



EMMA DALTON

Bad Boys
don't fall for
Shy Girls

Invisible Girls Club Book Three

Bad Boys Don't Fall For Shy Girls

By

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Chapter One

All my life, I've been the "Shy Girl." To be invisible and shy above that? Yeah, school has always been hard for me. Making friends, participating in class, trying to be heard? Not for Ally Bensen. Well, at least it hasn't been since my first day of school. This semester, though? Things will be different. I'm sure of it. Because I'm sick and tired of being the Shy Girl. I'm sick and tired of hiding behind my romance novels. I want to *live*.

I tell this to myself every semester, though. And every semester, I fail miserably. Maybe now is the time?

When I reach my locker, I find Dani already there, texting on her phone. Probably her boyfriend, Easton. As soon as I walk up to her, her head snaps up and a huge smile conquers her face. "Hey!" She throws her arms around me. "I'm so happy to see you!"

I laugh as I tighten the hug. "We saw each other throughout winter break."

She pulls out of the hug. "I know! But now I can see you and the others every day. And there's book club!"

I smile and open my locker. Dani formed our book club a year ago when she grew tired of not having any friends. She knew there had to be at least some kids at school who shared her interests. I was a little hesitant to join the club at first, since new social settings make me feel like I'll break out in hives, but I'm glad I forced myself to check it out. As soon as

I met Dani and Charlie, I knew we would be friends for life. And then Kara joined this year and we became one. The Four Musketeers. I honestly don't know what I would do without them and wonder how the heck I survived freshman year without them.

“Got your schedule?” Dani asks as she whips out her phone. “Let's compare. Easton told me he had a talk with the office. We'd better have some classes together.”

We compare our schedules and discover we share Trig and PE.

“Not ideal, but I'll take it!” Dani says. “Especially PE. Now we can suffer together.”

I smile, but inside I'm frowning. I hate not having my friends in my classes. All the other kids seem to have their friends and their cliques and I'm always left alone. I guess I should be used to it by now, but can someone ever get used to being lonely?

“There's Kara and Brayden!” Dani says, nearly bouncing on her feet.

Kara and her boyfriend walk down the hallway hand in hand, staring at each other as though they're the only two people in the world. I wonder what it's like to be so absorbed in another person that everyone else around you disappears. I experience it in all the romance novels I read, but as soon as I close the book? It's gone.

“Kara!” Dani waves frantically.

Kara breaks free from Brayden and barrels over to us, enveloping both of us in her arms. “Yay, we're all together

again! Well, once Charlie joins.”

I sense some of the other students staring at us, probably wondering why we’re so weird. I don’t think we’re weird, though, maybe a little different. Maybe we appreciate each other so much because all four of us know what it’s like to not have any friends.

“How were your last few days of winter break?” Dani asks Kara and me.

“Awesome!” Kara says, reaching for Brayden’s hand and pulling him closer. “We spent like every second together.”

“Me, too!” Dani says. “Easton and I were like joined at the hip.”

If that doesn’t say true love, I don’t know what does. It takes everything I have to shove away the deep ache in my chest.

“Kara talks about you guys all the time when we’re together,” Brayden says with a chuckle. “It’s actually really adorable.” He leans down to nuzzle her nose with his.

I turn my attention to my locker and rummage inside for... nothing. Because it’s the first day of the new semester and there’s nothing in my locker.

“Where is Charlie anyway?” Dani asks. “Classes start in ten minutes and she’s not here.”

“There she is.” Kara points to a girl with red hair handing over assignments to various students.

“Don’t tell me she did other people’s homework during break,” Dani says with a groan.

“Looks like it,” I say.

“Hey, Charlie!” Dani calls.

Charlie’s head springs up in our direction. Her face lights up and she waves frantically. She dumps the remaining assignments on some students before hurrying over to us.

“Hey, guys!” She hugs each of us and waves to Brayden.

Dani throws her hands on her hips. “Were you doing other students’ homework over break instead of having fun?”

“I thought teachers weren’t supposed to give us any work over break,” Kara says.

“It’s for kids who practically failed their classes and needed to do extra credit,” Charlie explains. “Don’t worry, I made sure they got Bs.”

Dani raises a brow. “Just Bs?”

Charlie shrugs. “As much as I love doing homework, I’m not a pushover. They thought they could be on vacation and dump all their work on me? They deserve those Bs.”

“Well, I would have given them Cs,” Dani says with a scowl. “I don’t like anyone taking advantage of one of my besties.”

Charlie smiles. “Thanks, but I don’t think I have it in me to hand in anything lower than a B.”

“So the Edenbury High School book club is back together, huh?” a male voice says.

We turn around to find Easton stepping up to Dani and wrapping his arm around her waist. “Hey, beautiful.” He gives her a sweet and passionate kiss on the lips. They are the only

couple at school who could get away with that much PDA. Because Easton's family practically owns the school.

I swear Dani's got hearts in her eyes as she melts in his arms. "I missed you, Easton."

"We just saw each other yesterday," he says with a chuckle as his lips sweep the side of her face.

She squeezes herself closer to him. "I know. Every second I'm apart from you feels like an eternity."

I glance at Charlie to see if she feels that pang in her chest like I do, but she seems fine, like usual. I don't understand how she's not jealous of our other friends. Obviously I'm super happy for them that they found their perfect guys, but I won't lie and say I'm not extremely jealous. I know I'll never experience anything like that. What guy would fall for a girl who's afraid of her own shadow?

The bell rings, and all four of us groan. We love school, but we don't exactly love the people who go to school with us. Which is why we cling on to every second we're together.

After wishing each other and the boys goodbye and good luck on first period, we separate to our classrooms, me to biology. First day jitters are normal for everyone, but everything is heightened for me. Any kind of social situation raises my anxiety levels through the roof. Having at least one friend with me would drop that level ten thousand feet.

Maybe it doesn't have to be that way anymore, though. Maybe all I have to do is put myself out there and try to make other friends. That way, I won't have to sit alone at my lab table praying someone would come over and offer to be my

partner. The thing most people don't get about the Shy Girl is that I'm not rude. I'm not cold. I'm not aloof. I want to be social, but it's like there's a brick wall standing between me and everyone else, one I can't seem to knock down.

As I enter the classroom, I notice most kids are already at their tables, many of them paired up. A few kids sit alone, too. I close my eyes for a second and take a deep breath, convincing myself to be strong and brave and confident.

I reach a table with a girl with dark curly hair. She doesn't look as intimidating as some of the other girls. I stand before her, waiting until she raises her head from her phone. She quirks a brow at me.

"Is that seat taken?" I nod to the chair next to her.

She lifts her bag off the table and places it on the empty chair, focusing back on her phone.

Trying not to sigh, I turn away and scan the room, my eyes zeroing in on a girl who's doodling in her notebook. She doesn't look hostile, either. Taking another deep breath, I march over to her. She looks up from her notebook.

"Hey," I say with a smile, my lips slightly quivering. "Is the seat next to you taken?"

Her nose wrinkles like I smell like sewage as she returns to her doodling.

Rejection is hard for everyone, but for someone as sensitive as me? It's like nails right into my heart. Trying not to sigh again, I try my luck with the girl sitting at the table across. But as soon as the words are about to leave my lips, she perks up and waves at someone at the door. Her friend

runs into the room and hugs her, both of them squealing. The second girl drops down in the empty seat and the two of them start gushing about their midwinter break, not even looking at me once. I've always felt invisible, but now? It's like I don't even exist.

I try with two more girls, but no luck. I've got no choice but to settle down at the empty table in the back of the room.

Since we didn't receive our bio textbooks yet, I don't have it to occupy myself. With a grin, I reach into my backpack and snatch up the new Regency romance I bought last week. I didn't have a chance to start it yet because I just finished another one yesterday. I'm so excited to dive into it! The blurb sounds amazing, about a woman trapped in a loveless marriage and desperately wants to escape. But then events happen and she and her husband find themselves having to rely on each other or they'll die. That leads to them falling madly in love. I can't contain my excitement anymore! I open the book so fast I almost rip off the cover and delve right in, completely disappearing inside.

A commotion at the door yanks me away from my fantasy world. My head springs up, my eyes flitting to the doorway, and my stomach flops right out of my body. He's standing at the entryway, surrounded by kids like he always is. With his hair styled a little differently than usual, he looks extra sexy today.

My heart hammers in my chest as his deep laugh echoes throughout the room. Jared Mitchell, captain of the basketball team and one of the most popular and hottest guys at school.

Just being thirty feet away from him sends my heart into a frenzy. Wait a sec—he's in my class? He's taking bio with me?

My heart rate speeds up as he steps into the room and is led to one of the tables by his friends, which is most of the basketball team. Now he's only ten feet away from me and my heart beats so loudly I swear they can hear it on Mars. Of course he doesn't look my way, but I like it that way. So I can admire him from afar and fantasize what it would be like if I wasn't me and actually had a shot with him.

Some jocks are jerks, but not Jared. He cares about the environment and has adopted many neglected animals. He's so sexy and charismatic on the basketball court, but humble as well. Sometimes when I read my romance novels, I imagine him as the hero.

I don't want anyone to think I'm a creep for staring at him, so I force my eyes away and focus on my book. But it's hard to concentrate because of his sexy laugh. It causes butterflies to flap around in my stomach.

The bell rings, signaling class is about to start. I place my bookmark in my book and tuck it away in my backpack, then glance at the empty seat next to me. I guess the class has an uneven amount of students. I try not to sigh for the millionth time.

“Almost late,” my teacher says from the doorway. “Step right in.”

My body perks up. Does this mean there's another student in this class?

A small grin tugs my lips as I wait for the person to walk inside. But it quickly plummets when my eyes soak him in. From the tight leather jacket covering a white T-shirt that strains against his muscled chest, to the dark brown hair that reaches just below his chin, and the hands fisted at his sides.

The guy who spent the last few months in juvie. The criminal Zack Hastings.

My eyes widen in horror as he studies the room, sharp gray eyes assessing every single table that is occupied by two people. Except for the one in the back.

He makes his way to my table, and my gaze immediately tears away from him. I stare down, my fingers wringing in my lap. *Please go somewhere else. Please go somewhere else.* He drops his notebook on the table with a loud thud and slides into the chair next to me, his body so tall he practically towers over me. My heart nearly catapults out of my chest. Oh my gosh, a juvenile delinquent is sitting next to me! He's going to be my lab partner for the whole semester. I'll wind up dead in his freezer.

The more time that passes, the more my heart pounds, and it's not long before my body starts to shake. I squeeze my hands in my lap as my pounding heart makes me feel lightheaded. Am I going to faint?

Mrs. Cooper is in the middle of explaining what we'll cover in this class, but the only thing my ears hear is *whoosh whoosh*. I'm going to pass out for sure.

Zack slowly turns toward me, and for reasons I can't explain, my gaze makes its way to his. Those sharp gray eyes bore into my face, growing harder and harder by the second.

Soon he's looking at me like he really *is* planning to murder me.

I yank my eyes away and stare down at my notebook. I feel him watching me for a few more seconds before turning away, releasing a low grunt. My fingers squeeze the pen in my hand as I try to calm down. But I don't think I can. For the next few months, I'll have no choice but to sit next to the guy who killed a man. I'll have to talk to him, interact with him, get good grades with him. And there's no point in trying to ask my teacher to switch partners because who would want to partner up with someone like Zack? More importantly, who would want to partner up with the Shy Girl?

Chapter Two

Zack

Being late to class? I couldn't care less. Grades? Why should I give a crap? But one thing I hate? People being scared of me.

Which is exactly what the girl sitting beside me is doing right now.

Every time I glance her way, she cowers like I'm about to hurt her. She's pretty much on the edge of her seat, and if she moves a centimeter, her butt will be on the floor. And she's trembling, squeezing the life out of her pen. When our gazes meet, she tears hers away like she's worried I'll fry her with laser beams from my eyes.

I haven't done anything to her—haven't done anything to anyone—so why on Earth is she looking at me like I've got swords instead of arms?

The teacher drones on and on about crap I don't care about. Seems silly to worry about school when my life is one big mess. The part that ticks me off the most? That I can't do anything to change it. To fix it.

Mrs. Cooper passes the textbooks around, placing two on our table. My partner's got her head lowered, her fingers pulling at her blonde ponytail. She eyes the textbooks, her hand twitching as if she wants to take one.

Letting out a grunt, I reach for one and slide it over to her. She keeps that head lowered and is half turned away from me. I grab the second book and flip through it. The thing's in pretty bad shape, the cover torn and peeling and I'm pretty sure some pages are missing. But whatever. It's not like I'll read this crap anyway.

My partner, though? Seems like the type to care about grades. I don't know her and have no interest, but I'm pretty good at reading people. And this girl? For some reason is terrified of me. Unless I hurt her in some former life, she's got no reason to. And that really annoys me.

She seizes her textbook from the table and places it on her lap, looking through the pages. It doesn't take a genius to realize she's busying herself with the book so she won't be forced to look at me.

During the lesson, I feel eyes flit to me and when I turn toward Ponytail, our gazes meet. Hers widen and she quickly looks away. I narrow my eyes at her. What the heck? I'm *not* going to hurt her.

This lesson is so boring, I can't take another second. And I can't take another second of that girl looking at me like I'll chop her head off. So to tune her and the rest of the class out, I pull out my phone, stick my earbuds in my ears, and turn up the music to the loudest volume.

It's not long before Mrs. Cooper is at our table, her lips moving like she's in one of those silent movies my grandpa used to watch. She's probably telling me to put my phone away, but I just cross my arms over my chest and ignore her.

My partner gapes at me with wide eyes and jaw hanging open. I internally laugh. She probably never broke a rule in her life.

The teacher says something else, but the bell rings and everyone gathers their things. I pull my earbuds out and stuff them into the pocket of my jacket.

The teacher still stands at my table and I reluctantly meet her gaze.

“Like I said, I’m letting it slide because it’s the first day, but if I catch you in my class with a phone, it’s detention.” She walks off.

Like I give a crap about detention?

My partner packs up her stuff like she’s catching a train, her hands shaking so hard she accidentally drops a few things on the floor. I grit my teeth. Is this how she’ll be for the entire semester? How can we work together if she thinks I’ll hurt her?

One of her books crashes to my side on the floor and the title catches my attention. It’s a Regency romance novel, the type of story my mom used to love. Dad and I would tease her about them all the time. A pang stabs my stomach as I remember how she’d cry at the end of those books. The happily ever after.

That crap doesn’t exist.

Ponytail grabs the book, stuffs it into her bag along with her other things, and dashes out of the room. The only thing she left behind is that pen she tortured to death.

I take my stuff and leave the room, passing many kids in the hallway chatting and laughing with their friends. The

atmosphere changes as soon as I come close to them. They stop talking and laughing. Their faces change, eyes narrow, and whispers are thrown around as I walk toward my locker. I can feel their stares boring into my back. That's how it's been since I moved back here three weeks ago, before winter break. They stare, point, whisper. They're not terrified of me like Ponytail. No, they just don't want me here.

A few kids are huddled near my locker and I push past them to dump my stuff inside. I feel their stares, hear their whispers, feel their disgust. Yeah, I'm not like them. I don't fit "the mold." And I don't care.

But I won't lie—there's a small part of me that *does* care about the way they look at me. They've drawn all these conclusions about me without even knowing me. And the worst offender? She's walking toward her locker, her backpack pressed to her chest as if it'll protect her from something.

And when our eyes meet, she pries hers away and hurries to her locker, burying her head inside.

I slam mine shut and stalk to my next class.

Chapter Three

My stomach's been rumbling like crazy since first period. I guess sitting *right next to* a criminal gave me a huge appetite.

At lunch period, I follow the rest of the kids to the cafeteria, trying not to get trampled. Sometimes it feels like I'm walking with a hungry herd of elephants. The smell of food attacks my nose as soon as I walk in, which makes my stomach grumble like there's a monster in there. The food here doesn't suck, but it's not as good as when Dani's mom was the cook. When she was still here, I would count down the hours until lunchtime. And because it was the only time, other than book club, where I could hang out with my friends at school.

After standing in line and getting my food, I head over to our table in the back of the cafeteria. Charlie is already there, frantically typing on her laptop. I lower my tray on the table and say, "Got work already?"

Her head snaps up for a second to give me a huge smile before she focuses back on the screen. "Yep! Seven assignments, all due tomorrow. And counting."

I laugh as I pick up my fork and dig into my chicken. Charlie likes to do other students' homework for fun. She always complains that teachers at Edenbury High don't give enough work. I like homework, too, but I would rather spend my time reading romance books or watching romance movies.

"Your classes okay?" she asks.

"Some of them. Yours?"

“I have the great fortune of having Teagyn Myers in my English class.”

I roll my eyes. “I feel you.”

“She already commented that my socks don’t match.” She shrugs. “I didn’t even notice.”

I bend down to look at her socks and smile when I find one with robot designs and the other with the planets. “Only you can pull off that look.”

She shrugs again. “Meh.”

“The food’s not bad,” I say as I take another bite of my chicken. “But I miss Mrs. Wood’s cooking.”

“Me, too. It’s great she’s still working at Easton’s family, though. Dani and her parents don’t have to work so hard. Dani has more time to dedicate to dance. And it gives her and Easton more time for each other.”

“Speaking of the cute couple,” I say when I catch Easton and Dani walk in, fingers interlocked like they never want to let go of each other. My eyes linger on their hands before I wave them over. Easton whispers something to Dani, then she nods and smashes her lips to his. Then she scurries over to us and plops down in the seat next to me. “Hey!” Her brows furrow at Charlie. “They’re putting you to work already?”

“No one puts me to work,” she says as she continues to type. “Only I put myself to work.”

Dani chuckles. “You’re definitely right about that! How are your classes, Ally?”

“Fine,” I say, trying not to think about my lab partner.
“Aren’t you getting food?”

“Easton’s grabbing me a plate.” Just the way she says the words shows how much she loves him.

“That’s so cute,” I say.

She glances at the counter, where he’s in deep contemplation about what food to choose. “Yeah, I might keep him.”

He pays for their food and heads over to our table with two full plates. “Thanks, Easton,” Dani says as she stretches her neck to kiss his cheek. “Wanna join us?”

“That’s okay. You guys catch up.” He sweeps his lips across her temple, then smiles at the rest of us. “See you later.”

They press their foreheads together for a few seconds before he walks off to his friends. Dani giggles. “He doesn’t want to hog me all to himself. He’s so thoughtful.”

“The cuteness is dripping off you two,” I say.

Dani clutches her heart. “I can’t believe how lucky I am to have him in my life.” She quickly wipes her eyes. “Nope, not gonna cry.” She perks up and waves at the door. “Kara!”

Kara and Brayden have just entered the cafeteria, their hands interlocked, too. She smiles and waves at us before she and her boyfriend get food. Then they separate, him to the football and cheerleader table and her to our table.

“So whose day is sucking so far?” she asks as she drops down and digs into her food.

“Mine’s good!” Dani says. “I have most of my classes with Easton.”

“So the office ran to obey his wishes by putting him with his girlfriend and not us with each other?” Charlie grumbles. “Talk about being unfair.”

“At least we each share some classes together,” Kara reassures her. “And we all have PE and trig together, too.”

“The dreaded PE,” Dani groans. “My muscles hurt already.”

All of us giggle.

“Did we decide what we’re reading for book club?” Charlie asks. “Time for a classic?”

“Maybe a paranormal romance this time?” Kara asks. “Haven’t read any in a while.”

“You know what my vote is,” I say.

“Duh,” Dani says. “A mystery with blood and gore.”

I gape at her.

She laughs. “I’m kidding! You want to read another Regency romance.”

I laugh, too. “You know me well.”

“Duh for real this time,” she says as she throws her arm around me. “I know all my Musketeers as well as I know myself!”

I smile. None of them can possibly understand how much their friendship means to me. Back in freshman year, I really

thought I would never have a friend in my life. Now I have three and I've never felt this loved.

But the smile vanishes from my lips when I notice the person who just walked into the cafeteria. Criminal Zack. With the most ticked-off expression I've ever seen on a person, he marches to the lunch line. Many kids stare at him, which ticks him off even more. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and stabs his earbuds in his ears, tuning the rest of the world out.

"Ooh, look who just walked in," Dani says. "Did you feel the drop in temperature?"

"Definitely." Kara shivers. "Like a Dementor is in here."

Charlie shrugs. "I don't feel anything."

"You guys are lucky," I say as I drop my fork and fold my arms across my chest. "I get to sit next to him every day."

They all stare at me. "What?" Dani says.

"He's my lab partner."

Kara's eyes widen. "You're kidding!"

"Nope. When no one wants to be partners with the Shy Girl, the Shy Girl gets stuck with the juvenile delinquent. He kept glaring at me and grunting. I felt like he wanted to hurt me. I couldn't concentrate in class."

"That's it," Dani says, getting up. "I'm going to demand they put you in my bio class. I'll use Easton if I have to."

It warms my heart how protective she is of me.

Charlie grabs the hem of her shirt, yanking her down.

"Relax. The dude's not going to hurt anyone."

My eyes widen. “How can you say that? Did you forget he *killed a person*? How could they allow someone like him back at our school?”

Charlie thinks about it for a second before scrambling to her feet. “Come, guys. Let’s get Ally out of there.”

“It’s okay,” I tell them. “Don’t make a big issue out of it. What excuse will you give the office anyway?”

“Um, that you’re scared for your safety? That you’re scared for your life?” Dani says.

“Any more than the other kids in my class?” I shake my head. “Forget it. I don’t need him to know I complained about him. That would put a target on my back. I’ll just have to deal. It’s just a few months anyway.”

My friends exchange a look.

“I’m fine,” I promise. “Let’s get back to lunch.”

They don’t look so sure, but they lower themselves back in their seats.

Zack storms to an empty table on the other side of the room, nearly dropping the pile of food on his tray. Many kids stare at him as he passes, some whispering and pointing. He ignores them and slams his bag on the table, fishing inside for something and plucking it out. My brows shoot up when I realize it’s a book.

A commotion at another table breaks my gaze away from him, and my heart pounds in my chest. Jared has just joined his teammates at the basketball table.

I yank my eyes away and focus on my food, but then they slowly make their way toward him. My lips lift as I watch him laugh with his friends. That deep, sexy laugh...

“And she was like why can’t I have a football princess theme for my birthday party?” Kara is in the middle of saying. “Her mom told her because there are no decorations for something like that. So you know what Bailey did? She bought every football and princess theme at the store and made a blueprint of exactly how she wants her mom to decorate the house. I’m telling you, guys, it’s going to be an epic party.”

“Cool,” Dani says with a grin. “I can’t wait. And I can’t believe she’s turning six.”

“I know! I think I saw Bray tear up a little the other day.”

Jared digs into his mashed potatoes, takes a bite, wrinkles his nose, and pushes his plate away. A girl from another table is at his side in a flash with her homemade lunch, which Jared graciously refuses. But the girl is adamant. Jared surrenders with a sweet smile and a big thank you.

I sigh. Could he be any more perfect?

“Ally? You okay?” Dani pulls me from my thoughts. “That was quite a heavy sigh.”

My cheeks warming up, I quickly stammer, “Yeah! I’m fine.”

“That wasn’t a depressed sigh,” Charlie observes as she whacks away at her computer. “That was an I’m-hopelessly-in-love sigh.”

My eyes pop wide open. “*What?*”

“She’s right,” Kara muses. “I know that sigh very well. It’s what I did practically every day before I told Bray how I felt about him.”

“So that means...” Dani’s eyes get so wide she looks like an adorable anime character. “That means Ally has a crush on someone!”

“I don’t!” I lie. But my eyes act on their own and stare at Jared. My whole body melts when I find him showing the people at his table a photo of the dog he just rescued.

“We don’t want to force you to tell us anything,” Kara says. “But you know you can always talk to us, right?”

“Holy crap, you have a crush on Jared!” Dani gasps.

My gaze snaps to hers. “What? Who said? No way!” Am I *that* obvious?

“It’s Jared, it’s Jared, it’s Jared!” she squeals.

My face hotter than an inferno, I motion with my hands for her to keep her voice down.

Charlie’s hands freeze over the keys. “Yeah, it’s totally Jared. Ally’s been staring at him since he walked in.”

I sink lower in my seat, wishing I could disappear.

“Hey.” Dani wraps an arm around me. “You don’t have to be embarrassed in front of us.”

I lower my eyes. “I’m not. Okay, maybe a little. I’m not used to, um...”

“We know,” Kara says softly. “But maybe in time you’ll feel more comfortable opening up to us?”

“I do feel comfortable with you guys,” I reassure them. “I just...I don’t know. I never had a crush on anyone before and...I don’t know.”

“It’s so great you like someone!” Dani says. “I *knew* it. But you don’t have to be embarrassed. Remember the massive crush Kara had on Brayden? And how weird I felt after I kissed Easton in the alleyway near his country club? I wanted the world to swallow me, too.”

I smile at her comforting words, feeling like a load has been lifted off my shoulders. “You’re right. I do want to talk to you guys about him...”

Dani and Kara squeal.

“What do you like about him?” Charlie asks.

“I think he’s sweet and kind. And humble.”

She squints as she thinks it over. “Yeah, I see that.”

“Oh my gosh, you should tell him how you feel!” Dani says.

It feels like she pulled a rug from underneath me. “*What?*”

“Yeah,” Kara agrees. “It sucks to harbor a crush and not tell the person how you feel.”

“But...but...”

“And Jared’s great,” Dani says. “You have good taste.” She winks.

“Guys, I can’t tell him how I feel!”

“Why not?” all three ask.

“Because I’m the Shy Girl?”

Charlie waves her hand. “Ally, stop. There’s so much more to you than being shy. You’re smart and have the biggest heart in the world. You’ll be such a great girlfriend because you give one thousand percent.”

Dani and Kara nod vehemently.

I shake my head. They don’t get it. They may be invisible and have a hard time putting themselves out there, but it’s more than that for me. That brick wall, remember? I can’t get past it.

“Nothing ever came to people who just sat on the sidelines,” Charlie says as she rubs my arm. “If you want something, Ally, go for it.”

I’m about to tell her there’s no way in heck I could ever march up to someone like Jared and tell him how I feel, but... both Kara and Dani overcame whatever held them back. Because they were strong and brave and confident, they were able to snag the guys of their dreams. I want to have a boyfriend so badly, want to experience what it’s like to have someone in my life who loves me unconditionally and treats me like I’m his world. Like Charlie said, I can’t have that if I hide in the shadows like I’ve been doing all my life. Maybe it’s time this shy girl came out of her shell and had confidence. Because like I said before, I want to *live*.

“What if he rejects me?” I ask.

“He won’t,” Dani says with a smile. “Because you’re awesome.”

“And if he does, his loss,” Charlie says. “Anyone would be super lucky to have you for a girlfriend.”

My body warms up. “You really think so?”

“Duh,” they all say.

Maybe they’re right. If I want to finally start living, I have to take risks. And that starts with telling Jared how I feel.

“Okay,” I say with a confident smile. “I’ll tell him.”

“Yay!” Dani claps.

“But not yet,” I quickly add. “I need to think it over tonight. Prepare exactly what I’ll say to him.”

Charlie raises a brow. “I don’t think this can be rehearsed.”

“I rehearse everything,” I say with a nervous laugh.

“I’m so proud of you.” Kara closes me in her arms. “It’ll be so awesome for you to have a boyfriend. You, too, Charlie.”

She waves her hand. “Pass.”

“Still?” Dani demands. “You still don’t yearn for a boyfriend?”

“Nope.” She pops the “p.”

My heart flutters. Could this be the start of the new Ally Bensen, the girl who’s no longer shy and unconfident, but one who’s finally showing who she really is inside?

Chapter Four

Easton and Dani drop me off at my house after school, Dani hugging me goodbye. Then they drive off, probably to a romantic date. I watch the car grow smaller and smaller before it turns the corner, vanishing from sight. But instead of feeling sad like I normally would, my body is buzzing with excitement. Because that might be me soon. Riding off into the sunset with the guy of my dreams...holding hands...kissing...

Shaking those thoughts away, I push the front door open and call out, “Mom?” She’s usually home before I return from school. She’s the manager of a high fashion boutique in Silverton and loves it. Not many people are lucky to land their dream job, but my mom is in heaven the second she steps foot into the store every morning. It makes me smile when I see the large grin on her face before I leave for school.

No response. I guess she must be out running errands or something. I drop my backpack on one of the kitchen chairs, then dig inside for my novel. I always read a chapter or two before homework or I wouldn’t be able to concentrate. Right now, the hero and heroine are trapped in a cave and she injured her foot. Her husband has to carry her everywhere and she secretly loves it, though she’d never tell him. And he would never admit that he loves holding her close to his chest, protecting her, wanting to kiss her. Sigh. I’m swooning.

On my way to my room, I hear voices coming from my parents’ bedroom. Sounds like laughter and excited voices. I

peek inside and find Mom and my older sister Amanda bent over boxes on her bed. Looks like clothes.

“Hi,” I greet as I inch deeper into the room. “I didn’t know anyone was home.”

Mom turns to me with a smile, blue eyes gleaming while my sister offers me a pleasant smile. “Hey, honey. How was school?” Mom asks.

I drop down on the bed. “Was okay.” I flinch as I think about my lab partner. But then it’s quickly replaced with excitement and my stomach swoops when I think about Jared.

Mom nods, then turns to my sister and they marvel over the boxes, touching the outfits like they’re gold or diamonds.

“Is that from the boutique?” I ask.

“They pulled them because of a disagreement with the designer. The designer didn’t want them, so I graciously accepted a few while giving the rest to charity. They’re just our style, look!” She holds up a shirt to my sister’s torso.

Amanda chuckles. “Better watch out, Mom. I’m taking all these with me to my apartment.”

Mom retracts the shirt, clutching it tightly. “Not in your life.”

As they continue to tease who will keep which article of clothes, I smile sadly. Mom and Amanda have always been best friends. Not only do they look alike, with golden blonde hair and bright blue eyes, they have everything in common. And I mean *everything*. Taste in clothes, men, movies, food. I’ve always been pushed to the side, second best to my sister. I know my mom loves me, but sometimes it feels like she’s

disappointed in me. Like I'm not the daughter she wanted. I know she's frustrated with how shy I am. And now that Amanda moved into her own apartment, it sometimes feels like Mom is missing her other half.

And Dad? Well, he's not like me at all. He's loud and social and makes friends so easily. He's a social worker, working very closely with foster kids, trying to provide them with a good life. I love that he's so dedicated, but sometimes he doesn't have time for me. One thing he makes sure to do, though, is take Mom out on a romantic date once or twice a month. I used to sit on the stairs when I was younger and watch him twirl her in his arms before they left the house, dressed in their finest. Those romantic dates mean so much to me because it shows me that a love like that can exist in real life, too, just as it does in my books. But not everyone is lucky to have that, and I'm pretty sure that won't happen to me. But I need to dream and hope, right? But for now I have my books and they make me happy.

Mom places a shirt over me, nodding in approval. "This will look gorgeous on you, Ally. Want to try it on?"

I take in the shape and design of the shirt, picturing the unflattering way it'd sit on my short body. "I don't know," I say. "It's not really my type."

Amanda scoffs. "You can't go around all day wearing jeans and a baggy T-shirt. And it wouldn't kill you to get out more, meet some people instead of hiding in the house with your books."

I cross my arms over my chest and glance away. Ever since she started cosmetology school, she's transformed into

this makeover machine, trying to dump me on a chair and *fix* me. But I'm fine the way I am, and when I talk to Jared tomorrow, I want to be the real me, not some caked-up version of myself. All the men in my books love the women as they are.

"I'm going to my room," I mutter before walking toward the doorway. As I leave, I hear Mom and Amanda continuing to gush over the clothes as if I wasn't there two seconds ago. When they get like this, I might as well not exist.

As I climb the stairs to my room, Dad enters the house, greeting me before rushing to his office to take care of something. Apparently he's working on a new case.

I wave at no one. "It was nice talking to you." Sighing, I continue up the stairs with my book, plop down on my bed, and am about to resume from where I left off earlier. But I realize I have an email from Ms. Mehta, the choir teacher, informing me that practice will start later this week and that she's looking forward to another amazing and fun semester. I click away, my heart soaring. Choir is my second favorite thing, after reading and hanging out with my friends. Being up on the stage, singing, the music touching my soul, it's the most amazing feeling in the world.

Still smiling, I open my book and drink in the words. Half a second passes before I'm totally and completely absorbed in the story.

As I read the amazing words, my mind wanders. I'm no longer in my room, but sitting next to Jared in a carriage pulled by two beautiful horses. We're on our way to a ball, he

dressed in a crisp suit and me in a breathtaking dress that is sure to make heads turn.

He grins at me, looking at me like I'm the only person in the world. We're quite distanced from each other, since it's not proper for us to sit so close, but his fingers that rest between us crawl closer to me. Closer and closer, making my heart thump all over my body. Then when his strong, warm fingers close over mine, I shatter into a million pieces.

"I'm so very glad you have joined me this evening, Miss Allison," he says softly, his mouth so close to my ear, his breath sending tingles down my spine.

"Yes," I breathe. "I am glad as well."

He smiles that sexy smile that does crazy things to me, bending close, his mouth inches from mine. And I shut my eyes, awaiting that kiss. He moves slowly, slowly, like he's savoring every moment...and then—

A crashing sound nearly causes me to fly to the ceiling. Amanda stands in my doorway, hand on the door that she threw open, not caring that she nearly broke the wall and gave me a heart attack.

She studies me. "What are you doing?"

I drop my book and pull at my ponytail. "What?"

"Your cheeks are flushed."

"I...um. No they're not."

She rolls her eyes. "Dinner's ready."

I stand. "You're staying?"

“Yep. Still got some laundry to do and I miss Mom’s cooking.” She leaves the room.

My heart still pounds, and I’m not sure if it’s because of that fantasy or Amanda barging into my room.

What *was* that? I’ve always dreamed about Jared, but never like this. Maybe that’s a good sign. Maybe it’s the universe’s way of telling me Jared and I belong together. It might not be long before I join Dani and Kara in the relationship club.

Pressing my face into my pillow, I squeal.

After I’ve relaxed somewhat, I join my family for dinner, where as usual Mom and Amanda are dominating the conversation. I add in here and there, but I’m mostly quiet, thinking about Jared and tomorrow. I’ve still got to practice what I’ll say to him, but I’m feeling good vibes.

Tomorrow will be one heck of a day.

Chapter Five

Jared has just walked into bio, surrounded by his friends. They talk and laugh as they lead him to his table, then once again surround him.

Last night, I was so ready to walk over to him and tell him how I feel, but now that it's actually THE MOMENT, all that self-doubt I've been carrying around for years rains down on me like a thunderstorm. As if someone like me could ever be with someone in his league.

I shake my head. No. No more second-guessing myself or putting myself down. I know Jared is a nice guy and like Charlie said yesterday, no one ever got what they wanted by sitting on the sidelines and waiting for life to hit them. You've got to go after what you want. You've got to take chances and put yourself at risk.

I'm about to stand up, but then I plummet back in my seat, my nerves getting the better of me. Maybe another pep talk will help?

I close my eyes for a second, taking a deep breath and letting it out. *You are a strong, confident young woman, Ally. You're no less than all those popular kids surrounding one of the hottest guys at school.*

With a nod, I'm about to stand up again when I catch sight of the person who just walked into the classroom. My wonderful lab partner and criminal, Zack. He stands near the doorway, eyes assessing every table like he did yesterday. As

though he wants to find a new partner as much as I do. But like I found out yesterday, every other student has been paired up, leaving the rejects with no choice but to be stuck together. His eyes reluctantly land on my table, and that look of murder crawls onto his face.

My gaze drops from his as I grab my textbook and open to a random page. It's a shame that he is the way he is. He's so good-looking, with the prettiest gray eyes I've ever seen and shiny dark hair. If he hadn't gone down such a dark path, I bet he'd be as popular as Brayden and Easton, and Jared, and all the jocks.

I hear his furious grunt all the way from the back of the room, and then he marches to my table, slamming his textbook down and sliding into the chair next to me. He releases another grunt, crossing his arms over his chest. I grip the edges of the textbook as my heart races. He's way more ticked-off than yesterday. I swear it won't be long before he loses it and murders another person—me.

Jared's sexy laugh yanks me out of my reverie. You know something? Screw this screwed-up guy and his murderous eyes. I'm going to march over to Jared and tell him how I feel.

I get up and take a deep breath. No one notices as I move closer to his table, which isn't a shock because I'm invisible. But all that's going to change once Jared and I become girlfriend and boyfriend. I couldn't care less about being popular, but no longer being invisible sounds really nice. Not to mention snagging the guy of my dreams.

Now I'm standing before Jared's table, but it's hard to reach him because there's literally a wall of people blocking

me. Clearing my throat, I say, “Excuse me?”

No one pays attention to me. Maybe they couldn’t hear me with all that laughter and chatter.

“Excuse me?” I say a little louder.

The kids right next to me glance my way. With a tentative smile, I say, “Can I get by?”

They look confused as they move aside, some even blocking my way even more because they assume I need to *pass by* instead of getting to the guy behind them. I squeeze between two students and find myself face to face with Jared, who’s laughing with a guy on his left. I’ve never been this close to him, and that causes my heart to gallop wildly in my chest. I take in another breath. “Jared?”

His mouth snaps shut as he looks at me, nothing but confusion on his face. “Can I help you?”

“Hi. I’m Ally. Allison Bensen, but everyone calls me Ally.” I hold out my hand.

His eyes drop to it for a second before he says, “Okay?”

I quickly drop it to my side. “Um, I just wanted you to know that I think you’re amazing. You care about the environment and it’s amazing how many neglected animals you’ve taken in. You keep posting pictures of them on Spill It! and they’re so adorable. They look really happy and taken care of.”

Now he looks even more confused. “Thanks, I guess? You stalk my social media?”

Some of the kids laugh, which makes my cheeks burn. “N-no. I don’t stalk you. I sent you a friend request a few months ago, but you never accepted it. You were probably too busy.”

“Right.”

“Anyway, I was wondering if, um...”

It feels like the walls are closing in on me. This happens every time I’m in a social situation that makes me super uncomfortable. Soon I won’t be able to breathe. It takes everything I have to shove those feelings away. That was the old Ally. The new Ally is confident and cool.

“What I’m trying to say is...I’ve had a crush on you for a long time and...do you want to go out with me?”

As soon as the words are out, I feel a huge sense of relief. And empowered. Wow, I actually did it. Is this how all the other girls feel? Like they can do whatever they want and conquer the world? Because it feels awesome.

Jared’s brows dip as he stares at me, studying me as though he’s never seen a human being before. Then he bursts out laughing, which makes all the kids around us burst out laughing, too. Soon the entire class is hooting with laughter.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he says as he wipes tears from his eyes. “Let me get this straight. You want me to go out with you?”

I’m about to nod, but the kids bark out in laughter again.

“You think *you* would ever have a chance with *me*?” He chortles as he glances over me. “Who the heck are you anyway? Where did you come from? I’ve never seen you before.”

The other kids guffaw again.

“Go back to wherever you came from.” He shoos me away like I’m an annoying dog. “Maybe try aiming lower, yeah?”

The kids continue rolling with laughter. With tears blurring my vision, I spin around and dash to my desk, grabbing my notebook and bag, abandoning my textbook and my pens. My throat burns as I hurry to the door, desperate to escape this nightmare.

Only to be blocked by Mrs. Cooper.

“Allison, correct? Please sit down. Class is about to begin.”

“I need...I need...”

“Take your seat so I can start. Settle down, class!” she calls out to the kids who are still sniggering so hard their stomachs might burst. “Settle down!” Her gaze returns to mine. “Allison, sit down.”

The tears are about to shoot out of my eyes. I can’t...I can’t...how can I show my face in here ever again?

Mrs. Cooper now looks irritated. “Are you going to take your seat or do I need to send you to Ms. Nakamura?”

Swallowing back the tears, I quickly shake my head and make my way to the table in the back, passing the other tables. One of Jared’s best friends coughs, “Loser,” while a girl gives me a look like I’m the most pathetic person on the planet.

And my lab partner? He’s also looking at me, but unlike his fellow classmates, he’s not laughing at me. No, he looks like he’s seconds away from grabbing a knife from his bag and

stabbing me right through the heart. I plop down in my seat, wishing I could disappear from the world. Wishing I could go back to ten minutes ago, when I actually thought it was a good idea to tell the popular guy how I feel. This isn't a book or a movie, it's real life. And real life *sucks*.

Zack grunts loudly as he tightens his arms over his chest, sending more of those murderous glares. At this moment? I wish he would stab me through the heart.

Chapter Six

“You’re early,” Kara says as she enters room 1B with Brayden hanging off her arm. I quickly wipe my eyes before either of them can see. I’ve been battling tears all day and have finally let go in this room, the only place in the entire school where I feel safe.

“You know me,” I say with a forced smile. “Book club is my favorite part of school.”

“Duh,” she says with a giggle. “Where were you by lunch? Dani said you texted her that you couldn’t make it?”

“Yeah, um...” I shift in my seat, biting hard on my bottom lip before fresh tears could fall. “I had a meeting with my teacher for extra credit.” Lie. I was hiding in the bathroom.

“Cool.”

Brayden sits down in the chair across from me, pulling his girlfriend on his lap. “So what book are you reading?” he asks as he wraps his arms around her and nuzzles his lips into the side of her neck. Just the sight of them causes more tears to attack my eyes.

“A paranormal romance, finally!” Kara says. “I’m so excited. You should be, too, Ally. I heard there’s lots and lots of romance.”

For the first time in my life, I don’t want to read a romance book.

I try to force a smile, but I know I'm failing miserably. Kara must notice that I'm battling tears because her eyebrows wrinkle with concern.

"Nice." Brayden sweeps his lips across Kara's cheek, making her giggle.

I can't take that sight a second longer. I sweep my bag off the floor and rummage inside for something—anything other than the Regency novel I'm obsessed with. Or I was. I can't imagine loving it anymore. I find my history assignment and start working on it.

Brayden and Kara continue to nuzzle and giggle, but I feel Kara glance at me from time to time. I'm glad she's not asking me why I'm upset. Brayden's cool and a good friend, but there's no way I can open up to anyone other than my Three Musketeers. If I want to open up, that is. I wish I could bury what happened thirty thousand feet underground.

"I like you much better without football practice," Kara says as she snuggles close against her boyfriend. "You give me more attention."

"Hey, I gave you a lot of attention during football season."

"True, you were perfect. But now I have you all to myself."

"Almost all to yourself," he corrects. "You need to share me with Bailey."

Kara laughs. "For her, I can make an exception."

I'm so happy for Kara, but right now I wish they wouldn't be so cute and in love. It feels like the sharpest knives are stabbing my heart.

“Maybe you can stay for book club,” Kara suggests. “It’ll be cool to hear a guy’s perspective.”

“That sounds great, girlfriend, but this is your and your friends’ thing. I wouldn’t want to get in the way.”

“That’s okay. We’re always open to new members, right Ally?”

I nod without looking up from my assignment.

“It’s cool, Kara. I want you to have this special time with your friends.”

“You’re so sweet.” I hear her press her lips to his. “Finally we can kiss without getting in trouble.”

Brayden doesn’t say anything, but with the corner of my eyes I see him eye-signal toward me. He’s telling his girlfriend to be more sensitive toward me and not make out in front of me. But Charlie and I assured her and Dani that we are totally fine with them making out with their boyfriends in front of us. It’s not like *not* making out will magically make a guy land in my lap. Why shouldn’t they share kisses just because I’m single? That’s selfish. It never bothered me before, but now it kind of does. But that’s not their fault—it’s mine. For thinking someone like Jared would ever look at me *that way*.

Dani and Charlie enter the classroom, Dani waving to Easton and telling him she’ll see him later. “Hey, guys!” they greet.

Brayden gets up, gently lowering Kara to the floor. “That’s my cue to leave.”

“You’re welcome to stay, Brayden,” Dani tells him.

“I know, but I figure you cherish your girl time.”

“True,” Charlie says.

He kisses Kara. “I’ll pick you up after?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s okay. Easton and I will hang out, maybe shoot some hoops. Text us when you’re done.” He winks. “We like our guy time, too.”

“Okay, bye.” She grabs him by the front of his shirt and kisses him one more time before he leaves.

“Your boyfriends are so understanding,” Charlie says as she sits down in the desk next to me. “They’re cool with giving you space so you can hang out with your friends.”

“Yep, Easton knows how important you guys are to me and he doesn’t want me to lose you.”

“Same with Brayden,” Kara says.

I don’t know why, but tears erupt from my eyes. Maybe because they’re so lucky to have such amazing guys when the guy I like basically slapped me across the face? I thought he was nice, but I guess I was blinded by love.

Dani gasps. “Ally! What happened?”

“I knew something was bothering you,” Kara says as she rubs my arm. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of Brayden because I knew you wouldn’t like it. What’s wrong?”

Charlie moves her desk closer to me and wraps an arm around my shoulder. For some reason, their care just makes more tears shoot out of my eyes.

“Ally,” Dani says softly. “Please talk to us. You know we’re here for you.”

“Didn’t you hear the latest gossip going around school?” I ask, lowering my gaze to my lap.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Charlie says.

“Kids were saying a loser freak tried to ask out a popular jock,” Dani says. “Why? Since when do we care about what those morons talk about?”

“It was me!” I cry. “I’m the loser freak!”

“*What?*” Kara exclaims.

“I tried to ask Jared out, just like you told me yesterday.”

Through the new batch of tears, I catch Dani and Kara’s lips form an “o.” Like everything is clicking into place.

“You tried to ask Jared out,” Charlie says, squeezing me close to her chest. “And he...rejected you?”

“He threw me down on my butt!”

“He *what?!*” Dani explodes.

“Not literally. But it felt like it.” I cover my face, my shoulders heaving. “It was so mortifying. Why did I let you guys talk me into it? This is why I don’t put myself out there. This is why I keep to myself and fall in love with the guys in my romance novels. Because they can’t hurt me.”

“Oh, Ally.” Charlie wraps both arms around me. “He’s a jerk for rejecting you.”

“No.” I pry myself out of her arms. “I’m the idiot for thinking someone like him would actually go out with me.

This isn't a fairytale, not one of my romance novels. It's real life! And in real life popular goes with popular and the Shy Girl gets no one."

"Don't say that," Kara says. "I was invisible and got the quarterback. He got to know the real me and fell in love with me."

"And I snagged the rich hottie who is obsessed with me," Dani adds. "Fairytale do come true. You just need to find the right guy. Turns out Jared's a jerk. Don't let that discourage you. The right guy for you is out there somewhere—"

"Just stop!" I whisper-yell. "Stop saying there's someone out there for me. What guy would want to go out with the Shy Girl? I'm the most pathetic person on the planet."

"That's not true!" Dani says. "Don't let that jerk get to you, Ally, *please*. You're amazing."

"Saying it won't make it true," I argue.

"It's already true," Kara says. "You're the nicest person I know."

"Guys don't want nice girls."

"Some do," Charlie says.

"But most don't."

"But you want a guy who wants a nice girl, don't you?" Dani presses. "You don't want a guy like Jared who only cares about popular, snobby witches."

I wipe my eyes with my sleeve.

"She's right," Charlie says softly. "Jared showed you who he really is. You don't want to be with someone like him."

I bury my face in her shoulder.

“It’s okay.” She rubs my back. “I know how hard it is for you, but you shouldn’t give up on love.”

I lift my head. “The only love I want is a fantasy love. From the romantic and sweet guys in my books.”

Dani shakes her head. “Mark my words, Ally Bensen. One day you’ll meet a real romantic and sweet guy. And you’ll be the happiest person in the world.”

I shake my head, sure that’s not true. I’ll never meet the guy of my dreams. I bet I’m destined to be lonely for the rest of my life.

“Can we not read the paranormal romance?” I ask. “Maybe a thriller or something?”

My friends exchange worried glances. I know, I never want to read anything other than romance.

“You sure?” Kara asks.

“You guys can read the paranormal romance,” I say as I reach for my bag. “I’ll go home.”

“No, don’t run away, Ally,” Charlie begs.

“Book club isn’t the same without you,” Dani adds.

“Let’s download the thriller ebook onto our phones and read it,” Charlie suggests. “Until Ally feels comfortable to start the paranormal romance.”

“That’s fine with me,” Kara says.

“Me, too,” Dani agrees.

I wipe a tear that slides down my cheek. “Thanks, guys.”

Chapter Seven

Zack

My music is cranked up to the loudest volume as I pretend to do homework. All I need are passing grades and I'll be set to graduate in a year and a half. If not for the teacher on detention duty who's forcing us to do homework, I'd pull out my novel. Escape to a magical fantasy land where the world isn't one big pile of crap. Where anything is possible.

There's another kid in here, slouching in the seat on the opposite side of the room. I've got no clue what he's in here for—not for being late to class like me—and I don't really care. But like every other student at this school, he gives me that look, as if telling me to back off. That would explain why he's pretty much across the ocean.

My gaze drops to my phone. Only a few minutes before I can leave this place. Not that home is much better.

I don't want to think about what I went through two years ago, which is why my earbuds are practically glued into my ears. And the music will probably make me deaf one day, but like I said, anything to drown the thoughts and memories away.

The time passes and the teacher tells us we can leave, also hoping not to see us again. Yeah, that's wishful thinking.

Grabbing my bag, I shove my phone into my back pocket and make my way out the door. The halls are empty, except for

a few kids busy with after-school activities. Hardly anyone looks at me, but I know they know I'm here. Some keep their distance like I'll contaminate them, others act like I'm not worthy enough to be looked at.

I go to my locker to grab some stuff, and as I'm fishing around inside, there's a commotion down the hall. That jerk Jared is surrounded by his friends and lots of girls, some twirling their hair, others batting their lashes. What is it about this guy that's got the girls salivating over him? Because he's captain of the basketball team? I bet he has a good life, never had the people he loved taken from him.

I tune them out because I don't give a crap what they're talking about, but when they start talking and laughing about Ponytail, my ears perk up. The hot topic today has been her failed attempt at snagging the most eligible guy at school. And the stuff these kids are saying? Calling her pathetic, a loser, and laughing like she's the most ridiculous thing on the planet? It makes me want to hurt someone. The girl told her crush how she felt about him and he threw it in her face. I'm not saying he should be forced to like her back, but he could have handled the situation differently. But what did he do? Got the entire class to mock her. I *hate* when a person in power steps all over someone they think is less than them.

The kids are still laughing about it when I grab my motorcycle helmet, shut my locker, and exit the building. After getting on my bike and roaring it to life, I head toward my house. The best thing about the bike? It zooms so quickly my mind doesn't have a chance to slip to the events that happened two years ago, when my world changed forever.

Minutes later, I walk through the front door. I've been living here for three weeks, and...well, it beats the last house I was dumped in.

My foster parents, Isabel and Geoff McClary, are seated on the living room sofa. On the chair across from them is their son, Travis. He's a junior at that fancy all-boys school in Silverton. Truth? I'm glad I don't have to see him for more hours than I usually do, and I'm pretty sure the feeling is mutual.

All three heads lift as I walk in, the parents with serious and stern looks on their faces.

"Have a seat, Zack," Geoff says, gesturing to one of the chairs.

I look from one McClary to the next, trying to get a feel of what this is about, but I have no clue. Far as I know, I didn't break the rules they pounded into me when I first got here. I didn't hurt anyone or skip school. Other than detention, but I seriously doubt they care about that. Or about me for that matter.

I plop down on the chair and hold Geoff's gaze. He turns to his wife, who sits forward, that stern expression deepening. "It seems some money was stolen from my wallet this morning."

My eyes shoot from one foster parent to the other. "You think I stole it?"

Geoff holds up his hands. "It's only twenty dollars, but if you needed money, you should have asked us."

"I didn't steal anything."

“We’re going to forget about it because you’re still new and this is the first time,” Isabel says. “But if you steal from us again, we *will* take the appropriate action.”

“I’m telling you, I didn’t steal anything.”

They ignore me, choosing to go over the rules again. I sit back in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. Why am I surprised they don’t believe me?

As they drone on and on, I catch their precious son trying to hide a smug smile. Of course. He stole the money and is pinning the blame on me. Why not? Why not let the messed-up foster kid take the fall for him?

I get to my feet. “Can I go to my room now?”

Geoff holds up a hand. “As long as you promise us this won’t happen again.”

I grunt, my hands fisting at my sides. “I already told you, I didn’t steal anything from you.”

Isabel sighs. “If we’re going to make this work, you can’t lie to us like this.”

“I’m *not* lying.”

She looks at her husband like she doesn’t want to deal with this anymore. He says, “Go to your room and remember what we told you—one more time and you’re out.”

I whirl around and head toward the exit. Travis jumps in front of me, chuckling as he rushes up the stairs. I glare after him, wishing I could do something, but knowing very well that I can’t. These people can throw me out whenever they want to.

As much as I dislike it here, they're not the worst foster family I've had.

"Are you sure we did the right thing?" I hear Isabel ask her husband in a low voice. "Taking in a troubled teenager?"

Her husband lets out a heavy breath.

"He stole from us," she continues. "This didn't start happening until he came here. Who's to say he won't do worse? We have our son to think about!"

"I know. They assured me he's a good kid."

"A good kid who stole from us. And then denied it right to our faces!"

He sighs again. "We'll watch him carefully. The second he breaks a rule or threatens our safety, we'll get rid of him."

Get rid of me. Like I'm a broken mop instead of a human being.

Gritting my teeth, I climb the stairs to the second floor and march toward my room, trying not to let their words get to me.

I nearly knock into my foster brother, who's on his way back to his room from the bathroom. He still wears that large smug smile on his face.

I glare at him. "I know you stole the money."

He scoffs, rolling his eyes. "Why would I steal money from my parents when they give me whatever I want?"

I step close to him, my chest nearly smacking into his. "You won't get away with it."

He scoffs again. “Really? Who do you think they’ll believe? Some foster kid that no one—not even his loser parents—wants around, or me, their flesh and blood?” He slams his shoulder into mine on his way to his room, then shuts the door.

I scowl at that door, my chest rising and falling heavily. I want to punch him, but of course I can’t. Until I turn eighteen, I’m at other people’s mercy. They decide who I live with, what school I go to, pretty much what happens to me. And I can’t stand it anymore.

I go to my room and throw myself on my bed with my novel. That jerk Travis is right—no one wants me around. Not my aunt, not these people. I bet they’re in it for the money so they can afford that rich school for their precious offspring.

It’s just a year and a half, I keep telling myself. A year and a half until I’m in control of my life.

Chapter Eight

After lunch, my friends, Brayden, Easton, and I are gathered by Kara's locker, chatting about random things. We have some time before the bell rings and then we'll need to get to trig. I'm so happy I share this class with my friends, so I won't be alone.

Brayden's arm is slung over Kara's shoulder and he looks at her like she's the only thing on his mind. Easton's leaning against the nearby locker, his head tilted toward his girlfriend as Dani talks about the dinner party they attended with his parents last night.

"Bianca Burrell was there." She rolls her eyes. "And I swear she gave me the stink eye. Because I dared steal her fiancé."

Easton groans. "I told you a million times she wasn't my fiancée."

"*Anyway*, I gave her the stink eye back," Dani continues. "That girl needs to learn to back the heck off. He's *mine*."

Chuckling, Easton bends forward and gives her a short but sweet kiss on the lips. "Totally yours."

I press my trig textbook closer to my chest, averting my gaze. As much as I love seeing them happy, the wound from my failed attempt at pouring my heart out to my crush is still raw.

Heels clack against the floor as Dani continues to talk about the fabulous dinner. Teagyn and her henchwomen pass

us, Teagyn muttering, “Ridiculous. One of those losers got the quarterback and now they all think they can go after the jocks? I hope that pathetic one learned her place yesterday. My gosh, how embarrassing!”

Her henchwomen nod in agreement and giggle as they walk off.

Kara wraps an arm around me. “Don’t listen to a word of that.”

I shrug. “I know. I don’t care what she says.”

The bell rings and we head to trig, taking seats near each other. Dani continues the conversation from before we were rudely interrupted.

There’s a chill in the air as Zack walks into the room, plopping down in the seat across from mine. I stare at him. Why did he specifically choose that seat? Is he stalking me?

He must feel me watching him because he slowly turns his head and narrows those pretty gray eyes at me. I glance away, my heart nearly catapulting out of my chest.

Kara, who sits in front of me, pulls at my elbow, eye signaling him. I raise my shoulders helplessly. Looks like I’m not the only one who noticed I’m on the criminal’s hit list.

Whispers sound around me. Kids are pointing and laughing at me. A few are watching Zack warily, but for the most part I’m the subject of their laughter and ridicule. I try to tune them out. Kids will gossip because they have nothing else to do or because they want to make themselves feel better. It’s high school after all.

The teacher enters the classroom and starts with a few problems on the board. I forget about what happened yesterday and focus on the lesson. That's the best part about school—that I can completely absorb myself in the work and not let my brain wander.

As I jot down some notes in my notebook, my eyes move to my right and I find Zack sprawled on his desk, sleeping. His chest rises and falls gently, and this is the only time I've ever seen him at peace. His face isn't as peaceful, though, as if his mind is active. Worried about something.

Wow...he looks so normal. Not like a criminal at all.

"Excuse me, young man," Mr. Tran calls from the front of the room. "No sleeping in my class."

All heads turn to Zack, who still snoozes as though it's perfectly normal to sleep in school. I'm not sure if he's secretly awake or in a deep sleep.

"Young man," Mr. Tran calls again.

No response from Zack other than those soft breaths.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Mr. Tran marches over and slams his fist on Zack's table, making a few kids jump, including Kara. Zack's eyes slowly open and they rove around like he's not sure where he is.

"Good morning," Mr. Tran says sarcastically as Zack sits up. Zack glares up at him, his lips pressed firmly together. "Zachary, is it? I don't allow sleeping in my class. You've just earned yourself detention." He tilts his head toward the board. "Now please go and solve those equations."

Zack narrows his eyes at the board, crossing his arms over his heavily muscled chest. He slants his head to the side, pushing some hair out of his face as he stares at the front of the room, jaw clenching.

Mr. Tran places his hands on his hips. “You can’t solve it? Perhaps it’d be wise for you to pay attention in class.” As Mr. Tran walks off, Zack mutters a string of curses under his breath. Then his eyes meet mine and I quickly look away, grabbing my pencil and pretending to do some equations. Why am I giving this guy more reasons to slice my head off?

Mr. Tran faces the class. “Who *can* complete the equations on the board?”

Charlie’s hand shoots in the air faster than the speed of light, then she rushes to the board and solves the equations within seconds. Mr. Tran is so pleased he’s smiling as if he’s never had a student like her before. And Charlie? She walks back to her seat like it’s no big deal.

The bell rings just as the teacher tells us what problems to complete for homework. The kids fly out the door while my friends and I take our time gathering our things. Zack gets to his feet, swinging his backpack over his shoulder, glares at the teacher, then leaves the room.

I stare at the door, my heart pounding. “Did you see that?” I hiss as the six of us exit the classroom and gather in the hallway. “The way Zack glared at Mr. Tran?”

Dani shakes her head in disbelief. “Crazy, crazy.”

Charlie shrugs. “Well, he did fall asleep in class. That’s rude and disrespectful. He deserves detention.”

My eyes roam the hall until I find Zack at this locker, rummaging inside, earbuds in his ears. He still wears that look on his face like he wants to hurt someone.

Brayden and Easton kiss their girls goodbye, then we separate toward our classrooms. Kara and Dani hug us tightly, murmuring how much they'll miss us before slipping into their class. Charlie and I enter physics, taking seats side by side. She starts on the jocks' and cheerleaders' homework while I skim over my notes until the teacher comes.

"You're good, right?" Charlie says, looking up from the homework. "What Teagyn said in the halls before trig...you know she's just jealous of our friendship, right?"

"Yeah."

"She has minions for friends. And it's like Dani said—Teagyn wishes she has friends like us." She rubs my arm. "So next time she talks crap about you, remember that."

I smile. "Thanks, Charlie."

"Sure thing." She scribbles fervently. "I think I can squeeze this assignment in before class starts..." Her lips snap shut as the teacher walks into the room. "Well, so much for that."

Chapter Nine

Today after school is my first choir lesson of the new semester. I, along with a few others, make my way to the music room, them chatting and me by myself like usual. I still haven't given up on making some new friends. Considering I have things in common with the other choir kids, maybe I'll have more luck.

We settle down in the chairs, waiting for Ms. Mehta to enter the room. Once again, the rest of the students are chatting and I glance around, hoping to find someone who is maybe sitting alone or needs a friend. But the entire class has separated into groups. I'd go over to one, maybe break the ice with a lame joke, but after what happened with Jared the other day? I'd rather stay away from groups.

A few kids squeal or cheer when Destiny walks into the room, head held high like she owns the place. Technically, she kind of does. She has the best voice in the class, always gets solos and all the praise. I used to be jealous of her—okay, I still am—that she has the confidence to get up on that stage, sing in front of hundreds of people, and completely own it. Me? I'd be mortified if someone caught me singing in the shower. I like to be in the background, singing along with the other kids, the spotlight *not* on me.

One time Charlie heard me singing in my room, and let's say I tossed and turned that night because I was so embarrassed. Even though she told me I have an amazing

voice, I refused to believe it. Me, an amazing voice? *Sure*. I'm just average. Average in everything, except for school.

Destiny sits down and talks about how she sang with this person and that person over winter break. How she performed at a cousin's wedding and someone posted a video of it online and she got close to a million hits. My heart rate spikes just thinking about all the people—strangers—listening to her. Judging her. Not that there's much to judge. She's flawless.

“Attention, attention,” a voice says from the doorway. Our choir teacher stands there with a wide smile on her face. “How was your winter break? Are you all warmed up? Ready to dominate performances?” She chuckles to herself. “How was my break, you ask? Pretty good, but I'm glad to be back.” She claps her hands. “Let's get started.”

Destiny's hand shoots in the air. “Did you hear me at my cousin's wedding, Ms. Mehta? The video went viral.” She beams.

Ms. Mehta nods, a proud smile on her face. “I sure did, after you sent me a million texts and emails directing me to the video.” She chuckles.

Destiny's smile just gets wider. “You can't ignore such amazing talent, can you?”

Our choir teacher laughs again. “I'm assuming you'd like to audition for a solo?”

“You assume correctly.”

Still grinning, Ms. Mehta's eyes scan the room. “Anyone else?” A few kids raise their hands or tell her they'd like to audition. “Great.” Her gaze lands on me. “Ally?”

My eyes widen. This isn't the first time she's asking me to audition for a solo. Actually, she's asked me since freshman year. Each semester I tell her the same thing. "N-no, thanks." I duck my head so she won't try to convince me to change my mind.

"All right," she says, a disappointed tone in her voice. I don't know why she insists. She knows I'm not a good singer. I mean, I'm decent or else I wouldn't be here, but I'm not extraordinary.

"Auditions will be next week," Ms. Mehta continues. "So please be prepared. And for those who don't plan to audition, please reconsider." I know she's talking about me, but I can't meet her gaze. Why embarrass myself more than I already have?

We start a new song and all my worries and insecurities fly out the window. I love that I can hide behind the other kids, mask my voice with theirs while still being able to sing to my heart's content. The only person who hears me is me and that's more than enough.

We sound amazing, which is all due to our teacher's talent for mixing the harmonies and her choice of song. Right now it's a pop song, but we put our own spin on it.

Destiny's voice carries over the others and it's not long before she's on her feet, strutting around the classroom as she sings so loud she might shatter the windows. She's not yelling like some singers do. Her voice is strong, controlled, flawless.

Ms. Mehta shuts the music. "That's very nice, Destiny, but please let the rest of the class sing so I can hear how they can improve."

Destiny chuckles softly, her cheeks a little red. “Sorry, Ms. Mehta. I was having so much fun I got carried away.” She plops down in her seat.

The class continues to practice for about another hour before it’s time to go home. I gather my things, heading for the door, when someone places their hand on my arm. “Ally, can we talk?” Ms. Mehta asks.

Swallowing, I nod, pressing my backpack to my chest.

She smiles. “How was winter break?”

“Good.”

“Did anything special?”

“Not really.”

Her smile widens. “Did you practice your singing?”

Not really. “A little,” I lie.

“That’s great.” She squeezes my arm. “I’d really love for you to reconsider auditioning for a solo. You have a beautiful voice, honey.”

I tighten my hold on my backpack. “No, I don’t.”

She tsks at me. “I heard you when you auditioned for choir two years ago. Your voice is soft, like velvet, you know? The kind of voice that makes you feel good.”

I stare at her. She’s just saying that to try to convince me, but it won’t work.

“I need to go. My mom’s waiting for me in the car.”

She nods slowly. “All right. I can’t force you to try out for a solo, Ally, but I can ask you to think about it. Will you do

that? For me? Your favorite teacher.” She winks.

I can't help but laugh. “Who said you're my favorite teacher?”

She winks again. “I know I am. Think about it, okay?”

I nod. I want to try out, I really do. I just can't. And she'll never understand because she doesn't have that brick wall holding her back from doing the things she loves.

“I'll see you next week,” she says.

As I leave the building and find Mom's car, I tell myself I'm fine with being in the background. I get to sing and have fun without embarrassing myself. That's enough for me.

Chapter Ten

The doorbell rings and I hurry down to answer the door. “Hey!” I greet.

Charlie hugs me with one arm, since her other arm is overflowing with schoolwork. “Hey, what’s up?”

I invite her inside and we go up to my room, where I already set up another chair at my desk. It’s a good thing my parents bought me a huge desk that can seat two people, because with all of Charlie’s things? Yeah, she really needs the space.

“I wonder if Kara and Dani dressed up,” Charlie muses as she unloads all her stuff. “Brayden hinted they’re going to a fancy restaurant. This double date is long overdue, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, totally,” I say as I lower myself on the other chair. “They’re going to have so much fun.”

“Hey.” She throws me another smile before wrapping an arm around me. “You and I are going to have just as much fun as them. Maybe more.”

I laugh. “As much as I love homework, I seriously doubt it can compete with a romantic double date with one of your best friends.”

She shrugs. “I’d choose homework over a romantic date anytime.”

I shake my head with a smile. “I don’t think you’d feel the same if you had a boyfriend.”

“Nah, I’m sure.”

I shake my head again and reach for my bio textbook. Charlie has already started on an assignment, but from the expression on her face, I know this isn’t her own assignment but another student’s. She gets this look on her face when she’s doing her own homework—like she’s in euphoria. When she does other kids’ homework? The euphoria is there, too, but not as strongly.

“You finished all your homework and are doing other kids’?” I ask.

“Duh,” she says with a grin as she continues to type on her laptop. “Finished mine before second period.”

“Whose are you working on?”

“DeAngelo’s psychology homework. Too easy.”

That makes me laugh. But then I frown. Psychology might seem easy on paper, but when you’re dealing with a person in real life? It’s anything but easy. But maybe that’s just me. I don’t understand people. Obviously, since a certain jerk who shall not be named turned out to be nothing like he appeared to be.

“Want food?” I ask. “My parents said we could order pizza.”

Charlie’s face lights up the way it always does when pizza is involved. “Yes, please!”

“Okay, I’ll order it now.”

I open the app and we order our pizza. Then we work in silence, the only sounds Charlie's typing and my pencil scraping across paper as I work on my trig homework. It's nice, comforting, sitting next to Charlie and doing homework in silence, not needing to talk.

After a few minutes, the doorbell rings. Charlie's hands drop to her sides and her face lights up again. "Is that the pizza?"

She's out the door before I have a chance to respond. I dash after her and find her thanking the pizza delivery guy and kicking the door shut, the pizza box securely in her arms. She inhales and her eyes roll backward. "Nothing beats the delicious smell of fresh pizza. Should we eat in the kitchen or your room?"

"I guess the kitchen. I wouldn't want you to get oil stains on all those kids' precious homework."

Charlie chuckles as she carries the box to the kitchen. "I've actually once purposely stained Macy's assignment."

"You did?" I say as I grab plates and napkins and place them on the table.

"Yeah, last year. Remember when she made fun of Dani because she went splat on the floor during PE?"

"Oh, I wasn't in your class. But I remember Dani was super embarrassed because she ripped her pants."

"Yeah, exactly! Pizza stain right there in the middle of her assignment."

I giggle. "Was she totally furious?"

“Oh, yeah.”

We laugh again as we settle down at the table and reach for our slices.

“Heaven,” Charlie moans as she takes bite after bite. “The place you ordered this from is awesome.” She wipes her hands on her napkin and looks around. “Aren’t your parents home?”

I shake my head as I swallow my bite. “Out on a romantic date.”

“And Amanda?”

“With her boyfriend at her apartment. Besides, she wouldn’t hang out at the house if it was just me.”

“Do you guys really not get along?”

I shrug. “It’s not that. We just don’t have anything in common.”

“Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if I had a sibling,” she says as she takes another bite.

“At least you don’t have to worry if your parents like your sister more than they like you.”

“You know your parents love you, Ally.”

“I know. But the question is whether they *like* me.”

“Who *doesn’t* like you?”

I give her a face.

“You’re not thinking of Jared the Jerk, are you?”

“No. I’m trying not to care about him anymore. It still hurts that he rejected me so harshly, but like you guys told me

during book club—now I see him for who he really is. I’d never in a million years go for a guy like that.”

She nods. “Good. I’m glad you’re not pining after him. Who needs guys anyway? It’s fun hanging out, isn’t it? Just you and me.”

“Yeah,” I say with a smile. “I really love it.”

“Me, too. And this pizza, oh my *gosh*.” She reaches for another slice and takes a bite. “You should invite me over whenever you’re home alone.”

“But you like doing homework alone,” I remind her.

“True. But I know you don’t like being alone.”

I shrug. “I’m used to it. My parents go out on a romantic date once or twice a month, and I’m used to Amanda not living here anymore. Anyway, she was always out on Friday nights.”

“Mmm.” She takes another bite of her pizza and sighs happily.

“I guess I want what my parents have one day,” I admit. “To still be so in love after twenty years.”

“You’ll have it,” she assures me with a smile.

“Thanks,” I say, even though I don’t believe it. The romantic guys in my books will keep me happy for the rest of my life.

“Ally, I’m sorry I encouraged you to pour out your heart to Jared. If I knew he was such a jerk—”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to apologize. I was so sure my dream would come true that I didn’t think it through. I

should have told him privately how I felt instead of announcing it to the entire class. I was stupid to think that just because I wanted it, he must have wanted it, too. That's not how things work, at least not in the real world. Feelings aren't always reciprocated."

"Sometimes they are. Actually, more often than not. I mean, just look at Dani and Kara and their boyfriends."

"I invented a version of Jared that didn't exist," I continue with a frown. "I guess I'm so used to envisioning my perfect guy when I read my romance novels that I did it in real life, too. But you can't fashion someone to be like you want in real life. People are the way they are, and you need to accept them for who they are."

"Or chase them away from your heart because they're jerks," Charlie mutters.

"At least no one can hurt me in books," I say.

Charlie's quiet for a few seconds before saying, "You don't have to escape to your books and live there permanently. There are some really good guys out there. You'll meet one one day."

"I don't know...maybe if I was different..."

She raises a brow. "Different?"

"Not so shy."

"Ally, you're perfect," Charlie says. "Don't let anyone let you think otherwise."

I shake my head. "Maybe if certain things in my life didn't happen, maybe I wouldn't be this way."

Charlie's eyes rove over my face. "If certain things didn't happen...?"

I puff out my cheeks as my gaze drops to the crumbs on my plate. "I was bullied in middle school."

"You were?" Charlie's voice rises an octave. "Who bullied you? I'll have each and every one of their heads."

"Most of them don't go here."

"Oh. Give me their addresses and I'll give them a piece of my mind."

That makes me smile. "Thanks, but it doesn't matter anymore."

"I think it does," she says softly. "You seem bothered by it."

"It's just that...what they did still happens to me. It probably always will."

"What did they do? You can tell me, Ally."

I get up to get Coke, pouring each of us a cup. Then I play with my empty one. "They took advantage of me. I guess I thought if I helped them with homework or study with them, they'd be my friend. But they just used me and called me names behind my back, and even sometimes to my face. Like teacher's pet and dork and nerd. And the stupid thing is that I would still help them with schoolwork because a part of me hoped—and yearned—for them to be my friend."

Charlie moves her chair closer to me and wraps her arms around me. "They suck."

"I didn't think I'd ever have friends until I met you guys."

“Dani forming the book club was the best thing that could have happened to all four of us.” She squeezes me.

“And things weren’t perfect at home,” I continue. “I always felt second best to Amanda. No matter how nice I was to my mom, she always preferred my sister, even when she wasn’t as nice as me or when she acted out. It hurt me so much in middle school, but I guess I’ve given up. I just accept things as they are and realize this is how it’s going to be for the rest of my life. My mom and Amanda, and then me.”

“I’m not so close with my mom, either,” Charlie says.

“But she doesn’t favor your sister over you.”

“True.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m so sensitive to rejection,” I say as I wipe away a tear that sneaks out of my eye. “Because I feel like I’ve been rejected my whole life. That’s why I kind of back into the shadows and escape to my books. Because no one will hurt me there. I don’t have to put myself out there and have everything blow up in my face.”

Charlie squeezes me again. “We’ll never reject you,” she promises. “The Four Musketeers for life. We’re going to be best friends until the end of time, even after that. I promise.”

“Even when you’re this big shot scientist working for NASA?” I say with a teasing smile.

“Heck, yeah! The four of us are glued to each other for life. Even when you marry this super romantic guy who will sweep you off your feet and shower you with the love you deserve.”

I shake my head as I pull out of her arms. “I’ve accepted that *that* will never happen.”

“It will,” she promises. “I know it will.”

“You can’t know the future.”

“Are you doubting the future scientist who will one day change the world?”

“You don’t believe in love!”

“Not for myself. But for you I do.”

I roll my eyes. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Sure it does! You deserve only the best, and mark my words, you will get the best.”

With a shake of my head, I stand. “Let’s clean up so we can get back to homework. You still have all those students to make happy.”

“Clarification,” she says as she throws her head up. “I have all those assignments to make *me* happy. Them? Not even in the equation.”

With a grin, I put my arm around her and we return to my room to continue our homework. Maybe I won’t get the guy of my dreams—at least not in real life—but my friends? There isn’t anything that can compare to them in the world.

A few hours later, Charlie’s phone rings with a call from Dani and Kara.

“They must be done with their double date,” Charlie says as she accepts the call. “Hey, lovebirds!”

“Are you still at Ally’s?” Dani asks. “I’ll add her to the call if you’re not.”

I squeeze my face next to Charlie’s. “I’m here! Hey, guys. You look so happy!”

Dani and Kara sit with their boyfriends at what looks like a park.

“Hey, Brayden and Easton,” Charlie says. “You guys done with your date already? It’s a little early. Thought you’d be busy making out until your lips fall off.”

I bump my shoulder into hers. “Charlie.”

“What?” She shrugs.

Easton chuckles. “I definitely can do with more of that, but Dani wanted to check in on you guys. I think she really misses you.”

“Duh I do!” Dani says. “You guys should have come, too. The food was amazing! You should have seen the way the hostess and the servers acted toward Easton. Like he was a prince!”

Easton chuckles again. “My family eats there all the time. I guess we’re VIPs.”

Brayden puts his arm over Kara’s shoulder and kisses her temple. “Kara misses you guys, too. Both she and Dani couldn’t stop talking about you. It’s like you were there with us the whole time.”

“Maybe next time you will be,” Kara says with a smile. “You know, since you were practically there.”

Charlie shakes her head. “You need to hang out with your boyfriends, Dani and Kara. Ally and I don’t want to be responsible for breaking up the two most perfect couples in the world.”

“You can’t break Dani and me up,” Easton says. “I know how important you guys are to her. I’m totally okay with her gushing about you all the time.” He kisses her cheek.

“Same,” Brayden says as he hugs Kara.

“Aw, you guys are the cutest,” Charlie says.

“In the world,” I add.

“Thanks,” Kara says shyly as she pecks Brayden’s lips. “Dani and I are glad you two are having fun. Wait, are you having fun?”

“We’re doing homework,” I tell them. “So yeah, Charlie is having a party.”

All four of them laugh. Then Dani says, “What about you, Ally? Did you and Charlie watch that romance movie yet?”

“Romance movie?” Charlie asks, turning to me. “You didn’t say anything about a romance movie.”

“You were so happy doing homework, so I didn’t bring it up. It’s fine, we don’t have to watch it.”

“Of course we’re going to watch it,” Charlie says.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “I know you’d rather do homework.”

Charlie turns back to her phone. “Guys, help me convince this one that we should watch the movie.”

“Ally, Charlie actually wants to watch a movie!” Dani says. “Grab the opportunity!”

“Before she changes her mind!” Kara adds.

“But she only wants to watch it because I want to watch it,” I argue.

“So?” Charlie says. “I’m one of your best friends. I want to do this for you. Dani, Kara, looks like I have a date with Ally. We’ll talk later. Make sure to make out until midnight.”

“I have curfew,” Kara says, “but have fun on your date!”

“Thanks.” Charlie hangs up.

“We really don’t have to watch it—” I start.

Charlie pulls me into her arms. “I’m not one to be all mushy, but I love you. Screw all that crap you went through in middle school. Now you have friends who would do anything for you. So let yourself be loved, okay?”

I rest my head against hers with a smile. “Thanks.”

Chapter Eleven

I wake up on Monday morning to a quiet house. Which is a little odd, since Mom and Dad are usually talking in the morning over breakfast, and sometimes Amanda drops by. But when I go down to the kitchen, I find it empty, spotless, as though no one has eaten here this morning. I check my phone to make sure it's actually Monday and not the weekend. Hmm...weird.

After checking all the rooms and finding them empty, I pour myself cereal and milk and sit at the table. Maybe Mom had to run early to work and maybe Dad had an early appointment with one of his cases. I read a romance novel on my phone as I eat, glad I've managed to climb over the temporary wall that separated me from the amazing romance novels that make up my world. I worried I would never be able to look at them again, but I don't think anyone can take that away from me, especially not a jerk like Jared.

And then I get a text.

Mom: GM, sweetie. Met with Amanda for breakfast. You can fend for yourself, right? There should be enough milk in the fridge for cereal. Have a good day at school!

I can't help the jealousy and betrayal brewing in my stomach. She's not here because she went on a breakfast date with Amanda? I know she misses her oldest daughter like missing a limb, but I'm still here, aren't I? I won't be around forever, either—I do plan on going to college—does she not like hanging out with me? I'm trying to be more patient and

understanding, but once again it feels like she's favoring my older sister over me.

Then a sudden thought hits me—how am I supposed to get to school if none of my parents are home?

I check my phone to see if I have a text from Dad, but he's not big on texting. He believes conversation is better suited face to face. My thumb reaches down to call him and ask if he's coming home and can give me a ride, but I pull my thumb back up. Dad's job is super important—it's his life mission to make sure kids in the system have happy and healthy homes to go home to. I can't bother him with something silly like a ride to school. And I sure as heck am not going to bother my mom when she's hanging out with her favorite kid. I guess I'll have to take the bus. I don't even know if I have a bus pass, though.

Tears prick my eyes, but I shove them away. I don't want to be so sensitive and cry over every little thing. The new Ally is supposed to be strong and not let things like this affect her this much.

I gobble down my breakfast and dump my dishes in the sink, then rummage in my wallet for money for the bus. Then, like a madwoman, I make a mad dash to the city bus that's five blocks away. And because the universe decided to take a humongous dump on Ally Bensen, a bus is just pulling away from the curb when I reach the stop. I try to chase after it, but it's no use. I flop down on the seat in the booth, my chest heaving. For the first time in my life, I'm going to be late for class. I know it's silly to worry over things like that, but it sucks to break a record. I don't want to blame my parents, but I can't help but feel abandoned or discarded. At least when

Amanda was still living at home, my mom wouldn't forget about me. And I can't blame Dad for pushing his cases before his own child—they need him more than me.

Ten minutes later, the bus comes, and it's packed. I find a corner in the back and pray to the gods of school that I'll miraculously make it on time. Or maybe my bio teacher will be late.

When the bus finally reaches my stop, I speed toward the school building and hear the bell. Oh my gosh, maybe I can make it after all! I quicken my pace and dash toward the building, catching up with the last few kids heading toward the doors. Wow, I made it in time! I guess the universe doesn't hate me.

“Student!” someone calls. “Excuse me, student!”

I stop and turn around. A woman who I think teaches freshman science waves at me. “Can you please help me?”

She's standing before her car with boxes all over the floor. It looks like it's equipment for a lab. I glance back at the open doors, hearing the final bell ring. It's my last chance to get to class or else I'll be late.

I turn back to the teacher with a smile. “Sure.”

“Thanks. Can you take these to room 1D? Carefully, they're heavy.”

It takes me a few trips to get everything to the classroom, and by the time I lug in the last box, my forehead is caked with sweat.

I meet the teacher outside the classroom, who gives me a grateful smile. “Thanks...what's your name?”

“Ally Bensen.”

“Thanks, Ally. Just tell your teacher you helped Mrs. Walters and she’ll excuse you.”

“Okay. Have a good day.”

I make my way to my bio classroom, which is already in session, no surprise. I open the door, and every single head, including the teacher’s, swivels in my direction. My cheeks heat up at the sudden attention.

“Late, Allison,” Mrs. Cooper says.

“Sorry. I was helping out—”

“I said, late. Detention after school today.”

“But I was helping—”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses, Miss Bensen. You’ve disrupted my class enough. Now please take your seat before I send you to Ms. Nakamura.”

My mouth closes as I turn around and walk to the back of the room. Mrs. Cooper has had it in for me since the day I told Jared I had a crush on him, thinking I was trying to skip class. Another kid would have stood up for herself, but I can’t seem to do that, no matter how much I try.

And oh no, detention? I’ve never had detention in my life. Does that go on your permanent record? Will I be able to get into college?

Zack glares at me as I reach our table and sit down in my seat. Oh gosh, in my rush to class, I forgot to get my textbook. Ugh, is this the start of another terrible week? And the worse

part? I'll miss book club after school because I'll be spending my afternoon in detention.

The detention classroom looks...foreboding.

Kara cranes her neck to peer inside. "Out of all of us, I never expected Ally to be the rebel," she jokes.

I roll my eyes. "Blame my shyness. Always getting me in trouble."

Dani puts her arm around me. "You'll be out of there faster than you can say, 'Darn Ms. Cooper.' What a witch for not even giving you a chance to explain why you were late. Our Ally is like the model student. Teachers dream of having students like her in their class. And what does the witch do? Treats her like she's..."

I lift a brow. "Zack Hastings?"

"Exactly! Wait, what? No, you're nothing like him."

I can't help but laugh. Maybe that's also due to my nerves. I have no idea what lies in store for me in that room. Will I emerge from there a criminal? Who knows what kinds of students are in there?

"Thanks for walking me to detention, guys," I say with a shaky smile. "But it looks like I'm on my own now." I peek inside and notice that no one else is there other than the teacher. Could it be I'm the only one? Maybe I won't get corrupted after all. "Oh, and you guys don't have to give up book club just because of me," I tell them. "You should continue discussing the book."

“You kidding?” Charlie says. “We can’t do book club with one Musketeer down.”

“How can we discuss a paranormal *romance* when our romance girl isn’t around?” Kara says as she playfully bumps her shoulder into mine.

Warmth spreads through me at how much they value me. “Thanks, guys.”

“Don’t mention it.” Dani throws her arms around me. “Be strong and you’ll survive.”

“I know,” I say with a laugh. “I’ve got my homework to keep me company. And it doesn’t look like anyone else is there, so I think my good character will remain intact.”

“Good,” Charlie says as she wraps her arms around me. “Because we love you as you are and wouldn’t want you to change for anything.”

“Yep.” Kara hugs me. “Just keep being you.”

“Thanks again, guys.” I take a deep breath and face the classroom, playing with my backpack strap. “Looks like this is it.” I look back at them and wave. “I’ll text you when I’m free.”

They wish me goodbye and good luck as I stand in the doorway and look inside. It’s just a normal classroom, but why does it feel like the entrance to hell?

“Are you Allison Bensen?” the teacher asks.

“Yes.”

“Okay, have a seat.” He marks my attendance on his paper.

“Is anyone else coming?” I ask.

“One other student.”

Let’s hope he or she isn’t an axe murderer. Like Zack Hastings. It’s a good thing he didn’t get detention today, or the next hour would really feel like hell.

I choose a seat in the middle and take out my homework. So far, not so bad. It’s kind of like I’m doing homework in my room.

As I’m way absorbed in my history report, the teacher says, “Late to detention again. Looks like I’ll be seeing you here tomorrow, Mr. Hastings.”

My pen freezes over my paper as my gaze shoots to the door. My heart nearly bullets out of my chest when I find Criminal Zack standing there with his arms crossed angrily over his chest and a huge scowl on his face.

No, no, no. This has to be a mistake. Zack Hastings didn’t get detention today! He was oddly well behaved during bio and trig.

Well...that’s the thing. I only have two classes with him. He could have gotten detention anytime today. Oh my gosh, he and I alone in a room? Isn’t that the first rule in a horror movie—to never be alone with a murderer?

“Take your seat, Mr. Hastings,” the teacher says.

He steps into the room and then spots me sitting there, a look of surprise on his face. Did he forget I came late to class and got detention? Isn’t a murderer supposed to pay very close attention to his future victim? I know, I know, no one said he’s going to murder anyone. But it can happen, can’t it? I mean,

he did time in juvie for *killing* someone. Who's to say he's not itching to do it again?

With a huff, he passes me and collapses in a seat in the back, plugging his earbuds into his ears and taking out his novel. I stretch my neck as far as it can go to catch a glimpse of the title and cover. Looks like another fantasy novel.

His eyes flick to mine. I quickly twist around and focus back on my homework. As long as the teacher is there, he can't hurt me.

"Crap," the teacher mutters as he stands. "I just remembered I forgot something in my desk." He looks at both of us with a stern expression. "I'll just be down the hall. If either of you moves an inch, it's detention for the whole week and the weekend." He leaves the room.

My jaw falls open. Did the adult just abandon the minor to a juvenile delinquent?

I slowly turn my head toward him and find him engrossed in his novel. Like everything around him disappeared and he's in his own happy world. A very...odd look on him, that's for sure.

Again, his eyes flick to mine. I release a silent gasp before spinning around. Shoot, shoot, shoot! I shouldn't get on his bad side when I'm alone with him!

I grab my phone.

Ally: Help! The teacher left the room and I'm alone with a murderer!

Dani: What? A murderer! What do you mean? Someone walked into the room with a gun? Holy crap, a

shooting in our school???

Charlie: I think she's referring to Zack.

Dani: Ohhh. Duh.

Kara: Are you okay, Ally? Are you sitting near the door in case he tries to hurt you?

Charlie: You're all overreacting. He's not going to hurt anyone.

Dani: How can you be so sure!? He murdered someone before. He'll probably do it again! I'm sure there are statistics about first time murderers eager to claim their next victim...

Charlie: We've been in school for over a week and he hasn't hurt anyone.

Kara: Psychopaths take as long as they need to carry out the perfect murder.

Charlie: Did you fall asleep watching a true crime show, Kara? I told you that stuff can give you nightmares.

Ally: Um...I'm not exactly near the door. I'm smack in the middle of the room.

Dani: Maybe you can move closer to the door?

Ally: What if that just makes him angry and he attacks me?

Charlie: Do you guys hear yourselves? You're being ridiculous! Zack isn't going to hurt anyone. He would be a moron to try something at school.

We're all quiet.

Dani: Maybe Charlie's right, lol. We're overreacting.

Ally: I don't think so! You saw the way he looks at everyone. Like he wants to hurt someone. I'm the perfect victim.

Charlie: And why is that?

Ally: The quiet ones are the first to go because no one knows they exist.

They're all silent.

Dani: That is kind of true...

Charlie: Dani! Stop freaking her out.

Dani: I'm just being realistic!

Kara: Keep texting us, Ally. Let us know what's going on at all times. What's he doing now?

Ally: Reading a book.

Dani: Wait, he reads? That doesn't seem like something a murderer would do...

Charlie: What did I tell you?

Kara: Unless he's pretending to read while forming his plan.

Ally: He did look at me when he felt me watching him.

Dani: Ally! Don't look at him!

Ally: I needed to know what book he was reading!

Kara: Yeah, I know what you mean. Whenever anyone is reading a book, I *need* to know which one it is.

Charlie: Same.

Dani: Can we focus here? Ally is in trouble and we need to help her.

Charlie: Dani, she's *not* in trouble.

Ally: I feel like—

“Put your phone away, Miss Bensen. Phones are off-limits during detention,” the teacher reprimands as he enters the room.

Then why can Zack listen to music on his phone?

I quickly glance at my phone. I didn't have a chance to finish the text and accidentally sent it mid-sentence. I manage to catch what my friends texted before I drop my phone into my bag.

Kara: You feel what?

Dani: Why isn't she saying anything?

Dani: Ally?

Dani: Ally, you there?

I tap my foot on the floor as I try to concentrate on my history assignment. Are my friends freaking out that I just disappeared?

The teacher is preoccupied with his laptop. Perfect. I sweep my bag off the floor and lay it in front of me on my desk, then reach for my phone and hide it behind my bag.

Dani: Guys, she's not answering!

Charlie: Dani, calm down! The teacher probably came back.

Dani: That is a big assumption, Charlie. Do we need to rescue her?

Charlie: I'm already home.

Kara: Me, too.

Dani: I'm on the bus, but I can get off and take one back to school.

Charlie: Dani, for the millionth time—Ally is *fine*. Nothing is going to happen to her. Sheesh.

Dani: Nope, can't accept that. I'm heading back to school.

My eyes widening, I quickly tap out a response.

Ally: I'm fine. Teacher came back. I'll text you later.

As I drop my phone into my bag, I try to hold back a smile. My friends definitely know how to bring up my mood.

I manage to finish most of my homework when detention is over. The teacher wishes us a good day and tells Zack he'll see him tomorrow. His response is a grunt. I pack away my things and dash out of the room, not wanting to be anywhere near Zack. Once we're off school grounds, nothing can stop him from committing a crime. My mom should be waiting for me in the car, and if I run, maybe I could get to her before he can catch up.

But my movements come to an abrupt stop when I nearly collide with the group of kids who have just walked out of the gym. Jared and the basketball team. They must be returning from practice.

“Lookie here,” one of his friends says as he slaps Jared’s chest. “Your girlfriend’s here.”

The other boys howl with laughter.

Jared makes a face like he swallowed a lemon. “I wouldn’t have her even if she was the last girl on the planet,” he says, which causes them to bark out in more laughter. His eyes focus on me. “Came back from *Star Wars* club, freak?” Jared sneers. He makes the Vulcan salute. “Live long and prosper.”

I internally roll my eyes. Is he so stupid he doesn’t know the difference between *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*?

I try to move past them, but they block my way, Jared in the front with his arms crossed.

“What’s the matter?” he says. “I’m trying to stoop down to your level. I mean, I guess there are some hot girls in *Star Wars*. Princess Leia is pretty sexy and isn’t there that woman who used to be some sort of robot? Six of Eight or something? Super hot.”

“Seven of Nine,” I mutter. “And she’s not a robot. She used to be a Borg drone. And she’s from *Star Trek*, not *Star Wars*. You’re mixing everything up.”

He puts his hand over his ear. “What was that?” he says loudly, like I’m deaf or something. “Speak up, Princess Freakzilla, so all the nerds can hear you. Don’t be *shy*.”

Everyone laughs.

I try to move past him, but he and his buddies once again block my way.

“Can you let me pass?”

They just laugh again.

I turn to the left and try to pass, but his jerk friends block me again. And then again when I try the right. “Can you please let me pass?”

“What’s the matter?” Jared guffaws. “Got another jock you want to confess your feelings to? How long until you get the message that you’re *not* what we want? What a freak. Just go somewhere and die—”

Someone whooshes past me and gets in Jared’s face, causing him to stumble back. My jaw nearly hits the floor when I realize it’s Zack. He’s clutching his motorcycle helmet in one hand as he glares at Jared.

“Got a problem, psycho?” Jared says.

“Let her go,” Zack warns.

“Let who go where?” he says with a smirk.

“Let. Her. Go,” Zack says in such a threatening voice that the hairs on my body stand up.

“Or what? You gonna take me on?” He gestures to his buddies. “You gonna take on all of us?” He snickers as his gaze slides to mine. “Didn’t know you were hot for that loser.”

Dropping his helmet, Zack grabs Jared by the front of his shirt. “I *said* let her go, scumbag. Or you’ll be sorry you were ever born.”

Panic flashes across Jared’s face, but he quickly tries to hide it. He shoves Zack back. “Get your filthy paws off me, psycho.” He smirks between the two of us. “Have your freak. She’s the best someone like *you* could do.”

He marches away, followed by his friends who are hooting with laughter.

My eyes meet Zack's. He looks like he's seconds away from slicing someone's skull open. Did he just...stick up for me?

I whirl around and dash out of the building.

Chapter Twelve

Zack

Shoving my earbuds into my pocket, I make my way up the stairs to a medium-sized house and ring the bell. It opens to reveal Sandra, a woman in her forties with kind eyes. Except those eyes are anything but kind to me. Never have been.

“Zack,” she says, not hiding the annoyance in her tone.

“Zane ready to head out?” I ask.

The door widens and my little brother leaps into my arms. I hold him tight, messing up his hair with my free hand. “How’s it going, little bro?”

He beams as I put him down. “I finished my book!”

“Already? That’s awesome, man.” I hold out my fist and he bumps it with a giggle. He’s only six, but reads way beyond his level. Gets that from me. Reading helped me deal with what happened to our family two years ago and I hope it does the same for him.

Sandra scowls. “Make sure to have him back within two hours.”

Two hours. That’s how long she lets me spend time with the only family I’ve got left. As far as foster mothers go, she’s all right. Treats my brother and the other foster kids well, makes sure he’s well-fed and sheltered and all that. I’ve got no clue what her problem with me is.

“Sure thing,” I tell her.

“And under no circumstance is he to ride on that horrendous motorcycle of yours,” she snaps.

“Got it.” As if I’d be stupid enough to endanger my little brother’s life like that.

She nods curtly, giving me a once-over before shutting the door.

Zane pulls at my arm. “What are we doing today, Zack?”

Wrapping my arm over his shoulder, I lead him down the stairs. “Surprise.” I wink.

His eyes widen. “I *love* surprises.”

I know. I used to be just like him until I received the biggest surprise of my life—and not in a good way.

The surprise I’m taking him to isn’t far from his house, but he doesn’t go there often. The place is kind of pricy, but it’s worth it for my little brother. There’s not a lot I can do for him, so it’s the best I can come up with.

He tugs my hand. “Are we there yet?”

“Almost.”

He taps his chin. “Is it the park?”

“Nope.”

He frowns, eyebrows furrowed like he’s solving one of those math equations Mr. Tran nearly forced me to complete on the board the other day. “The zoo?”

“Nope.”

“Aw! Tell me!”

I shake my head with a chuckle, zipping an invisible zipper across my lips. He keeps guessing until we reach the building and his eyes widen to the size of the moon. “Ice cream? Ice cream!” He pulls at my hand. “Are we really going inside?”

“Yep.”

As he cheers and tugs me toward the entrance, my insides twist. Something as silly and simple as ice cream brings him so much joy. No kid his age should be dealing with what he’s dealing with.

“Yay, there aren’t so many people in here,” he gushes once we walk inside. “We can sit at the counter.” He yanks me deeper inside.

“Yes?” the girl behind the counter says to me.

Zane proceeds to tell her exactly what flavor of ice cream he wants. With surprised eyes, the girl bends over the counter. “Hi. Didn’t see you there, little guy.” She beams at him. “Sure, coming right up.” Her eyes move to me. “And what would you like?”

I order the cheapest cone they’ve got here. This treat is for my brother after all, and I’d rather spend my cash on him.

The girl, who must be around college-age, scans me from top to bottom, then gives me a flirty smile. “Sure you don’t want anything else? Those are the specials right there.” She points to one of the hanging menus above. “Best ice cream we’ve got.”

I nod once. “A vanilla cone is fine.”

“Sure I can’t persuade you to try our caramel cookie explosion? It’s new.”

“I’m good.”

Her smile drops as she must realize that she can’t change my mind. “Okay.” She grins at Zane. “Your ice creams are coming right up.”

Zane tries to push himself up over the counter so she could see him. “Can we sit here?”

“Sure you can.” She smiles at him, then me, before getting to work on our ice creams.

I swing Zane in the air and lower him onto one of the five stools before the counter. I have no idea why he likes sitting here. I’d rather hang out in a booth in the back, away from the other people. But today is his day.

“Did you finish all your homework?” I ask him as we wait.

He shrugs. “Sandra doesn’t let me read until I finish. Sometimes I lie to her.”

“Zane, that’s not cool.”

He shrugs again. “I still get it done after! You told me I have to do good in school because that’s what Mom and Dad would have wanted.”

I play around with the napkin dispenser. “Yeah, that’s exactly what they would have wanted. Keep your grades up, go to college, have a career.”

“Are you going to go to college?”

I slug his shoulder. “No, I’m going to take care of you as soon as I turn eighteen.”

“Promise?”

“You know I promise.” I hold out my fist again and he bumps it. Then he tells me several stories that happened at school this week. We only meet twice a week or so, so we’ve got lots of catching up to do.

I don’t tell him much about my school. What’s there to tell anyway? How I get detention practically every day because I’m either late or sleeping in class? All because I can’t sleep at night? That’ll only worry him.

Should I tell him what happened today, how some jerks were giving Ponytail crap and I got involved? Only because I can’t stand someone picking on someone they think is lower than them. What’s their problem? Not like she was bothering them. Why not leave her alone?

When I saw them crowded around her and she didn’t have anywhere to escape to, my blood boiled. I wanted to hurt that jerk Jared so badly, put him in his place, make him feel how scared she must have felt. He thinks he can do or say whatever he wants because he’s the big man on campus? Screw that. The guy needs to be taught a lesson.

But not by me. As much as I wanted to give it to him good, getting suspended or expelled is not on my list of things to accomplish this year. If I want to take care of my brother once I age out of the system, I need to behave, show responsibility, no matter how hard it is to keep my fists at my sides.

“Here ya go,” the girl at the counter says as she hands Zane his triple scoop cone. She winks at him. “Added an extra scoop because you’re a cutie.”

Zane beams. “Thank you!” And he starts licking blissfully, as though he doesn’t have a worry in the world. I do that

enough for both of us.

As the girl hands me my vanilla cone, something thin pokes my palm and I realize it's a folded piece of paper. She winks before taking the next person's order.

Peering down at the paper, I unfold it, finding her number scribbled there.

“What's that?” Zane asks, craning his neck.

I stuff it into my pocket, not at all interested in pursuing this girl—or any girl. I sure as heck don't have time for a girlfriend, and I sure as heck can't be a good boyfriend. Besides, it won't be long before this girl hears about the psycho attending Edenbury High and she'll flee.

“It's nothing,” I tell my brother. “Is that good?” I nod to his cone.

He quickly licks from all sides before it drips on the table. “It's yum.”

I smile. “Good.”

“Want some?”

I wave my hand. “Nah, all yours.”

He continues licking, smearing ice cream all over his mouth and nose. Laughing, I grab a napkin and wipe it off. “Messy kid.”

He just continues to devour the thing like he hasn't eaten anything good in months. I work my way through my cone, not really paying attention to how it tastes. I have too much on my mind. Like getting my brother back home before the two hours are up, making sure I get to my home on time or else

Isabel and Geoff will give me crap, and other things that I don't want to deal with but have to.

“They treating you well at home?” I ask him, like I do most times we hang out. I've got to make sure he's happy.

Zane shrugs. “Yeah. Sandra doesn't like you. She thinks you're a bad influence on me.”

I try not to grit my teeth. “Don't listen to her. She's got no clue what she's talking about.”

He shrugs again. “I know.”

Once Zane and I finish our cones, he waves to the girl at the counter. She grins and returns the wave, giving me a flirty smile. I turn away from her, taking Zane's hand to lead him to the door. But he drops my hand, rushing to one of the freezers holding tubs of ice cream customers can purchase and take home.

“Yummy!” He's nearly salivating as I join him at the freezers, taking in the many different flavors they've got here. He points to a tray of six mini ice cream cakes with different cartoon characters on them. “Look, Zack!” His entire face flushes with excitement. “Can we buy it? Can we?”

My gaze drops to the price. Sixty dollars for mini ice cream cakes? Are these people out of their minds? I scan the contents and realize it's made from special ingredients and whatever, but *sixty* bucks?

I place my hand on his shoulder. “Sorry, bro. We can't get them. They're too expensive.”

He presses his face to the glass, staring at the cakes with longing. “Okay...” He slips his hand in mine, forcing a smile.

“We can leave now.”

We head toward the door and Zane turns back to stare at the freezer one more time before we leave the shop. He’s got such a gloomy face that I promise myself that I’ll buy him those cakes. One day.

After dropping Zane off at his house, I head over to mine and find my foster parents watching TV in the living room. Travis is probably in his room. They already ate dinner, like they do most nights because they can’t be bothered to wait for me. I’m not one of them after all. Isabel left something for me in the fridge that I heat up. Then I wash my dishes and go up to my room.

Chapter Thirteen

After stepping away from the lunch line with my tray overflowing with chili, I make my way to the Musketeer table. Everyone is already there, including Easton and Brayden.

“Hey, Ally!” Dani says when I approach. “Chose the chili, too? Looks like we’ve all got good taste.”

Charlie grins. “Great minds think alike.”

Dani raises her fist. “You bet.”

I sit down next to Charlie and take a bite. One thing the new cook has going for her is her amazing chili. Yum.

“The big day is drawing near,” Brayden says with a laugh as he takes a bite of his chili. “Bailey crosses off the days on the huge calendar she hung on the fridge. She’s worried we’ll forget all about it.” He playfully rolls his eyes. “As if we can forget. I still can’t believe she’s turning six,” he says with a proud but sad expression. “Soon she’ll be going off to college and...” His eyes snap wide open. “Holy crap, I sound just like my mom.”

Kara giggles as she snuggles up to him. “That’s what I love about you.”

He raises his brow. “That I sound like a middle-aged woman?”

She giggles again. “No! That you’re not scared to be open and vulnerable.”

He looks to his right and left before sneaking in a kiss.
“And I love everything about you, too.”

“Are you going to eat that?” Easton nods to the little bit of chili left in Dani’s bowl.

She snatches it away from him. “Mine!”

He pouts. “Darn.”

She grins and pushes it toward him. “Just kidding. I love when you eat my leftovers.”

He gives her a sweet loving smile before kissing the side of her face. “I love it, too.”

“Think you guys will have a double wedding?” Charlie teases.

Her face turning redder than a tomato, Kara knocks her shoulder into hers. “No one’s thinking about getting married! We’re only sixteen.”

Charlie rolls her eyes. “I already see your futures. You’re going to marry each other and live happily ever after.”

“And I thought I was the romantic one,” I say.

She shrugs. “This isn’t about romance. It’s just logical. Kara and Brayden are a great couple, and Dani and Easton are a great couple. They just work. So obviously marriage is in the future. Like I said, logical.”

Easton chuckles. “Romance doesn’t always follow logic.”

Dani throws her hands on her hips with a playful frown.
“Are you saying you don’t want to marry me?”

“Of course I’m going to marry you! Deaston for life.”

“Ah, so you’ve settled on a couple name,” Charlie says. She turns to Kara and Brayden. “What about you guys?”

Kara plays around with her chili as she thinks it over. “Well, Brara is weird and so is Kayden.”

“Kayden isn’t weird,” Dani argues.

“Yeah, I like it,” Charlie muses.

Kara and Brayden exchange a smile. Then they sneak in another kiss.

“Miss Gander and Mr. Barrington,” a teacher, who came out of nowhere, says as she stops before our table with her hands crossed over her chest. “Did I just see you two get within two feet of each other?”

“Uh...Kara had something on her face and I wiped it away,” Brayden says.

Kara tries hard not to giggle.

“Next time, keep your lips to yourself, Mr. Barrington,” she says before walking away.

All of us burst into giggles.

“Yeah, you wiped that thing off Kara’s face!” Dani laughs. “With your lips!”

We all laugh again.

“Good one, man.” Easton fist bumps Brayden. “Gonna use that excuse next time.”

“What are you talking about?” Kara says with an eye roll. “You two will never get in trouble for PDA.”

He grins at Dani. “She’s right about that. Wanna prove her point?”

With a smile, she stretches her neck and kisses him.

He sighs happily. “I’ve got the best girlfriend in the world.”

“I’ve got the best boyfriend in the world.”

There’s a chill in the air...and that can only mean one thing. Zack marches into the cafeteria, going straight for the lunch line. He orders two bowls of chili and heads to the tables, though there aren’t any vacant ones. He looks from right to left, a scowl on his face. He marches to one where two freshmen guys are sitting. As soon as he sits down, they scurry away.

Kara shivers. “Why did it get so cold all of a sudden?”

“The Dementor just walked in,” Dani tells her.

All of us stare at him as he eats his food, reading the same book he read during detention. I haven’t seen him since we parted ways yesterday, after he stood up for me to Jared and his jerk friends. He wasn’t in class this morning.

Kara rubs my arm. “You okay?”

“You’re not still scared he’s going to hurt you, are you?” Charlie says as she opens her laptop and starts working on an assignment. “I thought we already established that he wouldn’t do something like that during school.”

“Assumptions again,” Dani mutters. “You have no idea what runs around in a psychopath’s mind. I just hope you never get detention again, Ally.”

“Hey, if that delinquent dares mess with any of our friends, we’ll take care of him,” Easton promises.

Brayden nods. “Yeah, we look after our squad.”

With a squeal, Dani squishes herself against her boyfriend. “I didn’t know how good it feels to be looked after by a guy. I want to be strong and brave and confident, but it feels good to have someone take care of me from time to time.”

“I live only to serve.”

“Thanks, Bray,” Kara says, hugging her boyfriend. “It makes me feel better knowing we have you guys to rely on, if we need.”

“Of course.” He sweeps his lips across her temple. “We’d take a bullet for you.”

“Something weird happened after detention,” I announce.

They all stop what they’re doing and turn to me.

“What do you mean?” Charlie says, concern creasing her forehead. “Did he try something with you? Because if he did —”

“No, no,” I assure her. “He didn’t do anything wrong. Actually, he did something right.”

They just stare at me with confused faces.

I look back at Zack. He’s made his way through his first chili bowl and is on his second, eyes still locked on that novel. Looks like he’s almost finished it.

“Ally! We’re on pins and needles here,” Dani exclaims.

I yank my gaze away from him and focus on my friends. “Sorry. Um...” I play with the bottom of my ponytail. “After detention, I left the classroom and um, I met the basketball team. Jared and his stupid friends.”

Charlie straightens up with a warning look on her face. “Did *they* try something with you?”

I sigh. “Yeah, they did.”

“That’s it. I’m marching right over and chopping off their heads one by one.”

She stands, but I grab her hand. “No, Charlie. Forget about it. That’s not what I wanted to tell you. Come on, don’t start anything with them. They’re not worth it.”

She glares at their table, where they’re goofing off and are having the time of their lives. With a frown, she reluctantly sits down.

“What happened, Ally?” Kara asks, her forehead creased with concern, too.

I shift in my seat, not one hundred percent comfortable that every single pair of eyes is fastened on me. “They said some stuff and wouldn’t let me pass to get to the door. Then Zack came out of nowhere and got in Jared’s face. He told them to let me pass, and when Jared wouldn’t listen, Zack threatened him.”

Their eyes bug out.

I nod. “Yeah. It was...unexpected.”

“So...is Jared the intended murder victim now?” Dani says.

Charlie shakes her head with a laugh. “You’re killing me, Dani.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say. “Maybe he just likes threatening people. I’m sure I’m still on his hit list.”

“Why would you be on his hit list?” Charlie says, exasperated. “You didn’t do anything to him, did you?”

“I told you I’m an easy target!”

Charlie throws her hands up toward Brayden and Easton. “See what I have to deal with every day?”

Easton laughs as he puts his arm around his girlfriend’s shoulder. “She may be a lot of work, but she’s so worth it.”

“Watch what you say or I’ll uninvite you to dinner.”

Easton’s eyes grow big. “But your mom’s making creamy tomato and spinach pasta! That dish means everything to us. That’s what we ate when I came over to offer her a job.”

“You don’t have to remind me. I know exactly what that dish means to me and my family.” Dani folds her arms across her chest. “Am I really that much work?”

He wraps his arms around her middle, tugging her close to him. “Nah. You make my life have more meaning and that’s why I love you.”

“Aw.” She lays her head on his shoulder. “That’s so sweet.”

I move my eyes to Zack. He’s finished his second bowl and heads to the counter to fetch another.

“Ally, what’s bothering you?” Kara asks.

I pull my eyes away. “What?”

“You keep looking at him,” she says. “Be careful. Just because he stood up for you, it doesn’t change the fact that he murdered someone.”

“I know,” I assure her. “But I just realized that I didn’t thank him.”

My friends exchange glances. “Do you need to thank him?” Dani asks. “I’d rather you keep your interactions with him to a minimum.”

“Hard to do that when she’s his lab partner,” Charlie points out.

“I’d rather not talk to him, either,” I say. “But I believe that someone who deserves to be thanked should be thanked.”

“I believe that, too,” Kara admits.

“Same,” Charlie says.

Dani groans. “Ugh, I do, too.”

They all look at me.

I play with the tip of my ponytail with a shaky hand. “Do you think he’ll hurt me if I approach him just like that?”

“Don’t start with that again, Ally,” Charlie mumbles. “He won’t hurt you in a room full of students and teachers.”

“But he can always corner me outside of school to...” I shake my head. Charlie’s right—I’m being ridiculous. Why would he want to hurt me if he went out of his way to stick up for me? He threatened Jared. Maybe there was another reason for that, but he still saved my butt. And that deserves a thank you.

I stand. "I'm going to do it. In case he tries to do something, you guys are my witnesses."

"Good luck," Kara wishes.

With a nod, I turn around and head toward his table. Only to turn back around and return to my table. "Never mind. I can't do it."

"It's okay," Charlie says as I sit back down. "Maybe try tomorrow morning during bio."

But I don't want to wait that long. I might lose my nerve. And I want him to know that I appreciate what he did. It *can't* wait until tomorrow.

"Never mind." I stand up again. "I'm going there."

"Good luck again," Kara says.

With another nod, I make my way to his table. But I stop twenty feet away. Even though he's eating the last of his chili and reading his book, he still looks...menacing. I twist around and return to my table. "Never mind. I'm too chicken."

"You're not chicken," Dani says. "You do whatever you feel comfortable with."

"Yeah," I say with a frown. Zack risked getting on the bad side of the popular guys to stick up for me, and I can't give him a simple thank you? Shaking my head, I stand again. "I'm being silly. He deserves a thank you. I'll be back in a sec."

"Good luck again!" Kara says.

This time, I make it right up to his table. I don't think he notices me because his eyes are glued to his book. I open my mouth to say the two words, but they get stuck in my throat.

Nope, not happening. I spin around and march back to my table. “Say hello to the world’s first human yo-yo.”

“Ally, it’s okay,” Dani reassures me. “Do it when you’re ready. Take as long as you need. It’s not like he’s going anywhere.”

I frown again as I stand. “No, I can’t go back and forth like this. He might make enemies here because of me. The least I can do is thank him.”

“Good luck!” Kara wishes me for the millionth time.

This is it. No backing out. Just say the two words and be done with it. I know what it’s like not to be appreciated for doing something for someone. It feels horrible. I don’t want to inflict that on anyone else.

But standing in front of him again? Sheesh, why does he look even scarier than before? Maybe I should write him a note? Yeah, I’ll leave it on our lab table tomorrow morning. I turn to leave, but fingers wrap around my wrist, causing me to release a silent yelp. Turning my head, I find the person holding me captive is Zack.

Oh my gosh, I was right! I shouldn’t have gotten so close to him. He’ll throw me over his shoulder and drag me out to the backyard, where’s he’ll chop me up and stuff me in a bag

“You’re welcome,” his gruff voice says.

“W-what?”

He slowly releases my hand. “You’re welcome.” He returns to his book.

I stand there staring at him. Did he just...? What the heck just happened?

In a daze, I make my way back to my table. Dani grabs my arm. "Did he *touch* you? What happened?"

Still in a daze, I lower myself in my seat. "I didn't say anything. I *couldn't*. But then he took hold of my wrist and said, 'You're welcome.'"

They all gape at me.

"You good?" Easton asks. "He looked ticked off as heck from here."

"Because the dude has a perpetual scowl," Charlie says.

"A perpetual look of murder, you mean," Dani corrects.

"It's like he knew what you wanted to say," Kara says.

"Well, she did go back and forth like a tennis ball," Brayden offers.

"Yo-yo," all of them correct.

He holds up his hands. "Yo-yo."

"But he was engrossed in his book," I say. "And no one ever notices the Shy Girl."

Brayden shrugs. "Well, he noticed."

I look back at his table, but he's marching out of the cafeteria.

Chapter Fourteen

The house is noisy when I walk inside, finding Mom, Amanda, and her boyfriend Alejandro in the living room. Mom's sitting on a chair and my sister is working on her hair and makeup. Alejandro is sprawled on the couch, Coke in hand, scrolling through his phone.

"This is amazing," Mom gushes as she stares at the mirror, patting her hair and scrutinizing her caked face. "You're so talented, honey."

My sister beams. "My teacher told me I have a gift. I can just look at someone who badly needs a makeover and know exactly what they need." She holds up her hands. "Not that you needed a makeover, Mom. You're pretty perfect."

"Thanks, Mandy." Mom can't stop staring at her reflection. "I don't even recognize myself."

Amanda laughs. "The beauty of makeup. Wait 'til Dad gets home. He'll pass out at the mere sight of you." Both of them chuckle.

"Hi, I'm home," I say.

Mom and Amanda turn to me, Mom grinning. "Hey! How was your day?"

Weird, very weird indeed. Shrugging, I place my backpack on a chair and drop down next to it. "Was good. We had choir practice today."

Mom nods, still staring at her reflection. “That’s nice, honey. Can’t wait to attend your performances.”

Amanda frowns at me as she scans me from top to bottom. “Did you seriously wear that to school?”

I glance down at my baggy shirt and jeans. “I always wear this.”

She sighs heavily, shaking her head. “You want a boyfriend badly, right? How do you expect to catch a guy’s attention when you look just like a guy?”

I look down at my clothes again. “I don’t—”

“Alex.” She turns to her boyfriend. “You’re a guy. Tell her the truth. If you saw a girl dressed like her walking down the street, would you give her a second thought?”

Alejandro scans me from top to bottom like he’s bored out of his mind. “Nope. And don’t make me stare at your little sister, please. Makes me feel like an old creep.”

Amanda rolls her eyes. “I’m just trying to prove a point. She won’t listen to me no matter how many times I tell her to change her look. She’s so desperate for a boyfriend—”

My cheeks flame. “I’m so not desperate for a boyfriend!”

Mom and Amanda give me a look like they know better. I sink in my seat, averting my gaze. Am I *that* obvious?

Amanda steps over to me and pulls at the back of my T-shirt. “Why do you wear shirts two sizes too big?” She yanks on my ponytail. “You need an edgy hairstyle, some makeup, and you can snag whatever guy you want.”

I pull her hands off. “I don’t need makeup to get a guy.”

She gives me a look again. “Alex, tell her what guys find most attractive in a girl.”

He keeps his eyes on his phone. “She’s gotta be hot and sexy.”

“Would you say she needs makeup?”

He shrugs. “Like I said, she’s gotta be hot and sexy.”

Amanda nods like she rests her case. “You’re so stubborn you won’t listen to me, but if you keep going on like that...” She points at my clothes. “You’ll be single forever.”

I look at Mom. “That’s not true. Shouldn’t a guy like me for me, not for how I look or what I wear?”

Mom smiles sadly. “Unfortunately sweetie, that’s the way the world works.”

“You’re saying Dad only loves you because of how you dress?”

“No, of course not.”

“He loves you because you’re you, not because of anything else. You could wear a potato sack and he’d still be crazy about you.”

Mom rubs my arm. “That’s true, but you’re in high school, Ally. Boys aren’t mature enough to see a woman for her mind or her great personality.”

I gape at her. “So you’re saying I’m ugly? That I need to change for a guy?”

“No! I’m just saying you might want to take your sister’s advice. She knows what she’s talking about. Would a makeover be the worst thing in the world?”

I rub my forehead. “Great, my mother thinks I’m ugly.”

“Ally! That’s not true. But it wouldn’t kill you to dress up a little, put some color on your face.”

Amanda winks. “The second you walk through those doors, guys will flock to you.”

I shake my head. “That’s so not me.”

“Give it a try, Ally,” Mom urges. “What do you have to lose?”

Amanda pulls me up. “Trust me, you’ll thank me when all the guys fight each other for your number.”

I roll my eyes, but inside, I’m wondering. Could that be true? Could something as simple as changing the way I dress or makeup help me catch a guy’s attention?

I don’t believe in changing for a guy, but maybe Mom and Amanda are right. The makeover will attract the guy, but he’ll love me for me, right?

No way am I thinking about Jared being interested in me, but there are many more guys at school. Maybe it’s time I really put myself out there—with a little help from my sister.

I nod to her. “Do it.”

She cheers and claps, giving Mom a high five. Then my sister grabs a few things before pulling me to a chair and sitting me down.

“Your world is going to change, little sis.” She turns me around and starts washing my hair. I continue reading my book on my phone while she works her magic on me. Alejandro’s

bored, so he fetches some snacks from the kitchen and chomps them down as he plays with his phone.

I have no idea what Amanda is doing to me, but it seems like hard work. And I can feel her excitement, like she's putting her entire soul into it. I'm glad my sister found something she's so passionate about. After she graduated high school, she floated from job to job, not sure what she wanted to do with herself. It wasn't until she helped my friends and me get ready for homecoming that she discovered her calling.

"Are you done yet?" I mutter as she does something to my face, pulling it this way and that, interrupting my reading. The guy and girl are *this* close to kissing, and I'm reading it over and over because Amanda keeps bothering me.

"Almost," she squeals. "You're going to love it!" Mom nods in agreement, a wide smile on her face.

My first thought is to deny, deny, deny, but maybe I need to change my attitude. There's nothing wrong with wearing makeup. It's just not me. But maybe Amanda's right and I have been stubborn.

It's not long before Amanda puts her styling tools down and she and Mom stand before me, pleased grins on their faces. Actually, Mom looks at me like she's never looked at me before. Like I'm *part* of her now. I've always yearned for her to look at me that way, like I matter.

"What?" I ask sheepishly, my hands going to my hair.

Amanda catches it. "Don't touch it! You'll ruin it."

I drop my hands.

“Ready to see the new you?” Mom asks with raised eyebrows. She and Amanda can’t stop staring at me. Even Alejandro has dropped his phone on his lap and is staring at me in shock. Do I look *that* different?

“Um, I guess,” I say.

Amanda spins me around to face the large mirror. My jaw drops, eyes going wide. Is that...me? I do look different. Totally, completely different. My hair is shorter and styled in a way I’ve seen in magazines. There’s a ton of makeup on my face and I hardly recognize myself.

This is so...not me.

“What’s wrong?” Mom asks.

I pull at my hair, ignoring Amanda’s protests. “I don’t know. I don’t look like myself.”

“You look like yourself, but better,” Amanda tells me. “You’re beautiful, little sis. Girls would kill to look like you.”

“No. This isn’t me.”

I don’t know what I was hoping for. I guess to look like me, but maybe a little enhanced? But the girl staring back at me might as well be a girl on the cover of a teen magazine. It’s not a place for the Shy Girl to hang out.

Amanda groans at Mom. “Why is she so difficult?” She faces me. “Why are you so hung up on looking like the old you? All we need to do is match you with a hot outfit and you’re ready to turn heads.”

I pull at my baggy shirt. “Are you sure I can’t just wear this?”

She throws her hands up in exasperation. “Someone please kill me now. Look, let’s go to Mom’s room and find some clothes she got from the boutique. I’m sure there’s at least one thing you’ll like.”

She and Mom leave me no choice, pulling me up to Mom’s room. We leave Alejandro in the living room, but I think he prefers it that way. The only reason he’s putting up with all this girl stuff is because he’s here for Mom’s cooking. He loves it. And I’m pretty sure he loves my sister, too.

In Mom’s room, Amanda dashes to the closet and starts grabbing things and throwing them at me. When I’ve got a huge pile in my arms I can barely stand, she sorts through them, pushing aside things that are too mature or things she wants to keep for herself.

“Hey!” Mom says.

“Just borrowing, Mom. Chill.”

Mom laughs, shaking her head.

“Found it!” Amanda announces as she plucks a dress from the pile. She holds it out before me. “Put it on!”

I stare at it. It looks short, way, way too short. When I tell that to my sister, she rolls her eyes. “You seriously need to get out more.” She pushes me toward the bathroom. “Go!”

Putting this dress on is like science. School’s easier than this! But I manage to get it on and look in the mirror. I mean, sure I look good, I guess. But I don’t know who that girl is staring back at me. Not Ally Bensen. It’s Ally from another dimension. I’m not sure I like her. No, I know I don’t like her. Is this the only way to get a boyfriend?

“What’s taking so long?” Amanda groans. “I’m getting old here.”

The dress is so short and tight that I just want to hide in here. No way in heck am I going out. No way.

There’s pounding on the door. “Are you hiding? Ally, don’t be a baby.”

“I’m not!” I nearly bark out. “The dress is too tight. I can’t move in it.”

“Seriously? Do we even share the same genes?”

Trust me, I’ve asked myself that question a hundred times when I was little. Like, maybe I was adopted. Then I found the video of Mom giving birth to me and that threw my doubts out the window.

“Come out, sweetie,” Mom says. “Dad will be home for dinner soon.”

Sighing, I pull at the fabric that hardly moves, take another look at myself, and force myself out of the bathroom.

Amanda and Mom’s eyes grow so big you can fit the entire planet inside. I yank at the dress. “Is it that terrible?”

Mom grabs my hands. “Ally, you’re gorgeous!”

Amanda bows. “Thank you, thank you. I do good work.” She gives me a crooked smile. “Watch the guys fall to their knees for you.”

I shrug. “I just want a boyfriend. Are you sure this is the only way?”

Amanda groans. “I seriously aged ten years just now.”

I glare at her. “This isn’t me, okay?”

“Get used to it, sis, and own it.” She taps her chin. “We’ll need to find some shoes to match with the dress. Wear it tomorrow and watch the guys salivate.”

Mom places her hands on her hips. “Guys salivate?”

Amanda waves her hand. “You know what I mean. The point is, she won’t remain boyfriendless for long.”

Mom smiles at me. “But be careful.”

“Mom, she’ll be fine. You worry too much.”

I look down at the dress. “I can’t wear this to school!”

Amanda bends close. “If you say ‘you can’t’ one more time, I’ll smack you.”

“Whatever,” I mumble.

The front door shuts and Dad’s voice calls from downstairs. “Hello? Where’s everyone?”

“We’ll be down in a second, hun!” Mom calls back. “Let’s show your dad how beautiful you look.”

I follow her and my sister down the stairs, where Dad and Alejandro are talking sports. Alejandro plays college soccer.

As soon as Dad sees us, he smiles at Mom and twirls her around, bringing her close to his chest and kissing her forehead. “Missed you.”

“Missed you.”

Dad smiles at me. “How was school, Ally?”

“Same old.” I tell him about choir practice and he listens intently, knowing just as well as I do that we don’t have much

time to talk because he's always busy with work.

"Kyle, do you see something different about Ally?"

Dad looks at me. "Sure, you got a haircut. I like it."

"Amanda's doing," I tell him.

He kisses my sister's cheek.

"And...?" Mom prompts.

Dad rubs his chin as he examines me from top to bottom.

"Hmm. That's Mom's dress."

"It's Ally's now," Amanda says. "I gave her a makeover. What do you think?"

Dad frowns. "I think my daughter looks a bit too grown up."

Mom lightly slaps his chest. "Honestly, Kyle. She's nearly seventeen. She won't be your little girl forever."

Dad sighs like he knows she's right. He bends forward to kiss my cheek. "You look lovely, sweetie."

"Thanks."

I still feel like a different person. So uncomfortable and out of my element. But maybe I just need to get used to it?

We all settle down at the table for dinner, Alejandro reaching for the food like he hasn't eaten in days.

I play around with my food, trying to convince myself it's okay to change my look. Isn't that what growing up is all about?

A part of me can't wait for tomorrow. Is Amanda right? Will guys finally notice me?

Will I have a boyfriend?

Chapter Fifteen

Mom stops the car before the school, wishing me a good day. I tug at the dress Amanda gave me last night, not sure if I'm ready for this. I still don't feel like me. I wasn't even sure this morning when I woke up if I want to do this. But you know what? I'm ready. I think.

"You okay there, sweetie?"

Mom's entire attitude toward me has changed, not that she's doing it on purpose, I don't think. She chatted so much on the ride here, more than she's ever done before. I wanted to tell her I'm still me, that just because I put on some makeup and a dress, it doesn't mean I've magically transformed into my sister. But we're closer now, so I can't complain.

"Yeah, great," I tell her. "I'll see you later."

"Have a good day at school."

I nod and get out of the car, pushing my arms through the straps of my backpack. My entire being is filled with hope, determination. I can't wait for things to change, for guys to notice me. It sucks I have to go about it this way, but the important thing is the end result, right? A guy who will love me for me, someone I can pour my heart and thoughts to.

I pass a group of students huddled together chatting and laughing. A few stop and turn to me with raised eyebrows. Some scan me from top to bottom. My first instinct is to yank the dress down, cover myself up, but I shove that thought away. The new Ally is confident.

A few giggles bubble around me, but I ignore them. I mean, they're not laughing at me, right?

After entering the building, I find my friends huddled at my locker, waiting for me. Passing through the many students, I feel their eyes on me.

Dani waves me over, then her mouth pops open. Kara and Charlie turn around to see what's got her so shocked, and they, too, widen their eyes.

I feel so self-conscious all of a sudden as I approach them. "Hi..."

Dani blinks at me. "Wow. You look different."

Kara and Charlie nod, their foreheads furrowed. I know exactly what they're thinking.

I groan, yanking and tugging at the dress. "I know...this is so not me."

"But you look amazing," Kara says. "Just different."

I sigh. "No, I don't feel like myself."

"Then why did you do it?" Charlie asks.

I sigh again. "I don't know. My mom and Amanda convinced me to get a makeover. Said it will help attract guys. But I feel so out of my element, so not like myself. Like I've turned into someone else."

Kara rubs my arm. "You're beautiful with or without makeup, and with or without a dress. I hate that you feel like you need to change for a guy."

I throw my hands up. "But look at me! No one wanted to date me, so I thought...I thought...I don't know! But clearly

something was wrong with the old me and I needed to change.”

My friends take a few minutes trying to convince me I’m perfect the way I am, no matter what. But that can’t be true. No one looked at the Shy Girl. No guy would ever consider getting to know me.

But is changing myself the answer? I’m so confused.

The bell is about to ring and we grudgingly separate to our classrooms. I quickly grab my books from my locker and walk down the hall, passing many more students. A few chuckles echo around me as I make my way to bio. I feel snickers, fingers pointing my way.

“Do you see that?” a girl asks her friend as I pass. “How pathetic. The loser’s trying to fit in!”

“Doesn’t she get that she’ll never be like us?”

“And what the heck is up with that dress? It’s beautiful, but on her? It’s like dressing up a pig.”

“And putting makeup on a pig!”

The more kids I pass, the more comments are thrown around.

“She’s so desperate for Jared’s attention,” another kid says. “I feel bad for him, like doesn’t she realize he’s *not* into her? Such a creepy stalker. Stay, far, *far* away from her.”

“No guy would ever date her, no matter how much she tries to fit in. It’s so sad, really. I’d die if I was her. Totally die.”

One of the guys nods. “I’d *never* even touch that. Not if you paid me a million bucks.”

With my lips pressed together, I turn a corner, and instead of going to bio, I push the bathroom door open and bend before the sink.

My reflection stares back at me. It’s like it’s mocking me, taunting me.

“Stupid,” I mutter as I grab paper towels and rub the makeup off my eyes and cheeks. I didn’t even want this to begin with. Why did I let Mom and Amanda talk me into this? A makeover? Changing myself? For what? For some guy to notice me?

No. Not anymore. I shouldn’t have to change for a guy. I need to be me, and if people don’t like it, then...then I have my friends and my books and my book boyfriends.

I’m done with this. So done.

I scrub the makeup off my face, rushing because I don’t want to be late for class. When most of it’s gone, I tie my hair into a ponytail. Then I stare at my reflection. Much, much better. This is me. The real Ally Bensen.

My gaze drops to the dress and my insides twist in disgust. It’s a pretty dress, just not for me. I wish I could tear it off, but I didn’t bring extra clothes with me. The best I can do is grab my jacket from my locker and wear it in class.

I have about a minute before the bell will ring and make a run for my locker, heaving out my jacket, putting it on, then zooming to class like I have super speed.

Heads snap up, taking me in. And you know what? Now I can enter the classroom feeling like myself and not a fraud.

The kids still laugh and point as I go to my table and plop down. My partner still hasn't arrived. I feel them staring at me as I take out my novel and continue reading. They giggle and whisper. Of course it bothers me that they're gossiping about me, but I'm trying not to let it.

Mrs. Cooper enters the room and someone slips past her. Zack. He marches to the back of the room and drops down next to me, throwing his backpack on the floor. I place my bookmark in my book and put it away, focusing on the teacher and not Zack who's giving off vibes warning people to stay away from him. Me, too, I guess. Though I can't forget the way he wrapped his fingers around my wrist yesterday at lunch.

Mrs. Cooper walks around the room, handing the students microscopes. Our in-class assignment is to identify different specimens using the microscope. We'll have to hand in separate papers, but we can work on it together if we'd like.

The kids get to work, all of them doing it together. I eye the microscope, then glance at Zack. He's staring straight ahead. The microscope is on his end of the table and I'd have to bend over him to reach it.

He pushes it over to me, then crosses his arms over his chest. A "thank you" gets stuck in my throat. Even though he was kind to me, I can't forget that he murdered someone and went to juvie. And I can't worry whether or not he'll do the assignment or flunk. I need to focus on myself.

I take the microscope and begin, jotting down all the information. This is a lot of fun. And so educational, I love it.

I'm having a good time, looking at specimen after specimen that I forget about my partner. Does he want the microscope? I finish as fast as I can and slide it to him. He glances at it for a moment before taking it and starting his assignment.

Since I've finished early, I take out my novel and continue reading. The hero who I used to picture as Jared? He has no face now. I'm not basing the men in my books off anyone anymore.

The bell rings and Mrs. Cooper collects the assignments. As Zack passes his paper to the front of the room, I notice he left a chunk out. He doesn't seem like the type to care about school.

The day carries on like usual, except more kids are talking about me. Some kids, like Jared's friends, oink at me as I pass. But I tell myself to endure it until I'm home with my romance books and movies.

My friends are surprised—but so obviously relieved—that I'm back to my old self. No makeup, just plain, simple Ally. We talk about book club and other things during lunch and I'm so glad things are back to normal. That *I'm* back to normal.

Mom's face drops the second I climb into the car and slam the door shut. "Honey, what happened to your face?"

I cross my arms over my chest, staring out the window. "Can we go home?"

She doesn't start the car. "Did something happen?"

I sigh in frustration. “No, nothing happened. It’s just not me, okay? I’m not Amanda and I just want to be me. Can we please go home?”

“Ally—”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Mom. Please.”

She nods and drives home. She’s quiet, not chatty like she was this morning. With no makeup or fancy clothes, we don’t really have much to talk about. She asks me a little bit about school, but there’s not much to say.

When we reach the house, I go up to my room and take off the dress, throwing on jeans and my T-shirt that’s two sizes too big. Then I snuggle on my bed with my book.

Chapter Sixteen

Today is a special day because a certain adorable little girl is turning six years old.

Bailey Barrington has been gushing about this day for weeks. All of us have gotten pretty close to her ever since Kara and Brayden became girlfriend and boyfriend. In a way, she kind of got four big sisters. And since I've always wanted a younger sibling, I love my new role as "big sister."

Smiling, I slip into my floral dress and check my reflection in the mirror. I don't really like wearing dresses, except for special occasions. And this dress is completely different from the dress Amanda basically forced me to wear. Where hers was short and tight, this one is long and comfortable. More my style.

Pulling out my hair tie, I allow my dirty blonde hair to cascade down my shoulders. There's nothing special about my hair. It's just straight and boring. It's not even a pretty shade of blonde. But I guess I'm okay with it. I mean, it makes me *me*. And that's all I want to be.

And to have a guy accept me for who I am, wholeheartedly. I don't know if that'll happen, but I'm only in high school. I have my whole life to meet the one and fall madly in love. At least that's what I've been telling myself the last few days as I tried to get over Jared the Jerk. I don't want him to ruin love for me, but let's just say I won't be declaring my love to anyone anytime soon.

Charlie sends me a text, letting me know she'll be here in ten minutes. Her dad is driving all of us to the Barringtons for Bailey's party. I shrug into my jacket and wait downstairs for Charlie and her dad to arrive.

My house is quiet like it usually is on a Saturday afternoon. Mom is out with her friends and Dad is at work. If not for the party, I'd probably binge watch a few romance movies and then curl up on the couch with my book.

Charlie texts that they're outside. I leave the house with my gift for Bailey and climb into the backseat, saying hello to her and her dad, and to Dani who is already there. She throws her arms around me. "You look so pretty in that dress!"

"Thanks," I say. "You look so pretty in yours."

She beams. "Thanks." Then she leans forward to tap Charlie's shoulder. "Jeans and a T-shirt, huh? You're not dressing up even a little bit?"

Charlie shrugs. "I'm *not* wearing a dress. Besides, this shirt is pretty."

Dani lifts her brow at me and laughs. I laugh, too.

"What?" Charlie says as she glances down at her black T-shirt with an image of the Milky Way galaxy. "It *is* pretty."

"You can pull off anything," I tell her with a smile. "I like it. It's cool."

"Thank you." She turns to her dad. "Kara is next." She clicks on the address on the GPS, and then we're on our way.

She's already outside when we pull up to her house. After calling goodbye to her dad, she opens the door and grins at us.

“I’m so excited for today! I can’t believe Bailey’s turning six.”

“Kara, that dress is so pretty!” Dani says. It’s light pink with a matching belt.

“Yeah?” She does a small spin. “I look okay? I wasn’t sure what to wear. This is such a big day for Bailey and her family and I suck in the dress department.”

Dani giggles. “We all do! But I think we look great.”

“Even me?” Charlie raises her brow.

“Even you!” Dani says.

“The Milky Way,” Kara says as she climbs in next to me. “Nice.”

“Do we have everyone?” Charlie’s dad asks as he peers at us through the rearview mirror.

“We’re all here,” Charlie says. “Now off to Brayden’s house.” She turns around to face us. “Did I tell you guys I have my road test later this week?”

“No,” Kara says with excited eyes. “Wow, that’s awesome.”

“Cool!” Dani practically bounces in her seat. “It’ll be so much fun when one of us can drive. We could go wherever we want! Total freedom.”

“Are you nervous?” I ask Charlie.

“Nervous? Why should I be nervous? I know the rules. As long as I do what I’m supposed to do, I should pass.”

I wish I had her confidence.

She grins at her dad. “And I get a new car, right?”

“You can have this one.”

She shrugs again. “Any car is a good car.”

“Good luck,” I tell her with a smile. “I’m sure you’ll do great.”

“Thanks.”

We talk about various things until we pull up before the Barringtons. There are blue and pink balloons attached to the door along with a sign that reads, “Happy Sixth Birthday, Bailey!”

The four of us get out of the car and wave goodbye to Charlie’s dad, who promises he’ll pick us up when we’re ready to leave. Then we head to the house, each of us clutching our gifts for the birthday girl.

I hear music and children’s laughter from inside the house. Kara rings the bell, and a few seconds later the door flings open, revealing Bailey and Brayden standing behind her. She’s wearing a pink princess dress with a football jersey over it, and a crown in the shape of a pink football on her head. Her brother is also wearing the same jersey, and his shirt is pink to match her dress.

“Kara, Ally, Charlie, and Dani!” Bailey exclaims as she wraps her little arms around each of us. “You’re here! I’m so excited!”

The doorbell rings again and Bailey runs to answer it. Brayden stretches an arm around Kara and quickly pecks her lips. “Hey, girlfriend.”

“Hey, boyfriend. I love how you decorated the place.”

I love it, too. The pink and blue balloons have images of footballs and tiaras and all the decorations are of a princess and football theme. The way they meshed everything together is so Bailey.

“Easton!” Bailey cries as she jumps into his arms. “You’re here!”

“I wouldn’t miss the amazing Princess Bailey turning six!” he says as he spins her around, then lowers her to the floor. He smiles at us. “I saw you guys pull up. Joe and I were right behind you.”

Dani hugs him and they, too, sneak in a quick peck on the lips.

“You can put your presents there.” Brayden nods to the table stacked with gifts.

“Brayden,” Bailey hisses to her brother. “Easton didn’t get me a present. You said he’ll give me the best one.”

“Bailey!” Brayden hisses back with an embarrassed laugh. “Remember what we talked about? We don’t ask people why they didn’t bring presents.”

She blinks her huge eyes. “I know, but you said...”

Easton chuckles. “Don’t worry, Bailey. I have a huge surprise for you.”

“Yay!” She jumps up and down. “I can’t wait to open my presents, but Mommy and Daddy said I’ll do it later. First we need to play games and sing ‘Happy Birthday’ and eat the cake. Mommy and Daddy worked on it all day yesterday! I wasn’t allowed to see it. I didn’t go into the kitchen all day!”

“The cake is probably so yummy,” Kara says as she tickles Bailey’s stomach. “Like you!”

Bailey giggles just as the doorbell rings again. “More people are here! Come, Bray.” She grabs his hand and pulls him toward the door.

She squeals when more of her classmates arrive with gifts. Dani chuckles. “She’s something else, isn’t she?” She turns to her boyfriend with furrowed eyebrows. “What special surprise do you have planned for Bailey? You didn’t tell me anything.”

He tucks some hair behind her ear. “Because I really want it to be a surprise. And you can’t keep a secret.”

“Yes, I can!” She turns to us. “Help me out here, guys.”

Charlie twists her nose. “Well...”

“I think you can,” I tell her with a smile.

“See? Ally has my back.”

Easton chuckles as he closes his arms around her. “I didn’t want to take the risk. I can’t wait to see the look on Bailey’s face. She’ll love it.”

Dani rests her head on his chest. “I can’t even be mad at you because that’s so sweet.”

“Bailey?” Mrs. Barrington calls from inside the house. “Can you come here for a second, sweetie?”

With a swoosh of her pretty dress, she hops away.

“I can’t believe it,” Brayden says as he comes to stand next to Kara, sliding his hand in hers. “Bailey’s growing up. Crap.” He quickly blinks. “I told myself I wouldn’t cry. Not today.”

“Aw,” Kara says as she wraps her arms around his middle. “I love when you get like this.”

He smiles and kisses the top of her head.

“Hey, Brayden, is there any food here?” Charlie asks. Then her eyes light up. “Never mind. I see potato chips.”

She goes to the table, takes a plate, and pours a mountain of potato chips on it. Then she heads back to us and holds out the plate so we can share.

The doorbell rings. Brayden looks toward the dining room where Bailey disappeared to. “I guess I’ll let them in.”

As I’m munching on a salty potato chip that is so freakin’ good, my eyes catch sight of the person who steps into the living room. The potato chip slips from my hand and tumbles to the floor.

“Guys,” I gasp. “What’s he doing here?”

They turn around and stare at Zack. He’s dressed in his usual white T-shirt and leather jacket, and leather pants.

My eyes widen. “Oh my gosh, do you think he’s stalking me?”

“You still think he’s going to hurt you?” Charlie asks. “Did he not save you from Jared the Jerk and his band of nitwits?”

“Yes, but...” I shift from one foot to the other. “Maybe he hates me because there’s a target on his back because of me?”

Zack’s eyes sweep the area, focusing on me and my friends for a bit. Then he turns to someone behind him. That’s when I notice a little boy, the same age as Bailey. He looks almost

identical to Zack, like a mini version of him. They have the same dark hair and gray eyes.

My eyes pop wide open. “Guys,” I gasp. “You don’t think...do you think...is that Zack’s *son*?”

Dani and Kara gasp as they gape at the little Zack, who walks past us with big Zack and drops a small wrapped box on the gift table. Bailey runs into the room and greets the newest guest, pulling him over to a group of kids who are in the middle of playing a game. Big Zack follows close behind.

“Pretty sure he’s his little brother,” Charlie says.

My body deflates with relief. “Oh,” I say with a laugh. “That makes more sense.”

Brayden returns to us. “Wanna play some games? They’re mostly for the kids, but we can participate, too.”

“Sure,” we say.

It’s a little awkward at first, especially because the little kids giggle that we’re too old to play, but soon they’re totally in awe of how good we are at the games and try to be just like us. I notice Bailey leading Zack’s little brother around the many different activities, offering him things to participate in. But he seems really shy. Zack stays at his side at all times.

When Bailey makes her way back to us, she says, “You’re so cool! Everyone wants to watch you play the games.”

“Look at that,” Kara says sarcastically. “The only time us Invisible Girls are popular is around five and six year olds.”

We all laugh.

“Bailey, is that boy in your class?” I nod to Zack’s brother, who is sitting at a table with a book, Zack sitting next to him. He bends close and says something to him, but the boy just shrugs and focuses on his book.

She follows my gaze and nods. “You mean Zane? Yeah, he’s in my class. He’s always alone at his desk reading. Timmy didn’t invite him to his birthday party because he thinks he’s weird, and other kids in my class said they won’t invite him to their parties, too, because he doesn’t want to be friends with anyone. But I feel bad that he’s always alone at his desk. I try to be his friend, but I don’t think he likes me.”

“Of course he likes you,” Kara says as she puts her arm around her. “How can anyone not like you?”

“Maybe he’s just shy,” I say. I can definitely relate to him. At his age, I was just like him. Though it seems the book he’s reading is way above his age level. I didn’t read those kinds of books at six years old.

“Yeah, maybe,” Bailey says with a shrug. “But Mommy says I shouldn’t push if the person doesn’t want it. So I’m not pushing. I just invited him to my party. I didn’t think he’d show up. And he even got me a present! Even though it’s a small one. But Daddy says some of the best presents come in small packages. Like me!” She beams.

Dani laughs and ruffles her hair. “You’re too cute, kid.”

“Come!” She grabs my hand and Kara’s. “Let’s play more games! There’s still tons of stuff to do before we sing me ‘Happy Birthday.’”

Chapter Seventeen

Zack

I sigh as I watch Zane reading his book instead of playing games with the other kids at the birthday party. Bailey Barrington comes over with bright eyes, tapping my little brother on the shoulder.

“We’re gonna play musical chairs next,” she tells him. “Come.”

Zane barely glances up, shrugging as he turns the page. The birthday girl’s eyes move to me in confusion.

“Thanks. Maybe he’ll come for the next game,” I say to her.

She nods slowly, eyebrows pinched, before rushing back to the kids calling for her to play.

I bend close to Zane. “You sure you don’t want to play with the other kids? They’re your friends, aren’t they?”

“No.”

“But they’re in your class and you should try to be friendly with them. Don’t sit alone like this, please.”

He finally looks up. He tilts his head to where Ponytail and her group of friends clap and cheer as the kids circle the chairs. “Aren’t they in your class? You’re not talking to them.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?” He turns another page.

“Just is.”

He shrugs.

My eyes focus on the group in question. My lab partner looks a little different than usual. Her hair spills down her shoulders, not tied up in a ponytail. And I’ve never seen her in a dress before.

Our gazes meet, and she quickly pulls away, laughing at something Easton Knight says. I think back to a few days ago when she tried to thank me after I stuck up for her to that moron Jared. Not many kids would look at me, even if I were to help them. But she did. It was important to her that she thank me, and I know it wasn’t easy for her because she kept going back and forth. But she wouldn’t give up. She couldn’t get the words out, but I knew what she wanted. I didn’t need the “thank you”, but I appreciated the sentiment, more than I thought I would. She’s a kind person, not like the other kids at school. She doesn’t look at me like I’m less than her like they do...but she still seems scared of me. And I don’t know why.

“Zack, do we have to stay here?” Zane breaks me from my thoughts. He’s still got his gaze glued to his book.

“Do you want to go home?”

He shrugs.

I bend closer. “Bro, I won’t force you to stay if you don’t want to, but you were invited to this party. You showed up. You can’t just leave. It’s rude.”

He nods. “I don’t want to be rude. But no one likes me.”

I place my hand on his shoulder. “Maybe you haven’t given them a chance. Musical chairs is almost over, but maybe

you can try to join the next game.”

As soon as the game ends, Bailey zooms over to Zane, inviting him to play more games. Zane glances at me, and I nod for him to go for it. Bailey beams as he gets to his feet, grabbing his hand and pulling him along.

But it’s not long before he slouches back to the table. Bailey gives her brother a sad look, telling him she tried to include Zane as much as she could, but he’s not interested.

Not that I blame the kid. He doesn’t connect well with the other kids because he’s been through a lot. From losing our parents, to the terrible foster homes he was put in before Sandra took him in. He likes to keep to himself, read books where he feels safe. Maybe one day he’ll be ready, but clearly that’s not today.

After the games are done, the kids gather around Bailey to sing “Happy Birthday” and eat from the cake. I take Zane’s hand, bringing him to the group. He stands on the side, though, and I remain near him.

As everyone sings, I catch Ponytail’s eyes flitting to mine every so often. Is she thinking about what happened after detention that day? Or the day after when I took her wrist and told her she was welcome? I have thought about it more than once, mostly because I don’t understand her. Why is she different from the others? Why is she so scared of me?

After the singing is done, Bailey and her family hand everyone plates with cake. She walks over to where Zane and I stand, carefully balancing two plates in her hands. Beaming, she holds them out to us.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “Happy birthday.”

Zane slightly lifts his head, eyes meeting hers. “Thank you.”

She giggles. “Mommy and Daddy worked so hard on the cake and it’s so yummy. You can have seconds and even thirds! There’s tons!” She rushes off, jumping into her brother’s arms.

Zane and I eat from the cake, and it’s more delicious than I thought. Sandra doesn’t like giving him sweets, so it’s not often he gets such a treat. As for me? As long as I label my stuff in the fridge, my foster family knows to stay away from them.

Once everyone is stuffed with cake, the kids form a circle on the living room floor around Bailey, who sits on the couch. Brayden and his friends bring the piles of presents to her, placing them on the couch.

Zane and I drop down near the other kids and I catch a few giving him strange looks. I wish they’d just give him time to open up and get comfortable.

Bailey calls for attention. “I’m gonna open my presents now!”

But before she can grab the first one, her parents shoot her a warning look. Smiling sheepishly, she sinks a little on the couch. “Right. I’m supposed to thank you all for coming and joining me on my special day.” She beams. “I think everyone from class is here! Yay! And you all brought me presents... okay, okay. I know birthdays aren’t only about presents. Mom

and Dad keep telling me that. But thank you for bringing them.” She looks at her parents. “Can I open them now?”

They motion for her to go ahead. With a wide grin practically slicing her face in half, she seizes the first gift from the pile. “Bray, can you help me open it?”

He’s at her side in an instant, carefully tearing off the wrapping paper and exposing the gift. It’s a doll, which she seems to love.

One by one the presents are opened, each better than the last. I spot Zane watching with wide eyes. He didn’t get much for his birthday a few weeks ago. Sandra and her husband and the other foster kids had a small celebration. I was invited as well. It’s obvious he’s a little jealous of Bailey. I wrap my arm around his shoulder and pull him close. He doesn’t need presents. All he needs is me, and vice versa.

When Bailey picks up the tiny box containing Zane’s gift, my little brother perks up. Bailey seems a little disappointed about the size, but so curious what’s inside that she tears it open to reveal a homemade bouncy ball. Zane spent days working on it.

Bailey’s eyes widen. “A bouncy ball?”

“Zane made it himself,” I let her know.

Her eyes widen even more. “Really? That’s so cool!”

Zane smiles shyly. “And it bounces really high. Try it.”

Bailey does as he says and the ball bounces across the walls, nearly taking a few kids out. Luckily they manage to duck in time.

“Oops, sorry! I love it, Zane! Thank you,” Bailey gushes.

Zane just smiles shyly. He was worried his present wouldn't be good enough. All the other kids bought their gifts from the store, but I told him it's the thought that counts. He may not do well with other kids socially, but the kid's got a good heart.

More and more presents are opened until the birthday girl reaches the last one. It's from Ponytail and it's quite big.

“Ooh,” Bailey says as she stares at the shiny wrapping paper. “What is it?” She carefully opens the flaps to reveal an arts and crafts kit. “Yay! Looks like fun, thank you, Ally!” She places the kit on the pile with the other opened gifts and glances around. “I guess that's it.”

Easton steps forward. “Not yet. Remember I told you I have a surprise for you?”

Her eyes grow so wide you can fit two basketballs inside. She looks around the room. “Yeah. Where is it? Where is it?!”

The other kids survey the room in search of this mystery present as well. Chuckling, Easton presses his phone to his ear, telling someone on the other end that they're ready. No more than a few seconds pass before the front door opens and two men enter, carrying what looks like a dollhouse. It's the most massive dollhouse I have ever seen in my life. Pretty sure it cost a fortune, but for a billionaire like him, I'm sure he could handle it.

All the kids stare at it with eyes and mouths wide. Zane can't take his eyes off it. Of course he doesn't want a dollhouse, but he's never gotten such a large present in his life.

I hold him close to me, hopefully showing him how much he means to me and that although gifts are great, all that matters is that we have each other.

Bailey's hands shoot to her mouth and she trembles slightly. "Is that...for me?"

Easton grins at her as the guys place the dollhouse on the living room floor. "All for you. Happy birthday, Bailey."

She zooms over to him, wrapping her arms around him tightly. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

He laughs, ruffling her hair. "Of course, kid. You've been working so hard on dance and school and your parents told me you've been an extra good girl this year. You deserve only the best."

She jumps up and down in place. "Can I play with it?"

"Sure, but before you do that, there's more."

Her eyes widen. "More?"

He heads over to one of the guys holding a plastic bag. The guy hands it to Easton, who digs inside to reveal a wrapped box. He gives it to Bailey, and she rips the paper off and opens the box. "Dolls for my dollhouse!"

Easton takes them from her. "Not just any dolls. Custom-made dolls. See?" He holds one up. "She's a quarterback. Like you're going to be one day." He tousles her hair. "And she's a princess." He goes on to explain each doll and Bailey gets more excited.

"They're like me!"

"Exactly."

She jumps up and down again, then faces her friends.
“Who wants to play with my dollhouse?!”

The kids surround her.

Zane looks at me, forcing a smile. “She’s so lucky.”

I push some hair out of his eyes. “Hey, man. You’re very lucky too. And so am I.”

His eyebrows furrow. “Why? I didn’t get much for my birthday.”

“Because we have each other.”

He doesn’t say anything as he watches the kids go crazy over the dollhouse. But he doesn’t join them, probably figuring it’ll just make him feel bad for having so little. I wish I could do more for him, buy him the world, but I can’t. I’ll try my best to be a good brother to him. That’s all I can do.

I feel eyes on me and when I lift my head, I find Ponytail watching me. She and her friends are near the dollhouse as well, but they can’t get close to it because of all the kids. When our eyes meet, she averts her gaze.

After the party, Zane and I leave the house, hand in hand. “Did you have fun?” I ask him.

His face is gloomy. “I don’t know.”

I stop walking and take his other hand. “Hey, we have everything we need, all right? You and me forever, remember?”

He nods again. I put my arm around him, squeezing him close to me. Then we take the bus to his house.

The second I ring the bell, the door opens to reveal a ticked-off Sandra. “You were supposed to have him home half an hour ago,” she accuses.

“Party took longer than two hours,” I tell her.

She flares her nostrils, grabbing Zane to her side. “Follow the rules next time or I won’t allow you to see Zane.”

I step closer. “That’s not up to you.”

She huffs before directing Zane into the house and slamming the door in my face.

My bike is parked a few blocks down, since Sandra can’t stand the sight of it. As I put on my helmet and rev the engine, I think about what happened at the party. I’ve always known there are people like the Knights who have everything. It never bothered me much that I have so little. I only cared about my brother. But seeing Zane so sad? So jealous? I can’t deal with it.

But what can I do? Life threw us a curveball and I’m trying my best to help him live his life with as much joy as possible. But maybe that’s not enough.

Pushing those thoughts away, I zoom toward my house.

Chapter Eighteen

“I’m off to buy groceries!” Mom calls from downstairs.

I drop my pen and hurry out of my room, bending over the railing. “Mom?”

She walks back toward the stairs and glances up, throwing her bag over her shoulder. “Yeah, honey?”

“Do you want company? I finished most of my homework.”

Ever since Mom has been spending so much time with Amanda, I feel like she and I aren’t very close. Well, we were never really close. But maybe I’m at fault for that, too. I spend most of my time holed up in my room with my books.

She smiles. “That would be great.”

“Be down in a sec.”

I slip on my sneakers and make my way downstairs, where Mom is waiting. Together, we leave the house and go to the car, buckling up. As we drive, Mom asks me how school is going. I guess it kind of sucks that the only thing she and I could talk about is school, since we don’t have many shared interests.

“It’s good,” I tell her. “I’m acing all my classes.”

She grins. “That’s what I like to hear. And how’s choir?”

“Good.”

“Good.”

We're quiet.

Then Mom tells me about some crazy things that happened at work, like when a customer who obviously couldn't afford the high-end clothes they offer at the boutique made a huge scene because they didn't have a specific dress in her size. When one of the salespeople basically turned over the whole store in the hopes of finding one—and did!—the woman made another scene because of the expensive price.

I don't know how Mom can work at that job. I guess I've always been a little jealous of her and Dad and Amanda because of how good they are with people. They've never had a problem making friends like me. I don't know what kind of job I want to have when I'm older, but definitely not in retail.

Mom parks the car in the Edenbury Supermarket lot and we get out, grabbing a cart and heading inside. The supermarket is huge with so many food options. You could literally spend hours in here.

“Let's split up the list,” Mom says as she tears the small piece of paper in half. “It'll go a lot faster.”

“Okay.”

I take another cart and work my way through the list. Mom hadn't gone shopping in a while, so it's pretty long.

After about twenty minutes, I finish my list other than the canned food, which I saved for last because there are quite a few I need. I find the right aisle and push my cart along, adding the various items I need. And then I stop dead in my tracks.

Because a familiar leather jacket catches my attention.

Zack is crouched by one of the shelves, wearing a green Edenbury Supermarket apron. He's in the middle of placing canned corn on the shelves.

I didn't know he worked here. Well, I guess I don't know anything about him. Other than the fact that he went to juvie and that he likes to read fantasy novels.

He suddenly turns around and his eyes meet mine. A look of surprise flies across his face, but then he turns his attention back to stocking the shelves. I tear my eyes away from him and focus on getting the items from Mom's list.

When I feel him watching me, I slowly turn around. But he's concentrating on his work. He and I are the only two people in the aisle...maybe I should leave? I mean, he wouldn't do anything in a public supermarket, would he?

I glance back at the list and find the last canned food Mom needs—canned corn. Ugh, seriously? Zack is right there. There's no way I'm getting that close to him.

I watch him add more cans to the shelves, contemplating how to do this. He's pretty tall and is blocking the area. I guess I can always ask, but...I don't know. I'm trying to keep my distance from him because after all, he *is* a criminal.

He looks at me for a second before continuing his work. Maybe I'll just tell Mom they are out of canned corn? Ugh, I'm being ridiculous. Anyone else would just grab a few cans and be done with it. But the socially awkward Shy Girl blows everything out of proportion.

“How many do you need?”

I jump at the voice and stare at Zack. “W-what?”

“How many cans of corn do you need?”

“Oh, um, two,” I stammer.

He gets up, plucks two out of the box next to his feet, makes his way over to me, and drops them into my cart. Then he sits back down and continues to work.

“T-thank you,” I say.

He doesn't respond, just continues to work. I grab my cart and turn around, leaving the aisle.

“There you are!” Mom says. “Got everything you need?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Let's pay.”

I look back into the aisle and find Zack's head lifted, eyes pasted on mine. But he quickly looks away and focuses on his cans, which are nearly stocked.

Mom's brows furrow as she follows my gaze. “Did that boy say something to you?”

“What?”

“He looks like trouble. Why do they have someone like him working here?”

For some reason, I have a need to defend him. Which is crazy because he freakin' killed someone and went to jail. Shaking that away, I shrug. “I don't know. Can we go?”

After we pay, we load the groceries into the car and drive home. I get a text from Charlie when we're almost at the house.

Charlie: Group video call? I have some news.

Kara: I'm here!

Dani: In the middle of a killer math equation, but I can use the break.

Ally: Mom and I are in the car and will be home soon. Ten minutes?

Charlie: Sure thing.

Once Mom and I bring the groceries into the house and put them away, I run up to my room and tell my friends I have time for a video call. It's not long before Charlie calls me.

"Hey!" She waves to me, and the others who are already in the call wave, too.

"Hi, everyone," I say.

"So what's the good news, Charlie?" Dani asks.

She flops down on her bed. "Who said it was good news?"

Dani frowns. "You're right, you didn't say. So is it bad news?"

Charlie laughs. "Nope, it's good news!" She reaches for a piece of paper on her bed and flashes it before the camera.

"Look what I have!"

Kara gasps. "Is that your temporary license?"

Charlie nods vehemently. "You bet your butt it is!"

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh!" Dani bounces on her bed.

"This is awesome!"

"Congrats, Charlie," I tell her with a smile. "I knew you could do it."

“Thanks.” She shrugs. “There was nothing to it, really. Piece of cake.”

I smile and shake my head. Maybe for her it was a piece of cake, but I know it won’t be like that for me when the time comes. I get so nervous over every little thing.

“You know what this means, right?” Charlie says.

“That you are now practically an adult?” Dani says.

“No! I’m going to drive you all to school tomorrow!”

“Score!” Kara says. “It’ll be so much fun.”

“Easton usually drives me, but I’ll tell him to head on to school without me tomorrow,” Dani says, her whole face lit up. “Oh my gosh, Charlie, I can’t believe it! I’m so proud of you.”

Charlie shrugs again. “I told you it was a piece of cake. So who’s next?”

“Not me.” Dani shakes her head. “Awkward Girl should probably steer clear of a steering wheel for the time being.”

“What are you talking about?” Charlie says. “I think you’d be a great driver.”

“Um, have you seen me drive the virtual cars in Easton’s arcade games? Edenbury would be a safer place if Dani Wood remained on the sidewalk.”

All of us giggle.

“Maybe next year for me,” Kara muses. “With the school paper and Brayden and everything, I don’t think I could handle the stress of learning to drive. What about you, Ally?”

“I’m scared of my own shadow.”

“Well, you don’t have to do anything until you’re ready,” Charlie says. “But I’m telling you, you have no idea how amazing it feels to be able to drive. Total freedom. It’s awesome.”

“I’ll bet,” Dani says with a giggle.

“So I’ll pick you guys up tomorrow morning,” Charlie says. “Good night.”

“Good night!” Kara and Dani say.

“Good night, everyone,” I say. “And congrats again, Charlie.”

After we hang up, I get comfortable on my bed with my romance novel. But for some reason, my mind keeps wandering to Zack. It was weird to see him working at the supermarket my family shops at. Is it part of his community service or something, or does he just really need a job? And I also can’t get the image of him with his little brother at Bailey’s party this past Saturday out of my head. I guess I never imagined him as the older brother type. The way he looked after his brother was kind of sweet. I guess like Charlie said, people are multifaceted.

Chapter Nineteen

Zack

I've saved up enough money to buy Zane those ice cream cakes he wanted two weeks ago. I placed them in the freezer with my name on them so no one would touch them. And I plan to give them to him today when we hang out. He's going to be so surprised and excited. I know it's not much, but it means so much to him. And to me, too.

After I get home from work on Monday afternoon, I head to the freezer to fetch the cakes. But my eyebrows furrow when I don't see them anywhere. I push things aside, even check the fridge in case I put them there for some reason, but I can't find them.

That's weird.

"Looking for something?" Travis says as he waltzes into the kitchen. Leaning against the wall, he crosses his arms over his chest.

"Yeah, I put something in the freezer, but it's not here." I continue pushing more things around. "They were ice cream cakes."

Travis pushes off the wall, rubbing his stomach. He laughs deep and hard. "Ice cream cakes? You mean the ones me and my friends scarfed down a few hours ago?" His laugh grows stronger. "If you want 'em, you gotta hope I'll barf 'em up. Or

else you're out of luck. They were expensive, weren't they?" He rubs his stomach again. "Worth every darn penny."

"I put my name on them! You weren't supposed to touch them."

He shrugs. "So what if they had your name on it? This is my house. Not yours. My food. Not yours."

My hands clench at my sides. "I bought them with my own money for my little brother," I growl. "I saved up for them."

He just laughs. "Bummer. Guess you're gonna have to disappoint the little devil. Or save up again."

I glare at him, wishing I could bash the living daylights out of him. But as much as I hate him right now, I'm not a violent person.

Travis grins wickedly at me. "Come on, punch me. I know you want to. Oh wait, you can't hurt me because if you get arrested, then you won't be able to take care of the little devil, will you? Nope. You've got to be on your best behavior."

I continue glaring at him, my chest rising and falling heavily.

With his evil grin widening, he inches closer to me. "Your little brother is embarrassed to be related to a screwed-up low life like you."

"Don't talk about my brother," I warn.

He just chortles. "Why? You know it's true. He's living in a good home now. He doesn't need you. Doesn't want you. Same way your parents didn't want you."

I'm seconds away from punching his face into the wall.
Seconds away.

“You think he cares about those dumb ice cream cakes?” he goes on. “Think they would have made him love you more? He *doesn't* want you in his life.” He takes in my trembling fists at my sides and laughs again. “Punch me.” He rams his hands into my chest, egging me on. “Come on, hit me.” He guffaws when I don't move. But I want to, so badly. He shoves me again. “Hit me!”

I push him back. “Get your hands off me. And pay me back for the cakes you stole.”

He looks at me incredulously. “You kidding me? I'm not giving you a cent. You already stole from us, now you want more?”

“I never stole from you.”

He waves his hand. “Right, sure. Like I said, want the cakes? Better hope I barf them up.”

I grit my teeth. “I've never done anything to you.”

He shoves me again. “Are you retarded? I just told you that you stole from me!”

I grab him by the shirt and move my mouth to his ear, speaking slowly and carefully so he'd understand. “Quit saying those lies about my brother or I will beat the life out of you. And don't you *dare* talk about my parents again.” I push him away from me. “Got that, you piece of crap?”

His face fuming, he rushes at me, fists flying all over the place. I duck out of the way and he slams into the fridge. He comes at me again, his fists ramming into my eye, causing

pain to explode all over. Then he gets me in the stomach, knocking the air out of me. Pushing through the pain, I grab hold of his hand and twist it, preventing him from attacking me again.

He releases a yelp as I continue twisting his hand. “You don’t want to mess with me,” I threaten.

But he’s not done yet. With his other hand, he punches me in the jaw. I stumble back, releasing his hand. As he throws more punches, I try to block as many as I can. He’s like a madman.

“What’s going on here?” a voice shrieks from the doorway.

Before I have a chance to turn around or explain, someone leaps at me, tackling me to the floor and holding my arms behind my back.

It’s Geoff. Isabel stands in the doorway, a look of horror on her face.

“Mom! Dad!” Travis yells. “He demanded money from me. And when I wouldn’t give it, he got all psycho. He was going to kill me!”

“That’s not true,” I try to argue, but Geoff’s got my face buried in the floor, muffling my words. I try to thrash him off, but he’s got a firm grip.

Isabel sobs as she pulls her precious son into her arms. Patting his back, she turns to her husband. “I’m calling the cops. I want that boy out of my house.”

Chapter Twenty

When Charlie pulls up in front of my house, I wave and hurry to the passenger side, since it's my turn to sit shotgun. Dani wraps her arms around my seat from behind, gushing, "Good morning!"

I beam at her and Charlie. "This doesn't get old, huh?"

"Nope!" Dani says. "Feels like we're real adults now."

I internally sigh as I fall back in my seat. It seems like Dani can't wait to be a "real adult" while that thought scares me. I know the four of us will be best friends forever, even after going our separate ways, but living on my own at college? Having to deal with adult things? That's such a huge step. But I guess I have a little while until I need to worry about it.

"Aw, he's so cute," Dani says as she glances down at her phone. "Easton's bummed I chose to ride with you this morning and not him."

"You should really give the poor boy some attention," Charlie says as she makes a turn. "He sounds like a wounded puppy."

"I know," she groans. "I love riding with him to school every morning, but I love hanging out with you guys, too." She sighs as she falls back against her seat. "Juggling an awesome boyfriend with my equally awesome best friends is much harder than I thought it'd be."

“Good thing he’s so understanding,” I tell her with a reassuring smile. “He knows how much we mean to each other and gives you space.”

She sighs dreamily. “Yeah, he’s awesome.”

Charlie stops before Kara’s house and I shoot her a text, letting her know we’re here. A second or two later, the front door opens and she hurries out, clutching papers that look like they’re about to fly out of her hands.

“Sorry,” she says breathlessly as she slides in next to Dani. “I need to hand in this article to Martina today and I’m not even ready. Ugh, she’ll be so upset with me.”

“What’s it about?” I ask.

“The dangers of vaping. I know, that’s so cliché, but we still need to get the message out there, right? I was trying to put my own unique spin on it to show students how serious it is, but I’ve been so busy with Bailey’s party and everything.”

I bend forward as far as my seatbelt allows and rub her arm. “I know you can do it. And it’ll be amazing.”

She smiles as she leans forward to hug me. “Thanks. I really need that.”

“We have reached our destination!” Charlie announces, like she does every time she pulls into a parking spot in the student lot.

The four of us get out of the car and make our way into the school building. Since Charlie is such a good driver, she always manages to get us to school ten minutes early, which gives us enough time to gather at one of our lockers and chat. It seems we never run out of things to talk about. Easton and

Brayden come by a little later and snatch away their girlfriends for some private time.

“So you choose the next book for book club,” Charlie tells me as she opens her locker and rummages inside for her AP English textbook.

“Me? You know what I’ll pick.”

She shrugs. “So?”

“You hate Regency romances,” I remind her.

“But I love you,” she reminds me, playfully shoving her shoulder into mine.

I fight the grin trying to take over my face. “Well, there was this book I saw...”

Charlie raises her brows. “Yeah?”

“It’s a fairytale retelling, but it’s kind of a Regency romance, too. It’s got a bit of magic and fantasy and stuff.”

“Really? Sounds cool. Let’s go with that.”

“Oh my gosh, did you hear about that Zack psycho?” a girl standing next to Charlie’s locker says to her friend.

“No, what?” her friend says.

“I heard he attacked someone last night and was arrested.”

The second girl’s jaw falls open. “Seriously? Why the heck did they even allow him back at school? Sometimes the decisions this school makes...” she says as they walk away.

Charlie and I stare at each other with wide eyes.

“You think he attacked a student?” I ask, more like squeak.
“Maybe at detention?”

Charlie's eyes widen even more. "Holy crap. He really hurt someone? I didn't think he'd actually do that...Man, I should have taken it more seriously like you guys."

I fold my arms over myself as goosebumps pop up all over my arms. "Oh my gosh, he could have hurt *me*."

Charlie whistles. "Dang."

The bell rings. She looks at me with worried eyes. "You think he was released from jail and came to school?"

I tighten my arms around myself. "I don't know."

She hugs me. "Be careful, okay? Don't sit near him if you don't want to. I'm sure your teacher will understand."

I nod as I pull out of the hug. "If you don't see me at lunch..."

She playfully hits my shoulder. "Knock it off. Text me and the others, okay? Let us know if you're okay."

We say goodbye and part to our classrooms. The table in the back of the room is empty. I sit down and place my textbook and notebook on the table, my eyes drifting toward the door every so often, waiting for him to arrive. Would the authorities really let him come back to school after he attacked someone?

The buzz around the classroom is about Zack Hastings. I strain my ears to hear as much as I can, but no one seems to know anything. The time ticks away, and then Mrs. Cooper walks inside.

I glance at the empty spot next to me. I guess he wasn't released from jail after all. My body sags with relief.

“At least now you don’t have to worry about him hurting you anymore,” Charlie tells me on the way home from school. She hung out in one of the empty classrooms doing homework while I had choir so she could drive me home. I told her she didn’t have to, that my mom would have been fine picking me up, but she claimed it didn’t matter whether she did her homework at school or at home. A warm feeling once again spreads through me at how much of a good friend she is.

“But now I have a new problem,” I mutter as I hit the back of my head against the seat. “Who’s going to be my lab partner?”

“Hmm. Maybe your teacher will let you do the work alone?”

I snort. “Sure. That’s not going to happen.”

“I guess you’ll have to team up with a different group.”

And once again be the odd girl out. But I guess I should be used to it. This is how it’s always been. Maybe my new team will basically ignore me like Zack did.

Charlie pulls up in front of my house. “You have reached your destination!”

I laugh as I unbuckle my seatbelt. “That never gets old, either. See ya tomorrow, Charlie.”

“Bye.”

I get out of the car and wave as she drives home. Then I stick my key into the lock and push the door open. “Mom?” I call. “You home?”

Low murmurs are coming from the living room. It sounds like my mom and dad. It's a little odd for Dad to be home so early. I hurry into the living room, ready to ask him what the special occasion is, but my backpack slips from my fingers and tumbles to the floor.

Because sitting on the couch is none other than Zack.

I blink a few times, certain my eyes are playing tricks on me. Because there's no way in heck Criminal Zack is in my house.

"Ally," Dad says as he gets up from the recliner next to the couch. Mom is sitting next to Zack, nothing but sympathy in her eyes. "You know Zack Hastings, right? He goes to your school and should be in your grade."

Yes, I know Zack Hastings! But why in heck's name is he sitting on my living room couch?

I glance at him. His arms are crossed over his chest, and I notice he's got a black eye. When he lifts his gaze to mine, his eyes pierce right through me. I yank my gaze away. *Someone please wake me up from this nightmare.*

Dad clears his throat, throwing Zack an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Zack. Ally is a little shy." He turns his attention to me. "I'm Zack's caseworker. He'll be staying with us for a little while."

My eyes widen and I sputter, "What?"

"He's had a bit of trouble at his previous foster home," Dad explains. "It'll only be temporary, until we find a more suitable home for him."

At my lack of response, Mom stands up and smiles at Zack. “Would you like to eat something?”

I don’t get it. Mom seemed wary of him that day at the supermarket. Now she’s treating him like a guest? Am I the only one concerned that there is a criminal in our house?

Zack shakes his head.

“All right. Let me show you to your room. You must be really tired.”

Zack gets up and follows Mom upstairs, where she informs him that he’ll be staying in Amanda’s old room. Which isn’t that far down the hall from my room. A large swallow makes its way down my throat.

“Dad,” I gasp once they’re upstairs. “How could you do this?”

Dad rubs his forehead as he lowers himself on the couch. “I know I never bring foster kids to live here, but this is an emergency situation. Zack’s had it pretty rough. Last night at his previous foster home, the son attacked Zack, but he claimed Zack attacked him. Zack was arrested, but I believed him when he told me he was innocent and I got the charges dropped. He couldn’t return to that home, so I brought him here to live with us temporarily.”

“Dad.” I rush over to him. “How could you let a murderer into our home?”

Dad’s brows shoot up. “A murderer?”

“Yeah! He went to juvie a few months ago for killing someone.”

Dad rubs his head again. “Honey, I don’t know where you heard that from, but Zack didn’t kill anyone. He never hurt anyone. He had problems at one of his foster homes and was sent to his aunt for a short while, but she didn’t want to care for him, either. Ally, we need to do what we can to make him feel welcome here.”

Before I can say anything, he gets up and walks into the kitchen. I stand there staring at the spot Dad was sitting, a million thoughts racing through my head. Zack is here in my home. He’s going to *live* with us for a bit. Dad claims he never killed anyone. Is he wrong? He has to know all the facts if he’s his caseworker.

With my thoughts a jumbled mess, I climb up the stairs to my room. Only to be stopped by Zack, leaning against the wall near Amanda’s room with his arms crossed over his chest.

He pushes off the wall. “Is that why you’re so scared of me? You think I killed someone?”

My mouth opens and closes, but no words come out.

“I didn’t take you for someone who listens to all that gossip going around school,” he continues. “I thought you were different. Thought you wouldn’t judge someone until you got to know them.” He closes his hand around the knob and yanks the door open. “But I see now that I was wrong.” He enters the room and slams the door in my face.

I stare at the door as my chest rises and falls rapidly, guilt poking me from all sides. He’s right. I just listened to all those rumors without finding out if they were true. Without getting to *know* him. My friends and I assumed the worst in him

because that's what other kids wanted us to believe. But I never got to know the real Zack Hastings.

I myself know how important it is to get to know someone before you judge them, and that's exactly what I did to Zack. I'm a horrible person.

With tears pricking my eyes, I go into my room and close the door, climbing onto my bed and starting a video chat with my friends. Luckily, they are all available.

"What's up, Ally?" Dani says as they all appear on the screen.

Kara's eyes widen. "You okay? You look upset."

Charlie's face gets furious. "Was it Jared and his jerk friends?"

I shake my head. "It was me. I'm the jerk."

"What are you talking about?" they all ask at once.

I glance at my closed door before lowering my voice. "You'll never believe who's staying at my house for a little while."

Charlie's face goes sour. "Jared?"

I roll my eyes. "Thank God not."

"Then who?" Kara asks.

I glance at the door again and move my face closer to my phone. "Zack Hastings."

At once they all explode.

"*Zack Hastings?* How is he staying at your house???"

“Didn’t he just kill a second person? What’s he doing at your house?”

“Is he holding your family hostage? Do we have to call the police?”

“Guys, guys!” I shout.

They quiet down.

Lowering my voice again, I tell them what happened when I walked into my house after Charlie dropped me off, and what new information I learned from my dad. And of course the altercation I had in the hallway with Zack.

Dani’s brows furrow. “So...he didn’t kill anyone?”

I shake my head. “It was just horrible rumors kids spread at school.”

“Why do they do that?” Charlie says with disgust. “I feel so...”

“Rotten?” I offer. “Guys, we judged him without getting to know him. We know how terrible that feels and we did that to someone else.”

Kara nods slowly. “You’re right. We totally misjudged him.”

“So...he never hurt anyone,” Dani says. “He’s not a criminal. He’s not dangerous. He never went to juvie.”

I shake my head.

They sit in silence.

“Wow,” Charlie mutters.

“Yeah,” I say.

We're quiet again, none of us knowing what to say.

"Well...I guess I'll think differently about him from now on," Kara says. "I won't look at him like he's a criminal anymore."

"It doesn't look like he wants to be friends with anyone, though," Charlie says. "With or without the rumors."

"Yeah, seems like he just wants to be alone," Dani adds.

"I don't know how I'll live with him under the same roof," I say. "I don't blame him for hating me. I hate myself, too."

"It'll be okay," Dani reassures me. "Now we know the truth. That's what matters."

"And I'll need to apologize to him at some point," I say.

They nod.

"Ally, dinner!" Mom calls.

"I've got to go, guys. Thanks for listening to me."

They wish me goodbye and we hang up. I'm a little nervous as I go down to the kitchen, not sure I'm ready to face Zack. But he's not in the kitchen. In fact, he doesn't come to eat at all.

Mom and Dad tell me how important it is to be welcoming and kind to Zack because he's had a rough couple of years. I'm so curious why he's in the foster system and what happened to his parents, but it's not my place to ask. I wish he would come down so I could apologize to him, but I have a feeling he's super ticked-off at me and won't talk to me while he's here.

I wish I could rewind time and not be as awful as the rest of the kids at school.

Chapter Twenty-One

I get dressed the next morning and go downstairs for breakfast. Zack, Mom, and Dad are at the table, Dad and Mom eating eggs while our guest slurps some cereal. My parents are discussing the new movies coming out this week, but Zack just keeps quiet.

“Good morning,” I greet as I enter the kitchen and grab a bowl and milk. I sit down near Zack, who doesn’t look my way. I’m not sure what vibe he’s giving out. It’s not anger, but maybe disappointment? Why did he think I was different from the other kids? And why does he seem so bothered about it? The most we’ve interacted was when I tried to thank him for standing up to Jared for me and when he put the canned corn into my cart at the supermarket.

Dad smiles at me. “Good morning, sweetie.” He gets to his feet. “I need to get going. I’ll see you all later. Have a good day.” He squeezes Zack’s shoulder, as if reassuring him that everything will be okay. Zack doesn’t look his way, just eats his soggy cereal.

Dad kisses Mom and me on the cheek before walking out the door. Half an hour later, it’s time for Zack and me to head to school. Mom asks him over and over again if he has everything he needs and he nods that he does.

“Ally, is Charlie driving you to school?” Mom asks.

I fling my backpack over my shoulders. “Yeah, she’ll probably be here soon.”

Mom turns to Zack. “I’m sure she wouldn’t mind giving you a lift.”

Zack’s deep gray eyes slowly move to mine and they fill with that expression he wore before. Disappointment. Then he tears them away as if he doesn’t want to look at me.

The room suddenly grows cold.

“I’ll take my bike,” he says.

Mom opens her mouth, maybe to try to talk him out of riding that dangerous vehicle, but she must think better of it and wishes us both a good day.

Zack and I step toward the door together, our shoulders nearly knocking into one another’s. But he freezes and waits for me to go first, then follows me out the door. He heads to the garage to fetch his bike while I lower myself on the steps to wait for Charlie.

He wheels his bike out of the garage a few seconds later, his helmet tucked under his arm. I haven’t really gotten a good look at the bike, but it seems like it has many years on it. The way he touches it makes me realize it’s not just some random bike he bought at a store. It means something to him. Something so profound I feel it from all the way here.

He must sense me watching him because his head snaps up and our gazes collide. His jaw is tight as he watches me for I’m not sure how long. I have no idea what’s going on in his head, but the only thought in mine is that I’m a terrible, horrible person. I wish I could float over to him and apologize, but something tells me he doesn’t want me anywhere near him right now.

He breaks his gaze, pulling his helmet on his head and climbing onto the bike. Roaring the engine to life, he zooms off, his hair blowing in the January wind.

All I see before me are those disappointed gray eyes.

A beep yanks me out of my thoughts. I smile and wave to Charlie. She waves back from inside the car. Then her eyebrows furrow as she studies the front door, maybe looking for Zack.

“Hey,” I say as I climb in and shut the door. I turn around to the empty back seat. “Dani’s riding with Easton today?”

“Yep. And Kara with Brayden.” She rests her hands on the steering wheel. “Is, um, Zack coming? I figured we might as well give him a lift since you’re housemates now.”

“No, he took his bike. He couldn’t run away from me faster.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

I sigh, pulling at my ponytail. “You haven’t seen the look on his face every time he glances at me. Like he’s...bothered.”

Her eyebrows lift. “Bothered that you thought he was a murderer? I guess I can understand that. You wouldn’t want anyone thinking the worst in you.”

I shift in my seat. “But it feels more than that. I mean, I don’t know him, but it doesn’t look like he cares what anyone else thinks of him. Why me? We’re not friends. We’re barely even lab partners.”

She’s quiet as she mulls it over. “Maybe he saw that special thing in you.”

“What special thing?”

She pokes my ribs. “The thing that makes you you.”

I give her a look like I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“Ally, you’re the sweetest and kindest person in the world. You have a huge, huge, huge heart.” She gives me a look before I can refute. “Don’t even dare.”

I laugh lightly. “Thanks. But even if that were true, I never did anything nice to him.”

“Hmm...you thanked him for helping you with those jerks.”

“I *tried* to thank him. There’s a difference.”

She shrugs. “Either way, he knew what you meant to do. Even though it was hard for you, you wanted to do the right thing.”

I don’t say anything else on the topic and she starts the car. She loves listening to soundtracks of her favorite science fiction movies. The music is soothing as it fills up the car.

“So...how’s living with him?” Charlie asks after a few minutes.

“I don’t know. He went to bed early last night and didn’t join us for dinner. And this morning he kind of ignored me by breakfast. But I can’t really blame him.”

She nods slowly. “Maybe it’s best the two of you stay out of each other’s way for a little bit. I’m sure things will get better soon.”

“I still want to apologize.”

“We all do,” she says. “The others and I misjudged him, too, and that’s not cool.”

We listen to the music until Charlie pulls into the parking lot. I never really noticed it before, but Zack’s bike is locked secularly nearby.

“What?” Charlie asks from outside the car. I’m so consumed by my thoughts, I forgot to get out.

“Nothing,” I say as I join her outside. “Was just thinking.”

She follows my gaze to the motorcycle and rubs my arm. “Don’t beat yourself up over it. We made a mistake.”

I nod as her words sink into my head. I know we made a mistake—we’re only human—but I still feel rotten about it.

Hooking her arm through mine, Charlie leads us into the school building, where, as usual, kids are gathered in the halls, laughing and chatting. And like usual, no one notices us as we pass them to get to Kara, Dani, Brayden, and Easton at Dani’s locker.

Dani flings her arms around me. “I was up all night thinking about you.” She draws back to study me. “I know you were up all night feeling guilty about Zack.”

“Yeah, a little bit. Okay, a lot. I just need to apologize and maybe he won’t avoid me anymore.”

We drop the subject of Zack and talk about other things until the bell rings. I enter the bio classroom and spot Zack at our table, reading a book, his earbuds in his ears. He doesn’t look up or react when I drop down next to him.

This would be the perfect time to apologize because he's kind of forced to be next to me right now.

I stare at him, trying to get the words out. But they don't come, maybe because I'm distracted by how he's reading. It's interesting to watch other people read. Some seem bored but force themselves to finish, others are so into it even an earthquake won't crush their concentration. Some are on the edge of their seat, some skim to the end because the suspense is killing them. And some, like me, take their time soaking in each and every word. Zack is like that, too—relaxed and focused, but so intrigued. I've never met anyone other than my friends who get sucked into stories like Zack is.

His eyes slowly move in my direction, but this time, I don't look away. I'm going to get the apology out of my mouth. Why is it so hard?

He focuses back on his book, turning away from me like he really doesn't want anything to do with me. It's not that I think we'll be friends or anything—I just want him to know how badly I feel about what I did. But it seems he doesn't care enough.

I won't give up, though.

Mrs. Cooper enters the classroom and starts the lesson. Zack is forced to put his book and earbuds away or else he'll risk detention. Throughout the lesson, there's this wall between us. It's different from the wall I usually have—this one seems to be made for just the two of us. Zack has no interest in climbing over it.

It's a little hard to concentrate because of his coldness, but I try not to let it bother me. When the bell rings, he puts his

things away and leaves the class before the teacher finishes her last sentence.

The good thing about my history test that'll start shortly is that I can focus on it and not on Zack. I don't want to obsess over it, but how can I live under the same roof with someone who hates me?

Since the teacher is running a bit late, I bury myself in the book we're reading for the club.

When Mr. Alvarez finally arrives with a stack of exam papers, he orders everyone to clear their desks except for a pen.

Sabrina's hand shoots in the air.

"You know the rules," Mr. Alvarez informs her as he places a stack on her desk. "No bathroom breaks during my test except for an emergency. Is this an emergency?"

The girl nods vehemently. "It's not about the bathroom, though. Um..." She shifts in her seat. "We had a killer math test today and didn't have a chance to study for this test. It was just so hard...."

Mr. Alvarez's eyes roam around. "None of you studied?"

Another kid says, "We stayed after school yesterday to study for the math test together and couldn't cover this material in time."

The rest of the class nods in agreement.

Mr. Alvarez looks like he's at a loss of what to do. He gazes around. "Did anyone prepare for my exam?"

I raise my hand. His eyes brighten. “You’re prepared, Ally?”

“Yes.”

“She doesn’t take math with us,” Sabrina is quick to say.

“Yes, I do,” I say, completely confused. “We didn’t have a math test today.”

Each and every student glares at me. What have I done wrong? I don’t understand.

Mr. Alvarez’s lips form a flat line. He turns to Sabrina. “Is this true? Did you just lie to me?”

Sabrina holds up her hands. “I didn’t...I mean, we didn’t study...”

The kids continue to glare at me.

“I don’t want to hear another word,” Mr. Alvarez says. “Clear your desks. You’ll just have to do your best.”

While the rest of the kids grumble and keep sending me those looks, I disappear into the exam, devouring question after question like it’s providing me sustenance.

I don’t see Zack for the remainder of the day until it’s dinner time. As I leave my room to head for the stairs, the door to Amanda’s room opens and Zack steps out. His expression changes from indifferent to guarded. Our eyes latch onto each other for a few seconds before he shoves his hands into his pockets and goes down the stairs.

Dad gives Zack a hug, asking him how his day was. Zack seems a bit thrown off that someone is genuinely interested in

his day. I guess his other foster homes weren't like that.

"Was good," his gruff voice says.

Dad nods with a smile. "Good. How about yours, sweetie?"

"Good. I had a history test."

Dad chuckles. "Bet you aced it."

We talk about other things as we eat. Mom made chicken, rice, mashed potatoes, and many other side dishes. Dad's in the middle of talking about something he heard on the news when I notice Zack gobbling down his food. It's almost like he hasn't had a proper meal in a while.

I'm not the only one staring at him. Mom stopped eating and Dad's voice trails off.

Zack looks up, face turning a light shade of red when he realizes we're all staring at him.

Mom shakes her head, as if reprimanding herself for being so rude. "Please, take as much as you'd like. I made enough."

Zack looks a little embarrassed as she offers him from everything. "Thank you," he says in a low voice.

She squeezes his hand. "Of course. Please don't be shy or ashamed to ask for more. You're part of this family now."

His lips twitch, as if he's trying to smile but can't. I hadn't thought about it until this moment, but Zack always eats a lot of food during lunch. Considering how he gobbled up Mom's food, I can't help but wonder if maybe this really *is* the first real proper meal he's had in a while.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I carefully lift my favorite novel in the whole world, *A Lady of Wit and Her Handsome Duke*, and smile down at it. It's a pretty old book, from the 80s, and it's also the novel that made me fall in love with Regency romances. I must have been around ten when I found it stashed in the attic amongst other old stuff from my parents' days. The cover drew me in, but the amazing story had me hooked from beginning to end. I read it at least once or twice a year.

Since it's so old and falling apart, I promised myself I would only read it at home and not bring it to school. But I started it last night and I *need* to continue, like *right away* or I'll lose my mind. Which is why I'm not stashing it in my bag but carrying it around with me all day to protect it from any damage.

Charlie picks me up and we drive to school. I continue reading my book on the ride because I can't wait a second longer. Charlie understands my love for the book and knows to keep quiet when I'm absorbed in Miss Rose and The Duke of Pillings' banter that sends butterflies to my stomach. When she accidentally trips over her long dress and he catches her in his arms? My mind chants, "Kiss, kiss, kiss!" and it looks like they're about to. But then Miss Rose, her cheeks matching her name, quickly turns away and informs the duke that she has an engagement she needs to attend to. Ugh, I love this book *so* much.

“Why don’t you buy a new copy of the book?” Charlie asks when we’re a block away from school. “You taped that thing up so many times it hardly even looks like a book.”

I gently hug it to my chest. “This book is so old and it’s hard to find copies.”

“Bummer. No ebook version?”

I shake my head as I carefully tighten my hold on it. “This is all I have.”

Charlie and I get out of the car and head inside the school building. Instead of joining my friends at one of their lockers to chat before first period, I tell them I’m heading to my bio class, which they totally understand. The classroom will get pretty noisy once more kids fill it up, but I have a knack for tuning everyone and everything out when I’m sucked into a story. Seriously, there could be a fire and I wouldn’t even know.

I’m far gone and completely oblivious to what’s going on around me until someone drops his notebook on my table and slides into the chair next to mine. I slowly turn my head in Zack’s direction, but like yesterday, he ignores me and stares at the board at the front of the room. I internally sigh. Is he ever going to forgive me? Or at least give me the opportunity to apologize? I want to say the words, but like yesterday they get stuck in my throat. What if I make things worse? Maybe he just needs time, or maybe he’s content with pretending I don’t exist. I don’t know why that bothers me.

Actually, I do. I don’t want him to think I’m a bad person. But why don’t I want him to think I’m a bad person?

Pushing those thoughts away from my mind, I focus back on my novel. They're about to have another almost-kiss, though this one is hotter and more swoon-worthy than the last one. My heart pounds in my chest as the scene unfolds before me. *Kiss, kiss, kiss!*

Nope. This time it's the duke who pulls away.

"Kiss already!" I hiss, even though I've read this book a million times and know they won't kiss for another hundred pages.

Zack glances at me for half a second before staring back at the front of the room. With my cheeks blazing, I'm about to tell him how frustrating yet exciting this book is because of the push-and-pull relationship between the hero and the heroine, but I snap my mouth shut. He doesn't care. Like I said, he's content with treating me like I'm wallpaper.

I focus back on my book, but Mrs. Cooper walks into the classroom. I internally groan. As much as I love school, it's nothing compared to reading my Regency romances. I don't drop it in my bag, though. I keep it in a safe spot on the table.

We have a lab assignment today, but luckily we can do it on our own. A part of me wonders—maybe hopes?—that Zack will ask if I'd like to collaborate with him, but of course he doesn't.

When his paper is only half-full, he pushes himself off his chair, swings his backpack over his shoulder, and marches up to the head of the room. Mrs. Cooper attempts to convince him to try to complete the assignment, but he tells her he's done and leaves the room. Mrs. Cooper purses her lips and shakes

her head as she stares down at his paper. Like she doesn't know what to do with him.

I finish my assignment and hand it in, then hurry back to my table and continue reading my book. Just another ninety-five pages until they kiss!

The bell rings far too soon, making me groan. I gather my things and leave toward history, trying to move as fast as possible so I can squeeze in some more reading. But someone blocks my path.

Looking up, I find one of Jared's basketball friends, Brody, glaring down at me. When I try to move to the left, he blocks my way. He does the same when I move to the right. "Excuse me," I say.

"No, you will *not* be excused," he grits out. "I'm off the team because of you."

I just stare at him. "W-what are you talking about?"

He laughs like I asked the most idiotic question on the planet. "What am I talking about? Because of that little stunt you pulled yesterday in history class, I flunked the test and now I'm off the team."

"But how is that my fault?"

He laughs that laugh again, holding his hands out toward the crowd that has gathered around us. Quite a *big* crowd. "How is it your fault?" he says. "The whole class agreed we would tell Mr. Alvarez we couldn't study for the test because of the party Malik threw Tuesday night! And what did you good-for-nothing-goody-two-shoes do? You told the teacher

you studied for the stupid test and that we lied about the math test. I knew we couldn't trust you."

My eyes widen. So that's what was happening during history class yesterday? No one told me about the agreement my classmates made. Obviously I wasn't invited to the party, and even more obvious is that they wouldn't run to tell the shy, invisible girl about their plans. How was I supposed to know about it if no one told me?

I hear Dani and Charlie's voices quite a distance away. I try to find them in the crowd, but there are so many people. It's like it quadrupled in size. Then I catch Charlie's red head as she tries to push through the crowd to get to me. But there are way too many people.

Turning back to Brody, I stammer, "I didn't mean—"

"You didn't care," he nearly spits. "And because of you, my life is ruined."

"No one told me..." I try to say, but he looks so furious I know nothing I say will calm him down or help him see reason.

Narrowing his eyes, he says, "You took something I love from me. Now I'm going to take something you love from you."

He snatches my book out of my hands.

"No!" I cry. "That's a very delicate book—"

"Shut up!" he snaps as he tears the book in half. "You're selfish. No wonder the only friends you have are your stupid books. Well, say goodbye to this one." He chucks it at me, where it hits me in the chest and goes splat on the floor, half of

it landing at my feet while the other half skids a few inches away, a few pages scattering around. Brody whirls around and storms away.

The students stare at me and whisper to one another. After a bit, they slowly start to disperse. With tears welling up in my eyes, I slide down against the wall until my butt hits the cold, tiled floor. I don't want to cry right here in the middle of the hallway, but he destroyed my most prized possession for no reason. The jerk didn't bother to hear my side of the story. I would never intentionally get someone booted off the basketball team. And my poor book...

"Ally!" Dani calls. She sounds so far away. "Excuse me! I need to get to my friend. *Move!*"

I wish I could disappear. Hop onto a Star Trek transporter, say, "Energize" and beam myself to anywhere I want. Millions and millions of miles away from here.

A shadow looms above me and then a palm appears before my face. "Wanna get out of here?"

I slowly lift my head and find Zack standing over me with his hand outstretched.

"W...what?" I whisper, the tears threatening to burst out of my eyes any second.

"You wanna get out of here?"

I glance down the hallway, where Dani, Charlie, and Kara are trying to push through the crowd of students hurrying to get to their next class. The bell will ring any minute for the next period. And for the first time in my life, I don't want to be sitting at my desk in a classroom.

“Yes,” I say, my voice hoarse. “Please. Anywhere but here.”

I place my hand in his and he pulls me up. He bends down and carefully gathers up my torn-up book and the loose pages. He turns to one of the lockers and quickly does his combination, yanking the door open and plucking out his helmet.

Then he nods toward the stairs that lead down to the basement and makes his way over there. I hurry after him, and together, we slip out the secret exit that no one is supposed to know about but everyone knows about anyway.

He takes hold of my arm and leads me toward the student parking lot, where his motorcycle is parked amongst the cars. He slips his backpack off his shoulder and tosses it down on the ground, rummaging inside until he pulls out a plastic bag holding photos. After transferring them to a folder, he gently places my book inside and hands it to me.

“Thanks,” I murmur as I zip open my backpack and carefully place the book inside. Then I look up at Zack, who stares at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

“Anywhere you want to go?” he asks.

“I, um...I never...”

“Cut class?” he says.

I nod.

He nods toward his bike. “Hop on.”

I stare at the thing with wide eyes. He expects me to...? I’ve never ridden on something like that before. I mean, sure I

read about this kind of stuff all the time in my romance novels and would fantasize what it would be like to ride behind a guy with my arms wrapped around his strong chest...

I shake my head. "I've never been on a motorcycle before," I say lamely.

"Didn't think so," he says as he moves closer to the bike. Then he glances at his helmet before looking at me. "I don't have a spare helmet."

"Oh..." I rub my arm. "I guess I'll just take the bus somewhere..." Oh my gosh, did I actually leave in the middle of school? Ally Bensen doesn't do things like that. She's always been a good girl who followed the rules and never got in trouble. But I need to get away from this place.

"You'll be fine as long as you hold onto me," Zack assures me. "I'd give you mine, but then we both might end up roadkill."

My eyes fly wide open. "No! You should definitely take the helmet."

He doesn't say anything as he pulls it over his head. Then he lifts the visor. "Hop on."

I face the contraption, taking it in like I've never seen a motorcycle before. Which I technically haven't, at least not up close like this. It looks much bigger than I imagined one would look, and it's pretty high off the ground. How exactly am I supposed to get on it with my short little legs?

I glance at Zack for a second before moving closer and lifting my leg to swing it over the side of the bike. Darn my

short little legs. I try again, but I can't swing my leg over the side.

"I'll give you a hand," he says as he moves closer to me. The little hairs all over my body stand on edge as Zack closes his hands on my waist. The next second, I'm lifted off the ground, and I swing my leg over the side. Zack doesn't let go until I'm securely on the bike.

"Thanks," I say.

He settles down in front of me, then turns around to look at me through the visor. "Wrap your arms around me. And hold on tight."

With a nod, I lift my arms. But they just remain raised in the air. Touch him?

He waits patiently for a short while before turning back around, giving me a confused face.

"Sorry," I mutter.

"Might be best we get away from here before someone sees us."

Right. That makes sense. Why is it such a big deal to wrap my arms around him? Maybe because I've never touched a guy before? I've never been in such close proximity to a guy before.

This isn't one of my romance novels. There's nothing romantic about this. Just two kids who are breaking the rules and are ditching school. I should have no problem wrapping my arms around his strong-looking chest.

He shifts in his seat like he's losing patience. Forcing all thoughts out of my mind, I lean forward and close my arms around his middle, immediately feeling the strong muscles of his back against me. Wow, is this how guys feel? So strong? I've read lots of descriptions of male bodies in my books, but I never imagined it would feel like this.

"Gotta hold on tighter if you don't want to be roadkill," he says.

Tighter? I thought I was holding tight enough. Any tighter and our bodies would practically be fused together.

"Ponytail, we really need to split from this place."

Did he just call me Ponytail?

Shaking my head, I toss that out of my head. Okay, wrap my arms tighter around his muscular body. Easy peasy.

I shut my eyes and do it. A second later, he revs the engine and we're on our way. A silent yell escapes my mouth at the sudden speed, and I quickly squeeze my arms around his body. Holy crap, I didn't expect it to go so fast!

Chapter Twenty-Three

Riding behind a guy on his motorcycle? One of the best experiences I've ever had in my life. Feeling the cool wind smack against my cheeks, blowing through my hair, the adrenaline pumping through me as we zoom down the streets. Talk about total freedom.

Now I finally understand why the women in my romance novels love it so much. It's a rush you can't feel anywhere else.

I have no idea where we're going, but Zack takes us further and further away from school, toward the opposite side of town. Further away from my home and familiar surroundings. We drive until the houses and buildings grow less and less and the woods come into view. He slows down near what looks like an opening to the woods and then kills the engine.

After climbing off the motorcycle, he yanks the helmet off his head, causing his medium-length hair to cascade down his face. He tucks it underneath his arm and holds his hand out to me. My heart is beating wildly in my chest from that exhilarating motorcycle ride, and my body is a little shaky. Raising my hand, I slide it into his waiting one and allow him to help me off the bike.

"Wow," I breathe.

He looks at me.

"That was incredible."

We stand near each other in silence. I survey the area. There's not much here, just the woods that seem to go on for miles. I don't think I've ever been here before.

I turn to Zack. "Why are we here?"

"This is where I come when I need to...get away," he says. "Come. There's something you might like to see."

He leads me into the woods, further away until we're quite deep inside. We don't say anything to each other as we continue our trek, the only sounds from the twigs snapping beneath our shoes and maybe some birds. It's a little chilly out here. Zack has his leather jacket on while mine is stuffed in my locker.

He must see the way my arms are crossed over my chest because a second later, he shrugs out of his jacket and holds it out to me.

"Oh...that's okay," I say. "I wouldn't want you to be cold."

"I'm not. Here, take it."

Okay, so this is a situation that could be a very epic moment between a couple in a romance novel. I always swoon when a guy gives his jacket to a girl. I always wonder if the guy isn't cold and doesn't mind giving it away, or if he really *is* cold but wants to be a gentleman. I'm pretty sure it's the latter. Which, *swoon*. But obviously Zack and I are not in a romance novel and we're not a couple—we're not even friends—so there's no need for him to give me his jacket when he's probably cold, too. His white T-shirt looks pretty thin.

"It's okay," I say again.

“You’re shivering,” he insists as he stretches the jacket toward me. “I wouldn’t want you to get sick.”

I stare down at it. “You sure you’re not cold?”

“Very.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I poke my arms through the sleeves and pull the jacket closer to my body, immediately getting engulfed by Zack’s scent. It smells...really nice. Very much like guy.

“Thanks,” I say. Then I smack my forehead. “Sorry. I already said thanks.”

He nods and continues on with the journey. I can’t help my eyes from traveling to his chest. I’ve never seen him without his jacket on. I always knew he’s pretty muscular—I certainly felt it when my arms were wrapped around him on his motorcycle—but sheesh, he’s ripped. If all those false rumors about him haven’t been circulating around school since his first day back, I guarantee girls would have gone crazy over him.

As if he feels me watching him, he stops walking and peers at me. I blink, quickly pulling my gaze away, my cheeks heating up.

“We’re almost there,” he tells me.

“I hope you don’t fall and roll down a hill and vanish from sight,” I say as I follow him. “Because then I’d be screwed.” My eyes widen when I realize what just came out of my mouth. “I m-mean, sorry, that was selfish. Of course I wouldn’t want you to get hurt. Not just because I need you to help me get back to civilization.”

I want to smack myself. Why do I always say the wrong thing when I'm in any sort of social situation? Shy Girl in all her glory.

For the first time, I see a ghost of what looks like a smile tease his lips. "That's okay. But don't worry, I don't plan on rolling down any hills and vanishing from sight. I know these woods like the back of my hand. I'll get you back to civilization in one piece."

I smile in relief that he's not mad at me for my comment. After the way things have been the last two days, it's a nice change.

"It's right around here," he says as he steps closer to a cliff.

My eyes nearly pop off my face. He's edging way too close to that cliff...

"Zack," I gasp.

"It's okay. Come, look."

A shiver runs down my spine. Tugging Zack's jacket closer to my body, I inch forward until I'm at his side. And then my breath gets knocked out of me. Because what I see before me is the most amazing sight I've ever laid eyes upon in my life. A gorgeous waterfall.

"Wow," I gasp as I soak it in. "It's beautiful. I didn't know it was here."

Zack shrugs. "Most people don't."

"How did you find out about it?"

He turns his head away. "My dad."

From the way his voice wobbles at the word “dad,” I know he’s carrying around a bucket full of heartache.

“Oh,” I say.

We stand side by side and watch the waterfall. Sometimes, it’s awesome to take a break from life and just take in nature. There are so many beautiful things out there to explore, but everyone is busy with their lives—or burying their noses in too many romance novels. I experience this kind of stuff all the time in my books, but experiencing it for real? Seeing the wonders of the world with my own eyes? Nothing can compare to that.

“Thanks for bringing me here,” I say with a smile.

He nods and steps away from the edge of the cliff, lowering himself on the ground and facing the waterfall. I hesitate for a second or two before joining him.

“You sure you don’t want your jacket back?” I ask when another shiver passes over me. “You’re probably so cold.”

He waves his hand. “I’m fine.”

We’re quiet, the only sounds coming from the waterfall and the rest of nature. I don’t know how much time passes, but it’s nice just sitting here and enjoying nature. It’s no wonder this is Zack’s special place—I can’t imagine any other place being more spectacular than this.

And then another sound fills the air. My phone that’s buzzing nonstop.

“Must be my friends,” I say. “They’re probably worried about me.”

“You should let them know you’re okay,” he says.

I slip my phone out of my bag and see that they’re all freaking out. After texting them that I’m okay, I tuck my phone back into my bag.

“You’ve got good friends,” he says. “It’s great that they’re looking out for you.”

“Yeah. They’re the best. I honestly don’t know what I’d do without them.”

We’re quiet again.

I turn to Zack. “I’ve wanted to say this to you over the last two days, but I...um...” I play with the end of my ponytail. “I’m sorry for thinking you’re, um...” I shift in my spot. “I mean, I’m sorry for believing the rumors. You’re right that I judged you without getting to know you. That wasn’t cool.”

He slowly moves his eyes to me. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, it wasn’t right and I want to apologize. I’m...” I lower my eyes to the ground. “I’m not like that.”

“I know,” he says. “And I’m the one who should be apologizing to you.”

My brows nearly fly to the sky. “What?”

He lifts his shoulders. “I know I don’t exactly give off the most welcoming vibe. I guess I could see why...you believed what they said.”

“Still, that’s no excuse to just assume the worst in someone.”

He stares at the waterfall. “I’m sorry for giving you the cold shoulder. I guess I...” He takes a deep breath and lets it

out. “I guess for the last two years, people have been treating me a certain way. Probably because of the way I present myself. Coming back to Edenbury, I thought...I don’t know, that things might be different. That maybe everyone would treat me like I was one of them.” He slowly moves his gaze to me. “You seemed different from the other kids at school. You and your friends...you just seem like the kind of people who know who you are and don’t try to change yourselves. You do whatever makes you happy and you don’t judge anyone for being themselves. So when...” He shifts and clears his throat. “On that first day back from break, when you...seemed afraid of me, I don’t know, I guess I realized things won’t be any different this time around.”

I can read the words hanging onto his tongue. *And that means I would be just as lonely.*

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to make you feel that way. I’m just so socially messed up. I’m so sensitive about everything and the smallest thing could give me a heart attack. Thinking I was sitting next to a murderer...that threw me over the edge. But that was wrong and I’m sorry.”

He laughs softly. “You apologized four times. And you’re not socially messed up.”

“Sorry.” I smack my forehead. “I mean, thanks.”

“Don’t feel bad about it,” he says. “It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks.”

Does he really mean that, though?

He doesn’t say anything else, just continues to stare at the breathtaking waterfall. I focus on it as well, and we sit in

silence, each of us buried in our thoughts. Then I turn to him again. “I owe you a thank you. Well, I owe you two. One for getting me out of school today and the other for sticking up for me to Jared the Jerk.”

“You don’t have to thank me. People like that need to know they can’t just treat other people that way.”

“But you deserve a thank you,” I insist. “Especially for saving me from Jared and his jerk buddies.” I roll my eyes as I play with my backpack strap. “I was such an idiot for telling him how I felt. If I would have just kept my big mouth shut, none of this would have happened. I would still be invisible and no one would know I exist.” I shake my head at myself. “Why didn’t I talk to him privately?” I mumble.

“You’re brave,” Zack says.

I gape at him. “What?”

He detaches his gaze from the waterfall and pins those sharp gray eyes on me. “I think you’re really brave.”

I can’t help the chuckle that escapes my lips. “Me, brave? I’m far, far from brave.”

He shakes his head. “You are. Walking up to the guy you have a crush on and telling him how you feel? And in public? That takes a lot of guts.”

My face flushes at his compliment. No one has ever called me brave before.

“I don’t have a crush on him anymore,” I quickly inform him, rolling my eyes again. “I don’t even know what I was thinking. He’s nothing like I thought he was. If I knew who he really was, I never would have done what I did.”

“Okay,” he says. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Nice people like you deserve someone much better than that.”

He thinks I’m nice? After the way I treated him?

“Thanks,” I say.

We’re quiet again.

Then, because I can’t help myself, I ask, “Why do you always look like...um...”

“Like I hate everyone?” he offers. His shoulders heave as he sighs. “It’s not that I hate everyone. I just hate the way they look at me. Like I’m...lower than dirt.”

“And I made you feel that way, too,” I say. “That’s why you looked like you wanted to hurt me on the first day back from winter break.”

His eyebrows dip. “Did I really give off that vibe?”

“I don’t know. I take everything to the extreme, so I’m not the best person to answer that question. But...” I shift my position. “The way you reacted after I...after I made a total idiot of myself and confessed my feelings to the biggest jerk in the world, you kind of looked like you wanted to hurt someone. Mainly me.”

“No, I wasn’t ticked-off at you. I was ticked off at him. And all the other jerks out there that are just like him.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a nice person who had the guts to tell someone you thought you liked how you felt. It must have been extremely hard for you to gather that courage. But you did. And instead of appreciating it, he...”

“Threw me down on my butt.”

“Exactly.” He shakes his head. “I hate people like that. People who treat others they feel are lower than them like crap. Everyone is human and everyone has feelings. Obviously he didn’t have to return your feelings, but he could have been nicer about it. And because of him, the last few weeks have been very rough on you.”

I hug myself. “Yeah. I thought things were looking up the last few days when everyone started treating me like I was invisible again, but then the jerk Brody...” The words get caught in my throat as the memory of what happened just an hour ago invades my mind. Fighting off tears, I say, “I just hope it dies down soon.”

“Me, too.”

Once again, we sit in silence. I feel like a load has been lifted off my chest. Talking about all of this is nice. I mean, I’ve spoken to my friends about it and they made me feel better, too, but having a small heart-to-heart with Zack feels really good. Which is weird because we’re not friends. Are we?

He reaches into his pants pocket for his phone and scans the screen. “It’s almost lunchtime. Think you’re ready to get back to school?”

I puff out my cheeks. “No, but we should get back. I don’t want to get in even more trouble.”

With a nod, he stands. I do, too, and then we make our way back out of the woods.

Once I’m seated behind him with my arms wrapped around his waist, he revs the engine and we zoom down the streets.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Ally, oh my gosh!” Dani leaps off her chair and yanks me into her arms, squeezing me so tightly my bones might crack. Charlie wraps her arms around both of us and then Kara throws hers around all three of us. If I didn’t appreciate this so much, I think I might die from all the pressure.

I catch some of the kids from surrounding cafeteria tables giving us funny looks. Some even whisper about me and Zack, who is making his way to the lunch line to get food. But I push that away. Like Zack said, it doesn’t matter what these people think.

His jacket is back on his body and no longer on mine. Honestly, I feel a little cold from the loss of it.

“We were so worried about you,” Kara says once I’m free. But then she pulls me into her arms again. “You disappeared with Zack and we didn’t know what happened to you.”

“Thanks for worrying about me, but I was fine. I’ll tell you all about it once I get some food.”

“Stay right here,” Dani says as she pushes me to a chair at our table. “Charlie and I will get you some lunch.”

“Thanks,” I say as she and Charlie scurry away. I smile at Kara. “You’re all being so sweet.”

“You mean the world to us,” she says.

“Thanks. You guys mean the world to me, too.”

Charlie and Dani return a few minutes later with a tray filled to the brim with food. I raise my brow at them. “Is that all for me?”

“For you and some for us, too,” Charlie admits as she lowers the tray to the table. “Honestly, none of us could eat while you were gone.”

Again, I’m so touched by how much they care about me. It causes tears to gather in my eyes. “That’s so sweet, guys. I didn’t mean to worry you. I just needed to get away.”

Dani puts her arm around me. “We get it. What that jerkwad did was horrible. Charlie gave him a piece of her mind, but I don’t think that did anything.”

I look at Charlie. “You didn’t have to do that. No use in him hating you, too.”

“I hate *him*,” she seethes. “Anyone who messes with my friends will have heck to pay.”

That makes me smile. “Thanks.”

We dig into our food and I tell them about the adventure I went on today. I’m not sure one hundred percent if it even happened. Zack and I had a talk. We shared some personal things with each other. It feels surreal.

“Wait, wait, wait! You rode on his motorcycle?!” Dani exclaims. “That must have been awesome.”

“It was! So much fun.”

She frowns. “I’ve always wanted to ride behind a guy on a bike. Maybe I should convince Easton to get one.”

“You know you can ride the bike,” Charlie points out.
“You don’t have to ride behind a guy.”

Dani gapes at her. “Awkward Girl handling a bike? Out there on the streets while innocent people go about their daily lives? That’ll only lead to disaster.”

We all laugh.

“I didn’t know a waterfall like that exists,” Kara says. “It must be so pretty.”

“It is,” I say with a smile. “One of the most amazing places I’ve ever seen.”

I glimpse at Zack’s table and find him eating while reading a book. His tray isn’t as full as it was in the past. Now that he’s getting a good meal at my place, he doesn’t have to compensate by stuffing himself during lunch.

“I apologized to Zack,” I tell my friends. “And I thanked him for all he’s done. I feel a lot better. And did you see how he collected my torn-up book? He took such good care of it. I think he loves reading as much as we do.”

We all turn to watch him.

“Why do you think he never joined book club?” Kara asks.

“It doesn’t seem like group activities is his thing,” Charlie observes.

I sensed at the waterfall that he wants to have a friend. Maybe not a huge group, but at least one. I don’t know if he wants to be friends with me, though. Maybe he and I could never be that.

The bell rings. Ugh, I barely had a chance to eat anything. I stuff as much food into my mouth as I can before throwing out my tray and leaving with my friends. We pass Zack's table on the way, where he's still eating while reading.

He slowly lifts his eyes to me. I send him a small smile. And he returns it before focusing back on his book.

As soon as I come home from school, I call out a greeting to Mom who's in the middle of preparing dinner and settle down in the living room with tape. I carefully take out the damaged book Zack put in the bag and lay it out on the coffee table. Tears poke my eyes when I take in the poor thing. To me, that jerk destroying a book is like murdering a person. How could he do something so awful to something so precious?

I've made quite a few repairs on this treasure over the years, but I never had to do such extreme surgery before. After making sure I have every single page, I put everything in order and get to work. The only thing that runs around in my head is the memory of the freakin' jerk tearing it apart like it meant nothing. Doesn't he have any respect for books? What a monster.

You know something? I'm glad he's off the basketball team. I might have felt responsible and guilty before, but not anymore. I hope he stays off the team and never plays for a college or professional team, and that he has a miserable life where he works a crappy job with one of us invisible girls as his boss. Maybe Charlie. Yeah, she would totally make his life miserable.

The front door opens and someone walks in. I'm concentrating hard on making sure the pages are even as I tape them together, so I can't look up to see who it is. But I know it's Zack. I feel him standing at the entranceway to the living room, probably watching me as I gently and lovingly paste back together something that helped me get through the days the past six years. There are even some tear stains on some of the pages from when I was in middle school and the kids were picking on me. Just for being me.

Once the pages are perfectly in place, I look up at Zack.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi."

He nods toward the book. "You're fixing it."

"Yeah. Just two more left and it should be good to go. Thanks again for gathering all the pages and putting them in that bag. I don't think it would have survived otherwise."

"The death of a book is the death of a soul."

My eyes snap to his. That's exactly how I feel!

"Need help?" he asks.

I stare down at one of the pages that is bent and has a small tear. "Actually, yeah. That would be great, thanks."

He sets his backpack and helmet on the couch and walks over to me, getting down on his knees before the coffee table.

"Hold these in place, please," I say, and he does as I ask. I tape the pages to the rest of the book, then work on the tear. The way Zack's fingers gently press down on the book...it's just as lovingly as I did.

“Thanks,” I say when we’re done. “That was a successful surgery.”

“Almost as good as new. Now you can continue reading it.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“It’s so precious to me. I don’t want anything to happen to it. I’ll keep it in a warm and safe place.” I stand and smile at him. “Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome.”

I go to my room and carefully place it in my night table drawer, trying not to sigh. But even if I can’t read it anymore, the story and characters will remain in my heart forever.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I read through my bio notes as I wait for the first period bell to ring. A few kids glance my way, some whisper, but for the most part they're treating me like I'm invisible. Zack still hasn't arrived yet.

"Just on time, Mr. Hastings," Mrs. Cooper says as Zack slips past her in the doorway. He makes his way to the back of the room, dumping his backpack on the floor and plopping down next to me.

"Hi," I say.

He places his textbook on the table. "Hey. You good? Anyone giving you crap?"

"Oh, um. Yeah, I'm okay. No more books were thrown at me today," I say with an awkward laugh.

He nods once.

Mrs. Cooper starts the lesson and for the first time, I don't feel any coldness from Zack. No stay-away-from-me vibes. It's just me and him—two lab partners fervently taking notes.

Zack's eyes move to mine and his forehead dips, like he's trying to figure out why I'm staring at him. Clearing my throat, I look away.

The day carries on like usual. Luckily, I make it through my classes with no problems. Brody doesn't start up with me again, though he's still pretty ticked-off about being booted from the team. But the only one to blame is himself. He

partied when he should have been studying and needs to live with the consequences.

Charlie drops me off at my house after school. Kara and Dani are going out with their boyfriends tonight, and Charlie has a ton of kids' homework she needs to get done. It looks like it'll just be me and my books and movies on this Friday night.

Amanda and Mom are in Mom's room when I enter the house. Mom and Dad are going out on a romantic date tonight and she called in the expert to ask her opinion on what to wear. She wants to knock my dad off his feet. Dad's been working hard trying to find a new home for Zack, so this date will help my parents reconnect.

Mom holds up two dresses in front of my sister. "What do you think?"

"Hi," I greet them, sitting on the bed. "Is Dad home?"

Mom shakes her head. "Still at work. He'll meet me at the restaurant."

"And Zack?"

"At work, I believe."

I think back to our encounter in the supermarket, and once again I wonder about his life. Is that why he falls asleep during class sometimes? Because he works so hard?

"How's the kid anyway?" Amanda asks as she rummages in Mom's closet for more dresses. "I heard he has some issues."

Issues? What is she...no. No more listening to rumors. I want to get to know the real Zack.

Mom sighs. "I don't know where people are getting their information from, but the boy is a good boy. He's had some hardships in his life, but with your dad's help, he'll overcome them. Right now, the focus is finding him a new home, preferably with his brother. Those two are inseparable. The poor dears."

"What do you know about his brother?" I ask before I can stop myself.

Mom turns to me, lifting her hands. "You know your dad can't tell us all the details, but from what I know, the boy is sweet. The home he's currently living in treats him well. But all he wants is to live with his brother."

"And that's not possible?" I ask.

Mom shrugs helplessly. "It's been a little difficult finding a family willing to take in both children."

"What about their relatives?"

Mom shakes her head. "No more questions." She faces Amanda, who's holding up a golden dress. Her eyes widen. "That won't fit me. I'm not twenty years old!"

Amanda waves her hand. "Sure you will. Just try it on!"

As Mom gets ready, I do some homework, then sit on the living room couch with a new book, this one a romantic comedy that's so romantic I'm going to die. Once Mom's dressed and caked up with just the right amount of makeup that makes her look like a model, she wishes me and Amanda goodbye.

“Have fun!” I call after her.

“And don’t get in trouble!” Amanda jokes as Mom shuts the door behind her.

The room is dead silent. I continue reading my book while my sister stares at the blank TV screen.

She scoots closer to me. “So tell me how it’s going with boys.”

My head snaps up to hers. “What boys?”

She rolls her eyes. “Come on, you might not like dressing up, but you’re a girl with a heart and a brain. I’m sure you have a crush on someone.”

I want to laugh out loud. Sure, a crush. She has no idea what happened the last time I had a crush on someone. And like I told Zack yesterday, my life would be ten times easier if I had just kept my mouth shut.

“I don’t have a crush on anyone,” I tell her.

She rolls her eyes again. “You’re sixteen and there are lots of hot guys in your school. I remember when I was a senior and thought some of the freshmen and sophomores were pretty cute. I wished I was younger so I could date them.”

I give her a look. “Life isn’t all about boys.”

“But is it all about homework?” She taps my book. “Or books? When are you going to experience things for real instead of imagining them? I mean, stories are just words on paper. Nothing substantial.”

I gasp as I hug my book to my chest. “Don’t listen to her,” I whisper to my book. “She doesn’t appreciate the beauty of

words on paper. How they can make you feel all kinds of things you've never felt before."

"Yeah? Well, you know what really makes you feel things you've never felt before? Experiencing them in real life. Like a first kiss. Do you even know what that feels like?"

My cheeks heat up. "No, but I can imagine—"

"Imagining and experiencing are two very, very different things. If you'd just let yourself live...pull your head out of your books. Go out and see the world. "

I did see the world. Yesterday with Zack. Sort of. But... kissing a guy? Yeah, that'll never happen to the Shy Girl. "I'm good." I resume reading.

"It's just a shame," she goes on. "You're missing out on so much. There are so many guys out there, and if you'd just let ___"

I look up. "I don't need a guy to make me happy!"

She holds out her hands. "Fine, fine. I didn't say anything." She stands. "Alex is waiting for me. We're going out." She moves to the door, then turns to face me. "I really hope it happens to you someday, little sis. Because there's nothing else quite like it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Falling in love."

I furrow my brows. "You love Alejandro?"

She smiles. "I do. I really do. And I wish you'll one day find someone who will love you the way you deserve. 'Night, sis."

She leaves, shutting the door behind her. I stare after it, her words galloping around in my head. Then I shrug and continue reading because I know that'll never happen.

While I'm sucked in the pages, Charlie calls and we chat for a little break. She tells me how she's sabotaging a few kids' papers because they were treating her like their slave, and I can't help but giggle. Then we hang up and I near the end of the story, where the characters declare their undying love for each other. It's so beautiful, I read it three more times.

The door opens and Zack walks in, his helmet in one hand and backpack in the other.

"Hi," I greet.

"Hi.

"How was work?"

"Was fine. That book any good?"

"Very good."

"Enjoy."

"Thanks."

He nods and goes up to his room.

The house is so quiet, it's like no one's living here. I read that last chapter another time before deciding I need a break from reading and search for something to watch on Netflix. I settle on something a little different, a thriller that everyone at school was talking about.

Footsteps sound on the ceiling. I'm right under Zack's room. He's all alone up there, with no one to talk to. It's so... sad.

Slipping off the couch, I get to my feet and climb the stairs to the second floor. Zack's door is closed, but I can hear music bouncing off the walls.

I knock, but there's no answer. Did he fall asleep? Or is he maybe purposely ignoring me? I thought we were past that.

The door swings open, the music bursting out of the room and taking residence in my ears. "Wow," I blurt, flinching.

Zack looks at me with a raised brow. "Is the music too loud?"

"No. I mean, maybe a little, but that's not why I came here. Um...are you busy?"

Now both eyebrows lift. "Just chilling in my room with this." He holds up a fantasy novel. "Why?"

"I was watching a movie on Netflix and was wondering if maybe you want to watch it with me? It's the one everyone's talking about. You know, the one with killer acting and crazy action scenes that keep you on your toes. But there's also a huge romance subplot that..." I press my lips together. He doesn't want to hear me gush about the romance.

He watches me for a little bit, then shrugs. "Sure."

"Really? I mean, cool."

He shuts the music, then closes the door, following me down the stairs. He still clutches his book, almost like it brings him comfort. I didn't realize it before, but it's a little worn out. Maybe he's had that book for years.

In the living room, we sit down on the couch. Zack's so close to me that if I would move an inch, my leg would brush

his.

He looks down at the tiny space between us, then at me like he's trying to figure out what's going on in my mind. Well, he's not the only one. I have no idea what he's thinking.

He scoots over a little, widening the gap and I want to slap my forehead. What's wrong with me? Because I've never sat close to a guy before? We rode on his motorcycle. I was way, way close to him then.

"Um..." I play with my ponytail. "I'll rewind so you can watch from the beginning."

I pick up the remote, but he places his hand on mine. "No, need Ponytail. It's fine."

I wasn't sure if I heard him correctly the first time he called me that, but now I'm a hundred percent sure he did.

"Ponytail?" I ask.

He looks at me. "What about it?"

"You just called me Ponytail."

He eyes my hair. "You always wear ponytails."

"My name is Ally."

"I know. Does it bother you that I call you Ponytail?"

I should probably be offended, but oddly I'm not. And I don't know why.

"It's fine," I tell him.

We watch the movie, bending forward at the suspenseful parts, laughing at the few comedic scenes, and I find tears

pricking my eyes when the guy loses the girl he loves at the end of the movie.

“Darn it,” I mutter as I wipe the corner of my eyes. “Why do they always do that?”

He turns to me with creased brows. “Do what?”

I throw my hands up. “Kill the woman he loves. I mean, I know it’s not a romance movie, but still. We’re invested in these characters, want them to have a happily ever after, and then they just kill her?”

His eyes grow a little hard as he stares at the Netflix menu screen. “That’s life,” he says in an empty tone. “People we love leave us.”

I stare at him, at the slight tremble in his shoulders, the way he grips his book like it’s a safety blanket. Is he referring to his parents? Did they...?

He gets to his feet. “Want anything from the kitchen?”

I stand, too. “Mom left dinner for us in the oven. Lasagna. She borrowed Dani’s mom’s recipe. It’s so freakin’ good.”

He just looks at me. “Sounds like you love food.”

My cheeks redden. “Who doesn’t? But I’m crazy about Mrs. Woods’s food. I used to count down the minutes until lunch when she worked at our school. So yum.”

He turns toward the kitchen and I follow him inside, telling him to sit at the table while I fetch the food.

As soon as I open the oven, the wonderful aroma fills my nostrils and my mouth waters. “Smells amazing!” I set it down on the table, grab some plates, and place a large helping of

lasagna on his plate. I do the same for myself, then sit down and take a bite.

It's delicious, but it's missing a little bit of something. Maybe Mrs. Wood's touch? It's still so good I stuff my face. Zack is also stuffing his face, but he's not as excited about it as I am. He stares off in the distance, like something weighs heavily on his mind. Does it have anything to do with what he said about death a few minutes ago?

When he breaks out of his daze and looks at me, I glance away. Was I staring at him?

After taking another bite, I smile shyly at him. "So you like to read, huh?"

He stabs his fork into a noodle. "Yeah."

"Do you know my friends and I have a book club? It'd be awesome if you'd join. It's just us four, because I guess no one at school likes to read, but we'd love to have you."

He mulls it over and takes another bite, washing it down with Coke. "Can't, need to work."

Oh, right. "Do you work every day?"

"Yeah."

"That sucks. I'm sorry you have to work so hard."

He shrugs but doesn't say anything.

The table is quiet except for our forks scraping against our plates as we continue eating this awesome lasagna that I wish would last forever.

"That book on the couch...it seems really old," I say a few minutes later. "Does it have a special meaning to you?"

“Yeah.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn't. We eat for another few minutes in silence before he says in such a low voice I have a hard time hearing him, “Was my dad's.” And he leaves it at that.

Normally I'm okay with silence, but for some reason, it's bothering me right now. Maybe because I'm not used to someone else being quieter than me and I feel like I have to hold the conversation, which is so not what I'm used to.

I shift in my seat. “We have a huge collection of books in our home library,” I tell him. “Like a crazy amount because I can't help but buy a book almost every time I leave the house. So feel free to grab whatever you want. Though they're mostly romance.” I laugh awkwardly. “But you know my favorite? The one the jerk tore apart? I love it because...” And I gush about the plot and everything about it that makes me swoon like crazy. The words tumble out of my mouth, and it's not until I notice the surprised look on his face that I realize I'm rambling.

“Sorry.” I play around with some cheese.

He shakes his head. “No. I never heard anyone talk about books like that.”

I laugh shyly. “That's how we roll in book club. We don't shut up about books.”

Quiet again.

“Why do you like to read?” I ask. “I mean, I don't know many guys who spend their free time reading. Did you always enjoy it?”

He nods. “Since I can remember. My parents loved reading, so I guess they passed that onto me.”

I smile. “That’s great. Unfortunately neither of my parents are obsessed with books like I am. And my sister Amanda wouldn’t be caught dead with a book. I remember when she was in high school and begged me to write her report on *Tom Sawyer*. I flat-out told her no. You know what she did?”

He lifts a brow. “What?”

I snort. “She asked Charlie to write it for her instead.”

“Your friend?”

“Yeah. She does other kids’ homework. I’m sure you’ve seen her running around returning assignments during lunch.”

We’re quiet again. I tell him some of my other favorite books and recommend some we have in the house. There are a few fantasy novels here and there.

“And maybe after you read them, we can discuss them,” I go on. “We can have our mini book club in the house!” My hands shoot to my hair. “Or maybe that’s dumb.”

He shakes his head. “No, not at all. Sounds neat. I don’t have anyone to discuss books with.”

I smile. “Cool.”

Quiet yet again.

“I sneak in some reading during my breaks at work,” he informs me. “Ticks my boss off, but...” He shrugs.

“I know what you mean. You *need* to continue reading or you’ll lose your mind.”

“Even if it’s a book you’ve read a million times.”

“Yes!” I laugh. “And when someone next to you is reading a book, you *have* to know what the title is.”

He lifts a brow. “Like what you did during detention?”

My cheeks grow a little warm. “Oh, you noticed that...”

“Kind of obvious.”

I play with my ponytail. “You get detention a lot...It’s another reason why I thought you were...you know...”

“A criminal?”

I puff out my cheeks. “I suck.”

“It’s fine. No, I don’t get detention because I’m bad, or at least I try not to be.” He shrugs again. “Fell asleep during class more times than I can count.”

“But why? Is it because of work?”

He tilts his head to the side, squinting. “Not really. I had trouble sleeping.”

“You couldn’t sleep? Sorry if I’m being nosy.”

From the look on his face, I know I *am* being nosy, but he doesn’t seem to mind. Why do I get the feeling he normally would, though? Maybe because we’re having another kind of heart-to-heart.

He inhales softly, then releases it. “I never slept well in my previous foster home. I was always on alert, worried they’d throw me out or call the cops on me. Or maybe their son Travis would pounce on me.”

My eyes widen. “Really? I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah...and my little brother is constantly on my mind. Is his foster family treating him right? Is he happy?”

“But your sleeping has gotten better, hasn’t it? As far as I know, you haven’t gotten detention lately.”

He shakes his head. “Not since I moved here. I had my first good night’s sleep that first night.”

“Even after I accused you of being a murderer?”

“Even then. I knew no one would harm me here, and your dad...he’s been great to me. He cares.”

I smile. “That’s my dad. Works extra hard to help kids live a good, happy life.”

He nods. “He’s trying to find a home for me and Zane.”

“Your brother’s really cute. And he looks just like you. I noticed at Bailey’s party that he likes to read, too.”

“He does.”

“That’s amazing. I love kids who like to read, you know? Kids are always so busy with their phones and devices, so I’m glad to see there’s hope for future book lovers like us.”

His lips lift in a small smile.

We’re both done with our food, but we remain at the table, discussing more of our favorite books and authors. Well, I’m doing most of the talking, which oddly doesn’t feel as anxious or awkward as I thought it would. It’s strange because this is so not like me. It takes me a while to get comfortable talking to a person.

But not with Zack.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Zack

Zane rushes out the front door, into my arms, squeezing me tight. Sandra stands in the doorway, and I ignore the negative vibes she sends my way.

“Hey.” I squeeze him back. “Missed you.”

He smiles up at me. “Missed you more.”

“Never, little man.”

Zane giggles.

“Have him home within two hours,” Sandra reminds me for what must be the millionth time. “And don’t think of putting him on that motorcycle of yours.”

Zane slips his hand in mine, then waves at Sandra. She nods and shuts the door. Zane frowns. “Why doesn’t she like you?”

I shrug. “Not sure, bro.” I get down on my knees to look into his eyes. “They treating you well?”

He groans.

I put my hands on his shoulders. “It’s important, Zane. Are they treating you well?”

He nods, eyes cast downward.

“What’s wrong? Did someone hurt you?”

He shakes his head, but doesn't say anything. I squeeze his shoulders. "Come on, you know you can tell me anything."

He slowly looks up. "It's stupid."

"Nothing you say is stupid."

His chest heaves. "The kids never let me play Xbox. Everyone fights for it and I don't get a chance."

"Did you tell Sandra?"

He shrugs. "Sandra says we need to share, but I only get, like, half an hour."

I get to my feet. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"You want to play Xbox? We'll go play Xbox."

His eyes widen. "You're gonna buy me a console?"

I wish I could do that for him, but there's no way I can afford that. "No, but you'll see."

The mall is a little far from his house, so we take the bus there. As soon as we step off, his eyes widen as he takes in all the stores. It's the only mall in Edenbury.

I direct him to the game store, where his eyes widen even more. "So many games," he breathes.

And I wish I could buy them all for him. I've started putting some money aside for those ice cream cakes again and hope to buy them for Zane soon.

I point toward the back of the store, where they've got consoles the customers could try out. As soon as Zane sees them, he runs there and stares at them. The guy has never been

to a game store before in his life. I'm not much of a gamer, so I never took him.

He turns to me, eyes bright. "Can we play, Zack?"

I hand him one of the controllers and take the other. It's a football game, which Zane seems very excited about. I have no idea what I'm doing and my brother needs to explain the rules of the game.

"Didn't know you were into football," I say as our team tries to win.

He shrugs. "Nathan watches football all the time and the kids sometimes watch with him. It's fun." Nathan is Sandra's husband. I barely know the man, but he's kind to my brother. He doesn't hate me like his wife does.

This is fun and I find myself laughing more than I've laughed in a long time. When we've had enough, we move to another console where a different game is loaded. A shooter game. Zane completely demolishes me.

He lifts his hands over his head. "Loser!"

I playfully grab him, holding him close to me. "Who you calling a loser?"

He thrashes as I tickle him, begging me to stop. I let him go and he runs around the store. As I chase after him, I spot the workers and a few customers scowling at us.

Taking two long strides to catch up with Zane, I pull him to me. "This isn't the best place to run, buddy."

He takes in the expression on everyone's face and nods. "Sorry."

“No biggie. You want to play some more?”

He nods and we move to another console, playing for a little while longer. At the back of my mind, I know time’s ticking and I only have about an hour left with my brother.

“Some of the other kids were making fun of me because I was reading,” he says as he pounds the buttons on his controller.

I stop, turning to him. “They gave you crap because you like to read?”

He shrugs. “But I don’t care what they say.”

Grinning, I hold out my fist for him to bump. “Good.”

I think back to what Ally said yesterday, about kids being the future and how she wishes they’d love to read. And when she gushed about the books she loves? Her entire face lit up. I’ve never seen anyone as excited about anything like she was. I liked hearing her thoughts, found myself drinking in her words like they were water. She’s very easy to talk to, and she’s a great listener. We actually sat at the kitchen table talking for over an hour. I’ve never done anything like that before. If I’m being honest with myself, I wouldn’t mind it happening again.

When we’re done with the games, we grab some smoothies from the nearby fruit bar and stroll around the mall. Zane tells me about his day and I talk about my new home. He doesn’t know the details of what happened at my former foster home, but knows I’m in a much better place now.

As he’s chatting about something he saw on TV, something in the window of a sporting goods store catches my attention.

Helmets. I stop walking and take them in, and the next second, I enter the store and head straight to the helmets. Zane follows me.

Picking up one of the helmets, I think back to Ponytail... Ally wrapping her arms around my waist the other day. No girl has ever ridden on my bike before and it felt... nice. When I sped up, her arms squeezed around me, her scent filling my nostrils. And I could feel how excited she was, the adrenaline that must have been pumping through her. I had the same feeling the first time I rode my bike.

I didn't like that Ally rode without a helmet. I'd never want to put her life in danger. She'll need one for when we...

"Is that for me?" Zane bounces on his feet as he points to the black helmet in my hands. "For when I grow up?"

I examine it like I'm seeing it for the first time. Then I shake my head, laughing at how ridiculous I am. Buying Ally a helmet? Assuming she'll get on my bike again?

"Moron," I mutter under my breath.

Zane bounces again.

"Yeah," I lie as I take the helmet to the checkout counter and pay. Zane slips his hand in mine, knowing we only have a few minutes left before I need to take him home.

I clutch the bag with the helmet tightly in my other hand, worried for some silly reason that I'll lose it in the crowd of people. Then I once again shake my head at how ridiculous and impulsive I was for buying it.

Seriously, what was I thinking?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

People claim that the more you do something that scares you, the less scared you'll be. But they've never met Ally Bensen.

I can't count how many concerts I've been part of throughout my life, but standing there on stage in front of everyone—and in the first row because I'm one of the shortest in the choir—always makes me feel like I'll puke my brains out. It makes a part of me want to run away and hide in the bathroom. But the other part of me loves to sing and can't wait to stand up there with the rest of the choir and just sing. Let go of everything and allow the music to enter my soul.

There's chaos backstage as everyone gets ready. One girl's costume doesn't fit because she lost a ton of weight and it hangs off her body like a potato sack. A boy has literally shot up to the height of a tree the last two weeks and Ms. Mehta is trying to reassign where everyone stands, while in the middle of altering the girl's costume. I crack my knuckles as I pace around, wishing it would start already. I hear voices coming from the auditorium, which only raises my anxiety levels. In only a short while, all their eyes will be pinned on me. Well, not just on *me*, but it will feel like it.

Some of the girls are applying some last-minute makeup. Amanda usually did my hair and makeup before a concert, but since she's living in her own apartment now, Mom offered to do it. She's not as good as my sister, but I think she did a pretty good job. Not that I like makeup, but it's kind of a

requirement when you're up there on the stage with bright lights shining in your face.

Destiny is warming up on the side. She has more solos than anyone else in the choir because she has such a beautiful voice. I think some kids and teachers from school come to watch the concert just because of her. It must feel amazing to have such a great talent and share it with the world. I wish I was talented at something, other than school. Wish there was something I could share with the world.

“Five minutes!” Ms. Mehta announces. “Five minutes, everyone!”

“But my costume still looks awful,” the girl complains.

“We have no choice.” Ms. Mehta rubs her arm. “You look fine. Everyone, places!”

The choir gathers on stage behind the curtain. This concert won't be featuring the orchestra because we only collaborate with them once every semester. I love when we sing together with the orchestra because it sounds like a professional performance. And also because the members of the orchestra are very talented and they work so hard.

The announcer announces that the concert is about to begin, and a hush falls over the choir members and the audience. My heart is about to catapult out of my chest and every part of me shakes. Am I ever *not* going to feel this nervous? But I once read somewhere that it's good to feel nervous because it shows you care. Well, I must care *a lot* because I think I'm going to puke.

The curtain starts to lift, and little by little faces appear in my vision. Since I'm in the first row, smack in the middle of the choir, I can see everyone. It's a little hard to make out their faces at first because of the bright lights, but then I see my mom in one of the middle rows, who smiles proudly at me. Dad winks and Amanda, sitting next to her boyfriend, claps.

And then I nearly tumble off the stage. Because the person sitting on the other side of my mom is Zack.

Are my eyes playing tricks on me? What's he doing here? I didn't think he would be into this.

"Yeah!" Dani calls from the row behind my family, where she sits with Easton, Charlie, Kara, and Brayden. "Go, Ally!"

I can't help but smile. You're not really supposed to cheer until after the songs end or after a solo, but she doesn't care. It means so much that my friends come to every performance, but my eyes keep darting to the guy sitting in front of Charlie. Why did he come? I don't think anyone forced him.

Ms. Mehta plays the music and we start to sing. My eyes flit to Zack every so often, wondering if he's enjoying himself. He's kind of just sitting there without much of an expression on his face. There's one thing I can't deny, though—that his eyes are focused on me most of the time.

Destiny is the first to have a solo. I can't see her face because her back faces us, but I can picture the peace and serenity she has on her face when she belts out the lyrics. Like the music touches her soul. I feel like that whenever I sing, too. Music heals everything, just like books.

I just wish...I wish I were confident enough to stand up there like Destiny and sing my heart out.

When her solo is done, the audience erupts in cheers.

My eyes once again crawl over to Zack, who is sitting forward in his seat with his eyes fixated on me. Why have I gotten ten times more nervous all of a sudden?

Glancing at my friends relaxes me a little. We sing the next three songs, and then the concert is over. A mountain of relief crashes over me as the curtain is lowered and we go backstage.

I grab my jacket, shrug it on, and go out to meet everyone. The parents rush over to their kids, informing them what an amazing performance we put on. My parents are no different. This is one of the times in my life where I know they're proud of me. Not disappointed by how shy and insecure I am, or that I'd rather lock myself in my room with my books than go out. It feels really good.

"Great job, sis," Amanda says.

Alejandro smiles. "It was more enjoyable than I thought it'd be."

"Thanks."

"Ally, you were awesome!" Dani flings her arms around me. "The choir sounded so pretty."

"I never heard that song sung like that," Kara says as she takes me in her arms. "I loved it."

Then I'm in Charlie's arms, then Easton's, and then Brayden's. "You looked amazing up there," they say.

"Thanks, guys."

Stepping out of the last hug, I come face to face with Zack. His eyes remain pasted on me for a few seconds before he offers me a smile. “It was great.”

My face heats up. “Thanks.”

I say goodbye to my friends and Amanda and her boyfriend, and follow my parents to our car parked in the lot. Once we’re buckled up, Dad drives us home. Zack is sitting on his side of the car and I’m on the opposite side, but he’s so tall it feels like we’re much closer.

My parents discuss various things, but the back of the car is quiet. Again, I don’t mind the silence, but I wish Zack and I could talk about something. I really like talking to him.

“Um,” I say.

He turns to me. “Yeah?”

“Nothing,” I quickly say, twisting my head away from him and peering out the window.

“Your parents asked me if I wanted to come,” he says. “I’m glad I did.”

I turn back around. “I wondered if you were forced or didn’t have anything better to do on a Saturday night.”

“Forced?”

“Not forced,” I hurriedly correct, internally smacking myself. I don’t know why I said that. Why am I so nervous around him?

We’re both quiet again.

I wish I could say something to alleviate the awkwardness that was caused by my stupid mouth, but I can’t think of

anything to say. Then I blurt, “Are you going to come to the next one?”

“There’ll be a next one?”

“Yeah, with the school’s orchestra. It sounds amazing when we collab with them.”

“Sounds cool. I hope I can make it.” He lowers his eyes to his knees. “I hope Zane and I will be living together in a great foster home by then.”

It must be awful to carry that worry around every day. I wish I knew what to say to make him feel better. But he gives me a smile, letting me know he’s okay. I return it.

When we get home, Zack and I wish our parents good night before making our way upstairs. We walk down the hallway together until he stops before his room.

“You were great,” he says with another smile. “Good night, Ponytail.”

“Good night, Helmet Face.”

His brows disappear into his hairline. “Helmet Face?”

“Ugh. It’s a work in progress.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to seeing what you come up with. Good night again.” He opens the door and vanishes inside.

I smile to myself as I enter mine.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“I think we need to double date again,” Kara says by lunch, where we’re all gathered at our table with Easton and Brayden. “The last time was so much fun. And Charlie and Ally can join us, too. Maybe we can do something more casual, like bowling.”

“Yeah!” Dani agrees.

Kara says something, but it floats past my ears because I’m distracted by Zack who has just walked into the cafeteria. He marches up to the lunch line and gets food, then sits down at his lonely table.

“What are you talking about?” Brayden says to Kara. “The article was great. Written well and you brought up important points.”

“The paper came out already?” Charlie asks.

Kara shakes her head. “Later this week. Bray might have taken a peek at it.”

His brows lift. “A peek? If I recall correctly, a certain girlfriend of mine whom I love begged me to read it because she felt a little overwhelmed about writing about a very important topic.”

Kara folds her arms across her chest. “I didn’t beg. I bribed you with cookies.”

“I would call that begging.”

“Sounds like a bribe to me,” Easton says.

“I agree,” Dani says with a laugh.

“I thought no one is allowed to read any of the articles before the paper is out,” Charlie says. “Martina holds you all to that rule with an iron fist.”

Kara’s eyes widen and Brayden freezes.

Dani giggles. “So busted!”

“Kara and I are one,” Brayden says. “Letting me read it was like letting herself read it.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that would hold in court,” Charlie says with a smile.

“That was so sweet,” I say. “So romantic.”

Kara beams. “It was, right?” She snuggles closer to Brayden. “I love being Kayden.”

“Me, too.”

My eyes skip over to Zack. He’s still sitting alone reading a book. Well, of course he’s alone—no one seems interested in being his friend. Not even friendly.

Well...almost no one. I want to be his friend. It hurts my heart to see him sitting by himself like that. Not too long ago, I was just like him, eating my lunch in the bathroom because it sucked to sit all alone at an empty table.

“Guys?” I say.

They stop talking and look at me.

“You mind if I invite Zack to join us? He’s sitting all alone at his table.”

They turn around to peer at him.

“Sucks,” Dani says as she twists back around. “Yeah, you should ask him. We’re all good with that, right?”

Everyone else nods.

I smile as I get up. “Thanks. Be right back.”

I make my way to Zack’s table, starting to prepare what I’ll say like I always do when I’m about to start up a conversation with someone. But I need to stop doing that. Some things shouldn’t be rehearsed—they should come from the heart.

Zack must be way absorbed in his book because he doesn’t hear me approach. I clear my throat, which makes his head snap up, his face lighting up with surprise.

“Hi,” I say, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind my ear.

“Hi.”

I rub my arm. “So, I was wondering if you’d like to join me and my friends.” I gesture to our table, where every single one of them is staring at us. They quickly turn around and pretend to be talking.

“Thanks for the offer,” he says as he lifts his spoon and mixes his soup. “But I’m good.”

My heart falls to my toes. “Oh...maybe another time.”

I turn around and walk back to my table, my mind not even here as I lower myself back in my chair.

“What happened?” Dani asks. “Is he coming?”

I shake my head. Why does his rejection hurt so much? I thought he and I...well, after the movie and the concert and

the waterfall and the heart-to-hearts, I thought we were friends. Or at least friendly.

Kara frowns. “Does he hate us?”

“Doubt it,” Charlie says. “Some people just like being alone. Nothing wrong with that.”

“But he doesn’t want to be alone,” I say. “I know he doesn’t.”

“Maybe he’s just shy?” Dani offers.

“Maybe.”

They continue talking about other things, but I can’t concentrate on anything other than Zack sitting alone at his table.

I stand with my tray. “I’m going to join him,” I tell them. “I can’t bear him being alone.”

“Okay,” Kara says while the others nod.

This time, he hears me approach because his head lifts as soon as I reach his table. “Is it okay if I sit here?” I ask.

There’s nothing but confusion on his face. “Okay.”

“Soup’s great, huh?” I ask as I sit down, even though that’s a lie. It tastes like water and salt.

“Not really.”

“Yeah,” I say lamely. “I just didn’t know what to say.”

We look at each other in silence. I shift in my seat. Zack closes his book, but he doesn’t say anything.

“So, um...”

“Why aren’t you sitting with your friends?” he asks, eyes trekking in their direction. I follow his gaze and find all five of them watching us. They quickly turn around.

“Sorry they keep staring,” I say with flushed cheeks. “We’re all silent observers. It kind of comes with the territory of being invisible.”

“Invisible?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“You’re not invisible to me. None of you are.”

Why does that make a warm feeling pass through me?

“Oh...thanks.”

“Why aren’t you with them?” he asks again.

“Because I...well...” I stammer, trying to come up with an excuse that would make sense. Then I shake my head and take a deep breath. “I came here because I wanted to sit with you.”

Wow, I can’t believe I actually admitted that to him. Maybe Zack’s right and I’m braver than I thought.

His face washes with surprise. Then his brows crease. “Don’t bother. I’m not good company.” He focuses back on his tasteless soup.

“I think you are.”

He looks up. Then he takes a sip of his soup, makes a face, and takes another. “Thanks.”

“Everyone has something to offer,” I find myself saying. “Everyone has value.” I cover my mouth and giggle. “Sorry, I’m just spewing out all that stuff my dad says at the dinner

table. I mean, that's what adults want us to believe, but it's not exactly how we feel in high school."

"High school is overrated," he grumbles.

"Yeah, but we still have to suffer through these halls for the next year and a half."

"True. Good thing you've got your friends."

But what about you? Don't you want at least one friend?

"Being an adult scares me, though," I admit with an embarrassed laugh. "So as much as I want to be done with high school, I kind of don't, either."

He nods and continues eating his soup. Ugh, why am I rambling like this?

"Sorry," I say.

He shakes his head. "You have nothing to be sorry about."

"So..." a voice says from behind me. I turn around and find all my friends standing there with their trays. "Is it okay if we join you guys?" Dani asks.

I look at Zack. He seems a little uncomfortable, but he nods. Everyone squeezes around the table, and then we just sit here quietly.

"We want to apologize to you," Charlie says to Zack. "For believing the rumors. As someone who diligently does her homework, I should have made sure the rumors were true before judging you the way I did. But to be fair, I was the only one of the group who didn't think you'd hurt anyone." She gives Kara and Dani a pointed look.

Kara laughs sheepishly. “Yeah, she was the only smart one of the bunch.”

“Some of the stuff the jocks were saying wasn’t cool,” Brayden says with an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. And I’m trying to make them stop, but...” He shrugs.

“Yeah, we’re all sorry,” Dani adds. “I hope you can forgive us.”

“It’s fine,” Zack says as he plays with the cover of his paperback. “All good.”

“Ooh, what are you reading?” Dani asks.

Zack hands her the book.

“Epic fantasy. Nice. We don’t read a lot of that in the club.”

“I already told Ally I can’t join,” Zack says. “I have work.”

“I know, she told us,” Dani says.

We’re all quiet again.

“So how about the crappy soup?” I say.

“Ugh.” Dani pushes away her tray. “My mom makes the most awesome soups. This is nothing but water and soup mix.”

“So true,” Kara says. “I miss her. But I’m glad she has a better job working for Easton’s family.”

I study Zack as my friends continue to talk, worried this is all too much. I know he didn’t want to join us and maybe we overstepped. But he looks okay. Like he’s happy they’re here. Even smiles a little when some of us make our usual dorky

comments. And when Dani accidentally spills her drink on Easton, who just kisses her and tells her how much he loves her.

“I hope I don’t ruin your handsome suit at the winter dance,” Dani says, wrinkling her nose. “That would be an epic fail.”

“Suit?” Brayden asks with a bit of panic. “It calls for formal wear, not a suit.”

“Isn’t a suit formal wear?” Kara asks.

“I don’t know. I thought I would just put on a fancy shirt or something.”

Kara lifts her shoulders. “I don’t care what you wear as long as we’re together. I can’t wait to dance with you under the paper snowflakes.”

He smiles as he draws her closer. “Me, too.”

“You guys are coming, too, right?” Easton asks Charlie and me.

“I will be spending that night doing homework.”

“You’ll be doing other people’s homework while they have the night of their lives at the dance?” Brayden asks with pinched brows.

Charlie shrugs. “I prefer the homework. But I’ll go with you, Ally, if you want to go.”

I shake my head. “There’s nothing worse than sitting on the side hoping for someone to ask me to dance.”

“I’m sure someone will ask you,” Easton says.

“That’s kind of you to say, but we all know that’s not true. I’ll have a better time at home with my romance books and movies.”

My heart feels a little heavy. I’m super happy for my friends, but the winter dance is such an awesome dance. To sway in the arms of the person you love in a winter wonderland? Can anything be more romantic than that? But I’ll never experience it.

I find Zack’s eyes on me. But he quickly looks away when our gazes meet.

My friends hold most of the conversation, with me adding here and there and Zack answering questions they ask him. Then the bell rings, and I try not to groan. I love hanging out with all my friends, and now with Zack, too. I hope this will be a habit because I really like the friendship that’s blossoming between us.

After dinner, I’m reading on my bed, not paying attention to the time. It’s not until I need a break to swoon that I peer at my phone and realize it’s gotten really late. Holy crap. I should have been in bed hours ago!

Sliding off my bed, I grab my pajamas and rush to the bathroom to take a shower. I twist the knob with so much force that it breaks off, causing the door to spring open. Darn it. But I don’t have time to worry about that. If I don’t get enough sleep, I won’t concentrate on my classes tomorrow.

I step into the bathroom and stop dead in my tracks. Zack is staring at the mirror above the sink, wearing nothing but a

towel. It's wrapped around his waist.

I freeze. My eyes widen as they take in the hard muscles of his chest and arms. I knew he was buff, but not like this. I've never seen a naked male chest before, except in movies, but standing a few feet away from one is totally and completely different.

I swallow as I continue staring at that beautiful chest. Then my eyebrows knit when I notice the scar on the left side of his chest, near his heart. What is that?

Zack must have been frozen, too, because he shifts in place, making my eyes jerk to his. We just stare at each other.

Then it hits me that I walked in on him in the bathroom. Oh my gosh. I just *invaded* his privacy.

Backing away, I lamely hold up the broken knob. "Sorry! I um...wanted to take a shower, but I didn't realize that bathroom was...occupied..." I mumble as my gaze shoots back to the scar. Whatever caused it was huge, massive, and it looks like it was painful.

Zack glances down at the scar, then at me. "It's okay. Happens." He averts his gaze like he's uncomfortable that I'm staring at the scar. I shake my head. What's wrong with me?

He holds out his hand. "Maybe I can fix it?"

"Fix...what?"

He nods at the knob. "So you can lock the door while you shower."

"Oh, right. Sorry." I hand it to him. "I'll, um, go to my room while you finish getting dressed." And before I can stop

them, my eyes flit to his chest again, and my cheeks grow red.

Whirling around, I dash to my room and shut the door, leaning against it. Wow. I can't believe I walked in on him in the bathroom. He could have been...taking a shower or something. Or *naked*. This is so humiliating.

I pace my room, reliving the memory over and over in my head. Why was I so rude by staring at his scar? The last thing I want to do is make him uncomfortable.

There's a light tap on my door. "I fixed the knob. Bathroom is all yours," Zack says.

I open the door, finding him completely dressed now, no naked chests. "Thanks. And I'm really sorry for barging in like that. I lost track of time reading."

He nods in understanding. "It's cool." He shoves his hands into his pajama pockets, glancing away. Is he thinking about my seeing his scar like I am? How did he get it? I'm so curious, but it's obvious he doesn't want to talk about it.

Looking back at me, he gives me a small smile. "Good night."

"Good night."

As I grab my pajamas and take a shower, I can't get the image of his chest out of my head. Or the scar. Or the look on his face when he caught me staring.

What happened to him? What's his story?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ally: Make sure you guys have the most romantic and fun time of your lives! It's not every night you get to spend a winter wonderland with your amazing boyfriends. And make sure to get in lots and lots of toe-curling kisses!

Kara: You sure you don't want to come, Ally? You and Charlie could be each other's dates. We'll have loads of fun together.

Dani: Kara's right. Maybe you can try to convince her, Charlie?

Charlie: Like I told you, Ally, I'll come with you if you want. It's not too late to change your mind.

I look off in the distance, biting my bottom lip. Of course I want to go to the winter dance, but it'll just remind me—as if I need a reminder—that I don't have a boyfriend. Seeing all the kids at school paired up will just make me depressed.

Ally: Thanks, guys, but I'll have more fun at home with my romance movie.

Dani: All right, then. We can't convince you. Have a great time with your romance movie, Ally, and with homework, Charlie.

Charlie: I will. Have fun!

Ally: And tell us all about it when you get back, okay?
See ya soon!

I exit the text app and drop my phone on my bed, trying not to sigh. I've dreamed about high school dances ever since I was a kid, imagining myself in the arms of a sweet, caring, kind guy who would be crazy about me, and me about him. The two of us dancing the night away, lost in each other's eyes, as though we are the only people in the world. I guess there's only one place that fantasy can come true—in my dreams. Unless a guy magically falls into my lap within the next few hours.

The one thing that can make this icky feeling go away? A very, very romantic romance movie. When I get down to the living room, I find Mom and Dad ready to leave for the party Mom's boss is throwing in honor of her birthday.

"You look great, Mom," I tell her with a smile. "You, too, Dad."

"Thanks, sweetie. You can order something for you and Zack later. I didn't have time to prepare dinner."

"Okay."

She kisses my forehead, then they leave the house. I plop down on the couch with a huff, crossing my arms over my chest and sliding down on the couch until I'm almost hanging off it. Ugh, tonight will be a crummy night. Two of my best friends are out with their soulmates, my parents, also soulmates, are spending another evening together, my other best friend is content being single, and I'm here all alone.

After sitting up on the couch, I grab the remote and flip through Netflix. I don't want romance mixed in with action or mystery or suspense. Not even a rom-com. No, I want epic romance, only romance. The kind that will make every part of

my body melt into a puddle on the floor. I want to get so absorbed in the story and the characters that real life disappears, taking this gloomy feeling away with it.

I flip through option after option, not exactly finding what I'm looking for. I don't know, maybe most people out there aren't as obsessed with romance as I am.

There! That's it. A story about a young woman who lost her family and her home, basically everything, and answers an ad to be a nanny for two young children. Their single father is aloof and estranged from his kids, and the woman, who is a little reserved, ignites something inside him and brings the family together. And of course they fall madly in love. Score!

The more I watch this movie, the more invested I become, and soon everything around me vanishes and I'm plucked right into the story, joining the characters on their journey and feeling part of their story. Part of them. The gloominess and hopelessness I felt the last few hours dissipates. A winter dance? Nah, that doesn't mean anything to me. Not when Rachel and Adam have so much tension you can cut it with a knife. And the kids are sweet—little trouble makers, but still adorable. And they scheme to get their dad and their nanny together because the stubborn man is considering getting engaged to a major witch. Ugh, how could he pick someone like her over Rachel? The guy is blind.

An hour into the movie, the door opens and Zack walks in. It's as though I've been sucked out of my fantasy world and deposited back into the real world. The gloominess and hopelessness I felt before crash over me like a tidal wave, almost drowning me. Darn.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hi.”

His eyes rake over me. “You okay?”

I sit up straight. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Don’t know. You look bothered about something.”

Yeah, because I’m stuck in my house instead of spending the night with whoever is my soulmate. I wish I could find him in high school like Dani and Kara. If he actually exists, that is.

Trying to look as nonchalant as possible, I shrug. “No, not bothered about anything. Watching this amazing movie. The romance is so epic and—”

“Why aren’t you at the dance?”

My mouth snaps shut. “Huh?”

“The winter dance. Why didn’t you go?”

I tear my eyes away from him. “No one asked me.”

He doesn’t say anything, so I turn to look at him. He moves a bit closer, eyes assessing every feature on my face. “But you want to go.”

It’s a statement, not a question.

I shrug as I fold my arms over my chest again and stare at my shoes, swallowing the enormous lump in my throat. Of course I want to go! Understatement of the year.

He moves even closer. I slowly lift my eyes to meet his.

“Want to go with me?”

“What?”

“Do you want to go to the dance with me?”

Tears prick my eyes. I lower them back to my shoes. “You feel bad for me.” I quickly wipe away the tears before they can slide down my cheeks. “You don’t have to do that. I’m fine here with this romance movie. Did I tell you how awesome it is? There’s this woman, Rachel, who’s a little reserved, but she has such a fun personality. And she becomes the nanny of this stubborn and cold guy’s kids—”

“Ally.” He steps even closer until he’s only a few feet from me. “I don’t feel bad for you. I’d love to go to the dance with you if you want to go with me.”

I blink at him. Did he just call me Ally and not Ponytail?

“As... friends?” I ask.

“Yeah. We can go as friends.”

That doesn’t exactly help the situation, does it? I want to go to the dance with a guy who loves me. That obviously isn’t Zack.

I shake my head. “Thanks, but I told you I’m fine.”

“Ally.” He sits down next to me. “I know you really want to go. We can have fun dancing together. And with your friends.”

My eyes slowly move to his. He wants to dance with me? That makes my heart thump in my chest.

“You sure?” I ask. “You’re not just offering because you feel bad for me?”

“I don’t feel bad for you, Ally. Not at all.”

“But it’s getting late. The dance started an hour ago. And I don’t have anything to wear...” I sit up. “Actually, I do. I can wear the dress I wore to homecoming.”

“We can make it if we hurry,” Zack says. “Let’s meet back here in ten minutes?”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I rush up the stairs and burst into my room, heading straight for my closet. Oh my gosh, I’m going to the winter dance with Zack! It’s okay that we’re going as friends. Like he said, we can have loads of fun without it having to mean anything.

I slip into the rose gold dress, then check myself in the mirror. I pull out my hair tie, allowing my hair to spill down my shoulders. I quickly run a brush through it, giving it some more life. Then I study my face. Makeup. Ugh, why does there always have to be makeup?

The best I could do is lipstick and eyeshadow. Then I make my way downstairs, where Zack is already waiting. He’s wearing his leather jacket and black jeans, but his white shirt is a little fancier than the others he owns.

He smiles when he sees me. “You look great.”

“Thanks. You, too. I don’t have that much makeup on, though. Amanda won’t get here in time and my mom’s not home.”

He waves his hand. “You don’t need makeup. You’re perfect. Ready to go?”

Perfect?

I take in a deep breath to calm down the excited butterflies flapping around in my stomach. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

I grab a piece of paper and write my parents a note, letting them know where we went in case they come home before us and find the house empty. After I put on my jacket, Zack and I leave the house, where he walks over to the garage to get his bike. A thrill passes through me at the realization that I’ll be riding on his bike again. But I frown down at my dress. A dress isn’t the most suitable thing to wear on a motorcycle, is it?

Wheeling his bike over, he says, “What’s wrong?”

“You think my dress will get ruined?”

He studies it. “Don’t think so. I think it’s long enough for you not to worry about...you know.”

My cheeks heat up at the thought of the dress flying all over as we speed down the streets. But he’s right—it’s long enough. It should be fine.

“Need help getting on?” he asks.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Like the last time, the little hairs on my body stand on edge when he steps closer to me. He wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me a few inches off the ground, before dropping me back on my feet.

“What happened?” I ask.

“I just remembered I forgot something. Be back in a sec.”
He enters the house.

My eyes widen when he walks back out with his helmet in one hand and a second helmet in the other.

“Oh, you had a spare?” I ask as he hands it to me.

“Just bought it a few days ago. You might have to adjust the strap.”

I study the black, shiny new helmet. Did he buy it...for me?

I place it on my head and play around with the straps, which are way too loose on my chin. When he sees me struggling, he says, “Let me try,” and steps closer, so close that his scent and body heat practically spring onto me. Did the temperature just rise fifty degrees?

Because he’s much taller than me, the only thing I see when he tries to adjust the strap is his upper chest. The shirt is definitely fancier than the usual ones he wears. And did he put on more cologne?

“You’re all set,” he says, stepping away.

“Thanks,” I squeak. I clear my throat. “I mean, thanks.”

“Let me help you up.”

He once again wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me off the ground, and I swing my leg over the bike. Once I’m settled, he climbs on in front of me.

I close my arms around his middle, holding on as tightly as I did before. I feel his warmth from underneath his jacket, and the hard muscles of his back.

“Ready?” he calls over his shoulder.

“Ready.”

He revs the engine and we speed down the streets. My dress blows a little in the wind, but thankfully not too wildly where I have to worry passersby will see things they shouldn't see. It's such a different experience riding on a motorcycle at night. Feels more daring and thrilling. The whole town looks different because of all the lights. It's exhilarating and noisy, but peaceful as well. I wish I could ride with him like this every night.

When he slows down in the school parking lot, I almost tell him to forget about the dance and continue riding down the streets, just so I could stay on the bike for a little bit longer. He climbs off and pulls off his helmet, his hair falling down his face. Then he holds out his hand for me.

"Thanks," I say as he helps me down. I undo the strap and yank the helmet off my head. "Is my hair okay?" I ask.

His eyes leisurely sweep down the length of my hair. "Perfect."

He takes both our helmets and we enter the building. He makes a pit stop at his locker to stash the helmets, then we head to the gym, where the magic is happening. As soon as we enter, my jaw falls open. The dance committee did such an amazing job with the place. It really does feel like a winter wonderland. There is fake snow along the walls and paper snowflakes above. Everything is decorated in white and white crystals. There are even white trees.

"Wow," I breathe.

"Looks great," Zack says.

We're both so busy staring at the decorations that we don't realize that every single person in the gym is gaping at us until a hush falls on everyone.

I stumble back until my back hits Zack's chest. "They're staring," I whisper.

"Ignore them." He slips his hand in mine, guiding me deeper into the gym, where all the couples are dancing—well, *were* dancing—to a fast beat song.

"Ally!" Dani calls, waving to me from the dance floor.

Kara waves, too. Both of them look beyond shocked to see my hand attached to Zack's. So do Brayden and Easton.

"Hey," I say with a smile when Zack and I stand before them. "Looks like I made it here after all."

"Yay!" Dani pulls me into her arms. "I'm so happy you're here." She waves to Zack. "Hey, Zack."

"Isn't the place wonderful?" Kara asks.

"Beautiful," I say.

"Well, get your dance on!" Dani says, grabbing Easton's hands.

I look at Zack. He looks at me. He rakes his hand through his hair. "So...this dancing thing..."

I laugh lightly. "I don't know how to dance, either."

He laughs, looking relieved. "Okay, cool. So I guess we'll both make fools of ourselves?"

"Looks like it. Let's forget about how we look and just have fun."

“Great plan.”

I watch Dani and Kara dance before starting to shake my body. Dani is a dancer, so she’s putting in some killer moves, but Kara and I...well, let’s just say it’s about the fun and not the skill. Zack is a little stiff, but then he starts to loosen up. It’s not long before he and I are really getting into the groove of things.

And then he *really* gets into it. He grabs my hand and twirls me around, pulling me against his chest before dipping me. His face is close to mine, his eyes gazing into mine. Wow, they’re so much prettier close up. Such a beautiful shade of gray.

He blinks and straightens me so I’m upright, then lets go of my hand and continues to dance. I wait for him to twirl me or dip me again, but he doesn’t. It’s almost as though his body acted on its own without his permission.

“Want a drink?” he asks after we’ve been going at it for half an hour.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Anyone want anything?” he asks the others.

They tell him they’re good and he walks away.

“Ally!” Dani hisses as she grabs my hand. “How did you and Zack end up here together?”

“He asked me if I wanted to go.”

“So are you like...?” Kara asks with creased brows.

“No! We came as friends.”

“Cool. I’m glad you’re here. You look like you’re having so much fun.”

I grin. “I am. And you guys look like you’re having a blast, too.”

“We are!”

Zack returns with two cups of Coke, handing one to me. He and I gulp them down in less than thirty seconds.

“Wow, I didn’t realize how thirsty I was,” I say with an embarrassed laugh.

“Me, too. I—”

His voice cuts off when the music suddenly switches to a slow beat. All the couples on the dance floor step close to each other and wrap themselves in each other’s arms, swaying to the beat of the slow, romantic song. I watch Dani lay her head on Easton’s chest and Kara snuggle her face between Brayden’s neck and shoulder.

My alarmed eyes flit to Zack. Does he want to...?

He clears his throat. “I should probably throw out these cups,” he mutters as he turns away.

My heart tumbles out of my body. He doesn’t want to slow dance with me.

Well, I don’t know why it should bother me so much. I mean, we came here as friends. Friends don’t do what all those couples on the dance floor are doing.

Zack spins back around. “Screw it.” He dumps the cups on a table and steps closer to me. “Want to slow dance with me, Ally?”

“W-what?” I stammer, not sure I heard him right.

His eyes search mine, so deep and raw. “Ally, do you want to slow dance with me?”

“Yeah,” I breathe. “I’d love to.”

His face washes with relief. Then we just stand before each other.

With a swallow, Zack steps even closer, until there are hardly any inches between us. He slowly wraps his arm around my waist, drawing me closer to his chest. Then he wraps his other arm around me. A spark shoots up my body, making me shiver.

“You good?” he asks.

“Yeah, of course,” I breathe. Other than the fact that I feel like I just lit up like a fire...

With his arms securely around my waist, he slowly tugs me even closer to his body, until his chest touches mine. With shaky arms, I snake them around his neck, staring up into his beautiful eyes. He stares down into mine, and I see a whole lot of emotions in there. But I can’t make sense of them because every part of me is on edge, my heart beating in my ears.

Am I, Ally Bensen, actually slow dancing with a guy?

Our bodies sway to the beat of the music, so in sync with each other. The way our bodies fit together...it’s perfect. He’s much taller than me, but for some reason, it feels like the perfect contrast to my short body. His arms that are wrapped around my body feel strong and protective, but gentle and soothing, too. The way I’ve always dreamed it would feel to be in a guy’s arms.

He and I don't remove our gazes from each other. The world really does disappear and it's just the two of us on our own island, swaying under the paper snowflakes in this wonderful winter wonderland.

I lower my head on his chest, hearing the way his heart thumps beneath my ear. It's a little faster than a normal heartbeat, probably from all the dancing he did before. Mine is pumping much faster than his....but I don't think it's because of all the dancing.

It's because of much, much more.

Chapter Thirty

Zack

The students' eyes are pasted on us, but I've got my eyes focused on one person and one person only. And she's currently in my arms, her head dangerously close to my scar. I usually flinch when someone touches it, but right now Ally's head on my chest is the most calming feeling I've felt in a long, long time.

It's the happiest and safest I've felt in a while.

Her eyes are shut, her breathing even and soft as she sways in my arms on the dance floor. This is the closest I've ever been to a girl and I never imagined it would feel as good as this.

Ally looks beautiful tonight. Truth is, I think she's the most beautiful girl in the world, but tonight she's exquisite. The hair, the dress, her bright smile and excited eyes—everything about her makes me forget all the hardships in my life, and I allow myself to live in this moment.

Her head lifts off my chest and her eyes meet mine. "Why are you staring at me?"

Lifting my hand, I stroke the back of her head, loving the feeling of her soft hair brushing through my fingers. "You look beautiful," I whisper, so softly I'm not sure she heard me.

Her eyes and mouth widen slightly as her cheeks flush. A shy smile crawls onto her lips. "Thanks. You look very

handsome.”

I peer down at my semi-decent shirt, leather jacket, and black jeans. “Could have dressed up a little for the occasion.”

She laughs as she presses herself closer to me, resting her head back on my chest like it’s her personal pillow. She’s close to my heart now. Does she feel how fast it’s thumping?

“You don’t seem like the type to dress up for these things,” she says.

I would have. I would have put on a suit had she asked me to. If I had the money for fancy things like that.

We continue to sway to the soft, slow music. I rest my chin on her head, tightening my hold on her waist, shutting my eyes and allowing the music to flow around us. I can feel many kids staring, but I ignore them. Some still think I’m a criminal and a murderer, but I don’t care about them. The only person who matters right now is this girl in my arms.

She once again lifts her head, and I feel her watching me. Opening one eye, I find that sure enough, her gaze is on me.

I press my forehead to hers, my heart rate picking up. I’m not sure what it is about this moment, but I feel like a different person. Not a foster kid who lost his parents two years ago, but someone worth something. Someone who could make something of himself.

“Thanks for coming to the dance with me,” she says, forehead still pressed to mine.

“Of course. I’m glad I came.”

She smiles, resting her head on my chest again. “Me, too.”

Does she mean she's glad she came with me, or that she came at all?

I don't have time to linger on that thought because the music shifts to a fast song and the entire gym comes alive.

Ally doesn't lift her head off me. Her eyes are still shut, her chest rising and falling gently against mine. It's as if she doesn't want whatever this is to end. It's like she's in her own fantasy land.

I don't want it to end, either.

"Come with me," I say.

Her eyes snap open. "Where?"

"You'll see."

Pushing through the crowd of people, I lead her to one of the empty classrooms and close the door.

"Why are we here?" she asks. "Do you hate dancing that much?"

"No." I want to tell her that the past fifteen minutes were the happiest I've been in a really long time, but I can't get the words out.

After pushing the desks out of the way to clear some space, I slip my phone from the pocket of my jeans, tap on it until I find what I'm looking for, then place it on the teacher's desk.

As soft music starts to fill the room, Ally's eyebrows furrow. But as soon as she realizes it's a slow song, understanding crosses her features.

"A slow song?"

I take her hands. “Figured we could get away for a little bit, away from everyone’s stares. Put on our own music.” Dance in our own fantasy land.

She closes her arms around my neck, pushing herself against me. My hands go around her waist, my chin resting on her head. And like before, we sway to the beat of the music.

I once again shut my eyes and let the music flow through me. It’s completely different now that it’s just the two of us. No one is staring or pointing or whispering. It really is just the two of us in a fantasy land.

Time stands still as Ally lifts her head and stares into my eyes. I stare into her beautiful brown ones as we continue to sway and spin and share in this special moment.

Then her head is back on my chest, on my heart, as she squeezes herself close to me like I really am her personal pillow. And I don’t mind it one bit.

When I asked her to go to the dance with me, I never imagined it would feel like this. But like I told her, I’m really glad I came.

“I think we need to head back,” I whisper when nearly an hour passes. “Don’t want anyone to come looking for us.”

She lifts her head, and I catch a small frown on her face before she shakes it off. “You’re right. We don’t want to get detention again.”

We push the desks back in place before returning to the gym. There’s a fast-paced song playing, which neither of us is particularly happy about. I offer to get us some drinks as she and her friends chat.

As I make my way back to them, their words float into my ears.

“Wait, he took you to a classroom?” Dani asks. “To dance? Just the two of you?”

“It was nice. He’s really sweet. And thoughtful.”

I don’t like eavesdropping, so I make myself seen and they quickly stop talking. Ally thanks me with a warm smile as she accepts her drink. Soon Dani and Kara’s boyfriends join us and they talk about the dance and other things. My eyes meet Ally’s, and she gives me another warm smile, though this one is a little shier than the other. I return it.

When the dance is over, Ally and I bid goodbye to her friends and make our way to my bike. After our helmets are on, I place my hands on her waist and swing her onto the bike, then climb on.

Her arms come around my waist, cold for a second before warming me up. I peer back to make sure she’s securely on before kicking the bike into gear and zooming off.

Her hands squeeze my waist the faster I go and that makes a small smile attack my lips. Not because I’m making fun of her, but because I really like the feeling of her fingers squeezing me. I like the feeling of her so close to me, and the small gasps and squeals that escape her mouth.

Because she’s pressed so close to me, her long hair slaps all around me as I drive us to her house. Her body heat jumps onto mine, warming me despite the cold February wind. Does she feel as warm as me?

“Zack?” she calls over the strong wind. “Can we maybe take a longer route home?”

“You don’t want to go home?”

“I do, but I want to ride a bit longer. It’s so much fun!”

I laugh, glad she’s enjoying this as much as I am. “Sure thing.” I turn and zoom down a different path that would take us another ten minutes.

But that’s not enough for her. She wants to stay on my bike for longer.

“Unless I head to Silverton, there’s nowhere I can go. I could ride in circles, though,” I tell her.

Her hands squeeze around my waist. “Then go in circles. I don’t want to get off yet!”

There’s so much excitement in her voice that I chuckle. I’ve never had a girl ride on my bike before, but I’m pretty sure not many would want to ride around aimlessly so late at night.

“Please?” she says.

“Of course. I just hope your parents won’t worry about you.”

“You mean us. But don’t worry, I’m sure they saw the note. They’re probably in bed anyway.”

The fact that Ally’s parents would worry about me changes something in me. I mean, I know they care. Kyle’s working hard to find a home willing to take both me and Zane, but I never thought they’d worry about me. As if I were their own.

“Are you cold?” I call over the wind.

“Not at all. This is so much fun! Can you go faster?”

“That would be a bad idea.”

“Okay.” She actually sounds disappointed. I never took her for an adrenaline junkie, but there’s still so much to learn about her.

Since it’s getting really late, I have no choice but to take us home. Ally’s sad that the bike ride is over, and it’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her we’ll have more opportunities. But I press my mouth shut. How could I know that?

She climbs off the bike and holds both helmets as I wheel it into the garage. Then we enter the house, careful to be as quiet as possible because we don’t want to wake her parents.

At the door to my room, she hands me the helmets. But I close my fingers over hers, pushing it back to her. “Keep it. It’s yours.”

She eyes it. “Mine?”

“Yeah.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “So you did buy it for me.”

“I thought it was important to have a spare. Good night, Ally.” I feel her watching me in confusion as I enter my room. As I shut the door, my gaze meets hers and we stare at each other for a few seconds before it closes.

Lying in bed, I think about the dance and how much it meant to me. Ally would never know or understand that she played a large role in making tonight one of the best nights of my life.

Chapter Thirty-One

The best way to not obsess over what happened at the dance last night is to bury myself in a new book. It's not new, per se, but I haven't had a chance to finish it because another book came out and I got distracted with that one... Anyway, I'm reading it from the beginning and wondering why in the world I quit it. It's great.

It's a teen romance, where the guy and girl are star-crossed lovers. Their families have been at war for generations and they're off-limits. But they're in love and risk their parents' wrath by sneaking around to see each other.

The plot is overdone, but there's something about the way these characters are written that sucks me in. Maybe the way the guy whispers romantic things in the girl's ear. It makes me sigh in the best way possible.

For the past few weeks, the heroes in my books have been blank faces. I pictured myself as the girl, but the guys were faceless because, well, Jared ended up being a jerk and I don't want to visualize any guy. I don't want them to ruin reading for me. But as the scene unfolds before me, the guy's face transforms to one I know well. Sharp, deep gray eyes stare into mine as Zack's face floats before my eyes.

I gasp, dropping the book to the floor and backing away as though it has grown teeth and might pounce on me like a lion. What the heck? Did I just picture the love interest as Zack?

A tingle shoots down my spine.

“What in the...? *No*. I...” I take in a deep breath as I stare at the poor book I just chucked to the floor. This doesn’t make sense. Why would I picture Zack?

Maybe it’s best I take a break from reading. Clear my head.

After sweeping the book off the floor and apologizing for treating it that way, I go down to the living room and turn on the TV. I’m in the mood for a good Korean drama right now, one that will suck me in, make me laugh and help me forget... whatever that was in my room.

Within seconds, I’m laughing my butt off at the things the characters are doing on screen. No one else is home. Mom, Dad, and Zack are at work. Of course I’m lonely, but the K-drama will keep me company.

Not only is this show funny, but it’s super romantic as well. But unlike with my books, there are no characters to imagine. The images I need are right before me, no risk of a guy with beautiful gray eyes sneaking into my mind.

I binge episode after episode, feeling like I can’t get enough. That’s how it is with these types of shows—you can’t just watch one. The cliffhangers are torture.

Pressing the button for the next episode to start, I hug a cushion to my chest and glue my eyes to the screen.

The couch sinks as someone sits beside me. Flicking my eyes to my left, I find Zack lounging next to me. When did he come in? I didn’t hear the front door open. Was I *that* engrossed in the show?

Zack narrows his eyes at the screen. “What’s this?”

“A Korean drama,” I quickly tell him, worried I’ll miss something amazing the characters do.

“A what?”

“Korean drama.”

“What’s that?”

I pause the show and give him my full attention. “You never heard of K-dramas?”

He shrugs. “I don’t watch a lot of TV, and when I do, they’re not normally with subtitles. It seems weird to me to read a TV show.”

“But there’s nothing else quite like K-dramas! They have the best plots in the world and the romance is so gah! It drives me insane.”

He studies the screen. “All right. I’ll give it a go.”

I gape at him. “You want to watch a K-drama?”

He shrugs again. “If they’re as good as you say they are, why not?”

“I don’t have a problem with you watching,” I quickly say. “It’s just that...” *I’m kind of trying to avoid you because I pictured you as the love interest in my book. And of course I can’t forget the dance last night.*

He lifts a brow. “What?”

“You might find them boring. I mean, you don’t like rom-coms, do you?”

“I might.” He searches my eyes, probably wondering why I’m being weird. Is he not thinking about last night as much as

I am? Did it not mean anything to him?

I play with my ponytail. “Um, okay.”

He gets to his feet. “I’ll microwave some popcorn.”

As soon as he’s gone, I heave a sigh of relief. Having him sit so close to me brings me back to last night, how close we danced together under the snowflakes.

He’s back within minutes and drops down next to me, the bowl of popcorn between us. I summarize what happened in the previous episodes so he won’t be lost when we continue from where I left off.

His eyebrows furrow. “Wait, so she’s dressing up as a guy in an all-guys school to find out who killed her brother? I thought you said this was romance.”

“It is romance. The murder plot is kind of light, not intense like that thriller we watched the other day. Just watch and you’ll see.”

“Okay.” He places the popcorn on my lap. “Let’s get to it. I’m very curious now.”

I press play and we get comfortable, with a small distance between us. Zack glances down at it, then at me, then at the screen. I turn to stare at his profile instead of the show. He slowly twists toward me with a raised brow.

My cheeks warming up, I focus on the TV, stuffing my face with popcorn. We’re at a part where the hero finds out the heroine is a girl and his reaction is...not the greatest. He hates her for fooling him like that, feels betrayed and hurt and confused.

I stick my hand into the bowl and feel something hard yet warm inside. His hand? An electric spark shoots through my entire body, lighting me up like it did last night.

Yanking my hand away, my wide eyes meet his. They're on me, deep, intense, studying me like they did at the dance. All the memories from last night wash over me. The way he sweetly held me in his arms, so close I could see just how beautiful his eyes are. And his hands were wrapped around my waist, so gently like he was holding something precious. And when I rested my head on his chest, felt his pounding heart... it's like it happened minutes ago as opposed to hours.

I keep my hands on my lap, staying away from that popcorn bowl. What do those sparks mean? I mean, I read about them all the time, but what does it mean for me and Zack? Did he even feel them? Or is it all in my head?

Zack clears his throat, shifting on the couch and staying away from the bowl as well. It just sits between us, abandoned and unloved.

We focus on the show, not saying a word to each other. Good thing there aren't any romantic scenes right now because that would be really awkward.

I glance at him, but his eyes are latched onto the TV. Slowly, they move my way and I quickly avert my gaze.

This is ridiculous. Why are things so weird between us? Because we shared a special moment at the dance? I don't even understand it. Maybe it doesn't mean anything. We're two friends watching a K-drama together who happened to have shared a romantic dance last night.

But...why do I feel like it might be more than that? The fact that the love interest in my book turned into Zack's face... does that mean he and I...that's crazy!

Shaking my head, I reach into the bowl for more popcorn. Zack watches me, then does the same, though he waits for me to remove my hand first.

And so we watch episode after episode. Mom and Dad come home hours later, but other than greeting them, we hardly pay attention to them. The K-drama is just *that* good. Even Zack is on the edge of his seat when the girl gets kidnapped by the villain and the guy risks his life saving her. And they end their epic romance with a deep, sweet but passionate kiss.

When the final credits roll down the screen, I smile at Zack. "So, what did you think?"

He nods. "You're right. I've never watched anything like that in my life. It was great."

I lift my brow. "And is 'reading a TV show' that bad?" I tease.

He laughs softly. "Not at all."

"I converted you into a K-drama lover."

He laughs again. "You did."

I sit forward. "Does that mean you'd watch more?"

"Only with you."

My mouth snaps shut. What exactly does he mean by that? Is he embarrassed to watch on his own because he thinks those kinds of shows are only for girls? Because they're not.

He studies me with narrowed eyes. “Watching TV alone is depressing,” he explains. “Watching with someone else makes it more enjoyable.”

I’m trying not to analyze his words, but does he mean he wants to specifically watch with me? Or does he just not want to watch on his own?

I stare at him and he stares at me. His eyes are even more gray and beautiful than they were a few hours ago when we started watching the show. I can get lost in them.

“Ally, Zack, dinner!” Mom calls from the kitchen, snapping me out of whatever trance I was in. Zack blinks and peers toward the kitchen, as though forgetting for a second where he is.

I shoot to my feet. “We’d better go.”

As I move past him to get to the door, his fingers close around my wrist, freezing me in place.

“Thanks for watching with me, Ally,” he says in a low voice. “I had a hard day at work and...thanks for the company.”

I look down at his hand gripping mine, then nod. “Of course. Thanks for watching with me. And for not making fun of how obsessed I am with K-dramas and romance.”

He looks at me in disbelief. “Why would I make fun of you?”

I play with my ponytail. “I don’t know.”

He shakes his head, not releasing my wrist. His fingers feel so warm and smooth wrapped around it. “I’d never make fun

of anything you say or do or love. And anyone who does can screw off. You're special, Ally, more than you probably know."

Releasing my wrist, he heads for the kitchen. I stare after him, my heart pounding in my chest. A chill runs down my spine as his words replay in my head, over and over again.

Until Mom asks me for the millionth time to join the rest of the family at the dinner table. Once I get there, my gaze automatically connects with Zack's, and I find his eyes on me. There's something in them, something I don't really understand. It's different from how he looked at me last night. Less intense, but just as powerful. Why did he call me special?

"Ally, why aren't you sitting down?" Mom asks as she places the salad bowl in the center of the table.

My cheeks flaming, I lower myself in the chair across from Zack.

Dad's eyes move from me to Zack as he fills his plate with food. "Did you kids have fun last night at the dance? You both slept in and we didn't have a chance to talk."

Mom laughs as she dishes food onto her plate. "I remember my first dance."

"Jenna, let the kids talk. I'm sure they don't want to hear about our high school days."

"I do," I quickly say. "I really do." It beats telling my parents about that confusing yet magical night. And the confusing day I had today.

Dad waves his hand. "Nah, we don't have to go down memory lane."

Mom giggles. “Because your father is embarrassed to admit he was a terrible dancer.”

Dad takes her hand and gives it a loving squeeze. “But I got better, didn’t I? I had smooth moves at our wedding.”

They stare at each other with so much love my heart is about to burst. When I look at Zack, I find him watching me.

Mom and Dad ask for details about the dance and I keep it very on-the-surface. Zack adds in here and there, but it’s not much. I certainly don’t know how he feels about the whole thing.

Mom grins at me. “Did any guy catch your attention? Did you dance with anyone?”

My eyes meet Zack’s, and he keeps his on me.

“No,” I say. “No guys.” I’m not going to tell her I danced with Zack all night. I don’t want my parents making this a bigger deal than it already is.

Mom rubs my hand. “The right one will come, sweetie. You just have to be patient.”

I nod, my gaze once again creeping to Zack’s. He averts his, poking at his food.

My parents talk about their high school years, distracting me from the fact that I can’t stop thinking about the dance, the love interest who shifted into Zack, and that electric bolt that shot up my spine when our hands touched.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“You’re special, Ally, more than you probably know.”

Why can’t I get those words out of my head? I couldn’t forget about them when I got ready for school today, or during biology when Zack and I sat close to each other but acted like normal, good friends. Or during lunch when my friends, their boyfriends, Zack, and I sat together and talked about random stuff. Or during class. I could barely concentrate on anything. But then I told myself to get a grip. I mean, maybe he was just being nice.

But now as I sit in book club Monday after school, I’m wondering if maybe he wasn’t just being nice. That he actually meant it or that it had a different meaning. Maybe a hidden message?

Ugh. Why am I overthinking this so much?

“Ally, are you here?” Charlie asks. “We’re in the middle of discussing the most epic moment in the novel—the long-awaited kiss scene—and you’re not saying a word.”

I glance at my friends, taking in their curious and slightly worried expressions. “I’m fine. Was just thinking. Let’s get back to the book.” As much as I want to tell them about last night, there’s not much to tell. Zack and I watched a K-drama and then he called me special. That’s it.

We finish discussing the book, then part to our houses. As Charlie drives me home, we talk about the next book we’ll

read for the club, and she tells me that Teagyn had a fit when Charlie got her a B+ on an essay instead of an A-.

Charlie shrugs. "I still haven't forgiven her for what she did to Kara when she tried out for cheerleading. So no As in her future."

I laugh. "You know you're an awesome friend, Charlie."

She waves her hand. "Not as awesome as you and the rest of the Musketeers."

We can argue back and forth about who's the better friend, but it won't get us anywhere. So we drop the subject and discuss the homework she's looking forward to tackling tonight.

When we're outside my house, I tell her I'll see her tomorrow and get out of the car. Mom's in the kitchen making dinner, and after we exchange a few words about our day, I go up to my room to get some reading done before I need to start my homework.

As I'm working on it, I hear footsteps on the stairs and down the hallway. Zack must be home.

I leave my room to say hi to him, and find him in his doorway, his helmet clutched in his hand.

"Hi. How was work?" I ask.

"Was fine."

I eye his helmet. "Are you going somewhere?"

"To hang out with Zane. We get together once or twice a week for two hours."

I smile. "That's really sweet. Have fun."

“Thanks.”

He heads toward the stairs and I make my way back to my room.

“Ally?”

I turn around.

“Do you want to meet him?”

“I’d love to.”

I fetch my helmet from my room and follow him downstairs. We go to the kitchen to tell Mom we’re going to hang out with Zane, but she insists we eat something first. We eat quickly because Zane can’t stay out too late, then Zack takes something out of the freezer. A tray of ice cream cakes.

“Zane wanted these,” he tells me. “I’m going to surprise him.” He places them in his backpack and flings it over his shoulders. “Ready to go?”

“In a sec. I need to grab something real quick,” I tell him before zooming into the library and stuffing a bag with as many books as I can. Good thing Mom kept my books from when I was Zane’s age. And I also grab a few that are at a higher level because he reads above his age group.

I meet Zack who’s waiting outside and he squints at my bulging bag. “What’s that?”

“A surprise for Zane.”

“What is it?”

I grin. “Trust me, he’ll love it.” I pull my helmet over my head. “Looks like I have a need for this helmet after all.”

He nods. "Like I said, it's yours."

I place my hands on my hips. "I still think you bought it for me. What's the big secret?"

He doesn't respond as he pulls his helmet on, then places his hands on my waist and hoists me onto the bike. Just like before, his fingers are so warm.

"You good?" he asks.

"Yeah, thanks."

He gets on, waits for me to fasten my arms around him, then revs the engine. Honestly, I didn't think I'd be on his bike again so soon, but I'm glad I am. It's not only because I love the rush and the wind in my hair. I feel like it's something just the two of us share. Like our own secret.

Zane's foster home isn't far from my house and we get there in less than ten minutes. After Zack helps me off the bike, we make our way up the stairs to the front door, where Zack rings the bell.

The door swings open and Zane barrels into his older brother's arms. "Zack!" He wraps his little arms around him. "I missed you!"

He laughs and he bends down to squeeze Zane close. "Not as much as I missed you."

A woman steps out of the house, giving Zack a wary look. Is she Zane's foster mom? Her eyes flit to me and she narrows them.

"Who's this?" she asks Zack.

"Ally Bensen. She's a friend."

The woman eyes me from top to bottom. “And who are you, Ally Bensen?”

I glance at Zack. “Um...”

He straightens up. “Sandra doesn’t like Zane meeting people she doesn’t know,” he tells me, then turns to the woman. “Ally’s a good person. She’s Kyle Bensen’s daughter. You can trust her.”

Sandra scans me again, then must figure I’m not a threat because she nods. “Have him back within an hour.”

“An hour? I’m allowed two.”

The woman shrugs. “We have plans for the kids and I want him back in an hour.”

“But I have a right to spend time with my brother,” Zack argues.

Zane looks from Zack to Sandra with sad and worried eyes. He tugs on his brother’s arm. “Come, Zack. We’re wasting time.” He slips his hand in his and then we step down the stairs.

“Zane, this is my friend, Ally,” Zack tells him. “She wanted to meet you.”

I smile and wave. “Hi, Zane.”

He studies me. “I know you. You were at Bailey’s party. I saw you.”

“Yes, that was me. Bailey is my friend’s boyfriend’s little sister.”

We head to a park near Zane’s house and sit down at one of the picnic tables. The weather’s not too terrible right now.

“Got something for you, buddy,” Zack says as he pulls his backpack off his shoulders and rummages inside for the ice cream cakes. Zane’s eyes and mouth go wide as he takes in the treats. He grabs them from his brother, scanning them like he doesn’t believe what’s right before him.

“For me?” he asks, eyes growing even wider.

Zack smiles. “For you.”

“Thank you, Zack!” He flings his arms around him. Drawing back, he furrows his brows. “But you said they were too expensive.”

“Saved up. Go on, taste one.”

Zane glances down at the tray. “Okay, but only if you eat some, too.” He looks up at me. “And you, too, Ally.”

“Me? Are you sure?” I ask.

Zane nods vehemently. “I want to share it with you. Both of you.” He opens the package and hands one small cake to me, another to Zack, then grabs the third for himself.

I take a bite and my eyes light up. I’ve never tasted something so good in my life.

“It’s yum,” Zane says as he devours half the thing. “Thank you, Zack!”

Zack smiles as he hands Zane a tissue to wipe his face. “Of course, little man. You know I’d do anything for you.”

We continue eating our cakes. Zack keeps ruffling his brother’s hair as Zane talks about his day. I tell him stories that I’ve read or shows I’ve seen on TV and he’s really interested

in them. His eyes grow excited when I tell him I've got something special for him, but he needs to finish his cake first.

"I'm done!" he says, wiping his fingers and mouth. Zack and I have finished, too, Zack packing away the rest of the cakes for Zane to take home for later.

I bend down to retrieve the bag I placed on the floor by my feet. Zane's practically bouncing in his spot as I heave it onto the table and open it.

I hand him one of my favorite books I read when I was his age. His eyes shining, he scans the title and summary on the back. "Thank you!"

"There's more." I unload all the books I've brought onto the table. "You probably read some of these."

He grabs book after book, examining them like they're gold. "No, I didn't. Wow. Thank you, Ally."

I smile. "Of course. And you can keep them."

"Really? I don't know if Sandra will like that. My books take up so much space."

"That's okay," I tell him. "You can come to my house anytime and take whatever books you want."

His eyes widen. "Really?"

I nod with another smile. "It's so great that you love reading, Zane. Don't give it up."

His eyebrows knit. "Okay." He climbs off his seat, runs around the table, and wraps his arms around me. "Thank you so much for the books. No one ever gets me anything. Except when it's my birthday."

“When is your birthday?”

“It was a few weeks ago. Sandra threw me a small party. And Zack came.”

I smile. “You have an amazing older brother.”

“I know!” He grabs my hand. “Can we go on the swings?”

I look at Zack, and he nods that it’s okay.

“Sure.”

He pulls me to the swings, chatting about different things. Zack stays at the table to watch over our stuff, waving at us when Zane turns to him with a bright smile.

We go on the swings, the slides, and I chase him around the park. I’m so not in shape for this, but it’s fun. I don’t know when was the last time I let myself be a kid again.

“I can’t wait until Zack and I live together,” Zane says as we sit side by side on the swings. No one else is here, probably because it’s getting late.

“I’m sure you’ll be living together soon. My father is his social worker and is helping you guys.”

“Your dad’s nice to Zack.”

I nod. “He’s very nice to Zack. He takes care of him.”

“Like Zack’s going to take care of me when he turns eighteen. Zack!” he calls in the distance as Zack makes his way over to us, both backpacks on his back. “Ally told me her dad’s taking care of you.”

Zack ruffles his hair again. “He sure is. He’s a good person, just like Ally is.” He bends down placing his hands on

Zane's shoulders. "Sorry, but we gotta go, buddy. Sandra wants you home."

Zane lowers his head. "But I don't wanna go. I wanna spend more time with you. And Ally, too. She's so much fun."

Zack looks at me and smiles. I smile back.

"Another time, all right?" Zack says, holding out his hand to Zane. "We need to get you home."

Zane takes his brother's hand and gets up. After he slides his other hand in mine, we make our way out of the park.

Zane doesn't talk much, maybe because he's sad that his special time with Zack is over. Zack stares straight ahead, giving his brother smiles every so often. It's obvious they miss each other terribly.

To help lighten his mood, I tell Zane more stories of the recent books I've read, changing the plot a little to make them more kid-friendly. Zane listens with wide eyes and perked ears.

When we reach his house, Sandra comes outside to collect Zane. Zack hands his brother the backpack containing two books and the ice cream cakes, then gets down on his knees. Zane hugs him tightly. Zack shuts his eyes, inhaling deeply as he closes his arms around his brother.

"See you later," he whispers in his ear.

Zane holds on for a bit. "Don't go."

Zack draws back, giving Zane an apologetic look. "I've got to, bro. I'll call you later."

Zane nods and turns toward the door, but then he turns around and hugs me. “Thank you for the books. And for playing with me.”

I squeeze him close. “You’re welcome, Zane. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Zack fetches our helmets from inside the house. Sandra takes Zane’s hand, leading him inside. Zane waves sadly as the door closes.

Zack stares at the shut door for a little while before turning to me like he forgot for a second that I’m here.

“Thank you,” he says. “For giving him the books and for spending time with him and making him happy.”

I smile. “Of course. He’s such a sweet kid.”

He nods, jaw clenching. “A sweet kid who deserves so much more.” He descends the stairs with me trailing him.

“You’re a great brother,” I tell him as we head toward his bike.

He doesn’t say anything.

“It’s none of my business, but Zane mentioned that you want to take care of him when you turn eighteen? Sorry if I’m being nosy.”

He shakes his head as he stops walking and pushes his hands into his pockets. “You’re not being nosy. I want to be his guardian when I turn eighteen. That’s why I work so hard. I’m saving up for our future.”

“That’s amazing. You’re such a good person.”

He shakes his head again. “No, but I try to be. Thank you, Ally, for being so great with him. He’s usually shy with strangers, but he was very comfortable with you.” He smiles. “That’s the kind of person you are—warm and inviting. No wonder he likes you.”

My cheeks heat up. “Thanks. I like him, too. He’s adorable and so sweet and kind. And he’s lucky to have you in his life.”

“I’m lucky to have him.” He nods toward his bike in the distance. “We’d better get home.”

The only thought in my mind as we zoom down the streets is what an amazingly wonderful older brother Zack is. To work so hard to try to provide Zane a good future? Zack could be spending his time playing video games or watching movies or behaving like any other teenager. But he’s focused on his brother and his brother only. He’s just so...wow.

A little while later, when I’m reading in my room, Zack knocks on the door, holding his phone. Zane’s on video chat and wants to wish me a good night. I wish him the same.

Zack hangs up and gives me a warm smile. “Thanks again for being so nice to him, Ally. Good night.”

“Good night, Zack.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

I should be focusing on my homework, but it's a little hard to do that when Zack is working on his bike outside.

Mom and Dad went shopping for some new furniture and Zack just came home from work half an hour ago. He's been working on his bike since then. And I've been trying to avoid staring out the window to watch him.

But after another ten minutes pass, I know it's a doomed battle. I drop my pen on my desk and walk over to my window, pushing the curtain aside and peering out. He's on his knees before the bike, fixing whatever needs to be fixed. I watch his dark hair fall into his eyes, imagining what it would be like to brush it away...

I blink that thought away and repel from the window. No. I'm *not* going there.

Lowering myself back at my desk, I continue my homework. But I don't make it five minutes before I'm back at the window. Zack sheds off his jacket, sets it aside, and continues to work. My eyes widen as I watch the muscles of his back strain against his white T-shirt.

“Wow...”

He pauses and turns his head toward my window. With a gasp, I slide away and hide behind the curtain. Did he hear me? My window isn't open. Waiting a few seconds, I peek out and find he's back at work, those muscles once again straining against his shirt.

He wipes sweat from his forehead. He must be super hot and can use a drink...

Making my way downstairs, I pour him a glass of water and leave the house. His head snaps up, face filling with surprise when he sees me.

“Was I too loud?” he asks, frowning down at the bike. “Thought I knew what I was doing, but...” He shrugs as he pauses a video on his phone.

“No, you weren’t loud,” I say. “I just wanted to bring you a drink.”

“Thanks. That was thoughtful of you.”

With a smile, I hand it to him. Our hands touch as he reaches for it, and I almost drop it when another spark jolts me.

He gulps it down and smiles at me. “Thanks again. I needed that.”

“No problem. Do you need help?”

“Thanks, but I’m still trying to figure this out.”

“Okay. Let me know if you need help.”

I know he’s trying to fix the problem himself because he doesn’t want to pay for it to be repaired, since he’s saving all his money for when he turns eighteen and can take care of Zane. I want to offer to pay for it, but I doubt he’d appreciate it. He seems like the kind of person who likes to do things on his own and not ask help from anyone.

Back in my room, I try to continue my homework, but it’s even harder to concentrate now. Maybe because I’m worried

that he's trying to fix the bike himself instead of taking it to a professional. Maybe I *should* offer to pay for it? I don't want to offend him. But I hate seeing him struggle.

I get up from my desk again and look out the window. Zack drops a tool and blows out a breath, just crouched there on the ground and staring off into space like he's at a loss for what to do. Then his face slowly turns toward my direction. With another gasp, I jump to the side, but he definitely saw me. Darn, I don't want him to think I'm spying on him or stalking him like a creep!

I spin around to return to my desk and focus on my homework *only*, but then I hear a string of curses spew from his mouth. I rush back to the window and find him bent forward, clutching his hand. My eyes widen to epic proportions when I see blood dripping down that hand.

"Zack!" I cry.

Rushing out of my room, I bound down the stairs and burst out the front door, where Zack is still bent forward and holding his bleeding hand.

"Zack!" I cry, dashing over to him and grabbing his hand. "Let me see."

Curses continue to roll out of his mouth.

"Zack, *let me see.*"

He lets me yank his hand to me. A gasp escapes my lips when I take in the large gash across his left palm. It doesn't look deep, but there's so much blood. It's staining my hands.

"We have a first aid kit in the bathroom," I say, taking hold of his other hand. "Come."

He grunts in pain as I lead him into the house and into the downstairs bathroom. I grab a towel and wrap it around his hand. “Put pressure on it,” I instruct. “I’ll look for the kit.”

Where did Mom stash it? I push aside various things in the cabinet until I find it in the back. With a relieved sigh, I pluck it out and move over to Zack.

“Let me see,” I say as I reach for the towel. I carefully unwrap it and look at the gash. Ugh, it looks so painful.

He pulls his hand back. “My blood is getting all over you.”

“I don’t mind.” I take his hand again and study the wound. “We need to clean it or it might get infected. I don’t think it’s deep enough that you’ll need stitches.”

“I’m not going to the hospital.”

“Okay.”

I clean his wound using the first aid kit, concentrating hard on my work so I do it properly. I’ve never done anything like this before, but I’ve attended enough health classes to know what to do. It’s not until I hear Zack’s heavy breathing that I realize how close I am to him. My gaze slowly lifts to his, finding his face inches away from mine. So close I feel his warm breath on my cheek.

“I can do it myself,” he says, mistaking my momentary pause for either disgust or lightheadedness.

I shake my head, snapping out of it. “I’m fine.”

I feel his eyes on me as I continue to clean his cut, my hand moving slowly and gently over his palm so I don’t hurt him. It takes everything I have to keep my eyes on my work

and not meet his beautiful gray ones. Now is *not* the time to get lost in them.

“How do you know what to do?” he asks after a little bit.

I shrug. “I don’t, not really. I’ve learned about it in a few health classes and read a little about it, but it’s self-explanatory. I think.”

“You know what you’re doing more than I know what I’m doing with my bike.”

“You sure you don’t want to take it to someone? If money is an issue, I can pay—”

“Thanks, but I got it. I’ll figure it out.”

I internally sigh. I just want to help him.

He hisses as I continue cleaning the wound.

“Sorry,” I say.

“I can do it,” he says again, but I shake my head. He won’t accept my help with fixing the bike, but I’ll be darned if he doesn’t accept my help now.

Once the wound is clean, I bandage it up. “I think that’s it,” I say.

“Thanks.” He gently pulls back his hand and looks down at his bandaged palm. When I start cleaning up the bloody wipes and gauzes and gloves, he puts his hand over mine. “I’ll clean up.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

“You did enough for me. I can take it from here.”

“You’re injured,” I argue. “You need to rest.”

“My blood, my mess.”

“You’re stubborn, you know that?”

He stops, and then his eyes go a little small as he laughs.

“Look who’s talking.”

“I’m stubborn?” I ask.

“You could be.”

I snort. “I’m a pushover.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think so.”

We’re still standing pretty close to each other. I take a few steps back to put some distance between us and continue cleaning up. When he starts to help out, I want to scold him. He needs to rest that hand so it could heal properly. But I don’t want to argue with him. And being confined in a bathroom alone with him...as anxious as it makes me feel, I don’t really hate it.

Once the bathroom is spotless, we leave and he heads toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“To fix my bike.”

I gape at him. “You’re injured.”

He shrugs as he lifts his right hand. “Good thing I’m a righty, then.”

“Zack, I don’t want you to hurt yourself again. Take your bike to a professional. Please.”

His jaw tightens stubbornly. “I don’t need a professional.” He turns toward the door.

“Then I’m helping, whether you like it or not.”

Before he can say anything, I walk past him and get down on my knees before the bike. “Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

He stares at me for a few seconds, like he’s not sure he’s seeing right.

“You want to injure your right hand, too? Let me watch the video. I’m a quick learner.”

He blinks and walks over to me, getting down next to me on the ground. “Here’s the video.” He hands me his phone. “You don’t have to help me.”

I give him a look. “*You* don’t have to do everything yourself.”

His gaze averts to the ground. “Fair enough.”

“I’m serious, Zack. You don’t have to be alone anymore. I’m...I’m here.”

His gaze lifts to mine. And then a small smile tugs his lips. “Thanks.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Zack

“And where are the carrots?” the customer asks.

“Aisle seven.”

“And the nuts?”

“Aisle fourteen.”

“And crackers?”

“Aisle two.”

Pushing her cart overflowing with nearly every item in the store, the woman leaves the aisle where I'm stocking tomato paste. Today is one of those days, the kind where customers bother me every second for directions where to find things. I don't mind helping people out, but sometimes I get the feeling they're just lazy and don't want to look for it themselves. True I work here and I'm supposed to help, but I've got so many things to stock on the shelves and my boss doesn't appreciate when I don't get my work done by the end of my shift. Because then the guys who work in the morning will have to pick up my slack.

I shake my head and rub my forehead, feeling stressed. Maybe it's because of this darn injury. Or maybe it's because I can't get the girl who patched me up out of my head. The way she handled my wound last night, so gentle and caring... I can't remember the last time I felt cared for. Not since two years ago. I like the stubbornness I saw in her. I think it stems

from her determination to care for the people in her life. I know she would do anything for the people she loves. Not that I'm part of that category, but...

Nah, she probably would do it for anyone. I doubt I mean much to her.

As I continue stocking the tomato paste, my mind wanders again. I like how nice she was to Zane. I might be biased and think it's hard not to love the kid, but Ally...she seemed to really put the effort to get to know my little brother and show him what an amazing kid he is. He took to her very easily, too. I'm glad they like each other. Though I don't know why. It's not like...

I finger the bandage on my palm, remembering the feeling of her gentle fingers sliding across my skin, how soft and warm they were...how beautiful her eyes were so close to mine...

Shaking my head, I focus on my work.

When my shift is finally done, I get my helmet from my locker and make my way toward the door.

"Zack?" my boss Gavin calls. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

I make my way over to him, gripping my helmet tightly in my hands because I know what this is about.

"About the raise..."

I nod, swallowing hard and tightening my grip on my helmet.

He gives me an apologetic smile. “I really wish I could help you out, son, but I can’t afford it at this time.” He puts his hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

I press my lips together before nodding. “It’s cool. See you tomorrow.”

I leave the supermarket and pull my helmet over my head, trying not to let the disappointment destroy me. I knew it was a long shot—I’ve only been working here a month—but I’ve been working hard and haven’t missed a single day...

It doesn’t matter. I just wanted to be able to afford some nice things for Zane instead of saving everything up for our future. And in case I wanted to buy something special for someone—

I shake my head and scoff. Moron.

I kick my bike to life and speed down the streets. As soon as I step into the Bensen house, Jenna greets me and offers me from the cake she baked.

“Thanks.” I bite into it. “It’s great.”

“Thanks. Dinner is in an hour, okay?”

I nod and make my way upstairs. I really love that the Bensens don’t push me to talk. They don’t pretend I don’t exist like some of my previous foster parents. They give me the freedom and privacy I need, but also make me feel like I can talk to them if I want to. It’ll be a little hard to leave when Kyle finds a family willing to take me and Zane in.

And it’ll also be hard not seeing that special girl with a long ponytail every day...

I close my eyes, shoving that thought away. Again, moron.

My movements come to a halt on my way to my room when I hear a soft, beautiful voice. I stop and strain my ears, trying to locate the source of it. It's coming from the direction of...Ally's room.

My eyes widen. Is that her singing?

As quietly as possible, I make my way there, stopping before the slightly open door and leaning in. The voice continues to sing, so soft and gentle and sweet.

It has to be Ally because it sounds like her. Holy crap... Ally Bensen has the voice of an angel.

A warm feeling brews in the pit of my stomach and spreads to the rest of my body. Before I can stop myself, I push the door open.

With a startled gasp, Ally spins around and gapes at me with wide eyes. That angelic voice? It's gone. The only sound that fills the room is the low track playing from her Bluetooth speaker.

"Sorry," I say when I realize I just barged into her room without her permission. "I didn't mean to—"

"W-what are you doing home?" she asks, eyes flashing to the clock on her desk. She must realize she lost track of time because her face grows redder than a tomato.

"Ally," I say softly as I step into the room. "Was that you singing?"

"N-no," she stammers, her face growing even redder.

“It was you. I didn’t know you have such an amazing voice.”

“I don’t.”

“You do,” I insist. “One of the most beautiful voices I’ve ever heard. Why doesn’t your choir teacher give you a solo?”

From her expression, I understand exactly why.

“Because you told her you don’t want one.”

She turns around and disconnects her phone from the speaker.

“Ally.” I edge closer to her. “Why don’t you share your amazing voice with the world?”

“It’s not amazing!” she says as she turns around. “So stop saying it is.”

“You *know* it is. Deep down, you do. But for some reason, you’re lying to yourself.”

“Stop pretending you know what it’s like to be me. You *don’t*.”

“I don’t know what it’s like to be shy? Last I checked, I’m not the most outgoing person out there.”

She folds her arms across her chest. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does. Ally,” I say gently, “life is short. You never know when something might get snatched away from you...” My throat tightens like a stone is lodged inside. “I saw how you looked at that girl when she sang her solo at the concert. I saw how much you wanted to be in her shoes.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Has anyone else heard you sing?” I ask.

She shrugs. “My parents. Charlie, once. Ms. Mehta in freshman year.”

“And they haven’t encouraged you to have a solo?”

“Don’t you get it, Zack? I don’t want to stand in front of all those people and make a fool of myself!”

“You won’t make a fool of yourself. Not when you have the voice of an angel.”

Her whole faces changes. “The voice of an angel?”

“Yeah. And even if you didn’t sound as amazing as you do, if you want a solo, go for it. The only one stopping yourself is you.”

“But I’m the Shy Girl. I can’t just—”

“You’re not the Shy Girl,” he says. “You’re Ally Bensen. One of the most amazing and special people I have ever met. You’ve got so much to share with the world. I wish you had the confidence to do it.”

We’re both quiet, the only sounds our heavy breathing.

“I want to be alone,” she whispers.

I hold up my hands. “I’m sorry, but I think you should reconsider. Good night.” I back away from her and leave the room.

Her beautiful voice stays with me for the rest of the night.

Chapter Thirty-Five

School is canceled today because of some electrical problems. I take the opportunity to sleep in because I didn't get a lot of sleep last night. Zack's words didn't leave my head. And oh, gosh. He heard me sing! That's so mortifying.

I kind of don't want to leave my room, but I can't stay here forever. And anyway, I need food or I might turn into a monster.

Peeking out into the hallway, I don't hear a sound. Mom and Dad are at work, and I cringe as I remember Mom telling Zack and me this morning to be responsible, and that she trusts us to be alone together the whole day. I told her I plan to do homework and study for tomorrow's trig test. Zack reassured her that he'll probably hang out in his room and then go to work.

I don't really know where Zack and I stand right now. We didn't technically fight, but I told him to leave my room last night. I know he was just trying to help. I thought about it a lot all night, wondering if maybe he's right and I should put myself out there. Get on stage, sing my heart out, make myself, my friends, and my parents proud. But oh, gosh. I could barely handle my parents, Charlie, and Zack hearing me sing. How can I manage to sing before an entire audience?

I head downstairs to the kitchen and find Zack munching on some toast, earbuds lodged in his ears.

"Hi, morning," I greet as I go to the fridge for some milk.

He drags his earbuds out. “Morning, sleepyhead.”

“Sleepyhead? Were you awake all this time?”

He shrugs. “Called my boss to ask if I can take an early shift, but he doesn’t want me coming in until much later. Seemed useless to go back to sleep, so I cleaned up in here a little.”

“Oh, that was very kind of you. I’m sure my mom will love that.”

“Your parents have done so much for me, and I really appreciate it. Cleaning up is the least I could do.”

I grab cereal from the pantry and join him at the table, pouring some into a bowl and adding milk.

Zack and I are quiet as we eat. I hope he’s not thinking about last night. I wish I could vacuum out his memory of my singing. Ugh. I *can’t* believe he heard me. How did I lose track of time like that? Fine, I was into the song because I love it, but still.

He clears his throat, eyes meeting mine. He gets to his feet with his plate and rinses it off in the sink.

“I’m going to my room,” he tells me.

“Okay. I’ll see you later.”

He nods and walks off. I hate that things are a little stiff between us. All because he tried to help me and I kicked him out of my room? I want to see him laugh, want to see his smile brighten his face. I don’t think he realizes just how much that smile means to me.

I clean up my dishes before heading to my room. But instead of doing homework, I pace, running my hand through my hair. I'm so bothered about what he said that I can't stand it. Ms. Mehta has been asking me for a while to try out for a solo, but I always shoot her down. Then Zack tells me the same and I can't get his words out of my head? *Why?*

"Ugh!" I pull at my ponytail. Why did he put those thoughts in my head? Now I can't help doubting myself.

Plopping down at my desk, I sweep my phone off the table and click on the video of our concert that was posted on the school's website. Not to mention it's all over social media as well. But the school has the entire performance.

All eyes are always on Destiny, but I focus on myself. I've never realized it before, but Zack is right. I do watch her with longing and jealousy. I've convinced myself that I'm okay with singing in the background, but that's a lie. I don't want to be in the background anymore. I want to shine.

I don't know what it is that's making me feel this way, but I'm pretty sure Zack has a lot to do with it. My parents, Charlie, and Ms. Mehta have told me I have a beautiful voice, but Zack telling me...that changes things. Is it crazy that his words have a whole other meaning than my parents' and best friend's?

I watch myself on stage for a little while before stopping the video and leaning back in my seat. I only have a year and a half of high school left. Maybe it's time I seize every opportunity that comes my way. It'll be hard, of course, but I need to try.

Getting to my feet, I leave my room and head toward Zack's, knocking on the door. I can hear soft music playing from inside.

The door swings open and Zack stands there with a raised brow.

“Can I come in? I'd like to talk.”

He nods and widens the door. I enter but keep the door open because the last thing I need is Mom coming home early and catching us with a closed door. Not that we're going to do anything incriminating...

He drops down on his bed and I lower myself next to him, wringing my hands in my lap. He stares off in the distance while I keep my eyes on him. Then his eyes move to me.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “For kicking you out of my room last night. You were trying to help me and I was so rude.”

He shakes his head. “I pushed when I should have stayed out of it.”

I avert my gaze. “No, I'm glad you pushed. For years, I told myself that I was okay with singing in the background. That other kids like Destiny could shine on stage. But I was just lying to myself.” I look at him. “I want a solo. I want to be up there singing my heart out and sharing it with the world. But...” I sigh. “Wanting it and being able to do it are two different things.”

He scoots closer to me. “But you can do it, Ally. I know you can. The world will gain so much by listening to your beautiful voice.”

My cheeks warm at his kind words and my heart goes pitter-patter in my chest. “Thanks. But I’m so scared. Being up there in front of all those people...judging me...”

He takes my hand in his large, warm one. “Screw them. Sing for yourself and for the people who appreciate how wonderful you are.”

I glance down where my hand is swallowed by his. “Wonderful?” I squeak.

“Wonderful.”

With my free hand, I tuck some loose strands of hair behind my ear. “Thanks. But anyway, there’s no guarantee I’ll get a solo. I’d need to audition first, and I’m not sure Ms. Mehta is accepting auditions.”

He looks at me with eyes so deep and caring my heart beats in my head. “Of course she’ll give you a solo. She’d be nuts not to.” He bends close. “Honestly? Your voice is more beautiful than Destiny’s.”

I playfully slug his shoulder. “That was mean!”

He just laughs. “But true.”

I smile as I shake my head. “Thanks. I’ll talk to Ms. Mehta later this week and ask if I can audition for a solo. Thanks for all of this, Zack. I wouldn’t be able to do it if not for you.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not me. You’re the one with the killer talent.”

“Well, I don’t know about that.”

“I do.”

My cheeks warm again. “Thanks.” I glance around the room. It’s a little messy with books and some clothes strewn around, but for the most part it’s pretty tidy. “What are you up to?”

He holds out a book. “Reading this.”

“A zombie book? Cool. But what about homework?”

He shrugs. “No point in doing school. I’m not going to college after high school.”

I tilt my head to the side, thinking. “Why not? You can go to college and take care of Zane at the same time.”

He waves his hand. “Nah.”

“Zack, don’t be stubborn,” I insist. “Get an education. Show Zane that he can do anything he puts his mind to. And you have so much to share with the world, too.”

He snorts. “Sure.”

I give him a look. “You can help people. I think you’d be a great social worker.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Just think about it, okay? You still have time to bring your grades up and get into a good school. Or you can go to community college or take classes at night. The point is, there are options.”

“I do want to be a good role model for Zane,” he admits. “Yeah, I’ll think about it. Thanks.”

I smile. “No problem. So about this book...”

He laughs. “Zombies aren’t your thing?”

I laugh, too. “I love all books. I was thinking maybe we can read it together after homework and have our little book club?”

He smiles. “Okay, but do we have to do homework?”

I get to my feet. “Yep. I’ll be back in a sec with my textbooks.”

His groans are so loud I can hear them as I make my way to my room to gather my school things. As soon as I’m back in his room, I force him to get his butt up and join me at his desk. It was Amanda’s and is adorned with many different girly stickers she gathered over the years.

“This really isn’t necessary,” he complains. “I can get into a good college with my crappy grades.”

I point at the textbooks. “Sit and concentrate.”

With another groan, he does as I ask. But he grasps onto the material very quickly.

He glances at me. “I don’t think I can focus this much on school. I have too much on my plate.”

I place my hand on his arm. “But you can do it all. Do it for Zane. Don’t you want him to have every opportunity? With a college degree, you can get a good job. A well-paying job.”

He thinks it over. “I guess you’re right. Okay, I’ll try.”

I smile. “Great. And I can help you whenever you need, though I’m pretty sure you’ve got this. You’re very smart, Zack.”

“Thanks. Now, can we get this over with so we can read the zombie book?”

I grin. “Sure.”

After our homework is complete, Zack and I sit on the living room couch with our books in our laps. After reading ten chapters, it’s time to discuss it. I’ve got my phone on my lap, where I jotted down some notes.

“So how does this work?” he asks. “We just talk about the things we liked?”

“Things we liked or moved us or were confused about. Or just anything we want. My friends and I also discuss what-ifs. Like what if the guy didn’t kill the woman he loves’ husband? Would they fight to be together? That sort of thing.”

He glances at the book. “So...what do you think would have happened if Franny hadn’t turned into a zombie and caused havoc on her community? Think Peyton and Samantha would have gotten together?”

I lift a brow. “That’s quite a romantic thought, Mr. Hastings.”

He chuckles. “They were headed in that direction before Franny turned.”

“Or maybe she would have ended up with Jamie. He liked her.”

“But she didn’t like him back.”

We go back and forth discussing the many different points in this book. Then it’s lunchtime, and we heat up some leftover food from last night. We discuss the book more, I chat a little with my friends when they call, then, after we’re done with

our analysis of the zombie apocalypse, Zack and I sit on the couch before the TV.

“What are you in the mood for?” I ask.

He shrugs. “You pick.”

“Nope. You.”

He furrows his eyebrows. “How about we watch the latest movie that was added to Netflix? Whatever the genre is, we watch.”

I laugh. “Okay, but what if it’s, like, a kid’s movie?”

“Rules are rules.”

“Let’s see...” I turn on the TV to Netflix and click on the most recent movie, frowning. “A horror? Darn.”

He chuckles. “Rules are rules.” He lifts a brow. “Unless you’re scared.”

“Is that a challenge, Helmet Face?”

He groans. “Seriously? Thought you’d come up with a better name than that.”

My shoulders sag. “Yeah, me, too. Anyway, I’m in.” I scan the description. “Doesn’t seem too scary. It should be fine.” I press play and get comfortable on the couch. Zack is so close to me, I feel his body heat jumping onto mine. It’s so cozy with him by my side.

His eyes are glued to the screen, but they leap in my direction every so often. When our gazes connect, he lifts a brow. “Scared yet?”

I roll my eyes. “This is the most pathetic, non-scary movie I’ve ever seen in my life. Do you watch a lot of horror?”

“I don’t really have time for movies, but if a movie’s good, I’ll watch it.” He bends close. “Shh. This might be it.”

We watch for a bit longer, but nope, still not scary. I look at Zack and he looks at me. If not for the rule we implemented earlier, we would quit this movie and start another.

The scenes continue to play out, and we’re both bored out of our minds, but then one of the characters dies in the most gruesome way imaginable. I let out a shriek and wince, covering my face with my hands.

“You okay?” he asks.

Lowering my hands, I give him a reassuring smile and nod. “Yeah, I just wasn’t ready for that.” I focus back on the movie.

But then a second character is murdered in an even more grotesque way that I release another shriek and bury my face in Zack’s chest.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” I murmur.

He goes still for a second, but then his arms come around me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I bury my face deeper in his chest, feeling his hard muscles and breathing in his scent. It brings me back to the day we cut school and he gave me his jacket. And when we slow danced at the winter dance. It brings a calmness over me I never knew a smell could. It’s nice, familiar, friendly.

And so much more.

His arms tighten around me. “You’re shaking. Do you want to stop the movie?”

As I continue rubbing my face against the soft fabric of his shirt, and being very aware of his strong, protective arms around me, something dawns on me. This has always been my fantasy—to watch a horror movie with a guy and get so scared I bury my face in his chest and he comforts me.

Oh my gosh.

I’m in Zack’s arms.

And he’s holding me close like he’s trying to protect me from the evils of that movie.

I feel his heart thumping, just like at the dance. And his breathing has gotten a bit heavier than before.

Slowly, I lift my head and my eyes meet his concerned ones. I can’t believe I’m in his arms like this. And he’s not letting go, almost as if he *is* worried the murderer will launch out of the TV and kill me.

“You okay?” he asks softly. He reaches for the remote. “We can stop the movie.”

“No. No.” I force myself out of his embrace. “I’m good. Let’s finish.”

He searches my eyes. “I was kidding about the rule. We can watch anything you want. You don’t have to prove anything.”

“No,” I say resolutely. “I want to finish.” And I wouldn’t mind him holding me again.

After he makes sure I'm one hundred percent okay with continuing, we focus back on the movie. No more than a few minutes pass before another murder takes place and my face is once again smashed against his massive chest. His arms come around me tightly, yet gently at the same time.

That's how we remain for the rest of the movie. My face is pressed to his chest, my gaze flicking to the screen from time to time. But there is so much blood and violence that I'd rather keep my eyes away from the screen. Zack watches me more than the movie, checking if I'm all right, asking a million times if I want to stop. Of course I don't. It's not every day I'm in the arms of this kind, sweet guy, who makes my heart pound every time we look at each other.

My eyes flutter open and I take in my surroundings. I'm on the living room couch. School was canceled today and Zack and I spent the day together.

Turning to my left, I catch Zack sprawled next to me, his arm wrapped around me, his head slightly bent toward me, his chest rising and falling as he sleeps.

This is the second time I'm watching him sleep and I notice a difference from the first time. While he still seems to have a lot on his mind, he's more relaxed than when he fell asleep during class. Is it because he's not living in his former foster home? Because he feels more comfortable here? Because he's lying next to me? No, that's silly.

I take in the arm slung over my shoulder. Even in his sleep, he's still watching over me. I'd move, stretch myself a little,

but I'm worried I'll wake him. Resting my head on his chest, I stare at him as he sleeps.

His eyes slowly open and he looks at me. Then they widen and he quickly retracts his arm from around me, accidentally knocking his hand into my head.

“Ow.”

“Sorry!” He reaches for his phone to check the time. “Crap. I'm late.” Shooting to his feet, he slips his phone into his pocket. “Was supposed to be at work five minutes ago.”

I sit up. “Sorry. We fell asleep.” In each other's arms...

“Wasn't your fault. Don't worry about it.”

“Are you going to get in trouble?”

He shakes his head as he straightens out his clothes and brushes his fingers through his hair. “Nah, it's cool. But I really need to go. See you later.” He waves to me before disappearing out the door.

The room has suddenly gotten so cold, the house so empty. But I'm used to it.

Except, I'm not. Ever since Zack moved in here, it feels like the house isn't so empty anymore. Which is so silly because he's hardly home...

Getting to my feet, I head to the kitchen for a snack. After grabbing some books as well, I return to the couch and read until Mom comes home and asks me how my day was.

Well, if you must know, I got so scared watching a horror movie that I buried my face in Zack's chest and he protectively

wrapped his arms around me. Then we fell asleep in each other's arms...

It's perfectly normal for that to happen to friends...right?

Chapter Thirty-Six

Today is a wonderful Saturday evening. Because in only a short while, Zack will come home from work and he and I will continue to discuss the zombie book we're reading for our little book club.

I'm currently reading three books at once—for the Edenbury High Book Club, my Regency romance, and the club I have with Zack—and I love it. Being immersed in three different stories at once is awesome.

Mom and Dad are out hunting for furniture again, so it's just me alone in the house doing my homework in my room. I should be getting a head-start for next week, but my ears keep straining toward the front door, waiting to hear his footsteps enter the house.

Half an hour passes. He should be here any minute.

I haven't stopped thinking about his arms wrapped around me yesterday when we watched that horror movie. And how we fell asleep in each other's arms. I rub my scorching cheeks. I still can't believe that happened.

No, focus on homework, Ally. Homework!

But another ten minutes pass and the house is still empty. Where is he?

When another twenty minutes pass, I put my pen down and pad to my window, peering out. There is no motorcycle slowing down before the house. No super-hot guy in a leather jacket yanking off his helmet and allowing his pretty hair to

roll down his shoulders like soft waves. With a sigh, I sit back down at my desk and continue doing my homework.

Then another half hour passes. I start pacing my room. It's a little odd for him not to be home yet. Of course he doesn't owe me any explanations, but he told me before he left for work that he'll come home straight away to talk more about the book. He seemed just as excited as me—maybe more.

I look out my window again, but the streets are empty.

Why do I have a feeling in my stomach that something's wrong?

Walking back to my desk, I grab my phone and tap out a text to Zack.

Ally: Hey. You okay? Just wondering where you are.

I clutch my phone tightly in my hands as I continue to pace around my room, my eyes dropping to the screen every fifteen seconds. He doesn't respond. He doesn't even read the message.

Alarm passes through me. Something doesn't feel right.

I try calling his phone, but get his voicemail. Dropping down on my bed, I rub my temples, trying not to let the panic consume me. He's probably okay, right? Maybe he's out on his motorcycle somewhere. It would explain why he's not answering his phone.

But why do I have this strong sensation that something *is* wrong?

My legs carry me downstairs, where I peer out the window again. He's nowhere in sight.

I start pacing again. Should I call Mom or Dad? I don't want to worry them for nothing, but if something is wrong...

I yank the front door open and leave the house, making my way to the curb and looking to my right and left. There are no motorcycles around, not even cars. Being out here in the cold evening makes me feel even more apprehensive. Something is wrong, I *know* it is.

When my body can't take the cold anymore, I go back inside and continue to pace, contemplating if I should call my parents. Is it possible...that Zack ran away? But I thought he liked living here...

No, he couldn't have run away, not when he has Zane to consider. He'd never abandon him.

My heart pounding in my head, my mind conjures up different scenarios. Of Zack's motorcycle veering off a cliff and his body crushed somewhere out there with no one to find him...

Of Jared and his jerk friends finally deciding to exact their revenge on him for standing up for me. They corner him in an alleyway somewhere and beat the living daylights out of him, leaving him there to bleed to death...

A cold shiver rushes down my back. That's it. I'm calling my parents.

Just as I grab my phone with shaky hands, I hear a motorcycle outside. My whole body perks up with hope as I run to the door and yank it open. Sure enough, Zack rides up to the house on his bike. In one piece. No blood anywhere.

My body practically tips over with relief. I've never felt so scared before in my life!

“Ponytail?” he says, confused, as he pulls off his helmet. “What are you doing out here?”

Every part of me is wound up with so many emotions, I can barely talk. Feels like my heart will burst any second. I just shake my head at him.

He parks his bike in the garage, then heads over to me, peering closely at my face. “You okay?”

Still not able to talk, I nod.

“What are you doing out here? You're shivering.” He closes his hand over my arm and leads me into the house, eyes never leaving my face. “Ally, what happened?”

“You...” I swallow to get my breathing and heart rate under control, but seeing him alive and in one piece makes me go even more haywire.

Alarm conquers his face. “Did someone hurt you?”

I quickly shake my head as I hug myself. “No, I'm fine. I just...” I take in a deep, shaky breath and let it out. “You're late.”

“Yeah, sorry. I got caught up with work.”

On top of all the other emotions I feel, now another one is added to my plate: Embarrassment. I feel like a total fool right now. Here I was freaking out that something happened to him when all along he was fine. Seriously, what's wrong with me? Why does my brain constantly go to the extreme?

“Okay, cool,” I say before turning around and walking away. I invest my heart in everything I do. That’s why I always get hurt.

“Ally.” Zack catches up to me, grabbing my arm. “What’s going on?”

I yank my arm out of his grasp and continue my trek to the stairs. I’m not mad at him—I’m mad at myself.

“Ally, wait! Tell me what’s wrong. I don’t like seeing you like this. Did I do something wrong? Please, talk to me.”

I whirl around, tears pricking my eyes. “I was worried about you, okay? You didn’t come home and I tried texting and calling and…”

He stares at me for a short while. “You were worried about me?”

“I’m so silly,” I say. “I always jump to extreme conclusions. Sorry.”

I turn to leave again, but he says, “Ally, wait.”

Reluctantly, I turn around.

“I didn’t mean to make you worry. And I’m sorry I didn’t check my phone. Things were so hectic at work. I just grabbed my phone from my locker without looking at it and hopped on my bike.”

I’m so mortified, I just want to disappear.

“I… I’m not used to people worrying about me,” he admits as he runs his hand through his hair. “Not used to people… caring about me.”

“I do.” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them.
“I care about you a lot.”

His face fills with surprise. Dropping his hand to his side, he says, “I care about you a lot, too.”

My heart hammers in my chest. “You do?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s more than me caring.” The words continue to tumble out of my mouth. “I think about you all the time. I look forward to sitting next to you during bio class, hoping Mrs. Cooper would give us an assignment so we could talk. I look forward to lunch every day so I could sit with you and my friends. Every evening, I hope we’ll do something together, like watch a movie or do our book club. Every time I read a romance novel, the love interest’s face morphs into your face. And then I can’t sleep at night because I spend hours reliving every moment we shared together.”

The room is dead silent as Zack gapes at me, his chest rising and falling heavily.

It takes a few seconds for it to dawn on me that those words just shot out of my mouth. I just *admitted* all of that to Zack.

With an embarrassed gasp, I spin around and run away.

Fingers close around my wrist and try to stop me in place. But I continue fleeing. I don’t just want to disappear—I want to cease to exist. Ally Bensen...poof.

“Ally,” he says as he gently tightens his hold on my wrist to stop me in place.

I press myself against the wall near the stairs, wishing I could blend into it. With my cheeks on fire, I stare down at my shoes, not daring to look at his face. Tears of shame and frustration well up in my eyes.

“Ally,” he whispers as he tucks his fingers under my chin and raises my head until our gazes meet. “Do you really feel that way?”

I can’t say a single thing. I’m shaking, my heart galloping in my chest like a wild horse, and I’m not sure I’m even breathing.

“I can’t stop thinking about you, either,” he murmurs as he steps closer to me, lifting his free hand to rest it next to my head on the wall. With his body towering over mine, I feel trapped. But not in a bad way. “You’ve been driving me crazy for days.”

My heart is beating so fast and loud that I can barely think. I’m going to faint.

His hand that rests under my chin glides upward until it rests on my cheek. With soft strokes, his fingers caress my cheek. A jolt of electricity sparks through me, and the area where his hand strokes my cheek burns. Soon, all of me is lit up like I’m on fire. I’m not sure my legs could sustain my weight.

“You have such a big heart,” he murmurs as his hand moves higher toward my hair. “You invest yourself in everyone and everything around you. You put those you love first, always making sure they’re okay. You have a stubbornness that drives me crazy and the way your entire face

lights up when you gush about the books you love?” He shakes his head. “I’ve never met anyone like you.”

He steps even closer until there are only a few inches between us. No, it’s only a few centimeters.

My breathing grows heavier as his hand goes higher and higher, wrapping around the hair tie holding my hair in a high ponytail. Gently, he slides it off, freeing my hair from its binding and letting it cascade down my shoulders. He sweeps his hand through my hair, his fingers slipping through the strands. “And I love when you wear your hair down like this. You’re the most beautiful girl in the world.”

My heart is going to bullet out of my chest any second. My legs are caving in.

Gently clutching a clump of my hair in his fist, he tilts my face upward toward his and brings his face close to mine. Dangerously close. Only a few centimeters lie between his lips and mine. His gaze falls down to my mouth before lifting back up to my eyes, questioning, hoping, pleading. With a bravery I didn’t know I had, I stretch my neck and move my lips toward his, my eyes fluttering shut. Am I...about to have my first kiss?

Everything I dreamed of, everything I hoped for, has led to this moment. And there’s no one I want to experience it with other than Zack.

I feel his face draw closer, feel his warm breath on my cheek. In only a few seconds, I’ll experience something I’ve been yearning for years. Not living vicariously through characters in my romance novels. No, living it for *real*.

Keys jingle outside the door, and then my parents' laughter echoes through the house. Through the haze of this dream world I'm currently in, I realize my parents are home.

My parents are home!

My eyes flash open. Zack's face is still close to mine, lips mere centimeters from mine. His eyes are shut. But they slowly and reluctantly open, and although it feels like years, we stare at each other for a few seconds before he steps away from me just as my parents come into view.

"Hey," Mom greets with a smile, holding up a takeout bag. "We got Chinese. Who's hungry?"

My blood is still racing through my body and my vocal cords are off-duty. I don't know if I'll be able to speak for another few hours.

Zack glances at me for a moment, a look of yearning in his eyes, before focusing on my parents. "Chinese sounds great. Thanks." He takes the bags from my mom and brings them to the kitchen.

"You okay there, sweetie?" Dad asks as he shrugs out of his jacket and hangs it in the closet. "Why are you pressed against the wall like that?"

I quickly pull my hair back into a ponytail. "Th...there was a bug," I lie, surprised my voice actually works. "Zack killed it."

Dad chuckles. "Your hero, right? Come, let's eat."

My legs are shaky as I walk into the kitchen, where Mom and Zack are unpacking the food. He lifts his eyes to me for a second before returning his attention to his work, his

movements a little stiff. How will I sit through a meal with him right across from me? We almost...we would have...if not for my parents...

Oh, gosh! I can't believe I had an almost-kiss.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I can't get out of bed this morning. Last night...it had to be a dream. There's no way I was about to have my first kiss.

I tossed and turned all night, replaying it over and over in my head. If my parents came home just five minutes later...

I've been obsessing all night what it would be like for Zack's lips to move against mine. Would it be like fireworks on the Fourth of July like some characters describe it? Would it be like melting into a puddle?

My phone beeps with a text.

Kara: Wanna get together at my house today? Feels like forever since we had a Musketeer hang.

Dani: I'm in!

Charlie: You know I'm down.

Yes! My friends are serious lifesavers. I need something to focus on other than Zack and his kissable-looking lips.

Ally: I'm game.

Kara: Yay! Let's meet at my place in an hour.

As I get dressed, I try to push the memory out of my head, but it looks like it wants to take permanent residence in my mind. Will I always obsess over it like this?

Charlie picks me up and we drive toward Kara's house. She tells me funny stories about other students' homework, but as much as I try to pay attention, her words just float over

my ears. Zack's lips so close to mine is the only thing on my mind.

"Jerry failed his math test by one point and asked me to look over his work to see if I can get him one more point so he could pass," she tells me. "I managed to find a loophole and guess what? His teacher gave him back the point! I don't know why I feel more excited about it than Jerry. He's on the football team, you know, and he can't afford a failing grade... Ally?"

I blink. "Huh?"

"You good? You're so quiet."

"I'm always quiet."

She smiles wryly. "You're quieter than usual."

I shrug. "I'm okay."

Total lie. I feel like my brain got hijacked by my heart. I don't know if I'll ever be the same.

"We have reached our destination!" Charlie announces before parking the car before Kara's house.

"Where's Dani?" I ask as I look at the backseat, only to find it empty.

Charlie raises a brow. "You just now realized she wasn't here? Easton's dropping her off. He took her out for breakfast."

I wish I could slap my head against my seat. Why is this taking over my life?

We walk up to Kara's house and ring the bell. She answers immediately with a smile and wave, Dani standing behind her

and waving, too.

“Already ordered pizza for lunch,” Kara tells us with a grin. “It’ll be here in an hour.”

Charlie pumps her fist in the air. “Score!”

We settle down on the couch and recliners and start gushing about everything. Well, it’s mostly them since I can’t focus on anything but last night.

“His parents started a new charity organization for the homeless,” Dani is in the middle of saying. “And Easton’s going to oversee it. I mean, he’ll be busy with school and stuff, and then college, so he’s going to have help, but this will be his baby and he’s so happy.”

“That’s great,” Kara says. “Now he can help more people like Tommy.”

“He’s going to do great things when he’s older,” Dani says with a proud smile. “I know it.”

“I’m glad his dreams are coming true,” Charlie says. “He’s a good guy. So is Brayden,” she says to Kara. “He’s still dreaming to play pro football?”

“Yeah. Hopefully Astor University will open doors for him.”

“I can’t believe we’re having such an adult conversation!” Dani says. “College and the future...sheesh. Can you imagine us being adults? I can’t!”

Charlie shrugs. “It’s no big deal. Just the next stage in our lives.”

Dani playfully bangs her shoulder into hers. “Does anything get this girl nervous?”

“Well, black cats make me a little nervous,” she admits. “Only because my grandma was so superstitious and she freaked me out about them when I was little.”

Kara giggles. “Don’t bring Charlie next to any black cats. Or she might reveal that she actually has fears!”

Charlie shrugs again. “Nah, I’m mostly over it.”

Kara looks at me. “Ally, you’re so quiet. What’s been going on with you?”

“Um...” I shift a little in my seat. “I’m going to ask Ms. Mehta after choir practice on Tuesday if I can audition for a solo.”

They all gape at me. “What?”

“I think I’m ready,” I admit. “I’ve always wanted a solo, but I guess I was too scared.”

“That’s awesome!” Dani throws her arms around me.

“I could tell you really wanted one,” Charlie says as she hugs me. “And you have a great voice. You’ll definitely have a solo.”

“I’m so proud of you!” Kara hugs me, too. “I can’t wait to hear you sing.”

“Thanks,” I say. “The thought of standing in front of all those people makes me feel like I’ll break out in hives, but it makes me really excited, too. But I’m getting ahead of myself. We’ll see how the audition goes.”

“It’s in the bag,” Charlie assures me.

“I don’t know...”

“I heard you sing only once and it still resonates with me. You have nothing to worry about.”

My cheeks on fire, I say, “Thanks. But can we talk about something else? I hate being the center of attention.”

“Sure,” Dani says.

They discuss various things, and I join in the conversation. But then my mind wanders to what happened last night. And I get so sucked into the memory it feels like I’m experiencing it again. How his body was so close to mine, his warm breath on my cheek. How his lips edged closer and closer to mine...

“Ally?” Dani snaps me out of my thoughts.

I blink and look at her. “Huh?”

“You okay? Where did you go?”

I glance from one friend to the other, realizing their faces hold nothing but intrigue and concern. Grabbing a couch cushion, I hug it to my chest and stare down at my knees. “Something happened last night...”

Charlie straightens up like someone pricked her spine. “Did someone hurt you? Because if they did—”

“No, no,” I quickly reassure her. “It wasn’t anything bad. At least, I don’t think so...”

“You’re killing us here, Ally!” Dani whines. “What happened?”

I hug the cushion tighter. “I don’t know. It’s so confusing and I’m so embarrassed...”

“You can talk to us,” Kara says softly. “You know you can tell us anything.”

“Yeah,” Charlie adds. “We’ll never judge you.”

I raise my eyes to them and take a deep breath. “Zack was late coming home from work last night and...I guess I was worried something happened to him. That maybe Jared and his stupid buddies cornered him in an alleyway and beat him up for sticking up for me.” I roll my eyes. “Turns out he was just busy with work. I...ugh.” I cover my face. “I waited outside for him like some crazy worried mom.”

“Don’t feel like that,” Kara says as she lowers her hand on my arm. “It’s sweet you were worried about him.”

“Yeah,” Dani says. “You care.”

Charlie nods.

I avert my gaze to my knees again. “And then somehow...” I squeeze the cushion tighter. “Somehow I admitted to him that...” I slowly lift my eyes to theirs.

“That you what?” they all ask, on the edge of their seats.

My gaze drops to my shoes. “That I like him.”

Dani gasps. “You like Zack?!”

“No!” I shout. Then my shoulders droop. “Maybe.”

“Oh my gosh!” Dani gushes. “You have a crush on Zack.”

“Is it a crush if the love interest in my romance book’s face turned into Zack’s?”

“Uh, yes,” Kara says.

“How did Zack react?” Charlie asks, narrowing her eyes like she’s scared for the answer.

“Well...he...” I stammer. “He and I...at the wall...my ponytail...”

They all lean forward with their ears perked.

“We had an almost-kiss,” I blurt.

“An almost-kiss?!” Dani’s practically bouncing off her seat. “Why wasn’t it a real kiss? What happened?”

“My parents came home.”

Dani groans. “Parents always ruin everything!”

“So what happened?” Kara asks with wide eyes.

“I don’t know. We ate Chinese.”

“And that’s it?” Charlie asks. “You didn’t say anything else to him?”

I shake my head. “He left early for work this morning and I stayed in bed because...” My cheeks flame. “I don’t know.”

Dani puts her arm around me. “I know how scary this stuff can be, but if you like Zack and he likes you...”

“I don’t know if he likes me.”

“You *just* said he wanted to kiss you.”

“Maybe he was caught up in the moment. I mean, we’re two teens living under the same roof.”

“Zack’s a good guy,” Charlie muses. “I think you guys would be really good together.”

I stare at her. “You do? He’s been through so much and all I care about are my silly romance novels.”

“So?”

“I don’t know.”

“Just take one day at a time, okay?” Kara says. “Enjoy every moment you’re together. And if he feels the same way you do and wants to take things further...”

“Then you’ll have a real kiss!” Dani says.

I cover my face. “I’ve been up all night wondering what it would have felt like if we actually kissed.”

She playfully hits my shoulder. “Just be the amazing person that you are and maybe one day—and maybe sooner than you think!—you’ll experience it.”

My neck heats up at the thought.

“I can’t believe our Ally might have a boyfriend!” Dani says. “I’ve wanted this for you for so long. And Zack is so kind.”

“And maybe Charlie will have a boyfriend, too, and we could quadruple date!” Kara says.

“I’m not getting a boyfriend,” Charlie insists. “Boys are too much drama and a waste of time.”

“The good kind of drama,” Dani corrects.

“There’s no such thing.”

“Yes, there is!”

She laughs as she rolls her eyes. “I’m fine with how things are.”

“That’s because you’ve never been in love.”

“I don’t need it. I told you, I have you guys. I don’t need anyone else.”

“That’s a shame,” Dani says. “You’re missing out on so much.”

“I’ve got everything I need.”

“You guys are getting ahead of yourselves,” I say. “You’re all assuming Zack and I…” I can’t even say the words.

Dani grins. “I’m psychic, remember? I *know* things.”

“You are so not psychic,” Charlie argues.

“Yes, I am! I predicted we’d have bland mashed potatoes on Thursday, and I was right.”

“We have mashed potatoes like every Thursday,” Charlie says.

“But they were *bland*.”

Charlie shakes her head with a smile. “You’re so impossible. But I love you.”

She beams. “I know. It’s kind of hard not to love me. Just ask Easton.”

Their banter makes me feel so much better. Ever since the almost-kiss, I’ve been wound up like a tight ball. I have no idea what’ll happen between me and Zack, but at least I have my friends to keep me sane. Without them, I really think I’d lose my mind.

“You’re making me hungry, you know that?” Charlie says.

“Oh my gosh, I was just about to say that Charlie is going to ask for pizza!” Dani says. “See, I am psychic!”

“I never actually said I wanted pizza.”

“But you thought it! That’s me being psychic.”

“Not to burst your bubble, Dani,” Kara says, “but we all know Charlie loves pizza. It should be delivered any minute.”

Dani crosses her arms over her chest as she sinks on the couch. “Whatever. I’m still psychic.”

We laugh.

I relax on the couch with my cushion, pushing what happened with Zack last night out of my head.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

After waking up on Monday morning and getting dressed, I leave my room and make my way down the hallway toward the stairs. Only to collide into Zack's chest.

The strong blow makes me lose my balance and fall backward, but Zack grabs my arm.

"You okay?" he asks.

His face is so close to mine. Lips are so close to mine. The flashback of us standing inches away from each other on Saturday night knocks against my mind.

I quickly pull my hand free and stumble back. "Yeah. I'm good."

We just stand there.

"I was headed downstairs," he says as he turns toward the stairs.

"Yeah, me, too. Not that I was following you or anything. I was just going to the kitchen like I do every morning."

I want to slap myself. What the heck is coming out of my mouth?

He nods slowly before descending the stairs.

"Ugh," I groan, then follow him.

Mom and Dad are already seated at the table. Zack sits down and I lower myself in the chair across from him. He

reaches for the cereal box and is about to pour some into a bowl, but then he slides it across the table to me.

“Oh. Thanks,” I say. Once my bowl is full, I pass it back to him.

He and I eat our cereal quietly as my parents discuss various things. When I feel him looking at me, my eyes creep over to him. But he looks away, focusing on his cereal. Then I find myself watching him, until his eyes lift to mine and I quickly avert my gaze.

“See you later,” he says before pushing away from the table and reaching for his helmet. He leaves the house, and his motorcycle echoes down the street a few minutes later. My heart sinks a little. Was I hoping he’d ask me if I wanted a ride?

When I’m in Charlie’s car as she drives us to school, she asks me how things are with Zack.

“Weird,” I say. “Awkward.”

“Understandable. Things will probably get better soon.”

“I don’t know.” I lay my head against the window. “What if things are ruined between us?”

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” she says as she pulls into the student parking lot. “You’ll see.”

After meeting Dani, Kara, Brayden, and Easton at Kara’s locker, we talk about stuff and then separate to our classrooms. Zack is already seated at our lab table, nose buried in a book.

I lower myself next to him, my heart thumping wildly. From nerves, excitement, anxiety? I don’t know. Maybe all

three.

He raises his head and smiles at me. “Hey.”

“Hi.”

“So this book?” He lifts his paperback a few inches off the table. “It sucks.”

“Why?”

“Because the guy gets the girl in the end, right? But he loses her again in the next chapter. Then she turns into a ghost and haunts him for the rest of his life.”

I wrinkle my nose. “You’re right. That does suck.”

He laughs. I laugh, too. Phew, the awkwardness is slowly seeping away. Thank goodness.

“Yeah, this is definitely a book you wouldn’t like.”

“Yet...something makes me itch to read it.”

His brows shoot up in surprise. “Yeah? Thought you’re a sucker for happy endings.”

“I am. I hate sad endings. But I have a very severe case of FOMO when it comes to books.”

“Do you?” he teases.

“Yeah. When someone is reading a book I haven’t read, I have this need to read it, too.”

He leans back as he folds his arms across his chest with a slight smile. “That’s a very serious condition. I don’t think there’s a cure for that.”

“Other than you handing me that book, pronto.”

That makes him chuckle. “Sure thing. Once I finish this last chapter.”

As he finishes to read, I lean back in my chair and release a silent breath. Things seem to be back to normal, which makes me feel so much better. But at the same time, I have no idea what he’s thinking. Did he forget about our almost-kiss? Does it not mean anything to him anymore? Did it *never* mean anything to him? Or maybe he can’t stand the awkwardness either and is pretending it never happened? I can live with that. Pretend it never happened, or I’ll seriously lose my mind.

“You know something?” Zack whispers as he leans closer to me. Again, the flashback jumps into my mind, but I shove it away.

“What?” I whisper back.

“I don’t usually listen to the gossip going around school, but word in the halls is that your favorite person in the world got the rejection of the century.”

I give him a befuddled face.

He nods toward Jared, who is sitting at his desk playing with his phone. A few guys are huddled around his desk, but he’s focused on his phone.

“The piece of crap asked out one of the cheerleaders. And she rejected him in front of everyone.”

My eyes widen. “You’re kidding.”

He shakes his head. “Nope.”

“Good. I mean, that sucks.”

“No, it doesn’t. Your first response was the correct answer.”

That makes me laugh. “Is it bad that I don’t feel bad at all?”

He leans even closer, his lips dangerously close to mine. “Of course not, Ponytail. You feel perfectly right.”

Why do I feel like there is a double meaning to that?

“My dad always used to say, ‘What goes around, comes around,’” Zack continues. “Karma’s the b-word, isn’t it?”

I giggle. “Totally!”

He laughs, too. Then we both smile at each other.

Yeah, I think Charlie’s right. Things are going to be okay between us.

When Dad comes home from work late that night, he calls for Mom, me, and Zack to gather in the living room. Zack and I are in the middle of discussing the sucky book he gave me today after bio class, so I try not to groan in disappointment as I follow him downstairs.

“What’s going on, Kyle?” Mom asks as she lowers herself on the couch next to me and Zack.

Dad smiles, his eyes flitting to Zack. “I have wonderful news. Zack, we found a foster family willing to take you and your brother in.”

Zack sits frozen in his seat like he can’t believe what he just heard. “You...what?” he asks.

Face shining like he's got the sun buried there, Dad nods. "We found you guys a home."

"So...I can live with Zane," Zack says slowly like he's having trouble processing what he's hearing. "He and I... together. In one home."

"Yes. You and your brother can finally live together. And they're a really nice couple. I know you guys will be happy there."

"This is wonderful news!" Mom says as she closes her arms around Zack and kisses his cheek, tears forming in her eyes.

Zack is a statue in her arms, like he *still* can't believe what he's hearing. Then he relaxes as he hugs her back, body heaving with relief. "Oh my gosh, I'm going to live with Zane." He pulls out of her arms and stands, walking toward Dad. "Thank you so much, Kyle. This means so much to me. Zane and I...we owe you everything."

"Nonsense." Dad hugs him. "You and Zane deserve the best. And the Wilsons are the best."

I can't see Zack's face, but from the way his shoulders tremble, I know he's crying. And I'm crying, too, because I'm so happy for him.

"Thanks," Zack whispers to Dad as he steps out of the hug. "For everything."

Dad claps him on the back.

Zack slowly turns around and looks at me. With tears spilling down my cheeks, I leap off the couch and throw

myself into his arms. “I’m so happy for you,” I whisper as he lifts me a few inches off the floor. “So, so happy.”

“Thanks.”

He holds onto me, not lowering me back to the floor. It’s almost like he doesn’t want to let go because if he does, he’ll realize it was just a dream.

“This isn’t a dream,” I whisper to him. “This is real life. And you are going to have a wonderful life. You and Zane, together at last.”

He looks into my eyes, and I see the tears pooling there. “Thanks,” he says in a barely-audible voice.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You did.” He hugs me tighter. “Of course you did.”

He lowers me to the floor and turns to Dad, wiping his eyes. “When do we move in?”

Dad smiles. “Does tomorrow sound okay?”

Zack’s body perks up with hope. “Tomorrow? I can be with Zane *tomorrow*?”

“You bet.”

“Does he know?”

“His caseworker is probably telling him the news right now.”

Zack rakes his hand through his hair like he still can’t believe it. Mom, Dad, and I exchange smiles. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so happy before—real, genuine, pure joy. It makes fresh tears gather in my eyes.

“I need to call Zane.” Zack marches to the stairs and starts climbing them. “Holy crap, I can’t believe this.”

Mom wraps her arm around Dad and smiles at him. “You’ve changed two more lives today, my wonderful husband.”

He kisses her temple. “Two out of thousands more. One day, I hope I can help them all.”

I’ve never been prouder of my dad. And I’ve never been so happy for other people before. Zack and Zane deserve a good, happy, and healthy life. And now their dreams are coming true.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Zack

The Bensens wait for me as I pack my bag. I go down the stairs and meet them at the front door. Kyle's got a bright, encouraging smile on his face, Ally a sweet smile, and Jenna's busy making sure my clothes haven't been forgotten in the washing machine.

This is it. My last few minutes living here. It's the best home I've had so far...if I can even call it a foster home. It felt like a real one. Like I belonged.

I hope the next will feel the same.

My gaze darts to Ally, and she gives me another warm, sweet smile. I don't want to leave her. Things were a little weird after we nearly kissed, but I'm glad we're in a good place now. Back to being friends. Though, I don't think I'll ever think of her as a friend again. But I can't linger on my feelings for her because I've got a lot to deal with right now. Leaving this home where I've felt the safest, going to a new place, making sure Zane is well taken care of. Finally, after two years, we'll be under the same roof again.

With tears flashing in her eyes, Jenna folds her arms around me. "We were so glad to have you, Zack," she says, hugging me tightly. "Good luck."

"Thanks."

She dabs at the corners of her eyes.

Kyle takes me in for a hug. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again—no one deserves this more than you, Zack. You and your brother.”

I smile, my throat tightening up. I’ve only known them for a few weeks, but they’ve almost felt like parents to me. “Thank you.”

“Did you pack everything?” Jenna asks, taking in my backpack and helmet sitting on the table near the door.

“I think so.” I roll my shoulders. “I don’t have much anyway.”

Jenna dabs at her eyes some more, but the tears keep flowing. “Oh my! Please excuse me while I collect myself.” She exits to the kitchen.

Kyle reaches for his phone. “I’ll call the Wilsons and let them know we’re leaving soon.” He leaves to his office.

I turn to Ally and find her staring at me, a look of sadness and disappointment and frustration and happiness and hope mixed all together. I know how she feels. She doesn’t want me to go, but at the same time, she’s happy for me. That I may finally, finally have a place with my brother I can call home.

Biting her lip, she flings her arms around me. Her soft, warm cheek brushes against mine, igniting something deep inside me. “I’m going to miss you,” she whispers in my ear.

Laughing lightly, I draw back to look into her eyes. “You’ll see me every day at school.”

She continues biting her lip. “It’s not the same.” She forces a smile. “But I’m so happy for you.” She pushes some hair away from my eyes. “Really, genuinely happy for you.”

I hold her close to my chest, smoothing my hand down her silky ponytail. “Thank you, but I don’t want to get too hopeful. I trust that your dad found me and Zane a good home, but... you never know.”

Her face grows serious. “Call me or my dad the second you or Zane don’t feel safe.”

I nod. “I will.”

She throws her arms around me again. “I really will miss you.”

As I tighten my arms around her, I think back to her pressed against the wall, her beautiful hair spilling down her shoulders, her lips centimeters from my face.

The room has suddenly gotten hot.

Footsteps head our way and we break away from each other like we touched a pot of boiling water. Jenna returns to the room, laughing awkwardly. “I don’t know what’s come over me. I don’t normally cry this much.” She dabs her eyes again. “You’ve made quite an impression on me, Zack.”

“Thank you, Jenna. Really,” I tell her. “And thank you for letting me live here.”

She hugs me again. “It was our pleasure. Call and visit us, okay? Don’t be a stranger.”

My eyes meet Ally’s and she smiles. I return it. “I won’t.”

Kyle enters the room, sliding his phone into his pocket. He rests his hand on my shoulder. “Ready to go?”

I glance at Ally again. Why is leaving her so hard? Like I told her, we’ll see each other at school every day. But...it’s not

the same.

“Yeah,” I tell Kyle, picking up my backpack and helmet. I thank Jenna and Ally again before following Kyle to the door. Before I leave, I turn around and catch Ally’s eyes. I don’t know how long we stare at each other—it must be seconds but feels much longer—but I yank my gaze away and hand Kyle my stuff, which he places in the trunk. I’ll have to come back another time to fetch my bike.

Kyle and I get in the car and head toward the Wilsons’ house. Zane should already be there. He called me a million times during work, asking me when I’m moving into our new home. And now that he knows we’re on our way, I know the little guy can barely contain his excitement.

And I can’t contain mine. But I’m still wary, got to be on guard because I really never know when someone will betray me or hurt me. But I trust Kyle that he found a good home for me and my brother. Hopefully, we’ll live there until I age out and can take care of him on my own.

Kyle talks a little about the Wilsons, even though he told me about them last night. Maybe he’s trying to relax me. I didn’t realize until this moment how nervous I am. Meeting a new foster family always makes me anxious.

Kyle stops the car before a medium-sized building that looks very homey and inviting. He rests his hand on my arm. “Ready?”

I nod. “Ready.”

We get out of the car, and after Kyle fetches my things from the trunk, we make our way up the stairs to the front

door. My heart thumps wildly as he rings the bell.

No more than three seconds pass before it opens to reveal a woman in her late forties with graying dark hair and kind brown eyes.

She beams at me. “Hello, Zack. Welcome to our home. I’m Eleanor.” She drapes an arm around me, guiding me into the house. Kyle follows, shutting the door behind him. “Zane, look who’s here!” Eleanor calls.

Light footsteps sound a few feet away as Zane comes running to me, jumping into my arms. “You’re here!” He wraps his arms around me so tightly he’s nearly choking me. “I waited forever!”

Laughing, I lower him to the ground and hug him close. “I’m here now. We’ll be together forever.”

Drawing back, he smiles, exposing a missing tooth.

“You lost a new tooth?” I ask.

“Yesterday. Wanna see it?”

I chuckle. “Maybe later.”

He bends close. “She makes good food,” he whispers. “Better than Sandra.”

I laugh again, straightening up as an older man with graying hair and green eyes, who must be my new foster dad, enters the room and holds out his hand to me.

“Curtis Wilson,” he introduces himself. “Welcome to our home.”

I accept the handshake. “Thank you.”

“Are you hungry?” Eleanor asks me. “Zane just finished his dinner.”

“A little,” I admit.

She nods, as if she’s determined to stuff me like a chicken.

Kyle claps me on the back. “Go on, Zack. And good luck.” He takes me in his arms. “I’ll call you later to check how you’re doing.”

I hold him close. “Thank you for the millionth time.”

He squeezes my shoulder.

Eleanor brings me to the kitchen while Kyle exchanges a few words with Curtis. Eleanor scoops different varieties of food on my plate, motioning for me to take a seat. Zane drops down next to me, slipping his hand in mine like he doesn’t want to let go.

The food’s great, but not as good as Jenna’s. A pang hits my stomach when Ally’s face flashes before my eyes. It’s only been a few minutes, but I miss her like crazy.

Kyle leaves and Curtis enters the kitchen, taking a seat next to his wife. As I eat this delicious food, they go over a few rules. It’s not much. Behave like two young men, go to school, do our homework, no funny business. It’s pretty standard.

When I’ve finished eating, Eleanor and Curtis bring Zane and me to our rooms. Their two kids are all grown and married, and their bedrooms are next door to each other. Which is great because I’ll feel a lot better knowing Zane is sleeping close by.

Zane bounces up and down in place. “They have an Xbox!” he tells me.

Curtis laughs. “That was our kids’, and you’re welcome to use it. Like we said, everything in this house is yours now. You don’t have to ask permission to use or play with anything. And you’re welcome to take anything from the fridge or pantry.”

“We want this house to feel like yours,” Eleanor tells us.

I nod. “Thank you.”

Smiling, they leave my room, telling us to get some sleep because it’s getting late. So far, this place looks promising. I like it. And these people seem like they’ll take good care of Zane.

He climbs onto my bed, bouncing in place. “What do you wanna do?”

I sit down next to him, placing my hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got to go to bed soon.”

He frowns. “But you just got here.”

I stretch my arm over his shoulder. “True, but we’ll have lots of time to spend together. I’m not going anywhere and neither are you.”

He smiles brightly. “Can I sleep with you?”

“Only for tonight. I don’t think our new foster parents will like you sleeping in my bed all the time.”

“Okay.”

I help him get ready for bed, then Eleanor comes in a little while later to tuck him in. She’s taken aback for a second to find him in my bed, but smiles in understanding.

“Would you like me to read to you?” she asks him as she pulls the blanket up to his chin. It’s so mother-like that my throat tightens.

“Can I read to you?” he asks. “And Zack, too.”

“Sure,” she tells him. “I’d love that.”

Since there’s no room for me on the bed, I pull my desk chair over and plop down next to Zane’s side of the bed. He reads from one of the books Ally gave him. My thoughts shoot in her direction, wondering what she’s doing right now, if she’s thinking about me.

After he’s done the story, Eleanor kisses his cheek and wishes us good night. I take a quick shower, then climb into bed next to an already-sleeping Zane.

“Sweet dreams, little guy,” I whisper before shutting my eyes and drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Forty

After choir practice on Thursday, I walk over to Ms. Mehta, my heart in my throat. She smiles when she sees me. “Hi, Ally.”

I swallow before offering her a small smile. “Hi. I was wondering if I can audition for a solo.”

Her face shines so brightly I might need sunglasses. “You want a solo?”

I shift from one foot to the other, a part of me begging me to flee. But I force it away. I don’t want to hold myself back anymore. “Yeah. If it’s not too late.”

“Of course it’s not too late! I’m so glad to hear this, Ally. We’ll do it next week.”

“Can it just be me and you, and not in front of the entire choir?” I ask.

“Sure. Come to class fifteen minutes early on Tuesday.”

I nod. “Thanks, Ms. Mehta.”

“No, Ally. Thank *you*.”

I feel so empowered as I leave the music room. I’ve been agonizing over this all day, but it feels amazing to conquer my fear and do something I’ve always dreamed of. I know I didn’t actually get the solo, but this is a step in the right direction. Who knows what other fears I can conquer now?

“You look like you’re in a good mood,” Charlie observes as she gets up from the steps in front of the school building,

where she was waiting for me.

“I just asked Ms. Mehta if I can audition for a solo.”

“Awesome!” She wraps her arm around me and squeezes me to her body as we make our way to her car. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I feel good,” I say with a smile. “Even if I don’t get a solo, I feel good that I did it. Conquered my fear, you know? Oh, wait. You don’t know,” I joke. “Because you fear nothing.”

She laughs. “Sure I fear things. Black cats, remember?”

We both giggle.

Once we get in the car and she drives to my house, she asks, “Is Zack going to pick you up to take you to his new home?”

“Yeah. He’s coming straight from work to pick me up. I’m so excited.”

“He looks really happy,” she muses with a smile. “I’m so happy for him and his brother.”

“Me, too.”

She pulls up to my house and tells me to have fun at Zack’s as I get out of the car. I feel like I’m floating in the air as I make my way into the house. Zack moved in with his new foster parents only two days ago, but he already feels settled enough that he wants me to come over. I can’t wait to spend the evening with him and Zane. I miss the little guy.

It’s a good thing I have homework to distract myself with as I wait for the hours to pass. A few hours later, when I’ve

finished my homework and am reading my Regency romance, I get a text.

Zack: Just finished work. You ready?

I hold back from squealing as I tap out a response.

Ally: I've been waiting all evening!

Zack: Me, too. See you in a few.

I grab a bag and fill it up with a few books for Zane. He'll be so excited when he learns I brought him some more books. Zack told me the Wilsons have a vast library with so many books to choose from, but giving Zane some of my old ones is something special just the two of us share.

When Zack arrives, my parents invite him in and hug him and want to know how he's doing. He answers their millions of questions before they release him, and then he and I leave my house.

"I'm touched by how much they care," Zack tells me as we put on our helmets. "I'm still not used to having so many people care about me. Guess I thought your parents would forget about me once I'm no longer in their care."

"You kidding? You're stuck with them for life."

He grins. "Doesn't sound too bad." He puts his arms on my waist and hoists me onto the bike.

"Thanks," I tell him.

"You don't have to thank me. It's my pleasure."

"Sure I do. It's equivalent to you opening the car door for me."

Ugh, now I want to smack myself. Don't guys open car doors for girls when they are on a date? I don't want him to think I think it's a date.

“I mean—”

“No, you're right,” he says. Then he playfully taps my arm. “Because you're a shorty.”

I laugh lightly, my cheeks heating up.

He leans closer to whisper, “Don't worry about it. I love that you're short. Because then I could open the door for you every time I give you a ride.” He winks and gets on the bike.

Okay, the temperature just rose a million degrees.

Once I'm holding onto him, we zoom to his house and he parks in the driveway. The house looks really cute and inviting. Zack and I walk up to the door, where he stabs a key into the lock.

Zane, who's in the middle of playing Xbox on the living room couch, drops his controller and bounds off the couch. “Ally!” He wraps his little arms around me. “You're here.” He jumps up and down and then hugs me again. “You're here!”

“Of course I'm here,” I say with a laugh. “I came especially to see you.”

“Yay! Come play Xbox with me.”

He pulls me to the couch, where we sit side by side. He gives me a controller and teaches me how to play the game. I'm not very good because I don't play a lot of video games, but Zane doesn't seem to mind. In fact, I think he likes that

I'm not good. Not because he wants to beat me, but because he sees the value in having a good time versus winning.

Zack sits on my other side and laughs softly every time I die. That just makes this even more fun because all I want is to see Zack and Zane smile and laugh.

A few minutes later, a middle-aged couple walks into the room. Zack stands up and gestures to me. "Curtis and Eleanor, this is my friend Ally," he introduces. "Ally, this is Curtis and Eleanor."

I lower the controller and walk over to shake their hands. "It's so nice to meet you," I say.

"Likewise," Eleanor says with a sweet smile and kind eyes. "Zane has told us so much about you. And Zack as well."

That makes my cheeks heat up. Zack has been talking about me?

"We're so happy to meet Zack's friend," Curtis adds with his own smile. "Our home is always open to his friends. So please make yourself comfortable."

"Thanks."

Just from meeting them, I know they are extremely kind and generous people. I'm so glad Zack and Zane are in a good home.

Once they leave, I sit back down near Zane and pick up my controller, but he says, "Wanna play board games, Ally?"

"Sure. I love board games."

Zane grabs my hand and Zack's and pulls us toward a closet. "Curtis and Eleanor have a ton of board games! Even really old ones. Let's pick one!"

He throws the closet door open and sheesh! He wasn't kidding. They really do have nearly every board game here, even extremely old ones from like the seventies. Zane picks one and we settle down in the living room. It's been a while since I've played a board game, so I'm having a lot of fun with Zack and Zane.

"I win!" Zane says.

"Congrats," I tell him with a smile. "And I have the perfect prize for you."

His eyes widen. "Really? What?"

I reach into my bag I left on the couch and carefully dump its contents onto the table. Zane's eyes widen even more when he sees the books. "All for me?"

"Yes," I say with a laugh. "All for you."

"Curtis and Eleanor let me have as many books as I want! Can I keep them all?"

"Of course."

"Thank you!" He runs around the table and throws his arms around me. "I love you, Ally!"

"I love you, too, Zane." I hug him tight and move my eyes to Zack. He gives me a sweet smile. I return it.

"Can I read you the first chapter?" I ask. "I can do some voices."

“Really? Cool! Zack does voices, too! Maybe you both can do the voices.”

Zack grins. “That sounds like a lot of fun.”

We get comfortable on the couch, with Zane sitting between us, and read him the story, with Zack and me doing voices like we promised. I’ve never felt so at peace before, just reading to him with Zack by my side. I wish I could do this many, many times in the future.

After we finish the chapter, Zack tells Zane he needs to take me home. Zane frowns but says, “Okay.”

I wish I didn’t have to leave, but it’s getting late. I hug Zane and tell him we’ll do this again another time, and he cheers. Then I say goodbye to Curtis and Eleanor and leave together with Zack.

“Thanks for having me,” I tell him as we make our way to his bike. “It looks like you and Zane are really happy here.”

“We are,” he says softly. “I can’t thank your dad enough.”

I step forward and put my arms around him. “I’m so happy for you, Zack.”

“I know,” he says softly again as his arms come around me. “You’re genuinely happy for other people. That’s what makes you amazing.”

“Thanks.”

After a moment, he pulls back and grins. “I lied to Zane.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not taking you home.”

“What...?”

“I want to take you somewhere first. That okay?”

“As long as you’re not kidnapping me...”

He chuckles. “Are you listening to fake rumors again?”

I laugh, too. “No way.”

“Let me get the door for you,” he jokes as he puts his hands around me and lifts me onto the bike.

“You’re such a gentleman,” I joke back.

“I try.”

I have no idea where we’re going, but then the streets start looking familiar. Zack is heading to the woods. Is he bringing me to his special place—the waterfall?

He parks the bike on the side near the opening to the woods and takes off his helmet. “Look familiar?” he says with a smile.

“A little,” I joke again, pulling off my own helmet.

“Come.” He slides his hand in mine.

It’s a little hard to see because it’s dark, but we use the flashlights on our phones to help guide the way. And anyway, Zack assures me he knows the woods better than the town, so we should be okay. It’s not long before I hear the waterfall, and a few minutes later, the breathtaking sight comes into view.

I smile as I study it. “It looks so pretty even at night.”

Zack puts his bag down on the ground and takes out small lights to illuminate the area. It makes the waterfall look even

prettier. “Wow,” I say. “It’s beautiful.”

He takes my hand and tugs me down so I’m sitting near him. “I know this would have been better in the day, but—”

I shake my head. “This is perfect.”

“Yeah? Cool. I mean...”

Why does he look nervous?

“I just wanted to bring you here to thank you for everything you’ve done for me. You’re such a good friend to me and you’re great with Zane. He needs strong, positive, kind people in his life. People he can look up to. People he knows he can count on.”

I nod. “He’s a really good kid and deserves to be happy. Both of you do.”

“Thanks.” He wraps his arm around me, tucking me against his body. I lower my head on his shoulder as we watch the waterfall. The only place I want to be right now is here, my body pressed close to his in front of this amazing sight.

“I have a surprise for you,” he says.

I look up at him. “Surprise? Should I be scared?” Whenever someone says they have a surprise, I never know if I should be excited or nervous.

He laughs gently. “No, you shouldn’t be scared. I think you’ll be very happy.” He opens his bag and removes something from inside. It looks like...a book?

He holds it against his chest, away from the light so I can’t see it. “I’ve wanted to do this for a while now, but it took me forever to find a copy. I almost quit, but something made me

not give up. Maybe it's the spark you have inside you that kept me going. If it was you, you wouldn't give up, so I didn't want to give up, either."

I have no idea what he's talking about.

"You've done so much for me, and I really wanted to do something for you. So..." He turns the book around and holds it out to me.

My eyes almost roll off my face. I gasp. "Is that...?"

Zack nods. "*A Lady of Wit and her Handsome Duke.*"

I cover my mouth with my hands. "How did you... how...?"

He chuckles softly. "Like I said, it took me forever to find a copy. Had to drive out all the way to Silverton to this little old book store that no one even knows exists—"

I fling my arms around him as tears poke my eyes. "Thank you, Zack. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You're welcome."

"You say I did so much for you, but you did so much for me. You stood up to Jared for me and saved me from that jerk Brody—"

"No," he says as he runs his hand up and down my back. "You did so much for me. I wish I could show you how much you mean to me, but I don't think anything can show you what I feel in my heart."

I slowly raise my gaze to his.

He stares into my eyes with so many emotions shining in his. "Ally," he says softly as he strokes my cheek. "You are the

most amazing, beautiful, kind-hearted person I've ever met in my life. I don't know what I did to deserve to have you in my life. I'm the luckiest person on the planet, just to be your friend."

"Stop—"

"I know you're going to try to deny it. Say there's nothing special about you, but there is." He sweeps his fingers across my cheek, his gaze falling to my lips. "I wish we hadn't been interrupted that day," he murmurs, voice so soft I almost don't hear him over the waterfall. "I lie in bed every night wondering what would have happened had your parents not walked in. I wonder what it would be like for my dreams to finally come true."

I just stare into his mesmerizing eyes illuminated by the lights. Dreams? He's been fantasizing what it would be like if he and I...?

He dips his face toward mine. "No one can interrupt us now," he whispers, bending even closer.

I tilt my face toward his, my eyes fluttering shut. His soft lips press against mine.

My heart bullets out of my body as fireworks shoot in the sky. An orchestra plays a beautiful symphony as our lips move over each other's, hesitant and slow at first, then eagerly and fervently, as though we've been yearning for this for a long time. Zack wraps his arms around my waist and hauls me closer to his body until there is nothing between us, just our bodies fused together. My arms lock around his neck, my fingers sliding upward to tangle in his long dark hair. His heart

beats against mine, in the same rhythm as mine. As though we are both in sync with one another.

As his lips continue to move over mine, sweetly, gently, but passionately and lovingly, his hand moves upward until it's at my hair. He carefully yanks off my hair tie, once again freeing my hair from its binding. He pushes his fingers through the locks, massaging my scalp and sending tingles all over my body.

“Ally,” he murmurs as his lips sweep down to my throat, then back up to my lips again. “Ally...”

“Zack,” I whisper, feeling as though I'm no longer in my body. I'm floating up and up, weightless, like I'm on cloud nine. It's the best feeling in the world and I never want it to end.

He rests his forehead against mine, his chest rising and falling heavily. Mine rises and falls just as heavily. “I want to get close to you, Ally,” he says softly. “Want to tell you everything that lies in my heart. My struggles, my past, and everything I've been through. But I don't think I'm ready yet.”

“That's okay,” I whisper as I hold him close in my arms. “I'm here whenever you need to talk. I'll always be here.”

And then we kiss again.

When Zack drops me off in front of my house an hour later, I wrap him in my arms and kiss him, once again never wanting this to end. Can someone get sick of kissing? Because I don't think I'll ever get sick of this. I can't believe I've been

missing out on this all my years. I knew kissing was amazing, but I never imagined it could feel as incredible as this.

“Your parents might see us,” he says with a chuckle.

“I don’t care,” I mutter as I kiss him again. “You’re amazing.”

“You’re the amazing one.”

We kiss for another few minutes before I reluctantly pull away. “Good night, Motorcycle Hottie.”

His brows shoot up. “Motorcycle Hottie?” He smiles. “I like it, my beautiful Ponytail.”

I laugh. “I thought you might.” I press my fingers to my lips and then lay them on his. “See you tomorrow.”

“Good night.”

I kiss him one last time before entering my house. Thankfully, my parents are watching TV in the living room and didn’t see Zack and me outside. I’m sure they would approve because they love Zack and know how great he is. I don’t want to tell them yet, though, not when it’s still so fresh and exciting.

But there are some people I have to tell. As soon as I enter my room, I start a video call with my Musketeers.

“Hey!” Dani says as she pops up on the screen, followed by Charlie and Kara. “Ooh, someone looks happy.”

I squeal as I press my hands to my cheeks. “Is my face red?”

“Yeah,” Kara says. “And your lips look...puffy.”

I squeeze my fingers on my lips. “They do?”

Charlie narrows her eyes. “It’s like you made out with someone.”

They’re quiet for a few seconds before Dani cries, “Oh my gosh! Did you and Zack kiss?”

“Yes!”

As I plop down on my bed with a happy sigh, I tell them every detail about my magical night.

Chapter Forty-One

I'm smiling in my sleep because I just had the best dream. Zack and I...we had a magical night together. He and I kissing under the stars before a gorgeous waterfall...

My eyes snap open. No, it wasn't a dream. It was *real*. My cheeks hurt because of the huge smile that has taken over my face. I've never felt so close to another person before. I can't wait to get even closer to him, when he's ready. I'll wait however long he needs.

Reaching for my phone, I send Zack a text.

Ally: Good morning, Motorcycle Hottie! It's an awesome morning, isn't it? Can't wait to see you soon :)

I get ready as I wait for his response, but it doesn't come. Not after five minutes, ten minutes, or even twenty. Hmm. I guess he's busy.

When I'm eating breakfast in the kitchen a few minutes later, still awaiting his response, I can't help but feel a little disappointed. I hoped he would offer to take me to school, where we would ride on his bike and make a pit stop somewhere so we could make out, but he hasn't texted me back yet. I ask Charlie to give me a lift.

I gush about my evening with Zack on the way to school, and then again with Kara and Dani at my locker. I head to bio a few minutes early, hoping Zack came early, too, and we could spend some time together. But he's not in the classroom. I slip my romance novel from my bag and read.

The bell rings, snapping me out of the book world I just disappeared to. I glance to my left and find that Zack still hasn't arrived. And he doesn't arrive minutes before Mrs. Cooper walks in, either. He's late?

The class goes on, without Zack showing. That's a little odd because I know how important it is for Zack to stay out of detention. He needs to work so he could save up money for the future. Is he sick?

As soon as class is over, I send him a quick text, asking him if he's okay. He doesn't respond to me throughout the rest of the morning, causing alarm to enter my bloodstream. I hope he's okay...

By the time lunch rolls around, I'm really worried. I didn't see him at all today. He wasn't at his locker all morning and he still hasn't answered my texts. Maybe I'll see him at lunch?

Just as I'm about to enter the cafeteria, someone blocks my path. I take in the familiar leather jacket and leather pants. I raise my head and smile at Zack, relieved that he's here. "Hey," I say. "I didn't see or hear from you all day. Where were you during bio?"

He doesn't return the smile. With a serious expression, he says, "We need to talk."

"Is everything okay?"

He doesn't say anything as he leads me to an empty classroom.

"Zack?" I ask as we walk inside. "You good?"

"Yeah, we just need to talk."

Why does his tone sound so...cold?

I slowly lower myself in one of the desks, my heart starting to pound. A chill runs down my spine, and I quickly hug myself.

Zack doesn't sit down. He stands a few feet away from me, gaze not meeting mine. Crossing his arms over his chest, he says, "Last night...it was a mistake."

"W...what?"

"Sorry," he mutters, still not looking at me. "I shouldn't have...we can't be together."

It feels like the walls are closing in on me. "W...what... what are you saying?"

He glances at me for half a second before looking away. "We just can't be together. Sorry." He marches to the door, clamps his hand around the knob, yanks it open, and walks out.

I sit in my seat, the walls continuing to close in on me. Zack just...he just...

Did he just break up with me?

I don't understand. We had such a magical night last night kissing under the stars...how could he say that?

Tears prick my eyes. I wrestle out of the desk and dash to the bathroom, locking myself in a stall and dropping down on the closed toilet seat. The tears gush down my cheeks like a waterfall. Like the waterfall Zack and I watched last night, amidst making out. That special, magical night that meant the world to me....

All that ripped away by Zack's four horrible words: *We can't be together.*

What did I do wrong? After what he told me last night, how he wants to get closer to me in time...what was all of that? Was he just playing with me? How could he say those words to me and then rip out my heart like that?

I don't know how long I sit here with the tears bursting out of my eyes like a dam, but then I hear someone enter the bathroom and Dani's voice call, "Ally? Are you in here?"

Her footsteps move further inside, then stop before my stall. She must notice my sneakers because she calls out, "She's in here, guys!"

No more than a few seconds pass before I hear a set of two more footsteps. "Ally?" Charlie calls. "Ally, are you in there?"

"Those are her shoes," Kara says. She knocks on the door. "Ally, can you come out?"

I can't come out. I want to stay here forever, until I die.

"Ally." Now Charlie knocks on the door. "Can you please come out? We're worried about you."

I close my eyes, more tears seeping out and dripping down my cheeks. I don't want my friends to worry about me. I slowly get up and open the latch, allowing the door to swing open. Three worried faces stare at me, growing more concerned by the second.

Dani gasps. "You're crying!"

Kara puts her arms around me. "What happened?" She guides me out of the stall and toward the sink, where all three

of them surround me. At least no one else is in here.

“Ally, please talk to us,” Dani begs as she takes my hands. “Tell us what happened.”

“Z-Zack.” I hiccup.

“What about him?” Kara asks.

I shake my head because I can’t get the words out.

“Is it his foster family?” Dani asks. “Did something happen to him?”

I shake my head again and try to speak, but the only things that come out of me are more hiccups.

Charlie straightens up. “He didn’t...break up with you, did he?”

More tears burst out of my eyes. I bury myself in Charlie’s arms.

Dani gasps. “What? How is that possible?”

“It’s okay,” Charlie says as she rubs my back. “Take as long as you need.”

The only sound in the bathroom is my sobbing. I knew heartbreak was hard, but I never imagined it would feel so awful. I don’t know how much time passes, but my sobs don’t die down. Maybe they never will.

I slowly pull out of Charlie’s arms and hug myself. “H-he told me we can’t be together,” I struggle to get out. “Said last night was a mistake.”

Dani’s hands slap over her mouth. “No.”

Kara and Charlie gape at me like they can't believe it, either.

I nod as more tears flow out. "I...I don't understand. I thought we had an amazing time last night..."

Kara wraps her arm around me. "Could it be you misunderstood?"

I shake my head. "I heard him clearly. He doesn't want to be with me."

My friends are silent as they exchange shocked glances.

"Maybe he's not the right one for you?" Charlie asks.

"But he is!" More tears stream down my cheeks. "He is the one. I know he is."

"Oh, Ally." Dani takes me in her arms, hugging me tightly. "I'm so sorry."

Kara and Charlie wrap their arms around me.

There's nothing my friends could do but hug me. I don't know how I'll get through the days. How I'll ever find love again. I'm not sure I even want it anymore, not if it hurts this bad.

Chapter Forty-Two

Zack

The last few days have been the worst I've felt in a while. Ally's face constantly pops into my mind, and no matter how many times I try to push her out, she doesn't leave.

I miss her like crazy, which is silly because I was the one who broke her heart. I pushed her out of my life. I wish it didn't have to be this way—wish I could be the guy she deserves, but I'm not. And she'll never understand.

Over the weekend, I wondered if I did the right thing. Hurting the girl who's come to mean so much to me?

But it's for the best. It has to be.

Maybe the more I tell myself this, the more I'll be convinced.

“Son, are you all right?” Curtis asks me Monday morning as he, Eleanor, Zane, and I sit at the kitchen table eating pancakes.

Zane keeps his worried eyes on me, but I give him the best reassuring smile I can muster. “I'm fine. Thanks.” I play around with my food, having no appetite. That's how it's been for the last few days. It's like there's a pit in my stomach. And my heart...well, let's just say it's not doing so great.

“You've barely touched your breakfast,” Eleanor points out.

To not offend her or worry them or Zane, I force the food down. Honestly? It feels like cardboard to me right now.

Nothing will ever be the same. I met a girl who changed my life, a girl I can't have. A girl who deserves so much more.

Once we're done eating, I take Zane's hand, we wish our foster parents goodbye and to have a good day, then leave the house to wait for Zane's bus.

He glances at me and I force a smile. He frowns, looking away. We're in complete silence.

I bring up many topics, mostly about his Xbox and the books Ally brought for him, but he's not in the mood to talk. I hate that my gloomy mood is affecting him. We're finally living together. We should be ecstatic, but because of me, we're far from it.

I shouldn't have led her on. I should have stopped my feelings for her from growing as intensely as they did.

"Zack, my bus is here," Zane breaks me from my thoughts. He waves before climbing on, walking down the aisle until he finds a seat in the back.

I wave as the bus pulls away. Zane just keeps his eyes on me, as if he senses something's going on with me but doesn't know what.

I fetch my bike from the driveway, pull my helmet on, and kick off toward school. I dread going to school because I don't want to face her, but I have no choice. I can't...I can't bear being near her without smiling at her, talking to her, touching her. But like I told myself over and over, it's for the best.

She'll forget me. Move on. Meet someone who'll treat her right. Someone she could actually have a future with.

The second I walk through the school doors, my eyes automatically spring to her. She's at her locker with her friends and their boyfriends, listening to them talk. She doesn't say much, nodding here and there. Her eyes are still despondent. I thought—hoped—she'd get over me by now.

As I make my way to my locker, I force my eyes away from her. I feel her watching me. Heck, all six of them are watching me, but I don't look their way. I appreciate them all inviting me to sit with them at lunch and making an effort to be my friend, but I guess I'm destined to be a loner for the rest of my life.

The bell rings, forcing every student into their first class. I wait for the last second before slipping into the classroom and lowering myself on the seat at our table.

I feel her eyes on me, but I don't dare look her way. It hurts too much.

A part of me urges me to look at her, smile, apologize and tell her I made a huge mistake. But the rational side tells me to get a hold of myself. It's for the best. For the best. For the best.

Mrs. Cooper enters the room, announcing that we're to partner up for an experiment today. Great, that's just perfect. Two weeks ago, I would have jumped at the chance to work on an experiment with Ally. But now? I want to bolt.

Mrs. Cooper instructs us to work on it together but hand in separate reports. I'm glad about that because there's no way we can work on this together.

I figure I'll wait for her to begin, then do it after her. But she doesn't move. It's almost like she's waiting for me to acknowledge her, or say something, or I don't know. But I can't. The best thing for us is to avoid talking.

I push the items toward her, which gives her the message that I have no intention of doing it with her. My throat tightens as I sense her pain. My mouth opens to explain, to tell her why we can't be together, but I press it shut. If I were to explain, she'd try to talk me out of it. And that's the last thing I want.

She finishes the experiment quickly, then pushes the items to me before handing the teacher her report. She returns to her seat, plucks a Regency romance novel from her bag, and absorbs herself in the words.

I'm trying to make an effort to do well in school. And that's all because of the girl seated beside me. I wish I could tell her that, but like before, I force my mouth shut.

The second the bell rings, I shoot to my feet, handing the teacher my report on my way out. Before I leave the room, though, my eyes act on their own and dart to Ally. She watches me for a bit before pulling her gaze away and packing away her things.

I whirl around, heading to my next class.

The day carries on and it's time for lunch. Like last week, I sit alone at my former table, forcing myself not to look Ally's way. I can hear her friends chatting, but she doesn't seem to add much to the conversation.

The food tastes like nothing. I can't even focus on my book because I keep thinking about her. When will my brain—

my heart—understand that it’s for the best?

As I leave the school doors at the end of the day and make my way to the parking lot, three people stand before me. Dani, Charlie, and Kara. Charlie’s arms are crossed over her chest, Dani taps her shoe on the floor, and Kara glares at me.

Charlie steps forward. “We need to talk.”

“I’ve got to get to work.”

“Ally’s waiting for us in room 1B, so we don’t have much time, either,” Dani tells me.

“But you need to hear us out,” Kara adds.

I shut my eyes for a second, taking in a deep breath and letting it out. Opening my eyes, I nod for them to go on.

Charlie narrows her eyes. “What you did to Ally sucks. Do you have any idea how she’s feeling right now? How could you hurt her like that?!”

I open my mouth, but she goes on. “She’s a ghost of a person. Sometimes, I have to check to make sure she’s even sitting with us because she hardly talks. That’s all because of you.” She stabs her index finger into my chest. “You suck, Zack Hastings.”

I try to swallow the lump in my throat. “I never meant to hurt her.”

“But you did,” Dani says. “She loves you. Don’t you know that? Don’t you love her?”

I rub the back of my head. “It’s not that simple.”

“Why?” Kara demands. “Either you love her or you don’t.”

I hike my backpack strap over my shoulder. “I need to get to work.”

They block my way.

I sigh, rubbing my hand down my face. “Ally needs to forget about me. She should move on and meet someone else.”

“Why?” they ask.

“I can’t explain. And you wouldn’t understand. Just trust me that it’s for the best. I really need to go. If I’m late, my boss will fire me.”

They look like they want to argue further, but they know how important this job is for my future and Zane’s, and they don’t try to stop me as I head to my bike. They watch as I pull on my helmet and speed down the street. I know I didn’t give them much of an answer, but like I told them, they wouldn’t understand. They think the only thing two people need is love and everything will fall into place. But life doesn’t work that way.

“Zack!” Zane jumps in place as he and Eleanor wait for me outside when I get home from work. We head inside, where she gives us a small snack, then goes to prepare dinner. I help Zane with his homework, though he doesn’t really need my help. The kid’s smart and so good at school. I can’t believe we’re even related.

I work on my own homework, not that I can concentrate. Everything reminds me of her. I squeeze my eyes shut to push

her out.

“Are you and Ally not friends anymore?” Zane asks after a little while.

I glance up from my trig.

“You got into a fight, didn’t you?” he goes on.

I clear my throat. “Why would you say that?”

He shrugs. “She doesn’t come over anymore. And she doesn’t wish me good night. And…” He lowers his gaze. “You’re sad.”

“Zane…”

“She made you happy!” he insists. “Ever since you and her started hanging out, you were so happy. You laughed a lot. You didn’t worry about me so much. You had fun.”

I tear my gaze away from him. He’s right. I was happy. Happier than I’d been in a while. The world felt like it was mine to conquer. She opened my eyes to possibilities. Made me feel worth something.

“It’s not that simple,” I tell him.

“Why?”

“You won’t understand.”

He scrunches his brows. “I’m smart enough.”

I place my hand on his arm. “Let’s not talk about it, all right?”

“But I miss playing with her,” he says in a soft, sad voice.

My stomach knots. “I know, buddy. But it’s got to be this way, okay?”

He's about to argue further, but Eleanor calls us for dinner and the conversation is forgotten. I try to focus on the discussion at the table and not think about Ally all the time, but it's impossible. Will I always feel this way? Will I ever get over her?

Chapter Forty-Three

Yesterday sucked. During bio, it was so painful to sit so close to Zack as I worked on my assignment. So close, but so far. He didn't look at me once. A part of me thought he'd apologize and tell me he made a huge mistake, that he wanted me in his life—that he *needed* me in his life—but he pretended I didn't exist. That hurt more than anything. And then I felt bad for him during lunch period because he sat all alone. *I* felt bad when *he* was the one who crushed my heart. What's wrong with me? I still care about him.

Today is just as bad, but I push through. Then school is over and I'm supposed to head to the music room fifteen minutes early for my audition. A part of me urges me to ditch. When I asked Ms. Mehta for the audition, I was still with Zack. He made me believe in myself. Now without him...how could I believe in myself?

But I tell that part of me to be quiet. Because even though Zack was the one who encouraged me to audition, the truth is that I'm doing this for myself. Not for him, my parents, my friends, or anyone. This is something I've wanted for a while now, but I didn't have the courage to do it. Zack might have ignited the fire in me, but I need to do this for myself and no one else. So I march into the music room, where Ms. Mehta is waiting for me.

I push away the insecurities I've felt all my life and just sing. I let the music and the lyrics wrap around me like a cocoon. I get lost in the beauty and magic of it, allowing it to

enter my soul and spread through me, uplifting me. I forget that I'm singing in public—it's just me and the music.

When I'm done, Ms. Mehta claps, then wipes tears from her eyes. "Ally, that was beautiful," she says with a sniff. "One of the most beautiful auditions I have ever heard."

"Thanks," I say, feeling pride within myself. Because I did it—I actually did it.

"You're going to have the best solo in the choir," Ms. Mehta informs me with a bright smile.

My eyes widen. "But what about Destiny?"

"Destiny has had her share of solos. You deserve it, Ally. I can't wait until you sing at the concert. Everyone will love you."

As much as that scares me, it makes me feel good, too. Once I sing in front of all those people, my fear will be completely annihilated.

Even though I feel good about getting a solo, the ball of pain in my stomach hasn't disappeared. At home, I sit on the living room couch, hugging a cushion and trying not to let the loss of Zack consume me like it has the past few days. They say your first love is the hardest, right? I wish I could fast forward to when I'll no longer feel any pain. How do people bear it? Feels like my heart hasn't stopped bleeding.

"Oh, Ally, when did you get home?" Mom says as she passes by the living room with a basket of laundry. The smile vanishes from her face as she takes me in. "What's wrong, honey?"

I blink at her. “What? I mean, nothing. I’m fine.” I try to force a smile, but I know I’m failing miserably.

She puts the laundry basket down and sits next to me. “Are you sure? You seem upset.”

“I got a solo in the choir,” I tell her.

“You did? Sweetheart, that’s wonderful news! Why would that upset you?”

“It’s doesn’t.” I avert my gaze to the floor. “It makes me happy.”

“Then why does it look like you’ll burst into tears any second?”

On cue, tears gather in my eyes. “Because the guy I like doesn’t like me back.”

“Oh, sweetie.” She puts her arms around me and hugs me close to her chest. “That’s okay. I’m sure the right guy will come along when the time is right. Don’t revolve your life around a boy. Just enjoy your time as a kid. When the time is right, you’ll meet the man you’re meant to be with.”

I shake my head. She doesn’t get it. I already met the guy I’m supposed to be with. But he doesn’t want to be with me.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say, raising my head to look at her. “You know...you and I...we don’t really talk much.”

Her eyes widen in shock. “What are you talking about? Of course we talk.”

“Not really. Ever since Amanda moved out...never mind.”

“No.” She faces me and takes my hands. “What about Amanda?”

I swallow hard. I've never confronted my mom about this. But maybe it's about time. "My whole life, I felt inferior to Amanda. You guys have so much in common. Your love for clothes and makeup and you like the same kind of movies. Growing up, I knew you loved her more than me."

"What? Of course not, honey! I love you both the same."

I shrug. "It didn't feel like that. And then when Amanda moved out, all you wanted to do was hang out with her. While...I was right here. Always right here."

Tears well up in her eyes. "Oh, honey." She envelops me in her arms. "My baby, did you really feel that way? I never meant to make you feel like that. You seemed content reading alone in your room. I didn't invite you anywhere because when I did in the past, you would shoot me down. I wish you would have told me how much it hurt you."

I hug her back. "I guess I had a part to play in it, too. Instead of telling you how I felt, I pushed you away. I'm sorry, Mom."

She kisses my cheek. "Don't be sorry. From now on, you and I will spend a lot of time together, okay? Just the two of us. I want you to tell me if you feel left out again. All right?"

I nod and smile. "Thanks, Mom."

"And don't be hung up on this guy. One day you'll meet that special person and you'll forget all about this boy."

She's wrong. I'll never forget Zack.

I don't *want* to forget him.

My thoughts start to race. If I know in my heart that he's the right one for me, I *can't* let him slip through my fingers. I don't know why he broke things off, but to just let him quit on us like that? No, I can't let that happen. I should fight for what I want—I should fight for us.

But is there a point in fighting for us if he doesn't want it? If he doesn't feel anything for me?

The doorbell rings.

"I wonder who that could be," Mom says.

Could it be...?

"I'll get it," I say as I hurry to the door. But it's not Zack—it's his little brother.

"Zane? What are you doing here?"

He glances at a car parked before my house. "Eleanor's waiting. I don't have a lot of time." He turns back to me.

"Why aren't you friends with Zack anymore?"

My heart hurts at the pain in his eyes. "Oh, buddy. Things are...it's not so simple."

He frowns. "That's what he said, too. Why do grownups always say that? What's not simple about being friends?"

"Zane..."

"He's so sad," Zane whispers as he stares down at the floor. "He was so happy. Now he sits alone and looks so sad. And he doesn't play with me anymore. Why can't you be his friend, Ally?"

His words cause tears to tickle my eyes. I wish life worked from the perspective of a six-year-old. In his eyes, things

shouldn't be complicated. If you like someone, you be with them.

I told myself just a few minutes ago that I wanted to fight for me and Zack. But then I argued that there was no point because Zack didn't want me. But if he's as miserable as Zane claims, maybe he *does* want to be with me?

Maybe by sending Zane to me at this *exact* moment, the universe is telling me that Zack and I are meant to be. Maybe it's not too late to give up.

"I gotta go," Zane says, glancing back at the car. "Please come visit us. I miss playing with you."

I get down on my knees and hug him. "I'll try, Zane."

As I watch him climb into the car, I realize that I want Zane in my life. I want Zack in my life. I'm not going down without a fight.

Chapter Forty-Four

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Charlie asks as we pull up before Zack’s house after dinner the next day.

I nod, my eyes glued to the front door. “I’m sure. He’s worth fighting for.”

She holds out her arms and I let her enclose me in them. “Good luck and I hope it works out.” She draws back. “Do you want me to wait here?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know how long this will take. I’ll let you know if I need you to pick me up.”

“Will do.”

I place my hand on the door handle. “Thanks for the lift. I’ll see you later.” I get out of the car and wave as she drives off. Then I face the house, my heart galloping in my chest. I wasn’t nervous before because I was determined to do this, but now that the moment has arrived, I kind of want to call after Charlie to take me home. But I tell myself I can do this. I *want* this.

Taking a deep breath, I try to regulate my heartbeat and make my way up the stairs to the front door, where I ring the bell.

It opens to reveal Curtis, a pleasant and kind smile on his face. “Ally, hi. How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks. You?”

“I’m great. Would you like to come in?”

I thank him and step inside.

“Ally!” Zane zooms over to me, flinging his arms around me. “You came!”

Laughing, I say, “I did.”

Footsteps sound from the kitchen and then Zack stands there, his eyes wide with shock. He leans against the doorway, his gaze pasted on me.

I shift from one foot to the other, “I didn’t realize you’re in the middle of eating dinner. I’m sorry,” I say.

Eleanor comes to stand next to Zack. “It’s all right, dear. We’ve mostly finished. Would you like something to eat?”

“Thanks, but I already ate. It smells wonderful, though.”

She grins. “Thank you.” She and Curtis disappear into the kitchen, leaving me alone with the Hastings brothers. Zane hasn’t removed his arms from around me. I can feel Zack’s heavy gaze on me, but I keep my focus on his brother.

“Was school okay?” I ask him.

He nods. “It was fun.” He looks at Zack with confused eyes, like he’s wondering why he isn’t saying anything.

Zack pushes off the wall, folding his arms across his chest. He tries to look indifferent, but I can see the pain overflowing in his eyes. “Ally...I told you—”

I hold up my hand. “Zack, I need to talk to you.”

He shakes his head, opening his mouth to say something, but Zane grabs his hand. “Zack, don’t be mean. Please.”

Zack studies his brother for a bit, then pins his eyes on me. He looks like he doesn't know what to say or do, as though he's being pulled from two sides.

"Zack..." Zane pleads.

His tortured eyes meet mine. He lets out a heavy sigh.
"Okay. Want to go somewhere private?"

I nod.

Zack tells Zane he'll be back later, to listen to everything Curtis and Eleanor tell him, and that he'd better be in bed by the time he gets back. Zane practically pushes him out the door with me.

Zack slides his hands into his pockets as we go down the stairs and make our way to his bike, where his helmet is resting on it. I didn't bring mine.

"Where do you want to go?" he asks, a little stiffly, like he doesn't know what we are to each other. I don't really know, either.

"I thought we could go to the park we went to with Zane," I tell him.

He nods, pulling on his helmet. He faces his bike and just stands there, glancing from the bike to me, then back to the bike. Then he clears his throat, placing his hands on my waist. A bolt of electricity zaps through me, much stronger than it's ever been. It's almost like it's making up for the past few days when Zack ignored me.

With one swift motion, he swings me onto the bike, makes sure I'm good, and gets on before me.

I reach to wrap my arms around his waist, then freeze in place. Shaking my nerves aside, I close them around him tightly.

He glances back at me for a moment before kicking the bike into gear and zipping down the streets. I'm brought back to the other times I was on this bike and how so much could change in just a few days. We went from sharing something so special and sweet at the waterfall to...this. But I hope to change that this evening.

The park isn't far and we get there within minutes. Zack climbs off, helps me down, then I lead him to one of the picnic tables.

After placing his helmet on the table, he stares at the ground as if he's too nervous to meet my gaze. I'm a little nervous, too, but I'm determined to get to the bottom of what happened to us.

"Zack, please look at me."

He slowly lifts his head, and I note the pain in there. It has magnified in the last five minutes. "Ally...I..." He shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut. "I told you this isn't going to work between us."

"I won't accept that."

His eyes flutter open and he looks at me.

I bend forward. "I *like* you. I have strong feelings for you. And I know you feel the same. What I don't understand is why you're pushing me away."

He averts his gaze. "I don't feel that way about you." His voice trembles.

“Why are you lying? Why are you pushing me away when it’s so obvious you still have feelings for me? Even Zane knows it. Do you know he came to my house last night? He told me how sad you were...why are you doing this, Zack? Why put us through so much pain?”

His face changes. “Zane came to your house?”

I nod. “He told me how sad you are and that you hardly play with him. He’s worried about you.”

He runs his hand down his face, his chest heaving. “I didn’t mean to hurt him or you. I just...it has to be this way.”

I gently pull his hand from his face. “But why? Why does it have to be this way? I care about you. You care about me. Nothing else matters.”

He smiles sadly. “That’s what your friends said to me.”

“My friends?”

He nods. “They tried to talk me into giving us another shot. But I told them...I told them...” He sighs. “It just won’t work.”

“But why? You keep telling me it won’t work, but you haven’t explained why. Am I...too shy? Too weird? Not pretty or interesting enough?”

His eyes widen. “Of course you’re interesting enough. You’re amazing and so special. And you’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever met.”

Tears prick my eyes. “Then why did you break my heart?”

He bends forward, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “It’s just...you deserve so much better than me.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one I’ve been waiting for all my life, Zack. The guy of my dreams. It’s *you*.”

He shakes his head. “No...Ally...” He releases a deep breath. “In order for you to understand why we can’t be together, I need to tell you what happened to me two years ago.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, remembering him telling me at the waterfall that he wasn’t ready to share everything with me yet.

He nods, takes a deep breath, and begins, “Two years ago, there was a fire in my house. It started in the kitchen, but I’m not entirely sure how it happened exactly. I woke up and there were flames outside my room. My parents...” He hesitates. “Their room was across the hallway and a...a wall of fire separated us.”

I slide my hand in his, giving it a squeeze. He keeps his gaze on the table.

“They yelled at me to grab Zane and jump out the window. Zane was four and his bedroom was near theirs. But he was with me that night because he wanted me to read to him and fell asleep in my bed. I didn’t want to leave my parents.” Tears flash in his eyes as he lifts them to me. “But they yelled at me to grab my brother and save ourselves. And they reassured me that they would jump out their window and meet us outside. So I grabbed Zane. He was sleepy and didn’t know what was going on, but he sensed I was freaking out and he started crying.” He takes another deep breath. “I held him close to my chest, protecting him as I jumped out the window. I hurt my leg, but not too badly. I searched for my parents, but couldn’t

find them anywhere. Then I learned that at their end of the house...the ceiling caved in.”

“Oh, Zack,” I whisper as tears fill my eyes.

His tears slide down his cheeks. “I wanted to run back into the house and save them, but the firefighters didn’t let me. Turns out my parents were killed on the spot after the ceiling collapsed on them. And Zane...he would have died too, had he not slept in my bed.” He wipes the tears with his sleeve. “I would have lost my entire family that night.” He squeezes his eyes shut, more tears running down his cheeks. “I think about my parents all the time. I miss them like crazy.”

I pull him into my arms. “I’m so sorry, Zack. I know it doesn’t help, but I don’t know what else to say.”

He wraps his arms around me, squeezing me tight. “They would have loved you,” he whispers in my ear. “I’m sorry you’ll never have the chance to meet them.” Pulling back, he slips his hand into his jeans pocket and pulls out his phone. “These are the last pictures and videos I have of them.” He scoots closer to me, showing me pictures of the four Hastings smiling brightly at the camera. Both boys are carbon copies of their dad. And his mom was very beautiful.

“They look like amazing parents.”

He smiles sadly. “They were.”

He shows me more pictures and a few videos, and I have a sense of who they were. Both parents were kind, fun, loving. They loved to read, and that’s where Zack got his love for it as well.

I point to a picture of Zack's dad standing before Zack's motorcycle. "Was that your dad's?"

He nods. "Yeah. It's one of the only things I have left of him. Everything else was destroyed in the fire. Except for a few pictures I carry with me because I don't want to lose them. And that book I was reading the other day."

"The fantasy novel that means as much to you as *A Lady of Wit and Her Handsome Duke* means to me."

He nods again. "He loved that book and introduced me to fantasy. I keep it close to my side at all times. I don't have anything of my mom's, other than those pictures."

I think back to the plastic bag he placed my damaged book in, how carefully he took care of those pictures, and my book.

I rest my hand on his cheek, gazing into his eyes. "You have memories of your parents. Memories you'll cherish for the rest of your life."

He glances away. "You're being so sweet to me when I treated you like garbage. I'm so sorry. I know apologizing could never make up for how I treated you, but I want you to know that it's been tearing me up inside. I never want to hurt you, Ally."

"I know you don't," I tell him, my voice soft.

His shoulders sag as though he's been carrying around that weight. "There's more I need to explain."

I nod for him to continue.

After taking another deep breath, he says, "After the night my parents died, Zane and I were separated and put into

different foster homes. I missed him terribly. He was only four years old. No kid should go through that.” He pushes some hair away from his face. “They let us visit each other, but it wasn’t the same. My foster homes weren’t great, but some of Zane’s were much worse.” He pauses, collecting his thoughts. “Last year, he was living with a few other foster kids. An older kid around my age was giving him some crap. Zane was little and scared and the kid saw that he was weak and wanted to mess with him. Zane told me the kid was bullying him, and when I confronted him about it and told him to leave my brother alone, he pulled a knife on me.”

My eyes widen, leaping to his shirt where I know his scar is hiding.

Zack nods, tapping his chest. “Yeah. That’s how I got the scar. The guy stabbed me, missing my heart by a few inches. He nearly killed me. The doctors said it was a miracle I survived.”

My body trembles with pain for him. “I’m so sorry that happened to you.” I reach for his chest to touch his scar from over his T-shirt, but I curl my fingers.

Zack takes hold of my hand and brings it to his chest, to his scar. His heart beats erratically under my palm.

“People started rumors that I killed someone,” he says. “They got their facts wrong, didn’t bother to learn the truth.”

I stroke his cheek with my other hand. “We know the truth. That’s what matters.”

“Thanks. A few months ago, I found out I had an aunt I never knew about. She was my mother’s sister and they were

estranged. She and her husband decided to take me in. Maybe she felt obligated, I don't know. She didn't want Zane because she didn't want to take care of a little kid. That's why I moved away from Edenbury for a little while. But she didn't want to take care of me anymore and I came back to Edenbury. I was dumped in a new foster home, the one I lived in before I came to live with you." He pauses, his eyes filling with guilt and regret. "You went out of your way to make me feel comfortable in your house, and I treated you like crap. I'm so sorry I hurt you. I never meant to do that, but I figured that if you hated me, then maybe you'd forget about me and move on."

"But why don't you want to be with me? I'm so happy you're in a better place now and I'm glad you shared that part of your life with me. I want to be so close to you, to be there for you. Why won't you let me?"

He shakes his head with a deep breath. "I *can't* be with you."

My heart shatters into a million pieces. Tears gather in my eyes and I don't stop them from dripping down my cheeks.

He bends close, wiping my tears with his thumbs. "Please don't cry, Ally," he whispers. "I can't bear seeing you this upset."

"Then explain it to me."

He lets out a heavy breath. "I've been through a lot. I'm messed up, and I don't want to drag you into my life."

"You're not messed up. You're such a kind and caring person. You're an amazing big brother."

He sweeps his fingers over my cheek. “You deserve a guy who’s not complicated. Who doesn’t have so much baggage.”

I shake my head resolutely. “No. I know what I want. And that’s you, Zack. It’s *only* you.”

He gazes into my eyes. “I pushed you away because I don’t want you taking on my problems. I don’t have parents. I had to grow up quickly.” He takes my hands. “As soon as I turn eighteen, I’ll be taking care of my brother. If we’re together, you’ll be weighed down by a kid. You won’t be free like everyone else our age. I don’t want to put you through that. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

I take hold of his face with both my hands. “Zack, listen to me. I love Zane. I’d love to help you raise him...if we’re still together by that point. But I know we will be because like I told you, you’re the only guy for me. And Zane would never weigh me down. As for your past? You think you’re messed up? You’re strong and amazing and a wonderful person. Your past doesn’t push me away—it makes me love you even more.”

His eyes widen, and I realize I just admitted to him that I love him. My cheeks heat up, but I push all my insecurities away. “I *do* love you, Zack. I more than love you, if there’s such a thing. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know we’re only in high school, but you’re the right one for me. The *only* one for me.”

He searches my eyes. “Do you mean that?”

“I do. I wish you would have talked to me about your concerns instead of shutting me out. I don’t want you to ever

question my love for you or for Zane. I see the two of you in my future.”

He wraps his arms around me, staring into my eyes. “I love you, too, Ally. So much it hurts. You’re my world. And you’re right. I should have talked to you instead of pushing you away. I’ll regret that for the rest of my life.”

I shake my head. “No, please don’t feel that way. I understand why you did it. But I want us to be open and honest with each other. I want us to be able to tell each other anything. Our hopes, our fears, our dreams. Everything.”

He rests his forehead against mine, breathing softly. “I want that, too. And I also want to spend the rest of my life with you. You’re the most important person in my life. You and Zane.” He presses his lips to my forehead. “Please forgive me.”

I draw back. “Of course I forgive you. I love you like crazy, Zack.”

He fingers my bottom lip, bringing his mouth close to mine. “Not as much as I love you, Ally Bensen.” He bends closer, his lips inches from mine. I lift my head, and then our lips move against each other’s with so much longing and desperation, it’s like we’ve gone through the desert for weeks and we’re each other’s water.

My fingers tangle in his hair and his hands run up and down my back, sending chills down my spine. It’s as if we can’t get enough of each other.

“Ally,” he whispers, his breath warm on my cheek. “I’ll never hurt you again.”

“I know,” I whisper back as I press my lips to his.

We stay wrapped in each other’s arms, kissing like this is our last few moments on Earth. It’s not until we realize how late it is that we jump onto his bike and he takes me home. We kiss quickly before reluctantly parting for the night.

I climb the stairs to my room and stare out the window, finding Zack standing there. I lift my hand and he lifts his, and it’s like we’re touching each other from a distance.

“Tomorrow,” I tell myself. “There’s always tomorrow.”

And the rest of our lives.

Chapter Forty-Five

Tonight is one of the biggest moments of my life, and I feel like I'm going to puke my brains out.

How was I nervous in the past when I didn't have a solo? To stand in front of all those people and sing? Just me, my voice carrying through the auditorium...for all ears to hear...

But my parents will be in the audience. Amanda and Alejandro will be there. My friends will be there. And Zack will be there.

"Places!" Ms. Mehta calls after the orchestra has set themselves up on the stage. "Places, everyone." She walks over to me and rubs my arm. "Ready, Ally?"

I nod, putting on a confident smile. "I've been ready my whole life."

She rubs my arm again. "Great."

I follow everyone to the stage and take my place. Being short bothered me in the past because it forced me to be in the front, but now I love that I'm short. I love that I get to stand in the front and look out into the audience as I sing. I love that Zack lifts me onto his bike because of my short little legs.

As the curtain opens, the audience comes into view. The first people I see are my parents and Amanda, followed by Alejandro, my friends, Brayden and Easton, and then Zack. He sends me a loving smile as my eyes rove over his. My friends wave, and so does my family.

The orchestra starts to play, and then the choir sings. My nerves creep up on me as it gets closer and closer to my solo. And when I step up to the mic? I think I might faint. Then I focus on Zack, and on Zack only. I see his love for me in his eyes, the pride he feels for me, how he can't wait to spend every second with me. He loves me for me, unconditionally. Just as I love him. Like I've always dreamed of.

When I sing, I sing to him, pretending it's just him and me on our own private island. I pretend he and I are dancing under the stars, where we kiss and tell each other how much we love each other.

The audience erupts in applause, Dani cheering and clapping the loudest. I did it! I sang in front of an audience. I conquered my fear. And I know there will be many more fears I will conquer throughout my life. As long as I believe in myself and surround myself with people who love and accept me for who I am, I will be okay.

When the concert is over, I go to meet my friends and family. My parents squish me to death, and Amanda and Alejandro tell me how amazing I was. Then I'm smashed in my friends' arms, who can't stop gushing how beautiful my voice is. Brayden and Easton compliment me as well.

When they finally release me, I come face to face with Zack. All I want to do is hug him, but my parents are standing right there. They don't know about us yet....but you know something? It's time they do. I rush over to him and throw myself into his arms, hugging him tightly and pressing my lips to his.

“You were amazing, Ponytail,” he whispers in my ear. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Motorcycle Hottie.”

Dad clears his throat. “Is there something we should know about?”

I step away from Zack and face my confused parents. “Zack and I are together,” I tell them. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay!” Mom says as she gathers me in for a hug and then hugs Zack. “Zack is a wonderful young man.”

Dad claps him on the back. “I know you’ll be a great boyfriend to my daughter.”

“Thank you. I will,” Zack says. “I’ll treat Ally like the queen she is.”

After some convincing, my parents let me and Zack go for a ride on his motorcycle. We don’t have time to go to our special place, so he stops by the park that has become our second special place.

We settle down on a bench, and I snuggle in his arms. “You really were incredible,” he says softly as his lips graze my temple. “I’m so glad you were able to share your amazing voice with the world.”

“You helped me find myself,” I say.

“You helped *me* find myself.” He gazes into my eyes with nothing but love in his. “I can’t believe I almost lost you. I’ll never make that mistake again.” He holds me close in his arms as he showers kisses on my face. “I never want to let you go. Ever.”

I lower my head on his scar. “And I never want to let you go, either.”

Chapter Forty-Six

Bowling with my friends and our boyfriends this afternoon was so much fun. I didn't know Dani was so competitive, and Charlie actually used math to find the right angle to throw the ball. But guess who won in the end? Me! I guess I have the touch. Or maybe I'm on such a high. Making up with Zack, telling my mom how I felt, having an amazing concert last night, accepting myself for who I am, and just hanging out with my friends? I have everything I need. I don't think I've ever been happier.

Now we're in Easton's entertainment room deciding on a movie to watch. Zack and I sit in the middle row, with me snuggled against his chest and his lips sweeping over my face every few seconds. I know that this feeling in my heart will last forever. The butterflies will never go away. Every kiss will feel like the first time. That spark will always shoot up my spine. We'll be in love for eternity—I know it.

“I call for a thriller!” Easton announces as he and Dani get comfortable in the row before us, he putting his arm over her shoulder and pulling her close to his chest. “Been a while since I've been on the edge of my seat.”

“I'm cool with action.” Brayden lowers Kara on his lap and closes his arms around her waist. “Anyone up for that?”

“How about a fantasy?” Kara says. “Let's get sucked into a made-up world.”

Easton groans. “My brain is fried from all that bowling. Maybe something less complicated?”

“Because you got so competitive,” Dani teases as she pokes his shoulder.

He gapes at her. “Me? *You* were the competitive one, missy.”

“Fine, maybe I was. But that’s only because I was having so much fun! We need to do it again sometime.”

I look over my shoulder for Charlie and find her sitting in the back doing homework. “Charlie!” I call.

“Yeah, yeah, in a sec.”

“How about a horror?” Zack asks as he presses his lips to my cheek. “So we can cuddle in each other’s arms if we get scared?”

The boys seem happy with that. The girls, too.

“Bummer,” Dani says. “I was hoping we could watch Asher Park’s new movie. It just came to Netflix on Friday. I heard such good things about it! It’s supposed to have crazy action and suspense, but a super romantic plotline as well.”

“Oh my gosh, I totally forgot about it,” Kara says. “Forget the horror! Let’s watch Asher’s movie.”

“I’m game,” I say.

“Okay, cool.” Easton picks up the remote and opens Netflix, browsing through the new releases. “Ah, here we are. Wait, is someone missing?”

“Charlie!” Dani, Kara, and I call.

“Ugh, I really need to finish this paper,” she complains. “Just watch the movie without me. It’s fine, I’ll catch the next one.”

“But Charlie!” Kara says. “You’re going to miss Asher Park. *Thee* Asher Park.”

“He’s such a phenomenal actor, and so cute!” Dani says. “Not as cute as you, my handsome.” She says as she kisses Easton’s cheek. “No one is more handsome than my man.”

He chuckles. “Luckily, I’m confident enough that I don’t need to worry about losing you to Asher Park.”

“Charlie!” we call again.

“I don’t care about some movie star!” she says as she turns her back to us. “I told you, just watch the movie without me.” She continues working on her assignment.

My friends and I exchange a glance.

“I guess she’d rather do homework,” I say with a shrug.

“Fine, but she’s missing out,” Dani says as she takes the remote from Easton and presses play. “Don’t get mad at us for missing out, Charlie.”

“I won’t. There’s nothing I want more than to do this homework. Nothing that makes me happier. Other than you guys!”

“She needs a boyfriend,” Dani grumbles.

“I don’t know, Dani,” I say. “I think she’s content with being by herself.”

“Maybe one day she’ll feel differently,” Kara supplies.

“Yeah, maybe.”

We all lean back in our seats and watch the movie, leaving Charlie alone with what makes her happy.

Or what she *thinks* makes her happy.

Thanks for reading! Stay tuned for Charlie and Asher's story in *Movie Stars Don't Fall For Nerdy Girls*, coming soon!

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Emma Dalton is a sweet young adult romance writer. When not writing, you can find her devouring heart-melting romance novels. Her titles include the Invisible Girls Club series, the Hotties Next Door series, and Don't Kiss The Brooding Artist. She loves hearing back from her readers. Email her at authoremmadalton@gmail.com or follow her on [Facebook](#). For updates on new releases, click on the “follow” button on her Amazon author page [here](#).

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