholarship, too."

"No way!"

"Apparently they received a stellar recommendation."

"From who?"

Zac throws his head back, letting loose a louder laugh. “Mrs. Lorna Jacobs.”

“No *way!*” I repeat.

He nods. “It wasn’t all her, though. They looked at my records. Apparently, they were impressed with the boost in my grades this past year.” He shrugs, but there is pure pride on his face.

Zac is smiling down at me, his face so serene, so brutally and undeniably happy, that I don’t doubt for a second that there is anyone he would rather be with in this moment. Maybe even ever.

Everyone around us falls away as I curl up into his chest, one hand gripping the collar of his tux with the other clinging desperately to his lapel.

It doesn’t matter that I might not be the first girl Zac has held close. That there are other people on this very dance floor who, mere weeks ago, I would have been watching with envy as they confidently jumped and swayed to the music. All of that feels so insignificant in this moment. When Zac removes one hand from my back, using it to tip my chin up to him, I find myself mirroring his smile. Slowly, he lowers his head for a kiss and all insecurities bubble out of me and float away like dandelion puffs.

For the first time in years, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am enough. That I don’t need to change myself or settle out of fear of rejection. I have Zac, a good hearted, confident, *amazing* boy. And he has me. And that’s not going to change.

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About the Author

Anastasia resides in rural Michigan with her high school sweetheart (AKA her incredible husband) and two sons.

After leaving her corporate job to stay home with her children, Anastasia fell back into her love of reading and, consequently, writing! When not writing or immersing herself in fictional worlds, she enjoys baking, running, reading, and coming up with ways to entertain her toddlers.

Thank you for reading and reviewing!