

LINDA KAGE



NEVER

A Young Adult
Romance Novel

Gonna

HAPPEN

unless...

never gonna happen

Linda Kage



For Lydia Marie.

*Since this is the first book of mine you're planning to read, I guess I better dedicate it to you! I hope you like it. But even if you don't... Mama still loves **you**.*

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Never Gonna Happen

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TODAY WAS THE DAY.

I was finally going to secure a date to the school's masquerade ball for Halloween, and I knew just the girl I was going to ask. Carmen Morales was the prettiest, smartest, loveliest, most amazing girl in the tenth grade, and she had broken up with her boyfriend of nine months the week before, meaning she was free to pursue.

Sure, every available guy from the ninth to twelfth grade wanted a chance with her, but *I* was going to be the one to win her. And do you want to know how I knew that? Well, I'll tell you.

Because yesterday, I had subtly struck up a conversation with her. And when I'd learned her car was in the shop, I'd offered to be her chauffeur myself, and she had *agreed*. She'd agreed so eagerly, in fact, that I just knew she wanted me to ask her to the dance.

And I couldn't think of a better time to pop my big question than this morning on our special ride to school together.

After pulling into the driveway of a brown-and-white Tudor-style home, I checked my face in the rearview mirror, dusted a fleck of dry toothpaste off the corner of my lip, then did a quick sniff check to my armpits. When I decided all was good in the aroma department, I popped a breath mint between my teeth for extra measure and glanced expectantly toward the front door of the house.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I murmured under my breath, wondering what was taking so long.

I was going to lose my nerve if *someone* didn’t get their tail in gear.

Finally, after what felt like a century of waiting, the front door opened and a tall, slim girl exited, her honey-blond hair fluttering in the wind and whipping into her face, obstructing her view, along with the tail of a bright green, hand-knit scarf that was wrapped around her neck.

As she hefted a backpack over one shoulder and then hugged a pile of books to her chest with her other arm, I shook my head, wondering why she didn’t just put her books into the bag.

Because knowing her, she’d trip and—yep...

There she went, stumbling over her little brother’s bicycle that had been left abandoned and lying in the middle of the yard. Up flew her books, scattering all over the grass, and down she face-planted hard among them.

I winced, sitting up a little straighter to make sure she was okay, but she sprang upright so quickly that I relaxed back behind the wheel and drummed my fingers against my thigh impatiently.

She was fine.

Then I sighed as she paused every few seconds from collecting her fallen books to see better, wasting more and more precious seconds with each useless sweep of the hand as she tried to tuck her hair behind her ear, then push the scarf out of the way, only for the wind to shove it all right back into her eyes again.

News flash: it wasn’t going to stay put in this weather.

Why hadn’t she just pulled the heaping mess up into a ponytail or tucked the scarf inside her magenta jacket on a day so windy?

Girls.

Who understood them?

I tapped the horn, letting her know I wasn't getting any younger over here. At this pace, school would be over before she even made it to my Jeep Cherokee.

She cast me a nasty glare before yanking up her last book and surging to her feet. A huge, wet grass stain coated one knee on her blue jeans.

I heaved out another sigh.

Hopeless. She was so completely hopeless.

The door to the front passenger side jerked open, and the wind nearly ripped it from her grasp. But she held on so firmly it only wrenched her a couple of steps back.

I sighed, the third sigh within thirty seconds because, seriously, no one could be more pitiful than her.

Finally, straightening herself, she began to climb inside, muttering, "I'm fine. Thanks so much for your concern."

Yeah, I could tell she was fine. Didn't care.

Hooking my thumb over my shoulder, I shook my head and said, "Nuh-uh. Back seat today."

She froze, turning wide eyes my way with her backside only inches from landing on the seat next to mine. Mouth opening wide, she shrieked, "Are you freaking kidding me?"

"Totally freaking serious," I deadpanned.

"Unbelievable."

A sneer followed. Then she rolled her eyes and climbed back out of the front seat before slamming the door too hard, but thankfully not breaking the glass in the window. A second later, the back door opened and she lumbered in, grumbling under her breath before she fell heavily into the seat, making the entire Jeep rock.

I'm pretty sure I didn't want to know what she was saying about me, but again...didn't care. If I was going to be forced to drive her to school and back home every single day, then—

Wait, what?

Oh, you thought this girl was Carmen Morales? The heap of a mess riding in the back seat of my SUV?

Um...no.

That would be a big no. A gigantic no.

A not-even-close no.

Actually, I'd say I was kind of offended you'd even think I would ever treat the prettiest, smartest, loveliest, most amazing girl in the tenth grade, Carmen "the Queen Bee" Morales, so rudely.

Really.

No, this unwanted tagalong tragedy was just Peyton.

Yeah, I should probably explain. But don't worry, I *always* had to explain Peyton, so I was used to it.

The thing was: Peyton's mom and my mom were best friends.

You'd think that should cover the gist of it. But, no... Oh, no.

Again, not even close.

You see, Mom and Aunt Donna (as I'd always called Peyton's mother) were not simply best friends; I'm saying they were the-same-person-inhabiting-two-different-bodies kind of bosom buddies. They grew up next door to each other, sat out of gym class together when one was sick, were arrested for keying some jerk's car together when they were teens, then they went to college and lived in the same dorm room. There, they met their respective husbands (Peyton's and my dad) on the same night and got married within a year of each other, only to find houses on the same block, set up a business together, and get pregnant with their first babies three months apart. Those first babies being, yeah, me and Peyton.

They even coordinated our names to go together. At first, they decided Peyton would take my last name for her first name, and I'd take her last name as my first, so we'd be Royce Kinsey and Kinsey Royce. But then, our mothers realized that wouldn't work because they had already planned before we

were even born that we'd get married someday. At which point, it'd sound really strange for Peyton to go from Kinsey Royce to taking my surname and becoming Kinsey Kinsey.

Yes, our moms had thought it through *that* far. I'm not even kidding.

So they used each other's maiden names instead, dubbing us York Kinsey and Peyton Royce.

And the girl had been forced on me ever since, from the moment she was born.

You think I exaggerate? Hmph. I wish.

Let's elaborate.

We shared a crib for naptime, took our first steps together (but only because Peyton was a little overachiever who just *had* to start walking at her nine months to my twelve), took baths together when we were toddlers, we had our "first day of school" pictures taken together, along with every stupid year after that, went trick-or-treating together, took swimming lessons together. Vacations. Yearly doctor's check-ups. Dentist appointments. We even got braces in middle school together.

Honestly, there wasn't a single memory from my childhood where Peyton wasn't right there beside me, experiencing it too.

It was always let Peyton play with you, give Peyton half your candy, don't let Peyton sit alone at lunch, drive Peyton to school, be nice to Peyton.

Peyton, Peyton, Peyton.

We were treated like twins, yet always expected to fall in love one day and get married. The only problem with that was I didn't *love* Peyton. And I'm fairly certain she didn't even like me in return.

We were complete opposites, except no, we were even further apart than that. We couldn't be compared to night and day because those were still measurements of time, connecting them. And there was absolutely *no* connection between Peyton and me. We were more like night and...banana. We had

absolutely nothing in common, except that our mothers were two of the most irritatingly pushy, intrusive people on the planet.

Don't get me wrong. I adored our moms—swear to God—but they had to let this stupid notion go because one thing had become abundantly clear to me over the years. I would never marry Peyton Royce. I think it was my one goal in life, actually.

So... Sorry, Mom and Aunt Donna, but you two just weren't going to get your way on this.

Someday, they'd be forced to stop grinning like they knew something we didn't, and they'd quit spouting, *never say never*, to us because I just did.

Gauntlet dropped.

Peyton and I? It was *never* gonna happen.

Behind me, Peyton groaned. "Please don't tell me *Wes* is riding with us again."

See what she did right there, by saying *us* and calling my Jeep—mine—ours, like she was actually entitled to any of it or had any say in who got to ride in it?

Didn't that just grate on your nerves?

Well, it did mine.

It'd serve her right if I told her *Wes was* the other passenger riding with us today. If there was anyone on earth she loathed more than she loathed me, it was my best friend. That was probably why I hung out with him as much as I did. *Wes* liked to have fun and mess around and pick on her. And Peyton was never amused. She'd always been a fun hater like that. I think she was *allergic* to fun.

I mean, she was allergic to everything else, so it made sense.

"Nope, sorry," I told her, kind of relishing the fact she was actually wrong about something. Ha! Know-it-all Peyton was wrong. I loved it.

“Then who gets the front seat?”

I sighed before answering. She had a habit of turning me into a sigher. I really didn't sigh with such hopeless abandon *that* much, I swear.

“Maybe I just didn't want you sitting next to me,” I volleyed back cattily, while I paused at a crosswalk to let a bunch of grade schoolers by. “Ever think of that?”

With a glance into the rearview mirror, I caught the tail end of her rolling her eyes. “Not even *you're* that big of a jerk.”

“Hey, I'm not a jerk at all.” Offended, I pulled into the driveway of another house.

“Not to the rest of the world, maybe,” she allowed, talking more to herself than to me as she leaned closer behind me so she could rest her arms on the back of the front seat and peer curiously through the front windshield at the house we had parked in front of.

“Well, you don't count,” I told her distractedly as I also watched the house with the same fixed animation, eager for the door to open.

Peyton was like a sister. I think it was written somewhere that guys had to be rude to their sisters during their teen years. So basically, I was just following the social construct here. I'd still die for her if I had to, ergo she should shut up and just deal with a bit of insolence.

Not that Peyton was paying any attention to my answer, either, which figured. She was too busy reading the big rock sign in front of the house that proclaimed the owners were the Moraleses.

“Morales? Oh... Oh no...” She moaned as if supremely disappointed before sending me an incredulous glance. “Carmen Morales? *Really?* She's a freaking bully.”

“What?” I whirled to scowl at her in surprise. “She is not. I've never seen her bully anyone.”

“Then you don't hear her talk in the bathrooms.”

Why, no. No, I didn't. Still...

“Whatever.” Sniffing, I rolled my eyes and sat facing forward again, growing more impatient and more nervous by the second. “I think she’s nice.”

“You mean, you think she’s hot. Gah. You are so typical.”

I shrugged, feeling my face heat. So maybe I was carbon copying every other guy in school and drooling after Carmen Morales. What was the big deal? Wasn’t like I’d come right out and asked her to be my girlfriend like Robbie Jimenez had yesterday.

And it certainly wasn’t enough reason for Peyton to pull out the judgy eyes as if I were being dull and unoriginal. Geez.

Needing to defend myself, I spun back toward Peyton and muttered, “Her car’s in the shop, and she needed a ride to school, so I offered. Excuse me for being polite.”

“Polite?” Peyton lifted a single eyebrow. “And I suppose you would’ve been *polite* and offered her a ride if she were still dating Brock Heaton, huh?”

If she’d still been with Brock, then *he* probably would’ve offered her a ride, and she wouldn’t have needed one. But I didn’t point that out because I had a bad feeling Peyton had a ready comeback just waiting.

I scowled instead and turned back toward the house, hating how she could always figure me out. “Just...” I lifted my hand to block her from my peripheral vision. “Try to act invisible, alright?”

With a sniff, she muttered, “Why? Are you going to ask her to the *masquerade* ball on the way to school or something?”

Unable to answer, because this mind-reading trick she was pulling was really getting on my nerves, I sent her a short frown. “Shut up.”

Peyton’s eyes widened. “Seriously?” she squawked. “You are? While I’m stuck in the back seat creeping in on you guys? Not cool, York. Not cool at all.”

“So does that mean you’re offering to walk the rest of the way to school?” I asked, brightening with hope.

She snorted. “With the pollen count as high as it is? Yeah, right.”

Ugh, I’d forgotten. Ragweed was one of the many things she was allergic to, and there just happened to be an entire field full of ragweed plants lining the road between here and school. She loved to remind me that a single one of those plants could produce up to a billion grains of pollen. They were so deadly to her, she probably wouldn’t make it alive if she tried to walk through them. So she was just going to have to creep behind Carmen and me.

“Well, what else am I supposed to do?” I hissed as the door to the Morales house came open, and Carmen swept outside into the crisp October breeze, looking posh and cheerful. “Carmen’s not the type to stay on the market long.”

She had her dark, glossy hair piled up—smart girl—so that the few strands the wind tossed around seemed artful and classy. The whole flawless look made my stomach knot with nerves. She was way too classy and flawless for me.

That’s it. Peyton was right; this was a stupid plan. What in the world had I been thinking? Even if I didn’t have an unwanted creeper tagalong lurking in the back seat, Carmen would never agree to go to the dance with me. She was so far out of my league it wasn’t even funny.

With a moaning kind of sigh, Peyton flopped back into her seat and said, “Just—oh Lord. Fine! I’ll hop out as soon as you stop at school. Maybe you’ll have a second alone to ask her then. Just don’t do it while I’m in here; that would be lame.”

I nodded as I watched Carmen approach. “Okay.” For once, Peyton made a good point. “Any other advice?”

“Yeah. Try not to be so...you.”

“Hey.” I shot her a dirty glance just as the front passenger door came open.

And there appeared Carmen, while I was busy glaring at Peyton.

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“HI! Sorry if I took too long. My cat was demanding attention and—oh!”

Carmen slid all the way in and shut her door before she noticed Peyton.

She blinked three times before sending me a questioning glance, where my face merely burned hotter in response, before she turned back toward the back seat and hesitantly said, “Hi?”

Her confusion was palpable. That told me she hadn’t been expecting any other riders, meaning she’d thought we’d be alone together, in which case maybe she’d also been expecting me to ask her to the Halloween masquerade dance on the way to school, which then meant...oh wow, she’d been planning on telling me *yes!*

My heart leaped into my throat. Carmen Morales was going to tell me *yes*.

Then I remembered, oh yeah, she was still weirded out by Peyton’s presence. Right. Had to deal with that first.

“Sorry.” I cringed out an apologetic laugh and motioned toward the back seat. “You know Peyton, right?”

“Um...yeah. Sure. Hey, Peyton.”

Peyton sent her a silent, tight-lipped wave. She typically closed down around other people. Shy introvert and all that.

I was used to it. Carmen probably thought it was rude.

I cleared my throat and reversed from the driveway, hoping Peyton's freakish ways didn't ruin everything for me. "You don't mind if she rides with us, right?"

"Uh..."

That big pause right there meant *yes*, she totally minded. But being the prettiest, smartest, loveliest, most amazing girl in the tenth grade, Carmen had to act chill about it.

She cleared her throat before saying, "No. Not at all. The more the merrier. You two are... You're cousins, right?"

Pretty much everyone confused Peyton and me as related. It would've been easier if we'd just owned it, but nope, we typically explained the truth. "Nah, we're just neighbors," I answered, giving the short version. "My mom makes me give her a ride every day."

I could practically feel Peyton bristling from the back seat, and that made me smile a little as I focused on the road ahead. It only seemed right that I annoyed her as much as she annoyed me.

From next to me, Carmen murmured, "Ah." Then she added, "That must suck."

I blinked. Because...*excuse me*? But was that a dig at Peyton?

Not cool.

I mean, sure, I myself was totally allowed to hate driving Peyton to school and annoy her and fling all kinds of cheeky, obnoxious comments her way. Brother-like privileges and all that. I even allowed Wes some ribbing rights—until he made her cry, at which point I had to shut him down. But it felt all kinds of wrong to let someone *else* belittle her. I had thought Carmen was nicer and lovelier than that.

She's a freaking bully.

Casting a glance into the back seat, I pretty much expected Peyton's gaze to say, *see what I mean*, but instead, I saw her eyes watering.

Great. Carmen had hurt her feelings. Now I was going to have to defend Peyton. I *hated* defending Peyton.

But then Peyton followed up the wet eyes with an even wetter sneeze before she began to scratch her arms.

Okay, that wasn't her typical hurt behavior. Peyton usually only did that kind of stuff when—

Oh, this was just great. She was having a freaking allergic reaction.

But to *what*?

I glanced out the window, scanning for ragweed, except we hadn't reached the field where it grew yet, and besides, she was usually okay if we just kept the windows rolled up when we passed by.

Then it struck me... Whirling toward Carmen, I blurted, "Did you just say you had a cat?"

"Yeah. Why?" She sent me an odd glance before her eyes widened in horror, and she looked down at her lap. "Ugh. Sorry! Skittles sheds like a maniac." She began to brush at her pants madly with her hands, sending dust particles and dark cat hairs spiraling up into the interior of the Jeep.

"No!" I shouted, not really meaning to shout and yet shouting anyway.

But it was too late. The damage was done.

In the back seat, coughs turned into wheezes.

"York," Peyton gasped, clutching her throat.

My fingers clenched around the steering wheel as frustration and more panic mounted. This was going to end badly. This was going to end *so* very badly.

"It's only, like, five...ten more blocks until school," I reasoned with her as she began to scratch more vigorously at the hives sprouting on her arms through all her coughing, wheezing, sneezes. "Can't you just *hold* it, or something?"

"Right. I'll just hold in my..." More coughing commenced before she choked on her own words as if her throat were

swelling closed.

Yeah, we weren't going to make it to school like this.

"What's going on?" Carmen asked, glancing back at Peyton, only to yelp and smack her hand to her chest. "Ohmigosh, is she okay?"

Grumbling under my breath, because the answer to that question could be debatable, I jerked the Jeep to the curb and slammed it into park. "She's having an allergic reaction," I explained, turning to Carmen to give her an apologetic wince. "To the cat dander on you."

"Really?" Her eyes widened even larger. "Ohmigosh, I had no idea. I'm so sorry." Again, she began to sweep the feline remains off her with her hands, littering the air with more cat.

"No!" I hollered again, lifting both hands. "Stop. You're getting more in the air by doing that, and it's only making it worse."

Carmen froze, her hands poised above her lap. "What do we do, then?" she whispered before shifting her eyes, and her eyes only, Peyton's way, where Peyton wasn't faring so well.

"You two can't stay in here together," I answered. "Someone's going to have to walk the rest of the way to school." I reached past Carmen's knee, which made her jump and swing her leg away from me, so I could get to the glove compartment. "Sorry. Excuse me." I flipped open the door and started dragging out an EpiPen, inhaler, and nasal spray.

It would've been nice if I could've fit my own stuff in *my* glove compartment that actually belonged to me, but no, over time, it had become a mini pharmacy dedicated to Peyton and her allergies.

When I shut the glove compartment door, Carmen was still sitting there, gaping at me. Maybe I should've told her she could unfreeze now. I'm not sure. But I sent her a telling look, lifting my eyebrows meaningfully, so she'd get the hint.

She blinked once, then twice, before finally yelping, "What? You don't expect *me* to be the one to walk the rest of the way to school?"

We still hadn't passed Ragweed Row; there was no way Peyton would make it through there on foot, especially not in the condition she was in. But I didn't explain any of this to Carmen.

One: I didn't want her to start thinking of Peyton as some kind of freak of nature, and two: Hello! Peyton could barely breathe because of her. And now she expected Peyton to walk?

Where the heck was that lovely, selfless, amazing front she put on at school?

It was my turn to blink at her as if I couldn't be certain if she was being for real or not, because *really*? "You're not the one having an asthma attack right now," I said logically, or at least, it sounded logical to *me*. I didn't even flood my tone with any of the impatience or exasperation I was feeling.

But Carmen huffed as if I'd forced her to walk five miles instead of five—okay, fine, *ten*—blocks.

"Unbelievable," she muttered, flinging open the door before gathering her things and climbing out. "You're a real piece of work, York Kinsey. You know that? A real *jerk*." The passenger side door gave a hearty crack as she slammed it shut.

It'd be a miracle if the glass in that window made it through the day.

I sighed, defeated, and yet not able to take a moment to mourn the loss.

Turning promptly toward the back seat, I held up the drugstore in my hands. "Which one?"

Peyton blinked, trying to focus on the items through red, watering eyes before she grabbed the inhaler and nasal spray.

As she sucked in a lungful of albuterol, I rolled down the windows to air the place out, and the coughing stopped soon thereafter.

Giving her a moment to get herself back under control because we were going to have to roll the windows back up before we passed the ragweed, I stared sullenly out the front

windshield as Carmen stormed down the sidewalk away from us.

I guess I could've just left the Jeep with Peyton and walked with Carmen the rest of the way to school. But it didn't seem safe to leave my "patient" alone just yet, in case she happened to have another flare-up.

Behind me, the sound of Peyton snuffling her nasal spray made me sigh. Not even glancing back, I tossed a box full of tissues into the back seat for her.

"Thank you," she mumbled miserably.

I'd made the right choice, I assured myself. I had.

And yet, I still felt crappy.

"I'm sorry," Peyton added before blowing her nose. It was one of those big, goober-filled, gross-sounding blows, too.

I glanced back, cringing. She was already getting better, the hives were dissipating, and her eyes were losing some of their redness. But the poor thing looked so hopeless and pathetic, it reassured me even more that I'd done the right thing.

With a sigh, I turned away and put the SUV into gear as I rolled the windows closed. "Don't worry about it," I said. "I didn't want to go to the stupid Halloween masquerade ball that bad, anyway."

I'm pretty sure Peyton knew I was lying—she always did—but she didn't correct me. It only would've made things worse, almost as bad as things got when we drove past Carmen seconds later, and she glared, flipping us the middle finger as we left her behind.

three

WORST DAY EVER.

The sophomore queen bee, Carmen Morales, had decided she hated me. It wasn't even my fault—or choice—that stupid York had decided to shove me onto her radar in the first place by inviting her to ride with us to school in his stupid Jeep or that she ended up owning a stupid cat.

I was so completely innocent in all of this.

But sure enough, who did I hear her badmouthing as soon as I walked into the bathroom between second and third period? Me! Of course.

And who did York blame as soon as he learned she was also telling all her friends *not* to go to the masquerade ball with him if he asked any of them? Yeah, that would also be me.

He always blamed me.

Yet who ended up feeling guilty and miserable, even though she should be justifiably indignant about the whole eye-rolling situation?

Me, unfortunately.

I couldn't help it, though. It seemed as if every awful thing to ever happen to York *did* lead back to me.

I was like a blight on his entire life, an infestation, a fungus that made him eternally miserable, spreading bigger each year and spoiling something new and fun for him in a never-ending cycle.

And blights didn't particularly like being blights, let me tell you. We tended to slink away from drama and tried to appear as invisible and un-blightly as possible. We hated standing in the spotlight, making waves, causing problems, or inconveniencing anyone, so we always endeavored to be as good as we could possibly be.

Er, well, this blight did, anyway. I guess I shouldn't go around speaking for all the other blights out there; that was just rude and inconsiderate, which I didn't like to be either. So...

Blights. Right. I was one. Again.

Though seriously, I couldn't believe York was being blackballed from getting a date to the dance just because of *me*.

I mean, really. I hadn't been able to *breathe*!

Had Carmen honestly expected me to walk to school after that? It wasn't like I was allergic to a ton of different stuff, just some pollen and cat dander, that was it. How was I supposed to know I'd be bombarded with both on York's romantic Jeep ride with her?

He could've at least *warned* me she'd be there.

Then again, I was an unwelcome rider, forced on him by both our mothers. I was lucky the guy even spoke to me.

Sadly, he was about the only person at school who ever *did* bother to talk to me, which kind of made him my best friend, I guess. Not that I'd tell *him* that or reveal to him in any way that he was the only person I felt comfortable enough to be myself around. We weren't exactly the "share feelings" kind of friends. And he probably didn't even see us as friends at all, since he really only talked to me at school when he absolutely had to, so...yeah.

There was that too.

I know, I know. Why didn't I go forth and try to make myself a true friend if I wanted one so badly?

Well, because I was an introvert, you see. A *major* introvert. I was just more comfortable spending my time with one or two people at a time, not large crowds, and I enjoyed focusing on my own internal ideas and creating stuff by myself more than, you know, groupish stuff.

External things, like school and parties and assemblies, just made me frazzled. They turned me into an anxiety-ridden, worry-warting, shy scaredy-cat, meaning the rest of the world only saw an awkward, freakish mess when I was out in public. And if they didn't feel like looking past my social insecurities to see the real me, then I didn't feel like looking past their rudeness over calling me a freak to try to make friends with them. Ergo, I totally rocked the loner life, with York—and I suppose our families too—as my one link to the real world.

Hey, it worked for me. So no complaints from this corner, even if York saw it as a true problem.

Now, where were we?

Blights. Yes. There.

“All I'm saying is, can't she be homeschooled or something?” York asked our parents.

Actually, I wouldn't mind that idea at all, but I knew I had to get used to being around others if I ever wanted to go anywhere, or do anything, or one day work outside the home. So the homeschooling idea was out, unfortunately, even though I'd prefer it.

Regardless, I cast my best friend a scowl for suggesting it because he hadn't made it in any kind of way that was remotely complimentary or thoughtful of me. He just didn't want to drive me to school anymore.

Or be associated with me at all.

Totally not catching on to his true purpose, or simply just not caring, my mom laughed as she passed me a plateful of fried chicken, answering, “She wishes.”

York and Aunt Carol usually ate supper with us whenever his dad was out of town on business trips. And his dad was out of town pretty much always. So they typically ate all their

evening meals with us. Especially since my mom actually *liked* to cook and Aunt Carol did not.

“York!” Aunt Carol gasped—the only person in the room who was offended on my behalf—and sent him a killer glare. “She’s sitting right there.”

I cast her a dry glance. “That’s never stopped him before.”

With a sigh, she shook her head. “I know, but it’d be nice if he learned some tact and consideration. Someday, he’s going to regret being so mean to you.”

York and I both snorted in disbelief.

Then he shot me a death glare for daring to sniff at the same time he had, and he turned back to the mothers. “I mean, it’s practically unsafe for her to leave the house. And I’m the one who always ends up getting loaded down with her mess after she finds herself in a new *situation*.”

Aww. There went my bestie again, defending me...

And sarcasm was my one defense against my attack of self-guilt because he usually *did* have to deal with a bunch of crap because of me. Today had only been one example of seventeen years’ worth of my burdensome, crap-inducing, blight-self on his life.

“Oh, now, you’re just being dramatic,” Aunt Carol said with a roll of her eyes as she passed him a plateful of my mom’s homemade bread rolls. “I’m sure some girl will still be willing to go to the dance with you.”

“I asked *six* different girls today,” he shot back dryly. “They all said no.”

My eyebrows lifted. But wow. *Six*?

My little brother and I glanced at each other and mouthed the number silently in question. And Barrett seemed just as impressed by the total as I felt.

I mean, I would’ve given up after the first rejection.

Actually, there was no way I ever would’ve had the nerve to ask anyone at all, but one totally would’ve been my capped

limit if I had.

That was another thing about York, though. He was social—not, like, super popular, but he definitely ranked middle tier and belonged to an entire group of friends. The masquerade ball thing was actually important to him because, for some oddball reason, he *wanted* to be around his peers.

Weird, I know, but I also kind of envied him for his ability to be all comfortable and himself in group settings. It was a talent that had always escaped me. And it sucked that he had to miss out on it because of me.

“I bet Aria would go with you,” I suggested.

Except the narrowed-eye scowl York shot me said the devil would be a better candidate than Aria Urgent. Then again, maybe he *did* think of Aria as the devil. She was also a part of his group, and the two of them had dated for over six months last year.

When they had both remained in the group after their split, I figured it was an agreeably amicable part.

But, uh, maybe not.

“I still don’t see why you won’t just take Peyton,” my mom finally burst out before sighing at my brother. “Not so many mashed potatoes, Barrett. *Please.*” She totally missed the way both York and I gaped at her as if she’d lost her mind. “You need to eat some meat too.”

“Because I don’t *want* to go!” I squawked, highly offended by the entire idea. I mean, eww, talk about an anxiety attack just waiting to happen.

Seriously, let’s stop and think about this. *Me*: attending the most anticipated social event this semester, where I would be expected to dress all out in a costume and act classy and glamorous?

Yeah, I think not.

“Don’t you remember what happened freshman year?” York added. “At the homecoming dance.”

The moms had pushed for us to go to the first dance of our high school lives together.

After York had carried me home sobbing inconsolably, where I'd wept nonstop for two days straight and refused to leave the safety of my bed, they hadn't forced us to attend another dance together again.

My mother was off her rocker to even think about suggesting it now.

"Yeah, but she's improved so much since then," Mom argued.

I had?

York glanced at me, blinking quizzically. "She has?"

I scowled at him because it was okay for me to question my own lack of accomplishments, but *he* wasn't supposed to.

"Of course, she has," York's mom cheered. Aunt Carol always supported my mother's claims, even when they were completely whack. Like this one. "I mean, she hasn't had an episode like that since then, has she?"

"Because she never went to another after-school function again," York retorted.

His mom sniffed. "Well, then it's time to get back on that horse. It can be like a test drive before prom. Right, honey?"

Prom? I shook my head because *no*... She was most certainly not right. I didn't want to go to the prom either.

Next to me, York blurted, "Prom? No! No way. You're not going to make me take her to the *prom*. Because I refuse. Prom is supposed to be the most important night in all of high school, and she's *not* messing that one up for me. I mean, what do you two always call it again? Every time you talk about *your* prom. A night full of magic and memories? That's what I want, too. Magic. Memories."

Not Peyton, he silently added with raised eyebrows.

Not that the moms noticed his inference.

Mom sighed dreamily and leaned toward Aunt Carol as she grabbed her hand. “It really was a magical night, wasn’t it?”

“So magical,” Aunt Carol reminisced just as dreamily as she tilted her head to rest it against my mom’s.

“If you two are going to go off on another tangent about how what’s-his-name kissed my wife during the last song of your senior prom,” my dad spoke up from the end of the table, scowling toward my mom. “Then I’m leaving.”

“Preston Murphy,” the two moms announced together and then giggled as one.

They giggled a lot when they talked about old times.

“Yeah,” Dad muttered dryly. “Him. I hate that guy.”

“Oh, Henry.” Mom waved a dismissive hand his way. “How could you hate him? You never even met him.”

“If he kissed you, I can hate him.”

“That was two years before I was even *introduced* to you,” she reasoned.

“I still don’t like him,” Dad stated stubbornly as he shifted his glasses higher on his nose with the push of one finger before turning toward York. “Why don’t you just go stag to this dance? That’s what my group of friends always did in school. And those nights ended up being my favorite school memories.”

“Stag?” York wrinkled his nose dubiously. “But wouldn’t not having a date make me look lame?”

“It’s a costume dance, right?” Barrett piped up. “So pay me fifty bucks, and I’ll dress up like a girl and go with you.”

“You are not going to a high school dance,” Mom announced sternly to the twelve-year-old, while Dad shook his head.

“Why would it make you look lame? It didn’t make us look lame. More girls asked us to dance on those nights than anyone else because we were so available.”

“That was also twenty-five years ago, Dad,” I reminded him. “Social norms have shifted significantly since then.”

“Social norms have shifted *significantly*?” York leaned my way to snicker acerbically so only I could hear his razzing. “Gah, you are so odd.”

I sent him a dirty glance because I’d been trying to support *him* with my comment. When he didn’t even notice my scowl, I leaned his way and whispered, “At least I’m not a jerk.”

That’s what Carmen Morales had gotten a lot of the girls around school to call him today.

In my opinion, it was better than *freak*, which was what she’d gotten them all to call *me*. I’d take *jerk* over *freak* any day.

But *jerk* was still a direct hit to York. He wasn’t used to being called anything bad. So he reacted instantly, narrowing his eyes as he ground the heel of his shoe down on my foot under the table. The problem was, I’d taken my shoes off the moment I’d gotten home from school, so I was currently barefoot.

Which made it feel like he was wearing freaking cleats.

“Oww!” I shrieked, immediately jerking away and lifting my knee so I could prop my toes on the seat with me to squeeze the pain away with my fingers before checking the damage. “If that’s your way of proving you’re *not* a jerk, you failed. I’m not wearing any shoes, you monster.”

He sucked in a harsh, apologetic breath for me when we both looked down, and I lifted my hands away from the injury to reveal skidded flesh grated away from the rest with blood already welling to the surface.

“Ouch,” he rasped for me, wincing in sympathy.

I looked up at him in disbelief. “Ouch?” Was that really all he had to say? “You made me bleed.”

Sputtering, he narrowed his eyes and shot back, “Well, what were you doing, not wearing *shoes* to supper?”

“It’s *my* house. I shouldn’t have to wear shoes if I don’t want to!”

Before he could respond, Aunt Carol demanded, “York Palmer Kinsey. You didn’t just stomp on Peyton’s foot on purpose, did you?”

His mother was kind of a softy, though. She’d probably just give him some lame reprimand that, in return, gave *me* no sense of justice, so I decided to exact his punishment myself.

I shoved his arm as hard as I could with both hands, and he totally wasn’t prepared for it, which would’ve been epic *if* he hadn’t taken his plate with him when he toppled out of his chair and landed on the floor.

But everything accidentally spilled onto his lap. Peas, mashed potatoes, and chicken bones went flying, ceramic shattered against the wooden floorboards, and the chair he’d been sitting on overturned, nearly clocking him in the head in the process.

Everyone surged to their feet to check on him sprawled there, except me. Yeah, I sat rooted in my chair, frozen, with huge eyes because I knew I was about to get the lecture of the century.

“That’s it,” Mom growled, flinging down her napkin with a disgusted snap. “You two are on dish duty tonight.”

“And you’ll be washing them by *hand*,” Aunt Carol added.

York sent me a glare as he wiped a glob of mashed potatoes off the back of his hand before flicking it to the floor. “Of *course*, we will,” he muttered to the mothers. “She’s the one who pushed me, but fine... I’ll take the punishment too.”

“Maybe she wouldn’t have pushed you if you hadn’t stepped on her foot,” my dad reminded him mildly.

“But—” York started, hot and fired to defend himself, except the moms were done listening to him argue.

“Just do it,” they snapped together.

“Alright, geesh,” he grumbled, resigned to his fate as he glanced at me in disgust.

Every opportunity they got, the moms somehow managed to make York and me spend more time together. It was no surprise to either of us that our punishment would be a team effort. But from the glare he sent me, York was going to make sure I suffered through it more than he did.

“And don’t break another plate during dish duty either,” Dad added in warning, as if reading York’s glower the same way I had. “Or you’re both grounded.”

four

SUPPER WRAPPED up pretty quickly after that.

Nothing like arguing to take people's appetites away, I guess.

York studiously ignored me as we cleared the table. He even slotted in a pair of earbuds to really block me out.

I made sure to be the one who cleaned up the mess on the floor; he didn't seem inclined to help me at all, so he'd already started on the dishes by the time I got around to assisting him with that, meaning he'd taken the washing part and left me with rinsing and drying duty.

Sighing, I snagged a drying towel and pulled a cup from the rinse water, shaking it partially dry before patting it down and putting it away.

York had added three more items by the time I was done with the one. I sent him an irritated glance, which he didn't see because he was completely ignoring me. And I sighed even louder as I fished a fork from the water. Before I could even pull it free, however, he plunked down a freshly scrubbed plate, nearly splashing me in the chest with the force of his careless fling.

"Really?" I muttered, pausing to glare yet again, even though I don't know why I bothered. He still didn't see or hear me.

Grinding my teeth, I hurried with the fork, only to shake my head as he left way too many suds on the next plate that he dropped into my rinse water.

With the third plate, I'd had enough.

"Can you at least try to get a little bit of suds off before giving them to me?" I asked.

I wasn't sure if he genuinely couldn't hear me or if he was only pretending he couldn't, but I didn't receive an answer to my question. And it got on my last nerve when he slid the next plate that had even more suds slopped on top of it into the water.

Fed up, I scooped up all the foam from the surface with my hand and flicked it, right at the side of his face.

"Hey!" He jumped, not prepared for the backlash. Whirling toward me, he glared. "What is your problem?"

I lifted my eyebrows severely as he tugged out his earbuds. "I asked you to scrape the suds *off* before putting them in the rinse water," I told him.

"Well, my earbuds were in," he huffed back irritably. "I couldn't *hear* you. And besides, getting the suds off is *your* job."

"My job is *rinsing*, and it's getting impossible to tell which one is the actual rinse water when you don't even attempt to get any suds off first. And *maybe* you would've heard me if you didn't have your earbuds in, in the first place."

"My earbuds were in so I wouldn't *have* to hear you."

I slapped the wet plate down on a drying towel so I could plop my hands onto my hips. "Look, I'm doing two jobs over here: the rinsing *and* the drying. The least you could do is dunk it *one* more freaking time on your side to help me out a little."

"Help you out a little? I'm doing the actual, freaking *washing*. I think I'm doing my fair share just fine."

"Well, you're doing a really crappy job of it," I muttered, scraping a tiny glob of food off a *cleaned* plate with my fingernail. "Because you missed a spot." Then I flicked the spot at him, just to be petty.

“Cut it out!” he roared, lifting his hand to block the flying food remnant, even though it had already whizzed right over his shoulder.

To retaliate, he scooped a handful of water from his side of the sink and splashed me, completely dousing the front of my shirt and taunting, “Not so funny now, is it?”

I gasped at the shock of the wet, soaking warmth that instantly went cold, and I lifted my hands, blinking at the suds that were sliding down my chest. Then I looked up and narrowed my eyes.

“Oh, it’s on.”

And I scooped up the suds on my half of the sink with the entire length of my arm.

“Don’t you even dare,” he warned, backing away and pointing at me. “*Peyton.*”

I launched.

He ducked.

And the suds missed him completely.

We both huffed out a breath—mine in disappointment, his in relief—and we spent a second just glaring at each other before we dove back to our respective water sources in tandem and gathered our own arsenal of suds.

We both aimed and fired, crying out when each of us got a face full of bubbles.

The war was still fresh and heated with water flinging liberally and suds going everywhere when a duo of voices cried from the doorway.

“What in the world?”

Caught guiltily with both our hands raised and aimed at each other, York and I froze before we turned to face our mothers. They gaped back from the entrance of the kitchen as if we’d lost our minds.

I gulped, chest heaving with nothing to say.

Bracing for my cohort to totally throw me under the bus and claim that I'd started it—because I basically had—I glanced guiltily toward York.

But all he told them was, “Hey, we didn't break any dishes.”

five

peyton

I THINK the adults gave up on trying to discipline us after that. They merely gave us a collective sigh of tired defeat and then turned away again, rolling their eyes and calling, “Just clean it up,” before they disappeared from the kitchen once more.

York and I glanced at each other before we released a relieved breath together. We had majorly just dodged a bullet there.

And then, in tandem, we rushed to tidy the kitchen. We worked without fighting this time—probably because we decided not to speak to each other anymore—and we were mopping up the last puddle of water and putting away the last cleaned dish within five minutes.

As York rested his forearms on top of the mop and surveyed the floor, I whipped the damp dish towel from over my shoulder and tossed it onto the counter. He lifted his gaze to me, and I was sure he was going to say something nasty, blaming me once more for everything.

But then he cracked a grin and shook his head, starting to laugh.

He had such a beautiful, contagious laugh. The way his eyes squinted into slits and the tops of his cheeks always flushed red, how his lips stretched, displaying his teeth, it never failed to light a cozy fire inside my chest. And I had to start laughing with him.

“Did you see their expressions?” he asked, bending at the waist as he leaned more heavily against the mop.

When he tried to imitate them—“Just clean it up”—I laughed harder and then mimicked *his* response. “But we didn’t break any more dishes.”

York held his stomach with one hand and backed up to rest against the kitchen counters before he lifted his hand to wipe laugh tears off his face and try to settle himself. “Oh my God, that was classic.”

I nodded, agreeing, only to admit, “We’re lucky they didn’t ground us.”

He sniffed and shook his head, lifting his eyebrows at me. “Why would they bother? You don’t go anywhere.”

“But *you* do,” I said.

With a commiserating wince, he nodded and finally agreed, “I guess, we’re lucky they didn’t ground us, then.”

“Yeah.” I leaned my hip against another counter and sighed contentedly as I watched York store the mop back in the pantry.

He actually looked really good, all wet and soaked. The cloth of his shirt sucked up against his torso, making his shoulders look impossibly wide. My gaze ran appreciatively down the length of his back and to his butt just before he turned toward me again.

Caught in the act, I zipped my eyes up guiltily, and my face flamed hot. But he’d already seen where I’d been staring, so he glanced down as well and made a production of pulling the clinging cotton away from his sculpted chest.

“Gah. What a mess,” he said with no clue as to what I’d *really* been thinking. “I’m going to go home and dry off.”

I nodded stupidly, feeling this strange, overwhelming connection with him, like the air had its own pulse, and its heartbeat was thumping strong and steady between us, linking us together with warm vibes. I felt it all over me, too, especially in the oddest places.

With a hard swallow, I watched him intently to make sure he kept *not-noticing* any kind of interest from me because I

would've had to die from mortification right then and there if he had.

But then...

Then, he ruffled my hair affectionately as he started past me. "Try not to push anyone else off a chair for the rest of the night, huh?" he said as he made his way out the back exit.

I merely blinked after him, my throat burning.

And as he went, he briefly gripped the doorframe just above his head, where my gaze landed on the backs of his fingers. When a red spot resting on his pointer finger near the knuckle caught my attention, it made me reminisce back to when we'd been seven and caught hand, foot, and mouth disease together.

We'd had to stay home from school for most of that week, and the moms had put us in one bed so it'd be easier to care for us. After being warned repeatedly not to scratch our own rashes, we thought we'd be ingenious by scratching each *other's*, and I had scratched the backs of his fingers so hard that one sore had bled and gotten infected, leaving a small scar.

Not that he'd minded at the time that I'd permanently damaged him; he'd been grateful for the small relief my scratching had provided, while I'd been relieved for the company *he* had provided. We'd played so many games together in those few days that I'd actually felt lucky about getting sick to begin with because it had felt like one of the best weeks of my life.

There was just something about York's company that filled a void in me like nothing else.

As the door latch clicked with his departure, however, the air hissed from my lungs, and all hints of embarrassed anxiety mounted into full-blown fear.

Because that little physical spark I'd just experienced for him was new.

Except...

When he'd ruffled my hair like I was a little kid or a *pet* to him, I had felt as if I'd been kicked in the chest and completely friend-zoned.

Which was all I'd ever wanted to be—his friend.

So why had I been so disappointed by such a *friendly* move?

It made no sense to me. I *wanted* us to be friends more than anything else. Why would I suddenly want...more?

Confused, I shook my head and turned away from the door so I could head to my room and also find something dry to wear.

I ordered myself to put the strange reaction out of my mind and not think about it again.

Which didn't work at all. My subconscious totally had other ideas. And that night, I had a dream.

About kissing York.

I *know!* How crazy was that?

When my alarm went off in the morning, jarring me from the soft sponge of his warm lips, I bolted upright in bed, breathing heavily and beyond freaked out.

Gasping for air, I gaped dazedly around my room and clenched the sheets to my chest, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Because *that* had been weird and unexpected.

But I wasn't going to think about some bizarre dream, either, I decided.

So of course, it was the *only* thing my brain could revolve around from that point on. It became the sun to my thoughts on a cloudless day, blaring into every corner of my mind with bright, shining memories.

I had kissed York in my dream. York had kissed me. This was insane. Not real, but still...utterly mortifying.

And one thing became brilliantly clear to me: I absolutely could not face him right now. Not with everything going on in my head.

I might literally die of embarrassment.

Hey, it was possible. I'd looked it up before. The rush of adrenaline and stress could overdose my heart and kill me, and I was too young to die.

Ergo, I tried to talk Mom into taking me to school herself all the way through breakfast. And when that failed because she didn't want to drive so far out of the way to take both me and Barrett to our respective drop-offs, I tried to coax her into letting me take her whole car.

I dogged her heels around the kitchen while she fixed Barrett's sack lunch, begging, "But I should really work on my driving skills. I don't practice enough, you know. Come on, please. I'll take out the trash for the entire week, clean the bathrooms, *and* do the dishes."

But not even that swayed her.

"You just can't today, honey," she explained with an exasperated sigh as she tossed a small bag of Cheetos into the lunch bag, followed by a cup of sliced peaches. "Sorry, but I need the car myself. I have to go grocery shopping, pick up your father's dry cleaning, run to the mall for a new pair of pants for your brother, not to mention drop him off at school first *and* pick him up at the end of the day. So I really need the car myself."

"I'll drop him off, no problem," I offered. "And I'll pick him up again, too. I can even pop by the dry cleaners for you."

Glancing at me with lifted brows, she reminded me, "But you hate the middle school drop-off lane."

I did.

Except this morning, I insisted, "I can handle it. And then you can ask Aunt Carol if you can borrow *her* car for everything else." Latching my hands around her arm, I tugged briefly. "Just for today. Please. Please, *please*..."

It was a doable situation. She and Aunt Carol were around their houses almost every day because they worked from home, co-owning a business together, where they designed websites for people. And she had borrowed her best friend's car *plenty* of times over the years when our family's second vehicle was in the shop for something.

It wouldn't be *that* big of a deal.

But Mom paused in the middle of reaching for the water bottle that she was going to top off my brother's lunch with and pressed both hands against the top of the kitchen counters, closing her eyes briefly as if seeking patience before she sighed and looked at me.

"You're going to have to talk to him eventually, you know."

My gaze zipped to her in horrified surprise, only for me to remember, oh yeah.

After witnessing my fight with York at the supper table and then seeing the aftereffects of our suds war from the dishes, she probably thought he and I were still on the outs.

If *only* that were the true case.

Right now, I think I'd take being mad at him over this... this...*whatever* this was that was happening to me. The sensation was unnerving as all get out. And I didn't like it.

Feeling *whatever* toward York sucked. Big-time.

Not about to let my mom know the truth, though, I sniffed and wrinkled my nose at her. "That's *not* what this is about."

I mean, it was. But not in the way *she* thought.

All she did was lift her eyebrows knowingly, making me slink down a bit and uncomfortably fold my arms over my chest before insisting, "It's not."

She wrinkled her nose and answered, "You're not getting my car."

"Fine," I mumbled, hissing out a disgusted breath. "I'll see if Dad can drop me off on his way to work, then."

And I stormed out of the kitchen, only for Mom's amused voice to float after me. "Good luck with that."

Growling, I gritted my teeth and searched for my dad, finding him in the living room, already dressed in his work slacks and shirt; his socked feet were kicked up in his recliner, and he read the news on his tablet while sipping on a steaming cup of coffee.

"Daddy," I asked, sweetening my voice and perching myself on the armrest of his chair after he'd set his mug down on the side table. Then, I lovingly scraped my fingernails ever-so-gently over his bald head like I knew he liked.

He didn't even take his gaze off the screen as he answered, "I'm not driving you to school." Then he tipped his head toward me when I guess I hit a spot he liked. "Ooh, right there. Right there. *Yeah...*"

I dug my teeth into my lip and kept scratching the area before saying, "But I'll give you an hour-long back scratch tonight."

"Honey, it's nearly thirty minutes out of my way," he answered, still pushing his head into my palm.

"So if we left right now, that'd give you the perfect amount of time to get to work at your regular start time," I cajoled. "Come on, Dad. Please... Just for today?"

"And what about tomorrow?" he countered, lifting his face to look at me in question. "And the day after that, and the day after that?"

I figured I'd worry about tomorrow, *tomorrow*. But right now, I was supposed to face York in mere minutes, and I just couldn't do it. Not after that dream.

I couldn't.

Even the idea of it brought molten heat to my face. My entire head would probably melt right off my shoulders if I had to actually sit next to him all the way to school.

I stopped scratching Dad's scalp, trying not to think about the possibility.

Beside me, my father hissed out a sympathetic sigh. “You’re going to have to talk to him someday, you know.”

My face heated even more. I could only count my lucky stars that no one had any idea what was really going on in my mind.

“I will tomorrow, I swear. Please...” I sent him the most pathetic, begging eyes I had. “Just don’t make me ride with him today.”

“Sorry, kiddo.” He kicked down his footrest so he could push his way to his feet and affectionately ruffle my hair. “But he’s the only ride you have. And since you never signed up for the bus, you’re going to have to suffer through.”

I closed my eyes as my heart sank into my soul, and for a moment, I thought I was going to be physically sick.

I kind of hoped I *did* throw up; then I wouldn’t have to go to school at all or see him *anywhere* today.

But, unfortunately, the moment passed, my stomach settled, and I opened my eyes, stuck in reality, where I couldn’t escape York no matter what I tried.

Dad patted my shoulder as he passed. “Everything will be fine. Trust me.”

I sniffed and rolled my eyes as he left the living room.

He didn’t understand at all.

As the minutes crept closer until the moment I’d have to see York again, my nerves strung themselves tauter and tauter.

All I could picture was that dream—the tender look in his eyes as he’d cupped my face in his hands before leaning in to press his lips to mine.

And my stomach pitched again, anxiety mounting.

My jaw began to ache and my stomach swirled. My breathing went all wonky, and I couldn’t stop pacing. I kept wiping my palms off on the thighs of my jeans, and when I saw his Jeep pull to the curb out the front window, I let out a little groan of defeat.

Both my parents appeared at the entrance of the living room, watching me carefully.

I turned toward them, trying one last time to get out of this. “I really don’t feel well.” And I didn’t. By this point, I was probably a hair’s breadth away from having a full-blown panic attack.

Death from embarrassment lurked, circling me like a shark scenting blood.

I felt a lot like I had freshman year at the homecoming dance, right before I’d totally lost all cognition and had broken down completely.

Did they *really* want me to fall to those depths again?

But all my mom did was smirk and fold her arms over her chest as she leaned against the doorjamb. “Nice try. Now go to school.”

Next to her, Dad waved goodbye.

My vision wavered, and a shuddered breath left my lungs.

Fine. I could do this.

I *had* to.

six

MY ENTIRE BODY felt like one big ice cube as I robotically turned toward the door. I watched my own hand lift and grab the doorknob, pulling it open, but I didn't really feel it. I think I was beginning to have an out-of-body experience, where I was just watching myself from above, my limbs moving strangely as I left the house. I stiffly marched down the front steps and onto the grass.

Only to trip over Barrett's bicycle.

I stumbled and staggered but didn't go down entirely. Regardless, I felt like a complete moron by the time I reached York's Jeep.

What's worse, I could see him laughing at me inside.

I frowned, suddenly remembering the morning before when he'd forced me to sit in the back seat so Carmen Morales could take the front, only for me to get bullied by her all day because of it.

And just like that, the dream I'd had about him seemed to float off, out of my thoughts, as if I'd never had it. The blip of a crush I'd felt the night before flat-lined, and everything seemed normal again. He was back to being plain, irritating York.

Scowling at him through the window for laughing at me, I paused just outside the SUV and motioned between the front and back, asking where he wanted me to sit.

He rolled his eyes as if that were a ridiculous question, and he motioned to the front seat.

I opened the door.

“Seriously, have you ever walked a straight line *without* falling down?” he wondered as I slid in beside him.

“Shut up,” I mumbled and slammed the door.

He chuckled and put the engine into gear. Then he reached out and turned up the radio, ignoring me and humming along with the song playing as he tapped his hands against the steering wheel.

I watched his scarred fingers drum, glad my hiccup—or *whatever* it had been for him—was over. It helped that he seemed completely oblivious to everything that had been going on inside me.

Relieved, I turned to stare out the side window.

Twelve and a half minutes after I climbed into York’s Jeep, we pulled into the school parking lot and reached our destination.

I clicked off my seat belt and shoved my way free, sucking in a lungful of fresh air as soon as I was outside.

There.

That hadn’t been so bad. I was alive. No harm done. And the world hadn’t ended.

What the heck had I been so worried about, anyway?

Grateful that I didn’t have to think about York for the rest of the day, since the two of us didn’t share a single class together, I hurried into the building and made my way to my locker.

We had about ten minutes before the first bell rang, and I usually liked to get to my first class early so I could work on my latest art project before anyone else showed up. I ate most of my lunches in the art room too because the teacher didn’t mind.

It always made me self-conscious to explore my creative side when other people were around. But I loved painting and drawing and sketching—sometimes even sculpting—so I’m

glad Mrs. Willis was so willing to let me come in whenever I wanted.

Except I'd barely gotten my locker open when I heard what sounded like Carmen's voice behind me, saying, "Watch out. Freak alert. Everyone hold your breath; she might be contagious."

When laughter followed, I glanced past my locker door to find that, yep, Carmen was indeed walking by with her crew, and all of them were looking directly at me.

I sighed because I really wasn't in the mood to put up with them yet again today; I was still trying to recuperate from my York blip.

With a roll of my eyes, I turned back to my things, gathering what I'd need for the next hour.

The best way I'd found to deal with their type was to just ignore them. Any reaction fed the beast, and the more fodder they had to chew on and ridicule you with, the longer they picked and clawed and beat at you. But starve a bully out with no response whatsoever, and they got bored and moved on quickly enough, seeking sustenance from some other poor victim.

I was beyond ready for them to move on now.

But apparently, I'd given them a nibble because someone else snarked off, "Ooh, did you see her roll her eyes at us like *we're* the pathetic freaks?"

I mean, from my perspective, they *were* pathetic. But I didn't feel like getting into that with them, so I went back to ignoring them as Carmen answered, "I did. And wasn't it just so cute? Peyton thinks she has a spine."

Evil cackles followed.

Argh. Really, *why* had I rolled my stupid eyes? Now, I think they'd stopped walking so they could gather on the other side of the hall directly behind me.

Wasn't that just *great*?

Self-consciousness crawled up the back of my neck like a spider, making me want to reach my hand back and bat it away.

“Hey, Peyton,” one of the girls called, finally addressing me directly. “Ever heard of a brush?”

I closed my eyes in doom and realized too late that I’d been so preoccupied with thoughts of York on my rush inside that I hadn’t remembered to finger-comb my hair when I’d entered the building, so it was no doubt a mess from being out in the wind.

I automatically reached up to smooth it down without thinking, and the group behind me burst out laughing.

Crud nuggets! I’d fed them *again* by reacting to their taunts. What was wrong with me today? I was so off my game.

This was York’s fault. He’d distracted me with his...his blue eyes, charming smile, and just...ugh.

I was typically so much better at this.

But then, as if thinking York’s name had summoned him, I heard his voice shout an angry, “Hey!” from down the hall.

Jumping in surprise, I whirled around to find him storming forward. My chest tightened in dread, thinking he was mad at *me* for something.

But then I realized he wasn’t even looking at me.

Marching up to Carmen, he slashed his hand in her direction, thundering, “Enough! You can be ticked at me all you like for kicking you out of my Jeep yesterday morning because your presence in it was literally killing someone else. That’s fine. But you are *not* allowed to go after Peyton for almost dying. That’s *your* fault.”

I blinked, mesmerized by the fact that he’d just come to my rescue.

I mean, he usually did. It was kind of his lot in life. But he always seemed so reluctant and lackluster about it because he really didn’t *want* to defend me.

This time, however, he was all into it and passionate as if he truly cared about me.

He stopped in front of Carmen and leaned in to savagely flash gritted teeth at her face. “Leave her alone or I’ll make you regret it. And keep your little band of vipers away, too.”

With a sigh and impatient roll of her eyes, Carmen mumbled, “Whatever,” as she tried to step around him. “You have no sense of humor at all, York. We were just having fun.”

“You were harassing her,” he countered, veering into her path to keep her from escaping. “And I say no more.”

Carmen sucked in a breath and backed away from him, taking a moment to appear hurt and victimized before she narrowed her eyes and snapped up her chin, tossing her beautiful, long brunette hair over her shoulder as she did. After glancing once at her friends for moral support, she returned her attention to him.

“No more, huh?” she said airily as if she had better things to do than stand there, trading insults with him. “Think you can control me? Wow, you really are the biggest jerk in the school, aren’t you? Thank *God* I didn’t agree to go to the masquerade ball with you.”

He merely lifted one eyebrow before he calmly shot back, “I don’t recall ever *asking* you to the dance.”

My jaw sagged loose, and about a dozen surprised gasps ping-ponged between the walls around me, while everyone else listening in on their conversation choked on their shock.

But York was right. He never *had* gotten around to asking Carmen to the Halloween masquerade dance. He’d known he’d blown that chance the moment she’d climbed out of his Jeep and slammed the door in his face. He’d asked half a dozen other girls, but he’d never asked *her*.

Even Carmen looked taken aback by his answer, flushing slightly in embarrassment before she retorted, “Well... Y-you were *going* to.”

“Was I?” he countered, tipping his head in thoughtful amusement as he sent her a sly smile. Then he furrowed his

brow in contemplation and tapped his chin before shaking his head and admitting, “I don’t know, honestly. I have no interest in pathetic bullies who get their friends to gang up on completely innocent people. That’s not exactly my style. So, no, I don’t think I would have asked you. Sorry.”

Huffing at him, Carmen glared so hard that I’m almost surprised killer laser beams didn’t shoot from her eyes or steam didn’t puff out of her ears.

“I hate you so much,” she growled before spinning away and stomping off.

“And I should care because...why?” he called after her. Then covering his mouth in mock horror, he cried, “Oh no. A rude, nasty girl doesn’t like me. *Whatever* shall I do?”

Carmen ignored him, but it didn’t matter because the hall exploded in a chorus of *oohs* and laughter, and one person even yelled congratulations to York for standing up to her.

The queen bee paused and looked around in horror to realize she’d just lost that sparring match before she took off running, darting around a corner to escape as fast as she could, her hive of followers swarming after her.

Meanwhile, people flocked to York, slugging him on the back and fist-bumping him, calling him a hero and telling him how awesome he’d been.

At first, he just blinked at them in perplexed shock. Then a wavering grin lit his face before he was laughing and smiling with them, nodding along and answering their congratulations.

A second later, his gaze swiveled my way, as if he were seeking my approval, but thank goodness someone moved between us, blocking his view as soon as we made eye contact.

Because I felt more like crying than gushing out my gratitude.

But I was just so confused.

I took that opportunity to spin away and finish grabbing my things from my cubby. My fingers fumbled in my rush to pull out everything I needed for first hour.

Once I had the proper notebooks, tablet, and books piled into my arms, I slapped the metal door closed, and hurried off, heading away from the commotion York had created.

This just made no sense to me at all. I mean, he'd stood up for me before. Lots of times. So why did *this* time feel so different?

It was because of that stupid dream, I swear.

But if I was being totally honest with myself, I would have to admit that the dream was just a result of other emotions that had roared through me before I'd ever fallen asleep last night.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and all I saw in my mind was a pair of super blue eyes with the slashes of his dark brows above them, crinkling as he smiled. Then I pictured the way he'd laughed in the kitchen, dripping wet and clinging to that mop to hold himself upright.

And it finally struck me.

When he'd been slaying Carmen, defending *my* honor, my chest had compacted with an emotion that swirled up so big and heavy inside me that I could no longer deny what it meant.

I don't know how it had happened, and I certainly hadn't meant for it to, but I'd fallen for the one guy who had adamantly sworn over the years, time and time again, that he would never love me back.

Yeesh, what a fine mess I'd gotten myself into.

seven

I MEAN, it wasn't as if I'd expected Peyton to come racing to me in the school hall in front of everyone and throw herself at my feet in everlasting gratitude just because I'd stood up to Carmen Morales for her. She'd never bulldoze her way into being the center of attention like that.

But when I glanced through the horde of people gathering around me to find her locker, ready for her to smile or give me a head bob of recognition, or even shoot me a knowing smirk to tell me how much she'd warned me what a bully Carmen could be, I was left shocked to see her leaving instead.

Honestly. Where did she think she was going?

I'd just stood up to one of the most popular people in school. For *her*. And now she was simply going to blow me off?

Around me, everyone else wanted to discuss what had just happened. But I could only blink after Peyton, a bit irked that I hadn't impressed her *at all*.

When feminine arms wrapped around my bicep, I looked down to find my ex, Aria, grinning up at me.

"Congrats on your new hero status," she said, her eyes shining with pride. "I guess being labeled the school jerk yesterday came in handy today, huh?"

I gave a half laugh, half sniff because I sure hadn't seen her yesterday, supporting me when I'd been nothing but *the jerk* to everyone.

Her hand reached up and straightened the collar of my shirt. “You know, you never asked *me* to the masquerade ball.” Tearing her attention from my throat, she looked up into my eyes with a big, innocent expression as she added, “I wouldn’t have told you no.”

Except I couldn’t go to the Halloween masquerade ball with Aria. I’d broken up with her because it felt as if she was starting to like me more than I liked her. And I couldn’t picture myself growing stronger feelings for her either, so going to the dance with her now would feel cruel, like I’d just be giving her a false sense of hope or something.

Wincing, I shook my head and patted her hand before gently peeling her fingers off me. “Sorry, but I actually decided to go stag instead.”

“Seriously?” my buddy, Ferris, spoke up, brightening with excitement. “Then I’m going stag too.”

“Hey, me too,” Harvey said, slinging an arm around my shoulders and jostling me happily over the idea. “We can make a guys’ group of it. This will be awesome.”

Together, the three of us glanced toward Wes, thinking he’d join in on the fun, but he was looking at Aria instead. “I can take you if you want a date to the dance.”

She blinked at him in surprise. But then shrugged and said, “Okay.”

And that seemed settled.

The first bell rang, and the crowd dispersed, everyone heading to class.

But I paused to send a little scowl toward Peyton’s locker before I went, wondering why she’d left without even acknowledging me.

Yeah, never in a million years would I understand that girl.



WHAT FOLLOWED WAS A REALLY WEIRD DAY. EVERYONE hailed me as some kind of champion. People I didn't even know came up to congratulate me for the way I'd stood up to Carmen. It was actually pretty cool to have that kind of attention.

Except, *today* that kind of attention irritated me. I think Peyton had ruined what could've been the most epic day of high school ever for me. I mean, absolutely everything was perfect...except her reaction to what I'd done.

And I have no idea why her lack of response even bothered me. It just did.

After the last class of the day, my friends gathered around my locker, wanting to talk and hang out like we usually did, but I mumbled a distracted, "I gotta go," and I jerked my bag free from its cavern before slamming the door shut and taking off.

Peyton wasn't at my Jeep when I approached, however, and she always made it there first. She would stand, leaning against the locked front passenger side door, reading a book or doodling on a notepad, just waiting for me. But today, she was nowhere to be seen.

I slowed to a stop and turned in a circle, looking for her.

Someone across the lot hollered a greeting to me. I waved at them absently even as I kept searching for Peyton.

Where the heck was she?

Sighing, I climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine, pretending to check updates on my phone as I waited for her, but when too long passed and she still hadn't shown up, I started to get worried.

If Carmen had gone after her again and trapped her somewhere inside, alone, I was going to be livid.

Cutting the engine, I exited the Jeep, only to see my passenger finally leaving the building with her backpack hooked over one shoulder and her green scarf fluttering in the breeze like usual. She looked completely fine and unbullied.

I rounded the hood, anyway, prepared to defend her. “Everything okay?” I asked as soon as she had moved close enough to hear me.

She faltered her step and looked up in surprise. Then, squinting at me as if I’d lost my mind for asking her such a thing, she said, “Yeah. Why?”

I shook my head, confused. “What took you so long?”

She shrugged and sent me a bewildered frown as if she hadn’t thought it’d been that long at all. “I didn’t know I was being timed.”

“Well, you were,” I snapped. “And it took you...”

I glanced down at my watch to let her know just how long she’d left me waiting, only to realize, huh, I hadn’t even sat in the Jeep for a full minute.

Swallowing down my embarrassment, I snapped my mouth shut and looked up, hoping she didn’t harass me for acting like a buffoon.

When she merely blinked at me as if trying to figure me out, I opened her door for her—since I was standing right there—and I held it wide, so it wouldn’t look as if I’d raced around to her side for no reason at all.

“Just get in the Jeep, will you?”

She squinted in confusion, probably thinking I was crazy. “Okay...” she said cautiously and shifted forward.

Really uncomfortable about the whole situation, I waited until she started to slide in, and then I sniffed. “And you’re *welcome*, by the way.”

She looked up at me in surprise, but I slammed the door in her face and stormed around to the driver’s side.

When I sat next to her and closed us inside the Jeep alone, she meekly said, “Thanks for opening my door for me.”

I sent her an incredulous glance. “Really? You think *that’s* what I was talking about?”

She shook her head, brow furrowing. “Then what the heck were you talking about?”

“Oh my God!” I exploded and then tried to ignore her by starting the engine. But before I could put the SUV into drive, my anger got the best of me. I whirled toward her, snarling, “I stood up to *Carmen* for you, in front of the *entire* school. What do you *think* I’m talking about?”

Her lips parted. She gaped at me a few seconds before shaking her head slightly and saying, “Or... You know, maybe you finally just stood up to the girl who spent all of yesterday blackballing *you*, and none of that had anything to do with me whatsoever.”

Uh, excuse me?

But was I hearing this right? Because I certainly couldn’t believe it if I was.

Did she *seriously* think none of this had anything to do with her? I’d seen red the moment I saw Carmen picking on her. I’d been so upset that I’d stood up to probably the most popular girl in the school just to defend her, thinking it’d lose me some serious social points. But I’d done it anyway. For her.

And she had the gall to sit there and say it had nothing to do with her?

Narrowing my eyes, I muttered, “Right.”

Then, I drove home.

Peyton knew I was ticked. Usually, she read or scribbled in a notebook during the drive to and from school. But today, she quietly sent me worried glances as she wrung her hands in her lap.

While I concentrated on ignoring her.

She waited until I parked in front of her house and moodily waited for her to exit before she turned to me fully, looking worried as she bit her lip.

“Thank you for standing up for me today,” she finally said.

Nine hours too late.

I sighed wearily and shook my head, squeezing the bridge of my nose. “Just don’t, okay? It doesn’t count if I have to force it from you.”

She winced apologetically and glanced uncertainly toward her house, but didn’t get out of the SUV.

When she just continued to sit there, I opened my mouth to ask why she wasn’t leaving already, but then she spun back to me and announced, “I *did* enjoy the way she ran off with her tail tucked between her legs. That was...truly epic.”

I scowled, wanting to stay irritated with her.

But she batted her lashes at me hopefully. “It made my whole day brighter,” she added, her expression begging me to forgive her.

I stared stonily back, as hard as I could, refusing to budge until everything became a blur but her eyes.

And those eyes. I’m telling you...

Her irises were a mix between gray, yellow, green, and brown.

That probably should’ve made them hazel, except they were an extremely *light* hazel, heavy on the gray, which strangely made them look almost blue. Yet they were in no way blue. They were just...Peyton-colored.

And as she blinked her Peyton-colored eyes at me, my resistance melted. I couldn’t stay annoyed no matter how much I wanted to cling to my self-righteous indignation.

“People were talking about it in every class I had,” she added. “And the main consensus was that the best part happened when you called her out for saying you’d never actually asked her to the dance.”

A reluctant smile lit my lips, and I rolled my gaze toward the ceiling of the Jeep. “Yeah,” I had to admit. “That was pretty awesome.”

“Awesome?” Peyton repeated with a sniff. “No, it was absolutely legendary. I mean... I don’t recall *asking* you to the dance,” she added, quoting me as she nudged my arm and

flashed a brilliant smile. “Best burn ever. I think every jaw in the place dropped straight to the floor. You completely slaughtered her.”

I slid my gaze to her, fighting a grin from her praise. But then it broke through, anyway. “Yeah, I kind of did, didn’t I?”

“Totally,” she assured, and I was sunk, no longer mad at her for anything.

That was Peyton’s superpower, I think. No one could make me as mad or frustrated as she did. But then, no one could pull me from a sour mood like she did, either.

I looked into those Peyton-colored eyes once again, wondering how she did that before my gaze strayed to the rest of her face.

And, you know, she was actually kind of pretty.

I mean, when the wind wasn’t blowing her hair into a royal mess, it was beautiful and long and glossy, like a field of ripe wheat that rippled and swayed in a gentle breeze as the sun glinted off it, turning it to a sparkling gold. It was really soft too.

Plus, her face was flawlessly shaped, and her piercing eyes could bore into a person as if they were reading your very soul.

Then there was her skin that had to be the smoothest, most unblemished, clear skin I’d ever seen on anyone, new babies included.

And suddenly, she wasn’t just *kind of* pretty. She was freaking beautiful.

“What?” she asked, giving me a funny look that yanked me from my straying thoughts.

“What?” I countered, straightening and blinking her into focus.

Her brow crinkled in question. “Why were you looking at me like that?”

I shook my head insistently because no way on earth was I going to tell her what I'd actually been thinking. Talk about humiliation city.

"No reason," I said. "Just...thinking."

Her funny squint turned suspicious, but then she shrugged and said, "Okay. Whatever. See you later?"

She made it sound like a farewell, so I waved lamely. "Yeah. See you...later."

She frowned at me a moment longer, then shook her head, dismissing my weirdness.

I held my breath as I watched her climb out of the Jeep and walk away because the moment of attraction I'd felt as I'd looked at her kept buzzing its way under my skin and freaking me out.

But I wasn't attracted to *Peyton*.

I couldn't be.

I mean, I'd known her since birth. She was like my freaking sister. That was just wrong.

And seriously, just because I thought a person was pretty didn't mean I found them attractive.

But when Peyton had sat in the passenger seat, looking into my eyes—

Gah! This was wrong. It was *all* wrong.

So I squeezed my eyes shut, panicking and releasing all the air in my lungs in a rush.

What was happening to me?

I opened my eyes to look at her again, see if maybe I'd just imagined the moment, only to watch her go sprawling over her brother's bicycle. *Again*.

She ungracefully stumbled along until catching her balance and looking like a complete awkward weirdo in the process.

And I sighed in relief.

There. That was more like it. No buzzing under the skin, no thrill racing through my bloodstream. Just Peyton doing what Peyton did.

She glanced back and sent me a thumbs-up sign. I smiled affectionately, despite myself, and rolled my eyes.

After she disappeared inside, I climbed out of the Jeep and walked up the yard to move the bicycle out of her usual walking path, propping it against the outside of her house, and then I returned to my ride.

I still wasn't sure what had just happened, but I was glad it was over.

eight

THAT SATURDAY, I went stag to the masquerade ball.

I dressed up as a lumberjack in a black-and-red-plaid flannel shirt, blue jeans with suspenders, a black stocking cap, leather work boots, and the shadow of a beard on my jaw.

Ferris went as a sailor, and Harvey the grim reaper. Then, Aria and Wes showed up together, looking like a pirate and a mermaid, which didn't bother me at all, until about the third song of the dance, when I saw them up in the bleachers making out, hot and heavy.

So hot and heavy, in fact, that it didn't seem as if this was the first time they'd ever made out before. And I started to wonder if they'd messed around together behind my back when I'd been with Aria.

And that *did* bug me because I wasn't completely sure if Wes was the type who'd mack on a girl while I was dating her or not.

I tried to put the thought out of my mind, though, and just concentrate on the dance. My new status as the guy-who'd-stood-up-to-Carmen-Morales insured me plenty of girls willing to dance now. No one said no whenever I asked.

Except every time I *did* take to the floor with someone new, it was just so...boring. And lackluster.

I think I felt a bit resentful toward all of them for being scarce when I'd been the *jerk* but came flocking when I suddenly turned cool.

And just what *had* my best friend done behind my back when I'd been dating Aria?

This wasn't fun at all.

Why was there such a big, stupid hype about school dances anyway?

I wasn't sure what I'd been hoping to find when I'd come tonight, but whatever it was, it was still firmly lost.

So I skipped out early, like within the first half hour, and I headed home alone.

The lights were on in the front room when I pulled into my driveway behind Dad's car, and I could see two shadows moving behind the curtain in the window to the front room.

Dad must be home from...Ohio?

Yeah, I think he'd gone to Cleveland this time. Or maybe it had been Chicago. Who knew? Who cared? I just hoped he and Mom weren't fighting again.

Yet when I climbed from my Jeep and started up the front walk, I could already hear their raised, muted voices from inside.

They were definitely fighting.

Not in the mood for that—since they loved to suck me into the middle of their arguments and try to get me to take sides—I did an about-face and shoved my hands into my pockets as I meandered down the street toward the Royce house.

Aunt Donna and Uncle Henry *never* fought. Not in front of everyone like my mom and dad did, anyway. Peyton had it so lucky, and she didn't even know it.

I pulled my keys from my pocket as I dodged around to the back door. I'd had a key to their house for as long as I'd had a key to my own, and I'd let myself in enough times over the years not to worry about it now.

I hadn't expected the place to be so dark and quiet when I opened the door, though. It wasn't even ten yet. Why in the world had they already turned in for the night?

Oh well. I knew they still wouldn't mind if I crashed for a while.

The kitchen smelled like chocolate chip cookies when I slipped inside and locked the door after me, which instantly made me want one. I scoured the tables and countertops in the dark until I found the source. Taking three, I tiptoed out of the room and down the hall toward the bedrooms.

I briefly contemplated heading toward the front room and camping out on the couch there—it was huge and comfortable—but there was also a couch in Peyton's room. I wasn't sure why I preferred hers, since it wasn't as big and comfortable as the main sofa, and she always flooded it with her stuffed animals that got in my way, but it probably had something to do with privacy. If Peyton caught me lurking, she'd ask fewer questions than Aunt Donna would if *she* stumbled across me.

Aunt Donna would want to hear about my mom and dad's fight, my miserable time at the dance, and Aria and Wes's hooking up. Peyton frankly wouldn't care. Besides, she probably wouldn't even know if I slept on her couch or not; she was no doubt conked out too, just like everyone else.

When I passed her parents' room, however, Aunt Donna's muffled laugh floated into the hall through their closed door.

I froze, thinking I was caught, but then another noise emerged that made my eyes widen with awful realization.

No... Just no.

I hurried by, traumatized and not sure what was worse: hearing a set of parents fight or hearing them...not fight.

A dim light was glowing from the open door to Peyton's room, beckoning me forward like a saving grace, so I hurried that way, thinking the illumination was only her nightlight—since she'd always hated the dark.

And I walked right in without hesitating, only to find her wide awake and sitting up in bed, reading with her legs bent at the knees, a blanket covering her to the waist, and her back pressed against a load of fluffed pillows she'd stacked between her and the wall.

Cringing, I halted in surprise, and she turned her gaze from the glow of an ereader to blink curiously at me.

I gulped, caught in the act, and then hesitantly lifted one of the snacks I'd stolen. "Cookie?"

Her eyebrows pulled together in confusion as her gaze ran over my lumberjack costume. "Aren't you supposed to be at the masquerade ball?"

Heaving out a harassed breath, I pushed the rest of the way inside and bit into the cookie miserably before nudging the door shut behind me with my boot. "Turns out masquerade balls kind of suck."

"Ah." She made a sound in the back of her throat, letting me know she wasn't at all surprised to hear that, and she went back to reading, totally ignoring me.

I scowled. Was she not even going to *ask* why I was creeping into her room? Why I'd left the dance early? I mean, I know I hadn't wanted any questions from anyone, but now that I wasn't getting any, I sort of wanted to answer them.

"Aria and Wes hooked up in the bleachers," I finally blurted as I plopped down onto the couch and toed off my shoes before kicking my feet up and draping them over the armrest, knocking a trio of plushies to the floor as I did. Then I stuffed a cookie into my mouth almost violently.

Peyton didn't take her eyes off the words in her book. "Didn't they go to the dance together?"

I frowned. "Uh, yeah."

Why did that matter?

Her brow furrowed, but she kept reading. "Then what's the big shocker?"

My frown turned into a scowl. I'm not sure *how* it turned, but I knew my new scowl was much more irritated than the mere frown I'd sent her seconds earlier.

"They went as *friends*," I muttered. "Not people who hook up in the freaking bleachers. I mean, don't you think that was kind of inconsiderate of them? He's supposed to be my best

friend, and Aria and I broke up just this last *summer*. What if —I mean, what if they were hooking up behind my back while she and I were still together?”

“They probably did.” Peyton’s voice was so dry and practical that I gasped.

“You seriously think so?” I snarfed down another cookie to console myself.

Peyton glanced at me over the top of her ereader. “I’m sorry, did you want me to lie?”

“Yes!” I practically shout-whispered, polishing off my last cookie.

“Oh. Whoops. Well, then no. Of course not. They’d never do that to you. I mean, Wes is the soul of honesty and integrity, and he’s such a *good*, dependable, and loyal friend. And Aria... Well, she—”

“Okay, okay!” I muttered, waving my hands before whipping off my stocking cap and slapping it against my knee. “Geesh. Stop lying already. Besides, Wes isn’t *that* bad of a friend.”

Peyton snorted as her eyes returned to her book.

I lifted my brows. “Oh, really? You disagree that much, huh? What exactly has he done that’s been so crappy to me?”

“He steals a pen from you, like, every day at school.”

“Wow.” I rolled my eyes with a dry retort. “Yeah, he should definitely be flogged and tortured for that one.”

“He likes to slam your locker door shut *right* after you’ve just opened it.”

“Because he’s a jokester,” I explained with a tired sigh.

“He calls us the candy bar twins.”

I winced. “Yeah.” That *was* annoying.

But Wes thought that Peyton’s name sounded similar to the PayDay candy bar, and mine was close to York Peppermint Patties, which... I constantly told him were *not* candy bars at

all but chocolate-coated confections. Except that didn't even sway him. He maintained that both were still found in the candy bar aisle, and so he still called us the candy bar twins, despite our disapproval.

"He turned a hose on you and told everyone you peed your pants when we went to the zoo for that field trip."

"Another joke," I defended, starting to sound a little testy as I sent her a dirty look. "And that happened, like, eight years ago."

She shrugged. "It was still mean and cruel."

I huffed out a breath. It *had* been mean and cruel. God, I had a sucky best friend, didn't I?

I sighed, depressed.

"I'm out of cookies," I basically whined, fitting my stocking cap over my bent knee like I was sliding it onto someone's head.

"Then get more," Peyton told me, way too logically for my taste.

"Meh." I didn't budge, not feeling like walking past her mom and dad's door again. Not feeling like doing *anything*. "My parents are fighting," I said out of nowhere. "I don't want to go home."

Peyton finally set the Kindle down against her chest and gave me her full attention. Worry glinted in her eyes. "When did *he* get back?"

I shrugged. "Tonight, I guess. I don't know." Unable to handle the sympathy in her gaze, I turned my attention away and started to pick at a little hardened stain on the back of her couch from when I'd dripped a cherry-flavored icy pop on it once, years ago.

I gave up on the stain when it didn't budge and turned my attention back to Peyton. "Meanwhile, I'm pretty sure your mom and dad are doing it right now."

"*What!*" Horror flooded her features. "Why would you even tell me that?"

I lifted my shoulders again as if I didn't know why, except I did. I wanted her to feel as unsettled as I did.

Growling out my annoyance, I finally just said what was bothering me most. "I was really hoping I'd have a better time tonight. I mean, it was the big *masquerade ball*. It was supposed to be fun. But it was lame and boring, and I really think I should've just gone with a date, even if it was *Aria*. I wanted someone to talk to and dance with and just..." Blowing out a breath, I rolled my eyes and moodily muttered, "I don't know."

Peyton watched me worriedly for a moment. Then, she released a breath and flung the blankets off her, muttering, "Alright, fine."

As she crawled out of the bed, revealing that she was wearing an oversized T-shirt and shorts with sloths covering them for pajamas, I sat upright, confused.

Taking in the determined expression sprouting across her features, I demanded, "What? What're you doing?"

"I'm taking you back to the dance," she announced. "You stood up to Carmen Morales for me. Twice. Meaning, I owe you. So if you want a date to this masquerade ball thing, *I'll* be your date."

nine

MY MOUTH GAPPED open as I watched Peyton sling open her closet door and disappear inside.

“Uh...” One hundred percent certain I’d misheard her—okay, fine...*ninety-nine* percent certain—I shook my head and snapped my jaw shut.

“I’m sorry, but *what* did you just say?” I had to ask.

Squinting, I strained to hear better as she called back, “Don’t worry, I’ll go incognito in a costume with a mask and a wig. No one will ever even know it’s the freak who’s with you.”

I scowled. “That’s not—whoa!”

When a brown rat’s nest came flying from the closet and landed on the floor, I jumped and blinked at it before realizing it was the Belle wig that Peyton had worn when the moms made us trick-or-treat as Beauty and the Beast when we were twelve.

It’d been the last time we’d spent Halloween together.

Memories flooded my brain of how miserable I’d been, sulking and complaining the whole time because I hadn’t been allowed to go with my friends instead.

When a Mardi Gras mask with purple, green, and gold feathers landed on top of the wig, I blinked and returned to reality.

“Peyton, you’re not going to the dance,” I announced with a logical, tired sigh.

“Why not?” Her voice grew muffled.

What the heck was she looking for now?

I rolled my eyes and reminded her, “Because you *hate* school functions. They cause panic attacks. Like freshman year. Ring a bell?”

“Yeah, but this is different.”

I lifted my hands and shook my head. “How is this different?”

Voice growing winded like she was straining for something, she mumbled, “I don’t know. It’s last minute; no time to worry or stress. Plus, the dance is already halfway over, so I bet no one will even notice us arriving. I won’t feel like I’m on display and have to act a certain way. And with the mask and wig, most people won’t even know who I am. So... social anxiety averted.”

I wasn’t so sure that’s how that worked. Furrowing my brow, I argued, “But—”

Except she kept going, talking over me. “And if I’m your actual date this time, you won’t tell me to stay away, so I won’t feel so totally awkward and alone, right?”

I opened my mouth, startled silent.

But *what?*

Had telling her not to hang around me and my friends freshman year really *contributed* to her panic attack that night?

I pulled back and blinked, thinking about the situation from her point of view for the first time. She’d been shy and reserved and hadn’t known anyone but me. And what had I done? I’d told her to get lost so no one would know we knew each other.

Gah, I suddenly felt like the biggest jerk on the planet.

She must’ve been so lonely and afraid.

Appearing in the opening of the closet with some cloth full of light green ruffles and a sprinkling of sequins draped over one arm, she lifted her brows. “Unless you don’t think my

disguise will be enough, and you *still* don't want to be seen with me.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded blankly. “You make it sound as if I'd be *embarrassed* to be seen in public with you or something.”

Peyton tipped her head and looked at me as if she'd never seen me before. “Well...aren't you?” she finally asked.

And she was completely serious.

“*What?*” I exploded. “No! What in the world would even make you say that?”

She merely blinked at me, looking utterly confused. “Uh... from everything you do and say, I guess,” she finally answered.

I shook my head with no clue what she was talking about. “Like what?”

“Like...like...” Her hand flailed. “Earlier this week, you asked the moms if I could be homeschooled, so I wouldn't have to go to school with you anymore.”

I sighed and closed my eyes. “That wasn't because—”

“You straight-up ignore me in the halls unless you just *have* to talk to me,” she went on.

“I don't—”

“You look at my class schedule before you enroll every semester to avoid sharing any courses with me. You loathe driving me to school. You can't stand to be forced to spend any time around me. You put in earbuds to avoid talking to me. You criticize almost everything I do. You—”

“Okay, okay, okay.” I lifted my hands to stop her before backing up to slump down on the edge of her bed. “Geez, when you say it that way, I sound like a complete ass.”

She winced and flushed apologetically. “You're not an ass. You just...don't like me. It's not as if it's something you can help.”

My mouth fell open as she made that announcement, appearing to believe it completely. She honestly thought I hated her.

“Ah, jeez. What a mess,” I muttered, wiping both hands over my face before pushing my way back to my feet to face her. “Alright, I’m only going to say this once, so listen up. Okay? I don’t dislike you, Peyton. I’m not embarrassed to be seen with you. And I don’t want you to risk a panic attack just because you think you *owe* me one. Because you don’t. You’re like *family* to me. And yeah, ninety percent of the time, I’m sure I’m a complete jerk to you, which you absolutely do not deserve. But think of it this way. You and Barrett rarely get along, don’t you? You two bicker and fight and basically never do anything together. Yet you still love him and would annihilate anyone who hurt him, wouldn’t you? Well, that’s how I see it for *us*. You’re like my sister.”

Peyton’s lips parted and her eyes widened. “Really?” The load in her arms spilled to the floor between us so she could press both hands against her heart, but she didn’t seem to notice, so I went on.

“Yes. And most of those times that I’m irritated and annoyed and trying to distance myself from you, it’s because our *mothers* have always pushed us together so much. It’s *them* I’m mostly mad at; I just take it out on you. Which I know I really shouldn’t do, and I’m sorry about that. But if they’d just leave it alone, I’d probably get along with you most of the time. Except they constantly push and make me feel trapped, and I just...” I shook my head and huffed out a breath before muttering, “I’ve just wanted a little freedom, you know.” Glancing at her face, I added, “I would’ve thought you’d need a break from me sometimes, too.”

Peyton bit her lip as if worried. Then she met my gaze and quietly admitted, “Except I’m not like you.”

I snorted. “No kidding.” Then I shook my head. “But I don’t see how that—”

“Look, I know I’m not normal, okay?” she blurted, cutting me off. “I *know* that!”

“That—” I started, totally confused how that had to do with anything we’d just discussed. But she kept going, blathering over me.

“I know a lot of people think I’m weird or whatever. The school freak. And I’m okay with that. It’s fine. I don’t really care. I am the way I am. I’m awkward and quiet in big crowds and don’t know how to talk to a lot of people. I feel more comfortable in smaller, safer groups, and that’s how I like it. I mean, sometimes I do wish I could be more outgoing, but overall, I like the way I am. It was just recently that I realized the majority of the times it has ever bothered me is when it’s bothered *you*.”

“What? Peyton, I...”

She lifted her hand and briefly closed her eyes, looking strained. “I’m almost finished. Can I finish?”

My mouth worked as she reopened her lashes and looked at me with a frightened, pleading expression. Realizing that she was opening up to me, which she *never* did—so I should freaking listen—I nodded mutely and swept out a hand, letting her say her piece.

She swallowed audibly, then nodded her gratitude.

“Thank you.” After clearing her throat, she took a moment to organize her thoughts. Then, she nodded to herself and looked at me.

“I can handle everyone else having a problem with me,” she said. “No matter how close to perfect I could possibly get, someone would always have a problem with me, and that’s okay. They can have as many issues as they want. I don’t mind. It doesn’t bug me. Because they’re not important to me. But *you* are.”

For some reason, my chest felt tight when she said that. And my heartbeat thundered through my ears.

With this huge, overwhelming announcement hanging over us, I could only gape at her as she studied me back.

But instead of letting me process all this, she kept talking.

“Believe it or not, you’re the best friend I’ve ever had, and your thoughts and feelings matter to me. So I guess I always thought that if I could just get *you* to accept me as I was, then I could finally accept myself.”

Honestly, if she’d pulled out a sledgehammer and slammed it against my chest, I don’t think I would’ve been left any more surprised and breathless than I felt at that moment.

I’d had no idea I was quite that important to her.

Shaking my head, I fumbled for coherent words. “I...I...” But I couldn’t find any.

She sent me a soft smile as if understanding my befuddlement and forgiving me. “So I guess I’m just a little different than you,” she admitted. “All this time, I was looking for you to be some kind of lifeline for me that I could hang onto whenever we were away from home and out in, you know, *public*. And you... You just wanted a little breathing space after always being shoved at me. I’m sorry that I didn’t realize that until this very moment.”

I didn’t really want to receive an apology, though. I kind of wanted to issue one. Because I hadn’t realized what I’d been for her, either.

“God.” Stepping forward, I took her hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry *I* wasn’t there for you when you needed me the most. I...” Shaking my head as shame consumed me, I admitted, “I know how you are. I should’ve realized.”

“No,” she countered, waving a hand to stop me. “You’re fine. You didn’t—”

“I *do* accept you,” I spoke over her, needing to say it. Needing her to *know* it. “I accept you exactly the way you are. I honestly couldn’t imagine you being any other way than this, and I don’t want you to change. Alright? I mean, you know my flaws and weaknesses and bad sides more than anyone else and you still put up with me. And I like that because I don’t always have to be on my best behavior around you. I can just be myself or in a bad mood and say stupid stuff or just slack off and be lazy for a minute. I can always count on you to

just...*be* you. And if that's what you need from me—but in public—then that's what I'll be.”

Peyton exhaled and sent me a long, thankful look. Then she squeezed my hand briefly as she lifted her other hand to touch my cheek.

The shock of her fingers on my skin rippled through me, causing a strange wave of awareness to come over me that I didn't understand. I just knew that when she dropped her fingers, I had the strange urge to reach for them again and put them back where they'd been.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “But I think I had a few things wrong. Because I don't believe I should've been looking for someone *else* to accept me; I think I should've been finding a way to accept *myself*.” Exhaling a heavy but relieved breath, she let her expression bloom into a big, hopeful smile. “So you see, there's nothing for you to apologize about. I was expecting you to do something for me that I should've been doing for myself. And I'm going to fix that. I'm working on it, right now, in fact. Which means, we really need to get to this dance already so I can get started.”

I blinked. “What?”

Why were we still talking about the stupid dance? Screw the dance.

Peyton bubbled out a giddy laugh, though, and rushed to pick up the green ruffles that she'd dropped. “I want to try it,” she told me, her eyes alive with delight. “I'm feeling good. And bold. And I want to see how I'd do.”

“But...” My mouth worked to argue with her, except I had no idea what I even wanted to argue. I just knew that dances were not her thing, and yet, she suddenly looked *eager* to attend one. So the words didn't come. Instead, I blinked down at the heap she was holding and said, “What *is* that, anyway?”

She looked down at it as if she had to check for herself, then glanced up at me frowning slightly. “It's a dress.”

I shook my head. “Since when do you own a dress?”

She rolled her eyes and headed toward the dressing screen in the corner. Designed with cherry blossoms and a bamboo frame, it had been a gift my dad had brought back for my mom when he'd gone to Japan for a business trip. Except she hadn't known where to put it at home, so she'd given it to Peyton.

As Peyton disappeared behind it with the green dress, she said, "I have lots of dresses. The moms buy me at least two a year, hoping I'll change my mind and go to some dance or something with you after all."

I shook my head, still trying to make sense of what was happening right now. "But the dance is half over," I argued.

"I'll be ready in five minutes, I swear."

I snorted. I'd overheard girls all night talking about how it had taken them most of the day to get ready for the dance. If Peyton seriously thought she could get ready in five *minutes*—

She appeared from behind the screen, wearing something fit for a fairy princess, and my jaw dropped open.

Pausing to slip into a pair of sandals she had lying on the floor next to her bed, she then hurried to the wig and mask lying on the floor, telling me, "Four more minutes."

I shook my head, sure I was seeing things—positive this was all a dream—as she seated herself at her big vanity desk with the mirror and wound her hair up into a bun before tucking bobby pins here and there. Then she slipped on a hairnet-looking thing, flung the wig over her head, and secured a few more pins into place.

After finger-combing the mess into order, she opened a drawer and started to remove little plastic cases of makeup.

Yeah, no way was I still conscious, I decided. This couldn't be real.

Needing a closer look, I came to stand behind her so I could watch in the mirror as she applied a deep red shade of lipstick to her mouth.

"And now you own makeup," I murmured, completely stunned.

Peyton rolled her eyes as she finished carefully staining her lips. “Just because I rarely wear it doesn’t mean I don’t have it.”

I snorted. “Rarely? Try never. I’ve *never* seen you in makeup. Ever.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Whatever.” Capping the lipstick, she brushed some color onto her eyes and cheeks next. Then, she did something to her eyelashes that made them look longer and darker than I’d ever seen them before.

After that, she fitted the mask over her face, settled its elastic band around her wig, and finally turned to face me. “There. Ready.”

She sounded smug that she’d done exactly what she said she could do, all within five minutes, and she spread her arms to display the finished project.

I gaped at her, saying nothing.

But I had no idea *what* to say. She looked so different. The brown hair threw me off the most, but those deep red lips and the eyes she’d lined so thickly in black...

She was breathtaking.

And suddenly, she didn’t feel very much like a sister to me at all.

A wrinkle appeared between her eyes. “What?” She looked down at herself, then up again, beginning to appear uncertain. “You still want to go, right?”

Immediately, I began to nod, though it took my mouth another second to catch up. “Y-yeah,” I fumbled out. “But are *you* sure you want to?” Because I had to remind myself she did *not* like public scenes.

Peyton faltered before answering, but then she nodded and told me, “Yes. I want to try it. I think the disguise will help a lot.”

“Except I can still totally tell it’s you,” I countered, the words whispering from me as I stepped closer and lifted my fingers toward her cheek.

Her dark lips parted as she watched me. “Wha-what’re you doing?” she asked, her voice going breathless.

I gently caught a piece of super blond hair poking out from under the dark wig. “A piece of Peyton was showing,” I explained.

She glanced in the mirror, and the tops of her cheeks just under her mask flushed red. “Oh...” She huffed out a sound and then snagged another bobby pin from her vanity top. “Here you go.”

I stepped even closer as I took the bobby pin, then tucked the stray blond tendril out of sight, securing it into place.

Remaining there after I was done, I lifted my gaze to hers. “There,” I murmured. “Perfect.”

She was perfect. But I couldn’t say that. So I let her think I was talking about my own ability to hide hair under a wig.

She sent me a beaming smile that made my heart thump harder and said, “Thanks. Are you ready to go, then?”

I drew in a deep breath and lifted my brows. “Are you sure you still want to?”

Peyton nodded immediately, and I exhaled heavily. “Okay, then,” I answered. “Let’s do this.”

I held out my hand, and she took my fingers. We turned toward the door to her room, but once I opened it and was greeted with darkness in the hallway, I remembered the rest of the world beyond this room.

Pulling up short, I turned back toward her, finally remembering one detail. “Do you need to ask your parents if you can even go?” I whispered.

My mom already thought I was still at the dance, so I knew *I* was good in that regard. But Peyton’s parents thought she was in bed, probably fast asleep by now.

She winced and shuddered. “No way am I going anywhere near their room right now. I’ll just leave a note, telling them I’m with you in case they check in for some reason and find me gone before morning.”

I nodded. “Good idea.” I didn’t want to go anywhere near their room either. In fact, I fully planned on taking her out the front door instead of the back one I’d come in.

Besides, we both knew her parents wouldn’t care if she went. Hell, they’d probably throw a party in celebration if they knew she was even considering this.

And that was how Peyton ended up being my date to the school’s masquerade ball.

ten

I HONESTLY DIDN'T FEEL any nerves until we had already arrived at the school and were walking to the front doors from the parking lot.

"I still can't believe we're really doing this," York said, more to himself than me. Then, he gave a shaky exhale as if nervous and looked up at the exterior of the gymnasium that we were approaching.

That's when the butterflies finally took up residence in my stomach, and I had to flatten a hand over my abdomen to contain them. Because why was *York* nervous?

The night was chilly, but thankfully not windy. I shivered, wishing I'd remembered my jacket and scarf.

York glanced over immediately, strangely attuned to my emotions.

"You okay?" he asked, tightening his grip on my hand. His gaze glittered with concern. "Are you dizzy? Lightheaded? Nauseous? Do you want to leave?"

Oh...

He was just nervous for *me*. That was actually kind of sweet.

I shook my head and softened my expression with amusement. "We haven't even gone inside yet."

"Yeah, but if you feel uncomfortable at any time or just want to leave, say the word. Okay? And we'll head straight home."

I nodded, warmed by his concern. “Alright. But I feel fine. I promise.”

His gaze shifted over my face as if searching for the slightest crack in my composure. He had reason to worry; I knew. But somehow, I knew I’d be okay this time. A little nervous but not a complete train wreck. And he finally must’ve seen that on my face too because when he seemed reassured that I was definitely okay, he nodded and opened the door, holding it for me to go inside first.

I paused as music swelled out to greet me. The halls were darkened, just as I suspected they would be, lit mostly by fairy lights, but all the people I saw loitering just inside made me swallow. There wasn’t supposed to be anyone around when we walked in.

Crap.

My nerves tightened just a tick more. What was worse, almost everyone glanced over to see who was about to enter.

But no... I had this.

York touched my arm, and I knew he was ready to whisk me away at a moment’s notice. Instead of letting any more anxiety grip me, however, I stiffened my spine and stepped through the entrance.

Keeping my back straight and chin held high, I waited for York to step up to my side and take my hand, and then I started forward. We passed between a row of gawkers, some of them leaning towards others to whisper as they watched us, and I didn’t falter once.

I was so freaking proud of myself for simply walking through a hall, that after we paused at the check-in desk, I kept going, past the line of couples waiting to get their pictures taken at the photo station, and then right past the doors that led into the gymnasium, where the majority of students were inside dancing or crowded along the sidelines.

Finally, York leaned toward me. “Uh, Peyton? Where are we going?”

I shook my head, just regally walking forward, one step after another, no plan after that. “I have no idea,” I admitted. “Maybe you should lead now.”

He laughed and tightened his grip on my hand before veering me to the left. “Let’s check out the refreshment table. After eating your mom’s cookies at the house, I’m thirsty.”

“Okay. Good idea.” I followed him, pausing only when he stopped in front of a punch bowl. He filled a plastic cup with a ladle full of punch before glancing over and lifting his eyebrows, offering me the drink. “You want any?”

“God, yes.” I snagged it from him and started to gulp. By the time York finally had his own cup full, I was ready for a refill. I reached forward and ladled the second helping myself, and York watched, his punch poised halfway to his mouth as I drained the cup again.

When I reached for the ladle for thirds, he finally asked, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“What?” I lifted my gaze to him. “Yeah. I thought I was doing a million times better than last time.”

“Oh, you are,” he assured firmly. “But it’s still obvious you’re not comfortable.” He glanced around, frowning slightly.

“Comfortable is overrated,” I answered simply, shrugging as I finished the third cup.

He had looked so miserable and disappointed in my room, and he’d come to *me*. It felt like it was my responsibility to cheer him up.

“I can’t handle it when you’re upset,” I mumbled under my breath as I turned my focus to the food at the table. We’d pretty much *had* to come.

“What?” He strained closer, obviously not having heard what I’d said or at least wanting to make sure he’d heard me correctly.

But I pointed, distracting him from the topic. “Ooh. Rice crispy squares.”

Rice crispy squares were one thing we'd always been able to agree on. Actually, we usually fought over who got the last one in a pan. So when he glanced over to see that only one remained, he dived forward to snag it for himself.

I rushed to sweep it up before he did, but York was faster.

As he held up his prize, crying, "Ha!" I looked at all the pleasure and triumph on his face and was more relieved to see him smiling and happy again than I was upset about losing. I think I'd made the right decision to drag him back to the dance.

He smirked at me before realizing he probably shouldn't be crowing over the defeat of his date. Instantly, sobering, he glanced around at a small group about twenty feet away glancing at us, and he broke the square in half before extending it to me. "Here. Let's share."

I accepted his offer with a smile. "Thank you."

From there, we ate in content silence, our shoulders occasionally brushing before York nudged me with his elbow to get my attention.

When I looked up, he hitched his chin toward the photographer. "Should we get pictures and totally freak the moms out?"

I snorted. "They'd have a wedding dress bought for me within the week."

He lifted a single eyebrow. "You mean, they don't have one for you already?" As I laughed, he hooked a hand around my elbow and guided me away from the refreshment table. "Let's get our picture taken."

No way was I going to say no to him because, one, I secretly wanted to have a picture of the two of us together like this so I could remember this night for the rest of my life, and two, he seemed to be in too cheerful of a mood for me to deny him anything right now.

So we filled out our picture packet form and then waited in line behind all the other couples and groups until it was our turn.

Then, the photographer motioned us forward, already asking, “How do you want to pose? Facing each other? Backs to each other? Spooning with his arms around your waist? Or something silly?”

York and I glanced toward each other in question. But as soon as our gazes met, we nodded in agreement and said, “Something silly.”

The man grinned. “Right on.” Lifting the camera to his face, he backed up a couple of steps and took aim. “Alright, then, show me your best dance moves.”

Wait. *Dance* moves?

I looked up at York, thinking we’d just be making funny faces. *Dancing* seemed like something else altogether.

He looked similarly boggled for a moment, but then he shrugged and started to do the robot, turning stiffly to the side and bending his arms mechanically.

I faltered, not sure what *I* should do, but I knew I couldn’t leave York hanging, so I quickly dove into the swim, mimicking a couple of freestyle strokes before I held my nose and started to bend my knees, sinking down into imaginary water as I lifted my other arm over my head.

“Great! Perfect,” the photographer called, lifting his face to grin at us. “You guys did amazing.”

Realizing we could stop now, York and I both dropped our arms and automatically shifted closer together, where he took my elbow and escorted me off the backdrop cloth.

Some people who’d been watching clapped for us, appreciating our performance, and a few even catcalled.

My face went blistering hot, and I gripped York’s forearm as he steered us toward his friends that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“There you guys are,” he greeted with a smiling kind of scold as he joined them.

“Here *we* are?” his buddy, Ben Harvey, retorted, gaping at him madly. “What’re you talking about? You’re the one who

disappeared for almost an hour. Where were *you*?”

“And where did you find a date?” Wes added, eyeing me up and down, which made Aria, who was standing beside him, scowl irritably and fold her arms over her chest.

“Just down the road at the corner store,” York smarted back and even motioned over his shoulder as if spare dates could be found on aisle three, bottom shelf, near the end. Then he snickered and elbowed his friend in the arm as he rolled his eyes. “Seriously?”

But none of his friends laughed back. “Yes, seriously,” Wes deadpanned. “Are you going to introduce us or not?”

York’s smile faltered. “Huh?”

When he glanced at me in confusion, I could tell he hadn’t caught on at all that they didn’t recognize me.

“Do you even go to school here?” Aria demanded, her expression disgusted as she eyed my dress. “I didn’t think we were allowed to bring out-of-school dates.”

“Whoa! Guys...” York lifted his hands, laughing slightly. “Are you kidding me? It’s *Peyton*.”

I waved lamely and sank closer to him, feeling shy. Then, I glanced at Aria and said, “We’re in FACS class together.”

As she blinked at me, stunned, York laughed. “Did you honestly not recognize her? The mask doesn’t cover *that* much.”

“Yes, it *does*,” Wes countered, stepping closer and looking me up and down even harder. “The mask and the wig and the dress... Are you sure that’s really *PayDay* in there?” Getting right up into my personal space, he even reached out to touch my fake hair, but I evaded him, stepping away so that he missed.

Grin springing to life, he snickered. “Yep. That’s definitely her.” Then he shook his head and murmured, “Unbelievable.”

Aria appeared at his side, her eyes flashing with jealousy, as if she thought her date was giving me too much attention. “You guys totally don’t match,” she told York, eyeing his

lumberjack costume and then my...dress. I thought she was going to ask me what I was even supposed to be, at which point I would've had to confess that I really had no idea. But instead, she spun back to York, muttering, "And what happened to your stocking cap?"

York blinked and lifted a hand to his head, seeming surprised to find it bare. But then his gaze flashed to me just as I remembered...

"I bet you left it on the floor in my room," I blurted before realizing how that might sound to everyone else.

Ben's mouth dropped open, while York's other friend, Ferris, snickered under his breath, then cracked up, laughing openly.

Aria frowned harder, and Wes lifted his eyebrows before flashing us both a knowing grin. "And just what were you two doing so rowdily in her bedroom to cause you to lose your hat, huh, bud?" he asked, nudging York teasingly with his elbow.

"Oh geez, *really?* Shut up." York rolled his eyes, dismissing the joke. "You know better."

"Do we? Are you sure?" Wes taunted.

York's jaw set and he purposely ignored his friend as he turned to me. "Come on. Let's ignore these weirdos and dance."

eleven

WE HUNG out with my friends for the rest of the masquerade ball. Peyton remained quiet around them. Not that I'd expected her to turn into some social butterfly that suddenly became the center of attention. But she did seem to pay more attention to them than she usually did, which surprised me.

Typically, when she was forced to be in the presence of my crew, she ignored all of us, opting to play on her phone, read, doodle on a notepad, or do pretty much anything else to act as if they weren't there.

But tonight, she smiled at their jokes, looked interested when we encouraged Harvey to ask Lisa Lemmel to dance, and she even clapped and cheered along with the rest of us when Lisa actually said yes and followed Harvey onto the dance floor.

Feeling the need to move along with them during the song, I gripped Peyton's hand and dragged her onto the floor as well.

We had danced together just about every other dance, and Wes had even coaxed her into taking a turn with him once. It was strange but really nice. I hadn't gotten bored dancing with her yet, not the way I had with everyone I'd danced with during the first half of the night when I'd been here stag.

There was something comfortable and familiar about being near Peyton. The moms had taught us how to dance by forcing us to partner together, so I was used to her being in my arms. One might think that would take the thrill out of it, yet it didn't. Not at all.

Something about her was so different tonight. I was still alert and a bit worried about her nerves, but I also just enjoyed her company.

As I swayed her into a turn, hoping I could get another whiff of that scent I kept smelling from her, she leaned toward me and spoke into my ear. “I thought you said Aria and Wes were totally making out earlier.”

A slight smile lit my lips when—yes—I caught the smell again. I breathed in deeply, inhaling a hint of vanilla and maybe something flowery. “They were. Why?”

“Well, they don’t even look like they’re here *together* now.”

I glanced over and groaned. Wes was all the way across the gym, while Aria stood at the edge of the dance floor, her arms folded tightly over her chest and eyes narrowed as she watched Peyton and me.

Peyton studied her back curiously before saying, “She looks—”

“Jealous,” I grumbled with a sigh and rolled my eyes toward the darkened gymnasium ceiling. “Yeah. I think she is. Of *you*.”

Peyton whipped her head up to gape. “Of *me*?” She started to shake her head, not understanding, but then her eyes widened. “Because I danced with Wes? One time. Eww. She has nothing to worry about, trust me.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “I don’t think Wes is the one she’s upset about,” I finally admitted before sending Peyton a wince. “I mean, she kind of asked me to be her date for tonight before Wes asked her.”

“*What?*” Mouth dropping, Peyton suddenly whacked me on the side of the arm. “Then why didn’t you go with her? Oh my God, why did you go with *me*?”

“Shh,” I hissed, glancing around to make sure no one close to us had heard. Then I leaned in, catching another whiff of her scent, before saying into her ear, “I knew you wouldn’t think I was madly in love with you if we came together. And that’s

exactly why I broke up with Aria this summer. I just didn't feel it, and I didn't want her to get her hopes up and think I had changed my mind. Because I haven't."

"Wait..." Peyton's eyes flashed with interest. "You broke up with *her*? I thought it was a mutual split."

I sighed. "That's what we told everyone because she was pretty upset about it, and I didn't want her to be all embarrassed or lose face."

"Really?" Eyebrows twitching with surprise, Peyton tilted her head and considered me from a different angle. "That's actually super nice of you. Huh." She seemed stunned that I had a decent bone in my body. I was about to snark something sarcastic back to her, but then her eyes flashed and she moved in closer. "Hey, do you think that's why she hooked up with Wes earlier? She was trying to make you jealous."

"What?" I pulled my face back to frown in disgust over the idea. "No. She wouldn't do that. That would be incredibly—"

"Petty," Peyton filled in for me, even as she shrugged. "But hey, I bet it's the fastest way to force a guy to admit if he really likes you or not. See if you can make him jealous. And since it didn't seem to work..." She glanced toward Aria. "She has no interest in using your best friend anymore."

"God," I muttered, glancing over as well and wincing. "I think you might be right."

"Oh, I'm definitely right." Then she looked up at me and sighed. "And now she hates me; thanks a lot."

I rolled my eyes. "She doesn't..." But when I glanced Aria's way, she seemed to realize Peyton and I were talking about her. She dropped her hands and shifted uneasily to the side, watching us even closer. "You know what, let's dance over here."

I started to shuffle-dance Peyton toward the other side of the gymnasium, making her giggle. "What're you doing?" Then she squeezed my arm and leaned close to whisper into my ear. "Wait. *Carmen's* looking this way now."

Carmen? I blinked, having forgotten she even existed. But I glanced in the direction that Peyton tilted her head anyway, and yep. There was Carmen Morales standing amongst a group of friends, also scowling at us with her arms folded haughtily over her chest.

I grinned and tipped my face over Peyton's shoulder. "I bet she can't figure out who you are."

Peyton looked over, and when she met Carmen's scowl, Carmen swiftly turned away and stalked off, her friends hurrying with her.

Eyebrows lifting, Peyton turned back to me and cracked a smile. "I think she was jealous, too. Geesh, Kinsey. You're breaking hearts all over the masquerade ball tonight."

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right. *That* must be it."

Peyton waggled her eyebrows and said, "I think it's the suspenders." Then she wrapped a hand around one of the elastic straps and stroked it down my chest.

I shuddered at the tingling sensation it caused and then tried to hide my response by shaking my head and glancing swiftly up before looking back down again, right into a pair of Peyton-colored eyes. "You're crazy."

But Peyton was on a roll, intent to tease me. "Or maybe it's the flannel," she said, squeezing one of my biceps. "It's just so...*manly*, you know?"

I threw my head back and barked out an overly loud laugh.

People turned and looked curiously our way, and the attention freaked Peyton out, making her remember that we were in public. Around people.

She cleared her throat and let go of my bicep, shifting closer to me for protection.

But I only grinned. A part of me wished the rest of the world could see the real her whenever she came out of her shell, but then a selfish, greedy part of me kind of dug the fact that she reserved her best side for me alone.

From the speakers, the song drew to an end and the deejay announced that the dance was over.

The gym lights sprang on, and Peyton and I flinched from the brightness.

A bit of depression filled me; I wasn't quite ready for the night to be over yet. But then my friends found us before we could completely get our bearings back together, and Lisa Lemmel had been added to the headcount as she held Harvey's hand.

"My parents are gone this weekend," Ferris spoke up, looking hopeful. "If you guys want to come over and hang for a while."

"Hell, yes. I'm in!" Wes immediately announced, not even bothering to check with Aria for confirmation, and she shot him a glare for totally excluding her from the decision.

Harvey shrugged. "Sure, yeah."

When he glanced toward Lisa, she nodded enthusiastically. "Okay."

"Kinsey?" Ferris wondered, then glanced toward my date. "Royce?"

"Oh!" I was surprised he'd even bothered to ask us. No way had I planned on taking Peyton anywhere else tonight. She'd done wonderfully at the dance, but I wasn't about to press my luck.

For some reason, I had kind of assumed everyone would already know this, so when the rest of the group turned curiously our way, I was a little taken aback.

"Uh..." Glancing toward Peyton and trying to come up with a good excuse to get her out of it without either of us looking bad, I met her gaze lifting my brows, hoping she had an idea of what to say.

"Come on, PayDay," Wes encouraged, stepping up behind her and setting his hands on her bare shoulders as if to massage them. It was the second time this evening he'd put his hands on her.

I knew because she'd looked distinctly uncomfortable both times and had casually shifted her shoulders away from him.

Meeting my gaze, she gave a small shrug. "I guess we can go," she finally answered. "If you want to."

I blinked, sure I'd misunderstood her. Then I cried, "Really?"

I still didn't have any plans to take her, though. Her parents weren't even aware she'd left the house. At most, we might get a slight reprimand for attending a school-sanctioned event without telling them. But taking her somewhere else, where no adults would be around?

Aunt Donna and Uncle Henry would kill me.

But when Peyton nodded, agreeing to it, and Wes shouted, "Yes! I knew you were the good twin," I realized we were going to go. "This is going to be awesome."

I wasn't so sure. But Peyton seemed fine with it, so I kept quiet as I followed the rest of my crew from the gymnasium and out into the parking lot.

Ahead of me, Lisa and Harvey were holding hands and talking to each other, Ferris had shifted over next to Aria and was saying something to her, and Wes was throwing an arm around Peyton's shoulders and explaining why Ferris's house was the best place to chill.

I poked him in the back of the ribs, making him jump and spin around to glare at me and effectively get him *off* her. "Dude," I muttered. "She's not a jungle gym to hang all over. Hands to yourself."

Peyton sent me a quiet but grateful glance, and Wes lifted his handsy appendages in surrender. "Alright, alright, grandpa. I get it. Sorry for offending your tender sensibilities." Stepping to the side as we all walked down the sidewalk, he then tossed his arm over Aria's shoulders.

When he lifted his eyebrows at me, looking for a reaction, I merely rolled my eyes right back at him.

Wes laughed. Then asked, “So how did you two end up at the dance together, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled, feeling harassed by the question. “Peyton wanted to come.”

I mean, it was the truth. I’d left the school and was ready to *stay* gone. She’d been the one to hop out of bed, determined to drag me back.

But I sorta felt like I’d just thrown her to the wolves with that answer. And when all eyes shifted toward her, I swallowed hard, hoping my friends didn’t send her into some kind of anxious meltdown with their ravenous curiosity.

I tensed, about to tell them to leave her alone when she shrugged, and said, “It’d been a while since I tried attending a school function again after what happened freshman year, so I thought now was as good a time as any to give it another shot. So York agreed to take me.”

“What happened freshman year?” Ferris asked, since he’d transferred in the semester after that.

While everyone glanced away in awkward discomfort—Harvey wincing and scratching the back of his neck, Wes coughing loudly, and the girls looking innocently elsewhere—I opened my mouth to tell him not to worry about it. But Peyton surprised me again when she came right out and said, “I, uh, I kind of had a panic attack...right in the middle of the dance.”

“It was so scary,” Lisa added in a hushed voice. “York had to literally *carry* her out of the gym.”

Peyton winced miserably. “Yeah... I’m not so good with a lot of public...stuff.” She forced a nervous smile at Ferris, who didn’t seem to know how to respond. “But I think I’m getting better.”

“You definitely are,” I assured with a nudge to her arm. “You did awesome tonight.”

When she glanced up and smiled shyly in gratitude, I took her hand and squeezed her fingers supportively.

We broke away from the rest of the group then, since we'd arrived so late and were parked further back. The streetlamps sprayed down brightly, guiding the way for everyone else leaving the dance. But at that moment, it felt like just me and Peyton there. Alone together.

"I had fun," I told her, glancing over and grinning as I swung our hands between us. "Thanks for forcing me to come back."

"You're welcome." She looked up and grinned as well, then tipped my way so she could bump her shoulder into mine. "I had fun too."

Then she twitched her nose and made a face. "Except this mask is killing me," she added and had to let go of my hand so she could reach up and take it off.

After pulling the green, purple, and gold feathers up over her head, she hung the mask from her wrist and began to pull the bobby pins from her hair next.

Feeling eyes on me, I glanced over to find Carmen watching us from across the parking lot. She stared openly as Peyton peeled off the brunette wig and hairnet before shaking her blond hair free. And the moment Carmen seemed to realize who she was staring at, her gaze met mine and her mouth dropped open, shock flooding her expression.

I smirked, more pleased than I could explain, that she'd just realized she'd been jealous of a girl she'd thought was a loser and gotten everyone to call a freak. I couldn't recall ever being prouder of Peyton than I was at that moment. It was even better that Peyton had no idea what she'd just done, too.

Feeling like I was on top of the world, I flipped Carmen off, glad that I'd never gotten the chance to ask her to this very dance.

twelve

I WANTED to leave Ferris's house before we even arrived.

Pulling up to the curb in front of his place, I parked but left the engine running as I glanced over at Peyton. "Let's just go home," I suggested.

"What?" she glanced at me in surprise. "Why? I actually feel awake and ready to do something."

"Then how about we go back to your place, steal the rest of your mom's chocolate chip cookies, and watch a movie in your room on your laptop?"

Peyton studied me for a moment before furrowing her brow and asking, "Do you not want me to hang out with your friends?"

"Huh? *No!* That's not it at all," I assured. Then I shrugged because I *was* ready to get some distance from them for the night. "It's just..." With a heaving sigh, I finally confessed, "Aria's behavior is kind of creeping me out. Wes is being annoying. And—"

Peyton rolled her eyes, mumbling, "He's always annoying."

Ignoring that, I kept saying, "Harvey's going to be all into Lisa, while Ferris is just going to whine that he's the odd man out."

And basically, I just wanted to be alone with Peyton, which—I *know!*—was freaking crazy, considering that I had craved freedom from her for my entire life.

But tonight felt different.

Tonight, I felt alive, and it had something to do with her.

I wanted more of it, and I wanted it all to myself.

“Come on,” she told me, opening her door. “Let’s just go in for a little while. I’m actually in the mood to be around people. Do you know how rare that is? I probably won’t want to socialize again until I’m, like, twenty-one. *If* then.”

She was grinning and seemed so happy that I couldn’t argue. So I blew out a breath and grumbled, “Alright,” as I pushed my way from the Jeep as well. “Far be it for me to keep Peyton Royce from her once-in-a-decade night of socialization.”

“Yay,” she cheered and waited for me to come around and meet her on the sidewalk.

I could hear music from inside as we neared the front door. And unease tightened my gut even before Wes opened the entrance, greeting us with a bottle of vodka in his hand.

“Come in, come in, said the spider to the fly,” he taunted in a deep voice.

Peyton shifted close enough to me that she bumped into my arm, then she turned to send me a concerned look.

I lifted my eyebrows. “Ready to go home yet?”

With a sigh, she slumped her shoulders and admitted, “No,” and she turned back to Wes, letting him know she wasn’t thirsty when he offered her a drink, straight from the bottle.

“Thirsty?” he repeated in amusement as he turned to follow her, trying to shut the door in my face as he did. I scowled and caught it with my hand, easing inside to hear him add, “Vodka’s not for quenching your thirst. It’s for getting drunk, PayDay. Come on. One drink.”

I smacked him on the back of the head. “Leave her alone.”

He shot me a sour look but then relented. “Sure, dad. Whatever you say, dad.”

Rolling my eyes, I moved past him to reach Peyton's side, and we entered the living room together.

Harvey and Lisa were on a loveseat in the corner, not making out but talking so animatedly and closely that kissing didn't seem far behind, and Ferris was dancing with Aria next to the coffee table.

When she saw Peyton and me enter together, a wide, glassy smile lit her face. "Hey," she called and turned in a circle, lifting her arm over her head with a wave as if trying to call attention to everyone in the class. "Let's play truth or dare." Then she snagged the bottle of vodka from Wes. "And whoever doesn't meet their challenge has to take a shot."

I glanced toward Peyton and lifted my eyebrows as if to say, *See, this is why I didn't want to stay.*

She shifted closer, her eyes wide with fear. "Do I have to play?" she whispered out the side of her mouth.

I exhaled in relief. Finally, we could leave. "Absolutely not," I assured. "We'll just go home."

She shot me a worried glance. "But I kind of wanted to watch everyone *else* play." Her gaze turned hopeful and pleading. "Will *you* play?"

I frowned. "Seriously? You want me to play some juvenile party game? Why?"

She shrugged and blushed timidly. "I don't know. I'm curious."

"What about the candy bar twins?" Wes asked, breaking into the staring contest Peyton and I were having to slap my arm. "You two in or what?"

I glared his way, more annoyed by that name than I usually was.

When he only smirked back and lifted an eyebrow, waiting for my answer, I huffed out a relenting breath. "Just me," I answered. "Peyton's out."

"What? *No*," he protested, spinning to her. "Come on, PayDay. You'll have fun, I swear."

She shook her head and sank closer to me.

So Wes tried to coerce *me* into making her play. “You both gotta play or go home.”

“Fine.” I shrugged, totally okay with that alternative. Taking Peyton’s hand, I started to turn us away to leave. “We’ll go.”

“Okay, alright. Geez. Fun haters.” Wes gripped my shoulder, stalling me. “She doesn’t have to play.”

Peyton and I shot each other victorious smirks and turned back.

Since it was Ferris’s house, he chose who went first, and he pointed at Lisa, who, of course, chose Harvey to challenge.

When he picked the *dare* option, Wes elbowed Lisa and suggested, “Dare him to go into the closet with you for five minutes.”

She blushed and ignored him, daring Harvey to show everyone the most embarrassing photo he had on his phone.

While Wes snorted, and cried, “Lame,” Harvey pulled up his phone and started to scroll, with Lisa looking openly over his shoulder.

After a few seconds of the two of them staring at his phone, Lisa grabbed Harvey’s elbow and said, “Wait. What was *that*?”

He finally saw what she was looking at and promptly slapped the phone against his stomach. “Nothing.”

He blushed so hard that pretty much everyone in the room surged forward to get a look. “What? What was it?” we demanded.

“It was *nothing*,” he insisted.

But Lisa was more than eager to tell us, “I think it was a toilet full of—”

Harvey slapped a hand over her mouth.

She laughed and pulled his fingers away, screeching, “Poop!”

“No way!” Ferris snatched the phone from Harvey’s hand and looked. “Dude...” He shook his head and handed it over to Wes, who burst out laughing.

When the phone reached my hand, I turned the screen so Peyton and I could see it together. “What the hell, man?” I asked, giving Harvey his phone back, all the while unable to stop laughing and grimacing.

With an aggravated groan, he tried to explain. “My little sister in kindergarten has these epically huge turds, okay? She clogs the toilet at least once a month.”

“Oh my God. That’s your *sister’s* crap?” Wes cried. “Whoa. I think I’m impressed. And intimidated.”

“I hate you guys so much,” Harvey muttered, shaking his head and looking completely mortified.

But Lisa patted his arm and kissed his cheek to cheer him up, and he seemed to perk back to life after that.

Aria took her turn next. When she immediately turned toward me and Peyton, my stomach dipped with dread.

“York.” She smirked snidely. “Truth or dare?”

“Uh...” Damn. I shrugged, not sure what would be worse from her. I ended up going with, “Truth,” only to hold my breath and hope she didn’t ask about why I’d really broken up with her. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings and admit that I just didn’t feel any sparks.

But she glanced calculatingly between me and Peyton instead, then asked, “You two have known each other your whole lives, right?”

I frowned in confusion. “Uh, yeah. *That’s* your question?”

“No. My question is if you two have ever kissed before.”

“What? *No!*” I frowned at her for wasting her truth question on *that* and then glanced toward Peyton, shaking my head to let her know my group of friends was clearly insane.

She merely blushed and shrugged back.

And Wes took his turn next in the game.

“York!” he cheered. “Truth or dare?”

“Seriously?” I threw up my hands. “Why is everyone picking on me all of a sudden?”

“Truth or dare?” Wes repeated, lifting a challenging eyebrow.

I didn’t like where Aria had been heading with her question about Peyton, so this time I said, “Dare.”

Wes looked at me with victory, letting me know I’d chosen wrong, right before he said, “I dare you to kiss Peyton.”

thirteen

A COLLECTIVE GASP went around the room as Wes's challenge rattled through my ears. Instinctive panic coated my veins, and anger flooded my chest. The jackass was going to make me lose face because of this; I just knew it.

I narrowed my eyes at him for a split second, before sniffing acerbically and waving a dismissive hand, trying to play it off. "Don't be an idiot. Peyton's not even playing."

"That's why I didn't dare Peyton," he countered. "I dared *you*."

"No..." I rolled my eyes and sighed irritably. "Come on, man. Pick a real dare."

But he was like a dog with a bone. "I just did. I dared you to kiss Peyton."

Setting my hands on my hips, I looked toward the ceiling for patience and shook my head slowly. "I'm not going to kiss Peyton."

All the while, next to me, Peyton's tension was rolling off her in waves and making *me* anxious.

"Why not?" Wes pressed, unrelenting.

"Because she's like a sister to me!" My voice grew with the mounting anxiety. "That's weird."

If his pestering caused her to break down and cry, I was jacking him in the jaw, I swear. We'd been having a good night, too. I was happy; she seemed happy. Why was Wes so intent to ruin that?

“Then you gotta drink up,” he warned, tipping the vodka back and forth to taunt me.

“Fine.” I reached for the alcohol, prepared to do anything to make this moment pass. Except my terrible best friend pulled it back, just out of my reach.

“Or maybe you should just kiss her,” he cajoled.

Peyton crossed her arms over her chest, revealing her discomfort. Her knee started to bob. That was how her panic attacks usually started.

“Wes,” I warned, lifting my eyebrows, dead serious. “Give. Me. The vodka.”

The jerk tsked in reprimand and then winced playfully. “I don’t know, bro. You probably shouldn’t be drinking tonight. You still gotta drive home.”

“Peyton can drive,” I shot back. “Now, stop stalling and give me the bottle.”

He thought about it for a moment and started to hand it over, but as soon as I reached out, he pulled it away again. “Nah, I think I want to see you kiss Peyton instead.”

I snorted. “Never gonna happen. That’s disgusting.” Kicking roughly at his shin with the toe of my boot to let him know I wasn’t playing, I growled, “Now, stop fooling around.”

But Peyton cut in, muttering, “*Disgusting?*” She whirled to gape angrily. “You think kissing me would be disgusting? Wow. Thanks a lot.”

I spun toward her, surprised she had spoken at all, but it blew my mind that she seemed to be most upset with *me*.

I’d been the only one in the room trying to get her out of this mess.

“You know what I mean,” I muttered, irritated by her lack of gratitude over the fact that I was arguing with my friend for her.

But all she did was hug herself tighter and sniff at me, looking plenty annoyed right back. “I don’t think I *do* know,”

she muttered. "I mean, there's not a whole lot of different ways to take the word *disgusting*."

"She's got a point there," Wes tossed in, grinning with way too much pleasure. "Sick can mean cool. Nasty can be good. Wicked is awesome. But disgusting pretty much just means disgusting."

I sent him a scowl and turned back to Peyton. "I *meant*, it'd be weird since we were practically raised as siblings."

"Except we're not," she shot back. "We're not related at all, which should mean that, at most, a kiss with you might lack all excitement and passion, like pressing my mouth against my grandpa's cheek, but I never would've imagined that it'd be straight-up *disgusting*."

Beginning to glare at her, I bit out, "Okay. God! I'm sorry. Bad choice of words. I was just trying to spare you some embarrassment. Unless you *wanted* your first kiss to be with me? In front of all these morons?"

"Hey..." one of my moronic friends called, clearly offended, but Peyton and I were too busy scowling at each other to respond.

Peyton lifted an angry eyebrow and hissed, "What makes you think it would've been my first?"

I snorted. "Who would you have kissed?" I lifted my arms and spun in a circle, glancing at everyone so openly gawking and eavesdropping as we argued. Which only made me madder.

Peyton's chin rose haughtily, and she refused to back down. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Whatever." Rolling my eyes, I started to turn away as I muttered, "You haven't."

"You know, you don't know *everything* about me," she insisted.

Which made me come back around and grouse, "Yes, I do. And you know everything about *me*. Our mothers have made sure of it. Hell, you even know everyone *I've* kissed. So don't

try to act like you have some secret life going on behind my back that I don't know about. I *know*! Alright?"

Peyton glared back at me for a good five seconds, and I just knew she wanted to spit something back to put me in my place. But I was right, and she couldn't deny it.

Finally, her lips tightened in self-righteous reprimand before she stiffened her spine and lifted her chin. "You still don't know if it'd be *disgusting* or not."

"Oh my God!" I cried, throwing up my hands in defeat and frustration. "Fine. Let's find out, then."

"Fine," she repeated cattily.

Aggravated beyond words and unable to back down from her challenging stance, I stepped toward her, not about to end up on the losing end of this argument. Her eyes narrowed, letting me know she wasn't going to budge either and freely give up *any* victory to me.

So I hooked a hand behind her neck and yanked her against me, our mouths smashing together angrily.

At first, I was too mad to realize what I'd just done. I was straight-up determined not to lose *whatever* disagreement was happening here.

But she surprised the heck out of me when she grabbed hold of the front of my lumberjack flannel and balled two handfuls of cloth into her fists so she could kiss me back.

Maybe she was trying to prove that she wasn't disgusting, or maybe...

Honestly, I have no idea why she kissed me back. I just knew I hadn't been expecting it at all.

I froze, eyes wide as I gaped at her closed lashes that rested on the tops of her cheeks, where I focused briefly on a faint freckle near her left cheekbone that I'd never noticed before.

Then, the pressure between our lips shifted, telling me she was really trying to kiss me.

No. Not trying.

She *was* kissing me.

As the room exploded into a roar of applause, cheering us on, a strange silence deafened in my ears. Because...

Peyton was kissing me.

Peyton Royce was kissing me...and it wasn't disgusting.

Not even a little.

A shot of adrenaline seemed to spark through my veins, blaring all my senses to life. And I forgot about everyone watching every move we made as my eyes drifted shut. The tips of two of my fingers barely touched her jaw, and the feel of her soft warm flesh made my hand feel electrified.

In answer, Peyton murmured a sound from the back of her throat. I think it meant she enjoyed the touch, so my other hand lifted, sinking into her hair and fisting it tight while my mouth softened and moved against hers.

The kiss deepened, and we stepped closer to each other. But just as our mouths opened and tongues barely touched, Wes pounded on my back crying, "Oh my God. This is so epic. You guys are actually doing it. You're kissing."

Peyton and I broke apart, gaping at each other, neither of us saying a thing, just staring.

Still laughing and pretty much standing there between us, Wes shook my arm. "Wasn't like kissing your sister, was it?" he guessed, and his leer was so knowing that I wanted to punch him in the face.

Peyton started to lift a trembling hand to her mouth, but Wes turned to her next. "So what did *you* think, PayDay? Does my boy York here have—hey!"

When Peyton whirled away and raced from the room, Wes lifted his hands and stared after her before turning to me. "Where's she going?"

I shoved him. Hard. It made him stumble backward and trip over the coffee table. Aria and Ferris dodged out of his

way as he sprawled to the floor on his back, overturning the short table as he went, magazines, a candle, and someone's drink crashing down around him.

The others whirled to gawk at me as I pointed at him. "Don't ever pull anything like that again." And I turned my back on everyone so I could stalk from the room as well.

Just outside the doorway, there was a foyer that led upstairs, toward the front door, or down a short hall toward the kitchen. I ducked just out of sight so I could press my back to the hallway wall and blow out a long, shaky breath.

Wiping the palms of my hands against the thighs of my jeans, I tried to make sense of what had just happened in my head, but none of it computed clearly.

Peyton and I were never supposed to kiss.

And I *definitely* wasn't supposed to like it.

Oh God. I'd just kissed Peyton and *liked* it. How was this happening?

Panic flooded my pores, and I started to breathe erratically until I realized I could hear everything the others were saying in the front room.

"So...that just happened," Ferris announced, breaking the silence.

"Five bucks says they start dating by the end of the month," Wes chortled.

Only for Aria to snap, "Shut up, Wesley. You shouldn't have forced them to do that."

"Hey, they did that all on their own."

"Should someone go make sure they're okay?" Lisa finally spoke up. "They both looked pretty rattled."

"Nah, they'll be fine," Harvey assured. "York will take care of Peyton. He always does."

I drew in a sharp breath, realizing he was right. I needed to check on Peyton.

If our kiss had unnerved me as badly as it had, then I could only imagine what it was doing to her.

I pushed away from the wall, glancing both ways for her. I hadn't heard the front door open, so I was fairly certain she was still inside. I couldn't imagine her going upstairs. It'd probably be more private up there, but to Peyton, it'd also feel as if she was invading the family's space too much since that's where bedrooms would logically be located. I didn't think she'd do that, even in an agitated state.

So I hurried down the hall toward the kitchen.

And that's where I found her, leaning her back against the sink and hugging herself as she rocked gently back and forth. When I entered, she looked up, her eyes widening in...fear?

I tipped my head toward the back door and shoved my hands in my pockets. "Let's go."

She immediately popped away from the counter, more than ready to leave, and she led the way toward the exit.

Outside, we wandered down the side of the dark house, until we reached the front yard where a streetlight was thankfully shining down directly over my Jeep.

Picking up our pace, we started for it together. Just before reaching it, I lunged in front of her so I could open her door first, but instead of pulling it wide to let her in, I paused and glanced at her face.

From her expression, she looked as if she could be going into shock.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She nodded stiffly without speaking and darted her gaze to the ground.

"Are you sure?" I pressed. "Because from here, it looks like you could pass out any—"

"I'm fine!" she snapped, lifting her face to stare harshly at me.

My lips parted in surprise, and I pulled back a bit. But then I released a breath and nodded, opening the door the rest of the way for her.

Mumbling a quiet, tense, “Thanks,” she hurried past me and climbed into the Jeep.

I shut the door quietly and took a moment to breathe and let the October breeze cool my cheeks. Then I swept around to the driver’s side.

Neither of us spoke a single word in the Jeep, all the way home. I drove to my house, and when I pulled in behind my dad’s car, Peyton finally glanced up in surprise.

“I’ll walk you home,” I told her quietly as I killed the engine.

“I can make it okay,” she answered, even more quietly.

But I ignored that and shoved my hands into my pockets as I followed her past the three houses that separated hers from mine.

At her back door, I stopped behind her, silently waiting as she fumbled with the lock. Once she had it open, she paused and lifted her face, then turned back to me.

I opened my mouth, knowing I should say something. I should ask one more time if she was alright. I should apologize for my idiot friends who pressured us into everything. I should...

I should apologize for myself and for actually *kissing* her in the heat of the moment.

But no words came.

Instead, I took a step forward.

I had no idea what my intentions were. To hug her, maybe. To...

Hell, I don’t know.

This was just awkward, and I didn’t like feeling awkward around Peyton. She was my place of steady, reliable comfort.

Why was everything beginning to get uncomfortable with her lately?

She dropped her hand from the door and faced me fully, seemingly receptive to whatever I intended.

So I kissed her again.

And I have no idea why I did *that*. I hadn't been planning it at all, was pretty sure I hadn't wanted to do it. But there I was, pulling her to me and pressing my mouth back to hers, suddenly craving that crazy thrum of energy that had pulsed through me during the first kiss.

What shocked me most was how she pulled me back to her with so much enthusiasm it made me dizzy.

My heartbeat roared through my ears.

I shifted slightly, adjusting my stance to press against her completely, and before I knew it, I'd backed her against the back door of her house. My hands cupped her face as her lips molded against mine. She lifted onto her toes, rubbing against me, and her fingers clutched the front of my shirt with frantic desperation.

I didn't want to stop doing this. Ever.

I clutched her hair in a frenzied grip. A moan rasped from the back of her throat.

Our mouths opened, tongues touched—

And the dog across the street in the Feldmans' backyard started to bark.

Peyton and I jerked apart, breathing hard.

She seemed to sag down the length of the door, and I bent a little at the waist, pressing the back of my hand against my mouth.

Then, Mr. Feldman's voice yelled through the night, ordering the dog to shut up, and it stopped barking. The neighborhood went silent, except for the harried sounds of me and Peyton panting, trying to catch our breaths.

I finally risked a glance up, checking on her. Her eyes tentatively strayed my way. Our gazes touched and held, magnetizing the few feet of space separating us.

Then I nodded awkwardly and mumbled, “Bye,” before I spun away and hurried off, barely hearing her murmur, “Goodbye,” in return.

I slammed a hand against my gut as I staggered back to my house, trying to catch a decent breath but failing.

That time, I couldn’t blame Wes for nudging me into it. I couldn’t blame Peyton for inciting my anger and challenging me to kiss her. *That* had been all me.

I’d wanted to kiss her more than I’d wanted my next breath, so I had.

I had kissed Peyton.

And she’d kissed me back.

Gah, but what were we supposed to do now?

fourteen

peyton

I DIDN'T SEE or hear from York throughout the rest of the weekend.

With his dad back in town, he and his mom didn't come over for any meals. And being that there was no school, he didn't have to drive me anywhere.

There was no reason for him to stop by at all.

So he didn't.

I told myself that didn't bother me. I should be relieved that he stayed scarce. I had no idea what I was going to say to him when I saw him again, anyway. I pretty much completely dreaded the moment I had to face him again.

I mean, I had *kissed* him. With tongue. I mostly just wanted to dig a hole in the ground and bury myself there, where I could dwell peacefully and alone for the rest of my days.

But then...

He'd also kissed *me*.

York had kissed me. Twice! And that second time had been for no good reason at all, not because he'd been dared or angered or pushed into it. It was like he'd done it because he'd just *wanted* to.

Which couldn't be right.

But what if it was?

What if he was starting to like me in the same way I liked him? What if...

Oh geez, it made my head spin and stomach twist with anxious nerves every time I thought about it.

Except it couldn't be true.

Unless it was.

But it couldn't.

He'd sworn, almost daily, since he could talk, that he would never be with me.

If he'd suddenly changed his mind, then...

Well, I didn't know what that would mean. I was just so confused, and I kept thinking about how he told me about his non-feelings for Aria, how he didn't want to hurt her but didn't want to get her hopes up, so he had tried to avoid her and be nice to her in equal measures. And what if that became *me* next? What if he was going to avoid me, yet be extra nice when he couldn't?

But what if he actually liked me and was just as speechless about this as I was, and *that* was why he was staying away?

I needed answers. I needed them almost as much as I dreaded getting them. And so...I hated that he didn't come over to talk to me about it as much as I was *relieved* that he didn't. I certainly wasn't going to go over *there*, though, so I guess this was just how it was going to be.



BY THE TIME MONDAY ROLLED AROUND, MY NERVES HAD strung themselves so far out of balance that my legs felt like limp noodles when I walked, and the entire world just looked fuzzy.

I knew better than to try to beg Mom and Dad for a ride to school. They'd only ask what York and I were fighting about this time.

Besides, they still had no idea that I'd left the house on Saturday. Probably best not to give them a reason to question me into any kind of trap that forced me to confess everything.

They had a habit of getting all kinds of information out of me. I was way too honest for my own good.

So I just kept to myself, and they didn't suspect a thing.

The moment that familiar black Jeep Cherokee pulled into my drive on Monday morning, however, my stomach pitched, and I thought I might vomit all over the living room floor. The room went fuzzy, and I set a hand against the wall next to the door to catch my breath.

What if he wanted to talk about it on the way to school?

What if he didn't?

I wasn't sure if I could handle either possibility.

"You okay, kiddo?" Dad asked from his chair, where he was reading the daily news on his tablet.

I glanced back. No way could I tell him the truth.

Nodding, I mumbled, "Yep. Have a good day, Dad. Love you."

"Love you too, sweetie." But his voice was distracted as if something he was reading had already taken his attention away from me.

Ignoring the dizziness, I pushed my way out the front door and started for York's SUV. It tipped sideways in my vision, but I kept on anyway, determined to act as if nothing was wrong.

And when I slid inside and shut the door behind me, I looked straight ahead, out the front windshield, concentrating on nothing but breathing.

"Hey," he said softly.

I swallowed hard and kept staring straight ahead. "Hi."

York put the Jeep into gear and drove us to school, while I sat there stiffly, worrying the cloth of my green scarf between my fingers the entire way.

And neither of us said anything to each other for the rest of the day, not on the way to school, not on the way home, and

definitely not *at* school, even though I saw most of his friends watching me and talking amongst themselves whenever I dared to glance at his locker when I passed it.

Wes even tipped up his chin and grinned before winking. “Hey, hot lips,” he called. But that was all.

I simply rolled my eyes and faced forward again, ignoring him.



THAT EVENING, I WENT TO WORK AS USUAL.

I worked part-time in a used bookstore on the northeast corner of the town square for an hour or two after school twice a week and then on every other Saturday morning.

Not a lot of people shopped on the square; they usually went to the supermarket and mini-mall on the south end of town, so it was always pretty empty. It rarely saw customers, even though Kaylynn, the owner, had a small coffee shop tucked away in the back corner, which might make one think it'd get more business. But it didn't.

Being that quiet *and* within walking distance from home basically made it my dream job.

I'd been on the clock for half an hour when the bell over the front door dinged.

Sighing over the interruption, I set down the pile of new books I'd been tasked with shelving, and I started for the end of the range to greet the new customer, only to slow to a stop when I came to the opening and found *Wes* of all people strolling inside. By himself.

“Wha...?” I started to ask, clueless as to why he would be here. He wasn't shopping for any books; I knew that for sure. But why would he be here for *me*? I didn't even realize he knew where I worked.

He definitely didn't seem surprised to see me, though.

“PayDay!” he called in greeting, lifting his arms wide as he started toward me. “What do you got to drink in this coffee shop of yours?”

“Uh...” What was happening? I glanced past him to see if York was possibly lingering outside, but the sidewalk in front of the display window looked empty.

“Just fountain drinks and some basic coffee. That’s it,” I finally answered as I followed him over toward the coffee shop and slipped behind the cash register while he drummed his fingers on the countertop and read the short menu on the wall behind me.

“How about a Pepsi?” he finally said, lifting his brows my way.

“Okay,” I answered. “What size?”

He sent me a mischievous grin before announcing, “Oh, I need the biggest you got, of course.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes and nodded mutely before busying myself with preparing the drink.

As soon as I set it in front of him and met his gaze, however, his wicked grin returned. He kept looking at me as if he knew some kind of dirty secret I didn’t. It made my skin crawl.

“That’ll be two fifty-nine,” I told him as he picked the cup up, catching the straw with his mouth and just watching me as he drank.

Then he smacked his lips and let out a refreshed breath. “Come on, Peyton, seriously?” he started, his voice cajoling and grin slick with charm. “You’re going to *charge* me? I thought we were friends.”

Friends? I wrinkled my nose in confusion, never once having thought of him as *my* friend.

Before I could answer, however, the door opened again.

This time, I was sure it was going to be York, and I was fully prepared to tell him to get his creepy pal out of my bookstore. But, instead, it was Kaylynn.

“I’ll be in my office,” she said, looking flustered and harassed as she swept past, not bothering to greet my customer at all, as she usually would have. “No interruptions, please.”

“O...” But she’d already disappeared into her cubbyhole, shutting the door behind her. Only, she had so many books and things piled by it that it remained open a crack. “...Kay,” I finally finished, blinking at her unusual and abrupt behavior.

Huh. I was squinting at her shadow that I could make out through the crack in the door when Wes asked from the other side of the counter, “Was that your boss?”

I turned and frowned at him, watching him pull from the straw again. “Never seen her before in my life,” I deadpanned, feeling cruelly sarcastic.

Wes smirked in amusement and pointed at me. “You’re funny. Why did I not know how funny you were before? No wonder why Kinsey likes to hide you all to himself.”

My brow furrowed. Feeling even more uncomfortable around this weirdo than I had been before, I shook my head, not sure how to respond to that.

But thank goodness, I didn’t have to. Kaylynn’s furious hiss leaked from her office and filled the rest of the bookstore so loudly that Wes and I both turned to look this time.

“...Just saw you at the bank. With your *wife*,” she was snarling as she moved past the door, a phone to her ear. “I thought you were going to leave her. You told me you were going to leave her for me. You *promised*! But you’re not getting a divorce, are you?”

My mouth fell open in utter shock as I wondered who she was talking to. I had no idea she’d been seeing anyone, much less a—

“Ooh,” Wes whispered, leaning toward me and breaking into my thoughts. “Sounds like the boss lady’s been a naughty girl.” He bumped my arm. “Did you know she was dating a married man?”

I turned to him, hissing, “Shh! If we can hear her, she can hear us.”

“Geesh, sorry.” But he grinned too cheerfully as he said it, not looking very repentant at all. Then, he sat on the counter and lifted his foot to the edge so he could rest his elbow on his knee as he kept chewing on his straw. “So Kinsey said I had to apologize to you.”

I blinked and promptly forgot about Kaylynn and her love life. Hearing York’s name made me instantly blush.

“What?” I said.

Wes shrugged. “He told me I was a real ass on Saturday and owed you an apology.”

I shook my head, confused. “For what?”

Dropping his knee, he splayed a hand out toward me, and cried, “That’s what I said. Thank you.”

I opened my mouth to ask him what else York had said about me. Did he know about the second kiss? Did he know if York regretted them or what he thought about them at all? Did he have any idea what York thought about *me* now?

But I couldn’t ask any of that.

And Wes looked evilly gleeful, grinning as if he knew all the answers to all the questions I didn’t have the guts to pose.

When I remained mute, he let out a refreshed sigh and hopped off the counter. “Welp. If I have no idea what to apologize for, and you don’t know, then I’m going to bounce. Thanks for the drink, Royce.” He lifted it in farewell and started to stroll away.

But I hissed, “Hey.”

He paused and glanced back, lifting his eyebrows curiously.

Hitching up my chin, I asked, “Did you make out with Aria while she was still with York?”

“*What?*” He frowned in utter bewilderment, but then shook his head. “No. I’d never do that to my homeboy. Why?”

I shrugged. “He’s worried you might have. Because of the way you and she went at it at the dance. You should probably

tell him you didn't betray him if you didn't. It's been bothering him."

"Damn. Yeah..." he murmured, pointing at me. "I will. Thanks."

I nodded, and this time, I didn't try to stop him as he turned toward the exit.

It wasn't until the bell rang over the door, signaling his departure, that I realized, *crap...* He'd gotten away without paying for his drink after all.

I slumped onto the stool in front of the cash register and chewed on a fingernail.

At least I'd learned one good piece of information from this odd encounter. If York was forcing his friends to issue me apologies, that had to mean he didn't hate me, right? He had to care in some capacity.

And if he didn't hate me but hadn't said one thing to me about Saturday night, then he must be as awkwardly unsure of what to say about it as I was.

In which case, I had to assume this meant we were going to pretend it never happened.

Okay, then. That was one thing I could do. I could pretend.

fifteen

BY TUESDAY, I was ready to chew my own arm off.

Peyton and I still hadn't said a word to each other beyond *hi* and *bye*, and my dad was still home, keeping me from having a good reason to go anywhere near the Royce house.

I hadn't heard my parents argue since Saturday when I'd come home for the first time from the dance, but the air was quiet and tense between them. I hated to admit it, but the atmosphere around my house was always much more pleasant when he was out of town and it was just me and Mom.

She had been heating up old, frozen meals for supper that Aunt Donna had sent over eons ago and then passing them off as her own cooking. And Dad complimented her constantly for them, telling her how nice it was to *finally* get a home-cooked meal.

The last time he'd been home, he'd made some crack about Mom always ordering food in, and they'd fought about that for nearly a week.

I glanced between the two of them at the supper table, and Mom sent him a fake smile before she jammed a forkful of heated-up lasagna into her mouth.

I wasn't about to rock the boat and tell Dad the truth about who cooked what, so I took a quick bite to fill the ol' pie hole as well.

"York," he said, turning his interested gaze to me and apparently wanting to talk, anyway. "How's the Jeep Cherokee

treating you these days? Still wishing I'd gotten you that Challenger you wanted instead?"

Of course, I still wished he'd gotten me the Challenger. I mean, come on. A Challenger.

But I shrugged and waited until I swallowed before mumbling, "It's fine. I like it," because I wasn't in the mood for one of his you-should-be-grateful-you-have-any-wheels-at-all lectures and I really *was* fine with my Jeep.

I quickly shoveled more food into my mouth, hoping he'd get the point that I was *eating*. Not talking.

He didn't.

"Keeping it filled with gas and the oil changed regularly as I told you to?"

I nodded. "Yep." Then I shrugged. "Though, I guess it's probably due for an oil change soon."

"Well, then you should probably take it in and get it changed, shouldn't you?" He set down his fork so he could push his seat back and stand. Then, he headed to the counter where his checkbook was kept.

After clicking on his pen, he scrawled out a quick check, tore it from the rest of its booklet, and handed it to me. "There. That ought to cover it. Make sure you get it taken care of tomorrow after school, you hear?"

I wiped my hands off on a napkin and reached for the money, taking in how much he'd given me this time. Dad had such distinctive writing, very thick and bold, overly slanted with small letters juxtaposed next to big tall Ls and Ts and Ds along with low-hanging Gs and Ys and Ps.

"Thanks," I told him, looking up and lifting the check in gratitude. "Will do."

As I set it aside and returned to eating, I sent a small glance toward my mother, who peered back but said nothing. I guess, if I was going to keep her secret about the "home-cooked" meals, she could keep mine about taking my Jeep to a "shop" for oil.

Because the truth was, I'd never taken my Jeep to someone else for an oil change for as long as I'd owned it. Peyton's dad had taught me how to change the oil myself.

So the next day after school, I cashed Dad's check, used about half of it to buy a couple of quarts and a filter, and I pocketed the rest before driving to the Royce house and pulling straight into the garage that Uncle Henry had left open for me.

He was already there, listening to a classic rock station and trying to organize his workbench.

"Do you remember where I put the filter wrench last time we did this?" he asked as soon as I cut the engine and slid from my ride.

"Uh...right here," I said, unhooking it from a nail where it was hanging on the wall. And I waved it to show him.

He turned and pushed the glasses up on his nose before grinning. "Ahh. There we are. Well, don't let me keep you. You know what to do."

This was what I liked most about Uncle Henry. He didn't micromanage. He didn't lecture or talk down to me or try to force me to appreciate him by bluntly telling me exactly what he'd done for me.

He assisted when he was needed but otherwise sat back and let me do my thing. I respected his style so much more than my dad's.

As he found the oil pan for me to use, I set up my supplies. And just when I got the car lifted and was ready to start, Peyton's little brother wandered into the garage to watch us.

"Can I help?" he asked.

Uncle Henry shrugged and motioned toward me. "Up to York. It's his Jeep."

When the twelve-year-old sent me a hopeful expression with eyes that looked as Peyton-colored as Peyton's, I couldn't say no.

“Alright, fine,” I relented. “Grab the creeper and wheel it over here.”

Barrett blinked. “The...creeper?”

I squinted at him, then glanced toward his dad. Uncle Henry laughed and slugged me on the back. “He’s all yours.”

With a sigh, I pointed. “Yes, the creeper. That thing right there that you’re going to lie on to roll under the car.”

“Oh! Is that what that’s called?” Barrett raced over to grab the creeper. “I love riding on this thing. Never knew it had such a weird name, though.” And he plunked himself down on it, treating it like a boat as he rowed it over to me.

I sighed and shook my head. This might be a long oil change.

Except showing Barrett the ropes in pretty much the same way that his dad had taught me ended up being cooler than I thought it would be. He was eager to learn, he actually followed my directions, and it felt good to be the authority and show him all the tricks of the trade.

Afterward, Uncle Henry handed us each a cold soda that he’d gotten from the garage fridge, and the three of us sat together on a bench, enjoying the refresher and admiring my Jeep, which was now full of new, clean oil.

“So how’d Saturday go?” Uncle Henry asked out of the blue, tipping up his chin toward me in question.

I coughed and choked on my Pepsi, remembering Saturday vividly, especially the part where I’d had my hands and mouth on his daughter.

Face flushing hot with embarrassment, I tried to regain my wind and think up a good answer, all the while wondering just how much he knew.

Had he and Aunt Donna found Peyton’s note and somehow figured out I had kissed her?

“Whoa there.” Uncle Henry pounded on my back, to help clear my windpipe. “You okay, bud?”

I nodded and gulped uneasily. “Yeah, thanks. Uh...what did you ask again?”

Stalling.

I was definitely stalling right now.

“About Saturday,” he prompted. “The school dance. You took my advice and went stag, right? At least, I think that’s what Donna said you did. How’d that go? You get all the pretty girls to dance with you after all, or what?”

I flushed and ducked my face, unable to hide a smile. “Uh, yeah,” I mumbled. “I got the prettiest girl in the entire school to dance with me.”

Picturing how Peyton had looked in her costume, I smiled fondly. She had definitely outshone everyone.

“Yeah?” Uncle Henry lifted his brows in interest and bumped his arm into mine with congratulations. “Now *that’s* what I’m talking about. You ask her out yet?”

“What?” My eyes flashed wide. “N-no.” But the idea of going on a date with *Peyton*... Well, I’d never even considered such a thing before.

It seemed utterly foreign to me.

“Why not?” Barrett asked.

I blinked between father and son, only for my face to heat all over again. Wincing, I scratched at my hair and finally admitted, “I...I haven’t even really talked to her since then.”

Unless you counted all the awkward *hi*’s and *bye*’s we’d mumbled to each other in my Jeep each morning and afternoon.

“You should talk to her,” Uncle Henry encouraged.

“Yeah,” Barrett seconded, neither of them having any idea that we were talking about their Peyton.

I smiled at the irony. These two were the only two people in the family who’d never pressured me to like her, and now that they finally were, yet had no idea what they were saying, they were also the only two I actually wanted to listen to.

I found myself starting to nod. “Okay, yeah,” I said. “You know, I *should* talk to her.”

“Yes, you should,” Barrett encouraged. “And right now, too.” He gave me a nudge, trying to push me off the bench. “So go call her already.”

“And then tell us all about it at supper,” Uncle Henry added.

I started to laugh, only to almost immediately fall sober. “Oh, we won’t be over tonight. My dad’s still home.”

“Right. I forgot about that.” Uncle Henry nodded, and the grin slid off his face as if he was going to miss seeing me at the table. But then he lifted his eyes and smiled even brighter. “Well, that’ll be nice for you to get to spend some time with him too. Though, you might want to stop by our kitchen before heading home. I swear I smelled pie earlier. And I doubt you want to miss out on a piece of *that*.”

“Pie?”

I glanced toward the back door of their house, but pie wasn’t what was on my mind. Remembering what I’d done against that very door is what tempted me the most to want to walk that way.

But, you know, pie was as good a reason as any.

“I might just do that,” I murmured more to myself than the Royce boys, and I turned toward the house. “Thanks for the oil assist,” I called, waving over my shoulder.

And I headed toward the back door of their house.

sixteen

BARRETT AND UNCLE HENRY called something after me—probably a farewell—but I was no longer listening to them. Or thinking about them.

In my mind, I was already inside their house.

With *her*.

I'd been avoiding her all week, trying to pretend what had happened *hadn't* happened, and swearing to my friends that it hadn't meant anything, no matter how much they kept asking and bringing it up. But all that was bull.

Those kisses were the only thing I could think about. *Peyton* was the only thing I could think about. And it *had* meant something.

I had been going out of my mind, wondering what she thought about it all and if it had meant anything to her too. But I was done wondering.

This was Peyton. I could talk to Peyton.

So that's what I was going to do.

The kitchen was empty when I slipped inside, but the scent of baked apples and cinnamon hung heavy in the air. My mouth watered when I spied the pie cooling on the table, but I walked right past it with other things on my mind.

Down the hall, the door to Peyton's room stood open. I strode forward, more determined to see her the closer I got. When I glanced inside and spotted her sitting on the bed, watching one of those artsy videos she liked to watch on her laptop, I smiled affectionately.

There was so much about her room that was completely different from mine. She was all fancy and frilly, filling her space with pastels and rainbows and cute stuffed animals, while I liked dark blues and deep reds, fast car posters, and pictures of me hanging out with my friends.

I don't think we had a single thing in common, but that didn't matter. We were connected, anyway. All this time, I'd been completely wrong about us.

Like York Peppermint Patties and PayDay candy bars, we might not go together at all. Yet, I think we'd still always belong on the same aisle in the store, no matter what. Side by side.

This was where I belonged.

With her.

I stepped into her room.

She glanced up distractedly and began to look down again, only for her eyes to widen and shift up again when she realized it was me. Her mouth fell open as I shut the door behind me. Then, I took a bolstering breath and crossed the room to sit on her couch.

Peyton quietly paused her video and then slowly shut the laptop. Remaining cross-legged on her bed, she lifted her gaze and waited for me to speak.

But I didn't even know where to start or what to say. I glanced down at my hands that I was wringing between my knees, and I felt stupid for being so nervous. So I picked up the first stuffed animal that was sitting on the couch next to me, hoping to hide all the anxiety that was flooding my system.

I petted its soft yellow fur for at least ten seconds before I realized I had no idea what I was even holding. It looked like a pineapple. But also a...duck?

"What *is* this thing?" I finally asked, glancing up.

"It's Georgie," Peyton answered, squinting as if I should already know that.

“Right.” I tossed the pineapple duck back down on the couch beside me. “So should we, you know...talk about it?” I asked, returning my attention to her.

Her eyes flared with surprise, and her cheeks drained of color. “Do you *want* to?” she asked hesitantly.

“Do *you*?” I countered, lifting my eyebrows.

She bit her lip, appearing completely uncertain, only to make it worse by admitting, “I don’t know.”

“Oh, come on,” I growled, throwing up my hands and then slapping them down heavily on my knees. “We tried the whole ignore-it-and-hope-it’ll-go-away strategy. That hasn’t worked. It’s still *all* I can think about.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, bobbing her head, her eyes wide with worry as she picked up her closed laptop and hugged it to her chest for support. “Me too.”

“So...we should talk about it?” I hedged, inclining my head slightly to get her to agree. “Don’t you think?”

She shrugged, then finally nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay.” I huffed out a breath and relaxed, glad we were finally going to clear the air between us.

But when I glanced at her expectantly, ready for her to start talking, and she said absolutely nothing, just stared back as if waiting for *me* to say the first thing, I completely blanked out.

I couldn’t talk to Peyton.

“I have no idea what to say,” I admitted bleakly.

She shook her head slowly. “Me neither.”

I huffed out an exhausted breath and melted against the backrest of her couch, where I tipped my head back to stare up at her ceiling.

What the hell were we supposed to do now?

“This is so freaking weird,” I muttered bluntly.

“You’re telling me.” Peyton snorted and shook her head, looking bamboozled.

I watched her for a moment, then blurted, “I kissed you. You kissed me back. We kissed each other. *Twice.*”

There. I’d said it. Aloud.

It had been said.

Peyton exhaled harshly and nodded once. “Yeah,” she whispered.

“So what’re we going to do about it?” I demanded, needing this *weirdness* resolved...like, yesterday.

Her eyes widened. She obviously hadn’t come up with an answer for resolution, either. “I don’t know.”

“Great,” I muttered, surging to my feet and starting to pace her room. “You don’t know what to do.” I went one way across her floor, swiping both hands through my hair. “I don’t know what to do.” I went the other way across her floor, gripping my hair now. “That’s just...great.” Pausing, I turned to scowl moodily at her. “You know, if you hadn’t guilt-tripped me into taking you to that stupid dance in the first place, this never would’ve happened.”

Her mouth dropped open. Then she very slowly said, “Excuse me?”

There was plenty of caution in her voice, warning me to watch what I said. “What do you mean, *guilt-tripped?*”

But I was beyond rational. So I growled, “Guilt-tripped! You know... Telling me I caused your panic attack freshman year, and that if I wasn’t so cruel to you all the time, you never would’ve had one in the first place.”

“What?” she exploded. “I didn’t say that!” Slapping her laptop down, she flew off the bed and stomped toward me, effectively cutting off my pacing trail as she surged into my path so that I was forced to plow to a stop and face her.

Which caused us both to scowl at each other.

“I only made you go back to that dance because I felt *bad* for you,” she charged. “With all your moping around, depressed because you couldn’t get any other girl to go with you. And blaming *me* for that! I mean, what was I supposed to do at that point?”

Shaking my head because she had it *all* wrong, I said, “I didn’t—”

“Oh, whatever. You totally blamed me for how Carmen blackballed you.”

I snorted out a laugh. “As if! I blamed *Carmen* for that. One hundred percent.”

“But she wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t for *me*. And—let’s see—how did you put it to the moms? That you have to clean up all my messes. That I should be homeschooled, and it’s unsafe for me to leave the house.”

Gah! I hated how she always used my own words against me. Especially when I didn’t really mean what I’d stupidly blurted at the time in the height of irritation.

Growling, “That’s not—” I, of course, didn’t get to finish my defense before she started talking over me again.

“And you made damn sure I knew that I owed you one after you stood up to her in front of the whole school for me. So excuse me for trying to pay you back by giving you exactly what I thought you wanted: a date to the stupid dance!”

“You didn’t *owe* me a date,” I muttered.

“Oh...” She laughed bitterly and shook her head. “Yeah, I did. I *sooo* owed you—”

“Bull,” I growled, denying it.

We narrowed our eyes at each other and glared, our chests heaving and breaths surging. And then the scowling just kind of melted. I could tell my state of mind changed from anger to want at the same moment I saw it morph in her eyes, too.

Ah, crap.

We stepped toward each other simultaneously. My mouth was already watering for another taste.

Each of us gripped the other's shirt; I gathered a handful near her waist and she got a fistful near my shoulder. Then we strained together, our bodies crashing into each other and mouths colliding just as the muffled voice of her mother yelled something from down the hall, either hollering *at* Barrett or *for* him.

Peyton and I jerked apart, gaping at each other in shock, our breathing still erratic and unsettled. Then, we stepped even further apart until we were on opposite sides of the room.

Grabbing a piece of my hair and pulling in frustration, I looked up at her ceiling and rasped, "Why does that keep *happening?*"

"No idea." Peyton turned away and hurried to her bed, scurrying back to the safety of blankets and pillows until she was sitting down again much the same way she'd been when I'd first entered the room. "But we seriously need to cut it out." Picking the laptop back up, she clutched it to her chest once more as if it were a teddy bear she was seeking comfort from.

Swallowing thickly, I watched her, still rattled to my bones, and I croaked, "We do?"

"Huh?" She gaped at me in absolute confusion.

Slowly, I blew out a breath and reversed until the backs of my knees bumped into her couch. Grateful for the relief it would provide for my suddenly shaky knees, I sank back down to sit.

"York?" she prompted, seeking clarification.

I lifted my gaze to her, and a craving so hard and hungry gnawed at my gut that it physically hurt to think about never experiencing another kiss like the two—er, make that *three* now—that I'd shared with Peyton.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I had no idea what I would've actually said. I can't imagine that I would've confessed that I wanted to kiss her again, that I couldn't stop

thinking about her, that everything had changed in the space of a few days, even though those were the only thoughts swirling around in my head. I'm sure I wouldn't have confessed any of it.

Not that it mattered, anyway. Aunt Donna plowed her way into Peyton's room without knocking before I could get a single word out.

"Peyton, can you—" But when she saw me, she skidded to a surprised halt. "York!" She smiled in delight, then frowned in confusion. "I didn't know you were here."

"Uh...yeah." I stood up from Peyton's couch and cast an uneasy glance across the room to where Peyton remained huddled on the bed. We shared an uneasy gulp. "We were just...studying."

"Oh!" Aunt Donna nodded, pleased to hear that since the moms had never been able to get us to study together before. "That's great. Anyway..." Her gaze slid to Peyton. "Do you think you can be a doll and run down to the corner store real quick and pick up a dozen eggs?" Tossing her car keys onto Peyton's bed, she added, "I'm making meatloaf for supper."

Meatloaf? My mouth watered. I adored Aunt Donna's meatloaf.

She glanced at me as if reading my mind. "Your dad's still home, right?"

I nodded, a bit depressed about that because...no meatloaf for me. And no more chances to see Peyton for the rest of the night.

Reading my expression, Aunt Donna said, "You can still stay for supper, anyway, if you want to."

"I probably shouldn't," I answered regretfully.

Dad would say something if I did. And Mom would probably defend me. And then the two of them would argue.

"Yeah." Aunt Donna nodded and sent me a sad smile that seemed to tell me she understood. "Say hi to your mom for

me, though, alright?” And she touched my arm kindly before turning and leaving the room.

I exhaled, and from behind me, Peyton asked, “Studying? Really? There’s not a textbook in sight.”

I turned to find her grinning and rolling her eyes, so I shrugged. “What? She bought it.”

As she climbed off the bed to stand with me, I motioned toward the laptop she was still holding. “Maybe you were quizzing me from notes you have on there.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “I was watching a Moriah Elizabeth video. What would I be quizzing you about? The name of her most iconic dinosaur squishy?”

My mouth fell open. “Her...what?”

Peyton grinned and took a step toward me. My breath caught as I watched her.

“His name’s Pickle,” she told me, moving close enough to make my skin tingle with awareness and my back straighten in anticipation.

Was she going to kiss me? Because it kind of seemed like she was going to kiss me.

When she moved to within only a few inches away, her gaze lifted from my chest to my face. “And he’s been guarding your stocking cap and keeping it company for almost a week now.”

When she motioned toward her bed, I glanced over and saw some kind of green stuffed animal nestled among the pillows on her bed with my lumberjack stocking cap covering half its head.

For some reason, her not giving me that hat back made my blood heat. I liked thinking that she’d wanted to keep something of mine with her.

“Well, it looks pretty good on him,” I said. “Maybe Pickle should just keep it.”

Peyton's face flushed with pleasure as she smiled. "Okay. He says thank you."

She had such a nice smile. I found myself captivated by her mouth. Her lips were really soft. I couldn't wait to taste them again. "Tell him...any time."

I really, *really* hoped I got the chance to taste them again.

I found myself moving closer to them, until we were, like—you know—*close*.

Peyton sucked in a breath, probably wondering if I was going to make another move. I liked the way her eyes flared expectantly. I think she wanted it as much as I did.

But, you know, I wasn't *sure*. So I whispered, "I should probably go."

She exhaled in a rush, and her lashes fluttered. "Yeah... probably," she returned.

Feeling rattled, I mumbled, "See you later," and I hurried from the room, needing some distance and space and time to think.

"See you," she called after me.

Yeah, we definitely couldn't keep going on like this. All the heightened flare of senses every time I got near her would no doubt fry every brain cell I had soon. But I still had no idea what to say to her to fix the uncertainty and awkwardness between us either.

I needed a plan. Yes! That's what I needed. A plan to repair all the awkwardness...but also be allowed to kiss her again.

It was too bad I didn't have one.

seventeen

peyton

SO, I guess York and I were *not* actually going to talk about it. Because that little convo we'd had in my room had cleared up absolutely nothing for me.

I mean, if anything, I was even more confused now than ever.

Last week, I'd never kissed a boy before, had no prospects of kissing one, and wasn't even thinking about kisses in general.

This week, it was the only thing on my mind, and the boy I was getting all the lip action from was York. I repeat, *York*.

It just felt so insane.

When he pulled into my drive the next morning to take me to school, I was once again a tense and rigid mess.

"Hey," he said—the same thing he'd said on Monday and Tuesday.

"Hi," I murmured quietly, repeating my own daily dialogue.

He put the Jeep in reverse and backed from the driveway.

Silence reigned between us.

Okay, I couldn't take this anymore.

I turned to him, lifting my eyebrows. "So did you send Wes to the bookstore on Monday to apologize to me?"

York glanced over in surprise. "I didn't send him to the *bookstore*," he hedged. "I just told him he needed to apologize,

but I figured he'd do it at school. He actually went to see you at the bookstore, though? Wow."

I nodded. "Yep." I didn't mention the part where Wes had failed to pay for his drink. I didn't need York to force another non-apology from him. "So did he tell you he never messed with Aria while you two were dating?"

York straightened and glanced at me in surprise. "Yeah. He did later Monday night, in fact. Was that because of *you*?"

I shrugged, still smugly happy I'd gotten York's answer for him, concerning that question. "So if he didn't tell you about that, then I'm guessing he didn't tell you about what we overheard together while he was there, either."

"No." York shook his head, seemingly confused. "Since I didn't even know he visited you at all. What'd you guys overhear?"

"I think my boss is having an affair with a married man," I blurted, nodding eagerly and needing to talk to him about something, *anything*, just as long as it wasn't about me and him...kissing.

He blinked in surprise and glanced over. "Say *what*?"

"I know! And get this..."

From there, I proceeded to tell him all about Kaylynn's phone call, glad I had a topic to blather on about because one more day of a silent car ride with him to school would've freaking killed me.

His eyes grew big as I spoke, which made me happier that I was actually entertaining him with my story, too.

"No way," he gasped at the end. "I never would've pictured Kaylynn as the other-woman type. She seems so independent and self-assured, you know."

I nodded because I totally agreed.

"I wonder who it is," he murmured thoughtfully and lifted an eyebrow my way. "Did you hear her say a name?"

“Nope. I had no idea she was seeing *anyone*. She acted as if nothing had happened when she came out of her office again. I mean, she was a little distracted. But she smiled at me and asked how many customers we’d had. It was just... bizarre.”

“I bet. Wow.” He shook his head thoughtfully as he paused at an intersection. Then he pointed. “Hey. Check it out.”

I glanced over and saw a red truck also stopped at the stop sign to our right. Squinting, I focused on the interior of the cab to find Brock Heaton behind the wheel, with Carmen Morales sitting next to him.

I gasped. “She took him back? Geez, didn’t she break up with him the first time because she caught him making out with someone else?”

“That’s what I heard.” York glanced over at me, and we lifted our eyebrows in unison before snickering. “Serves her right, huh?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

After Brock’s truck turned toward the school, we fell in behind him and followed them the rest of the way.

“Think she gave him another chance because *you* humiliated her in front of everyone, and he was the only person left who still wanted her?” I wondered. “I kind of hope so.”

York hissed in surprise and glanced over at me with raised eyebrows. “Savage,” he murmured in approval.

I shrugged. “What? She kind of deserves to be stuck with a cheater.”

He threw his head back and laughed.

By the time we pulled into the school parking lot, I wasn’t even thinking of kissing anymore. Life seemed way less stressful, and I was glad for a little relief from always wondering if it was going to happen again and what it all meant for us now.

Until York cut the engine and I started to open my door.

“Hey,” he murmured, catching my arm to stall me.

I paused and glanced over, where the look in his eyes made my stomach dip.

And just like that, kissing was once again the only thing I could think about because, oh goodness. Was he going to kiss me? Here? At school? In the parking lot in front of everyone?

It kind of looked like he might.

Stress skyrocketed through me, making my skin flush hot and my brain go haywire.

I wasn't ready. What if my breath stank? What if people saw us and laughed? What if their snickering and pointing embarrassed York to the point that he was too horrified to ever be seen with me again?

Sending me a private smile, he gazed into my eyes, then murmured, “See you later.”

I exhaled in a rush. No attempts at kissing were made at all.

But gah... Maybe it would be better just to rip the bandage off and straight-up ask him what he thought of me now, and if he actually *wanted* to kiss again.

Except I couldn't.

“Bye,” I said, breathless and drained from all the tension he'd just put me through.

And I got out of there before he could wind me up anymore.

By the time I made it to my locker, I was a mess. Blowing out a breath, I pressed my forehead against cool metal and wondered what the heck I was doing.

I mean, this was crazy. I was driving myself mad, worrying about something that probably wouldn't even happen again.

Get your head on straight, Royce, I told myself. York doesn't want you like that. End of story.

There. Mental pep talk done. I had nothing to look forward to: no kisses, no York, no life. Things were going to go back to normal. And now, I was going to get to class. So that's what I did.

I put York from my mind and was able to actually concentrate in my first three hours of the day, but then *someone* had to ruin all that for me during the break before fourth hour.

As I approached my locker, I was utterly shocked to find York already there, leaning against it and obviously waiting on me. I paused and gaped for a moment, blinking at him and sure I was seeing things.

When he spotted me, he straightened, coming forward. So I started walking forward too, to meet him halfway, with no idea what this was about.

He didn't pause when he reached me. He merely stepped around me, hooking his hand around mine as he went, and then he kept going, spinning me around and forcing me to follow him down the hall in the opposite direction.

I rushed and almost tripped to keep up with him in his hurry. And when he opened the door to an empty classroom that he must've known wouldn't be in use this hour, my stomach tightened in anticipation.

Was he going to kiss me *now*?

As soon as the door was shut and we were alone, he whirled to *glare* at me, however. "Just what all did you and Wes talk about at the bookstore?"

"What?" I pulled back, totally not expecting an angry accusation from him. "Nothing. Why?"

"Well, he wants to ask you out, now," he growled, stepping toward me confrontationally.

I blinked, not comprehending. "Huh?"

I thought we were talking about *Wes*. Why had York suddenly mentioned someone who wanted to ask me out? The two topics seemed totally unrelated. I was so confused.

“He told me he had no idea you had such hidden depths,” York hissed bitterly, rolling his eyes before scowling at me as if I’d betrayed him.

My mouth fell open, flabbergasted by everything I was hearing because it still lacked any sense.

Then, I furrowed my brow and waved my hands. “Wait, wait, wait. You think *Wes* wants to ask me out. Me? And *Wes*?”

Was his brain okay?

“He said you guys bonded and that you gave him a free fountain drink.” Jaw tensing with anger, York jabbed a finger into his chest. “You’ve never even given *me* a free fountain drink from the bookstore.”

“But I *didn’t* give him a free drink,” I insisted, frowning and rolling my eyes. “He just took it without paying. And he didn’t apologize to me either, for whatever you thought he should apologize for. He just told me that he didn’t think he needed to. So I was like, *I never expected you to*, and he went all, *great. Good talk*. Then Kaylynn came in, and we overheard her on the phone, and he left right after I asked if he’d cheated with Aria. That’s all. End of encounter. I’m so confused as to why any of that could be considered bonding.”

“I don’t know,” York bit out bitterly. “But whatever you did, it impressed him enough that now he wants to go out with you.”

“Whatever,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “He does *not*. He just told you that to mess with you.”

York threw up his hands as if disgusted. “Why would that mess with me?”

I blinked at him dryly because, clearly, it was messing with him.

With a sigh, I sent him a stern glance. “I mean, this is *Wes* we’re talking about. Just think about it. After seeing us kiss during truth or dare, I bet he hasn’t been able to stop teasing you. It’s probably all, *York and Peyton sitting in a tree*, with him whenever he’s around you anymore.”

“No.” York made a face. “He’s not eight.”

I sent him a dry look. “You’re telling me he hasn’t mentioned it *at all*? That he hasn’t tried to bug you about it, not even *once*?”

York narrowed his eyes at me for a good five seconds before releasing a breath and scowling harder. “He asked if he could be the best man at our wedding,” he finally relented.

“See. There you go,” I offered, splaying out a hand. “Like I said, he’s just messing with you, the same way he did at the dance with Aria, making out with her to see if he could get a rise from you. And when you came back with someone else, clearly not concerned about her, he suddenly lost interest too. So now he’s trying to figure out if you like *me* by seeing if he can make you jealous with his whole *I wanna ask out Peyton* act.”

York wrinkled his nose in disgust. “No, he’s not. Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know.” I rolled my eyes on a defeated sigh. “Because he’s Wes?” Did there really need to be another reason than that?

Continuing to scowl, York studied me for a thoughtful moment longer. Then he asked, “Are you sure that’s all that happened at the bookstore?”

“Yes!” I hissed, glaring, only to pause. “I mean, he told me I was funny.” I shrugged and rolled out my hand. “Actually, he said, *I had no idea you were so funny.*”

York’s mouth dropped open, and he gaped at me as if I’d just confessed to murdering someone. Then he quietly accused, “You showed him your *funny* side?” As if I’d flashed Wes my boobs instead.

“I don’t know.” I lifted my hands, feeling clueless and lost. “I guess so... If he said I did.”

“Why would you do that? You only show *me* your funny side. That side of you is mine!”

My eyes widened, and I pulled back, shocked. “It’s *yours?*” I repeated slowly.

“Yes.” He stepped closer, scowling. “You’re a shy, quiet introvert for everyone but me. You can’t just go giving away your special side to someone else now.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry...” I drew out slowly, making it sound genuine and even fluttering my lashes at him. “I didn’t mean to give someone *your* side of me...seeing as I had no idea I even *had* a certain side, reserved solely for you.”

Then I scowled and shoved at his chest, trying to get him to back off as I growled, “You know, since you *appreciate* me so much and truly *value* these super special sides of me and all.”

Setting my hands on my hips, I started to grow angrier and angrier the more I talked. “Maybe you should stop and ask yourself if you deserve *any* of me. Because you certainly don’t seem to care what I do give you. You run so freaking hot and cold. You’re all *get away from me, you’re disgusting, I don’t want anyone to see us together*, one minute, and then all nice and *you’re like my sister, I’d die for you*, the next. And then sticking your tongue down my throat the minute after that, only to turn around and blame me for *that* too. It’s exhausting. And you’re a complete pain in the butt.”

He pulled his face back, seemingly bulldozed to hear what I’d just said. But then, he sniffed and rolled his eyes, muttering, “Yeah, well, you’re no picnic either.”

“Then why are we even here, talking at all?” I snarled. “I’m leaving.”

I stepped around him to stomp from the room, but he gripped my arm and pulled me back to face him.

“We’re here,” he bit out, “because whatever trick or jealous game you’re convinced Wes is playing on me is working, *okay?*” he muttered irritably. “I don’t like thinking about you and him together. I just see black rage every time I try to picture it, and I get all stupid panicky and mad and

just... Don't go out with him, alright? Promise me you won't go out with him."

My lips parted, but no words came. I totally was not expecting him to say that.

York slid his hand down to mine and squeezed my fingers urgently. "You'll tell him no, right? When he asks you out."

I shook my head. "He's not going to ask me out."

"He might."

"He's *not!*"

"Peyton," he whispered, leaning forward to press his brow to mine. "Just tell me that you *don't* have a thing for my best friend and that you don't want to go out with him."

I groaned and closed my eyes. "I'm not sure how you could even think it was possible that I have a thing for *him* right now when the thing I have for *you* is so overwhelmingly big and consuming that it's all I can think about. There is room for absolutely *nothing else* in my brain. But fine. Sure." I opened my lashes and looked him dead in the eye. "I don't have a thing for Wes, and I swear I won't go out with him. Happy now?"

eighteen

HAPPY?

Was I *happy* now?

After that kind of bomb was dropped in my lap?

Ha!

I think Peyton had just made everything *worse* by telling me she had a thing for me. Because if all this had only been one-sided on my part, I could've easily ignored it. But now that I knew we were *both* feeling it...

Gah...

I mean, did you ever get scared at night of the shadows in your room when you were little? Like, you were positive you saw a monster or a bad guy in every corner, only to turn on the light and, bam, it was just a toy or a chair. And suddenly, everything just *changed* inside you. There was no more worry, no more fear.

Just relief.

Well, that's kind of how things felt to me right now. I'd been blindly going along with my life in the dark, with Peyton there with me the whole time, annoying me and pestering me, and constantly being pushed on me by our mothers. And seriously, who liked anything forced on them?

So I had probably resisted wanting anything to do with her on principle alone; I had refused to feel anything *good* about her.

But when I had kissed her, it was like someone turned on a light, and voilà, I suddenly saw...

Her.

Sure, I was still blinking a lot and trying to adjust to the sudden brightness, and I was completely bumbling along, tripping into things, and most likely knocking all kinds of important crap to the floor in the process.

But I could truly *see* now, and I knew what I wanted.

Except it was Peyton that I wanted. *Peyton*.

And maybe I could've handled realizing I had a crush sprouting for the one girl I'd been absolutely positive I would never feel that way toward, but to learn she had one growing right back for me...?

Well, that freaked me out. There was no ignoring it now.

After gaping at her for far too long, I finally swallowed, then asked, "You have a thing for me?"

She sniffed sarcastically and rolled her eyes in disgust. "Trust me, I have no idea why. You're kind of a mess. And mean."

"*I'm* a mess? You're a mess," I countered with a frown. "Plus... You're weird."

"And you're, like, *jerk*-worthy mean," she added moodily.

"God, I want to kiss you again," I blurted and lifted my hand to her cheek, where my thumb slipped over soft, porcelain skin.

She closed her eyes and exhaled. I set my thumb over her lips to feel the warm moist release of her breath.

"I don't even know what's *happening* between us," she confessed, keeping her eyes closed.

"Neither do I," I admitted, stepping closer. "But do we have to figure that out right now?"

Her eyes opened slowly, and they were filled with achy uncertainty. "If we're going to keep kissing, then yeah, we

should probably figure it out.”

“Right. Yeah, good idea.” I nodded and started to lean toward her. “Then this—whatever it is—is just you and me. Exclusively. No dating Wes, or anyone, for you. No dating anyone for me. It’s just...us.” I cupped her waist and looked down at her mouth. “Is that a good enough start on figuring out what’s going on here for me to get to kiss you again?”

“I...” She gulped big and drew in a long breath, seemingly overwhelmed by what was happening. “I mean, I guess.”

“Great.” I tightened my grip on her waist and yanked her forward, pulling her flush against me. Then, my lips landed on hers, and finally, we were kissing again.

It felt like coming home except new and thrilling all at the same time.

I have no idea how long we kissed, but when I pulled back to look into her eyes, she was breathless and panting.

I smiled smugly.

Above us, the tardy bell rang.

“Oh crap,” she gasped in horror, pulling away from me and looking freaked. “We’re late to class.”

But my smile was firmly stuck in place. “Worth it,” I claimed.



AFTER PEYTON AND I WALKED TO THE OFFICE TOGETHER TO get our tardy slips, we hurried to our separate classes and didn’t see each other again for the rest of the day. When the last bell finally rang, I was beyond ready to get to my Jeep as fast as possible because I knew *she’d* be there.

Except my friends had other ideas. Wes and Ferris reached me first, then Harvey. Aria was suspiciously absent, but she seemed to have been replaced by Lisa, who was holding hands with Harvey.

“So you’re with Peyton now, right?” Ferris asked, obviously having already gossiped with Wes and heard about me warning him away from her, which...I *might’ve* done before confronting Peyton when he’d first told me he wanted to ask her out.

With a grin, Ferris slugged me in the arm and said, “Way to go, man,” without even waiting for me to answer, which was fine, since I probably wouldn’t have. “It’s about time. I predicted this from the first week I moved here and met you, you know. Just from the way you watched her.”

“What?” I wrinkled my nose and shook my head, confused. “How did I *watch* her?”

I hadn’t *watched* her.

Had I?

Ferris shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess it was like you were always looking out for her, making sure she was okay, ready to jump in and help if she needed anything.”

Feeling my face heat, I punched him lightly in the arm. “Whatever, man. It was probably just a habit. Our mothers pounded it into my head my entire life that I had to take care of her.”

“Oh, but you *liked* it,” Ferris accused with a knowing grin as he pointed at me. “You might’ve always complained about stepping in as if you *didn’t* like it, but you did. You *still* like being her hero. You like feeling needed. By *her*.”

“Aww...” Lisa cooed, gripping Harvey’s arm and resting her cheek on his shoulder. “That’s so sweet.”

“Just adorable,” Harvey agreed, but he was totally teasing me.

“Whatever,” I mumbled. “I’m going to go. You guys are weird.”

“And you’re in *love*...” Wes called, laughing. “Kiss her one time for me, big guy. A long, wet, sloppy one, alright?”

I lifted my hand over my shoulder and flipped him off.

At the Jeep, Peyton was waiting, resting her back against the passenger side door and drawing something in a notepad.

“Hey. Whatcha drawing?” I asked as I approached.

She jumped and lifted her face, only to flush and mumble, “Nothing. Just...clock people.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Did you say *clock* people?” She slapped the notebook closed, but I snagged it from her hand before she could hide it. “I want to see.”

“York...” She protested, leaping after me and straining to retrieve the pad as I held it away, just out of her reach. Then I set a hand on her forehead to hold her back as I flipped open the cover one-handed with a flick of my wrist.

“Hey, these aren’t half bad.” Letting go of her, I turned the pad sideways to see the picture upright.

She’d taken little kids mostly, and turned them into actual clocks, a bit like the clock off *Beauty and the Beast* but... different. It was interesting how all the kids were different shapes and sizes and ethnicities and that she used all different types of clocks as well to best match their personalities. I could see her talent in all the little details.

Looking up when she ripped the notepad from my hands, I blinked. “Why didn’t you want to show them to me? They’re good.”

“I don’t know.” She sighed and hugged the pad to her chest. “I put a lot of work into them and was kind of proud of them.” Biting her lip, she lowered her gaze. “I guess I just wasn’t ready to have someone point at them and find all the problems and critique them just yet.”

“And you really think I would’ve done that?” I asked, a little insulted by her lack of faith.

She glanced up. “Well... You have before.”

All the air vacated my lungs. Feeling like absolute crap because I knew she was right, I *had* made fun of her pictures before, I bowed my head shamefully and muttered, “I have, haven’t I?”

Peyton shrugged and glanced away, mumbling, “It’s fine, though. Just...whatever.”

She turned and started to open her door to the Jeep, but I stepped up behind her.

“Peyton...” I started with an apologetic sigh.

“Seriously, York,” she countered, whirling back to face me. “It’s fine. I—”

I shut her up by gripping the two ends of her scarf that were draped over her shoulders and using them to tug her the rest of the way against me, where I enfolded her into a big hug.

“It’s not fine, and I’m sorry,” I said into her ear. Resting my cheek on her hair, I admitted, “I’ve been a complete ass to you over the years. I know that. But I’ve always thought you were beyond talented. I mean, you were drawing unicorns and dragons when I was still trying to master stick people. So every rude thing I’ve ever said about your artwork was just because I was jealous that you could do something I knew I’d never be able to do. Got it?”

Peyton pulled back just enough to look up at my face thoughtfully. I peered deeply into her eyes as she studied my features, hoping she forgave me for all my past transgressions.

But instead, she admitted, “I’ve always been most jealous of the way you can talk to people and make friends.”

I snickered and teased, “Is *that* why you’ve always made fun of the group I hang out with?”

She flushed and shrugged. “You have to admit, Wes *does* make it incredibly easy.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Yes, he does,” I murmured, thinking she kind of sounded affectionate when she mentioned him now, like his wonky personality was beginning to grow on her too, as it had me.

“My point *was*...” Peyton said with a sigh. “I haven’t always been the nicest to you either. So all the past strife

between us..." She gave a dismissive shrug. "It shouldn't matter. We were raised like siblings, so we acted like siblings."

"And now?" I prompted, feeling a little worried for some reason.

"And now..." She lifted her eyebrows as if she wasn't quite sure how to answer that. But she said, "Things are different."

I nodded, agreeing. But to get more clarification, I had to ask, "Because we like kissing?"

Peyton blushed hotly and ducked her head but mumbled, "Yeah. Because of that."

I hissed out an aggrieved sigh. "So we really *should* figure out what's happening here, huh?"

She glanced up, still blushing. "Probably."

That shy yet seeking look in her eyes filled my heart with this crazy stirring. I reached out and tucked a piece of blond hair behind her ear.

"Want to come over to my house for a while?" I asked. "We can talk there privately and figure things out. Mom wanted to redecorate our front room, so she and Dad went into the city to go furniture shopping today. They probably won't be home until late."

Peyton blushed again and had to look away. "This is still just straight-up weird, you know? You and I."

"Oh, I know," I said. "But it's a weird I dig. So I'm willing to roll with it."

She bit her lip again and lifted her face to mine. The longing in her gaze told me everything I needed to know. She liked our weird too.

"So...my place?" I encouraged.

Her expression fell. "I can't. I'm supposed to work at the bookstore."

I groaned and leaned forward to rest my brow against her shoulder. "That's right. I forgot."

She touched my hair tenderly, which made me lift my face.

When our gazes met, longing swelled inside me. Nodding, I said, "I guess we better get you home, then." I let go of her and took a step back. "So you can get to work." With a wink, I smirked, "I'd hate to make you late to too many places in one day all because I had you so transfixed with my amazing charm."

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Oh, geez. Calm down there, Romeo, or your head's not going to fit into the Jeep."

"Whatever. You know you want me," I whispered in a tease, then winked and hurried around to the driver's side.

nineteen

AT HOME, Mom and Dad were just pulling into the driveway ahead of me.

“Hey, I thought you guys would be home later,” I greeted when I jumped out of the Jeep, watching both their faces closely since more often than not, they ended up fighting whenever they went shopping together. And that would certainly explain why they would cut their shopping adventure short.

But Mom grinned as if she were actually happy. “What can I say? I knew what I wanted as soon as I saw it. They should be delivering our new living room set by the end of the week.”

“Sweet,” I said, lifting my eyebrows and offering her a fist bump.

She knocked her knuckles against mine as Dad came around to throw an arm over her shoulders.

“The two of us are going to head out again here in a bit and eat somewhere special for supper,” Dad told me. “You think you can fend for yourself this evening?”

I nodded. “Sure.” Mom looked happy. Dad looked happy. I could definitely scrounge around the kitchen and forage for my own meal if it meant they stayed exactly the way they were.

“Great.” Dad reached into his back pocket. “Here. I’ll give you a little cash if you need to go out to eat, too.”

“Thanks,” I said, totally accepting it.

My father and I might not be close, but he'd always opened his wallet to me. And I could not complain about that.

So as those two got ready for their big date night, I went to my room and threw on some body spray, checked my hair in the mirror, and then decided to change my shirt.

Then, I was out again and whistling to myself as I returned to my Jeep. I went to Peyton's favorite drive-through and ordered a meal for two at the window.

By the time I made it to the town square and found a place to park on the northeast corner, my stomach knotted with nerves. I hoped it would be a happy surprise for her if I brought her supper for us to eat together on her break. But what if I was wrong?

I stalled inside the parked Jeep, worried for some reason that I would upset her instead.

But while I was sitting there, procrastinating, I saw some delivery person carrying a huge bouquet of bloodred roses into the bookshop.

"What the...?" I frowned, wondering who was sending flowers to Peyton at work.

Wes, was the first name to enter my head. And it stayed there.

Needing to find this out for myself, I grabbed the sack of takeout and jumped from my Jeep.

The delivery woman was leaving just as I opened the door, so I held it open for her, nodding politely when she thanked me. Meaning, Peyton didn't hear me come in since the bell only rang once.

She was too busy leaning down to read the card on the flowers to realize I was even there. When her mouth dropped open and eyes widened, I swallowed down a sharp slice of jealousy.

"They're from Wes, aren't they?" I asked, suddenly certain that Peyton was wrong, and he hadn't just been trying to get a rise out of me when he'd said he wanted to ask her out. The

jerk honestly, truly liked her, and he was trying to steal her from me.

Peyton jumped, and her head sprang up guiltily. “York...” she gasped, looking stunned to see me.

I slowed my pace but kept walking toward her, doom filling my gut, and our supper still clutched stupidly in my hand.

“He wasn’t just trying to make me jealous, was he?”

“What?” She looked totally confused.

I tipped my head toward the roses. “The flowers. Wes *does* like you.”

Her eyes widened with worry. But all she did was shake her head insistently. “No. They’re not from Wes. They’re not even *for* me.”

I frowned, deciding it was my turn to be confused. “Then what’s wrong?” She looked too shaken for nothing to be wrong.

Except she insisted, “N-nothing,” anyway.

Not believing that at all, I turned my attention to the flowers, and she immediately leaped forward, lifting her arms to block me from them.

“Wait! It might not be...”

But I’d already paused next to her and was looking at the envelope on the card.

And well...

She’d been honest. The flowers weren’t for her at all.

It said *Kaylynn* on the envelope, plain as day. In thick, slanted letters, the L sweeping unusually high and the two Y’s hanging incredibly low.

I blinked at that one word, unable to believe what I was seeing.

My vision started to waver and go fuzzy, but that name remained bright and crisp and blaringly bold in my eyesight.

Buzzing filled my ears, and my breathing picked up. I shook my head, denying it.

Peyton touched my arm, and I could feel the worry oozing off her before I even glanced over and saw it swimming in her eyes.

“It could be anyone’s handwriting,” she tried to comfort me, but even she didn’t believe that. I could see it in her face. She knew just as much as I did.

“It’s not anyone’s, though,” I uttered, shaking my head. “It’s my dad’s.”

twenty

AS YORK'S hand went limp and he dropped the bag of takeout from my favorite fastfood place to the floor, I barely had a moment to register how sweet the move had been for him to bring me supper in the first place, before he backed away from the roses, staring at them in horror, and all my attention veered to his face in alarm.

“York...” I reached for his arm, but the way he turned and looked at me as if I'd betrayed him made me stop.

“Oh my God,” he uttered, gripping his head and gaping at me. “You—you—you even said she was seeing a married man.”

“But it might not be *him*,” I tried to deny it. “They could be from anyone. For any reason.”

He was no longer listening to me, though. Turning away, he shook his head as his hands continued to hold onto his head. “This makes no sense. He took Mom shopping for furniture today. They're on a date right now. They looked *happy*. Why would he be sending another woman roses during all that?”

“See.” I pointed at him hopefully. “That *doesn't* make sense. These must be from someone else who just writes like your dad.”

He turned to stare at me blankly. “*No one* writes like my dad. Gah...” He spun away again and went back to pacing. “Do you think he's really cheating on Mom? What if he *leaves* her? Oh God...” He stopped dead in his tracks. “They could get a divorce.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, okay,” I tried to rationalize. “I mean, flowers could mean anything. And they’re probably from someone else, anyway. And it could just be her birthday.”

He spun toward me and lifted a brow in warning. “What about that phone call you overheard?”

I shrugged, cringing, because, okay, that didn’t make any of this better. “I don’t know. It could be totally unrelated to this, though.”

“Fine,” he muttered. “Then let’s just find out what these are about.”

He leaped forward and snagged the card from the flowers before I could stop him.

“York!” I gasped, but I didn’t really try too hard. Instead, I crowded closer and clutched his arm, reading over his shoulder as he tore the inner note from its tiny envelope.

I miss you. I want to see you again. Please forgive me.

That’s all it said.

In Palmer Kinsey’s very obvious penmanship.

“No...” York rasped.

The note started to tremble in his grip. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist, steadying his hand, and he looked up at me, appearing completely lost. “He’s cheating on her.”

I shook my head, still trying to deny it. But he nodded.

From the front of the bookstore, the bell rang.

York and I looked up, snapping alert. He shoved his hand behind his back, hiding the note he was still holding.

Kaylynn paused in the entrance, carrying a large, paper grocery sack in both arms.

When she saw us, she paused in surprise. “Oh!” Her gaze darted to York, and I could tell she immediately recognized him because why wouldn’t a mistress make sure she knew what her boyfriend’s son looked like?

Then, her gaze flickered to the flowers, and I swear I saw her face pale. “Hello there,” she greeted, plastering a big smile on her face a second later as she came forward. “I’ve seen you in here before, haven’t I?” she asked him. “Visiting Peyton? It’s...York, right?”

His mouth shifted into a tight smile, but none of it reached his eyes. “Yeah,” he told her quietly. “Good memory.”

Considering that he’d visited me at the bookstore maybe only once when she’d been there.

She laughed and then paused when she glanced down, finding the bag of fast food on the floor.

“Oh!” York rushed to pick it up. “Sorry. I hope it’s okay that I brought Peyton some supper. My *parents* were out on a date, leaving me to find my own food for the night, and I thought, why not?”

Kaylynn visibly flinched at the mention of his parents, but then she forced out another smile. “Yeah, no. That’s no problem at all. It’s sweet of you actually. Did he bring you the flowers too?” she added, directing the last question to me.

“Uh...no.” I floundered for a moment as both York and Kaylynn focused all their attention to me. “The delivery person said they were for you.” I motioned to them and noticed the little clear note holder was empty. My eyes flared. “But, uh, the card must’ve gotten lost in their van or something. It didn’t have one when it came in.”

Kaylynn swallowed and nodded. “That’s okay,” she told me kindly. “I know who they’re from.”

Next to me, York drew in a hard breath.

Kaylynn glanced his way almost guiltily and then turned back to me in a rush. “You know what? Why don’t you take off early and go eat with your friend. You barely even have an hour left, anyway, and I’m here now. Go have fun.”

“Thanks,” York told her, answering for me as he took my arm and jerked me against his side. “I think we’ll take you up on that offer.”

He probably would've dragged me out of the bookstore right then, but I had to get my scarf and jacket and purse first.

As soon as I was ready, however, he hooked a hand around my elbow and walked close as he escorted me outside.

"She's totally banging my dad," he said as soon as we were on the sidewalk.

I winced. "Yeah..."

"Son of a bitch," he hissed and shook his head as he marched toward his Jeep, not letting go of my elbow once. "I don't know why I'm even surprised. He's never home. They always fight. She's not happy. None of us are happy when he's around. This makes perfect sense."

I didn't answer. I don't think I was supposed to. He seemed as if he just needed to vent.

We both climbed into his Jeep, and he started the engine, then we just sat there, not moving.

"How am I going to tell her?" he finally said, looking at me.

I opened my mouth with no idea how to answer that. Then, I whispered, "Do you *have* to tell her?"

If she'd looked happy when she'd gone out on her date, why did we have to hurt her? I couldn't handle seeing Aunt Carol hurt.

But then York slaughtered me with yet another question, "How could I *not* tell her?"

He was right. It would hurt him more to keep it to himself.

I swallowed, wishing I could help somehow, when an idea struck. "Maybe I could talk to *my* mom."

He looked up at me, his eyes bright with hope.

I nodded. "Yeah. She's your mom's best friend. She would know best how to break it to Aunt Carol. I could just tell her that I saw the note on the flowers, and the handwriting looked like your dad's. Simple enough. And the complete truth."

“And you won’t mention me?” he asked, watching me carefully.

I faltered. “Uh, no. Not if you don’t want me to.”

“I don’t,” he said. “I want to hear what she says when you talk to her, but I don’t want her to know I heard.”

I nodded. “Okay. So...”

“We’ll go to your house,” he decided, backing out of his parking spot and heading us toward home. “No. We’ll go park at mine. Then walk to yours, and you could let me into your room through the window. I could hide in the closet or something as you ask Aunt Donna to come to your room for a talk.”

If this was how he wanted to do it, then this was how we’d do it. “Alright,” I agreed, willing to agree to anything for him right now.

And it was decided.

twenty-one

“MOM, CAN I TALK TO YOU?” I asked, poking my head into the living room about five minutes after I made it home.

The whole family was there. Dad was stretched out and lying on the couch with his head pillowed on Mom’s thigh, while she gave him a head and back scratch, and my brother was camped in the rocking chair with his feet hanging over the armrest as he played on his tablet.

Mom looked up in surprise at the question. As did Dad. And Barrett.

Geez, but why did no one ever pay attention to me when I spoke until I didn’t want them to?

And then I messed up and made it worse by adding, “Alone.”

“Ooh.” Barrett sat up, intrigued. “I want to listen.”

“*Alone*,” I ground out, scowling at him. “It’s girl stuff.”

“What? Did you get your *period*?” he taunted.

“Alright. Come on, bud,” Dad announced, groaning as he sat upright on the couch. “Let’s go get a slushy or something from the corner store, and let the ladies talk alone.”

“Really?” Barrett popped off the chair immediately and tossed down his tablet. “Can we go to Taco Bell too? I want nachos.”

Dad sighed and set a hand on the back of Barrett’s neck as he guided him from the living room. “I suppose we could.”

As soon as they were gone, Mom twisted on the couch until she was facing me expectantly. Then she patted the cushion next to her. “What’s going on?”

“Uh...” I glanced at the couch, then looked over my shoulder toward the opening of the hall that led to my room. “Can we go to my room?”

She blinked in surprise, since there was no reason to seek more privacy now that the boys were gone. But thankfully, she stood up readily without question. “This sounds serious,” she murmured as she followed me to my room.

“Well...” I bit my lip. “It might be. Maybe. I don’t know.”

In my room, I slumped onto my bed and tucked one of my knees up under my other leg. Mom sat on the bed as well, facing me.

“So my boss...” I started, biting my lip and wincing before I glanced toward the closet door that was open a crack. “Kaylynn. I heard her on the phone earlier this week, talking to someone, and it sounded like she was seeing a married man. She seemed really upset and asked him why he hadn’t left his wife for her yet like he promised he would.”

Mom’s eyes flashed wide. “Really? Wow. I had no idea Kaylynn was... That she’d...”

“I know,” I muttered. “I didn’t either. And then she got some roses at work today.” I held up the note that York had never put back in the flowers. “Look who they were from.”

Mom sent me a confused frown but slowly took the note. As soon as she read the envelope, her eyes flared with recognition, but after she tore the note out and read it, all she did was look up innocently and say, “It’s not signed.”

“Mom.” I furrowed my brow sternly. “We both know whose handwriting that is. It’s Uncle Palmer’s.”

Mom paled and blew out a breath before closing her eyes and shaking her head slowly.

I reached out and touched her knee. “What do we do? Do we tell Aunt Carol? We should definitely tell her. But *how* do

we tell her? She deserves to know.”

“Honey...” Mom opened her eyes and caught my hand, gripping it hard. Then she shook me to the core by saying, “She knows.”

My jaw dropped. “*What?* She...”

“She’s been aware for a while. We just didn’t know *who...*” She smiled sadly at me. “Until this.” When she lifted the note, my stomach dropped.

It was true, then. It was really true.

“I...” I shook my head. “But... She *knows*? Why hasn’t she done anything? Why does no one else know? York—”

“Oh, you cannot tell York,” Mom warned immediately, her hand clamping down tight around mine. “Absolutely not.”

I gaped at her in shock. All the while, the cracked closet door burned in my peripheral vision. “What?” I croaked.

“Peyton, promise me.” Her voice was stern. “You cannot tell him.”

“W-why?” I shook my head, then guessed, “Because Aunt Carol wants to tell him?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Maybe not.”

“Maybe *not?*” I cried, totally aghast. “What does *that* mean? Why wouldn’t she tell him? He deserves to know just as much as she does.”

“There’s no reason to tell him if she decides to stay with Palmer.”

I pulled back, not comprehending. “*Stay?*”

Mom gave me one of her seeking-patience sighs and eyed me carefully. “She hasn’t decided how to handle this yet, and there’s no reason to unnecessarily hurt York if she ends up not leaving her husband. Do *you* want to see him hurt?”

“No,” I said automatically. “But I don’t want to lie to him either.”

“Peyton, listen to me. Sometimes we have to lie to the ones we love the most. To protect them.”

I just stared at her. “So what have you lied about to *me*?”

She groaned and closed her eyes. “Nothing. Sweetheart... Just trust me on this one, okay. If Carol wants York to know, *she* will tell him.” When I didn’t answer, she gently pressed, “Alright?”

I watched her a moment longer and then slowly nodded my head. “Okay,” I whispered.

From the back of the house, we could hear Dad and Barrett returning home. Mom glanced that way, then turned back to me. She sent me a bolstering smile and touched my cheek. “I’ll go keep the boys distracted. You should stay in here for a bit and let yourself adjust to all this. I know it’s a lot. You look pretty shaken.”

I *was* shaken.

Nodding, I said, “O...okay.”

Worry glistened in her eyes as she finally drew her hand from my face, then she nodded too, and turned away. When she closed the door behind her, I stepped forward and quickly locked it.

“So...” York said, stepping out of the closet.

When I turned to face him, he had tears on his cheeks. “Would you have told me or not?”

I exhaled and let my shoulders slump. “Hell, yes, I would’ve told you,” I promised and rushed to him.

He opened his arms and enfolded them around me before burying his face in my hair.

From there, we cried together, weeping over his parents’ marriage, the lies they were both telling him, his uncertain future, and the loss of some of our innocence.

twenty-two

peyton

YORK STAYED in my room with me for nearly an hour. We held each other on my bed, not talking, just sobbing and rubbing each other's backs.

His phone vibrated half a dozen times, and when I finally sat up and checked it, I saw that all of them were from his mom.

He flinched, hearing that, and shook his head, letting me know he wasn't ready to talk to her.

"She's lying to me," he said bitterly. "Knowing everything and purposely keeping it from me. And he...God. I don't want to talk to *either* of them right now."

"But they're probably worried sick," I said. "I mean, they just came home from dinner to find your Jeep there but *you* gone."

York sent me a sharp glance, letting me know he didn't particularly care. So I dropped it and let him stay until my mom finally knocked on my door.

"Peyton?" she called through the wood.

"Uh..." Both York and I sat up, gaping at each other before we flew off the mattress. "Just a second."

York slipped on his shoes, hand-combed his hair, and then turned toward me. His eyes were still red and puffy from crying. I lifted a hand to his face, worried about him.

He caught my fingers and kissed them. Then, he tugged me close and stamped a quick kiss to my mouth.

From there, he opened the window and slipped outside, disappearing from my room.

After shutting the window after him, I raced to the door and pulled it open, smoothing my hands over my clothes as I went.

Mom exhaled sympathetically when she saw my face. “You’ve been crying.”

I bit my lip.

She held out her hand. “Come on. We’re going to make cookies together. Nothing cheers me up or calms me down like cooking.”

I made a face but followed her as she dragged me along. But *cooking*? Ugh.

“You know I’m not you, right, Mom?” I reminded her. Cooking would not cheer *me* up *or* calm me down.

She sighed. “I know. But come with me anyway and keep me company as I calm *myself* down from worrying about you.”

“I’m fine. Really,” I assured her. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“And Carol,” she added. “I’m worried about her too. Now that she has a face and name for the woman—”

“You already *told* her?” I blurted in surprise.

Mom glanced over and sent me a dry glance.

I rolled my eyes. “Right,” I muttered. Why wouldn’t she tell her best friend everything as soon as she learned it?

I mean, she expected me to keep a secret from my best friend, but she could go off and tell *hers* everything. It didn’t exactly seem fair.

“Now...” Mom carried on perkily, pointing at a stool for me to sit on at the end of the counter. “Which cookies should we make? It feels like a brownie kind of night, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I answered dryly.

I had absolutely no opinion on the matter, so I just agreed with her. Cooking really did make my mother feel better, though, and as she pulled all the ingredients from the cupboards, her good mood started to contaminate me. I found myself smiling by the time she was mixing together a bowl full of gooey chocolate goodness, especially when she let me lick the spoon afterward.

She'd just put the pan into the oven and was straightening with a satisfied sigh when the back door banged open.

We both whirled to find Aunt Carol storming inside, looking furious.

And I mean, I honestly don't think I'd ever seen her so mad before. My eyes widened as the door slammed behind her.

From there, I expected her to turn to my mom and tell her all about whatever had just happened with York when he finally went home because *something* had obviously happened. Popping off my stool, I stepped forward, eager to hear everything.

But when she looked straight at me, physically vibrating with anger, I was too surprised to even react.

“How...*dare* you?” she seethed. The palm of her hand swung out and cracked me right across the cheek, slapping me hard enough to wrench my face to the side. “You had no *right!*”

This time she screamed the words, otherwise I probably wouldn't have heard them over the ringing in my ears.

Pain exploded across my jaw, and my neck felt jerked out of joint.

I clutched my face and looked up at her with no idea what to say.

She glared back, looking like she might pull my hair next or rake her claws down my face, so I was eternally grateful

when Mom leaped in front of me, physically blocking me from the mad woman.

“Carol!” she shrieked. “What’s gotten into you?”

Aunt Carol pointed past her, jabbing her finger threateningly at me. “She told him. You told her not to tell, and she turned right around and ran straight to York, telling him everything. Oh my God, Donna. He was so upset. He told Palmer to leave and never come back, he yelled at me for keeping secrets, and then he took off in his Jeep to who knows where. Heaven help me, I don’t know where he went. I don’t know *when* he’ll be back, or *if* he’ll come back. What if he doesn’t come back? What if neither of them ever comes back? My family is completely falling apart...”

The last word ended on a hopeless sob as her shoulders curled in, and her anger faded into grief.

As she began to cry in great, heaving sobs, however, my mother stayed firmly in front of me and hissed, “Well, that’s not *Peyton’s* fault. And you will never strike my child again.”

“She did *what?*” Dad roared, only having just then appeared in the opening of the kitchen to see what all the yelling and commotion was about.

A second later, a gentle hand was taking my elbow. Dad turned me toward him and slid a hand under my chin, coaxing me to lift my face.

When I looked up at him through tearstained eyes, his mouth fell open and he boomed, “Donna!” letting Mom know she needed to take care of this. Then he pulled me into his arms and hugged me hard, tucking my face under his chin and cupping my head in both hands.

I started to sob uncontrollably, gripping handfuls of the back of his shirt as he kissed my hair and murmured, “It’s okay. Shh. It’s okay now.”

Behind me, Mom was busy railing at Aunt Carol as she defended me. It was so surreal. I’d never heard her yell at her best friend like that before. And she was doing it for *me*.

“But you asked her not to tell him,” was all Aunt Carol could say in her own defense.

Not wanting them to fight, I finally looked up and pulled away from Dad’s arm. “I didn’t,” I swore, wiping the tears off my face and pushing my hair from my eyes as I focused on the moms.

They turned to me in astonishment.

“He already knew,” I added. “We found out together. He was at the bookstore when the flowers were delivered. He saw the note at the same time I did.”

“My God, Peyton,” Mom breathed, shaking her head in disappointment. “Why didn’t you say so? A little warning would’ve been nice. To *prepare*.”

My mouth fell open at her scolding. Then I lifted my brows. “Oh, you mean, like the warning you two gave *him*? You didn’t see his face when he found out. It came at him like a sledgehammer, and all this time, both of you knew and could’ve broken it to him gently. *You* should’ve told him.”

“Listen here, you little brat,” Aunt Carol said, trying to step around Mom to get to me, her expression once again filling with anger. “My family situation is none of your—”

But Mom grabbed her arm, stopping her. “Don’t you dare go near her. And if you’re going to stand there and tell her she has no right to get involved in *your* family affair, then you have no right to get involved in mine. She is *my* child to deal with. Now get out of my house. My daughter’s just been physically assaulted, and I need to take care of her.”

Mom’s cruel words finally seemed to reach Aunt Carol, and she blinked before her face fell with regret.

“Donna, I didn’t mean—”

“Get out!” Mom thundered.

Aunt Carol flinched. Then her chin trembled, and she nodded before turning away and slipping out the back door.

Mom immediately spun back to me. “Baby, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She pulled me into a hug and squeezed me to her hard before pulling back to get a look at my face. When she hissed out a sympathetic breath, Dad nodded. “Pretty wicked, huh? She’s going to have quite the battle wound from this.”

“Are you okay?” Mom finally asked.

I shrugged and dropped my gaze. “I guess.” Lifting my gaze, I added, “I—I’m sorry I didn’t—”

But she shushed me with a sharp, “Shh. No. You have nothing to apologize for. None of this was on you. She’s just going through a rough time and never should’ve taken it out on you.”

“Never,” Dad repeated adamantly.

When a sniff—like someone was crying—came from the doorway, we turned to find Barrett peering worriedly into the room.

“Hey, partner,” Dad greeted and opened his arm, inviting my brother to join us. “What...?”

Barrett stepped into the kitchen with us, only to stop short and gape at my face. “Did Aunt Carol really hit Peyton?”

I pointed to the stinging area, and it must’ve been pretty red, because his eyes widened and he raced forward to join the family hug.



IT WAS ABOUT TEN WHEN I FINALLY RETURNED TO MY ROOM.

Mom and Dad, and even Barrett, fussed over me, making me take a pain reliever and put ice on my face. Then they asked me a bunch of silly questions to make sure I didn’t have a concussion.

By the time they finally left me alone, my fingers were almost shaking too hard to keep hold of my phone as I ripped it off my nightstand.

But if my encounter with Aunt Carol had gone the way it had, I couldn't even imagine how York's had gone for him.

Are you okay? I texted.

Almost immediately, he answered, **No.**

I bit my lip, wondering what I should say next. I wanted to know where he was, what I could do to help, if he needed anything, but then he added, **Can I stop by later?**

Of course, any time, I answered immediately.

Thank you, he said. **I just need a minute to process all this, then I want to see you.**

My heart warmed. Nodding, I typed back, **I'll be here. Whenever you're ready.**

twenty-three

IT WAS LATER that night when I was already in bed and trying to get to sleep but totally failing when someone tapped on my window.

My eye was pulsing unpleasantly and my cheek felt like it was on fire, but I popped out of bed immediately and yanked on the pull cord for my blinds.

York's stricken face peered at me through the dark.

Fumbling, I pulled the glass open.

"Is it okay that I came to the window?" he asked even as he climbed inside, gripping the frame and hoisting himself up to throw one leg over the edge before he spilled his way into the room. "The light in the kitchen was on, but I wasn't really in the mood to see anyone but you."

Not so long ago, it would've been completely bizarre to hear those words coming from York Kinsey's lips. They would've felt insincere as if he was making some kind of sarcastic crack, and I would've had no idea how to react if he *were* being honest.

So much had changed in such a short time. Because tonight, *I just want you* were the magic words that made everything okay, and I couldn't wait to pull him into my arms.

"It's okay," I assured him, lingering anxiously as he picked himself up. Then I reached for him before he'd even fully straightened himself. "Are *you* okay?" I demanded, going in for a hug.

He opened his arms to me. “Yeah. I—whoa!” Pausing, he ducked his face down to be level with mine as his gaze dropped to my cheek and widened. “Is that a black eye? Why do you have a black eye? What happened?”

I waved dismissively and made a sound in the back of my throat, letting him know I didn’t want to talk about that. “Later. Now come here.”

He released a relieved breath at my command and pulled me in until he was resting his face on my hair. I sighed and relaxed against him, glad he was here and okay.

Satisfied with that, I pulled free and nodded. “Okay, now tell me everything.”

Taking his hand, I led him to the bed. We both sat, facing each other. He took his shoes off before positioning himself cross-legged like I was. Then, resting his elbows on his knees, he exhaled. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“How about when you left my room last? You went straight home, right? And both your parents were there, so you confronted them immediately?” I guessed.

He winced and lowered his gaze before admitting, “Yeah.”

When that’s all he said as he looked down at his hands in regret, I exhaled.

“Did you really tell your dad to leave and never come back?”

He lifted his face, blinking in surprise.

I shrugged ruefully. “Aunt Carol came over afterward.”

He winced. “What did she say? Is she mad at me? I yelled at her too. For keeping everything from me. I just had to yell, you know?”

I nodded and licked dry lips. “I get it. But don’t worry about her. She’s not mad at you at all. And she didn’t say much, really. Just, uh, that you told your dad to leave before you yelled at her too, and then took off in your Jeep to who knew where.” Watching him carefully, I cautiously asked, “Where *did* you go?”

He shook his head dismissively. “I just drove around. Tried to clear my head. I sat in the school parking lot for a while. It was quiet and empty.” I expected him to go on, explaining what conclusion he’d come to and how he was going to go on from there, but all he did was cringe and reach for my cheek.

“This looks really bad,” he whispered. When he barely brushed his fingers over my bruise, pain crackled through my brain. I sucked in a breath, and he lifted his attention to my eyes before he pulled his hand back. “Headache?”

I nodded, flinching from the agony that skated through my skull.

“Have you put any ice on it?”

I rolled my eyes and nodded. “Yeah. Everyone’s been pampering me all night, forcing ice and painkillers on me as if I were dying or something.”

“What’d you do anyway? Trip over your brother’s bike again?”

I looked up at him, unable to lie but not about to tell him what really happened, either. I already knew the truth would upset him more.

So I blurted, “I was really worried about you,” and I surged forward to hug him.

He pulled me close and kissed the side of my head. “I’m okay,” he assured. “I mean, I have no idea what to do. What if my parents get a divorce? What if they don’t? I don’t even know what I want, except maybe to punch my dad right in the throat.” He exhaled roughly. “I just can’t go home right now.”

“You can stay here,” I offered. “For as long as you want.”

He nodded but his eyes remained hopeful as he asked, “Can we lie down? Together? Like we did before?”

“Of course.”

We settled down on our sides facing each other but not talking. York’s brow knit as he reached out slowly and delicately traced his finger around the outer edge of my bruise before leaning forward and touching his lips to it.

I exhaled softly and murmured, “Thank you.”

His mouth trailed down my jaw toward the side of my throat. “For what?” he asked as he buried his nose in my hair and inhaled the scent of my shampoo.

“For coming here tonight,” I said, running my own fingers up into his hair. “I was really worried about you.”

“I’m okay,” he repeated, and his fingers grazed my elbow before coasting up the outside of my arm toward my shoulder.

“You are not at all okay,” I told him as I cupped his cheek.

He sighed and looked into my eyes. “No. I’m not,” he agreed. Then he pressed his forehead to mine. “But I don’t want to think about that right now.”

When his hand landed on my waist, I caught my breath. I knew exactly what he wanted to think about.

My stomach tightened in anticipation. Tilting up my chin so that our mouths aligned, I felt his breath on my lips before he was pressing his to them, clutching my hair and kissing me deeply.

I pulled him close, relishing the feel of a solid, real York under my hands. It was still a little hard to believe that this was happening, that we’d gone from barely talking and not at all getting along to *this*.

We kissed until we were breathless, and then we kissed some more. I clutched his shirt, getting irritated with it being in my way, and he buried his fingers in my hair, gripping the locks as he drank hungrily from my mouth.

My hands found their way under the hem of his top until my palms smoothed over his smooth, warm back.

He paused from our kiss long enough to pull back and grin at me. “That feels good,” he said before sitting up and pulling his shirt all the way off.

I had seen York shirtless plenty in my life. During the summer, my dad liked to tease him, asking if he even owned a shirt. But here and now it was completely different.

I sat up too and then reached out, my fingers anxious to sculpt their way over his heated landscape.

He shuddered and grinned at me in appreciation as soon as I began my exploration. Then, he coaxed me back down on my back among my blankets, and he crawled over me, kissing me some more.

When his lips left mine swollen and thoroughly kissed, he trailed his mouth down my jaw toward my throat, and I gripped the slick muscles on his back, trying to catch my breath.

I tilted my neck back to give him more access just as a knock sounded on my door.

“Peyton?” Mom called softly as she opened the door—the very door I hadn’t even thought to lock—and she entered.

twenty-four

peyton

"I JUST WANTED to check in and make sure you— *Oh my God!*"

Mom jarred to a halt, gaping as York flew off me and we sprang upright, lurching to opposite sides of the bed.

"Wha...?" Mom stared, shaking her head helplessly. Then she pointed at him, hollering, "Get off my daughter!"

York leaped off the bed, since he was already *way* off me. "Aunt Donna..." he started, lifting his hands to seek peace.

But she stormed toward him, glaring. "Don't you dare call me that."

When he stamped his mouth shut and nodded mutely, appearing stunned and hurt by the venom in her voice, more people decided to join the fun.

"What in the world is going—*whoa!*" Dad stumbled to a halt when he saw Mom backing a shirtless York into the wall just before a curious Barrett peered around him into the room with big eyes.

"Holy shit," the twelve-year-old cried. "Were Peyton and York having—"

"To your room. *Now!*" Dad ordered, cutting Barrett off from finishing that question.

"But what did *I* do?" he cried. "Peyton's the one who—"

"Just go!" Mom screamed, and a wide-eyed Barrett immediately disappeared.

“And you,” Mom growled at York. “Put your clothes back on, for God’s sake.”

“Oh my God, Mom,” I groaned, pressing a hand to my brow. “Do you have to make it sound like he’s completely naked? Really?”

Across the room, York fumbled in his haste to jerk his shirt on and shove his feet back into his shoes.

“Just how long have you two been seeing each other behind everyone’s backs?” Mom demanded.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Like...tonight,” I answered, just as York said, “Since the night of the masquerade ball.”

I whirled to gape at him in disbelief. But he shrugged at me cluelessly. “What?”

“There was no *sneaking* then,” I spat.

“Oh?” he countered with a lift of his eyebrows, always ready to disagree with me. “So they know you went to the dance?”

“You did *what*?” Mom shrieked.

I scowled at York, then turned to my parents, who were speechless. “I left a note,” I explained as if that should make it fine. “And you guys were...” After a fumbling cringe, I finished with, “Already asleep by the time I decided to go. I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Wait, so you really went to the dance? The *school* dance?” Dad asked, waving his hands and appearing completely awed. “And you were okay? No nervous breakdown? No panic attack?”

I shook my head, starting to smile as York stepped up to my side and proudly announced, “She did great.”

Mom, however, folded her arms over her chest and sniffed acerbically. “None of this explains what you were doing half-naked on top of my daughter in her bed *tonight*.”

“Right,” York said and cleared his throat before shifting a bit away from me. “Well...” He sent me an apologetic cringe

before turning to my parents. “We kind of got suckered into playing truth or dare that night after the dance, where one of my idiotic friends dared me to kiss Peyton, and...” His cheeks turned red as he paused before admitting, “I liked it.” Then he glanced my way, saying, “We both liked it.”

The room fell silent as I began to blush hotly, while my parents just blinked at us.

York couldn’t seem to handle the quiet, though, so he rushed to add, “I had no idea kissing her would be so...so... *not* sisterly.”

“Hold up.” Squinting in confusion, my dad pointed back and forth between us. “You mean, you two had never kissed before?” He sounded as if that were impossible to believe.

“What, *no!*” York cried before looking at me, where we shared a frown together, and then he turned back to my mom and dad. “That was the first time.”

“And so you’ve been sneaking in through her window every night *since* then?” Mom sneered before folding her arms moodily over her chest and rolling her eyes. “To make out?”

York blinked at her. I could tell that he was completely boggled by her hateful behavior toward him. Honestly, I was confused by it too. She loved York, and had always, *always* wanted this to happen.

“No,” he said slowly. “We’d actually been *avoiding* each other since then. But I went to see her earlier tonight...at the bookstore.”

“Ah. Right when the notorious roses were being delivered,” Dad concluded, whistling out a breath and shaking his head. “Damn. That explains *that*, then.”

He started to smile as if amused by the whole string of events, while next to him, Mom’s scowl only grew. With narrowed eyes, she spat, “Well, whatever this is you two think you’re starting, it ends. Right now.”

My mouth dropped in shock, Dad whirled to gape at her, and York just kind of blinked before slowly saying, “What?”

Mom pointed toward the doorway of the room. “You need to go home. I want you and your slap-happy mother to stay *away* from my daughter. You got that?”

He glanced at me, furrowing his brow and quietly asking if I’d heard the same command as he had. Then, he turned back to Mom. “Seriously? But I thought you’d be...” His words trailed off, however, as he shook his head and squinted. “*Slap happy?*” he repeated, finally focusing on that term. When he turned to me again, seeking clarification, I lifted my hand to hide the bruise from him.

Except all I did was bring attention to it.

His mouth fell open. Sick realization entered his eyes, and he pointed at me. “No way... Are you saying my *mom* did that to you? But *why*? What happened?” He glanced back and forth between me and my parents before settling on me. “Peyton? What happened to your eye?”

When I didn’t answer soon enough, Mom growled, “I’ll tell you what happened.” Snagging a cell phone she saw sticking out of my dad’s back pocket and making him cry out an indignant, *hey*, she started to dial as she kept talking. “Your mother struck my little girl for no other reason than simply *thinking* Peyton told you about your father’s affair.”

York’s mouth dropped open. “Are you serious?” He turned to me. “Is she serious?” Not even waiting for me to answer, he whirled back to Mom. “But Peyton didn’t even *tell* me. We found out—”

“Together,” Dad finished for him. “Yeah. We know that... now.”

Mom held up a finger, silencing everyone, and then she started to talk into the phone.

“I know you’re having trouble keeping your unfaithful louse of a husband out of other women’s beds, but if you could keep your half-naked *son* out of my daughter’s, that’d be great. Thanks.”

“Donna!” Dad gasped in dismay as she hung up and handed his phone back to him.

“What?” she muttered insolently. “Carol might let her do-whatever-he-pleases son ride roughshod all over her, but I’m not going to stand for it. Now you...” She pointed at York, glaring. “Get out. And don’t ever sneak into her room again.”

On my nightstand, York’s phone began to vibrate. With a disgusted sigh, he hurried over to fetch it, only to flinch when he saw the screen.

“Mother,” he answered in a low, hard tone. After listening for a moment, he seemed to interrupt whatever tirade Aunt Carol must be having on the other side of the phone when he said, “Yeah, fine. I’ll be home in a minute.”

Mom held out her hand as soon as he hung up. “And hand over your key to my house.”

He paused, clearly taken aback by that request.

Even Dad murmured a scolding, “Donna,” but she ignored him and kept glaring at York as she held out her hand expectantly.

York exhaled a rough breath and looked devastated before he whispered, “Yes, ma’am.”

After he reached into his pocket and pulled out his set of keys, he took a moment to remove one from the ring. He looked a little mutinous as he handed it over, but then he glanced my way, and his expression melted into regret.

“I’m sorry,” I started, feeling awful about the way he was being treated.

But Mom pointed at me and growled, “Nope. No talking to him.”

York sniffed and shook his head. “Unbelievable,” he muttered and hurried out the door, brushing brusquely past my parents as he went.

As soon as he was gone, I whirled toward my mother. “What is *wrong* with you?” I demanded. “You just treated him like a monster. And it was York. *York!*”

He was the very guy she’d wanted me to end up with since I was born. She’d told me to go to him for help my entire life:

when I was having trouble tying my shoes, when I was bored and wanted someone to play with, when I couldn't figure out a program on my laptop.

Watching her warn him away from me and be mean to him made the entire world suddenly feel as if it'd been turned on its head.

"And it's not like we're even dating behind your back or anything," I muttered, rolling my eyes. "We're not even a couple. It was just a couple of kisses."

Her eyebrows lifted with anger. "Oh... So he's okay with kissing and taking his clothes off, but not making any kind of commitment or promises to you, hmm? *Lovely.*"

Crap. I hadn't thought about it that way.

"That's not—"

"Trust me, sweetie," she assured, coming forward to grip both my hands. "That is not at all the kind of boy you want to date. Forcing you to keep the two of you a secret? Sneaking in through your window? Taking advantage of you like he was when he knew you were feeling bad for him? I mean, if that weren't bad enough, just look at the man who raised him. Now *that* will tell you exactly what kind of boyfriend he would've become. A no-good, lying *cheater*. You're better off without him."

I gaped at her in open-mouthed astonishment. Then I glanced at my father. He sighed and took off his glasses to rub his nose as if he didn't understand her behavior either. But he wasn't about to contradict her while she was in this frame of mind.

So I decided I would be the one to make her see reason. "I *am* looking at the man who raised him," I said before jabbing a finger at my own dad. "And don't even try to deny it. *Dad's* raised him way more than Uncle Palmer ever has. And if York turns out to be half the kind, generous, caring and selfless type of person that Henry Royce is, then I'll consider myself beyond lucky. I mean, seriously, Mother. You've known him his entire life and have always wanted this to happen."

“She has a point, dear,” Dad interjected quietly, making her steer a deathly scowl his way.

“Oh, so you’re going to side with *him*?” she growled indignantly. “He was lying on *top* of her when I walked into the room.”

As my face flushed hot and I hugged myself in mortification, Dad sighed and stroked his jaw, glancing between me and his wife.

“Okay, so I don’t condone their behavior tonight,” he admitted warily. “We’re definitely going to have to set up some ground rules. But we do know York. There’s no one I’d trust more with my Peyton’s heart than him. Just please... Try not to take your current anger with his mother out on *him*. There are two totally different situations going on here.”

Mom had never been able to argue with Dad. When she wanted to rail and lose her temper, he remained calm and logical, and it drove her crazy, especially when he said something that made her realize she might be wrong.

Furious tears welled in her eyes, and she began to vibrate from all the emotions swirling through her. Then she growled, “You just don’t understand,” and stormed from the room, weeping.

Dad released a breath and shook his head. “I hate it when those two women argue. It turns your mother into an unreasonable knucklehead.”

I lifted an eyebrow because *knucklehead* wasn’t exactly the word I would’ve used, but remembering Mom’s behavior and everything she’d said made tears fill my own eyes.

“She was so mad at us,” I said in a shaky voice. What if she never let me see York again?

“No...no,” Dad assured, pulling me into a hug and kissing my hair. “She’s not mad about that. I promise you. She just can’t handle it when she and Carol are on the outs. She’ll get over it.”

“Wha...” I glanced at him cautiously. “Do *you* mind if York and I end up dating?”

Dad chuckled and kissed my forehead. “Of course not. I’ve been rooting for you two for as long as your mother has. And I even understand why you guys tried to hide it from us. If everything else weren’t happening right now, Donna and Carol would’ve been so excited and intrusive that they would’ve spoiled all the best parts for you two and taken away the fun of getting to fall in love on your own. It’s just...” He shook his head and blew out a low whistle. “You have some seriously lousy timing, you know that. kiddo?”

I laughed and wiped tears from my eyes. “Believe me, I know.”

“No more of him climbing in through your window, alright?” he added.

I cringed and bit my lip, wanting to die of mortification. “Okay,” I said.

“And from now on, the door stays *open* whenever he visits.”

“Dad...” I started, feeling my face melt because it was so hot.

“Open,” he stated firmly.

I nodded. “Alright. Fine.”

He studied me for a moment and then smiled proudly. “Did you really go to that dance?”

I bit my lip and nodded, hoping I didn’t get scolded for that one.

He let out a breath and stroked a hand down my hair. “He told me he danced with the prettiest girl in the entire school that night. Why didn’t I figure it out then that he was talking about you?”

twenty-five

THE NEXT MORNING, Mom woke me by bursting through my door and tearing open the curtain, filling my room with enough morning light to wake the dead.

As I groaned and buried my face into my pillow, she was already announcing, “I’m going to take both you and your brother to school today, so get up a little earlier than usual, will you?”

Take me to school? Sitting up, I winced at her through all the brightness. “But that’ll take you over an hour out of your —”

“Don’t even *think* about arguing with me, young lady. I’m taking you to school. End of story.”

“Does York know I’m going with you?”

Her expression frosted. “Don’t worry about that boy.”

That boy? I sniffed and rolled my eyes, dismayed at how quickly he’d gone from being my future husband in her eyes to *that* boy.

When I realized she was placing colored pieces of masking tape over the seams of my window, I frowned. “What’re you *doing*?”

“If he even thinks about climbing in through your window again...” She lifted the tape roll triumphantly. “I’ll know.”

“Oh my God.” I rolled my eyes and grabbed the blankets, pulling them over me once more as I plopped back down onto my pillows. My mom had lost her ever-loving mind.

And the insanity didn't stop there.

Half an hour later, Mom was militantly marching me and my brother outside toward her car.

When Barrett whined about wanting to sit up front, Mom growled, "Fine. Barrett can sit in the front. Peyton..." She glared my way. "Back seat."

I sighed over her behavior but started toward the back passenger side door anyway. Until York pulled up to the curb in front of my house.

I shot Mom a scowl. "You didn't *tell* him?" I accused.

How could she not even tell him that I wouldn't be riding with him?

Mom merely narrowed her eyes and opened the back door of her car for me.

I faltered, looking into the back seat before glancing toward York's Jeep that was still sitting there, idling at the curb. He had no idea what was even happening.

Feeling bad for him and even angrier at my mom, I turned away from her and raced toward the Jeep.

"Peyton!" Mom yelled at me in surprise.

But I ignored her and flung open the front, passenger side door. "Go!" I gasped as I jumped inside and slammed the door behind me.

York didn't budge. Gaping between me and my mother who was glaring at us from the driveway with her hands on her hips, he demanded to know, "What in the world is going on?"

"Mom's trying to force me to ride to school with *her*."

"What? Why?" he asked, sounding utterly confused.

I sent him an incredulous glance.

His eyes widened. "Because of last night? Seriously? She's still *that* mad at me?"

"She's completely lost her mind," I grumbled miserably.

“Yeah, so has my mom,” he commiserated with a roll of his eyes. “She tried to tell me I was no longer allowed to date at *all* this morning. I swear, they both forget how to grasp all rationality when they’re fighting.”

I sniffed. “No kidding.”

York looked out his front window at my mom who was still standing at the opened back door of her car, waiting for me. Then he exhaled and glanced my way. “But you still have to go with her today.”

“*What?!*” I totally wasn’t prepared for him to side with *her*.

“Come on, Peyton,” he begged. “I can’t give Aunt Donna any more reasons to hate me right now.”

“But I don’t *want* to go with her,” I spat.

“I know.” He took my hand gently and lifted it to his mouth for a kiss. “I don’t want you to, either. But if we don’t give her this right now, it’s going to take her even longer to cool down.”

I scowled at him for sounding so logical and too much like my dad. My father really *had* influenced York, maybe more than he should have.

With an encouraging smile, he opened his own car door and slid out. Then, he came around to my side and opened my door for me. When he held out his hand, I sighed in defeat and took his fingers.

He held on to me all the way back to my mother.

“Sorry; I didn’t realize she already had a ride this morning,” he told Mom calmly once we reached her. Then, he let go of my hand and took a gentlemanly step back. “Are you going to pick her up after school too?” he asked.

I swear, it was the perfect question ever. He was respectful and polite, but it also reminded Mom how rude she’d been for not even letting him know his carpooling duties were over. Plus, it made her stop and think about how much it would take

out of her day to keep picking both Barrett and me *up* from school as well.

Except the crazy was still stirring around inside her.

She narrowed her eyes.

“Yes, I’ll be making sure that she gets to and from school from here on out. Thank you.”

York sent me a defeated glance but said nothing as he turned back to Mom and simply nodded. “Alright, then,” he choked out. “Thanks for letting me know.”

And he turned away, leaving me with my mother.



THANKFULLY, YORK WAS WAITING FOR ME AT MY LOCKER AS soon as I made it to school.

“Are you okay?” he asked immediately, stepping toward me as I approached. “Your eye looks even worse today.”

“I’m fine.” Waving a hand to dismiss my own problems, I demanded, “How are *you*?”

He snorted and leaned against the locker next to mine as I started working on my combination. “My dad never came back after I told him to leave last night. I mean, he actually *left* when I told him to go, and then he stayed gone. God.” He wiped a hand over his hair, looking tormented. “What if he never comes back?”

“Come on. Of course, he’ll come back.” I yanked my locker open and turned to face him. “He’s your dad. It’d be crazy if he didn’t.”

He glanced at me uncertainly. “You know what I thought was crazy? Him *cheating* on my mom in the first place. Or my mother *hitting* you. Or *your* mother hating me for kissing you. Or the whole fact that *you’re* the only person I want to be around right now. So, you know, crazy has kind of become my norm these days.”

I reached out and touched his arm. “He’ll be back,” I assured.

He glanced at me miserably. But whatever expression I gave him seemed to work, and after a moment, he smiled softly, relaxing.

He covered my hand with his own. But before either of us could say anything, a familiar voice snipped, “So it *is* true.” When we looked up to find Carmen walking past, we both sighed. “The freak’s dating the jerk. How fitting is *that*?”

“Just keep walking,” York advised in a tired voice. “We don’t have time for your petty nonsense today.”

“Petty, huh?”

Instead of continuing past, however, she changed course and strode right up to us, looking irate. I straightened in surprise and dropped my hand from York’s arm. But... She was going to confront us without her band of followers around? Or a crowd watching us? How odd.

York shifted, moving partially in front of me. I blinked at his back, startled by how quickly he tried to protect and shield me.

But Carmen’s glare was all for him. “I’m going to make you pay for what you did to me. I just wanted you to know that, York. So...beware.”

With a weary groan, he rubbed a few fingers over his brow and then dropped his hand, admitting, “You go ahead and do whatever you gotta do, Carmen. But honestly, I don’t even know what I did to you that was *so* awful to begin with.”

Stepping closer, she hissed, “You made me look like a fool. Twice.”

“Jeez. Seriously?” He sighed. “Look, I’m sorry about the car ride. It was never my intent to make you look like *anything* in the Jeep. I swear. Peyton’s health came first; I thought that one would be obvious to you. I was actually a little upset that you weren’t more understanding about it. I mean, you saw her hives and puffy eyes. Why’d you have to treat us that way afterward? We wouldn’t have told anyone what happened,

either, especially since it made you feel slighted. *You're* the one who did that.”

She narrowed her eyes, but as she kept glaring at him, her chin trembling and eyes blinking as if she had something in them, she hissed, “You made me think you were going to ask me to the masquerade ball.”

When York refused to answer, and Carmen appeared even more hurt, I rolled my eyes and had mercy, saying, “He *was* going to ask you.”

She glanced at me in surprise as if she hadn't been aware I could even talk.

York sent me a short frown before he turned back to her. “But then you blackballed me,” he quickly added. “And bullied Peyton, and that moment passed, so...yeah. I'm glad I didn't get the chance.”

Carmen's lips parted as if she'd only just then realized what a huge mistake she'd made.

York took my hand and squeezed. “But now that all that's over,” he said, looking at me and smiling fondly. “I'm kind of grateful for how mean you were to us.” He turned back to Carmen. “It led me to something even better. So thank you. I owe you one.”

I flushed, not sure how to react.

Carmen looked a little lost for a moment too. My pity for her mounted. But then a voice from behind her called, “Hey. You messing with my girl, Kinsey?”

“Oh, brother,” York groaned as Brock Heaton strutted over and flung a proprietary arm over Carmen's shoulders. “No, man.” He waved the backs of his hands at Carmen and Brock as if trying to shoo both of them away. “Trust me, she's all yours.”

Carmen sniffed. “And thank God,” she snorted, stiffening her spine and turning all tough and bully-like again now that there was a witness. Her gaze turned my way before she cast me a degrading once-over. “If that black eye's any indication of how he treats his girlfriends, I totally dodged a bullet.”

As Brock and Carmen laughed and strolled away together, York turned to share a look with me. “Remind me again why I ever wanted to go to the dance with her?”

“Because she’s beautiful,” I promptly answered. “And popular.”

“And really shallow,” he muttered, rolling his eyes. “Gah. Do you think she’s finally going to leave us alone now?”

“Lord, I hope so,” I mumbled. Bullies were such a pain in the neck.

He nodded, agreeing with me just as the first warning bell rang for the day.

I started in surprise. “Oh my goodness! Is it already time for school to start? But I didn’t even get to go to art class early.”

“And you spoke actual words to Carmen Morales,” York added, covering his mouth in a mock gasp. “It’s like...you’re shedding your shell or something.”

“Oh, whatever.” I poked him in the gut, and he laughed before grabbing my hand. “I like my shell. It’s not going anywhere.”

He laughed some more and took my hand. “I like your shell too. It’s you. Now come on,” he prompted. “I’ll walk you to class.”

I smiled up at him. This was nice. Totally different and completely weird. But I think I liked different and weird.

“Okay,” I told him, smiling with pleasure. “I guess I’ll allow you to be my escort this one time.”

As he rolled his eyes, I laughed. Yeah, I could get used to different and weird.

twenty-six

peyton

I FULLY PLANNED on eating my lunch in the art room, like usual, but a loud voice, shouting, “PayDay!” from down the hall made me wince and cower deeper into my locker.

Then, I took a deep breath and finally found the courage to pull my head free from its safe haven and cringe as Wes approached.

“There you are,” he called as if he’d been looking for me everywhere, while I’d always been here—at my locker. His grin was big and mischievous, and he opened his arm wide to receive me. “I’ve been looking for you.”

I glanced at some kid not so far away watching us and exchanged a blank glance with him before turning back to York’s best friend. “You have?” I asked. “Why?”

“Because, today, you’re not eating wherever it is that you usually hide out during lunch. You’re eating at our— Wow! What a shiner.”

He placed a knuckle under my chin and lifted my face so he could get a good look at the bruise. “Did Kinsey give you that?” he asked before letting out a low, impressed whistle and shaking his head. “Wow. Just how wildly have you two been going at it?”

“Oh my God,” I muttered, jerking my chin away from his touch. “You’re ridiculous. I am *so* not eating lunch with you.”

“Of course, you’re not,” he agreed readily. “You’re eating with my boy, York. I just came to fetch you.”

As he drew an arm around my shoulders and turned me down the hall in the direction of the cafeteria, I discovered York heading toward our way.

“Hey! My man,” Wes greeted him cheerfully, lifting a hand to wave. “We were just talking about you.”

“What’re you doing?” York demanded, plucking my hand to pull me away from his friend. Then, he tugged me against his side. “Why are you bothering her?”

“Geez, relax. I wasn’t bothering her.” Wes sent me a conspiring look and shook his head as if to say, *this guy*. Then he turned back to York. “How’d you know I was even talking to her? You got her chipped or something?”

“You were shouting at her from the other end of the school,” York answered dryly. “*Everyone* knew you were talking to her. Now, why are you bothering her?”

“Gah, you are so uptight.” Wes patted his arm in a calming manner. “Chill, man. I was just trying to get her to eat lunch with us. So *you* could see her.”

And just like that, York chilled.

His brows lifted as he turned to me. “You’re going to eat lunch with us? Really?” He sounded so excited about the idea that I flushed and nodded.

“Uh, sure. I guess. If you want me to.”

His smile bloomed wide, and he squeezed my hand. “I do.”

I squeezed back, and we started down the hall together.

As we neared the lunchroom, however, my anxiety mounted. All the noise and commotion made my heart begin to race. It’d been so long since I’d stepped foot in there, I suddenly wasn’t sure if I wanted to be around that many people all in one place.

But York smiled over at me, and I couldn’t let him down, so I sucked it up and followed him inside.

With him next to me, I knew I’d be okay.

Until suddenly, he wasn’t.

Out of nowhere, he went sprawling forward, tripping over something and falling away from me. His hand was jerked from mine as he lost his balance before, bam, he landed face-first against one of the lunch table benches.

I gasped and covered my mouth with both hands as Wes cried, “Oh snap, man! Are you okay?”

We both surged forward to check on him, but one of the lunch monitors was faster, leaping to him and grabbing York’s arm when he didn’t immediately get up on his own.

“Hey, are you alright, bud?” He pulled York upright, and York cupped the side of his mouth with one hand, where blood was already seeping out around his fingers. The side of his eye looked scraped and bloodshot, too.

“Oh my God,” I gasped, pulling up short and gaping in horror.

“Let’s get you to the nurse, Mr. Kinsey,” the lunch monitor said, already turning him toward the exit.

York met my worried gaze and lifted a hand. “I’m okay,” he muffled out, but he didn’t protest at all as he was steered out of the cafeteria. “I’ll be right back.”

“Damn, Royce,” Wes whistled at my side. “You got my boy tangled up in all kinds of knots. He can’t even walk a straight line around you anymore.”

I turned and looked at him severely. “He did not fall that badly all on his own. Someone must’ve tripped him.”

He blinked at me in surprise, then we both turned together, looking where a person would’ve had to be standing in order to trip him.

When I found a handful of people there, gaping after York as he was escorted from the lunchroom, I quickly surveyed my suspects.

There was Aria and Harvey and Lisa...

And Carmen Morales.

“You,” I growled, narrowing my eyes. “Did you *trip* him?”

She whirled toward me in surprise, her eyes widening.
“*What?* No! Why would I—”

But I’d already found her guilty, and so I condemned her.

Surging forward, I wound my arm back and balled my hand into a fist. “That’s it!” I shouted. “I’m done letting you mess with us! *No more.*”

And I punched her right in the face.

twenty-seven

I WAS SENT to the principal's office and then was just as quickly suspended from school, effective immediately.

But even as I sat in the office, waiting for my mom to arrive and pick me up, I still couldn't feel regretful about what I'd done. I mean, Carmen had *hurt* York; she deserved to get punched.

Except half the cafeteria had freaking cheered as I was ushered away, Wes clapping the loudest and calling, "You're my hero, PayDay. My freaking hero."

That part had been awful. I did not like having that many people staring at me.

Meaning, it was official. The next time someone tried to talk me into eating in the lunch room with them, I was just going to run in the opposite direction, screaming.

Or maybe not screaming; that'd just draw more attention. But I'd definitely run.

The bright spot in the whole encounter was that Carmen was also called to the principal's office after I told them *why* I'd punched her. She was in there now with the door closed. I think I could hear her crying.

Hmph. Wuss. At least I'd taken my out-of-school suspension like a champ. I hadn't cried once through the whole lecture Dr. Jackson had given me.

And now, I rose to my feet as my mother was buzzed into the building. A second later, she blew into the office, pausing

in shock when she saw me. And just like that, the worry on her face darkened to anger.

“You are in so much trouble, young lady,” she murmured before turning her attention to the secretary, who asked her to take a seat next to me, so we could wait for the principal to have a word with her after he was finished speaking with Carmen.

“What in the world happened?” she asked in a hushed hiss. “They just said you’d been suspended, and I needed to pick you up immediately.”

Before I could answer, however, a buzz alerted the main desk of another visitor at the front door. And a moment later, Aunt Carol hurried into the office.

She fell to a surprised halt when she saw us.

She and Mom gaped at each other, neither of them speaking until the nurse’s door opened and York was ushered into the room. He was holding an ice pack to one side of his face.

I sprang to my feet, instantly concerned. “Are you okay?”

He jarred to a halt and blinked at me, obviously not expecting me to be there, waiting for him. “I...uh, yeah. They’re just going to take me to the hospital to get checked out, make sure I don’t have a concussion or anything.”

“Oh my God,” I moaned, shaking my head and slapping a hand over my mouth. But a concussion? That didn’t sound good at all. What had Carmen *done* to him?

He squinted at me, then glanced between me and my mother. “What’s going on? Why are you two here?”

In answer, the door to the principal’s office opened.

“Ah, Mr. Kinsey,” Dr. Jackson greeted as he stepped aside to let a watery-eyed Carmen hurry out in front of him. Her cheek looked puffy and red as well, right where I’d hit her.

As she raced past me, fleeing the office, I glared after her, realizing she wasn’t going to get reprimanded for what she’d done. And that ticked me off.

“I trust that you’re feeling better.”

York blinked in confusion after Carmen and turned back to the principal. “Uh, yeah. I’m okay. What...?”

“And you told the nurse that someone did indeed trip you, correct?”

“I...” He shook his head, looking baffled. “I mean, I think so. But I have no idea who.”

“It was Carmen,” I spat, still feeling venomous toward her.

“Miss Royce,” the principal warned in a harsh tone. “That’s enough. Don’t make me extend your suspension even longer.”

“Suspension?” York echoed in disbelief as he darted a wide-eyed gape between me and Dr. Jackson. Then his mouth fell open. “Oh my God. You didn’t *hit* Carmen, did you?”

“She hurt you,” I growled. “Of course, I hit her.”

“Wait, wait...” My mom stepped forward and waved her hands. “Are you saying Peyton’s been suspended for *hitting* another student?”

Appearing completely aghast by the idea, she turned to blink at me.

Next to York, Aunt Carol snorted and crossed her arms over her chest as she smirked self-righteously at my mother. “And you questioned *my* parenting skills? Look which one of our kids is in trouble now.”

“Mom!” York gasped in reprimand.

But the mothers seemed oblivious to anyone else in the room.

“Don’t you even start with me,” Mom hissed back to Aunt Carol. “*You’re* the one who taught her that striking people was a sufficient way to solve problems. And besides, the source of all her troubles lately has led back to *your* son.”

“York didn’t cause this,” I tried to defend, but Aunt Carol was already shouting back.

“Oh, get off your high horse already, Donna. I’m tired of you always rubbing it in my face that you have the happier family, the faithful, more attentive husband, the better-behaved child.”

“As if!” Mom cried, pressing a hand to her heart. “You’re the one who’s always making such a big deal about how much more *money* you have with your bigger house and nicer cars and—”

“Ladies, ladies,” Dr. Jackson said, lifting his hands and trying to step between them. “Why don’t we just calm down and—”

“Of course, I always mention it,” Aunt Carol roared, rolling right over the principal. “Otherwise, I’d look like absolute garbage next to you with your...your perfect *housewife* act.”

“Act?” Mom cried, looking confused.

“Yes!” Aunt Carol spat. “Because who really likes to cook that much?”

“*I* do!”

“And clean. You always have to be so freaking *tidy*.”

“Well, excuse me for being a neat freak! You’ve always known I can’t handle messes.”

Except Aunt Carol *didn’t* excuse her. Shaking her head, she growled, “And you’ve *always* made me feel like a lazy slob who can’t even keep her husband at home because of it. No matter how hard I try, I just can’t be you. *Damn* you! This is *your* fault. You ruined my life.”

As Mom just gaped at Aunt Carol, with nothing to reply to that accusation, York finally took the moment of silence to rasp, “That’s enough. Both of you. My entire head feels like one big throb. I just want to get this hospital thing over with, then go home and sleep for a week.” Touching his mom’s arm, he added, “Let’s go. Now.”

Aunt Carol’s chin trembled as she looked at him. But she nodded without saying a word. The secretary discreetly

cleared her throat to get their attention, and York's mom turned that way so she could sign him out for the day.

Feeling rattled, I moved closer to my mom and touched her arm for moral support. She grabbed my hand and squeezed tight as Aunt Carol tossed the pen down. Then, she turned her back to us without even a farewell glance, and she stormed out of the school, leaving York to follow.

He paused before turning his attention toward me. Shaking his head slightly as if to apologize for his mother's behavior, he sighed heavily, slipped his hand down the side of my arm in farewell, and then trailed after Aunt Carol.

After they were gone, Mom straightened her shoulders professionally and turned toward the principal. "Now... What's this about Peyton *hitting* another student?"

twenty-eight

“JUST SO YOU KNOW, you’re grounded. You are *so* grounded for this,” Mom growled as she pulled the family car away from the school and started us down the road toward home.

The principal had let me get my things from my locker, but other than that, I wasn’t allowed back on school grounds until next Thursday.

Everything felt so bizarre and surreal to me. Before today, I’d never even gotten a slight reprimand from a teacher to quiet down or pay attention during class. Heck, yesterday had been my first *tardy* slip. I just wasn’t the troublemaker type.

And then there’d been that whole bit where I’d stood up to Carmen in the cafeteria in front of the entire school. I’d been so mad at her that I hadn’t even cared if all my classmates were watching.

It was almost like I wasn’t even *me* anymore.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately,” Mom lectured, obviously thinking similar thoughts. “But it ends now. No more phone. No more laptop. No electronic devices at all. No borrowing the car or going anywhere. And no more York.”

When I sighed and slumped lower in the passenger seat, she growled, “I’m serious. Ever since you got involved with that boy, you’ve been sneaking out of the house, making out in your bedroom with your impressionable little brother just down the hall, and now you’re getting into fights at school.”

I rolled my eyes, resisting the urge to tell her that I'd been involved in *that boy's* life since I was born. And *she* was the one who'd pushed me at him for as long as I could remember.

It had to be the ultimate irony that now that I actually wanted to be around him, Mom suddenly hated the idea of us getting together.

"I mean, you *struck* another girl," she was saying. "What were you thinking?"

With a shrug, I went honest. "I was thinking that I was tired of her *bullying* us. She's been spreading gossip about both me and York, harassing us in the halls, and making our lives miserable. Well, today she crossed the line. He's on the way to the *hospital* right now because of her."

Mom sniffed. "If you were having issues with her, you should've gone to a school official and told them what she was doing. You should've—"

"Oh, really?" I snapped, spinning to gape at her. "Like I did today after she tripped York? His head landed on a *bench*, Mother. He's lucky she didn't kill him. But what did the principal do after I told him what Carmen had done? He talked to her for a few minutes and then *sent her back to class!* Where's the justice in that? York could have internal bleeding in his brain right now and be dying."

Mom sighed and rolled her eyes. "Don't be dramatic, Peyton. I'm sure he's fine."

"But what if he isn't?"

"He's *fine*," she snapped. "But what isn't fine is your behavior. The first thing you're going to do when you return to school again is apologize to that girl. And then you're staying away from York Kinsey. Forever."

"Lovely," I muttered, crossing my arms tightly over my chest as I slumped further into my seat. "All my life, you've hounded me to be more outgoing, stop being so shy...*don't be yourself so much, Peyton*. Like you were ashamed of the kind of person I was and just wanted a *normal* daughter. But today, the first day I actually stand up for what's right and do one

thing that's a little outgoing, suddenly, I'm the worst person in the world to you. So what's up with *that*, Mom?" With a sniff, I shook my head and gazed out the side window as we passed the hospital. But when I strained to see either York's Jeep or his mother's Land Rover in the parking lot, I saw nothing. Moodily glancing back to the driver's seat, I muttered, "Thanks a lot for your loving support, though."

"That is not at all what this is about," Mom said, sounding utterly aghast. "Peyton, you know I support you. How could you even say that to me?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, honestly over this conversation already. "Maybe because you haven't taken a breath from lecturing me and telling me how wrong and awful I was to even pause and ask if *I* was okay or for *my* point of view."

"Hey," she said, pointing. "Don't try to deflect away from what you've done today, young lady. You messed up. Big-time."

I turned and stared out the window again, not answering her.

"Lord," she mumbled with a defeated sigh. "I just can't with you right now."

And thankfully, she went quiet for the rest of the trip home, too.

When we pulled into the drive, she put the car into park and killed the engine. I didn't move, and she didn't move. Finally, she growled, "Go to your room."

Mumbling, "Gladly," I tore out of the car and slammed the door behind me before racing inside to my haven.

Mom showed up a few minutes later to collect all my electronic devices, but other than that, I was left blessedly alone.

She didn't let me know when she left a few hours later to go pick up my brother from school, but I heard her pull out of the drive. So I took that time to scour the house for half an hour until she returned, looking for my phone—or anything—

to contact York privately and check in, see how he was doing. But she'd hidden everything well. And by the time she returned, I still had no idea if he was okay or not.

Mom walked by the opened door of my room to make sure I was still inside, but other than that, she said nothing to me.

After pulling York's stocking cap onto my head, I gathered my stuffed dinosaur into my arms and hugged Pickle tight, trying to figure out a way to see York without the guard dog noticing.

Deliverance came when Dad finally arrived home from work. I had no idea how he was going to react to my new life of crime, but I couldn't imagine that he'd fly off the handle quite as badly as his *wife* had. Dad was the calm parent.

Still... Mom had gotten to him first, so I knew he wouldn't be on my side either. I paced my room, waiting for my reprimand from parent number two, when Barrett silently appeared in the doorway, watching me.

"What?" I growled, sniffing at him acerbically and quickly ripping off York's stocking cap so my little brother wouldn't make fun of me for wearing it, to begin with.

Barrett smirked happily and tipped his head up at me in greeting. "Heard what you did. Mom and Dad don't think I heard, but oh...I heard."

"Good for you," I growled. "Now leave."

"Hey, that's not a very polite way to speak to your one and only ally right now. I only stopped by to praise your awesome swinging arm and tell you what an honor it is to be your brother right now. Oh! And to deliver this little message." He held up a folded piece of paper between two fingers.

My lips parted, already guessing who it was from. But I still had to ask, "What is that?"

"Nothing much." He shrugged. "Just a note for you from my boy, York."

I stepped forward. "You saw York? How did *you* get to see York?"

“Easy.” He shrugged. “I’m not grounded. In fact, I can do anything I want right now, since both the parents are focused so much on what *you* did wrong. And when I heard he got hurt, I wanted to make sure he was okay. So... I went over there.”

“Well, *is* he?” I demanded, coming forward to snag the piece of paper from the twerp’s hand.

But my annoying little brother jerked my note out of my reach.

When I narrowed my eyes, he simply grinned.

“He’s good,” he reported cheerfully, finally coming all the way into my room so he could jump onto my bed and stretch out his legs to relax back against my pillows. “Little bit of a headache but no concussion or anything. Oh, and he chipped his front tooth, but Aunt Carol already has a dentist appointment set up to get that fixed. I told him you were grounded and had your phone and everything else taken away, so that’s when he scribbled down a note for you.”

“Great. Then give it to me,” I said a little more sternly as I held out my hand.

Barrett sighed dreamily and folded his arms behind his head, really making himself at home on my bed. “Let’s talk,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. What do you want?”

“I want a ride to the arcade every Friday night so I can see my friends.”

“I’m *grounded*,” I bit out. “No car privileges. Remember?”

“Not forever you won’t be,” he countered happily. “And no one ever wants to drive me anywhere. But as soon as you’re free from this, your driver’s license...is mine.”

I sighed and slumped down onto the bed, sitting next to his legs. “For how long?”

He shrugged. “I’m thinking...a year.”

I snorted. “Try a month.”

“Wow. I guess this little love note from your boyfriend isn’t that important after all.” He lifted the folded paper toward his mouth as if he were going to eat it.

“Really?” I said dryly. “You’re going to pretend to eat the note? That’s lame.”

Barrett paused and narrowed his eyes at me. “Nine months,” he tried.

“Three,” I countered.

“Six.”

“Two.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Three.”

I smiled and held out my hand. “Sold.”

My brother sent me a short scowl and slapped the paper into my palm. “It’s not that interesting, anyway,” he grumbled as he climbed off the bed. “He didn’t even say *I love you*.”

I wanted to yell at him or at least throw a stuffed animal at his retreating back for reading my private business, but who was I kidding? I wasn’t even surprised that he’d snooped and read the note. I’m sure I would’ve done the same thing if I’d been in his shoes. And he’d actually gotten it *to* me, so I had to be grateful for that.

After tearing the message open, I flattened the folded creases against my knee and began to read.

He didn’t write any incriminating *To* or *From* labels, he just started right in, with his clear, York scrawl.

DON'T WORRY. I'M OKAY. NOT EVEN A CONCUSSION. I CAN already picture you dreaming up all sorts of brain injuries and permanent memory loss for me. But I swear, I'm fine. I mean, I'm as good as can be expected.

Dad finally came home when he heard what happened. And he and Mom announced they're going to get a divorce after all. He's already found a new place to live and

everything, so I have to stay with him every other weekend from now until I turn eighteen. So that sucks.

I heard about your grounding. Barrett says your mom's even taped up your window to keep me out. Bummer, but I'll find a way to see you, anyway. I swear. They can't keep us apart forever. Baby bro and I are going to figure something out.

Until then, try to keep from punching anyone else in the face until I can at least be there to witness your awesomeness, okay? And thank you for being my knight in shining armor, by the way, and defending me against the queen bee. You are the absolute best girlfriend ever.

GIRLFRIEND?

He called me his girlfriend.

I refolded the note and pressed it against my heart.

York thought of me as his girlfriend.

I hadn't even dared to think that far into our relationship yet, and here he was, bandying the word around as if he'd always thought that way about me. It made me a little dizzy from the thrill it sparked in my veins.

My heart jumped like crazy, and I started to smile the biggest smile I swear I'd ever smiled before.

But York Kinsey was now my boyfriend.

Wow.

That's it; I had to see him. Right now. Not when my grounding was over. Not when he and Barrett figured something out.

Right now.

Hopping off the bed, I hurried to the doorway, and peered out, listening. I could hear my parents' muted voices from the kitchen, so I stepped into the hall and headed in the opposite direction toward the front of the house. Without pausing, I hit the living room and kept right on going toward the front door.

It opened fairly quietly, without any protest, and I made my way outside and down the front walk.

I hurried barefoot—because who could remember shoes when you had a boyfriend to sneak out and see—down the sidewalk along the street and four houses over until I reached the Kinsey residence. Then, I ducked down the side alley, fallen dead leaves crunching underfoot until I found myself just outside his window.

Lifting my hand boldly, I knocked.

twenty-nine

BY EARLY EVENING, I was wiped out. It just had *not* been a good day for me. The pain relievers I found in Mom's bathroom had left me extra drowsy too; it's possible I took one too many.

Not that Mom even noticed.

I spotted her sitting in the front room alone, with the television off and all the lights dimmed while I was shuffling my way back to my bed.

Pausing, I mumbled, "Mom? You okay?"

She sucked in a breath and looked up, sitting straighter on the chair. "Yeah. Fine. What about you? Do you need any aspirin or anything?"

"Just got some," I assured her as I showed her a thumbs-up. "Here. You should lie down. Let me help you to bed." I stepped toward her, and she didn't stop me as I hooked my hand around her arm and urged her to stand.

"Thank you, baby," she said, sending me a watery smile and patting my hand gratefully. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

I wasn't sure either. She usually had Dad around to help her out of any situation. And if he wasn't, I just had to call Aunt Donna over, and she'd fix it.

But with them both out of the picture, it was left up to me. That was kind of an intimidating thought, though, and I didn't want to think about it right now.

Right now, all I had to do was get her to bed, and I could do that.

Once in her room, I pulled back her sheets for her and waited until she mechanically climbed in. Then, I tucked her in tight and kissed her forehead.

She was already closing her eyes as I straightened.

“Get some rest,” I murmured.

“Kay,” she slurred back, half asleep. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I slapped her. I’m sorry I couldn’t keep him here. I’m sorry I’m such a bad mother.”

“You’re not a bad mother,” I assured, stroking my hand over her hair. “Not at all. You’re the only mom I want. Got that?”

But she was already asleep.

I sighed and stood there a moment longer, watching her and feeling awful that she had to go through all this alone. I hadn’t helped her situation much either by yelling at her when I found out about Dad’s affair and then confronting her about what she did to Peyton. She’d burst into tears both times, and I’d been left feeling awful. Now, I was heaping my head injury and chipped tooth onto her shoulders, too.

She seriously needed a win in her corner soon.

Finally pulling my hand from her hair and whispering, “Love you,” I left her there to rest and finally returned to my own room.

I’d just curled up in bed and was nearly unconscious myself when I heard a tapping at my window.

I knew who it was, but it still took me a minute to wake back up and drag myself out of bed so I could hobble to the blinds before I pulled them up.

Peering out at Peyton’s worried face, I tried to offer her a reassuring smile as I worked to open the window the rest of the way for her, but the sight of the tiny chip taken out of my right canine caused her eyes to widen and her hands to fly to her chest.

I grinned blearily and finally got the windowpane lifted and the protective screen pulled off out of the way. “Don’t worry,” I assured. “I’m fine.”

“The entire right side of your face looks like it’s going to be one big bruise,” she argued.

“Well, I couldn’t let you have the more impressive shiner,” I teased, holding out my hands to assist her.

“It’s okay; I’ve got it,” she told me, but she so obviously did not. She clamped her fingers around mine and strained and grunted, mumbling, “How the heck did you make this look so easy when you climbed in through *my* window?”

“I’m taller,” I assured, unable to stop smiling over her adorably lousy efforts. “And your window sits lower to the ground.”

“Does it really—oomph!” She tumbled inside and landed on the floor so hard that she caused a huge thump to echo through the house.

And my mom immediately called, “York? You okay?”

“I’m good,” I called back. “Just dropped my...phone.”

“Okay. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do. Thanks.” Turning my attention to the girl picking herself up off the floor in front of me, I took both her hands and smiled wider as she flipped her head up and sent me a silent wide-eyed gape.

Grinning, I leaned forward and kissed her right on the tip of the nose. “You’re so freaking adorable when you break into people’s houses.”

She blinked at me in confusion. “Why are you slurring like you’re doped up on drugs?”

“Painkillers,” I answered, nodding repeatedly. “Lots of painkillers.”

“Oh.”

As she went about dusting herself off, I studied this girl in front of me, this girl I’d known my whole life but also this girl

I felt as if I was learning something new about each day. Like the fact that she was willing to get violent to protect me. Or sneak out to see me. And I had to admit, I really liked that.

My loyal, protective little lion.

As she looked up, however, I frowned at the bruise on her jaw. It had turned a rather spectacular purple and looked completely out of place on her clear, porcelain face.

“I’m still so sorry she hit you.” Reaching out, I barely touched the purple with my fingertips. She sighed and took hold of my hand, keeping my fingers pressed against her cheek. “She feels bad about it if that helps.”

She nodded without saying anything.

“Wes is calling us the black-and-blue twins now,” I added.

Peyton rolled her eyes. “Great.”

Swirling a finger, I motioned around my room. “He and the others were here earlier.”

“Were they?” Peyton’s brow knit with concern as if she was worried about my mental state. But I was fine.

“Yeah,” I told her. “You only missed them by—I don’t know—maybe half an hour. An hour? It was earlier.” I waved my hand dismissively. “I swear, they spent the whole visit telling me how badass you were, going up against Carmen as you did.” I shook my head, still mystified by it all. “I can’t believe you actually hit her. For *me*.”

When I leaned in to kiss her cheek, she furrowed her brow and studied my face harder. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m great,” I sang, only to frown. “But tomorrow will probably suck after the drugs wear off.” Turning away, I splayed out a hand toward my nightstand. “Look. My friends... They left presents.”

“Cool.” Peyton nodded and lifted the half-open card I had propped up. It was from Wes and had a cat hand drawn inside it, telling me to quit faking it already.

Typical.

Peyton squinted at it, however, and tilted her head, sending me a questioning glance. “What’s the cat about?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “It’s his stupid way of making fun of me for everything that’s happened. Because, you know, all this started with a cat.”

Except Peyton frowned, totally confused.

“Carmen’s cat,” I explained, lifting my eyebrows to get her to remember.

She shook her head.

“If you hadn’t been allergic to her cat,” I started. “I probably would’ve asked her to the masquerade ball that morning, and I never would’ve gone to the dance with *you*. And she never would’ve bullied us. Plus you and I never would’ve kissed. And she wouldn’t have tripped me or gotten you in trouble for punching her. Just... Everything would be different without that cat. So Wes has been teasing me, claiming that cats are now my spirit animal or something.”

Peyton glanced down at the really lame cat Wes had made. “Huh,” she finally said. “He’s kind of right, though, you know. I doubt your parents would be getting a divorce either. It seemed like your mom was thinking about staying with him until *we* found out and caused a ruckus. And *my* mom wouldn’t be fighting with her at all.”

My eyebrows lifted because it was all true. Without that cat, we’d all still be carrying on, as usual, completely oblivious to everything going on around us. And she and I would most likely not be together at all.

Peyton looked up at me sadly. “It’s almost like the universe is trying to tell us something.”

I didn’t know what she meant. But mostly, I didn’t like that worried look in her eyes. Furrowing my brow, I slowly asked, “Like what?”

“Like... I really am a blight, aren’t I?” Peyton murmured quietly to herself. “Maybe you’d be better off without me always causing you so many problems.”

“Huh?” I asked, squinting and not sure what she was talking about. Because no way on earth would I be better off without her.

“Nothing,” she mumbled as if she wasn’t sure what she was talking about either. Then she pointed to the other get-well gift I’d received. “I like the candy bar bouquet, by the way.”

“Thanks.” I smiled tightly. “That one’s from Aria.”

She’d been extra worried about me being okay.

Peyton glanced at me quickly, and I could literally see her grow insecure about the fact that my ex had given me a gift. But what she said was, “That was nice of her.”

I nodded.

With a small, mirthless laugh, Peyton sat on my bed and flicked a finger at the packaging for the York Peppermint Pattie, no doubt noticing that there wasn’t a PayDay bar in sight. “She definitely hasn’t gotten over you yet. That’s for sure.”

But I didn’t want to talk about Aria. I sat next to Peyton and took her hand.

She looked over at me, squinting miserably. “I’m sorry about your parents.”

“Yeah. Well...” I shrugged and looked down at our interlaced fingers, running my thumb slowly over her knuckle before I lifted my gaze to her. “I’m sorry about your grounding.”

With a quick grin, she grimaced. “Turns out, I’m not very good at following my grounding rules.”

“What?” I gasped in mock surprise. “You mean you weren’t supposed to sneak over here barefoot and climb through my window? What kind of insane rule is *that* for a grounding?”

“I know, right?” She rolled her eyes and then smiled before worry once again laced her features. “How are you, really? You don’t have to pretend anything with me, you know.”

Well, in that case.

I exhaled a big breath, then bowed my face and admitted, “Of course, I’m not okay. My family’s falling apart. I have a freaking chipped tooth. My head won’t stop throbbing. And the one person I want to be with most had to sneak behind both our moms’ backs to get here. Right now, I’d like to just sleep for a week and not wake up until all this is over.”

As I encouraged her to lie down next to me on the mattress, Peyton blew out a long breath too and began to run her fingers through my hair. “I’m so sorry you’re going through this.”

“Me too,” I mumbled. “God, that feels good, though. I wish you could just stay.”

“Yeah. But I probably need to get back soon, though, before I’m missed. If I’m found here now, I have a feeling it’d be a disaster of epic proportions.”

“Probably,” I mumbled. “I really hate it when they fight. I wish your mom would just apologize already, so they could both finally screw their heads on straight and remember that they *want* us to be together.”

The fingers in my hair paused. And then, slowly, Peyton glanced over, frowning. “Why does it have to be *my* mom who apologizes? Aunt Carol is the one who hit *me*.”

My eyes opened. Sitting up slowly, I nodded to her and answered, “I know, but you don’t still hold that against her, do you? I mean, her marriage just fell apart, and she’s beyond upset. She wasn’t thinking right that night.”

“Yeah, but...” Peyton sat up as well and darted a confused glance around the room before saying, “That’s not *my* mom’s fault. She didn’t do anything she needs to apologize for.”

I sniffed. “So you don’t think any of the crap she spewed in the school office earlier was mean or nasty?”

“Well, yeah. But your mom started that too.”

“I’d just gotten hurt,” I snapped. “She didn’t know if I had a concussion. She was upset.”

“So *my* mom should be the one to apologize for being attacked *first*? That makes no sense.”

“Aunt Donna’s *always* the one who smooths out the waters first,” I reasoned, shaking my head in confusion and not sure why Peyton was completely overreacting to everything I said.

“I guess then it’s *your* mom’s turn to smooth them out first this time.”

I sniffed. “Come on. That’s just stupid. She—”

“How is that *stupid*?” Peyton growled.

“Peyton...” I tried, sighing out my exhaustion and reaching for her arm. I really wasn’t in the mood for this right now.

“No! You know what?” Lifting her hands out of my reach, she hopped off the bed and backed toward the window. “I’m going to go home. My mom told me to stay away from you, and maybe I should’ve listened to her.”

“What?!” I cried in disbelief. “What’re you talking about? You’re not seriously going to leave, just like that?”

“Yeah, I think I am.”

“Wow,” I muttered, sitting back on the bed and sniffing as I watched her pull the window open. “Nice. I’m suffering through hell over here, and you’re just abandoning me. Thanks a lot. Great girlfriend material right there.”

I knew it was the wrong thing to say the moment the retort left my lips, but I couldn’t take it back once it was out there. She’d already heard it.

Sending me an icy glower, she snapped, “I don’t recall ever agreeing to *be* your girlfriend.”

And... I no longer felt bad about what I’d just said.

“Then maybe you *should* go,” I told her icily.

“Fine.” With that, she crawled out my window and right out of my life.

“Dammit,” I hissed, falling back on my bed and gripping my head.

I really was a colossal jerk, wasn't I?

thirty

ON SATURDAY, Mom let me call my boss, and instead of telling Kaylynn that I couldn't work that day, I quit my job entirely. The bookstore just felt ruined for me now.

I was numb most of the way through the weekend. So much had happened in the past few weeks that I was kind of grateful to be grounded. It gave me the perfect excuse to lie on my bed alone and just think about everything while wearing pajamas and hugging stuffed animals to my chest as if I were still a little girl.

Of course, the problem with *thinking* and replaying certain events through my head was that it showed me all kinds of mistakes I'd made.

I mean, York had made his fair share, sure. And I started to get mad at him all over again for being...well, *him*. But I wasn't in control of what he did. I was in control of my *own* actions.

And I was utterly ashamed of them.

By Monday, the numbness had worn away completely, and I turned into a sobbing mess. I didn't have the guts to sneak over again to see him anymore, too afraid he'd just close his window blinds in my face. And he didn't attempt to see me.

That I knew of, anyway.

Honestly, I wouldn't blame him if he never wanted to talk to me again.

When Mom stopped by my room to tell me to make myself a sandwich for lunch, my eyes were swollen, my face was red

and blotchy, and my nose wouldn't stop running.

“Oh...honey,” she sighed and stepped inside. “Give me one of those stuffed animals.”

I handed her a lavender monster with white stripes for pants and a yellow horn for hair.

Settling next to me on the bed with her back to the wall and her knees bent, just as mine were, she hugged the stuffed animal to her chest and pressed her shoulder to mine before leaning her face to the side until our heads rested against each other.

“I'm sorry,” I said, sniffing and trying to calm myself. “I don't...”

“Shh,” she murmured when I couldn't seem to find the right words. “It's okay. I'm sorry too.”

I closed my eyes and felt one last tear trickle down my cheek.

“You know I'll always love you, right?” she said a moment later. “No matter what.”

I nodded and swallowed.

“Good,” she whispered.

Silence fell between us, and it was just nice to have her there beside me. Finally, I glanced over and asked, “Do you think you'll ever make peace with Aunt Carol?”

Except, what I really wanted to know was if I'd ever make peace with York.

Mom exhaled and looked sad before shaking her head. “Honestly, I don't know. We've known each other a long time, and we've had our fair share of tiffs over the years. But this time felt different. We each said and did some things that I'm not sure if we can ever come back from.”

I hugged the blue dinosaur in my arms a little harder. “I hope that's not the case.”

“Yeah,” she agreed softly. “I do too.”

“She’s going through a hard time right now,” I said. “I bet she needs a best friend more than ever.”

“Okay, I get the hint,” Mom answered, laughing a little as she bumped her shoulder into mine. “As subtle as it was. Let’s turn the tables, then, shall we? What’s up with you and York?”

Whatever brightening mood I might’ve been heading toward dropped flat. “Nothing,” I mumbled.

“Oh, really?” Mom raised her brows. “It didn’t look like *nothing* when I had to chase him out of your room on Thursday. Or on Friday when you punched some girl to defend him.”

“Yeah, well...” I sighed heavily. “We attempted to try something, but it didn’t work. We’re just...too different. Or there’s too much history between us. Or something. I don’t know. It was just never meant to be.”

“*No...*” Mom groaned, throwing her head back. “Not you too. You’re not going to adopt York’s slogan of *it’s never gonna happen*, are you?”

I shrugged, letting her know that yeah, I guess I was.

She was quiet a moment before blurting, “I think you should give it another chance with him.”

“Excuse me?” I turned to send her a shocked glance. “You’re the one who told me I was never allowed to see him again.”

She winced and waffled her head back and forth. “Alright, I might’ve been acting a tad bit rashly when I said that. But I’ve calmed significantly since then and can think rationally again. And, I mean...” Lifting her brows severely, she sent me a serious glance before she added, “You’d be crazy to let that slip by. He’s kind of a hottie, don’t you think?”

“Mother!” I gasped, not even sure how to process the words that were coming out of her mouth and going into my ear. She’d never been quite this cringe before.

“Plus, both you and your dad weren’t wrong. I’ve known him his entire life; he’s a good kid. I know he’d treat you

right.” Then she shrugged. “And if he didn’t... I also know where he sleeps every night.”

“Oh my God, *stop!*” I ordered, unable to stop blushing.

Mom laughed. Then settled down into a long sigh. “All joking aside, what do you really think of him? If you took out the fact that you’ve known him since birth and everything that’s happening between me and Carol. Just look at him, as he is right now, and tell me... Do you like him? Do you wish it had gone somewhere between you two?”

Closing my eyes tight, I bowed my head and drew my knees up tighter against my chest. “Yeah,” I reluctantly admitted. “I do.”

Mom patted my knee in support. “Then you should give it another shot. After your grounding, of course. Or heck, I’d give you your phone back for half an hour if you wanted to call him tonight.”

Except, I shook my head. “I can’t,” I admitted. “Not yet, anyway. I’m still too much of a chicken.”

She shrugged. “Alright, then. There’s no rush. You still have the rest of your life to convince him how much he needs you.”

I sent her an amused glance. “I like how you worded that.” As if I was some kind of prize to be won when I felt more like a hot mess.

But Mom only squeezed my knee and shook it. “It’s the truth.” Then she lifted a finger. “Though there will be new rules between the two of you going forward. One: no closing the door to your room when he’s—”

“Don’t worry,” I assured her, lifting my hand with a small laugh. “Dad already went over all that with me. And we’ll behave. I promise.”

If I could even get him back, that was. And even then, mmm... It was only a low-key promise because... Yeah, behaving was so hard to remember whenever York’s mouth was on mine. And I definitely wished I’d get to taste those lips again.

Gah. I wished I could even just *talk* to him again. I missed him like crazy. I couldn't even imagine a world without York constantly being in it.

Please, I sent up the prayer. Please don't let it be over yet.

thirty-one

THURSDAY MORNING CAME ALL TOO QUICKLY.

It was time to return to school after my suspension.

Except I wasn't ready. I didn't want to go back. I kind of rocked the homeschool life. Plus, people would stare.

There goes the girl who punched Carmen Morales right in the face.

There's the freak who just finished her out-of-school suspension.

There's...Peyton.

Ugh. If only I could be someone else—anyone else—today. But life was never that kind to me. I was stuck doing this, whether I wanted to or not.

Fate obviously wanted me to struggle through it as hard as possible too. I stubbed my toe as soon as I stepped out of the shower, I spilled milk on my shirt at breakfast, and then I couldn't find my freaking scarf.

“Does anyone know where my scarf is?” I yelled through the house, grumbling when I tried to sling my book bag over my shoulder, only for about half the contents to spill onto the floor.

No one knew where the scarf was. And I really needed it for moral support today.

It was the most hideous bright green color, but it was also the last thing my grandma York had knitted for me before she

had died. Today was *not* the day for me to discover my scarf was missing too.

But Mom seemed to at least *sympathize* with my plight. When she pulled up to the high school to drop me off, she offered me an encouraging smile. “You got this.”

I sent a nervous laugh back, full of serious doubts. “Yeah. Sure.”

“You do,” she assured. “You are not the same frightened freshman girl that lets her nerves get the best of her and needs to be carried home from a dance. You power through. You’ve *got* this.”

I glanced at her in awe and then nodded. Yeah. I did have this.

Scarflless, I opened the car door and stepped onto the sidewalk that led to the main entrance.

As soon as I entered the front hall, however, a hush fell over the crowd, and I could tell that everyone was staring and whispering about me.

It was like my greatest fear coming true. Panic pricked my skin, and my breathing went a little wonky, but I entered the building, anyway, and walked past the gawkers until I reached my locker. Then, I hung up my book bag and gathered my things for first hour.

Slapping the locker door closed, I spun around to get to the art room, but I jarred to a halt when I saw York.

Halfway down the hall, he’d been walking with Wes and Ben, but he slowed to a stop when he saw me. His eye had a dark ring around it and another bruise marred his lower jaw.

We stared at each other for an overly long moment. He didn’t step toward me. I didn’t step toward him. Then I heard a loud laugh.

Flinching in surprise, I glanced over to see a pair of girls watching me as they giggled together about something, and I turned away, taking off down the hall away from all of them.

Anxiety raced through my veins, spurring me on. And once I reached the art room, I blew inside, relieved to have made it in one piece.

Panic attack averted.

I pressed my back to the door and blew out a relieved breath, a little proud of myself because I'd done it! I hadn't needed anyone else to take care of me; I'd made it through my own problem without completely freaking out.

I had survived!

Grinning over the tiny accomplishment that felt more like a huge victory to me, I stepped away from the door, only to glance over my shoulder, out the window, and see York approaching.

Crap. I could only handle one victory at a time here.

Quickly ducking out of the way and then darting behind a tall cabinet, I held my breath until I heard the door to the art room open.

Footsteps came inside and paused. Then York's quiet voice said, "Peyton?"

When I bit my lip, too afraid to answer, he finally left, and I waited a moment longer before hurrying to the door to peer out after him. His back was to me as he stood there, looking both ways as if he was still searching for me.

I wasn't yet sure what to say to him, so I just watched him until he finally gave up his search and went away.

He didn't seek me out through the rest of the day, and I started to freak, worried that I'd lost my one chance to mend my ways with him.

Carmen Morales caught me unaware, though. She waited until I was basically alone about halfway through the day, and then she approached cautiously by herself.

When I looked up from the bench where I was sitting and doodling more clock people, my eyes flared.

I'd given her a pretty nasty bruise on her face. She, York, and I probably looked like triplets.

Straightening in alarm, I glanced around for her band of friends, but she was alone.

Carmen lifted her hands as if to signal that she came in peace. She didn't look all that mad or indignant or hateful either, which was...weird.

"I just wanted you to know that I didn't trip him. York," she told me, pausing in front of where I was sitting. "It wasn't me. I swear."

I blinked at her, not expecting a denial.

"You swear?" I said, narrowing my eyes suspiciously.

"Yes. If I had hurt someone as much as he got hurt, I would've owned up to it."

Releasing a breath, I nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry I hit you, then. It's just... When I looked up and saw you standing there, I saw red."

She nodded, believing me. "Yeah, I probably would've assumed it was me too after everything. But it wasn't. I didn't even know he was there until I looked over after he'd already fallen."

"So you didn't see who *did* trip him?"

"No. I'm sorry."

I bobbed my head, and strangely enough, I both forgave and believed her. I mean, not everything that had come from her bullying had been bad. I was actually kind of grateful to her for some of it.

"So is this thing between us..." I paused when she glanced at me in surprise and then lifted my eyebrows. "Are we good, then?" I asked.

A small smile lifted up the corners of her lips. "Yeah," she murmured. "I think we are. I was letting my vanity get the best of me, and I shouldn't have. I'm sorry for that."

"And I'm sorry for hitting you," I added.

Laughing, she answered, “I’m not! My boyfriend’s been treating me better than ever now that I’m all wounded.”

I chuckled out a small laugh and sent her a thumbs-up. “Glad to be of service.”

But ugh! *Glad to be of service?* I was such a weirdo.

Carmen sent me a funny look and shook her head, but then she motioned toward the lid of my laptop. “Neat sticker,” she said, pointing out the picture of a yellow bunny in a cow costume. “Moriah Elizabeth?”

I smiled big. “Yeah.” But Carmen knew her Moriah Elizabeth figures? Be still my heart! Maybe she wasn’t the most horrible person on the planet after all.

Feeling my soul bloom for her, I added, “I, uh, I have a Cousin Derp sticker if you want it.”

She blinked. “No way. Really? You’re sure?” When I nodded, she let out a small laugh and shrugged. “Alright, then. Who could turn that down?”

“Right on.” I nodded and then scrambled to pull open my bag and find the sticker. When I handed it over, she gave me another funny look, but one that seemed to say that maybe she’d misjudged me.

“Thanks,” she murmured before waving the sticker goodbye at me and then strolling off.

I watched her go, feeling...good. Because I’d survived yet another encounter without anyone around to hold my hand or guide me through it.

Maybe I was getting the hang of this being-social thing after all. I mean, a limited amount of socializing, anyway. Not some full-out rock concert or anything, but just enough to get me out to places that I actually wanted to go.

I could *do* this!

By the end of the day, I was beginning to think that maybe I had enough nerve to possibly even approach York. After popping by the art room to finish my latest painting because I knew I’d have to wait forever for Mom to pick up Barrett first,

I finally returned to my locker, debating with myself if—or more accurately *when*—I should attempt contact with him when someone called my name from behind me.

I turned and found Aria approaching. Wondering why *she* wanted to talk to me, I blinked in confusion until I realized she had something familiar and green in her hands.

“Hey,” she said cautiously, giving me a shy smile and slowing to a stop before actually making it all the way to me. “How’re you doing?”

“Uh...” Shaking my head, I lifted my hand to my cheek because she seemed to be focusing on my bruise. “Fine,” I told her. “It’s all good. Barely hurts anymore. Thanks.”

When my gaze returned to what she was holding, she finally lifted the scarf toward me.

“Yeah, good,” she started. “I mean, here. I found it on the floor near your locker last Friday. You must’ve dropped it when you were leaving for your suspension.”

“I dropped it? Wow. But *thank you!*” I gushed, surging forward to retrieve my baby. “I looked everywhere for this.”

As I promptly whipped it around my neck, glad it was back in its rightful place, Aria reversed steadily away, watching me with a strange look in her eyes. It wasn’t quite a happy gleam, but it wasn’t as spiteful and jealous as I thought she’d be toward me, what with York between us.

When I said, “Thank you,” again, she nodded and spun away, hurrying off.

Okay, then.

Strange. And yet... It’d still been nice of her to wait near my locker for me, even after almost everyone else was gone, just to return my scarf.

I shrugged the encounter away and turned back to finish gathering my things, beginning to hurry because I’d taken longer in the art room than I’d meant to, and Mom would arrive soon to pick me up.

When a mighty sneeze claimed me, I wiped the back of my hand across my nose and finished piling everything I needed into my book bag. And there was a lot. I swear, all my teachers had waited until I was gone before they'd assigned, like, the biggest projects of the year.

Loaded down, I sneezed again and my eyes began to water as I hefted the pack onto my back.

Clutching the straps, I started down the hall and almost immediately got winded.

Geez, I must need to work out more. I knew the book bag was heavy, but this was starting to make me feel like a wuss.

My heartbeat picked up, and my body went superhot before going super cold. I took the book bag off my back so I could drag it along beside me, but that didn't help. I began to sweat like crazy and my skin went itchy, except... Wait...

I slowed to a stop and looked down at the spots appearing on my arm that blurred in my vision. This wasn't a normal workout sweat. It was all cold and clammy and—

The blood seemed to drain from my head as I stood there, leaving me lightheaded. I wheezed, finding it hard to breathe.

I glanced around, trying to locate the source of my reaction when... Crap. Was that *cat pee* I smelled?

Things inside me felt as if they were starting to swell. Like my windpipe. I turned in a circle, looking for help. I needed help. But I couldn't see anyone in my blurry vision. I think this hallway was already empty.

That was okay. There'd surely be someone still in the *front* hall. In the office. I just had to make it to the office.

I shook my head, feeling disoriented.

Was the office this way or that? I took a step and bumped into a wall. It really hurt. The floors seemed to slant sideways and then rushed up at me, slamming into my hands that I had held out in front of me.

I gasped from the pain, then wheezed for air, and began to crawl, dragging my book bag with me and clawing at the scarf

to get it off me so my neck didn't feel so strangled. But I'm not sure if I removed it or not. My fingertips felt numb.

I found a doorway, or maybe it was the opening to another hall, so I turned and crawled inside.

"Help," I rasped hoarsely, wishing I could see better. And breathe better. And that Mom had at least given me my phone back today.

But she hadn't, and I still couldn't see *or* breathe.

I was on my own for this one.

thirty-two

I WAS MISERABLE.

My mom took her supper into her room and cried behind closed doors almost every evening.

My dad had called only once and that was to put off taking me for the first weekend that I was supposed to be with him, which was fine with me—I didn't want to go stay wherever he was living now—but it also didn't win him any brownie points with me, either.

I mean, what if he'd moved in with Kaylynn? That was going to be a hard pass from me if he expected me to sleep under *her* roof.

My jaw still hurt whenever I tried to eat, and the appointment Mom had gotten for me to see the dentist wasn't for another week.

Plus, I missed Peyton.

I think I missed Peyton most of all. I'm pretty sure I would've been able to handle the rest if she'd just been there, that steady, supportive presence that she'd always been so good at being.

I wished I hadn't been such a jerk to her when she'd sneaked from her grounding and climbed through my window to check on me. I mean, in my defense, I had been loopy and drugged up, but come on. She'd broken her *grounding* for me. Peyton wasn't the type to do that. And she'd risked getting caught by my mother, the very woman who'd left a bruise on her.

I shouldn't have started a fight with her or let it go as far as it had.

And now, I didn't know how to talk to her again.

Gah, I was such a chicken.

"Dude. Will you please just talk to her already," Wes called from my bed, where he was stretched out on my mattress, his legs crossed at the ankles as he tossed a hacky sack ball up at my ceiling and then caught it as it came down again. "Your moping around is driving me freaking crazy."

Frowning, I spun away from my desk to punch at his leg. "I'm not moping."

"You're *so* moping. You watched her like a kicked puppy at school today. It was pathetic."

"We broke up," I muttered moodily. "It's over. Next topic, please."

"Fine, then." He lifted his eyebrows at me, accepting my challenge. "Yeah, you know, being a divorced kid isn't so bad, really. I know you're worried and freaked about that too, but hey... Look at me." He grinned and spread his arms wide. "Two birthdays, two Christmases, two bedrooms. I'm living the life over here. And so shall you. After the initial suckiness of it passes, it's fine...ish."

I swallowed, not wanting to think about my parents, either. That was still too fresh and painful.

"Or... How about we discuss *homework*," I stressed through gritted teeth as I spun back to the screen of my Chromebook. "If we're going to be partners on this assignment, we gotta come up with a topic before tomorrow or Lewinski will assign us to different people."

"Alright, alright, alright," he grouched, catching the hacky sack with one hand and sitting up. "How about World War I?"

I made a face. "I bet we'd find more stuff on World War II."

"Whatever. Sure." He rolled his eyes and hit me in the center of the back with the ball.

I glanced over my shoulder to send him a glare. “Do you mind?”

He shrugged in fake apology. “Sorry. It slipped.” Then he hopped off the bed to retrieve the ball and pace my floor as he juggled the hacky sack back and forth between his hands. “So why’d you two break up anyway?”

“Because it was never going to happen to begin with,” I murmured distractedly as I typed stuff into my search engine. “You want to cover Hitler? The Holocaust? Hiroshima? Pearl Harbor?” I asked.

“Yeah, great. Sounds good.” He waved a hand, unconcerned about our upcoming history report. “But you guys were good together.”

Spinning in my chair to send him an intense frown, I cried, “Says who? We *fought* more than we did anything.”

“Yeah, but...” He made a face. “You seemed to get off on fighting with her. Like it was your own personal energy drink, you know. You got a jolt out of it. Aria never gave you that spark. Royce makes you...fight happy.”

I shook my head as if he was all wrong. Except he wasn’t. Strangely, Wes was exactly right.

Exhaling harshly, I tipped my head back and groaned. “I don’t know how to make it right again,” I admitted. “And our moms are still on the outs.”

“Huh? What do your *mothers* have to do with any of it?”

“Nothing. Everything. I don’t know! It’d just make it easier to have a reason to talk to her again.”

“Look, man. Forget your mom. Do you like this girl or not?”

“Yes,” I hissed, glaring at him.

He threw up his hands, completely exasperated. “Then, for the love of God, go get her.”

That was the best feature about Wes. He was simple. And sometimes, simple was all a person needed to make everything

clear again.

Did I want the girl? Yes. Then go get her. End of story.

“You know what...” I nodded and stood as if prepared to rush over to her house right then. “You’re right.” Only to sit back in my chair, remembering, oh yeah... “But she’s grounded.”

The doorbell rang.

Wes slapped a hand down on my shoulder. “Did that stop her when she wanted to see *you*?”

I shook my head. No, it hadn’t. Dammit. I stood again. “I’m going over there.”

“Thank God,” my best friend grumbled, only to lift a fist for me to bump. “And call me when my best friend is his normal self again because, honestly, I don’t know how much longer I can stand to be around you while you’re in this funk.”

I smiled, grateful that he’d just knocked some sense back into me, and I clashed my fist against his. “Will do, man.”

A knock came on my bedroom door. “York?” Mom stepped inside, sounding serious. Both Wes and I turned to find Barrett and a hand-wringing Aunt Donna with her.

My brow furrowed in instant confusion. “What’s going on?”

“Is Peyton here?” Aunt Donna stepped past my mom to address me directly. She didn’t look upset, just worried as she continued to mess with her hands. “Did she get a ride home from school with you?”

“What? No.” I shook my head and glanced between both mothers before turning back to Peyton’s. “I haven’t even talked to her since...” I winced when I realized how long it had actually been. “Last Friday.”

“Are you sure?” she pressed. “I won’t get mad if she’s here, I swear. I’m just worried.”

Well, now *I* was worried. I glanced toward Wes as if he might know where she was. But he shook his head and turned

to Aunt Donna. “I came here straight after school, and it’s just been the two of us the whole time.”

“She wasn’t at the school,” Aunt Donna’s voice wavered, and Barrett stepped into the room to hold her hand. Then my mom gripped her other arm in support. But she just kept looking at me, her eyes pleading. “She wasn’t waiting where she was supposed to wait for me. And she quit her job at the bookstore, so she wouldn’t be there. Do you think... You don’t think she’d attempt to *walk* somewhere, do you?”

“No.” I shook my head, knowing that wasn’t possible. “She couldn’t. Not with the ragweed as bad as it is.” I looked over at my mom. “She *has* to still be at the school.”

“Then why wasn’t she waiting outside for me?” Aunt Donna’s voice trembled as she asked. “We sat there for a while, waiting on her.”

I shook my head. “Did you call her?”

She winced. “I took her phone. Part of her grounding.”

Damn. Okay, that wasn’t good. My hand lifted to my bruises. If Carmen had gotten a hold of Peyton to exact some kind of revenge, who knew what she might’ve done.

“I’m going back to look for her,” I announced. “She has to be at the school.”

“I’ll go with you,” Mom jumped in to announce.

Aunt Donna grabbed Barrett’s arm. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“I can check around the square and at the bookstore,” Wes offered. “Just to be sure she’s not there.”

I nodded my thanks to him, and with that, we all parted ways, Peyton’s mom and brother hurrying from the house, Mom following me out to my Jeep, and Wes taking off in his truck.

“So you really like her?” Mom asked while we were heading toward the school. “Peyton. You and she weren’t just pretending a romance in the hopes of forcing Donna and me to make up?”

“What?” I sent her a confused frown. “Why would we do that?”

She shrugged and began to chew on a fingernail, which she usually did when she was upset about something. “It just seemed ironic that you two were suddenly discovered in bed together *right* after Donna and I had our fight.”

“Oh my God, it wasn’t like *that*,” I groaned. “You’re making it sound a lot worse than it was. And technically, she and I were starting to, you know, get close *before* that night. Besides, I didn’t know you and Aunt Donna were fighting until after she caught us together. And even when I did hear about what you did, I thought the fight was more between you and Peyton. I mean, you gave her a freaking black eye that she still has today. Why would she care so much about you making up with her mom after you did that?”

Mom paused the nail chewing to press a hand to her chest. “Did I really slap her that hard? She *still* has a mark?”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Oh yeah.”

“Lord. Is she very upset with me?”

“I think she deserves a pretty big *apology* from you,” I answered, hurrying us through an intersection as fast as I could. “You’re like a second mother to her, and for you to just attack her without even getting all the information first—”

“I know, I know,” she grouched, shifting her hand up to her brow and closing her eyes. “I messed up royally. I wasn’t thinking straight that night. And after that scene between you and me and your father—”

“I know,” it was my turn to assure. “I get it. I understand. And I’m sorry for making you that upset. But...”

“No. You have nothing to apologize for, baby. I mean, for you to find out the way you did...”

“It wasn’t going to be easy, no matter how I found out,” I said.

She released a long breath. “Yeah. But I still wish it had gone down differently.”

I shrugged. “Me too. Peyton was there with me, though. That helped more than anything else could have.”

Mom glanced over, smiling a bit tearfully. “So you really *do* like her?”

“Yeah, I do.”

With a small laugh, she shook her head. “That’s great. Amazing. I just... It’s going to take me a minute to get used to. You two honestly had me convinced that it was truly never going to happen. I didn’t even think you were friends.”

“We were...” I shook my head, not sure what we’d been, so I settled with, “Complicated.”

Mom laughed. “Complicated,” she murmured to herself, nodding. Until the smile fell and she glanced over at me, once again looking worried. “Do you think she’s okay?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured, shaking my head and tightening my grip on the steering wheel. “But I have a bad feeling. Peyton doesn’t just go missing.”

We pulled into the school parking lot. There were only a handful of vehicles left, and most of them were over by the gymnasium, where different teams must be practicing.

“Here we go,” Mom said, patting my arm briefly. “We’re going to find her.”

“We better.” I killed the engine, jerked my keys from the ignition, and I hurried from the Jeep, Mom racing along with me as we literally jogged toward the front doors.

The school was left unlocked for about an hour or so after dismissal, so we were able to get in without any resistance. It was eerie to see the halls so empty and quiet, though. I faltered, gaping around me, as unease crept up the back of my neck and gave me chilly goose bumps.

“Where should we look?” Mom asked, jolting me back to reality.

I shook my head, then said, “Her locker first. Then...”
Crap, I had no idea. “Maybe the art room.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

With a nod, I took off, calling, “Peyton? Hello?”

When only our footsteps and the echo of my own voice answered, I shuddered.

Where *was* she?

By the time we made it to the hallway where Peyton’s locker was located, I was breathing a little hard, trying not to panic.

No one was there, but I went to her cubby anyway and set my hand against it.

No idea why I did that. It wasn’t like it was a car that I could touch the hood of and tell if it was still warm from recent use. She wasn’t here, and I had no idea where she was.

“Where’s the art room?” Mom asked, ready to move on from Peyton’s locker faster than I was.

“It’s...” I turned to point down the hall, only to spot something on the ground, near a darkened recess that led into a classroom. Stalling short, I blinked at first, not sure if I was seeing a shadow...or something else. Then I uttered, “Oh my God.”

“What?” Mom demanded, alarmed by my tone.

“Her scarf.” I started forward, moving in slow motion at first, as if I were trying to run through water. But then my speed finally kicked in, and I was sprinting.

Because the closer I got, the more I realized it wasn’t just a bit of Peyton’s bright green scarf on the floor peeking out from the doorway of a classroom, I swear there were also the fingertips of a hand there.

“Peyton!” I yelled.

I ran so fast that I skidded by the time I reached the doorway and went past it a few feet before I got myself fully stopped. Then, I veered back and breathed, “No,” as I found the rest of Peyton lying faceup in the empty, darkened classroom, the rest of her scarf still wrapped around her neck,

and those slightly curled fingertips connected to her limp arm that lay flung across the floor and draped away from her prone body with her book bag lying beside her.

Her eyes were open, but she didn't seem to see anything or be aware of much as she labored to breathe, and stuttered air wheezed from her swollen, purple lips.

"Pey...Peyton." I fell to my knees beside her and gathered her into my arms. "It's okay," I assured. "I got you." Her entire face looked blue, though.

This was *not* okay.

My fingers trembled as I pushed her hair out of her eyes, then I started to drag the scarf off her, giving her throat more freedom to breathe, only to pause and blink at a multitude of short white hairs plastered to the green yarn.

Cat hair.

"Oh my God," Mom cried from behind me. She started to cry in heaving sobs. "What's wrong? Is she okay?"

I ripped the scarf away and flung it as far as it would go as if it were poisoned, which to Peyton, it pretty much *was*.

"York?" Mom shrieked in alarm.

I swallowed hard and looked up from the floor where I was cradling the limp, half-dead love of my life in my arms.

"She's gone into anaphylactic shock."

thirty-three

“WHA-WHAT DO WE DO?” Mom asked, already shaking and freaking out.

I wasn't exactly steady myself. This was serious. I'd never seen Peyton this bad off before.

But I had dealt with her allergic reactions enough times now to be able to react on instinct. Still holding Peyton against me with one arm, I shoved my free hand into my pocket and fumbled for my Jeep keys.

Down the hall, the muffled voice of Peyton's mother started to call her name.

“Donna!” my mom shrieked. “Down here. We're down here! Hurry!”

“Mom,” I said as soon as I freed the keys. But she was too busy flagging her friend down to hear me. “*Mom!*”

She ignored me as she reached out to grab Aunt Donna, dragging her forward and clinging to her arm as soon as she arrived.

Peyton's mom and brother peered through the doorway at us, and Barrett froze, gaping with a sheet-white face while Aunt Donna's knees gave out and she slumped to the floor beside me and Peyton.

“Oh God. Oh God. Peyton?” Aunt Donna croaked.

“She's still with us. We can fix this,” I assured, only to focus on Peyton's brother. “Barrett. Run out to my Jeep, right now, and grab everything you can find in the glove compartment.” Tossing my keys at him, I shouted. “*Go!*”

The twelve-year-old caught the keys and nodded, his eyes big with fear. A moment later, he was gone, racing away.

Next to me, Aunt Donna pulled her phone from her purse and dialed for help, while Mom stayed plastered to her side, gripping her arm for moral support.

From there, everything happened in a blur. The janitor finally came along, took one look at the situation, and said he'd find an administrator, while Aunt Donna spoke to some emergency dispatcher, explaining the problem as best as she could, and I took hold of Peyton's cold hand, squeezing gently.

Barrett returned, panting hard, his arms loaded with my mini Peyton pharmacy. Falling to his knees beside us, he let the contents he was holding spill to the floor around me. I scanned over what we had to work with and then snatched up the EpiPen.

With a flip of my thumb, the yellow cap went flying off and I dumped the pen from its outer tube. "Blue to sky, orange to thigh," I murmured to myself, remembering the instructions Peyton had given me eons ago about how to use the thing.

"Barrett, remove the blue release button," I ordered, holding up the pen. "Pull it up straight without bending it."

He did so without question.

"Good." Nodding, I gripped Peyton's outer thigh with my hand and then slammed the orange part into her leg until I heard it click. "One...two...three," I counted slowly before easing the needle free and rubbing at the spot I had just injected.

"Is she... Did it work?" Mom asked, gripping Aunt Donna's shoulders and helping them both creep forward to check on Peyton.

In answer, Peyton gasped and surged upright, her eyes wide and alert.

"Oh God," I breathed. "Oh God. You're okay. Are you okay?"

“I think... I think I’m going to throw up,” she rasped, breathing erratically and struggling to lean over to the side as she scrambled into position. “I can’t...”

“Okay,” I assured, keeping hold of her as I helped her get where she was trying to go. “I still got you. I’ve got you.” But as soon as I had her bent over my arm, she vomited all over the floor next to me.



THE AMBULANCE TOOK PEYTON TO THE HOSPITAL FOR FURTHER monitoring, in case she needed another dose of epinephrine.

Aunt Donna went with her, so Barrett rode with me and my mom in my Jeep. We arrived at the same time Uncle Henry did, where he’d come straight from work, and he met us at the front counter while we were asking about her.

I watched Barrett run to his dad and hug him around the waist as the receptionist pulled up Peyton’s information. Uncle Henry hauled the boy close and ruffled his hair before kissing him on the head. Then, the two looked toward me for answers.

“What do we know?” Peyton’s dad asked, guiding Barrett over to us.

“Uh, it looks like she’s being admitted now,” the receptionist answered, reading the screen of her computer. Then she glanced up at Mom and me. “Are you family?”

Uncle Henry stepped closer, setting his hands calmly on the raised countertop. “I’m her father.”

The receptionist nodded and went back to checking her screen. “Alright, then. If you’d take a seat over there in the waiting area, we’ll let you know which room she’s in as soon as she gets settled.”

“Thank you.” After nodding to her, he turned to us and led us to the seating area, but I couldn’t sit.

I paced the floor until my phone rang.

When I saw that it was Wes, I remembered that he was still out looking for Peyton too, so I answered to give him an update.

“We found her,” I said. “We’re at the hospital now, but I think she’s going to be okay.”

“The hospital?!” he cried. “What—”

“She had an allergic reaction and went into shock. We found her collapsed at the school.”

“Whoa. No way. That’s crazy. But you said she’s going to be okay, right?”

“Yeah, we got some epinephrine in her, and she was already doing better by the time the ambulance arrived.”

“She had to go in an *ambulance*? What set off her reaction?”

“I’m not sure.” I set a hand on the back of my neck and bowed my face as I paced further away from the others. “But I swear I saw some cat hairs or something on her scarf.”

Wes was quiet for a moment, then he asked, “Were they white?”

I stopped walking and froze. “What?”

“The cat hairs. Were they white?”

“Yes,” I pushed out in a low voice. “Why?” When he didn’t answer soon enough, I growled, “Wes! How did you know that?”

“Okay!” he muttered, trying to calm me down. “Alright. It’s just...I saw Aria with a green scarf today, just like that hideous thing PayDay wears everywhere. And she has a white cat.”

“Aria?” I uttered, totally lost.

“Yeah, man. She is not taking you moving on from her well at all. The only reason she paid any attention to me at that dance was to get *you* to notice. She wants you back.”

“But she wouldn’t actually *hurt* Peyton,” I insisted, shaking my head and completely denying it. “Would she?”

“I mean...” I could practically hear Wes wince. “We all knew she was allergic to cats after that thing with Carmen. But not even I would’ve guessed she was quite *this* allergic. At worst, I could imagine Aria wanting to make her a little itchy and uncomfortable. She’s petty, but she’d never actually try to *kill* anyone.”

I shook my head, my jaw knotting with anger. “I guess there’s only one way to find out. I gotta go, brother.”

“Yeah... Good luck, man.” And he let me hang up on him.

A doctor came out to give us an update on Peyton, so I stepped forward to hear.

“She’s doing well and will probably only need to stay for a couple more hours to make sure there are no more flare-ups. She’s in room one-twelve if you’d like to follow me; I can take you there now.”

Everyone fell into line behind her, but I waffled.

When Mom glanced back, furrowing her brow in question, I waved a hand and called, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

And then I called Aria.

“Hey!” she answered, sounding pleasantly surprised. “I was just thinking about calling you.”

“Did you have Peyton’s scarf?” I asked bluntly, not beating around the bush.

“Uh...” She paused before stumbling over her words as she answered. “I found it last Friday and gave it back to her today. Why?”

“Did you purposely let your cat lie on it?”

“I... Is that what she told you?” She sniffed as if blaming Peyton for spreading some kind of nasty rumor about her.

“She’s not telling me much of *anything*, Aria,” I snapped. “Because she’s at the hospital, trying to recover from

anaphylaxis after having a severe allergic reaction to *cat* dander on her scarf.”

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “I...I had no idea. I didn’t think people actually had that bad of a reaction to cat allergies.”

“Well, Peyton does!” I hissed.

“But I thought it’d just make her a little sneezy with a runny nose and watery eyes. That’s all.”

“So it *was* you? You took her scarf?”

“No! I...I really did find it. I promise. On Friday after her suspension, it was on the floor near her locker. I picked it up and took it home, where I left it by my cat’s litter box and let him sleep on it and stuff for a week before I gave it back to her.”

“God, Aria. I cannot believe you. You *purposely* tried to make her have an allergic reaction?”

“I—I didn’t *know!*” she cried, defensive to the max. “I swear. I never meant to *hurt* her. I was just jealous. I mean, the way she snatched you up and stole you away from me... It was—”

“Stole me!?” I shouted, shifting from upset and sliding right into livid. “We broke up months ago. No one stole anything. You and I are *over*. Long over.”

“I know. I just... I was so sure we were going to get back together again.”

“Well, we’re not!”

“I *know!* I know that now.” But she didn’t sound as if she really knew. She sounded as if she were just being placating and saying what she thought I wanted to hear so she wouldn’t look like the bad guy in my eyes. “Can’t you just forgive me?”

“*Forgive* you?” Metaphorical steam began to mist from my ears, but then I blew out a breath and calmed myself. “Here’s the deal. If Peyton makes it through this okay, agrees to forgive you first, *and* doesn’t press any charges against you—”

“Charges?” she repeated in shock.

“Then, and only then, will I think about forgiving you. But from here on out, whether I agree to be understanding or not, I want you to stay away from me. *And* Peyton. Got it?”

“No,” she rasped hoarsely. “I don’t get that at all. I *love* you, York. And I... You really upset me when you broke up with me.”

“And I’m sorry about that. But I hope even you would agree that someone who isn’t all-in doesn’t deserve you, and I wasn’t all-in. Alright?”

“But—”

“It was never going to happen with us, Aria. I’m sorry. But it wasn’t. Whether I had Peyton in my life or not, you and I? It just wasn’t there.”

“God,” she growled. “You’re such a jerk. You know what? I’m *glad* I tripped you in the cafeteria!”

Wait, what?

“*You* tripped me?”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have rubbed it in my face by bringing that skank into the cafeteria with you and holding her hand like you were. You *never* held my hand...anywhere.”

And that was pretty much all I needed to hear.

“Yeah, we’re done here,” I told her before I quietly hung up the phone and shook my head.

But damn. Peyton had gotten a suspension for punching *Carmen* in my defense, and all this time, it’d been Aria.

I blew out a disgusted breath but then squeezed my eyes shut.

If Peyton never forgave me for almost dying and getting into trouble at school all because of *my* bitter, vengeful ex, then I wouldn’t blame her.

thirty-four

ONLY FOUR VISITORS filled my recovery room, but they managed to make it feel like twenty with the half a dozen loud conversations they seemed to be having around me.

Okay, fine. There were actually only two conversations. But they were both loud and filled with plenty of emotion.

Not emotion for *me*, of course. It was pretty much like I wasn't even there.

To one side of me, Mom and Aunt Carol were hugging and crying and finally making their peace with each other, gushing out their apologies and insisting their fight had been both their own faults.

Aunt Carol had already apologized to me and hugged me hard before kissing the corner of my bruised eye in regret. But then she and Mom promptly started *their* make-up session. They'd probably be at it a while; since they had a full week of talking and mom gossip to compensate for.

Dad stood on the other side of me, casually stroking my arm, to remind himself that I was okay, I think. But he wasn't paying me any attention either. He was busy listening avidly to Barrett, who sat at my feet on the bed and replayed everything that had happened at the school with big hand gestures and plenty of sound effects.

"Then York jammed the pen into the side of her leg as hard as he could, right through her jeans. Bam!" He made a stabbing motion against his own thigh, in case Dad hadn't been able to envision the scene well enough from his vivid descriptions alone. "And Peyton bolted upright like a zombie

coming to life before spewing all over the floor. York had to hold her hair back and keep her from falling flat on her face.”

Speaking of York...

I glanced toward the doorway, wondering where he was. I remembered him at school. He'd been there, right beside me until the paramedics had arrived. He hadn't even made room for my mom, who had to hover behind him to check on me. But then they'd forced him to step back when I'd gotten into the ambulance, and I hadn't seen him since.

His absence now felt like a clear sign that *he* didn't want to make peace with me the same way our mothers were. I mean, he'd just been his typical York self when he'd saved my life at the school, cleaning up yet another one of my blight messes. But after that...

He'd disappeared.

So I guess that meant it must really be over between us.

I swallowed down a rush of tears and squeezed my hand around the hospital sheets covering me, trying not to cry. But I couldn't stop staring at the open doorway to the room, praying he would appear.

“Where *is* York anyway?” Dad finally asked, glancing around.

“Oh, he was on the phone when the doctor escorted us back.” Aunt Carol paused to answer him. “Probably calling all his friends to let them know Peyton's okay.” She laughed and waved a hand. “That boy had half the town out looking for her.”

He had?

Hope rose inside me, and my tears seemed to evaporate almost immediately. But he'd been *worried* about me? That had to mean he cared, right?

And then, there he was, filling the doorway to my room, his hair fluttering across his brow as if he'd hurried to get here.

His gaze found me immediately. Everyone else might've forgotten I existed now that I was okay, but *he* still knew.

I sat up straighter and offered him a tremulous smile.

He sent me the same uncertain, questioning grin back, and then he stepped into the room and came straight toward me as if there was nowhere else he'd rather be on earth. I thought he was going to be forced to stop at the end of my bed since either side was full, but then my dad noticed him.

"*There's* the hero of the day," Dad greeted with a grin, and he stepped aside to let York up next to me, patting him companionably on the back as he passed.

York sent him a brief, grateful nod, only to return his attention to me.

Not stopping until he was directly beside me, he set both his hands on the bed next to where mine was resting, and he looked into my eyes, forcing me to notice that he had red rings around his own eyes as if he might've recently been crying.

But he smiled one of his genuine smiles, not one of his fakes he was forced into to be polite.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

I nodded and swallowed, twitching my hand that was sitting so close to his that I could feel the heat from his fingers. "Yeah. Lots better. Thanks."

Thanks for asking.

Thanks for saving my life.

Thanks for being here.

Thanks for being you, so I had the perfect boy to fall in love with.

I'm not sure if he had any idea of all the things I was actually thanking him for, but he nodded modestly and began to drum his fingers as if trying to control the anxious energy in them because they wanted to reach for mine as much as I wanted to reach for his.

I mean, at least, I hope that's why he couldn't keep his hands still, and not for some other reason, like his mom had

forced him to come in here and say something nice to me and now he was just waiting until he was allowed to leave again.

But then I lifted my gaze and saw his eyes again, reminding me that he looked as if he'd recently been really worried. Plus, the way he was looking at me now told me he didn't want to be anywhere else.

My stomach dipped and my lips parted as I tried to take a decent inhale because my lungs suddenly felt empty.

He opened his mouth to speak.

I held my breath, eager to hear what he had to say.

And then Barrett asked, "Are you two going to kiss already or what?"

"Barrett!" Mom gasped in reprimand, while York and I whirled to scowl at him.

Dad laughed, however, and hooked a hand around my brother's shoulders. "Come on, kiddo," he said, practically dragging Barrett off the bed. "Let's go see what they have to eat in the vending machines around this place. I'm starving."

York and I watched them go before we transferred our gazes to the moms, who had stopped talking to each other and were now looking almost expectantly back at us as if they wanted to pull up some seats, dive into a tub of popcorn together, and watch whatever show they thought York and I were going to put on for them.

He tilted his head in their direction. "So you two made up, huh?"

Aunt Carol hooked her arm through my mom's, and Mom patted her hand in welcome.

"Can't keep us apart for long," Mom told him.

He nodded and said nothing.

The moms said nothing.

I glanced between him and them...

And said nothing.

Finally, York huffed out a breath and muttered to our mothers, “Well, can you give *us* five minutes so we can do the same?”

As I gasped and whirled toward him, my heart beating hard, the moms leaped into action, blabbering, “Sure, sure. We’ll give you all the time you need,” as they crowded into each other on their rush toward the door.

York sighed and shook his head as he watched them go. “They’re so freaking obvious,” he said.

“Do you *really* want to make up with me?” I asked hopefully.

He turned, his eyes glistening and bright as he nodded. “But I have to tell you something first.”

That sounded ominous. I shrank back, bracing for him to tell me that he really did find me disgusting and regretted our brief...whatever it had been.

Except he released a big breath, like he usually did before confessing something he’d done that he’d grown guilty about, like putting a dead spider in my hair.

“I know who caused your allergic reaction.”

“Oh!” I blinked in surprise, and my shoulders slumped in relief. Was that seriously all he was going to say? “You mean, Aria? Yeah, I...I know.”

“You...” He shook his head as if he didn’t understand. “You do?”

“I mean...” I shrugged. “She gave me the scarf back, and I eventually smelled cat pee on it. But I’m sure she didn’t mean to—”

“No, she did,” he blurted and then winced. “She knew you were allergic, and she purposely meant to set off your allergies.”

My mouth dropped open because yeah, okay, I hadn’t known *that* part.

“She didn’t know how severe and *rare* your allergy was, but she did purposely try to make you itchy and sneezy. And it’s all my fault. She was jealous of us. I just got her to admit it on the phone. She went after you because of me.”

“O-oh...” My mouth was still hanging open, but seriously... It felt so completely bizarre to learn that someone could actually be jealous of strange little me and see me as a threat.

I mean, this was sort of *awesome*.

I suddenly felt powerful and feminine.

I was Peyton, hear me roar.

Queen Peyton.

Boss Peyton.

Peyton of the jealousy-inducing superpowers.

“Well, as long as I got my scarf back,” I said, making sure I sounded chill about it. “It’s fine.” I couldn’t really blame the girl for going so gaga over York that she lost her mind a little. I could actually *relate* to that.

“Oh, I’ll be washing it, like, a hundred times before I give the scarf back,” York assured. “But yeah, I grabbed it for you. As well as your book bag and everything else.”

“You did?” I murmured, smiling affectionately. “Thank you.”

He nodded, only to send me another apologetic glance. “Not that I know *why* you’re thanking me,” he said, sounding awful. “After Aria, and then the way Carmen bullied you because of me, I wouldn’t blame you if you never wanted to talk to me again. Everything bad that’s happened to you lately... It’s all my fault. It’s like I’m a...a...”

“A blight?” I asked softly.

His eyes lifted to mine in surprise and pain. They looked even redder now than before.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “Everything about me seems to hurt you. I’ve been so awful to you. I’ve treated you badly, said bad

stuff to you, and I didn't protect you from my ex-girlfriend. If you never forgave me, I'd understand. But I wanted to say sorry, anyway. I'm sorry about *everything*."

I drew in a deep breath, and his eyes grew even more worried as if he expected me to kick him out of the room. But then I said, "I'm more sorry."

And he blinked as if he didn't understand what the word meant.

So I cringed, thinking I'd said it wrong. "Or is it sorrier?"

Hey, I was an art person, not a grammar enthusiast.

Finally, he furrowed his brows low and boomed, "What're *you* sorry for?"

"For being a jerk to *you*," I said. "You'd just gotten hurt, your parents were breaking up, you had a load of painkillers running through your veins, and I...I wasn't being a very good, supportive girlfriend."

"Peyton," he whispered, shaking his head. "No." He grasped my hand and squeezed. "It's totally fine. You didn't..."

I squeezed back on his grip, halting him. "How about we agree that *both* of us contributed a little to hurting the other, and then we forgive each other because, despite our faults, we're actually the best thing the other person could ever have?"

"God." He swallowed audibly and then burst out with a huge grin. "I love you," he breathed before leaning in to press his forehead to mine. "You *are* the best thing for me, and I've missed you so damn hard this week."

"Me too," I admitted.

Keeping our brows together, he cupped my head in one hand and continued to hold my fingers in the other, and we just stayed like that for a moment, soaking in the silent gift of simply being together after our miserable week apart.

"Hey," I whispered.

He pulled back to look at me, his gaze seeking. “Hey.”

I smiled shyly and felt myself blush. “I know I’m not perfect,” I said, biting my lip sharply. “I’m going to do stupid stuff, and it’ll occasionally keep hurting you. But you are my home. You’re my family. And I don’t want to do this life thing without you. I love you too. Plus, I really miss kissing you.”

Pleasure spread across his face, and then he laughed. “No fair. It’s like you stole my own thoughts straight from my head.”

I preened. “Cool.”

“But what am I supposed to say back to you?”

I shrugged. “Same?”

He chuckled and dutifully repeated, “Same,” as he swiped his tongue over his bottom lip and looked down at my mouth. “So...are we good now? Are we back to being...?”

“Friends?” I asked, lifting my brows.

He frowned. “Hell, no. I’m ready to skip right over the friend zone and try being boyfriend and girlfriend. *Without* letting the moms influence us this time.”

I made a thoughtful face before beginning to nod. “That works for me.”

“Thank God,” he breathed, and before I knew it, his mouth was on mine, and our tongues were touching. He leaned deeper against the bed I was sitting on as I twisted on the mattress to face him better. I must’ve bumped into something I shouldn’t have, though, because one of the machines in the room gave a beep that had us springing apart in surprise.

We laughed together, breathlessly, and pulled a little farther away from each other, remembering we were in a hospital room, where anyone could walk in at any moment.

“Yeah,” he admitted, still chuckling. “I definitely missed kissing you too.”

“Definitely,” I agreed.

“But I missed just plain *you* more,” he clarified. “I could deal with the fact that my parents were splitting up and that I was going to have to separate my stuff between *two* places to live now, but it was downright miserable thinking I might not ever see *you* again.”

“I missed just you too,” I whispered.

He grinned as he leaned in to kiss me one more time.

But two voices from the doorway, singing, “Aww...” had us pulling apart.

“We did such a good job with them,” Aunt Carol announced, gripping my mom’s hands and beginning to cry. “Didn’t we do such a good job with them?”

“Yeah. We’re awesome mothers.” Mom wiped at her own damp eyes, grinning madly. “I couldn’t have asked for a better boy to complement my Peyton. He accepts her exactly as she is and doesn’t expect her to change.”

“And Peyton will actually stand up to him and tell him when he’s wrong. He likes the challenge and thrill that comes with arguing with her. It keeps him from getting bored.”

“How long have you two been standing there?” York demanded, scowling.

“Oh, we never left,” his mom reported proudly. “We were just standing *out of sight* most of the time and listening in.”

“*We* just arrived, though,” Dad called from behind them.

Barrett appeared from around the side of the mothers. “I knew you two were going to kiss.”

York sighed.

I took his hand sympathetically, and he glanced at me, squeezing back on my fingers.

“So can we come in now?” Dad asked. I saw just enough of him to realize his arms were loaded with drinks and candy bars and chip bags and such to feed everyone. “Or do you two women want to keep standing there, blocking the door, and congratulating yourselves on your matchmaking skills?”

“Don’t steal our thunder, Henry.” Mom glanced back to send him a half-teasing frown, half-smiling smirk, even as she and Aunt Carol stepped into the room to let him and Barrett in as well. “This is a big moment for us. We’ve waited years for this. Isn’t that right, Carol?”

“Hell, yes we have,” she agreed before promptly turning to her son. “It’s time to say...”

“We told you so!” both moms chorused together, looking rather smug about forcing him to eat his own words.

“I mean, did we say you and Peyton would make a cute couple? Or did we say you and Peyton would make a cute couple?”

“Okay, fine,” York groaned, tossing up his hands in defeat. “You were right. Peyton and I...” Pausing to glance my way, he sent me a genuine smile and then reached out to grip my hand. “We were always meant to happen.”

epilogue

AND THERE I WAS.

I was finally going to a dance with Carmen Morales.

As the corsage on her wrist pressed against my left coat sleeve, Mom cheered, “Say cheese.”

Everyone around me followed the order, but I only scowled. “Mom. Seriously. How many pictures are you going to take? We’re going to be late to the freaking prom.”

On my right, Peyton squeezed my hand in warning. “Just let her get this out of her system, will you? Or she’ll stall on purpose.”

I glanced at her, realizing she was right. But that was why I loved her.

Oh...

Wait.

You hadn’t thought *Carmen* was my *date-date* for the night, had you? Geesh. I wasn’t that fickle. I can honestly say I hadn’t wanted to be with anyone else but Peyton since that fateful night eons ago when we’d kissed after the masquerade ball.

But technically, yeah, I was still going to the dance with Carmen too. Along with Wes. And Ferris, Harvey, and Lisa, plus Ferris’s date—some girl named Kallie that Carmen had hooked him up with for the night. We were all going as a group. We’d rented a limo together and everything.

“Just a couple more,” Donna swore to me as she stood next to my mom, clicking off just as many photos.

Strangely, Peyton and Carmen had formed a sort of friendship after Peyton had given her a black eye. Carmen had given up a lot of her bullying ways too, and after Carmen’s boyfriend had cheated on her yet again, Peyton had suggested she give Wes a try.

So Carmen and Wes had been dating ever since. I think they really liked each other, too. It was weird. But I’m glad they were both happy.

“Yeah, just a couple hundred more,” Henry called, teasing us jovially.

And, yes, I had stopped calling both of them Aunt and Uncle just a few months after Peyton and I became official.

I mean, when they became my in-laws someday—in the very distant future—it was going to be really weird if I kept referring to them as my honorary aunt and uncle. So both Peyton and I had weaned ourselves off those titles.

Next to Henry, Roger chuckled, amused by his joke.

It was eerie how much like Henry he was.

Wait. Sorry, I never mentioned who Roger was, had I?

Well, it had taken Mom a long time to move on after my dad moved out. I mean, Dad had gone through three—no, you’re right, *four*—women since the divorce, but Mom had remained depressingly single for the longest time.

But then, just a few months ago, she’d met Roger at the grocery store.

I could stomach him. I guess.

He didn’t try to parent me or be my best friend, which I respected, but mostly he made my mom happy, and I’m talking *giddy*-happy. She laughed a lot these days. And that’s what had won me over more than anything. Roger could stay. Just as long as he kept my mom happy.

“Okay, now can we have one with just Peyton and York?” Mom asked, waving the rest of my friends away.

“Candy bar twin time,” Wes cheered, dragging Carmen to the side and out of our shot. “You got it, Mama Carol.”

I sent him a dry glare, but then turned my body in more toward Peyton and slipped a hand around her waist, kind of glad I finally got to pose with just her. She glanced up at me and grinned as if she could read my mind. I winked, and we seemed to be locked in eye contact for the longest moment, just smiling at each other.

Because she was my person, and I was so glad for her. And I knew she felt the same.

“Ooh, can you pose the same way you did for the pictures from that masquerade ball thing?” Mom pleaded.

She adored the picture that Peyton and I had surprised her with once we’d finally gotten the prints back. It hung in a frame on the wall in our front room. And my mother never failed to embarrass me by showing it off to every visitor we had.

“Nope,” I said. I would most definitely not stand that way ever again.

“Come on,” she pressured, sending me her sweet, innocent begging smile. “Please.”

“No.” I laughed at her silly attempt to persuade me before I swore, “Never gonna happen,” with my eyebrows raised to let everyone know I wasn’t playing. The masquerade dance pose had been a one-and-done, end of the story, no repeats, no encores, curtain closed.

But the moms merely glanced at each other as if they had this one in the bag.

Next to me, Peyton groaned and squeezed my arm. “You just had to go and say that, didn’t you?”

The End

ALWAYS
Meant to

NEVER
~~*gonna*~~
HAPPEN

about the author

Linda writes romance fiction from YA to adult, contemporary to fantasy. Published since 2010. Went through a 2-year writing correspondence class in children's literature from The Institute of Children's Literature. Then graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, English with an emphasis in creative fiction writing from Pittsburg State University.

Now she lives with her hubby, two daughters, cat Holly, and nine cuckoo clocks in southeast Kansas, USA. Farm girl. Parents were dairy farmers. Was youngest of eight. Big family. Day job as a cataloging library assistant.

Harry Potter House Gryffindor, Patronus White Stallion, character match Hagrid. Supernatural Team Dean. Game of Thrones Team Jon Snow and Tyrion Lannister. The Walking Dead Team Daryl. Outlander Team Jamie Fraser. Teen Wolf Team Stiles. Avenger Team Thor...or Hulk (can't decide). Justice League Team Flash. Arrow Team Stephen Amell. Stranger Things obsessed. Heard Laurel, not Yanny.

Started out reading with the Baby-Sitters Club. Then moved to Sandra Brown, Linda Howard, Julie Garwood, and LaVyrle Spencer in high school. Now all over the place with her romance reading tastes.

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