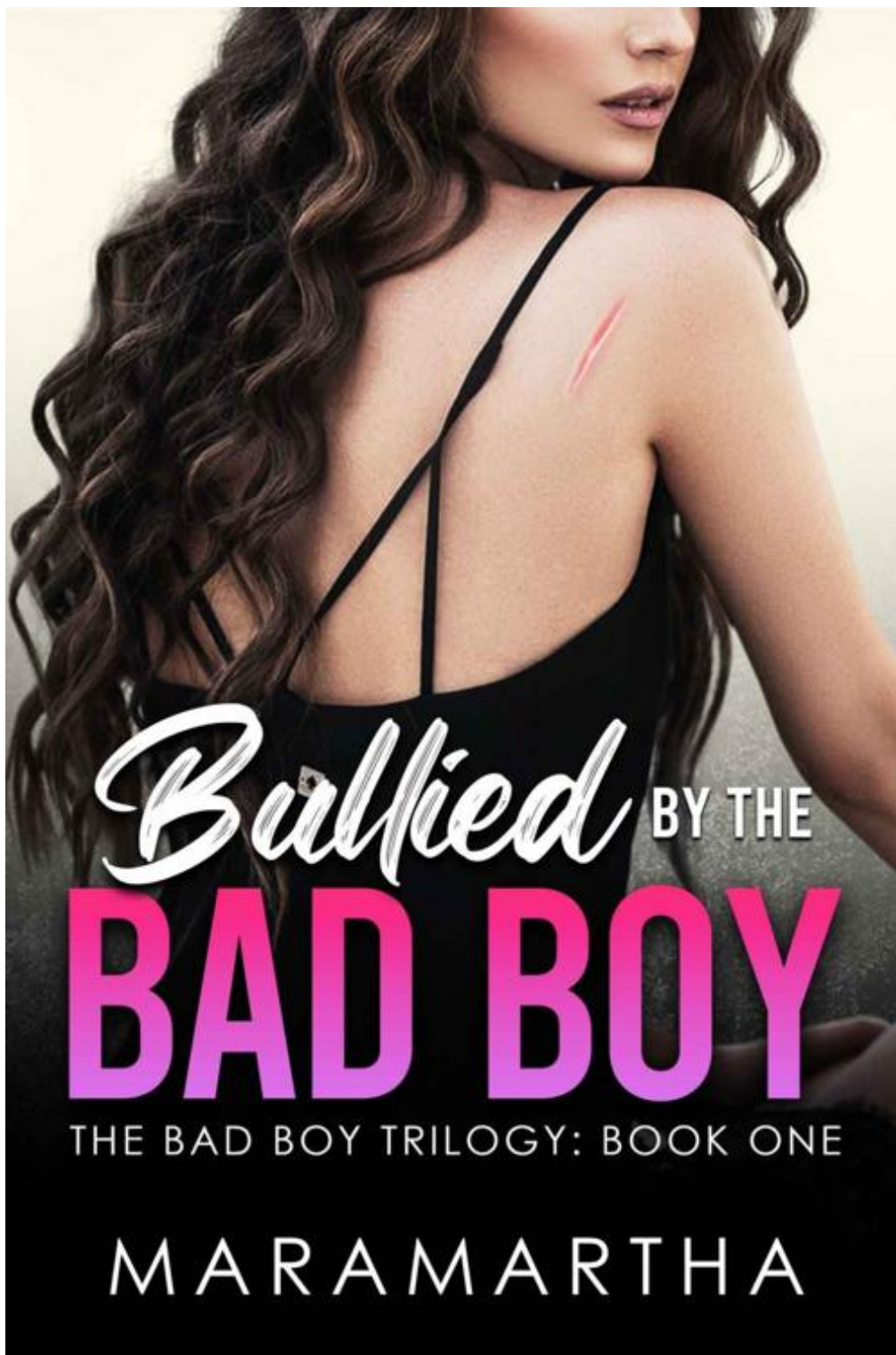


Bullied BY THE
BAD BOY

THE BAD BOY TRILOGY: BOOK ONE

MARAMARTHA



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For my Chi. This is because of you.

One



I AM Broadway Heights most disliked. Well, not the entire school, only the senior class. The thing is when the Queen B—Bee or Bitch, your pick—starts hating on you, the whole school joins her. It’s a viral hate no one questions. The few who don’t join the hate train stay completely away to avoid trouble. Sure, only Olivia and her minions are bold enough to hate on me openly, and I don’t expect her to change. It’s her fault we are no longer friends. If only she had kept it in her pants.

A tug on my shirt snaps me back to the present. The reflection of my best friend appears on my car window, and I turn around with a huge grin to welcome her into the new semester. Her high-pitched scream has me plugging my fingers into my ears as she snatches me in a hug. Summer was no fun without her.

“Hola,” she says in her beautiful Spanish accent and switches to the language as if I understand it.

I wait for her to finish talking, but the thing with Maria is she never stops talking. If you want to get a word in, then you must cut her off, so that’s what I do. I throw an arm around her shoulders. “Maria Vega! How was the party?”

Some boys from our school hosted a party last night, a prelude to our last year in Broadway Heights, and in Maria’s book, you never say no to a cute boy who asks nicely. In my book, you say no to every boy. High school isn’t for dating.

It's that period of your life you're forced to endure, so you do your best to get by and stay unnoticed.

"Not bad. You should have come." Maria shrugs my arm off her shoulders and drags me toward the door. I hesitate at the front stairs. She takes a step forward and stops. "Tessa?"

See, Maria is very pretty. With her waist-length blond hair, honey eyes, smooth accent, banging body, and beautiful heart, she is the type of cheerleader everyone wants to befriend. And then, you have me. Cool Tessa. I am a sight for sore eyes. At least, that's what my mom says. I'll look better if I try to wear something besides black T-shirts and skinny jeans. Sometimes, I think she's disappointed her only daughter isn't following her fashion path. My mom is a fashionista.

"Theresa Mower!" Maria snaps her fingers in my face. I offer her a sheepish grin and widen my big brown eyes into what I hope is a puppy-eyed look, but she pinches my nose. She places her hand on her waist and says, "This is a new session. We promise to try and socialize more, right? We have one more year to go. Let's make the best of it."

By *we*, she means *only Tessa* because she's already a social butterfly, and I am that friend who would rather spend her weekend binge-watching old movies or tv series. She loops her hand through my elbow and pulls me to stand on the stairs with her. I am two inches taller than her, but her heels already take care of the height difference.

Maria pushes the door open. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and step in.

The hallway is quiet as we stroll in, but I make sure to stick beside Maria as we head for our lockers. People seldom glance my way when I'm with her. All attention is always focused on her. I can always handle myself, but having her around me in the mornings feels good since we don't share any classes.

We are almost at our lockers when the silence hits me. Broadway Heights brims with various categories of teenagers. The good, the bad, the ugly, and the nice, so silence a few days after resumption should worry anyone. And it unnerves me,

even Maria. She retrieves her phone from her purse, and I laugh when I see the big fluffy ears attached to the case of her iPhone. She calls it a fashion statement. I call it a miss.

I know she's searching BGC. Broadway Gossip Column. It's a gossip blog run by an anonymous student. My guts tell me it's Olivia, as the whole thing reeks of her. Pink themes, dull design, and boring interface. But no one knows for sure. I've stayed away since they leaked a student's nude.

The blog is helpful for two things: ruining the reputations of Broadway Heights students and updating us on the latest gossip. I pause in front of my locker, waiting for the update. Maria's brows furrow as she continues swiping on her screen. I can easily pull out the Samsung phone I got on my last birthday, but I'll pass. Maria will provide me with whatever information I need.

"There's a video of Nate dancing on a pole," Maria says through a laugh. She pushes her phone in my face. I grimace at the video of the shirtless boy on her screen. He must be drunk. No way will a sane boy be grinding on a pole or kissing it with such passion. "He's cute but a big idiot."

With a nod, I return Maria's phone. Nate may attend my school, but we are not friends, so he's none of my business. My first class is AP Calculus. I have no idea why I'm even in that class. But on the plus side, none of the cheerleaders takes the course with me, making it more bearable.

Put me in a class far away from Olivia, and I'll be fine for the entire semester.

I open my locker, and a smile slips to my lips as I stare at the picture glued to the door. It's a picture of Maria and me. I'm standing with my legs apart, arms crossed on my flat chest, body tilted to one side with a massive scowl on my face, while Maria is being Maria. Her usual diva self with the most blinding smile, model-like pose, and black skintight gown. I must have been trying to prove a point to my mother. Why else would I wear a tuxedo to prom? I admit my fashion sense is dead, but I hate tuxedos. Skinny jeans, please.

Maria made us take that shot. Maybe to have something to laugh about or simply for the memories. Liv—Olivia and I were still friends back then. Her picture was beside this, but I guess old things have passed. I will never admit it to Maria, but this is one of my favorite pictures from our sophomore year.

My hands locate the textbook in my locker. I'm still smiling at the memories from the party, remembering how I embarrassed us with my horrible dancing skills when someone rams into me from behind. Everything stops. A sharp pain spreads to my shoulder, my forehead connects with the metal bar, and stars dot my vision for a second.

Maria sucks in a sharp breath. "Are you blind?" she yells at the person behind us.

I spin, ready to punch the demon who shoved me when I see who it is.

The witch. The witch is here.

Two



“OOPS,” Olivia murmurs with a fake smile glued to her lips. She straightens her frilly jacket with so many feathers on the collar, and I can’t help wondering how she breathes in it. Mom used to like her because they shared similar tastes. I push that memory out of my mind. “Sorry. I didn’t see you there.”

Giggles echo behind her. I cock my head and see the girls. Her friends. Minions. Name it; that’s four of them. Charlotte. Riley. Chloe and Zoey, the only twins at our school. They follow Olivia around like their diplomas depend on it. Unlike the usual minions I see in movies, they genuinely care about their mistress.

I turn to my locker, reminding myself to ignore Olivia. Ignoring her is always the best option.

Maria doesn’t take kindly to my silence. She flares up on my behalf. “Of course, you didn’t see her. You blind bat.”

These girls better beware. Maria is good with her mouth, and I am good with my fists. As much as I don’t want to start the new session with a suspension or detention, I will not hesitate to throw a good right hook if the situation demands it. Done getting my books, I adjust the bag sliding off my shoulder and tap Maria.

Maria breaks her stare-off with the witch and her minions and flicks me an annoyed look. I point at the empty hallway. Sometimes, my calmness irritates her, but when you are the quiet type who hates attention, you do everything to get it off

you. Besides, the bell will go off soon. We can't afford to be late because of them. They are not worth our time, and Olivia's father can always soothe the principal with a donation.

Olivia blocks our path. Her minions flank her on each side, forming a barrier to keep us trapped. I place a hand on my waist and draw a line on the tiles with my foot. It's too early for this. A sly smile takes over Olivia's lips. She can tell I'm getting agitated. She wants me to lose it. Witch. Her gaze darts between Maria and me. I release another sigh. Sighing seems to be all I've been doing since they walked in.

"Mother Theresa," Olivia says while batting her fake lashes. "Aren't you mowing for us today?"

I roll my eyes. Dumbass. I can start by plucking out her lashes. That joke stopped being funny long ago. Yes, my last name is Mower, but her joke is lame. It's why only her minions laugh.

Seconds pass as we stare at each other, waiting for the first person to break. My jaw ticks, but I keep still. Olivia arcs a perfect blond brow. *Drama queen, not today.* I have a fight to prepare for this weekend. I can pretend my opponent is Olivia while kicking the shit out of him.

With that in mind, I push past them, yelping when someone drags me back by my hair. My hair isn't as long or thick as Maria's or Olivia's, but I take good care of it, and it hurts like hell when someone pulls it carelessly. I make that point known with a slap across the cheek of the culprit.

Olivia gasps. Maria claps a hand over her mouth.

What? She wanted me to be more social. This is social.

A hush descends in the hallway. This morning was supposed to go smoothly, but Olivia had to be her usual bitchy self. I wince at the glare she levels me. With her platform heels, she towers over almost everyone. Her hand slowly touches her cheek, which is fast turning red. Maria snaps out of her trance and stands beside me in solidarity. We must leave before Olivia takes revenge by kicking her out of the

cheerleading team. As the captain, she decides who stays on the team.

An apology hangs on the tip of my lips, but I swallow it. Olivia deserved that slap. Not only her, all five of them, but I will keep my hands to myself for the rest of today and stay out of her way. Her minions are still dazed. Their identical blond hairstyles and outfits make it harder to tell them apart, but they all blink like they cannot believe I slapped their queen. Neither can I.

Charlotte glares as I bend to pick up my bag. I wink. Hopefully, this will teach them not to mess with me anymore. Tugging on the sleeve of a shocked Maria, I start for my first class of the day.

“I can’t believe you did that.” Shock colors Maria’s voice. I snort as we turn to the left and see a row of doors. Her classroom is before mine. “God, you slapped Olivia. You slapped the queen.”

Maria’s hand trembles. I should also be freaking out, but I’m still reveling in my audacity.

“Who made her the queen?” I reply in an accent I must have picked up from a movie. “She’s no queen of mine.”

We stop in front of Maria’s class. The door is locked. She delays going in by hugging me.

“You coming for lunch?” I ask. Her mom packs the most delicious lunch for her, so she doesn’t have to eat cafeteria food like the rest of us. She nods in response, and I pout. “See ya.”

As soon as Maria disappears, I tighten my hold on my backpack and look around. I might have been within my rights to slap the Queen of Broadway Heights, but Maria called Olivia Beckham the Queen for a reason. She will try to get revenge, or someone else will to curry favors from her.

I’m screwed. No, I’m not. I will be prepared. I must. This fighter isn’t going down easy.

But how prepared can I be in a school where everyone listens to her? Ah, fuck. I know things never go according to

plan, but it's falling to pieces right at the beginning. The plan was simple: Be the best friend I've always been to Maria, try to make sure she forgets about our dumb bucket list, and live out the rest of the school year without any drama. But look at me now.

The whole place is silent as I resume walking. My heart beats so fast I have to take deep breaths. I make the short journey to my class without any mishaps. The voice of the calculus teacher is audible from outside. I work up a quick lie in case I need one and push the door open.

Mr. Sam is too focused on the algebraic equation on the board to notice me. I tiptoe to my seat at the back. Only now, there's one problem. Someone is in my seat. And that someone is Benjamin.

Blue-eyed Benjamin Carter. The hottest boy in my school is in my seat.

A lock of black hair falls casually over his forehead and his toned bicep ripples when he sweeps a hand into his scalp. I blush to my roots, newly stunned by his beauty to move. Mr. Sam clears his throat to grab my attention. I force a smile to my lips and slide into the chair beside Ben. He doesn't acknowledge me. Of course, he won't. I am not in his league. He only acknowledges girls like Maria, Olivia, and her minions, not a girl so tall and skinny she can pass for a boy.

I shouldn't be bothered Ben is ignoring me because I don't need the attention, but I am.

Our classroom is sectioned into rows with a reasonable gap between each desk. I always take the seat closest to the window so I can have a distraction when the class gets boring, as it is bound to sometimes. Mr. Sam is a good teacher, but I'm an easily distracted student. I catch Ben doodling on his notepad. What's he doing in my class? Since when do jocks take advanced courses?

Mr. Sam drones on and on until boredom sets in. The hot guy on my right continues sketching in his notepad, which annoys me for some unknown reason. My brother, Hayden,

was once the hottest boy in school, but he was nice to everyone.

I kick Ben's chair. He stops drawing. "You are in my seat."

Ben barely spares me a look. I didn't expect him to, but it stings a little—maybe more than a little. Curiosity takes over me when he pulls out his phone. I strain my neck to glimpse the video playing on his screen, but he twists his body so I see nothing.

"Benjamin," I say.

Turning to me, his eyes lower to my foot pressed to his chair. I freeze. He smirks. "Hey."

Three



BREATHE, *Tessa. Breathe.*

He only said, hey. I know it's a simple word, but it's coming from him, which makes all the difference. Under his stare, my cheeks heat up, and I avert my gaze to the whiteboard. Holy cow.

Ben spoke to me. I need to text Maria immediately.

Wait, what's wrong with me? I need to get a grip.

It's just hey, and I don't do boys. High school isn't for dating. I fiddle with the pendant on the necklace Hayden gave me. It's my good luck charm. I wear it everywhere, even inside the ring.

The coldness of the necklace helps to calm my thoughts, and I remember my mission before he spoke. "You are in my seat," I tell Ben with more conviction than I did the last time.

"Really? I didn't know school labeled them after each student," he says. I open my mouth to counter his argument, but he pats his lap. "Not to worry, you can sit here. It's much more comfortable than the chairs."

Mr. Sam's voice cuts off my reply, not like I had a good one. I follow his fingers as he explains the formula on the board, something about a pentagon. Or was it a hexagon? Whatever it was, it ended with *gon*.

Ben nudges me with his foot twice, but I choose to ignore him. His chair squeaks as he drags it closer to mine. Chills run

down my spine when he leans in to whisper, “Nice slap, cutie.”

My eyes almost pop out of their sockets. Ben called me a cutie. Where is my best friend?

Wait. *Nice slap?* My head jerks toward Ben. He chuckles and pushes his seat back without a sound. At my confused look, he waves his phone in my face, ducking it out of my reach when I make to grab it. Dread settles in the pit of my belly. No, I refuse to consider the only possibility.

It cannot be. We were alone in the hallway.

“Let me see,” I whisper to a smiling Ben, who is all too happy to see me worked up. “Please?”

His fingers curl in his hair, and he leans back in slow motion like he knows how sexy the move is. He’s hot and intelligent. While I can appreciate that perfect combo, he doesn’t have to know.

Putting on my best poker face, I hold his gaze for a second, and that arrogant smirk returns. *Aish*. He’s so full of himself. I point to his phone, hoping he will take the hint and show me the video. Instead, he shrugs and slides the phone into the pocket of his jeans without breaking eye contact.

I should have grabbed it when I had the chance. After one last shared dirty look, my eyes fixate on the back of Mr. Sam’s head as he scribbles on the board. I’m determined to pay attention to the class, but Ben is hell-bent on making that impossible.

He nudges me again. I ignore him. A crumpled note falls to my desk, courtesy of the handsome jackass on my right. As curious as I am, I flick it off my desk without a peek, and his muffled groan makes me grin. Unlike both of us, other students are taking notes. I pull out my notebook to busy myself. Ben pokes me in the side with his pencil. I grit my teeth, and my head snaps to his stupid smiling face.

“What?” I bark at him.

The classroom quietens. Heads turn to us with a death glare directed at only me. Mr. Sam pauses his intense writing,

his gaze alternating between Ben and me. He sighs.

“Theresa, be quiet.”

I offer him an apologetic smile. Ben laughs again, but no one calls him out for it. I suppress a hiss at the partial treatment and start doodling on my note, all interest in this class gone. The bag at my foot vibrates. I take out my phone, and bile rushes to my throat at the message in all caps.

“Hey.” It’s Ben again, but I’m too focused on Maria’s text to entertain him. If it’s all caps, then it has to be urgent. I don’t want to open BGC like my best friend’s text demands. “Next time, you should punch her. Break her nose or something.” I glare at him, and he winks. “Nice necklace.”

At that, I shove my necklace into its hiding spot. He snickers but doesn’t bother me anymore. Mr. Sam throws us a warning glance. I convince myself to open the blog, and my head spins a bit.

No, no, no. Not this.

Nice slap?

Next time, punch her.

It all begins to make sense when a mute video of me slapping Olivia in the hallway stares back at me. The worst are the comments asking if it’s photoshopped, while some reply with memes of the slap.

My mood takes a downward shift, and I groan. I’m in deep shit.

“You good?”

Again, I ignore Ben.

Maria sends another text to know if I’ve seen the video, and I reply with a picture of the type of flowers she should bring to my funeral because I’m dead. When I finally lift my head from my phone, the class is empty, or so I think until I notice Ben watching me. Is he waiting for me? He looks away before I voice my suspicions. I pull my bag over my shoulder and stand.

This is weird.

It's also our first time in the same place alone. We have spoken in unavoidable situations, but I bet he doesn't remember those encounters. I doubt he knows my name. I clear my throat to call his attention, but he looks out the window as if he's embarrassed to get caught staring at me.

Alright then. Without a word to Ben, I exit the class for my next lecture.

The rest of my classes are a blur. Stolen glances and more stolen glances are directed at me. A few pointed fingers and giggles here and there, but no physical attacks. I faintly remember Maria leading me to the cafeteria and dumping a tray in front of me. No soda. No junk on my tray. I have a fight on Saturday evening, but she doesn't know that. She thinks I'm watching my weight. As if I am not already skinny enough. I pick at my salad, taking only a bite before I push the tray away.

"Cheer up. It's not the end of the world," Maria says in her overly happy voice. Easy for her to say. She's used to being the center of attention. Me, I'll rather disappear. "The video will be forgotten soon."

Her jacket is gone, revealing her fitted top. It must be nice to have great boobs, not the dots God stuck on my chest as an afterthought. My boobs are not that bad. They are just not great for someone super conscious about her appearance. I tune her out once she starts on her latest YouTube video.

Of her five siblings, she's the best singer, and her dream is to one day perform with Shakira. I am all for supporting your best friend, heck, I was her first subscriber, but I need some quiet for the rest of today. Pressing my fingers to my temples, I let out a sigh. The cafeteria was a bad idea. I jump to my feet, prepared to leave, when the doors of the cafeteria swing open. I sink into the bench as everyone redirects their attention to the group strolling in. My eyes instantly locate Ben.

Ben, the showstopper. And he doesn't even try.

They pause at the center of the cafeteria to allow us a chance to admire them openly, but the only person I am interested in is Ben. The tall hunk with a flirty grin. My smile vanishes as his arm snakes around Olivia's waist. He must have known I was staring because he kisses her cheek.

Are they a couple now? Who cares? I stab the lettuce on my plate. Maybe I do care, if only a little. It's unfair how everything is easy for her. Watching them drop down to an empty bench, that tightening in my chest occurs again when Olivia claims Ben's lap. Her arms band around his neck while his settle on her waist. Ben must be out of options or lacks great taste in females.

Maria taps me, but I cannot look away from the couple. They fit together.

"Are they dating?" she asks the question lingering in my mind.

Ben doesn't date. I have been here long enough to know that. What if Olivia manipulated him? His eyes meet mine over Olivia's shoulder. I freeze, my cheeks a bright red at his subtle wink.

Four



I HATE CROWDS, so why am I here in a noisy pub with shitty beats in the name of music?

Simple. For my best friend.

Maria slides a tiny glass of coke to me. I make a face when she gulps the colorless content in her shot glass with a grimace. In less than a year, we will both be eighteen and eligible for semi-clubbing. Not like it matters to me, but Maria is looking forward to it. My head bobs to the beat as I squint at the bright, colorful lights swirling over the small crowd moving on the dancefloor.

Though our fake IDs allowed us entries, alcohol is off-limits. For fun, I had them serve my coke in a shot glass, acting like it's the almighty vodka we have heard so much about. Only tonight, Maria got lucky. She got her first real taste of vodka. I need a clear head for tomorrow's fight.

"Ryan Reynolds, smash or pass?" she asks, shot glass turned over to catch the last drop of vodka.

I fake gag. The man might be fine, but no way. "Pass. He's older than you. Both of us."

"He's not that old."

But I am not interested in smashing him. She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear, showing off a hoop earring that's so mine.

"Alright, Zac Efron?" she mutters.

I curl my hands around my neck and pretend to strangle myself.

Maria laughs. “Party pooper.”

Hey, I’m not the one who wants to talk about boys.

Maria nods at her empty glass and burps. “Doesn’t sting as bad as they say it does.”

The DJ starts a new song, and the dancefloor cheers with appreciation. My body sways with the music, and I snap my fingers along to Coldplay’s jam. Maria eyes the dancefloor with longing but remains seated. I am a lousy dancer, but she’s not. Being a great dancer must come with her singing ability because she does both effortlessly. If we were in a movie, she would be the leading actress while I’d play the supporting character, the silent and supportive best friend in the shadow.

Maria leans in, and her head drops to my shoulder. I pat her arm. “Don’t worry. You will ace it.”

She lifts her head to stare at me like I said the impossible. I shrug, and she returns to her former position. After the risks we took to get here, she has to kill that opening, or we will be eternally grounded. As far as our parents are concerned, she’s at my house, and I am at hers. They don’t know their beloved daughters are at a pub, awaiting the go-ahead from the manager. He promised to let Maria open for the new band. I don’t know why they are late, but we have to wait.

The song switches. Maria yells, almost falling off her seat as Shakira’s “Time for Africa” plays. She is obsessed with that woman. Her bandage gown rides up her thighs as she begins to rotate her waist. I play the role of a hype man, clapping and encouraging her to move that sexy body.

My phone pings in my pocket. There have been tons of messages since someone uploaded that slap video. I’ve also received praises. Talk about “nice job”, “Congrats on hitting the bitch”, and “You go, girl”.

Ben also complimented me—that is, if “nice slap” counts. I’m aware many students hate Olivia’s guts, but I don’t want to be anyone’s hero. I must have looked sad because Maria

plops back in her seat and squeezes my knee. When my phone vibrates again, she pulls it out before I can.

“Told you your five minutes of fame will end soon,” she says.

What’s she talking about? Five hours since the incident, and I’m still getting buzzed. My phone dangles between her fingers, and my brows nearly disappear into my hairline at the new post.

A video of Ben planting a kiss on Olivia’s cheek plays on repeat like a broken record. It was not even a real kiss. That was a sloppy peck.

“Everyone’s talking about the cafeteria kiss,” Maria says. Her feet dangle from the bar stool, and she frowns at me. “I thought Olivia only deals with college boys now. What’s she doing with Ben?”

I don’t know, and I don’t want to care. Since that breakup, she has not dated anyone from school. She’s above that and will rather date college guys. Good for the rest of the girls crushing on the jocks.

“She might have changed her mind,” I say when I see she’s waiting for my reply. “Ben is...fine.”

“Oh, he is more than fine.” Propping her elbows on the counter, Maria lets out a dreamy sigh. “He’s hot. I would change my mind too if he asked me out.”

I doubt he asked Olivia out. She must have imposed herself on him. Maria is still frowning, so I nudge her with my knee. She can get any boy in school if she tries. Her phone beeps, and she scowls at the screen.

“Daniel’s not coming,” she declares.

Daniel Holt is our friend, the last person in our group. Tall, curly hair, and green eyes. Maria has had a giant crush on him for as long as I’ve had one on Ben. Hold up, that didn’t come from me. I don’t have a crush on Ben. He’s hot, and that’s it. Anyway, Maria has a crush on Daniel but won’t mention it, and Daniel is oblivious. The boy barely comes to school; how

will he know? I'm a bit glad they are not together. I don't want to be the third wheel or watch them suck on each other's faces.

I am about to reassure her when her phone rings. She pouts at something the voice on the other end says and, on a nod, ends the call. The second time she smoothens her gown, I grab her hand.

“What?” I ask.

“It's time.”

She's the one performing, but my limbs liquify when I get up to engulf her in a hug. “Good luck.”

Maria's smile is jittery, and the layers of makeup don't hide her nervousness. She walks a few feet away from me and stops to toss me a look over her shoulder. “You better get my good side.”

I flip my middle finger, but she is already out of sight. We discussed this. I don't want to be in a crowd of sweaty bodies holding up a phone to create a video that will never make it to her TikTok or YouTube channel. At the end of it all, I will get bashed for my poor videography skill.

The crowd goes silent as Maria climbs the stage. I eye those in the VIP section. They get a first-hand view of everything, so they should make the video for her. My resolve weakens at her smile. Why do I have such a soft heart? Knowing me, I'll be out there in seconds, trying to get Maria's best side as she sings her heart out. I pop out of my seat, but a walking nightmare stops me from moving.

Olivia.

How does she always know where to find me?

Olivia is not alone. Nate has a protective arm around her waist. I almost feel bad for Ben. His girlfriend is cheating on him hours after their kissing show. Nate snickers when I shove my hands into my pockets, and I remember what sticks out about him. She cheated on him with Nate.

My blood boils at the distant memory. It was a long time ago, but I can never seem to forget it. I put on a fake smile and

excuse myself, covering only a few steps before a cold liquid trickles down my scalp. Olivia stops in front of me with an empty glass in her hand, smirk intact. I want to throttle her or slap some sense into her head, but Nate is here. She slams the glass on the counter, and a crack appears on it. I scoff as she closes the gap between us to gloat, and my fist uncurls when Nate takes a protective stance behind her. The bitch can't fight her battles alone. Shame.

Maria's voice fills the pub. It's so angelic and smooth I want to scream "she's my best friend". One more glance at Olivia's smirking face, and I stand taller. This night belongs to my best friend. Hair dripping with coke, I brush past Olivia and the tall bozo by her side to capture Maria's moments on stage. I can't let them ruin her night. Besides, getting back at the witch will only result in a back-and-forth of dirty pranks. I want none of that.

I slapped her, and she emptied a drink on me. Now, we are even.

Five



ONE THING MARIA and my parents don't know is I fight in an underground ring. Mom and Dad will have a mini heart attack if they learn their daughter is somewhat of a champion at underground martial arts, thanks to their son. There's no way to tell Maria without her diving into a series of questions, wanting to know why I haven't beaten half the school's population for giving me shit.

But their shit is what fuels me each time I enter the ring. It fuels me now as I listen to an original from Maria's untitled album.

The tension in my joints melts away. I relocate to the front of the mirror and start my stretches. From here, I can hear the crowd cheering, and my heart skips a beat. Ten more minutes until my fight. Swiping my brown hair out of my face as I bend to touch my toes, I focus on keeping my raging heart under control and regulating my ragged breathing.

In. In. In. Out.

I exhale and repeat the process four more times.

Today's Special Nights match is super important—the biggest since I started this. I am fighting another champion in my age group. Special Nights are rare. You fight anyone in your age group irrespective of their weight. But hey, that's one of the many reasons this place is underground and illegal. My palms grow clammy at the thought of losing. I've lost a few matches, but I can count the losses on one hand.

“Tee.” A knock on the door follows. I recognize the voice as Coach Greyson’s. “Can I come in?”

One glance at my half-naked self in the mirror, and I scream, “No.” I snatch the bandage roll on the table that carries the rest of my belongings and adjust my tube top. “Not yet. Just a second.”

Wrapping the bandage around my chest to make my boobs flatter, I throw on a black tank top matching the color of my tube and pull the wig cap over my sleek ponytail to keep it from falling out of the mask. I avoid looking at the discoloration on my stomach and upper thighs. The doctor called it segmental vitiligo—a patchy loss of skin pigmentation. There’s no known cure for it.

I hate it.

I hate that it might spread to all parts of my body, even my face. I should take Maria’s advice—rock crop tops, bodycon, and spaghetti straps while I still can, but I hate seeing the difference between my family and me. I hate looking at my body. To be reminded that I am this way. Different.

Hayden doesn’t have it, and neither do my parents.

One day, I was a typical teenager. The next day, I have white spots on my stomach, back, and legs, as if being skinny with small boobs and having no sense of fashion isn’t enough of a curse. Mom claims I’m not that skinny and can work on my style, but I’ll rather do nothing and sulk. There’s no point to any of that since I can’t show off my body. On the bright side, I’m toned and fit.

Another knock on the door forces me out of those sad memories. I pull the leggings over my waist. I can’t change my body, and this is not the time to feel bad about it. It’s the time to fight. To beat my opponent in the ring like he’s the cause of my vitiligo and the reason Olivia is such a bitch.

“You can come in now,” I scream to the person behind the door, and my phone pings with a message. Only one person texts me this much. She texts more because I hate calls. I

laugh at the picture of Maria standing in front of a blinking banner in her big, fluffy ears headband.

She is at the concert.

Maria's weekends consist of concerts, music festivals, and street shows. If it involves music, you can bet she will be there. Music is everything to her. She loves singing, and her parents will only agree with her decision to skip college if she finds a label to push her career. Skipping college is not an option for me. My parents will send me to therapy if I so much as joke about it. Besides, I want to attend NYU acting school to hone my skills. I send Maria a text with lots of kissy faces and slide my phone into my bag. Staring at the door with a frown, I cross my hands on my chest.

Coach Greyson should be here. I can't go out there without him. Why isn't he here?

After a jerk at the door and the violent twitching of the knob, it hits me. I locked the door.

"Sorry, Coach," I say once I open the door. He takes a seat on the couch opposite the vanity. I drag a chair and straddle it backward, folding my forearms on the headrest. "How's it out there?"

He shrugs. "You ready?"

Coach Greyson was Hayden's coach before he went to college. He knows my actual age and is fine with me coming here as long as I keep up my grades and win him a few thousand dollars monthly.

"Nope," I say. He laughs and pats the spot beside him. I am nervous. I am always nervous before every fight, but tonight, I'm skittish. I hide my face behind my palms. "I can't do it, Coach."

"You can do it," he says. I join him on the couch, and he throws a bulky arm covered in tattoos over my shoulders. Don't let his Viking appearance fool you. The man has a heart of gold under all that thick, bushy beard, a big body, and tattooed sleeves. "Remember to throw your punches this way,

not that way. And your right hook, never forget to use it. Show me your right hook.”

On his feet, he balls his hand into a fist and punches the air to demonstrate his point. I lost my last match because I was trying to pull a punching stunt I saw on YouTube. He wasn't so pleased.

The right hook has always been a winning hit. I use it after my head kick because my punches don't pack as much weight, so I need to weaken my opponent first. I mimic Coach's stance and jab the air from under.

Coach whistles and raises his hand for a high five. “Attagirl. That's how you knock an opponent out.”

Few more minutes of practice, and I think I'm ready. I bounce on my toes, shaking my limbs to chase the stiffness. The wall clock above the mirror shows two more hours until my curfew. Each round lasts twenty minutes. If I stick to all I know and knock out my opponent in the first round, the fight will be over. After a knockout, the referee gives the opponent ten seconds to recover. If they stay down after the count, then I win. If I want to get home earlier, I must ensure the motherfucker doesn't get up after round one. A roundhouse kick to the face can do that. No pressure.

Dumping the water bottle Coach gave me on the table, I wipe the sweat decorating my forehead and head for the door. I stop at the sound of Coach's voice, a bit hesitant to face him. He doesn't need to know I am still nervous after his pep talk. He's a great coach. I can't lose this match.

“Tessa. Your mask.” Oh. My eyes lower to the black mask he stretches to me. I accept it with gratitude, taking one last look at my room before putting it on. “Calm down, kid. Just breathe.”

I follow his breathing pattern. We go at it two more times, and my heart slows. Coach Greyson squeezes my shoulders in his usual fatherly manner, drawing me in for a side hug. I kiss my pendant for good luck and step into the auditorium to my theme song, which is almost drowned by the screams and

chanting of my name from the audience waving flags with my caricature.

Out here, I am Tee. The guy behind the mask. No one can tell my identity, and I love it. It adds a bit of mystery to this persona. My opponent is already bouncing in the ring. As I observe him from my periphery, the fear in my guts intensifies. I trot to the ring with a calmness I don't feel. The dude is a brick of muscles, and I am a pole of flexibility, speed, and skill. With a huge opponent, I must move faster and work twice as hard. I have a chance if I hit all the point spots. To be a bit fair, the ring uses a scoreboard similar to the real system.

The music fades once I step inside the ring. As expected, I wave to the crowd, and they erupt into another round of cheers. I reciprocate with a smile through the *Rey Mysterio-style* mask showing my lips. Coach got this design so I can sip water during breaks. This win will also be for them. I touch my chest one last time to confirm the presence of the necklace, and a familiar calm surrounds me.

I can do this. I will win.

For Hayden, for Coach, for the crowd. That unmasked guy behind me is going down.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins. I turn, ready to rumble, and my breath ceases.

Shit.

It's him.

* * *

The first round lasts twenty-one minutes.

I am bleeding behind the mask. My heart beats so loud, I can hardly hear a thing. Coach squats in front of me with a water bottle held to my mouth for me to take a sip. I wince when I lift the hem of my bloodied tank top. He presses a warm towel to my side, and my teeth sink into my lip to stop

me from crying or punching him. He should have discouraged me from getting into that ring tonight.

“Are you okay?” Coach asks with a worried expression. I nod. I am not in the least bit okay. My body hurts like hell. I need to soak in a tub full of ice for a week and eat only ice-cream. “Tee.”

“I’m fine.”

We would have gotten helmets, shin guards, and body protectors at a fair competition. But here, nearly everything is different. Kicks to the head score the most points. Body kicks are welcome; the impact is worse because we lack protection. The thrill of illegal fighting comes from the possibility of danger, and the crowd loves it. I love it too, but my body feels like a war zone right now, and I want nothing more than to rip this blinding mask from my face and take off.

I try to sit up on the dangling wires surrounding the ring, and a bout of pain cuts through my insides. I mask it with a smile, but Coach sees through the faux bravado. He cups my face with one hand.

“If you can’t go the next round, Tee, just say the word. You fought a good fight.”

No. I am no quitter. I will not say that word. Chuckling, I punch him lightly on the chest. Gosh, even chuckling hurts.

“Na, I’m good. I’m fine.” His eyebrows lift in disbelief. “Coach, this is nothing. I can handle it.”

But I fail to mention I might not last a third round. All fights are two rounds. Since the first round ended in a draw, another was automatically added. It sucks right now, but it has always been the rule. Coach hands over the water bottle. I take a sip, rinse my mouth and spit. I glance in Ben’s direction to see if I caused any damage. He is hunched in his corner, eyes downcast.

Would he have gone easy on me if he knew I was a female?

Ben raises his head, and our eyes meet. The open gash on his eyebrow is what I notice first. The profound bow of his

pink lips is next. My gaze rests there for too long, and my mind works up scenarios. The commentator's voice snaps me out of it. Our break is almost over. I clear my throat and flex my hands. How can I be thinking of kissing my opponent? Right now, Ben is the enemy.

He twists his neck, and a pop echoes in the ring. A lump forms in my throat when his eyes return to mine. I want to look away, but I can't, not when he's staring hard like he can see behind the mask. I touch my cheek to be sure the mask is intact, and a corner of his lips slowly lifts into a smirk.

Coach squeezes my knees, and I note the tensing of his jaw. "Tessa." His voice lowers as if he's about to tell me a big secret. My gaze flickers to Ben, who is talking to his Coach. They seem to be having a heated discussion. "His knee, his right knee is weak. Go for it. Take advantage of it."

His words unlock old memories. I'm reminded Ben used to be the captain and center-back of the soccer team. He was the star player until a knee injury retired him. Though he no longer plays soccer, he still rolls with the jocks. I glance at Coach and subtly at Ben's right knee. I wouldn't have known if Coach hadn't mentioned it because he never walks like he has a busted knee.

If I get one foul, I can make up for it with a headshot.

The female commentator's voice booms through the speakers, dishing out so many instructions at once. Coach helps me to my feet. I understand his nervousness. I am also nervous. The cheers are not as loud as at the beginning of the match, but the tension in the air is thicker, so thick I can almost taste it. I don't want to wonder how many of them placed a bet on me. Coaches are not allowed to place bets, but Coach Grayson has someone who does it for him. I get twenty-five percent. I don't mind the amount since it doesn't affect the regular cut I get at the end of each match.

I take one step forward, and Coach pulls me back. He motions to his leg. "His right knee, Tessa."

With one pat on my back, Coach's gone. I walk to the center of the ring. Two ladies in tiny black bikinis sashay into

the ring, holding a banner with number two boldly written on it to indicate the new round. I take that time to assess Ben as he joins me in the middle. None of us reacts to the crowd. Instead, we analyze each other quietly. He towers over me by at least four or five inches, and the wheels in my head spin into overdrive, trying to remember tricks I can use to my advantage.

When fighting a taller person, you must get closer to them so they have little to no opportunity to launch headshots. Ben's weight makes it harder for him to kick as fast, as high, and as much as I can. It's what I get for being skinny. But his weight also lends strength to his punches; they are deadly. I ponder over this as the ladies exit the ring. The referee steps between us to create some distance, the bell goes off to signify the start of the second round, and the crowd falls eerily silent.

Ben is the first to attack. I dodge it. Someone in the crowd yells his stage name, but he doesn't flinch. In here, it's him and me alone. My heart pounds against my chest like a caged animal. He strikes again, and I groan as his fist connects with my side. Not again. Coach screams my name. He's not allowed to give instructions once the fight begins, but I know what he needs me to do. Getting into position, I fake an attack. Ben ducks, and I perform a slapping kick to his right knee.

Foul.

But it works. Ben staggers backward, and a dark look crawls into his eyes as he slides to a stop.

I smirk. Coach was right.

Six



MY HEAD HURTS. I'm confident I'll see stars if I pry my eyes open, so I bury my face in the pillow. Thank God today is Sunday. Maria will be too busy trying to recover from last night's concert, so I don't have to face her or anyone. Mom's voice reaches into my room from outside. I only relax when I realize she's on a phone call. At the sound of a knock, I roll to my uninjured side.

"Sweetheart?"

"Mom."

The door opens without a fuss, and I am grateful I didn't lock it last night. I was too tired to think. Mom peeks inside, but I doubt she can see anything in this darkness called my room.

"Tessa?"

I put on my phone's flashlight and wave it at the door so she can find her way to me.

"In here." My bed dips as she lowers herself to the edge. I panic when I hear her fumbling for the bedside lamp switch. "No, not the lights."

She giggles but doesn't attempt to switch on the lights anymore. I use my hair to cover a side of my face as her hand finds mine hidden under the covers to give it a slight squeeze. Relieved she didn't notice the callus on my knuckles, I hold in a wince. I used a bandage for last night's match, but damn Ben

and the mass of muscles he calls his body. My whole body freaking hurts.

“Good morning, Mom.” I push my phone to the side when she leans to kiss my forehead.

“It’s 4 pm, Sweetheart.”

No way. I got into bed how many minutes ago? I try to sit up, but a splitting headache sends me back under the comforter. Tucking my hair behind my ear, she caresses my cheek, and a throbbing pain spreads through my face. He also damaged my cheeks.

“Tessa, are you okay? You have been in bed almost all day.”

“First week of school was fucking—” I yelp when she flicks a finger over my forehead. “Mom!”

“Language.”

I roll my eyes, and she pinches my nose until I let out a small scream of protest. I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard her swear over the phone or when telling Dad about a client. *But okay, language.*

“First week of school was a bit tough. Is it too late to switch schools?” The answer is no, but it doesn’t hurt to ask. Mom shakes her head like I expected her to, and I pout. “Where’s Dad?”

As a neurologist, he works hellish shifts, and I don’t get to see him as much as before. I miss it—our Sunday picnics and daddy-daughter bonding time. I miss having everyone at home. He loves us, I know. The pay is fantastic, I know that too, but it sucks to be the daughter of such a busy man.

Mom’s smile dims. I catch a glimpse of her glossy eyes as she plays with a lock of hair identical to mine. She also misses him. Sometimes, I wish he didn’t get his promotion. He has always been a busy man, but with the recent promotion, we would be lucky to get forty-eight hours with him.

“He’s at work. Speaking of which...” She plants a sloppy kiss on my temple, and I wrap my arms around her shoulder in

a brief hug, inhaling her vanilla scent. “I have to get going now. Don’t forget to clear Hayden’s room so I can give out some of his old stuff later in the week.”

The only valuable thing Hayden has that I’ll be keeping is his old flip phone. It was the first phone our parents ever got him. Sony Ericsson Xperia X10 Mini Pro. He loved that Ericsson with his life.

“Will you be okay on your own?” Mom asks when I haven’t replied. I nod. I’ll take pictures posing with his phone and send them to him with a pouty emoji. I was not allowed to touch it back then, but oh well. “Your food is in the microwave. Call me if you need anything, okay? I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

The door shuts quietly behind her. I scramble out of my bed as fast as someone with a bruised body can. Locking the door, I rest my forehead on it and twist the key in the keyhole twice.

Light floods the room once I hit the switch. My gaze travels round my room, and I grin at the lady on the poster glued to my door. Michelle Waverly, a model-turned-undefeated MMA champion. She is holding the United States flag above her head. Mom doesn’t understand why I have her posters, but she allows it. Like Hayden, I’ll quit fighting once high school is over.

A honk sounds from outside. Mom. I saunter to the window and wave until her car disappears. Making myself comfy on the windowsill, I examine my arms. From experience, I know the tiny cuts scattered all over the back of my palms will fade in a day or two. A hoot draws my attention outside. Our next-door neighbor’s car drives to a halt. He can’t see me from my spot, but I can see him.

Something else catches my eye: a motorcycle and its rider.

His relaxed stance and a half-empty bottle of water say he has been there for a while. Dressed in camouflage that blends so well with the bark of the tree he is parked beside, it’s no

wonder the neighbors haven't bothered him. They can't see him. I wouldn't have if I weren't seated here.

The biker is not from around here; that much I can tell. I wait a few more minutes for him to leave, but he doesn't. My eyes narrow. Can he see me? What's he staring at with such intensity?

Our house?

No. He's staring at me.

A shiver cuts through me. I jump down, but he pulls down his visor before I get a chance to look at him better. Fighting through the pain, I hurry downstairs and wrench the front door open. A disappointed sigh leaves me as he rides off. He was watching me. He was watching our house.

Why?

With an ice pack in hand, I head to my room and sit in front of the mirror. My reflection stares back. I look like shit. There's a cut between my brows and another below my nose. Thankfully, they can all be covered with makeup. I lift my shirt and suck in a breath. Ben almost ruined my body.

The second round had me sticking to the plan. I focused on his knee. By the time he noticed, I was leading by a wide margin. The few times he managed a hit, he made sure to leave his marks.

I press the ice pack to my side and hiss in pain. Never again. After last night's fight, I need a month's break. I deserve it. Coach can get money from his other protégées. I climb into bed and grab my phone from under the pillow. The notification from my best friend makes me roll my eyes. Ever the dramatic Maria. She should consider joining me at acting school if her music career fails. I pull the notification bar down, and my heart slows to a stop at the line staring at me.

Drama Queen: YOU ARE TRENDING!!!

Seven



BY MONDAY MORNING, I am still trending. It turns out a video of me getting dunked with iced coke by Queen B is far more interesting than a video of Ben kissing Olivia in the middle of the cafeteria. Either way, the entire school is laughing at my expense, and my fame doesn't seem to be expiring soon. I detest this spotlight. They should be going crazy over Maria's sweet voice in the background. She sounded like an angel, but those teenage devils would rather come for me.

"Sweetheart, you are going to be late," Mom calls from somewhere downstairs.

"I'm almost done," I reply.

Another ping sounds from my phone. I glare at my reflection in the mirror before looking at the sender. This time, it is Daniel. He wants to know if I am okay. Okay? I scoff. If they are taking turns sending me messages, then they must be super worried by my silence over the texts in our group chat. I haven't had time to reply because every time I pick up the goddamn phone to do that, a message pops up from our class group chat, and guess what it is? Another stupid meme.

I set my mascara down and smack my lips to highlight the red lipstick.

How can I be okay with a sticker of my head attached to a coke bottle or the many caricature pictures that came out of the cursed video? I am not okay, but I will live. High school is fun.

Bullying in Broadway Heights is normal. It goes round and will surely reach the turn of whoever uploaded that video. The tone of the new message lets me know it's Maria. She must be outside.

I'm not driving today, possibly tomorrow, and for the rest of this week. I apply an extra layer of foundation and splurge concealer over the fading bruises. When I'm done, there's no indication that I was a walking bruise some minutes ago, and I give myself a thumbs up for a well-done job.

Maria honks again like a crazed woman, and my head pokes out the window. I scream for her to shut the fuck up, but the idiot called my best friend horns again. I swear I hear her laughing. I adjust the sleeves of my sweatshirt and tug them over my knuckles to hide the bruises. The next thing I check is my necklace. After one last glance at the mirror, I shake my hair out of its bun, letting it cascade down my chest. I am dressed the same way, but I dare say I look pretty today.

On my way outside, I grab an apple from the fruit bowl on the dining table and hurry out, barely giving Mom a chance to gush over my makeup. She must be proud. I got my flawless skin from her, but it's rare to see me in makeup. All I have always needed is lip gloss, and I am good to go. Except today.

I enter Maria's car and shut the door gently. With her eyes closed, head bobbing to the pop music blasting from her radio, she doesn't notice me. I spell out vitiligo twice before raining on her parade.

"Hey," she hollers when I turn off the music. Her eyes shoot lasers. If looks could kill, I would be dead. But I don't care. We need to get to school, or we will be late. "Why did you stop the music?"

I throw one hand out the window and hit the car while she shrieks like a banshee. "Just drive."

"Who shoved a stick far up your ass this beautiful morning?" she asks as she reverses out of the driveway. The song resumes playing but on a low. She hits the horn when we are at a stoplight like she's obsessed with it. The driver in front flips us the bird, and she yells, "Fuck you too."

And I'm supposed to be the one with a stick up my ass.

The light turns green, and Maria speeds past the angry driver. I fasten my seatbelt because I will be flying out through the open roof of her car at the rate she's driving. She belts out the lyrics of *Love yourself*. So carefree. She reminds me of Sofia Vergara sometimes. Her attitude, accent. She's also dramatic. When I can't take her singing anymore, I shut the music. Some of us love silence.

"Why are you such a killjoy?"

"Why are you such a happy person?" I retort.

Maria flips her hair with one hand, effortlessly spinning the wheel with the other as we approach our school. Goosebumps race down my arms. I glance at the enormous building with the name of my school in blue and gold letters. I don't like this place, and I am sure I will like it less today.

"Daniel will be in school today," Maria whispers.

It clicks.

I understand why her gown is tighter and her makeup heavier. I watch my friend fix her eye makeup in a compact mirror. My gaze falls on her chest. She is showing cleavage. She pushes her boobs up and winks. Hater. Small boobs also matter. But on a serious note, she can't keep this up.

"You can always tell him you like him," I offer.

"No," she says. We open our doors simultaneously without getting out. "That's the guy's job."

My lips pull into a tight smile. I will save that line for a future argument. Maria retrieves the mirror to make final touches to her face while I wait patiently for her. This is one reason I hate makeup. It's time-consuming. She claims it becomes less so with practice, but I don't believe that girl.

We are out of the car when she gives me a once-over. "Are you wearing makeup?" *Oh, God*. I slam my door, but she doesn't take the hint to be quiet. She wiggles her brows, and I plug my fingers into my ear as she screams, "You are wearing makeup. Tessa is putting on makeup."

My best friend is a tarantula. I'll put her up on eBay. No, I'll swap her for another poster of Michelle Waverly.

Without a reply, I dash to the entrance as fast as my banged-up body can manage. Maria bridges the gap in no time, undeterred by her pointed heels. Her arm sneaks around my wrist, dragging me to a stop.

"Tessa, what's the occasion?"

"None," I reply. She throws me a cautious look but doesn't say another word as we climb the front stairs. I push the door open, using my back to support it, and she steps in. "Is he here yet?"

She peeks at her phone. "No." Daniel might not show up, and that won't be a surprise. She must have heard my thoughts. "He had better not change his mind. I put so much work into this dress."

"And you look gorgeous, Maria," I tell her, but she scowls. "I mean it, pretty girl."

Maria blushes. I drag her toward our lockers, so she has no chance to think about Daniel. It feels like the first day of resumption all over again. I scan the hallway filled with students. Some are at their lockers, but no one is openly staring at us—at me. I don't know what I expected, but things are way too calm. I expected the pointed looks. Maybe there are sticky notes on my locker door.

We arrive at our lockers, but there's nothing on my door. I open the locker. Nothing is inside.

Maria says something about the video I captured after Olivia baptized me with the coke. I tune her out and bring out all the books needed for the next four periods because I don't want to be out here in this hallway without her. I have Spanish for the first period, while Maria has Greek.

A normal person would jump at the idea of learning her native language with her best friend, but not my Maria. Do people still speak Greek? A hush falls in the hallway. Maria and I exchange a suspicious glance. In synchronization, we look to the door.

Drama always begins at the entrance.

Today's drama closes in on me. Benjamin Carter. I hug my textbooks to my chest as if they will protect me. The playful Ben I shared a class with is gone, replaced by the version I met in the ring. I take a step back, and my back connects with my locker. He pins me with an arresting gaze. His hot breath fans my face, and I stare wide-eyed at him like a deer caught in the headlights.

What the hell is he doing? His eyes lower to my chest. I follow his gaze to the necklace poking out of my sweatshirt. Our gazes collide, and a knowing glint creeps into his eyes. It can't be.

Another look at his face confirms my fear.

Ben knows I was at the ring Saturday night.

Eight



THE HALLWAY IS SILENT, way too quiet for a noisy school.

Everyone is watching, feasting their eyes on us and waiting to see what Ben will do. As for me, I want to crawl into a hole and disappear. But I can't move. Ben is so close that I can see the cut on his lips, and the pupils of his blue eyes dilate in irritation. He places both hands on either side of my head and leans in till his nose brushes my ear. Shivers spread down my back. His breath tickles my neck, and I shut my eyes tight to avoid his gaze like it would save me from his wrath.

“Where were you Saturday night?” he asks in a clipped tone doused with anger, oblivious to the scene he is making. His voice is loud enough for anyone nearby to hear. My eyes flutter open.

From my peripheral view, I see a few girls bring out their phones to record. Maria gawks at us, and I can imagine the wheels in her head rolling out of control. It's not what she thinks. I cast a pleading look at Ben. We can discuss this later, but he doesn't lose his composure. His brows furrow so much that a wedge appears between them. I pray for a teacher to appear.

“Are you deaf? Where were you?” he barks.

His tone doesn't sit right with me. I clear my throat. “It's none of your business, Benjamin.”

As soon as the words leave my lips, Ben punches the space beside my head. A collective gasp echoes through the hallway,

the loudest of it coming from me. I steal a glance at the fist still plastered to my locker door, and his eyes narrow to harsh slits. He could have hit me.

“It will be. Very soon,” Ben whispers, and chills rush down my spine. I swallow hard when his mouth parts to repeat his question in a slow, menacing voice. “Where. Were. You. Tee?”

“Home,” I blurt out. My voice shakes, and one of my books drops to the floor. Our gazes follow it, but none of us attempts to retrieve it. I would have picked it, but I’m too scared to move. On a regular day, I can handle myself against bullies, but Ben’s eyes hold a promise, and I won’t give him a chance to fulfill it. We can hash this out somewhere private. “Benjamin, I was at home.”

If looks could burn, I would have been reduced to ashes. There is so much anger and hate packed into the stare he levels me that I might have confessed if I didn’t have to protect my identity. But I can’t tell him the truth with Maria standing inches away from me. We have been best friends since napkin days, and she doesn’t know I fight for Coach Greyson. I force tears to my eyes, batting my lashes at Ben, who continues staring at me like I have grown a horn on my forehead.

Does he believe me?

“She was at home. I can confirm it because I was there,” Maria says, her voice a tiny ray of hope. My head jerks shakily in agreement. Moving forward, I will do whatever she requests of me without complaints. I will even take a photography class for her sake. She inches toward Ben and shoves her phone in his face. “We were at her house, an all-girls night.”

I know she’s showing him a picture from the last time she spent the night at my house, which was before her travel. We are not allowed sleepovers when school is in session, but Ben doesn’t need to know that. The silence stretches. I’m confident I’m not the only person awaiting his response.

Where are the teachers when you need them?

Still locked in a battle of stares with me, Ben replies, “Stay out of this, Maria Vega.”

This can't be good.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead, but I can't do a thing as it stings my eyes. Maria flashes me an apologetic smile and steps back. I breathe normally when Ben backs away from me. His finger connects with my pendant, and I shrink into myself. I shouldn't have worn the necklace today.

Ben traces the shape of the pendant. "You were at home, yeah?"

I nod. Ben squats to retrieve my textbook. I accept it, and the remaining notes in my hands drop to the floor. I can't hold anything with everyone gawking at us, waiting for drama. But he picks up the notes and points at my backpack. The bag slides off my shoulder, and he shoves my books inside. His thumb caresses my cheek, and I stop breathing. He makes a sound at the back of his throat, then walks away.

The crowd thins out in his absence. Maria confronts me. "What was that all about?"

"I don't know. Why don't you go ask him?"

"Tessa!"

"I'm serious, Maria. I have no idea." For lack of anything to do, I open and close my locker door without picking out anything. She can easily tell if I'm lying. "I have to go. I'll be late for class."

Maria shuts my door. Her face draws closer to mine, and she pins me with a motherly glare. "Where were you Saturday night?"

"At home. What's up with both of you?"

I spin on my heels and start for my class, knowing she will catch up. Unfortunately, she catches up too fast.

"I can't believe Ben touched you. How does it feel? Maybe we can strike that off your bucket list?" What? No. It was only my cheek, and I'm sure he did it to check if I was wearing makeup. Shit. Of course. That's why he touched me. I stop in the middle of the hallway. "Tessa, what—"

I hug her briefly. “I forgot something. Just go on without me. See you later. Love you. Bye.”

Her gaze punctures holes into my back as I hobble away. Where am I going? No idea—hold that thought. Ben appears at the other end of the hallway, beckoning me with a crooked finger. Double shit.

“Keep walking, Tee.” I scan the empty hallway for an escape. How did Maria get away so fast? I don’t move an inch. Ben covers the distance and grabs my wrist. “Looking for your best friend?”

“Ha-ha. Funny.” But I fall in line with him like an obedient lamb. He stops in front of a class and opens the door. “Benjamin, Ben, you have the wrong person. This is all a big misunderstanding. I was at home.”

“You are beginning to sound like a broken record, Tee.”

“Tessa. The name is Tessa.”

I enter first. The class is empty. Great. Ben follows behind me and shuts the door. I jump. *Just breathe in like Coach taught you.* I can handle him. I did it once in the ring. I can do it again. I watch him lean back on the door, fold his arms on his chest, and then cross his legs at the ankles.

Why is he posing? We should both be in class.

“You cheated,” he starts. I open my mouth to lie my way out of this situation, but he holds up his finger coated with my foundation. “You are hiding the bruises, Tee. You never wear makeup.”

How does he know that? Ben pushes away from the door. Before I can spell vitiligo, he has me pinned to the wall. My confidence deserts me. I can’t even lift my hands to punch away his smirk.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” He breathes down my face.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Ben fakes a punch, and I yelp. The idiot laughs. His palm lowers to my stomach, and he presses hard on the sore spot he hit Saturday night.

“Stop,” I say.

“Stop what? Not so confident without your coach to cheer you, huh?” The force behind his palm increases. Pain spreads through my stomach, and a whimper escapes me. Tears crowd my eyes, but I force them back. He’s a sore loser. “Rematch. Right here. Fight back.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Fight. Back.”

“No,” I grit out. His anger scares me. We are all alone, and I’m at a disadvantage. In the ring, there were rules. Out here, he can do whatever he wants. “Leave me alone.”

Ben grabs my hands and force them into a fist. I drop my arms. “Hit me, or I will.”

“Go ahead then, Ben.” I gather the courage to shove him. At least I try, but his feet are cemented to the floor. “Hit me. Hit a defenseless girl you dragged into an empty class. Go on, Benjamin!”

Rage clouds Ben’s face. His hand swings back, and my eyes clench shut, waiting for that punch.

I don’t feel anything.

One eye pops open, and the second follows. Ben’s fist hovers inches over my nose. He exhales and slowly shakes his head. Well, the hate is mutual. I hate him more than he could ever hate me.

“Asshole,” I whisper under my breath.

Ben twists the knob to open the door. “You would know better. That’s who you are.”

Nine



AP CALCULUS CLASS IS EMPTY, thank God. I take a seat beside the window and plug in my earbuds. To pass the time until others arrive, I hit play on my phone, and Maria's voice filters into my ears. My head bobs to her cover of Beyonce's solo. Maria has a whole album dedicated to covers.

My eyes lower to the seat I occupied on Friday because that idiot thought it okay to steal my space. Will Ben be in attendance? If he will, I hope he trips on his way in and breaks his neck.

The door opens. Abigail Adams, a brunette with hot brains, troops into the class. I know her name because she answers almost all of Mr. Sam's questions. She doesn't say a word to me as she plops into the seat a few rows ahead of me. No surprises there. We are not friends, but her furious glare has me squirming. I grab my phone and feign busy when she spares me another glance.

"How did it feel?"

I point a finger to my chest. Is she talking to me? What's she on about?

"Yes, you, Tessa," she adds.

Rude much? I increase the song's volume, but I still hear her nasal voice above the music.

"How did it feel to have Ben's hands all over you? He touched you." She lets out a dreamy sigh. If she wants to know

how it felt, she can continue this chit-chat with his fist. “Lucky you, Tessa.”

Foolish you, Abigail.

One by one, students stroll in, and our one-sided conversation ends. If she thinks I enjoyed him touching me, she’s nuts. Unlike Maria and Abigail, I don’t consider that threatening caress of my cheek an actual touch. Number five item on the bucket list still stands. *Let a real man touch you.*

Ben is not a man. He is a boy who drags girls to empty classes to intimidate them.

Mr. Sam finally shows up. He offers his apologies for being late and introduces a new topic. I try to focus, but my eyes keep darting to the empty seat beside me. Maria sends a message to check in on me. I reply with a promise to meet her for lunch, resisting the temptation to see what new video is on BGC. I know clips of me will be all over the blog. They will use the best part: the ugly face I made when I thought he would punch me. New memes will be out soon if it already hasn’t happened.

Ten minutes into the class, the door opens. Everyone stops what they are doing, and our heads snap to the entrance where Ben is standing like he didn’t interrupt a lecture. The guts of him.

“You’re late,” Mr. Sam says.

“I know.” His eyes find mine. I avert my gaze and pretend to copy the notes on the board.

Ben gives Mr. Sam a note that earns him a nod and a dismissal. The girls in the class ogle him, all of them but me. He’s good-looking, he’s hot, but he’s a major asshole. Abigail is braver. She taps the seat by her right in a silent invitation, but Ben walks past her. *Good boy.* I can’t wait for him to drag her into an empty class and punch her so she knows there’s nothing sexy about him.

My anxiety hits the roof as he approaches my desk. Abigail gives me a sly smile, and I gag in my brain. This isn’t cute. I am still avoiding Ben’s gaze when he settles into the

seat beside me. Mr. Sam resumes his teaching, and I lose focus. How can I not when this boy keeps gawking at me? I don't look at him. Instead, I place my backpack on my desk to avoid those intense hateful eyes.

He almost hit me twice, yet he's acting like I am the guilty one.

"Benjamin, read out the question on page ten."

"I don't have the textbook."

Truly, he doesn't. His desk has only a notepad for doodling. His drawings are pretty sick, but I'll never tell him that. Why does he have to be in this class if he doesn't care? Mr. Sam doesn't take kindly to Ben's answer. He storms toward us in a haze. I flip to page ten, prepared to read out the question in case Mr. Sam calls on me. I'm also half-hoping Ben gets detention for disobedience. He deserves it, and I don't want to see him again. Whatever crush I had on him died this morning.

"No textbook?" Mr. Sam says when he's at Ben's desk. His anger dissipates when he realizes Ben is being honest. The guilty boy nods. How does he manage to look innocent? Mr. Sam drums his fingers on Ben's desk, then nods at me. "Theresa has a textbook. Share with her."

He doesn't notice the discomfort his words cause me. Teacher and student glare at each other for a strained minute. I pray Ben refuses so he can get into trouble with him. My dreams of seeing him in detention fade when he drags his seat closer to mine. His arm brushes mine, and I jerk.

"Get a grip, Mother Theresa," Ben hisses out.

"You get a grip, Father Asshole."

"Now," Mr. Sam says from the front of the class, "read the question, Benjamin. Theresa, quiet!"

Ben smirks. Royal bastard. He drags my textbook to his front and reads out the question. I hate myself for this, but I swoon at the sound of his voice. Mr. Sam takes over from there. "Thank you, Benjamin." He places a hand on his waist and points the other at me. "What's the answer?"

The answer?

“Theresa.”

I wipe my sweaty palms on my shirt, staring at the question in the textbook like the answer will appear.

“Yes? You will have no choice but to leave my class if you fail to answer,” the teacher says.

That’s it. Mr. Sam hates me. Why do I have to leave the class?

“Fifty-four,” Ben replies. “She can stay.”

Wait, did he—did he just help me? Ben stares straight ahead and explains how he arrived at his figure.

A smile lights our teacher’s face. He shoots me a disappointed look and a proud one at Ben. Usually, I would study over the weekend since I have a hard time concentrating in class, but I didn’t have a chance to do so. The fight was on Saturday, and I spent most of yesterday sleeping.

The rest of the lesson progresses without any hiccups. Mr. Sam doesn’t ask me any questions, and I never volunteer to answer the ones he throws open to the class. Ben continues doodling in his notepad but never misses a question directed to him. Once, I almost reach over to his side to rip out the page.

Minutes until the bell rings, Ben leans over his desk, and his pendant dangles into my view. I feel my neck where my necklace should be. Empty. Who does he think he is?

“Give it back,” I whisper. Ben ignores me and slides his phone out of his bag. I pull my textbook out of his sight, but he continues typing under his desk. How I want to slap him! “Give it back.”

Abigail gives me a pointed look. Is my voice that loud? Not like I care if I distracted her. If she was really focused, she wouldn’t have heard me. I raise my middle finger in response. She can kiss my ass. Ben has my necklace, and he’s acting like he has no idea what I am talking about.

I drop my phone on my desk without pressing it. Ben drapes his arm around my chair.

“Fuck off,” I tell him.

Mr. Sam turns. His eyes dart to my desk. “Theresa. No phone in class, remember?”

Ben chuckles beside me. I mutter a string of apologies and return my phone to my bag.

“Okay. I’m sorry,” I start in my friendliest voice. I’ll make a great actress once I convince myself to enroll in drama class. Another item I need to get off my bucket list. “Please give it back, Ben.”

He tugs on the necklace, and it comes off. His voice is barely a whisper. I have to crane my neck to hear him. “You want this, right?” My throat bobs as I swallow hard. Why do I feel like this is a game to him? I nod, and it goes flying right above my head. Right out the window. “Fetch.”

I cover my mouth to muffle my gasp. He threw my necklace out the window. A sob hitches in my throat, and my voice breaks when I say, “Benjamin. You didn’t have to do that.”

Trying to locate the necklace with my eyes only leads to more frustration. I don’t see anything in the thick shrubbery outside my window. I’ll kill him if I lose that necklace. I request permission from Mr. Sam to use the bathroom, but he refuses on account that his class is almost over.

My eyes sting with tears that drop to my cheeks. The necklace is one of the biggest ways I can be close to Hayden. We might call each other frequently, but it’s not the same as having something from him close to my heart. I glance at Ben, and the idiot shoves his hands into the pockets of the hoodie pulled over his head. He stares at the board like the most exciting lecture is ongoing.

“Why are you such a jerk?” I whisper loud enough for him to hear.

This behavior can’t be a result of Saturday night. Would he have preferred an opponent who didn’t fight back? He doesn’t react to my question. I release a shaky breath, exhaling slowly

until the tears rushing to my eyes dry up. I won't let him get to me. I won. He'll have to deal with that.

“Why are you such a liar?” he says at last, and I roll my eyes. Real mature.

The bell finally goes off. Ben waits behind after the class empties. I ignore the dick as I pack up. My movements are a bit slow due to the mild throbbing in my stomach. His gaze follows my every move. I might have seen remorse in his eyes, but it's gone before I can confirm it. He exits the class silently, leaving me alone to sort out the mess he created, and I collapse back into my chair. I can't continue the rest of the semester that has barely begun this way. I deserve better.

Ten



BEN

VIRTUAL REALITY GLASSES are the real deal. They change everything. I kind of understand why Asher desperately wanted Josef to get him a set. Adrenaline swims through me as we start a new level, and I adjust my goggles. My body vibrates when my opponent strikes me in the shoulder, a searing pain shoots down my arm, and I almost drop the gamepad. Asher jumps in on that chance to fire again. He points his gun at me. I know the moment he releases the trigger, but it's too late for me to duck out of range. A sting rockets my entire frame. They told us we would be able to feel the pain in the game, but I didn't think it was this intense. I wrench the headset and glasses off me.

“Fuck!” I grit out. I can't believe a nine-year-old is whooping my ass.

“No cussing in the house, Benny,” Asher murmurs.

The figures on the big, flat-screen TV stop moving when I hit pause on the gamepad. It's game over. I rub my shoulder where the pain lingers, and Asher frowns at his big brother. “Sorry, Champ.”

“Want to go again?” he asks.

“No, thank you.”

I sit on the floor and lean back on the couch. Asher joins me. I run a hand through his hair as he changes the settings from dual to single mode. It took a while for them to let me have him, but he is here now, and I will always protect him. I leave him to his game while I tidy up the mess he made with the popcorn and soda. Having Asher for the week means encouraging his excesses.

The other phone rings while I'm cleaning up. Only one person from school has that number. Olivia. She has it in case of emergencies. Recently, there has been a lot of that from her

end. I skip to the dining table to grab the phone, and a sound of discomfort tears out of my lips before I answer the call.

“Hey, Liv,” I say into the phone.

“Can you come pick me up?” she asks right away.

I tuck the phone between my ear and shoulder and jog upstairs to grab my lighter and a new top. The other phone beeps while I’m searching for my bike keys. I smile at the text from Noah. He wants to set up a bet for the games. The soccer timetable is out. I may not play anymore, but I’m actively involved. I lean my hip against the wall and type in my reply. Hell yeah. I never say no to money. The idiot replies with a thumbs up emoji. I nod and toss my phone on the bed. It’s on.

Asher is still playing his game when I return to the living room. From his stance, I know better than to disturb him. I scribble on a note to let him know I’m headed to Olivia’s, then rush out to my bike. There’s a pack of cigarettes in the pocket of my sweats. I pull out a stick and light it up.

Almost immediately, Mom’s face appears to reprimand me. I blow rings of smoke on her face till she is nothing but a figment. She can save all that talk for when I take Asher back to their house. I toss the lit cigarette to the floor and stomp on it. Smoking isn’t cool anyway. I do it mostly to annoy her, but having a pack comes in handy during winter or when I’m slightly nervous or idle.

The bike purrs under me. I grab the available helmet and shove it down my head. The streets are as busy as they always are at this time of the night. Chill air seeps through my fingers, caresses my neck, and slithers into my skin. I pull up in front of Olivia’s family house. I don’t have to call her because she is outside waiting for me. She looks nothing like the queen B from school.

“You look normal,” I say as my way of greeting.

Olivia laughs and accepts the helmet I offer her. Her face is free of makeup, and she is spotting a genuine smile. “Well, you don’t look like the guy who threatened a student in front of everyone.”

I guess we are both out of our element. In school, everyone acts so tough. “I didn’t threaten her.”

“Hmm-mmm.”

Olivia climbs onto the bike, and I rev the engine. She hits my back for us to leave. I stare at her mansion one last time, then zoom off into familiar streets. She is quiet until we are near the streets of my house.

“They were fighting again,” she says when I stop a block from the house. Her parents fight more than any family I know. To be fair, I don’t know a lot. I like to stay indoors, except I have a fight to prepare for. “I don’t understand why they won’t get a divorce and move on with their lives.”

“I don’t think a divorce will solve the problem,” I say.

“Living together isn’t the solution either.”

Olivia gets off the bike but stands beside it with the helmet close to her chest. She follows me to park the bike at my usual spot behind. The evening breeze whistles through her hair, and she puts it in a knot. We retrace our steps to the entrance of the house, but none of us attempts to go in.

I sit down first. Olivia drops down on the curb and rests her head on my shoulder. Seconds roll by without a word from us. I watch the houses on the other side and try to picture the owners’ lives. Do they also have a weird family dynamic like Olivia’s and put on a smile for outsiders?

Olivia straightens up. “Have you figured out what college you will be attending?”

“Nope,” I reply. “You?”

“Still thinking about it.” A pause, and then she asks, “Why did you threaten her?”

My brows crease. “Threaten who? Oh, Mother Theresa? I didn’t threaten her. Why do you keep saying that?”

“Zoey said you did.”

I click my tongue at the mention of a member of her clique. “Well, I didn’t.”

Olivia pulls her legs over the curb and crosses them under her. “Why were you talking to her?”

That girl is infuriating. And she cried that day in class. The fuck? I didn’t mean to make her cry, but she took the money, and I had to ask Olivia. She cheated, *or* she mainly took advantage of my weakness. Either way, she sucks. She is a loser. Dumb too. Who wears a necklace to a fight?

“We have a few classes together,” I reply. “Liv, you are the one who’s mean to her.”

“I’m mean to everybody.”

“Except me.” I wink, and Olivia blushes.

“Are you defending her?” I throw my hands up in resignation. Olivia is the reason I was able to purchase the glasses for Asher after losing to that slime. I’ll always be on her side. “Don’t be fooled by her outward appearance, Ben. Tessa is not an angel. She took something from me.”

Same here. My foot taps a sharp tattoo onto the floor. I wait five seconds before I utter a reply. “What did she take?” I ask her, but she shrugs. I’m not one to gossip, but there is something she isn’t saying. To get her to talk, I whisper, “She also took something from me. It’s nothing important anyway.”

“What did she take?”

I shrug. Olivia rolls her eyes.

“You should get back at her,” she adds.

I have enough problems already, and I don’t intend to make Tessa one of them. “No need.”

“I’ll do it on your behalf then. I don’t like her.”

That piques my interest. I prop a foot on the curb and rest my jaw on my knee. Tessa is quiet with a predictable routine. So I thought until that match ended. I even followed her to her house and checked back on Sunday. She is the kind of student you brush past in the hallway without knowing because she mostly keeps to herself, except she has her loud, lying best friend with her.

Tessa seems okay, and I know Olivia to be a bit troublesome. “What exactly did she do?”

“I told you she took something from me,” Olivia snaps.

We glare at each other. I break eye contact first. “Don’t do anything stupid, Olivia.”

“Of course I won’t, Benjamin. Give me some credit.”

I rake a hand through my hair. If Tessa fights underground like me, I need not worry about her. The crybaby can handle herself. Besides, Olivia can’t fight beyond a few insults thrown around.

In the silence that follows Olivia’s snarky reply, tension thickens the air. I glance at her, and her scowl deepens. Guilt stabs me in different places. I brought her out here to make her forget the drama at home, not give her a reason to be unhappy. My foot slips off the curb, and I place both hands on my knees. This companionship shit can be so complicated sometimes. Do I apologize?

“I made pasta,” I whisper.

“Good for you.”

A smile splits my lips. “Asher loved his gift. Thanks for the money. I owe you one.”

“Please, don’t start that owing BS today,” she says. I laugh, and she pokes my side. “How’s Asher?”

Her feet drop to the floor. I stand and help her up.

“Cool. He’s inside.” We start for the front door. “Do you want anything? I think Asher has some leftover ice cream from yesterday.”

“Excuse me?” Olivia rears back like I hit her. I don’t understand how we have maintained our closeness for this long. “No, thanks, Benny boy. The queen doesn’t do leftovers or ice cream.”

“You are such a bitch.”

“Sometimes,” she replies in a singsong voice. I unlock the door without opening it. From here, we can hear the sounds

coming from the TV. “Do you think parts of our parents rub off on us?”

I’m not like any of them. “Na, we only share DNA with them. They can’t contaminate us.”

Olivia’s eyes crease at the corners, and I offer her a smile. “Good. I don’t want to be like him.” She slides her hand into mine and pushes the door open. “Thanks for coming to get me, Ben.”

Eleven



SOMETHING IS WRONG. I feel it as soon as I step into the hallway.

My hands tighten around the straps of my backpack. I've been extra cautious since the pranks began. It started with the itching powder sprinkled on my books. Goosebumps cover my skin at the memory. I don't want to remember that episode or the swelling it caused. Mom panicked. Dad made me stay at home for a day. Cheap pranks don't seem like Ben's thing, but I can't say.

The jam on my locker came next. It took Maria dipping a finger into the thick, red mixture to convince me it wasn't blood. The tampons glued to the locker door made it look natural, and I know a certain she-devil who might have had a hand in that. Maybe it's all in my head, but things changed after Ben dragged me into that class. Everyone is unleashing their reserved hate.

Students are everywhere as I meander to my locker. I cast backward glances at intervals, half-expecting someone to appear behind me. Someone named Maria. I am avoiding her and Daniel; they have made it their job to walk me to all my classes. I can't let them continue babysitting me. It won't stop the pranks. The loud conversation around me makes it easier to stay hidden. I arrive at my locker without any drama or outlandish stunts as the bell for fifth-period rings. Literature class is next. I need to get one of the two novels for the class, but I am afraid to open my locker.

What will be inside this time? I take a deep breath and yank the door open.

Nothing happens.

I sigh and reach for the novel, *The Old Man and The Sea*, inside my locker. That's when I feel something rough and sparkly on my hands. I retract my arm to stare at my glitter-covered palms, and a frown drops to my lips. How? I step back, but it's too late. The small-sized buckets of glitter held together by a string roll forward. In my hurry to escape, I slip and fall to the floor.

Glitter rains down on me, sneaking into my shirt, hair, and mouth. Someone screams my name from the end of the hallway. I jerk my head in their direction to see Maria mouthing words and pointing at something above me. My eyes snap to the bucket dangling from the top of my locker, shock glues my butt to the floor, and I shut my eyes as I'm bathed in glitter for the second time in less than ten minutes. Up on my feet, I toss the bucket hanging from my head like a helmet.

Olivia will pay for this. I'll gouge her eyes out and fill her eye sockets with glitters.

Giggles from behind have my head spinning. I storm toward the three girls in matching outfits crowded at a locker with their phones clutched in their hands as they record my embarrassment.

"What? You think it's funny?" I bark at the unfamiliar faces. People will never offer help when needed, but they will be the first to make a video of you. The girl with dimples visibly shrinks. Her phone slips to the floor, and her friends lower their hands with their phones. "Get out of here."

An arm snakes around my shoulder, and my scowl fades when I realize it's Maria. I relax slightly but stiffen almost immediately at the murmurs that float around us. I can't wait to be done with this place.

"Easy tigress. Smile," Maria says with a toothy grin. Right. As if she will remember to smile when someone empties

buckets of glitter on her. “You look like a unicorn threw up on you.”

“Unicorns don’t exist,” I reply with a frown.

Hiking my bag up my shoulder, I rummage through my locker for hidden buckets of glitter, anything shiny or sparkly I can use to slap some sense into Olivia’s thick skull, but my search comes up empty. Maria helps get some of it out of my hair, but when I look in the compact mirror she passes to me, I have to admit, I look like a sad rainbow. I kick the bucket out of my way and return her mirror.

“Where’s your prince charming?” I ask.

Her cheeks flush as she transfers her bag to the other hand. “Absent.” So, why is she happy? Her eyes light up, and she leans so closely that she gets glitters on her black tank top. “We have a date.”

A high-pitched scream follows from Maria. I slap a hand over her mouth to keep her shut, but she licks my palm. My best friend is a baby goat, and I love her with all my heart. Some of her excitement eventually transfers to me. I forget I’m covered in glitters for a moment and grab her arms. We jump, squeal, and perform a two-second happy dance that ends in boisterous laughter.

“When?” I ask.

“Friday night.”

Today is Wednesday.

“Maria has a date on Friday night,” I sing offkey, and she turns a deeper shade of red.

We have never had boyfriends. They are not worth it to me, but I’m happy for her. I fire rounds of questions at her, and she volunteers the answers without fuss. Last time I checked, Maria was crushing on Daniel from afar, and now there’s a date? While I was looking for the necklace that boy discarded, they were getting acquainted. What if this is a sign that my crush will also notice me and possibly ask me out? Oh, wait. He already noticed me, and I absolutely loathe his existence.

We head for our classes, enjoying the serenity of the quiet hallway as we giggle at intervals without fear of being recorded. Maria hugs me tight in front of my class, and I ruffle her blond hair.

She pulls back with a look of uncertainty. “Talk to Ben. He might be able to put an end to this.”

Yeah, right. The same Ben who is the cause of my misfortune. I would rather talk to a tree.

“Sure,” I reply. She pats my cheeks, and I grimace at the amount of glitter that covers her palm. I thought I wiped them all. I can deal with having them on my clothes but not my face. “Bye.”

I wave at her retreating figure until she disappears into her class. I’m late, but I’m in no hurry to go in. A round of chuckles greets me once I open the door. Heads turn in my direction. On cue, the entire class breaks out laughing. I don’t look that bad. I flash them my middle finger, but Ms. Eva, the literature teacher, calls me out. Some students say she is a miserable old hag with fifty cats. No one knows if she’s married. Her life’s purpose is to annoy students and take sides with the jocks and richest kids. I don’t hate her, but she is not the nicest teacher we have.

“They were laughing at me. They started it,” I say in my defense, but Ms. Eva wants to hear none of it. The class doesn’t bother to hide the fact they are laughing. She hits her table twice to signify silence at the increased laughter. When I am out of hearing shot, I whisper, “Bitch.”

I might be acting like a spoiled brat, but she’s evil. I feel a pair of eyes boring into me and turn to the source. Without a thought, I flip Ben off. He is the reason I am the laughing stock of the school.

A corner of Ben’s lips twitches. I hold his gaze for another second before looking away. Why are the bad guys always so good-looking? It would be easier to hate him if he was ugly with a pimple-infested face. I give myself a mental punch for checking him out. This guy is a prime dick.

Why must we share another class? I know everyone who should be here, and his name is not on that list. My gaze falls on his desk. He's the only one here with a photocopied copy of the novel.

Is he really part of this class, or he came to torment me?

"Find a seat, Sparkles," the hag says, eliciting another bout of laughter from the class.

See, not the nicest teacher. I remain standing in the middle aisle for a moment, confused as my eyes take in the new arrangement. Everyone is in pairs — everyone but Ben. He notices me staring at the seat closest to him and props one leg on it. I suppress the urge to walk over to him and slap the back of his head with my paperback. Who says I want to sit beside him? I'll rather sit on the floor. I occupy the lone seat by the wall covered with quotes from great philosophers and writers. Once I've settled down, I bring out my novel and flip through it to arrive at the page written on the whiteboard.

"Find a partner."

Without looking up, I know Ms. Eva is talking to me. My chair scrapes the floor, and the screeching sound draws everyone's attention to me. I offer the class a frigid smile that grows bigger at Ben's blatant irritation. Not so smug now, eh? I yank the other chair by his left, and his foot drops to the floor with a thud. Ben winces but covers it up with a glare when I notice. I sit without remorse and smile proudly when I catch him glowering at me. Two can play the bully.

Twelve



I LIED.

Two can't play the bully. I don't want to be another bully; I just want to be the ignored student.

There's no evidence of yesterday's mishap on the clean floors of Broadway Heights as I slow in front of the stairs. I use my hand to shield my eyes from the sunlight seeping in through the long window opposite the stairs. My mind is foggy with numerous thoughts, and I'm pretty exhausted.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I ignore it and push away from the window. I have graced the blog's front page long enough to know this is another useless notification from my class group chat. They can make as many memes of me as they want. I don't give two shits about them.

On second thoughts, I pull out the Samsung phone from my pocket and laugh at the text boldly written on my screen with multiple exclamation marks for dramatic effects. Maria is freaking out about what to wear for her date with Daniel. To be fair, she freaks out about everything possible.

Under her text is a short video clip. I hit the play button on my screen, but the video doesn't play. Using my shoulder to keep my locker open, I ransack my bag for my lunch ticket. I can't believe Maria is skipping classes for this date. The video starts. I giggle at the clothes that fill my screen. Her closet is messy, with shoes strewn across the room and only a few dresses left on the hangers.

Drama Queen: I HAVE NO CLOTHES FOR THE DATE. I'M RUINED!!!!!!!!!!!!

I laugh at the desperateness oozing from the text. Indeed, she is ruined by her numerous options.

Me: the date is tomorrow, keep calm. It's just Daniel

Maria replies with more crying emojis. I forget my meal ticket for a moment and type a fast but cool reply to calm her down. If a guy asks me out, he best believe I will show up in my signature skinny jeans and T-shirt or sweatshirt. I might wear pink sneakers instead of my usual white or black converse to add spice. A guy who likes me wouldn't care so much about my appearance.

Me: shouldn't you be in school? Studying like the rest of us single ladies??

Laughter bubbles up my throat. My phone rings and my best friend's picture appears on my screen. I let it ring, head bobbing in rhythm to the ringtone before ending the call. We both know her parents will be furious if they find out she skipped classes to prepare for a date that's hours away. For them, it's school before boys, and I wholly agree with them. Degrees before boys.

My phone resumes ringing almost immediately. Maria is at it again. I place the phone face down inside my locker and work on finding my ticket. I'm sure I left it here. Or did I forget it at home? My stomach knots tightly in hunger, and one hand slips under my shirt to massage my belly.

The only thing I ate for breakfast was an apple. We always have a big bowl of them on our dining table because Dad believes it keeps the doctor away. If everyone takes their health as seriously as Dad thinks they should, all doctors will be out of jobs, including him. But I am glad I have an excuse to eat as many apples as I want without my mom giving me the stink eyes.

I take a step back to assess my blue locker. My hands lower to my waist, and I drum my foot on the floor. It should be here. It is always here. I empty my bag inside the locker,

shake my books, and flip through the pages, yet I find nothing. Another sigh escapes me when I realize my wallet is also missing. I bury my face in my palms and let out a silent scream.

Can today get any worse?

Hunger pangs claw the insides of my belly violently. I take a deep breath to ease the pain. My eyes flicker to the next locker, and a switch flips in my head. I grab my phone. I remember Maria's locker combination, but I need to be sure her ticket is inside. I wait for her to respond. My eyes scan the empty hallway as my fingers rap impatiently against the door. I have less than ten minutes until lunch break is over. I am famished. There is no way I will attend the next class without eating.

The longer she takes to respond, the deeper my teeth sink into my lip. I shut my eyes and breathe through my mouth. This is not the time for my best friend to take revenge. Fine, I was ignoring her, but this is urgent.

Something crawls up my arm. My eyes flutter open, and everything slows at the sight of the tiny-legged creature on my hand. How? A scream tears out from my lips. I clench my eyes shut, willing the giant spider to disappear. My legs tremble so badly I have to lean on the locker for support.

Someone, please get this monster off me.

I hate spiders and all crawling insects.

Maria knows that.

So does Olivia.

I remain frozen until the spider crawls away. There is no way this is a coincidence. I sanitize my hands but still feel dirty. My fist pounds the locker, and I wince. With a determined scowl, I snatch the forgotten tube out of my locker and slam the door, storming off in the direction of the witch.

This ends today.

The cafeteria quietens once I step in. Avoiding eye contact with everyone, I shove people out of my way. I keep my gaze

on Olivia, her minions, and the soccer team at their table in the center.

Attention whores.

Anger spurs me on. I push forward and slap the tube of glitter from their last prank on their table. I found it in my textbook. They must have forgotten to move it. Who else is dumb enough to leave the evidence at the crime scene except for Olivia? Recognition flashes briefly in Olivia's eyes. She twirls a strand of her blond hair and smiles at me, batting her fake eyelashes like she's about to have a seizure.

Ben is unfazed by my presence. I still have a score to pick with the handsome jerk. I haven't found the necklace. Noah digs into his burger without another glance my way. Olivia's girls flank her on each side of the bench like they are protecting their queen. My blood boils as they pick at their salad and mumble among themselves like I am invisible. No worries, I can fix that.

"Someone thought putting a spider in my locker would be funny," I say. Olivia shares a look with her crew, and they double over with laughter. Still seething, my hand works faster than my brain. I retrieve the tube from the table and unscrew the cap. "I also found this in my locker yesterday."

They erupt in full-blown laughter. Without a thought, I empty the content of the tube on Olivia's head. Her laughter dies down, and my lips quirk. I eye the colorful mess before me, the salad tray with too much glitter. I don't need to turn to know the entire school population is gaping at me.

Olivia's shock lasts a while longer than I expect. Her mouth opens and closes. Her bewildered gaze alternates between me and her crop top covered in glitter. She rises to her feet slowly and climbs on the table. Excitement flows through my veins. I take a step back to create space in the cafeteria so I can beat the shit out of her. Ben throws me a warning glare, but I ignore it. The scumbag should be more concerned about his cheating girlfriend because I am about to beat her to a pulp.

"You," Olivia screams and charges at me.

We roll on the floor, and she manages to get the upper hand. A cheer erupts. People surround us as we fight. Olivia claws at me, her acrylic nails out to tear the skin off my face. I spend the next minute avoiding her hands. The first chance I get, I switch our positions and straddle her. I flash her a smile before I land the first hit—a hot slap to her cheek, which instantly burns red. My palm connects to her cheek again. I'm about to slap her for the third time when I'm pulled away.

“Let go of me,” I yell at no one in particular while kicking the air. I'm not done with her. The familiar scent of the person tickles my nose. I don't have time to identify the owner because Olivia gets up and spits blood. I ram my elbows into the sides of my captor, but he doesn't release me. “Let me go.”

“You bitch!” Olivia charges at me for the second time today, but I cannot defend myself.

A stinging slap on my cheek shuts me up completely. My head snaps to the side, and my hair curtains my face. Olivia slaps me again, my ears ring, and my vision becomes blurry. The crowd cheers her on, the grip on my waist slacks, and I slide to the ground. I whimper as a figure comes into view. Ben. He let his girlfriend hit me. I blink once, twice, and finally, give into the darkness.

Thirteen



I AM WEARING makeup today because the witch scratched my cheeks. First, her boyfriend bruised my face, and his girlfriend did the same almost three weeks later. They make an incredible duo.

I can't forgive Ben. I will never forgive him, even if he was the one who carried me to the nurse after I blacked out. He should never have interfered. It was a fair fight between a fellow girl and me. I pound my fists against my thighs, determined to ignore the boy in my peripheral view.

Mr. Sam scribbles some Calculus jargon on the board and follows it up with a short explanation. They say you understand the lyrics of a song when you are sad, but in truth, you only appreciate Calculus better when you are unhappy. I am saddened that I have to sit through this class with Ben and partner with him in Ms. Eva's literature class. Mr. Sam throws a question to the class.

I surprise myself by raising my hand. His hesitation to call on me stings a little. Abigail snickers as I head to the front of the class. She twirls her hair around her pencil and offers me a fake smile. If she wasn't such a bitch, I would have swapped seats with her so she could get a chance with her boy crush. I don't enjoy sitting beside Ben, but he won't sit elsewhere just to spite me.

We are officially enemies.

"Yes, Theresa. What's the answer?" Mr. Sam asks when I'm beside him.

I force my eyes away from the asshole and the girl crushing on him. I am the type of student who barely speaks in class, so I start solving the equation on the board without a word. I don't know how much time passes, but the place is quiet when I finish. Mr. Sam collects the piece of chalk with a hint of a smile. His eyes sweep over the board, he nods knowingly, and my chest puffs with pride.

"That's correct. Very correct, Miss Mower," he says.

Crossing one arm on his chest, he tucks the hand holding the chalk under his jaw, eyes still glued to the board. He circles the final answer and wipes the subtraction sign to replace it with an addition sign. My cheeks flush. I don't let it dampen my mood. It didn't affect my final answer because a zero followed the sign. I tilt my head and catch a smile on Abigail's face and a scowl on Ben's.

"Care to explain how you arrived at your answer?" Mr. Sam asks.

My explanation lasts another five minutes. He nods so much in approval that I fear his head will fall off. Shoving his hand into the pocket of his black pants, he nods one last time when I finish.

"Thank you, Theresa," he finally says. I wince at the mention of my name. Mr. Sam and other teachers insist on calling me by my full name. I am not okay with it but coming from them, it never sounds like an insult. My head dips a little. He motions to the row with my desk and Ben's. "Have your seat."

The short journey to my seat is interrupted when someone says, "Sir, I don't understand."

Our heads snap to the source of the voice. Ben flips his messy hair and places the pencil I am confident he was doodling with between his book. I avoid his gaze like I've been doing since he walked into the class. How will he understand when he spends more time drawing than listening?

"What part do you not understand?" Mr. Sam asks. I ball my hands into fists, and my nails dig into my palms. I choose

to focus on the pain instead of the blue-eyed demon bent on making my last year of school miserable. Mr. Sam taps me with a pen. “Theresa? Tell her. She will explain.”

“Everything,” the demon says with a staid expression. “I don’t understand everything she said.”

Pride gleams in his eyes when my lips twitch. If it was up to me, I would have choked him with his shirt for lying. Ben is too brilliant to have missed my explanation. He is fucking with me. Mr. Sam hands me a piece of chalk. I section the board into two, slowly rewriting and explaining what I have on the other side. The class is eerily still when I finish. A few take down notes while the rest stare at my fancy handwriting. My eyes locate Ben, and he scoffs when I drop the chalk.

Slouched in his chair, he picks up his pencil and rolls it between his fingers. “I still don’t get it.”

Someone, please slap this boy on my behalf. A kid would understand what I wrote. It’s simple as reciting the ABC, but this dumb, frustrating human is out to get me. My eyes narrow at the idiot, and my arms tremble slightly in anger when Mr. Sam looks to me for another explanation.

Come on!

I stretch my arms to cover the entire expanse of the board. The letters and figures have all been arranged to make complete sense to a toddler. “You don’t understand any of these?” The smile returns to his lips, and he nods. I scoff. “Maybe you should ask Olivia for an explanation then.”

Someone gasps. I don’t care to find out who it is because my attention is one hundred percent on Ben. I am tired of this guy being a deliberate asshole to me. He clenches his jaw. I almost smirk.

“I don’t want an explanation from Olivia,” he replies through gritted teeth.

Good. We are getting somewhere. Now, we are both pissed. “Too bad for you, Benjamin Carter, because she is the only one who might succeed in getting this into your thick skull,” I fire back.

Pent-up anger from weeks of tolerating him and his girlfriend shatters over me. I don't want to stop talking until I get every damn thing off my chest. Ben's mouth parts open in the most silent gasp of shock. Yes, this is what happens when you push an introvert past their breaking point.

I tap a finger to my lips and click my tongue. "Oh, I get it now. You don't want an explanation from the bitch because Olivia is dumb too. What's so hard to understand? X plus y equals z—"

"Theresa."

"What?" I snap. The anger flows out of my body when I realize I talked back at my teacher. I offer him my best smile. "Mr. Sam, I'm sorry. I really am, but this guy is frustrating me. Jesus!"

Mr. Sam levels me with a frown. "Do you need to go to the principal's office? To cool off?"

"What? No, sir."

Another person snickers. Evil bunch. I notice Abigail capturing this moment. I storm off to her, snatch the phone, and delete the video. Why do I have to be in the same class as these devils?

The adrenaline wears off. I drop her phone on her desk while she gawks at me in disbelief. Mr. Sam is stunned by my outburst. I am too. I point to the back row. "I'll just return to my seat, sir."

At least I have one more thing to add to the ever-growing list of reasons I should never speak in class.

"No." Mr. Sam shakes his head. "Not yet, Theresa."

I guess this is it. He will send me to detention. I've never been in detention.

"Sir, I'm sorry."

"Not good enough, Theresa. I'm quite disappointed in you." *Good work, sir. Reprimand me in front of the whole class and give Ben a bigger reason to laugh at me because*

that's how I'll know not to repeat this. “If you have issues with Mr. Carter, keep it out of my class. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir. Crystal.”

“Mr. Carter, on your feet,” my teacher says. Ben scowls at me. Fuck him too. “Miss Mower, apologize to him.”

A low whistle leaves someone's lip. Mr. Sam turns to the skinny guy with an afro sitting in the front row. “Another of that from you, Tyler, and you will be sitting nicely in the principal's office.”

Most of the class laughs, but their laughter dies down at the glare Mr. Sam fixes them. A smile appears on Ben's lips. He angles his head and lifts his brow when my mouth opens and closes without a word to him. I don't want to apologize to him or anyone else in this class. They owe me an apology, starting with him. Abigail sneers at me. I will die if I have to apologize to her.

“Theresa Mower.” At the sound of Mr. Sam's voice, my body turns in his direction. Ben folds his arms on his chest, and I want nothing more than to strangle him with his own hands. “Apologize to him right now, or you will have to explain to the principal why you think it okay to use words like dumb and bitch on your fellow student because he asked for an explanation. Unbelievable from you, Miss Mower.”

Mr. Sam bursts into a rant about how he never talks down on students, no matter how many times we fail to understand his lecture. He won't take that from us, including this young lady, AKA me.

Excuse me, sir. It is your job to explain to us, not mine. I am a student, and he is an ass. Ben isn't the innocent guy Mr. Sam or the clueless lot in this class think he is. His middle name is Trouble.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

Ben curves a hand around his ear. “I didn't get that,” he says.

My pendant peeks from his shirt sleeve, and a blinding wave of anger threatens to drown me. I swallow my apology.

He's using my necklace as a bracelet. My brother gifted that to me. God. This is the idiot who deserves an apology. He notices me staring at his hand, his eyes fleet to the pendant, and he smirks.

“What did you say to me, Miss Mower?” Ben says.

Mr. Sam clears his throat, and I say, “Sorry, Mr. Carter. I will never use such words with you.”

I rush to my seat before Mr. Sam permits me and bury my face in my textbook. I don't care anymore. He can send me to the principal's office, and I will gladly go there. Maybe not. I hate the principal. Everyone does. He and Ms. Eva will make a great couple since they are both bitter and unmarried. I wait for Mr. Sam to call me out. He doesn't, and I release an audible sigh of relief.

The class resumes. Ben looks me over a few times, and I glare daggers at him. He is so stupid.

“Benjamin, what was your confusion?”

I take deep, measured breaths like Coach would have instructed to keep the tears trying to escape at bay. Sadly, I am a part of the small population who sometimes tear up in anger.

Why can't I punch things and people instead?

The sound beside me pulls me back to my sad reality. I shut my textbook. I have had enough Calculus for today. In fact, I have had enough Broadway Heights for today.

“Benjamin?” Mr. Sam calls.

I feel his eyes on me, but I don't look up. “It's fine,” he replies. “I get it now, sir.”

Of course, he does. I shove my textbook into my bag. Once the bell rings, I am the first to leave.

Fourteen



“YOU SHOULD HAVE CALLED ME,”

Maria says for the fifth or one-hundredth time. I stopped counting the second time she said that. She rubs her hands together, angry eyes boring into my forehead.

“What would you have done?” I ask.

Whenever Olivia is involved, I try to handle it on my own. Maria is my best friend. She always has my back, but I want her to remain on the cheerleading team. I drag my sleeve over my knuckles, shivering slightly in response to the gust of cold air that sweeps into the field. Most of the chairs are still wet from yesterday’s rain, but the atmosphere is cooler than it will be in the cafeteria.

I am never going in there again.

“I don’t know,” Maria replies with a shrug, and her top rides up to reveal her pierced belly button. “Just call me the next time you are in trouble. Olivia needs to have a taste of her own medicine. It’s long overdue.”

True. But as long as she has Ben and the other jocks on her side, no one can harm her.

Maria stops at the top stairs and dumps her bag on the bleachers. We are having an outdoor lunch on the field today because I don’t want to see Ben or Olivia. I grab the sandwich my best friend offers me and cross my legs at the ankles. She ransacks her bag for a small carton of juice. I take a bite of the sandwich, and my eyes close as my teeth sink into the toast to

savor the delicious mix of all the simple ingredients. Only Maria's mom can make a sandwich taste this good. I love it.

"Tessa," she whines. "Come on. I need details. I came out all the way here for you."

"Oh, please." I scoot away from Maria before she can poke me. But the beautiful troublemaker closes the gap and loops her arm through my elbow. "Can I at least eat my lunch? One minute?"

Impatience rolls off her in waves, but I take my sweet time to finish my snack. Maria wants to know how Ben got involved in the fight between Olivia and me, and I don't want to talk about it.

A beep breaks through the quiet. Maria picks up her phone and grins at the screen. "Time up, Tessa." Did she set an alarm? I didn't mean that literally. "How do you know he took you to the clinic?"

"Because the nurse told me about a Mr. Carter," I answer and pray that this is the last of it. My eyes zoom in on the field. I imagine the jocks kicking the ball and making a dash for the goalpost. Ben was good at this, a top goal scorer for a long time. Images from that time replay in my head like a series on fast forward. I picture Ben in his number 17 jersey, running with the ball. The last match he played got us to the state finals. "It's not a big deal. He probably felt bad."

Ben doesn't play anymore. Does he miss it? I know I would. I will miss fighting for Coach.

Is that why he picked underground fighting? For the adrenaline rush?

"Maybe." Maria kicks the brown paper bag at her feet and downs the rest of my juice. My jaw drops. This girl said she wasn't hungry. "Something is up with that boy. I saw him smoking."

Good for him and his lungs. I don't give a hoot. He's Olivia's problem.

"Are you cheering today?" I ask to steer the conversation from the weird blue-eyed boy. Her date is tonight, the same as

today's game. It tends to run late sometimes. If our school wins, the guys will find a bar to celebrate or throw a party at the house of one of the super-rich jocks. Maria nods. I tense at her strained smile. I don't want to be the third wheel when she gets together with Daniel, but she's not excited about the date. I dump my trash in the bag. "What about your date?"

Her fingers run through her thick mass of curls hanging over one shoulder in a slow motion that irritates me. I snatch her hand to place it on my legs. "He canceled." Her voice cracks on the last word. She retracts her hand to put her hair in a messy bun, but I know she's stalling. "But, I get to cheer fine boys at the game," she adds, and I cringe at the fake cheeriness that laces her words.

We sit in silence for another moment, and my gaze travels the length of the field. By night, this place will be filled to the brim with the lights lining the poles at the corners shining bright enough to blind anyone dumb enough to stare into them. A glance in the direction of the cafeteria sends shivers down my spine. I rub my cheek with a soft sigh. It dawns on me now—the reason Maria was willing to eat out here. Daniel is in the cafeteria. We are both avoiding our demons.

Leaning forward to prop my elbows on the bench, I make funny faces until she giggles. The lines on her forehead even out, Maria mimics my position, and a small smile finds its way to my lips.

"We don't need boys when we have each other," I whisper. Her head jerks in agreement, and her eyes light up. "Who needs a Daniel Holt from Broadway Heights when Zac Efron is way hotter."

She fans herself with one hand, and I whistle like the thought of that man drives me as crazy as it does her. Zac is a fair actor, nothing special, but she adores him.

"Hot, single, and richer, Maria," I add.

"Fuck Daniel!" she screams. I cheer her on and punch the air. Fuck Daniel Holt. Fuck the boys of Broadway Heights. Maria bends to retrieve her phone from her school bag, and I

hide the smile trying to make an appearance. “Did you see the last video he posted on the gram? The pictures?”

Nope. I have only twelve followers, two of which are Maria’s personal and singing accounts. Social media is not so much of my business. My best friend stares into space and sighs dreamily while palming her face like a hopeless Disney princess forgotten by her ugly prince charming.

“Man’s so hot it should be a sin,” she says. On a scale of one to ten, I will rate him a seven. If he does away with the fake tan and British accent, I might make it a nine. “I can’t wait to be legal.”

I double over with laughter. “Then what, Miss Vega? You have never even kissed a guy.”

“Shut up, Killjoy.” In a way, the bucket list is also for her. But unlike me, she has already started on her goals. Her finger alternates between the two of us. “*We*,” she says with emphasis on the word, “have not kissed a boy. But at least you got a boy to touch you. He even carried you, Tessa.”

Because it was partly his fault that I fainted! Why does she think I liked him touching my cheek or carrying me? Right. She knows about my former tiny-weeny crush on the asshole. That aside, I believe she will get her first kiss before me. It might have happened today if Daniel wasn’t an ass. I need to talk to him. I can’t think of anyone wanting to date me, so I will probably never get a real kiss. Maybe college will be different. And if I’m lucky, I might get a kiss during filming.

Maria’s scream jolts me out of my reverie. I plug my fingers into my ears before she damages my eardrums. I glare at her while considering my next move. To smack her into silence or wait for her excitement to wane. She makes that decision for me by grabbing my hand to squeeze the life out of me. I am surprised I don’t pass out. Pushing me back to the bench, she bursts into fluent Spanish. I know a few things from language class, but I do not understand a word she says.

When the drama queen is done being dramatic, she frowns at me. “Why are you not happy for me?” she asks in a thick voice that reveals her Spanish roots. Without waiting for my

reply, she slaps the back of my head. “Bad Tessa. Bad friend. Why aren’t you happy for your best friend?”

I roll my shoulders carelessly. “First of all, I didn’t understand one word you said. Care to repeat that?” She scowls. Her grip tightens on her phone, and I pinch her rosy cheeks. “In English this time. Please.”

After a deep breath, she says, “Okay, horrible friend.” That’s all I get before her phone drops to my lap. I shriek when I see the numbers below the video. My hands curve around my mouth, and I let out another scream as she performs a graceful double flip. Maria takes a bow and waves at our invisible audience. “Thank you, thank you all. This accomplishment wouldn’t have been possible without my best friend here.”

The video is from that night Olivia emptied a drink on my head. Watching the video makes my heart swell with pride. It’s short, lasting only two minutes, but my best friend made the most of it.

Our eyes meet, and my cheeks hurt so much from smiling at my soon-to-be world-known star. One hundred thousand views, a thousand more subscribers, and loads of comments on her page begging for new videos with suggestions on her next song. She squeals and hugs me for the last time. This might not be much of a big deal to another YouTuber, but this is a huge win for her. Before now, her highest view was ten thousand, and the comments never reached one hundred.

We get up simultaneously. I return Maria’s phone. I’m glad to be the one who captured her most defining moment. This could be her big break. Her arm hangs lazily on my shoulder as we start for the school building. My heart fills with so much joy that the thought of running into Ben and Olivia doesn’t faze me. Moving forward, I will ignore them completely.

“Has your mom seen it?” Her smile dims. I tickle her, and she brightens a bit. “Well?”

“Well, yes, she has.” We stop at my locker for me to get my things. “And she was delighted.”

“But?” I add, waiting for the bad news to follow.

Her mom is not one to be messed with. The comments on the video asking to confirm the pub’s name will put her in trouble if they haven’t already. “But I am grounded for life. *Eso es todo.*”

Grounded for life means she will have to be more careful when sneaking out because she can’t stay away. I cackle like an old witch, and it earns me a few looks from the passing students.

“But it was worth it,” I say to cheer her up.

“Definitely.” We don’t stop walking, but our steps slow as we near her class. A smile replaces her frown. “I almost forgot. You have drama practice after school. Good luck with number one.”

“What?” I whisper.

My cowardly best friend escapes to her class. Before the door closes, I flip her the middle finger.

I will kill her.

Fifteen



NUMBER ONE IS the first item on my bucket list. The bucket list is a stupid list of things we want to do before finishing high school. I have something as silly as going on a date, while she has something as big as sending her singing clip to America's Got Talent. The bucket list says I have to try out for drama club this session, something I always put off because Olivia and her minions have been the reigning drama queens, but that sneaky best friend of mine snuck it into the list. I get enough acting experience from being in the church's plays, but that doesn't count for Maria.

I slip into Ms. Eva's class as quietly as I can. It's not supposed to hold today, but she's trying to make up for next week when she will be unavailable. I don't know why the teacher agreed to it.

My partner is already seated. I ignore him. I ignore everyone except Vance reading in front of the class. A familiar figure from outside the class waves at me. Daniel Holt? What the hell does he want? Maria is mad at him, and by virtue of our friendship, I'm as angry at the boy.

Daniel motions for me to step out. I steal a glance at Ms. Eva, whose head is bent over her novel. She nods along to what Vance reads, oblivious to the boy trying to steal her student. Daniel puts his hand together in a plea, but I shake my head. He must think I'm like him, skipping classes and all that. I raise my book to my eye level, a sign for him to get out of here. I'm not joining him.

“You should stop ogling him,” my partner murmurs.

My head snaps to him. “Jealous much? Does it bother you?”

Ben laughs. He leans close enough to whisper, “Some girl had her mouth all over his dick at Vance’s party.” My book drops to my desk. I clap a hand over my mouth. He is lying. Did Vance have a party? I turn to the door. Daniel is gone. “I’m not jealous or bothered, but you should be.”

No way. Daniel likes Maria as much as she likes him. Ben doesn’t look my way for the rest of the class, and I choose to believe he made that up to spite me. He’s jealous, disturbed that I am not worshipping him like Olivia and the other girls do. I spend the remaining minutes thinking up lies to escape this little problem Maria created for me. What if I pretend to be sick? Or faint?

After my last class for the day, I find myself en route to the drama hall. I’ll check it out today and move on with my life. A peek through the small rectangular window on the door reveals an empty room. I frown at the words written boldly on the paper glued to the door. It’s an announcement.

PRACTICE STARTS AT FIVE. AUDITIONS FOLLOW IMMEDIATELY.

What am I auditioning for? Do I want to do this? I can give a show in the ring because I have a mask on, but we are in school. And everyone is getting ready to go support the boys playing today. No one will be here to witness my embarrassment. With that in mind, I push the door open.

There’s a lady at the desk on the podium writing notes. She looks up when I saunter in like the shy girl I am. “Hey,” she says, “are you here for practice? Today’s practice has been postponed.”

My hands become clammy. I wipe them on my pants, too relieved at the latest update. Without a word to her, I exit the hall with a spring in my step. Fuck Maria. I am a bit wary of the emptiness of the parking lot, and a few times, I look around to be sure I’m really alone. I can’t put anything past

Olivia and her foolish minions. My phone rings, and I pull it out to see the caller's identity.

A scowl takes over my lips. I enter my car and dump my bag in the backseat. Maria is the reason I am still in school while she goes off to do what she does best. Have fun and cheer pretty boys.

"Tessa," Maria says once the phone is connected to my ear. "I need your help."

My hand freezes on the steering wheel, and my back goes stiff. "What do you need?"

"Sharon is still in school. Dad was supposed to pick her up after practice, but he forgot, and Mom's busy. I'm busy." I hear the band playing in her background. The game must be starting soon, or they are warming up. She sighs again. "Can you help?"

Sharon is the baby of the house and a sweetheart who sings as well as Maria. Singing runs in their blood; they have actual talents in their family. I fasten my seatbelt and nod again. There's nothing for me to do at home except binge-watch movies I have already seen a million times.

"Sure," I murmur, already driving out of the school gate. "I'm on my way."

After a torrent of gratitude, the call ends. Minutes later, I'm at Sharon's school. I ring Maria to ask for her sister's location, and a groan slips out when she doesn't answer her phone. The locked doors have my hands digging into my hair in frustration. I circle the tall building, twisting knobs and knocking on iron doors. Her school looks nothing like ours except for a path that cuts into the field. I follow the trail, a big, proud smile brightening my face when I spot the lone figure sitting on the bleachers. It must be Sharon. The poor thing looks so alone and out of place.

I jog to catch up with her, only to be disappointed when I reach the bleachers. The blanket draped around the big, black bag seems to mock me. "Fuck you too," I tell it. Fuck whoever

thought it was okay to do that to a bag. I make my way down the stairs while redialing Maria. “Pick up.”

A short text pops up from Maria. An apology. Her mom managed to get someone to pick Sharon up. Great. I don’t bother with a reply. I drive out of the parking lot and slow down at the sight of the figure hunched on the curb by the second gate. This time, I am reluctant to leave the comfort of my car.

What if my eyes are deceiving me again, and it is another bag shaped like a human?

The uncertainty fades when the figure raises its head. I am met with blue eyes, the color of the sky. He flashes me a grin that reveals perfect dentition, swatting his bangs that continuously fall into his eyes.

“Hey,” I hear myself saying. He laughs. The time on the dashboard shows ten minutes past six. Elementary school closes earlier. The kid should be lounging at home. “When did you get here?”

“I was here when you drove in,” he replies.

Oh. That means he has been here for hours. Does he know Sharon? Are they friends? We stare at each other while I contemplate my next decision. I get out of the car. A smile curves my lips when he balls his tiny hands into fists. He shifts to the end of the curb to create a gap between us as I lower myself on the concrete surface. Little man is a fighter. Good thing I am on his side.

“Do you mind the company?” I ask. His eyes fleet to my car, a fancy black Honda CR-V that can fit a small family. He hides his fists between his legs. “I can leave if you don’t want me here.”

As someone who loves solitude, I understand if he wants to be left alone, but I don’t feel good about leaving a kid all by himself. I look at the fast-turning gray skies. I can’t leave him here.

“What say you, Mister...”

“Asher. My name is Asher.” His hands curl around the straps of the backpack hanging from his shoulders. I almost ask him to drop it on the curb to ease the weight on him, but I don’t. “It’s cool. You can stay.”

We fall into a comfortable silence. I leave Asher to bring a pack of homemade cookies from my bag in the car. The only problem is, I’m not sure how to offer it to him without coming off as a creepy stranger. His eyes linger on the chocolate cookies, but he dodges my gaze each time I look in his direction. Covering the little distance between us, I stretch the cookies to him.

“Want some?” I ask.

His eyes linger on the cookies, but he shakes his head. “Benny says not to collect stuff from strangers.”

Fair enough. I put the cookies out of sight, and more seconds of silence roll by. Asher yawns and stretches his arms. I don’t know if he’s hungry or tired or maybe both. I’m also tired. Familiar white patches peek out of his sleeves, and I swallow the urge to comment on them. My feet vibrate with impatience. We have been here at least five minutes, and no one has shown up to claim him.

“Who’s Benny?” I ask to break the silence. “I think you should drop your bag on the floor.”

Asher lowers the backpack between his legs and then rolls his shoulders. “That feels better. Benny is my big brother. I’m waiting for him.” Anger for the so-called brother grows inside me. Asher can’t be more than ten years old and is still in school. My gaze strays to his wrists. “It’s my superpower.”

Excited to show off this superpower, he rolls up his sleeve to reveal more of the white patches. He has vitiligo. If I had his confidence, I wouldn’t be stuck wearing only sweatshirts, T-shirts, and other conservative outfits to protect my stomach from the public. He pulls down his sleeve.

“Cool,” I whisper.

Asher’s stomach growls, and my insecurities take a backseat. I place the cookie in the small space between us and

hide a smile when he picks it up.

He takes the first bite and shows off his chocolate-stained teeth. “Don’t tell Benny.”

Making a criss-cross sign on my heart, I say, “I promise.” I jog to my car and return with a bottle of water I pass to him. It’s fifteen minutes to seven, and no sign of this Benny. I send Mom a text to know what we would be having for dinner. It’s the only way to tell if she is at home. Her work schedule is unpredictable, and homemade dinner means she will be home tonight. My phone pings with a reply from her to order takeout. Yay. I’ll be home alone again. “Is Benny always late?”

“Sometimes,” he says with a shrug like he is used to it. A strong urge to beat this irresponsible Benny takes over me. What about his parents? What kind of lousy duo are they? Asher finishes the last batch of his cookies, and I slide the empty wrap into my pocket. He points to his chubby cheeks to ascertain there is no evidence of his snacking. “How’s my face?”

“You’re clean.”

We laugh. “What’s your name? Sorry I didn’t ask earlier.”

“No biggie. My name is Tessa.”

His lips pucker in a cute frown. “Tessa, as in Theresa?” I nod. “Thanks for the cookies, Tessa.”

“You are welcome, Asher.”

He swipes the bangs off his forehead, but it only drops back into his eyes. I take out an old clip from my hair to keep his stubborn curls off his face. “Thank you. Do you have a big brother?”

Loneliness crashes over me, and I hug myself. I miss Hayden. Ben hasn’t returned the necklace. “Yes.” Asher notices the slight change in my mood. He pats my leg, and I smile at him. I would never leave him out this late if he was my kid brother. Benny deserves a beating. “He’s in college.”

“Do you do stuff together when he’s around?”

“Yes, plenty of stuff.” I want to mention our fights and how Hayden introduced me to Coach Greyson, but I don’t want to spook the poor kid. “We bake together. I baked the cookies you ate.”

“Wow.” A laugh tunnels out of my mouth at the pink spreading to his cheeks. His eyes are even more pretty when he is surprised. “Benny can’t bake, but we play video games together. He spoils me all the time.”

The Benny he is talking about sounds like someone else. Only an asshole leaves his brother in school this late without a backup plan. “Where might Benny be? And what about your parents?”

“Dad’s dead.” My chest tightens. We look up at the rumbling sky. “Benny is never this late.”

“Is there a way for us to contact him?” I ask.

“Benny would not be happy that I was talking to a stranger.” A yawn escapes him. His eyes droop, and I draw him close so he can rest his weight on me. “I liked the cookies. Very tasty.”

His compliment warms my heart. I squeeze his arm. “I can make you another batch.”

Baking was a bonding exercise with Hayden. I barely do it now because the kitchen feels empty without him complaining about the amount of sugar I sprinkle all over my donut. Mom can cook up a delicious storm, but she has no idea the first thing about baking. Dad is only good at tasting.

Asher sits up. His eyes pop wide open. “Really?” My head jerks in a nod. I am more than willing to please this kid. “I would love that. Um, can you make cake?” he asks after a minute of silence. “Benny’s birthday is next month. I don’t have enough money saved up to buy him a real cake.”

My mouth opens to ask about his mother and to deliver a lecture on why Benny doesn’t deserve a cake or anything nice, but his smile sucks the speech out of me. “Okay,” falls out of my lips.

“I will pay in installments if that’s okay.”

“You don’t have to pay,” I answer and squeeze his shoulders. “We are friends now. Friends help each other. You just have to tell me what you want on the cake, and it’s done.”

His smile shows I said the right thing. He takes out a note to write down the details for the cake.

“How old will Benny be?” I ask.

The sound of a revving motorbike cuts him off. Asher flings his note and rushes to hug the guy getting off the bike. My jaw almost hits the ground when the biker removes his helmet. This is just fantastic. I take a step out of sight, away from the nemesis who torments me in school. Ben.

Benjamin Carter is Benny.

Sixteen



“BENNY!” Asher screams and jumps on his big brother. Ben catches him mid-air like he weighs nothing.

Ben is a bigger asshole than I thought. The two are lost in their little world as I escape to my car. I insert the key into the ignition without starting the car. Ben slides his helmet onto Asher’s head and hooks the strap under his jaw. He pats the helmet twice with a grin, his eyes gleam, and the harsh lines around his lips soften. I’ve never seen him this relaxed or smile this way with Olivia.

They fist bump. I smile at how easy it is for them to get along. Ben climbs the bike, and Asher gets in behind him. I have never been on a motorbike. I’m not sure I want to be on one with Ben in control. If he is anything like the royal jackass I know him to be, he will throw me off his bike.

With his leg on the brake, he throws his brother a look over his shoulder. “Ready to go, Champ?”

“Yes.” Asher’s eyes flit to the curb. “Wait. My new friend.”

I slide down my seat, breath held in, and eyes closed. For once, I’m grateful for my weight because I fit in the tiny space. There is a brief moment of silence, and the engine dies off.

“I think she left.”

The disappointment in Asher’s voice is palpable. I almost give out my location, but the reminder of Ben’s presence shuts

me up. Someone needs to give him a talk for keeping his brother out this late, but it won't be me.

"Who?" Ben asks, a note of exasperation in his voice.

I place a hand over my mouth to stop myself from getting out of the car to yell at him. He has only been here a few minutes, and he's already annoyed. He kept his brother waiting for hours.

"Theresa. She was waiting with me." A long, painful minute passes, and swallowing becomes more challenging for me. I curl into myself when I don't hear the sound of his bike leaving. "Look, that's her car!"

Footsteps near my car, and a forehead presses to the window. The figure raises his hand to knock on the tinted glass, his breath fogging my window. My legs cramp from kneeling at an awkward angle for too long, but I don't move. I don't breathe until Ben inches away, and my chest sags in relief.

"There's no one in there, Champ," Ben says.

"Too bad. I wanted you to meet her." Thanks, but no thanks. Asher might be a sweetheart, but his brother is a walking demon. "She was really nice, Benny. And pretty too. Can we go now?"

The fading footsteps followed by the revving of the bike calm me. I don't sit up until I hear the sound of the engine across the street. A note on the curb calls my attention. I walk to it and grin.

It contains the message Asher wants on Benny's cake. I might switch Benny to Demon so it will read: Happy Birthday Demon. It is what he gets for being an asshole and a liar.

The bright lights attached to the school building guide me as I walk back to my car with my silhouette for company. I settle inside, glad for the respite against the evening cold as my fingers hit the heater. Sadness hangs over me like a cloud. I stare at the spot Ben stood. Emotions clog my chest, and I have to take a deep breath. It has to be because I saw them together. I never miss my brother this much.

Tears leak from the corners of my eyes as I approach our street. I park in front of our dark house. Yay. Another night without my parents. Out of the car, I sling my backpack over my shoulder. I should be more grateful. Their job is why I can drive a car like mine and live in a lovely house.

Once inside, I grab the first drink I touch from the fridge, order pizza, and rush to my room. My room is dark enough to pass for a cinema when the delivery guy arrives. Moments after he leaves, I snuggle under the comforter, my laptop propped on my legs, and a pizza box on the bed. I giggle as the credits roll in. I've seen this movie a thousand times, but the suspense remains the same as the first time. I happen to be in the group that would rather rewatch an old movie than start a new one.

A yawn leaves me. I close my eyes and jolt awake to the sound of my phone going off. I squint at the phone, my mind a bit hazy as I blindly reach for the switch. Light floods the room. I blink sleepily at my phone, unable to process the texts. A bottle crunches under my feet as I get out of bed. I toss it into the trashcan beside the door, groaning when my phone resumes vibrating.

Who calls someone this late at night? With a grunt, I answer without looking at the caller ID.

“We won, Tessa,” a shrill voice says from the other end. I retract the phone to glare at my screen, only to groan at the image of Maria smiling at me. Her voice drills through the fog in my brain. I stagger to the vanity and collapse on the chair. Of course, she is the one calling. “Are you there?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“We won.” I wipe the dried makeup off my face with the last of my face wipes. I couldn’t care less about the game if Maria wasn’t involved. She drones on and on about the after-party she missed because she is still grounded. I give the expected responses, humming and forcing out laughter to let her know I am listening. My eyes wander to the table clock, my brain freezes at the time, and I miss her last words. Shit. It’s Saturday already. “Theresa Mower, are you there?”

I place the call on speaker and pinch my pale cheeks to restore color to them. My smile falls a little when my eyes return to the clock. If no one woke me up last night, it means I am home alone on a Saturday. My lips turn down in a frown. Mom should be here. Maria's annoyed voice snaps me out of my misery, and I pout at the digits on my screen. She has been talking for five minutes.

Still sulking, I trace the shape of the wonder woman sticker glued to the mirror. "Yes? I'm here."

Her heavy sigh drifts into my room, and I manage a smile. "Are you coming to my house?"

"Why am I coming to your house?" I ask.

"Because I am still grounded," she replies in a *duh* tone. "And I'm bored out of my mind."

"You're always bored, Maria," I retort, but I am halfway to the bathroom. "I'm on my way."

I finish up in less than five minutes and rush down the stairs like I can't get out of this empty house any faster. I haven't checked the messages on my phone, but I bet they are from Mom to let me know she will be home later than usual. Being the owner of a fashion line, I would expect her to have enough free time as the boss, but it's never the case. On the bright side, she's better than Dad. I always see her every day. In the mornings like yesterday, and I'll see her tonight.

My car stops in front of Maria's house, a small white bungalow with pink flowers surrounding the porch. I ring the bell once, then twice. If her mother opens the door, I might get an earful for following Maria to a pub. I guess she's not mad at me since she didn't tell Mom, or maybe Maria is an excellent liar. She claims to have told her mother that a kind stranger captured the video.

After another minute without a response, I am poised to ring the bell a second time when the door opens to reveal Maria in a white, halter neck gown. She places one hand on her chest and sighs. My forever drama queen.

“At long last, the queen has arrived. All hail Queen Tessa, party pooper, and—” I push my way in as she rattles nonstop behind me. “What took you so long, Tessa? Did you come with anything?”

I have been to her house far more times than I can count, so I don’t need directions to her room. “Anything like what?”

“No idea,” she replies. “Just anything.”

Well, I didn’t come with anything because she didn’t inform me.

Maria’s room has more posters than mine. Posters of her favorite artist, Shakira, are plastered all over the walls of her room. In addition to the CDs, a closet full of gowns, crop tops—everything a teenage girl should have. Kicking my shoes off, I jump on her massive bed and catch the bag of chips she aims at my forehead. She joins me on the bed, sitting cross-legged in front of me like a disappointed grandma. I shove a handful of the chips into my mouth and make a funny face.

With my mouth full, it’s hard to form a coherent sentence, but I still murmur, “I love this. Too good.” Maria’s face scrunches tight in revulsion. I burst out laughing, and bits of chips fly out.

“That’s disgusting, Tessa.”

Not as disgusting as another girl having her mouth on Daniel’s dick. “Did Vance have a party?”

Maria fakes a gasp. All hail the drama queen. “Look who started reading the gossip,” she says.

“Um, yeah. I was bored. I just took a look.”

Laughing, she flops down on the bed and drags her phone from under the pillow. I point at the table with different nail polish, and she nods. I skitter to it and return with two colors. Purple and red. Red for me and purple for her. She stretches a hand to me, and I start applying the polish.

“Vance had a party last week or so. I don’t remember the date,” Maria continues from where we left off. “Daniel sent

some pictures before it started. Not many pictures after the party ended.”

Because he was with someone else. “Did he go alone?”

“Well...he didn’t go with me.” She wiggles her finely plucked eyebrows. “So yeah, he went alone.”

I almost laugh. She is not his girlfriend yet, so he can go to parties with other girls. But we won’t discuss that now because a relationship with them might never happen.

“How was the game?”

Maria shrugs. She offers me her right hand when I am done with the left. “Cool. He was at the game,” she whispers. This is not the same girl who called earlier. “Might be why he canceled.”

Our knees touch when she draws closer. I bite my lips and concentrate on doing a great job on her nails, but she clears her throat. I don’t want to talk about boys. I don’t want to think about them or a certain big brother by the name I shall not mention. He shouldn’t have told me about Vance’s party.

“Say something.”

“Something?” I tease. I feel her eyes on me before I look up. “You might be right.”

Maria curls and uncurls her hands. She would have run her fingers through her hair if her nails were dried. I set the nail polish aside and rotate my shoulders.

“But...” she whispers. She knows I have more to say, but I’m hesitant to do so.

I smooth the creases on my sweatpants and focus on the red nail polish. “I don’t think so, Maria. If he really cared, he would have asked you to go to the game with him.” She hums, and my eyes meet hers. “Everyone knows you’re a cheerleader. You would have definitely been at the game.”

Maria blinks, and the sad look is gone. “I guess so. I guess he doesn’t like me anymore because I was willing to miss it for my date.” I click my tongue like her mother would if she

found out Maria missed the game for a boy, and she hits me on my forehead. “You should have seen Ben.”

The image of him ruffling Asher’s hair flits through my mind, and my heart skips. He made his brother wait because of a game. Ass. Maybe I need a chill pill since Asher wasn’t mad at him.

“He was everywhere, motivating the boys. I don’t think we would have won without him.” Her flirty smile has my insides knotting. I don’t like this feeling. Maria falls back on the bed. I mimic her position, and we stare at the ceiling. “If he wasn’t dating that bitch, I would totally do him.”

Something strange claws at my heart, something that wasn’t present when Ben pecked Olivia. I shut my eyes so tight my face pulls into a grimace. I shouldn’t feel this way. I hate that boy.

“No, you won’t. You like Daniel.”

Seventeen



BROADWAY HEIGHTS IS BACK to normalcy by Monday morning. The hallway is crowded with various groups chatting and laughing. I laugh at something Maria says, and she gives me a look.

“What? It’s true,” she says.

“It’s not,” I reply, trying to keep the flatness out of my voice. My best friend is a clown. She watched a ‘fire’ show and convinced herself it was real. Her dramatic gasp amuses me. She grips my shoulders, but I don’t allow her intense look to keep me from saying, “You cannot walk on fire without getting burned.”

“You know nothing, my dear,” she retorts.

Maria scurries ahead of me with a wicked laugh and stops in front of her locker. I join her. She hums to herself while taking out her books for the first period. I mimic her movements, stuffing my bag with more notes than required. I snicker when the weight of her books drags her arm down. Her textbook drops to the floor, and my eyes fall to the purse strapped around her waist.

Already sensing my snarky remark, she squats to pick up the textbook. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Fashion before comfort, huh?” I tease. I don’t know who gave her the idea that the tiny excuse of a bag that fits only a phone and a few pencils is ideal for school. It can’t even fit two phones. But yeah, it’s the best choice for her outfit because a backpack will ruin its beauty. “Smartass.”

Maria's mouth opens to fire a snide reply I am sure will annoy me. "You..." she trails off. Her eyes dart behind me, and she scowls. I follow her gaze to Daniel walking up to us with worried green eyes. She pulls me in for a quick hug and places a sloppy kiss on my cheek. "See you later."

With that, she races to her class in her stilettos like they are flat boots. Daniel halts beside me. I shake my head and slam the door shut after taking out my bag. Do I tell Maria what Ben told me? No. Not yet. Ben has no evidence to back it up, and he might be lying. Daniel wouldn't let such happen. Right? Too bad I can't confidently answer that.

"Nope," I say without looking up at Daniel. I am tall, but the giant is taller. "If she's not talking to you, I'm not talking to you. It's what the rulebook says. Sorry."

I try to get past Daniel, but he cages me between him and the door. Unlike when Ben did this, I feel nothing but a slight annoyance toward him. He cheated on her. Not exactly, but it's unfair. The coldness of the metal seeps into my skin, but I don't give Daniel the satisfaction of meeting his gaze. He can handle a little silent treatment from his only female friends in the entire school.

"At least hear me out," he whines.

"Nope."

He groans. I raise my eyes to his and frown at his pouty lips and sorry attempt at puppy dog eyes. *Nope, it's not working on me.* "If Maria won't talk to me, you should at least hear me out. Tessa!"

"Daniel!" He grabs my shoulders, and his fingers dig into my skin hard enough to stop me from escaping but not so hard it will leave a bruise. His eyes narrow for a second, and he bats those unnecessarily long lashes. I imagine Maria drooling if he does this in her presence, and my lips almost curl in a smile. "Why did you do it? You did something stupid at that party, didn't you?"

He releases me to shove his hands into his pockets. I frown at his peculiar choice of outfit today. He is wearing the

school's team sweatshirt with the number 54 and their mantra written in front. Daniel doesn't play soccer. He doesn't get involved in school activities. I don't get him.

Some students walk past us, reminding me I need to be seated in class. No one gives our position a second glance. I push away from the locker and swat the stray hairs flying into my eyes behind my ear. I miss the clip I gave Asher. That clip might be old, but it always saves the day.

"Did you do something stupid at the party?" I ask the quiet giant in front of me.

Daniel sighs. This cannot be good. "Look. I'm going to go, okay?"

What is happening? I can't get a word past the lump growing in my throat. He needs to step up and confess whatever he did wrong to Maria. Fuck Ben, but I will not be put in that position.

"Yeah. See you at lunch?" I say. "Maria will be there."

Already walking in the direction Maria left, he nods. "Sure. Later."

I stare at his racing figure and shake my head. Maria will never date him if it turns out to be true. She will hate me if she finds out I knew. But who will tell her, Ben? He has no reason to spite her. A tap on my shoulder forces my head up. Speaking of the devil, Ben glares daggers at me, his brows drawn so tight over blue eyes boring into me. I can't help thinking he knows I was the Tessa Asher referred to. I force a tiny fake smile to my lips, but it ends up as a grimace.

"Hi," I mutter. My voice comes out shaky, and I clear my throat. I wave a hand in his face. "Hi. Ever heard of personal space?"

His warm breath on my face slightly disconcerts me. I poke his rigid shoulder. Ben doesn't move. Instead, he arches a bushy brow and slaps my finger off him.

"Don't."

I'm not sure what he means. He's the one in my way. "Sorry," I hear myself saying, proud my voice doesn't betray me. Pushing past him is futile. The boy is made of steel. From the corner of my eyes, I note the empty hallway, and that lends me courage to say, "Excuse me, I need to get to class."

"Right. Class." He takes a step back to retrieve a familiar object from his pocket. Goosebumps break out on my arms when he yanks my wrist to place my hair clip on my palm. My eyes fleet to his face, and his tongue runs over his naturally pink lip. "I believe this is yours, Miss Mower."

"Tessa." Closing my hand over the clip, I bite my lower lip. There is no use denying it. "Yes."

Ben's fist clenches at his side. "Stay away from my brother."

The contempt in his voice irritates and pokes me in all the wrong places. I square my shoulders. "Or what?" My only offense was keeping his brother company until his arrogant, irresponsible ass showed up. He should be thankful. I've done nothing to him, but all he does is terrorize me in and out of the classroom. The anger in his eyes fuels me to add, "What will you do if I don't?"

Time slows like I'm in the ring, ready to face a bigger opponent. I blink, and the next moment, I am slammed against the locker. Ben's fingers dig painfully into my cheeks. Blood roars in my ears, and my cheeks burn from the cruelty of his hands. I don't miss the callousness of his palms. My breath locks in my throat when his lips near my ear, and my eyes dart to the hallway for help.

It's fucking empty.

"Not so tough now without your mask, eh?" Malice dances in his eyes while mine burns with hot tears eager to escape. Maybe he's right. Maybe I am a weakling without the mask to give me strength. "Stay away from my brother. Play with your age grade, or I will make your life hell."

Seconds pass, and his fingers press harder into my skin. I am sure there's blood because that spot stings. Ben's dark gaze

sweeps over me before resting on my face as if asking if his instruction is clear. I nod. He lets go, and I suck in a sharp breath to ease the burning in my lungs. My eyes sting from holding back my tears. I whimper and sidestep him to escape his evil reach.

Ben chuckles—a sinister sound that taunts me as I wipe the caked blood on my cheek. He will be the reason I start using makeup before I graduate high school. The inside of my cheeks hurts like somebody stabbed me there with needles. I straighten up and ball my hands into fists.

I beat him once; I can do it again. Ben notices my stance. He scoffs and eyes me from head to toe. “Instead of harassing girls, you should focus on being a more responsible big brother.”

An emotion crosses his face. In seconds, he bridges the gap between us. This time, he doesn’t touch me, but he’s close enough for me to notice the tiny scars and cuts littered below his brows. Has he been fighting? I never go to the ring except I have a match. I rehearse in Hayden’s room or mine.

“What did you say to me?” His voice thickens with an emotion that scares me. I lose my willingness to talk and resort to shaking my head. He grabs me by the collar, cutting off my air supply. “C’mon, Tee, repeat it.”

“I...I didn’t say anything,” I whisper, gaze fixated on the wall behind him. His grip on my collar slacks, and I squeeze my eyes shut when he clicks his tongue. I am not in the wrong. If anyone among us should be sorry, it’s him. But for today, I’ll have to let things slide. I’m not safe here with him. “My name is not Tee. My name is Tessa. Now, let me go.”

Ben steps back so I can pass. “Okay. Go.”

He’s fucking with me. He’s going to hit me from behind, isn’t he?

“You go first,” I whisper.

Hands up in the air, Ben heads in the same direction as my class. I can either follow behind him or do the safest thing by using the backdoors. I wait until he’s out of sight, then run out

of the building. I might end up late, but there will be no Ben to scare the shit out of me. I adjust the straps of my backpack and quicken my pace as I round the school building to use the other exit. Most students use the main entrance, but this is what being bullied by the bad boy has led me to.

A figure straightens up when I'm near the corner leading to the back entrance.

It's him.

Ben's sadistic smile is the last thing I see before stars dot my vision.

"Shit," he whispers.

Excruciating pain spreads through my stomach. Did he come out here to wait for me? I double over and collapse to the ground as his footsteps grow closer. I even hear Mom's voice from this morning screaming at me to eat breakfast before leaving the house. I should have listened to her.

Tears burn the back of my eyes, and my eyelids grow heavier. He hit me. Benjamin Carter hit me because I talked to his kid brother. I have trouble staying awake, so I give in to the darkness.

Eighteen



BEN

“IS SHE GOING TO BE OKAY?” I ask Nurse Mae.

She kicked me out of the room once Tessa was out of my arms. I sink my fingers into my hair while observing her face for any signs to determine the extent of the damage. Her scowl shows I'm unwelcomed here. The last time Tessa fought with Olivia, I was the one who brought her in. To this day, Olivia still gives me shit for that. Nurse Mae probably thinks I hurt Tessa. Well, I did. But it was an accident. I was waiting for that idiot to show up. For God's sake, I let her go.

Why did she follow me?

She doesn't ever listen. She is always running her mouth, showing up where she's not wanted.

The walls around us seem to close in on me. I flex and unflex the same hand I used to punch her. Fuck. “The sooner you get out of here, boy, the faster I can get to work on her. What happened?”

“She fell and fainted.” It's half the truth. Nurse Mae eyes me from top to bottom, and the disgust coating her eyes makes me cringe on the inside. I point behind me to the door. “I'll be outside.”

“Get to class,” she orders.

I'm out of there before she repeats it, not because I'm scared of her, but because I don't want to be there when Tessa wakes up. Noah is waiting for me outside. I step out, and the bastard laughs at my sulking face. The punch was aimed at him. He lost a bet to me, and now he won't pay up.

The punch was supposed to be an inspiration, a reminder to always keep his end of the bargain.

“My money,” I say, hand stretched out to him.

Noah slaps five ten-dollar bills on my palm, and I pocket them. Last Friday, we had another bet on what team would win. The idiot was confident we would lose because a teammate was injured. I couldn't say no to free money. If they won't let me work, I have to find a way around to make money. Fighting is cool, but the bruises are getting more noticeable. Asher might grow curious.

I pace the front of the clinic. I don't know why I'm here. No one saw me except Noah, who showed up later, and he won't tell a soul. I can get away with it, but my feet guide me to the principal's office. Josef will be pissed, which kind of encourages me to knock once and open the door.

The principal looks up when I open the door. Automatically, he frowns. He's on a phone call. He wedges the phone between his ear and shoulder and mouths the words, "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"Yes," I reply, and he waves me off.

I should tell him what I've done so I can be adequately punished because it's only fitting, but he returns to his phone call. My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and sneer at the caller.

Her.

She never takes the hint. I shove the phone into my back pocket and retrace my step to the clinic. Of course, I don't go in. I lean back on the wall, close my eyes and wait. The school counselor should be expecting me. We have one of those foolish sessions a few hours a week. I don't want to be in that drab office, listening to that woman drone on and on in her even more boring voice. But I have to do these fucking things to please them, or they will cancel the arrangement. Fuck them.

Minutes go by, and my fingers start to jerk. It's the guilt mixed with nervousness. I think I feel bad. I run my palms over my face and exhale slowly. No point staying here. I grab my backpack and head to the same place I punched her. Bile pushes to my throat, my forehead meets the wall, and I flatten my hands on the wall. What's the difference between her and

me? I punched someone who had no defense. A girl. My eyes smart with tears. I am absolutely like her, maybe worse.

I unzip my backpack and pull out the second phone. It has the account I sometimes use to check info on BGC. My palms are sweaty as I open the website and tap on *Message Us* at the bottom of my screen. Anyone can message them, but there are no guarantees your scoop will go live on their page. I have a feeling this will make it to the front page since it has to do with Theresa Mower.

Ben punched Tessa. She's in the clinic now.

They might take Asher from me if this gets to them, but I hit send on the text and wait for the worse to happen. The post shows up almost immediately with a meme of a girl in a hospital bed.

That was fast. The first comment appears. It's a hate comment saying Tessa totally deserves it. I bark out a short, fake laugh. They don't even know the true story. When did anyone ever care for the true story? We are all fakers. Another person reposts it, and I do the same. I need her best friend to see the post. When the post has about fifty likes, I shove the phone into my pocket and go in.

The bell goes off. Ms. Ola should be getting ready to leave for lunch, so I increase my steps. The sea of students in the hallway parts for me. From the distance, I spot Daniel and the best friend.

Guilt bubbles up to the surface. Maria's gaze collides with mine, and her scowl deepens. She saw the post. Good. Now, she can do the needful. Because I'm getting used to being an asshole, I slow down for them to catch up. Maria brushes into a string of words I don't understand. Everyone knows she is Spanish, and she is probably cussing me out. But I have to be the asshole, so I wink. Daniel is more aggressive. He slams his shoulder into mine, and they both walk away.

The few students gathered to watch the drama disperse as soon as my head raises. I cover the gap to Ms. Ola's office, but before I can knock, the door opens, and the hand with her purse drops.

“Mister Benjamin Carter.”

Ms. Ola is not pleased to see me. I’m about to ruin her lunch break the same way she will destroy the minutes we have been forced to spend together. I half-expect her to kick me out. For once, I need her to stop being a professional. I need her to flare up and yell at me so I can feel less horrible for giving her such a hard time.

But she steps back into the office. “Come in.”

I follow behind her. She shuts the door, and I slump into the single chair I always occupy since I was forced to do this crap. One semester of this bullshit was our agreement. They think they can fix me by dumping me here when the real issue hasn’t been addressed. Ms. Ola settles in the seat opposite me. There’s a table between us with an unsolved puzzle on it. It wasn’t there during our first session, but it showed up at the next meeting after I mentioned—in passing—that I loved puzzles. It’s one of the things Asher and I spend the week doing before he has to leave. That and gaming.

“There’s a rumor going around that you punched someone,” she starts. Today, she is not smiling at me, and the lines on her forehead wrinkle as she holds my gaze. “Is it true? Did you do it?”

One, I hate that her voice is soft and comforting. Two, why does she have to be so kind? She sure as hell knows it’s true, but rather than jump to a conclusion like everyone else, she gives me the benefit of a doubt. I count to seventeen under my breath, then count backward to one.

“Benjamin?”

I sit up straighter and lower my elbows to the armrests. “Yes.”

“How come?” I shrug. She drums the tip of her pen against the corner of her lips. Ms. Ola has long learned I won’t tell her shit, so there’s a small recorder on the coffee stool beside her couch with its red light blinking. “Do you know what this could do to you, Benjamin? The principal will have to suspend

you. It will be on your report and affect your chances of getting into college.”

“Like I care about that,” I say, teeth gritted.

“Well, you should start caring. It’s your last year of high school.”

Not once does she raise her voice. Mom would have had a fit already. We would be engaged in a screaming bout by now. Maybe that’s why I crack. “She touched him. My brother,” I whisper.

“Inappropriately?”

Red clouds my vision. I breathe in and out. I would have killed her if she did.

“No. She was just around him.”

Confusion settles over Ms. Ola’s face. She tips her head back like she wants to understand this student before her. She should quit trying. I don’t even understand myself. She shakes her head slowly. Is she disappointed in me? Maybe. Her hand runs through her cropped hair, and I follow the movement as the same hand grabs a pen to scribble on her note. I go stiff. She never writes when I’m here.

“What’s wrong with that?” she asks.

“You shouldn’t touch anyone without their permission,” I mumble. *Or give them cookies.*

Ms. Ola quirks a brow. “Did you have her permission to hit her? Because that involved touching.”

Oh. “I didn’t...” I stop myself. There is no good enough reply to her based on my argument. I slide down the chair like it can hide me. “It was an accident. She wasn’t supposed to be there.”

“Did you apologize to her?”

“She’s at the clinic,” I reply.

Guilt hits me from right, left, center, and everywhere. Though Tessa is so annoying, and Asher keeps saying nice stuff about her, I didn’t mean to hit her. I only used that exit to

ambush Noah, expecting the idiot to come out for a smoke. That's what the school's backdoors are for, to escape classes without any teacher noticing. Then she gave me those sad eyes like she believed I was an asshole, and it just... I blink, and those silly thoughts withdraw to the back of my mind. Ms. Ola is staring. With my shoulders drawn, I recline on my seat and try to flash a cocky smile.

“Will you apologize to her later?”

“No?” I clear my throat and give a more confident reply. “No, I won't.”

Her green eyes lock with my blues. She drops her notepad and pen, then crosses her legs at the ankles. “I do hope you reconsider.” I will not. I'll rather face the principal. She must have heard my thoughts because she lets out a soft sigh. “Have you been doing the exercises I gave you?”

“Nope,” I lie.

“What is going on, Ben?”

“Everything is fine, Ms. Ola.”

“Is it?” She cocks her head. There is a full minute of her inspecting my face. “What do you need?”

A hug? Someone to worry about me like her best friend does. Someone to listen.

I need to forget.

My back goes rigid, and my spine is as stiff as a pencil. “I need to get out of here.”

“Okay,” she answers. What? She chuckles at my obvious shock. “You can leave, Benjamin.”

Five seconds later, Ms. Ola still stares at me like she means it. Wait—she does mean it. I snatch my backpack at my feet and start for the door. She doesn't stop me. I walk out and slam the door shut.

Nineteen



MY EYES FLUTTER OPEN, and I squint at the bright lights pouring into my face. A sharp pain pierces my skull, and Maria's face hovers over mine. I hold my hands to my head and blink to clear the dots in my vision. The headache eventually subsides, and I send Maria a small smile to alleviate her worries. With her help, I sit up and scan the room. There are only two beds, and the other one is empty. Maria sits on a small bench beside my bed with my palm clutched protectively between hers.

Light filters in from the high windows, and I stare at the white walls until it clicks.

We are at the school clinic. I whimper when I try to sit up. My lower belly hurts like someone beat me badly in a fight. That's right; Ben punched me. That wicked asshole punched me in an unfair fight. I guess this is why Mom insisted I eat breakfast after skipping dinner last night.

Maria must have read my thoughts. She turns my face to one side while stroking my cheek, and I am reminded of Ben's fingers cutting into my soft skin. She passes me a hand mirror. I flinch at the visible fingerprints on my cheeks. The marks will fade, and makeup will hide the scratch, but it stings. He also left imprints on my neck when he almost strangled me. My throat closes up at the vivid memory. I cough, and she shoves a glass of water into my hand. I down it in one gulp.

The school's nurse, Mae, walks in with a notepad and a pen tucked behind her ear. Her brown skin glistens under the

bright, fluorescent lights, and her warm smile brings a tiny one to my lips. Maria slides to the end of the bench for Mae to get more access to me. She hooks a finger under my jaw to inspect my cheek and neck. I chew on my lips to stop from wincing. I want to go home.

Nurse Mae's eyes lower to my stomach. "Theresa Mower. How do you feel?"

Those eyes are like lasers piercing through the fabric covering my stomach. "Better."

"Very good." I shake my head when she tries to lift the hem of my shirt. Maria can't see my belly. Granted, she has seen it before, but some of my belly bruises didn't come from Ben. They are from fighting in the ring. They will fade and blend with my skin as they always do, but for now, they are visible. Nurse Mae smiles kindly at me. I relax when she straightens up to fold her hands behind her. "Thankfully, it was nothing serious, so we didn't have to call your parents."

My parents. I inhale shakily and expel the air through my mouth. They would have lost their mind if they saw me in here. Mom would bombard me with questions, cry and cling to Dad, who would take charge of the situation. My head jerks in a nod. I am fine. I am completely alright.

"Does that mean I am free to go?" I throw one leg over the bed. Pain scorches my inside, but I put on a bold front. I'm okay. I need to leave before she decides to call my parents. "I feel okay."

"Sure?" She holds up a finger and pulls out a bottle of pain relief from her large pocket. The pills clatter when she shakes the bottle. "This will help. If you feel any sort of way, please come back."

The smile I give her is polite. There is no way I am coming back here, even if it hurts. We fall silent when Nurse Mae leaves the room, and Maria takes my hands to massage them. I don't remember who brought me here, but it couldn't have been her. A mild throbbing in my stomach has me popping a pill into my mouth, but Maria snatches the bottle before I can take another.

“Did he really do this?” she whispers.

I am not sure what she means by *this*. I don't look so bad, except for the scratches on my cheeks.

“Who?” I pick at the loose thread on the knee area of my ripped jeans, and she flicks a finger on my forehead. “Don't do that again,” I spit out. Who told her I was here? That stupid boy will pay.

She rolls her eyes which finally come to rest on the stinging spot on my cheek. “Ben. Did he really punch you?” I shrug again. She jumps to her feet, eyes dark with fury. “I'll be right back.”

“Maria, forget it.”

But she's out the door with the same speed she left when Daniel showed up this morning.

I fall back to the bed on my unhurt side and close my eyes. Here I am, trying to get comfortable after asking permission from Nurse Mae to leave. Who brought me here? The janitor? He would have found me faster than any student. I don't know how long I stay there, but the click-clack of Maria's heels jolts me awake. My eyes open, and I blink at an angry Maria who plops down on the bench.

“Ben is not in detention. I heard he got detention,” she says. Good for him. In my opinion, he should have gotten a more terrible punishment. Maria props her elbows on my bed, I ruffle her hair, and she scowls, earning a giggle from me. I push a pillow behind me and grab my phone from the stand. “But that dude is not there. I swear if they let him off easy after this, I'll report him to the police.”

Or, we can deal with him ourselves. I unlock my phone to no missed calls or texts from anyone.

“How did you know to find me?” I ask.

“It was all over the blog.”

“What?” We were alone. “Who told them?”

Maria rolls her shoulders. “Don't know. Don't care. He is an asshole. We need to deal with him.”

Yes, but the last bell for today will ring in ten minutes. “Shouldn’t you be in class?”

Maria gasps. I laugh and ready myself for whatever jargon she will spout. “My best friend is sick, and I’m distressed by that news. How do you expect me to be in class?” Her hand migrates to her chest, and she levels me with her infamous disappointing gaze. “Theresa, you wound me.”

“Point of correction, I am not sick, just injured,” I say.

She scoffs. “Same difference.”

The door to the sick bay opens before I fire a response, and Maria starts shoving things into my backpack. “Alright, Tessa, time to go.” I roll my eyes, arms folded on my chest as Daniel closes the distance between us. She ignores him to glare at me. “Nurse Mae said you could leave.”

Daniel makes a funny face above her head, doing that thing where he looks cross-eyed with his tongue sticking out a side of his mouth. I giggle, and Maria’s stony gaze darts between both of us.

Oh, the silent treatment is still on. I don’t want to be part of it anymore. This is why friends shouldn’t date within the same circle. You will be forced to pick sides. I don’t want to, since I suspect he brought me here. Daniel ignores Maria and slides onto the bench, paying no mind to her scowl.

“Hey, how do you feel now?” he asks. Maria creates some distance between them. She frowns at me like I betrayed her by letting him talk to me. I try to offer her a sympathetic smile, but she glowers. “Sorry I didn’t come earlier. Pop quiz, but you were knocked out when we dropped in.”

Ah, I knew it had to be him. If any student is likely to be loitering around the premises, it’s him. “It’s fine. Thanks.” I point to Maria. “As Grumpy here said, I am good to go. I’m ready to leave.”

Daniel glances at Maria like he’s seeing her for the first time. She stares at her fingernails, and I have to clamp my hands over my mouth to keep from hollering. She’s nervous. What? A giggle escapes me, and I look away when their gazes

flicker to me. Maria and nervous cannot exist in the same sentence.

“Maria,” Daniel whispers.

“Don’t talk to me.”

I tap my phone, pretending to scroll through my messages. The jerk who put me here didn’t even stop by. No one did. The only two who care about me are right here, glowering at each other. I catch Maria’s frown as Daniel closes the gap. She swallows, and I turn to the wall to give them privacy.

Daniel mutters something. I try not to listen, but Maria snaps. “You are sorry? Fuck out of here with your apology because I don’t need it.” Uh-oh. This is bad. Maria is not one to swear, but there are degrees to her anger. Since she’s still speaking English, this won’t end well. “I saw you with Zoey after the game, and you couldn’t even be bothered to talk to me. And now you are sorry?”

Zoey, one of Olivia’s minions? Has Daniel gone mad? What if it was Zoey at Vance’s party? Why didn’t Maria tell me this? I guess I’m not the only one keeping Daniel-related secrets.

“You should have at least done me the simple courtesy of canceling our date to my face rather than send that silly text,” she whispers. Maria’s voice cracks, and I am tempted to get up and hug her tight. She yanks the hem of my jeans. *No, count me out.* “Tessa, let’s go. It’s time to leave.”

“Not yet, Maria,” Daniel says. “Tessa, don’t listen to her.”

They both turn to me, hurt evident in their eyes. They expect me to pick a side. I can’t. Besides, Daniel has some explaining to do, and she needs to hear it. I shake my head. I am such a coward.

“Sorry guys, you have to sort this one on your own.” I get out of the bed, my steps a bit slow as I shuffle to the door and throw them one last glance. Maria sniffs. Daniel sighs. “Love you. Bye.”

Twenty



THE CHILLY AIR welcomes me outside. Octobers in San Francisco aren't always this cold, but of late, the weather has been deceptive. I couldn't stand the heat in the morning, and now it's freezing. On some days, the reverse is the case. I lock my arms around my waist and race to my car. A figure with his head bowed catches my eyes, and I almost stop to inspect it until I am reminded of the evening with Asher. That evening that got me into the clinic.

My stomach groans as if to remind me of the pain, and I continue walking. The figure pushes away from the motorbike to lace his sneakers, and I smile when I realize it is indeed Asher. I don't call him. Ben must be lurking somewhere, ready to pounce on me again if the bike is there.

Asher might be a cutie, but I will pass today. Sadly, Asher notices me when I'm almost at my car. He screams my name, and I curse under my breath. I turn slowly to wave at him, my eyes darting to the front of the building. The door opens, and an unfamiliar face walks out. I relax slightly as Asher closes the short distance between us. I will only spend a few minutes with him.

"Hey, Tessa. Were you really going to leave without saying hi?" Asher says.

His blue eyes are big, bright, and innocent, nothing like Ben's, and his hair sticks out in a gelled, spiky mess I ruffle. He scrunches his face and looks up at me. I muster a smile, eyes on the door.

“Of course not,” I lie through my teeth. “I didn’t see you.”

Asher pushes himself on his toes, and his fingertips brush my cheek. “Who did that to your face?”

Your brother. “Some guy,” I say with a shrug.

“Not cool. Does it hurt?” Not as much anymore, but I nod. His lips pucker, and he motions for me to bend. When I do, his thumb grazes the spot. “Sorry. I’ll tell Benny so Benny can beat him up.”

A laugh escapes me. He can’t report the guy to Benny if Benny is the bully. “Where’s Benny?”

Asher draws lazy circles on the floor with his foot. “Inside. He’s talking to the principal.” My lips twitch. I can only hope the purpose of the talk is to switch his detention to a suspension. It’s not okay to hit anyone, especially when you are bigger and there is no one to regulate the fight. Asher’s voice lowers like he wants to tell me a big secret. “Benny was early today. Very early.”

“Nice.” But it is more than nice. A strange but warm feeling settles in my chest. Ben might have gotten upset, but he listened, and Asher’s big smile kind of makes up for the punch. I open the door to grab the chocolate cookies in the glove compartment. “All yours, Champ,” I say, tossing the pack he catches mid-air. Asher giggles so much that I start giggling. “Why are you laughing?”

“I don’t know.” He takes a small bite out of his cookies. I accept the piece he offers me, and we munch silently. I should leave before Ben arrives, but I find myself opening the passenger door for Asher to get in and make himself comfortable. He drops the pack of cookies on the console so I can eat out of it. I cough. My heart melts when he brings out his water bottle and offers it to me. He is the opposite of Ben. “Only Benny calls me Champ. It sounds funny when you say it.”

In reply, I whisper, “I won’t repeat it.” I overheard Ben calling him that the other day.

He shakes his head. “No. I like it. It’s just funny.” He finishes the first round of his cookies and says, “Is this your school? Where were you that day? I wanted to introduce you to Benny.”

That wouldn’t be necessary. I know Benny already, and he introduced me to his fist today.

“Do you know Benny? I call him Benny, like Benny from Dora, the explorer. Benny is the cow.”

Laughter sputters from my lips. I glance at the kid rambling in my car. He is awesome. What better way to humble someone than name him after the cow from a popular kiddies show? Thinking of Ben with a cow head on his body sort of calms me. I don’t care what he will say or do this time when he sees me with his younger brother. Asher taps me. I stop laughing and grin.

Benny, the cow.

“But his name is Ben. Benjamin Carter.” Asher’s legs bounce in the car, and he drums his fingers on the dash. Without looking at me, he continues, “Carter is our last name. Do you know him?”

I open my mouth and close it without getting out a word. Asher’s inquisitive eyes remain on my face, and I manage a tight smile. I left the clinic to avoid an awkward conversation with my best friends, but this seems worse. I’ll pick talking to Maria and Daniel over answering his question.

What was his question again? I clear my throat. “Um. I think I know Benny.”

“Is he your friend?” His eyes widen with anticipation, and his lips press into a close-lipped smile.

“Not really.”

“You should be friends with him, so some guy won’t do that to your face again,” Asher replies. He looks away, and my chest deflates with relief. Children ask too many questions. I take it back. I don’t want a younger brother anymore if he’ll be this inquisitive. “Will you still make the cake?”

My fingers become more attractive. I pop my knuckles, and Asher clears his throat. His eyes are too hopeful. I don't want to disappoint the kid. "How will you get it? And when's his birthday?"

"You can bring it to our house," he answers. "It's not so far from school."

I shake my head. I don't know where they live, and I don't intend to find out. "No, Champ."

Asher taps his index finger on the corner of his mouth. His brows wrinkle, and his features contort into what I now understand to be his thinking face. A minute later, his head slowly turns to me, and a sparkle creeps into his eyes. "What about his locker? Can you put it there? As a surprise?"

"No." The heartbreak on his face has me gulping the rest of my words. His lips pucker into a sad smile, and my heart shrinks when tears spring to his eyes. "I can try. I can put it in his locker."

The happy child is back in an instant, he grins from ear to ear, and my lips pull into a line. "His birthday is on October 17. Benny has never gotten a good surprise before. I want this to be his first."

My heart clenches at his thoughtfulness. This boy adores Ben. I can get it into his locker. If I can't, Maria will. She's friends with some cheerleaders. They should be able to smuggle a cake.

"That's so nice of you, Champ."

Asher blushes. "Benny is nicer than that." I highly doubt it, but I am not the killjoy Maria claims I am. I pinch his chubby cheek, and he retaliates by pinching my arm. We laugh. "Thank you, Tessa. Benny will know it's me when he sees the name. I'm the only one who calls him Benny."

When the car is quiet again, I turn on the radio and ask, "When is your birthday?"

"January 5."

The front door slams close, we jump, and our eyes snap toward the school building. Maria storms out with Daniel hot on her heels, his lips moving as fast as her feet. Their talk must have ended horribly. I check my phone for new messages, and sure enough, I have a few from her promising me death by the most painful means for betraying her best friend. She can't do shit.

I chuckle, and Asher raises his brows.

“What is it?” I ask. He says nothing, and I roll my eyes. It's obvious he has something to say. Asher flicks through the radio channels until he settles on a song I have never heard. I frown, a cautious eye still on the front door, but the boy remains mute. At least I know stubborn runs in their veins. To diffuse the awkwardness, I tell him, “You didn't ask about my birthday, Champ.”

“When is it?” he squeaks out.

“April. I was born in April.”

“Mommy, too. April 5th.”

His smile fades, and he hides his hands inside his shirt. Sadness rolls off him.

“Where's Mommy?” I ask him.

A faraway look blankets his face. He shrugs and looks out the window. I observe the little man in silence. He tugs on the gloves keeping his superpower out of sight, and I raise my shirt to peek at the irregular white patches that have taken over my stomach. I am not sure I will ever call my vitiligo a superpower. To me, it's a blemish, something to hide. A knock on my window drags me out of my thoughts, and my brain freezes at the angry eyes glaring back at me. Ben knocks again.

“Benny,” Asher calls out to his big brother. He stretches his arms for a hug and pouts. I would have laughed, but Ben's angry eyes grow angrier, and his brows pull together to form a unibrow. I hastily fasten my seatbelt. I don't like how he looks at me like I am the most horrible person on earth. So what if I am having a conversation with his brother hours after he

warned me to stay away from him? I couldn't have left Asher there alone. He needed company. "You took so long."

I don't miss the dark promise in Ben's eyes as he moves around to Asher's side. I hit the lock, and the door opens. He squats in front of Asher. "Sorry, Champ. I had to sort some things out." I avert my gaze when he throws a sinister look my way like the thing had to do with me. "Ready?"

"Yeah," Asher drawls out without leaving the car.

I focus on my thighs, on the small gap between my legs. I have a thigh gap. Maybe I can join the latest TikTok trend, get famous, and have the other girls at school look at me with envy for once.

A voice at the back of my mind mocks me. I know I will never join any trend, but it's nice to distract myself with such thoughts. The two pairs of eyes boring into mine finally get me to raise my head. I look up to see the Carter brothers staring at me. Asher smiles. I make sure to keep my eyes trained on him alone, but my gaze wanders to Ben's face, and his frown morphs into a scowl.

Why does he loathe me this much? I should be the one hating on him. He punched me!

"You remember Tessa from that day?" Asher nudges Ben on his side, and Ben grumbles a reply. He hops out of the passenger seat, dragging Ben to my side of the car. "Tessa is in your school too, Benny."

No shit, Captain Obvious.

Asher unlocks my door. "Tessa, meet my brother, Benny." He squints at his big brother, who sighs softly. Yeah, I don't want to talk to him, either. He is not even that handsome. Asher is cuter. "Benny, meet my new friend, Tessa. So, Benny doesn't like people calling him Benny."

Is that so? I stretch out a hand to him. "Hi, Benny. Benny, the cow."

Asher laughs. Ben scowls and grabs my hand in a tight handshake. Shit. He squeezes too hard.

“Hi, Tessa. Nice to meet you, mask girl.”

Alarms go off in my head. Mission aborted. I retract my hand and shove it into my pocket. His reply sounded like a threat. He’s going to make my life miserable, isn’t he? Oh, my God. Ben and Olivia will team up. The pranks will resume. He will punch me again. I don’t want that for my final year.

The attention is taken off me when Asher turns to his brother. He motions for Ben to squat, and when Ben does, I am blessed with an up-close view of his pretty blue eyes. His rugged features soften at the words Asher whispers into his ears. Ben chuckles, a sound I hardly hear from him.

Our eyes meet before I can look away, and the arrogant asshole smirks. I know Ben is arrogant, rude, and snobbish, so why am I still ogling him? I want to stop, but I can’t. They say the eyes are the gateway to the soul, and Ben’s eyes are so beautifully blue I want to keep staring at them to uncover those layers he puts up. To know if he is really a jerk or if it’s a facade. *Okay, where the fuck did that poetic bullshit come from?* I don’t like Ben at all. I used to have a crush in the past, but now it’s as dead as Olivia’s kindness.

I’m still repeating the mantra to myself when Asher taps me. “I told Benny about your face. Next time, he will beat the person up,” he says. Ben stares down at his feet. Of course. Asher’s mouth opens wide to release a yawn. He throws his arms around my neck and pulls me into a hug. “Bye, Tessa.”

I will bet my life that Ben is watching our exchange with a scowl, but I don’t look to confirm it. Instead, I squeeze my eyes shut and return Asher’s hug. He breaks away to smile at me. “Bye, Champ.”

Twenty-One



MARIA IS STILL NOT TALKING to me.

On Tuesday, I endured it thinking her mood swing would pass, but that best friend of mine didn't say a word to me. Even now, Maria is silent as we stroll to our lockers. Too calm and unlike her loud self. I poke her, and she raises a perfectly tweezed brow at me. That's all. I clasp my hands and muster my best puppy eyes. In reply, she slams her locker door and sashays out of my sight.

Nice one, Maria. Best friend ever.

We need to figure out what to do about Ben before he does something worse than a punch to me. Why am I getting punished for something that's not my fault? The beef she has with Daniel has nothing to do with me. I didn't know about him talking to Zoey until she mentioned it. Speak of the devil, and Daniel blocks my path right as I'm about to race off in the same direction Maria headed. Resting one hand on my locker, the other shoved inside his pants pocket, he grins at me.

"I need your help," he says when I don't return his smile.

My eyes roam the empty hallway before coming to settle on his face. "Is this about Maria?" He nods, and I relent. I take another long look at my wristwatch and facepalm. I have a few minutes until literature class, and I haven't got my copy of the second text for that witch's class. "Fuck."

"What?" Daniel asks. He pushes away from the locker to stand in front of me. "Tessa."

“I need to get to the library,” I tell him and make a U-turn, shuffling down the hallway like Usain Bolt. If I am fast enough, I will make a photocopy of the chapters we will be reading today. Ben used a photocopy for *The Old Man and The Sea*. I should be allowed to do the same for this text.

Exiting the front door, I go around the back and turn into the path leading to the library. On cue, I sneak a glance around to be sure Ben won't jump me like the last time. Where's he anyway?

Footsteps echo behind me. I push the straps of my backpack up my shoulder and quicken my pace as Daniel catches up. The boy doesn't attend classes often, and it will be no surprise if he misses today's lectures. As for me, I can't. I am still trying to make up for the notes I missed on Monday because Ben sent me to the clinic. He hasn't apologized to me or been to class—not like I care or miss him.

“Tessa. Please, wait. I need to talk to you.”

I slow down long enough for him to catch up, and he drags me into an empty corridor. “Five minutes,” I say. I should be done with the library in ten minutes since we are reading only two chapters today. I dig a foot into the ground and snap at Daniel. “Come on, man. Start talking.”

Instead of talking, he pulls out his phone, and I roll my eyes so hard I'm shocked they don't fall out of their sockets. My gaze narrows suspiciously when he walks to both ends of the corridor to confirm we are alone. He plugs in his earpiece and puts one bud into my ear. I wait impatiently for his black screen to come alive. He inputs his password, and a strangled gasp leaves my lips.

What in God's holy name is this?

The male figure in the video is undeniably Daniel. The girl kneeling between his legs, sucking him off as if her high school diploma depends on it, is obscured. I can't tell who she is from this angle. But Ben's words ring out loud in my head, followed by Maria's. It has to be Zoey.

Why can't people keep it in their pants for fuck's sake? I raise disappointed eyes to Daniel, and he groans. "Seriously? You have only four minutes. Start talking." I don't care if all three of us are friends. If he hurts my best friend, then I am done with him. "I don't have all day, Mister."

"Someone sent this to me last week," he says. He runs his fingers through his face, then shoves them into his hair which he tugs harshly from the roots and groans again. "I don't know who."

"Does it matter who? Is this Vance's party?" I ask him and he nods, so I punch him in the stomach. He was sending Maria pictures at the beginning of that party. "How could you do this? Are you insane?"

An angry storm gathers in his eyes, and his finger shoots up to quiet me. "First of all, Maria and I are not an item. I don't owe her fidelity." My lips move into the shape of an O. I cross my arms on my chest and tilt my body to one side. Boys are what again? Assholes and a big waste of time. But he's so right because their chances of dating after this are zero to none. "I like Maria. I really do, but if this video gets out, she will be hurt badly. I'll pick her attitude over her seeing this."

Weirdly, it makes sense. Maria might talk dirty about actors she hopes to smash, but everyone knows she only has eyes for Daniel. My chest falls. "So...what do you want me to do, Daniel?"

"Talk to her. Tell her to be nice to me."

"You just said you will pick her attitude over her finding out about this." I slap his shoulder, and he jumps back like I did any real damage. In a bored voice, I mumble, "Dude, pick a struggle."

He shakes his head. "I don't want to."

Tension rolls off me, and I close my eyes. The four minutes are gone. I shouldn't be mad at him since he didn't cheat. When my eyes flutter open, I'm calmer. "If you like Maria so much, why is your dick in another girl's mouth?" He coughs, and I throw him a look of disgust. This is the thing

with horny teenagers. They don't think. One more reason why I will never be in a relationship. This video will ruin great friendships if it ever gets out. "You better fix this, Daniel Stupid Holt."

"I am trying to, Tessa. Someone's blackmailing me."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Oh, Tessa. And I'm not stupid."

That's debatable.

Daniel pulls his hair while I make random shapes on the floor. I stop doodling on the floor when he clears his throat and straightens up. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know," he answers. A snide reply floats through my mind, but I offer him a tight smile. He should have thought of the consequences before shoving his dick into another girl's mouth. Of all girls, it had to be someone Maria and I hate. "I don't remember much from that night. I was at the party, drinking, talking to some girls, then I went to take a leak. Can't remember much after that. The whole evening kinda blurs after. Woke up with a massive headache the next day."

On today's episode of why you shouldn't attend high school parties: you might black out, and someone blackmails you with a video. They need to be more like me, and there will be no drama. Four minutes since my class started, I'll have to grab any available copy of *The Great Gatsby* to return it later. There is no time to make a copy, and I don't want to be Ms. Eva's plaything today.

His words hover my head like a halo, and a light bulb flips. Girls. He was talking to girls.

"What girls?" I say. His face scrunches in what should have been an adorable look of confusion, but I am tempted to slap him. Maria is ignoring me because of him. I ground my teeth in frustration when he doesn't reply. "At the party, you said you were talking to some girls. What girls? Names? I need their names."

"Michelle. Charlotte. Nia..." I nod as he spits out familiar names from school. They all have one thing in common.

Cheerleaders who answer to Olivia. “Zoey and Olivia. That’s all...I think.”

“Olivia?” He nods again. I lick my lips as thoughts cloud my head. Olivia will go the extra mile to hurt me, but what does she stand to gain by blackmailing Daniel? I snatch his phone from him to rewatch the video. With a person in mind, the girl’s features become more noticeable—her high cheekbone and shiny black hair. It’s Zoey. “What did the person say? What do they want?”

“For me to stay away from Maria,” Daniel whispers. “Told me to cancel our date.”

The missing piece of the puzzle finally fits. The whole thing reeks of Olivia. It has to be her. To hurt me, she will hurt Maria. Fuck the witch, but it’s working. Does our beef ever end? To think we used to be best buddies. I close my eyes and push back those old memories. It’s not my fault.

“What happens if you don’t?” Tapping a finger to my pouted lips, I narrow my eyes.

Daniel shrugs. “They will release the video, I guess.”

“Do you care if they do?” I ask due to his nonchalance.

“Do I care if everyone in school sees a video of someone giving me a blowjob?” he says, and I cringe. That doesn’t sound like something I would want for myself either. “Yeah, I do. Maria would, too.”

“Fine. But I need to go now. I’ll talk to Maria later.” I grab my bag lying on the floor. It makes a bit of sense. Then again, it doesn’t. He can’t remember it actually happening, but there is a video of it. The video wins. “Thanks for taking me to the clinic but don’t do anything stupid, Daniel.”

I jog the rest of the distance to the library without waiting to hear his reply. On entering inside, I hurry to the literature section and pick out the first copy of *The Great Gatsby* I find on the shelf. A crumpled note falls out of the book as I am about to tuck it into my school bag. I look around to see if anyone is here, but there’s no one within walking distance. I open the novel and frown.

It is a letter. A handwritten letter.

My phone vibrates in my bag, drawing my attention to the time. I'm fifteen minutes late. I shove the letter into another copy of the novel but pause on second thoughts. I don't feel comfortable leaving it here. What if the wrong person picks it? I know my school. They will probably upload it to BGC and make cruel jokes out of it. Scribbling hurriedly on a sheet I tear out of my note, I apologize to the owner of the letter and explain in two short lines why I took it with a promise to keep it safe. I shove the apology note into the novel, return it to the shelf, and walk out of the library.

All I need now is a reasonable excuse for showing up late to Ms. Eva's class.

Twenty-Two



DID YOU READ IT?

I stare at the paper in my hands until the words blur. Yesterday when I came to return the letter, my note was untouched. But today, there is a reply. I shake my head like Lett—I have decided to call the owner of the letter that—can see me. I didn't read it. I only caught a glimpse of the first line and chose not to. But right now, I am curious, and I might give in. Is it someone I know?

The handwriting is strange. Maybe, like me, the person has handwritings for different occasions. I tear out a note from my notepad to write out one word on it. *No*. Curiosity niggles me. I want to know what is in the letter. I need to know. I squash the paper and put up a new response—a lie.

Yes. Sorry.

Before my conscience weighs in, I shove the note into the novel, run out of the library, and drive out of the school like a character from *Fast and Furious*. I don't stop to think until I am in my room, under the cover, with the letter in my hand. Taking a deep breath, I beg God for forgiveness and dive into it.

Hey mom, I hope you are happy. I hope you are happy knowing you picked your husband over us.

How do you sleep at night knowing you picked the father of the girl who molested your son over him? You say you love us, yet you force us to come to Thanksgiving and have Christmas dinners with your new family like we want to be

there. You fought with dad a lot because of that, remember? You hated us being at home for Christmas dinners, and you wanted to be outdoors on Thanksgiving. How come you love it now?

With him, you pretend we are a happy family, that we are your whole life, but it's a big lie. How can we ever be a happy family if you don't love us? You hate us, mom. Why? A mother will never pick a man she just met over two kids she brought into the world. Jack can never be our father so stop trying to force him on us. Daddy might be dead, but he's a better man than Jack will ever be. A better parent than you.

Why can't you love us, mom? Is it because I shouted at you the last time we met? I am sorry, mom. I was so upset, and you refused to listen to me. You didn't care that AJ no longer dances. You never listen to anything we say to you unless Jack agrees. But that's okay. We forgive you. Parents don't know it all. But please leave him. If you leave Jack, I promise we will be good boys. We won't talk back at you. We will make you cheesecake; you still love it, right?

We can live anywhere, even in a shoebox. We won't mind as long as we are all together. Let's go back to the old days, the years after daddy's death, before you met Jack. We were all we had, and we worked. You said we are your whole world. How do you exist without your world?

You said we make you happy. How are you happy without the source of your happiness?

AJ wants his mom. I want my mom too. I miss her. I miss your forehead kisses. I might have complained a lot, but I miss you coming to our room at night to kiss us goodnight. At school, when other parents show up for PTA and Thanksgiving feast, I am the one who has to attend because you say you will be there, but you never keep to your word, and you never apologize.

It is never your fault. You are too busy being the trophy wife to a multimillionaire and a mother to his pedophile daughter to care about me and AJ. After his games, games he no longer loves to play, I have to pick him up. I love AJ, but I

would like to be a normal teenager for once in my life, to truly experience high school, do things regular teenagers would do, fight and drink at parties.

I am tired of being so responsible all the time. I want to go to a party and not have to check the time because I fear I'll overstay, or I am too busy worrying about AJ to actually enjoy the party. I want to try and drink at least once because it looks cool. You probably think my ideas are stupid, and I know they are stupid, but that's the point. I want to do something stupid for once without thinking of the consequences.

Do you know I have never had a girlfriend? I have never even kissed a girl. Everyone at school thinks it must be easy to get any girl I want, and maybe they are right, but every time I try to talk to one of the girls, I see your stepdaughter and am reminded of all the times she put her filthy hands on me. The times she made me touch her in places a kid should never be allowed to touch an adult. All the times I cried to you that she was molesting me, and you didn't believe your son, your baby. You said I was your baby and you would always love me, but you chased me out of your room when I came to tell you. Do you remember? You said in your own words that I will be grounded until thy kingdom comes if I utter such nonsense again. But what was so hard to believe? That she touched me? I have never lied to you, mom. Mom, why? You broke my heart.

You have ruined me, mom. It's unfair that you get to move on, live your life normally and be happy while I am this broken boy who has to take care of AJ because, at the end of the day, he's all I have got, and I am all he has got because you never come through for any of us.

YOU RUINED OUR FAMILY

I really hope you are happy, mom. Really happy. I hope Jack slits his throat the next time he shaves. I hope you cut your finger the next time you are making club sandwiches. I hope she chokes on her smoothie or dies from food poisoning while eating her nasty salad. I hope I make enough money, so I never have to accept help from you again. I wish dad didn't have to die. I wish we didn't miss you. I wish I had my own

money. I wish you never went out that morning to get us donuts because you would never have met Jack. I wish we didn't put your happiness before ours by encouraging you to go on that date with him. The date that changed everything.

Daddy might have been a bad husband to you, but he was a good father to us, and I wish you had died in his place. I hate you, mom. I hate that you still exist while he rots in the ground. I hope you die very soon.

All my hate,

Your once beloved boy.

Hot tears roll down my cheeks. I drop the letter on the bed and hug my pillow to my chest. Guilt stabs me. I shouldn't have read the letter. I don't know him, but I am hurting for him. It's all too much for a teenager to bear. I clench my eyes shut. To think I always thought I had problems.

More tears leak out of my eyes. I tighten my hold on the pillow and cry for the little boy in the letter who misses his mother. The teenage boy who wants to be a normal high schooler. The poor kid who was molested by his stepsister, and his younger brother who has to deal with it all.

I snuggle under the cover and pull it over my head. A message from Maria pops in. I switch off my phone without checking it and slide it under my pillow. Someone knocks on the door. I hide my face in the pillow with no intention of moving. I can always say I didn't hear them knock.

The knocking ceases, and I curl into a ball. I don't want to think of Lett. I don't want to imagine him to be one of those students I call names behind their backs. The bed dips under the new weight, and the cover is yanked off my head. I open my eyes to see Mom staring worriedly at me. She touches my cheek with the back of her hand and feels my forehead to ensure I'm not running a temperature. I manage to offer her a small smile. She is not like Lett's mom. She will never leave Hayden or me.

"Honey, are you okay?" I am more than okay because I have her and Dad. They will always be a couple. They will

always love me no matter what. “Why are you crying? Are you hurt?”

My tear dam bursts open once more. I lurch myself into her arms and cry into her chest. She tries to pry my hands off her, but I hold on tight. I don’t know the boy behind the letter, but I feel his pain and am thankful for the things I have, even the little ones I might have taken for granted.

I am thankful for Daddy and his busy shifts.

I am thankful for Mom and her warm hugs.

I am thankful for Hayden and his brotherly love.

Mom rubs circles on my back, and my cries eventually reduce to hiccups.

“I’m sorry if I’ve not been the best daughter to you,” I say, my voice a bit muffled from the tears.

“Sweetheart, you are the best daughter a mother could wish for.” I pull away to peer at her face, and sure enough, she’s telling the truth. She tears up a little. “You and Hayden are the best kids.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

Mom dabs my cheeks with the heels of her palms. “Is that why you’re crying?” I nod. She tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and cups my cheeks, so I can’t avoid her gaze. Staring into my eyes, she mutters, “Don’t cry. You are a good daughter. My favorite daughter.” I laugh, and she plants a kiss on my forehead. I hug her again. “Did someone say something to you at school?”

See why I love her. She’s the best mother on earth. I love her always. “No. I’m just grateful.”

Twenty-Three



“YOU ARE ACTING STRANGE,” Maria
comments.

We are back to being best friends, but I can't say the same for her and Daniel. She doesn't want to hear his name, doesn't want to talk about him. The video is still out there. She'll die if it goes viral. I pretend to mull over her words, and she slaps my forehead. I didn't miss this part of her.

“How strange?” I finally ask.

We take the stairs two at a time. But my attention is partially on her and the people rushing past us to the cafeteria. My eyes linger on some of the males' faces, trying to figure out who owns the letter I carry around with me like a prized souvenir.

Who is Lett?

“Very strange, Theresa.” Maria drags me toward the cafeteria, and I smother a laugh. She asked earlier if I would eat there, but I ignored her. “Clingy kind of strange. Are you on your period?”

My cheeks pink at her direct question, and I use my hair to cover my face. She can be too blunt for poor old me. “No...” She lifts a brow. “Well, yes. But it has nothing to do with my mood.”

It ends today, and my mood is fine. I am among the lucky few who only bleed for three days. The cafeteria door swings

open, and we jump to the side as a student barrels out. I shake my head.

Teenagers.

“Tell that to yourself all you want, baby girl,” she says. “But I know strange when I see one.”

We ignore the murmurs around us once we are inside. The setup is the same. Cheerleaders and jocks are in their spot—the center of attention, but their table looks out of place without Ben. I don’t comment on that, and neither does Maria. We haven’t discussed revenge. I wonder what it must feel like to sit at that table with the boy the whole school admires, no spiteful remarks, only genuine friendship. It must be nice to be Olivia. I grab a tray from the counter. Maria does the same, and we move behind the line to gossip. She didn’t bring lunch today. It’s a rare occurrence but not strange.

“Tessa. Look,” Maria whispers, a malicious note in her voice. I groan without looking at the student she subtly points at, making sure to keep my gaze on the tiled floor. “Smash or pass?”

“None.”

“Killjoy,” she replies.

The line eases without any more remarks from her, and soon, it’s our turn. I place an order of fries with ketchup on the side. Maria eyes my plate and purses her lips without saying a word.

We are on our way to find a table when I notice a male student by a dark corner. It’s easy to miss him because he’s slumped over his bench like he wants to be anywhere but here. I drag Maria in his direction and plop on the spot beside him. What if he’s Lett? I promised to be nicer to everyone.

“See?” Maria whispers, taking her seat opposite us. I ignore her and smile at him. “Strange.”

The boy barely spares us a look. Instead, he shrinks into himself and stabs his fries. Maria gives me a look that screams: *what is your plan?* I also have no idea the plan.

This guy doesn't strike me as the kind of guy that was molested by his stepsister. But what do molested kids look like? His appearance screams evil and gothic. Dark eyeliner. Black lipstick. Jet black hair. Spiky hair and boots. With these boots, he should be able to fight off his stepsister.

"Hey," I say. Small talks shouldn't be this hard. I point to his tray. "Tastes nice, huh?"

He lifts his gaze, and I wither when cold eyes meet mine. I will pick Ben's glare over his. He stands, I attempt to apologize, but he walks out on us with both hands clenching his tray. Maria giggles when he stops in front of the trash can and empties his meal into it. He turns once to send me his middle finger. Her laughter irritates me to the point I pinch her, and she pouts. My eyes trail the lanky figure of the idiot speeding to the door. Well, fuck him too. I was only trying to be nice.

"What was all that about?"

I shrug. I wish I knew.

He is a bigger ass than Ben. At least Ben had a mini reason to hate me. I stop my thoughts from wandering in that direction. There I go again, thinking about him. I don't like Ben. I'll never like him. Where is he, anyway? He hasn't been in class for a week and two days. His clear blue eyes pop into my mind, followed by that naughty, arrogant smirk. He is an ass with a cute little brother, that's all.

"Where's Ben?" I ask out loud.

Maria drops her tray beside mine. "I heard he was suspended. What are you thinking?"

"Not thinking anything."

She stares pointedly at me. I shrug. "Anyway, I think we should damage his tires."

"What?" It's her turn to shrug. I don't like the idea of causing him any discomfort because it will also affect Asher. Bad tires mean he will be late to pick up Asher. I push my tray from her reach before she finishes my ketchup. "Don't you think the suspension is enough punishment already?"

Maria wastes no time in saying, “No. We will slash his tires when he resumes.”

I open my mouth to refuse, but she cuts me this look only a Spanish mother can pull off. “Okay.”

The rest of lunch goes by without any conversation, and a strange quietness descends over our table. I don’t even stop her from stealing my fries or soda. Maria walks me to the front of my empty class. We stand at the door for some minutes, unaccustomed to the awkward silence.

“Hug?” she says, her voice a little too hopeful as she stretches out her arms. I hug her, and her arms wrap around me. We stay that way for about six seconds before she pulls away to kiss my cheek. “I hope it’s just your period because you are acting weird-ish. Be fine, okay? Love you.”

“Love you too,” I say without opening the door. Abigail struts toward us, I step aside, and she rolls her eyes before sashaying into the class. I giggle when Maria raises a brow at me. She won’t leave until I am inside my class, so I go in and wave to her through the glass. “Bye, señorita.”

Abigail and I are alone in the class for less than a minute before other students join us. We are seated for another ten minutes without any sign of Mr. Sam. I stand at the same time the door opens. Mr. Sam walks in with an apology that dies on his lips when he sees me on my feet.

“Where to, Miss Mower?” he asks.

“Bathroom,” I lie.

His brows furrow. I expect a refusal, but he says, “Five minutes.”

I rush out of the class, my feet taking me in the direction of the library. I make it halfway to the other hallway before someone slams into me. Textbooks drop to the floor. I squat to pick them up without glancing at the intruder but pause when I notice the person doesn’t lend a hand. I look up. Ben. I toss all the books to the floor, a deep scowl on my lips as I fold my arms on my chest.

“Typical,” he mutters, bending down to pick up his shit. “Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“Shouldn’t you be suspended?”

Ben growls. I step back before he swings for my face, not like he was aiming at me. “Bitch.”

“Male bitch.” What the fuck? I need a vocabulary upgrade. Ben chuckles. “Asshole.”

“Seriously? That’s the best you have?”

Blue eyes take me in. He asked for it. I spit out the first word that pops into my mind.

“Used condom.” It sounded better in my head. But the point still remains. Useless. Ben is useless except for scaring off girls in the empty hallway and punching them.

Ben’s brows furrow. “What?”

My brain works faster, and his eyes narrow in confusion. “I mean, condom with holes.”

This time, he stops short. “What?” he says.

“That means you’re useless,” I explain. He laughs. Damn him. “If you’re a condom with holes, you have no use for anyone.”

Oh, God. He’s staring at me like I’m dumb. I do need an insult upgrade. But the plan was to confuse him enough so I could easily slip past him. I doubt it’s working.

He steps forward, but I stand my ground. “That’s all you’ve got?” he whispers.

“You want to know what else I’ve got?” My chest puffs out in faux pride, and I stare up at him with the same amount of annoyance he’s showering me. “I’ll let the principal know you violated your suspension. How’s that for a bitch?” His face falls. He withdraws. “Ben, I didn’t mean that.”

But Ben is gone. He shuts down, and I can’t get over the feeling that I fucked up.

I am still feeling that way when the final bell rings. But as soon as I step into the library, some of the sadness melts away. The smell of books instantly comforts me, and I release the breath I held in and allow the worries fade to the back of my mind. My fingertips brush the edge of the shelves as I walk through rows and rows of books. What if Lett hasn't replied? What if he won't reply?

On getting to the literature section, my confidence fails me. My heart skips a beat as my fingers connect with the green novel. This is it. I chew on my lips and pull out the book to check for the apology note I left in the middle. The pages of the novel stare back at me with nothing in their center.

My note is missing.

Twenty-Four



BEN HASN'T RESUMED YET. I wasn't looking out for him, but it's easy to notice his absence when he is your partner, or there is no one to bug you in Calculus class. I start for the library. There was no letter yesterday. I will check for all of this week, the next, and the next after that before I give up.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. It has to be Maria. She's driving me home today. I ignore the phone and quicken my steps to the library. Anxiety thrums under my skin as I edge closer to the shelf. I pick the first copy and shake it. Nothing. Again. I should be used to it, but I flip through the novel. I toss the text to the floor and pick another. I open the first page, and my answer is there.

It's there in the form of a torn note like it was written in a hurry or angrily, as its content depicts. The words staring at me diffuse my joy. The novel drops to the floor with a soft thud, and I am super tempted to end this. I can move on and forget this ever happened, but the poor boy will still be hurting.

***Lett:** Haven't you heard of the word privacy?*

***Me:** I'm sorry for invading your privacy. I'm sorry that happened to you. I'm sorry for the things you had to experience alone. I'm sorry she didn't believe you. I'm sorry you are hurting. You didn't deserve any of that. Nobody does. AJ must be proud to have you as his brother, and your dad, too, must be proud. He's probably sending you a million hugs. For what it's worth, I believe you, and I really hope she chokes*

on her smoothie. Tell me where to keep the letter, and I'll do that.

I reread my reply two more times to be sure I'm not coming off as creepy or desperate, though I am kind of desperate to hear back from Lett. I tuck my letter in the novel, then place it on the shelf.

Maria is nowhere to be found when I get to the parking lot. I stop beside her car and send a text. She replies with a red face emoji and a wink. My gaze drifts to our school building. The library is behind it. The longer I stand here waiting, the more I am convinced Lett will tear up my letter.

I should go in and retrieve it.

What if he's someone I hate? I have considered the possibility of it being someone I'm mean to, but what if he has been mean to me? I go out of my way to keep to myself. I only react except provoked, and the regular duo who mess with me have kept their distance. Ben is suspended, and Olivia hardly spares a glance my way. They both have perfect lives. Everyone loves them.

I close my eyes like it will stop the thoughts fighting for attention and rest my head on the hood of Maria's car. He deserves a reply. It's the least I owe him after taking his letter. I can move on if he doesn't reply, knowing I tried my best. But a more significant part of me hopes he replies.

A tap on my hip has me raising my head. I look over my shoulder to see Maria grinning like she didn't keep me waiting. She taps on her car fob, a beep follows, and I unlock the passenger door.

"What took you so long?" I ask when we are both inside her car.

The sky rumbles, and we both look out the window to the sky. The October air is chilly, and the clouds have been gray all day, but no sign of rain. I fasten my seatbelt and turn on the heater. Maria doesn't start the car immediately. I bury my face in my palms and sigh. "Look outside."

“What am I looking at?” I answer, eyes scanning the almost empty lot. She took so long to come out, and now that she’s here, we can’t even leave. Tired, I drum my fingers on the dash. There is nothing of interest because everyone has gone. We should also leave. “Can we just go, Maria?”

Kneeling on her seat, she grabs my face in her hands and tilts my head in the direction of a Benz. A man is leaning against the car with his head bent over his phone. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. I purse my lips, and she eases her grip. He looks familiar, way too familiar.

“Isn’t that your dad?” she murmurs.

I peer at the figure from head to toe. It does look like him. My phone rings. I pull it out, and a smile forms on my lips. “Daddy,” I scream into the receiver. His chuckles tickle my ear, Maria mouths something about a daddy’s girl, and I stick out my tongue. Looking out the window, I watch him take off his glasses to dab his eyes, and my smile expands. “Dad, where are you?”

“In front of your school. Where are you?”

I end the call and dash out of Maria’s car with a shit-eating grin. “Fuck you, Maria, for keeping me waiting. Just kidding.” If we had left, Dad wouldn’t have met me here, but she’s still a mini bitch for keeping me waiting for this long with no explanation. I close the door. “Love you.”

“Don’t forget Nate’s Halloween party,” she screams, but I continue racing to my dad without a backward glance at her. She will survive. “Theresa Grace Mower, I know you heard me. Don’t forget.”

Halloween is in twenty days. I have never understood the fuss, but Nate’s hosting it at his parents’ new house this year. Everyone has been talking about it. Apparently, he hosts the best parties. I haven’t been to any of his parties, so I can’t confirm or deny it. But it’s all I ever hear in the toilet and drama club. Speaking of the drama club, I should tell Maria I am not interested. Only five people showed up for the auditions. Five girls. And they couldn’t care less about the

revamped Juliet and Romeo script. I have a feeling the turnout would have been different if Olivia had signed up.

Dad looks up at the sound of my pounding footsteps. He squints, and I snicker when he puts on his glasses before spreading his arms for a hug. He is short-sighted. The man can't see beyond his fingers without the aid of his glasses. I rush into his arms, and he squeezes me in a tight hug. I haven't seen him in a week. It is either he's gone before I wake, or he comes home when I have already left for school. But on the bright side, he's alive and still married to Mom. No stepsisters.

He pulls me back to stare at my face. I grin. "I've missed you," I say and hug him briefly.

"I've missed you too, Tessa." He pats my back and opens the passenger door for me to get in. Ben could take some gentlemanly lessons from him. Maria honks from the other side of the parking lot, and we wave at her. "Is that Maria Vega? She doesn't come to the house anymore."

As if he was ever there the few times she visited. As if he's ever at home. Anger breezes through me, but it's forgotten when I turn and catch his smile. The car starts, and he drives out of the school.

Five minutes into our drive, I glance at his side profile. As expected, he has both hands on the steering wheel. Between both parents, I look more like my dad: flat chest and absent hips.

"What are you doing here?" Am I coming off too strong? I'm not mad, only a bit disoriented by his visit. I pout at my reflection in the side mirror, and he snickers. "I thought you were busy."

"Never too busy for my daughter," he replies, but his eyes remain on the road. I shake my head as laughter bursts out of my lips. I can count the number of times he showed up for me on one hand. The money is always available, but sadly, Dad isn't. "Do you still like Dan and Dan?"

Dan and Dan is a cafe owned by a father and son duo with the same name. We used to spend our Sundays there. Me and

him alone, talking about everything and nothing until he got swamped. It feels surreal to be in a car with him, to talk like we are back to those good old days, and I keep stealing glances at him to be sure he is real. Dad is busy, so busy his wife and kids don't get to see him often. Going by his recent schedule, he shouldn't be here with me. He should be at work.

I stretch my hand outside, and the breeze caresses my fingers. "Did Mom put you up to this?"

Putting my hand out of the car will annoy him, so I start a countdown until he notices.

One.

Two.

Three.

"Theresa. Hand inside the car. Now," Daddy says in a stern voice. I roll my eyes but indulge him, and he rolls up all the windows, shutting off the natural air. "Back to your question, yes and no."

His reply doesn't come as a surprise to me. Mom must have been scared by my breakdown.

"Okay," I whisper and stare down at my knees.

"I have always wanted to come see you, but I couldn't get the day off until today. Aren't you happy to see me?" He squeezes my hand, and we don't discuss any further until he pulls up in front of the familiar building of Dan and Dan. I am about to hop out of the car when he says, "Work has been quite hectic, Tessa. I am sorry I am not available as much as you would like."

I nod because it's what I am kind of expected to do. I am expected to understand that his work keeps him away from us. I don't like it, but it is what it is. I interweave our fingers, and he smiles.

"It's alright, Dad. I get it."

The pad of his thumb brushes my cheek. "Thanks. But..." he trails off to unfasten his seatbelt and walks around the car

to open my door. "I'm working on something. I hate being away from you and your mom."

"Me too," I admit as he takes my hand. We walk a few steps away from his car. "I miss those days when you hadn't been promoted."

His steps falter. "You wouldn't have a fancy car if not for the promotion," he says.

"But I'll get to see you every morning, and you can always drive me to school. You or Maria or even Mom." I feel the tears coming and take a big breath. "But it's cool. I love my car. Thanks."

"Tessa," he starts. Facing me, he makes to grab my shoulders but stops to run his hands through his hair. "Sometimes, some things are out of our control, but I promise to make it better soon."

"How soon?" I whisper.

"Very soon," he murmurs. He stretches his hand for a handshake. "Doctor."

I laugh and accept the outstretched hand. "Actress."

It's our thing. We swear on our professions to show we are telling the truth. And if we are lying, we will have awful careers. I link our hands and start for the door. We find a booth at the end of the cafe, but none of us bothers with the menu on the table because we know it offhand. I do a double-take when a server walks past our table. I could have sworn it was someone from school.

The baseball cap pulled over his face can't protect him.

Dad notices and nudges me with his elbow. "See someone you know?"

The boy with blue eyes. The one I shall not name. Is he still mad about my lame threat? "No."

It has been too long since Dad and I hung out, and it feels awkward. "How was school?"

I think back to Lett's note and the chilly tone. "Fine. Nothing eventful happened." He frowns. Sometimes, I think his doctor's instincts notify him when I lie. "What about you? How was work?"

"Okay. Same old, same old. Consultations, patients who need help. Nothing eventful happened."

He rubs the back of his hand against his eyes. For the first time, I notice the eye bags, the dark circles, and the wrinkles that have multiplied on his forehead. Maybe I am too hard on him.

He's alive.

He's here.

He's trying his best.

"You are doing a great job, Dad," I tell him. He throws an arm around my shoulders. I pick up the menu and skim through lines of familiar items typed in black ink. "I'm glad you came today."

"Me too. I'm happy to be here."

A brunette waitress sashays to us with a pink apron tied around her waist and a notepad peeking from one of the pockets. I'm disappointed to see her in place of him, but I mask it with a smile when she requests our order. What will he look like with the apron? Was he wearing one? Why didn't I check? Did he see me? Even if he did, would he have acknowledged me? I doubt it.

Dad lists my favorite items on the menu, and I stifle a laugh. "Burger. Fries. Big coke." The girl nods. He makes his order and turns to me when she leaves. "Did I get everything right?"

"Yeah...random question, Dad. If you find a letter in one of your patients bags, will you take it?" His brows scrunch, and I quickly add, "You were not snooping or anything, you just saw it by chance, and you were afraid some other doctors would find it. Would you take the letter?"

He slowly nods as if contemplating his answer. “First of all, I shouldn’t be in my patient’s bag without their permission. It’s stealing. But yeah, I guess I will. To protect the patient’s privacy.”

“Will you read it?” He shakes his head. My insides churn with guilt. “Not even out of curiosity?”

“No. The point of taking the letter is to protect their privacy, right? Reading it is the opposite of that.”

That’s not what happened in my case. Curiosity got the best of me, but I didn’t do it to hurt Lett’s feelings. “It makes sense,” I say. He eyes me like he knows this is more than a random question, but the waitress shows up at the right time, effectively cutting off our talk. “Look, our food is here.”

I dig into the fries first, dipping a stick into the ketchup before pushing it between my burgers. Dad’s face wrinkles, but he doesn’t say a word. He’s the one missing out on this deliciousness.

“How will you know if you like someone?” I ask after the third bite of my burger-fries.

“You will just know,” he says when his pancake drenched in syrup is almost gone. A smile curls his lips. “You will always think about them, just like I think about your mom. All the time.”

That sounds like a waste of mind space or whatever. Good thing I don’t think about him. At all.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he replies with a nod. His smile grows wider, and it nauseates me. I don’t want to like anyone this much. “And when anybody asks you if you like someone, their name automatically pops into your mind, and you smile. What name came to your mind when you asked me that?”

“What?” He set me up.

“Do you like someone?” I choke on my burger. My eyes tear up. He pats my back and passes my drink to me. Yeah,

this is a setup. “Is this about a boy, Tessa? Do you like someone from school?”

Ben’s face flashes in my mind. I have no reason to like him. Beyond his good looks, he has no redeeming qualities. Something must be wrong with me if I think I like the guy who punched me.

“No.” His lips curve in a teasing smile, and I cough to clear the nerves in my voice. “I don’t like anyone.”

Twenty-Five



BEN

FUCK. She was there. She is everywhere I go like a damn pest. If that stupid Noah had agreed to come over to the house with his notes, I wouldn't have been at school. Whenever I think I have succeeded in getting her out of my head, she gives me a new reason to remember her. Did she report to the principal after I left? Good for her if she did. She will have a hard time proving it.

Why did she have to come to *Dan and Dan* with her dad, looking all sad with those brown eyes before they hugged? I wasn't watching, but it was hard to miss them when they were right in front of the door, blocking possible customers who might have wanted to enter. What if seeing her today is a sign from the universe that I need to apologize? I shrug out of my tank and toss it on the bed. If I am really considering an apology, I need to back the fuck up and examine my head.

The pounding in my temple forces me to the bathroom. I haven't smoked in weeks, a sign that I don't need those death sticks. I don't miss it, but I pull out a pack of Marlboro from the cabinet. I never smoke around Asher. He will chew me up. He's the only one who can set me straight. But he's not here now to scold me, and I need a lot of courage if I intend to go over there to get him.

I jump into the shower for a quick bath. Water forms a trail behind me as I step out of the shower to stand in front of the mirror. Images of those girls from school throwing themselves at me during Vance's party zoom through my mind, but none of them evokes a reaction from me or my dick except her. I hate her. She's not even that pretty. Well, she's cute, but that's beside the point.

She needs to stay out of my business so I never have to hear Asher talk about her again.

He's obsessed. And that's something since he barely likes people outside his video games. What if I misunderstood the situation? What if I am indeed injured from last night's match? Because what are all these thoughts? She threatened me. She took from me. She is just like her namesake.

While my body dries up, I light up a cigarette without smoking it. I know I am stalling, but it's never easy to face them, and today is Thursday. I don't get him until Monday. But I miss Asher. It's empty here without him. I stalk back to my room and throw on the cleanest sweats and wifebeater I find. It's colder in the evenings, but I need to give her a reason to shout. She notices everything but somehow fails to observe the most important aspects. Parents can be wild.

Outside, I am confronted with the stupidity of my dress choice. I shiver. The second helmet is in my room, but instead of racing inside to get it, I tug this one over my head and start the bike. Asher can use it on our return. I'll be fine. The cold lashes at me as the bike speeds past cars. If she is in a great mood and I don't succeed in getting on her nerves, we should be out of there in five.

In exactly fifteen minutes, I reach the house—the mansion. I take off my helmet. The cameras at the top of the black gates rotate to capture my face, and the gates slide open. Rich people's problem. I drive in and park in the middle of the compound, fully aware there's a huge garage at the back.

They must have been expecting me. I twist the knob once, and the door gives away. She is alone and watching a movie with a bowl of popcorn on her legs. I don't greet. I walk past the couch, but she calls me back. "Benjamin." I stop. It's her house, after all. "Haven't you any manners?"

"No," I reply. I backtrack behind the couch and grip the top. "I left them outside."

"Good to see you too."

Her eyes lift to my face. Blues to blues. She hasn't changed. If at all she did, she looks younger. I straighten up. If that is all, I will be on my way upstairs to get Asher. But for

the life of me, I cannot move an inch from there. My nails sink into the top of the couch, and I wait. For what?

No idea.

She sets the bowl on the couch and replaces it with a throw pillow she hugs to her chest. It kind of makes her look sad. But when her mouth opens, my pity flies away. “Where have you been?”

“None of your business,” I answer.

“Benjamin.” We don’t say a word to each other. She drops the pillow to the couch and rises to her feet. The sofa is the only barrier between us, but it feels like there’s more. Angry unspoken words. On the plus side, she hasn’t raised her voice yet. I thought I did, but I don’t feel up for another yelling battle with her. “I was asking because Amanda saw you. You were serving...”

I understand what she’s getting at, but I have no idea who this Amanda is, and the thought of any of her friends or women from her circle knowing my whereabouts makes my head spin.

“So, you have people watching me now?” I say, and it sounds like a growl.

“No, but we know people who know other people, and they will see you, and they will talk.”

I try to keep it down but a grunt tears out of my lips. My gaze rakes over her from head to toe. With hair the same color as mine framing her face, the resemblance between us is uncanny. She is pretty in her beautiful dresses and flawless makeup. Pretty and untouchable, but I try. I try to reach into that part of her that should care. “Of course. It’s always about other people and never your son.”

“Benny, no,” she cries out. “You know that’s not true.”

“Don’t.” My fist comes down on the couch. They can replace it if I damage it, and the thought of doing that grows more appealing to me. Her eyes seek mine. She wants a compromise, but I am not giving her anything. “Don’t call me that. I just want Asher, and I will be out of your hair.”

“You can’t take him. You are still suspended, and you worked. We agreed you wouldn’t work.”

A steel resolve sneaks into her eyes. To be fair, I broke the rules. But don’t we all? I have missed him, and he has been away for too long. “There was nothing else for me to do with my time.”

“Then next time, don’t get suspended,” she says in a clipped tone.

She is close now. Soon, if I keep up with this, I will get what I want. A mother shouting at her son. I shake out my arms to ease the stiffness in them. My eyes roam the pictures hanging on the wall of the living room. I can point out their position without looking. The picture-perfect family.

“It was...” I stop myself from saying more. She doesn’t deserve an explanation. “Fuck you.”

“Watch your tone, young man.”

“Or what?” I say, and she closes the gap, leaving only the couch I’m leaning on between us. I spread out my arms. My voice is low, mocking, and full of hate and annoyance. “You will cut me off?”

“Remember who pays the bill, Benjamin. Remember why you get to stay there.”

Her reply humbles me. The truth of my reality pushes a lump that I have trouble swallowing into my throat. I look at her from top to bottom. She fits in here. She belongs here. I might have come out of her, but we are opposites. It’s crazy how you can hate someone yet be so dependent on them. I nod more to myself and point toward the stairs leading to Asher’s room. She must have gotten the memo because she doesn’t say another word until my foot is on the first stair.

“You make this so hard, Benny,” she whispers.

The silence lends weight to her words. They go straight into my heart and sever it. My hand clamps around the railing, and I breathe in deeply. “Then stop trying. Stop acting like my mother.”

“I am your mother, Benjamin!”

A thousand and one harmful words fight to be set free. I whip around to face her. Tears drop to her cheeks, and the rude reply dies on my lips. I got to her. But that doesn't make me happy. She claps a hand over her mouth and sniffs silently, like she'll be less of the woman she is if I watch her crumble. I meet her gaze once and look away. I don't think I like it when she cries.

“Look,” I say in a softer, more subdued voice. “I'll just check in on Asher and leave.”

Without hearing her reply, I bound up the stairs. I made her cry. I made Tessa cry. I always make the females around me cry. I stop in front of Asher's door. It's eerily quiet. I crack the door open, and a smile tilts my lips as I lean on the doorframe. He's asleep with his earbuds plugged in. Asher makes everything better. In a few strides, I'm at his bed. I pull the comforter over his chest and place a kiss on his forehead. He mumbles something in his sleep and relaxes when I stroke his arm. I sigh. I'm almost eighteen and can't sleep well without my kid brother on the same bed.

“Monday is almost here,” I whisper and remove his earbuds. “We will be together soon.”

One last kiss on his forehead, and I am out of his room. I meet her seated on the last stair with her face buried in her palms. She is not crying, is she? I can't deal with any more tears. My steps are slow as I approach her. She stands and takes a step back. I glare at the coat she stretches to me.

“It's cold outside,” she volunteers to my silent question. My gaze doesn't leave the coat. I could do with one. I should have brought mine if I wasn't so stubborn and damn stupid. “It's mine.”

I accept it with a tight smile. “Thanks.”

An uncomfortable veil of silence hovers above us, and she wraps her arms around herself. She doesn't expect me to hug her, does she? That will be going too far, and it's just a freaking coat.

“I’ll be on my way now. Thanks again, and goodnight.”

She walks me to the door and even opens it. Can’t wait for me to leave, can she? I start doubting myself when she falls in line with me as I start for my motorbike. She is weird tonight. I hate it. I hate changes.

“Goodnight, Ben,” she whispers when I’m on my bike. I give her a curt nod and drive out.

As I near the big gates, I glance behind to see her still standing where I left her. For unknown reasons, I honk once but keep my gaze straight ahead until I am back at the house. The loneliness hits me harder than it does on the weekends Asher leaves. I dial Olivia, but she doesn’t pick up. Somehow, I am always available when she needs a shoulder to cry on, but I can’t count on her for the same. I restart the bike and drive around the city. When I slow down, I’m at her house.

The window to her room is closed. I get off my bike and park by the tree I did the first day. Is she asleep? She and her Dad left the café much happier than when they walked in. It must be nice for her to have such moments with him. Why does she fight? It’s not for people like her.

I am not sure why or what I am doing here. But when her window opens, I pull the coat a little tighter around myself. Her head peeks out like she can sense my presence. For the fun of it, I wave. Tessa smiles and actually waves back. What the fuck? I get on my bike and ride off.

Twenty-Six



I HAD a weird dream last week. In that dream, Ben was staring at me, and I waved. I'm thinking of the possibility of that happening in real life when I get to the library to drop my reply to Lett. The content of Friday's letter is still fresh in my mind. The words burned so hard that I was unable to think up a good reply. I bring out his letter to read, which hurts even more than it did last week.

***Lett:** I don't need your pity. I don't need your wishes. You can keep the fucking letter. It's not even real.*

***Me:** I've never been to a high school party before. I've never dated or kissed anyone. I think I might die celibate because no one ever looks at me like they want me. I'm not sure what alcohol tastes like. My parents see me as this innocent child, and I don't want to ruin that image for them. Daddy is always busy, but he tries to be there for me. Sometimes I wish he would lose his job or get demoted so I could see him more often. Lol. Between you and me, I never said that.*

At school, I am bullied by this guy who thinks it's okay to be mean to me. I try to be tough when the pranks and bullying start, but it really gets to me. It sucks. My best friend tries, but sometimes it's not enough. I go home thinking and wondering if they will still bully me if I look a little more like them and less of myself. But then, I like how I am for at least most of the time. Being skinny sucks.

I'm sorry for taking your letter. I'm even more sorry for reading it. I won't bother you anymore.

Satisfied with my reply, I insert it into the novel and dump it on the shelf. The tips of my ears are red from the cold as I hurry out of the library to my locker. Maria is waiting there with a frown. My steps falter, I bridge the gap between us, and her frown deepens. "Where were you, Tessa?"

"Nowhere?"

Maria gives me a onceover that sends chills down my spine. I push one foot out. "You keep disappearing." To check on Lett. I don't want his letter to get into the wrong hands. My lips stretch into a thin line, and she stops typing on her phone to inspect my face. "Is it a boy?"

Eyes wide open, I blurt out, "No. There is no boy. I don't even like boys."

"Yep. It's a boy." She empties the content of the binder into her bag. "Make sure he's cute, at least. And I'm here when you're ready to spill. Have you decided on your Halloween costume?"

"No, I'm not interested." Maria has never required my presence at these parties, and I am happy being in the shadows. She pulls me by the ear. I wince, but she doesn't release me. "Maria, stop."

"No. Not until you say you are going." I nod in a desperate attempt to free myself from the nails digging into my sensitive skin. Her hands jam together in excitement. She smiles and massages the spot. Slung her backpack over her shoulder, she wiggles her brows. "I'll go as Catwoman, and you will be Wonder Woman. You've got the height. And you don't have to drive. I'll pick you up."

"Thanks, bestie," I reply with the enthusiasm of a dying goat.

Maria laughs. She throws her arm around my shoulders, and we talk about everything from her and Daniel to the costume we will be wearing. They are not dating yet but are

back in the talking zone. Good for me since it means I never have to mention that video Daniel showed me to her.

We are in the corridor leading to the drama hall when she says, “How’s drama club going? You never talk about it.” Because there’s nothing to say about it, and it’s not as fun as having an audience on YouTube or being the superstar in the school’s choir. “Come on, Tessa. It can’t be that bad.”

“It is *that* bad, maybe worse.”

Maria stops walking, forcing me to do the same. She grips my shoulders gently. Incoming speech alert. “I think you don’t enjoy it because you already closed your mind to it.” She has a fair point, but it’s hard to commit when no one shows up. “Try to enjoy it, okay? I know you, Tessa. You can act. For God’s sake, you had my mom bawling her eyes out at that stupid church play.”

The *Passion of Christ* play. Our pastor asked us to act instead of watching the televised version like we usually do. It was more fun than I expected, and many people commended my acting.

“Fine, I’ll do my best. You can go now.”

“Not yet.” I groan, and she returns her arm around my shoulders so we can resume the journey to the hall. “Guess who I saw in school today? *The Benjamin Carter*. We should go fuck him up.”

“Are you still on this?” I ask.

Maria makes a face. “Excuse you. I was never out of it.”

A sigh leaves my lips. Ben didn’t show up for any of our classes today. “What is your plan?”

“We can’t beat him since he’s too strong but we can slash his tires,” she replies. I would have been on board, but I have to consider Asher. Who will pick him up? The poor boy shouldn’t suffer for his big brother’s stupidity. I smile to get Maria off the topic. I’m not interested in slashing anything. She moves to my back and nudges me forward. “I’ll meet you after practice. Don’t keep me waiting, Theresa Grace Mower.”

She skitters away before I recover. Questions flood my mind. What will she be doing while I'm at practice? Daniel Holt. He was in school today. I stare in the direction she went and shake my head. Soon enough, she will be in a relationship, and I will be the odd one out. The third wheel.

I push the door open before the thoughts dampen my mood. Today, there are only four of us. Ms. Jota, the drama coordinator, sits on the podium's edge, a small pile of scripts by her side. She welcomes me with a kind smile, then motions for me to occupy one of the plush seats. I take the one farthest from the group, away from those three girls with thick hair and heavy makeup that make them appear older than their actual age. They always act like I'm invisible. And I do the same.

Ms. Jota distributes the scripts and returns to her seat with a small smile. She claps to get our attention. I look up from the script—a modern retelling of Romeo and Juliet. “As you all know, we should have started the end-of-session drama production, but we don't have the numbers yet.”

Her eyes fall to the empty seats, and I feel bad for her. She seems nice. Nicer than Ms. Eva.

“It's fine since we won't be performing until next year, but this is something for you to think about. Auditions will start in a few weeks. The date will be communicated to you, but there's no harm in giving you more time to practice, is there?” We all shake our heads. She walks over and starts distributing the scripts to us. “Good, I believe that's all. See you all on Friday. 5 pm.”

One of the girls raises a manicured hand. I believe her name is something that starts with a W—Whore. With her fake tan and boobs complimented by her red lipstick and thick eyeliner, the name sounds right for her. She blinks like she's about to have a seizure. Ms. Jota arranges the leftover scripts into a neat pile. Her countenance doesn't change as she waits for the girl to speak her mind.

“What if we don't want to perform?” She looks at her squad, and they giggle like little witches. Why are they in

drama club if they don't want to perform? "Is it okay to do something else?"

Ms. Jota pauses. "Something like what, Whitney?"

Oh, Whitney. Whore suits her better. "I don't know. The stage will need designs." She gestures to the podium bereft of any glamor. Ms. Jota frowns. "We can make set designs while the others perform."

"That's not a bad idea, Whitney." Ms. Jota nods thoughtfully. I have to admit it's a good one. "If you can find more students interested in joining you to design, then I'll discuss it with the art teacher."

I leave the hall after Ms. Jota dismisses us. From the few lines I read, I know I want to play the role of Juliet. We will need a male lead for Romeo, but I have a feeling Whitney and her friends have someone in mind. The parking lot is not as empty as it should be. I toss my scripts on the passenger seat, eager to leave, when I spot Ben's motorcycle. Maria wanted us to slash the tires.

We can't do that. I text to let her know I'll do it myself. She requests evidence with a promise to join me in two minutes. I roll my eyes and charge toward his bike. Ben's bike is hard to miss. I squat to protect myself from curious eyes. I'll take a video of me "slashing" his tires and send it to her. The problem is, I don't have anything to use except my hairpin. It will have to do the job.

I try first to see if it will work before making a video, but nope. You can't puncture a hole into a tire with a pin. Footsteps approach me, but I don't look up. Finally, the drama queen is here. It took her long enough.

Something dangles in my face. I squint. "Here, use this."

Why does Maria have a knife? Since when does she talk like Ben? Shit. I jump to my feet.

"I thought the bike was for Maria," I blurt out.

I am shit at this thing called lying. Ben shoves his hands into his front pockets. He leans forward, and I jump another

step back. He won't punch me, right? And he doesn't. "Maria has a bike?"

Speaking of the devil, Maria appears in my peripheral view but backs away when she spots Ben and me. That girl will so get it from me. Ben snaps his fingers in my face. He is so close. I clear my throat. I can do this. "Yeah. Yes, she does. I was checking the tires to be sure they are okay."

"Are they?"

"Perfect." A second passes. "You shouldn't be here. Why haven't you gone to pick up Asher?"

Ben arches a brow. My heart pounds against my ribcage. "Who are you to question me?"

A wedge dips between his eyebrows as he waits for my answer. But I don't have anything to say. Another second of awkward silence passes. Do I apologize? If I do, then it means I am guilty.

"I'll just... Bye," I mutter and flee to my car. I wait in the sanctity of my car till he's gone.

Ten minutes later, I drive out of the school. My foot clamps hard on the brake when I spot Ben crouched beside his bike. I only touched the tire. I didn't tamper with anything. He runs a hand through his hair and kicks the tire. I slow down beside him, but his gaze doesn't leave his bike.

"Need a ride?" His eyes lift to my face. The annoyance boldly written all over his features almost has me eating my words. I remind myself he has to pick his kid brother. That's why I stopped in the first place. "You know, Asher doesn't like being kept waiting even if he pretends to be fine."

He huffs. "Fine."

My smile disappears when he leaves the bike unguarded. "What if someone steals your bike?"

"Then Josef will get another one." He slides into the passenger seat. I rush to grab the script, but he holds it above his head to read. He flips through it, and my cheeks warm

when he levels me with a hot glare. “What is this shit? Romeo and Juliet. A modern retelling. You are a romantic.”

“It’s for the drama club. You don’t need to be a romantic before you enjoy romantic plays,” I reply.

Ben doesn’t say a word to that, and I start the car. I half-wanted to know if he was a part of the population who didn’t consider the play a romance. And it’s not a bad thing to be a romantic.

We are at a stoplight when he drops my hairpin on the console. “You forgot this.”

“Thanks.”

“You shouldn’t fill your head with rubbish from the play. Love doesn’t exist,” he says quietly.

I grip the steering wheel. He’s the real killjoy. “Thanks for the pep talk. Please use your seatbelt.”

His eyes burn into my side, and I breathe normally when he looks away. He has a girlfriend. He should talk to her about love and its inexistence. As for me, I’ll fall in love. Maybe I won’t, but I won’t discourage others. We are en route to Asher’s school when he pulls out a pack of cigarettes from his bag. The knife drops to his feet. Ben picks it up and removes a stick from the box.

“Please don’t smoke in my car.”

“Who says I was going to smoke?” he whispers.

The unlit cigarette dangles from a corner of his mouth. “I guess you brought out that cancer stick to admire it.” When he says nothing, I add, “You shouldn’t smoke these things, Ben. It’s bad.”

“It helps to clear my mind,” falls out of his lips in a silent whisper. That was...unexpected. We are having an actual conversation. Ben straightens up in his seat. “Smoking helps with the cold.”

Asher’s school appears from a distance. I find a parking spot, but none of us get out. I toss him a glance. He still has the cigarette tucked between his lips, but the lighter is gone.

Feeling bold, I pull it from his lips and break it into two. “They cause cancer. And you can die from cancer.”

Ben huffs out a laugh. He props his jaw on top of the bag he holds close to his chest. For once, he doesn’t look formidable. “Maybe I’m trying to get myself killed, Mother Theresa.” I can’t tell if he’s joking since we barely speak to each other. “But what do you know, Miss Perfect?”

First of all, I am far from perfect. I can’t dress how I want because I have vitiligo, but I am not about to tell him that. I won’t give this bully another reason to mock me. He never returned my necklace. For all I know, he’s the one with the perfect life. He left his bike there. No flinching.

“Not much, maybe. But I know there will be no one to take care of Asher like you do if you die.”

Ben is quiet after my response, and then I hear a “Fuck you.”

“I wouldn’t come near your prick with a ten-foot pole. Nice of you to offer, though, Benny.”

A small smile breaks out on his lips, but it’s gone the moment he catches me staring at him. The silence isn’t as stifling. I don’t know if we can be friends, but we can be non-enemies for a start.

Something drops to my leg. I look down to see a bracelet. “From Asher,” he says. “He made it.”

“I thought you didn’t want me talking to him.”

He opens the door and puts out a foot. “I don’t. Thanks for the ride.”

“Ben!” I say. He stops walking but doesn’t turn around. My throat dries up. This can only go one of two ways: bad or extremely bad. “Do you have a ride back home? I can wait. I don’t mind.”

Time slows as he shortens the gap. He bends over so I can see his face. I offer him a grim smile.

“Don’t you have stuff to do with your best friend?” he asks with a sneer in his voice. I don’t take offense. Instead, I shake

my head. He doubles back in shock, and I have half a mind to laugh at him. Maria and I hardly get to see each other after school hours. Her family is wholesome and fun but can be too much sometimes. Weekends are best for hanging out. “We won’t be long.” A smile touches my lips once he’s gone, but he makes a U-turn, and my breath catches. “Thank you, Tee—Tessa Mower.”

Twenty-Seven



I TWIRL my new bracelet and trace the tiny letter beads with my name on them while waiting my turn. Ms. Jota takes note as Whitney performs. Much to my annoyance, Whitney's red pointed heels connect hard to the wooden floor of the stage, the sound scratching my ears. I focus on Ms. Jota's face to tell if she's pleased with Whitney's performance, but she gives nothing away.

Whitney finishes with a mock bow, her friends clap, and she climbs down the stage. Ms. Jota picks a sheet from the table, squinting at the list. "Theresa Mower?" I raise a hand. "Your turn."

My heart thumps against my ribcage as I grab my script. I almost stumble on my way up, and the girls seated in the audience giggle. I release my breath when I make it to the stage in one piece.

"You are auditioning for the role of Juliet?" Ms. Jota asks.

"Yes," I answer with a nod, very much aware Whitney also auditioned for that role. I must get it.

Ms. Jota reclines on her seat, arms folded on the table. She signals for me to start, but the words dry in my throat. With Whitney and her friends, she was bent over her desk, taking notes while they performed. I had hoped for the same. My eyes wander to the audience, the three girls gaze expectantly, and the only boy present yawns. I close my eyes, take a long breath, then open them.

The words on the paper jump at me, and my heart beats so loud in my ears that I forget the lines I memorized. Ms. Jota coughs twice from the table positioned a few feet away from the stage, and I offer her a tight smile followed by an apology. I will be fine. I have done this before; I can do it again.

With that in mind, I read out the first line, and my shaky voice echoes through the hall.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper harshly to the air, pushing fear into my voice to fit the scene where Juliet finds the stranger on her balcony. “You shouldn’t be here.” I take two steps back as required, ramble some more lines, gesticulating and moving around the stage. Soon, I forget where I am as I am drawn centuries back into the frame of a seventeen-year-old Juliet. “Romeo!”

A cheer erupts from the audience at the end of the last scene. I tear my eyes away from the script clenched in my hand, and my head dips in a bow. The adrenaline wears off. I hide my trembling hands behind me and take in the proud smile on Ms. Jota’s face. The corners of my lips twitch. She stands to clap for me, causing me to become more uncomfortable as I walk down the stairs.

The only boy present hasn’t stopped clapping. I can’t remember his name. The only people who aren’t so impressed with my acting are Whitney and her friends. I walk past them and drop to my seat.

“Great job, Theresa,” Ms. Jota says. I wince. “What is it?”

Making circles on the floor with my foot, I answer, “I prefer to be called Tessa.”

I look up to understand the reason for the sudden silence. Ms. Jota has a weird smile on her face. Teachers never listen when I tell them to call me by that name, but it’s always worth a shot.

Ms. Jota sits. “Okay, Tessa. Great job.”

Heat creeps up my neck. She called me Tessa. Ben also did. Not like it matters since it was only Asher who spoke for the entirety of the ride to his house. Murmurs break out from

somewhere behind me. I roll my eyes without giving those three ugly witches the satisfaction of turning to confirm my suspicions. They must be talking about me. They always do. Last I checked, they didn't care to be here. They were more interested in the set: set designs, boy talks, and makeup.

The three combinations are not bad, but if they don't want to be here, they shouldn't make the rest of us who enjoy the club feel like we are wasting our time. Besides, it's not their fault I can't apply makeup beyond a not-so-winged eyeliner and red lipstick. Still, they are super annoying.

The boy—Curt is his name, I remember now—strolls to the stage to audition. I tune out the girls and focus on his bulky frame. With that height, he can't pass for Romeo, but none of us says a word as he gets into his role. Within minutes, the auditions end. Chairs are pulled back, and Ms. Jota claps once so we can gather around her. She's all smiles as her eyes land on our faces, and I find myself smiling back at her. For the first time, I feel seen by a teacher. It's a great feeling.

"You did great today," she says. Curt whistles. I grin. The three witches giggle. "I'm impressed."

Her smile wanes as she arranges the pile of unused scripts on her table. A pang of guilt hits me. The time she took to rewrite the play shows, and it's a shame we don't have enough people to appreciate her efforts. We might have to cancel the play if our numbers don't increase soon.

"We will meet again tomorrow, okay? Same time, same place. Be early." Our heads bob in reply, and she gives us a thumbs up. As we are about to file out, Ms. Jota clears her throat. "Whitney."

The rest of us pause to hear what she has to say, but Whitney steps forward. A part of me wishes she wants to tell Whitney that I'm the one taking the role of Juliet, but it won't matter since we don't have a full cast. "How's it going with the set designs? Have you informed your friends?"

"Yes," Whitney replies.

Ms. Jota spares all of us a glance, and then she picks a script from the pile to wave it at us. “We need the numbers,” she says in a pleading voice, “these scripts won’t read or act themselves.”

Whitney’s hand shoots up. “My friends will be here tomorrow.” She throws me a pointed look, and I wink. So what if I don’t have friends to invite? Maria has other engagements as it is. I sigh as she pulls out her phone to show Ms. Jota what I assume will be set designs. They converse in hush tones for a moment. In a loud voice, Whitney asks all of us, “What do you guys think of this?”

We cross over to them. Whitney hands over her phone, so we can take a look and pass it around. A picture of a stage done with cardboards and colorful cut-outs fills her screen. I pout, unwilling to admit the design looks good. She did her homework right. Ms. Jota crosses her arms over her chest, foot tapping into the floor in impatience as we take our time to analyze the designs. Our eyes meet, and she smiles softly at me. My chest swells with pride, and I look away. I think I might be her favorite student. She just might be my favorite teacher if she makes me Juliet.

“I like the design,” I say and return the phone to Whitney. “It suits the play.”

The others mutter their agreement, and Ms. Jota dismisses us for the final time. We exit the hall in pairs. Curt sticks to my side because we are easily the perfect misfit. We are quiet as we speed down the hallway and out the backdoor. I shiver at the cold and skip down the remaining stairs.

“You did a great job back there,” I tell him.

“Not as great as you did,” he replies in a voice similar to my character. I laugh, and he flashes me a grin. His hands slide into the pockets of his gray shorts. “I don’t think I’ll get the role. I should have auditioned for someone else,” he says with a forced indifference, and I keep mute.

He might be correct, but we don’t have the numbers or options to pick who we want.

“Never say never,” I mutter.

“We both know it’s the truth. But you, Tessa, you killed it. Damn. You did a great job, Juliet.”

A strangled sound escapes me. Curt looks at me and chuckles. I am not used to being praised this often. “Thank you.” As we continue to the parking lot, I kick pebbles out of my way. I stop by my car, expecting him to walk past me, but he stops, and I am prompted to ask, “Need a ride?”

“If you don’t mind.” His reply reminds me of the last person I gave a ride, and my heart flutters. Curt snaps a finger in front of my face. I offer him a sheepish grin. He’s far different from Ben. Short, cute and chubby. Why am I thinking of Ben? He’s a bitch. Is he? I don’t know if I can hold onto the anger. Sure, he hasn’t apologized or shown remorse, but... “Back to earth, Tessa.”

I hit the red button on my car fob, and a beep follows. Curt winks at me, and I stifle the urge to puke all over myself. Granted, a lot of guys don’t talk to me because I spend most of my time in Maria’s shadow, but I have a type, and it’s not Curt. I don’t know what my type is. Maybe blue eyes? No. Definitely not that. I join Curt in the car to see he has already raided my cookie stash.

The fuck?

“This tastes so good,” he says, revealing teeth stained with chocolate chips. He digs into another cookie, munching loudly. He didn’t even ask for my permission. “Did you make this yourself?”

I start the car without replying to the chubby fuck. What if the cookies are poisoned?

The sound of a bike cuts through the air, and I slow down as Ben’s bike crawls out from the other side of the parking lot. Ben notices my car and pushes his visor up. Our eyes lock, and a shiver runs down my spine. We are not friends, but we are no longer enemies. I wave at him, happier than I should be to see him. He scoffs, looking behind me to see the person in the car.

His eyes return to mine in a chilly glare. I lower my hand hanging in the air and tighten it around the steering wheel. The motorbike's engine punctuates the silence, and Ben drives past my car without a word or glance at me. I slide down my seat. I don't know why I thought we were cool.

I don't know why I thought the ride I gave him yesterday made us non-enemies. I stare at the hand I used to wave, and his reaction stings more than it should have. He could have at least honked or waved or stopped by to ask if I got home safe.

Benjamin Carter is an asshole.

A song blasts through the radio. I yelp, and Curt laughs, reminding me of his unwanted presence. What is his problem? Touching things in people's cars without their permission is wrong.

"That was hella awkward, Tessa," he says. I hope he chokes on the cookies. This is one time I wish I wasn't nice. I ignore him and step on the brake. "But that guy is too arrogant, anyway."

Twenty-Eight



LETT: *I'm sorry you get bullied. And I understand how you feel about your dad. I know that feeling all too well. Daddy used to be so busy, but he tried to be there for us as much as possible. I miss him sometimes. We both do. Some days hurt more than others, but we do our best to survive.*

The divorce hit him so bad he spiraled out of control and was always in and out of rehab. Alcohol was his new best friend. The few times he was sober, he was the best dad a kid could ever ask for. Daddy didn't want the divorce, but mom did. She wasn't happy in the marriage anymore. We all knew because their fights became more frequent, but we hoped she would change her mind.

It's funny how no one asks the kids what they want, they don't care how the separation affects us. We didn't even ask to be brought into this fucking world. It's unfair of them and maybe selfish of me to wish she stayed with him a little longer until AJ and I were much older to handle the divorce, but I wish she did. Maybe he might still be here with us today. Daddy was a really good man. They were both good parents.

Lol. I think I am rambling now. Enough about me and my sad stories. Let's talk about you, miss. Am I right? You are a girl, right? Why haven't you been to a party? Why haven't you kissed or dated? Tell me.

My cheeks hurt from smiling so much as I bring out my pen to reply Lett. I fold his letter and slide it into my bag to store it in my favorite shoebox once I get home. He's not here,

but I'm nervous. I try to picture him hidden behind the shelves in the library as he scribbled those words.

Does he wait till he gets home before replying?

Does he get so anxious and impatient about my reply?

Does he change his handwriting like I do, so the chances of figuring out who he is, are less?

How often does he check? I give up on figuring out the mystery guy and start writing.

Me: Yes, I'm a girl. What do you want to know? Ask me anything and I promise to answer. Relationships are complicated. I don't think we should be thinking of it at this point. We have our whole life ahead of us. We can meet people, fall in love, and have our happy ever after. No need to rush into it.

Guilt threatens to choke me when I reread my lines. The white lie. I turn off the radio playing in the background and stare out the window. Lett was honest with me. I owe him that much.

I tug on my ponytail one last time and resume writing. This time, I will be honest. We don't know each other. I can get away with telling him whatever I want. Plus, I trust him.

Me: BUT. The primary reason is relationships scare me. Many things can go wrong. I don't want to lose lifelong friendships over a failed relationship or be the middleman when there's a fight between two of my best friends. Sorry if I'm not making sense but it happened to me once. I can't risk it happening again, so no relationships for now. Besides, I don't think anyone wants to date me. No one notices me, and I like it that way. I admit I make efforts to be invisible. I don't know why but I am kind of used to it.

There isn't really much to say about me. I am the good girl, the poster child for good behavior. Straight As with the occasional B+ that happened only once. I think that's all there is to know about me. Now I'm the one rambling. Lol. I ramble a lot when I am nervous, you are making me nervous. Lol.

Anyways, how's AJ? I hope you two are fine and taking care of each other. I'm sure you are. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask, I will always try to help. Before you say it, the answer is no. I don't pity you. I just want to help. Two of you don't deserve the hand life dealt you and if you need anyone to talk to, I am here for you. I hope you take me up on my offer, and I don't mind reading your rambles. I ramble too.

Someone bangs on my car window. I scream, and in my panic, the note flies to the backseat. My hand goes over my chest to calm my racing heart. I breathe through my mouth until the pounding subsides. Maria raises her eyebrows in mockery and folds her arms on her chest. She gestures for me to roll down the window, and I grudgingly oblige her. Why can't she act normal for once?

"The bell already rang twice, Tessa," she says. "What are you still doing here?"

Maria's eyes wander to the sheets scattered on the backseat. I start shaking my head, but that only piques her interest. No, she can't read them. I have never complained to her about my dad or his job. It's bad enough that I invaded Lett's privacy. I won't forgive myself if she reads his letter.

"Is it the boy?" She opens the backdoor, picks up my letter to him, and slides in. It is *the* boy, but it's not what she hopes. I think Lett is okay, but that's it. He's still a stranger. A cool one. "Can I?"

"No."

I angle my upper body so I am facing her. My fingers itch to snatch the letters spread on her lap, but I stay put. If I show too much interest in it, her curiosity will grow, and against my wish, she will read them out and tease me about it for days. To be fair, that's something I might do to her.

"Please don't read it," I murmur in a soft voice while playing with the hem of my shirt. Maria shoves the letters under my school bag, and I smile when she joins me in the front. "Thank you."

“It’s a boy, yeah? You know you can always tell me anything, right?” I do know that, but this is something I don’t want to share with her. I manage a nod. She squeals and claps like the dramatic cheerleader she truly is. “I knew it was a boy. Is it Ben? You didn’t tell me what happened.”

My head snaps in her direction so fast that I feel dizzy. “Ben? Ew, no.”

“Ben is not ew. He is just an idiot.” That he is. An idiot who blatantly ignores the girl who was stupid enough to offer him a ride after he punched her. “What happened? What did he say? Tell me everything that happened, or I’ll think myself to death. Did you punch him? Did he hit you?”

Maria tries to tickle the information out of me, but I swat her hands before they do any real damage. “No. No. None of that happened, but I’m not telling you anything because you left me. It was your idea, and you fled the second I got caught.” Maria pouts. I cannot believe this girl. I tug harshly on my shirt. “But why would you think the letter is from him? Ben hates my guts.”

“Can’t blame him. He missed two weeks of lectures because of you. Now he has a bulk of notes to copy,” she says while inspecting her nails coated in red polish. “And you are a bit annoying—”

“Hey.” I pinch my best friend’s arm, and she laughs. “I’m not annoying,” I whisper. “And he deserved to be suspended for punching me. It’s not okay to hit a lady, not okay to hit anyone.”

Maria agrees with a nod. I lean over my seat to pick up the papers on the backseat. She is quiet as I slip the letters into my bag. I have to drop my reply at the library later. When I am settled in, I turn to her. “You didn’t answer the question, Maria. Why do you think the letter is from Ben?”

She might know something I don’t. But I can’t imagine anyone molesting Ben. That boy can fight, and I don’t see anyone overpowering him in a battle without rules, especially a female.

“I don’t know. Because you have a crush on him?”

I fake a shudder and force a frown to my lips. I don’t have a crush on him. Before he punched me, I did, but not anymore. Besides, almost every girl in Broadway Heights has a crush on him. I’m not special. I’m not his type, nor is he mine. He’s dating Olivia, and I don’t need her drama.

“Maria,” I warn when she makes kissy faces at me. Ben will never kiss me.

“Fine. Sharon saw you drop him at her school last week. You were smiling with his brother,” she says, and my cheeks burn. I wipe my sweaty hands on my sweatpants, and she wiggles her brows suggestively. Her sister is such a little snitch. “Why was the guy who punched you in your car?”

“Um, he apologized,” I lie. *God, please forgive me.* Maria makes a disapproving sound but does not interrupt me. She leans back on her chair and throws her leg over the dash. This girl. I slap her foot off my baby. This car cost my dad a lot of money. “He needed a ride, and I was there.”

She casts me a long suspicious look and hums. “That’s all that happened? Do you forgive him?”

“Yes, I do. There was nothing to it. I only helped because we share a few classes. That’s it. The boy can’t stand the sight of me, and that’s okay.” The scowl he passed my way when he saw me and Curt flashes in my mind. I shake it off. “Even if I have a crush on him, nothing can happen.”

“We should have slashed his tires,” she mumbles.

“You can do that yourself,” I tell her with a big smile. Maria brings out her phone, I am not sure what her plan is, but I say, “Don’t even think about it. Maria Vega, stop typing immediately.”

Maria slides her phone into her shorts, and I sit straighter. She conceded too quickly.

The warning bell rings. We share a glance and shrug. We should get back to class since lunch break is over, but I don’t feel like it, and from her composure, neither does she. I push my seat back to create more legroom, and she does the same.

“I asked Daniel out,” she blurts out after a moment of comfortable silence. My eyes round to saucers, and she throws her hand over her eyes. I open my mouth and close it without a word. When I told her to ask Daniel about the Halloween party, I didn’t mean this. “I think it was a bad idea.”

So do I, but I don’t say it. They will make a power couple, but their relationship will not happen if that video is still out there. She might not recover from it. Curiosity prickles my skin. I throw one leg over my seat and pull her hand between mine. She offers me a smile, and my heart skips.

“What did he say?” I ask quietly. Maria is hot, any guy she asks out should be excited, but Daniel is not any guy. He has a lot at stake. She pulls her hand back. “Maria, what did he say?”

“He didn’t say no, but he didn’t say yes,” she says with a shrug. My muscles relax. That’s okay, I guess. But the look on her face says otherwise. “He said he has to show me something first.”

“When?”

“Didn’t give a date,” she replies. Sitting up, she folds her arms across her chest. Her focus is on her boots until she cuts me a look. “What do you think he wants to show me? I swear to God I’ll kill him if it’s something stupid. I’ll be done with his stupid ass for good.” Her back connects with her seat, and she frowns. “It better be worth it. What do you think? Should I be bothered?”

Bile rises to my throat as that video replays in my mind. “I don’t know what to think.” Her laser gaze fixates on my face, and I rotate my shoulders. I promised to keep it a secret until Daniel resolves it, but it’s hard to uphold my end of the bargain. “Maybe you are overthinking it. He likes you.”

“Who wouldn’t?” The sound of our laughter fills the car. I cross my legs, and she leans back until her head touches the window. Fifth period should be starting. “Halloween is almost here.”

We both know she's only interested in it because Daniel's presence has been confirmed. On the bright side, I can strike it off my list. It's a costume party, but still a party regardless. "Yeah," I say. Ben's birthday is also around the corner. I already got the ingredients for the cake. Baking it is the only thing left. I'll do that on the morning of the seventeenth. "We should get back inside."

Maria's lips twist in a frown, she nods, and we hop out of the car with our backpacks. Linking our hands, we stroll to the front door and push it open. Today is not the day we will miss classes.

Twenty-Nine



MUSIC BOOMS from the earbuds plugged into my ears, and I slap a hand against my hip in rhythm to the song infiltrating my mind. I nudge the door to the drama club open with my foot and stop.

Everyone is here.

Not everyone but half the school soccer team is present. I pluck out the earbuds and shove my phone into my pocket. My feet refuse to function. I pinch my thighs, praying my brain sends signals to them, but they remain glued to the floor. The hall is packed with tall walls of bricks in the form of jocks. I can almost touch the testosterone in the air. Their heads snap to me in unison, and my eyes find my sneakers.

What are they doing here?

“Tessa, nice of you to finally join us,” Ms. Jota says. The cheeriness in her voice washes off some of the awkwardness. I walk briskly to where she’s seated. I’m only a few minutes late, so she won’t reprimand me, but the unwarranted attention feels like punishment. “We have new members.”

The new members are the boys seated in a circle straddling their chairs backward. I drag a seat behind Ms. Jota’s work table. She glances at me without saying a word, but I am grateful for her frame, which hides me from the view of those boys. I don’t understand why they are here. Are they lost? Because this is not the gym or school field. Ms. Jota doesn’t seem to mind. She looks content with the number. On the plus side, we might get our Romeo. They are all good-looking.

Whitney giggles. I look to see her in the circle of boys. Her friends are also with her. For the life of me, I can't recall their names. They whisper among themselves, hands over their mouths to stifle the giggles that still escape as they cackle like aged witches. I feel someone's hot gaze on me. My eyes flit in that direction, and my heart slows when I locate the blue eyes fixated on me.

Calling him a witch or wizard doesn't sound right. It also lacks the same intensity. Well, he's a male bitch. I avert my gaze and drop my school bag at my feet to retrieve my script. I spent most of last night and this morning rehearsing my lines, but with all of them present, I might not remember.

Why do they have to be here?

My hands shake as I reach for the zipper of my backpack. I miss it twice and give up. I'm super nervous, and rehearsals haven't started. Great. Ms. Jota stands, leaving me visible to the boys. I hear a few whistles and catcalls directed at me. I raise my head to glare at them, realizing my shirt has bunched at my back. My cheeks burn a bright pink as I tug the hem of my shirt over the waistband of my jeans, thankful that the part of my skin on display has no white patches.

"Before we start," Ms. Jota calls out in a powerful voice, and I am forgotten as everyone's eyes return to her. She walks to the center of the stage with the scripts in one hand. When she turns to Whitney, who smiles politely at her, I gag in my brain. "I would like to know if everyone is here for the drama or...some are here for the set designs. The numbers are welcome, but I need to know before we start. Introduce yourself, please and let us know." Pointing to one of the boys, she says, "You, yes. You first. Introduce yourself. What name do you want to be addressed?"

Noise breaks out among the boys after Ms. Jota's statement. Typical of them. They can't do without causing a commotion. My gaze darts to Whitney, who is all too pleased with herself. We wanted more members, not the hottest guys in school. Even manwhore Noah is here. Can the boy even read? Yes, he's hot, but hot alone doesn't cut it for me. Hot with brains? Yes. Like Ben.

I give myself a mental slap for thinking about him, my fingers dig into my palm to stop me from peeking at him, but my eyes have a mind of their own. I steal a glance. From my periphery, I catch Ben already staring at me and duck my head so that my hair falls over my face to hide my blush.

That boy is odd.

First, he winks at me in the cafeteria, saves me from getting kicked out of Mr. Sam's class, warns me about Daniel, threatens me to stay away from his brother, punches me right after, and then accepts my offer of a ride only to begin ignoring me. Talk about weird. I don't even like him that much. He doesn't know how to treat a girl, which might be why Olivia cheats on him with Noah.

Heavy footsteps fill the silence as the boys move to the stage. I squeeze my lips as the first group starts their introduction, not caring to look at them. I can identify them by their voices. They are halfway gone with the introductions when it hits me that someone is missing. I raise my hand.

Ms. Jota nods. "Yes, Tessa?"

A lump forms in my throat when different pairs of eyes turn to me. "Curt is not here."

"Curtis?" That's his full name. I nod, and she pulls out a note from under the script. "He quit."

Instant relief fills me. Guilt tries to take over, but it's swallowed by happiness. Curt is too loud, and I still dislike him for eating my cookies. It will be awkward having him as my partner on set. He's too short to play Romeo. Wait a minute, who says I am playing the role of Juliet? What if Whitney gets it? She brought all these people. Ms. Jota might give her the spot. My eyes locate Ms. Jota at the corner of the stage, watching the boys introduce themselves while dishing out scripts to those who care for acting. I want the role of Juliet. It's the only one that truly matters.

I look up at the sound of chairs scraping the floor. The boys have been grouped. Noah is on the left side of the stage, and Ben is on the right. I am not sure what he picked. How did

Whitney get him to come here? Sure, they sit at the same table in the cafeteria, but I have never seen them talk. Why is he here without his almighty girlfriend? Drama club is the perfect place for her to dominate.

“It’s settled then. Thank you,” Ms. Jota says, and they file down the stage to their seats. “We already started the auditions, but you boys will have more time to practice since the play isn’t until next year. I will ask the art teacher, Mr. Rizwan, to provide us with designs to use. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” echoes through the room.

I grow conscious when she turns to me, then spares a look at her wristwatch. “We have a bit of time for rehearsal today.” Her eyes return to the boys, and I relax. “Who wants to play Romeo?”

Numerous hands shoot up in response, and I swallow tight. That’s a lot of potential Romeos for only one play. All of them want it, including the boys who volunteered for set designs. Ms. Jota laughs and gives Whitney a double thumbs up. My insides knot with fury, maybe even jealousy.

I thought I was her favorite.

“Does Romeo get to kiss Juliet?” one of them, a blond with one hand in his pocket, asks.

Another person says, “Who’s playing Juliet?”

“Tessa will,” Ms. Jota replies, and my eyes round to the size of saucers. *Holy cow! I’m Juliet.*

She doesn’t glance at me to see my reaction. I blink at the stage, picturing myself in my costume while reciting my lines to an audience that jumps to their feet to clap for me at the end of my outstanding performance. Wow. It will also look good on my applications. *We can do this, Juliet.*

“Nuh-uh, I don’t want to kiss Mother Theresa. How about we do a Romeo-Romeo? Or Whitney plays Juliet? She, I can kiss,” Noah says. His voice snaps me out of my daydream. Chuckles follow his remark, and I chew on the inside of my lip. Ms. Jota opens her mouth to say something but his head

rounds to a giggling Whitney. “Yo, Whitney. What do you think? Want to be my Juliet?”

As I rise to my feet, a new wave of anger rolls off me. The sound of their laughter increases, and my fists clench at my sides. I beat Whitney or Ms. Jota to reply to the mannerless prick. I won’t let him take this moment from me. “Even if I have a gun pointed at my head, I won’t kiss you.”

Fury shadows Noah’s face at the hoots and cheers that follow my clapback. I match his stony gaze with a wicked smile, and he finally looks away after a few seconds of intense glaring.

Who wants to touch that public toilet he calls his lips? I am sure his mouth has been on half the cheerleading squad and places I never want to talk about. Disgusting fellow. Ben, I can kiss.

On instinct, my eyes locate Ben. He arches a brow, and a corner of his lips lifts in a smirk. I pretend to be unaffected by him. He’s so fine without even trying. If only he isn’t an asshole or is as nice as Asher. I plop on my seat, and a smile finally breaks out on my lips. He’s impressed.

I impressed Ben.

A stifling silence takes over the hall. I look up to see Ms. Jota glaring at me, and I shrink in my seat. Her disappointment is heavy. Noah started it first. “There will be no kissing anybody in this place, Noah. And nobody, no one will be pointing a gun to anyone’s head.” She narrows her eyes at everyone seated as if asking if we get the point. “Settle down now. Tessa, join me on stage.”

Thirty



A HUSH FALLS over the hall. I head for the stage, nearly exploding with anxiety. Someone puts out a leg to trip me. Ben. My eyes lift to his face, and he smirks. Idiot. My heart beats against my chest, I feel eyes on the back of my head, and all I want to do is scream. Instead, I hurry to join Ms. Jota.

She points to a line in her script—scene two. “We can start from here today,” she says. Unable to talk, I can only nod. Her arm lowers, and she frowns at my empty hands. “Where’s your script?”

My finger juts out in the direction of my bag, and she lifts a thin eyebrow, probably wondering why I left it there. I forgot it in my hurry. “Do you know the lines?” I don’t know how I manage to move my head, but I do, and she walks off the stage. When she’s downstage, she says, “Start.”

Blondie puts two fingers in his mouth to let out a whistle of support, and Ben kicks the back of the boy’s chair. Ms. Jota’s stern gaze lands on them. Blondie offers her a sheepish apology, but Ben shrugs. She ignores them, and her eyes fall back to me. “Tessa, over to you. We are waiting.”

I don’t know why my gaze scrolls to Ben. He frowns when I delay, and I lose focus.

He’s making me nervous.

The scene opens up with Romeo sneaking into Juliet’s room. I know the words she says to him and his replies, but

they evaporate into thin air once I open my mouth. I can't remember.

“Tessa, do you need help?”

My mind blanks. Ms. Jota walks up to me with a script. I accept it from her with a small smile.

“It's okay. You can read from the script today.” But that's not my problem. That boy in front with a smug smile playing on his lips is. She gives me a thumbs up. “You can do it. Go on, Tessa.”

The lines blur. I shake off the nerves and pretend there's no one watching. I can't fuck this up. Ms. Jota must not regret making me Juliet. With my nerves under partial control, I clear my throat and let it flow. To the thin air where Romeo should have been, I say, “Good night, good night.”

As I continue, I start to really get into it. I can tell something is lacking in my performance, but I am not sure, so I don't dwell on it. I soon forget about the script as the lines flow from my lips.

“Your emotion, Tessa.” The disapproving tone permeates my bubble. I pause without turning to Ms. Jota because turning means facing Ben. “Put your heart into it just like you did yesterday.”

Only yesterday, there wasn't a group of hot jerks hoping I failed. My head jerks furiously in a nod. The crowd will be massive on the D-day, and I'll have to still perform.

Ms. Jota's voice breaks through my thoughts a second time. “Again. Do it again. You have to make the audience feel it.” The bells in my head trip when I hear a snicker. I don't bother to confirm the source, but it heightens my nervousness. “Tessa? We don't have all day. Start over.”

And so, I start all over. My nerves are worse this time. I can hear them in my voice. My palms grow sweaty, and my speech falters multiple times. Ms. Jota stops me from continuing and walks over to the stage. I look down at her, and my teeth sink into my lip as she crosses her arms.

“What’s going on, Theresa?” She called me by my full name. She’s disappointed in me. Tears burn the back of my eyes. I’m nervous, but I can do this. “You were doing so good yesterday.”

“She needs her mask, Ms. Jota,” someone yells. “Can’t do shit without it.”

What mask? Juliet doesn’t need a mask for this scene.

“Language, Mister Carter.”

Mister Carter. Benjamin Carter.

My eyes snap to the audience to find him, and he cocks his head as if daring me to argue back. I would have if Ms. Jota was not here. Hasn’t he gotten over losing that match to me? He won all his games after that. I know because we both qualified for the All-Rounder coming up next year.

All-Rounder is the club’s unique form of the Olympics. But the rules are stricter for the games. I can’t get away with knee shots, and fighting in pairs is allowed. Coach Greyson is subtly agitating for me to find a partner because the prize money for dual matches doubled this year.

“Maybe she needs her little boyfriend, Curtis, to prep her.” That same voice. Fool.

Ms. Jota turns to Ben. If he so much as breathes out a word about the ring, I will deny him. Ben matches her stare with equal intensity. She shakes her head and peeks at her wristwatch. I feel her pain. He also exhausts me. I helped him, but he’s still mean. I can’t wrap my head around it.

“We will continue next week.” My relief is enormous. I beam at the idea. Her phone rings. She pulls it out of her pocket and frowns at the screen. “Just a minute,” she says and exits the hall.

A minute passes without Ms. Jota showing up, then it starts. “Juliet, show us your tits.”

I don’t know which of the idiots said that, but when my eyes raise to the audience, Ben’s wide grin is the only thing I see. He slides his phone into his pocket. His smile vanishes,

and he glares at me like I am the reason he's here. I ignore the room full of jerks while drawing circles with my foot. This is our last year together. It will end soon. I'll never see most of them after this.

"Come on. A little peek won't hurt anyone."

"Guys, leave her alone." I recognize the voice as Ben's. "Juliet is not so tough without her mask to hide her ugly face."

The smile making its way to my lips disappears. My face is not ugly. Why does he always have to do this to me? How's he such an angel with Asher and a demon with me?

"Stop calling me Juliet, you ungrateful prick," I say through gritted teeth.

The others are being their usual annoying self by teasing me with no real harmful intent, but Ben is deliberately trying to get under my skin.

"I'll call you whatever I want, *Juliet*," he fires back with enough anger to make the hall grow quiet. The whispers increase. They must have sensed the underlying animosity between both of us. I don't reply with words but flash the loser my middle finger, and snickers break out from the crowd behind him. I know better than to think they are on my side. "What was that, Juliet?"

Red briefly clouds my vision. I try to spell vitiligo under my breath, but it doesn't work. "*What was that, Loser?*" I whine, and the cheers grow louder. My head jerks up and down like a puppet on a string. Their laughter fuels me with more courage. "Shouldn't you be with your fellow losers? Why are you even here?" The thing is, I don't only ramble a lot when nervous. It also happens when I get too excited, and right now, I am. In a singsong voice, I add, "Loser. Loser. Loser."

Ben jumps to his feet. His chair clatters to the floor, and the rest of my words hook in my throat. Shit. The room shrinks in size. I start backing away from the stage once his foot connects with the stairs. Double shit. The hall is too quiet. No one is trying to stop the menace storming toward me. Ben

climbs the stage. He takes one step, then another, until he is a few feet away from me.

Fear zips through me, and my eyes dart to the door in search of Ms. Jota. Where is a teacher when you need one? I don't want to be hit again. My feet fail me. They stop moving, and Ben closes the distance in one giant stride. I can do this. I'll punch him first. His hot breath fans my neck when he leans to laugh in my ear. My legs recover. I take one step away, but he covers it.

We continue the cat and mouse game until I am backed up against the wall with nowhere to hide. "I can smell your fear," Ben murmurs. I hate this boy so much. I fucking hate him. Maria was wrong, and so was I. I don't have a crush on him. My chest sags in gratitude when he steps back. He stretches his hands like a host about to reveal an item on sale and cocks his head to the audience staring. "Mother Theresa, oh, sorry, I meant Juliet. Little Miss Juliet isn't so tough now, is she?"

They erupt in laughter, whistling and stamping their feet like they are in the field. They are so loud that I expect Ms. Jota to burst through the doors and admonish them, but nothing happens.

Noah claps like the fucking moron he is, and his head falls back with laughter. It is not even funny. Ben's joke is lame. Noah's partner, Whitney, is all over him, giggling like a fool. I hope his neck snaps and his head rolls onto Whitney's ugly laps so the bitch will forever be scarred.

Ben returns to torment me. Ms. Jota is taking too long. I count to five, but she doesn't show up, so I start thinking up a list of drugs to put in Ben's cake. Asher will have to forgive me, but his brother and everyone who eats that cake will purge till their asses bleed. Then we will know who the true tough guy is. It's unfair that he is allowed to do whatever he likes and get away with it.

Hooking two fingers under my jaw so my eyes are on his face, he mutters, "You said something when I was down there." A lump collects in my throat. Ben is so close I can't breathe properly without inhaling him. Why does he smell so

nice? So manly? He looks more handsome up close. Pray tell, why am I thinking of this right now? I need a grip. A slap. “What did you say to me, Juliet? Cat got your mouth now, eh? Miss Juliet, or should I say, masked girl? Are you dumb?”

I shove him, but Ben is a firm wall of muscles, so my effort is useless. I aim for his knee, but he dodges my foot and chuckles. His free hand comes to rest beside my head. Still, I try to defend myself by speaking up. Our gazes meet, and I take a deep breath to ease some of my nerves.

“My name is not Juliet. My name is not masked girl. My name is not Mother Theresa. My name is Tessa Mower. You don’t have to be an asshole to me all the time. I am tired of you treating me like shit. It’s unfair. I didn’t do anything wrong to you.” Tears rush to my eyes. Great. I’m about to cry in front of the jackass and give him more ammunition as if he doesn’t already have enough. “Don’t talk to me at all rather than talk shit to me each time you open that dirty mouth of yours.”

Holy Jesus. Bloody Mary.

I slap a hand over my mouth, stunned by the words that left it. That wasn’t what I meant to say. I meant them, but they were supposed to stay in my head. Ben stiffens. I squeeze my eyes shut. I hope I get a chance to tell my parents I love them before he buries me alive. “What did you say?”

“Stop treating me like shit,” I whisper, eyes still clamped shut. Ben scoffs, and I reprimand myself for talking back at him. I need to learn to keep my mouth shut in the right circumstances, like this one. His breath warms my neck, and I imagine him trying to strangle me. “Asher will be disappointed in you, Ben. If only he knows his Benny is just a big bully who preys on girls.”

That was the final stroke. I shouldn’t have said that, but nothing happens. I open one eye to see him staring at me with a bemused expression. I freeze when his thumb traces the outline of my lower lip. Is he going to squeeze my lips until I pass out? Can he do that? Can I die from that?

The fear gradually fades. I become aware of our position and the softness that takes over Ben's features. He's not so scary anymore with the vulnerability and sadness swimming in his gaze. He's right to be sad for making a girl like me miserable. I'm not the best person on earth, but I don't deserve the hate. Ben blinks. His lashes are so long and curvy. I bet his hair is soft to the touch.

"You think I'm preying on you?" he whispers.

I don't know if his question is genuine, but my reply is. "Yes. Asher won't like it. I don't like it."

A sad smile pulls the corners of his lips. He cups my cheek, and his thumb moves up and down my cheekbone. My breath catches. What is he doing? My mouth opens to utter a stupid remark because my brain can't handle our proximity, but Ben presses a finger to my lips to shut me up.

"You've got a sharp mouth. Razor sharp," he mutters. "It will put you in trouble one day."

Then he walks away like he did nothing.

Thirty-One



IT IS STUPID. I should be prosecuted for this, but I still think of how Ben's finger felt against my lips. Against my cheek. How his voice softened, and he looked at me like he could see Tessa.

I'm so hopeless and foolish for thinking about kissing the guy who treats me like gum on his shoe. Last night, I had a dream where he asked me out. I press another finger to my lips and trace the Cupid bow like Ben did. Butterflies flutter in my belly at the thought of kissing him on stage. Ms. Jota sneaked in a kiss scene at the end. So, he has to play Romeo, and I'll be his Juliet. My inner voice mocks my fairy tale, and a soft sigh escapes me. I am getting ahead of myself again.

Maria nudges my shoulder. I snap out of my reverie and try desperately to wipe the smug smile off my face, but it sticks. My best friend wiggles her brows suggestively like she caught me with a hand in the cookie jar. I ignore her the first time. The third time, I throw my hands up. "What?"

She says nothing. I grab my bag from the backseat, but she gives me that look again.

"Maria. Speak now or forever hold your peace." Her brows only shoot higher, and her smile grows. She does this a lot. And it makes you so antsy you start confessing to unknown crimes. "Fine, don't say it."

I wrench the door open and jog to the entrance of our school. Maria calls out to me from behind. I turn sharply and place a hand on my waist. "Are you going to tell me why you

were smiling like that?” Within a minute, she covers the gap and throws an arm around my shoulder. We take the stairs two at a time, but she stops me from opening the door. “Maria Vega, what is your problem?”

The drama queen finally opens her mouth to talk. She folds her arms on her chest, her foot raps on the floor, and she levels me her infamous look of disapproval. I didn’t even do anything wrong.

“Why didn’t you just tell me you and Ben are a thing? The letters? Sneaking around? Seriously? You thought I wouldn’t know? This is Broadway Heights, Tessa. Nothing stays hidden for long.” I place the back of my palm on her forehead to be sure she is okay. But she slaps my hand away. “I have evidence, so don’t you dare deny it. Best friends tell each other everything, Tessa.”

Her facade of seriousness doesn’t crack. I push the strap sliding down my shoulder and take a big breath. “Deny what?” Maria scowls like the answer is obvious, but it isn’t. I have not the faintest idea what ‘denial’ she is talking about. Ben and I are a thing? Of all the impossible things, she chose the most outlandish. I reach for the knob of the front door, but she swats my hand. Jesus. I clench the straps of my backpack. “Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?”

Mondays are not our favorite days of the week, but we have survived it so far. And we can endure it for the rest of the year. Silence meets my question. I push the door open, take my first step, and wobble back. Staying outside with Maria feels like a better option than this mini crowd.

The hallway is crowded. First red flag. I meander through the students huddled in groups, talking in hush tones. A few subtle glances get thrown my way. Second red flag. Did Ben do something? I steal a look over my shoulder to see Maria glaring at me. I don’t wait to find out what might be bugging her but rush to my locker. The faster I get my books, the sooner I can get to my class and hide.

The last time everyone paid this much attention to me, it didn’t end well.

In front of my locker, I don't open the door immediately. If the pranks have resumed, I need to be prepared. Maria yanks the door open before I'm ready. But nothing jumps at me. No spiders. I check every nook and cranny. No glitters. No itching powder. No used tampons. Nothing odd.

And that itself is odd. Something is wrong. The whispers along the hallway increase. I catch two students pointing at me, but they look away once I straighten up. I flip through the weekend activities and last week for a hint, but my brain comes up empty. The only attention-worthy thing I did was fight in the ring with my mask. Yes, I won, but no one knew it was me except Ben. But my match was after his. I also went to the supermarket to get the items for his cake since his birthday is on Friday. No one from school saw me, but they are acting strange. As strange as Maria or worse. Does this have to do with Ben? What did that boy do this time? We had a deal.

Did we? It looked like it with how his eyes softened after I mentioned Asher.

"Care to explain this?" Maria shoves her phone into my face, nearly blinding me. She thinks with her ass sometimes, and this is one of those times. I'm yet to see what the fuss is all about when she adds, "You are not crushing on Ben. You two don't have a thing, but you are kissing him."

I ignore my crazy best friend and tap the video on the screen. My breath catches when a scene from drama club plays. I pause the video to tell her, "There was no kissing." She huffs. I might as well have been talking to myself. "Maria, there was no kissing. This happened during practice."

A dent appears between my brows, and I hit the replay button. The video starts when Ben leans in. Watching it reminds me of the actual event, and my breath grows ragged. In the video, the space between us is inexistent. When he dips his head to whisper into my ears, it looks like he pecked me. The scene where he traced the outline of my lips looks more intimate, something that would not be a problem if we were a real couple. Heat floods my body at that thought. I blush when Maria clears her throat. The video ends with our eyes locked and his fingers under my jaw.

To outsiders, we look like couples about to kiss or do more. But I was about to melt in fear.

Maria snatches her phone from me. I bring out mine and check BGC. They will ruin my life at this rate. Is Whitney in charge of the site? She has to be the one who made the video. The boys were too busy laughing at me to create one. I might have noticed if Ben didn't trap me with those evil eyes. The comment section of the video is blowing up with mixed comments. My cheeks burn at the caption of the most-voted response, and I cringe at other brash and nasty comments.

Nerd girl snags BH's famous jock!

Ew. Who captioned this?

First of all, I am not a nerd. I have been to a pub. I have a fake ID, and my best friend is a pretty cheerleader. I am selective about the people I roll with, that's all. I didn't snag anybody. Ben was trying to bully me into silence. The second most-voted comment leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

Attention whore. Throwing yourself at the bad boy will get you nowhere.

Throwing myself? How dare they? I did not want to be there. I was trapped. I shove my phone into my backpack and face Maria. I'll go crazy if I continue reading those comments. Her lips pucker into a frown.

"It is not what it looks like. Look at Ben's face. He was literally about to kill me. Literally."

Maria leans on the locker. "With his lips? His fingers? His tongue? Or his sexiness?"

Oh, God.

Dirty thoughts spring up from nowhere. Images of Ben kissing me, forcing my legs apart to put his fingers and tongue where they have no business tormenting me. I'm a big ball of tomato by the time I find my voice.

"No. None of that," I murmur.

But I won't mind death by those lips. Can you die from kissing? What if he touches me and finds out I'm a virgin?

Will that turn him off? Honestly, why am I letting these thoughts roam free in my mind? Ben will never kiss me.

I explain the whole encounter to Maria. The glint in her eyes dies as my story progresses, and her frown gradually fades.

“Yep, nobody is kissing anybody.”

“So you didn’t snag the bad boy?” She sounds disappointed. I am too, but only a little. My heart does a funny dance. I shrug it off and put on a brave front. We won’t work out. “Such a big fat shame.”

Whatever! As if he will agree to be with someone like me. He has Olivia. Has she seen the video?

“I didn’t snag anyone.” I am dying to forget this conversation, so I start walking to my class. “I told you he hates me.”

“I doubt it. Ben likes you. I know when a boy likes a girl, and that boy likes you as much as you like him.” Ugh. I don’t like him. She might know a lot about boys, but she is wrong on this one. I have interacted with Ben. I know who he truly is. We stop at the door of her class, and she lets out a sigh. “Watch out for Olivia. The bitch already hates you, don’t give her another reason.”

“Isn’t she like with Noah now?” I saw both of them leaving the janitor’s closet on Friday. The girl acts as if she’s disgusted by the idea of high school dating, but she is forever sneaking in and out of locker rooms, the library, and other secret places with a new guy, yet Ben still hangs out with her. “She doesn’t have to worry. I don’t like her *man*,” I say, forcing myself to sound nonchalant.

Someone like her is expected to be with guys like Ben and Noah, while I’m stuck with guys like Curt. Maria eyes me, and I draw her in for a hug. I don’t like Ben.

“Bye, Maria. I’ll see you later.”

Once Maria is out of sight, I lean on the wall for support. Her words echo in my head, and fear tightens my belly. If Olivia thinks I like Ben, she will come for me; do something

worse than the video of Daniel. I push away from the wall and start for my class. I will worry about that later.

So lost in my thoughts, I miss a step and crash into someone who shoves me to the floor. Pain shoots up my knee. I whimper, and the sound dies down when something cold and pink trickles down my hair and onto my face. It takes me a minute to recover and dab my eyes with my shirt.

This girl will get it from me today. I stagger to my feet, and my anger evaporates.

Olivia's minions surround her. I can't take five of them down. She flashes me a smile, and my eyes dart to the empty cup of yogurt in her hand. "Oops. I didn't see you there, *thief*."

Even if she were blind, she would have seen me. The witch pushed me. She stalks forward. On instinct, I take a step back. Her lips turn down in a frown, and her finger shoots out to stop me. I pause, and she bridges the gap. I am so tempted to strangle her with her hair, but she towers over me with her heels. A smile breaks out on her lips as her gaze sweeps over me. I need to change.

Olivia closes in on me like Ben did in the video. Her breath tickles my ear. "Benjamin Carter is mine," she whispers. Her icy tone sends shivers down my spine. She stands straight and smiles. Stretching an arm behind her for a paper towel, she folds it in half and pushes it into my hand, giving me no option to refuse it. "Be careful, Theresa. Next time, watch where you are going."

Thirty-Two



“YOUR SHIRT IS HOT,” Blondie tells me.

I smoothen the front of the white shirt I borrowed from Maria. “Um, thanks.” He winks. After Olivia made a mess of my shirt, I had to get a new one, and the only thing my best friend had was a skin-tight top highlighting the shape of my boobs. I don’t need to look hard enough to see the outline of my pink bra, and I know that’s what drew Blondie’s eyes to me. I need to stop calling the poor boy by his hair color. Shouldn’t he be with the set design group? “Where’s Ms. Jota?”

After giving instructions to the set design group, she left without a word. He shrugs. “Dunno.”

Ben is not here. Has he seen the video? How did he react? He must have laughed his heart out. Someone chuckles behind me. I twist my neck to steal a peek at the culprit, and Noah grins at me. I avert my gaze and return my eyes to my script. Just one top, and everyone is interested in me.

What if he was the one who recorded the video? Whitney is missing. She chose set design, and I am glad about that. I don’t need the competition. She and Ms. Jota spent the first few minutes of practice time discussing the designs for the set. Mr. Rizwan also loved her ideas. Cue the eye roll.

The door opens. I don’t look up when someone pulls out a seat from the second row.

“Yo,” Blondie says. “You’re late to the party.”

Party? No party in the script. I throw a glance his way as he exchanges manly handshakes with Ben. They start a discussion about hockey, and I return to reading. My feet drum a sharp rhythm on the floor. I chew my lips, reading one line for the fifth time. We have been here for a while.

A figure sits beside me. From the boots, I can tell the owner. His masculine scent envelops me, and I struggle to breathe properly. I suck in a soft breath when Ben taps me. My head raises, and I swallow the lump in my throat. I need to get a grip. I saw him in class. And he didn't bug me.

For a while, we are both quiet until his pinky finger brushes my leg. I look up, but his eyes are on the stage. I move my hand to stop him from touching me, but when my finger touches his, I'm frozen. Ben's gaze rakes me from head to knee. He doesn't mention my chest like the others, and when his eyes lower to our pinky fingers, which are somewhat interconnected, he smiles at me.

This is a dream. I pull away first and pinch my thighs. This is not a dream. Ben touched me.

"Hi. We have a class together, right?" We have more than one class, but I nod, and a tiny smile spreads to his lips. Another smile? What's going on? "Did you get Mr. Sam's note? I missed it."

I think the fact Ben is talking to me like a regular person erases my ability to speak. My mind blanks, and my eyes zero on his lips. He snaps his fingers in front of my face. I wet my lips, but the words refuse to form. I copied the note and understood it.

"Hello? Hi? Hey? Are you there?"

Air rushes into my throat. "Yeah," I breathe out. "Yeah, I did. I did."

Ben's eyes roll over me to the point of self-consciousness. I hide my trembling hands under my script. He needs to stop doing that, stripping me naked with a look. I clear my throat, forcing his eyes back to my face, and he nods slowly. A half-smile hits his lips. He's more handsome with a smile. He leans

back on the chair, and a bolt of jealousy hits me. Oh, to be a chair so I can enjoy his touch again. I shake my head to clear those thoughts. His closeness must be driving me crazy.

“Can I have it?”

“No.”

Ben arches a brow. “No?”

I clear my throat and, hopefully, the cobwebs in my brain. “I will give it to you if you apologize.” His laughter is seductive, a hoarse sound I can get used to hearing. Ben spares me another look and doubles over in laughter. I press my lips into a line. I mean it. “Or you can ask Abigail for hers.”

They stayed back to talk after class. I wasn't spying on them, but ignoring the invisible distance between them was tough. He stood as close as he stood beside me in that video. I hated it. I didn't like hearing her laugh at what he said. Olivia will have a fit if she finds out I am not the actual competition. I will be more than glad to be the snitch. I stop my thoughts from straying to darker zones. Besides, I have Lett. He understands me. I don't need to impress him. We flow so easily.

“No. I want yours.” Good for me because I won't hand over that note without a proper apology from him. He fixes me with a smile, and my heart gallops. I love his smile. His eyes, too. They steal attention. “But I won't apologize. Because I already did, and you accepted my apology.”

What is he talking about?

“Okay...” My eyes return to my script, but I can barely focus on my lines. I stare at my sneakers for a second. “Will you at least stop calling me Juliet? My name is Tessa. T. E. S. S. A. Tessa.”

“I know your name, *Juliet*,” he replies, voice dripping with arrogance. I hate this guy sometimes. His confidence in his superiority bothers me because it's hot. “About that note? Where is it?”

“Um...” I trail off.

He bends over to lace his boots, and his muscles flex against his shirt. I bite my lips. “Don’t do that.” Do what? My teeth sink deeper into my lip, and he says, “Stop it. You will hurt yourself.”

The only thing that can hurt me is his presence and this awkward conversation.

Ben groans, and I find it harder to understand his point. “Now, your lips are bleeding. You never listen, do you?” Oh. I press a finger to my lip and retract it to the sight of blood coating my fingertip. Without meeting his gaze, I swipe it over my jeans, and he chuckles. “Now, the note?”

“No.”

“I just saved you from chewing your lips and losing blood. You could have died from blood loss.” I roll my eyes so hard that he laughs. “In my opinion, Miss, that’s better than an apology.”

Clutching my knees, I shake my head. “I don’t need your opinion. I need your remorse.” Silence falls over us. Ben snickers. I look up, and my eyes twitch. He has my backpack. He is going through my backpack. I try to snatch it from him, but it’s too late. He holds my calculus note above his head with a sheepish grin I want to wipe off. “Haven’t you heard? You don’t go through a lady’s bag.”

“But you’re not a lady. You are a girl, Juliet,” he mutters with no malicious intent. I scoff, and he shrugs. Our knees touch. His eyes hold mine, and my chest tightens. “Word: Lady. Etymology: Middle English. A woman of authority, a breed of higher class. The mistress of a household.”

He’s brilliant, and he’s gawking at me. I swallow my initial comeback, thinking long and hard of a smarter reply. “There are many meanings for a word. A lady could also mean a young woman.”

“Yeah,” he comments as he lowers my bag to the floor, “but you are a girl, not a young woman.”

“Ben,” I whine.

His brows crease. I try to avoid more body contact. “What’s wrong with being called a girl?” My mouth drops open when he touches my arm. “Close your mouth, sweetie. A fly might get in.”

When I thought we might get along, he had to remind me of his authentic self. Ben brings out his phone to take pictures of today’s note, and the click-click of his camera breaks the silence at intervals.

“Are you even going to read it?” I whisper.

“Nope.”

He tilts his head slightly for me to catch his smug smile. “You are so annoying.”

“Yep,” he replies.

My eyes find my feet when his head jerks toward me. What is it this time?

“Is this your handwriting?” Ben asks. He flips pages and takes more pictures. “Juliet? Miss?”

“Yeah.”

I save my best handwriting for class because I don’t want to spend half the time later figuring out the notes instead of reading. The curvy, more calligraphic handwriting is reserved for Lett.

Ben must have realized I won’t fight him for my note because he doesn’t try to hide it from me. I twiddle my fingers when his eyes rest on my face for the umpteenth time. The idiot is well aware of the effect he has on most girls. As much as I hate to admit it, I am on the list of girls smitten by his looks. His arrogance is stifling but attractive.

There I go again, thinking about him in a good light. I hate this. Ben gives me mixed feelings.

“Almost done.” I try to ignore him while he clicks away, but it’s hard. He’s sexy. Plus, he was nice to me today. I steal more glances at him, doing my hardest to be subtle. “Like what you see, honey?” A cough catches in my throat. Cheeks staining red, I stare straight ahead. He called me by a new pet

name. I think he hates my name. “Keep staring, and I will have to charge you for it.”

See, his ego is larger than this entire room, and where is Ms. Jota?

Speaking of the devil, she walks into the room with puffy eyes, and I forget about Ben. She looks like she has been crying. I don’t like that. Ms. Jota claps to garner everyone’s attention, and the noise ceases. I am not the only one who notices her eyes. Ben snuggles close to me. Too close for comfort.

“What happened to her?” he whispers.

Chills race down my body at his proximity. His arm rubs against mine, and I scoot back. He’s touchy today. “I’m so sorry for keeping you all waiting, but there will be no practice today.” A gasp echoes through the room. Ben frowns at me, and I realize I am the one who made the sound. Ms. Jota forces a smile to her face and waves her phone in the air. “I, uh, have received some...devastating news, and I need to attend to it immediately. Practice will resume next week.”

I slide down my seat. I love Ms. Jota, but come on, that’s a week from today.

“Keep practicing,” she adds.

The hall is silent after Ms. Jota leaves. None of us expected today to turn out this way. Students begin to file out of the hall. I snatch my note from Ben’s hand, and he doesn’t give me issues.

“You registered for the All-Rounder yet?”

I pause. My ears must be playing tricks on me if he is talking about the illegal ring in school. If I admit to knowing what the All-Rounder is, I can’t deny being a part of it. “Are you asking me?” Ben looks behind me and shrugs. We are alone. “I don’t know what you are talking about, Ben.”

Laughter trickles from his lips, he eyes me, and I almost blurt out the truth. “Okay, Tee,” he says. He doesn’t have to call me by my stage name to make his point. I get it. He knows

it's me, but I will still deny it. In school, I am Tessa. A corner of his lips twitches. "Good luck fighting Pablo."

The hall grows hotter, and so does my cheek as I grab my backpack from the floor. I fight Pablo on Thursday. It's impromptu. Coach begged me to stand in for one of his guys. Ben's smile makes me jittery.

I hear myself say, "I am going to go now. Bye."

Thirty-Three



BY 4 AM ON FRIDAY, I am awake and mixing cake ingredients in the kitchen for a jackass who confuses the hell out of me. My movements are slow as I hop from one corner to another to prepare the pan and other items. I might have won last night's match, but Pablo did a good one on me. The bastard managed a kick to my cheek before I knocked him out. I will need an extra layer of foundation to hide the marks. If he had gotten a headshot, that would have been my end.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing?”

If I wasn't so sleepy, I might have jumped out of my skin in shock, but my body delays my reaction to my mom's presence. I blink sleepily at Mom as she stalks to the sink to fill her empty glass.

“Baking, Mom.”

She rubs the back of her hands against her eyes and rests her weight on the fridge. Her gaze runs over me. I must look a sight with flour on my face and fingers buried in dough. “What time is it?”

“Um, I don't know.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* I know it's too early for me to be awake. “I'm not sure.”

Her smile falls. She doesn't believe me but leaves me to finish mixing. In less than one hour, I'm done mixing. With the cake in the oven, I ready everything for the icing. Per my agreement with Ben's brother, it must be in his locker. Ben is punctual, so he should see the cake before the icing melts. I'll be using fondant icing anyway. The main trick is putting it into

his locker without getting caught. I would employ Maria's help, but she's convinced I am crushing on the poor guy.

What was all that about in drama club and the ring? After my fight with Pablo, Ben showed up in my dressing room, wanting to know if I needed a ride. The cancer sticks must be affecting him.

In one of my letters to Lett, I jokingly asked him if he knew how to pick locks, and he told me to use hairpins. He warned me against getting caught after I refused to disclose my plans. My face heats up thinking about Lett's reply: *why is a good girl doing bad guy's stuff?* I am doing it to fulfill my promise to Asher.

Ben cheered for Tee yesterday before offering me a ride. I rejected it because I didn't want him to know my house. Our interaction at school is enough. The boy keeps confusing me. But it was weirdly nice to have someone I knew cheering for me.

The oven pings. I take out the cake, spread the icing, and write Ben's name as instructed by his younger brother. Asher doesn't have a phone, but I take pictures I will show him the next time we meet. For now, I am taking Ben's advice to stay away from his brother, except I run into him.

That boy is too fantastic to be ignored.

I sneak out of the house as early as 6:30 am. A massive record for me, one I should gloat about to Maria, but how do I explain why I have to be in school that early? I don't have a crush on Ben.

The parking lot is almost empty when I drive in. I recognize a few teachers' cars. Thankfully, the front door is unlocked. I tiptoe to Ben's locker, tired. After inputting different codes, including 1710, which is today's date, I am ready to give up. Of all days to forget my hairpin, it had to be today.

A bit frustrated, I punch in 0501—Asher's birthday. The opening click echoes in the hallway, and I place the cake inside. With the number of Asher's pictures glued to Ben's

locker door, you would think the locker belonged to him. He's a good big brother. Since Asher didn't ask me to insert a note, I didn't add one. I close his locker and jump at the sight of the person in front of me.

Black eyes bore into my forehead. I palm my chest. "Is that your locker?" the janitor asks. I nod. I am an awful liar. His face conveys his disbelief, but he doesn't call me out. "Why are you early?"

"There's no rule against punctuality," I reply and stalk in the opposite direction, walking past my locker to hide behind the stairwell.

Footsteps reverberate in the hallway. I hold my breath until the nosy janitor passes my spot. Once he is gone, I return to the staircase to capture Ben's expression when he sees the cake. I make myself comfortable, throat closing up at the birthday cards already glued to his locker.

How many minutes was I gone?

Bile jumps to my throat when one of his fangirls tries to open his locker. God being so merciful, it doesn't work. A grin pulls my lips. These girls are so thirsty, and he doesn't even like them.

As the morning wears on, the hallway grows noisy. More students troop in, and a few stop at Ben's locker to tape a note or birthday card to the door. I roll my eyes when the fifteenth person passes. I only got a card from Maria and Daniel. Then I went home to a birthday surprise from my parents. I'm grateful for that but watching this show of love makes me feel more like a loser.

People love him. No one loves me.

I push up to my feet. What am I doing here? I glance at the phone that vibrates in my hand, and I automatically smile. Mom is checking in because I left earlier than usual. My parents love me.

Maria loves me.

Hayden too.

Even Daniel.

Halfway to my class, I halt. The hallway is quiet. I toss a glance over my shoulder as the birthday boy struts to his locker with some girls on each side of him. They must have given him gifts. Birthday wishes ring out in the air. I stop feeling sorry for myself and return to hiding with my camera turned on. This is not the best spot, but it captures him. Plus, I have an amazing phone. The zoom quality is crazy.

My heart skips as Ben opens his locker. The door cuts my view of him, and my breath catches in my chest. Seconds grow longer without him making an appearance. Did someone steal the cake when I turned? Wait, has it melted? My knees scream from squatting for too long, so I stand.

The door finally shuts. I tense. Ben has the mini-sized cake in one hand. I tried to make it fit into his locker. His eyes roam the hallway, the hand holding my phone lowers, and I hide behind the wall so only my head pokes out. Other students are recording this. I will find the video on BGC.

Ben's eyes find me, a look passes between us, and I almost drop my phone. I avert my gaze to my sneakers. I'm wearing blue converse. Not black, not white. Maria will have a glorious fit.

Ben opens his mouth but never speaks because the uproar cuts him off. Olivia sashays to him with a smile bigger than her GP and pecks him. Her eyes scan the hallway when she notices the direction Ben is looking. When they land on me, she kisses him on the other cheek. I straighten up and step out. No need to hide. Finally noticing the cake in his hand, she throws me a dark look. I inch closer to the wall for protection. She knows I bake. She used to come over a lot then.

"Happy birthday, Benny." Her voice is extra loud, most likely to spite me and mark her territory. She's so greedy. Why must she have all the good-looking guys? Ben grins at her, and I mentally strangle myself. I can count the number of times he has smiled at me, but with Olivia, his dirty mouth is ever willing to spread into a smile. She is not allowed to call him Benny. "I see you got my surprise."

“Surprise?” Ben is as stunned as I am. I almost tumble forward in shock. This scum of the earth. This witch. Anger courses through my veins. I clench and unclench my hands. “Your surprise?”

Olivia moves in front of him to obstruct his view from everyone, mostly me. Her voice is louder than ever. I feel the words pierce my skin and harden my heart. “Yeah. The cake. Do you like it?”

“You did this?” Happiness leaks into Ben’s voice, and a wry smile forms on my lips. Asher was right about Ben loving the surprise. Olivia’s head bobs. God help me, but I want to walk over there, rip out her extensions and shove them into her mouth so she’s silent forever. She is a fucking liar, and I am a goddamn coward, so I keep staring at them. Not moving. Not blinking. “For real, Liv?”

I can’t see Ben’s face, but his voice is so soft, so raw with emotions, and it breaks my heart. He called her Liv. Her fingers rake his hair, she moves a bit, and I see Ben’s smile. I hate all of them.

“This is unbelievable,” he whispers.

“Believe it, Benny, I’ll do anything for you,” she says. Why can’t she have a seizure and die? I don’t ask God for a lot, but *God, please*. “Asher said he had a surprise for you, but he wouldn’t let me in on it.” So that’s how she knew. I loathe her. “Took a while, but we agreed to do this.”

Liar.

The bitch knows I am listening; a lot of us are. I hope she chokes on one of her salads. Ben drops the cake into his locker. Giggles follow him when he lifts Olivia off the ground and presses her back flush against the locker beside his. Her legs wrap around his waist, and he smiles up at her.

A dull ache spreads through my chest. My nails dig into my palms as her head lowers.

No.

His mouth hovers above Olivia’s, and she palms his face. Tears sting the back of my eyes.

Please, no. I made the cake. Kiss me instead.

I storm out once his lips brush hers. Both of them deserve each other, so why am I tearing up? The sexy jackass and the conniving bitch. It suits them. Pretty but manipulative. Handsome but devious. Perfect duo. I shove a student out of my way, feet slapping the tiled floor as I rush to the exit. Someone yells my name. Ignoring them, I quicken my pace. I'm a mess and not a sexy one.

“Tessa.” It's Maria. She catches up before I reach the exit. I keep my head down because my eyes won't stop leaking. She grabs my shoulders, but I refuse to meet her gaze. “Tessa. Theresa, look at me.”

I don't. I can't. Maria draws me in for a hug, and I burst into tears. Students bump into us, but no one stops. Of course, they won't. I am not Ben or Olivia. I am no one. Maria draws circles on my back, and I eventually quiet down. She holds me at arm's length to inspect my face. I accept the tissue she offers me with a grateful smile, and she drags me in the direction of the backdoor.

Fresh air hits us once we exit the building. I inhale shakily and bite my lips harder to push out Ben's voice warning me against it. “I made the cake,” I whisper. Maria doesn't appear surprised. She also knows I bake. “She's a liar. I hope she dies.”

Maria grunts in reply. I launch into the story of how I met Asher and our agreement on the cake.

“She's a big, skinny liar,” I murmur once I'm done. “Demoness. Used condom.”

Laughter escapes Maria. “Why didn't you say anything?” I shrug. First, he warns me to stay away from his kid brother. Then I put a cake in his locker. Yeah, that's creepy. “You like him.”

I punch her on the shoulder. I just broke down, and that's all she cares about. I need to have a conversation with the angel who controls our feelings because I really, *really* like Benjamin.

“Yeah,” I whisper, head cast down and cheeks flaming red with embarrassment. “Now what?”

Thirty-Four



MARIA IS CRAZY. Like insane, and I should demote her from best friend to friend. Her only solution to my boy problem is much crazier. The door creaks open, and I close my eyes. I stiffen when he sits. A whiff of his cologne is all it takes to identify him, but I don't chance a glance his way.

He kissed her.

He kissed her in front of everyone.

I am only taking one of Maria's advice, and that is: to stay away from BGC until something bigger blows this over. Their kiss is everywhere on the site. They are trending as couple goals.

As for her other advice? Not happening.

On our bucket list, item two is: *Tessa will get a boyfriend.* And today, Maria changed it to: *Tessa will date Benjamin.* I almost burst out laughing from thinking about it. I can't even get a kiss, which is number four on the bucket list. Only someone like Maria puts fucking before kissing. Ben won't look at me twice. It's bad enough I have to complete most of the items on the list before the school year runs out. Now, she wants me to date Ben. Impossible. Not after he has had his lips on that walking STD called Olivia Beckham.

I don't want him anymore. She can have him. The image of their kiss replays in my head as if to mock me. I fist my hands. Fine, I am way out of his league, and so is he. He's not my type. I like faithful guys who don't kiss liars. Guys who won't smile at a girl in drama club, and then kiss another.

Maybe he did it out of excitement? Asher said he would love the surprise. I hate to admit this to myself, but he was genuinely happy, the happiest I have ever seen him. Ben's usually closed off and cool, but I felt his joy. The way his eyes crinkled at the corner when he beamed at Olivia. He should have at least confirmed it from the people hanging around the locker before kissing her.

Olivia is a good liar. I had first-hand experience with her. Hayden too.

Besides, I would willingly kiss him. I'll make him cake every day if it means getting his kisses. A yawn escapes me, and I drape a hand over my mouth to stop another. I missed hours of sleep because of this. Reason 12355626 why dating in high school is a big no. My eyelids are heavier by the time Mr. Sam walks in with an apology. I force myself to stay awake.

Ben taps me. Without looking his way, I say, "Go bother your girlfriend. Leave me alone."

"You jealous?"

I scoff. "You wish."

But I am. My heart hurts. Ben leaves me be, and I am okay with that. He can spend the rest of his life kissing Olivia. Too bad she is already cheating on him with Noah. Isn't karma such a pretty bitch? She might be late, but she does show up to serve. I hope to be around when Ben finds out.

The lecture starts. Mr. Sam introduces a new topic, but I am unable to concentrate. Every nerve in my body screams for me to check the site but the sane part of me squelches that urge. Is he a good kisser? It must feel nice to have full access to those lips. Does he kiss as well as he fights? I breathe slowly. I shouldn't be thinking about that. He kissed the enemy, and that's unforgivable.

"A little birdie told me you cried in the hallway," Ben says when Mr. Sam turns his back to us. "Why?"

"None of your business." On second thought, I add, "You and your little birdie can go fuck yourself."

If he cared, he wouldn't have kissed that bitch. Why is he bothering me? Why is he acting like he gives a shit about me and my feelings? I am not cut out for this attitude switch. He should stick to being an ass; I liked him better that way. Maybe I didn't, but whatever. He needs to fuck off.

"Help me out here, Miss. I'm trying to be nice. *Stop treating me like shit.* Remember that line?"

He still won't call me by my name. "Just leave me alone."

"Your call."

But he tears a sheet out of his notepad, scribbles something on it, then passes it to me.

Don't cry again. Asher won't like it.

There is a sad face emoticon at the end of the paper. I stare at it, then back at Ben, who hasn't looked away from the board. What is this? He writes me a note, and he can't look at me? It's not Asher I have a crush on, for God's sake! I rip the note into shreds and scatter it all over his desk.

There, that will do it. None of us speak to each other for the rest of the class, and I take solace in the fact Abigail is also ignoring Ben. Stupid of her to think she stood a chance with anyone Olivia shows interest in. I don't know what it is about that girl that makes every guy want to please her. She might have a sexy, fuck-worthy body, but her soul is as black as the nail polish she's sporting. Black must also be Ben's favorite color since he likes the bitch. Two bitches.

The bell for break rings. I am slow to get my things or even stand. Getting up feels like a chore imposed on me. Quite frankly, I don't feel up for anything. I don't want to be here. Not in this class or school that reminds me so much about the kiss. I ignore the wall of handsomeness beside me as I pick up my bag. I hope he loses his match tomorrow. I hope he doesn't find a partner for the All-Rounder. The winners take home fifty-thousand grand. I might not need money, but that's a lot. A whole fucking lot, but I haven't found a partner. For the singles, you get a quarter of the price. They claim the dual

fighters have more sponsors, but it's a shitty excuse to get more participants.

“Wait up,” Ben calls out when I'm at the door.

Doesn't he get it? My brain has a mind of its own because I don't want to be in the same room with him, but my feet stop. I turn slowly to him as he approaches me with a frown. Even his frown is cute, and I need to get my head out of the gutter. He's with Olivia. He can never be with me.

I force a scowl to my lips, and Ben raises his hands in surrender. I might have laughed at his poor attempt at a joke, but the red lipstick on the corner of his lips catches my eye. How did he miss that spot? The idiot flashes me a wide grin, and I almost slap him when my heart skips a beat. He needs to stop doing that because it's affecting my silly brain. I am turning to goo on the inside.

“What's up?” he murmurs, his grin intact.

“The ceiling,” I reply with a finger jerking upward.

Ben's blue eyes gleam with unnamed emotions. He chuckles, a sexy sound that melts the anger I'm desperately trying to hang onto. I hate the angel who controls human feelings. They failed me.

“So...” Ben pushes one leg forward, then clears his throat without saying a word. Is the bad boy nervous? Shouldn't he be rushing out to have lunch with his diva of a girlfriend? “I... Tee.” Oh, no, not again. “I know you fight. I do too.” He drags a hand through his face, pulling his lower lip to reveal his perfect dentition. He should be the face of toothpaste brands. I start shaking my head, and he holds up a finger to shush me. “Don't bother denying it. You were there that night.”

“What do you want?” I ask.

“To apologize.”

Ben shoves his hands into his pockets and bounces on his toes like he does inside the ring. His eyes hold mine. He is not laughing. This is not a dream. “Apologize?” I ask to be clear, and he nods. Can today get weirder? I asked for an apology last week, and he threw it in my face. “For what?”

Stretching a hand in my direction, he says, “Look, I love my brother.”

I am not sure why he’s telling me that. “Good for you, *Benny*.”

A deeper sigh escapes Ben, and my belly knots. He stares at his hands and says, “Asher wants to see you again, and no matter what I say to him, he won’t listen. He thinks we are best friends. *Haha*.” Oh. He’s doing this for his brother. Last week’s chat was a warm-up for this request. But did he have to laugh after that last part? I know we can never be friends, let alone best buddies, but really? Douchebag. “I don’t know what you did to that poor guy, but yeah, will you come?”

His eyes are everywhere but on me. I might have found his nervousness cute, but I am confused. First, he didn’t complete his apology. Second, he believes his kid brother is smitten by me.

“Come? To where?”

“To his games.”

As sweet as his request is, this won’t work. I take a deep breath. “No.”

“No?” Those expressive eyes narrow at me. I shake my head. “You are saying no?”

“You heard me right the first time, *Benny*.”

Shock registers on his face. The boy must be used to getting his way. “A little boy asks you for a favor, and you say no?” I stick my chin in the air. I won’t be there. Ben will have to deal with it. Good thing I won’t be there to see him break Asher’s heart. “You are saying no to my brother?”

The kiss must have damaged his ears because I didn’t mince words. “No in all caps. No.”

His voice deepens, and he covers half the gap between us. “I told you to stay away from him, didn’t I?”

“And that’s exactly what I’m doing,” I reply, as exasperated as he is. He thinks he can buy me off with a half-

baked apology. “Staying away from your brother. You should be grateful to me.”

That intensity that’s only present when he is in the ring flashes in his eyes. He punches his palm, but I hold steady. My back digs into the door, but my gaze doesn’t waver. I am not backing down.

“Grateful? The fuck am I grateful for? You are the only thing he mentions, and now you say no?”

What the hell is wrong with him? My blood boils at the venom laced in the words he spewed at me. He is acting like it’s my fault. So what if he is sexy and intelligent? I don’t have to tolerate him. I don’t have to help his arrogant, ungrateful ass. “No. N-O. No. No is no, what don’t you get?”

Our heads are so close our foreheads almost touch. The tension rolling off both of us is palpable.

“Your cruelty, I don’t get it. How can you be cruel to a kid?” His venomous gaze rakes over me. Guilt prickles my skin, and I almost swallow back my words. “Oh, I get it. I really do. You are so sad and lonely and want him to feel the same way.”

Everything falls apart. Ben’s words drive a rod through my chest, and my mouth falls open.

When I finally find my voice, I whisper, “Me, Tessa? Cruel?” I don’t know why I start tearing up, maybe because doing favors for that little cutie got me here. I gave this idiot a ride, and he didn’t acknowledge me the next day. Tears roll down my cheeks, but I don’t care to wipe them. “I am not cruel or sad or lonely, you expired coupon, who has no idea how to be nice to anyone. You know nothing about me, Ben.” My voice breaks, and my chest heaves with each shaky breath I take, but I am not done. “Fuck you, Benjamin Carter. You and your girlfriend can go to hell.”

I am out of the class before he has a chance to reply. If his girlfriend was so perfect, Asher would have invited her. Tears blind my vision as I jog to the library. No way am I going to

the cafeteria looking like this. Unlike those cheerleaders, I am not a hot mess when I cry. I am an ugly crier.

The library comes into view, and I slow down. What was I thinking? Did I have to make my jealousy obvious? He and his girlfriend can go to hell, really? I need to work on my comeback skills.

The shelf holding *The Great Gatsby* novel is the first place I seek; my new comfort zone. I slide down to the floor with my weight resting on the shelf. I like to think Lett does the same, and I feel closer to him in the few minutes I spend here. I take out the novel, and a smile falls on my lips.

I might never be friends with Ben, but I have Lett. On my insistence, Lett admitted to being hot. He was modest about it, saying that's what all the girls say. I believe him. It felt right because the most beautiful ones, except me, are always the most broken. I am not beautiful or broken. I'm Tessa.

As expected, Lett's note is in the middle of the novel. Last time, he was telling me about a party. He was so worried about overstaying I had to calm him. My heart drops once I read the first and only paragraph in the note. I take a deep breath and read slowly. I shouldn't have advised him to have fun and let loose.

Lett: I enjoyed the party; it was lit. Lots of noisy teens. Guess what? I got my first kiss.

I don't know when I stand, but the next moment, I am running out of the library without a reply to him.

Thirty-Five



IT TAKES me five days to reply Lett. While we wait for Ms. Jota to show up, I find a comfortable space at the back and start drafting my reply. It's short. I don't have much to say to him, but I try to be supportive.

Me: How did it feel? Was it good? Did sparks fly everywhere? Did it feel like the movies? Is she your girlfriend now? Will you two get married and have kids? Lol. Tell me everything. I want to know.

The ache in my heart grows as I slide the note into my bag. I'll drop it off tomorrow. What was I thinking? That a hot stranger will fall for me? The boys who know me hardly talk to me. And the only reason Lett probably talks to me is that he is bored. He said it himself. Girls are so easy for him to get. I hug myself, trying to hide in the shadow as Ben's head turns in my direction.

It might be in my head, but he has been avoiding me. Sure, we have a few classes together, but he sat beside Abigail today. I am not bothered. Nope, I can never be. I am over him. I am over Lett.

I am over boys. They can all go fuck themselves.

Ben's eyes find mine. His face pinches into an unknown expression, and my heart flutters. I look away before I start overthinking it. He can't be concerned about me. He still hates me for saying no to his brother. I hate myself too, but I am no longer doing favors. Maybe I should do it for Asher's sake. We are friends.

It takes the memory of the kiss with Olivia to get me back on track. I remember how his lips brushed hers, the soundless gasp that escaped Olivia before she slammed her lips against his. I remember because I spent the weekend watching it on repeat like a loser. A boyfriend-less loser.

A screech pierces the silence. I wince and plug a finger into my ear.

“Sorry,” Ms. Jota says, pushing the microphone away from her lips. She motions for one of the boys to carry the mini-speaker to the stage. I cringe at the thought of my voice echoing from it. School is over, so no one except the people inside the hall will hear me, but the microphone is extra. It makes me feel vulnerable. “We will quickly go over the last scene to pick our Romeo, then move on to the next. Today’s focus will be on the scenes where Romeo appears. Juliet, be ready.”

On cue, my eyes locate the back of Ben’s head. He fits the role of Romeo, but I don’t know if I still want him to be my Romeo. I force the voices out of my head and climb the stage. Juliet and Romeo have an encounter in the next scene, but we haven’t selected Romeo. Noah and Ben came out top in the audition for the role. I know who I want, but my heart is tired of aching for him.

“Can I start from the top?” I ask Ms. Jota.

Back to her position behind her desk, she nods. “Carry on.”

But I don’t.

The doors swing open. Olivia steps in with her girls, and everyone’s head turns to the door in unison. It’s the Olivia’s effect. She is that pretty. I roll my eyes as she sashays to Ms. Jota’s table. What does she want? Ms. Jota must share my irritation. Her eyes narrow, and she tilts her head.

“Yes, Miss...?”

“Olivia Beckham,” the witch adds. I zone out once she launches into an unwanted speech about her accomplishments. No one wants to hear it. Ben throws me an annoyed look. I

return it with a scowl, and he averts his gaze. Just because Olivia is his girlfriend doesn't mean the rest of us have to worship her. "I want the role of Juliet." My world stops. I hear my heart shatter into a million pieces. She can't want it. It's mine. I am Juliet. "I have been practicing. Ben lent me his script."

Ben, the asshole. Ben, the girl beater. And now, Ben, the dream stealer. Why would he do that?

I don't look away when our eyes meet for the nth time. He shrugs as if to say he can't resist her. I let out a heavy sigh. It's so hard to be sane when I have annoying people like him around me.

The hall is silent as we await Ms. Jota's response. Tension tightens my body. I hide my hands behind me and try to breathe. There are other roles I can play. Juliet doesn't have to be the star of the night. I can take the part of a side character and kill it. Maybe act as the nurse or Lady Capulet.

But I want to be Juliet. I want to kiss Romeo.

Ms. Jota flattens her hands on her table, her face an epitome of tranquillity as she replies, "The role is taken, but you can apply for another." Olivia's shocked gasp resounds in the hall, but she's not nearly as shocked as I am. A smile springs to my lips. Pride puffs my chest. I stand taller like I am about to give a presidential speech about great women like Ms. Jota. "Tessa, go on."

Sure thing. I flash Olivia a brief smile. I can't wait to kiss her beloved boyfriend. Wait, is that good? Whatever! She stole my kiss first. Ben would have kissed me if he knew the truth about his cake.

"You don't understand. You are making a big mistake." Olivia's voice stops me from beginning my performance. I place a hand on my waist. She flips her hair over a shoulder. Pretty but dumb. We should get in a ring, me and her. "I was the lead actress last year and the year before that."

Who cares? A new era is here. I am the queen now.

“Besides, Ben and I have great chemistry. That’s important for any role.” I fake gag. Just wait. I’ll show her chemistry with a little bit of biology, calculus, and even literature. “Why don’t you let Romeo decide who he wants to be his Juliet? The main leads must have chemistry, but—” She throws me a sinister look that burns holes into my body. On instinct, I wrap my arms around my belly. “I can’t say it’s the case with Ben and Mother Theresa. Ben and I have great chemistry.”

“Tessa.”

“What?” Olivia spits back at Ms. Jota.

Ms. Jota nods toward me. Heat crawls up my neck, and I stare at my feet. “Tessa. Her name is Tessa. And who says Ben is playing the role of Romeo?” Is he not? I’m not kissing Noah. Olivia can have him and his lips. “If you will be rude to any of my students, you shouldn’t be here.”

Can this woman get any more awesome? Next time I see a shooting star, she will get a wish.

“I will decide who plays Juliet, and I already made my choice,” she adds. This woman is the best of the best. It’s official. She’s my favorite teacher. Ms. Jota rises, and Olivia takes a step back. Not so much of a queen anymore, huh? I steal another look at her boyfriend. “Auditions started weeks ago, and you think you can walk in here to tell me how to do my job? I won’t tolerate that, Miss Beckham.”

Ms. Jota turns to the rest of us, and her angry voice bounces off the walls. “If any of you have a problem acting with the selected cast that gave their time, showed their skills, dedication, and commitment right from the beginning, you can take your leave alongside Miss Beckham. Go on!”

Another gasp travels through the air. Olivia’s minions turn to each other. I love Ms. Jota. The group of five walks out with their heads bowed in shame. I should have recorded this. My smile fades as Ben’s head snaps up. I might have imagined it, but a ghost of a smile flits to his lips.

Weird. Giving it a serious thought, he doesn’t appear bothered, maybe thankful to see her leave.

“Everyone, change of plans,” Ms. Jota says with a clap. “Tessa will start the next scene.” My head bobs in agreement. Her wish is my command. “Noah, get to the stage. You play Romeo.”

Okay, maybe not every wish. Noah delays standing. He moves like a sloth, and Ms. Jota snaps. “Noah, hurry up or get out of my hall.” He quickens his step, surprising us with a sudden change of route toward the door. Giggles rock my body. Today is full of good surprises. Unfazed by his stunt, Ms. Jota points to the blue-eyed human. “Benjamin? Yes, you. You are Benjamin, right?”

This might be my first and last class with Ms. Jota, but she’s incredible. She knows and calls everyone by their names. Mr. Sam also does that. Ben nods, and a corner of his mouth quirks.

“Just Ben. I’m Ben.”

“Okay, Just Ben. Get on stage.” Ben blushes. What? She slaps a hand against her hip. “Chop, chop. These scripts won’t act themselves. We don’t have all day. Tessa, get ready to step in.”

Ben joins me on stage, and I take two steps away from him. “Closer, Tessa. You need to be close to him. Proximity is important because it’s a love story.” Ben smirks. I gulp and obey. “Good.”

We get into character. Ben starts reciting his lines first, and his expertise throws me into another dimension. He walks the walk, looks the look, talks the talk, and I almost start to believe each word he says though they are directed to my character, not me. His fingers brush my shoulder, and a jolt of electricity zaps my spine. I jump out of reach. If this is chemistry, we have lots of it.

“Tessa, loosen up. Great job, Ben. Keep going.”

Yeah, keep going, Benny. Touch me again.

My eyes zero in on his sexy mouth that stops moving. Why aren’t they moving? I love watching his lips. He takes

another step, so our bodies are almost touching, and my teeth dig into my lips.

“Not the poor lips again,” he whispers. I chuckle. *Okay*, I shouldn’t laugh. I hate the guy. But his strong arm slides around my waist as the scene requires, and he tugs me forward. “Relax, Miss.” I want to, but he’s touching me. His hand is on my lower back, and he’s not looking back at me with disgust. I can kiss him if I try. Nudging me with his hip, Ben says, “Your turn. Juliet, your lines.”

“Ah, yes.” I jump into action. My voice quivers, but he flashes me an encouraging smile, and my nerves dissolve. I look into his eyes. “Don’t waste your love on someone who doesn’t value it.”

Ben’s blue eyes narrow to slits, and the rest of the words die in my throat. He releases me without notice. I stumble back and instantly miss the warmth of his body. My lines feel like a warning, but it’s the truth. Olivia isn’t a good girlfriend. He’s not exactly a good person, but he deserves better than her.

“Ben...” I whisper. His eyes lower to mine, and his thumb reaches up to caress my cheek. We are both out of character, but Ms. Jota doesn’t call us out for it. “She’s not good for you, Benny.”

“And you are?”

Thirty-Six



BEN

I TOUCHED HER AGAIN, and I kind of liked it, which in itself is a problem. She's trying to create a rift between Olivia and me.

My eyes close. My heart does a funny thing as the memory from our last rehearsal plays through my mind in slow motion. A smile pulls at the corner of my lips, but it's gone the instant she talks about Olivia that way. Olivia is not bad. She only needs more patience. Besides, she contrived with Asher to surprise me with a birthday cake. You can't beat that. I open my eyes and glare at the letter beads scattered on the coffee table. There are five letters arranged to form one word.

MOWER.

I made her cry that day. I don't know why it still bothers me. She spoke to me during rehearsals, didn't she? She must have forgiven me, or she wouldn't have tried to 'save' me from Olivia. I had been avoiding her. I didn't know what to do when she said no. Asher still thinks we are best buddies. I push one of the letter beads we got from the craft store through the black thread, then another until I'm done. The stairs creak as Asher pads downstairs. I throw a book over the mess on the table.

"Benny? Is that you?" he calls out in his sleepy state. Walking to the living room, he plops down on the floor and rests his head on my shoulder. On instinct, my arm loops around his waist. "I can't sleep, Benny. You were not in bed. Why? What are you doing? Isn't it too early to be up?"

"It is, Champ." Asher raises his head, and our identical eyes meet. "I was trying to study."

He picks up the unfinished bracelet under my textbook and reads the word. "M. O. W. E. R. Mo-wer. What's this?"

"An apology," I reply.

“Another one? For who?” I shrug. Instead of getting mad, he grabs the thick thread. “I want an apology too.”

Laughter catches in my throat. I ruffle his hair. “Alright.” On my feet, I pull him up and throw him over my shoulder. “Now, let’s get you to bed. You need to be in fine shape for the game.”

“Is she coming?” he asks.

“Tessa?” I whisper. A pang of guilt and hurt goes straight through my chest. I don’t even like her, yet I’m hung up on how I treated her in class. I stop at the foot of the stairs to put him down. He weighs so much now. Asher tugs on the hem of my top. “Yeah, Tessa. She’s kind of...sick.”

“Too sick to come?” I don’t know how to turn him down. My shoulder jerks a little in a semi-shrug. “Did you tell her she could come late? She doesn’t have to be there for the whole game.”

Without an answer for him, the place falls quiet. No is no, like she yelled. Hands interlocked, we jog upstairs. Asher heads straight for the bed, and I pull the comforter over him. I make a beeline for the door, but his hand wraps around my wrist. I smile at our connected hands. “Benny?”

“Yes, Champ?”

“She really can’t come to watch my game?” My heart clenches. I fake a smile. “Okay.”

“Did you tell Mom?” I say to fill the silence.

He shakes his head, and I sweep the hair off his forehead. “No, you would have been mad.” A sad, painful sound spills from my lips. “Do you think Tessa is mad at me? The cake was nice.”

“It was,” I reply. We never talked about the details of the cake. Asher was more interested in eating the half I brought home. The phone on the bedside drawer beeps. I peek at the screen. 4:15 am. It’s a text from Olivia. She has been bugging me to leave drama club. I only joined to annoy Tessa, but I love the experience now. “You told Olivia you wanted to make me a cake?”

“Yes. Tessa is a good baker.”

My brows furrow. He’s not making sense. I thought those two hated each other. Asher yawns. I slide into the bed and pull the cover over both of us. “Olivia told Tessa to make the cake?” I ask.

Laughing, he says, “No.” I wait another second for him to say more, but he doesn’t. He rolls on his side, and I do the same with my hands tucked under the pillow. “Will you ask her to be your girlfriend? I have a girlfriend. You should tell Tessa you like her, so we can go on double dates.”

I sit up and kick the cover off me as his words drive a stake through my heart. Asher frowns, then pulls the comforter back over us. He has a girlfriend. I thought I told him that girls have cooties.

“I don’t like Tessa,” I say with my eyes clenched shut. I force myself to think of the match I lost to her, that or anything that will grow my hatred toward her, but nothing happens. My mind decides to punish me with images of her with tears in her Bambi eyes. Tears I put there with my words. My eyes jerk open. Asher is also seated, watching me. “I don’t like her. And you can’t have girlfriends.”

“Why not? I know you like her. You are making another apology bracelet for her. What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. She’s just annoying. Go to sleep, Champ.” I slide down the bed and flip the switch. Darkness descends over the room. A hush falls on us. “You can’t have a girlfriend.”

“Yes, I can.”

I sigh. “No, you can’t. Listen to your big brother. I’m older and wiser.”

“Mom is older and wiser, but you don’t listen to her,” he whispers. The truth of his words guts me. I roll onto my stomach and bury my face into the pillow. Asher inches close. “I like her.”

Who? His girlfriend or Tessa? I don’t reply or ask questions. He tickles my side to get a reaction out of me, but I

remain stiff like a log of wood. His heavy sigh carries around the room, and I almost turn to him.

“Goodnight, Benny,” he says into my hair. I laugh when he kisses my temple. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Champ,” I say into the pillow.

* * *

I walk into the school with stiff shoulders. To make it up to Asher, I had to carry him everywhere until he was ready to leave the house. When I asked this boy how he knew for sure that he liked his girlfriend, he said: she brings me cookies daily and also makes me smile.

Tessa annoys the shit out of me. And she is too quiet sometimes. That’s the only reason Olivia and the others mess with her. She needs to borrow some of her best friend’s confidence, not to talk to boys, but to be a little less awkward around others. What do I care anyway? It’s her life.

The phone vibrating in my pocket draws me out of my thoughts. I pull open my locker door and grab some textbooks. We don’t have a class together until much later today, and I’ll sit with Abigail. Does Tessa miss our sitting arrangement? I’ll need that patience and tolerance she has for Olivia because I can’t sit through an entire class with ‘the queen B’ talking about giving up something I’m starting to like for her sake.

Speaking of the queen B, where is Olivia? Thankfully, her parents haven’t had any new fights, but she should be here waiting for me. I slide my vibrating phone out of my pocket and hit the answer button. Mrs. Stella, Asher’s class teacher, clears her throat. I jam the door close and start toward the exit. If it’s bad news, I need to be able to get out of here immediately.

Mrs. Stella says something, and my feet stumble to a stop. An invisible hand closes around my throat, my breath hitches, and I stretch my free hand to the side to grab anything sturdy.

“Did you...did she...” I stutter. I can’t get the words out. She went to Asher’s school. God, why? What the hell is her fucking problem? My vision blurs. I stagger toward a door and prop myself against it to keep standing. The hand eases around my neck. “Did she... Where’s my brother?”

“In class.” I suck in a shaky breath, then let it out through clenched teeth. He’s fine. She can’t get to him. Asher is in good hands. But my heart lurches against my ribcage. “Do you know her?”

“Unfortunately. But I did not authorize the visit,” I say. “Please keep her away from him.”

“Will do, Mr. Carter.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. After a long pause, I ask, “Why didn’t you call my mom?”

“I did, but she was unreachable.”

Of course. She’s never there when we need her. I nod and straighten up. “Thank you.”

The call ends, but I don’t leave the spot. My forehead touches the wall, and the weight around my neck creeps into my chest. I take deep breaths, but it’s not enough. I need to leave this place.

“Benny?” I whip to face Olivia. I told her not to call me that. But it’s not Olivia who waves at me. It’s Tessa. She waves again, and I remember how to use my hand. Why does she have to be her namesake? I stare down at the shy girl waiting for me to speak. She clears her throat. “Hi, Benny.”

“Hi.” I pat my pocket to retrieve the bracelet. Tessa hides her hands at her back, and I bark out a laugh. She’s cute. And she looks prettier today. Did she dress up for a boy? Olivia always does that when she’s trying to grab someone’s attention, not that it’s necessary. “It’s from...Asher.”

“Another one?” she squeaks out. I nod and stretch it to her. She looks up at me. “Mower?”

“Yeah.” Tessa rolls her sleeve over her wrist, and I see the first one. When she slides the second bracelet below the first,

my heart does that odd thing it likes to do around her. “It’s a companion bracelet for the first one you received. Asher asked me to give it to you. It’s a gift to his friend.”

“That’s nice of him,” she says without meeting my gaze. Her cheeks redden from embarrassment or shyness, I don’t know, and I’m not sure why it’s the case. I’m the one who should be ashamed and embarrassed. Tessa draws a circle on the floor. “So Benny, about the game. I was thinking—”

“It’s fine,” I cut in. Tessa’s head jerks up, and she rolls her lip between her teeth. She needs to stop doing that. I make a sound at the back of my throat, and she lets go of her lip. Poor lips. Okay, where was I? I cough into my fist. “Asher understands. I shouldn’t have pushed that way. Sorry.”

“Are you okay?” she whispers. Don’t I look okay? The façade is back up. “Benny?”

Does she realize she calls me Benny at random? And do I know I haven’t mentioned that to her?

“I’m cool,” I reply. Not like she cares. She has more than one reason to hate me.

Tessa bounces on the soles of her sneakers, her hands intertwined in front of her. “Do you need a hug?” she rasps out. My mouth drops open. “Maria likes to kind of hug me when I’m sad. So?”

“Yes?” I say. She laughs. It dawns on me that she won’t mock me. “Yes, please.”

Her arms wrap around me, and I tuck my face into her shoulder to sniff her. She’s quite skinny. I laugh, and the sound vibrates through her. How did someone this skinny kick my ass in the ring? She’s much stronger than she lets herself show. I need to accord her some respect because she has earned it.

“Do you feel better?” she asks when we pull back.

The hug was too short. “Yeah, thanks. You are kind of nice to hug.”

Tessa offers me a beautiful smile, and I capture it for another time. To revisit and remind myself that I’m more

human and less asshole. She wouldn't be smiling at me if she considered me a jerk.

"I kind of wish you'll be nicer to me, Benny." I shove my hands into my pockets, and her eyes hold mine. She's not scared of me anymore. I like it. "Maybe then I'll give you nicer hugs."

Blond hair catches my eyes. I retract the hand I was about to stretch out to solidify our deal of niceness. Tessa is eagerly staring at me so she doesn't see Olivia strutting toward us. But I do.

"You should go," I whisper. "Go. Now. Leave. Please."

"What?"

Olivia is within earshot, so I yell, "Girl, fuck off." Her smile drops. A myriad of emotions race across Tessa's face, all heartbreaking. I'm an idiot. "Just go. Please," I whisper under my breath.

"But—" she tries to say. I shoo her off with my hand like she's a pest. She's not. Not anymore.

Olivia finally covers the distance between us. Tessa looks between both of us and nods slowly. I can't stare at her anymore, but it's not what she thinks this is. There was an error in judgment once, and that's it. Her lips pull into a tight smile, and she begins walking backward, away from us. I notice the foot Olivia puts out to trip her a little too late, but by then, Tessa is on the floor. She looks at me for help, but I look the other way. She was nice to me, and this is how I repay her.

"That was unnecessary," I say when Tessa is gone. Olivia rolls her eyes, and my anger spikes, shooting through every nerve inside me. I step away from her to calm myself. This is mostly my fault. "Liv, you need to stop doing that shit. Now, you made her cry. What do you get out of it?"

"Do you like her, Benjamin?"

"Seriously? That's the only thing you are concerned about?" My gaze strays to the floor, and I let out a tired breath. How did I end up being friends with Olivia? I sigh again. Tessa didn't take the bracelet. I am a shitty person, and I owe

her a proper apology. I snatch the bracelet from the floor and point a finger at Olivia. “Keep up with this attitude, Liv, and we won’t be friends for long.”

Thirty-Seven



LETT: *It was okay. Nothing like the movies, but there was a lot of tongue. Honestly, I regret it. I wish I had given my first kiss to someone I like. Don't be like me. Make sure your first kiss is someone you love, or you will spend the rest of your life thinking about it. Anyway... Are you going to the Halloween party? I don't think I'll go. I have had enough parties to last me the rest of the school year. Parties are a waste of time.*

Me: *I agree. A big waste of time with horny teenagers and loud music. Sadly, I will be going :(Because my best friend will be there and I can't break her heart, she will skin me alive. I have my costume, don't ask, I'm not telling. Thanks for the advice, but why did you kiss someone you don't like? I can't do that. I want my first kiss to be special. I want to have my first kiss with my husband. Is that cheesy? I know it is ;) but don't you dare laugh at me. It's crazy that we are in the same school. Do you ever think of that?*

Lett: *A lot. I'm like, what if you are someone I know and maybe hate? Lmao. I don't hate anyone, BTW. All the hate is reserved for my mother. Lol. As much of an asshole as she is, I miss her sometimes. Is that crazy? Does that make me a wuss? I feel like it does, it makes me pathetic. She's the only living parent I have, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life hating her, but she's barely making any effort. Haha, I digressed. Sorry, not sorry. I really hope you find your Mister right, or you find Mister left and bring him to the right. Did that make you laugh?*

And it's not cheesy. Even if it's cheesy, it's the kind of cheesy we all like. My parent's marriage didn't work, but that has never stopped me from secretly wanting to have a wife and kids that I'll shower all my love and attention. I don't know the kind of husband or father I want to be, but I know the type I don't want to be. I still have a bit of a girl phobia, so that might take a long time to happen, but it's not cheesy. I guess the kiss was supposed to help me overcome the phobia, but I felt worse afterward. Like I committed a crime, I dunno, it's stupid. The girl likes me, that's for sure. I kind of like her too, but in a different way, if you know what I mean, letter girl.

I think about it a lot. I think about you, try to picture you dropping the letter. Do you smile a lot? What if you are one of those hot girls secretly dying for my touch? Crushing on me since first grade?

***Me:** Believe me, hot and letter girl are words that should never be used in a sentence. I am far from hot. My mom says I'm cute. I think she says it to make me feel better. You shouldn't feel bad for kissing her. I'm sure you will feel better after a while, but if you don't like her, don't lead her on.*

I know adults are supposed to do the reaching out, but if you can and miss your mom so much, I think you should contact her, but only if you want to. You are not pathetic. You are not a wuss. You are an awesome person. I'm sure you will be a great father. Your wife and kids will be lucky to call you theirs. And yes, I laughed. I laughed so hard I farted. I'm lying but did that make you laugh? I think about you too, a whole lot. Lol.

***Lett:** Nope, I didn't laugh :/ OK, I did but only a little. You will have to up your jokes. I can teach you but before I do, can I have your number? Like it or not, you are hot. You just have to fake it till you believe it. Easier said than done, but it works. If you think I'm awesome, then I'm allowed to think you're hot. What do you like doing? What grade are you in? Are you a new student? You don't have to answer if you don't want to.*

***Me:** I like doing plenty stuff like baking. Can you bake? I can't dance but I make a mean donut. Do you like donuts? I'll*

take a wild guess and assume you do because everyone loves donuts. Nope, I'm not a new student.

I have this shoebox for keeping everything I love and it holds our letters. I don't want this to end. We might hate each other in real life but we are safe within these letters. I like that feeling. I like that we don't know each other and I want it to be like this forever. Is that a stupid thing to say? It is, right?

Lett: *No, never stupid. It's not stupid. Nothing you say is stupid. It's fine. I get it. I do. I feel safe within our letters too, because I can tell you anything without being judged. I have a lot of friends but they have this image of me and I have to keep up appearances. I asked for the number because sometimes I don't want to wait too long for your reply. If this helps, I promise not to stop sending the letters. I don't have a shoebox but I keep yours in a box in my closet. I reread our letters sometimes. Lol. Now I sound cheesy.*

One week.

It has been one long week since I gave him Hayden's old number. I push the notes into my shoebox and close the lid. It might be weird, but I duplicate my replies and keep a copy for myself. Why? I don't know, but I like rereading them with his reply. To know when I go off. Like now, I have reread all of them in order. But nothing seems off in my reply. So, why hasn't he replied?

I have been checking Hayden's old phone since I gave him the number. Did I scare him by mentioning his brother? I ask about AJ all the time. I know how much he loves cookies and cake.

These thoughts occupy my mind as I skip to my closet to prepare for Nate's Halloween party. It starts at seven, but we will arrive at eight as per Maria's orders. The later, the better, that's what the party animal said. Left to me, I would rather be in here rereading our letters. I'll never admit it to Lett, but I am glad he regrets kissing that girl. Does he have lips as soft-looking as Ben's?

Not me thinking about that idiot again. If I wasn't sure before, now, I am confident he's ignoring me. He sat beside

Abigail in all our classes this week. In Ms. Eva's class, he sat far away from me, and I'm his partner. He accepted my hug, acted like we were cool, and then became this demon when Olivia showed up. If anyone should be ignoring anyone, I should be the one ignoring him.

Who does he think he is? I thought...I thought he liked...I don't know anymore. But Ben is evil.

The phone ringing on the vanity pushes me into action. I let it ring twice before picking.

"Didn't you hear your phone? I have been calling you since like forever, Theresa Mower," Maria screams the moment I answer. She yells a lot when she is excited, and I know why or who is making her act this way. Daniel Holt. "Anyway, I hope your ass is ready cos I'm almost there."

"Almost where?"

The call ends. I stare at my screen and whimper. *Okay, I can do this.* If I attend this party, it's one more item off my list. Sign up for drama club. Check. Attend a party. Double check. Getting a kiss is hard. Getting a boyfriend is harder, but we will have to make do with those two for now.

I slip into my costume and run my fingers over the soft, red material. Like Superman's, it covers every inch of my body. A mini spread skirt is replacing Spiderman's underwear, and the S logo emblazoned on my chest is also in cursive. I let my hair down, apply dark makeup around my eyes and finish the look with a red lipstick that can be spotted from a mile radius. I ditch my sneakers for a pair of combat boots that elevate my height, giving myself two thumbs up in the mirror.

If I do say so myself, I look good. With the smoky eye and bold lips, I'm a different version of the Tessa everyone is used to seeing. I look like an actual girl who puts effort into her appearance.

Almost downstairs, I am forced to stand at the foot of the stairs while Mom takes a million and one pictures. She grins, a proud look in her eyes as she suggests poses to me. I strike

every pose without a fuss to please her and myself because I love my outfit and how it makes me feel.

Her eyes shimmer with tears at the end of our photo session. She gives me a side hug, and I relax my head on her shoulder. “My baby girl is so grown. When did you grow so much?”

I laugh. “Mom, I’ve always been a big girl.”

“A big girl who attends parties.” She dabs her eyes. I muster a big smile. She gets too emotional over little things. “I wish your dad was here. He’s so proud of you,” she whispers as she pulls me in for another hug. My smile dims. He had to rush to the hospital, or he would have been here.

The honk from outside causes us to break apart. “My ride is here,” I whisper. Mom lets go, but her hand lingers on my shoulder. Maria honks again like the crazy lady she is. I try to pry Mom’s hand off me, but she refuses, so I give her another brief hug. This is how I feel when they leave me here alone for the night and on some weekends. “Mom, it’s just a party. I’ll be back.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t forget your curfew.”

Today I get to stay an extra hour out, but I know for sure I’ll be back early. “Yes, Mom.”

Her hand rests on my back as we walk to the front door. “Make sure you have fun.” I already had fun playing dress up. I don’t want to push my luck. “Take pictures. Loosen up, Tessa. Be a teenager.”

The breeze slaps our hair into our faces as soon as we open the door. Mom walks me to Maria’s car in silence. Maria’s face is a mask of innocence when we approach her. I roll my eyes when she flashes my mom a sweet smile. This vagabond wanted to ruin my eardrums a few minutes ago.

Mom subjects us to another photo session and my eyes water from staring so much at the flashlight. Eventually, my mom lets us go, and Maria drives off immediately to avoid her calling us back.

I love Mom but no more pictures. “Your mom is clingy,” Maria murmurs.

We are a few meters away from the party. I can hear the music. Nate’s parents must be out of town, and we don’t have to worry about disturbing the neighbors if he doesn’t have any.

“Tell me about it,” I say seconds later.

“I like it.” We share a look, and she shrugs. No doubt Maria’s mother loves her, but she doesn’t show it the way Mom does. Mom is very physical with her emotions, and she loves to show that. Maria parks in front of Nate’s mansion, and my jaw drops. His house is enormous, the kind of house you only see in movies of teenagers with filthy rich parents. “Let’s get this party started.”

Thirty-Eight



THE MUSIC IS TOO LOUD. It's barely 8:30 pm, but the thick smell of alcohol clogs the air. Drunk teenagers of varying degrees crowd the mansion. A few students dance on a pool table. A girl from school prepares to strip, and the boys around the table encourage her with whistles and catcalls. I will never get naked in front of anyone, but I have no problem watching others do it.

Maria drags me into a quieter area before the live show starts, and we meander through sticky bodies to the messy kitchen. Half-empty red solo cups litter the countertop. I avoid touching them as my best friend waltzes to the tall fridge like the landlady. Someone clears their throat from the door, our heads snap in that direction, and Maria turns to a blushing queen. She's a goner with Daniel.

Red dots appear on Daniel's cheeks when their eyes meet. He stops in front of us with two cups. "Don't accept any drink that's not from me." We nod like the good girls we are. If he didn't offer this to us, I would sip water all night. He is talking to both of us, but his eyes never leave Maria. I clap to get his attention, and he smiles sheepishly. "I love your dress. Who are you wearing?"

"I wish I knew," I answer.

Maria did the work. I'm playing my part by being here. I hope to God she counts this Halloween party as a real party. As planned, Maria is dressed as Catwoman, and I am Superwoman. Yep, I made that up to get her off my back. Her

legs for days are on display in the black tights, and the light material of her bralette clings to her chest. My cleavage is an embarrassment to her boobs.

Her outfit matches Daniel's black tuxedo. He spins her in a small circle that ends with him placing a kiss on her lips. Gross. They should take this somewhere else, and Maria has a lot of explaining to do. What was that she said about being done with him? I sip my drink to appear busy, and my face scrunches at the burst of flavors on my tongue. I taste berries, a hint of lime, and something really sweet.

Daniel says something not-so-funny, and Maria snorts so bad her drink spills all over her belly. She laughs her way to the sink to wash off the stain. I lift the cup to my lips. "Have you told her?"

Our eyes stroll to her, and Daniel smiles. Third wheel alert. We catch her reflection in the window above the sink, she waves at us, and we wave back. "By Monday. I don't want to ruin tonight."

Maria returns before I reply. Daniel hands over his cup, and she accepts it with a grin. They are so sweet I might have diabetics from watching them. Backs against the counter, away from the noise, we strike a conversation. They try to involve me, but I am the third wheel. I'm so over my best friend's pretentious laugh.

I excuse myself without any idea where I am headed. Pop music blasts from the box speakers at different corners of the large room. My eyes scan the place, and my chest falls with defeat. No familiar faces.

Loneliness creeps up on me. I make a U-turn toward the stairs, empty my drink into a flowerpot and lean on the bannister for support while watching people dance, make out and have fun. Things I am having trouble doing. I have only been here for...ten minutes, but this feels like a bad idea.

Tired of watching others do what I lack the confidence to do, I saunter toward the door at the end of the dim hallway. The cold air stings as I pull the door open, and my hand tightens around the knob. I should have brought a sweater. I

step out to scan Nate's backyard. It's vast, with an empty tub in the center, a few foldable chairs, and some empty beer bottles lying on the fake grass.

A few more steps into the backyard, and my teeth chatter. This outfit is pretty but impractical. It's freezing out here. A sane person will get back inside, but *oh well*. I sit on the edge of the tub, pull off my boots, and dip my feet into the water.

Shivers shoot straight to my scalp. Oh, hot tub. Alone, my thoughts circle back to Lett. Why won't Lett reply? Why is Ben an ass?

Is there something wrong with me? Why do all the boys I know act warm, then switch up? I look up to the sky and release a sigh. If I was with my car, I would have left. I hope my ride home is not drinking. At the thought of rides, the backdoor flings open. Maria rushes out, and I jump out of the tub as she storms toward me. My best friend is not violent, but I blanch at the anger in her eyes.

Daniel runs out behind her, his chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath. Maria holds a hand to stop him from speaking. She inches closer to me, and I notice the tears in her eyes for the first time. My heart misses a beat. I look to Daniel for an explanation. What did he do this time?

"Maria." I try to touch her, but she slaps my hand. Tears leak from her eyes, and mascara runs down her cheeks. Daniel keeps his distance, a plea on his face. Boys! Ugh. "What happened?"

"You knew, Tessa," she murmurs. "You knew, and you didn't tell me. I thought we were friends."

Panic claws my inside. "We are friends. You are my best friend, Maria." My only female friend on earth. I can't lose her. She erupts in taunting laughter, and Daniel takes another step back. I am guessing this has to do with him, but the coward is now mute. "What are you talking about?"

Stomping to Daniel, she pulls out a phone from his breast pocket and slaps it across my chest. "Watch it. Don't make me

mad, Theresa Grace Mower. Watch the fucking video right now.”

My heart dips. I know the video, but I don't want to watch it.

“Maria.” She starts shaking her head. “Maria. Just—”

“Watch the goddamn video!” she deadpans. I tap the screen, then hit play on the video of Zoey giving Daniel a blowjob. When the video ends, she snatches the phone. “Did you know about this video?” I open my mouth to explain, but she cuts me off. “Tessa, I just need a yes or a no.”

Color drains from my face. I manage to whisper, “Yes.”

Without another word, she walks out. Daniel tries to talk to me, but I skip past him. I don't want to hear the speech he should have given when Maria was in my face, disappointed and in tears because I betrayed her. It's not what she thinks. I would have told her, but Daniel wanted to do it himself.

None of the faces resembles Maria's. I jog up the stairs, peeking into rooms with doors ajar. The smell of beer grows thicker. I also smell weed, but it doesn't stop me from checking the rooms. My stomach churns at the sight of some students making out. I hurry out and resume my search.

She has to be in here somewhere. Maybe at the entrance. I'm prepared to leave this cursed party when I bump into someone. The witch. Fury rolls through me at her smug smile. I push past her, but she yanks me back like I'm one of her dolls. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I scream.

Olivia sneers. “You really want to know?” I stand my ground as the bitch nears me, the sound of her heels bouncing off the walls. I don't care, but I don't move another inch. Breathing heavily on my neck, Olivia tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “What did I tell you about Ben?”

I give her slutty outfit a onceover. Is she dressed as a call girl? Anyway, I have a best friend to apologize to. I try to walk around her, but I am dragged back. Only now, she's not the one who yanks me. Someone holds my hands behind me. I wriggle in their embrace, desperate to be free.

“Let me go,” I spit out, and she smiles at the person holding me. “Olivia, what the fuck is this?”

Her smirk signifies doom. I can't help the sinking feeling that tonight will be worse than other days. She inserts two fingers into her mouth and whistles. Zoey steps out with a blue bucket.

What is going on? I stamp the foot of my captor. The fool groans, and his grip tightens. Olivia's smile widens at my failed attempt to escape, and her eyes darken with mischief as she grips my jaw. I spit on her face, and she gives me a backhand slap that causes my neck to snap to the side.

A stale smell assaults me when Olivia opens the bucket. Zoey's nose wrinkles. Is that fish? She cannot put that on me. I hate fish. I am allergic to it. She knows that, yet she has a bucket of what smells like a stream of dead fishes. Olivia snaps her fingers. “Noah, get that slut on her knees.”

I squirm, try to fight, get a kick to his side or ram my elbow to his ribs, but I'm at a disadvantage. Noah's feet slam into the back of my knees, and I collapse to the floor, too weak to move as they empty the content of the bucket over my head. I try not to think, not to breathe, not to feel as the dirty water soaks my body, seeping into my costume and places it should never be. I try. I really try to ignore the mess I am sitting in, but the smell overwhelms me, and I throw up on myself.

Olivia plugs her nose. “You stink, Tessa.” They laugh, and she whispers, “Did you get that?”

The itching starts before I have time to process what has happened. I bolt to the nearest bathroom with their laughter ringing behind me and rip the costume from my body without care for who will see my vitiligo. I wet paper towels to scrub my body and press it against my neck and chest.

It fucking itches. Everywhere. My whole body itches.

My skin reddens from all the scratching. I duck under the sink, rinsing my hair until my scalp hurts. The door opens and closes after a while. I hear a few clicks, but I am too engrossed

in getting the smell off me to care about my state of undress. I am not even putting on a bra.

I hate today.

I hate Nate for throwing this party.

I hate Olivia for existing.

But most of all, I hate myself for offering Ben a hug. This is all his fault.

Thirty-Nine



OUTSIDE IS QUIETER. No one notices the girl with the torn costume and itchy skin. Maria's car is gone. My ride home is gone, and I am not with my phone. Emotions clash inside me, tears fight to escape, but I push them back. I don't need to cry. I need to find a way to get home in one piece.

I start walking home. The distance seems to increase the further I walk, and my only company is the streetlights lining the walkway. The itch worsens. I shiver and sniff as the chilly air lashes at me.

Tonight was a mistake.

The powerful sound of an engine cuts through the air, and a motorbike rolls to a stop beside me. I quicken my pace, ready to break into a run. I need to get out of here before I become a statistic.

"Why are you out here looking like a ghost?"

Very funny. I force a foot in front of the other, urging my body to cooperate. I am alone on this street, and anything can happen. Anything bad. My heart jumps to my throat as the rider continues at my pace. I refuse to look at him. It's a struggle not to scratch my back and everywhere reachable.

"Juliet." The voice goes softer, almost concerned. "It's me. Are you okay?"

My head rounds to his face at the mention of that name, and my brain finally registers his voice. Ben. I almost cry in

relief until the itch resumes. I hate him too. He's the reason I'm in this mess.

"Just go away, Benny."

He doesn't. I increase my speed, but he is on his damn bike, so he follows, riding by my side. I spell vitiligo under my breath and stop. He stops. Hands clenched at my sides, body shaking like a wet leaf, I cock my head, and with as much confidence as I can muster, I tell Ben to fuck off.

"What happened?" he asks. I seal my lips shut, and he climbs off his bike. "Juliet?"

"Go away. My name is Tessa." I take a step back when he moves forward. Ben grunts. "Go."

"Can you just stop? I'm trying to help." My mouth opens to fire a torrent of insults at him, but a sob slips out, and his arms enclose me in a hug. He's going to smell like fish. "Please, don't cry."

"I need help. I need new clothes," I whisper into his chest. Ben backs away from me to pull off his shirt. I laugh and swat the shirt stretched to me. He frowns. "I don't mean your clothes, Ben."

Ben stares at me like I've grown a horn, his gaze roams my body, and I stand stiffer, straighter like it will hide the welts making criss-cross signs around my arms, back, and other open skin. In one step, he covers the gap. He grabs my hand and closes it around his shirt. "Put this on. Now."

Maybe it's tone of his voice. I nod. "Okay."

A ghost of a smile crosses his lips. He hops on his bike and nods for me to join him. "Climb on board."

Ben's phone rings before he repeats his order. He holds up a finger and pulls out his phone from his pocket. My eyes stray a few times to his biceps, the toned muscles of his arms that flex when he presses the phone to his ear. He turns, and I look away, my cheeks flaming hot. I think I want to see him without a tank. I tug his shirt over my head, grinning from ear to ear as his cologne invades my nostrils. Holy fucking shit. I am wearing Benjamin Carter's shirt. I pinch myself.

It's just a shirt. But does it count as skin-to-skin contact? He wore it first, and now, I'm wearing it.

"Yeah," he says to the caller and sighs. I wasn't paying attention to the call, but the rigidity of his shoulders pique my curiosity. He cups one hand around his mouth, the other hand pinching his forehead. He's annoyed. I move closer in case the phone slips from his shoulder, but he grabs it. I inch back to give him privacy. "Yes. Something came up. An emergency. No, I can't make it."

The call ends. Ben shoves his phone into his pocket and stares straight ahead at the empty road. I freeze when he cocks his head toward me. My hand moves before I can think, and I wave. "Hi."

Ben laughs. "Hi."

"You have an emergency?" I ask. His shirt is a huge relief from the cold. I can make do with it or give Mom a call from his phone. I point a finger behind me. "Thanks. I'll find my way from here. Um, thank you for the shirt. You'll have it back by Monday. Go attend to your emergency."

"What? No, I just said that—" He stops himself and offers me another one of his rare, beautiful smiles. "In fact, Juliet, I have a big emergency. Now climb on board. It's getting cold out here."

My brain shuts down. I stare at his bike and back at his face. "I've never been on a bike before."

"There's a first time for everything. Come on, or we will freeze to death." An odd feeling swells in my chest. Is that concern I hear in his voice? I refuse to think about it. This is probably one of his good moods. I can't dwell on it. "Juliet? Is this how you choose to repay me? By gawking?"

I realize Ben is kidding when he smiles. I climb behind him, my arms tight around his waist. He spares me a glance. "Easy, Juliet. I can't breathe." His words elicit a smile from me, and I relax.

Our position is intimate. I can feel the imprint of Ben's abs through his tank top, and my silly mind begs me to cop a feel.

I ease my grip around his waist without fully letting go. We arrive at a duplex. There's no time for questions as Ben ushers me into the house. I jump into the shower and scrub my body until I'm sore, standing there with water dripping down my body when I finish.

I really didn't think this through because I need a towel. I need new clothes.

On cue, a knock sounds, and Ben's head pokes inside. "I'm coming in. I got you something to wear."

Words lump in my throat, and I simply nod. Steam from my bath heats the shower's glass, giving me some decency, but I am still shy. I refuse to look his way. Ben's head lowers as he drops a towel and some clothes on the toilet seat. As soon as the door clicks shut, I scramble to change.

A smile touches my lips at the scent that hits me. The sweatpants smell like Ben, even the shirt. I hum a familiar tune as I pull it over my head. Maria will shit her pants when I tell her this. Thinking of her sours my mood. She left me without a ride. What if Ben never showed up? I push thoughts of her out of my mind. I dump my costume in the trash can and fold the shirt he gave me earlier.

The house is silent as I wade through the darkness to get to the living room. A figure reclines on the couch in front of the TV showing the highlights of last week's game. I blink, and he's gone. My pulse quickens when the TV goes off. I backtrack in the direction I exited because tonight is not the night. I've had enough horror today. Someone taps me. I jump, and a scream tears out of my lips.

"Gotcha," says a voice behind me. Light floods the room. Seeing the cute Asher by the switch, my anger evaporates. I stand taller, trying to calm my racing heart as he strolls toward me. "Did I scare you?" I shake my head. The little demon scared the shit out of me. "Liar. You screamed."

We both laugh. Asher leads me to the couch, and my eyes wander to the stairs that disappear into a curve. I expect Ben to appear any moment now and pull us apart. Asher mutes the

TV and folds his hands under his jaw. His eyes settle over me like a hawk. “How are you now, Tessa?”

“What?”

“Benny said you couldn’t come to my game because you were sick. What made you sick? Are you fine? I missed you. Will you come to my next game? It’s next week.” Guilt washes over me. I nod, and he flashes me a smile. He touches my outfit. “Why are you wearing Benny’s clothes?”

Okay, time to leave. I stand and drum my fingers on my thighs. “Where’s Benny?”

“Inside?” We fall into a comfortable silence. I remain standing and out of place while my eyes roam their living room. It is smaller than ours. The only pictures on display are that of Ben, his brother, and their awards. Nothing of his parents. No Mom or Dad. I back away from Asher with the hopes of slipping off quietly. Ben has helped enough today. “Tessa, are you leaving me?”

When he says it like that and pouts? Unfair. I steel my heart, prepared to turn down his requests.

“Don’t go yet.” Just like that, my resistance goes up in flames. I sit. “Benny liked his cake. He kept talking about it, and he brought some home for me. I like your cake. You are a good chef.”

With Asher rambling, there’s no chance to reply, but I manage to correct him. “Baker.”

His cute face scrunches, lines appear on his smooth forehead, and my heart flips.

“Huh?” Asher asks. “What’s a baker?”

“Someone who makes cake. A person who bakes,” I explain. “A chef is someone who cooks.”

“Can you cook?” Not so much, but I nod. With that intense look in his eyes, I dare not disappoint the poor boy. My reply pleases him. He tosses the pillow serving as a barrier between us, and his knees brush my legs. “Can I call you a baker chef?”

My chest vibrates with laughter. “You can call me whatever you want, Champ.”

Someone—Ben clears his throat. I jump to my feet, and Asher’s palm slips into mine. Ben’s eyes lower to our linked hands. I hold my breath, waiting for a snarky reply that never leaves his lips. When my gaze strays to his legs, a grin splits my lips. We are wearing the same gray sweatpants. Unlike me, the jock didn’t need to roll his waistband about a hundred times for it to fit his waist.

Water coats Ben’s forehead, rolling down his temples. I steal another peek at him. Did my smell affect him so bad he had to take a shower? My breath catches in my throat when he lifts the hem of his tank top to wipe his face. I release Asher’s hand to fan myself because the place grows hot.

Who turned up the heat?

That V line. Does he sleep in the gym? I also work out, but I only have a flat tummy. I swoon at the sight of his sexy body; he has eight fucking packs. I thought the total number was six. How did I not notice all of this during our fight? Right, I was busy trying not to get beaten to a pulp.

“Pick it up,” Ben whispers.

I push out those silly thoughts. He helped me. The least I can do is thank him rather than ogle him shamelessly like I’ve never seen a hot boy. Have I? Ben has to be the hottest boy I know.

My eyes flit to his face, and he lifts a brow. “What?” I ask.

“Your jaw. It dropped when you were staring.” My mouth snaps shut, and my cheeks turn red. The idiot snickers. He has an ego bigger than this house. “Liked what you saw, Miss Juliet?”

“Nope,” I reply with an apathy that makes me proud. “Nothing to see there, *Benny*.”

Unfortunately, he covers his abs. It must feel good to lie on that broad chest, kiss those lips, and be cuddled by those strong arms. What will it take to have that? *Okay, Tessa, stop*

it. The reason I'm here in the first place is because of him. Somehow, everything bad always leads back to him.

Ben belongs to Olivia.

"Thanks for helping me," I whisper. My hand blindly reaches for Asher's. I don't like how his brother is gawking at me. I don't see Asher, and it takes another second for me to realize we are alone. That sends my heart racing. I bite my lip, and his eyes narrow. "I...I have to get home."

He jumps over the couch to stand beside me, and I become a million times aware of his presence. Do I say something? No, I should run as fast as I can. His fingers brush my arm. I stop breathing. My knees turn to jelly when he takes my hand. By some miracle, I don't fall flat on my face.

Ben raises my hands to his lips, and his breath kisses my knuckles. "You are shaking. Are you okay?"

How can I be okay when he's touching me? Ben grabs a remote to turn off the AC, and I am forced out of my daze. Who turned that on in this weather? Ben tugs me toward the stairs and yells, "Champ, we are leaving." Asher screams back at us to wait, but Ben refuses. Urging me to the front door, he mutters, "Go, go, go. Hurry, Juliet. I don't want him out of bed."

The urgency in Ben's voice pushes my feet forward, and at the sound of approaching footsteps, we dash out. I laugh hysterically when Ben locks the door behind us, only for Asher to start pounding on it.

He groans. I resist the urge to ruffle his hair and comfort him. "Go to bed, Champ," he says to the door.

Another knock. "No." Knock. "I want to see Tessa." Knock. "Tessa, tell Benny you want to see me."

Ben covers my mouth and whispers, "Champ, she's gone. She's not here."

My eyes widen, and he shrugs. Ben, the liar. Asher eventually leaves, and we saunter to his bike without a word. I notice our hands are still connected. Ben does, too, and sadly,

he releases me. The warmth racing up my arm dies, and an awkward silence settles over us. I miss his hand.

“It’s past his bedtime. That’s why I didn’t want him to come with us.”

Ben looks everywhere but at me as he says this. I don’t know how to reply, so I nod. The thing is, I don’t know if this is another one of those: *be nice now, treat me like shit* moments with him. He gives me a whiplash. I shouldn’t care because we are not even friends, but I’m drawn to him.

“Your mom, where is she?”

“Out.”

Ben moves to the curb supporting his bike, and I follow suit because I am not ready to leave. We stand a few feet away from each other, and the awkwardness worsens. I search my brain for a safe topic but draw up a blank. What do we have in common? Drama club and a few classes. We have an assignment.

My head lowers, and my foot juts out to trace an invisible circle. This is more than awkward. “Ms. Eva asked us to submit a one page summary on Scott Fitzgerald.”

We are reading his most famous work.

“Done and submitted,” Ben answers.

I lift my head. “Without your partner?”

“She didn’t say we had to do it together.” No, but I assumed he would want to work with his partner. That’s why I haven’t started. “It doesn’t matter who submits it. We both get full marks.”

“Oh.”

“Ah.”

“Um, thanks?” I whisper. He’s making this even more uncomfortable.

“Um, you’re welcome?”

We are the weirdest partners I know. We don't talk to each other. Fortunately, the summary is our first group assignment. Except for sitting beside your partner during class, we don't do any teamwork. Ben runs his fingers over his sweatpants as the silence grows more uncomfortable.

"You went to Nate's party?" he asks. Grateful for a switch in topic, I nod. "What happened?"

"Your girlfriend. She doesn't want me around you."

A moment passes. I wait for that mocking laughter, but he doesn't laugh. A strange emotion fills his eyes. I don't want to stare into them, but they are begging me. I tear my gaze away from his face. "She's not my girlfriend." I scoff, and his face grows serious. "Liv is not my girlfriend."

"Yeah?" He lowers himself to the concrete surface, and I settle down with enough space between us. He called her Liv, but she's not his girlfriend. I don't believe him. "So...you two broke up?"

Ben shrugs. I kick him, and he responds with a laugh. He might be correct since she came to the party with Noah. But having a boyfriend has never stopped Olivia from flirting with other guys.

I sneak a glance at Ben. He's staring into space. "Maybe because you are a terrible kisser?"

He turns to me. I should back off, but I hold the bad boy's gaze. "Am I?" he whispers.

The playful note in his voice encourages me to add, "I wouldn't know. I'm not the one you—"

Ben cuts me off with his lips. My mind blanks, and then my thoughts rush back with violence.

Benjamin Carter is kissing me.

What do I do?

Do I use my tongue? What about my hands? How should I act? *Think.*

Ben nibbles on my lip when I remain unresponsive. A low growl escapes him, and I melt against his chest. My eyes close. I follow his lead, kissing him back clumsily and sucking on his lips to the best of my ability. He pulls away too fast, and my heart clenches. We miss him and his soft lips.

“So?” he says, eyes gleaming with glee. I must look a mess. Just one kiss, and I am speechless. Ben appears okay. Why wouldn’t he? He kisses girls like Olivia regularly. I put some distance between us, but he pouts and covers it. He traces my lips with his thumb, sparks dance on the spot, and my heart pounds in my ears. Olivia will kill me, but I want us to kiss again. “How did I do?”

The memory of the kiss still muddles my mind. Ben is so close. “What?” I breathe.

“You said I might be a terrible kisser, so how did I do? On a scale of one to ten, rate our kiss.”

Our kiss.

I must have fallen in love with his choice of words because I lean forward and kiss him again, a brief kiss that happens before we can process it. My eyes lock on his blues. “Eleven,” I reply.

Forty



THROUGHOUT THE RIDE HOME, we don't talk. His kiss was unexpected, but my reaction shocked us more. I can't stop thinking about it, replaying it like a broken record. I kissed Benjamin Carter.

How would he rate my kiss? A pathetic two?

The wind slaps my hair into my face, but the fear of falling doesn't allow me to push the strands out of my eyes. The heat from Ben's body chases the cold seeping into my skin. I tighten my arms around his waist as we skip to a new lane, trying and failing to enjoy my second bike ride.

He is moving too fast. And I don't have a helmet. Without notice, Ben increases his speed. I yelp, and my eyes clench shut. His body shakes with laughter. The idiot is messing with me. Again.

"Relax, Juliet." I loosen my vice-like grip on his waist. If I didn't know better, I would think he loved having my tiny body pressed against his. "You only live once. And you are in safe hands."

His words do nothing to reassure me. I only relax when we turn into familiar streets. The bike's engine shatters the silence, and I look around to see if anyone is disturbed by the noise. No one is.

"We don't live once. We live every day," I whisper against his neck. He throws me a backward glance. I have never fully understood that quote. It makes little sense. "But we only die once."

For the rest of the ride, Ben maintains a reasonable speed. We are a few blocks from my house when it dawns on me that he didn't ask for directions. I don't know our status after the kiss, but we are not friends. I didn't even know his house until recently. He has no reason to know mine.

Ben parks in front of my house, and I take some time to arrange my messy hair. He watches me run my fingers through my hair, and I can't help but blurt out, "How do you know where I live?"

"I know a lot of things, Juliet," he murmurs, and my stupid lips curl into a small smile.

What happened to: my name is not Juliet? I cast one look at my house, reluctant to go into the darkness. I want to stay here with him, pretend we are best friends or lovers. I like lovers better or Ben's girlfriend. The sticker of a phoenix glued to Ben's bike catches my eye, and then it clicks.

"You have been here before," I grumble. My eyes immediately search for the tree across my house. I point to it. He was here a day after he lost his match to me. Ben shrugs. "I knew it."

No, I didn't, not until a second ago, and I have been seeing his bike at school. "It was you, wasn't it? You were watching me." His fingers run through his hair, and he rolls his shoulders carelessly as if to say: so what? He throws his other leg over the bike so he's more comfortable and focuses on my face. My insides knot. If he dared lean over, he could easily grab my waist, and I highly doubt that I would protest. "Why?"

"No reason," he says. I narrow my eyes and poke his chest. "That wasn't the first or last time."

My jaw drops. Oh, my God. I slap a hand over my mouth. My dream was not a dream. Was it?

"No way."

"Yes way. I followed you after that match." How many people have followed me home, and I didn't notice? I never take my car. I use the public bus and walk the rest of the

distance to avoid anyone knowing where I live. It takes a creepy stalker to find me. Ben, the stalker. His gaze trails my body. “I wanted to know what the person who beat me looked like. And I saw you. Your cute necklace gave you away, but I didn’t want to believe it. I lost to a fucking girl. That’s a first.”

Though his tone grows lighter, I am still wary. I don’t trust him. He didn’t return my necklace. I repeat the words he used to get me on his bike. “There’s a first time for everything, Benny.”

He laughs. “Do you realize you call me Benny all the time?”

“No, I don’t.” He’s a liar. Ben, the liar. “I only call you Benny.” He quirks a brow. Oh. My cheeks grow warm, and my hair curtains my face. “It was just this once, and that was a mistake. I meant to say Ben.”

“Did you?” he whispers.

I push one leg forward. The lights from a passing car illuminate my face. I bow my head and almost throw up at the vomit coating one side of my boots. I am never wearing these shoes again. Ben tucks a hand under my chin after the car drives off. I swallow at the intensity of his gaze. He doesn’t look at me like I disgust him, but I have no idea what to call that hungry look in his eyes.

“We make a great team on stage, Juliet. We will make great partners in the ring. What do you say?”

I don’t have the courage to look away from those piercing eyes. I don’t dare lie. Ben pulls my lower lip down to reveal my teeth. The simple action restricts my airflow, and I forget how to function.

Is it me, or is he leaning closer?

Is Ben going to kiss me again? *Yes, please.*

Ben’s breath warms my face, and my tongue wets my lip. I do everything but look away. I close my eyes when his lips brush mine. This time, I will do better. I will kiss him better. Seconds pass without another contact of his lips. Do I kiss him? One eye pops open, followed by the second.

Embarrassment prickles my skin at Ben's smug smile. He wasn't going to kiss me. His tongue runs over his soft lips, and he folds his arms on his chest, showing off his toned muscles. Doesn't the cold affect him? Maybe not. His ego probably keeps him warm. It's bigger than my head.

"Juliet," he mutters. My hands disappear behind me when he stretches his. "Be my partner."

That acute emotion creeps into his eyes, but I manage to look away. Why is he doing this to me? Acting as if we are cool. This whole thing confuses me. Ben doesn't fancy me, and he will never like someone like Mother Theresa. He needs a partner. This is his way of doing things. Get me comfortable, then make a request like he did when he wanted me to show up for Asher's game.

I can't let him manipulate me. But my heart wants what it wants, and it wants to please him. All rational thoughts fly out when Ben flashes me another grin. I shove my hands into the pocket of my—his sweatpants. Maria will so hate me. I am such a simp. "I'll have to ask my coach, Ben."

Ben's hands circle my wrists, and my mind muddles as he drags me to stand between his legs. Our foreheads almost touch. He's still grinning when he releases me. I shake my partially wet curls, so they frame my face, but he pushes my hair into a messy bun, and my breath ceases again.

I am in love.

"So, you do fight?" he teases.

Blush rises to my cheeks. I hate how easy it is for him to evoke a physical reaction from me, but my heart never listens to my brain when Ben is involved. He drops my hands, and pathetic me misses his touch. I am stupid to think we have a future together after a silly kiss that only happened for him to prove a point.

"Never said I didn't," I snap. He lifts a brow, and I am forced to say, "Sorry." His scowl worsens my guilt. It feels like I ruined the start of something great by overthinking it. "Thank you for the ride."

“No biggie, Miss.” No, I need him to call me Juliet. His flat tone confirms my fear. I throw him a sad look, and his face hardens. No, I want his smirks and arrogance. “Now, we are even. All good.”

My confusion must have been evident. “Even?” I ask.

“You gave me a ride last time. I gave you one today. Even. I don’t owe you a favor anymore.”

That stings. I hug myself. Ben’s sweatshirt doesn’t seem to protect me from the cold or his words. I playback my reply a few times to be sure it makes sense before I tell him, “Benny, you never owed me anything. I didn’t do it so you could repay me. I wasn’t thinking about that.”

Conflicting emotions flash across his face, but surprise stands out the most. He’s such an irony.

“What were you thinking? Why did you do it?” I shrug, and he snorts in disbelief. He makes my overthinking feel like a joke. How else did he arrive at his conclusion? He needed a ride, and luckily for him, I was there. Plus, I got to see Asher. “You pick up random boys from school?”

I let out a tired sigh. When my eyes open, I am calmer. “You are not a random boy.” His lips lift in a smirk. Pompous cutie. No, he’s not cute. He’s hot. “I did it because you needed help. I would have done it for anyone else.” Ben wiggles his brows, and a peal of laughter escapes me. I smack his shoulder. I might have a big, fat crush on him, but he needs to get over himself and maybe kiss me again. “I mean someone from school, Benny, not a random dude. It’s just a ride, got it?”

“If you say so.” I do. Some of us know how to be kind. It is what it is. “Thanks for the ride.”

Weirdo.

Another second passes, my thought drifts to our kiss, and I scratch the back of my neck. Are we going to talk about it, or was it just a little experiment to him? It was more than that to me. It was my first kiss, another item off my bucket list. I catch Ben staring at my lips. Our eyes meet, and he averts his

gaze. At least I am not the only one affected by the kiss. God. His lips are so soft.

I will gladly kiss him every single fucking day. “Thanks for the ride. Thanks for helping me out today.” I motion to my outfit, glad to have something else to distract me. “I’ll return this later.”

“Nope. Keep it,” he says, waving off my request. “I do...”

I follow his gaze to see what snagged his interest, and the light in my parent’s room trip off. Mom. It has to be her. Great. Now, I have to explain what a boy was doing in front of our house.

“I think you need to go inside, Juliet.” As much as I don’t want to, I have to. Ben must have sensed my hesitation. He pulls me in for a hug and offers me a genuine smile. “Go. Night, Juliet.”

“Night, Romeo.”

But I don’t move, and he doesn’t try to force me. He chuckles. I grin, comforted by the fact he also wants to be here with me. He points to the house. “Who was that anyway? Dad or Mom? Oh, your mom?” I nod. My nosy mother. He pouts. I look away to stop myself from pressing my lips to his. Why does everything about him have to be so sexy? I bet I look like plain Jane when pouting. It’s unfair how God spent so much time on one person’s beauty. “I have to go, don’t I?”

A shy smile springs to my lips, and my head jerks in a nod. Ben starts his bike. “Night, Romeo,” I scream at his retreating figure, and he horns twice. My heart flutters, and butterflies dance in the pit of my belly.

I like Ben.

Forty-One



MOM MUST BE WAITING for me, but that fact doesn't stop me from shutting the front door quietly. The living room is dark, except for the lights on my bedroom floor illuminating the staircase. I tiptoe to the stairs. If I can get into my room, I'll be safe from her questions tonight. She does not quit, and if I prove too stubborn, she will recruit Dad's help. As a team, they are harder to resist.

"Where do you think you are going, young lady?"

My boots drop to the floor, and I scream until the familiar voice penetrates my brain. It's Mom. Laughter echoes behind me as I let out a soft breath. The light comes on, and I frown at my mom doubled over in laughter beside the switch. It feels like déjà vu, but there's no Asher this time.

Mom strolls toward me to wrap me in a hug, and my anger disappears as fast as it comes. "You should have seen your face," she says. I huff, and she responds with a bigger smile. "How was the party? You are early. Maria called earlier. I tried to call her back, but she wasn't picking up."

Yeah. She is still upset with me. Mom ushers me to the couch. I offer her a tight smile. "Maria didn't bring you home. Why not?" Shrugging, I press a hand over my mouth to stifle my giggles. I know her like the back of my hand. She is trying to ease me into the main questions. "Theresa."

Her manicured fingers poke my sides, and the giggles I held in break out. I wheeze with laughter, struggling to catch my breath. I am ticklish. "Okay, Mom. Fine. I will talk." She

stops but raises her hands, poised for a repeat should I go against my words. A nudge on my side earns her a frown and the events of the evening crash down on me. I hide my face in my palms. “We fought.”

Surprise washes over her, and her arm slips behind my waist to draw me close. “What happened?” My eyes lower to my hands tangled in Ben’s sweatpants, or should I call it mine? I fight back a smile and roll my Ben-kissed lip between my teeth. “What are you wearing? What happened to your costume? Where’s Maria?” Her voice is an octave higher, she taps me, but I refuse to look up. I wipe the invisible dust on my knee. “Theresa Grace Mower, start talking, or I’ll have to call Mrs. Vega.”

My mouth snaps open, and I tell Mom everything.

From the video to the assault to the kiss, everything I would have told Maria. The living room falls quiet once I’m done. I tug on the sweatshirt, counting the seconds until she blows up in anger. She’s too quiet. Mom is never quiet for this long. She hates silence, and I hate her silence.

“I’ll speak to Mrs. Beckham tomorrow.” Pranks and bullies are normal. Most people never get their parents or teachers involved, I wouldn’t have, but I am tired of having to endure it, so I nod, and she squeezes me in a hug. “You should give Maria space. She has every right to be angry.”

Maybe she does, but it’s not my fault. She shouldn’t have left me. I went to the party for her. I didn’t have a ride or my phone.

“She shouldn’t have left you,” Mom says to herself. “That might have been why she called me.”

If Maria didn’t leave, the kiss would never have happened. Argh. It’s so confusing. I want to be mad at her, but I am thankful she left me behind. Ben fucking kissed me. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Tessa, I know you were trying to help, but Maria expected you to be her friend first before you were Daniel’s,” Mom says when I remain quiet. She pushes one leg over the

sofa, and my chest sags. Maria is the one who stands up to anyone who so much as glares at me. She is the one who always has my back, not Daniel. The realization hits hard. I'm a horrible friend. Mom must know I feel bad because she rubs circles on my back. "Your loyalty lies with Maria first, not Daniel."

"Yeah."

"I can't believe it." My head jerks up from her shoulder, and Mom flashes me a grin. "Tessa, you kissed a boy." That's my mom. She actually took so long to mention it. I pout, and she palms my cheeks. "My baby is growing so fast. Partying. Kissing. Preparing for college. Soon, you will be getting married."

Hold that thought. Wait, I like it. I like the idea of getting married to Ben. Will our kids have dull brown eyes or blue ones? They had better take after his beauty, brains, and confidence, and none of my ability to daydream about getting married to someone who kissed me to prove a point.

"Do you like him?" Her voice lowers like we are best friends in cohorts. Words are not enough to describe how much I like Ben. My head bobs. "Next time, invite...what's his name again?"

My cheeks are burning up. I cup my face and create some distance between us. "Benjamin. Ben."

"Next time, invite this Ben gentleman for dinner so your dad and I can thank him for helping our daughter." Yeah, right. That's code for: *so we can grill him to decide if he's good enough for our baby*. "You should invite Ben for Thanksgiving." No, thanks. My back presses against the couch, but there's no place left to hide. The lines on my palms become attractive, and my head dips to avoid her gaze. "How was the kiss? Nice? Okay? Meh? I like it so much we should do it again?"

"Mom," I warn.

"Was there too much tongue?"

"Mom!"

She is too blunt and too forward. How does Dad cope? There wasn't too much of anything. The kiss was perfect. Mom laughs. With my cheeks turning tomato red, she allows me to leave for my room after a series of uncomfortable questions, and I make sure to lock the door behind me.

I locate my phone in the dark room and crawl under the comforter to text Maria. Light from the phone brightens my face. I read the words I sent her over and over again, waiting for her reply.

Me: I'm sorry bestie. I LOVE YOU.

Maria doesn't reply.

I lie flat on the bed, stand, and then pace my room. We have had our differences, but it has never been about a guy. I am seated in front of the vanity, finger-combing my hair, when she replies.

Drama Queen: Luv u 2.

Are we cool now? Maria didn't spell out her words or use emojis. I stare at myself in the mirror. My fingers trail the collar of the sweatshirt, and the memories of our kiss invade my mind.

My thumb climbs up to my lips, tracing the curve the same way Ben did. I push my hair from my face to see what Ben sees when he looks at me. What are we? Did it mean anything to him? Does he like me? Today is the nicest he has been to me. What if it was payback for dropping him off? That boy has an odd way of thinking. Maybe he did it to make me think about him, so I could consider his proposal for a partnership.

Well, it's working. I want every excuse to spend time with him. I bring out a pen and paper to write. Lett hasn't replied, and I need to talk to someone my age. Someone who's not mad at me.

Me: Hey, stranger. You didn't reply my last letter, are you okay? Is everything fine at home? How's AJ? How are you? I would have waited for your reply but I am too excited to tell you what happened today. I went to the party. My best friend made me go. It didn't end well but I got something that made

*up for it. Guess what that is? Don't bother. I can't wait another two weeks or months for your reply. *Inserts eye roll* I hope you are fine, though. This silence is unlike you.*

Drum roll please

I got my first kiss. I might look like I'm okay but I'm screaming. I got my first kiss. Do you know what it means? It was like the movies. Sparks. Electricity. You name it. I want to kiss him again. One kiss in the morning, another in the afternoon, then at night like a doctor's prescription. That was cheesy. OMG! But did it make you smile? I finally ticked a kiss from my bucket list. Yippie!

That being said, I miss you and our letters. Don't ignore me again. Please reply this one.

A yawn escapes me. I pull off Ben's shirt and hang it on the wall in preparation for Monday. Sending one last look at the shirt, I hop into the bed and fall asleep with a big smile on my lips.

* * *

On Monday, I am all smiles while preparing for school. I take two apples from the fruit basket and allow Mom to smother me with kisses as she teases me about Ben's shirt. I am not letting go of it. It's mine now. The ride to school is a happy blur. I slip the letter to Lett inside the novel and jog back to my locker. On seeing Maria at her locker, my excitement wanes, and my steps falter. I cover the distance between us, ribs digging into the metal bar as I watch her bring out her books.

I should say something, I want to, but I don't know what. This is unlike us. Maria spares me a glance. The most I get from her is a tight smile before she walks away without a word to her best friend. I hug myself to chase the loneliness that creeps in. Students dash to their classes, but I remain there.

A hoot grabs my attention, and my cheeks turn pink once I spot Ben at the end of the hallway. Holy cow. Ben is wearing the same outfit as me. His blue jean is ripped at the knees,

mine isn't, but our sneakers and sweatshirts match. Is this a sign? When I meet my soulmate, I will know, right?

What if Ben is mine, and this is the sign?

My feet guide me in his direction. I don't know what I'll say, but I'm happy to see him. A girl approaches him before I do, she flips her red hair, and I gag in my mouth. Abigail. I stand by the side, using my foot to draw lines on the floor while she blabs about something Ben doesn't care to know. His gaze flickers to my face, and my brain decides to embarrass me by flooding my mind with images of our kiss. I smile at him, expecting his arrogant smirk in return, but he looks away.

Weird.

The bell will ring soon. I should leave, but the part of me that glimpsed his caring side convinces me to wait. He might be in a bad mood. Ben nods again to something Abigail says, and his chest visibly sags when she leaves. I occupy her position, standing before him with my fingers in the tiny pockets of my jeans. Ben's face softens. I give an awkward wave, and his smile solidifies.

I like it.

"Hey," I say with a smile, standing on my toes so I can reach his height. "How are you?"

Ben opens his sexy mouth. His eyes roam my body, and I take a step back at the disgust fueling his gaze. I don't get it. He smiled, then the switch flipped. What did I do? Did I smile too much? I wrap my arms around my belly, wishing I had changed out of his sweatshirt. Now I seem desperate.

"Don't get it twisted, Mother Theresa. We are not friends. You don't get to ask me how I am."

Forty-Two



WHAT WAS I SERIOUSLY THINKING?

That a kiss will change anything? My life isn't a movie or a high school romance novel where the bad boy ends up with the good girl. That kiss was a godawful mistake. Hell, I will finish high school without a boyfriend, and I will die a virgin. Yay Theresa!

Ben should have walked away. I would pick his silence over his words. We are not friends, so why did he kiss me? Oh, I get it. He did it to prove a point. I was nothing but a little experiment to the jerk.

A tap on my shoulder has me straightening up. I am still where Ben left me. Daniel tries to smile, but I hold up a finger to stop him from talking. "If you know what's good for you, stay away from me." I shake my head when his lips part. These boys are out to annoy me today. "I don't want to hear it. I'm not the one you need to talk to anyway. Talk to Maria and leave me out of it."

"Tessa."

"Talk to Maria," I scream. A few heads in the hallway turn to us. "Leave me out of your mess."

I have mine to deal with already. A broken heart to heal. Daniel sighs. "Fine. Have a nice day."

"You too," I spit at his racing figure, annoyed at myself for feeling bad for him.

Daniel did this. If he had told Maria about the video earlier, Olivia wouldn't have found me, and the kiss would never have happened. I enter the class when Mr. Sam is already teaching. He sizes me up and wordlessly ushers me inside. Ben questions me with his stare as I plop on the seat beside Abigail. I dislike her, but I will rather sit with her instead of the rude jerk staring at the back of my head. What does he want? To gloat? How dare he look sad when I walked over to Abigail?

“Trouble in hell?” she whispers, wiggling her brows as her eyes wander between Ben and me.

“You mean trouble in paradise?” I grumble.

She shrugs. “Same difference. Baby boy looks like you killed his puppy.”

Really? I want to confirm it, but I don't want to give Ben the satisfaction. She's probably lying. Mr. Sam interrupts us, saving me from her questions. The rest of the day goes by without a hiccup. When the final bell rings, my mood takes another downward slope. I am a bit slow to drama club.

On getting there, the hall is empty. I collapse into one of the chairs and try to gather my thoughts. My stomach rumbles, and I retrieve the leftover chips I got for lunch. Three minutes pass without a sign of Ms. Jota or anyone else. I gulp my juice greedily and shove the empty carton into my backpack.

“Hey.”

I almost jump out of my seat. My hand goes over my chest, and I release my breath slowly. Why is everyone trying to scare the shit out of me? And why is Ben talking to me? Hold on. I scan the hall. We are alone. We were also alone the last time he was nice and spoke to me. Is he ashamed of me? In the hallway filled with students, he ignored me. He kisses me one day and treats me like trash two days after. I grab my backpack, ready to leave the hall and escape him. I will not be anyone's doormat.

“Sharing is caring, you know?”

Ben crosses over to me and occupies the seat beside me. I try not to look at him, and my grip on my backpack tightens. “Nice shirt. It looks better on you.” Am I supposed to reply to that? He can’t keep giving me mixed signals and expect me to be cool. I push myself to my feet. “Sit down.”

My stupid knees weaken at his order, and I fall back to my seat. “I have to go,” I say to the floor.

Ben leans so close his breath fans my neck. He whispers, “Have you spoken to your coach?”

Talking becomes difficult. I want to leave, but my butt is glued to the seat. I focus on the stage to distract myself and try to picture myself acting, but every scene leads to the same thing. Romeo kissing Juliet. His legs touching mine don’t help, I adjust, and his fingers brush my neck when he slides his arm around the back of my seat. His hand is warm. Without meaning to, I lean into his touch, and he relaxes his arm on my shoulder. Ben laughs a little. God. I am such a pathetic sap.

“Ms. Jota had to cancel today’s rehearsal because of the game,” he offers. We ignore his finger on my neck and the sparks flying on that spot. I don’t keep up with the school’s games. The only update I get is from Maria, and since we are not best friends now, there’s no way to know. Not like I would have cared, but it still begs one question. I twist my chair, so I’m facing Ben. His head lowers as he tugs on the loose thread of his jeans. “She didn’t want anyone missing out on it.”

“Then why are you here?” I whisper. “To remind me that we are not friends?”

He shrugs without looking up. “I was waiting for you. I knew you would miss it.” And I did, but how did he know? We are not friends. He made that clear. Why does he care what I do if he can’t be bothered to speak to me in public? I’m tired. “You barely paid attention in Calculus class.”

“Yeah,” I say because it feels like I’m required to speak. I mimic him by running my hands over my knees. His hand angles closer to mine. He stretches his pinky finger as if

asking for a silent truce, and I shove my hands into my pockets. I can't do this with him again. "I was distracted."

And it's his fault. His mood swings are worse than a girl on her period, and I don't want to get caught in his mess. If I get into trouble with Olivia, it has to be for something worth it. And I'm starting to think Ben isn't.

"Is it because of your friend?" Our eyes meet, and he tilts his head to the side, bringing my gaze to the new cut on his eyebrow. There was a fight last night. I got the summary from Coach. I lick my lips, and Ben's gaze locks on them. My pulse quickens, and the urge to flee intensifies. "She didn't talk to you. You didn't walk her to class like you always do. Then you ignored Daniel."

He has been watching us—me. Why? Is this another one of those foolish cases of the boy who likes a girl but bullies her because he doesn't want to like her? It's stupid, but I read it in a book Maria gave me last year. Even more ludicrous is the girl falling in love with him and having a happily ever after with his kids. I must be stupid, too, because my heart flutters at Ben's smile.

I squeeze my knees. "Yes. She's not happy with me." A pause ensues. "I'm not happy with you."

This damn mouth. Those words did not come from me. I square my shoulders and wait for his reaction. Ben folds his arms. I hate to say it, but he looks genuinely upset. I hurt his feelings. Good.

"You wound me, Juliet." It's the way he says it that makes my cheeks heat up. My lips curl in a shy smile. I have to reprimand and remind myself to behave. "That is not how our love story goes."

"What love story?" Do we have a future together? Oh. He means Juliet from the play.

"Juliet loves Romeo."

My head rears back, and my eyes sweep over his upper body. "I thought you didn't believe in love?"

“I don’t, but in the play, which by the way, doesn’t qualify as romance, Juliet loves Romeo.”

I scoff. My attraction to Ben goes up in flames. “It’s a romantic play, Benjamin.”

“It’s not a romance if they both die at the end, Juliet.”

My jaw slacks. I gape at him. Ben folds his arms on his chest, silently urging me to say otherwise. Not all romance stories end with a picket fence and kids. I want mine to end happily, but that’s not everyone’s lot. Jack from the Titanic is an example. He gave up his life for Rose to live. Epic.

“It’s a romantic tragedy,” I finally say. Ben clicks his tongue. “You should watch the Titanic.”

“You are a sadist.” This boy is unbelievable. He leans toward me, his forehead wrinkling as he mutters, “Why must anyone die? Why must I give up my life for a woman in the name of love?”

“You know nothing,” I tell him.

Spreading out his arms, he smiles at our invisible audience. “Oh, look. I’m a Jon Snow.”

Very funny. “What’s a Jon Snow?” I ask with my straightest face.

That question wipes the smile off Ben’s face. My heart flips triumphantly, and I hold his gaze with a practiced look of confusion. I don’t give myself enough credit for my acting because Ben looks like he just discovered everything he knew as a kid was a lie. His arms drop to his knees.

“You don’t know Jon Snow?” he whispers. I shake my head slowly. If anyone hasn’t heard of that name, it’s because they live under a rock or lack internet access. “Okay. Hold on. Ever heard of Game of Thrones?”

“Is it a game?”

Ben slaps a hand over his mouth, his eyes widening to the size of saucers. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from falling over with laughter. I should take a picture to savor this epic moment.

Tessa: 10,000 - Ben: 0

“No, not a game. Forget it.”

A calm settles over us. I'm still riding the high of my mini-victory when Ben touches my knee. It's so sudden that a cough wracks my body. He pulls me down to his lap, rubbing my back until the cough subsides. His face twists in concern, and two of his fingers slide under my jaw. I am so close I can kiss him. I think I want to.

“Juliet, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” If there's anything wrong, it's the little distance between us and my heart pounding in my ears. I smoothen the light creases on my jeans and redirect my gaze to the floor. “Thanks.”

Acutely aware of our position, his hand on my lower back, the other on my knee, I try to stand, but his arm locks around my waist. Panic tightens my body, and I whisper, “Ben.” But the Ben staring at me now is the one from the weekend who was nice to me. The one who makes sitting on his legs feel okay. I try again, placing both hands on his chest to push him away. “Benjamin. Benny.”

His hand slides behind my neck to bring my head down. With our mouths inches away, he pins me with a gaze as if to seek consent. I try to remember his unnecessary harsh words from this morning, his cold attitude toward me, the punch, and the kiss with Olivia after I baked his cake.

We are not friends.

He does not care about me.

“Ben,” I whisper.

His eyes lift to mine. “Please,” he breathes out.

I don't want to be anyone's second option, but that's all it takes for my head to jerk in a nod.

Ben captures my lips. For a brief moment, I forget how to respond. His fingers tangle in my hair, he massages my scalp, and I snap out of my confusion. Our lips move in synchrony. He is gentle, letting me lead the pace. I kiss him back like I

have always seen in the movies. At one point, he pulls my legs on each side of him, so I am straddling him, and then he takes full charge of the kiss.

His chest vibrates with a growl when I nip his upper lip, and he kisses me harder. I tense as his hand slips inside my shirt. His fingers brush my boobs and circle one nipple, and a moan escapes me.

Tingles shoot to my toes and erupt all over my skin. We break one second for air. I grind against Ben, he moans my name, and I repeat it. A new but welcome sensation spreads through my chest. Without breaking our kiss, Ben cups my small breasts. I whimper, horny, nervous, and excited to see where this leads. The little voice of reasoning in my head manages to take over. I love this, but we are moving too fast. I don't want to remember my first time in a place like this.

“Ben,” I say, pulling his hands out. He doesn't protest, and I silently thank him for complying. If he so much as insists, I will give in. Our foreheads touch, he grins, and my heart flips. His hand dips into his pocket to retrieve the bracelet I rejected, and he tugs it over my wrist. “Thanks.”

“No, Juliet. Thank you.”

When his hands move to the hem of my shirt, I panic and blurt out, “I'm a virgin.”

Ten seconds pass without a reply. I want to chew the insides of my lips, but Ben doesn't like it, so I resort to clenching my fists. His eyes are clouded as he inspects my face, possibly regretting the kiss. He has been with a lot of girls. Olivia must be a sex expert, not a nun like me who stops the hottest guy from kissing her or doing more. Pushing my hair behind my ears, he pecks my lips. I am less worried when our gazes lock. Smiling, he takes my hands and laces our fingers.

“Me too,” he replies. I heard wrong, right? Ben cannot be a freaking virgin. His face gives nothing away. “You confuse me, Juliet,” he says so low I strain my ears to pick out his words.

I press my lips against Ben's in an innocent kiss. "You confuse me too, Romeo."

Forty-Three



UNKNOWN: *Hey, sorry it took so long to text you. I have been so busy with AJ, who misplaced the phone, so I didn't have time to read or reply your letters. I am not ignoring you, I swear. Just busy :(This week has been so hectic.*

AJ? I know AJ, and only one person says AJ. I snatch the Sony Ericsson from the nightstand and begin typing. Since I gave Lett the number on the phone, I keep it close to me, so I don't miss his texts.

Me: Hey stranger. You share a phone with AJ? What about now? Have you read them?

I sit at the edge of the bed, back hunched with my teeth between my lips. My feet drum into the floor as seconds roll by without his reply. The answer is easy. Yes or no. I toss the phone on my pillow and collapse on the bed. I spell vitiligo twice, then peek at my screen. No reply. I cup my face, glaring at the ceiling as I scream. I am dying to talk to someone about Ben. About our kiss.

What should I do? I need advice.

Maria is a no-no for now. She sure as hell wouldn't want to hear about boys after getting her heart broken by one of them. Why do boys have to be so stupid and complicated sometimes? Mom is out of it. I can't tell her about our second kiss, or she will force me to bring Ben home.

He kissed me again.

We almost went first base, and he admitted to having feelings for me. Does being confused count as having feelings for someone? Was that a confession? I play with the beads of my bracelet. I don't have answers. That's the thing when Ben is involved. I become a Jon Snow, a lost cause.

My phone pings. I sit up so fast that a wave of dizziness slams into me. It took Lett ten minutes to reply, and only to tell me he didn't read them. I sent those letters earlier this week. What's his problem? I move to the window and close the curtains to chase the light filtering through the cracks. Bouncing on my toes, I do everything and nothing to delay my reply to him. If he's not so eager to text me, I shouldn't be. My phone vibrates. By the time I return to it, only a minute has passed.

Unknown: I'm sorry.

Apologies can wait. What I need to say can't. At this point, I will even talk to Daniel.

Me: No biggie, I'll save you the stress. I kissed him. I got my first kiss after the party.

The three dots appear to show he's typing. I fall back on the bed with the Sony tight in my grip. I love typing on it. The phone has a real keyboard. A minute passes without his reply. I text again.

Me: You can get the details in the letter. But it was hot. I felt everything. Sparks. Fireworks. You name it.

A frown touches my lips when I hit the *add contact* button and save his name as Lett. We are the oddest pair. I don't know his first name, and neither does he know mine. And we don't care. Maybe I do a little, but I guess it's part of being anonymous. I can easily find him if he tells me his name. He can do the same. If he's half as popular as I think he is, I will find him in a day, at most two.

Anticipation courses through me as the seconds grow. Why is it taking him so long to reply? If I sent this to Maria, she would have called me as soon as she got the first text. I dial his number. It rings once, and he doesn't pick. The second time,

he denies the call. My heart clenches as I hug a pillow. Seconds later, I roll on my side, tapping random numbers on my calculator till his reply pops up.

Lett: Sorry, can't pick. Busy with AJ. Sorry for the late replies. Do you like this guy?

Apologies will mean nothing if he doesn't step up. I want to type that, but I force myself to wait twice as long as it took him to reply. I am busy, too, busy being busy. After a few stretches, I pick up my phone and groan at the time. I used only five minutes. Time is so slow when I'm involved.

Me: Very much. I've had a crush on him since forever.

Butterflies flutter in my belly. I bring my knees to my stomach and grin sheepishly at the ceiling. Ben isn't here, but I'm blushing at the thought of him and our kiss. Is he also thinking of me? Does he smile when I am mentioned or frown like he did on Monday morning? We didn't discuss that. He effectively dodged my question. I shouldn't have allowed it if his mood swings still bother me.

Will we be friends? Will we continue kissing secretly? I don't mind kissing him, but I want to know what we are. Is he my boyfriend? Does he have to ask me out first? Yes. It's only proper.

Lett: I'm happy you got your first kiss with someone you like. Makes me regret mine all over again. Your first kiss is something you will always remember with a smile. Lucky you, stranger.

Lett: Does he like you?

Me: I confuse him.

Lett: What does that mean?

Me: I don't know.

His reply takes so long that I stop expecting it. I read the back and forth between us and sigh. He is not ignoring me. He is busy with AJ. I punch the air and practice my kicks. If Ben will be my partner, I'll have to be in the best shape. It's so crazy how we are partners in almost everything. Drama.

Literature class. And now, fight club. My phone finally pings. I don't hesitate to pick it.

Lett: Then you shouldn't be kissing him.

A sliver of anger rushes through me, I clench and unclench my fists, waiting for the annoyance to pass, but it doesn't. I lower myself to the bed and reread Lett's message. When he got his first kiss, I was so supportive. As much as it hurt, I didn't show it, and he can't do the same for me?

Is this how pen friends act? Wait, is he jealous?

Me: YOU ARE NOT MY DAD. DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO.

Me: I will kiss him all day if I want to.

Three minutes pass. The idiot reads the message without replying. I reread it once, twice. The words play in front of me until it all begins to make sense, and a truckload of guilt hits me. I dial his number, but he denies the call twice, and my heart cracks into a thousand pieces. Tears sting my eyes. I didn't mean that. I place a hand over my lips, my body vibrating with remorse. Fuck.

His dad is dead. I'm an idiot.

The three dots I am beginning to hate appear on my screen, and I gulp when they disappear. With the letters, we were safer. We had time to process each other's messages and reply logically. But this is new territory.

Me: I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Sorry. Please don't be mad. I'm sorry. I don't want us to fight.

Lett: I kissed someone too. I like her. I really do. I have never liked anyone like this before. It kinda freaks me out a little. Fuck that. It freaks me out a lot because I'm not used to this feeling. It feels weird to worry about someone else other than AJ. I'm LOL typing this but I don't want to get hurt. I spend so much time thinking about her but I am too much of a chicken to ask her out.

Lett: I liked the kiss very much. It made up for the first kiss with all the sparks and fireworks. I wish she was my first kiss

because I smile every time I think about our kiss and her cute face.

Lett: *Don't bother to ask. I'm not sure she likes me.*

Me: *Then you are in no position to judge me.*

Lett: *I guess. I gotta go now. AJ needs me.*

Stupid me. I slap a hand over my forehead and possibly some sense into my skull. Did I have to write that? I didn't even ask about the girl. Why is he going around school kissing girls? Pinching my stupid self, I frown at my phone. I'm a giant prick who says all the right things at the wrong time. He got a better kiss and expressed his vulnerability, and that's all I had to say?

Am I jealous?

No. Nope. Is this our first fight? I take deep breaths, pull out my phone, and type a better reply.

Me: *I'm sorry I don't sound so excited about your kiss. Maybe I am a bit angry at you for telling me not to kiss him.*

Me: *Tbvvh, I know you are right, my best friend will probably say the same but I don't want to hear it because I want to kiss him again. I am not sure he will ever like me but when we kiss, it feels so right. I can't stay away from him.*

Me: *That feeling is out of this world. I am SUPER GLAD you got another kiss. It's nice to get a kiss from someone you like. It is nicer if the person likes you back but I'm fine with this for now. He might start liking me later. Who knows?*

Lett: *I get you. I really do. That's how I feel about her, she is so cute but we share nothing in common. OK, we share a few things in common but she always looks at me like I annoy her. Maybe I do annoy her but she didn't seem to hate the kiss. Lol.*

Lett: *Do you think I am annoying?*

Me: *Except for the fact you take so long to text back, I don't think so.*

Letty: Right. I think she was very much into it. So AJ is calling. He needs me. Stay safe for me, stranger. Lol. We need to find better names for each other.

We do. But I don't type that.

My phone alarm goes off, and I shoot out of bed to get a change of clothes. I promised Asher I would be at his games, and it's today. One glance at my outfit in the mirror has me nodding in approval. Ben will be there to support his brother, so I need to look good if I want another kiss.

I leave the house with Maria's song playing on repeat in my ears. If she ever auditions for AGT, she will ace it. I slide into the only available parking spot with my arm hanging outside the window. Before stepping out of the car, I take a second to freshen up in the rearview mirror.

The cheers threaten to deafen me. I head into the stadium filled to the brim with opposing teams seated far from each other. The scoreboard shows the guests are losing. My eyes scour the field for Asher; he's number eleven. The stadium quietens when an opponent snatches the ball. I stop trying to find a seat and wait to see what happens next. I shift when some viewers yell at me to get out of their sight, veins bulging like I am the reason the opposing team snatched the ball.

In my haste to get a better spot, I collide with a wall. Time stops. I try to find my balance, but it's too late.

Forty-Four



I AM FALLING.

My instincts kick in, I try to grab onto the wall, but my hands slice through thin air. Closing my eyes, I wait for my body to hit the ground, but nothing happens. It's too calm. No, wait. I am moving. I peel one eye open. The blue sky comes into view first, the roof is next, then a mop of brown hair with the owner squinting at me with worry etched on his face. I sit up slowly, hands stretched out to steady myself should I fall again. But I don't fall because I'm on something firm.

I look down to see I'm seated. I'm sitting on a guy's lap.

As if reading my thoughts, his hand snakes around my waist to keep me down. "What are you doing?" I whisper harshly, but the stadium drowns my voice. They are cheering too loud, and this lousy idiot is touching me. I don't care that he saved me from falling. "Let...let go of me."

"Relax, Tessa. It's me," the boy says. My brows furrow, and he chuckles. "Brian. Brian McCartney."

I don't relax, but I don't try to stand. I give him a onceover, studying the freckles littered over his nose. Only one person has this many freckles, and I haven't seen him since they moved. I forget we are in the view of disapproving parents and whisper, "Brian?" I swipe a finger over his freckles. "McCartney."

Brian nods. I fling my arms around his neck, choking him in a hug. He was my first crush until his family moved, then I experienced my first heartbreak. His chest vibrates with

laughter. I pull away to smile at him. He pinches my nose like he used to do. I feign annoyance and swat his hand.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, making myself more comfortable. A woman on the bleacher above ours frowns down at me. I kiss Brian on the cheek to annoy her. “It’s been what—eight years?”

Brian laughs and raises one hand. “Five?” he says. I shake my head. “Seven?”

It has been longer than that. Brian’s focus returns to the field, and the countdown to the end of the match starts. My knowledge of sports may be limited, but Asher’s team is leading by a goal.

“Our junior team is playing,” he says, pointing to the opposition in yellow jerseys. Asher’s team is in blue. I adjust my weight on his legs, and his arm steadies me. “I decided to tag along. I was gonna come around to the house, but I wasn’t sure you still lived there. I have missed you, lady.”

See, he called me lady. Ben needs to take lessons from him.

“We still live there,” I tell him as I mess up his hair. “I missed you too, young man.”

The final whistle blows, and the crowd erupts in a thunderous cheer. People rush to the field to hug the players. I sight the scoreboard and grin. Asher’s team won. I try to locate him in the joyous mess, but it is impossible. I look at Brian, and he smiles like his junior team didn’t just lose.

He has grown so much since the last time I saw him. He is no longer the shy nerd I knew. With his current looks and build, he would fit right here in Broadway Heights, in the same clique as Ben.

Speaking of Benjamin Carter, where is he?

“Wait, why are you here?” First, he is not wearing his school jersey. Second, he is in the enemy’s corner. I mimic a magical character from our childhood movies, waving my invisible wand in his face. “Tell me, traitor, have you come to spy on us? Speak now, or I’ll have your tongue.”

“No, Milady,” he replies with a mock bow, and we burst into laughter. “You still haven’t forgotten, huh?”

No way I’ll forget my first and only play with my crush. I note Brian’s lean muscles. His biceps contract when he brushes his hair away from his face, and my pulse quickens. He used to like me back then. I wonder if he might have become my first boyfriend if he had stayed. Would I notice Ben?

The crowd begins to disperse, but we are too comfortable in each other’s presence to move. Asher’s coach pats some players, dishing out what I assume is praises because their faces light up. I need to say hi to Asher before he leaves. He is the reason I’m here. Not for Ben or a kiss.

My eyes roam the field for Ben, and I suck in a soft breath when they find him. He is by the side entrance with a frown so deep it’s almost a scowl. I raise my hand to wave at my favorite jerk, but my arm refuses to move. Ben disappears into the shadow, but I still feel his eyes on me.

Why is he glaring at me?

Brian’s arm settles on my shoulder. I’m still on his lap. “Is that your boyfriend? He’s hot.”

Very.

“No, but I like him.” Lett’s words float to my subconscious. I should define things with Ben. I shrug Brian’s hand off my shoulders, and he ruffles my hair like I am still the little girl he left behind. I look up and try to act unaffected. “He doesn’t like me back, so don’t even ask, Brian.”

“Doesn’t seem like that to me.” My face wrinkles. Maria said the same. But I don’t believe them. Brian tugs my hair out of its bun to frame my face and give us some privacy. His lips inch closer to mine, and I hold my breath. What is he doing? My hands flatten on his chest. “He likes you.”

Yeah, and pigs can fly.

“Do you want him to be your boyfriend?” I have never admitted it out loud to anyone, and the words to reply to Brian

refuse to form. Our lips are so close. “Play along. Loverboy is watching.”

My body listens to Brian. As his big hand slides to the back of my neck, I become deathly still. Acting comes naturally to me. I gradually relax and fall into the role of the lover he is trying to portray.

“He’s fuming,” he says. Laughter coats his voice. Somehow, I like the idea of making Ben angry and jealous. *Take that, Benny boy.* Next time, don’t kiss that bitch. “You can look if you want.”

I turn slowly, and my breath ceases at the intensity of Ben’s stare. He’s no longer hiding in the shadow. It is obvious he is watching us, and he doesn’t care. I almost backtrack, but Brian’s arm keeps me grounded. Brian shakes his head in a silent warning, and my body sags against his chest. I’m not doing anything wrong by talking to Brian or sitting here. Ben is not my boyfriend.

“Make the boy come to you. If he can’t man up and let you know how he feels, he has no right getting upset when you are with other guys.” I nod slowly, but everything in me wants to run into Ben’s arms and explain this situation to him. Brian plants a kiss on my cheek, and I turn the same shade as a ripe tomato. I swear he has done this before. He’s too good at it. “You gotta relax.”

His tone is light, but I don’t find the humor in our situation. It feels like I am cheating on Ben, and we are not dating. I snap my gaze from the spot Ben is standing. “Yeah,” I reply. “You’re right.”

“Tessa, I have to go,” he whispers into my hair. “My bus is leaving.”

He helps me to my feet, taking my hand as we walk hand in hand to Ben’s line of sight. I die a little on the inside when he places a kiss on my forehead and draws me in for a long hug. Shit.

“Make him come to you,” he says, keeping his lips close to my ear like he is whispering sweet nothings. I don’t want to

play along, but I have to. To be fair, Ben is not a saint. “He likes you, or he wouldn’t be that bothered. Trust me on this. I’m a guy. I know when a guy likes a girl, Tessa.”

That line sounds familiar. Brian straightens up and pushes his phone into my hand so I can input my digits. I return his phone. He bops my nose one last time and winks. Is Ben still watching? I am a horrible person. “Take care, Tessa, and you better let me know when you two start dating.”

Brian leaves before I can reply. I am still smiling as I head toward Asher and his silently fuming brother. The school bus is a few meters from them, someone shouts Asher’s name, and he gives her a thumbs up. My smile falters when the gap between us shortens. I direct my gaze to Asher.

“Tessa,” Asher cries out, tackling me in a hug that almost causes us to fall. “You came.”

“I told you I would, Champ.” We fist bump. “Great game,” I say.

His arms are still locked around my waist when he turns to his brother. “Benny, I want to see Samuel. Can I go?” Ben shrugs. Asher takes that as a sign of approval and dashes to the bus slowly filling up with boys his age. He stops at the entrance and waves. “Thank you, Tessa.”

For what? An awkward silence falls on us. I nudge one leg forward, waiting and hoping Ben will start a conversation. A soccer ball comes flying at a boy heading to Asher’s bus, missing his face by some inches. The lucky boy snorts with laughter. He wouldn’t be laughing if it had hit him.

“That would have hurt,” Ben comments.

His fingers slide into his pocket. He twists, facing the yellow bus while I assess him.

“I know, right? I have been hit by balls before, and it hurt badly.” A bemused look takes over his face. I pinch myself. “Um, I meant soccer balls, you know...like the balls they play on the field.” An eyebrow shoots up. He smirks. Oh, God, I’m making this worse. “You know what I mean.”

He grins in amusement, the only good thing about this moment. “I don’t. Enlighten me.”

My cheeks turn pink. I push my fingers into my back pockets and bounce on my toes. This is weird. “Forget I said anything. Thanks.” Ben folds his arm on his chest. “Stop looking at me like that.”

Ben looks away. A few seconds pass, then his eyes scroll over my frame. He cocks his head as if to speak, but his lips press into a thin line. About a minute later, I hear, “Who was that dude?”

I hide a smile. “What dude?”

“The one you were seated on his lap,” he spits out. My face crunches in faux confusion, and he grits his teeth. So cute. If I ever get a teddy, I’ll name it Benny. “That jerk you wouldn’t stop touching.”

Someone’s jealous, and I like it. I school my face into an innocent mask. “Brian is not a jerk.” Ben’s frown deepens. “He’s actually a gentleman. I fell, but he caught me. He saved me, Ben.”

“Yeah, saved you from your clumsy self.”

His jaw clenches. I should be offended by his choice of words, but my first reaction is to laugh. I don’t. His poorly veiled annoyance gives me enough satisfaction. Now he has an idea what I felt when he kissed Olivia after I made him a birthday cake. Since he hasn’t defined what we are, he can’t be mad at me. If Brian is right, Ben doesn’t have to hide the fact that he likes me. I like him too. I think it’s a mutual feeling, or he wouldn’t care who I hang out with. Brian is not a threat.

The awkwardness returns and my body sways lightly. The school bus is not in sight.

Ben takes a step back. “Are you leaving?” I blurt out.

“Yeah. There’s nothing left for me here.” I don’t miss the subtle jab directed at me or the flash of hurt that crosses his face, but I don’t offer any reply. Brian is right. I have to make him work for me. He hasn’t even called me by my name yet. “Asher won the game. We are off to celebrate it.”

Liar. Asher is with Samuel. They left together with the school bus. I spread my arms, then hug myself. The weather is cool. A great topic for conversation. “Cool weather to celebrate, yeah?”

He eyes me with apparent disbelief. “Yeah.”

“I could join you two. I don’t have to be home yet.” Seriously? I need a lock for my mouth.

What happened to *make him work for me*?

Ben makes a throaty sound. I look away when his gaze returns to my face. “You are not invited.”

What? *Breathe, Tessa. Breathe.* It’s not working. Ben takes his first step away from me, and my entire body vibrates with anger. I glare at the foolish, rudest, and most entitled boy I’ve ever met.

“Is this it?” I scream. He stops walking. “You kiss me once, then act like I’m some piece of trash you can’t wait to dispose. Really?” Ben slowly spins to face me, and my heart breaks. “No, wait. That’s not it. You kissed me twice where no one could see us because you are ashamed of me.”

“Juliet...”

He holds his hands up, taking tentative steps toward me, but I am raging too hard to hear him out or care how I look. He does this every time. I have feelings, too, and they are hurt.

“We are not friends, remember?” I yell at the frustrating idiot. “And Juliet is not my fucking name, you moron.”

Ben flinches. I am grateful for the little distance because I can’t think so well around him. I make a sweeping motion across the empty field. As usual, he freely talks to me here because we are in an unfamiliar environment. No one from school can see us here. No one knows him here. The realization sends a new wave of anger growing inside me, and I level him with a deathly glare.

I am done.

“You are blowing this out of proportion,” he whispers in that silly voice that made me kiss him.

Am I? He's annoying, and his smug face isn't helping. There are so many things I want to say, and my head threatens to explode from keeping it all in. He takes another step forward. I snap.

"You know what? Fuck you, Ben." My finger stabs the air, and a shiver rolls through me. "God forbid anyone sees the great Benjamin Carter talking to someone like me. I get it. I really do."

Ben tries to speak, but I cut him off. "I'm not your type, and I was stupid to think for one moment that our kisses meant anything to you." My words catch in my throat. I take a deep breath, barely seeing him through the stupid tears that decide now is a great time to make an appearance. "I am done. I'm leaving." I spot Asher from my periphery and start walking backward. Why is he even here? This mess is his fault. "Make sure you tell your brother how much of an asshole you are."

Forty-Five



STUPID ME. Stupid tears. Stupid Asher. Stupid Ben. Stupid feelings. I pat my pockets for my keys. I need to leave this stupid place. My search comes up empty, and my feet grind to a halt. No way. I march in the direction I came from, my steps too fast. The first place I check is the bleacher. Nothing. I pat my pockets again, refusing to believe I have lost my car key. It was here with me.

How do I get home? It's getting late, and my phone is in the car. Nice. I look up to the sky and groan. This is all Ben's fault. I start the sad journey to my car, head cast down, arms wrapped around my torso. The only thing I know about picking locks is based on what Lett told me. And I'm not with my hairpin.

The early November chill air hits my face, and the tip of my nose reddens as I shuffle to my car. I'm screwed. I bump into someone, almost falling for the second time today. My head snaps up.

"Watch where you are going," I bark, ready to punch sense into the idiot standing in the middle of the parking lot like he owns the place. The person doesn't move. I stomp to his front, half-launching into a speech when I see it's Ben. He is not moving. I tap him. "Ben. Benjamin."

"She's here."

His eyes have a faraway look. I follow his gaze and see nothing but a black Toyota with tinted windows. His arms

jerk. I try to pry his fists open, but he doesn't stop shaking. What's wrong?

"Who?" I whisper.

"Her."

Tears fill his eyes. His breathing becomes labored, but he doesn't look away from Her, whoever that person is. Fear claws my insides. I snap my fingers in his face and poke him on the side to get a reaction out of him. But nothing happens. This is not the Ben I know, and I will gladly pick an asshole Ben over a scared Ben. The Toyota is still there, but it's not the only car in the lot.

A tear leaks to his cheek. My heart clenches, and I do the most stupid thing. I kiss him.

His lips are as soft as I remember, but he doesn't return the kiss. I palm his face, willing him to snap out of his trance, but he's unresponsive. "Romeo," I whisper. "It's me. Juliet. Your Juliet."

Nothing. As I'm about to pull back, Ben pecks my lips, and I grow shy, knowing he's conscious. A part of me expects him to shriek in horror because I kissed him, but he cups the base of my neck.

"My Juliet," he says.

"My Romeo," I reply in the same tone. My lips press to his. "I'm here."

Ben kisses me back. Softly at first, as if seeking consent, and I provide it with a moan. Tingles travel from my lips to my feet. I kiss him with more urgency. He picks up the pace, kissing me like he needs me to survive. Goosebumps erupt on my arms, my body melts into his perfect frame, and my fingers slide into his messy hair. I massage his scalp, loving the sound it elicits from him.

We disengage to get some air. Ben's forehead touches mine, and a smirk flits across his lips. I want to smile, but every single wrong he has done rushes to the surface, especially his attitude from tonight. I almost step back, but the vulnerability in his eyes keeps my feet rooted to the floor.

Where does this leave us now?

My lips part to ask that, and he whispers, “Shh. Don’t ruin the moment.”

I nod. I can’t do otherwise. Ben laughs. I laugh. Soon, we are both laughing hard from our bellies. As we head to my car in silence, he slides his hand into mine and laces our fingers. He stops beside the driver’s side, and I am about to tell him I lost my key when he produces it from his back pocket.

“You dropped this,” he says. I accept it without meeting his gaze. “I was coming to give it back.”

“Thanks.”

Ben pries the key from me and opens the door. I am relieved and excited when he slides into the passenger seat without an invitation. I won’t say it, but I want him here. My hand closes around the wheel, and I focus on the wall before us until I regain control of my breathing. OMG. Ben is in my car. I have given him a ride in the past, but we never kissed. I tuck my hands between my legs.

“Who was that?” I whisper.

Silence hangs over us, and I dart a gaze outside. The tinted car is gone. Whoever that was, she scared the shit out of him. I don’t like it. I don’t like the sinking feeling that settles in my belly. Ben is never scared of anyone. I’ve watched him fight guys twice his size, and he showed no fear.

“Theresa,” he whispers. Thinking he’s calling me, my head jerks toward him. But his head hangs low like he’s talking to himself. He sighs. “Her friends call her Tessa. I hate that name. I hate her.”

I am not sure he realizes what he said. He clenches and unclenches his fist, staring at them for so long a chill creeps down my legs. I clear my throat, and he looks up. “Thanks for helping me.”

“No biggie.” I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans. Are we going to talk about her or the argument on the field? Why does he hate the name? Is that why he loathes me? I share a name

with Her. “Grace. My middle name is Grace. You can call me Grace if calling me Tessa makes you uncomfortable.”

“Grace,” he mutters like he’s hearing it for the first time. I like how uncertain my name sounds coming from him. It might take some getting used to. “Gracie. I like Grace. It’s way better.”

That comfortable silence descends on us once more. I should start the car, ask him to leave or check on Asher. My job here is done, but I don’t want to ruin the moment. His thumb trails my cheek, my tongue wets my lips, and Ben repeats the action with his forefinger, eyes trained on me.

“I’m sorry I made you cry,” he says. I almost laugh, but I settle for a tight smile. It doesn’t matter how many times he apologizes. It won’t change what happened between us. He doesn’t like me, and I can’t bring myself to be mad at him. I’d rather be hurt than be with someone forced to pretend they care about me. I gulp when he unbuckles my seatbelt. “I’m not ashamed of you.”

“Don’t.” He retracts his hand, and a pathetic sigh leaves me. I miss his touch. This proximity is messing with me. I close my eyes to garner the courage to speak out. I will never get this off my chest if he continues staring at me. My hands shake, and I hide them behind me. “Don’t lie to me, okay? Don’t act like you care, Ben. You don’t. You don’t have to explain yourself. I get it.”

Instead of looking at him to gauge his reaction, I gawk at the wall. I am doing this for myself.

“You don’t get it. Please look at me.” My eyes clench tighter, and he sighs. I don’t want to look at his face. Maybe I lied, and I don’t want him here. “Olivia was in the hallway, and she was watching us. I didn’t want to give her another reason to bully you. You said it yourself on Halloween night. She told you to stay away from me. Gracie, I’m not ashamed of you. I was trying to protect you.”

Protect me from what he started? My head rounds to him, and he grimaces. I exhale loudly. “You can’t protect me if you are part of the problem, Ben. That day I hugged you, and you

just acted like it meant nothing. Like I was some clingy pest you wished never existed. Who does that?"

"Gracie—"

"Only you, Ben," I cut in. My finger juts at the windshield. If we were outside, facing each other, I might have stuck the finger in his eye. "You punched me, yet I was still nice to you. You held me back so your non-girlfriend could hit me!" I pause to catch my breath, my palms sting, and I open them to see the tiny cuts made by my fingernails. Lifting my gaze to the annoying human beside me, I let out a shaky breath. "Now you talk about protecting me? Oh, please. If you want to protect me, tell her to stop being a bitch, and you can stop being such an arrogant jerkface."

Still fuming, I roll down the window to let out the bad air. I don't try to hide my irritation as my foot drums into the floor. I might like Ben, but I'm not dumb. He opens the door and puts out a leg.

He doesn't leave, but he doesn't say anything either. "I didn't see your bike," I say after a second.

"It's at the mechanic."

How was he planning on leaving? I insert the key in the ignition. "Where's Asher?"

"Went with the bus. He's sleeping over at Samuel's."

A moment of uncertainty passes between us. I might regret it, but I still say, "I'll give you a ride."

"You don't have to." I spare him an angry glance. He frowns. "Gracie," he calls out.

My heart flutters, and I almost forget every reason to be mad at him. "It's fine," I murmur.

"The punch was an accident. I was waiting for Noah, and you showed up. Did you follow me?"

I let out a squeak, throwing an annoyed look his way. "Get over yourself, Benny."

Ben jams the door close and hoists me on his lap. His big hand cups my face. I lean into him and sigh softly. "I'm sorry, Gracie. It really was an accident." I don't know if I believe that, but he has his eyes on me, so I nod slowly. "You know? You cheated. You were not fair to me that night."

We only talked on Halloween night, and I was more than fair. I kissed him. We talked, and we were cool. Oh, he's not talking about that. He's talking about our match. About that one kick.

"It's not cheating if I got back the points." He tsks. "It was a means to an end. I had to win."

"Yeah. By any means necessary, right?" Ben says, but I can sense he's holding back. I cup his face, loving the smoothness of his skin on my palm. Ben pouts. I want to know what makes him tick, what makes him laugh. Why he does the things he does. He brings my hand to his mouth to place kisses on my knuckles. "We should get going."

"Yeah," I reply. Ben nods, but his arms loop around my waist to keep me close.

I raise my brows in question, and he smiles. I love and hate his smile. "Thank you for the cake."

I freeze. "You knew?" If he knew, why did he kiss her?

Ben shakes his head. "Found out yesterday. I overheard you and Asher talking, but I never got a chance to grill him." He drags a hand through his hair. A rare smile touches his lips, and I squirm on his lap. "Why didn't you say anything, Gracie? I would have kissed you instead, you know?"

"What does it matter? You kissed her, and you looked happy. Didn't want to ruin the moment."

His eyes find mine, and he hooks a finger under my jaw. "You were jealous. Is that why you cried? You snapped in class." I hate his brain. Why does he have to remember? I nod again. "Sorry."

"Don't be, Benny."

Ben frowns, and my head drops to his shoulder. I have no idea what I'm doing, but my arms lock behind his waist. This is lovely. "But I should be. I'm sorry I made you cry. I do that a lot, yeah?"

"Well, you are kind of an asshole and a big bully," I murmur. "At least to me."

"I'm sorry, Gracie. I'm sorry I punched you."

Oh, Ben. He sounds so sincere and remorseful. But it doesn't matter.

This won't work.

I pull away from Ben to take a deep breath and create some space between us, which is almost impossible because I'm right on his lap. Finally working up the courage, I mutter, "Look, your apology is cool. But we can't keep doing this. I like you, and you don't like me back. It's fine."

No, it's not.

Fine lines appear on his forehead. I rush out the rest of the words before I chicken out. "I'll give you a ride, and we'll pretend today never happened. You don't have to talk to me in school, and I won't even be mad. We're not friends, so it's cool." I know I'm rambling, but I can't stop. I don't even have the confidence to look him in the eyes as I say this. I'm talking to the roof. "People like you and people like me can never be friends. It's expected. I don't expect you to..."

I don't finish my statement because Ben slides a hand up my cheek. His forehead touches mine.

"Ben—"

He kisses the rest of the words out of me. I groan against his lips. Why does he have to be such an excellent kisser? He breaks the kiss before I have time to process it. "I like you too, Gracie."

Forty-Six



ME: *He likes me back. We kissed. Oh my God. We kissed not to prove a point but because he wanted to. We seem to be doing a lot of kissing but I like it. I don't really know him, but I want to know him. I don't know what to expect. What do you think I should do? As a guy, would you appreciate it if a girl asked you out? Should I ask him out? Does that make me desperate?*

Me: *It does, right? I will wait for him to ask me.*

I shove the phone into my drawer without waiting for his reply. Lett was right. It's easier to chat with a phone. He hasn't replied to my letters, and I have stopped checking. If he replies, he will let me know. I grab my stuff, rush out of the house and make the journey to school. It still feels odd walking down the hallway without Maria, but the memory from my last kiss with Ben has me smiling.

We kissed again when I dropped him off. He made me walk him to the door of his house, and we kissed a second time. I blush from thinking about all the kisses. We kiss a lot. I like it, and I don't like it. I want us to have regular conversations. Like me, did he start fighting to protect himself or for the money alone? I round the corner leading to my locker, and my arms tighten around my bag straps.

Maria is at my locker with her books in one hand. I stop in front of her and muster a smile. Her little frown makes me hopeful. At least she's not ignoring me. Am I forgiven? I miss my bestie.

“You should have told me,” she says. There’s no anger in her voice. I take it as a sign we will be best friends again in no time. Holding her book to her chest, her eyes narrow to slits. “You lied.”

To protect her feelings. “I’m sorry. He made me promise not to tell you.” She scowls. I pull her in for a hug before she protests. “I missed you. I will never, ever keep a secret from you again.”

“You better not, Theresa Grace Mower,” she says against my chest, voice muffled. We break apart, but I rest an arm on her shoulder. I missed her hugs. My smile is so big my cheeks ache. “I missed you too. God. Life was so boring without you. Don’t do that again, or I’ll never forgive you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I open my locker to get my books, but she grabs my wrist and rolls up my sleeve to reveal the name bracelets. Tessa. Mower. I haven’t thanked Asher for them. “It was a gift.”

“A gift?” she asks. I hide my face in my locker as I murmur my reply to her. “From who?”

“Asher,” I reply. No more secrets from my best friend. “Ben’s baby brother.”

The whispers in the hallway grow louder. I don’t bother to check out the source of the noise. It has to be one of the jocks or cheerleaders doing their thing. My gaze returns to Maria, who hasn’t said a word yet. I close my locker and sling my backpack over my shoulder. I have a class with Ben.

Her head lowers. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“For what?” I raise my wrist with the bracelets. “Because of this? But you give me stuff all the time.”

Maria bites her lips, and a smile flits to mine. If I did that in front of Ben, he would chide me. He likes my lips. He likes them without bruises. I like his too. Pouty. Soft. I tug on her arm, and we start for our classes.

“I left you at the party. I was supposed to be your ride home,” Maria says.

Bile rises to my throat as the memories from that night flash through my mind. I shrug to appear nonchalant. Something good did come out of it. She stops feet away from my class to look at me.

“I tried calling your mom when I was a bit calm, but she wasn’t picking up. She probably hates me now, doesn’t she?” I can’t help my smile. Mom was on her side. “How did you get home?”

This will be the best time to tell her about the kiss and everything about Ben. “I got a ride.”

Her perfect brow shoots up. “From who?”

My friend circle is tiny. We both know it. Maria folds her arms on her chest, but my lips remain sealed. I want to tell her about Ben, I really do, but I have no idea how or where to start the story.

“Me.”

Our heads snap in the direction of the voice. Ben. He leans close to plant a kiss on my cheek and another on my temple. My insides turn to goo. I hear a few gasps, and heat crawls up my neck. People are watching. Maria questions me with her eyes, I duck my head, and Ben takes my hand.

To Maria, Ben says, “It was me. I gave her a ride home.” Stunned into silence, she can only nod. I inhale a whiff of Ben’s cologne. He smells nice. “Next time, don’t leave your friend stranded.”

“I won’t,” Maria promises. With the way Ben is staring at her, she dares not say otherwise.

Ben’s gaze lowers to my face, and my heart thumps against my ribcage. I know I told him not to ignore me, but this is too much. He is holding my hand! I move in front of him to block my view of the small crowd that has gathered to watch us. He pecks me again, and my knees turn to jelly.

His hand snakes around my waist to steady me. “Are you okay?” he whispers. Is he kidding me? How can I be okay when he’s being so touchy in front of everyone? I manage a shaky nod, and he winks. Jesus. “How was your weekend?” I

open my mouth, but it seems I have lost my ability to talk. His blue eyes flash with mischief. He flicks a finger over my nose and chuckles. “Guess what I found?”

I forget about everything but us. We are in our world, and Ben is the only person who matters. A childish excitement washes over me, I bounce on my toes, and his eyes light up with equal joy.

“What?”

“It’s called a guess for a reason,” he says. I push myself on my toes and press a kiss to his nose. Ben sighs, but I can’t think right now. “You have to guess, Gracie. You didn’t even try. Guess.”

A poke on my side drags me out of our bubble. I glower at a frowning Maria, and Ben’s gaze alternates between us. She mutters an apology and steps back, as she should have done long ago.

We are back to our bubble. Ben’s hands reach behind him, and he whispers, “Close your eyes.”

I oblige him. With Ben, I can’t think straight. Something cold settles on my neck. I pry my eyes open and stare at the object. Hayden’s necklace. Tears well up in my eyes and drop to my cheek. I missed my necklace. Ben offers me a big smile. I punch his shoulder hard, and he jumps back.

“Normal people would say thank you, Gracie,” he teases, thumb brushing the tears on my cheek.

“Normal people wouldn’t take my necklace in the first place.” He squints. “Fine. Thank you.”

Ben’s chest puffs like I said more than thanks. He swings his arm around my shoulders, guiding me toward our class. For the first time, I notice we are alone. When did Maria leave?

I have a lot of questions to answer. Questions I don’t have answers to because I don’t completely understand Ben. It’s like he switched to a new personality after our talk. I steal a glance at him as he rambles about something Asher did. I

should speak my mind more often if it will yield positive results like this.

“Did I scare your friend?” he asks when we are in front of my class. I peek inside. It’s empty, and I don’t bother to go in. A part of me wants everyone to see us together. The perfect mismatched pair.

“Maybe,” I reply.

Ben must have had the same silly thought as me. He curls his arms around my waist and tucks his head into the crook of my neck. The hallway is empty, so we have it to ourselves. I hook my arms on his waist, closing my eyes as the need to understand our relationship hits me.

“What are we?” I ask without breaking the hug. He’s big, warm, and cuddly. I like it and can get used to it.

Ben captures my lips in a brief kiss, and I am left breathless by the time we come up for air.

“My Gracie. My babe,” he answers. Ben presses his forehead to mine, his perfect dentition on display, and my heart riots in my chest. My back arches against the wall. He pecks my lips again and again until I melt against him. I can get used to this. “So? Does that answer your question?”

Not entirely.

We kissed. He called me his babe, his Gracie. Babe, not girlfriend. They are not the same. People use babe even with friends. We still haven’t defined our relationship. Are we friends with benefits? As appealing as that might sound, I want something more intimate and explicit from him. Like a relationship status. Are we dating now? Must he ask me out before I can call him my boyfriend? I mean, he walked me to class. He pecked me in front of everyone. Those are boyfriend duties.

“Yes.” I place my hands on his chest to feel his heartbeat. He bites my nose. “It does, babe.”

Someone clears their throat, and we jump apart to see Abigail glaring at us. “This is a school, not a brothel.” Ben snickers, and her irritation heightens. She redirects her gaze to

me. “You should take your shenanigans elsewhere. Some of us would like to study without fear of getting an STD.”

Abigail shoves me out of the way before I can think of a proper comeback. Of course, I am the one who has to bear the brunt of her anger. Ben snaps out of his trance when she jams the door close. I stop him from going after her, and he frowns down at me. She’s not worth it.

A breath leaves his lips. His chest falls and rises. “Just ignore her, Gracie. She’s upset I’m off the market.” My heart slams against my chest. Did he just say what I think he did? That he is off the market. Wow, it’s official. Ben is mine. I press a kiss to his lips, then another. “What was that for?”

“For being the best babe a girl could ask for,” I answer.

Ben kisses a corner of my lips and offers me his hand. “Ready to go in?”

I glance at the end of the hallway. I shouldn’t have.

A chill travels down my spine. I swallow hard as Olivia’s blood-red lips move into an evil smirk. We haven’t spoken since that night. She makes a slicing motion across her neck and winks.

Crazy bitch.

Ben’s head snaps in the direction I am looking at, but the bitch is gone. He eyes me warily, questions heavy in his blue orbs. I force a smile to my lips, and we enter the class holding hands.

Forty-Seven



I CAN'T STOP THINKING about Olivia.

And now, Abigail. I wrap an arm around myself as Abigail darts a murderous glance at me for the umpteenth time. If she's so mad Ben chose to be with me, why can't she take it up with him? Same with Olivia. If she wants me to stay away from Ben so badly, why can't she tell him that?

What happened to girl power? Why must we girls hate each other?

"Then X gives you five." Mr. Sam's voice jolts me out of my reverie. He scribbles on the board and rambles some more about X. "If you move the equation to the left, we will find the other X."

I doubt anyone is paying attention to him since he has repeated the same thing twice. A paper plane hits my temple. I narrow my eyes at the sender, and Ben winks. My cheeks turn a shade darker. How did I land him? Are we real? Ben motions for me to pick up the plane at my feet. I delay for a nanosecond to get a reaction from him. He clasps his hands and juts out his lower lip.

A smile springs to my lips at the content of his note. I flip him off. He is too sweet. So unreal.

The note says: *Are you okay? You look lost.*

I push the doubts creeping up on me. People change. They deserve a second chance, but what made Ben change his mind about me? We didn't start talking until this semester. Wait, was

it the cake? He was pretty excited about it. I take out my pencil to write down a reply to him. He makes kissy faces at me, and I giggle, slapping a hand over my mouth to avoid calling attention.

He is so distracting, but I really like him.

Yup. I'm okay. The class is boring.

I don't want to bother him on the first day of our relationship. Ben's hair falls over his eyes, and he flicks it off. I like this look, but he needs a haircut. I pass the note to him like a normal person, but Ben being Ben, does the opposite when he sends his reply. I make a sound of disapproval, and he joins his hands, linking his fingers on one side of his chest to form the shape of love.

My heart skips. Is Ben in love with me?

Love. It is too strong a word, and we have never used it. Love takes time to form, right? He can't love me. I don't think too much about it. Well, I try not to, but my lips stretch into a small smile.

***Ben:** Yes. So boring. I wish we could get out of here. I want to kiss you again and again.*

Giggles sputter out of my lips, abruptly dying when I lift my head to Mr. Sam's glare. His hand shoots out for the note, and some heads turn in my direction. My cheeks heat up. "Hand it over."

Ben grimaces and subtly shakes his head. I will die if Mr. Sam collects it.

"Theresa Mower, the note, or you can forget Calculus for the rest of this semester." Sweat breaks out on my forehead, and my palms grow clammy. In a few strides, Mr. Sam is at my desk, hand stretched out to me like I owe him money. "You are wasting precious time. We don't have all day."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I drop the note on his palm. He storms back to the front. Ben gives me two thumbs down, and my heart rolls to my belly. Is he going to break up with me after this?

He cannot.

What am I saying? We are not a couple. Wait, we are. He called me his babe, and I'm his Gracie.

The class falls quiet as Mr. Sam scans the rows of students for another scapegoat. There's only a little gap between Ben and me, but it seems to grow wider when he refuses to look my way. I fold my sweaty hands under my thighs as Mr. Sam's finger moves left and right until it settles on Abigail.

He invites Abigail forward and hands her the note. My breath halts in my throat. "Read it to the class."

My cheeks redden. I hide my face in my palms when she starts reading. A lump forms in my throat each time she stresses a syllable. She didn't need to emphasize them. Ben's aloof attitude only increases my worries. The delight in her voice is clear. The witch is so excited to embarrass me.

The awkward silence is punctured by muffled giggles when Abigail finishes. My cheeks are a darker shade of red as my eyes locate the formula calendar hanging on the wall. I'm not a part of this.

"Who wrote this?" Mr. Sam asks.

The class erupts in laughter, some steal glances at me, and I slide down my chair. I have never been in detention. Never been suspended. But I know one of that will happen if I say something.

"I did." I cast Ben a worried look. He can't take the blame alone. I am also to blame, so why am I mute? Because I'm a terrible babe. "It's a rehearsal for drama club. I'm Romeo, and Gracie is Juliet," he explains to anyone listening. I clear my throat to draw his attention. He's the only one allowed to call me Gracie. The whole class doesn't have to know. "I mean, Mower. Miss Mower is Juliet."

Damn. Theresa or Tessa must have hurt him so badly for him to hate the name this much.

"Drama club?" Mr. Sam mutters, and Ben nods. Wrong move. Mr. Sam's face darkens. I attempt to talk, but he continues, "You are rehearsing for drama club in Calculus

class?” At that, Ben has nothing to say, and I feel like an asshole for peeking behind my fingers. No one says a word. Mr. Sam stops between a row of chairs and drums his fingers on a desk. “Principal’s office. Now.”

The class is eerily quiet after Ben leaves. I can hear their unspoken words, the hate directed at me. Mr. Sam turns to me. He says nothing, but his disappointment is palpable. Remorse weighs heavily on my chest. For the rest of the class, I behave. Even when he starts droning about the same things, I listen.

When the bell rings, I wait for everyone to leave. I am halfway across the class when Mr. Sam calls me. “Theresa.” I stop. He drops the notebooks he’s arranging on the desk. “Be careful.”

“Sir?”

Surprise must have been evident on my face. Mr. Sam leans back on his chair as if reconsidering his decision to hold me back. “Don’t get carried away by...” He points to the door. “By him.”

Him is Ben. “I won’t.”

For the next three lectures, I’m distracted. Once the bell for lunch rings, I bolt out of the class. Maria is by the door waiting for me. A frown forms on her lips. I try to play it off by placing an arm on her shoulder, but she shrugs it off. She flips her hair over one shoulder as we brush past students.

“Spill.”

I look around. The hallway is bustling with girls and boys rushing to the cafeteria. “Not here.”

Maria nods and drags me to the janitor’s closet. She shoves me into the small space that can barely fit both of us. The place is pitch black, and I can’t see past my fingers. I can’t even see her. A foul smell infiltrates my nostrils, forcing me to plug my nose. “Maria Vega, not here.”

“Agreed.”

We stumble out, laughing, and gulp clean air. Maria’s hand clamps down on my wrist to stop any plans of escape.

“I don’t understand why the kiss is not on BGC,” she says. “It should be the highlight of the day.”

It would have, if Olivia didn’t control what was posted on the site. Anonymous my foot. We all know it’s her, or at least we pretend not to know. It doesn’t matter. I have Ben, and she doesn’t.

The cafeteria quietens once we step in. It might be my imagination, but they all pause to check me out. My palms moisten. Someone claps, and everyone snaps out of their trance. I toss a look over my shoulder to see Olivia. No surprises. She hates when the attention is on someone else.

Where’s my Ben?

Speaking of Ben, he struts into the cafeteria like the handsome jerk he is. Maria sighs again. “Snap out of it, Tessa Grace Mower. What was that you said about not having a crush on him?”

“Maybe I lied,” I reply. It feels good to get it off my chest. We join the slowly moving line to get our meal. I press the tray to my chest. “It was only a teeny-weeny bit of crush that blossomed.”

“Into what?” Her face wrinkles like she’s disgusted at the thought of us together. “Since when?”

I shrug. Ben and I are different. I know that already, but she’s not being supportive.

“Since I don’t know.”

Getting our meals, we find a seat farthest from Olivia, a long bench by the window. Ben has not noticed me, and I don’t know how to feel. Is he even looking? I stab the poor chicken when I see him at Olivia’s table. My chest constricts. I grab my soda and gulp down quarter the entire content.

I release a belch that has Maria frowning at me. But I don’t care. He is at Olivia’s table, not ours.

Why?

“We kissed after Nate’s party,” I say, eyes on the back of Ben’s head. Why isn’t he looking for his babe? Is this payback

for letting him take the fall in Calculus class? Maria's jaw drops. She doesn't say anything, and I fear a fly will enter her mouth. "I was stranded, and he helped me."

Remorse flits across her face, but I shrug it off. I'm over it. It's a good and bad thing she left me. Maria stabs her fries while I push my chicken around the plate. I was so hungry but not anymore.

Maria leans in. "Are you two together now?"

"He called me his Gracie."

"I noticed," she cuts in.

"And he called me his babe," I finish.

Maria drops her cutlery on the table and crosses her arms under her boobs. I wish I wasn't sitting opposite her because right now, she's giving me that look her mother gives when she fucks up.

"That doesn't make you his girlfriend." It does, doesn't it? She picks a fry from her plate, and my eyes wander to Olivia's table again. "Tessa, if you two are not dating, what are you doing?"

I open my mouth to answer and close it wordlessly. "Ben sent you to the clinic," she reminds me.

Doubts begin to creep in again. "He apologized," I say. But I don't sound as confident. He is not the same person who punched me. He won't repeat it. I can feel it in my guts. I sip my soda until it's finished. "He is really sorry."

"He didn't ask you out, Tessa. Why do you keep kissing him? Look at them. Does it look like he cares?" I guess Ben sitting at Olivia's table instead of mine sends the wrong message, but we can't decide based on that. Her worried eyes hold mine, and she sighs. "Do you want to get hurt?"

"No." I look away from the picture-perfect couple at the other end of the cafeteria. Maria offers me a sad smile, and I swipe a hand across my nose. "I guess I thought Benny really liked me."

“Benny? You call him Benny? Well, if Benny does, he’s not doing a good job of showing it.”

Forty-Eight



MARIA IS WRONG.

Ben likes me. And he proves it by coming up to our table to slide his tray close to mine. His arm goes around my shoulders, and I'm a blushing mess when he kisses my cheek. Maria shakes her head. That disapproving look is sent in my direction once more, but Ben is here. He showed up.

"Sorry, babe. Olivia kept me waiting," Ben tells me in an annoyed voice, like he didn't want to be there with her. He pouts, and my anger dissolves. How can I stay mad at that face? "Had stuff that needed my help. I didn't know it would take so much of my time. But I'm here now, okay?"

Ben's gaze roams my face. The pad of his thumb brushes the skin under my eyes, and my lips spread in a shy smile. Maria must have gotten annoyed by our interaction.

"She didn't," my best friend snaps.

We turn to her, and a wedge appears between my eyebrows. "Sorry, what?" Ben says.

I slide my hands under the table to take his. Maria doesn't like him. I know she's looking out for me, but she needs to give him a chance. I've never liked any boy this much since Brian, and that's so long ago. I like Ben. I want him to be my boyfriend, and I also want my best friend's blessing.

"Olivia didn't need help. She just wanted to take you away from Tessa," Maria says.

Her haughty tone brooks no argument, and my hand slips from Ben. I don't want to be stuck in the middle if this conversation turns sour, but I agree with Maria. It's not beneath Olivia. We glance at her table, and she is already glaring at us. A smile lifts her lips once Ben raises his head. She waves, and unfortunately, the idiot called Benjamin Carter returns it with a salute. I imagine strangling her, and the thought calms me down until a ghost of a smile flies across Ben's face.

Maria clears her throat. "She deliberately kept you waiting to piss off your girlfriend here."

My best friend did not just say that. Ben doesn't flinch at her utterance. So, I'm his girlfriend?

"Oh, come on, Maria," he replies. He looks to me for help. "You don't know Liv like I do."

What the fuck does that mean?

Did he lie about not being her boyfriend? I take an involuntary inch away from him, and he sends me a pleading look I ignore. I hate this. Cheers break out in the cafeteria as two people start dancing in the center. I focus on their feet rather than Ben's hand clenched on his knee.

"Maybe. But I know she's a manipulative bitch," Maria retorts. She tilts her head to the side to give him a onceover. Ben lifts a brow. "Something you fail to see, yet you claim to know her."

The dancing couple exit the cafeteria, and Maria's smile falls when her gaze returns to me. I try to hide my feelings behind a fake smile, but she sees through it. My best friend shoots to her feet.

"I will leave you lovebirds to catch up."

The sarcasm in her voice flies over Ben's head. He covers the distance between us and steals a fry from my plate. I push my tray toward him, my appetite as dead as the smile Maria flashed me before leaving. Ben picks up my empty can, shakes it, and replaces mine with his. It doesn't make things better,

but I take a swig of his chilled Coca-Cola to tame the building jealousy.

“What crawled up her ass and died?” Ben asks once Maria is out of earshot.

Anger flits through me. Red, hot, flaming rage. I slam the Coca-Cola on the tray, and the dark liquid sloshes out of the opening. I like Ben, but Maria is my best friend. She will be there when he decides he has had enough of this skinny girl with vitiligo and insecurities larger than his ego.

“Your attitude.” Ben gasps. The fry sticks out from the corner of his mouth like a cigarette, he takes it out, and a sad expression replaces his shock. “You should have come to our table first.”

Ben juts out his lip, and his eyes shine with contrition. This guy is all mine, but he’s clueless and annoying. I need to know that I can always count on him. “Babe.” My heart clenches, I allow him to lace our fingers, and he kisses my wrist. “I’m sorry, Gracie. It’s hard to say no to Olivia.”

That familiar ball of insecurity rolls through me. The part of me that always feels second place to Olivia jumps awake. “But easy to say no to me, right?” Maybe Maria is right, and I will get hurt if I continue this *thing* with him. “What if I want you here and she doesn’t? Will you go to her?”

The bell rings before Ben replies. His hand circles my wrist when I attempt to stand. “We are not done talking.” I am. I don’t want to have this conversation. I snatch my hand from his grip, and he whispers, “Please.”

I close my eyes and take deep breaths. We are not doing this right. This is why I shouldn’t date. I don’t know the first thing about relationships. The cafeteria is almost empty when my eyes open again. Ben’s contrite face fills my vision. “Gracie, I am sorry. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“It was. It is,” I whisper, eyes on my hands tucked between my legs. His finger moves under my jaw, and our gazes meet. Ben sticks out the tip of his tongue, and I crack. I offer him a half-smile. “Maria was right. She’s manipulative.” He winces

like I punched him, so I switch topics to avoid an argument. I can already tell she will be an issue for us in the future. “Ben, I have to get to class.”

He stands. “I’ll walk you.”

It takes a few seconds for me to accept his hand. I stare at it like it’s out to attack me. He shoves his hands into his pockets. “Gracie.” The pain in his voice chews me up with guilt. “I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t make sense, Benny,” I blurt out.

A minute of us staring at each other in silence passes. I loop my hand through Ben’s elbow, and we exit the cafeteria. Ben slows his pace. We don’t have a class together for the rest of today, so I want this moment to last a while longer. Emotions are weird. I am mad at him, but I still want to be around him.

“What doesn’t make sense?” he asks once we climb the stairs leading to the lockers.

“The fact that you like me all of a sudden,” I answer.

His sigh is so deep it bounces off the wall. Ben stops. I stop. “What if I’ve been secretly crushing on you?” I frown. That’s impossible. I’m not the type of girl anyone would crush on. Secretly or openly. I’m that reserved. No one knows me. “Give yourself a bit more credit, Gracie. Own it.”

Easy for a jock who everyone loves to say. I can’t own it like him. I force a smile to my lips. We resume walking, with our pounding footsteps acting as a reminder that we are both late for class.

“What if Olivia doesn’t want you talking to me?”

Ben doesn’t reply until we are at my locker. I take out some books. “What about it?”

I steal a glance at him. Is he deliberately being obtuse like Maria said? “Everything about it.” He looks on in confusion. Boys. They need us to spell everything out for them. “What if she asks you to pick between her and me? Your friendship with her or me? I’m serious, Benny. What if?”

The lines on his forehead deepen. “If Maria told you to pick between her and me, would you?”

Maria will always be my best friend, but I don’t want to be in that position. She won’t ask that of me.

“I won’t.”

“Me too.” Ben touches his forehead to mine, and the worry choking me slips away. I plant a soft kiss on his lips. “Liv is *just* my friend. She won’t come between us.” I nod in agreement because it feels like that’s what he wants me to do. I hate that girl. I hate that he calls her Liv. “Promise.”

I know we will be fine when he pushes out a finger for a pinky promise. On turning to my locker, a laugh slips from me when I realize I picked out the wrong textbook. I retrieve the correct one and bring out my backpack. Ben places one hand on the locker beside mine. An image flashes through my mind, and chills race down my spine. The last time we were this close, I thought he would hit me.

What if he hits me this time? Or gives me another bruise on my cheeks?

The thoughts take form, and my breath falls out in shallow rasps. I lean on the locker for support. My chest falls and rises as the memory spills out, and an invisible cord tightens around my neck.

He hit me.

Ben grabs my shoulders. I tremble so much I am unable to stand on my own. His lips move, but I can’t hear a word he says. I’m sinking into a deep, dark hole created by this image. My knees turn to jelly, and I fall forward without meeting the ground. Memories rush through me like a movie on fast-forward. He starts breathing, and I follow his breathing pattern until I eventually calm down.

When I recover, my face is squashed against his firm chest, with his fingers drawing random patterns on my lower back. I breathe him in, and the comforting scent of his cologne surrounds me in a bubble. Seconds later, I step back to stare at him. Ben stares back with a worried face.

He palms my cheeks. “You good?”

I contemplate telling him. In the end, I decide to fuck it. “Just remembered when you punched me,” I reply with a fake smile spreading from ear to ear. If we will move forward in whatever this thing is called, I want to be honest with him. His hands drop from my face. He might be sorry now, but it doesn’t change what happened, and I am such a dumb bitch for still liking this jackass. “I know you said it was an accident, but before then, you weren’t much of a nice guy.”

“Yeah.” His hands hover over my shoulders, but he doesn’t touch me. “You forgive me?”

Feeling light-hearted, I push myself to plant a kiss on his lips. “You have to earn it.”

“I will, Juliet.” He deepens the kiss, his tongue seeking entry into my mouth. “I will.”

Forty-Nine



I'M WAITING for Ben in my car when the dashboard vibrates. It has to be Lett. I brought the phone to school today. A door slams shut as I open the glove compartment to retrieve the phone. I want to be mad at Lett for taking this long to reply, but I want to hear from a male. He doesn't know Ben, so he might be more objective. I toss my school bag on the backseat and slide to the front to wait for Ben.

***Lett:** Asking him out doesn't make you desperate.*

***Me:** Maybe but I'm not asking him out. My best friend says it's the man's job and I agree with her. I even asked him what we were and he didn't give me a definite answer.*

Two minutes later and he hasn't replied.

***Me:** I don't want to push him away.*

***Lett:** Baby steps. Let him do it at his own pace.*

***Lett:** If he doesn't like you, he won't be kissing you that much. Boys don't kiss just any girl. I know I don't. I kiss this girl because I like her and she likes me back.*

***Lett:** Take this time to get to know him, kay? What if you find out he dips his fry in his latte before eating it? Then you are stuck with that kind of person as your boyfriend.*

Laughter trickles from my lips as I read the last line. I mentioned that I hated it once. It is almost as bad as dipping your toast in your coffee. Only witches do that. My insides hurt from laughing too hard, and my hair falls over my face. Lett might be correct, but I still want Ben to ask me out.

Me: Guess you are kind of right. Do you think people can change? From asshole to nice guy?

Lett: Some. My girl says I have to earn her forgiveness because I was a little bit of an ass.

Me: A little? Lol. That sounds like something I'll say.

Lett: You must be a smartass then. Maybe do the same? Let him earn this spot in your heart.

Me: I think I'll do that. Thanks. How have you been?

Lett: Good. Very good, actually. I saw your letter. Sorry it took so long to get to it. I'll reply soon.

His tone sounds promising. I want to know more about his girl. We haven't spoken in weeks, and I miss my penfriend. Owning two phones is tricky. Sometimes, I forget I have the Sony because it's reserved for only Lett. The other one has to always be available because Ben loves texting.

Am I supposed to tell Ben about Lett? No. We are not official yet. Baby steps like Lett said.

Me: Have you started applying for colleges?

Lett: Not yet, have you?

Yes.

Me: Not yet

Maria storms toward my car, and I pocket the phone before her arrival. She knocks on my window. I roll it down, and she eyes me warily, pursing her lips as she takes in my appearance.

“Where's loverboy?”

Lunch with both of them was tolerable today. She will come around. “Inside. He will be out in a bit.”

A gust of cold air rushes into the car through the open window, and my eyes dart to the entrance to seek Ben. I roll up the window and unlock the passenger door for Maria. She flicks through radio channels to fill the silence as the awkwardness drags into something more unfamiliar. I don't wait for my best friend to ask before telling her everything

about the night my relationship with Ben changed. From the fight at Asher's game after he saw me on Brian's lap to his reaction to knowing I made his birthday cake.

Maria sighs a lot, but she never interrupts me, even at the mention of Brian. We both knew him.

I finish with a shaky smile and take her hand. "You have to give Ben a chance to prove himself." That sigh again. It spurs my heart into overdrive, making me defensive. My best friend tilts her head to one side, and her gaze sweeps over me. "Benny—Ben is not bad, I swear. Maria Vega."

Maria laces our fingers. "Are you sure you are doing the right thing, Tessa?" I don't know, but I nod. I think I am. Ben likes me. "I don't trust that guy, but I'll try to be nice. Be careful, okay?"

"I will," I say with a firm resolve.

A tap on my window causes me to raise my head, and a smile takes over my lips. Maria whispers, "Behave." But I don't want to. I have behaved for so long that I am allowed a break today. Ben slides to the backseat and pokes his head between the two front seats to peck me soundly on the cheek.

My fingers itch to crawl into his hair and kiss him properly, but for Maria's sake, I behave.

"Hey, you," he says to me. His tone is less warm when he turns to Maria. "Maria Vega."

"Benjamin Carter," she replies. We share a brief look and a warning flashes in my eyes. She shuts her eyes tight and pinches her fingers together. "You know what? Let's cut this crap."

This was so not the plan. Ben is not looking at me, so I can't gauge his reaction. I cross my legs and face Maria, mouthing for her to calm down. When Ben turns, I force a tiny smile to my lips.

Maria's voice drags his attention back to her. "I am only being nice to you because of Tessa, but if you hurt her..." She leaves the statement hanging for it to sink in, and her finger

juts out in his direction. She is in full mama bear mode. I love it. “I’ll hurt you in two hundred different ways. I swear it.”

My hand sneaks into Ben’s hair. I tug on it lightly from the roots, and he moans softly.

“She will,” I add.

The awkward tension between my two favorite people crumbles, and Ben’s eyes twinkle with mischief. “Ouu, I’m scared.” Maria squints, and he lets out a laugh. I hide a smile at his effort to convince her. I’m aware I forgave him a little too quickly, so I’m secretly grateful for her and her attitude. “I won’t hurt her. Contrary to what you think, I’m a gentleman, and I intend to prove it.”

“We’ll see,” I murmur.

“Gotta go, bitches,” Maria says. Ben runs his fingers through my hair and leans in. His lips graze the side of my face. I blush, and Maria strangles the air. “Enough with the PDA, you two.”

Maria throws her arms around my neck in a brief hug, and I thank her silently for being my best friend. Seconds later, we are alone, and Ben takes over the passenger seat. He opens his arms for a hug. I shake my head. This is the first of many punishments to come for being an ex-asshole.

“But why?” he asks with a pout.

I start the car and drive out of school. Since his bike is still at the mechanic, I am his ride home.

“We should go out,” I say once we are at a traffic light. Ben turns off the radio when he doesn’t find a channel to his liking. I push one hand out of the car and retract it once I remember my dad. He will have a fit if he sees me. We need another father-daughter hangout. “What do you think?”

“Out like where?”

“A date.”

The light turns green. I zoom off in silence and connect my phone to the car’s speakers. Maria’s voice filters into the air. I

try not to steal glances at the handsome boy in my car, but I can't help it.

Ben catches my stare once. "When did you realize that you liked me?"

I shrug. I've had like an unserious crush on him. It's like fangirling over Hulk Hogan, well aware you two might never meet. It was the same case for him. "I don't really know. What about you?"

"When you hugged me the first time. It felt right. The second time was even more perfect."

I clench the steering tight. "I'll hug you every day, Benny."

Ben blushes. "Thank you."

We fall into a companionable silence. I sing along to Maria's songs. Electricity zaps through me when his fingertips brush my arm. I slow the car. I don't think I'll ever get used to his touch.

"Your friend sings good," he mutters.

"Yes," I reply, desperate to jump on any conversation. Maria is a great singer. She knows that. She has the voice of an angel and the mouth of a sailor. I love it. Her snarky mouth never fails to come to my defense. "Number one on her bucket list is to sing at America Got Talent and win."

We turn into the street leading to his house. The streetlight reflects on the hood of the car parked in front of his house. I park a few meters behind the red Volvo.

"Big dreams. She will be popular before you know it," Ben says. I lean over for a quick hug, pulling back with a smile he reciprocates. "Thanks"

I laugh and position myself at an angle that allows me a full view of his face. "You're welcome."

"Your best friend doesn't know you fight, does she?"

"No." Ben mimics my position, leaning his back on the door as his eyes sweep over me. Before he asks, I proffer an

answer. “I don’t think it’s something worth sharing. Fighting is temporary.”

“Do you also have a bucket list?”

I crack my knuckles with my thumb. My head bobs. “Kinda.”

“What’s on it?”

Silence so thick I can wrap my arm around it settles over us. I clear my throat, but the lump in my chest only doubles in size. The only item of any real value is joining the drama club and getting into my dream school, NYU. I’ve tackled drama club, but the other is near impossible.

“Getting a boyfriend.”

His brows draw together. I gulp. Hard. “What else?”

“You don’t think that one is important?”

Ben pushes away from the door to place his hand on my knee. “I didn’t say that, Gracie.”

But he didn’t say it was, either. With him, there are no definites, only assumptions and what-ifs. It’s frustrating, but what’s the right way to let him know how I feel without coming off too strong or needy? I train my face into a cool mask. We’ll take it at his pace, that is if this counts as a pace.

“Do you have a bucket list?” I ask.

“No. Can you sing?”

“Not to save my life,” I answer with a laugh.

Some of the tension flies out of the window. I fold my legs under me, and Ben pokes the car seat.

“That makes two of us. I can’t sing.” He draws a circle on my knee, sitting up when the door to his neighbor’s house bursts open. A child runs out, and a couple dashes out behind him. “Mikael.”

Ben’s eyes linger on the boy whose head is cast down as his parent’s lips move rapidly. They must be scolding him. “He’s always trying to run away from home.” He redirects his

attention to me, and I finger-comb my hair to appear busy. “Have you ever tried to run away from home?”

Did the thought ever cross my mind? Never. As busy as they are, I love my parents and brother, and I can’t imagine a life without them. “Nope. Never. I’m the poster child for good behavior.”

“I tried to run away once,” he whispers. I tilt forward and take his hands to offer silent comfort. Ben smiles with a lost look that shows he’s in his head, not with me. “Came back the same day.” He laughs, but his laugh is so sad and empty, and my heart bleeds for him. There is more to his story. I scoot over to his seat, and my legs drop to each side of his hips. “Couldn’t do it, Gracie.”

“Why not?”

Ben’s gaze meets mine. “Asher. Couldn’t leave him.” He smiles, replacing the sadness with a glint of playfulness. “What’s the most juvenile thing you’ve done?” I start shaking my head, but he stops me. He draws my hands up, curling them around his neck. “Come on, babe. Don’t tell me you are perfect. Just one bad thing that can get you in trouble. It could be anything. Silly. Foolish.”

“Fighting,” I reply. If Mom finds out, she might faint. When she wakes, she will call Dad immediately. Later, they will find a reason to blame themselves or beg me to know where they went wrong. Good thing they won’t find out. I am quitting after the All-Rounder. Ben’s disappointment is evident. I try to compensate for my lack of bad behavior by saying, “It’s illegal, so it counts.”

“Yeah.” But his tone has lost some of its excitement. I pinch him. He tries to grab my hand, but I duck. We go at it until I give up. “We need to start practicing, babe. The first round is in January.”

And we are in November. We will make great partners in the ring, but the thought doesn’t excite me as much. I open my palms, he traces the lines, and a shiver shoots up my back.

“Yeah. We need to,” I murmur.

Ben pulls his lower lip between his teeth, and his eyes clamp shut. He looks more at home in this car than I, the actual owner. His eyelids flutter open when I least expect them. "Can you dance?"

"Not really," I reply, "I don't have any talents." Ben stares at me like he's about to dispute my statement, but in the end, he says nothing, and we engage in another staring bout. It's so crazy how speechless one becomes in the presence of their crush. "Can you? I mean, can you dance?"

He nods. "Yep. Very much."

Ben stares at his front door. I don't want him to leave. I guess he feels the same way. That's why we are going back and forth with the questions. Warm air fans my cheeks. Ben grins when I stare down at him, and my breath hitches in my throat. I cup his face, feeling the softness of his skin.

His nose brushes mine. We are breathing the same air, and the proximity muddles my brain.

"Where's Asher?"

I feel the subtle shift in the air before he motions to his backpack in the backseat. I take the hint and climb off his lap. He accepts his bag with a polite smile. "Asher is out with my mom."

"Your mom?" Ben nods. I observe him, but his face gives nothing away. This is an opening to know more about him and his family, so I take it. "You never talk about her." He shrugs. His nonchalance stings a bit. He's too laidback. For now, I don't let it bother me. "Where's she?"

My question seems to turn him off. His smile is tighter. "Out with Asher. I have to go, Gracie."

He places a kiss on my lips to shut me up. If he's home alone, why is he in a rush? Ben stops at the entrance of his house to wave at me, and I realize he never replied to my question about a date.

Fifty



I AM PICKING Ben up today, like I have been doing for the past two weeks. His bike is working fine, but our arrangement is better. We don't share so many classes, so this is one of our chances to get a private moment before school. The other option is to let him pick me up from the house. My boyfriend might be an expert biker, but I am still scared to death of bikes. Ben has promised to teach me, but nope, I will stick to fighting for now. Besides, I don't want my parents to meet him yet.

Their front door swings open. Asher runs to my car with an excitement I never feel on a Monday morning. He is always so happy, and I wish I could share some of his happiness. He takes his rightful position in the front seat and pulls me in for a hug. Ben is not the only one who stole my heart. His younger brother did as well.

"How are you? How was your weekend? Did you miss me? I missed you, Tessa," Asher says all at once.

He breaks away from the hug, and I smoothen the collar of his white T-Shirt. Ben comes out in a shirt of the same color but with blue jeans. We are all wearing jeans today. I might have slipped that into our conversation last night. I honk. Ben holds up one finger and returns inside to pick up something. He does that almost every time. It is annoying in a cute way, if that makes any sense.

Asher snickers at his brother's forgetfulness. He takes pride in embarrassing his big brother. I might pretend to be on

Ben's side when his younger brother starts his funny uncensored stories about him, but I secretly love hearing them. Who knew the school's hot jock loved performing a concert in the bathroom with his awful voice? Asher claims Ben sounds like a dying chihuahua.

"Fine. Fine. Yes, I missed you too." The weekend was filled with texts, calls, and scheduling. I ruffle Asher's hair, and his eyes light up. He stops me from removing my hand from his head, so I let it rest there. Asher equals cuteness overload. "How was your weekend? How's your mom?"

I don't understand their family arrangement or dynamics. Ben doesn't want to talk about it, and I am afraid I will push him away if I insist. His mom is a no-go area, almost the same as talking to a brick wall. Asher wasn't home all weekend. Ben informed me when he returned last night.

"Champ," I call out to Asher, who's raiding my car for his cookie stash. "How's your mom?"

Asher grins. Since I became their driver, I always bring him cookies on Mondays. "Mommy is fine."

That's all I get, nothing more, nothing less. Asher is more forthcoming than Ben, but his answer can be unhelpful sometimes. He squints at my wrist and frowns at my bracelet. I haven't thanked him.

"Thanks for the bracelets, Champ. I love them."

Asher's laughter builds like a faulty car about to start. His head falls back, and his raucous laughter takes over the car. "It's not me. It's Benny. He made two of them." My head rears back. The first and second time Ben gave them to me, he clearly stated they were from Asher. "It's an apology. Yep. Apology. What did he do? Did you forgive him? Is that why you are dating him?"

This is twenty questions too fast. I open my mouth. "Err..."

"Wait, is Benny your boyfriend?" he cuts in. Chocolate sticks to the corners of his lips as he dives into his cookies. I

pass him a paper towel to clean his mess. “Are you dating Benny?”

My hands close around the steering wheel. A pink hue stains my cheeks as my eyes fall on the curb we had our first kiss. The first bracelet he gave me was after he punched me. The second was before I hugged him. Why? He was nice to me at the rehearsal. Oh. Before that, he made me cry when I refused to go to Asher’s game. Both times were a silent apology to me. He’s an idiot.

“Are you okay?” Asher asks. I cut him a look that evokes a smile from him. “You are smiling, and I didn’t say anything. I don’t think that’s normal. Wait, is that an adult thing? When Ben and Mommy do weird things, and I don’t understand, they say I will understand it when I grow up.”

Laughter overtakes me. I snort. “I’m okay. I just thought about my boyfriend. It made me laugh.”

“Benny?” he asks. I nod.

Ben didn’t ask me out, but he acts like my boyfriend. We fell into our respective roles without a word. I drive him to school, he carries my bag, walks me to class, and is always waiting at the door of my last class. Our chemistry is sizzling. Ms. Jota commented on it at the last rehearsal.

Asher’s eyes mist with tears, and my hand lowers to his back. I’m on high alert. He sniffs and mutters through his tears, “But Benny says you are not his girlfriend. I want him to be your boyfriend.”

Come again, say what? His words run over me like hot coals. I repeat them in my head, and my heart thumps like an angry squirrel. I unfasten the seat belt that grows too tight around my neck.

“When?” I whisper. His forehead wrinkles in confusion, but he doesn’t reply. I don’t find him so cute right now. He should have kept his mouth shut. Maybe not. “When...when did he say this?”

“Last night.” I fake a smile, and he smiles in return. We spoke last night. The load in my chest shifts to my hands, and

they grow too heavy for me, which is good because I so want to strangle that boy right now. “When we were talking. I wanted us to go on a double date with Shantel.”

Shantel is his beautiful girlfriend. He tells everyone who cares to know that. Asher licks his lips, then continues demolishing the cookies. My hands tremble violently as I clench them into fists to stop myself from doing something as stupid as storming into the house to hit the two-faced jerk.

“Thanks for telling me.”

Asher smiles, and his missing tooth comes into view. “I want both of you to date. I want you to be his girlfriend.” I also want to be his girlfriend. Tears spring to my eyes, but I force them down. I thought I was his babe. Isn’t that what a girlfriend is called? Maybe not. Asher curves his hand around his mouth and whispers, “Benny likes you very much. He told me. And I like you too.”

I like him too. Asher and Benny. Very much. When Ben joins us, I manage to plaster a tiny smile on my face. Throughout the ride to Asher’s school, I am quiet. I don’t hug or kiss Asher’s cheek when he alights. My fake smile must have been convincing because none of them questions it.

When we are alone, Ben flicks a finger over my ear. It stings, but I don’t react. I am numb and still trying to process Asher’s words. Ben tries to join me in the front as he always does after Asher leaves. But I start the car and stomp on the brake so hard the car crashes to an abrupt stop. Ben is flung back. He groans. His pain doesn’t compare to how I feel, but it satisfies me a little.

“Hey. What was that for?” I drive out of Asher’s school without answering him. “Babe.”

I catch his blue eyes blazing with annoyance in the rear-view mirror. He thinks he has a reason to be mad. I’m not his babe. “Don’t call me babe.” His irritation turns to confusion. He puckers his lips, and his brows knit. Damn him for being sexy. “You told Asher I was not your girlfriend.”

Thankfully we are at a traffic light. I watch Ben's face for a reaction. He rolls his shoulders in a casual shrug, and it stings more than hearing it from Asher. Tears rush to my eyes, and my breath hitches. I can't cry for a boy. Chanting the mantra works. I meet his gaze in the rear-view mirror.

He is still unbothered.

"Yeah." The pieces of my heart clinging to the hope he would deny those words shatter. A jolt of pain flicks through me. I swipe the back of my hand against my eyes. "Last night. I hate labels."

But I don't. I want this particular label.

"It puts pressure on me." He breaks eye contact and looks out the window to watch the other cars waiting in the traffic or maybe to hide as he hurts me with his words. "And when you label it, it becomes real and something you can lose. I don't like labels, but I like you, Gracie. Very much."

Different emotions explode inside me. I can't identify any of them except for the raw, intense anger curdling in my veins. He hates labels because it puts pressure on him. Pressure to do things expected of a boyfriend. Because it becomes too real. So what we have is what, a charade?

I roll down the windows to let in a breath of fresh air. I don't need someone like him. "Okay."

Ben doesn't say anything to my curt reply. The jerk doesn't care to ask if I am also okay with labels. Nothing. Selfish, arrogant prick. The rest of our ride to school is quiet. He doesn't make his usual lame jokes, and I don't try to initiate a conversation. My eyes sting from holding back the tears for too long. I park in the available slot and take a deep breath before unlocking the doors.

The tears are harder to control, and my heart slams against my chest when Maria's car slides into the space beside mine. She warned me. Ben exits the car first to open my door. I don't find it or his smirk attractive. All I want to do is slap some sense into him. Hurt him like he's hurting me.

Ben takes my bag like always, and I snatch it from him. “Babe,” he whines.

I ignore him, empty the contents of my bag on the front seat, and put them back slowly, so he doesn’t feel bad. I shouldn’t care about his feelings. He doesn’t care about mine. He takes a step back for me to get out of the car. When he offers me his hand, I grab my phone so it doesn’t seem awkward or too obvious I am being a bitch. His lips press into a line as his eyes trail my body.

He stretches out his hand to me, but I push it down. “Gracie, where’s my puzzle?”

Asher once mentioned Ben loves crossword puzzles, and we have a pile of magazines with those. I have enough puzzle cutouts to last a session, so I give him one every morning, and he returns the gesture with one of his Little Miss notes. My non-boyfriend drawings are sick. He would draw a tiny-limbed emoji with a Little Miss caption above it and a funny note below the emoji.

Last Monday I got: *LITTLE MISS I HATE MONDAY. BUT BENNY IS THERE TO MAKE IT BETTER.*

We do this from Monday to Friday. It’s creative and cute and something to look forward to every day of the week. Ben always slips the note into my back pocket while walking me to class but collects his at the parking lot. He nudges me with his arm for his puzzle, and I prepare to break his heart.

“I forgot.” The dumb part of me wants to wipe off that look on his face. The puzzle is between the pages of my biology textbook, but I don’t want to play girlfriend roles to someone who hates the label. His lips quirk in a half-smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Sorry. I’ll make up for it tomorrow.”

His disappointment is so thick it forms a veil around us. Guilt gnaws my insides when he nestles his head in the curve of my shoulder, and his arms wrap around me for a hug to seek comfort. He presses a feather kiss to my shoulder, and shivers travel down my feet. I will miss this. Asher too. I pry myself from him before I get in my feelings. We can’t continue this. I will only get hurt.

“It’s okay,” he says with a smile.

Ben runs his fingers through his hair, sending it in all directions. I want to sink my hands in his scalp and straighten the sexy mess he created, but I opt for warming my hands in the pockets of my hoodie.

He hates labels. He doesn’t want what we have to be real. I must never forget that.

“I got you something,” he says in a whisper and retrieves a clip from his backpack. It’s similar to the one I gave Asher, with a little butterfly attached to the end. My lips twitch in a smile. This clip is brand new and shinier than the old one I have had since middle school. Ben tucks my hair behind my ear, stares at the hairclip on his palm, then back at my face. “Here. Do you like it?”

His voice quivers. I should placate him since I am the reason he’s nervous, but my tone falls flat. “Yes.”

His eyes dim when I don’t say more. I don’t know how to act unbothered about that confession. Maria’s voice drags us to reality. I fight a smile as the lyrics of ‘One love’ float into my ears. She must be singing. Sometimes, my friend forgets how loud she can be with her earbuds plugged in. I am sure that’s the case now, but I don’t turn to find out. I can’t even move under Ben’s intense stare.

“Ben, I have to go,” I whisper. His mouth moves into a disappointed frown. I bite my lips to stop myself from kissing him and sidestep to the left to avoid his touch. He tries to touch me again, but I grab his hand and give it a small squeeze. He glares at our linked hands. “Maria will walk me, okay?”

Placing a hand on the hood of my car, he nods at the clip sticking out of my pocket. “Will you put it on? I’d like to see how it looks on you.” He shrugs in that careless manner, but his eyes are hopeful. I want to make him happy, but he hates labels. “I was pretty excited to show you, babe.”

And I am excited to show off my first gift from him, but I am not his girlfriend, so why should I indulge him? Maria

drags me from Ben before a reply leaves my lips. I release a shaky but thankful breath and let her lead me inside without so much as a glance at the boy who hates labels.

Fifty-One



I DON'T WEAR the clip. It remains in my pocket.

“Why do you keep touching your pocket like that?” Maria screams. She’s so loud, thanks to her earbuds.

To avoid further yelling, I retract my hand from my pocket. Maria inserts one earbud into my ear and her melodic voice envelopes me. I press my fingers against it to prevent it from falling off.

“Sorry for taking you away from loverboy,” she offers at my glum smile. “But this is important.” I respond with a snort that earns me the look. The look that says: *I know something is going on with you, Tessa, but I don’t want to hear about it now.* Ugh. I need to vent. “What do you think?”

We halt at my locker, and she releases the second earbud to me. I can barely hear a word above the cover of the song blasting in my ears. I tap my foot to the floor in tune with the beat. Her voice is insanely good.

“It is the song I want to use for AGT.” America’s Got Talent. Maria believes the shorter version sounds cooler. Kind of. She bounces on her toes, hands clasped together as her big, bright eyes await my evaluation. “I need to send it today. I’m so fucking nervous. What if they hate it, Tessa?”

“They won’t,” I reply.

Forgetting Ben, I close my eyes, and the lyrics wash over me. My eyes sting with hot tears. It’s an emotional song that brings out the best of her singing. As far as I’m concerned,

Maria is the best singer in our school and might end up the best on the show if the AGT judges know their jobs.

“Do you have a backup song?” I ask. She leans on the locker with her shoulder supporting her weight and shakes her head. “I love this one. Everybody loves Celine. But try to get a backup.”

She groans. “Any ideas?”

Something along the lines of—*give me my label, call me your girlfriend*, will be great.

“You can ask Daniel. I’m sure he will have great suggestions for you.” Irritation flashes across her face, and she slams my locker door. I scoot back. “Take it easy on the poor thing, woman.”

Maria bares her teeth, I mimic her, and we are baring our teeth at each other in the hallway like two aged primitives. Her phone’s ringtone echoes in my ears. I flinch for the second time in five minutes. She peeks at the caller and slips the phone back into the pocket of her cropped hoodie.

“Daniel?”

There’s a terse moment of hesitation, and she covers it with a false smile. “Yep.”

Daniel doesn’t hate labels. They have a shot.

“Are you going to try to talk to him? It wasn’t his fault.”

He likes her, and she also likes him. I don’t want to be the only friend in a relationship. Wait, I’m single. I have always been single, but at least I got to tick an item off my bucket list before her.

Maria twirls her curl around her pencil and blows air through her closed lips. “For now, I want to focus on my music.” I offer her a tight smile, and she shrugs. I should also focus on getting into NYU. The school is about six hours from San Francisco, and Mom won’t have a problem crashing into my dorm to check on her baby. She’s partly the reason I want to move to another state for college. “Besides, we will be out of school soon. Daniel won’t matter then.” Tears gather in her

eyes, and she redirects her gaze to her feet. I will miss this loud, obnoxious lady. We must make it in Hollywood, but she will have to go first. Her phone rings again. “He won’t stop calling me.”

“Maybe you should hear him out. Give him a chance to prove himself.” Like I gave Ben, right? I am such a hypocrite, but at least Daniel doesn’t hate labels. The phone stops ringing and resumes immediately, and her back connects with the locker. I nudge her with my arm. “We both know it was a setup, and besides...we both know you want to hear his voice. You know you want to. Pick up.”

“Fine,” she mutters. “I think I might have judged Ben too early. He seems like a good guy.”

I trace circles on the floor with my foot. He is a good guy who doesn’t like labels. “Yeah, he is.”

Maria’s head bobs, but she is no longer listening. She rips her earbuds from me and stalks in the opposite direction to answer the call. There will be a lot of swearing. Poor Daniel. He’ll be fine.

The hallway goes silent as I resume the lonely walk to my class. I’m late already, but curiosity gets the best of me. I peek at the front door to see Ben with his bag hanging from his shoulder. His blue eyes roam the hallway in search of...me? I use my notebook to hide the blush spreading to my cheeks. When his gaze finds mine, he waves. I wave back and spin on my heels to escape.

I can’t let myself get hurt again.

Heavy footsteps close in on me. I try to quicken my steps, but I’m not fast enough. “Gracie. Babe.” Ben. I don’t stop nor look up to him. My gaze glues to the tiles as I continue to my class. It is a miracle I don’t bump into a wall. “Gracie, did I do something? Was it what I said about labels?”

Yes. But I shake my head a second time. He halts in front of me, and I almost run into him. He steadies me by holding my waist. His fingers curl under my jaw. I close my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

My gaze flies to his face. “For what?”

Ben shrugs and releases his grip on my waist to take my hands. His palms are warm. I want him to cup my cheeks and share some of his warmth. “I don’t know, babe.” My heart thuds. I love it when he calls me babe. God. I’m in so much trouble. “For whatever I did to earn this...attitude.”

Guilt pushes a lump into my throat. I hide my hands behind me, and my heart cracks at his smile. I am not an awful person, but I need to protect myself. His thumb brushes my cheek. Oh, God.

“I want my Juliet back,” Ben whispers with a small smile that doesn’t transfer to my lips. His worried eyes take in my appearance: my flustered face and pouted lips. But I don’t say a word to him. He frowns. “Alright. Since you won’t tell me the issue, can I at least walk you to class?”

The warning bell rings. We jump apart, and he chuckles. Students bump into us in their hurry to reach their classrooms. Ben’s head jerks toward my class, but I am stiff. Kissing a corner of my lips, he slips his hand into the crook of my elbow before I can process anything. It almost feels like we are back to being cool, but that voice in my head doesn’t fail to remind me of our status.

“Have a good day, Gracie,” Ben says when we are at the front of my class.

Ben darts in the other direction without hearing my reply. What if I chase him with my attitude? We are not dating, but I want him in my life. I am so confused. I want him as more than a friend.

I zone out during class. Once I get a chance, I excuse myself to use the bathroom. I splash water on my face and glare at myself in the mirror. My wet hair sticks to my forehead. Aside from the drops dotting the front of my shirt, I look okay. No eye bags or bruises. A hint of lip gloss. I have been putting more effort into my appearance. Talk about wearing coordinated outfits and trying more color combinations after Ben jokingly asked if I had anything other than black t-shirts. If only he knows about the pile of

untouched clothes Mom dumps with me in hopes that my tastes will improve.

The door creaks. I clamp my eyes shut, willing the intruder to leave. A girl cannot get a moment of privacy in this school. My eyes jerk open when the person claps. “Who do we have here?”

If I missed her entrance by mistake, I can’t miss her sarcasm or the mockery in her voice. Our eyes lock in the mirror. Olivia flips her imaginary hair, and I stifle a laugh. Her hair is in a bun. She would remember that if she wasn’t bent on making me miserable. Bitch. Did she follow me?

“Poor you,” she coos. “Trouble in love island?”

She and Abigail would make great friends. They make up phrases on the spot.

“None of your fucking business,” I spit out. “Get a life. Ben chose me over you. Deal with it.”

Olivia clicks her tongue and takes menacing steps toward me. My back presses into the sink as she bridges the distance to level me with a distasteful look. I can punch her, but it won’t help me in the long run. It sucks when the person you shared your insecurities with turns against you. That’s the case with us. It won’t matter how much I punch her. As long as her mouth functions, she will tear me down with her words. Sadly, there’s no handbook on how to protect yourself from that.

“Don’t be so sure about that, Loser.”

Olivia leans so close her breath fans my face. She is jealous and hurt I got the boy she wants. We stand toe to toe, the perfect position for me to headbutt her. Will Ben take my side if he finds out I hit his friend? Why am I thinking about him? He is the reason I couldn’t concentrate in class.

“You are not even his girlfriend,” she whispers, stepping back to gauge my reaction. Knots form in my belly. I force myself to meet her gaze. I cannot let her get to me. “And you will never be. I wouldn’t want to date you too. Not with those ugly stripes on that zebra skin. Is it contagious?”

Vitiligo is not zebra skin, and it is not contagious. She would know this if she picked up a book to read. I absorb her words like a wet sponge, and she jumps another step back to make her point.

“I bet it is. It’s why no one wants to talk to you. Four years, Tessa, yet no one wants to be friends with you except Maria. Makes me wonder if she also has that thing.” Her face contorts on the last word like she’s holding back her puke. Disgust coils my spine, and I countdown from twenty. She is not worth the effort. She is a hater. “Maria has the looks, but what do you have?”

Olivia knows where to hit, and she hits it hard.

What do I have? Nothing. Flat chest. Skinny legs and arms for days with no fashion sense. Her words burn holes into my fragile confidence. I tug my sleeve over my knuckles and shrink into myself. Her pointy heels click against the floor as she sashays forward to deliver the last blow.

“Ben will never pick you over me, and you know why?”

A traitorous tear spills out of my eyes, I swipe at my cheek to catch it, but the dam finally bursts open. Olivia shudders. Her condescending gaze sweeps over my body, and she smirks. I hate that she’s right about everything, about Ben, that we were once friends. She knows where it hurts.

“Because I am everything you will never be, Mother Theresa.”

She is not lying. I can never perfect that aura of confidence she has going on for her. I can never look as sexy as she does in something as simple as faded jeans. I can’t even wear a crop top.

“People like Benjamin Carter don’t date girls like you. They date me, Olivia Beckham. You will never be good enough for him.” She straightens up and pokes my shoulder. I swat her hand, and she chuckles. “Don’t bother trying. Find your type and stay away from him. Benjamin is mine.”

The ensuing silence after her exit is loud. My tears create a small puddle at my feet, and I let them pour shamelessly until

the pain in my heart subsides. It was meant to happen. All I needed was a reminder and a wake-up call. But it was fun while it lasted. Dating in high school is unnecessary.

Her words are a shield over me as I step into the hallway. They echo so much in my head that I begin to believe them.

Ben is out of my league.

I will never be his type.

He hates labels only because it's me.

What was I thinking? That he will be my prince charming? My life is not a movie. I rush to the nearest trashcan and dump the hairclip and bracelets inside. He couldn't even apologize to my face. I will never be good enough for him to put a label on this thing between us, so why bother trying?

Fifty-Two



MY PHONE RINGS. I press a pillow to my face, screaming my frustrations into it. It's time to train. Ben has a match tomorrow, and I promised to help him prepare. I fought his opponent once. The boy beat the shit out of me, but I lasted both rounds. If he wasn't so muscled, I might have won.

The urge to answer the call and turn Ben down is strong, but I left him at school with a silly excuse I can't remember now. He had to hitch a ride with Nate. Was he able to pick Asher early? *No, stop.* I shouldn't care about them. They are none of my business. I don't want to see them. I don't want to be Ben's partner. I don't want to be anything to him. We are wrong for each other.

My phone buzzes again. I fling the pillow, and it crashes into something. I don't bother to inspect the damage I might have caused as I kick the cover off me. I will save both of us the hurt and break this before things get too far. I pick up the phone and hesitate at Ben's text. He wants to know if I'll be joining him at the gym. I suck it up, type a quick reply, and change into a better outfit.

I told Ben I liked him to his face and should be bold enough to break up with him the same way. I grab my keys from my dresser and make the short drive to the old gym on his street. I practice in Hayden's room, except Coach demands my presence. My parents are barely at home to notice.

The car slows to a stop behind Ben's bike, and I take a minute to gather my wits. This is it. The floor is wet with light

rain, and the chilly air stings my exposed skin. I jump over a broken fence and find my way inside. I can always pass the other accessible entrance, but this route is shorter. Besides, this is not a gym I'll recommend to anyone, but Ben prefers it. Who am I to object?

It is not dark, but I turn on my phone's flashlight to light up my path. Water leaks from the gaps in the roof, light seeps in through the cracks in the wall, and I almost stumble on a discarded brick. The place is under renovation, but Ben insists it's safe. The men who work out here seem to share his confidence. In a few more strides, the glass doors come into view. Two men are in the ring, with the smaller one showing the bigger one some blocking techniques. Ben needs to learn that.

I spot the heartbreaker by a red punching bag. Ben's bandaged hands hover over his phone, possibly to ring me again. On cue, my phone vibrates in my shorts. I end the call, and he punches the bag in frustration. I smother a laugh and push the door open. The men lifting weights at a corner stop briefly to leer at me, and I quicken my pace. I'm wearing nothing revealing, as usual. Only this time, I opted for shorts instead of my sweatpants. Shorts that are way past my knees.

Ben growls at them.

"Easy, Kiddo. She is pretty, that's all," one of them says, the one on the bench with a beer belly. He is new. I didn't see him last time. Ben nears me, and the man winks. "How ya doing, Miss?"

The man's eyes gleam with mischief as he notices Ben's glare. I grin to annoy Ben. He can't be mad if we are not in a relationship. Ben pushes me behind him, and the whole gym erupts in laughter. The naughty man and his partner resume lifting. Ben drags me to a quiet corner. Our only source of light is the overhead window and a fluorescent bulb dangling from the ceiling.

"Don't smile at people you don't know, babe," he mutters through gritted teeth. I pout. I like jealous Ben and the way his

lips pucker. Crap. He grabs my shoulders. “Gracie, I’m serious.”

“Hmm,” is all I say.

My eyes return to Ben’s mouth, and I gulp. We didn’t kiss today. I miss his lips.

Tension rolls off him in thick, troubling waves. His shoulders sag, and he draws me in for a much-needed hug. “Gracie,” he says into my hair, planting wet kisses all over my face. “I missed you.”

We were only apart for less than twelve hours, but it feels longer than that. This will be tough. I didn’t eat lunch with him either. I made sure to avoid the cafeteria. He palms my face, and I manage to relax.

“You came.”

“You called,” I reply.

His eyes soften, and my heart skips. “I was thinking you wouldn’t,” he admits.

Me too. But I am here for a reason. The switch in my head flips at that reminder, and I pry Ben’s hands off my face. We notice the shift in the atmosphere, but we don’t mention it. His hopeful eyes stop me from telling him the real reason for my presence. I can tell him after we practice.

“Let’s get started,” I say to the floor. How do I break up if I can’t look Ben in the eyes? He is calm, too silent as we move to stand in front of the punching bag. I motion to his hands. “Let me see.”

He stretches his arms for me to inspect the bandage. Good.

“Do I need gloves?” he asks.

His seriousness is cute. No, hot. And something is wrong with me for letting my mind stray from our current discussion. What were we talking about? Ah, gloves.

“Those are fine. We need to work on your block, punch and kick combo. Jack likes to go one and two. One, two,

three,” I say and demonstrate, punching the bag in quick succession with a kick to explain my point. “Like that.”

My foot returns to the floor after another kick, but I continue bouncing on my toes. Coach says it helps to keep me alert, and Jack, Ben’s opponent for Saturday, is always alert. I create space for Ben to repeat the moves, and my cheeks grow hot under his gaze. He is openly ogling me. Jesus.

“Your turn, Ben. Stop staring at me like that.”

“Fuck, Gracie. You looked so sexy doing that.” He supports his words with a chaste kiss on my lips, and my brain blanks. Ben thinks I am sexy. My mouth opens and closes as he recreates my moves, throwing in a little kick of his own. He flashes me a grin. “So, how did I do, Coach?”

I shake my head to clear the cobwebs growing in my brain. I don’t think I can do this. “Good.”

He smirks and crosses his arms. Did Hayden look this hot as a teen? My brother isn’t as skinny as I am, but he isn’t bulky. My heart clenches as my thoughts drift to unholy places. Why can’t he be mine? I don’t know who created the ranking system, but they were unfair to me. The poster child should get a reward for being good. I want Ben to be my reward because I really like him.

“Just good, Coach? Come on,” he says. His eyes crinkle with delight as he stands in front of me with his arms planted on his hips. Sexiness oozes out of his pores. I’ve never been on board with the idea of licking people, but all I can think now is...*lick Ben*. “Admit it, you were impressed.”

Ben watches me for a long minute, and his lips turn up in an arrogant smile. The urge to scream and beg him to love labels or break the ranking system and love me is stronger. On instinct, I step back and redirect my gaze to the current task to stop myself from doing something silly.

“I can do it better,” I say with a grin. Ben snorts. His confidence is so overwhelming, one thing he shares with Olivia. “Watch,” I add, slapping my phone against his chest, “and learn, Benny.”

My fists connect with the old punching bag in a tap, tap, punch rhythm. I forget where I am and smash it like I have seen professional boxers do. Picturing it as Olivia's face also helps. I keep at it until my arms protest, and my speed slows. When I stop, my breath rushes out of my lungs. It has been a while since I used a punching bag. Most of my fights involve only the legs because my punches don't carry as much weight as the guys. A punch of theirs has the force of three of mine.

I bend to catch my breath, hands on my knees. Looking up, my gaze meets Ben's.

"What?" I ask.

Ben blinks like he is having trouble with his sight. I snatch the bottle of water someone offers me and take a greedy gulp. Aside from the state of this building, the occupants are pretty chill.

"Wow," Ben says with open admiration.

"That's how it's done, Benny," I murmur. The cockiness I tried to put into my voice is missing. I take another sip from the bottle and run my fingers through my damp hair. My arms hurt like hell.

"She will kick your ass, Kiddo," the man from earlier screams. "Run while you still can."

Ben rolls his eyes. Without looking back, he says, "Mind your own goddamn business, old man."

The men roar with laughter, letting us know it's all in good fun. Ben tugs me to his chest, and my breath catches. Sweat rolls down my forehead to his top. He doesn't notice. If he does, he doesn't care. His head lowers, and he nibbles on my lips before capturing them. The bottle in my hand drops to the floor. I don't remember being carried, but my legs curl around his waist, and my back presses against a wall.

Ben tastes like mint. Mint is his favorite bubble gum flavor, and now it's mine. I groan against his lips. He breaks our kiss to pepper more kisses along my neck, collarbone, and any visible skin.

“Gracie,” he says with another kiss on my jaw. I melt in his hold and at his words. The intense emotions on his face have my insides knotting with dread. Too bad we can’t be together. “You didn’t kiss me this morning,” he whispers against my neck, and a chill shoots to my toes. “I didn’t like that.”

“Ben.” I place a hand on his chest, and he sets me down on my feet. Giggles escape my lips as he rubs his nose against mine. No one pays us attention, and I am grateful for that. Ben’s proximity messes with my brain, and his scent clouds my thoughts. I forget what I have to say. “Ben. Benny.”

The hottie hums, but he doesn’t stop kissing my neck. My head falls back. “Gracie.”

A moan slips from me. “Ben, stop.” He doesn’t. I don’t want him to. “Ben. Please.” His eyes search mine, hoping for an answer. I clench my fists at my sides. It’s now or never. “We can’t.”

Ben arches a brow that disappears into the mess of hair hanging over his forehead. I don’t want to do this. “We can’t what?” he asks, tone heavy with fear and uncertainty. My palms press into the brick wall behind me, supporting my weight as I search for an escape that’s not there. Ben cups my jaw and pulls my lip between his. I don’t want to do this to us. “Talk to me, Gracie. We can’t what?”

“We can’t be together.”

A second or two passes. It’s hard to keep count with his eyes piercing me. “Where’s the clip?”

What clip? Oh, that one. “In the house,” I reply.

“And your bracelets?”

“House?” I croak out.

Ben steps forward like the distance between us isn’t invisible enough. Goosebumps erupt on my skin, and an electrifying feeling zaps through me as his chest presses to mine. “So I’m guessing this one…” he starts as he pulls out the clip and bracelets I dumped in school. Words lodge in my

throat. "...I found in the trash just happens to resemble the one I gave you, babe. Right, Gracie?"

What was he doing in the trash? I manage to nod. "Yeah. A big coincidence."

Another terse moment passes between us. Ben's stare soaks me with guilt, and I'm glad when he backs away from me. He knows I'm lying. His sadness is so palpable it wraps around him like a cloak as he processes my reply. He smiles sadly at me, and my pulse quickens. I am such an asshole.

"You could have told me you didn't want it. I know it's nothing, but I thought you would like it."

"I did. I do," I whisper through the weight in my chest. "I know the bracelets are from you, not Asher. They were apologies."

There, I said it.

Ben's palm closes around his gifts. I do like them. I love the clip, the bracelets, and him.

"Yeah. The bracelets were from me, not Asher. That's why you threw them away?" he whispers.

God, no. I was...I was what? Eyes on the floor, I murmur, "Not really."

"Will you take them back?"

Ben stretches the bracelets and hairclip forward, and I make a sound from the back of my throat as I swat his hand. I can't accept anything from him. It will only make this hurt more. "Benny."

"We can talk to each other, right? Babe, did I do something?" I shake my head. It's me. I am not his type, and I don't want him to spend precious time defending his choice. "I don't understand, Gracie. Please, help me because I'm lost. Why do you want to end us if I didn't do anything?"

"Because we are a mistake." He sucks in a breath that echoes seconds after. I feel like an asswipe at his reaction. His quietness frightens me, but the words burning on the tip of my tongue need out. I'm doing what he won't do. It's the right

thing. “People like you are not allowed to be with people like me, Benny. We are not meant to be. I am supposed to just watch from the sidelines.”

Ben punches the space beside my head, and the sound of flesh meeting brick cuts through the air. I stay still. I don’t flinch as he struggles to catch his breath. He won’t hurt me. Not physically, at least, and I have proven to be able to hurt him emotionally. He hurts me, and I hurt him.

This is not it.

“The fuck are you talking about? Who made these rules?” I don’t know, but I hate them. I hate them for making me doubt myself. I hate them for making me feel I’m wrong for him. “Fuck the rules, babe.”

“I can’t.” He hates labels because it’s me. I shove him gently. He’s in my space, and it’s messing with my head again. I take a step to the right, and he follows. I take another to the left, and he does the same. “Stop it,” I yell. The shock of hearing me scream makes him pause. “Ben, we are done.”

His arms drop. He raises a hand as if to touch me, then lowers it. “Gracie?” Ben sounds defeated, as tired as I am, but I still nod. I fucking nod because my throat is closing up on me. “Done?”

“Done. This won’t work out, Ben. Let’s end it before it gets too far and one of us gets hurt.”

His fingers sink into his hair. “And you think you aren’t hurting me right now? How about that?”

It might hurt now, but we haven’t known each other for that long. Well, I’ve had a crush on him since forever, but he will get over this quickly and move on to Olivia. She is his type. They are meant to be.

I pat his shoulder. “You will be fine.” I take a step and another away from him. I will be fine.

“Gracie.” Against the voices screaming in my head, I stop, but I don’t turn around because I can’t face him. I don’t want to see the blazing hurt on his face. “If you leave now, then we are really done.”

Author's Note

First, thank you for giving this book a chance. Second, I'm deeply sorry for the cliffhanger and promise to deliver a worthy continuation in book two: [Broken by the Bad Boy](#).

Acknowledgement

This book wouldn't be here without a lot of people, especially Nikki. What started out as a joke between us two progressed into something bigger.

Ebun, when I figure out how to squeeze you into a box and carry you wherever I go, I'll let you know. Thank you for the listening ear. I don't know how we do it, but we are always doing it. Little Miss author says thank you.

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I would also like to thank my family for their support. Sometimes, my siblings are convinced I'm crazy when they catch me staring into space or at my laptop screen, but their support is always constant. Daalu.

To the cover designer, editor, proofreaders, we are here. We. Are. Here. Thank you!

To everyone else who contributed to the success of this book, my readers from the web apps (Goodnovel/Novelcat and more), thank you. On some days when imposter syndrome hits the most, all I have to do is read through the comments and everything is okay, even if for a short while.

And to my new readers, thank you for taking a chance on this author. I hope you've enjoyed this story as much as I enjoyed creating it.

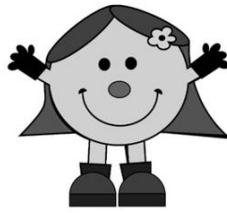
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LITTLE MISS I HATE MONDAY



**BUT BENNY IS THERE TO
MAKE IT BETTER!**