

# HOW TO GET REVENGE ON A CHEATING EX

### MAGGIE DALLEN

#### **CONTENTS**

- 1. The First Kiss
- 2. Rewind & Replay
- 3. The Breakup
- 4. Party Time
- 5. The Truth Hurts
- 6. Aftermath
- 7. The Pitch
- 8. Show Up or Showdown
- 9. <u>Family is Family</u>
- 10. Like Hell, Only Hotter
- 11. My Girl
- 12. Smurfette or Sassette
- 13. Tony! Toni! Toné!
- 14. First Kiss Take Two
- 15. A Heartbeat
- 16. The Kiss Heard Round the World
- 17. Old School, New World
- 18. What Have You Done with Bailey Tucker?
- 19. Like an Outsider
- 20. I'm Good
- 21. Proof & Practice
- 22. Puzzle Pieces
- 23. Take That, Suckers
- 24. Five Minutes Earlier
- 25. Aftermath, Take Two
- 26. Nobody Puts Bailey in the Corner
- 27. Kiss Today Goodbye

**Epilogue** 

**Just One Kiss** 

**About the Author** 

## ONE THE FIRST KISS

#### **Bailey**

I'VE KNOWN Zack Myers my entire life, but I've never noticed the gold flecks in his dark brown eyes until right this second.

Then again, I've never stood this close to him before. Not like *this*—face to face, with mere inches between us.

We're caught in some weird staring contest that's about to end.

Any second now...

My belly does a backflip as adrenaline spikes through my veins. It's too quiet. The amusement park where we both work is normally a cacophony of sounds. Voices and rides and game vendors shouting out to frazzled parents trying to wrangle shrieking children.

But the amusement park is closed to the public at the moment, and all I can hear is the sound of my own heart clattering against my ribcage.

Zack's gaze darkens, disarmingly serious as he leans in even closer.

Yup. It's official. Zack Myers has pretty eyes.

It shouldn't come as a surprise. It's widely understood that Zack is the hottest guy in our class. Unfortunately for me and the rest of humanity, Zack is well aware of this fact.

"Are you ready for this?" His voice is a low murmur. So low it's almost lost in the breeze that whips around us and makes me shiver.

Am I ready to kiss the boy next door? The childhood friend who's been the bane of my existence since middle school?

I definitely don't know the answer to that.

But really, the only question worth considering is this—am I ready to kiss my boyfriend's best friend? Because that's what Zack is, first and foremost.

Once upon a time we might've been friends, but the only reason we've voluntarily spent any time together this past decade is because he's best friends with Grayson.

My boyfriend.

My insides twist into tight knots and my hands start to shake. "Ready as I'll ever be."

And by that I mean *no*. I'm not at all ready for this. I've only ever kissed one guy in my entire life—Grayson.

The guy I'm about to cheat on.

My heart gives a sharp kick of panic. This close, I wouldn't be surprised if Zack can feel it pounding.

His brows come down. "It's not too late to turn back, Bailey."

If Zack had been taunting me, I would've run. If he'd been his usual irritating, smug, condescending self, I would have taken that as a sign that I'd lost my mind when I'd made a deal with the devil, and I would have bolted.

And let's face it, I *had* made a deal with the devil.

But for once, Zack's being nice, and that's more unnerving than anything I'm about to do. He's giving me an out, and his serious, gold-flecked gaze is telling me he'd understand if I wuss out.

He won't judge, even though we'd agreed we were in this together.

Together.

Me and Zack.

What did that make us? Definitely not friends, but maybe...allies? Teammates? Partners in crime?

Good grief, what has my life come to? I've clearly lost my ever-loving mind.

A sound comes from inside the staff trailer beside us. The games and rides shut down an hour ago, and Grayson and the other employees on closing duty are finishing up. Soon he'll be walking out that door.

Any second now...

Oh God, this is happening. Like, *right now*.

We are doing this.

I'm seconds away from destroying my relationship with the guy I thought was the love of my life.

My eyes flare wide and I can't quite catch my breath, even though I'm standing still. Suddenly Zack's stare is an anchor. His dark eyes with those pretty flecks are the only thing keeping my feet on the ground.

"Relax, *Bae*." He leans forward, tipping his head down until his nose grazes mine and I can feel the heat of his breath on my lips. "I promise I don't bite."

I draw in a sharp breath. *Bae*. That's what Grayson calls me. The nickname for Bailey that he and he alone uses.

And Zack's use of it now brings on an instant reaction.

Fury. Betrayal. The toxic mix of angry, bitter emotions that have been threatening to drown me for more than a week now.

Rage sideswipes nerves and knocks them right off the road. The new hit of adrenaline coursing through me comes from anger, not anxiety.

Zack's so close that his gray zippered hoodie is brushing my fingertips, and I reach for it, clasping the material in my fists, and tugging him even closer until the familiar scent of his soap and laundry detergent blocks out the ever-present smells of fried food and cotton candy.

He dips his head and his lips curve up in a smile I can feel against my cheek. "That's my girl."

"I'm not your girl." I barely recognize my voice. I sound freakin' feral with rage. But there's also a tremor to it that I know we both hear.

"And you're not *his*, either." Zack's tone is calm by comparison. Not at all shaky with emotion like mine.

But then again, Zack's kissed lots of girls. Kissing one more is no big deal. And Grayson might've stabbed him in the back, but he didn't break his heart.

Our anger might be the same, but my heart's still shattered.

At least, I think it is. It was a little while ago. Right now, though, it feels stronger than ever as it thuds against my ribcage like it's plotting an escape.

We both tense at the sound of voices just beyond the thin trailer door. Grayson's is the loudest of them all. I hear his laugh and it makes my stomach twist.

"This is it." Zack pulls back just far enough to meet my gaze. "Last chance to bail, *Bail*."

"You're hilarious," I mutter.

"I think so." His cocky, lopsided grin—the one that usually makes me want to smack him—is oddly comforting right now.

I'm not alone. We're in this together.

For better or for worse.

"You in or you out?" When I don't instantly answer, he adds, "I need you to say it. I need you to be sure."

The lock on the door slides and my stomach takes a flying leap toward my throat. "I'm in."

His smile widens. "That's my girl."

I go to tell him for a second time that I'm not really his girl. He knows as well as I do that this is all for show.

No, it's all for revenge.

But the door opens before I get the chance, and Zack doesn't miss a beat.

He closes the distance between us and crushes his lips to mine.

Here's hoping he crushes Grayson's heart while he's at it.

All I know is, Zack's lips are on mine and for a second, I forget.

I forget where we are, I forget who's watching. I forget my own freakin' name.

There is just Zack. And me.

And there's no going back.

## TWO REWIND & REPLAY

#### **Bailey**

LET'S back this up a bit, shall we?

It's hard to know where to start, but for me the story begins on the first day of summer vacation. That's the day I got my first hint that maybe my life wasn't perfect.

I know, I know. No one's life is perfect. But in my defense, my life was pretty dang close.

Junior year ended on a high note. I'd aced the SATs, applied for early admission to the school of my dreams, and my boyfriend's top pick was within driving distance. If all went according to plan, we wouldn't even have to deal with long-distance drama.

Yup. Life was good. Right up until—

"Hey, Smurfette!"

I let the front door click shut behind me with a weary sigh. I don't have to glance over at the neighbor's driveway to know what I'll see.

Zack Myers. Working on his car, most likely.

Like the most stereotypical stereotype, Mayfair High's ultimate bad boy is sinfully hot, stupidly beloved by the girls in our class, and crazy into cars.

He's also insanely annoying, but apparently I'm the only one who sees that side of him.

Lucky me.

But today, at least, I won't have to deal with him for long. Grayson texted two minutes ago that he's close, so any second now he'll pull up in front of my house and whisk me away.

Idiot that he is, Zack pretends to be offended by my silence. "You wouldn't be *ignoring* me, now would you?"

He even adds a gasp, and if I look over, I have no doubt he'll be pretending to clutch his nonexistent pearls for good measure.

But I don't look over. Instead, I ignore him some more. It's the only way to deal with Zack. If I attempt to engage, it'll only get ugly.

I *never* win these verbal sparring matches.

I might have a high SAT score, but when it comes to slinging insults, I end up sounding like the idiot here, and we both know it.

"Aw, come on..." His voice is all low and rumbly. I might even call it sexy if every word out of his mouth wasn't tinged with a smugness that makes me want to punch him in the throat. "Smurfette, don't be like that."

There it is again. *Smurfette*. He's trying to get a rise out of me, but I won't give in.

I know what you're thinking. Why does he call me Smurfette?

Your guess is as good as mine. It started the day I got blonde highlights our freshman year, and it's never stopped. Ever.

Grayson always tells me to ignore him, that it's not an insult. He even argues that everyone loves Smurfette.

But I know better.

I watched those cartoon reruns right alongside Zack when we were kids —back when we were too young to realize that we had nothing in common.

Back when we actually had *everything* in common because we were kids. All we did was play pretend and watch cartoons.

So I know very well that Zack thinks Smurfette is lame. I also know that he has super gross theories about her role within the Smurf community, with her being the only female and all.

But *one time* I made the mistake of fighting back on the nickname thing by calling Zack "Gargamel," and Zack pretended like he didn't remember anything about the Smurf villain or his cat Azrael.

I ended up looking insane as I tried to explain Smurf lore to the football team.

But Zack was lying. He remembered Gargamel. He so obviously remembered.

He'd just wanted me to look like an idiot in front of Grayson's friends. The ones I actually like, I mean. And I do like Grayson's friends.

All of them except for this one.

Unfortunately, this one is his best friend. The two are annoyingly joined at the hip. And as most people say the same about *me* and Grayson...

Yeah. I spend way more time with Zack than I'd like.

"Seriously, Smurf—*Bailey*." His use of my actual name has me looking over despite my best intentions to ignore him.

I was right about him working on a car, but it isn't his. It's his mom's, the one she keeps threatening to replace.

Despite my hatred of Zack, I love his mom. I'm glad to see he's working on her car because we all know she can't afford a new one.

Unlike Grayson and his other friends, Zack and I live on the less-thanwealthy side of town, and after Zack's dad took off, it didn't take a genius to see that they struggled to make ends meet.

He eyes me from head to toe, taking in the ugly, pale blue polo shirt and the navy pleated skirt. "Going to work?"

"If you're about to make a comment about how I'm wearing blue because I'm—"

"No," he interrupts with a laugh. "I wasn't even thinking that." He studies me again. "But now that you mention it..."

I can see that dangerous mocking glint in his dark eyes all the way over here on my side of the divide. 'The divide' is a literal line in the grass between our driveways. My side is neatly mowed. His is not.

Shocker.

The guy isn't exactly Type A when it comes to his lawn *or* his appearance. His faded gray T-shirt has grease stains, his jeans have holes, and his dark hair is too long and too shaggy on top, so it falls into his eyes as he crosses over the line to join me on our driveway.

My belly does that little backflip it always does whenever he gets too close.

It's not attraction, it's self-preservation. When Zack is around, I'm sure to be teased, taunted, or tortured. Sometimes all of the above.

Why Grayson is even friends with the guy, I have no idea. I gave up on being his friend years ago. Right around the time he started calling me Smurfette.

I don't even try to hide my wariness. "What do you want, Zack?"

He stops short and...hesitates. That hesitation does not help the anxious churning in my gut. I'd say there are butterflies in my belly, but that isn't the case.

Zack doesn't evoke butterflies. He commands armies of bees.

It should be noted that I'm deathly allergic to bees.

"I, uh..." He glances around us and then down the street. "You waiting on Grayson?"

"Yeah, why?" I cross my arms defensively when his gaze dips down to the logo on my shirt. "You guys supposed to hang out today or something?"

He doesn't answer. He just nods toward the logo. "I thought they don't open until next week."

'They' is Windy Falls, the amusement park on the far end of town where we've both worked every summer since we were thirteen. "I'm a manager this year, remember?"

Not like I actually expect him to remember. But then again, he *had* mocked me mercilessly for trying so hard to get the promotion last summer.

"Who could forget?" His smirk makes some of that anxiety morph into anger.

When it comes to Zack, I'll take anger over tension any day.

"Yeah, well, the managers start early so we can go through the hiring paperwork and dole out assignments."

"Don't tell me..." He gives me a knowing, sidelong look. "You're saving the best job for yours truly."

I roll my eyes. "If by 'yours truly' you mean Grayson, then yes."

His smirk fades and for the first time in possibly forever, his eyes lose that dangerous glint. There's no teasing there, no mockery, and no laughter.

My stomach sinks in response. I've known Zack my whole life and I've never once known him to be serious.

His gaze darts around us again, like some shifty criminal keeping an eye out for the cops. "We need to talk."

I frown. "What? Why?"

As a general rule, Zack and I do not talk. We interact when forced to because Grayson makes us hang out together. But typically, I speak to his girlfriend Rina—she's surprisingly normal and nice, considering who she chose to date—while Zack jokes around with Grayson.

This is well understood by both of us, so it's not like I'm being mean when I ask, "Why would we need to talk?"

He's so serious. *Too* serious. It's freaking me out.

Zack scrubs the back of his head. "Look, I don't know how to say this, but—"

The sound of Grayson's SUV pulling up next to the curb has Zack stopping short.

I arch my brows. "You don't know how to say...what?"

But Zack ignores me as he returns Grayson's nod of greeting.

"What's up, man?" Grayson asks through his open window. "The guys and I are hanging out at the lake today while my girl here's at work. You in?"

*My girl*. I never get tired of hearing him call me that. And those bees in my stomach? They magically morph back to butterflies when Grayson flashes me that smile I love so much.

"Nah, I've got work to do around here." Zack's voice is...weird.

I look back at him, and sure enough, the laughter is still nowhere to be found. But I make the mistake of staring a second too long because Zack arches his brows and leans forward with a smirk. "See something you like, Smurfette?"

*Ugh*. My lip curls in a sneer at the faux sexy voice.

Okay, fine, the voice is sexy. But he's just mocking me because he knows it freaks me out when he flirts with me. Or *pretends* to flirt with me. Whatever.

Sure enough, my cheeks grow too hot, and I hear his knowing snicker as I turn away.

"Go clean yourself up, Zack." I head toward Grayson's ride. "You look like crap."

"Crap, huh?" His voice follows me as I walk, and I'm not sure if I'm relieved or annoyed that his taunting tone has replaced the flirty one. "Tell me, Smurfette, are you physically incapable of cursing?"

I don't look back as I head for the passenger side door. Grayson shakes his head. "Leave her alone, man."

"Come on, repeat after me," Zack continues. "Zack, you look like sh—" "Shut up," I mutter.

"No, I'm serious." He follows me to my side as I open the door and climb in. "Did your parents implant some sort of chip in your brain that makes it impossible for you to talk like a normal person?"

"Come on, Zack." Grayson's voice has that indulgent tone that he always uses when Zack is torturing me. The one that says, *I get the joke*, *bro*, *but I've got to protect my girlfriend*.

I hate that tone.

I hate Zack for bringing out that tone.

But what I hate most is that Zack never knows when to quit.

"Or maybe it was Grayson." Zack rests his elbows on the open window beside me and my head whips to the side to face him.

It's that weirdness in his voice that made me look, but it's the hardness in his eyes that has my stomach sinking. Dread fills my gut and slithers through my veins.

And I have no idea why. But somehow, not knowing why he's acting so strange only makes it worse. I have this sickening sensation that I'm missing something.

Zack pats the inside of the passenger side door, and his gaze never leaves mine. "Maybe good ol' Grayson here doesn't approve of his perfect girlfriend cursing like a sailor. Is that it?"

I stare at him, my lips parting in surprise at the change in him.

Grayson is the beloved best friend. *I* am the one who gets the brunt of his mockery. But right now, it's like something has shifted. There's an edge to his voice when he mentions Grayson.

But Grayson doesn't seem to notice.

"If you change your mind, man, shoot me a text," Grayson says as he puts the SUV into gear. "We'll be at the lake all day."

Zack doesn't respond.

Again, Grayson doesn't notice.

But I can't ignore the fact that even when Grayson pulls away, and Zack's forced to step away from the window, his gaze never wavers from mine.

When we pull away from the curb, I look in the passenger side mirror, and there he is. Watching us.

He stands there watching until we drive out of sight.

### THREE THE BREAKUP

#### Zack

I SHOULD CARE. I really should care.

That's all I keep thinking as Rina gives me *the talk*. You know the one. It's not you, it's me.

Yeah, of course it's you, dumbass. You hooked up with my best friend.

That's what I should say. It's what I *mean* to say. But I'll be honest—I hadn't seen this coming.

"It's just..." Rina's sigh is filled with sorrow. "I'm going to be gone most of the summer with my family, and in the fall I'm leaving for college." She places a hand on my arm and squeezes. "I think maybe it's best if we go our separate ways."

I stare at her. And quite frankly, I'm speechless.

My brain is refusing to compute.

She gives me a little wince of regret. Two days ago I would have found that wince adorable. Right now? It makes my gut churn and I instantly know that if I do puke, I'm gonna aim right for those new strappy sandals she's so proud of.

Rina moves her hand to my upper arm and rubs it, as if I'm some little kid who just got a boo-boo. "You okay?" She tilts her head to the side like a bird.

She *looks* like a bird, now that I think about it.

I eye her steadily. Yup. There's definitely something birdlike about her. All small, sharp features, big eyes, and twitchy movements.

Again, if you'd asked me two days ago, I would have said she was cute. Pretty and outgoing, she's got the sort of smiley personality that's easy to be around.

Hell, even Bailey gets along with her and Bailey's the most judgmental chick on the planet.

That toxic churn in my gut is replaced by a swift jab of guilt at the thought of my neighbor. Bailey's sanctimonious and uptight, and—

And I really should have told her this morning when I'd had the chance. Why hadn't I?

I don't know. Annoying as she is, not even Bailey deserves to have her heart broken.

And it *will* break when she finds out. She freakin' loves that asshole.

Me? I'm still staring at Rina, who's looking more and more anxious with each second of silence.

Good. Let her stew.

She probably thinks I'm in shock or something. And maybe I am. But not in the way she thinks.

Right now, I just feel like I missed my shot. I'd had this whole speech planned out. I was gonna show her the picture I'd taken when I'd left school early the other day and found Rina and Grayson making out all hot and heavy behind the gym.

For the last twenty-four hours, I've been waiting for this, but she just went and sabotaged my 'gotcha' moment. She launched into a weepy breakup speech before I could even whip out my phone.

So yeah, maybe I'm a little shocked. But more than that, I'm sitting here trying to care. I mean, Rina and I had been hanging out for a year now. Exclusively.

That's the longest relationship I've ever had.

I should care that she cheated on me, right? I should care that this is over.

Rina bites her lip and then lets it go. "Zack?"

"Yeah," I find myself saying. "You're probably right."

I force a smile and her whole body sags with relief.

Because I'm on a roll, apparently, I even give her the same wince of regret she's giving me. "I mean, it sucks, but...it makes sense."

She heaves another sigh. It sounds sad, but I'm guessing she's just as relieved as I am.

Yup. That's what this feeling is. I don't just *not* care that she and I are over. I'm relieved. The fact that she cheated on me still makes me furious, but the fact that we're over is a freakin' relief.

Shit. What does that even say about me?

I don't know. And right now, I don't really care. Maybe I'm an idiot when it comes to relationships, but at least I don't cheat. So, I guess I've got that goin' for me.

Rina's talking again. Don't ask me what she's saying. I don't know and I don't care. It feels like I'm watching her from a mile away.

For the first time since I saw them the other day, I can sense a little sanity returning.

My first reaction to seeing my best friend with his hands all over my girlfriend was shock. Then rage. For days I've been wallowing in humiliation and betrayal—*his* betrayal, mainly.

She'd been my girlfriend, yes. But he'd been my closest friend for years, ever since he'd transferred to our school freshman year.

We've always had each other's backs. Sure, his taste in girls sucks—I mean, Bailey? Really? But aside from that, we were tight. We've always been different, obviously. He's all football and good grades, and I'm...not. But we were still friends despite all that.

And he single-handedly destroyed that friendship over *her*.

Rina doesn't seem to notice my sneer of disgust as I watch her talk, her hands flailing. She's trying too hard to make it seem like we're all good. Like we can actually just be friends after hooking up all year.

Like we actually had a friendship to begin with.

We didn't. We had mutual attraction, that was it.

"...and I really hope we can still hang out when I get back from vacation, you know?"

I nod. This is so not how I'd expected this confrontation to go down. *I* was supposed to be breaking up with *her*. I was going to dump her fake, cheating ass and then—

Well, that's as far as I'd gotten with my plan. Truth be told, dealing with Rina was the easy part. I knew we'd break up. Obviously. And like she just pointed out, she'd be out of my life soon enough.

Come fall, she'll be off at college where she can fool some other moron into thinking she's all sunshine and rainbows.

So yeah, dealing with Rina was the easy part. Although, I hadn't expected her to beat me to it.

I sink back in the couch cushion, pulling away from her hand resting on my arm again. This isn't nearly as satisfying as my plan, but it's probably easier this way.

I would have made her cry, and I don't deal well with tears. Especially not fake Rina tears.

"I'm so happy we're on the same page," she's saying now. She shifts, resting against me as she curls her legs up on the couch. Like we still cuddle. Like this is still a thing that we do.

As if I have any desire to *snuggle* with the chick who cheated on me and then dumped me.

Oh hell no.

I stand up too quickly. "I'm just glad you said it first, to be honest."

Her eyes widen and she's watching me from the couch with a stricken expression. "You are?"

"Yeah." I force a smile that she must know is fake. "All good things, right?"

I don't even know what I mean by that, but it sounds good. She's nodding and agreeing, but her answering smile isn't quite as enthusiastic as it once was. "Right."

She blinks a few times, clearly confused by my easy acceptance.

And that's when it hits me. I mean, that's when I finally, *truly* comprehend the situation.

Rina doesn't know that I know.

*Grayson* doesn't know that I know.

This should've been obvious, but I was so caught up in the brutal first waves of disbelief and anger that it's only now really sinking in.

I've got the upper hand.

The toxic pit sensation eases up ever so slightly at the realization.

Rina and Grayson may have played me for a fool, but now...now I'm the one who's in the know.

I give Rina another one of these regretful grimaces that she and I have been rockin' ever since she showed up on my doorstep tonight. "I don't mean to be rude, Rina, but if you're still here when my mom gets home..."

She laughs. "Yeah, that'd be awkward. I get it."

I lead the way to the front door, and I swear I can see the nervous tension in Rina as she overcompensates when we reach it. She's too loud, too effusive.

She's trying so hard it hurts.

Finally, she gives me a kiss on the cheek. One last sad lingering glance, and then she's gone.

I can actually start to breathe normally when I watch her drive away. *Good riddance*.

Is that the way I'm supposed to feel after breaking up with my one and only real girlfriend? Probably not. But I have bigger problems on my plate.

Namely, Bailey. *Smurfette*. I smile at the thought of her nickname. More specifically, the way it drives her nuts.

It literally never fails to piss her off.

Seriously, you'd think that after *years* of hearing that dumb nickname on a daily basis she'd get over it, right? But nope. Not Bailey Tucker. The girl can hold a grudge like nobody's business. And the way her lips purse and her eye twitches every time I call her Smurfette?

It never gets old.

Is it obnoxious that I still get enjoyment from her pain? Sure. But the way I see it, somebody has to remind Bailey that she's a mere mortal, and as one of the people who's known her the longest and is stuck living beside her? That falls on me.

The girl spends so much time trying to be the best student, the perfect girlfriend, the most beloved member of our class, the ideal employee—quite frankly, it's exhausting to watch. But the thing is, people buy it. Grayson, my mom, our classmates, everyone. They all think she's God's gift. That she really is as perfect as she pretends to be.

In reality, Bailey is irritating, and judgmental, and a know-it-all, and...

And she still doesn't deserve to be cheated on.

I let my head fall against the doorframe with a thud. Bailey has her faults, but she's nothing if not loyal.

And in love.

The thought makes my chest tighten painfully. I have no idea how I'm going to break this to her.

I'm still standing there at the front door when Grayson's SUV pulls up a little while later. It would seem Grayson-the-dutiful-boyfriend has picked up his Stepford-wife girlfriend from her first day at work, and he's bringing her home safe and sound.

Repeat after me. *Awww*.

I don't bother to hide my disgust. These two have never *not* been nauseating. And no, this isn't my current hatred of Grayson talking. I've despised these two as a couple since the day they made it official freshman year.

And yeah, they made it *official*. Like, declaring it on social media and holding hands in the hallway every chance they got official.

It was obnoxious then, and it's still annoying now. But then again, pretty much everything about Bailey annoys me.

I watch as she steps out of the SUV and comes around to Grayson's side. He's smiling that big, dopey bright-white grin of his as she says...something. I can't make out what.

Then she's at his open window and she's leaning in and—

I look away before I puke.

And yes, that *is* my current hatred for Grayson talking. I'm not such a prude that I can't stand the sight of a little PDA, but the fact that Grayson is kissing her...

That she's kissing him...

That she doesn't know...

It lands like a punch in my gut.

Shit. She really needs to know. But I'd give just about anything to *not* be the one to break it to her.

I could confront Grayson. Tell him I know, show him the picture. Demand that he tell her before I do.

But that doesn't feel right either.

Bailey whirls around, her ugly, pleated Windy Falls uniformed skirt twirling like she's a cheerleader.

I rub my temple, which is now throbbing with the start of a headache.

The girl might not be my cup of tea, but I've known her forever and I know she deserves better than this.

Better than him.

And If I let Grayson confess, there's no telling how he'll spin it.

Even before I realized he'd been playing me, I knew he was a player. Oh, not in the screw-every-girl-in-sight kind of way. He's always seemed more than content having Bailey doting on him every second of the day.

But he's a player, all the same. He knows how to work people. How to charm them. He knows how to get his way, and I have no doubt that if given half a chance he'll spin the hell out of his cheating and make it seem like it was all Rina's fault. Or mine.

Don't ask me how I'd be the one to blame, just know that he could do it. He's *that* persuasive, especially when it comes to Bailey.

She's still smiling as she crosses the lawn toward her front door. Grayson shouts out, "Love you, Bae," as he pulls away and I see her lips curve up in this insanely cute little smile as she tucks her head and picks up her pace.

She looks so stinkin' sweet. So very...girlie. Like she's gonna go inside and kiss her pillow and write love notes with lipstick kisses.

My chest lurches at the sight of it. I only ever see scowling Bailey. Or brown-noser Bailey. And my least favorite—perfect-girlfriend Bailey.

Seeing her like this, when she doesn't know I'm watching, I feel...

Well, I kinda feel like a stalker, actually. But more than that, I can't help a surge of pity. I know exactly how she's gonna feel when she finds out, and I have no idea how to make it better for her.

But she deserves to know. And Grayson?

I watch his taillights until he drives out of sight.

I have no idea how to deal with Grayson. Somehow a shouting match and throwing punches just doesn't seem like the answer. It doesn't feel like *enough*. Not for the way he hurt me, and definitely not for what his betrayal is going to do to Bailey.

I wait until she's inside, the screen door clicking shut behind her, and only then do I go back into my own house.

I might have no idea how I'm going to deal with Grayson, but I do know this. I want him to suffer. I want him to pay.

I want the ultimate revenge.

## FOUR PARTY TIME

#### **Bailey**

IT'S OFFICIAL. Zack Myers is freaking me out.

He's on the other side of the pool in Macy Layman's backyard, but he doesn't seem to notice the crowd of bikini-clad seniors to his left or even the group of soccer players picking up a squealing Macy and pretending they'll throw her into the pool.

How could he notice any of that when he won't stop looking at *me*?

Grayson takes the sunscreen from my outstretched hand, and I turn to give him better access to my bare shoulders. But not even the cold slather of sunscreen on my skin can take away the burn from Zack's stare. "Um, Grayson?" I say. "Why is your best friend staring at me?"

"Um, Bae?" he teases, mimicking my tone as he hands back the sunscreen so he can use two hands. "Why is *your* neighbor glaring at me like that?"

I shrug in answer as he glides his hands over the back of my neck and upper back.

This is a game we've been playing for years. Neither of us ever wants to take responsibility for Zack and his bad behavior. I always claim that Grayson should keep him in check as his best friend, and he always reminds me that I've known him longer.

It's a silly game and I'm really not in the mood for it right now.

Zack's been acting super odd these last few days, and it's totally weirding me out. Grayson's noticed too, but he's a guy so he's acting like it's not weird that Zack's been hanging out with us every chance he gets. Or that when he does, he seems pissed, like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Even today, at what should be a fun pool party with our friends, he's just...off. Normally he'd be having some drinks, laughing with his friends, flirting with the girls. Normally he'd be *cool*. Zack prides himself on being soooo cool. But today he's the opposite of cool. He's too intense, and way too serious, and—

Have I mentioned that he's freaking me out?

"He's acting strange lately." I drag my gaze away from the dark intensity of Zack's stare.

Grayson makes a little 'hmm' sound of agreement. "He did just get his ass dumped."

I wince, a flicker of guilt cutting through my paranoia. "You're right. That's probably it."

Zack might be a pain in the butt, but he's not a robot. I'm sure he has feelings, even if he does hide them behind a thick layer of sarcasm and apathy.

I turn to glance at Grayson over my shoulder. "Did he say anything about that? Did he, I don't know...open up to you?"

"Did he cry on my shoulder? Is that really what you're asking?" Grayson laughs. "No. Of course not. You know that's not Zack's style."

"No, of course not," I deadpan. "Heaven forbid any of you guys actually express your *feelings*." I over-enunciate the last part, making Grayson laugh.

I adjust the straps of my swimsuit. A one-piece that Grayson says looks hot on me and which Zack insists makes me a prude.

Am I a prude? Maybe. But I prefer to think I just have high standards.

Zack catches us staring back at him and gives a little mocking salute.

"Keep your eyes off my girl or I'm comin' for you, bro," Grayson shouts. His booming voice is filled with laughter. I look down at the ground with a sigh, ignoring the attention that's now on us and pretending there's no heat creeping into my cheeks.

We all know Zack's not looking at me like *that*, because we all know that Zack can't stand me almost as much as I can't stand him.

"No can do, *bro*," Zack calls back. There's a mockery to his tone that goes beyond the norm and it has me looking up, glancing over.

His eyes are still locked on me, and I find myself tensing up...until he swings his gaze back to Grayson. "You can't blame a guy for looking when your girl's as hot as that."

The girls clustered beside him look over and whisper. I'm suddenly stupidly self-conscious, and for the life of me, my brain can't tell if Zack's mocking *me*, or Grayson, or...not mocking at all.

It's confusing, and it does nothing to help the flames surging up into my cheeks.

Dang it. I hate blushing.

And Zack's still staring. He's eyeing me in a way he's never once done before. Not like I'm annoying and not like I'm a stuck-up snot with a stick up her butt—his words, not mine. But like I'm actually hot. Like he's actually tempted.

My lips part in shock and he...he winks.

What the—

I blink in surprise. What is happening here?

Grayson wraps an arm around my waist. "I know you're single now, man, but find a girl of your own."

A few people laugh, and I wince on Zack's behalf. Of course, I hate the guy. More now than ever since he's decided to make me the center of attention like this. But I also know that he actually liked Rina, and it's hard not to feel sorry for the way it ended.

Zack's taunting smirk is familiar and the glint in his eyes as he laughs makes my belly twist into a knot. "No need to go all caveman, Grayson. So long as you're treating her right, I'm sure you've got nothing to worry about."

Laughter again. Even Grayson laughs and drops a kiss on the top of my head.

"Jackass," Grayson mutters. But his tone is affectionate. Indulgent. That's how he always is with Zack, and I have no idea why. Maybe it's because Grayson doesn't have siblings so he's cast Zack in a sort of younger brother role in his life, even though they're the same age. Or maybe being around such an aimless screw-up makes Grayson feel better about himself.

*Or* maybe I read too many self-help books and need to stop psychoanalyzing everyone around me.

Either way, I try to shake off the weird vibe Zack's giving off just as easily as Grayson does.

I try, but I fail.

Later, when the sun starts to go down, and the real party's getting started, it's like a switch gets flipped in Zack's brain. Instead of sitting on the sidelines staring at us, he becomes the life of the party.

I try to ignore him, but he's impossible to ignore. He's pounding beers like he's a freshman at his first kegger, and he's laughing too loudly, flirting too outrageously.

And his digs at Grayson and the other guys carry too much of a sting.

Zack's always been a snarky turd, but today there are actual barbs in his jokes—a meanness that's usually only aimed at me. But tonight, he's not holding back, taking shots at Grayson, and the other guys on the team. Even Macy and her friends.

And yet, everyone else is laughing it off, like they don't notice that something is different. Maybe they don't. I seem to be the only one who sees it.

And I don't just see it, I *feel* it. His weirdness is like a freakin' cattle prod to my anxiety.

I haven't taken pills in years—not since the therapist said I didn't need them anymore. But right now, I'd kill for a little blue savior to take this edge off. And it's *his* fault. It's all Zack's fault. Every time I see him, practically vibrating with some new inexplicable tension, every time I hear the edge in his voice when he's supposedly *just kidding*, my stomach flip flops in response.

I'm doing my best to enjoy myself, but to be honest, even if Zack wasn't wigging me out, this isn't really my scene.

I mean, it *is* because it's Grayson's scene, but I'm personally not much of a party person. Big groups leave me with a hangover that has nothing to do with alcohol. If I don't give myself a couple hours of decompression time afterward, I know I'll be staring up at my bedroom ceiling for hours, praying for sleep as I replay every word I've spoken tonight, and overanalyzing every conversation.

Social interaction hangovers are a legit thing in my world. And yeah, I do know how bizarre that is. Which is precisely why I don't talk about it. I

just know by now that if I intend to get some sleep, I need to leave early and go through my nighttime routine in peace.

I head over to Grayson, who's laughing with a bunch of his buddies, Zack included. I smile and laugh along with them until I find a moment when Grayson isn't the center of attention. That's when I lean into him. "Hey, babe, you ready to go?"

The look he gives me isn't just regretful, it's filled with disappointment too.

Gah! I hate this look.

I'm the worst girlfriend ever, that's what I take away from that look. Not that Grayson would ever say such a thing. That's just my inner drama queen at work. But it doesn't make it any easier when he gives one of those weary sighs. "Already?"

I shift my bag on my shoulder. I am the worst. But also... "I've got work in the morning, remember?"

His smile is the same kind of affectionate indulgence he uses with Zack.

I really hate this smile. But mainly, I despise that I'm being *that* girlfriend. The one who can't hang.

But then again, Grayson likes that I'm so responsible. He loves me for it.

He reaches out and tucks some of my hair back behind my ear. "Just a little while longer, yeah?"

My smile falters, but I'm about to say *yeah*, *okay*. *I can hang for a little while longer* when we're interrupted by Mr. Freaky himself.

"I'll take her home," Zack says.

And suddenly he's right there. In my space.

Grayson and I both turn to gape at him.

"Um, what?" I frown up at Zack, but he's grinning at Grayson as he slings an arm around my shoulders and tucks me against his side.

The guy is hot.

Not like *hot*-hot. Though he is *hot*-hot, that's already been established. No, I mean temperature wise, his skin feels like fire. For a moment I ponder the rate of his metabolism if he's putting off this much heat on a cool early summer night.

"Seriously, I can give her a ride." Zack's talking to Grayson about me as if I'm not here.

My frown turns to a glare.

"You're ready to leave?" Grayson says.

They're talking over my head. Not like their meaning is lost on me, but like physically. With me tucked under Zack's arm like this—as if we're buddies or something—Zack and Grayson are literally talking about me over my head.

I squirm and wiggle my way away from Zack's side. "You've been drinking," I say, looking pointedly at the drink in his hand.

He uses that beer bottle to gesture to Grayson's. "So's he."

"Yes, but—"

"But I can hold my booze better." Grayson smirks and I just barely hold back an exasperated sigh at boys and their pride.

The truth of the matter is, I'm the designated driver. Grayson drives us to parties, and I drive us home. Totally fine by me, but I don't know why Grayson never admits it aloud. He always lifts his car keys when he's leaving a party and says something stupid like *wish me luck!* 

Boys are so dumb sometimes.

"Nah, man. I got this." Grayson takes my hand and tugs me away from Zack so I'm pressed to his side instead.

I smile up at Grayson. Sure, he has his flaws, but this is *my* dumb boy. And he's the only guy I want to end the night with.

"Dude, I live next door," Zack says.

And why on earth Zack's arguing for the right to drunkenly drive me home when we normally go to great lengths to avoid any alone time together is beyond me.

I squeeze Grayson's hand. Even when he's drunk and I have to call an Uber to get from his house to mine, the ride home is our thing. The goodnight kiss portion of the night is still my favorite part of these outings. There's no way I'm tossing that aside for a ride home with Zack, and I know Grayson feels the same.

"You sure, man?" Grayson wobbles a bit on his feet.

I blink up at him. Wait...what?

But Zack's already grabbed my other hand, so I'm standing there between them in a human tug-of-war. I'm a wishbone about to be broken.

I have this crazy urge to start swinging both arms so they'll look as ridiculous as they sound.

"No," I say, turning to Zack. "What Grayson meant was no. That's not necess—"

"Bae, he's got a point." Grayson's voice is all sweet and cajoling.

I hate this tone. I never ever win against this tone.

"What?" I ask again, as if hearing him repeat himself is going to make this better.

Grayson drops my hand and cups my cheeks like I'm a little kid. "I know you need your sleep, Bae. You've got a big day at work tomorrow."

I open my mouth to protest, but I can't. It's true. I take my managerial role seriously and I have an early start time. "But—"

"We'll hang tomorrow, okay?" He gives me a light kiss and pulls back to smile down at me. "Don't worry. Zack's all bark and no bite."

I shake my head. I hate that phrase, and right now it's completely senseless. Of course, Zack's not going to harm me. That's not what I'm worried about.

I glance over at Zack, who's smirking. He won and he knows it.

Though why he wants us to ride home together is beyond me.

"I'd rather ride home with a dog with rabies," I inform him.

He gives a sharp "Ruff!" of a bark right on cue.

A girl I can't see but who's clearly listening giggles, and Zack's smirk grows into a lopsided grin that makes me want to punch his stupid mouth.

Before I can argue again, though, Zack's tugging me away from Grayson and the others. He flashes a look back at Grayson. "Don't worry, bro. She's in great hands with me."

## FIVE THE TRUTH HURTS

#### Zack

BAILEY'S all grim determination as she stares me down beside the driver's side door. "Give me the keys, Zack."

"You think you're driving?" I laugh. "That's cute."

I'm just messing with her. Which I really shouldn't do since I'm about to tear her heart out and stomp on it, but I can't help myself. It's habit.

Her lips press together in a thin line.

It's also kinda hilarious to watch her get all worked up and self-righteous. "You've been drinking." She sticks her hand out palm up. "Hand over the keys."

I make my voice all high and breathy, and narrow my eyes to mimic her glare. "*Hand over the keys*." I drop them into her outstretched hand. "You've got that whole sexy teacher vibe down pat."

Her sigh is sheer exasperation as she takes the keys and turns from me to open the door.

"Do you use that voice on Grayson when he's been naughty?"

She ignores me.

"Aw, come on. Admit it. You two get freaky, don't you? Role playing and whatnot."

She slams the car door in my face and starts the car, so I have to hustle to the passenger side. There's no doubt in my mind she'd drive off without me.

It would probably serve me right.

I turn to face her and I wish to God that beer had done its job. I was hoping slamming a few would make this easier. All it's done is make me tired.

And I still have no idea how I'm gonna tell her the truth.

But I have to. It's time. Watching her be all obedient girlfriend to that cheating ass is killing me. But the thought of telling her?

That's even worse.

Despite what she thinks of me, I'm not the devil in disguise.

I mean, I'm no saint either. Obviously. But I definitely don't revel in the thought of breaking this to her. I know exactly how she'll feel and if there's any way I could spare her that, I would.

But I can't.

So, I annoy her instead. Don't ask me why. It's what I do. It's how we co-exist. And right now, an irritated, stuck-up priss is easier to handle than the Bailey I'd watched at the party. All doe-eyed and sweet to her a-hole of a boyfriend who clearly couldn't have cared less that she hadn't been having fun at the party.

*I'd* noticed she'd been bored out of her mind. How had *he* not noticed?

He'd acted all put out at having to leave. Imagine, having a girl who's willing to drive your drunken ass home and treat you like your God's gift. Must be tough to be Grayson.

"Please tell me you roleplay as Smurfette," I say.

She clamps her lips together so tight it looks painful.

I adopt that stupid high voice again. "Oh, Papa Smurf. For a smurf so old, you sure know how to—"

"Ew, stop!" Her hands clench the steering wheel.

I stare at her profile because I could have sworn I'd seen a twitch of her lips.

But no. No way. But then again...

I lean in closer for a better look, and she shakes her head.

"Just stop," she says. But her lips are trembling and—

A laugh tumbles out of her, loud and genuine, and it ends with a little snort. She clamps a hand over her mouth, still shaking her head.

"That wasn't funny," she says when she drops her hand.

Her annoying goody two shoes voice is spot on once more, but I can't help grinning because...I got a laugh out of Bailey Tucker. Over a dirty joke, no less.

Over a dirty joke that involved *Smurfs*.

I feel my own lips tugging up on one side. So, Bailey Tucker has a deviant sense of humor somewhere under that buttoned-up, takes-everything-way-too-seriously exterior. Good to know.

She drives in silence for a little while and the closer we get to my house, the more I start to sweat. She says something and I miss it because I'm too busy staring out the window, trying to figure out how best to start a conversation that'll crush a person's life.

No, not her *life*. Just her heart.

Yeah, that's way better.

"Zack?"

I look over to see her staring at me with her brows drawn together in concern.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course."

I expect that to be the end of it. We're not friends. We don't do 'talking.'

But she clears her throat and the awkward silence instantly grows ten times more awkward. "You've been acting kind of weird lately."

"According to you, I'm always weird," I shoot back.

This isn't quite true. She doesn't call me weird. Just a screw-up, a moron, a slacker, an idiot, a buffoon, a child. The list goes on and on, but it doesn't include *weird*.

"Well then, you've been weirder than usual," she says.

I stare at her profile for a long time, trying to figure her out. She says it like it's an accusation, but I think maybe...she's worried about me.

Crap. My head falls back against the seat with a thud. The last thing I need is this girl being nice to me. That's only going to make this harder.

She turns onto our street and a second later, we pull into my driveway.

This is it. There's no avoiding it any longer. I've been waiting for days to catch her alone. To find a time when she's not in public or with Grayson.

I draw in a deep breath. This is it.

"Okay, well..." She goes to open the car door. "Thanks for the ride...I guess."

I lean forward to stop her. "Wait."

She pauses with one hand still on the steering wheel, the other on the door handle. She turns back with a question in her eyes.

For a second I sit there with my mouth open and no words come out.

Her brows arch up and she looks torn between concern for me and wariness. "Zack, if you're going through something..."

She clears her throat again and her tongue darts out to wet her lips.

She's nervous. I'm making her nervous.

Awesome. Good start.

And yet I still find myself just...staring at her lips as my brain draws a complete blank. I'd been rehearsing what I was going to say for days. But right now, all I can do is sit here like a chump as the words refuse to come.

How was I going to start?

Shit, I'm seriously drawing a total blank here. Everything I'd planned to say sounds too harsh now that we're here.

She turns toward me, her brows drawing down now. I'm suddenly facing a *very serious* Bailey. "Look, I know we're not exactly close, but it seems like you're going through something, and I..." She hesitates. "You know, if you need to talk..."

Okay, this is too much. I'm about to ruin her life and she's decided *now* is the time to be my friend again?

I draw in a deep breath and run a hand through my hair.

She touches my arm, and every muscle in my body tenses. She draws her hand back quickly, like she just realized what she'd done. "Zack, I'm here if you need—"

"Grayson cheated on you." The words spill out too loudly, and so quickly it sounds like one word.

She blinks. "What?"

And then she blinks again and I see the words register behind her eyes. I swear I feel it when the meaning of them settles inside her like a sack of bricks.

"What?" This time her voice is high and tight.

I know what she's feeling. I know *exactly* how she's feeling. Like the world is off center and the ground is pitching forward.

I reach for her to...what? Hug her? Pat her back? I don't even know. But she swats my hand away. "What are you *saying*?"

"I'm sorry, Bailey. I really am."

She's staring at me with her features screwed up in confusion. Like she's not sure why I'm saying something so stupid. She's trying to figure out why I'm lying.

I let out a long exhale. I wish to God I *was* lying, if just to spare us both this moment.

"No." She shakes her head as she turns away. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I saw them."

She freezes, staring straight ahead through the windshield like she can read some hidden message in the faded paint of my garage door.

The sun's sinking below the horizon and the world takes on that surreal orange glow. Quite frankly, it's not helping matters. This moment already feels like something out of a movie. We don't need cinematic lighting for effect.

For her, I know that unreal sensation is even worse. That disconnect between what she's hearing and what she believes to be true, it's growing wider by the second.

"No," she says again, slower this time. "You're wrong."

"I have proof." The words seem to hit her like a punch, and she jerks back like I literally struck her.

God, I hate myself right now.

I hate that I'm relieved that it's out there. I hate that I'm glad I'm not the only one who knows.

And as she scrambles for the door handle and I watch her climb out—I hate that I just broke this girl's heart.

### six AFTERMATH

#### Bailey

I HATE *Zack Myers more than life itself.* 

The words race through my brain like some sort of toxic mantra as I race toward my house.

As if I can outrun Zack's words. No, his *lies*.

He is lying. Of course, he's lying.

I fumble with my house keys as I let myself in and slam the door shut behind me.

He's clearly lying. But why? I squeeze my eyes shut and blood rushes to my head. My temples throb as a roaring sound fills my ears.

I have proof.

My stomach heaves like it did back in the car. Like it always does when I ride Windy Falls' highest coaster and it tips over the edge.

Saliva pools and I clap a hand over my mouth. Oh crap, I'm going to be sick. I dart through the family's living room. My mom doesn't look up from her book as she calls out a hello, and my dad is watching the news so intently I'm not even sure he sees me.

I make it to the bathroom just in time, and the contents of my stomach come out in one massive heave.

"Oh. My. God." My sister Jane's voice in the doorway makes me groan. I sit back on my heels and flush, reaching for a towel to wipe my mouth.

"Did Saint Bailey actually get drunk at a party?" My younger-by-oneyear sibling gasps. "But that would mean you actually had fun, and that's...well, that's just impossible to imagine."

"Shut up," I mutter.

She is so *not* what I need right now. But Jane follows on my heels all the way to the room we share at the end of a narrow hallway. Our little brothers share the room to our right and our parents are across the hall.

It's no secret that Jane is counting the seconds until I move out and she can have the room to herself. She actually crosses off days on a calendar with giant red X's that make me think that if for some reason I don't move out next fall, she's gonna make me disappear.

"So what happened?" she asked as I lay down on my bed. "Did Grayson finally convince you to let loose with a wine cooler?"

Jane's purple-streaked hair is in my face as she bends over me like she's examining a lab rat.

"Leave me alone." I cover my face with my hands. She doesn't move.

I can hear her breathing over me as seconds tick by.

But mostly I just hear my heart pounding, and I am trapped somewhere in the back of my mind. Like I'm watching myself from a distance.

I'd say it was an out-of-body experience except that I haven't escaped my body. I feel *everything*. My muscles are too tense and my chest feels like Jane's sitting on my ribcage, even though she's not. She's just hovering.

And then she's cursing under her breath and the bed sinks beside me. "Are you having another panic attack?"

"No." Yes. Probably. But this is worse than any panic attack I've ever had because it's not only my nerves that are frayed, and it's not just my mind on the fritz.

This feeling of distance, like I've taken three steps back from my brain? It's not gonna last forever. And part of me doesn't want it to end. Because if Zack *isn't* lying...?

But he is. He has to be.

"Should I get Mom?" The worry in Jane's voice only ratchets up the adrenaline in my bloodstream. My breathing is getting shorter and quicker by the second, and my insides feel like they don't fit inside my body.

I need to calm down. I need to breathe.

There's an explanation for all this. There has to be.

I drop my hands to find Jane frowning down at me, her face so close I can tell she's been snacking on tortilla chips and salsa.

I swallow down another wave of nausea.

"Bailey? Should I get—"

"No...Mom." Crap I'm panting outright now and I curl into myself, my nails digging into my palms. But my parents can't help and I don't want them to worry.

"You gonna be okay?" Jane's voice is weirdly nice.

I nod.

*No. Not really.* 

And then panic takes over completely. My heart races out of control and I try to calm the urge to writhe, and pant, and clench, and scream.

It's not pretty and it feels like hell.

But Jane doesn't go anywhere, which is also weirdly nice.

It's never awesome to have someone witness an attack, but she's seen it all before, and she sits with me until the worst of the panic attack passes and exhaustion makes my limbs feel heavy.

She shifts beside me. "Want to tell me what brought it on this time?"

I shrug and go to tell her it was nothing.

It wouldn't be the first time I'd had an attack I hadn't been able to explain. But something about the way Jane's watching me has me blurting out the truth. "It was Zack."

Her eyes narrow and she lets out a hiss. Like, an actual hiss, like she's a freakin' snake. "What did he do to you?"

I feel a hysterical laugh forming, along with a surge of gratitude.

We might not be friends—and most of the time Jane seems to hate my guts—but she's still my sister. And my sister has my back.

"What did he do to you?" She asks it louder this time as she gets to her feet.

For a half a second I think about letting her go just to see what she'll do. But then again, the last thing I need right now is to make a trip to the police station because my little sister's taken a bat to the neighbor boy's car.

With Jane, you never know.

I stop her with a hand on her arm and she goes still. She's waiting.

I open my mouth and have to close it to swallow. It sounds so silly when I go to say it aloud that I know it can't be true. "He said Grayson's cheating on me."

Jane's jaw goes slack and her face grows paler than usual.

"But he's lying," I say quickly. "He has to be lying."

Jane perches on the edge of my bed, more tentative than she's ever been around me. That makes me nervous. "Bailey, why would he lie about that?"

"I don't know." It comes out more defensively than I'd intended and I rub a hand over my forehead. "I don't know," I say, softer this time.

Jane's hand lands on my shoulder and I whip my head around to stare at her in alarm.

*Pat. Pat. Pat.* Three solid, thumping pats to my shoulder and Jane's giving me this awkward grimace.

"What is this?" I demand. "Are you trying to comfort me right now?" She shrugs. "I thought I'd try."

"Well, cut it out. It's bizarre."

My sister might have my back, but touchy-feely we were not. I inch away from her and see her flicker of relief that she's not expected to hug me.

"It's not only strange, it's unnecessary," I continue. But my voice sounds off. I sound just as uptight and prissy as Zack makes me out to be. My enunciation is absurdly on point. "There's been a mistake. Zack is wrong. And I will prove it."

*I have proof.* Zack's words from earlier are a punch to the gut, and I shift on the bed so I can reach my phone in my back pocket.

Jane watches me with a frown. "What are you doing?"

"Texting Zack. He said he has proof, but obviously he's wrong. Or he's lying."

Why would he lie?

That question will just not quit. Zack has no reason to lie, and I know it. Grayson is his best friend.

In an instant, my mind conjures up every strange Zack interaction I'd witnessed these past few days. The way he'd been acting so off around Grayson...

I text Zack with cold, numb fingers.

"You sure you want to do this?" Jane reads the short text over my shoulder.

ME: Show me.

"I'M SURE," I lie.

My heart starts racing again and my already shaky limbs are outright trembling. I clasp my arms around my knees and hold on tight.

Jane's hand lifts and hovers. I think she's about to take another stab at comforting me again, but she drops her hand to her side with a sigh. "Do you want me to call a friend?"

I nod.

A friend. Yes, a friend would be good.

But even as I nod, my mind flips through the list of potential friends who would rush over to be with me during my moment of crisis and it comes up empty.

Macy, Bridget, and the other girls I hang out with at school are still at the party. And even if they weren't, I'd feel weird talking to them about Grayson. They're *our* friends, not mine.

And, if I'm being honest, they're probably more his friends than ours.

They'd not only laugh at me for doubting Grayson, they'd turn right around and tell him that I'd actually believed Zack.

Zack, who's obviously lying. This is one of his pranks. A joke he's playing at my expense.

That's the only option.

My phone dings and I stare at it. Then I look to Jane and she picks it up with an expression of grim determination.

She looks first. I wish she hadn't because I see it on her face. I see her horror and then her pity when she hands me the phone with a picture on the screen.

My hands are shaking so badly I can barely hold it steady. But even shaking, and even blurry, there's no denying what I'm seeing.

It's Grayson. And Rina.

And they're going at it against the wall of the school like they're starring in their very own porno.

"I'm gonna throw up." No sooner do I whisper the words through frozen lips than Jane's hauling me down to the bathroom.

When we're back in our room, and I'm lying on the bed staring at the ceiling, I have no idea what to do next. Neither does Jane, apparently, because she asks for a third time if there's someone she can call.

She clearly wants off friend duty, and who can blame her?

"You've got to have one friend who's not a Graysonite," she says.

*Graysonite*. That's what she's been calling Grayson's teammate buddies for years now. She makes it sound like he's running some sort of cult, when in reality he's just popular.

And here I am, sticking up for him in my thoughts when he's so thoroughly betrayed my trust.

"What about Toni?" Jane asks.

I turn my head to give her a bland look. Toni was my best friend in grade school and junior high. We didn't get into a fight or anything, but we'd gone in different directions in high school. We haven't hung out outside of school since the summer after eighth grade. I couldn't exactly call her up now and expect her to come running.

I turn my face back up to the ceiling as a fresh wave of self-pity washes over me. "I have no friends."

Jane doesn't argue.

"My boyfriend cheated on me, and I have no friends." I say it aloud just to see how it feels.

Still doesn't feel real, to be honest. There's a sort of numbness around my heart now that the shock has faded. That's probably good. Probably for the best.

But hours later, after Jane's fallen asleep, the panic is back.

It's back and it's been joined by heartache—a crippling, searing pain in my chest every time I think about that photo.

It hurts. It hurts so badly I just want to knock myself out to avoid the pain. But I can't shut off my brain because I have questions.

So. Many. Questions.

When did this start? Was it a one-time thing? Did Grayson want to break up with me? Had he fallen out of love with me? Had she thrown herself at him, or had he instigated it? And did that matter?

The questions won't let me sleep, and I physically cannot lie here any longer just staring into the dark.

I can feel myself spiraling and if I don't get up and get out of my head, I'll be at the mercy of another panic attack.

The entire family is asleep when I finally give up hope that sleep will claim me. The halls are silent as I make my way out back.

I need an outlet...and I know exactly where to find one.

# SEVEN THE PITCH

#### Zack

### THWACK.

Thwack.

The muffled sound coming from outside has me frowning up at the ceiling over my bed. I hadn't been sleeping, and the sound wasn't so loud it would wake me. But now that I'm aware of it, it's driving me crazy.

Thwack.

I sit up in bed and reach for a T-shirt. The sound is steady, but irritatingly inconsistent. And it's coming from outside.

It's coming from *her* house.

I walk out to the back screen door, careful not to wake my mom. She's been working twelve-hour shifts all week and she looked wrecked when she got home tonight.

The screen door creaks open, but then I'm outside and there's that perfect early summer breeze welcoming me.

The neighborhood is deathly silent.

Thwack.

Except for that.

I didn't put on shoes, so I pad barefoot over the cool, damp, overgrown lawn in my backyard. It's obvious the moment it changes from my backyard to hers because the Tuckers take crap like *lawn care* way too seriously.

Maybe my mom and I would too if we weren't so busy trying to make ends meet.

I can make out Bailey's silhouette in the moonlight. Little more than a dark shape and an arm swinging and—

Thwack.

I laugh under my breath when I realize what she's doing. "I didn't know you guys still have that back here."

Bailey's squeak of surprise is muffled, and she recovers with a way more familiar huff of annoyance. "Why are you sneaking up on me?"

Her voice is low and hushed, but the breeze seems to carry it my way and I hear her perfectly as I walk toward her, trying my best to avoid sharp stones and twigs. "I wasn't sneaking up on anyone. Just trying not to wake the neighborhood."

She doesn't respond. I'd half expected one of her complaints about how loudly I play my music when I'm working in the garage, but she's back to focusing on the pitcher's net that's situated in front of the line of trees that marks the end of the Tuckers' property.

I don't need to see her eyes to know her gaze is fierce as she eyes her target. Bailey has never been chill about anything, and when it comes to sports or games, forget about it. The girl gives new meaning to the word 'intense.'

Even as a kid, she was that uber competitive child who wouldn't let a game of tag end until she'd been declared the winner.

Her arm draws back and she lets loose, nailing the picture of the catcher's mask in the middle of the net.

Thwack.

"Ethan wants to do little league next summer," she says.

I blink in confusion, and for a second I'm thrown by the fact that we're still talking about the pitcher's net. And then I don't respond right away because I'm confused all over again trying to picture little baby Ethan playing baseball. "No more tee ball?"

She shakes her head. "This was their last year."

"Wow." I swat at a bug that's landed on my arm. "And Nate?"

"He's not interested." Her lips twitch up a little at the corners. "Says athletics are a waste of his time."

I laugh. I can totally picture him saying that.

"First grade keeps a guy busy," I agree. I love that kid. I love *both* those kids. They'd come as an unexpected surprise to the Tucker family when Bailey, Jane, and I were in middle school. Since I'd never had siblings, I'd been fascinated by the whole thing. I still remember the day they came home from the hospital in vivid detail. It's ingrained in my memory, just like the day my dad left a couple years after that.

Between infants, puberty, and delinquent dads, it was a busy few years in our little neck of the woods.

I eye the net again, memories flooding me at the sight of the old, worn net. "Your dad must be psyched."

Bailey gives a little snort of amusement. Her dad had been just as fanatical about Bailey's softball games as she'd been back in the day. He'd been crushed when she'd finally quit freshman year—because of Grayson.

Not that she'd ever admit it was because of him. She'd said at the time that it was pointless to pursue that extracurricular when it wasn't going to earn her a scholarship, and she didn't need it for her applications, and blah blah.

Everyone believed her.

I think maybe Bailey even convinced herself. But I knew better.

The thought of Grayson, of that first year they were together when they'd been so obnoxiously inseparable—it has me tensing beside her.

For a second there, I think maybe we both forgot that we can't stand each other, but this little trip down memory lane ends with a major shift in mood.

The neighborly small-talk is replaced with a thick tension.

The whole reason she's out here chucking balls at a piece of plastic is because of me.

Well, because of Grayson. But yeah, because of me too. Because I'd told her. And when she'd asked for proof, I'd shown her.

Wind up, release, *thwack*. Over and over until my feet start to freeze in the cold grass and the refreshing breeze turns frigid. After a while, I start to back away, to head back to my own house. Clearly, she wants to be alone, right? But then she breaks the silence. "How long?"

I freeze. "What?"

She turns to face me head-on and—aw hell.

I can make out her features well enough to see just how badly she's hurting. Her eyes are puffy, and standing this close, they're also

frighteningly empty.

"How long have you known?" she asks.

I shift. "A few days. I caught them right before school let out."

She nods like this confirms what she thought. She turns and walks away, toward the pitching net where she starts to gather up some softballs to start all over again.

"He doesn't know that you know." Her voice is earily calm considering the fact that her hands are shaking and I can feel her pain like she's sending out a beacon.

"No," I agree. "He doesn't know."

"Does *she*?" She cuts me a sidelong look.

"Rina? No." My laugh is undeniably bitter. "She broke up with me before I could confront her."

She nods again like this makes sense. And then she surprises me with an, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not." But I say it too quickly, and neither of us is fooled. I turn to face the net again. "We would have broken up anyway."

That much is the truth. I hadn't held out any hopes for some long-distance romance when she went off to college. Not like Bailey had.

"I wasn't in love with her," I add.

Another truth.

The words sit between us as she pitches again, harder and faster than before. "Well, I was. With him."

My head whips to the side to face her and I know she hears it at the same time I do.

*I was.* Past tense.

"I *am*," she says quickly. "I think." Her brows come down with a frown and her gaze is distant, not fixed on the net anymore. "Actually, I don't know what I am now."

There's a short silence, and I feel like she's waiting for an answer.

"Heartbroken," I offer.

She casts me a suspicious sidelong look to see if I'm making fun of her, but I'm not nearly as much of an ass as she thinks I am.

Okay, fine. Maybe I am. But I'm not cruel and I don't mock people in pain.

She must see I'm not laughing, not even a little, because she swallows and I see her throat work as she fights tears. "Yeah. Heartbroken."

She turns back to the net. *Thwack*.

I jerk back as the softball hits the net with so much force I'm surprised the old equipment doesn't break. "Damn, Bailey. You should be glad your dad never found out what heartbreak did for your pitching arm. He never would have kept you from dating for so long."

To my surprise, and no doubt hers...she laughs.

It's a sweet, high-pitched little sound that is shockingly close to a giggle.

She clamps her mouth shut and I have to swallow a laugh of my own. Bailey is so not a person who giggles. A, because she's serious. So very serious. She has no idea how to have fun. And B, because she's Bailey, and she prides herself on being above anything as childish as giggling.

Maybe A and B are one and the same, but whatever. That's not the point. The point is the little sound is happy and it gives me hope. Not for me, but for her. If she can still laugh, she'll be okay.

Just maybe not anytime soon.

"What are you going to do?" I ask when the silence stretches too long.

She shakes her head, but she doesn't ask what I mean. She *knows* what I mean. Is she going to kick Grayson's ass to the curb? Is she going to give him a chance to explain?

I have no idea why I'm so tense as I wait for her answer. Probably because that jackwad hurt me too, and I don't want to see him walk away without paying a price.

She sighs. "I don't know."

I nod. Fair enough. "You don't have to figure it out tonight."

She tosses the ball in her hands as she thinks that over. "I don't think I'll be able to sleep until I do."

"You're working tomorrow, right?"

She nods, turning to look at me again. "It's going to be torture."

"Nah, it's probably for the best that you have a distraction." I speak like a man who knows. Because I am. Between memories of my dad and talk of Grayson, I feel like the world's leading expert on the topic of betrayal.

I wince at the thought. Not exactly where one wants to be in life. I'd far rather be an expert on beer pong and getting laid, and maybe I will be by the end of the summer. But right now I'm the freakin' king of rejects.

Awesome.

Bailey's eyeing me oddly and I can't tell if she's really seeing me at all.

"We're going through the hiring paperwork tomorrow," she says slowly. "As a manager, I'm in charge of choosing the employees for my zone."

And there's my Bailey. The girl who can turn any conversation boring in the blink of an eye.

"Oh yeah?" I can't even pretend to sound interested. With everything going on right now, does she honestly care about who's going to be working the ice cream stand and who's on rides?

Apparently so, because her eyes have some life to them for the first time since I'd come out here. "I was going to give Grayson a job with me in the souvenir shop."

Of course she was. It's the cushiest job at the theme park. Standing around in air-conditioning all day and dealing with grown-ups rather than little sticky-faced terrors?

And she was *going* to give it to Grayson.

I grin the moment I get it. It might not be much, but prissy, stick-up-her-butt Bailey is thinking about revenge. Small, petty-ass revenge, but I like it.

It's a start.

If I have my way, it's only the beginning.

"Not anymore?" I ask, as if I don't know.

She shakes her head. "I think he'd do way better at the Tilt-a-Whirl." Her lips curve up a bit and—holy crap. The girl's smile is *wicked*.

She arches a brow. "Don't you?"

I'm laughing now at the thought of Grayson cleaning up puke at the ride every employee knows is the worst assignment. I rock back on my heels as I pretend to consider it. "You know, I think he'd be a perfect fit for that ride."

She laughs too, and there's some disbelief there, like she can't believe she even thought of it.

I'm not so sure she'll even go through with it.

The girl is gooder than good.

Maybe she's thinking something similar because her laugh trails off and her smile dies. She stares down at the softball in her hand like she's not sure how it got there.

I move closer to her and nudge her arm with my elbow to try and get her out of her head. "See? You have a plan for tomorrow. It's a start."

She gives a little scoff. "Yeah. But what do I do after that? I can't avoid him forever."

I shake my head like I don't have an answer. But...I do have an idea. It's a crazy idea, and one she'll probably never go along with.

But there's no way I'm going to hit her with it now. Not when she's still reeling. She has to figure out her own mind first. The girl has to get through the shock. And then...

Well, then, maybe we'll talk.

"What am I going to do?" She says it so quietly, I know she's not asking me.

But my idea is right there, on my mind, front and center like it has been for days now. Earlier tonight, I'd even tested it out. How Grayson would respond to his best friend making a move on his girl.

He didn't even think it was possible. The cocky ass couldn't even conceive of it. Which meant…he'd never see it coming.

But I shove the thought aside for now. I'm not gonna push Bailey when she's still so obviously in shock. She's not herself tonight, and taking advantage of that would be a total dick move.

She's turning the ball in her hands, lost in thought about how she's going to handle this. What she's going to say to Grayson...

An idea occurs to me and it makes my stomach plummet. "Do you think you can forgive him?"

Please say no.

For the love of all that's holy, seeing Grayson come through this unscathed and with Bailey still fawning all over him...

I run a hand through my hair and take a deep breath, holding it until she answers.

"I don't know." She turns and meets my gaze and the force of the impact hits me in the gut. She frowns and then she shakes her head. "I don't think so."

I hate the satisfaction that swells in my chest.

I don't want to sway her. Well, I *do* but I won't. But if Grayson ends up with Bailey Tucker after all he's done, well—there's officially no justice in this world.

I know, I know. Life's not fair. But there should be some karma, right? And while we might not be able to control outside crap like the weather and freak accidents, we *can* decide if people are forgiven.

We can choose how to respond when someone screws us over.

I steal the ball from her hand, ignoring her surprised "hey!" as I wind up...and throw it as hard as I can.

Thwack.

Damn. That felt good.

"Not bad," Bailey murmurs beside me.

I grin and shove my hands in my pockets.

Bailey and I might not have asked to be Grayson's victims here—but we can sure as hell decide if he's made to pay.

## EIGHT SHOW UP OR SHOWDOWN

### **Bailey**

THE FLUORESCENT LIGHTS in the manager's trailer are killing my eyes.

My eyelids feel like sandpaper after no sleep and endless fits of crying. But that doesn't keep me from staring intently as Derek, the harried college sophomore back for a summer at Windy Falls, holds up Grayson's application and peers at it. "Grayson Abler. Second year."

Seniority is everything at Windy Falls, and it's the only real consideration since we have hundreds of positions to fill.

I think of Zack who's been an employee here just as long as I have, and still working a crappy maintenance job. Okay, maybe seniority isn't *everything*. It's key to advancement, but you still won't move up unless you show some interest. You have to ask to be promoted. You have to show them that you're serious about advancing in the ranks.

I tap my pen against the edge of the table.

Or, you have to have an in.

Which was exactly what Grayson had last year since I'd put in a good word for him, which was why he was the only first year to get a sweet gig taking tickets at the amusement park's indoor theater.

Derek looks around the table, waiting to see if someone will speak up on Grayson's behalf. When no one does, his application gets tossed in the stack with the other first and second years. The stack that leads to the worst jobs.

And just like that, I watch Grayson's summer get tossed into the toilet.

It's that easy. All I had to do was keep my mouth shut. It's almost *too* easy.

The thought has me clamping my lips shut to smother a laugh.

Not a good laugh. A crazy laugh. The kind of laugh that's only heard from a condemned lunatic in bad horror movies.

Actually...I'm a little afraid it's an evil laugh.

"What do you think, Bailey?" Shelley, one of the few managers who's permanently on staff, faces me across the large foldout table that passes for a conference room in this amusement park's largest trailer.

Her blonde hair is high. So high I can't help but wonder how much hairspray she uses on a daily basis. How many bottles she must go through in a month.

The sound of someone sipping coffee and Derek impatiently shuffling papers farther down the table has me blinking in confusion.

What do I think?

What do I think about what?

I glance down the row of faces, some more familiar than others. No newbies here. Of course not, it took seniority to be a manager—assistant, part-time or otherwise.

My former BFF Toni is at the far end on the opposite side and her red curls dangle in her face as she leans forward to stare at me too.

Ever since Jane brought her up last night, I've been wishing Toni and I hadn't drifted so far apart. It would've been nice to have a real friend to talk to last night.

My gaze connects with hers. I want to smile. I want to wave. But I can't do much of anything today but sit here and stare.

I think I may have officially lost it.

This feeling has to pass eventually, right? I'm not going to spend the rest of my life reeling from a breakup...am I?

Crap! I went and thought of the b-word again. I swallow down a wave of emotion before I can do something unforgivably embarrassing like cry.

Shelley arches her brows, which makes her entire head of helmet hair shift, and creases form along her brow. "It looks like you still have an opening in souvenirs," she prompts.

I blink. Right. I'm not done working. "Um..."

Everyone stares at me. I avoid looking at Toni because she's the only person here from school. The only person who might be wondering why on earth I'd just let Grayson's application get dumped in the garbage, relatively speaking.

But she doesn't say anything, and I'm on the spot.

I'd come up with my ideal staff ages ago, and Grayson was on it. So now I have an opening, and...there's only one person I can think of whose promotion would annoy the crap out of Grayson. "I was thinking Zack Myers.

To my surprise, my voice sounds normal, and while my silence might have stretched way too long, no one seems to care.

The fact that I'm a walking zombie is hidden by the fact that no one wants to be here. They probably think I'm just hungover and miserable like they are. Or just miserable about having to work on such a gorgeous sunny morning.

"Zack," Derek mutters as he sorts through the applications in his hands. He tosses it into the pile closest to me. "Done. What section's next?"

I lean back in my chair, the muscles in my stomach unclenching for the first time all day.

It's done. I got my petty vengeance on Grayson and...

And I don't feel anything.

No triumph. No satisfaction. Not that I'd thought being a petty witch would make my heartache disappear. I hadn't.

But still. It's pretty anticlimactic.

The rest of the meeting is kind of nice though. Boring, of course, but I can deal with boring. I have to pay just enough attention that I can't sit there and wallow in memories of a certain photo I can never erase from my brain. And no cell phones are allowed, so I can't check my phone and stew over the text that's still waiting for a response.

It's from Grayson asking if I needed a ride. I didn't respond, but he hasn't seemed to notice. Then he texted asking if I wanted to hang out with his friends Cody and Macy tonight. Cody and Macy have been an on-again-off-again couple nearly as long as Grayson and I had been dating. When they were on-again, we did lots of couple stuff together. Typically. But the thought of going on a double date right now makes my heart sink. The idea

of seeing Grayson at all is enough to bring on full-blown panic, so I don't go there.

I didn't respond to that text either. Mainly because I'm still just as clueless as I was last night as to what I'm going to say, and how I'm going to handle this.

Until I figure it out, I'm not going to say or do anything at all.

Avoidance. That's a healthy coping mechanism, right?

I'm still in a daze when the rustling of papers and the squeak of chairs being pushed back alerts me to the fact that we're done here. I follow the rest of this crowd and spot a familiar redhead in front of me. "Toni, hey."

She turns to me with a smile that seems to be part surprise, part autopilot.

"Looks like we'll be working together again this summer," I say.

She bobs her head with another smile. "Looks that way."

We shift forward but the narrow door to the trailer has created a bottleneck and there's a line forming to get out.

"So..." My brain is moving like molasses as I try to think of something to say. It's been so long since she and I have talked, apart from the occasional small talk in class or questions about an assignment. I'm drawing a blank. "How's your family?"

Her eyes widen slightly in surprise and I see a glint of amusement in her eyes. "Good, thanks." After a beat, as we continue to shuffle forward, she adds, "How about yours?"

"Good." My heart is breaking. "They're fine."

I want to tell her. I want to unload on a friend. I want to ask for advice. I want—

"I have art class with Janie," she says.

"Oh, that's right." I love that she still calls her Janie and not Jane. It's a reminder of how long she's been in our lives. So that makes us friends, right?

Yes. Definitely. This is a girl I trust. Someone who knows me well.

It's just, I have no idea how to bring this up. I have no clue how to break away from the small talk.

Toni's smile brightens. "Janie was telling me about your parents' trip to Italy?"

It's a question. A prompt.

Toni is definitely better at making small talk than I am, this much is clear.

"Yeah. They leave in a couple weeks." I force a smile that feels brittle and wrong. "They've been talking about this second honeymoon for about five years now, so we're all happy for them."

The small talk continues, and it leaves me feeling more hollow with each passing second. I need a friend, and somehow Toni and I are stuck in that polite zone. The friendliness is there, but it's a thin veneer of smiles and inane questions.

I don't know how to start a real conversation, and by the time we get outside, it's clear she's not in any hurry to forge some new bond.

"Well," she says as she takes a step away from me. "Guess I'll be seeing you soon." She nods toward the amusement park with a wry smile.

"Right." I laugh. "Work buddies."

Her smile grows and for a second, it feels real. But then her gaze catches on something behind me and the smile falters. The moment's over. "I see Grayson's here, so I'll just..." She gestures toward the parking lot where the staff parks, but I'm too frozen to say goodbye.

*I see Grayson's here.* 

He's here. He's here? Now?

Why is he here?

I thought I had time. My heart lurches into an uneven gallop, but somehow I manage to smile and say goodbye to Toni like nothing's wrong.

"Hey, Bae." His arms come around me from behind and I stiffen. He pulls back with a laugh. "Did I scare you?"

I turn around with a laugh that doesn't sound like it's coming from me at all. "Yeah, I didn't see you there."

He's grinning, his eyes crinkled up in that way I love.

The way I loved.

Right now, the sight of his easy laughter makes my stomach turn.

Do not throw up, I order my insides. You will not vomit on Grayson.

Giving commands to my body has never worked before and I have no reason to think it will now, but it's worth a shot.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

His eyes are still laughing. He's so happy to see me. So freakin' happy. "Didn't you get my texts? I'm here to give you a ride."

Up until this moment, I never cared all that much that I don't have a car of my own. I've always been content to have Grayson give me rides, or use my mom's when she didn't need it. I've been saving every penny for college, and a car wasn't essential.

Until now.

Because there's nothing more horrifying in this moment than the thought of sitting alone in a car with Grayson.

He'd expect me to talk. And laugh. And kiss.

The thought makes my stomach churn.

I'd have to either pretend like everything's okay or confront him about the photo.

I don't want to do either. I really, really don't. But I haven't thought of any alternatives yet, and so long as he's standing there smiling down at me, I never will.

His brows furrow at my silence. "Is your phone not working again? Bae, you need a new one."

I shake my head. This is so very Grayson that for a minute I forget my paralyzing dilemma. "I don't need a new phone."

He reaches forward and snags me around the waist and tugs so I'm pressed up against him.

Do not throw up.

"No girl of mine is going to walk around using an old piece of crap hand-me-down. I told you I'm getting you a new phone for your birthday, right? Let's just make it an early present."

Early presents. Belated presents. Grayson excels at justifying presents.

Which I normally don't mind. Okay, fine. Sometimes I love it. I'm an independent woman, and I don't want a sugar daddy. But who doesn't like getting presents? And it always makes Grayson so happy. He lights up like a kid at Christmas when he's giving me some new gift.

Normally I'd laugh and give in. At any other time, I'd love that he's worried about me. But right now...?

All I can hear is that one phrase—no girl of mine.

He thinks I'm his. And I know it's just a turn of phrase, but it still sorta sounds like I'm one of many and so it makes me wonder—how many girls does he have?

I shake off the thought. I'm definitely jumping to conclusions. Maybe he and Rina were a one-time thing. Or maybe it was one moment of

weakness. I can feel hope taking root in my belly, growing in direct proportion to his smile.

Maybe Rina started it and he got caught by the camera right before he pulled away in horror. Or maybe he's been riddled with guilt and is just looking for the right moment to come clean.

He deserves the benefit of the doubt. Right?

He's grinning down at me, and I think I must be smiling back because he's already talking about what kind of phone he's going to buy me.

Neither of us hears Zack until he's right on top of us. "Look who it is!"

I jump away from Grayson like my dad just caught us making out on the couch. My cheeks are burning, and both guys give me a look that says I'm acting like a weirdo before Grayson turns to Zack. "What are you doing here?"

Zack's eyes widen, and I realize I have never given Zack enough credit for being a good actor.

"What am *I* doing here?" Zack laughs. "What are *you* doing here, man?"

Sure, he's been off lately, but right now Zack's acting about a million times more normal than I am.

My stomach twists with guilt. Shame. I've been caught. But I don't even know what I feel more guilty about—that Zack and I are in on a secret behind Grayson's back, or that Zack caught me hugging the enemy.

No, not the enemy. My boyfriend.

But boyfriend or not, I wince as I see this scene through Zack's eyes.

I look pathetic. So freakin' pathetic, letting Grayson hold me in his arms. Letting him buy me a new phone, as if that's going to make anything better.

"Didn't Bailey tell you?" Zack looks between me and Grayson with a wince of regret that fools no one. "This is awkward, huh?"

"What's awkward?" That laughter is finally gone from Grayson's eyes. "What are you doing here?"

Zack turns to me. "Didn't you tell Grayson we had plans?"

He sounds so confused that for a second even I believe him.

I stare at Zack. He stares right back. Grayson shifts away to see me better. "You have plans." Grayson's voice is full of disbelief as he adds, "With Zack."

I tear my gaze away from Zack's to look up at a frowning Grayson.

"Yes?" My *yes* is a question and a whisper, and it sounds incredibly lame.

I sound like such a freakin' wuss.

Because I *am* a wuss. If I had a spine I'd be breaking up with Grayson right now. I'd be telling him where he could shove it because I'm too good for a two-timing cheat.

And yet, I'm staring back at him with wide eyes, all but pleading with Grayson to believe me.

As much as I might not love Zack, he's offering me an out. And I want it.

I *need* to get away from here. I'm not ready to confront Grayson. I have no idea what I even want to say.

But right now, Zack's talking for me. He's telling Grayson about some family get-together his mom invited me to when I gave him a ride home the night before.

I have no idea what he's talking about, but he sounds legit. I almost believe him myself and I know very well we never ran into his mom, and I certainly didn't agree to tag along to some family party down by the lake.

But Grayson's sighing and rubbing my back. "And you want to go?" he asks me.

The way he asks it makes me feel like a child. Like, I'm so helpless I can't say no to a party without his help.

Grayson's brows arch when I don't instantly respond, and his gaze is searching. Do I want to go...?

I nod.

Turns out, that's all I have to do.

Grayson gives me his pouty face. I've never loved this expression. I'm sure he thinks it's cute, but it's always rubbed me the wrong way. And right now, that stupid pout is exactly what I need so I can pull away from his touch once and for all.

"I promised Zack's mom I'd go so..." I shrug in a 'what are you gonna do?' kind of way.

Grayson's backing up, heading toward his car. "Call me when you're done, Bae. And be safe."

I nod. I've always loved how overprotective Grayson is, but right now that *be safe* just feels condescending. I have this urge to flip him off.

I don't. I smile instead. And just before Grayson turns away, Zack slips an arm around my shoulders.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he pulls me in against his side. Between him and Grayson, I feel like a rag doll today. But I don't stop smiling and Zack laughs like I said something funny.

Grayson's looking over his shoulder. He sneaks a few looks in our direction as he goes his way, and then Zack and I head toward Zack's car on the other side of the lot.

It's not until we're in the car that I turn to face Zack. "What are you doing?" I ask again.

He grins, and the laughter in his eyes is the dangerous kind. "Taking you to a family party, what do you think I'm doing?"

I start to ask more questions, but he reaches for his seat belt and nods toward mine. I automatically reach for it, but I'm not done with the questions. "What was that back there?"

He shoots me a sidelong look and that laughter is dying. "I could ask you the same thing. I figured you might need a ride since your personal driver is, you know, the same guy who's *cheating* on you."

I flinch. Turning so I can face him better, I narrow my eyes. "And the party?"

He shrugs. "I really do have to go to this party. It's my great uncle's birthday. You remember Ray, right?"

I nod. Of course, I do. We used to spend long, lazy afternoons at his great uncle's lake house when we were kids. I haven't been back there in years.

Zack doesn't say anything more, but there's a tension in him that's at odds with his easygoing words. There's more going on here, and I deserve to know what.

I remember the way he wrapped an arm around me a minute ago, just like he did the night before at Macy's pool party.

I'm not proud of the flicker of satisfaction I feel at the memory of Grayson watching us.

His confusion over me having plans with another guy. The way cool, confident, always in control Grayson was thrown for a second.

It was brief, but it was noticeable.

And I liked it.

I liked it a lot.

"So, back there..." I nod toward the parking lot. "You weren't trying to, like..." I pause to take a deep breath. "You weren't trying to make Grayson jealous, were you?"

Zack eyes me. From head to toe, I feel his gaze rake over me like a scalding burn and I have no doubt my cheeks are bright red when his eyes flick back up to meet mine. "Why? Do you want me to?"

My lips part, because...

I don't know.

Do I?

# NINE FAMILY IS FAMILY

#### Zack

BAILEY IS quiet for way too long on the drive out to the lake house.

Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Her silence is better than her nagging, or her lectures, and it's a hell of a lot better than her tears.

Not that she's ever actually cried to me, but the evidence is written all over her face.

I glance over and she's still staring straight ahead, lost in thought. Or maybe she's sleeping with her eyes open.

She *should* sleep. She clearly needs it.

How Grayson wasn't falling all over himself with concern at the sight of her this morning is beyond me. Her eyes are puffy and red-rimmed, and her face is about two shades too pale. She has some makeup on, but her hair is pulled back in a messy ponytail that's not even close to her normal blownout perfection.

And her uniform is wrinkled. Anyone who knows Bailey knows she never goes anywhere without looking a hundred percent, and she doesn't do wrinkles.

Seriously. I'm pretty sure she irons her pajamas.

When she finally does speak, her words have nothing to do with the topic I know is on her mind. "I'm surprised you still come out here."

Her eyes are focused on the sign that's welcoming us to the lake and reminding us to clean up after ourselves.

"Yeah, well..." I shift in my seat as her gaze swings my way. "It's my mom's idea."

"Really?" She sounds surprised, and it's not hard to understand why.

My great uncle Ray and his crew are my dad's family, not my mom's. It's probably weird that I still come up here for big family gatherings. If it were up to me, I wouldn't. I don't want anything to do with the guy who walked out on us. But my mom has other ideas.

*Family is family*, she says. As if that means something.

I find myself muttering it now to Bailey like it's some sort of excuse. "Family is family."

She stares at me. Probably because the words sound even lamer coming out of my mouth.

*Family is family.* Someone really ought to have told my dad. He's the only one who has a problem with the whole *family obligation* thing.

"Family is family, huh?" Her voice holds a hint of laughter and I turn in time to catch a little smile. "Sounds like something your mom would say."

I laugh because... Yeah. She called it.

"So, you're still close with your dad's side?" she asks.

I shift in my seat, readjusting my grip on the wheel. Why the hell we're talking about this, I have no idea. "I wouldn't say we're close." I shrug. "I see them a couple times a year."

"Must be hard." She says it so softly I'm not sure she meant for me to hear.

I stare straight ahead and ignore it. There's no way I'm going to have some heart to heart about my family drama with Bailey freakin' Tucker.

We stay quiet the whole rest of the drive. I have no idea what she's thinking about as she glares at the dirt road like it's just insulted her outfit. For my part, I'm just trying to keep cool as we draw closer and closer to the lake.

I hate this place. Not the lake—the cabin. I used to love it here. Back in the days when Bailey tagged along with me and my parents, this place was my own personal heaven on earth. Which is probably why I hate it so much now.

It's a reminder of another time. Another life.

As if it wasn't bad enough that my dad left, he had to go and ruin my favorite spot while he was at it.

As I pull off the main road and head down the narrow dirt strip that leads to my uncle's place, I see the familiar cars and trucks. There's Uncle Bill's dirty old Ford, and my cousin Jesse's red pickup truck.

The gang's all here. The only cousin missing is me. I'm late, as usual. And my mom will be even later because she has to work a double. Not that anyone here will acknowledge that my mom is busting her ass to keep a roof over our heads because their precious Derek ditched us to go 'find himself.'

Nope. That's a topic the Myers clan excels at avoiding.

Bailey leans forward in her seat and cranes her neck for a better look at the wooden structure hidden in the trees. The old tree fort. It's dilapidated and sad to see now, but once upon a time Bailey and I thought it was our own personal castle.

Another twist in the road and we can see the cabin, along with a bunch of my older cousin's kids who are running around in swimsuits and shrieking at the top of their lungs.

Ray's cabin is just that—a cabin. Some of the places they call cabins up here in the touristy lake area are actually second homes. Vacation mansions for the rich.

My great uncle's is an actual cabin. It has running water and electricity, but that's where the amenities end.

I park next to my Aunt Ruth's old beater and we sit there in silence for a full minute. Neither of us makes a move to get out of the car.

"They must have seen us pull up." She shifts to face me. "You can't stay in here forever."

Her tone is unbearably preachy, so I ignore her. She hates to be ignored, especially when she's being a bossy know-it-all.

I might have slid by with straight D's in school, but there's one topic I've always done well in, and that's *Annoying Bailey 101*.

She huffs. "Zack, we're being rude by just sitting here."

"Nah, they'll just think we're a couple of horny teenagers who can't keep our hands off each other." I wink, and a bright pink blush works its way up her neck, into her cheeks.

It's kinda cute. And a hell of a lot better than the ghostly pale look she was sporting earlier.

"They won't think that," she mutters. But she doesn't sound convinced.

"Won't they?" I keep my voice bland and she wiggles in her seat, wildly uncomfortable that anyone might think we're getting it on in here.

For the first time since we turned onto the dirt road, that tightness in my chest starts to ease. "Would it be so bad if my dad's family thought we were hooking up?"

She narrows her eyes. "It's interesting that you refer to them as your dad's family. They're your family too."

"Thank you, Dr. Bailey." I lean in toward her. "But don't try to change the subject."

"You're the one trying to embarrass me."

I don't deny it, but I'm also not going to let it go. "Would it be so horrible if people thought we were hooking up?"

Her eyes lock on mine. She knows exactly where I'm going with this.

Annoying or not, Bailey is nothing if not smart.

I hold her stare. "Do you want to make Grayson pay, Bailey?"

Her eyes flash with too many emotions for me to clock. There's anger and fear, confusion and panic.

I lean back in my seat. "Last night you said you didn't think you'd forgive him."

Her lips press together and her cheeks flush a deeper shade of pink.

I tap the steering wheel, my fingers quietly padding out a steady rhythm as I watch her think.

It's true, thinking isn't something you can normally watch someone do, but I swear I can see the wheels turning behind those pretty blue eyes of hers.

She doesn't glance away from me and I have way too much time to just...look at her. Maybe it's being back here at this place we used to go to as kids, but I'm suddenly very aware of how much she's changed since the last time we were here.

Physically, I mean. She's always been a type-A little nerd. But these days...

She still has the same big blue eyes that could fool a guy into thinking she's helpless.

She's not. Never has been.

But the rest of her is all grown up. There's a reason Grayson singled her out. He could've had any girl in our class, but he took one look at Bailey,

with her high cheekbones and pointed chin, the full lips and the bright eyes, and he saw what most had overlooked.

Little Bailey Tucker had turned into a hottie when no one was paying attention.

"I don't know what you want me to say," she finally says.

I can't hide my disappointment. That answer is beneath her. She's not stupid and she doesn't play the part well. "You never answered my question, Smurfette." I know I don't have to spell it out for her. But I do anyway, speaking slowly as if to a child. "Do you want to make Grayson pay?"

Her lips part, and with her eyes all wide like that, she actually looks really sweet. Kind of vulnerable and fragile.

But this is Bailey Tucker, and she's definitely not sweet—not to me, at least.

On cue, she glares at me. "Don't you think that's a little juvenile?"

I grin. "Juvenile's my middle name."

"Richard is your middle name."

I do my best Grayson impersonation. "Aww, Bae, you remember my middle name. I'm touched."

Her lips press into a thin line and her nostrils flare. I think I see a twitch near her eye and for half a second I think maybe she'll explode.

She doesn't. Of course, she doesn't. This is Bailey, queen of control.

"Don't call me Bae." She's so calm it makes me want to scream on her behalf.

I turn away with a loud exhale. Just once I'd like to see her lose her cool like a normal person. Just once I wish she'd admit that she's human and not Grayson's perfect little trophy wife in the making.

"Your aunt is waving to us." Her voice is stiff and weird, and when I glance over I see it's because she's smiling at my Aunt Ruth who's standing at the edge of the deck where a grill is smoking and a group of the older relatives are playing cards. "We should go join them."

"You haven't given me an answer." I regret those words instantly.

I'm actually regretting a lot of things right now.

I promised myself I'd give her time. I honestly only showed up at Windy Falls to help her out. I figured maybe she'd need a ride.

But then I saw Grayson's smug face as he held her in his arms, and...

And here I am. Pushing her, just like I told myself I wouldn't.

She turns to face me and her gaze is hard to read. I have no clue what she's thinking, but what I do know is she hasn't said no. She hasn't laughed or shut it down. All she's done is make a snide comment about what a *juvenile* idea it is. Yet, she hasn't said no.

But she hasn't said yes, either, and right now I'm picturing the way she'd been gazing up at Grayson when I showed up in the parking lot earlier. That's when I realize...

There's a very good chance she'll go back to him. She might actually forgive him.

A wave of anger hits me so hard it leaves me winded.

Shit. I want to take Grayson down for what he's done, but even more than that, I need Bailey to want it too. I need her to want this just as badly as I do.

That anger has me gripping the steering wheel hard, and it settles between me and Bailey like a brick wall. This lake, this cabin...

Maybe this anger's been a long time coming.

Thing is, I didn't have many friends after Dad left. Bailey and I were already growing apart, and while I *acted out*, as my junior high guidance counselor put it, Bailey grew more uptight than ever. We still hung out, but she was constantly nagging me to grow up and be more responsible.

And then Grayson came along, and the Bailey I knew was gone entirely.

*Poof!* Any hints of her former imperfect life pre-Grayson were cast aside. And that included me, I guess. And Toni. And her sister Janie. Basically, anyone who wasn't as perfect as her beloved Grayson.

And yeah, that sucked. But Grayson was cool. He went out of his way to befriend me, even though I wasn't a part of his football crowd. His huge house with its pool and rec room—that became my home away from home.

The place I could go when the tension in my house got to be too much. Next thing I knew, I thought we were as good as brothers.

He made me trust him, when I'd given up on trusting anyone.

So yeah. I'm not about to let this go.

And with all those memories slipping and sliding through my mind, I shove aside my promise to give Bailey room to decide.

Screw that.

Grayson doesn't get to be forgiven for this. He hurt us both, and if we do this together, we can actually give him a taste of that same pain.

"Well?" I tap my fingers against the steering wheel again. "I can wait in this car all day. What's it gonna be, Smurfette? You in or you out?"

## TEN LIKE HELL, ONLY HOTTER

#### Zack

BAILEY BITES her lip and toys with the hem of her navy skirt, which does an excellent job of showing off her tanned, toned thighs. Not that I'm trying to notice that. I'm not actually interested in this girl, but I am male and it's impossible not to notice that she's female.

She glances over in my direction, but I stare straight ahead. I'm not sure I want her to see just how pissed I am right now.

"So?" I say.

"I don't know." Her voice wobbles and I *almost* feel bad for pushing her for an answer. I squeeze the steering wheel hard. I may be pushing, but I'm not going to manipulate her into this.

That's my new promise to myself. My ethical compromise, if you will.

Because I could easily rile her up if I wanted. It's truly tempting to point out all the reasons she has to be furious, to get even. But I won't because she's smart. She's well aware of how he'd betrayed her trust, and judging by the fact that she hasn't said no to this idea, she sees its merit.

I bite my tongue to keep from pushing for an answer again. Part of me knows that if she thinks I want this too much, she'll take off running in the opposite direction.

Bailey can be stubborn like that.

And if she goes down this path and regrets it? I don't want her blaming me.

Hell, *I* don't want to blame *myself* if Bailey gets hurt by this plan. This has to be her decision.

But damn if it's not tough to wait her out.

I do, though. I sit there and I wait. In silence. And all the while, my dad's family slowly gathers on the deck's edge, hands shielding their eyes from the sun for a better look at us.

There's no doubt they're all wondering what we're still doing sitting in the car on this hot summer day.

I give them all a little salute that makes Bailey sigh with impatience. "We look ridiculous."

"Then tell me what you want to do," I say. "How do you want to handle this?"

"I don't know, okay?" Her voice goes up at the end and I glance over in alarm.

But she's not crying. She's nibbling on her lower lip and messing with the hem of her skirt so badly that it's inching up higher and higher without her noticing.

Crap. I whip my head around to stare at my Aunt Ruth. Gossipy, annoying, completely unsexy Aunt Ruth.

"I haven't figured out what I want to do." Her voice is painfully small.

I grip the wheel again. Hard. "Mmhmm."

She clearly gets that I don't believe her and she snaps. "What?"

I turn to meet her stare. "I don't believe you."

She frowns. "Why not?"

"Because I know you."

Her brows come down. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I shove my hair back. I'd turned off the car when I'd parked and the temperature in here is rising fast. "It means, you hate confrontation and you'll avoid it at all costs."

"I confront *you* all the time," she says.

"No, you give me lectures and tell me what a screwup I am—"

"Exactly."

"Not the same." I shift in my seat to face her. "You don't shout or punch me in the face, like I know you want to. And my guess is, you've never so much as hinted to Grayson that your relationship might be anything less than perfect."

"It *is* perfect." Her annoyed response is automatic, and she flinches a second after it slips out.

I could mock her for it—I mean, her so-called *perfect* boyfriend is cheating on her, after all. But she doesn't need the reminder.

"My point," I continue with exaggerated patience, "is that you are a pro when it comes to sweeping issues under the rug and hiding your feelings—" "I don't—"

"But this isn't a problem you can ignore," I continue.

She looks like she still wants to argue but she stays quiet.

"Despite your weird fear of rocking the boat, you're not an idiot and you're not weak, Bailey."

"Uh, thanks?" she mumbles when I pause to let that sink in.

"Which means you *will* deal with this. It's just a matter of whether you call him out as the two-timing, sleazy asswipe he is, and listen to his pathetic excuses and his justifications or..."

Her gaze locks on mine. "Or?"

"Or you make him pay." I reach out and push a strand of blondehighlighted hair behind her ear, and for the life of me I don't know why I'm touching her.

Maybe because I know that despite her current calm, she's torn apart inside. "You give him a taste of what it feels like to have the person you love betray your trust."

Her lower lip quivers and her eyes are too wet.

"So, what do you say?" I lean back in my seat.

The silence grows thick. The heat is cloying. Her eyes are pained and panicked.

And then she's saved by Aunt Ruth.

A knock on her passenger side window makes her jump, and then her door's thrown open and there's no more hiding from my dad's family.

"Is this little Bailey Tucker?" My aunt's voice is high and shrill as she tugs Bailey out of her seat and into a bear hug.

My entire family has always been gaga for Bailey.

All hell breaks loose as we get out of the car, and the amount of squealing going on at the unexpected arrival of "little Bailey Tucker" is insane.

My cousin Ashley, who's one year younger than me, is over the moon. "I haven't seen you in forever." She gives Bailey a hug. "I can't believe you're here."

I follow behind, nodding and shaking hands as my relatives belatedly realize that I'm here too. Not that I mind. It's actually kind of nice to have someone else here to take some of the attention off of the black sheep of the family—AKA me.

And Bailey is a pro at these kinds of things. Despite her heartbreak and her lack of sleep and the current dilemma she's facing about how to deal with Grayson, she's all beaming smiles and laughter as she plays catch up with the aunts and uncles.

By the time we reach the deck, they're all eating out of the palm of her hand. Even Uncle Ray, and he's a cranky old bastard.

"You brought Bailey," Uncle Ray says after clapping a hand on my back with enough force to make me stagger.

"I did," I agree.

He gives this low rumble of a laugh. "I always knew you two would end up together."

I open my mouth to argue. Me and Bailey? Never. But I'm not in the mood to explain why she's here with me, so I just nod. We both turn back to watch Bailey dazzle my dad's family.

"Cabin's looking good," I say.

He grunts. "It's a pile of crap."

I choke on a laugh as one of Ray's sons hands me a soda that I didn't ask for. Ray's eldest son nudges my arm. "Pop says this place is his own personal hell."

"But hotter," Uncle Ray adds. "It needs more work than this old geezer can handle." He follows this with a sad shake of his head.

If my mom were here already, she'd be leaping in to offer up my help. But not me. I've only ever done the bare minimum as far as family duty goes—at least when it came to *this* side of the family. "You got fire insurance for this place?" I ask instead.

Uncle Ray arches his wiry white eyebrows. "Why? You know a guy?"

I give a noncommittal shrug and that sets him off with another low, gravelly laugh that makes me smile in turn. I do like this guy. Always have. It's not his fault my dad's a spineless jackass. And unlike the aunts and uncles, he never even asks about my grades or college plans.

"Why don't you have a swimsuit?" Ashley's voice carries over the classic rock playing from a stereo down by the lake where the younger kids are swimming.

Bailey makes up some excuse about how she decided to tag along at the last minute, but Ashley's already steering her toward the cabin. "Don't worry. I always keep a backup here in case I forget mine."

Bailey casts me a pleading look that makes my grin widen. I could help her—but I don't. I lift my can in a salute and she rolls her eyes as she gives in and lets Ashley drag her inside.

Uncle Ray's chuckling beside me. "You're a lucky guy, Zack. Bailey's a sweetheart."

A sweetheart? Hardly.

"She's something, all right," I mutter.

My uncle Tony joins us and I'm sucked into a boring conversation about the work he's doing on his house. I'm one hundred percent tuning him out when Bailey reappears. I freeze with the soda halfway to my lips because...damn.

Bailey sees my stare and gives me this warning scowl which should absolutely *not* be sexy.

*She* should not be sexy.

But try telling that to Ashley's itty-bitty bikini. The white scraps do nothing to hide her curves or the perfectly taut stomach.

Holy hell, how long has she been hiding that body?

I try to swallow and end up choking on saliva. I'm still coughing when she reaches my side.

"Tell me you have a spare T-shirt in your car," she hisses. "I can't walk around with my butt hanging out like this."

I'm torn between a laugh and a groan because...damn. I hadn't seen the best part yet. Even in her prim and proper everyday clothes, it's impossible not to notice this girl's ass. It's a freakin' great ass. And apparently, it's on display. It's taking all my effort not to drop my gaze down to her toned thighs, her legs, her—

"Zack!" Her high-pitched whisper has me coming back to my senses. I close my eyes and take a deep breath that will hopefully calm this surge of heat.

She's tugging on my arm, pulling me back toward the car. "You have to have something I can use."

I do, actually. I have a gym bag in the trunk, and while I'm tempted to lie and leave her hanging, I don't.

Look at me being the gentleman, right?

I take out the gym bag and look away as she sorts through it, pulling out a T-shirt that'll hang down to her knees. "There." She gives me a satisfied smile before wriggling into the light gray tee and crossing her arms over her chest. "I'd almost forgotten how pushy your family can be."

I laugh. "That's one way of putting it."

"They're just as obnoxious as you are," she adds. But she's still smiling and the barb is more old-friends-teasing than outright harsh. "It's nice to be back here." Her gaze has moved past me to the lake where Ashley is shouting for us to come join them for a swim.

"Yeah?" I try to see it through her eyes. And for a second I'm back to being a kid. I remember how much fun we had—before it all fell apart.

I think of Ray's comment and find myself echoing it. "It's like hell, but hotter."

"You don't like it here?" She honestly seems surprised.

"It's too hot." Right now, it really is. It's still early days of summer, but the sun is beating down on us and a bead of sweat is trickling down the back of my neck.

"That's why you come here to swim," she says with a laugh.

"I don't swim." And yeah, right now I'm the one being stubborn. But I can't help it. She's suddenly all happy-go-lucky and fitting right in with my family, and I don't even know what she's doing here.

"I need an answer," I say.

Her smile fades and...I'm an ass. I know it, but I can't seem to stop it. "You're not here because we're friends, Smurfette. And you're not a part of this family." I take a step toward her, blocking her view of the lake and my dad's family. "You're here because I saved you from having to deal with Grayson, and now Uncle Ray and everyone else thinks that you're my girl."

She blinks at that and my ribs feel like they're going to snap from some pressure I can't explain.

My girl.

I have no idea why that phrase makes my pulse race, but it does nothing to help my temper. "You gotta decide, Bailey. What do you want to do?"

Her gaze meets mine and she draws her lips in, mashing them together as she takes a deep breath.

I half expect her to tell me she's still not sure, but she surprises me with a short nod and a steely look of determination. "I want to make him pay."

Triumph and something so freakin' hot and fierce I don't know what to call it has me grinning. "That's my girl."

# ELEVEN MY GIRL

### **Bailey**

MY FIRST THOUGHT: What have I gotten myself into?

But this is followed closely by a far more pressing concern. "How are we going to do this?"

I'm following Zack down to the lake because apparently now that I've agreed to go along with the crazy revenge scheme he has in mind, he's forgotten that he hates the cabin, and this lake, and...you know...

Me.

He ignores the question. Of course he does.

His *that's my girl* comment is still ringing in my ears and it has me glaring at his back. "Condescending prick," I mutter.

He stops long enough to turn and face me with a look of feigned shock. "Why, Bailey Tucker. Are you cursing back there? I thought you were biologically incapable."

I set my hands on my hips. "I can curse. I just choose not to."

"That's right, I almost forgot. Saint Bailey holds herself to higher standards than us mere mortals."

I stop for a second, shocked at hearing the nickname I loathe. "How do you know Janie calls me that?"

He laughs as he shakes his head and waves to a cousin who's setting up a fire pit on the far side of the property.

"I don't think I'm a saint," I say. "I just think cursing is crass."

He scoffs and my frustration grows in direct proportion to his amusement.

Once more, he's off, striding toward the lake as I hurry to keep up.

"Having standards isn't exactly a bad thing, you know," I say. "In fact, having some standards might be good for you—"

He cuts me off with high-pitched *meep-meep* noises, like Beaker from the muppets as he imitates me.

I sigh. "You are such a child."

He laughs, and honestly I haven't heard him sound this genuinely happy in ages. He's gone from grumpy party pooper to happy camper so quickly my head is spinning.

And all because I'd said yes to this stupid plan.

This stupid plan which...I have yet to learn. "So, what does this entail exactly?"

He's walking so quickly I'm practically running to keep up with him.

"Hey, talk to me."

But when we reach the lake, he *can't* talk to me. We're surrounded by his family, which includes a whole bunch of little ones I've never met before, a few of his cousins who're close-ish in age to us who I vaguely remember, and two uncles who insist on calling me Little Bailey Tucker, like 'little' is actually part of my name.

Zack's different around them. He's still sarcastic, but he's more guarded. I don't even know how to explain it, but I can see the difference. He's not as relaxed and there's something strained about his voice.

He's also on his best behavior as he laughs at his cousin's jokes and rough houses with the kids.

This is definitely a side of him I've never seen before. I wonder if Rina ever saw him like this.

And just like that, I'm freakin' *blinded* by rage. It comes over me so fast, I'm shaking.

This time it's not on my behalf—at least, not entirely. I'm pissed for Zack too. He might not have been planning to marry the girl, but he'd liked Rina. And she'd hurt him.

I wasn't in love with her.

I can still hear Zack's voice as he'd admitted that. Like that made it okay?

Rina might not have broken his heart like Grayson had mine, but I know enough about Zack's past and his family to know that he doesn't trust easily. He doesn't let many people in. So for his best friend and his girlfriend to betray him like that...?

The thought has me making excuses and walking away from the cute little kid who'd been talking my ear off about her crush.

Zack has a smile frozen on his face. It's a polite smile, but it's clear that he's bored out of his mind.

"Can I steal him away for a minute?" I ask the cousin who's been giving Zack a play-by-play of his new diet to help him build muscle.

"Thanks for the save." Zack lets out a long exhale as we walk away from the cousins and toward the lake. "I thought that was never going to end."

"You're welcome."

"I'd say another twenty minutes or so and we can make our exit." He gives me a crooked grin that reminds me of my old friend. "Another funfilled family get together in the books, and a full year before I have to relive the misery."

I laugh. "They're not that bad."

"They're not your family."

I shrug. "Fair enough." I know better than to tread near this topic again. Zack is snarky at the best of times, but when the topic of his dad comes up he can be downright mean.

As if by some unspoken agreement, we head toward the dock.

"So, did you drag me away because my cousin's kid was driving you insane or..." He turns to look at me with a flirty smile. "Did you just want some alone time?"

"Neither," I say. "It's time we figure out our game plan. We need to focus."

"I love it when you talk sexy, Smurfette."

"Shut up."

"Seriously. Nothing turns me on more than that businesslike tone of yours." He makes his voice all breathless like he's doing a bad Marilyn Monroe impersonation. "Focus," he says. "Game plan."

I will not laugh. "Are you through?"

He half turns so he's facing me and walking backwards as we head out onto the dock. He points a finger in my face. "See? There it is. My sexy librarian."

"You are such an idiot." I swat his arm and he turns back with a laugh. "And I'm serious—"

"Oh, I know you're serious. You're always serious."

"I need to know what I'm supposed to say to Grayson." As if I summoned it, my phone chirps. Another text. I've been ignoring Grayson for the last two hours and I can't ignore them much longer.

"You want to know the game plan?" Zack snatches the phone out of my hand. "First step, you don't respond to this." He tosses my phone back toward the grassy area next to the dock.

"Hey!"

"We're gonna take it slow." A wicked smile curves one side of his mouth. "We're gonna make him wonder."

I frown. The thought of drawing this out is unbearable. I can't have another run-in with Grayson like the one I had this morning. "I'm not good at faking it."

"Yeah, I know." Zack's laughter is low and soft, and not necessarily mean. "But that's the beauty of this plan. The weirder you act, the more he'll wonder." He turns back to study me. "Hasn't he ever made you wonder?"

I go to say 'no', but I can't because a memory hits me so hard it nearly knocks me off my feet. The night he went to a Valentine's Day party without me because I was sick. I told him to go, but I remember how he didn't respond to my texts, and I'd had this overwhelming fear.

Not that I ever really thought that he was cheating on me. It wasn't that. It was just...

I'd hated knowing I was missing out. That he was having fun without me. I worried he'd forget all about me if I wasn't there.

I swallow and give my head a shake. It's a random memory, but for some reason that night in particular stands out.

The next morning he'd been so sweet and I'd felt like a jerk for ever doubting him, but now...

Now it's like the memory of that one night cracks open all the others. All the countless nights where I worried because I wasn't at his side.

A few times I'd tried to talk to him about it, and he'd laughed off my fears. He'd made me feel like I was paranoid or needy.

What if that wasn't my anxiety but my instincts trying to tell me what was going on right in front of my face?

I rub my forehead like that's going to help clear my thoughts.

How many times was I right to be paranoid?

I look over at the phone. Even from where we stand on the docks, I can see that it's lit up with a new text. From Grayson, probably.

Is he wondering why I'm not answering? Is he feeling a little paranoid, but trying to laugh it off?

Zack moves closer, and now he's so close I can see the sheen of sweat on his neck. "We're gonna make him wonder, Bailey."

He says it so softly, for a second I think maybe he knows. Like somehow, he saw me curled up in bed, clutching my phone as I desperately waited for Grayson to text me back.

"Make him wonder about what?"

"You. Me." He wraps an arm around my waist and tugs me close. "*Us.*" I push against his chest until he lets me go. "There is no us."

"Not yet," he agrees. "First, we give him some reason to be suspicious. We laugh. We flirt. But we *will* be an 'us' soon enough, so you'd better get used to a little PDA, Smurfette."

The nickname has me wrinkling my nose at him, but he just laughs. "What's wrong? Worried you might really fall for me if we get too close?"

I refuse to cater to his teasing. "More like, worried he'll never buy that I'm attracted to you. Or...vice versa."

His eyes dip, and my heart skips a little when they land on my lips. But then his cocky gaze meets mine. "I promise it won't be so bad."

I arch my brows in disbelief.

"Fine," he says. "We'll both be miserable. But even if we drive each other completely insane, at least we know it's worth it because Grayson's gonna lose his shit when he finds out."

My belly tightens into a ball of nerves at the thought of Grayson's reaction.

"When the time is right, we'll let him catch us." Zack's smile is so smug, it's a little frightening. He seems so sure about this, and I'm only now starting to realize what I've gotten myself into.

I try to swallow down the thick knot that's starting to choke me. "He's never going to forgive me for this."

It comes out as a whisper, but I know he hears me because Zack's eyes narrow. "Do you want him to?"

I blink at the hard edge to his tone. "What? No. I mean, I don't know—" "Well, you'd better figure it out."

His harshness has me backing up a step as I glower up at him. "I'm allowed to have some doubts here, Zack. I mean, it's not like you're known for your brilliant plans—"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I throw my hands up. It's not him I'm angry at. I know this. But the words still come flying out. "It means, you do whatever you want whenever you want without a thought for repercussions. You don't even know the meaning of the word responsible or—"

"And you do?" He laughs, but it sounds bitter. "Following other people's orders doesn't make you responsible, Bailey, it just makes you a sheep."

I gasp, but he's not done.

"I know what's really bothering you about this plan." A muscle in his jaw twitches with his anger. "You want his permission—"

"I do not," I cut in.

"You do. You always have." His eyes are hard when they move over my face, down my neck to the collar of his T-shirt and back up again like he's seeing me—*really* seeing me.

I back up a step, my insides twisting.

His tone is just short of pitying. "You need his approval, Bailey, but this is one time when you're not going to get it."

"I've never needed his approval." I hate the way my voice shakes.

"You *always* need approval." His words land like a punch. The disdain and the knowing—it hurts. It hurts more than I want to admit.

"You're wrong."

"Am I?" He starts walking toward the far edge of the dock where the water gets deep and I hurry after him to say my piece. But before I can tell him again how wrong he is, he glances over at me over his shoulder and says, "So then I guess it won't bother you that when this is all said and done, everyone will think *you're* the cheater?"

I open my mouth and close it.

That...hadn't occurred to me. A sudden wave of doubt has me stumbling over my own two feet and I catch myself by reaching for Zack. My hands

land on his bicep and I don't let go.

He's come to a stop at the edge, and the way he's looking at me makes me want to curl up and hide. He's staring at me like he knows me better than I know myself.

He's looking at me like he doesn't like what he sees.

It hurts, but it also makes me furious, and I latch onto that anger.

He eyes me from head to toe and I drop my hands from his arm. "You always talk about how mature you are," he says. "How responsible. But really, all you care about is what people think of you."

"This coming from the man-child who refuses to take anything seriously." I hate that my voice is all high and tight while he sounds like he's talking about the weather. I sound too defensive and I know it. "You're the one who doesn't think about the future. You're the one who doesn't even try."

"Maybe," he agrees. "But at least I'm doing it on my own terms. I'm not waiting for permission to do what I want. I don't give a crap if anyone approves of me, and I don't change who I am just to please my boyfriend."

My lips part on a sharp inhale. How *dare* he? "This is just you justifying your childish lifestyle." I'm so angry it's hard to breathe. "You make it sound like you've got it all figured out, but you're just hiding. You're like a kid who thinks if they cover their eyes, no one will see them." My breath is coming short and choppy. "You pretend like you don't care, but that's just an excuse so you don't have to try."

He doesn't flinch. He barely reacts. But I see the dark haze of anger in his eyes. "You're always telling me what a child I am, Bailey. But maybe it's time *you* grow up."

My whole body is shaking and the rush of adrenaline makes me dizzy. "Or maybe it's time I start acting like a child. Like you."

I don't think. I'm beyond thinking. I just reach out and shove.

He stumbles backward and lands in the water with a giant splash that gets water all over this T-shirt. It's cold enough to make me gasp, although that might be my shock over what I've just done.

Zack surfaces with another splash and he's...

He's laughing. He's laughing so hard I'm afraid he's going to drown.

"You'd better get in here, Bailey," he calls.

And to my shock, I realize I'm actually smiling.

What the heck?

The anger's fading fast at the sight of him fully clothed and soaked. The hurtful words we just threw at each other still hang in the air, but...

They're out there now. And there's something weirdly freeing about that. Something that loosens that knot in my chest and lets me breathe.

He splashes me as he treads water. "What are you waiting for, Smurfette?"

A little part of me is worried about his phone, his car keys...

"You'd better get in here, Little Bailey Tucker."

His teasing smile is hard to resist. "Or what?"

He arches his brows. "Or I'm coming up there and *throwing* you in."

"I'd like to see you try," I shoot back.

But I'm already stripping off the T-shirt and getting ready to dive in. When I surface, he's closer than I'd thought and he's grinning at me like he used to.

Like we're friends.

We're not. I know this. But it's nice all the same.

"Think you can still beat me?" He nods toward the other dock by the cabin a little ways off.

I laugh as I doggy paddle to stay afloat. We used to swim to that dock and back, and I won every single time. "I know I can."

"Big words, Bailey," he says. "You know I've gotten a few more muscles since the last time we raced, right?"

I try not to let my gaze drop to the water-soaked shirt that does nothing but define every muscle from his shoulders and biceps down to his flat abs. I try to swallow and fail. "Mmhmm."

He arches a brow. "Still think you can win?"

A familiar flare of adrenaline has me smiling in anticipation. "Only one way to find out."

We take off at the same time, and this time, for the first time, he wins. But I demand a rematch. And for a little while, we actually have fun.

I don't forget about Grayson or all the drama that's waiting, but when we're swimming and splashing and trash talking...

It's an escape from the crushing heartbreak. At least for a little while.

By the time we're back in his car, in dry clothes but with wet hair, the sun's setting and I'm pleasantly exhausted. We're quiet for most of the drive, each caught up in our own thoughts.

I try not to think. At least, I try not to obsess. So, I watch the trees whip past the window and catch glimpses of the sky between the branches.

We're almost home when Zack breaks the silence, his voice low and quiet. "I'm not doing this to make him jealous."

I turn my head and stare at his profile. "What?"

He glances over, his grip shifting on the steering wheel. "I'm not doing this to make him jealous, Bailey. I'm doing this to get even." He casts another sidelong glance my way. "There's a difference."

He sounds so serious, and I have no idea what he wants me to say. I'm not even sure I get what he means. He turns his head to look me directly in the eye. "I'm not doing this to help you get him back."

My lips part and my eyes widen. It's not so much his words as the intensity in his gaze that shocks me.

He turns to look back at the road, but I know he's waiting for some sort of response. An answer.

"Okay," I say quietly.

His Adam's apple moves and he gives a short nod. "Okay."

# TWELVE SMURFETTE OR SASSETTE

#### Zack

SITTING ACROSS FROM GRAYSON, pretending I don't want to punch him?

Yeah. This is my new version of hell on earth.

"So, I told her if she had a problem with it, she could take her kid somewhere else." Grayson reaches for the ketchup in the middle of the table. He's wearing this expectant look, like he's just waiting for me to crack up.

I don't. I manage a smile, but that's the best I've got. Resisting the urge to punch this guy in the throat is freakin' exhausting. I'm not sure how Bailey's been doing it.

But Grayson doesn't seem to notice that I'm not laughing at his lame work story because the girls we're sitting with give the requisite chuckle, so I'm off the hook.

I glance over at the door instead. Bailey should be here by now, but I wouldn't be surprised if she worked right through her lunch break. Such an overachiever.

Or maybe she's avoiding Grayson.

Not that I can blame her. She's been playing the role of dutiful girlfriend all week, and it's got to be killing her. Bailey is many things, but a liar is

not one of them. Being two-faced doesn't come easily to her. Or to me, for that matter.

I glance over when the doors open, but it's not her.

Maybe she's avoiding me. I can't really blame her for that, either. Working together at the souvenir shop, we're spending more quality time together than we have since we were ten and decided we should live in her tree fort for a summer.

We didn't last the summer. Not even close. But my point is, that's the last time we've been so joined at the hip, and I wouldn't blame her for being over it.

I mean, we even drive to and from work together these days. Bailey gave Grayson this whole song and dance about how it only makes sense for me to drive her to work since we work the same hours, and blah blah.

I was there for this speech, and Grayson's expression had been so awesomely confused.

Understandably. Bailey's spent the past few years actively avoiding being alone with me, and now she's voluntarily carpooling with me twice a day?

It was a real head scratcher for poor ol' Grayson. Watching his confusion and the flicker of jealousy he'd tried to hide? It'd been epic.

Even Bailey had looked smug when he'd walked away.

So yes, if she bails on lunch today, I can't really blame her. But I can't stop keeping an eye out for her all the same.

But the doors to the break room stay closed.

The break room is also a cafeteria, of sorts, although no one here actually eats the disgusting food they keep in those warming stations all day long. Instead, we all use our discounts at the parks' food court or have our friends who work at the food trucks hook us up.

Jessica at the taco truck has a thing for me, which is why I'm eating a burrito for the third day in a row. I never turn down free food, even if there are strings attached.

And these particular strings are why Jessica is sitting beside me right now, working on a burrito of her own, her friend Krista on the other side of her. Jessica's a sweet girl, but too young for me. She'll be a sophomore next year. She's friends with Macy and the rest of the cheerleaders, though, so she's in with Grayson's crowd.

It's not a surprise at all that she's laughing a little too hard over his story of parental drama at the Tilt-A-Whirl.

Across from me is Toni, Bailey's old bestie from back in the day. She's not laughing, and her smile is small and tolerant. Her gaze meets mine and she widens her eyes a bit in a way that says she's bored as all hell at this table.

I tuck my head to hide a grin. I've always liked Toni. It sucked when she and Bailey stopped being friends because then she and I stopped hanging out too. The common denominator named Bailey was all we'd really had in common.

Although now it seems maybe we share a mutual dislike for Grayson, Prince of Rides.

He'd taken his subpar job in stride. He'd actually believed Bailey's wide-eyed lies about how she'd tried to put in a good word for him, and I'd watched with more than a little amusement as *he'd* comforted *her*.

I know you did your best, Bae.

Patronizing ass.

The question I've been grappling with lately is this—had he always been such a d-bag? How had I not seen it before?

Because now it's all I *can* see. Every time I look at him I see the schmoozy, lying dickwad who made out with my girlfriend and betrayed Bailey. His smile makes me want to vomit. He's so freakin' slick. So sure of himself.

Toni kicks me under the table, and when I look up she's giving me this weird look I can't decipher. It's part confusion, part understanding—and then she gives a little head tilt in Grayson's direction and I realize...

She knows. Or she knows enough, I guess, because I think she's warning me that I'm acting weird.

Because I am. I totally am. I relax my features and look away. She'd caught me glaring at Grayson, no doubt with all the disgust I'm feeling.

If anyone else had seen my hatred, there'd be questions.

The jig, as they say, would be up.

Toni goes back to eating her food, ignoring me and everyone else. I'd kill for one minute alone with Toni so I can ask her what she knows.

Apparently I was too focused on Toni, because Bailey's sudden appearance at my side catches me off guard.

I give her a quick once over, relieved to find that she looks okay.

Which is not a surprise. I mean, I literally just saw her at the souvenir shop, like, twenty minutes ago. But the girl has been under some serious stress lately and I'm always half waiting for her to run off and have a breakdown in the employee bathrooms.

"What took you so long?" Grayson's tone is all put out as Bailey leans over and kisses his cheek before sliding in beside him.

"Sorry." She's out of breath, and her cheeks are flushed as she sets a prepackaged salad in front of her. Her hair's pulled back in a ponytail, and it's so perfectly neat and tidy, I have an overwhelming urge to reach over and mess it up.

Toni stops eating to stare at Bailey's salad. "Girl, where do you even find greens in this place?"

I laugh because she has a point. Hot dogs and burgers? We have 'em in spades. Salads? Not so much. The only salad I know of at this amusement park is the tater nacho salad, which is mostly made up of meat and fried potatoes, and it's just as disgustingly delicious as it sounds.

"I brought it from home," Bailey says.

"Lame," I say through a cough. Mainly because it's expected of me.

Bailey ignores me. Rightfully so.

"I like to be healthy," she says.

"I like to be healthy," I copy in a high voice. And yeah, I'm acting like a ten-year-old, but it makes Jessica giggle, and so long as Bailey's rolling her eyes in exasperation, she's not on the verge of tears.

To be fair, she's held it together pretty well this week, all things considered. I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who notices the way her mouth thins into a flat line whenever Grayson's name is mentioned.

I cast a quick glance over at Toni. Or maybe I'm not the *only* one who's noticed.

But more importantly, when Bailey's around Grayson she's been acting like her old self. For better or worse.

"You might want to try a salad every now and again, Zack." Bailey's voice is all snooty and superior as her gaze drops meaningfully to my beef burrito. "They just released a study that links too much red meat to erectile dysfunction."

Toni snorts out a shocked laugh around the hot dog she's eating, and I let out an honest-to-God laugh, because...holy shit. Bailey just made a dick joke. Kind of. Close enough.

Grayson's eyes are wide as he turns to her, and her cheeks turn the most adorable shade of pink. But she's smiling, all proud of herself for getting a dig in at my expense for once.

I clap my hands slowly, a wide grin creasing my face. "Bailey Tucker, I think I love you."

She laughs at that, and I know neither of us misses the caustic glance Grayson shoots my way.

He's not outright antagonistic. Oh no. He's still way too sure of himself to be truly worried.

But all week we've been doing crap like this. The occasional teasing remark that's *just* this side of flirting. The familiar bickering banter but with a little less heat and way more inside jokes.

He's not going crazy with jealousy or anything—not yet. But it's getting to him. And watching his discomfort every time our teasing takes a flirty turn is so freakin' satisfying. It almost makes pretending to be his friend worth it.

Almost.

I'm ready to be done with this, though. I'm just not sure Bailey's ready.

I keep telling her it'll be like pulling off a Band-Aid. But she keeps worrying about all the wrong stuff. Like what everyone else is going to think of her. Or how 'two wrongs don't make a right.' That's been her new favorite phrase lately, and I swear if she says that trite cliché one more time, I'm dumping her out of the car and letting her walk home.

Grayson turns to me as he picks up his burger. "Looks like your sense of humor is rubbing off on Bailey."

I laugh at his bland remark that hides so many questions.

I hope like hell he's wondering right this second. I hope he's replaying every flirty exchange trying to reassure himself it's nothing.

"Rubbing off on her? Nah." I point a finger in her direction with a knowing smirk. "If it was, she'd have come back with a dirty joke about how I'd like to rub one—"

"Ew, Zack!" She throws a beet at my face so hard it stings.

"Ow." I rub my cheek, but I'm laughing too hard to care.

Annoying the crap out of Bailey has always been my favorite pastime, and it's definitely been the highlight of this shitty week. Trying to make her blush is the only entertainment I have at this lame ass job. "I didn't even finish," I say.

"You don't have to. Whatever you were going to say was going to be disgusting and degrading." She leans over the table, reaching past Grayson to jab a finger in my face. "Stop being gross."

"It's sex, Bailey, not waste removal." I turn to Grayson. "No offense, man."

Toni snickers again because we'd all seen Grayson pulling garbage duty this morning. Probably after cleaning up puke.

Even Bailey looks amused for a second—before she remembers she's giving me a lecture. "Not everything is about sex, Zack."

"True," I agree. "Sometimes it's about Call of Duty. But most of the time it's about sex."

She narrows her eyes. "What is wrong with you?"

I shrug. "I blame it on the neighbor I had growing up. Bad influence."

Only Toni is laughing. Jessica and her friend are looking between me and Bailey like we're a tennis match on TV, and Grayson is watching us with an expression I can't quite read.

"Why do you have to make a joke out of everything?" Bailey's brows are arched high and she looks so freakin' holier than thou I just want to lean over and...

And what? I don't know. Make her smile and laugh, and forget for a second that she's the responsible one, I guess.

"I just don't get why you can't be serious for five seconds," she says.

I lean forward too so we're talking past Grayson like he's not there. "And I don't get why you freak out anytime I make a sex joke."

"I don't," she says.

"You do." I look to Grayson. "Am I right?"

He looks down with that punchable grin of his and shakes his head. "Leave me out of it, man."

Nice. Real nice. That's his way of defending his girl when some guy's being an ass?

Okay, fine. *I'm* being an ass. But it's all part of our game, and I know that Bailey knows it, even if no one else does.

All this bickering and teasing is feeling more and more like sexual tension, and I can't be the only one who senses it.

Actually, I know I'm not.

"I'm serious," I say to Grayson, because putting him on the spot is kind of fun. "Is she this weird about sex with you?"

"Zack." Bailey hisses my name, and when I turn to look at her, I'm caught off guard by the embarrassment in her eyes.

Crap. I...had *not* meant to do that.

It's not just her normal prudish weirdness that I see, it's something more.

And even as I'm thinking that—I know. I get it.

She hasn't had sex with Grayson.

Don't ask me how I know, but I do. She has this guilty look going on that makes me want to ram my fist into Grayson's jaw. Meanwhile, he's still doing that head shaking grin thing as he looks down at his burger like he's no longer a part of this conversation.

I feel Toni's gaze on me, and Jessica and her friend are waiting like vultures for someone to be humiliated.

But it won't be Bailey.

I like to tease the girl, that's all. I'm not gonna make her any more of an embarrassment than Grayson already has.

So I drop it, distracting everyone by pulling out a tacky blue keychain and throwing it in Bailey's direction. She catches it and then frowns down at the trinket.

Grayson laughs. "Where'd you find a Smurfette keychain?"

I can't make out Bailey's expression because her head is tipped down, studying the little figurine and turning it over in her hands. "We sell them at the souvenir shop."

Her voice is tight and weird. And then her shoulders start to shake and she lets out a hiccupy sound.

She's laughing.

Bailey is laughing.

I made Bailey laugh.

She looks up at me with arched brows, her eyes dancing with amusement. "You better not have stolen this."

Grayson's smile is fading fast as she and I keep staring at one another, ignoring him entirely. I hold my hands up, my smile widening. "Why do you always assume the worst?"

"Uh, because I know you?" she deadpans.

I pretend to be offended. "Cold, Bailey. So cold."

She smirks in response, and a smirk looks good on her. It's sexy as hell. "Tell me you didn't shoplift from your own store."

"I didn't, actually." I pause. "I shoplifted from *your* store."

"Zack," she groans.

"I take no responsibility for that store," I continue, ignoring her withering glare.

"You take no responsibility for *anything*," she shoots back.

I reach for the figurine. "So, you're saying you want me to take this back?"

She jerks it away, out of reach. "I didn't say that."

We share a stupid little smile that's only partly for show. I'm sure she's just as aware as I am that Grayson is watching us and his interest is anything but casual.

And God, I hope she's enjoying that suspicious look just as much as I am.

"You know I was thinking about you last night," I say as I lean in farther.

She arches a brow in surprise and I see Grayson frowning out of the corner of my eye. Toni and the other girls are deathly silent. I get the feeling Bailey and I are on stage together, but no one else has any idea where this show is going. "I think it's time you get a new nickname."

She purses her lips, trying not to smile.

"Sassette," I say.

She bursts out laughing, and she's the only one. Probably because nobody but Bailey remembers that random Smurf.

She's seriously such a nerd.

"I can't believe you remember her." Bailey sounds delighted.

She's about to say more, but before she can finish, Grayson wraps an arm around her shoulder. "Eat up, Bae, your lunch break is almost over."

She blinks as she turns to face him, and her gaze focuses belatedly.

Holy crap, this girl is *good*.

Even I'm fooled into thinking she'd forgotten all about him for a little while there.

Then she smiles up at him, back to being his sweetheart of a girlfriend. Back to the perfect girl next door routine she's been acting out for years now.

This is one performance I don't care to watch.

I push back my chair and get up to leave.

My job here is done.

# THIRTEEN TONY! TONI! TONÉ!

### **Bailey**

BEING SO fake all the time is literally killing me.

Okay, fine. Not literally. But my face hurts from all the unnatural smiling and I'm pretty sure I'm developing an ulcer.

"You and Zack seem to be getting along better lately," Grayson says as Zack walks away from the table.

"Mmm." I make a noncommittal sound as I shove a forkful of salad in my mouth.

When in doubt, give him nothing. That's my new rule. One I picked up from Grayson, of all people. The more I think back to those nights when I'd lay awake worrying about the fact that he hadn't called, the more I've been able to remember how he'd acted. The ways he'd made me doubt him, myself...my sanity.

So now, it seems only fitting that I take a page from his book and use his own actions against him. I focus on the fork in my hand, the food in my mouth—anything but the guy sitting next to me right now. He'll probably drop it. He's been mostly ignoring my newfound friendship with Zack all week.

"What's up with that?" he asks.

Or maybe he *won't* drop it.

I turn to him with a blank stare. "What's up with what?"

Jessica and her friend go back to talking amongst themselves. They're talking about a party I missed the other night that was thrown by my friends. Friends I've barely spoken to this week.

Are they still my friends? I don't know.

I hate that I don't know.

Will they still be my friends by the time Zack and I are done getting even?

Definitely not.

I reach for my club soda to help wash down the arugula that feels dry as sand in my throat.

"You okay?" Toni asks.

I nod as I gulp down the last of my soda. She's watching me and I've never felt more like a fraud. Toni and I might not be close anymore, but she still knows me better than most. She has to know I'm acting. And, let's face it, I'm probably doing a crappy job of it.

Grayson doesn't seem to notice that I'm choking. He's looking at something on his phone. "We still on for tonight?"

"Tonight?" At least choking on my salad is a valid excuse for why my voice comes out all croaky and weird.

Grayson drops the phone to give me a look of such exasperation I find myself flinching. I just barely hold back the instinctive apology, even though I'm not sure what I'm apologizing for.

"Did you forget?" His voice is loud enough that Jessica and Krista start to pay attention. We're interesting again now that I'm being scolded. Grayson widens his eyes, all offended as he prompts my memory. "Devon's party? Tonight?"

I blink at him as my heart races in panic. "I can't."

What I mean is, *I can't spend any more time with you*. I can't keep pretending like this. And I definitely can't convince an entire party full of people that I'm still madly in love with the lying turd who cheated on me. But all I actually say is, *I can't*.

His brows draw together in confusion. "Why not?"

I open my mouth and nothing comes out. I've been doing such a great job of finding excuses to avoid being alone with Grayson lately, but this one catches me by surprise and my brain goes blank.

Grayson's expression is all annoyance. "We talked about it last week. You said you were going."

I can't stop staring now because...seriously? Does he have any idea how whiny he sounds? Like a kid about to throw a temper tantrum.

"I don't remember that." It's the truth. I don't remember—but I'm sure he's right. I probably did agree to whatever plans he'd thrown at me a week ago, because that was what I did. I said whatever Grayson wanted to keep him happy. I did whatever he asked.

Except for sex, of course. That was one area where I hadn't caved. It's not like I'm super religious or anything, but I've always thought the first time should be special. I'd wanted to wait until it felt right and there were absolutely no doubts.

Most of all, I'd wanted to wait until we had the perfect time and place for such a monumental first. I didn't want my first time to be in some stranger's bedroom while a party raged around us. Or worse, in the backseat of his SUV.

And now my brain is fixated on sex. I can't stop staring at Grayson as I wonder—did he sleep with Rina? I swallow a wave of nausea as I push the salad away, dropping my gaze to the table so he won't see the horror there.

I've wondered before, of course, but right now it seems so obvious. And after that awkward moment that Zack threw us into, I wonder if it was inevitable. Maybe I'd been insane to think a guy like Grayson would wait.

I shake off the thought because Grayson's still talking. No, he's giving me a lecture on how I haven't spent enough time with him lately, and how I have to go to this party.

But I can't. I just...can't.

I glance up and see Toni watching me closely. I turn to face Grayson. "I wish I could go," I lie. "But I already made plans."

"What plans?" He's so confused, it's almost funny. Like the idea of me making plans without him is just so mind-boggling.

But it's not funny because my brain is scrambling to come up with some sort of fictional family outing or—

"With me." Toni reaches for her drink, her eyes wide and innocent as she lies far more convincingly than I ever could. "Bailey promised to help me with a summer class I'm taking and tonight's the only night we're both free."

I stare at her.

She stares at Grayson.

Grayson turns to stare at me. And for some reason, I tense up. I half expect him to call me out as a liar, but he just sighs like I'm a huge disappointment. "I can't believe you forgot."

I shrug and give him a wince of regret. "Sorry."

Grayson leaves the cafeteria first, but not without giving me the cold shoulder and a passive aggressive sarcastic comment about how he hopes I have fun with my study date.

Jessica and her friend follow him, asking about the party, and Toni and I wait a minute before tossing our trash and following the others into the bright sunshine.

"You okay?" Toni's voice is gentle, and it makes me want to cry. I wonder how much she knows...or how much she's guessed.

I turn to give her a smile. "Thanks for the save."

She shrugs. "No problem."

We walk in silence toward the souvenir shop. She's stationed a little farther off by the games, and neither of us is in a hurry to get back to work.

"Are you guys fighting or something?" she hedges.

I swallow. *Or something*. I give a little nod.

"Does *he* know you're fighting?" Her tone is still gentle, but there's a hint of amusement there that makes me smile.

"Not exactly."

"Ah," she says with a knowing smirk.

For a second, it's so normal to be talking to her. It's almost like no time has passed. Her shoulder-length red curls bob as she walks, and I can't make out her expression, but I have this overwhelming urge to spill my guts.

I need a friend so badly, and Toni stepping in back there—it was like old times. I remember vividly how good it felt to have a friend who knew what I was thinking, who was always on my side. Who I trusted to keep my secrets and to have my back.

"Do you want to know why?" There's laughter in my voice now, too. Not like I suddenly find it hilarious that Grayson cheated on me and broke my heart, but there's something so nice about walking with her like this. Talking to her about something that's not meaningless small talk.

She glances over with an impish grin. "Only if you want to talk. I'll admit, I'm curious what's going on between you two, but it's not like it's my place to ask, you know?"

That stings just a little. I mean, it's the truth, but it still stings.

But I want to tell her. I love my sister, but we're not friends. We're too different. And Janie has always hated Grayson so I can't talk to her about what's going on between us without feeling her 'I told you so' even when she doesn't say it aloud.

And Zack is...well, Zack is Zack. He's got his own issues going on with Grayson, and he's not exactly the person I want to go to for girl talk.

Toni looks over again and laughs at whatever it is she sees in my expression. "Look, forget it. You don't owe me anything. We're not BFFs anymore and—"

"He cheated on me." I blurt the words out quickly and we both come to a stop as a group of tween girls pass us with high-pitched laughter.

Toni's eyes are wide with surprise, but she doesn't speak right away and the air is filled with the sound of games and rides and the voices of people walking around us.

She blinks and the surprise fades to a look of regret. "That sucks."

Now it's my turn to blink. *That sucks?* 

Her gaze is shifting to take in the people around us and she looks decidedly uncomfortable.

That sucks? Really? That's the best she can do?

I hadn't really thought about how she would respond, but if I had, I would have expected shock, horror, sympathy. A whole lot more than 'that sucks.'

There's a hint of sarcasm in my tone when I agree. "Yeah. It does suck."

"Sorry, it's just..." She bites her lip and meets my gaze. "I thought you already knew."

I can't stop blinking. As if opening and closing my eyes will somehow make her words make sense. "What do you mean?"

She shrugs, her expression wary, and my stomach plummets toward the ground. "It's just...I thought you always knew."

"Always?" My voice is little more than a whisper.

She sighs, and her gaze fills with pity. "You didn't know."

"Know what?"

She looks around as if she'd rather be anywhere but here. Or maybe she's hoping someone will come along and save her.

I move in closer so she has to look at me. "Know what, Toni?"

She presses her lips together and takes a deep breath. "He's been cheating on you all along, Bailey. I thought you knew. I mean..." She wets her lips. "I thought you just chose to look the other way or something."

"He's cheated on me before?" It's a horrified whisper, and the world is toppling around me.

Her eyes crinkle up at the corners. "I'm sorry, Bailey."

She *sounds* sorry, which somehow makes it worse. She's not lying. And she truly thought I knew.

"How—who—" I stop and try to swallow, but my mouth is dry and my face is numb. "Why didn't you tell me?"

The pitying look fades and now she's staring at me in disbelief. "Why would I do that?"

"Because...because we're friends," I say.

Her brows draw together in confusion and the little smile on her lips isn't sincere. "No," she says slowly. "We're not."

"But—"

"Bailey, we stopped being friends the moment you got together with Grayson and left me behind."

My lips part and I'm gaping at her now. At the bitterness in her voice. "What?"

She gives her head a shake and looks away. "Look, it's ancient history, okay?"

"I didn't mean to..." I trail off as I try to remember what happened back then. It was freshman year, and Grayson was new, and I was totally smitten. Then suddenly he was into me too and we were spending all of our time together. It was all such a heady blur. So exciting and new and...

My heart stumbles and guilt makes my stomach turn. I never meant to ignore Toni.

"We just...we grew apart," I tell her now, repeating the story I've been telling myself for years now. "We started hanging out with different groups of friends and—"

"No." Her voice is a little harder than before. "You started hanging out with a different group. You got the popular boyfriend and were suddenly in with the *cool crowd*." She uses air quotes when she says 'the cool crowd' and her lips twist in bitter amusement. "And I got left behind."

"I didn't—" I stop and start again. "I didn't think you wanted to hang out with those people—"

"Yeah, because it would have been such a bummer to be invited to parties." She talks in a monotone that feels like a punch in the gut. She rolls her eyes. "Like I said, this is ancient history. It's not like I'm still hurt or anything."

*Still hurt.* Which meant she had been hurt. My mouth opens and closes. Guilt wraps around my chest and squeezes. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry."

She sighs again, her gaze fixed somewhere over my shoulder. "Yeah, well, that's why I didn't tell you that your asshat of a boyfriend was sleeping his way through the cheerleading squad."

My stomach lurches into my throat.

Her eyes meet mine again as she shrugs. "It wasn't my place." Then that pity is back. "And I really did think you knew."

I stare at her for a long moment. She's serious. She thought I knew that Grayson was cheating on me and was just okay with it. "You thought I knew because..." My mind's racing. "Because...everyone knew?"

She winces. And that's my answer.

I close my eyes and squeeze them tight. I don't want to believe her. It's bad enough to think he slipped up once. It's hard enough to have that image of him and Rina burned into my brain. But to think it had happened before?

To think that everyone knew?

*Zack*. I have this flash of my neighbor's smug smile and his constant jabs at me over the years.

Had he known?

I start walking away from Toni as she calls out after me, "I really am sorry."

She's sorry? So am I. I'm sorry I ever met Grayson. I'm sorry I ever trusted him. I'm sorry I lost the only real friend I'd had. I'm sorry I've been a laughingstock for the past three years and never even knew it.

The bell above the door rings when I walk into the souvenir shop, which is ice cold compared to the muggy afternoon heat. Zack's leaning over the counter, reading something on his phone as he ignores the customers milling around him.

I stop right in front of him, and he looks up. His automatic smile falters. "Hey, you okay?"

Am I okay? No. Not even a little. But as the shock fades, I am one giant seething mass of anger.

Grayson hasn't just betrayed me, he's made a fool of me.

If Toni's telling the truth—and I have no reason to believe she's not—then I've spent the last three years either being pitied or laughed at because of him. I've spent the last three years bending over backwards to be the perfect girlfriend, to make him proud to call me his girl, because I thought... I thought it was such an *honor* that he'd picked me out of all the girls who'd had a crush on him. I'd been freakin' *grateful*. Like he was doing me this big favor by going out with me.

And all the while he's been a lying, cheating, manipulative—

"Bailey?" Zack's brows draw together in clear concern. "What's wrong?"

What's wrong? What's wrong?

I swallow down a hysterical laugh and force myself to focus on Zack. "I'm ready," I say.

His eyes widen and I know I don't have to spell it out. His lips curve up as a devilish glint fills his eyes. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I nod, swallowing down the nausea and the panic. "Let's get this over with."

# FOURTEEN FIRST KISS TAKE TWO

#### Zack

I SWEAR I can actually *feel* Bailey's tension. Anxiety comes off her in waves as she rings up an old couple and the stuffed animal they just paid way too much for.

"Your granddaughter's going to love it." Bailey gives them a beaming smile that fools no one.

Well, it doesn't fool *me*. The old couple seems to buy it because they're all smiles and waves as they head back outside to the rides and the games.

Then we're basically alone again. There are a few customers still walking around—a couple of freshmen boys who are no doubt about to shoplift something, and some tween girls who are...also about to steal something if their nervous glances in our direction are anything to go by.

This souvenir shop is something of a training ground for little wannabe badasses. Every kid in town knows the security is nonexistent and the employees don't care.

Well, except for Bailey. I bet she chases down the thieving little bastards. Probably frog marches them over to the security guard's hut down by the bathrooms, all the while scolding them about how they should do better. *Be* better.

She probably bores them into obedience with all her lectures about responsibility and talk of their futures.

She turns and catches me watching her. "What are you smirking about?" My smile widens. "Nothing."

She narrows her eyes but lets it go, turning to lean against the counter as that tension comes back with a vengeance. I'm not kidding. She's so high-strung her body's basically humming like a tuning fork.

"So, how—" She inhales quickly and then gives a sharp exhale. "How are we going to do this exactly?"

I study her for a long moment as I waver between an honest answer and a joke to get her to loosen up. Even eye rolls and weary sighs would be an improvement right now. But what ends up coming out is, "Do you want to talk about it?"

She stares in surprise.

I've kind of shocked myself, to be honest. I'm not much of a touchy-feely, *let's talk it out* type, and we both know it. But like it or not, we're stuck together in this whole pretense of not knowing what Grayson and Rina did, so—

"Did you know?" It comes out of nowhere, her voice sharp and accusatory.

My head jerks back at her intensity. Out of the corner of my eye I see the tween girls fleeing. Bailey's scared off the wannabe thieves without even trying.

She presses her lips into a thin line like she's bracing herself for my answer, and I—

I officially have no idea what we're talking about. "Did I know... what?"

She huffs in annoyance. "That Grayson's been cheating on me from the beginning," she says, her voice just as stiff as her muscles. "Did. You. Know?"

Her words hit me like a blow to the chest. He's been cheating all this time? My horror has nothing on hers, but I swear I can feel the ripple effect of her shock. Of her *pain*.

I shake my head. Shit. "No."

She narrows her eyes slightly, like she's trying to read me, and I cut off all the stupid questions that are flying around in my head. With who? Since when? How do you know?

"No," I say again, with more heat this time. "I promise you, Bailey, I had no idea."

Her throat works as she looks away, staring at the door as the bell rings, announcing that the junior high boys have left as well.

Probably with pockets full of magnets and bottle openers.

I brace myself for Bailey's tears, but she visibly swallows, and when she turns back and her gaze meets mine, she's in control again. "He's your best friend," she says evenly.

*Was*, I want to say. He *was* my best friend. But I know what she's saying. I was his best friend so, if what she's saying is true and he's been cheating on her for years—how could I *not* know?

I ask myself the same question and come up short. I give a helpless shrug. "I don't know what to tell you, Bailey. I had no idea."

A beat passes as she studies me, and I realize belatedly that I'm holding my breath. Why? I don't know. But I don't let it out until she nods.

She believes me.

Some of that tension in the air eases up as well. Don't get me wrong, she's still a walking ball of anxiety, but at least the air doesn't crackle with her tension anymore.

It's no longer aimed in my direction, at least.

Without it, all I can feel is her sadness. And that freakin' sucks.

I clap my hands and rub them together. "So, we're definitely doing this then."

Her lips twitch upward and I call it a win. "We're doing this."

"Today," I say.

She looks around us at the empty store that we're supposed to man until closing. Point taken.

"Fine, tonight."

She bites her lip and her eyes widen. I half expect her to back out, and I wouldn't really blame her if she did. She's having a day.

But she nods. "How? I mean, what's our game plan here?"

I hold back a sigh. She's overthinking this in a big way, but then again—this is Bailey. Overthinking is her superpower.

"We don't need some grand plan," I say. "We just need to make sure he sees us gettin' it on." I bite my bottom lip and give a couple of hip thrusts like I'm James Brown or something.

She rolls her eyes, but I catch her lips twitching as she fights a smile. And hell, after watching her heart break all over again just seconds ago, that hint of a smile feels like the world's best win.

She arches her brows in a cute, haughty look. "You do know we're not *really* 'getting it on' right?"

I stare. "Did you just use air quotes?"

She does it again as she says, "I did."

I choke on a laugh. "You're such a dork."

Her lips finally curve up as she loses the battle with her smile. "And you didn't answer my question."

"Okay, fine." I lift myself up so I'm sitting on the counter, my legs swinging as she scowls.

She may have told me a time or two that sitting on the counter is a nono.

"We'll keep it simple," I say. "All we need to do is find a spot where we know he'll be and let nature take its course."

She purses her lips in a look that says she's unimpressed by my plan. Or maybe it's the 'nature taking its course' part that annoys her.

"Where's he going to be tonight?" I ask.

The sad thing is, she knows his schedule. And I know she knows.

"He's going to Darcy's for some party." She wrinkles her nose, no doubt at the idea of trying to stage our 'gotcha' moment in front of half our class.

"So, we catch him before that," I say.

Her eyes get a glint. I'm not going to say it's excitement, but whatever it is, it's wicked, and it's bright, and...quite honestly, it's sexy as hell.

"He's on closing duty tonight," she says.

Closing duty means he'll be at the staff trailer filling out paperwork as they tally the days' ticket sales. One of the perks of working at the souvenir shop is getting to skip all that crap.

But closing duty also means we know exactly where he's going to be tonight before he takes off to hang with his friends.

We share a look, and then Bailey starts to fidget. "So...what? We just plant ourselves in front of the staff trailer and start making out?"

I grin. She sounds so turned off by the idea of making out with me, it's kind of hilarious. Sure, some guys might be offended, but my ego can handle it.

In fact, a little part of me may have just perked up at the challenge.

I'm going to kiss Bailey Turner tonight...

And I'm gonna do it right.

Out of nowhere, I have this vision of Bailey in my arms, her lips parted and her eyes glazed with desire. I imagine kissing her until she forgets her own name. Until she forgets that I'm me, and she's her, and we're...us.

My lungs contract, and for a second I can't breathe. Bailey going up on her tiptoes, her arms wrapping around my neck as she presses against me, and—

"Zack?" Bailey's eyes narrow. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

I give my head a shake and clear my throat. Reality smacks me in the face and I shove all those thoughts out of my head. I point to her. "You. Me. Closing time. It's a plan."

She fidgets, shifting from one foot to the other. "It's not much of a plan, though, is it? I mean, won't it seem weird that we're kissing right in front of the staff trailer?" Her eyes widen as she adds, "Where Grayson just happens to be?"

"You're overthinking this."

"I'm not. I'm just saying, why would we be kissing in front of the staff trailer when—"

"Because we got caught up in the moment, Bailey." I hop down from the counter and that puts me right in her personal space.

She doesn't back up. So, at least she's getting more comfortable being close to me. That's progress.

"We did?" Her brows draw together in disbelief.

"Picture this." I move in a little closer. "You and me, we're doing our bickering thing. You're giving me a hard time about my terrible work ethic and I'm making you blush by talking about how great your legs look in that little pleated skirt."

Her eyes widen slightly. "They do?"

I nod. "Hell yeah, they do."

Her cheeks flush, just as I'd said they would.

"You're teasing," she mutters.

"I'm not." I move in closer until she's backed up against the counter.

I place my hands on either side of her, having a little too much fun watching her eyes darken with awareness. "Can't you picture it? Bickering turns to flirting, and flirting..." I reach out and tuck some hair behind her ear. I don't even know why, I just want to touch her.

Her lips part, and my point is made, but I spell it out for her anyway. "All week Grayson's been watching the sexual tension build between us.

And today, that sexual tension is about to break."

She blinks a few times. "It is?"

I nod. "It is."

I see the tip of her tongue as she wets her lip, her breathing uneven. "Okay then."

I fight a smile because the way she's looking up at me right now, all wide eyes and parted lips? It's exactly like I'd imagined.

The sound of the bell dinging over the shop's door has her jerking away from me as she calls out a greeting to the middle-aged couple who's walking in.

They smile and wave, and we both wait until they've started browsing the T-shirts by the front window before we go back to the topic at hand.

Bailey turns to me with a determined look. "Tonight, at closing." She draws in a deep breath. "We're doing this."

The next couple hours crawl by as we go through the work that Bailey insists we do. How she can worry about whether or not I've swept the back room is a mystery to me, but I go along with it because at least nagging me and checking chores off her list keeps her mind occupied.

She's almost calm by the time we lock up and head over to the staff trailer. Almost.

We have time to kill, which doesn't help. It'll take them a little while to do the closing routine, and it's not like we can stand out front for too long without it looking weird. So, we take a leisurely stroll through the park, watching harried parents herd their kids toward the exit and concession stand workers as they pull down their gates.

We watch as lights go out one by one as the rides stop and the games shut down for the night.

We're oddly quiet as we walk together. But it's not a bad quiet. It's actually kinda...nice.

When it's time to head to the trailer, her hands won't stop fidgeting with the hem of her polo shirt, and I can feel her tension grow by the second as we head in Grayson's direction.

I wish there's some way I could make her feel better, but I have no idea what to say that'll make it easier for her to cheat on the guy she's loved since freshman year.

Even if I wanted to reassure her, I'm having a hell of a time ignoring the guilty voice that's telling me I pushed her too hard, that I talked her into

this.

I have to repeatedly remind myself that she's a grown woman with a mind of her own.

But I can't shake a nagging fear that at the end of the day, she's gonna resent the hell out of me for this.

We reach the trailer and the sounds from the rest of the park feel like they're coming from miles away. It's too quiet as the seconds tick down.

I turn to face her and my heart twists when I see her staring up at me with wide eyes.

She's scared. Bailey Tucker is scared—and that kills me.

Her fear is like a freakin' knife to my chest. My voice comes out too low and gruff. "Are you ready for this?"

No. The answer's no, and we both know it.

She swallows, and I see her hands shaking before she clasps them together. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"It's not too late to turn back."

She doesn't respond, and then a sound from inside the trailer makes her stiffen, and her eyes go impossibly wide. The way she's looking at me, all vulnerable and helpless—my heart twists like a dishrag being rung out to dry.

I want to comfort her. Tell her it's all going to be okay. But we have seconds before Grayson walks out here, and it's not comfort that she needs to get through this.

She needs anger. She needs to remember what he's done and why she's doing this. So instead of comfort, I offer a smirk as I lean in close. "Relax, *Bae*." I use Grayson's nickname for her because I know it'll piss her off. "I promise I don't bite."

Her inhale is loud and quick, and her eyes flash with fury. *There it is.* 

That's my Bailey.

She reaches out, grips the worn fabric of my hoodie and tugs me closer. That determination, that fire...

Relief has me drawing in a deep breath, and suddenly I'm surrounded by the scent of Bailey's shampoo and the warmth coming off her skin. She's pulled me in so close I can feel her breath on my cheek as she exhales sharply with resolve.

"That's my girl," I say, because I know it'll piss her off even more.

"I'm not your girl," she snaps.

"And you're not *his*, either." It comes out a little more forcefully than I meant it to, and she tips her head back to frown up at me.

She's on autopilot, getting annoyed with me out of habit. But I'll take it. It's way better than her terror.

Grayson's voice comes from the other side of the door, and we both go still.

"This is it." I pull back just far enough to look into her eyes. "Last chance to bail, *Bail*."

"You're hilarious," she mutters.

"I think so." I smile down at her because I need her to know—she's not alone. I'm with her on this. We're in this together.

And also, *I* need to know she really wants this. I need her to be absolutely positive. "You in or you out? I need you to say it. I need you to be sure."

She blinks a couple of times, and I think she's probably startled by the intensity in my voice.

I know I am.

The bolt on the door slides and my heart pounds in response.

This is it. The moment of truth.

For a second I think she's going to back out, but her eyes fill with determination as her grip on my hoodie tightens. "I'm in."

Relief floods my chest, and I grin down at her. "That's my girl."

She's about to protest again, but I lean down and capture her lips before she has the chance.

I'm dimly aware of the door swinging open beside us. But honestly, for a second there—I completely forget why we're doing this.

Her lips are warm and soft, and she tastes like vanilla chapstick and... perfection. Her lips crushed against mine is weirdly familiar and new all at once, and it's totally disorienting. Like jumping off a high dive, for a second my stomach flips, and I'm positive gravity falters before the world realigns.

The smell of her surrounds me, and the feel of her in my arms is more overwhelming than I ever would have expected, and I—I need more.

So I take more.

Tilting my head, I deepen the kiss, and she opens for me, her lips parting on a gasp that I devour. And then she's kissing me back, all fierce and passionate, like she can't get enough of me either.

She's kissing me back like…like she *means* it.

My blood is lava. My body is on fire as it reacts to hers like it's just been waiting for this moment. Her warm hands clutch my shoulders and my hands press against her back, pulling her even closer. She slides her arms around my neck as she moans, and—

Holy shit, that moan.

Nothing in my life has prepared me for the level of sexy that is Bailey Tucker in my arms. And nothing on earth could stop me from touching her skin, from kissing every inch of her, from—

Hands grip my shoulders and wrench me back.

"What the *hell*?" Grayson's face is red with anger as he gets in my face. "What do you think you're doing?"

I'm too slow. My body's still caught up in that kiss, and I don't even move when I see his fist coming.

The next thing I see?

Blackness.

# FIFTEEN A HEARTBEAT

### **Bailey**

FUNNY HOW EVERYTHING can change in a heartbeat.

One second, one action, one decision, and...boom. The world is a different place.

I'm a different person.

One photograph of Grayson and Rina, and my heart's broken. One conversation and I'm out for revenge. One kiss and...I'm a slut.

A whore.

At least, that's what Grayson's telling me. He's hurling F-bombs in my face and that should make me flinch, but all I can do is stand here and stare in disbelief.

Did I really just kiss Zack Myers? My lips still tingle and my heart is racing as I touch my fingers to my mouth.

Yeah. I did that.

One kiss and...I don't know who I am anymore.

My heart's racing, but it's fear for Zack, who's sprawled on the ground. My stomach's still churning from the sickening *crack* of Grayson's fist colliding with bone.

Two of the staff members who'd walked out with Grayson are holding him back now so he can't hit Zack again.

Or maybe...so he can't hit me.

I don't know if he would, but the way he's shouting at me right now... He could.

Spit flies from his mouth as he curses and rages, and...I should be upset, right? I should be feeling something more than this.

Maybe I'm in shock. But I don't think so. I hear Grayson say, "We're through. You and me? We're done!"

I should care. I really should.

But all I feel is a surge of relief as the indecision and fear and anticipation that's been tying me up in knots all week comes undone.

It's over.

And it's...not good. I get that. Zack's groaning on the ground, and Grayson's red-faced with rage, and the employees holding Grayson are shouting at him to calm down, and one's telling the other to call security.

Or, no, he says that to me. And I realize they're looking at me like they're waiting for me to do something.

But I just stand there and watch Zack to make sure he's okay.

I see a crowd forming around us, but I don't care. Most of them are employees I only know by sight. Except for Jessica. She's one of Macy's friends, and she's watching Grayson and me with an open mouth and her phone in hand.

Someone's got to be taking pictures, maybe even filming our breakup.

And I...don't care.

Not now, at least. Maybe later I'll care.

Yeah, I most definitely will care later.

But for now, Grayson shakes off one of the kids who'd been holding him back—Tom, I think his name is. He's young, a freshman, I think. He's no match for Grayson in size, and I almost feel sorry for him.

I don't want him to get hurt like Zack, who's rolling onto his side to get up. No one moves to help him, so I push past Grayson to help Zack to his feet.

Grayson finally goes quiet and I turn to see him staring at me like he's never seen me before. He's looking at me like I'm a stranger.

*Welcome to the club.* I know the feeling well, and I can't bring myself to feel guilty. Maybe I should.

No, I definitely should. The old me? The girl who *hadn't* been cheated on? The one who *hadn't* kissed Zack?

She would definitely feel guilty.

I should be a bigger person. I'm better than this. Two wrongs don't make a right. It's better to take the high road.

I get all that. My brain understands this. But all I *feel* is freakin' relieved that Grayson is out of my life.

I can move on. I can pick up the pieces and figure out where I'm going, and who I'm going to be.

Is this who I'm going to be now? The girl who gets even. The girl who cheats. The girl who kisses Zack Myers...

And likes it.

I shut down that thought as Zack moves so he's in front of me. He's protecting me from Grayson and his wrath.

But Grayson's not ranting anymore. He's just staring at us, his breathing heavy and his brows drawn together, his expression caught somewhere between confusion and pain.

And yeah, my heart must be a petty bitch because all I feel there is glad. I'm so freakin' glad that he's had a taste of it—the betrayal, the heartache, the disbelief. It's what he deserves, and maybe I *should* feel guilty...

But I don't.

"You okay?" I ask Zack.

He nods, his gaze colliding with mine. Something passes between us.

I've had secrets before. Of course, I have. But nothing like this.

I've never had a secret that sets me and one other person apart from the world. Something that makes me feel like we're on our own, but we're in it together.

"C'mon, man, let's get you out of here." The kid I think is named Tom claps a hand on Grayson's shoulder and steers him toward the parking lot. Grayson gives me one last look—a sneer—and then he follows.

The rest of the crowd follows them slowly, but not without a whole lot of stares and whispers.

"Get used to it," Zack says under his breath. "We're going to be all anyone's talking about for a while."

Jessica pairs up with one of her friends and they're leaning in to look at something on her phone. She glances back over her shoulder and gives me a withering stare. Her friend giggles and then they're off, following Grayson and the others.

Zack's right. I'd better get used to it. I'm the bad guy now. I'm the cheater and the liar, and I've definitely given up my social status. I've lost

my entire circle of friends as well.

I let that sink in, expecting to feel...something.

"You okay?" Zack asks.

I nod.

And I am. Because those people that I'd thought were friends—the Jessicas and the Macys of my life—they must have known he was cheating on me. In fact...

I go still as memories come back to me. I'd bet my entire college savings that Macy is one of the girls he cheated on me with. She's always flirted with him, sometimes right in front of my face. I'd never liked it, but I'd told myself she was jealous of me. That she might want him, but she couldn't have him.

In reality, she'd probably been laughing at me.

"Bailey?" There's concern in Zack's eyes, and I realize I've been too quiet for too long.

I force a little smile. "Yeah, I'm good." I take a deep breath. "I'm *really* good."

His eyes say he's not sure if he believes me, but he returns my smile with a crooked grin of his own. "Really good, huh?"

I shrug. "Well, *I'm* not the one who got sucker punched."

He winces. "I could have taken him."

"Uh huh."

"He caught me off guard."

The crowd's gone and we head toward the parking lot at a very slow pace so we don't catch up with Grayson. Zack slings an arm around my shoulders. "I was distracted, that's all."

I glance up and he's looking down at me with this funny little smirk. It's knowing, and it's amused, and it's so freakin' sexy it steals my breath.

I look away quickly. "Distracted. Is that what we're calling it?"

His chuckle is low and I can feel the vibration of it in his chest where I'm pressed against his side. "That kiss was..."

I hold my breath as he trails off. That kiss was what? My mind fills in the blanks. That kiss was...

Hot? Sinful? Epic?

Yes, yes, and yes.

"You're an excellent kisser, Bailey Tucker." He leans in a bit as we walk so his mouth is closer to my ear, and I'm not sure if it's because he doesn't want anyone to overhear or if it's just for show. Toni and some of her friends from the games area are a little way off, and they're definitely watching us.

Maybe word has already spread.

"You sound surprised," I say. "Did you think I wouldn't be a good kisser?" I turn to face him to avoid making eye contact with Toni. I don't want to answer questions. Not now. Not yet.

His lips twitch slightly like he's amused by the question. "I guess I never gave it much thought."

I arch my brows. "You've never thought about kissing me?" Disbelief is clear in my voice, and I don't wait for a response. "Liar."

I'm not sure where that even comes from. My voice is low and breathy, and my words are all bold confidence.

It doesn't even sound like me.

His eyes widen slightly before his gaze drops to my lips.

My heart hammers in my chest.

"What did you just call me?" His voice is low and teasing, but it's not like his normal mockery. There's a flirty, sexy edge there that I've never heard before.

My belly does a backflip in response, and my heart races as he holds my gaze.

But I look away first. I face forward, scanning the parking lot for his car as I strive for a more casual tone. "I just mean, we've known each other forever. You're a guy, I'm a girl..."

He doesn't respond right away as we reach his car.

"It would be weird if you didn't think about it." My voice sounds stupidly loud in the quiet parking lot.

He opens the passenger side door for me, which is...a first. I look around to see if we have an audience, but we don't.

When I look back, he's wearing a familiar smirk and his eyes glint with laughter. "What I'm hearing is, *you've* thought about kissing *me*."

My lips part and my eyes widen. "No, that's not what I—"

"It's fine," he says, giving me a little nudge so I slide into the seat. "You've been fantasizing about me for years. I get it."

"No, I didn't say—"

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, Smurfette." He leans over the car door and even though I know he's teasing, I can't come up with a response.

"You're a young woman with needs, it's totally natural."

"I don't have needs," I hiss, my cheeks burning.

He bursts out laughing as he shuts the door, and I'm kicking myself for reacting like a prude just like he knew I would.

He opens his door and climbs in.

I fold my arms. "Are you through?"

His eyes are still dancing with laughter, but his smile is surprisingly soft. Almost affectionate. "I'm just kidding around, Bailey. You know that."

I roll my eyes. Of course, I know that.

He starts the car and we head toward home. I don't know where Zack's mind has gone, but I can't stop replaying what we just did.

Now that the shock is fading, I take it apart, moment by moment. That kiss, Grayson's rage, how it must have looked to everyone else...

"What now?" I ask.

He glances over and blinks like I just dragged him out of some deep thoughts. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what now? What's our next play here?" I shift so I'm facing him and he glances over again with a little smile.

"Our next play?" He shifts his hands on the wheel. "I've created a monster."

He's joking, but my chest gets tight because...I don't know what he's created. Or, what I've become, rather.

I mean, it's one thing to say I'm going along with this plan. But to be the person who cheats, who betrays...

I feel a little sick as I recall Grayson's pain...and my own satisfaction.

God, maybe I *am* a monster.

He's still smiling when he looks over, but that smile fades fast. "What's wrong?"

I open my mouth to deny that anything's wrong. My lips part, my tongue goes to form the words, but what comes out is, "I don't know who I am anymore."

I realize how incredibly lame that sounds, but I can't bring myself to take it back or laugh it off.

His brows hitch up in surprise, but he doesn't laugh at me. He doesn't even pretend like he doesn't know what I mean. Turning back to look at the road, he says, "You're Bailey Tucker. Competitive, perfectionist..." His throat moves when he swallows. "And the strongest girl I know."

I stare at him for a long moment. Competitive? Yes. Perfectionist? Obviously. The strongest girl he knows...?

I lean back in my seat with a sigh. "I think a stronger person would have confronted Grayson," I say. "She would have called him out for the lies and broken up with him."

He lifts one shoulder, clearly not convinced. "You can still do that."

"No. I can't." I'm shaking my head for added emphasis. "He can't know that we know, remember? That defeats the purpose. I'll look even more pathetic than I already do and you..."

His smile is smug. "Don't you worry about me, Smurfette."

"I thought we were done with that nickname."

"I'm just saying, do what you need to do. I don't care." He leans back in his seat. "I don't care what anyone thinks of me."

I give a little snort of amusement. "Must be nice."

He arches a brow. "I don't think *you* really care either."

I go still as I think about that. I *don't* care—not much. I don't care that I'm the bad guy, at least. Or, at least...

Not as much as I would have thought.

"I agree, though," he says. "If we can sell this like we had no clue he and Rina cheated on us, all the better."

I nod in agreement.

"But if you change your mind..." He shrugs. "I'll understand."

My throat grows tight. "Thanks."

"Does that make you feel better?" He gives me a sidelong glance as he makes a turn toward our neighborhood. "You can still come clean...eventually. You can still be *the bigger person*."

The way he says it makes me feel like he could read my mind earlier. Like he knows exactly how my brain works. The old me would definitely want to be the bigger person.

I have this weird hollow sensation as it hits me again. "I don't know who I am anymore."

He scoffs. "I told you, you're—"

"No, that's not what I mean. It's that..." I wet my lips as we turn onto the familiar streets of our neighborhood. "Janie has this theory..."

"I can't wait to hear this," he murmurs, already smiling.

"She's big into psychology, and she believes that our identities were pretty much forged when the twins were born."

"Okay," he says slowly.

I'm not even sure where I'm going with this. I feel like I'm pulling at a string that leads to the knotted mess that is my brain right now, and I have to see where it ends. "When the twins were born, they were the center of attention, right? So, Janie and I had to figure out how to exist in this new family dynamic."

I glance over, waiting to see a smirk, but his expression is serious and he seems to be listening intently.

"That makes sense," he says.

"So, I got attention by being...good." This sounds way better when Janie explains it using all the big words and her annoyingly condescending teacher voice. "I got good grades, and I won every award, and I helped out around the house, and I made my parents' lives easier. Or I tried to, at least. Because Janie—"

"Went the opposite route," Zack finishes with a little huff of amusement.

I laugh too. "Exactly. She was always whining for attention or getting into trouble..."

I trail off because this isn't about Janie. It's about me.

It's about me realizing that Janie was right all along. And so was Zack.

I sigh as I say it aloud, "I'm a people pleaser."

He gasps, claps a hand over his heart, and pretends to be shocked. "No!"

A laugh slips out as I smack his arm. "Shut up. I'm being serious."

"I know you are, and that's why it's so hilarious." He's outright grinning now, and he looks like he's trying not to laugh. "I can't believe you're just now owning up to the fact that you're a people pleaser."

I wrinkle my nose. "Gloating doesn't look good on you."

"Everything looks good on me."

I don't deny it, because I'm pretty sure he's right. He's too dang hot for his own good.

"My point is," I say loudly, getting us back on track. "I don't want to be that person anymore—"

"Hallelujah."

"And today I wasn't."

"Definitely not," he agrees.

He's having way too much fun considering I'm having a major existential crisis over here.

"But that means..." My voice is getting too high and tight, and I rub my clammy palms on my skirt. "That means I don't know who I am. I don't even recognize myself and that's...that's..."

"Terrifying." For once he's not laughing or teasing. He's totally serious, and that helps to alleviate a little of the anxiety.

"Yeah," I say. "It's terrifying."

He parks in his driveway and shifts to face me. "Look at it this way. Finding out Grayson was cheating on you, and this whole revenge plan—this is just like when your brothers were born."

I narrow my eyes. "You're comparing my heartbreak to the birth of twins?"

He laughs. "Just hear me out. It's a moment, right? It's a significant event, something that reshapes how you see the world and your place in it."

"Yeah, I guess," I say slowly.

"So, this is just another chance to—" His brows draw together. "How'd you put it? *Forge* your personality?"

I purse my lips as I mull that over. "I guess that makes sense."

His eyes meet mine. "You'll figure it out. And I'm betting you'll be better off for it."

I give a little snort of amusement. "I hope so." My mind's replaying moments with Grayson. All those times when I'd thought I was being a good girlfriend but, really—I was a pushover. A doormat.

I cringe at the thought, but I can't unthink it.

And I can't go back either. I can't go back to being that Bailey.

And I can't undo what's already been done.

My mind calls up the memory of kissing Zack, and it's so vivid it's like I'm feeling that bolt of electricity all over again. I press my lips together to keep from touching them.

I can't undo that kiss. Or the way it made me feel.

I cast a sidelong look in Zack's direction. Had he felt it too? Because for me, it wasn't just a kiss. At least, not like any kiss I'd shared with Grayson.

I swear I felt something inside me wake up. And that something was...unfamiliar. It was terrifying, and *wild*, and...

And whatever that something was, it wanted to kiss Zack again—and this time without a crowd of witnesses.

Oh holy crap.

My breath whooshes out of my lungs and I stare straight ahead at Zack's garage door. I can't *really* want to kiss Zack. Not for real.

"Hey." His voice is surprisingly gentle as he touches my hand where it rests between us. "You're going to be okay, Bailey."

"I've lost my mind," I whisper. Because I'm still freakin' reeling from these crazy thoughts about kissing Zack.

"Nah," he says. "You'll figure it out. And until you do, don't stress."

I turn to face him. *Easy for you to say*. The words catch in my throat before I can say them because his dark gaze is fixed on mine and it leaves me speechless.

"You won't be lost forever." After a beat, he adds, "I won't *let* you stay lost forever."

His promise makes my heart thud painfully.

He reaches out and tucks some hair behind my ear. "You might not know who you are right now, but *I* know."

I try to smile. "Right. Competitive, and a perfectionist, and—"

"Not just that." He's serious. So very serious. "You *are* good, Bailey, but you're not perfect. You're strong, but that doesn't mean you can't get hurt. And yeah, you're competitive and ambitious, but that's only because you care. A lot. You care more than anyone I know."

My breathing is shallow and tears sting the back of my eyes as his eyes hold mine and don't let go. His lips curve up on one side. "You are Bailey Tucker, and you may have been a people pleaser in the past—but that's not you. Not anymore."

I nod, my eyes brimming with tears. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." His smile is slow and sweet, and I feel a response low in my belly. "That's what fake boyfriends are for."

# THE KISS HEARD ROUND THE WORLD

#### Zack

THE LOOK in Bailey's eyes, her words, the way she'd tasted when I'd kissed her...

I was up half the night replaying all of it. I can't shake the image of the way she'd looked at me. I keep hearing her words and can't stop seeing that panic in her eyes.

Mostly, I keep hearing my own words, and I still have no clue where that little speech came from. I mean, it's all true. But it was more serious than any conversation I've had since my mom sat me down to tell me that my dad left.

My brain doesn't know what to make of that.

And then there was the kiss. I can't stop replaying every freakin' second of that kiss. Over and over again.

So yeah, it was a late night.

I don't have work today, and one might think this would be an excuse to sleep in.

One would be wrong.

My mom also has off today and she has plans for us. For *me*. She got me out of bed bright and early with a list of chores a mile long. Which is why it's barely even breakfast time and I'm already outside cleaning off our old, worn patio furniture.

I hear Janie's voice coming from her yard. "You've impressed me, Myers."

"I'm an impressive guy, Tucker," I shoot back.

She's standing at the border that separates our backyards. Her arms are crossed, her eyes narrowed. It doesn't take a genius to see she's suspicious.

Suspicious...and protective. I've known Janie just as long as I've known Bailey, and while the sisters might be as different as night and day, they're still sisters. They care about each other, look out for each other, protect each other...

When they're not driving each other insane.

But right about now? I'm betting that's why Janie's out here this warm summer morning. She wants to protect Bailey—from me.

I drop the hose and shut it off before heading over to her. "Did you want to say something, Janie, or did you just want to ogle the neighbor boy while he plays with his hose?" I give my brows a suggestive little waggle.

This has her rolling her eyes in a way that makes her look alarmingly like her sister. "How'd you do it?"

My head jerks back at her accusatory tone. "Do what?"

Her pinched lips say she's unimpressed by my response. Like she thinks I'm playing dumb, which I'm not. "How'd you get Saint Bailey to stop being a martyr and start getting payback?"

She knows. Of course, she knows. She's Bailey's sister. They share a bedroom, and Bailey already told me how Janie was the one there to pick up the pieces that first night when she first found out.

"I didn't have to talk her into this, if that's what you're thinking." Even I can hear my defensiveness. And yeah, maybe a little guilt.

She gives a little snort. "Relax, Myers. I didn't accuse you of anything. And besides..." She arches her brows. "You couldn't possibly talk Bailey into anything she didn't already want to do."

I nod, stupidly relieved to hear her say that. The way Bailey had teared up last night. The way she was questioning herself...

I shake off the memories and the tightness in my chest that comes with them. "So, what are you doing over here?" I study her the way she's been eyeing me. "Something tells me you didn't come over here just to watch me work."

She blows out a long breath, like she doesn't want to say what she's about to say. "I deleted Bailey's social media accounts."

I widen my eyes. "What? *How*?" Those questions go unanswered, but it wouldn't come as a shock to learn that Janie knows Bailey's passwords—or that she's some crazy talented hacker, now that I think about it. Janie's totally the hacker type.

She's watching me with pursed lips, her expression stubborn like she's waiting for me to get over it and move on already. I run a hand through my hair as I take in this girl who's a strange blend of confident badass and worried little sister. "You deleted them?"

She nods.

I'm not a big social media guy. It's not really my thing. But Bailey...? "She's going to kill you."

"Yeah, I know. I just..." She glances away. "But she's gone through enough, you know?"

Yeah, I do know.

I speak slowly. "What exactly are you protecting her from?"

But I know. I mean, I can guess. And when Janie starts rattling off some of the nasty rumors that are flying about Bailey, she just confirms it. They're all making her out to be the bad guy. Her so-called friends are throwing her under the bus.

Me? I've always been the bad kid, so I guess it's expected. Janie says there's some talk about how crappy it was of me to go after my best friend's girl. But most of it is about Bailey.

This leads Janie into a long, angry tirade about the unfair double standards for women, and—I can't disagree. I *don't* disagree because she's obviously right.

But I still tune her out after a little while because my insides are revolting. My stomach's churning, and my heart's pounding, and there's a heat flooding my veins that I'm definitely not used to.

It's anger, yes, but it's also...fear. I'm freakin' worried as hell about Bailey. About how she's going to react when she finds out. I glance at her sister who's so worked up, her cheeks are turning red.

I get now why Janie did it. She's just as worried about Bailey as I am. But Janie can't hide Bailey from the world forever.

My chest feels like it's getting tighter and tighter. I rub a hand over my heart. Either I'm about to have a heart attack or this is a new emotion for me. I take a deep breath and glance over at Bailey's house as I try to make sense of what I'm feeling.

Protective. I guess that's what this is. I want to go in there, scoop Bailey into my arms and take her away somewhere where she won't have to face Grayson or anyone else. And that's just...weird.

It's also not my place.

We're friends at most, and even that seems tenuous. We've forged a truce, that's all.

But that kiss...

That kiss changed nothing. It was all for show, and I know that better than anyone. I cut into Janie's tirade. "Janie, I get it, okay? Inequality sucks."

She gives one last huff of indignation at my ineloquent synopsis of her long-winded speech. But when her eyes meet mine, there's none of her usual attitude. "She was acting weird when she came home last night."

"Weird how?" As if I need Janie to spell it out.

Janie just gives me a knowing look.

Of course, Bailey's been acting weird. Her world's been flipped upside down and she doesn't know up from down. "She'll be all right," I say with more confidence than I feel. "She's just going through some stuff. It's only natural, right?"

Janie nods slowly. "I guess." But she still looks disturbed. "It's just weird seeing her like this. She's normally so...so..."

"Bailey?" I finish.

She cracks a grin. "Yeah. Exactly. She's normally so *Bailey*." She gives another little huff, this time with amusement. "I never thought I'd see the day when I actually miss Saint Bailey."

"She'll be back to her holier-than-thou self in no time," I assure her.

But...I'm not so sure. It's about more than Grayson's cheating now, and I think we both know that. This isn't just Bailey discovering she didn't have the perfect boyfriend, it's about realizing there's no such thing as perfect. That what she's been striving for all these years doesn't exist.

"Maybe," Janie says doubtfully, but then her tone hardens. "All I know is, I don't want to see her getting hurt any more than she already has. Especially not by those freakin' Graysonites."

I start to laugh at the term. It's surprisingly accurate. The guy doesn't have friends, he has followers. Except for me. I'd never been one of his sheep.

But I don't count anymore.

There's something satisfying about knowing the dude lost his only real friend when he messed with Bailey.

Janie shifts, and she fidgets with the hem of her T-shirt. "Some people are saying stuff like...like maybe Bailey finally woke up. She opened her eyes."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

She shrugs, looking more uncomfortable than I've ever seen her. "They're making it sound like...like he's cheated on her before. Like, a lot."

My stomach lurches. Toni told Bailey the same thing, but I still have a hard time believing it. Then again, I wouldn't have believed that Grayson could cheat on Bailey with Rina either, so it's clear I didn't know the guy as well as I'd thought.

"Did you know?" It's an accusation, not a question.

And she sounds *exactly* like her sister.

I tell her what I told Bailey—the truth. "No. I didn't know."

Her brows come down. "How could you not? You're his best friend, right?"

"Was," I say. "And I don't know. I really don't. Maybe I was too close to it all...?"

Even I don't really buy that, but it's the best I can come up with.

"Maybe." She studies me as she thinks that over. "Or maybe he didn't want you to know because he knows you and Bailey are tight."

I laugh. "Uh, I hate to break it to you, but Bailey and I haven't been *tight* for a long time."

She arches a brow in disbelief. Or maybe it's mockery at my expense.

Yup, she's definitely laughing at me. And I have this sinking feeling like I'm missing something obvious. I want to ask what that look means, but also...

I'm not entirely sure I want to hear Janie's take on my friendship with Bailey. So, I steer the conversation back to Bailey. More specifically, how we're going to protect Bailey from the aftermath of the kiss heard round the world. "Look, I'll do anything I can to protect Bailey from the worst of it, okay?"

Janie glances over my shoulder and her gaze snags on something behind me. A mischievous glint fills her eyes. "I hope so. I mean, as *Bailey's boyfriend* that's kinda your job."

The way she raises her voice...

I wince. I know who's behind me without having to turn around.

"What's this?" My mom's right next to me now, her voice high with excitement. "You and Bailey Tucker? Really?"

Janie flashes me an impish grin, which also, oddly, reminds me of her sister.

"You're gonna pay for this," I say in a low voice.

Her smile widens.

"Jane Louise Tucker, I am going to *kill you*!" Bailey's voice comes from their back door and Janie's smile falls fast.

I can't help but give her the same evil smile she'd given me as I taunt, "Good luck."

Bailey looks freakin' adorable when she storms out of the house. She's all bedhead and smudged eye makeup as she marches across the lawn in a pajama set that's little more than a skimpy tank top and a pair of short shorts that are so freakin' short—

I tear my eyes away with a rough exhale. Not now.

This is so not the time.

I turn to greet my mom as Janie turns to face Bailey, her hands held up in surrender. "It was for your own good."

"You disabled all *of my accounts*?" Bailey's voice is rising to a glass-shattering screech behind me, but that's nowhere near as terrifying as the unadulterated joy on my mother's face.

Oh no.

"You and Bailey?" Her eyes are painfully wide as she looks from me to the shrill, raging, bed-headed cutie stalking toward Jane on the neighboring lawn.

I hold my hands up. "Mom, it's not what you—"

She grips my face between her hands. "This is wonderful!"

I flinch, mainly because she's crushing my cheeks in her enthusiasm. "Mom," I start.

"Seriously, Zack, this is the best news. I mean, I always suspected there was something there between you two. You'd have to be blind to miss it. But, oh honey, to finally see you happy..."

She's gushing, plain and simple. There's no stopping her now, so I give up with a sigh, not bothering to chime in until she says the words that set off alarm bells. "She'll be such a good influence. You need that. You have so much *potential*."

And there it is. The P word. The most despised word in the English language...

For me, at least.

"Okay, all right," I cut in, hoping to change the topic. "I get it. You're happy."

"But..." Her chin goes back and her brows come down. My mom is clearly putting the pieces together. "But what about Grayson? I thought he was dating—"

"Not now, Mom, okay?" I glance over my shoulder, but Bailey's too busy reaming out her sister to be paying any attention.

"Okay, fine." My mom leans over to call past me. "Morning, Bailey!"

Bailey stops her tirade and blinks twice before a wide smile covers her face, taking her from adorable to hot in one point three seconds flat. "Hi, Mrs. Myers!"

My mom beams right back at her. "I was just telling Zack he should invite you over for dinner tonight—"

"You were?" I interrupt.

She ignores me. "We're cooking out since it's such nice weather."

"Oh, uh..." Bailey's eyes are wide and startled. She looks to me for help, but I got nothin'.

"Janie, you should come too," my mom continues, excitement lacing every word.

Janie's grin is sheer trouble as she glances between me and Bailey. "I wouldn't miss it. Thanks, Mrs. Myers."

The two of them exchange a few more blissfully happy interactions as Bailey and I look on in silence. When they've both walked away, Bailey walks over to me, barefoot and scantily clad, and way too hot for her own good.

She's also sporting a worried look. "We can't let your mom think this is real."

I cross my arms. "Uh huh. And are *you* going to be the one to tell her what we're really doing and why?"

She winces in response.

"That's what I thought."

"I feel bad though." Her tone's sulky, which is just as rare as seeing her disheveled.

Again...stupidly cute. I have to fight the urge to reach for her.

Instead, I back up a step. There is no doubt in my mind that my mom is watching us right now through the back window, and that's creeping me out.

"Look, I don't exactly relish the idea of lying to my mom either," I say. "But I can guarantee she's not going to approve of what we're doing."

Plus, she'd be crushed to know that her great shining hope is really just a mirage.

My mom's stopped with the motivational speeches, for the most part. She's finally come to grips with the fact that I'll never be some overachiever earning a scholarship for a good school. She's even starting to suspect that I don't plan on going to *any* school after graduation. *Ever*.

But I know she's going to get the wrong idea if she thinks Bailey is my girlfriend.

I sigh. "Trust me, if I knew how to tell her this is a lie, I would."

Bailey bites her lip for a second. "So, what do you want to do then?"

She doesn't mean for it to sound suggestive, this much I know. But between the skimpy pajamas, the heavy-lidded eyes, and the just-rolled-out-of-bed look she's got going on, her question goes straight to the dirtiest part of my brain.

I study her a little longer than I mean to. She's not wearing a bra. And I wish to God I hadn't noticed that, because now there's no unknowing this fact.

My mouth goes dry as I drag my eyes up the length of her neck and to her lips, which are pressed together in a thin line as she waits impatiently for my answer.

This close I can see that her eyes are red-rimmed from crying, and that's exactly what I need to snap out of it. Hotness be damned, the girl is heartbroken and it's still kinda my fault.

I mean, it's Grayson's fault. Obviously. But I'm definitely...involved.

And that's gotta be why I have this crazy urge to protect her right now. This desperate need to make it all better for her.

At this moment, all I want is to make her smile.

"Come to dinner." My voice comes out way more gruff than it should.

I clear my throat as her brows furrow in confusion.

"Yeah?" she says.

"Yeah." I shrug. "Why not?"

Her eyes widen, and I get the impression she could think of many reasons why going along with this act in front of my mother might be a bad idea. All probably accurate.

"There's another party tonight," she says by way of a non-answer. "At Macy's."

I stare in disbelief. "And you...want to go?"

She lifts a shoulder. "Not really. I mean, I never even liked parties when I *wasn't* the cheating whore who broke Grayson's heart."

I flinch. Clearly Janie hadn't deleted her accounts quickly enough.

To my surprise, though, Bailey's lips are curving up in a wry smile. "So no, I don't particularly want to go. But we should, right?"

She catches her lower lip with her teeth again, and I just barely swallow a groan. God damn, this girl is sexy first thing in the morning.

"That's the next part of the plan, isn't it?" she continues. "Let everyone see us together and act like we're happily in love?"

I don't immediately answer, and she arches her brows in a prompt. But that's when I see it—that worry is back in her eyes.

I don't know whether to laugh or groan in exasperation when I realize what's going on here. It's not enough for Bailey Tucker to make her cheating ex pay. Oh no. She has to do it perfectly.

The girl is a perfectionist even when it comes to revenge.

I have to swallow down the sudden urge to pull her into my arms and laugh.

Don't worry, Janie. Despite it all, Bailey is still so very...Bailey.

Laughing will not go over well, however, so I move in closer until she's tilting her head back to meet my gaze. "Bailey, if this thing between us were real, and I'd finally won Grayson's girl away from him after lusting after her for years..."

Her eyes widen and her lips part as she waits for me to continue.

I lean in closer, like I'm letting her in on a secret. "Do you really think I'd share you with the world?"

She blinks.

"Do you think if this were real that I'd let you face Grayson and his catty friends?"

"I don't know," she mumbles. "The point is to be seen."

"No, the point is to make people believe we're really into each other." I reach out and tuck one of those wispy locks back behind her ear.

Apparently, it's a thing that I do now, and I can't bring myself to stop. "I promise you, Bailey, if this were real—there's no way we'd be going to a crowded party tonight."

She blinks, and her eyes look a little dazed. "What would we do?"

A smile tugs at my lips. "Well, first we'd probably have dinner with my mom and your sister to avoid my mother's wrath."

She chokes on a laugh. "And then?"

I don't think she means to sound so flirty, but I can't stop my gaze from dropping to her lips. A surge of need makes my muscles tense as I fight for reason.

This isn't real.

But try telling that to my body. It's responding to hers like it just can't wait to relive that kiss. Her lips are parted, and I hear her uneven breathing, and...

I'm almost positive she feels it too.

"What would we do after dinner?" Her voice is breathless and so effing sexy I feel that heat pounding through my veins.

"You'd stay to watch a movie," I say. "Your sister would leave, my mom would go out, and you and I would—" I cut myself off with a sharp inhale.

She blinks a few times, still looking adorably dazed.

"We'd what?" she whispers.

And now I know she feels it. I'm positive she wants to kiss me again too.

That thought makes my pulse skyrocket and I almost lose my shit and tug her into my arms right here and now—in broad daylight and in plain sight of both our families.

I lean down a little closer and lower by voice. "We'd...watch a movie."

The lie is so obvious, so not at all what either of us is imagining, but it earns me a cute little smile.

"A movie," she repeats, and I know the break in tension is helping her to calm down.

God, I want to reach for her. I want to hold her close and rub her back until the last of her worry disappears and she melts into me.

"Okay." She backs up a step and I watch her chest rise and fall with a deep breath. "But I pick the movie."

I smile at the unexpected teasing note in her voice. "Deal."

She's still backing away, and there are questions in the air. Questions that I don't even know how to ask.

"Deal," she echoes quietly. And I'm pretty sure she's just as confused as I am.

We have a deal, that much is clear.

But I don't think either of us really knows what we've just agreed to.

## OLD SCHOOL, NEW WORLD

### **Bailey**

I'M AVOIDING THE INEVITABLE, and we both know it.

Still, I can't quite bring myself to walk over to the faded old couch where Zack's sprawled to sit down beside him. My sister's gone back home, and his mom has mysteriously disappeared just like he'd predicated, and we're alone.

We are so *very* alone.

My mouth's gone dry and for a second I can't even bring myself to look over at the couch, let alone walk toward it.

What is wrong with me? I've never been this nervous before. At least, not around Zack. It's weird, and I don't like it.

"You want to watch a movie or are you just gonna hover in the middle of the room all night?" He sounds lazily amused, and that only puts me more on edge.

I avoid joining him on the couch a little longer. Instead, I walk over to their TV. "I can't believe you guys still have a DVD player."

He laughs under his breath. "Yeah, well, we're old school like that." I glance over at him and he shrugs. "Plus, we're poor. If it ain't broke, we don't fix it. Or give it to Goodwill, which is probably where it belongs."

"Fair enough." I walk a few steps to the cabinet beside the TV. "I see that goes for your DVD collection too."

"Hey, there are some classics there," he says.

I run a finger over his collection of *The Mighty Ducks* movies. "Uh huh."

He turns on the TV and the sound of it makes me jump. I know he notices because I hear his soft laugh behind me.

Great. He's laughing at me. I turn to face him. "I thought I was going to pick."

He holds out the remote like a challenge. Or maybe like bait. To get the remote, I have to join him on the couch.

Which is not a big deal.

Or...it shouldn't be a big deal.

With a sharp inhale I head over, snatch it out of his hands, and plop down beside him, ignoring another low laugh at my expense.

He knows I'm nervous. *I* know I'm nervous.

This is so stupid.

I click the icon for Netflix, because apparently his DVD collection isn't our only option, and the opening sound fills the air as it turns on.

I'm only half paying attention as I scroll through the options, but I can feel some of the tension seeping from my muscles as I do. At least flipping through shows and movies gives me something to do.

After I've scrolled through three different categories, he sighs loudly. "Okay, Smurfette. Hit me. What's your problem?"

I turn to face him for the first time since I sat down, and he's so close it makes my mouth go dry again.

But the stupid Smurfette nickname sort of offsets the newfound nerves that come with being this close to Zack, and I spit out the first issue that comes to mind.

It also happens to be the easiest one to talk about. "I feel guilty about your mom."

One corner of his mouth twitches and I know what's coming before he even says it. "I feel guilty about *your* mom."

"Don't be gross."

His smile is quick and sudden, and it steals the air from my lungs. "Okay, fine. Saint Bailey feels guilty. Duly noted." He arches his brows. "Is that it?"

No. Of course not. He knows that's not what has me sitting so straight my spine hurts, and it's definitely not why my belly is a pit of nerves.

I turn back to the TV. I have to pick something. I don't even care what. We can't keep sitting here in silence with nothing to focus on but the sheer proximity of our bodies.

At least, that's all *I* can focus on. It's a two-person loveseat, which means there's just enough space for the two of us, and no space in between.

I'm *insanely* aware of that lack of space. I'm acutely attuned to the way his jean-clad thigh brushes against mine, and how I'm so close I can smell his soap and feel his body heat.

I don't realize I've stopped scrolling through movies until Zack comments on the one I've stopped on. "I would not have pegged you for a horror fan."

"I'm not." I blink and the screen comes into focus, and I immediately start scrolling again.

His laughter is a low rumble, and I swear sitting this close, I can feel it.

He shifts, and I tense. I think he's going to wrap an arm around my shoulders, but he stops so he's half facing me and I'm forced to do the same or have him stare at the side of my face.

"What?" I say when he just stares at me in expectant silence.

"Want to tell me why you're so freaked?"

I clamp my mouth shut and he sighs. But while his sigh is exasperated, he's wearing this funny little smile and his eyes are soft with laughter.

That smile makes my heart squeeze and my belly takes a dive like I've just dropped into a freefall.

I turn my head to look at the TV again. "I don't know," I mumble. "It's just..." I clear my throat. "It's weird to be here like this." I shrug. My brain feels sluggish and I can't find the right words, so I settle for another easy explanation. "It's been a while since I've been here. Since we've hung out just the two of us, you know?"

He gives a short laugh. "Whose fault is that?"

I snap my head to the side to see his expression, because his tone...

There's an edge there that I haven't heard in a while. Not since before the conversation when he told me Grayson was cheating on me.

His expression gives nothing away, but his eyes aren't so soft anymore, and that sexy little smile is back to being a smirk.

My brows come down because his question feels like a dig. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He rolls his eyes a little and now it's his turn to face forward, like he's suddenly interested in whatever movie it is I've landed on. I've lingered on it for so long the trailer is playing in the background, but I barely notice.

My heart's starting to pound too quickly, and I can't tell if it's anxiety or anger or...something else that has my pulse racing.

"Zack?" I prompt. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He throws his hands up, clearly annoyed now. "I don't know, just..." He turns and his gaze collides with mine. "Whose fault is that?" he repeats. "We used to hang all the time."

Before Grayson. That's what he means. And just like that, my stomach churns with guilt because I'm remembering Toni's accusations.

I never really *stopped* thinking about what Toni said to me the other day.

I mean, aside from her comment about Grayson cheating on me from day one, I keep thinking about her take on how our friendship ended. I hate that she saw it that way. And not just because I hate being the bad guy—although, I do. I can admit that.

But more than that, I hate that I hurt her, whether it was intentional or not.

And it *wasn't* intentional. I mean, I can see it from her point of view, I guess. But it wasn't like I'd ever meant to leave her behind. It just sort of...happened. Grayson's social life became my social life. His friends became my friends.

It's a crappy excuse, but it's the truth. It wasn't intentional. I hadn't *meant* to be a selfish jerk back then.

But then...does anyone *really* set out to be a self-absorbed asshat?

Probably not. I doubt most people mean to be selfish and hurtful.

I've been reliving that time in my life non-stop lately—usually when I'm supposed to be sleeping, and...and she was right. I hadn't invited her along with Grayson's crew. I told myself Toni wouldn't have fit in at the kind of parties Grayson had been taking me to—that she would've been miserable.

But I can't remember a single time I'd let her decide that.

And maybe...maybe I'd been worried that Grayson would be annoyed if I'd asked her to tag along. Or...

Or maybe *I* would have been embarrassed.

I shut my eyes as a wave of guilt and shame washes over me and leaves me weak. I owe Toni an apology. A real one. But Zack...?

I narrow my eyes on him and bring myself back to the moment. This isn't about Toni, this is about me and Zack. And ours is a totally different story.

Zack's eyes are moving over my face and I wonder how much he's just seen. "You okay?"

If he'd said anything else, I would have turned away or maybe even made an excuse to skip the movie and go back home. But his voice had softened with concern, and I can't avoid this conversation any longer.

"No," I say. "Not really."

His brows come down. *Are we really doing this right now?* 

I swear I can hear his thoughts.

I hold his gaze. Yeah. We're totally doing this.

I pick up where I left off. "It's weird to be back here because we used to hang out all the time, but then—"

"Then Grayson came along." He cuts me off and his voice is hard, his eyes dangerous.

I draw in a shaky breath as my belly clenches tight. I hate conflict. I avoid confrontation. So, what am I doing right now?

I should let it go. It's ancient history—isn't that what Toni kept saying? But it's not history. Not between me and Zack. Not anymore.

"That's not what happened," I say.

He looks away, but I catch the way his nostrils flare, the way his jaw clenches. "Isn't it? Because that's how I remember it." He swings his gaze back to meet mine and it hits me like a punch in the gut. The accusations.

No, this isn't ancient history. Not for us.

"Things weren't good between us before Grayson came along," I say.

"Yeah. I remember. You became obsessed with grades and honor roll and—"

"And you stopped trying." The words come tumbling out.

He stares at me for a long moment and I have no idea what he's thinking. "You were *trying* enough for both of us."

I flinch because somehow it sounds like an insult. From him, it is. He could never understand why I wanted to fit in at school, or why I cared what my teachers and my parents thought. He never understood because he didn't care. And he thought anyone who did was lame.

Probably still does.

I take a deep breath and fiddle with the remote that's still in my hands. "You used to care about stuff," I say. "About your future and your family and...and me. You went from being someone who cared about everything to someone who cared about nothing."

My heart's climbing up into my throat like it wants to escape. This whole topic makes me want to cry and scream.

I've tried not to think about me and Zack over the past few years. It's easier to just say that we grew apart.

And we did.

But it freakin' sucked. And if I'm being honest, it hurt. Losing him as a friend *hurt*, and it never stopped hurting.

He interrupts with a harsh curse under his breath. "Just because I stopped giving a crap about school—"

"I don't mean school." My voice is louder than intended, but I can't control it. "I'm not *just* talking about school. I mean...everything. You stopped coming to my softball games and babysitting the twins with me—"

His derisive snort cuts me off. "Do you even hear yourself right now? You're upset because I bailed on babysitting and softball games?"

"Maybe they weren't fun, but we did them together. And suddenly you were too cool." I sound like a moron, but the truth is coming out and I can't stop it. I don't *want* to stop it. It's been a long time coming, and judging by the way his muscles are tensing and the flush in his cheeks, he's just as pissed as I am.

"I wasn't *too cool*," he says, his brow furrowed in frustration. "I was..." He lets out a harsh exhale. "I was hurting, okay? My dad left and I was pissed."

That stuns me into silence, but not for long. "So, what? You just gave up?" My voice is high and tight with unshed tears that have been building for years. "You just stopped caring?"

He thrusts a hand through his hair with another muttered curse. "Why does it even matter?" His glance my way is bitter, at best. "You moved on, right?"

I flinch. The words have an edge, but it's the pain I hear underneath them that freakin' guts me.

"It matters because I missed you." My heart is pounding and my lungs feel so winded it's a struggle to get the words out. "I miss you, Zack." My

voice is too loud and the words seem to echo in the answering silence.

His throat works. And when his gaze finally meets mine, it's heavy and dark. "I'm right here."

Silence. A heartbeat. The air is thick with tension that needs to break.

I don't know who moves first. I think maybe it's me.

Our mouths collide in a kiss that's harsh and angry, and...explosive. Then he pulls me close, and I'm in his arms, kissing him with all the pain and frustration that I don't know how to express.

The kiss is hot and wet and...urgent. Frantic.

Desperate.

I'm on the verge of tears, but I can't get enough. I need this kiss like I need air.

His lips are bruising and harsh, and he kisses me without tenderness or reason. But my answering kiss is just as hungry.

My fingers are clenching his T-shirt and his groan sends a tremor racing through me. The heat from his body is scorching and I am on *fire*.

His lips slant over mine as he crushes me to him so we're pressed together. One of his hands slides over my hip, my thigh—and then he's tugging my leg over his so I'm half straddling him.

His arms are a vice around me, clutching me tight, but even *that's* not enough.

It's like we can't get close enough. We can't stop touching and kissing, and it's still not enough.

Our lips are frantic as they meet and cling. He tastes like heaven and he smells just as good. His scent is all around me and it's gone straight to my head, making me dizzy. He's nipping at my bottom lip as I pant for air.

I am *drowning* in sensations.

I am freakin' lost at sea and my grip on his shoulders is the only thing keeping me afloat.

When his tongue slides against mine, I melt. My insides are molten lava and...I've never felt like this before. I've made out with Grayson plenty, and I thought it was good. It was safe and pleasant and...nothing at all like this.

Nothing in my life has ever prepared me for this, not even the epic kiss at work last night. Because that was just a taste, and it started off as something dirty and wrong and...not for us.

But this kiss is ours. There's no one else here in this room.

One of his hands moves up to cup the back of my head as he tastes and teases, deepens and devours. He pulls me fully onto his lap.

Pressed against him like this, I feel his heart pounding in his chest.

I can't get enough. And what starts as desperation and urgency grows dangerously close to panic. I'm trying to get closer, to touch more, and taste more and...

What is happening to me? Reality pierces this heady haze of desire.

He must feel me tense, because he slows the pace of the kiss and gentles his grip. The kiss turns less frantic. Our lips never part, but the urgency settles, and soon his lips are teasing and tender and...sweet.

So freakin' sweet as he slides his mouth over mine with infinite patience. Like he's not going anywhere.

Like this is just the beginning.

My chest swells and tightens at this new aching sweetness, and I don't know what to make of it.

My heart trips and skitters in my chest, and I can't tell if it's excitement or terror. Or both.

I don't know what to make of any of this.

And Zack knows it.

"You're okay," he says in a low voice as he trails kisses across my cheek and down my jaw. "I've got you. You're okay, Bailey."

I don't know how he knew that's what I needed to hear, but it takes away that edge of panic, and then I'm back to drowning in this new world of blazing heat and overwhelming need.

I sink against him, letting him hold my weight as I kiss him the way he's kissing me.

Like we have all the time in the world. Like there's nothing in this world more important than exploring and tasting and learning each other.

Yup, I am definitely back to drowning in sensations. But I'm not lost at sea.

Zack's got me, and he's holding me tight.

And while I might not have a clue what this means...

I also know that there's no place I'd rather be.

### **EIGHTEEN**

## WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH BAILEY TUCKER?

#### Zack

THE NEXT MORNING I'm leaning down so close to Bailey that my nose brushes against hers. Her soft laughter is a breath of warm air against my lips.

"You smell like hot chocolate," I inform her as we continue our epic PDA on the sidewalk in front of Windy Falls' front gates.

I'm not working today, and Bailey swears Grayson's off today too, but Bailey has a shift so I'm here on fake boyfriend duty. Plus, I'm a little worried that Grayson will show.

He hasn't said a word to Bailey yet—at least, as far as I know. No texts, no calls.

And that's put me on edge.

I know Grayson, and he's not the kind of guy to sit back and let another dude take his girl.

I pull back and squint down at her. "Seriously, Smurfette. Who has hot chocolate for breakfast?"

She purses her lips like she's thinking this over, and it's so stinkin' cute. "Keebler elves?" she offers. "And maybe children under the age of ten." I start to laugh as she adds, "But *I* had a mocha latte with breakfast."

"Ah," I lean down and kiss her. "Much more mature."

She smirks. "That's me. Mature."

I have so many dirty jokes whirling in my head, I don't even know where to start. Bailey rolls her eyes like she can see it coming and is not having it. So, I settle for, "That's you, all right. Rated M."

She snickers, and then she opens her mouth to retort but she's cut off by a too-loud comment coming from a girl entering the park to our right. "Oh look, it's the whore and her new boytoy."

Bailey stiffens, but neither of us looks over to see who said it. Instead, I take one of my hands from Bailey's waist and hold it up to flip them off. Bailey's eyes never leave mine, and I love the fact that she's laughing right now. Her eyes crinkle at the edges and little dimples appear at the corners of her mouth. She's genuinely laughing about the fact that I'm giving some Graysonite dipshits the bird.

Huh. This was not how I'd expected Bailey to react on her first day back at work after the public breakup. Honestly, I was just as worried as Janie about how Bailey's going to deal with all the hate coming her way in the aftermath. But seeing her laugh off these bitches just now?

A tension in my chest eases. She'll be okay.

And besides, she's Bailey. She might be a pain in the ass, but she's likeable. She's nice to everyone, with a smile for all. She's basically our town's very own Type-A Cinderella. Not *everyone*'s going to turn on her.

At the very least, I'm almost positive Toni's got her back.

She reaches up and touches the spot between my eyebrows. "What's with this?" she asks. "You look worried."

"Worried, huh?" I reach up to touch the spot as well, shaking my head in mock disappointment. "I was going for brooding."

She laughs again, and I'm feeling like the king of the world. She's in a good mood this morning, which is a relief.

Things were...weird when she left my house last night.

Okay, fine. She freaked.

My mom inadvertently interrupted the makeout session of the century when she passed by the living room on her way to the kitchen. She didn't even walk into the living room or anything, but Bailey jumped away from me like she'd been electrocuted, and then she'd started babbling a million miles an hour about her work schedule, and her parents, and how she had to get home.

All the while, her eyes were wide and panicked like a spooked animal.

So yeah, she'd freaked, and I couldn't exactly blame her. It was crazy enough that we were pretending to be a couple. It was even more mind-blowing to discover that we actually have chemistry. Like, insane, off-the-charts, hot-as-hell chemistry.

But then, on top of that, things got *real* last night.

The kissing was hotter than hot, and I'm pretty sure Bailey was freaked by that. But it was the conversation before it that messed with my head.

Which was why I didn't try to stop her when she walked out the front door, even though everything in me wanted to haul her back into my arms. Instead, I just waved her off and told her to have a good night.

We both needed some time to figure shit out. And Bailey...? Well, she clearly needed space in a big way.

If there's one thing I've always known about Bailey, it's this—she needs alone time to process stuff. I still remember this one time when we were kids...

I was all pissed because I'd thought Bailey was giving me the cold shoulder after some stupid little spat we'd had over who was better at Mario Kart.

My mom knew better. *Give her time*, she'd said. *That girl's a thinker*. *What am I*? I'd asked.

She'd laughed and tousled my hair. *I guess that makes you a doer.* 

"You're doing it again," Bailey said, a little smile tugging at her lips. "You're brooding."

I laugh because...*this*? The teasing, the laughing. This is rare. I haven't seen this Bailey in way too long.

*I missed you*. I still hear her heart-wrenching voice from last night. *I* miss you.

I swallow hard because...yeah. I get it. I know what she meant.

"I might be brooding," I start. Then I spot another group of Graysonites heading our way so I lean down again, my mouth next to her ear as I tug her closer until she's resting against my chest. "And you are in a suspiciously good mood."

I feel her lips curve up against my cheek as her smile widens. "Am I?"

"You are." I run my hands down her back, and I'll be honest—I no longer have any clue how much of this is for our audience and how much is for me.

Because I like touching Bailey Tucker. In fact, I might be addicted to the feel of her, which is...

I don't know what it is. But it's probably not good. And there's a sinking sensation in my gut that says it's only going to lead to trouble. And —oh shit.

I really *am* brooding.

She pulls back and cocks her head to the side so she can see me. "I should go. The souvenir shop isn't going to open itself."

I tsk. "And wouldn't it be a shame if someone had to wait to purchase a crappy overpriced Windy Falls mug?"

I wait for her to smack my arm or give me that prissy, pursed-lip scowl she's been aiming in my direction these last few years. But instead, she just rolls her eyes, laughing softly as she pulls away. "Fine. Maybe I'm not saving the world with plastic mugs. But I do need the money they're paying me to make sure it opens on time."

I reluctantly let her go. And the crazy part? That reluctance is definitely not for show. I really don't want to let her go, and that's...

Nope. Still don't know how I feel about that. But as she turns to leave, her pleated uniform skirt twirling around her thighs, I call out after her. "Your good mood is creeping me out. You know that, right?"

She turns her head to flash me a grin that hits me in the gut like a sucker punch. "Maybe that's my plan."

Other employees are walking past and she makes a show out of turning to face me, walking backward as she blows me a kiss. "Maybe I like to keep you on your toes."

Holy shit. Her tone is flirty, and sexy, and carefree, and—I'm just about ready to chase after her so I can kiss her again.

Instead, I shout so she can hear me as she reaches the employee entrance. "Who are you and what have you done with Bailey Tucker?"

She turns away with a laugh and joins a group of younger employees I don't know. They look like first years, and while they seem surprised that Bailey's decided to chat them up, they're greeting her with smiles.

So yeah, I can let out that breath I've been holding, because she's going to be just fine.

And me?

I'm still standing here, staring at the gate where she disappeared, wondering what the hell is going on here. I'm still wondering minutes later

when I finally turn to leave.

I head back to my car, and I don't even see where I'm going because my head is spinning.

Between the crazy hot kiss last night, the major talk we'd had before that, the way she'd freaked out and ran away, and now this morning's happy-go-lucky, flirty Bailey, I'm not at all sure where things stand.

And I really shouldn't care so much. It's not like I'm one to get caught up in labels, and I hate to talk about feelings and shit. I look back at the spot where Bailey had stood. Where she'd blown me a kiss and then walked away.

I am officially clueless as to what's going on between us, and for the first time in my life...that is not okay.

My world feels like it's been flipped upside down, and I'm so messed up by that, I don't see it coming.

I'm about two feet away from my car before I realize that Grayson is leaning against my hood.

### NINETEEN LIKE AN OUTSIDER

#### Zack

### LET ME REPEAT.

Grayson is leaning.

Against. My. Hood.

Like we're in a scene straight out of *The Outsiders* or something. And yes, Bailey made me watch the movie way back when, and no, I'm not even remotely scared of Grayson Abler.

But still...

Shit.

I'm not in the mood, you know?

I let out a loud exhale as he straightens. The good news is, he's alone. At least I'm not about to have my ass kicked by the entire football team. So...that's cool.

I don't bother to hide my irritation. "What do you want, Grayson?"

He's giving me this glare that's probably supposed to be intimidating, but honestly it's kinda hard not to laugh. His nostrils are flaring, a muscle in his jaw is clenching.

He's like a freakin' walking definition of 'roid rage.

He doesn't answer right away, and for the first time since Bailey and I blew up his world, I get to enjoy it. Without her here to worry about, I can

actually revel in the fact that I got one over on the asswipe who'd betrayed me and broken Bailey's heart.

"If you're looking for Bailey, I'm afraid you missed her," I say with a shit-eating grin that I know will drive him nuts.

His eyes are dark with anger as his lips curl up in a sneer. "You think you won, Myers?"

I stop and look around like I'm considering that. "Yeah. I guess I do."

"You don't get it, do you?" Grayson's voice is taunting, the look in his eyes cruel. "She'll never choose you, Zack. Never."

I widen my eyes. "Oh yeah? Then why was she with *me* last night instead of you?"

He shrugs, but he can't hide his anger. It's right there in his eyes. He hates the fact that she cheated on him, but what he hates most is that it was with me.

I see myself through his eyes then, and...it's not a good look for me, to be honest.

I'm the guy he looks down on. I'm his 'friend' because I make him look good by comparison. He's the rich, popular jock with good grades and a plan for his future.

And I'm the screwup who'll never measure up. And we both know it.

Or, more like...we both *knew* it. Until I took his girl.

He shakes his head. "I'll admit it. I was shocked—"

"Look, man, it wasn't personal," I start.

Of course it was personal. But I need to play the part, right?

He starts to laugh. "Nah, man. I wasn't surprised that *you* went for *her*. I just didn't think Bailey had it in her to go slumming."

I give a huff of laughter and try not to let him see how much the words get to me.

But he knows. He sees the cut and he digs deeper. "You know, I always knew I couldn't trust you with her. I saw the way you watched her."

I stare at him. What is he talking about?

"Why do you think I never told you anything about our relationship?" His smile fades. He can't quite keep his cool. "I never told you a goddamn thing because I always knew if you saw any opening, you'd pounce."

All I can do is stare now, because...that's why?

That's why I didn't know he'd been cheating.

"You were so obvious," Grayson continues. "So pathetic. And you know what, you proved me right. You're just as much of a backstabbing traitor as I knew you'd be."

I give him my best cocky grin as I wag a finger in his face. "*But* I'm the backstabbing traitor who's hooking up with Bailey, so…" I pretend to think it over. "Yup. I'm okay with that."

He scoffs. "You're such a prick."

"Maybe." I shrug. "But apparently Bailey likes this prick." I glance down at my crotch like the jackass that I am.

This time he outright laughs. It's cruel and it's cold, and I feel like I'm just now seeing the real Grayson Abler.

"Please." He shakes his head, still laughing. "The girl won't sleep with you."

"Well, she definitely won't be sleeping with *you*." I'm seething with rage, but I'll be damned if he sees. "Not sure if you got the memo, but your Bae? She's with me now."

My muscles might be twitching with rage, but I look like a goddamn Zen master compared to Grayson. His lips are twitching and his face turns so red it's practically purple. "She'll be begging me to take her back once she's gotten you out of her system. I'm her future. I know it. She knows it. You know it too—"

"Do I know this, though?" I rock back on my heels, an obnoxious little smile on my lips as I pretend to ponder this. "Do I really?"

His certainty makes me physically sick. I see it in his eyes. He's furious, yes. But he's still absolutely certain that Bailey will take him back. I want to kick his ass for Bailey's sake, but I hold on to control with everything I've got.

Because I might be a screwup and an idiot when it comes to school and shit, but when it comes to Grayson?

I know exactly how to take him down.

He takes my silence for a win.

Idiot.

But Grayson recovers. Or, at least…he doesn't look like he's going to explode. "She'll come back to me because Bailey's smart. And she *needs* me."

I can't help myself. "That's not what she said last night."

Okay, fine. I'm not exactly proud that I basically resorted to a 'that's what she said' joke, but I'm *this* close to losing my shit, so I'm pretty pleased I came up with any response at all.

He laughs, and the sound is unhinged. "I know she's not sleeping with you, asshole. And she never will. You know that, right?" He arches his brows as his smile twists into a sneer. "She's still a virgin."

I swear I feel a blood vessel burst in my brain. But I stick to my plan. "Is that why you cheated on her?"

His head jerks back at that. The shock in his eyes is so effing satisfying. *Yeah*, *that's right*, *jackass*.

I know.

I don't give him a chance to respond.

"Relax, asshole. Bailey never knew." Not a total lie. She didn't know... before.

The fact that she knows now? I'm definitely not playing that hand.

The beauty of this plan is that Bailey cheated on him without knowing that he'd cheated first. *She* left *him*. I won't take that win from her.

But that doesn't mean I won't use the fact that I know to make him squirm.

"She never knew," I say again.

And I hadn't either, but he doesn't need to know that. From the moment Bailey told me about the rumors of his cheating, I knew how I'd play this.

Like I knew. Like I've always known.

Like I've been planning to steal his girl all along.

"I knew," I say, making sure to hold his questioning stare. "But I never had the heart to tell Bailey."

"Yeah, right." He scoffs. But there's doubt there. I've thrown him. I can see his mind racing as he wonders how much I know. I swear I can smell his paranoia.

He's scared to death that Bailey knows.

That's right, asshole. You live with that fear.

"That's why she...with you..." Yeah, he can't even form sentences now, and that's a good start.

"Nope." I pop the *P* like an asshole. I let him see my smug satisfaction as I lean in close to spell it out. "I didn't have to tell her."

His glare is part rage, part confusion.

Now it's my turn to laugh, and God it feels good. "It was clear to anyone with eyes that she was over you. All I had to do was give her a ride home..." I throw my arms out wide with my best cocky grin. "And let nature take its course."

He comes for me with a curse, but this time I'm ready and I land a punch to his jaw before he can hit me. My knuckles shriek in pain, but he goes reeling back with a satisfying grunt before coming at me again.

He manages to get one shot in before I knee him in the gut and jam another fist in his face.

The dude might be tough, but he's no fighter. He only knows how to be aggressive on a football field where there are rules and he has backup.

He doesn't know what a real fight is. But in the years after my dad left, I found out. And now, for once, those wasted nights getting into trouble, picking fights and taunting strangers just to overcome the fear of pain and learn how to protect against it...

It's finally paying off now. I step back and watch Grayson spit blood, bent over and hissing in pain.

It's not enough though. He deserves so much worse for what he did to Bailey. What he did, what he says, what he thinks.

She'll be begging me to take her back.

"You're pathetic," I growl, enjoying the way he backs away from me in fear as I stalk toward him. "She deserves better. She's always deserved better than you."

"Screw you." he backs away, spitting and panting.

He looks as weak as he is now. Underneath all that charm and confidence, he's just an effing coward.

I just wish Bailey was here to see him like this. If she saw him like this she might actually believe that it had nothing to do with her.

The guy needed to be fawned over. He couldn't stand not being the center of the universe. And Bailey...

It's why he still needs Bailey. He needs her unconditional love.

"You know, Grayson, I'm gonna do you a favor, for old times' sake." I wait until he looks up at me from where he's kneeling on the ground. "I'm not going to tell Bailey that you cheated on her."

I say, all casual-like as I head toward my driver's side door. I've caught my breath and I sound almost normal as I continue. "But my guess is, she'll

find out. Now that you've split, rumors are flying, and we both know Bailey's not an idiot."

He's swiping blood from his bottom lip when he stands. "I'm not worried."

Bullshit. He's terrified.

"If she knows or not..." He shrugs, giving this new cool guy act his all. "Doesn't matter."

His smirk is so arrogant it takes everything I have not to go back over there, slam him to the ground and pound his head into the pavement.

"Don't kid yourself, Myers." He swipes at his bloody nose, and it's back—that confidence he wears like a second skin. "She'll come back to me. Even if she finds out about my mistakes, she'll forgive me, and we'll be back together by the fall."

I stare at him for a long moment. "You're delusional."

He laughs. He freakin' *laughs*. "Nah, man. You're just naive. Do you honestly think that Bailey's gonna end up with some loser like you? Anyone can see you're the guy who'll wind up a deadbeat dad with a deadend job." He shakes his head, cruel laughter in his eyes as he backs away. "I'm the real deal for Bae, just like she is for me."

I scoff, but it doesn't come out quite right.

He shrugs. "She's slumming it, that's all. I didn't think she had it in her, but I can't really blame her. We all have to have our fun..." He eyes me with a smirk. "Make our mistakes."

He stops walking and stares me down. "But at the end of the day, I'm the one leaving this town. I'm the one with a future."

He shoots me a grin that makes my gut clench and my hands curl into fists. "Enjoy her while you can, Zack." The asshole has the nerve to wink as he walks away. "Trust me, you won't have her for long."

# TWENTY I'M GOOD

## **Bailey**

TONI'S WAITING for me when I get off my shift.

"You know I don't need an escort, right?" I head over to where she's sitting, bent over as she scrolls through something on her phone.

Her curls bounce as she tosses her head back to look up at me. "I just got off too. Figured maybe you'd want some company while you wait for your ride."

I narrow my eyes, but I'm still smiling. "I'd love some company, but I swear I don't need you looking out for me every second of the day."

She ignores that. We've been through this already at lunch, when she sat down beside me at the otherwise empty table in the staff lounge.

Is it fun being a pariah? No. But I wasn't lying when I said I could handle the whispers and the stares. In fact, I've been in a great mood all day, and not even rude comments or mocking laughter can bring me down.

Toni and I are going against the tide as we head toward the exit. There's a concert in the amphitheater tonight—just local musicians and then the main event, a one-hit-wonder band from the nineties. But in this small town, any live music is a big deal.

We have to weave our way through the crowds pouring in, and it means we're smushed together by the time we hit the gates where Zack's supposed to pick me up.

Toni makes no move to leave as I stand at the pickup spot.

I start to laugh. "Honestly, Toni, I appreciate the concern, but I can handle being on my own for a few minutes."

Toni crosses her arms as she turns to face me. "Okay, seriously, Bailey? This whole Little Miss Sunshine routine is killing me." She holds up her phone. "There's no way you're this okay with all the stuff they're saying."

I glance at her phone. "First of all, Janie made it almost impossible for me to read all that stuff." Not that I didn't know what people were saying. I'd seen enough before Janie went all rogue hacker on me.

And what I didn't see, I'd heard when Grayson's friends talked about me in passing at work all day—so loudly I would have had to be deaf not to hear.

"And second..." I shrug because I don't know how to explain now any more than I had earlier today when Zack told me I was creeping him out with my good mood.

The memory makes me grin. "I'm okay. I'm honestly okay today."

Her look says she thinks I've lost my mind. Maybe I have. I don't know. All I know is that this morning, for the first time in weeks, I feel...good. Great, even. Like a weight's been removed from my chest. Like I can take a deep breath for the first time in years.

Nothing's really changed, and yet everything feels different today. I don't know how long this bliss is going to last, but for right now, I want to hold on to it. No one can take it away.

"Grayson." Toni's sharp tone snaps me out of my thoughts. She's looking at someone behind me.

*Oh crap.* I turn slowly.

"Hey, Toni," Grayson says, his attention on my friend. I give her a quick look and see that she's giving him a little smile, and pink stains her cheeks.

Is she...is she *blushing*?

I turn back to Grayson, who shoves his hands in his pockets as his serious gaze meets mine. "Hey, Bae."

You don't get to call me that anymore! I literally have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming that at him.

He tilts his head to the side, his eyes all soft and warm. "You okay?"

I tense. I...did not see this coming. Of all the ways I thought our first post-breakup interaction would go, this was not it.

I nod. "You?"

He shrugs.

For a minute I think neither of us is going to say anything. But the way he's rocking on his heels, the way his hands are shoved into his pockets in that boyish *aw-shucks* kind of way that makes me want to shove a fist in his face...

"Is it true?" I ask.

His eyes widen and I feel Toni tense beside me.

"What?" he asks.

I wet my lips. This is it. My chance to confront him on the lies, the cheating, the betrayal. "I'm hearing all sorts of stuff about you." I take a deep breath. "About you and...other girls."

He flinches. "Bae, I never meant..."

He presses his lips together as he looks upward. His throat works like he might cry or something.

If I hadn't known him for so long, I might have actually felt sorry for him.

But I do know him, so my stomach turns in disgust. I see right through this act, just like I'd always seen through his puppy dog looks and that cutesy tone he'd use when he wanted something.

His gaze drops back down to meet mine and I feel my gut clench like I might puke right here and now. "Bae, I never meant to hurt you. I can explain—"

"Don't. Please." I look around pointedly at where we are, and that's when I see Macy and some of his friends from the football team a few steps back watching.

Macy's smirk says she heard everything.

Grayson shifts forward, his brows coming down in concern. "Is that why...I mean, did you know? Is that why—"

"No." My tone is too harsh and I clear my throat.

There's no way he's winning this round. I can match his lies.

I can out-play this asshole.

I can *do* this.

I force my gaze to soften and my lips curl up in a sad little smile. "I didn't know until today, but I guess..." I heave a big sigh as I shake my head. "I guess it's best this ended when it did."

He takes a step toward me. "Bae, let's talk about this."

"Not now," I say, with another sad shake of my head.

I want to vomit on his shoes. I want to jab my fist into his gut and then knee him in the groin. I want to scream at the top of my lungs.

But I don't. I keep it together.

My head's spinning and adrenaline floods my veins, but I manage to keep up the pretense, because there's no way in hell I'm going to let him see how much he hurt me. I cast a meaningful look toward the parking lot. "Look, Zack's gonna be here any minute—"

"I can't believe you hooked up with *him*." His face twists in anger, and that's when I see it.

I mean, this is when I truly *get it*.

It's not losing me that breaks his heart. It's the fact that I chose Zack that's killing him.

It's the fact that he lost.

Pathetic. He's so effing pathetic, I feel a wave of nausea all over again, but this time the disgust is with myself for not having seen it sooner.

I bite the inside of my cheek so hard I draw blood, and then I land my last blow in the kindest, most gentle tone I can manage. "You know Zack and I have always had a connection." I give a helpless shrug. "I guess we just couldn't deny it any longer."

"Grayson, come on!" Macy calls out, ignoring me entirely as she grabs Grayson's hand and tugs him away from me.

I'm still watching them walk away when Zack reaches me.

"Hey," Zack's out of breath. "You okay?"

I blink up at him because I hadn't even seen him coming. But clearly he'd seen me and Grayson talking because his gaze is roaming over my face like he's searching for injuries.

"I'm fine." I glance over at Toni, who's watching me closely as well. "I'm good."

She rolls her eyes and tells Zack, "She's been saying that all day."

They both turn to me and I shrug. "It's the truth."

Toni looks unconvinced, but Zack gives me this sexy little lopsided smile that makes my belly flip. Happily for everyone, the urge to puke left right along with Grayson so the belly flip doesn't end in disaster.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, letting it sink in. I did it.

Facing Grayson was the last big hurdle, and I survived. "I'm honestly okay."

"That's more than I can say for Grayson," Toni says. She's still watching him walk away, and I can't get a read on her tone. I think maybe she feels sorry for him, which is understandable, I guess.

I mean, if I didn't know him so well, I might have bought his wounded puppy routine too. I don't get a chance to ask her about it because Janie's suddenly at my side and tackling me with a hug that is so not like Janie, it catches me off guard.

"I saw." She's breathless too. "You okay?"

"She's great," Zack answers for me. He's still wearing this knowing smile, like he completely gets how annoying it is that everyone's just waiting for me to fall apart.

But I'm done falling apart. I don't want to waste another second crying over Grayson or worrying about what his friends think of me.

I pat Janie's back because, honestly, this is kinda sweet. She's so *not* the touchy-feely sort, and up until this Grayson disaster I wouldn't have even said we were friends. But she's stepped up in a major way, and I guess that's a silver lining for what's been a terrible few weeks.

"What are you even doing here?" I ask.

She has a part-time job too, but she works at a fast food joint downtown.

"Meeting some friends for the concert tonight," she says. "You going?"

I open my mouth to say no, but Zack cuts me off by whipping out two tickets and waving them in my face. "She is."

I arch a brow. "Is she now?"

He smirks. "I mean, if you're not up for a night out in public yet—"

I snatch the tickets from his hand and turn to face Janie. "We're going."

Toni's already backing away. "Well, I for one have to head home." She flashes me a little smile and a quick wave. "Seems like you're in good hands, so I'm gonna bounce."

"Thanks again," I call after her. "For everything."

She gives another wave as she walks away. When I turn back, I find Janie and Zack both staring at me.

"What?"

Janie presses her lips together and she looks shockingly similar to our mom right now. She'll kill me if I say that though, so I start to walk toward the line so I can file back into the amusement park along with the rest of this crowd. "Janie, I promise I'm fine."

She snorts. "Yeah, like I'm going to believe that after what happened last night."

Zack's response is instant. I can feel him tense beside me as we walk. "What happened last night?"

His voice is mild, but I know what he's thinking.

Last night we made out on his couch.

Last night I had the most epic kiss of my life.

Last night I left his house like a raving lunatic because that kiss was so hot it broke my brain.

I shoot him a quick look, trying to tell him without words that I didn't tell Janie about the kiss. But Janie beats me to it by oversharing on my behalf, as she's prone to do.

"She had the panic attack to end all panic attacks last night," Janie says.

The air rushes from my lungs. *Thanks*, *Janie*.

I swear I can feel Zack's eyes on me, and I pick up my pace like I can outrun his concern and the humiliation this conversation brings up.

I'm not exactly proud of the fact that I'm a neurotic anxious mess. But it's not like Zack doesn't know me or my mental health issues. And Janie *knows* that he knows, so apparently that means it's fine to discuss.

"Seriously, dude," Janie says to Zack as I speed walk ahead of them. "You should've seen her. It was bad. Like, epically bad. I thought I was gonna have to take her to the hospital or something."

Thanks to my speed walking, we're already at the end of the line and there's nowhere for me to run. Janie's still talking to Zack, but his attention is entirely on me.

I know he's piecing it all together. The way I'd freaked after we'd kissed. The way I'd run out of there.

The way I was so happy this morning.

He's confused. And he probably should be. I tug my hair out of my ponytail and run my hands through my hair, more to give myself something to do than in any real attempt to look good.

If I'd known we were sticking around for a concert I would've packed a change of clothes. But instead, I'll be sporting my work uniform of a polo shirt and a pleated skirt to a rock concert, and trying not to freeze my butt off when the sun goes down.

I'm not really paying much attention to Janie and Zack.

I am back to being good, dang it. I refuse to let anyone bring me down today. And I really, *really* don't feel like chatting about last night's descent into hell.

I'm not exaggerating. Panic attacks are pretty much hell on earth, in my opinion, and I'm more than happy to leave it in the past.

But Janie and Zack are watching me, and I'm shuffling forward, wishing this line would go a whole lot faster.

"What up, bitches?" Janie's best friend Alexandra shouts at us from the parking lot.

The tall girl with her spiky black hair is with a few of Janie's other friends. When they reach us, Janie gets caught up in a conversation about people and places I know nothing about.

Zack moves forward to stand next to me, and now we're basically alone. "So, last night..."

I bite my lip. I so don't want to talk about last night.

I mean, I do. I know we *should*. We avoided the topic all morning when he'd driven me to work. But I still have no idea what to say about last night. Not about the way he made me feel, or the fact that it's *Zack* who made me feel that way.

I'd been making out with Grayson for *years* without ever once feeling anything close to that raging inferno that Zack had managed to bring out in me with one heated kiss.

So no. I'm not sure what to say.

Zack doesn't seem all that certain, either, because he's shifting uncomfortably beside me, painfully silent.

Which would be kinda funny if I wasn't so uncomfortable too.

So...here we are, the two newest residents in the world of awkward.

Finally, with a sharp exhale, he turns to face me. "Did I make you have a panic attack?"

My lips part in surprise. Is that what he's worried about? I shake my head without even having to think. "No." But that's not quite right. "I mean, yes. Sort of. But not like *that*."

His brows hitch up slightly at that lame response.

I take a deep breath and try again as we follow the people in line ahead of us. "Maybe a little, but mainly I think it was just an accumulation of...stuff." I wince at my own ineloquence.

"Stuff, huh?" he teases.

"Yeah, stuff." I smile at the understatement. "You know, little things like being cheated on, and being hated by everyone at our school, and then, oh yeah—making out with the neighbor boy I've known my whole life."

He laughs under his breath, and the sound is...nice. It's warm, and low, and I'm pretty sure I can feel it filling some cavity in my chest.

We reach the front of the line before he has a chance to respond and the next few minutes are spent getting in and waiting on Janie and her friends to follow.

"You want something to drink?" Zack asks as we all head toward the far end of the amusement park where the concert's taking place.

"Sure." I go to snag some money from my bag, but he's already walking off with one of Janie's friends who's been sent to get snacks for their crew.

"So, Zack's treating you to a night out," Janie says beside me, her voice smug as can be.

I roll my eyes. "You know this isn't real."

And yes. She does know. I told her everything at some point during the trip to anxiety hell.

"I know that, but do you?" Janie's eyes follow Zack. "Does he?"

My stomach does another flip, and I have no idea what to make of it.

All I know is that I don't want to go there. Not right now. Janie's aware that we're faking this relationship to get back at Grayson, but she has no idea about the epic makeout session last night, and I want to keep it that way.

"I was at dinner last night, remember?" Her tone is taunting. "I honestly couldn't tell if you guys were pretending or not."

I open my mouth and close it.

"Mrs. Myers definitely bought it," Janie continues.

I flinch. It will never be okay that we lied to his mom. She's the nicest of the nice.

"So either you have some crazy awesome acting skills that are sadly underutilized..." Janie's having way too much fun with this.

I'm debating ways I can shut this down without giving her any more ammunition, but the sound of Macy's voice behind me makes my brain go blank. "I can't believe you had the nerve to show up here tonight."

I turn as Janie makes a sound that can only be described as a growl, and her friends gather closer around us. But even though my stomach twists at the thought of a confrontation, I don't need backup. "Why wouldn't I show up?" I say with the sweetest smile I can manage.

"Because you're a cheating slut," Macy spits.

I blink a few times as the words land like a slap, but the hypocrisy behind them makes me laugh. Like, an honest to God laugh, which has Macy frowning in confusion.

This is not the response she'd expected.

Good.

"Is this funny to you?" Her look of disgust makes me laugh harder.

"It *is* kind of funny," I say. "Because from what I've been hearing, you're one of the girls Grayson cheated on *me* with." I manage to say it with a smile, and the gasps from Macy's friends is hilariously melodramatic.

How many of them knew? I let my gaze move over the group of girls I'd thought I'd known. How many had known and laughed behind my back?

When I look back, I see Macy's surprise that I'd had the nerve to call her out, but she recovers quickly with a smirk. "What did you expect?"

The way she's eyeing me makes me feel like a child. "What?"

She leans in, eyes widening. "Is it true you're still a virgin?"

Her friends start to laugh, but then Janie is at my side. "Is it true you're a whore?"

I wince. I truly don't like confrontation. And I hate that word. So I grab Janie's arm before Macy can reply and I start leading her away before this can get any more unpleasant.

Macy shouts after us. "Of course he cheated on you, he was dating a frigid bitch!"

Her friends are laughing like they're at a stand-up comedy club, and the crowd around us is turning to see who she's shouting at.

She's still calling me names, but her voice is muffled by the crowd. We all hear enough, though. Even Zack and Janie's friend, whose arms are full of drinks and snacks for the group.

Zack looks pissed as he reaches me. I take my drink from him and he reaches for my free hand. "You okay?"

The feel of his grip is reassuring. It grounds me, and I almost mean it when I smile and say, "Yeah. I'm good."

# TWENTY-ONE PROOF & PRACTICE

#### Zack

DESPITE WHAT SHE SAYS, Bailey is not *good*. She can't be. The girl just got called out by our school's queen bitch after having a run-in with her ex.

This is not exactly her best day.

But I have to admit, she's putting on a good front as we head toward the stage. Janie and her friends want to be right up front where people are already dancing to some terrible college band, but Bailey and I head toward the grassy hill where clusters of concert goers are lounging on picnic blankets and lawn chairs.

Grayson, Macy, and the others are halfway across the amphitheater—close enough to see us, but far enough away to not cause us any trouble.

"This is perfect," Bailey says.

She's all smiles, and while I'm definitely enjoying this new, carefree Bailey, it's still freaking me out. I'm no less weirded out by it now than I was this morning. Maybe even more so because of what Janie said earlier.

I have a crazy knot in my gut at the thought of Bailey having a panic attack.

It's been a long time since I've seen her lose her shit like that, but it's not something I'll ever forget. The last time it was after a softball game. She'd been pitching, and her team had lost.

I found her under an apple tree behind the dugout, bent over and panting. I couldn't tell if she was about to throw up or if she was hyperventilating or what, but her eyes were unfocused and when I reached her side, she clung to me like she was drowning.

I totally get why Janie's worried, and it has me freaked too.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Bailey asks.

I sit down beside her and for a second I can't form a sentence because all the blood in my head has rushed south at the sight of her bare thighs as she stretches her legs out in front of her in the grass.

She arches her brows and I force my brain to work. "Tell me what happened last night."

Her lips curve up slightly and she tilts her head down so she's looking up at me from beneath her long lashes. "I'm pretty sure you know exactly what happened last night." Her gaze drops to my lips. "You were there."

Holy freakin' hotness. She's hitting on me and it's so effing sexy, I can't take it. I'm equally stunned and turned on by the flirty look in her eyes, and I lean forward and kiss her because I can't *not*.

She inhales quickly—clearly not expecting it—but she rises to the occasion like a champ. And when she kisses me back, I forget where we are and why. I tug her into my arms, into my lap and she wraps her arms around my neck like she's just as turned on as I am.

The sound of kids shrieking with laughter somewhere in the distance is what finally puts an end to the kiss. We're both breathing heavily as I kiss the tip of her nose and start to pull back to calm down. "We probably shouldn't scar children for life."

"Probably not," she agrees as she shifts off my lap. But she sounds so adorably dazed and confused, it takes everything in me not to pull her back into my arms.

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly as she tips her head back to look at the sky. "They're watching us, aren't they?"

I don't even have to look over. I can feel the glares from here. "Yup." Bailey tilts her head my way to give me a wicked grin. "So that was..." "Proof," I say.

"Still proving that we're a couple?"

I shake my head and reach for her hand. "Proof that you're no frigid bitch."

She flinches slightly at the reminder of Macy's parting barb, and I'd very much like to murder Macy right about now.

"She's not totally wrong, though," Bailey says.

My grip on her hand tightens. "Bailey, trust me when I say you're not frigid. You're freakin' hot as hell."

Her lips curve up slightly and a hint of pink creeps into her cheeks. "Thanks, but I meant she was right about me being a virgin." She glances over, but her eyes don't quite meet mine. "I guess you weren't there for that part."

"So, she called you a virgin." I shrug. "So what?"

She pulls her knees in and wraps her arms around them. "Do you think she's right? I mean, is that why Grayson cheated—"

I put a finger over her lips because I honestly can't stand to hear her even say it aloud. I definitely can't take the uncertainty in her eyes right now. "Listen to me, Bailey, and listen good."

Her gaze holds mine and everyone else seems to disappear. There's just us, and the music, and the night sky. "If Grayson couldn't wait until you were ready, then he's even more pathetic than I'd thought."

Her eyes widen in surprise, and they're suspiciously wet when she nods. I drop my finger from her lips.

"You're right," she murmurs. "I know you're right."

We sit and watch the musicians for a while in relative silence, but when she starts to shift, trying to find a comfortable way to sit in the grass, I tug her closer so she's between my legs and resting against me, her back leaning against my chest. She turns her head and I catch a glimpse of her smile. "This is nice."

"You're nice," I shoot back.

She makes herself comfortable against my shoulder and I glance over to see that Grayson, Macy, and the others are heading out. To a party, I'd guess.

We don't make any move to leave, and we pass another long, peaceful silence listening to the music. When the breeze kicks up and I see her shiver, I wrap my arms around her to keep her warm.

She sort of snuggles in against me and...yeah. She's not wrong. This is nice.

And *nice* might be the understatement of the century.

"Still happy?" I ask when the last local band leaves the stage and the headliner's roadies start to load their equipment.

"Very," she says.

"You know that's weird, right?" I whisper it right into her ear and she laughs, turning in my arms to face me.

"I don't know how to explain it. It's like..." She narrows her eyes and purses her lips, lost in thought.

I don't push her because I am oddly desperate to hear what she has to say. Something's changed in Bailey since she left my house in a panic last night and I want to know what.

I need to know.

"For so long I've been afraid," she says slowly, her voice quiet but discernible amidst all the talking and laughter of the crowd around us. "I didn't even realize how afraid I was until last night."

I wait because I know she's not done. I run a hand down her back as if I can somehow retroactively help with last night's panic attack.

"I've been so terrified of messing up." Her gaze meets mine. "Of saying or doing the wrong thing with Grayson. Of his friends not liking me, of not being...perfect, I guess. But then, last night, it was like..." She starts to laugh softly as she glances away. "It was like I realized all at once that all of my worst nightmares have come true, you know?"

I go to make a joke about how I fit into her worst nightmares, but I can't get it out. I'm still hanging on her every word.

"And yeah," she says with a shrug. "I had a panic attack and that totally sucked. But when it was over...?" Her eyes shine with emotion when she looks at me again. "When it was over, I was so freakin' relieved."

My gut tightens at the intensity in her eyes. At this relief, and the freedom, and everything else she's feeling for the first time in way too long.

"Like, the nightmare came to pass and I survived. Everything I feared..." She shrugs helplessly again. "It wasn't the end of the world, and I made it through, and I'm—I'm better for it." She takes a deep breath. "You know?"

We both know she doesn't expect me to answer, and for a second my chest feels too full to respond. But when I do, I force a lighthearted, teasing tone. "So, what you're saying is, I didn't singlehandedly push you over the edge with that kiss then."

"Oh no, you did," she says, but her eyes are dancing with laughter. "That kiss was..." She trails off as the blush in her cheeks deepens, and I swear my heart triples its speed in record time.

"Keep going." I nudge her gently with my knee. "You're killing me here, Tucker."

She laughs softly. "That kiss was like the last straw, I guess. I felt so...so...out of control. And I don't know if you know this, but..." She gives me a teasingly serious look. "I'm not so good at letting go of control."

I nod slowly. "I do know this about you."

"So I guess...yes. That kiss was what set it off." She bites her lip as she gives me a pleading look, like she's begging me to understand. "But in a good way. You know?"

"I think I do."

Her smile is slow and sweet, and it freakin' lights up the night. My chest contracts so violently, for a second I can't breathe. "Bailey?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to freak out again if I kiss you right now?"

She's still smiling as she shakes her head. She leans in, placing her hands against my chest, and this time she kisses me first. I let her take her time, because I don't want to rush her.

This is her figuring shit out, and I'm just here for the ride. I get that.

I don't know what it means for me, but I understand it. And I'm okay with it.

For now, at least.

Do you really think Bailey's going to end up with a loser like you?

My ribcage constricts with the memory. Grayson's words from earlier today are threatening to ruin the moment, but I shove them aside as I draw her closer into my arms and hold on tight.

The kiss is slow and sweet, and so freaking hot it nearly kills me.

When she pulls back, her lips are swollen and her eyes are dazed. "Question."

I can't help but smile at her tone. Like a student raising her hand in class. "Shoot."

"If that kiss earlier was to prove something..." She glances meaningfully to the place where Grayson and Macy are *not*. "Then what is this?"

The question is simple, but the look in her eyes is anything but.

What are we doing? That's what she's asking. What's happening between us?

I don't have the answer. Honestly, I don't really want to think about the question. Not right now. So, I run a hand over her hair and lean in until my nose brushes against hers. "This is practice."

She starts to laugh. "Practice?"

"Everyone knows practice makes perfect, right?"

She's still laughing as she nods. "And I do like perfection."

I grin against her lips. "Then it's settled."

Our lips meet and cling like this is a dance we've been doing forever. The music starts up in the distance and I am brutally aware of the fact that this is the last band, which means the night is almost over. And this thing between us...?

That's almost over too.

I try to shove the thought away as I wrap my arms around her so we can watch the last performance. But despite my best efforts, I still hear Grayson's parting shot.

Enjoy her while you can, Zack. Because you won't have her for long.

## TWENTY-TWO PUZZLE PIECES

## **Bailey**

IT'S difficult to restock stuffed animals when Zack's watching me like this.

But I'm nothing if not a competent employee—even if my coworker is the worst sort of distraction.

I don't have to turn around to know he's staring at my butt as I go up on my tiptoes to shove another stuffed moose in its place. I feel his eyes on me.

"I'm just saying, you don't have to do this," he says.

"Restock the stuffies?" I tease. Because we both know that's not what he's talking about. "Why? Are you offering to do it?"

"Bailey, you know very well I have a fear of ladders," he says in his best lazy jackass tone.

I laugh under my breath. "Since when? Because I could have sworn I saw you up on your roof fixing the gutters on Wednesday after work."

"Oh yeah?" I can hear the smile in his voice. "Were you watching me, Bailey?"

"No." But I say it a little too quickly, and I feel heat starting to creep into my cheeks.

"Liar."

I wince at the stuffed elephant in my hand. *Busted*.

But really, when the hot neighbor guy is shirtless and sweaty right outside your window—what's a girl supposed to do? If you're *this* girl, you

settle in and watch the show.

And if you have Janie for a sister, she makes popcorn for the occasion.

I turn to see him leaning back against the counter. And I was right, his gaze is totally fixed on me in the most inappropriate way. The heat in my cheeks intensifies as I tug down the polo shirt which had ridden up, exposing some skin. Zack smirks in response.

"We're at work," I remind him as I climb back down the short ladder.

"That didn't seem to be a problem for you, oh—" He consults an imaginary watch. "Ten minutes ago."

The heat in my cheeks is outright burning me alive. Or maybe that's the memory of the way he'd kissed me senseless in the inventory room.

We'd been restocking supplies for the window display and when I'd turned around I'd caught him staring—kind of like he is right now—with his eyes so dark with desire, it's impossible *not* to feel an answering sliver of heat.

Despite my blushing, I give him a smug smile of my own as I arch my brows. "Yes, well, we're back on duty now."

He mutters something about being stuck with a fake girlfriend on a power trip, but he's smiling in a way that makes my belly flutter.

It's so far from the mocking smiles I'd grown used to over the last few years. These days his teasing is softened by warmth. Affection, even.

It's the sort of teasing one would expect from a close friend.

Or maybe from a real boyfriend.

"Do me a favor?" He's got this sexy, lazy tone as he crosses toward me and lowers his voice. "Let me know when you're ready to take another...*break*."

Right now that warmth in his eyes is so hot it's ready to spark into flames, and I feel the same potential energy humming through my veins.

All it takes is a long look, a stolen touch, a brush of lips, and we combust into a raging inferno.

It's simple chemistry. It's pheromones and hormones and...I get that. But that doesn't make it any less overwhelming.

I push against his chest playfully when he starts to back me into the wall of stuffed animals. "You'll be the first to know."

I glance at the front door when the bell dings and we watch an older couple head toward the postcards. "But for now..." I take him by the arm and steer him toward the counter. "Back to work."

He groans, and I'm not gonna lie—I'm disappointed too. I'm enjoying the heck out of all this 'practice' we've been doing.

I'm more than enjoying it. I'm *loving* it.

Heck, I'm tempted to kick out the new customers and put up the closed sign so I can see just what he has in mind for our next break.

I'm starting to crave these stolen moments with Zack, and I still don't know what to make of that. But for the moment, I'm doing my best not to think about it at all.

Being laidback, go-with-the-flow Bailey doesn't exactly come naturally for me, but I'm trying to let go of the need for constant control. It's not easy, but it's progress. Right?

I think so.

I've been happier this past week than I have been in a long time, and that's a good start. It helps that the whispers have died down a little—at least, the stuff about *me* seems to have lost momentum.

I'm almost positive that's Grayson's doing. He's set a tone for his followers, and aside from Macy, who seems to have it out for me personally for reasons I don't understand, the rest of them suddenly seem to see me as some sort of victim here.

I hate that. So much.

But what's worse? Grayson's acting like he's a victim too.

I haven't spoken to Grayson directly since that little run-in before the concert last weekend, but it's easy to see the story he's spinning on his end.

If he and I are both victims, then there's only one bad guy here—and I'm looking at him.

That thought kills the playful vibe in a heartbeat and I face Zack with crossed arms.

He'd very nearly sidetracked me with all this talk of breaks and kisses, but I am a woman on a mission, dang it. He cannot distract me. "I want to go to the party, Zack. With you. As a couple."

His head falls back with an exhausted groan. "I just don't get why you'd put yourself through that." He lifts his head so he can meet my stare. "You see Grayson and his friends all the time here at work. We even ran into them when we grabbed food at the diner the other night—"

"I know." I move past him to work on tidying the folded T-shirts. I'm not trying to *avoid* Zack, necessarily, but I don't particularly want to face

him right now when we're talking about Grayson, and us, and the whole fake dating thing.

Zack's always been good at reading me, but lately it feels like he can take one look at my face and see everything I'm feeling. Honestly, sometimes I feel like he gets me better than I do.

It's disconcerting.

"Everyone believes we're a couple," he says, like he's checking off a list. "No one thinks you knew about his cheating before the breakup..."

"I understand that," I say as I flash the elderly couple a bright smile.

Neither of us speaks again until we've walked past the couple at the postcard rack and are far enough away we can't be overheard.

Before I can slip behind the counter, Zack steps in front of me and cuts me off so I'm forced to face him. His chest rises and falls right in front of my face and I blink in surprise at his sudden closeness.

I'm getting used to being this close to Zack. But I don't know that I'll ever be unaffected. The guy is an assault on my senses, even when he's keeping his hands to himself.

I almost wish he wouldn't. Kissing him sounds a heck of a lot better than trying to explain myself right now.

For one crazy second, I'm tempted to steal a kiss. Screw the consequences. Forget the old couple and what they'd think if I launched myself into his arms.

I don't even care that there's a surveillance camera trained on us right this very second.

See? Progress. I might still be a goody two shoes, but I'm learning how to unwind that tension in me that tells me I have to be perfect in order to be loved.

My lips part with a gasp as that thought echoes and ricochets in my skull.

*I have to be perfect to be loved.* Is that what I thought?

That I had to be perfect to be accepted? To be wanted?

I frown at Zack's chest as I try to sift through my own messed up brain. Is that really what I'd thought?

Huh. Janie would have a field day with that one.

But the realization makes something shift and click into place. Like I just rearranged the same puzzle pieces that had been baffling me for weeks, and now they make sense.

They fit.

The anxiety. The need to be the best. The draw toward Grayson, a guy who saw my insecurities and used them to his advantage.

He understood my need to please better than anyone. Grayson got it. He fed off it.

And he manipulated it.

He manipulated *me*.

God, it's so obvious.

"Bailey? You okay?" Zack's voice is gentle and I shake off the stunned expression that has him frowning down at me in concern.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I say. "I'm good."

His lips curve up a bit and I know he's thinking about teasing me for saying that phrase again. He and Toni spent the better part of lunch doing imitations of me saying that while wearing big, creepy grins because they're so hilarious like that.

But right now Zack doesn't tease and he doesn't laugh. "You sure?"

I take a deep breath. "Positive."

"So then..." He pauses as the bell signals that the old couple left, the other customers right behind them.

And we're alone. He moves closer to me. So close I could lift a hand and touch him. And I know without a doubt that's all it would take and he'd pull me into his arms and kiss me.

The conversation would be over.

It's tempting. Very, very tempting.

But when I look up, I'm blindsided by his seriousness. "If you're so fine and good, do you want to explain why you feel this burning need to go to the party this weekend?"

I press my lips together. Do I want to explain? Not really. But there's no getting away from Zack. We have another two hours left of this shift, and while he might be easygoing about most things, when he truly cares, he's more stubborn than I am.

Also, we've been doing this honesty thing lately, and I don't want to be the one to screw that up.

But, then again, he's going to hate the real reason. So I give evasion one more shot, and try for a casual shrug. "Everyone's going to be there."

"*Errr*." He makes an obnoxious buzzer sound like I got the wrong answer on a game show. "Try again."

I purse my lips, torn between amusement and annoyance. "I just want to go, that's all."

I wait for another buzzer noise, but instead he shakes his head. "You are seriously the worst liar on the planet."

I try my best to go neutral. I let the muscles of my face go slack so I'm not giving away any tells.

His sudden grin and the laughter that follows are pretty good indicators that I'm not succeeding. He reaches out and wraps an arm around my waist, tugging me closer until I'm pressed against him from head to toe. "You know I have ways of getting answers out of you, right?"

"Zack," I start to protest, but his mouth has found that spot on my neck that makes my knees go weak, and my words come out so breathless I sound like a phone sex operator. "We're at work."

"Mmm," he hums as he trails kisses up to my ear. "Then you'd really better spill before you get us both fired."

"Me?" I try to sound outraged, I really do. It doesn't come out that way at all. It sounds like I'm not sure of my own identity.

Which isn't too far from the truth, really. My head is spinning with that dizzy sensation I've never experienced before Zack.

It makes me forget my own name. It also makes me want to drag Zack into the back room, and deal with the consequences tomorrow.

But luckily for me and my college fund, Zack pulls back to stare down at me. "Spill, Smurfette."

I sigh in resignation. The fact that he's calling me by that stupid old nickname? Yeah, he's not about to let this go. Not even if I drag him into the storage closet.

"You don't need to go to this party and deal with Macy and her friends in order to convince anyone that you've moved on from Grayson," he says. "And it's only going to make you miserable to be there. So why are you insisting that we go?"

I arch my eyebrows. "Why are you so opposed to it?"

I bask in a single moment of triumph at that comeback, but he just gives me a look that says I've lost my mind.

"Uh, because it's at *Macy*'s house? She's not your biggest fan, if you'll recall. Not to mention, it's going to be packed with Graysonites, not to mention *Grayson*."

I trail a finger down his chest and his arms tighten around me in response. "You worried about me, Zack?"

I say it with a teasing tone, but I hope the answer's no.

I know I gave him a scare last week. Him, Janie, *and* Toni. They've all seen me at my worst lately, and I get that. But I'm past that now. I'm stronger than that...

And I really want Zack to know it.

He lets out a long exhale. "I'm not worried. I just want to understand."

"What's so hard to get?" I push back a little so I can breathe. And think. Thinking is exceptionally hard when we're pressed together like this.

"Why you want to go." His gaze meets mine. "What are you still trying to prove?"

I open my mouth and shut it. I want to say I'm not out to prove anything, but we both know that's a lie. I didn't even like going to these ragers when I was a part of Macy's crew.

And he's right. I don't have to go to a party to prove that we're together. Everyone believes us.

Sometimes even *I* believe that we're together. All the 'practicing' makes it easy to forget.

"I want them to see me...with you," I say slowly. "I want them to see *us*."

"Why?" One word, but it hits hard. There's no escaping when he looks at me like this—like I'm the only person in the world that matters. Like whatever I say next is crucial. Like he'll wait all day to hear the truth from me.

I swallow. "I don't like what they're saying about you."

He frowns. "About me?"

I nod, suddenly feeling more shy and awkward around Zack than I have in weeks. "I see the way people are acting around you, and I know what Grayson's doing."

"What's he doing?" His voice is low, but his gaze is so heavy it makes my stomach muscles tighten and my heart beat faster.

"He's making you out to be the bad guy."

He doesn't deny it, and he doesn't look surprised either.

"So?" He shrugs. "I don't care."

"Liar." I mimic his tone from earlier.

One corner of his mouth hitches up in a crooked smile that makes my belly dip.

"I care," I say. "Grayson's making me out to be some pathetic, spineless idiot who didn't stand a chance when a player like you came along."

Zack doesn't deny that either. "Anyone who believes that is a dumbass."

I give a huff of amusement. He makes it sound so simple. So easy to disregard what people say.

"And Grayson..." I shake my head. "He's acting like he's the injured one here. I've heard what people are saying. They feel sorry for him. Zack, they *feel sorry for him*." I repeat it louder, like maybe he didn't get it the first time.

He gives me another small smile. "Again. Anyone who believes his pathetic acting isn't worth our time."

I can't deny that. Every time I see Grayson in passing at work or with his buddies in the break room, I wonder how on earth I fell for that act for so long. It's so obvious now. Still...

"Do you know Jessica and her friends stopped me on my way out the other day to plead his case?"

Zack doesn't respond, but I see him stiffen. I watch a muscle in his jaw clench tight.

"Apparently, he's fooled everyone into thinking he's racked with guilt for cheating on me. He's making all sorts of excuses and telling everyone how I deserve better—"

"You do," Zack interrupts. "You do deserve better."

"Of course, I do. But *him* saying that has made everyone think he deserves a second chance."

Zack shrugs. "So?" His eyes get hard, and I feel a slither of wariness.

This is why I didn't want to talk about it. This is why I didn't want to have this conversation. Every time we talk about Grayson, I feel him pull away. Every time we talk about the reality of what we're doing and why, he shuts me out.

"He's making you out to be the bad guy here, Zack, and I can't stand it." I pull back far enough that I can cross my arms, and he lets me go. "I won't let it slide. The more we hide out and act like we're ashamed that we're together, the more people buy his sob story."

"And?" Zack's voice is hard.

I throw my hands up. "And I'm tired of watching you be cast as the villain."

"You already said that." His voice is too mild and it sets me on edge.

"No one forced me to be with you. And you didn't coerce me, or seduce me, or—" I take a deep breath and stand a little taller. "I wasn't some helpless victim, Zack."

He frowns. "Of course you weren't."

"*I* chose to cheat on Grayson. *I* chose to be with you instead."

I pause and hold my breath. I half expect him to remind me that we're not really together. That it doesn't matter what anyone thinks because none of this is real.

But he doesn't remind me, and I let out a relieved breath.

"I just don't know what you think going to this party is going to prove," he says.

I bite my lip because...I'm not totally sure either. But I'm tired of hiding and I can't just sit back and let Zack take the heat for my decisions.

He's watching me so closely that I hesitate, choosing my next words carefully. "I want to show them that I'm happy."

His brows hitch slightly in surprise.

"Because I am," I add.

He stares at me with this unreadable stare. He's quiet for so long the words seem to swell and take up space between us. They sound more significant than I'd intended, so I hurry to add, "They need to see that you're not the bad guy here, Zack."

With a sharp inhale, he looks up to the ceiling, the muscle in his jaw working again. "Why does that bother you so much?" His gaze drops down to meet mine. "I told you I don't care."

"Well, I do."

"Why?" he asks again.

"Because you're *not* a bad guy." My voice is too loud, but honestly, his attitude is annoying the crap out of me. "You're *good*, Zack." I move toward him until I'm right in his face. "You're good, and you're kind, and you're loyal—"

"Careful there, Smurfette," he interrupts with a lazy smile. "Now you're making *me* out to be some sort of saint, and we both know that's not true."

I look into his eyes and I don't like what I see. There's his snark and that apathy that he hides behind so well, but there's something more.

Something darker. It's self-derision or...or something like it. It's disdain and maybe even disgust, but it's not toward me.

Maybe it was never toward me.

The sight of it makes my hands curl into fists, defensive on his behalf. But I don't want a fight, and that's what he's looking for.

I soften my tone. "I know you're no saint, Zack." I try for a smile and fall short. "Trust me when I say I have no misconceptions about you. I know your flaws, and I know...I know..." I fumble over my words as I stare at him, because all at once I see it. I get it.

Just like the pieces clicked into place for me, I'm seeing his too. It's staring me right in the face. "I know your flaws, Zack, but I also know that you're not *him*."

A flare of his nostrils is the only sign he heard me, let alone understood.

I move a little closer but stop when he tenses. I want to reach out to him, but I don't. I can't. Because if I do and he backs away, I'm not sure what I'll do. "You're not your father, Zack."

He stares at me for a full heartbeat before looking away. "I know that." "Do you?"

He doesn't answer. I didn't really expect him to.

My heart is aching, and I don't know what else to say. How to make this right.

I don't know if he outright fears becoming his father—I'm not a mind reader—but I do know there's something there.

I might have gotten it into my head that I had to be perfect to be seen and heard and respected, but he'd figured out that it was far easier to just not care.

Or, at least, he'd learned it was easier to *act* like he didn't care. I swallow hard, hurting like hell for the kid I'd known. For my friend who'd needed me back then.

He'd fooled me along with everyone else, and I hate myself for that. For not seeing it sooner.

He'd been hurt, and he'd retreated.

He'd stopped trying.

But he'd never stopped caring.

"Look..." I shift closer, my fingers itching with the need to reach for him. "We've both made mistakes. We've both acted like idiots."

He doesn't react. And I can't get a gauge on where he's at, or what he's thinking. So I keep going and hope I'm getting through to him.

"But I'm done pretending to be something I'm not," I say. "And I'm not about to sit by and let people make you out to be something you're not either."

He stares at me for a long moment, his eyes moving over my face like he's reading something there. The silence stretches so long, my heart starts to pick up its pace, and fear knots in my gut.

"You know," he finally says, so slowly he draws the words out. "You're crazy hot when you get on your high horse."

I let out a huff of laughter as relief courses through me. His tone is teasing, and it's the good kind. The warm kind.

"I mean it." He closes the distance between us and wraps his arms around my waist. "I could watch you give pep talks every day of the week."

I laugh as he drops a kiss on the tip of my nose. "It's not a pep talk, it's the truth." I squeeze his arms, willing him to understand. "You're so much more than they know. And you have more integrity in your little finger than Grayson can even imagine."

He's chuckling softly as he kisses the top of my head, holding me close in a hug that feels so good I sigh with contentment. "Integrity, huh?" His voice is a low murmur, and it wraps around me like a blanket.

"Yes. Integrity. And loyalty and honesty and—"

He kisses me hard to make me stop. When he pulls back, he's feigning confusion. "So, what you're trying to say is..." He narrows his eyes with a frown. "You want to go to this party?"

I burst out in a laugh. "Yes. That's what I'm saying."

He shrugs. "Then why didn't you just say so?"

He lets me go as I smack his shoulder, and he flashes me a smirk that I hate.

But I also kind of love it.

It's official. Me and Zack's smirk? We have a complicated relationship.

# TWENTY-THREE TAKE THAT, SUCKERS

### Zack

THIS IS A MISTAKE. I know it the moment we walk out onto Macy's back deck where the party is already well underway.

Bailey's smile is frozen on her face when she looks up at me. It's a valiant attempt at swagger, I'll give her that. But watching her try to appear unaffected by the stares and the whispers makes me want to take a blowtorch to this place.

Or, even better, sweep her off her feet, off the deck, and get her right back into my car so we can do some more *practicing*.

Bailey squeezes my hand. "I kinda wish Macy was old school and played vinyls because this would totally be a record-scratching moment, don't you think?" She leans into me as she speaks, and the scent of her shampoo hits me, and—

I'm a goner. I get this now. She might not realize it yet, but she's got me wrapped around her little finger.

She didn't even try, that's the pathetic part. She just came along and did her Bailey thing.

Her smile widens as she looks up at me, amused by her own joke. "What's with that look?"

I swallow. I have no idea what my face is doing, and there's no way I can tell her what I'm thinking right now, so I tug her closer until her body is

pressed against mine. "Should we make this an entrance they'll never forget?"

Her eyes dance with mischief, and this is officially my new favorite look on her.

"I thought you'd never ask." She goes up on her tiptoes and I meet her halfway, our lips coming together in a long, lingering kiss that will never get old.

She pulls back just enough to whisper against my lips. "Take that, suckers."

To all those gawkers watching us, it no doubt looks like she's whispering sweet nothings when she's actually talking trash.

I start to laugh, but then she glides her lips against mine again, so soft and sweet I almost believe it's real.

Almost.

"Okay, you two. Break it up." Toni's voice cuts into the moment and we pull apart.

"Sorry," Bailey says, not sounding the least bit sorry as we turn to face her friend. "It had to be done."

"Uh huh." Toni rolls her eyes, but she's grinning. I think Toni's getting off on this whole stick-it-to-the-cool-kids game we've got going on. She's eyeing the crowd before us with a wary expression. "I'm glad you guys showed. I keep waiting for someone to toss me out."

She's exaggerating, obviously. But not by much. I take a look around at this crowd of football players and cheerleaders. Toni doesn't fit in any more than I do. But I'd never let that stop me before, and tonight I'm proud as hell that I don't fit in with Grayson's friends.

I catch one of Macy's besties sneering at me and I give her a wink that has her turning away so quickly she nearly topples into the basketball bro standing next to her.

"You could've driven here with us, Toni," Bailey says. "You didn't have to show up alone."

"And risk ruining your grand entrance?" Toni arches a brow. "Never."

Bailey laughs. Of the three of us, Bailey seems the least uncomfortable right now. Which is alarming considering she'd normally be voted *girl most likely to freak*.

I mean, she's not exactly reveling in the glares, but she's not a ball of nerves like I'd thought she'd be either. And whatever anxiety she's feeling,

she's hiding it well.

I'm probably the only one who sees that her smile is strained, and I know I'm the only one aware that her hand is gripping mine like she's trying to crush some bones.

Meanwhile, Toni's staring at the crowded pool area like she's facing a firing squad, and all I can do is count the seconds until this is over.

I get why this is important to Bailey, but these people mean nothing to me. This party holds no appeal. Especially when the alternative is being at home alone with Bailey. Or at the movies alone with Bailey. Or at a restaurant alone with Bailey.

The clock is ticking on our pseudo relationship, and I resent the hell out of the fact that I have to share my time with her tonight.

I can admit it. I'm hooked on the girl. If Bailey were a drug, I'd have a major problem. I don't know when it started, or how it got to this point, but I crave her touch like a fiend. The sound of her laugh alone is enough to make my heart start pounding.

This past week I found myself seeking her out just to talk. To *talk*. And if that's not a sign that I've lost my shit over this girl, I don't know what is.

"Well?" Bailey says. Her smile is in full force now for the sake of these onlookers, and even though it's strained, it's the most gorgeous sight I've ever seen. "You ready to do this?"

How many times have I watched her smile up at Grayson just like this? And now, it's mine. It's for me.

"Grayson alert, six o'clock," Toni mutters.

Okay, fine, maybe the smile is for Grayson's benefit. But it's still aimed at me. And I'll take it. I'll take whatever I can get for however long I can get it.

How pathetic is that? I'm like a freakin' stray dog begging for crumbs and I can't even bring myself to care.

This isn't going to last forever. I know that, and I'll deal with it when the time comes. But until it ends...she's mine.

I ease my hand out of her death grip so I can wrap an arm around her and hold her close. I kiss the side of her head just above her temple and linger so I can talk directly into her ear without anyone overhearing. "You sure you don't want to turn around and head out of here?"

I want her to say yes. I want her to say yes so badly it hurts.

She laughs a little too loudly like I've just said something funny. Apparently, we're still being watched.

"We don't have to do this, you know." I'm serious. I'm deadly serious, and I think she knows it. "We can still leave."

Her head tilts back so she can look at me.

Say screw it to this party, I silently urge. Say you don't care what they think. Tell me you don't give a crap what Grayson says about us.

"I want to do this," she says through her forced smile. "Please, Zack."

I let out a long exhale and see Toni arching her brows at me behind Bailey's back. I think maybe she knows. About me, I mean. About how I feel. Toni's perceptive like that, and right now I can't quite meet her eyes because I'm afraid of what I'll see.

If there's even a hint of pity there, I'll lose it.

Bailey's gaze has gone all soft and pleading, and—what am I supposed to do, right? I can't drag her away from here, not after I promised I'd do this.

And I get it. I do. I know Bailey thinks she's doing this for me. And maybe she needs this for her too. Maybe it's the closure she's after, or whatever. But my gut's twisting as I take a move toward the steps leading down to the crowded pool area. "What are we waiting for?"

She wraps an arm around my waist and squeezes. A silent thanks, or maybe she's trying to reassure me. But I swear it feels like she's reaching inside my ribcage with that squeeze.

Bailey's got my heart in her hands and she doesn't even know it.

Freakin' hell. How did this happen?

My chest tightens further with every step we take into enemy territory. The crowd is thick and the music loud, and over the next couple hours it only gets more packed, and the music keeps getting cranked up to be heard over the voices.

It's just a matter of time before the cops arrive, and everyone knows it, which is why they're throwing themselves into this party like it's the last time they'll ever see a beer.

Even Toni's drinking, which is kinda hilarious. I'm not sure what she gets up to with her drama friends on the weekends, but judging by the way she got drunk in a heartbeat, I'm gonna guess they don't throw a lot of keggers.

"Do you think I should tell her to slow down?" Bailey asks. There's a motherly concern to her voice, but she's watching Toni throw back a Jello shot with an indulgent smile.

"Nah, she's having fun," I say.

Also, selfish ass that I am, I don't want Bailey to walk away.

Considering how much I don't want to be here, we've actually been having fun. Sort of. I mean, I'd still rather be alone with Bailey, but seeing as we're currently social pariahs, we're pretty much on our own in this little corner of the party.

I'm nursing a beer, just biding my time. Bailey's not drinking, but she's relaxed as she leans against me. I've got an arm around her shoulders, and we've spent the better part of the past couple hours either making fun of our drunken classmates, debating the merits of the music selection, or narrating the scene before us using stupid sports announcer voices.

"Ugh." Bailey's nose crinkles up as Toni gets swallowed up by a crowd of Graysonites. "She's gonna need a rescue soon."

I stroke her back. "She'll be fine. You worry too much."

She rests her head against my shoulder, and I love it. I love the feel of her in my arms like this. Like it's second nature.

"They're gonna grill her about us," she says. "You know that's what they're doing."

No sooner does she say it than two of the girls standing near Toni with their backs to us whip their heads around and spear us with curious glances.

"See?" Bailey says lightly. Too lightly. She's acting like she doesn't care, but she clearly does.

"Are you psychic?" I ask. "Seriously. That was impressive the way you called that."

She laughs and I feel it where her upper body presses against my ribcage. "Not psychic. I've just been in that circle enough to know what they're up to."

"You don't think they've decided today is the day they befriend Toni?" I tease.

She winces as she watches them. "Toni's too good for that crowd."

"Ah," I say as if I'm having a lightbulb moment. "So that's why you never invited her to these parties when you and Grayson got together."

She elbows me in the ribs. "Cut it out."

I kiss the top of her head in apology. She told me about her come-to-Jesus moment with Toni. I know she's still feeling the guilt, but I also figure it's up to me to help her make light of it. "It's in the past, Bailey. We've all made mistakes."

She blinks up at me, her brows arching. "Even you?"

I meet her gaze evenly. I know what she's asking without her spelling it out. We haven't revisited the heavy conversation about how our friendship ended since the night at my house when she called me out on my shit.

You stopped trying. I can still hear her saying it, every inflection in her voice engraved in my brain. Those words have been haunting me for weeks now. So, what? You just gave up?

My jaw grows tight at the memory of her accusations. But she hadn't been wrong. So yeah, I know what she's asking. She wants to know if I've owned it. If I'm taking responsibility.

Even you? she'd asked.

"Especially me," I say.

Her eyes grow soft and they flicker back and forth like she's reading something deep down inside me. When her lips curve up a bit, I relax.

"Did you see where she went?" Bailey glances away, shifting for a better view of the crowd Toni was with.

"No," I say. "I'm sure she's fine, though."

Bailey's brows draw together in a worried little frown. It's a cute look on her, and one I know well. She's deep in Big Sister Bailey mode and no amount of me reassuring her that Toni is fine will help.

"I'm gonna go see where she went off to," Bailey says.

"Want me to come with?"

She shakes her head. "Do you mind grabbing me a drink?"

I pretend to be shocked. "Saint Bailey is *drinking* tonight?"

She rolls her eyes. "Only Janie is allowed to call me that, and only because I can't get her to stop."

"Okay, fine," I say with a laugh. "What are you in the mood for?"

Her smile is pure sin as she backs away. "Surprise me."

*Oof.* The air rushes out of my lungs like she just sucker punched me, and when she bites her lower lip and gives me a wink, I'm pretty sure I've died and gone to heaven.

I'm still getting used to this new mischievous, sexy, flirty side of Bailey, and I'm well aware that I might just be the luckiest guy alive since I'm the

only fool who gets to see it.

For now, at least.

"Meet you back here?" she shouts back to me.

I nod and watch her disappear into the crowd.

The party's gotten even more packed than I'd realized, and I have to shove my way through the crowd. Everyone's too caught up in their own conversations to pay attention to me.

Until I get to the makeshift bar, at least.

I don't even hide my groan when I see Macy leaning against the table's edge, right next to the cooler and the mixers. She doesn't try to hide her sneer either, so we're even.

"You have some nerve coming to my party," she slurs.

When she stands up straight, she wobbles a bit like the ground is uneven.

It's not.

I just barely hold back a sigh. A sober mean girl is bad enough. But drunk?

She's a nightmare.

"And here I thought you'd be happy to see me." I grin as I reach past her for a red plastic cup. "You and your friends seem awfully interested in me and my love life, so..." I throw my arms out wide. "Here I am. The man of the hour."

Her lip curls up, but it's her laughter that sets off a warning sound in the back of my brain. "Your love life? Please. Who are you trying to fool?" She snags the cup out of my hand like a spiteful little brat. "No, what I meant was, I can't believe you'd show your face now that the truth is out."

I stare at her for a long moment, trying to keep my features even as dread coils in my gut. "What exactly do you think you know, Macy?" My voice comes out bored despite the tension building in my muscles.

She leans forward and jabs a finger into my sternum, nearly knocking us both over when she loses her balance. "Bailey never fell for you. She never cheated. She never chose you over Grayson." Her voice is strangely high, her tone a childish sing-song. "This whole thing was never *real*."

Her hands flail and she nearly smacks my face, but I barely notice because the contents of my stomach are curdling, and that tension is building into all out fear. Not for me, but for Bailey. Where is she? I turn to look for her, but it's useless in this thick crush of people.

"Everyone's talking about it, and you—" She pulls back like she smells something rotten. "You're just pathetic."

I stare at her as my pulse pounds in my temples. The loud music is making it impossible to think.

"I can't believe anyone actually bought it," she continues. "Like, everyone *actually* believed that Bailey would pick *you* when she had Grayson."

She makes a scoffing noise and I try not to flinch.

*Shit*. This is bad. I don't know how much these people know, but they know enough. And Bailey's out there in this sea of vipers on her own.

"You know what though?" Macy's slur is so thick she makes it sound like one word. I realize she's barely even seeing me at this point. Her gaze is unfocused as she rests her weight against the table again. "I'm glad she found out."

Her smile makes me sick.

"She used to strut around—" Macy swings her shoulders and arms in what I assume is an imitation of Bailey strutting. "She thinks she's so perfect." Her lips fall flat as she mutters, "Grayson still thinks she's so perfect."

I start to turn away but she reaches out a hand and catches me by my bicep. "You're in trouble," she says in a singsong.

I shrug her off, but when I turn back to the crowd, I see that she's telling the truth. Not about me being in trouble, but about everyone knowing that Bailey and I have been faking it all along.

I see the stares and I swear I can practically hear the whispers, even through the music.

How the hell did they find out?

"...just can't believe she'd do that to him." Macy's latched onto me again, and apparently she's still talking, but I'm barely paying attention. I'm too busy scanning the crowd for any sight of her.

"I mean, yeah, he's a dick for cheating, but he's a guy, you know? And he's freakin' Grayson. She was an idiot to think he wouldn't take it when he could get it."

I pull my arm out of her grip because...this feeling? It's not tension. It's freakin' desperation. I need to get to Bailey and make sure she's okay.

I have to get her out of here.

"I guess she got her revenge though, right?" Macy's saying. "But what did *you* get out of it?"

I glance over to see Macy peering at me through narrowed eyes.

"Why'd you go along with it?" She sounds genuinely curious.

I'm guessing she didn't know about Grayson and Rina. Maybe Macy thought she was the only one he cheated with. Maybe she'd thought she'd be the one to replace Bailey when they broke up.

For a second I almost feel sorry for her. Not enough to stick around and listen to her toxic garbage though. I turn to walk away but my path is blocked by the crowd trying to get to the drinks.

"Bailey got her revenge, but what did you get?" Macy's laugh is cruel behind me. "Poor Zack. Poor, *stupid* Zack. Bailey got the better end of this deal, didn't she? She played you just like she played Grayson."

I swear to God she cackles behind me. Like the freakin' wicked witch.

"She made Grayson grovel." Macy's having fun now, and I'm stuck trying to push against a human tide. "She actually made him believe that she'd left him for you. But now that he knows she's not really into you, he's going to have her back like—"

I hear a sound, and look over to see her attempting to snap her fingers.

She's too drunk to manage it.

Sure. Snapping is too difficult for her drunken brain, but spewing nasty gossip? No problemo.

That tracks.

Macy sees me watching her and gives me a sloppy grin. "He's probably hooking up with her right now."

I snap. "She's not going back to him."

Shit. I should've kept my mouth shut. Macy's smirk makes me physically ill. "Oh, sweetie, she will definitely go back to him because, duh —he's Grayson." She leans in close. "And where does that leave you?"

I see an opening in the crowd before us and squeeze my way through. All I can think about is getting to Bailey before Grayson or someone else confronts her about the rumor.

Or...the truth.

The rumor which *is* the truth.

I make my way into the crowd, but I hear Macy behind me as I leave, her words deflated and pitiful, and...probably not meant for me. "Where

does that leave *me*?"

I don't have that answer. For her or for me. Because one truth is becoming jarringly clear as I push and shove my way back to where I'd left Bailey.

It's over now.

The charade is over.

Everyone knows that we've been playing a game. They all know it's not real. So, there's no reason to continue. There's no one left to fool. There's no reason for us to stay together.

*Unless* we make it real.

My heart's hammering so hard it makes my insides rattle.

I stop short when I reach the corner where Bailey and I had agreed to meet. My pulse is so loud it's drowning out the music and the voices.

But I still have my sight, and what I see right now?

Oh hell no.

I see Bailey. And I see Grayson.

And I see the way they're kissing.

# TWENTY-FOUR FIVE MINUTES EARLIER

### **Bailey**

THIS NIGHT GOES from good to bad to a full-blown nightmare so quickly my head is still spinning.

First there's the vomit. On my feet.

Which is just awesome.

I didn't have to go far to find Toni. Or anywhere, actually. She'd been heading my way, and she reached me just in time for me to watch her turn a horrific shade of green.

I hauled her toward a tree that lined the yard, but I didn't step away quickly enough and some splatters on my shoes.

I try to hide my disgust as the vile smell of upchucked beer hits my nose, and Toni looks at me with agonized eyes as she claps a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she wails, but the words are muted by her fingers.

"It's okay, Toni." I go to wrap an arm around her shoulders, already fumbling in my pocket with my other hand to get my phone. I have to tell Zack I need an assistant to get Toni out of here. "Let's just get you home."

She wiggles out from under my arm. "No," she moans, misery written all over her features. "You don't understand. I'm so *sorry*."

"It happens." My tone is as bright as I can make it considering I'm still holding my breath to keep from inhaling the stench.

"No, Bailey." She grips my arm. "You don't get it." She's shaking her head in wild swings from left to right that makes me fear for her ability to continue standing upright. "*I messed up*."

When her eyes meet mine, I still, my arms outstretched awkwardly as I try to keep her upright while also maintaining eye contact.

Her gaze is still unfocused, but she's serious.

"What do you mean?" Wariness hits me hard. "Toni? What happened?"

"I was just—" She interrupts herself with a hiccup. "I was just so mad at the things they were saying, and maybe I was still a little mad at you." She gives me this desperate, pleading look as she shakes her head again. "I don't know why I said it, Bailey. I really don't know."

Her voice is high and she's dangerously close to tears.

My face feels tight as I try to control my expression, but my stomach is churning with dread. "What did you say, Toni?"

She sniffs. "I told Jessica that you and Zack were faking it." She presses her lips together with a pathetic little moan. "I told them you only got together to get even with Grayson."

I cringe, acutely aware now of the eyes that are on us.

On me.

I look around and see the stares, all trained on me as they whisper, and they laugh, and—

*Crap.* My heart races in my chest. Where's Zack? I whip my head from side to side, but I can't spot him in the crowd. Instead, I see *him*. Grayson.

He's walking toward me, the crowd parting for him like he's freakin' Moses.

Maybe it's the smell of puke lingering in the air, but my stomach heaves when I see his expression. Saliva fills my mouth and I have to swallow hard to fight a sudden wave of nausea.

It's not a smirk Grayson's sporting, it's more like a...it's like a *simper*. That's the only word I can think to describe the ingratiating, smug, holier-than-thou look he's wearing right now.

I tear my eyes away from his because—

Where is he?

Where the hell is Zack right now? This pounding in my chest isn't just from embarrassment because people are staring and whispering. It's a clawing sensation that makes me want to shout.

I want to scream Zack's name.

It's terror, plain and simple, and I can't explain it.

And even if I wanted to sit down and sift through my feelings to figure it out, I can't. Because Grayson is right in front of me. He's smiling down at me.

That smile is sappy and...and just plain *gross*.

It's his puppy dog look times a million.

He knows. That much is obvious. He knows about me and Zack faking it, and he thinks that means something.

He knows, and he thinks he's won.

It makes me want to barf, and I'm almost positive that urge isn't just because of the raunchy smell at my feet anymore. It's all him.

"You make me *sick*." I spit the words out with all the venom I feel. It's the truth I haven't been able to say because of our payback plan. But what's to stop me now, right?

His eyes widen like I've struck him. He looks genuinely wounded. "Bae, let's talk about this."

"What's there to talk about? You cheated on me. You made a fool of me." I give him a smile that's not even close to pleasant. "And I got even. There's really nothing left to say."

"I can explain." He's the picture of earnest sincerity, his brows drawn down in concern, and his eyes crinkled at the corners as he gives me a beseeching look.

Toni makes a choked sound like she's trying not to hurl again.

My feelings exactly.

Grayson's gaze flickers over to Toni and he flinches at whatever he sees. "I'll have one of the guys take her home," he says to me.

"She's right here," Toni says.

Her irritation about being spoken of in the third person might have been more effective if she hadn't hiccuped loudly at the end.

"Right." Grayson gives her this condescending little grimace of regret that makes me want to scream all over again, but this time in rage.

Who does he think he is? What gives him the right to look down on everyone in our school? What makes him think he's so much better than Zack?

And that's what he thinks. I've always known it. Heck, much as I hate to admit it, there was a time when *I* believed that bullshit.

I get hit with another wave of revulsion. Once upon a time, I'd actually compared the two guys and found Grayson to be the winner.

God, sometimes I just want to go back in time and kick my own ass.

"I'll ask Zack to take me home," Toni says. I'm pretty sure she's talking to me, and then she's trying to get past us. To leave us alone.

Or maybe she just wants to escape the spotlight.

If curious looks could burn, Grayson and I would be on fire right now. The crowd's inching closer like they might be able to hear us over the music.

They can't. And they *won't* because I have nothing left to say. I start to turn away but he stops me with a hand on my arm.

"Bae, just hear me out," he says as he steps in front of me.

I shift, shaking off his hand as I try to move past him. All I want is to join Toni, and find Zack, and the three of us can get the hell out of here.

But Grayson's blocking my way. And he's a big guy. He doesn't even have to move to keep me in my place. All he has to do is stand here and I'm trapped.

*And back when we were a couple?* The thought comes out of nowhere.

All he'd had to do then was prey on my insecurities to keep me on my leash. Looking up at him now, all those old feelings come back with a vengeance. The way he'd made me feel paranoid, and needy, and boring, and plain, and like…like I wasn't enough.

Like I could never be enough.

And God, I actually fell for it. I want to cry and scream and then maybe cry all over again.

But not here. Not now.

So I clench my hands into fists and sneer up at him. "You are such an asshole."

It feels good to finally say it aloud. But he acts like he doesn't even hear. "You were hurt, Bae. I totally get that."

I arch my brows and use a saccharine tone. "Oh really? Do you *get that*?"

He gives me a chiding look, like he's disappointed that I've reverted to sarcasm. It's a look that says I'm being immature.

Maybe I am. I choke on a laugh. Maybe Zack's been rubbing off on me, after all, because right now the fact that *I'm* being immature strikes me as hilarious.

"What do you want, Grayson?" I fold my arms over my chest. "What exactly do you think is going to happen here?"

"I just want to talk."

"Err." I mimic Zack's buzzer sound. "Try again."

I want Zack to be here right now. I wish he was at my side, helping me to put this asswipe in his place.

I look past Grayson, but I don't see Zack in the crowd. All I see is Toni hovering nearby like she's not sure if she should leave me alone.

Or maybe she's just trying not to puke again.

Either way, I'm on my own here with Grayson, and that clawing sensation is still there.

I need to find Zack.

"...but they never meant anything to me, Bae. You have to know that." Grayson's talking. I catch bits and pieces as I continue to scan the crowd for Zack.

Grayson's voice is pleading, wheedling. "You're the only girl I've ever loved."

"Yeah?" I mutter, still not looking at him. Still too distracted trying to find Zack. "Then maybe you should have treated me better."

"I should have. I know I should have."

God, his tone is so aggravating. How he manages to sound smug and pathetic all at once is a mystery. He somehow manages to convey that he's the real victim here, but also that he's one hundred percent confident that he'll walk away the victor.

The thought has me looking up at him again.

That's a mistake. He seems to take my sudden interest as a positive sign. Like I'd just heard him and finally understood his reasoning.

"I was so scared, Bae." He reaches for my arms but I stumble back a step.

"Scared?" I can't help myself.

I shouldn't encourage this display of idiocy, but the word is so ludicrous —and also so exactly what I'm feeling right now.

I'm scared. I'm so freakin' scared.

My heart clatters wildly, panic rising with each new breath.

Where is Zack? I need to see him. To talk to him. To figure out what this means for us, and—

"Of course, I was scared, Bailey," Grayson interrupts my panicky thoughts. "My feelings for you are so intense. I just love you so much, you know?"

I can only stare at him in disbelief.

Is he kidding right now? Surely, he must be joking.

"You loved me so much you cheated on me?" I ask, just to make sure I got that right.

He opens his mouth to respond, but I'm not done.

"You love me so much you made a fool of me, and made me feel like I was paranoid for ever doubting you?" I take a step toward him as anger temporarily drowns out the fear. "You loved me so much you made me doubt *myself*. Over and over and over again?" I shake my head. "That's not fear, Grayson. That's just cruelty. You weren't afraid of your feelings, you were afraid of missing out. You wanted it all, and the only thing you're afraid of is losing."

Of losing to Zack.

I don't say it aloud because I don't want to drag Zack into this. This conversation is about us—me and Grayson.

"That wasn't it. I was weak, and those girls, they—" He pauses, like he's overcome, his eyes full of bullshit pain. "They took advantage."

I can't stop staring at him, my lips parted in shock. He...did *not* just say that. "They took advantage."

I repeat his words in utter disbelief. Horror, even. But apparently, that doesn't come across in my tone because he's nodding, his brows drawn together in that earnest look again. And I swear, it almost looks like—

Oh my God.

"Are you *crying*?" It's horrible, but I kind of want to laugh. No, I really, *really* want to laugh. I've never once seen Grayson cry, and this...?

This is the worst performance I've seen in years. It's sheer crocodile tears that fill his eyes. Even my little brothers are better at this when they play their game of *who can be more pitiful to get his way*?

"Don't you see, Bae? You're the one for me." He moves closer and I have to tip my head back to keep staring.

I wish Zack was here to see this in the worst possible way. He'd know what to say to end this conversation for good.

And then he'd make me laugh until I cried as we replayed this ridiculous scene.

I look at Toni, but she's still on her own and there's no sign of him. *Where is he?* 

I'm terrified, and with each second that I don't see Zack, that fear grows and the questions get louder and louder. *Has he heard? What's he thinking? What does this mean?* 

And the question that nearly knocks me off my feet. "Does this mean we're over?"

I don't mean to say it out loud, but honestly, I sort of forgot Grayson was standing there. I'd been so intent on searching for Zack that I actually forgot the dumbass standing right in front of me.

Until he reaches for me.

I go to pull back, but I'm too late. His big meaty hands are wrapped around my arms.

"That's what I'm trying to say, Bae. It doesn't have to be over. We can start again."

"What?" That's all I manage to get out before Grayson's leaning down. I tug my head back, but he's persistent. His lips land on mine, and yeah—I'm so ready to puke.

I wrench my arms free and pull away. I swear I can *feel* Zack because my gaze swings to the left and there he is. He's staring at me with dark, hooded eyes and—*oh holy crap*.

His eyes might be hooded, but the tick in his jaw gives him away.

He's furious. At Grayson, no doubt. He can't possibly think I'd *wanted* to be kissed. But even so, the sight of Zack's hard stare makes my stomach sink and that clawing in my chest grows infinitely worse.

Zack looks away, and then Grayson's hands land on my shoulders, holding me in place and bringing my attention back to him. "Let me take you home, Bae—"

"Get off of me!" I shake him off for good measure. "Touch me again and I'll press charges."

Ugh. Not exactly the comeback of my dreams, but I can't even care about Grayson right now. He doesn't matter.

I start toward Zack, but he's hovering over Toni, wrapping an arm around her and tugging her toward the street where he's parked. I turn back to Grayson, jabbing a finger in his direction. "No, scratch that. Touch me again and I'll cut off your dick."

His eyes widen but I spin around before he can reply. Immature? Maybe. But it sure as hell felt a lot better to threaten castration than legal action.

"Zack, wait up," I call when we're out of the crowd and the car's in sight.

"You can stay," he says. "I'll make sure Toni gets home safe."

I stop. No, I freeze. My blood runs cold at his tone.

I could handle anger or confusion or...anything else, really. But his words are bland. Bored. Like he couldn't care less if I stay or go.

That tone is a cold knife to my chest. He can't think...

I stop walking. "Zack, look at me."

He glances over his shoulder, but his hold on Toni has him facing forward again quickly when she stumbles.

"I've got you," he tells Toni under his breath. He's gentle as he gets her into the backseat.

So freakin' kind when he wants to be.

But then he straightens and turns to face me, and his eyes are blank. There's just a dark void where there used to be warmth and laughter.

"Zack, I can explain." I stop with a wince when I realize I sound just like Grayson.

"No need." He shrugs. "We're done, right?"

"I didn't..." That's not fear that makes my chest feel like it's being torn apart from the inside out.

It's not fear and it's not panic.

It's something so much worse.

"I didn't kiss Grayson." My voice sounds too weak, and Zack doesn't even glance in my direction as he closes the back door on Toni.

"It sure looked like you did." His smirk is what does it. It finally cuts through the pain and gives me a heaping dose of anger.

"Aren't you even going to let me explain?"

He lifts a shoulder and heads toward the driver's side. "If you want."

"If I want..." I trail off with a loud exhale. "So what, that's it? We're just...done? We're over just like that?"

My voice is climbing higher but he doesn't so much as flinch as he slides into his driver's seat.

"You should probably get in the back with Toni," he says. "She might need some help."

I stare at him until he slams his door shut.

Then I slide into the back, behind the driver's seat, and next to a miserable looking Toni.

"Zack, talk to me," I say. "You can't just shut me out."

"There's a water bottle by the arm rest," he says in response. Like he's a freakin' Uber driver and not the guy who was making out with me in this very same backseat the night before.

"Zack," I start again.

But he clicks on the radio making it even harder to talk, and then he's driving us back to my house.

I look at Toni, who's staring wide-eyed back at me.

"You can't go home like this," I tell her.

She nods.

"Want to sleep over?"

She nods again.

I force a small smile even though my heart is breaking.

"I'm sorry about tonight," she whispers.

My smile makes my face feel like it's going to shatter, and I fight the urge to look for his gaze in the rearview mirror.

I know I won't find him looking back at me.

He's already cut and run.

"At least it's out in the open," I say to make her feel better. I hand her the water. "I guess it's all over now."

She reaches for my hand and I take it.

When I finally give in to the urge to look in the mirror, my heart gives up the battle and shatters in my chest.

I swallow a sob before it can escape. But now I know that *this* was what I'd been so scared of.

I'd been terrified of losing Zack.

# TWENTY-FIVE AFTERMATH, TAKE TWO

#### Zack

THE DRIVE HOME IS A BLUR. I'm vaguely aware of Bailey and Toni's hushed voices in the backseat, but I can't make out what they're saying and I don't try.

I'm too busy trying to get a freakin' grip.

My hands are clammy on the steering wheel, and adrenaline makes my muscles twitch. I stare at the road in front of me and the green streetlights that mark the way home.

But all I can see is Grayson kissing Bailey.

All I can hear are his words in my head. Mocking. Taunting. *Enjoy her while you can, Zack, because you won't have her for long.* 

Bailey's voice comes from the back. She's talking to Toni quietly, reassuring her, it sounds like. But the sound of her voice makes my nerve endings feel raw.

I'm overreacting. I *know* I'm overreacting. She walked away from Grayson. She's going home with me.

I should talk to her. I should *look* at her, at the very least. But even as I think it, I keep my eyes trained on the road because...what will I see if I meet her eyes in the rearview mirror?

I don't know what I'll do if I see guilt.

Or something even worse, like regret.

So, no. I can't bring myself to meet her gaze, even though I can feel her eyes on me. And I can't get a handle on this anger because...

Was Grayson right?

Is it just a matter of time before Bailey comes to her senses? She's too smart to go back to Grayson, but that's not the point, is it? The point is that she'll never want a guy like me. Not for the long term. Not for anything real.

Sure, we've been having fun. But that's all it was—fun. A diversion. I was the escape from her normal life and the rebound for her broken heart.

Seeing Grayson kiss her tonight, knowing that this deal of ours is over—it was all so clear. Like somebody had flipped on the glaringly bright overhead lights, and in that moment I saw us for who we are. Bailey's the straight-A overachiever who's headed to college and a brilliant future, and I'm...me. The slacker who likely won't ever escape this town and who she's never taken seriously a day in her life.

I'm not the guy who gets the girl.

At least, not *this* girl.

I get that now. I understand what Grayson meant that day in the parking lot. Because even if he can't have her—that doesn't mean that I will either.

Toni moans from the backseat when I hit a pothole and I hear Bailey murmuring to her in this gentle tone. *Saint Bailey to the rescue*.

The snarky voice comes back like he's never left, but I know it for what it is now. That me, the one who'd mocked and taunted and did everything in my power to get under her skin—he was just a jealous asshole. He was a bitter, jaded jerk who wanted what he couldn't have.

I wish I could go back to hating Bailey, but I can't even be pissed at her. That's the really shitty part. I want to be mad at Bailey. I want her to be the asshole here. But she's not. She hasn't done anything wrong. I saw Grayson lean in and I watched long enough to see her pull away. So, no. I can't be pissed.

I know *she's* pissed at *me* though. And she should be. I was a dick back there, not even giving her a chance to explain. Not answering when all she wanted to know was where we stand.

I turn the radio up louder to drown out her voice in the back. I was a dick, but what else could I do?

The writing's on the wall. We're over. The ruse is done.

My hands clench the steering wheel. We've always been heading toward a dead-end. This was only ever supposed to be a limited-time deal, and the time is up. So where does that leave us?

Nowhere. That leaves us nowhere. I can't sit around and wait for her to be done with me. I'm not the worst asshole in the world, but I'm not that nice either. I can't be her stepping stone while she rebuilds her confidence and moves on from Grayson.

And that's all this was for her.

If tonight showed me anything it was how badly I'd messed up these past few weeks. How thoroughly she'd gotten in my head. And yeah, okay —my heart.

I can admit it. Bailey's become the center of my whole freakin' world, and the only way this ends is in heartache.

For me, at least.

We're just...done? We're over just like that?

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel and swallow hard at the memory of the hurt in her voice. I make one last turn, which brings us to our street. Bailey's unbuckling as soon as I pull to a stop in the driveway.

I go to open my door, but her too-quiet voice cuts me off. "I've got it from here."

I open my mouth and...nothing comes out.

Shit.

I should stop her. I want to stop her. And say what?

A rush of rage and need and frustration hits me so hard it leaves me winded.

*Don't go.* That's what I want to say. But I can't get the words out and she's slamming the car door shut behind her, herding Toni up the front steps to her house.

And I'm stuck sitting there.

I want to go after her, but I can't. Some part of me won't allow it. Call it my pride, I guess, but I can't do it. Not when I already know how this ends.

But I can't go home either. The darkened windows mean my mom's still working, and even if she was home, it's not like I'm in the mood to talk.

I need to do something—anything. I need to work off this tension before I lose my freakin' mind.

I'm pulling out of the driveway and driving down the street before I even fully realize where I'm going. Back to the party. My knuckles hurt

from gripping the wheel so hard, and my chest is so tight that only a fight will save me.

I need an outlet for this rage, and there's only one person I want to hurt right now.

But when I pull up and get out of the car, reality sets in. I listen to the sounds coming from the party. I see a few of Macy's friends who are hanging out on the front lawn.

What are you even doing here? It's Bailey's voice in the back of my head right now asking me what I hope to accomplish by coming back here.

The answer? I don't know.

I lean back against my car and listen to the music and voices coming from the backyard. That anger that drove me here is draining out of me so quickly it's like a balloon popped inside my chest, and it's deflating fast.

Too fast.

I'm sinking right along with it.

I spot Grayson and a couple of his friends coming around the side of the house, but they don't seem to notice me. His buddy Chuck is laughing like a hyena and Grayson's wearing that dumb-as-shit grin that tells me he's wasted.

Macy stumbles alongside him, and he laughs as he wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her close. She giggles and pretends to fight him off as he lifts her off her feet. When she turns in his arms and they start drunkenly making out, all I feel is a general sense of disgust toward Grayson and a mild swell of pity for Macy.

They still haven't noticed me.

I could go over there and start a fight, but...what's the point? Bailey walked away from him. I didn't hear what she said, but I know she didn't cave.

And she won't. Macy and Grayson don't know shit about Bailey. She's way too strong for a weak-ass idiot like Grayson. She left him behind and she's never going back.

Which means Bailey hurt him more than I ever could.

"You here to start trouble?" A familiar voice has me straightening in surprise.

My ex Rina smiles when I look over to find her walking toward me. "Because if you are, I should warn you that the cops are gonna be here any

second now." She nods toward the neighbors' house. "I heard the old guy next door say he called."

"You're back," I say by way of answer.

Her smile widens as she leans against the car beside me. "Just for the weekend." She glances over. "I would've let you know, but I didn't really think you'd want to see me."

I don't argue.

She wets her lips and takes a deep breath, her gaze straight ahead on the revolting image of Grayson and Macy making out like their lives depend on it.

"Is it true what they're saying?" She turns to face me, her eyes wide and her expression pained. "Did you, um—" She bites her lip. "Did you find out about me and Grayson?"

I nod.

"And that's why you and Bailey..." Whatever she sees in my expression, she trails off and faces forward. "Pretty devious."

"I'm a devious guy," I say.

She gives a snort of amusement. "You're really not."

Her eyes are bright with amusement when she turns toward me again. "But I wasn't talking about you. I meant Bailey." Her lips quirk up in a wry smile. "I honestly didn't know she had it in her."

I know what she means, and guilt is a kick in the gut I really don't need right now.

When Rina and I were together, Bailey was something of a running joke. I wasn't the only one who made fun of Bailey for being a straightlaced bore. "Yeah, well, there's more to Bailey than I ever gave her credit for."

I stare straight ahead, but I feel Rina's eyes on me. I can also feel her fretting beside me as she shifts from foot to foot. Finally, when I can't take her silence or her fidgeting any longer, I let out a loud exhale and look her way. "What is it?"

"I'm..." She twists her hands together. "I'm sorry."

"Okay."

Her answering smile is soft and sad. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

I wish I could say I feel something. Anything. But I look right at this girl I dated for many months and I feel...nothing. Not a goddamn thing. "You didn't hurt me," I say.

And I mean it.

Grayson had hurt me. His betrayal had cut like a knife. But Rina? All she'd done was dent my pride. She hadn't been close enough to really hurt me.

I get that now, obviously. Because right now it's not my pride stinging at the thought of losing Bailey. I wish to God it was, because this...this is brutal.

My insides feel like they're crumbling as it hits me all over again that it's over.

No more teasing, no more laughter, no more kissing, no more talking. No more being understood. No more being needed.

I drop my head. Jesus, I need to get a grip before I do something unforgivable...like fall apart over a girl I hadn't even really been dating to begin with.

Apparently, Rina misreads my agony because next thing I know she's clutching my arm, her voice all intense and pleading. "I'm seriously so sorry, Zack. If I had any idea you'd take it so hard—"

"You cheated on me with my best friend," I say. "How'd you think I'd take it?"

She drops her hands, seemingly surprised by my even tone and overall lack of giving a shit.

"Honestly?" She winces as she gives a little shrug. "I didn't think you'd care."

I stare at her for a second. "You mean, you didn't think I'd find out."

She rolls her eyes, leaning back against the car beside me again. "That too. But seriously, I thought even if you did find out, you wouldn't care. You didn't really pay much attention to me unless you wanted to hook up. I always got the feeling that we were both just sort of…killing time. It wasn't like we were a *real* couple, you know?"

I look over to see her eyeing me warily. Like she's afraid she's hurt my feelings.

She hasn't. I'm now painfully aware that this girl is completely incapable of hurting me. There's only one girl who's gotten close enough to cause serious damage and she's probably cursing my name right now as she nurses Toni back to sobriety.

Rina gives me a small smile. "I'm right, aren't I?"

I don't bother to deny or confirm. "My best friend, though?"

"Yeah. That was...a mistake." She has the good grace to flinch. "Sorry."

We're both quiet for a little, until I get tired of drawing this out.

She was shitty. I was shitty.

Maybe we're just two shitty people.

I lean over to bump my shoulder against hers. "I'm sorry I was a crappy boyfriend."

It's the best peace offering I've got in me.

She shrugs. "You were fine. But I realized pretty early on that you were never going to let me all the way in, you know?"

I nod. Unfortunately, I do know. As Bailey so brutally pointed out, I've done a stellar job of keeping just about everyone at arm's length ever since my dad walked out.

Even Grayson, though he'd gotten closer than most.

So, where the hell was that self-preservation when it came to Bailey?

"But I am sorry," Rina says. "You deserved better than that. And so did Bailey." She looks over at me, her expression pained again. "Is she okay?" I shrug.

"It must have sucked for her," she continues.

I say nothing. But Rina doesn't seem to get the message that I don't want to talk about my new faux girlfriend to my cheating ex. "At least she got her revenge tonight though, right?" She shakes her head, amusement dripping from her tone. "Poor Grayson. Everyone's talking about how disgusted she looked when he kissed her." She makes this funny angry face and raises her voice in what I gather is supposed to be an imitation of Bailey. "Touch me again and I'll cut off your dick."

Rina tips her head back with a laugh.

I'm staring at her now. "Wait. Bailey said that?"

Rina's still laughing as she nods. "A bunch of people heard her. That and a whole speech she gave him about how pathetic he is." She widens her eyes. "And, I mean. He is. What kind of asshole goes after his best friend's girl?"

I stare at her, but I can't bring myself to point out that she was a part of that equation. Because...hell.

I lift a hand to my chest, as if that's going to help. It doesn't. My ribcage feels like it's being crushed.

One part of me is proud as hell that Bailey told him off, but another part of me is drowning in regret at the way I walked away.

*Shit.* Would it have made a difference?

We'd still be over. If not tonight, then soon enough, right?

And I'm right back to where I started when I drove over here looking for a fight. But now...

No amount of fighting is going to make this pain go away.

And there's nowhere left to run.

I scrub a hand over my face, only vaguely aware that Rina's still talking about all the excitement of the night and the gossip she'd heard about me and Bailey. About Bailey and Grayson. About Grayson and Macy.

"You know, I always liked Bailey. I'm glad she finally saw Grayson for the lying cheat he is," Rina says.

"You knew he'd been cheating on her?" I ask. "I mean, before you?"

She shrugs. "I suspected. He's that kind of guy, you know?"

Clearly, I hadn't known. But I do now.

"Anyway, Bailey deserves better." She leans over and nudges my arm with a playful smirk. "I'm glad you two finally worked things out between you."

I let out a muffled grunt as her teasing comment stabs me in the chest better than any knife ever could. "I guess you didn't hear the part where she and I were just pretending to be together to get back at Grayson."

She laughs. "Oh no, I heard. But I also heard you two have been all hot and heavy for weeks now."

She holds up her phone like it's proof when I glance over. "Trust me, Zack. No one wasted any time filling me in on how quickly my boyfriend moved on."

I flinch and part of me thinks I should apologize—until I remember that this all started because she cheated on me.

"Honestly, I was surprised at first," she says, her tone all thoughtful as she stares at her phone. "But then, the more I thought about it, you two kind of make sense in a weird sort of way. I always felt that tension between you guys. And you know what they say about love and hate, right?"

"Yeah, well..." I don't finish.

I don't know what to say. *It's not real. It never was.* I can't bring myself to say that, so I just shake my head. "It doesn't matter." To a confused Rina, I add, "It's over now, anyway."

"Oh." She looks startled. "Is that what you want?"

I blink in the face of her oh-so-blunt question. *Is that what you want?* Such a simple question.

Such an obvious answer. "No."

Her expression turns sickeningly sweet with sympathy. "Oh, Zack." She leans in closer until her arm presses against mine, like she's trying to physically give me support. "So that's what *she* wants?"

Yes. Maybe. I settle on, "Probably."

"Probably?" Rina frowns. "Did you even ask her?"

"I..." I clamp my mouth shut. No.

"Ugh, *Zack*." Rina whines my name in a way that is familiar and irritating. It's a tone that says I've disappointed her. Again. "You didn't even try?"

You stopped trying.

My heart slams against my ribcage. She'd been right that night. I had stopped trying. It was so much easier not to try. Not to care. Not to get hurt.

"...but Bailey deserves better." Rina's still talking. She's lecturing me. I guess for old times' sake?

I don't listen. My thoughts spin out of control, and my heart races away from me like it knows what I'm about to do before I even decide to do it.

"I'm going to do it," I say softly.

Rina's staring at me in confusion. "You're going to do what?"

I straighten away from my car. I'm already fishing for my keys in my pocket. "I'm gonna try," I say.

Rina's face brightens. "Really?"

She sounds so shocked, it would be funny if I wasn't currently trying not to throw up at the thought of what I'm about to do.

"I'm gonna try," I say again, this time to myself. I'm gonna do more than try. I'm gonna fight. My heart slams against my ribcage again, and the adrenaline is back.

I am going to fight tonight—but not Grayson.

He's not worth a fight.

I'm going to fight for something better.

I'm gonna fight and I'm gonna win.

Hopefully.

But at the very least, I'm going to try. Because Rina's right—Bailey deserves better. She deserves better than Grayson, and she deserves a hell of a lot better than the guy I've been these past few years.

The guy I was earlier tonight.

That's not me, not anymore. Not when I'm with Bailey.

And I might not know what I want out of life, or in my future, but I do know one thing. I want to be the guy who gets the girl.

I want to be the guy who's worthy of Bailey Tucker.

# TWENTY-SIX NOBODY PUTS BAILEY IN THE CORNER

### **Bailey**

TONI'S SPRAWLED out beside the toilet, her hands clasped over her chest as she stares up at the ceiling. "Okay," she says. "I think that was the last of it."

I hand her a cold wet washcloth and grab an unopened toothbrush from one of the cabinet drawers.

"Thanks for letting me crash here," she says.

"No problem." My parents were out on a date night when we got home, and Janie's the only one awake since the boys went to bed hours ago.

Janie shows up in the doorway now, her nose scrunched up in a sympathetic wince. "You hanging in there?"

Toni nods and points to me. "I'm doing better than her."

I sigh. "Thanks, Toni."

Janie swings her concerned gaze in my direction, and Toni somehow manages to look smug and superior even as she sticks a hot pink toothbrush in her mouth.

"What happened?" Janie asks.

I shake my head. I'm trying my best not to think about it.

It's not really working, but I'm trying.

"Zack," Toni says around a mouth full of foaming toothpaste. "Zack happened."

I turn to her in exasperation. "No, *you* happened." Is it nice to play the blame game with the sick girl who's been puking for the last ten minutes?

Probably not. But I'm not in the mood to talk about Zack and I'll do just about anything to get Janie to stop staring at me like this.

Like she's about to psychoanalyze me until I beg for mercy.

My evil plan works because Janie looks from me to Toni. "Okay, I give up. What's going on?"

Toni's leaning over to spit in the sink, so I give Janie the Cliffs Notes version. "Toni spilled the beans about me and Zack."

Janie's eyes widen. "That you're faking it?"

I nod, but look away. I don't want to think about the fact that we were faking it. Or that it's over now.

Or that Zack shut me out the first chance he got.

I definitely can't think about the fact that my heart feels like it's breaking.

"Grayson tried to win me back," I say.

When Janie growls in anger on my behalf, I shrug. I can't summon up anger anymore, but my nose crinkles up in disgust at the memory of his lips on mine. "I told him to get lost, and..." *And Zack broke my heart*. "And that was that."

"Please tell me you didn't actually use the phrase 'get lost,'" Janie starts to tease.

But I'm definitely not in the mood for teasing, so I push my way past Janie because the bathroom is small enough to begin with. With three of us in there, the walls feel like they're closing in.

I take a deep breath as I head for the living room.

Janie follows hot on my heels, Toni right behind her.

"Oh no," Janie says. "Nope. Not gonna happen."

"What's not gonna happen?" I hit the den, which is—as expected—a complete and total disaster. The boys left games and toys lying everywhere because Janie sucks at making them clean up. She falls for their 'but we're so tired' routine every time.

I have my hands full of action figures when I straighten to find Janie and Toni blocking the doorway with matching expressions of stubborn mutiny.

I widen my eyes. "Um...what's happening here?"

"You're not doing this again," Janie says.

Toni arches her brows and purses her lips, all self-righteous agreement.

Janie takes a step toward me and starts ticking off points on her fingers. "You're not going back to pretending that everything is perfect. You're not going to shove your feelings under the covers in the name of *maturity*." She uses air quotes just in case her sarcastic tone wasn't obvious enough. "You're not going to turn back into Saint Bailey and pretend you're above it all when we all know you're falling apart right now."

I stare at her in surprise because...is it that obvious? Probably.

Toni winces in sympathy at whatever she sees on my face.

Okay, definitely.

I shake my head as my chest tightens and my lungs expand. I don't want to think about Zack. I don't want to talk about the fact that it's over. I don't want to think about how hollow I feel, like I've been gutted and left standing. Because the second I do...

"I don't *want* to fall apart." And yes, it comes out sounding absurdly childish. I might as well have stomped my foot when I'd said it.

The look Janie gives me is pitying. "No one does, Bailey. But you can't keep burying your feelings. It ends up coming out one way or another. You know this."

I look away and the only sound in the room is a plastic Iron Man toy hitting the carpet. I glance down to see I'm still holding a bunch of action figures. I let them go and they hit the ground at once, scattering at my feet.

"You know you can talk to us, right?" Toni says. "You can trust us."

I give her a blank stare. "Can I? Because I'm pretty sure the last secret I shared with you was just outed to the world."

She winces. "I really am sorry about that."

I shrug, but I'm not exactly feeling nonchalant at the moment. Sorry isn't cutting it right now. In fact, anger is simmering in my gut the more these two come at me from their high horse.

I know it's not logical to blame Toni for the way things ended with Zack, but I can't shake it either. I can't help but wonder how things might have gone if our secret hadn't been spilled so publicly.

And so while I know I should drop it...I don't. "Why, Toni? I mean, I know you were drunk, but was that all it was?" I remember vividly those moments right after she puked at my feet. *And maybe I was still a little mad at you*. "Was this some sort of payback because I was a crappy friend?"

Toni shakes her head and I can see her regret.

Part of me feels guilty for making her feel bad, and I can see Janie's discomfort as her eyes dart from me to Toni and back again.

But they want me to air my feelings, right? Well, here we go. Saint Bailey would have let this slide, but that's not me anymore.

I might not know what I'm going to say to Zack or how I'm going to handle his rejection, but this is a start.

"I honestly don't know," Toni says. She heads past me and sinks down onto the couch. "I want to say it was a mistake, but I think maybe, if I'm being honest, there's some resentment there, and when I got drunk, it sort of...slipped out."

We're silent for a long moment, and I fall onto the couch beside her as the silence stretches between us.

I still feel like an ass for how I handled things between us years ago, but it's hard not to feel hurt right now, too.

Janie stands in front of us with her arms crossed. "Do you know what you two are?"

I glance at Toni, and the two of us look up at Janie. "What?" I say.

She waves a finger between us. "You're Baby and Lisa."

We stare at her for a long moment until Toni finally says, "Wait, like, from *Dirty Dancing*?"

She nods, looking far too smug for a chick who's about to use a *Dirty Dancing* metaphor as therapy. "Exactly. This is like when Baby goes off with the cool kids and poor Lisa is stuck doing the talent show—"

"I thought Lisa was happy to do the talent show," I say.

This earns me stares from both of them as Janie says wearily, "Bailey, no one wants to do the talent show."

Toni gives me a little shrug, like she kinda agrees.

"But you like the theater," I say.

"Yeah, I *love* my drama friends, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't want to hang out with a different crowd now and again. Have some new experiences. Not to mention, I would've been with *you*." She toys with the hem of the nightshirt I loaned her. "It's not fun being left behind."

I open my mouth to protest, but shut it quickly. I should have included her, and I know it. This isn't news, but I haven't really apologized. Not the way I should have. "I'm sorry, Toni. I was a crappy, self-absorbed friend. You're right," I say. "And I was wrong."

She meets my gaze levelly for a long moment, and then her lips twitch up at the corners and she drops her voice several octaves. "When I'm wrong, I say I'm wrong."

I burst out in a laugh that feels strange when my chest still feels so empty. "That is the worst Jerry Orbach impersonation I've ever heard."

She shrugs, and I look up to a smug Janie looking awfully pleased with herself.

"See?" Janie says. "You two are like Baby and Lisa, and in the end, you have each other's backs against the Robbies of the world."

"Grayson is totally Robbie," Toni says.

"Oh totally," Janie agrees.

"So, who does that make you?" I ask.

Janie shrugs. "Oh, I'm Penny all the way. Sexy, badass, and mysterious, with all kinds of scandalous secrets..." She wiggles her fingers in our direction. "And way too cool for both of you kids."

I snort. We're both older than her. But even so...she kinda has a point. She is no doubt way cooler than me, but I'll never tell her so. It's my sisterly duty to keep her ego in check whenever possible.

But I will admit, if only to myself, Janie has zero effs to give when it comes to what people think or say about her, and while I'm getting *better* about not caring—I'm not there yet.

I've been making such good progress, but tonight, with Zack, I took the old-Bailey way out. Yes, he'd been a dick, but I should've given Zack hell right then and there. I should've told him...

What? My mind goes blank for a second. I have no idea what I should've said.

I wince. No. That's a lie. I'm totally lying to myself in a way I haven't done in weeks. Emotions I've been trying to bury ever since we got home tonight are right there, just beneath the surface.

My hands are shaking when I look down at them.

I know *exactly* what I should have said. I was just too scared to put myself out there. I was too afraid of rejection, afraid that I'd look in his eyes and see pity, or something even worse.

I'd been a freakin' coward.

"Shit." The word slips out on a harsh whisper. and I look up to see Toni and Janie staring at me with wide eyes.

"I will say this," Janie says slowly. "Hanging out with Zack so much has done wonders for your vocabulary."

Toni snorts with amusement.

Even I manage a small smile. "He's done more than just expand my vocabulary."

Janie's eye roll conveys 'well, duh' and Toni outright says it. "Of course he has, Bailey. Anyone can see that you two have been good for each other."

I look down at my hands again. They're still shaking, but I can't say if it's from fear or sadness.

I know heartache is waiting. It'll come barreling down on me with full, heart-crushing strength just as soon as I resign myself to the fact that this thing between us is over.

But I don't want it to be over. I'm not ready to give up on us, even if he is.

"I need to talk to him," I say suddenly.

"Yesss," Janie moans. "I'm so glad you figured that out on your own." She looks at Toni with a fake pout. "Our little baby girl is growing up."

Toni laughs.

"You guys, I'm serious." I stand up and all the blood seems to rush from my head.

I feel faint. Is it normal to feel faint when one confronts a guy she's pretty sure she's in love with?

Oh crap. A cold sweat breaks out on my brow at the L-word.

I don't *love* him...do I?

Oh crap, I think I might. I press a hand to my forehead. It's time to be brave, and admit it.

I, Bailey Tucker, am head-over-heels crazy in love with Zack Myers.

A weird wheezing noise escapes from my lungs. It's terror, and excitement, and panic, and...terror.

Did I say terror already?

I look from Janie to Toni, and then back again. "I don't know how to tell him."

Toni stands up and pushes me toward the door. "Girl, you look worse than I feel. The best thing you can do is just...say it. Say whatever it is you need to get off your chest."

"Rip off the Band-Aid," Janie agrees from behind me.

I let them lead me to the back door. "But what do I say? What if I panic? What if I freeze?" I look at them with wide eyes as a whole new fear hits me smack in the forehead. "What if I'm *wrong*?"

What if I'm wrong about how I feel, is what I mean.

But also, what if I'm wrong about how *he* feels?

What if he doesn't feel the same? What if he's not even *close* to feeling this way?

My head is spinning with horrifying *what ifs* as Janie takes me by the shoulders and grips me like she's a coach about to give some tough love. "There's no *wrong* when it comes to emotions. You can be confused about what you're feeling, or your feelings might not be reciprocated, but—"

Toni smacks Janie's shoulder when my face drains of blood and my eyes widen.

"But," Janie says again loudly. "You won't know unless you confront this head on. One of you has to be brave."

"Why does it have to be me?" I whimper.

Janie gets serious. "Because you're Bailey Tucker and you're strong as hell."

Toni nods. "You told Grayson you'd cut his dick off. You're a freakin' badass."

Janie looks to Toni. "Wait, she did what?"

I straighten, their words giving me a burst of confidence. "Right. You're right. I need to do this for my own sake, no matter the consequences."

"Damn straight." Toni clasps a hand on my shoulder alongside Janie's, her expression fierce. "Remember, nobody puts Baby in the corner."

Janie nods. "Nobody puts *Bailey* in the corner."

I stare at them for a long moment to see if they're serious. They are. "As far as rallying cries go, I'm not sure that's a winner."

They're both giving me fierce glares now, and I'm not gonna lie, it's a little weird.

Toni repeats the line. "Nobody puts *Bailey* in the corner."

I nod, letting go of the ridiculousness of that battle cry. It might be stupid, but...it's kind of working. "Yes. Okay. Nobody puts Bailey in the corner. I can do this."

I'm done swallowing my emotions. I'm through pretending I'm all right when my heart is breaking. I'm ready to come out and fight for what I want.

I wipe clammy palms on my pajama pants as I head through the back screen door to go find Zack.

Toni and Janie follow me onto the back porch.

"Summon your inner Baby and tell him how you feel!" Toni shouts.

I take a few solid strides toward Zack's yard, but I stop short when I see him burst out of his back door, and head straight for...their shed.

Well. That's not exactly heartening. I'm over here planning to spill my guts to this guy and apparently, he's decided that tonight is the night to take up weeding.

I square my shoulders. I will not be deterred. Baby is my spirit animal and I will tell Zack exactly how I feel.

Even if it's as painfully awkward as Baby shouting out Johnny's name in that weird, desperate plea. I flinch at the memory of the scene I hate so much.

My eyes are fixed on the shed where the door flopped shut with a bang behind him. I should be thinking about what I'll say, but it's easier to think about *Dirty Dancing*. Or literally anything other than the terrifying leap I'm about to take.

I've almost reached the shed when the door flies open again. Zack comes barreling out, his arms filled with...balls?

I blink in surprise as he halts right in front of me, clearly just as shocked as I am.

Although, I'm not the one holding an armful of balls in the middle of the night.

"Bailey." He says my name like it's a prayer and my heart leaps with a burst of hope.

His gaze is dark and hot as it rakes over me. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you." I can't stop staring at the balls in his arms. He's got everything from an inflatable beach ball to those big, soft tee-balls my brothers used to use. "What are you doing?"

"I was bringing these," he says. "For you."

I meet his stare head-on. "You were bringing me...balls."

His lips twitch ever so slightly. "I figured you're pissed, and I know you like to take your aggression out with pitching, so..."

He trails off as I stare at the pile in his arms again. "So, you brought me balls."

He shrugs. "I didn't want to get a concussion. Or lose my junk."

"Because I'll be throwing balls," I repeat like a moron as I try to keep up. His lips twitch again and I frown. "Don't you dare make a dick joke right now."

He gives me a wide-eyed look of fake innocence. "I would never."

A little huff of grudging amusement escapes, and that crooked little grin of his threatens to take me out at the knees.

"I'm filing it away for another day," he says.

"Good," I say. "Now is not the time." But my heart is falling, tripping, and tap dancing because I'm starting to realize... "You were coming to talk to me too."

He nods. And even though he's still smiling, I see his throat work as he swallows. He moves forward slowly, warily, and then takes a beach ball on top and holds it out as a sort of peace offering.

I don't move. I can't take it. Because all at once, another line from *Dirty Dancing* leaps into my head.

I'm scared of walking out of this room and never feeling the rest of my whole life the way I feel when I'm with you.

I never really understood that line as a kid, but I get it now. I *feel* it now. It's desperation and it's need. It's wanting another human being more than you want air to breathe.

And that is *exactly* how I feel right now.

My chest aches, and this feeling of needing another person is so freakin'terrifying I don't know if I want to run away or run to him. All I know is...

"I am so scared," I whisper.

He drops the balls, and neither of us notices as they roll away because all I see is him, coming toward me, and pulling me into his arms.

# TWENTY-SEVEN KISS TODAY GOODBYE

#### Zack

### BAILEY'S KISS IS EVERYTHING.

The way her lips meet mine, the way she throws herself into it with crazy abandon. My arms wrap around her tight, and I can't even pretend to hide my need.

I can't let her go. Not again. Not ever.

She tips her head to the side and whimpers when our lips meet and cling.

We fit. We've always fit, but right now I *feel* it. Not just in the way our mouths lock together like we've been kissing for eternity, and not just the way her body molds to mine like we were built for this.

It's everything. It's her scent, and her sighs, and the way that holding her makes me feel like everything is right in the world. Like we're in this together.

Her arms twine around my neck and her fingers are in my hair, holding me to her like she'll never let go. The way she's kissing me....

It's with all the desperation that I'm feeling, and all the relief.

She's here. In my arms.

Which means it's not too late. I didn't ruin everything.

"I'm sorry." My voice is gruff and little more than a whisper when I pull back to say what needs to be said.

I rest my forehead against hers, our breathing heavy and our lips still so close, like we can't physically break apart for too long. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry too." Her voice is higher than usual. It's laced with emotions that make my heart feel like it's cracking.

I pull back slightly in confusion. "Why are *you* sorry?"

"I...I don't know." A little huff of laughter slips out as she shakes her head, like she's trying to think. Her eyes are dazed and she looks more flustered than I've ever seen her.

It's freakin' adorable. My heart gives a fierce kick of protectiveness and gratitude because...this is a Bailey that nobody sees. Nobody but me.

She trusts me. She lets me in, and that's humbling.

More than anything, I want more to be the guy who's worthy of her trust. I want to be the one who protects her, who cherishes her.

"You have nothing to apologize for," I say. "I'm the one who walked away." I lean down again, kissing her softly. "You were right before, when you said I'd stopped trying." My insides churn with the admission, but I know it's true. "I thought it would be easier, you know?"

She nods, and I think maybe she does know. Maybe she understands me better than I understand myself.

I swallow hard and pull back so I can look into her eyes, so she can see how serious I am. "I'm done with that, though. I don't want to be that guy anymore. I want to be...better." I flinch slightly at the inadequate words and that gets another huff of amusement from Bailey.

"I want to try. For you," I say. "I'm not letting you go again, Bailey. Ever."

Her eyes widen slightly, and I'll admit—I'm slightly freaked out at the intensity in my voice.

"And yeah, I realize I sounded like a stalker just now," I add, hoping to make her smile. "I don't intend to take you prisoner, I just mean...I'm going to fight for you. Always. I'm not going to let you go without a fight, and—"

She stops me with a hard kiss.

Putting myself out there...? It's a risk. It's scary as hell. But when Bailey flings her arms around me and squeezes me tight...

It's worth it.

It's so freakin' worth it.

"I love you." She whispers the words in my ear. Her voice is shaky and packed with emotion, and my heart...

My heart can't take it. The world as I know it breaks into pieces and is re-formed right in front of my eyes.

She loves me.

I hold Bailey so tight we're pressed together from head to toe. My hands clench, gripping the fabric of her top as a wave of emotion hits me with the force of a tsunami.

For a second I can't speak. I can't do anything but hold her, my eyes shut tight as the past is washed clean, and the future stretches out ahead like a beacon, because...

Bailey Tucker loves me.

I'm not sure I'm worthy of that, but I want to be. And I will be. Because my girl deserves nothing less.

"God, I love you, Bailey." I bury my face in her neck. "I love you so much."

She gasps. Or maybe it's a sob. All I know is, we're frantic to touch each other, to kiss and hold and get as close as humanly possible. And as I kiss her, there's wetness. She's crying, and I try to kiss away her tears. And for a while there, the rest of the world stops.

There is no world outside of us.

All I know is her.

All I want is her.

"I'm never letting you go," I say again. It's a promise. A vow.

She nods, her breath catching. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I'm holding you to that, Smurfette." My heart is aching, my throat tight.

She makes a sound that's somewhere between a sob and a laugh. "That's the least romantic nickname for a girlfriend I've ever heard. You'll have to come up with something better."

"You're probably right." I steal a kiss, a goofy-ass grin spreading across my face.

*Girlfriend*. She's my girlfriend now. Not in a phony way, and not with a time limit.

"What about Bae?"

"Absolutely not." She melts against me in a way that I love. Like some couple version of a trust exercise, she rests against me like she knows I'll

catch her.

"I'm sorry about tonight." Her eyes are still wet with tears when she looks up at me. "I shouldn't have given Grayson a chance to speak, let alone kiss me."

I nuzzle that spot behind her ear that always makes her shiver. "I get it. A lot was going on, it caught you by surprise."

"I was just..." She grips my shoulders tight when I kiss her *there*, and sure enough she shivers.

I can't stop a smug smile as I kiss my way up her neck and along her jaw.

"I was just so scared," she says.

This is the second time she's said that, and I pull back to cup her cheek. "What are you scared of, baby?"

The cheesy term of endearment slips out, and I guess I've found my new nickname for my girlfriend because it feels weirdly right.

"As soon as I found out that our secret was out there, I was terrified that *this*—" She clutches my T-shirt. "—would end."

My heart just gives up the fight right then and there. She owns me.

I kiss her hard, like I can kiss away her earlier fears or somehow make up for the scare I gave her when I walked away.

"I love *this*." She tightens her arms around my neck when I start to pull back. "I love *us*. And I love who I am when I'm with you."

"And who's that?" I try for teasing, but my voice is so gruff from all these emotions, I barely recognize it.

Her voice wobbles. "Myself?"

I grin, and I'm pretty sure my heart triples in size in my chest like the goddamn Grinch who stole Christmas.

"I'm myself when I'm with you." She shrugs. "And you still like me, faults and all."

"I don't just like you, Bailey." I squeeze her waist. "I love you. *Exactly* as you are."

Her smile is watery. "Even when I don't know who I am?"

"Especially then." I'm a total sap right now and I don't care. She needs to hear it, and I need to say it. "You'll always be perfect for me because you're *not* perfect." I make a scoffing sound. "Perfect's boring. Give me a complicated, competitive, sexy Smurfette any day."

"That's so gross," she whispers, her tone still thick with emotion. "Never use sexy and Smurfette in the same sentence again."

"Deal," I whisper back.

Her eyes fill with tears as she goes back to serious territory like we'd never left.

"That's how I feel too, you know. I love you for the good and the bad." Her eyes are so *very* serious when they meet mine, and now I am legally obligated to make her smile. It's boyfriend law.

"For the good and the bad, huh?" I shift her in my arms so we sway slightly. "What about...for better or for worse?"

"Yes." She chokes on a laugh. "But don't propose just yet, 'kay? I don't think either of us is ready for that."

I'm laughing too, and it feels like I've just chugged a bottle of champagne. There's this lightness inside me, and it fills the air between us.

I'm a dude, and I would not normally use the word giddy. But right now?

Yeah. I'm giddy as hell.

"Fine. No proposal tonight," I say. "So, what's next then?"

She smiles up at me and her smile puts the sun to shame. "Let's start with an epic summer. And then...take it from there."

"What?" I pull back as if horrified. "Smurfette, are you trying to tell me you don't have our future all planned out?"

She rolls her eyes at my teasing, her lips still curved up in a grin. "I thought you were done with Smurfette."

"Pshh." I pull her in tight. "I'll never be done teasing you, baby. You should know that by now."

She shakes her head with feigned exasperation.

"I'm the bad influence." I point to myself, like I'm lecturing her for real. "And you're the goody-two-shoes who'll make sure I don't get too far out of line. Everyone has a job in this relationship, Smurfette. I hope you don't think you can just slack off now that we're officially together."

She's laughing as she loops her arms around my neck. "Zack?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up and kiss me."

I grin and lean in. "Yes, ma'am."

### **EPILOGUE**

One Year Later...

BAILEY

THE SUN'S bright overhead as I lie out on the little beach area by the lake. My eyes are shut, and my limbs are heavy as the early summer sun warms my skin.

And I am so freakin' chill. Seriously, I think I may be more relaxed than I've ever been.

Why? Because life is perfect.

And by that I mean, it's not perfect at all. But it's close enough for me.

First of all, it's done. High school is *over*. I'm still wrapping my head around this fact. Considering everything that went down last summer, senior year ended up being a blast.

Was I still a social pariah? Maybe in some circles.

Did I care?

Big nope.

Grayson's reign over the school was never the same after last summer. Sure, he still had some followers. Namely, underclassmen on the football team who hadn't seen through his shiny veneer yet.

But they will eventually, because people like Grayson are all smoke and mirrors and eventually people wise up.

Most of our school figured it out by the end of last summer. No amount of his BS could change the fact that he'd cheated on me from day one. Not to mention, the other girls he'd hooked up with started finding out that they weren't the only ones—hello, Macy, I'm looking at you.

And once school started up, and everyone actually saw Zack and I together, day in and day out...

Well, let's just say even catty high schoolers can't resist a good love story.

We went from being the bad guys to the underdogs. The couple everyone was rooting for.

Which was...whatever.

I can honestly say I stopped caring what people said about us. It didn't happen overnight, obviously, but by the end of last summer, I was well on my way, thanks to Toni, and Janie. And of course Zack.

Much as I'm glad the school year is behind me, it was an epic year, with countless movie nights on Zack's couch, and tutoring sessions that ended in makeout sessions, and sleepovers with Toni, and long weekend days spent watching my hot boyfriend get all sweaty working on his car.

Plus all that other senior year stuff. Homecoming, prom, graduation, and a class trip to the beach...

Zack and I did all of that together—and laughed our asses off every step of the way.

It hasn't been all sunshine and roses, obviously. There've been fights, and long talks, and compromises, and breakthroughs. Some scary moments, some sad times, but overall...

Yeah. Pretty damn perfect.

And now school is over, and college doesn't start for another three months, and I'm lying out by a lake with a shit-eating grin on my face because life is so freakin' good.

I know the moment Zack reaches my side because a shadow blocks out the sun. I open my eyes to see him giving me that crooked smile, and—

*Oof.* Will I ever get used to that smile aimed at me like that? Like it's for me alone, and like I'm the only person on the planet who matters?

I let out a sappy sigh as he crouches down beside me.

A girl could get addicted to that look.

I know because I have. I'm totally, one hundred percent hooked.

"Hey, beautiful." His gaze rakes over me. I still prefer one-pieces that actually cover my butt, and last summer Zack said he prefers them too—so no one else could see what's his.

*I'm not yours*, I'd said, all righteous indignation.

*Sure you are.* Then he'd pulled me into his arms and dipped me like we were in some old movie. *Just like I'm yours*.

It was hard to stay offended knowing I owned the hottest guy I'd ever known.

Then he'd kissed me, and...

Protests forgotten. I'm his. He's mine. And did I mention life is freakin' good?

But that's history. Right now, I go up onto my elbows and lift my sunglasses. "How'd it go?"

But he's distracted, his eyes lingering on my body like he's about to devour me. "Holy hell," he mutters. "I am the luckiest man alive."

"Zack." I slap his arm, and he turns that lethal grin on me.

He holds out a hand and helps me sit upright, while he takes a seat next to me on my towel. He'd been working, and his hair is plastered to his forehead, and sweat trickles down his neck as his gaze darkens. "Am I too disgustingly sweaty to kiss you?"

I grab his sweaty T-shirt and pull him in close. "Never."

He smiles against my lips before giving me the sort of long, slow kiss I adore.

It's the kind of kiss that says we have all the time in the world. That he's not going anywhere, and he plans to cherish me until the end of time.

Because he does. I know this. I may have put the kibosh on a proposal last summer, but my ridiculous, over-the-top boyfriend has been bringing it up more and more as graduation drew closer.

*Is it time yet? Am I allowed to ask now?* He's kidding.

Mostly.

I think.

Although his mom did inform me that he'd asked for his grandma's old ring approximately three minutes after we officially became a couple.

And he makes fun of *me* for being the long-term planner.

I grudgingly pull back from his kiss because right now, I'm way more impatient to find out the answer. "How'd it go?"

His grin says it all.

I clutch his shoulders. "Yeah?"

He nods and I throw my arms around him with a squeal that makes him laugh and has both of us toppling back onto the towel.

I drop kisses all over his face and his arms wrap around my waist.

"He said yes. With conditions." Zack's smile is too sexy not to kiss.

Turns out, Zack's wildly ambitious when he's properly motivated. Last summer, his whole extended family was so happy we were official, we started hanging out here at the lake more often.

I'm not gonna lie. It hasn't been all hunky dory. His dad is still a sensitive topic. But it seems like Uncle Ray and his sons have been more than happy to meet Zack where he's at.

So, Zack started working for Uncle Ray, fixing up the lake property, and then doing some odd jobs for his son's new home.

Zack figured out pretty quickly that it's not just cars he's great at repairing. He may not be book smart, but he's a freakin' genius working with his hands. His family noticed this too.

And did I mention that his dad's whole side of the family is in construction in some form or another?

So when we found out that I got into my dream school, Brown University, a few hours away, Zack hatched a new plan.

I'm pretty sure his mom helped to start the conversation, because apparently she's just as psyched as we are at the idea of us staying together during college.

Not that we couldn't do long distance. We totally could.

But I don't want to, and neither does Zack.

And as Zack put it...construction happens everywhere, right?

So he and his great uncle made a deal. If he worked hard for the family during the year, he'd pull some strings, and make some calls, and try to get him a job with a company near my school.

"He even offered to give me a loan so I'll have enough for first months' rent before we get there." Zack's laughing as he talks because I haven't stopped peppering him with kisses.

And I don't plan to anytime soon.

This was the last piece of the puzzle for our big five-year plan.

And yes. Fine. I do have a five year plan. I basically started working on it approximately three minutes after I officially told Zack I was cool with

going with the flow.

I am not, in fact, a go-with-the-flow sort of person. And I'm okay with that.

And for some reason, Zack adores that about me.

His fingers slide into my hair and he pulls me back gently so he can meet my eyes. His are warm and soft, and sparkling with laughter...and those gold flecks I love so much. "I take it you're happy?"

I smile. "The happiest."

"Mmm, that's what I love to hear."

We both hear the cars pulling up and Zack sighs. "That'll be the cousins. Now's the time to make a run for it, baby."

"Nope. Your mom would kill us."

He flinches, like he hadn't thought of that.

These family get togethers have become a more common occurrence, and I, for one, love them. And so do Toni and Janie, who love to join.

In fact...I crane my neck. "That might be Toni. She said she'd drive out after her shift."

Me, Toni, and Zack are all back at Windy Falls for one last summer.

Grayson didn't apply this year. Which is too bad. I'm a manager again, and I was really looking forward to putting him on puke duty at Tilt-A-Whirl again.

Not that I'm still harboring any anger in that area, really.

I mean, I'll never forgive the jackass, but these days he's too pathetic to worry about. He's kinda sad, in a cautionary tale sort of way.

Like, *look kids*, *this is what happens to manipulative narcissists who prey on others' insecurities*. At the end of the day, they end up sad and alone.

And that's exactly where Grayson's heading.

So no. I'm not angry. But I'm definitely not above petty revenge either, as I believe I've proven.

"Come on." Zack's getting to his feet.

"Where are we going?"

He doesn't pause to answer, just leans down and scoops me up into his arms. His eyes are so bright, and there's a lightness to him these days that's so at odds with the brooding, snarky ass he was only a year ago.

I cling to his shoulders as he carries me over to the dock. "Zack..."

I know what he's planning. I know it before he even turns that wicked grin my way.

I pretend to scowl. "Don't even think about it."

"Oh I'm not thinking." He strides out onto the dock. "If I recall, last summer you threw me into this lake..."

"Zack." I'm kicking my legs, but I can't stop laughing either so I'm not really fooling anyone.

Truth be told, I'd been burning up under the sun and a dip sounds kinda awesome.

But I don't want to ruin Zack's fun so I half-heartedly swat at his shoulders. "Put me down."

"You know what they say about payback..." His smile is the best. So playful and cute, even as it makes my belly dip and a whole new heat spread through my limbs.

"You know I'm just gonna pull you in after me," I point out as he hovers at the edge of the dock.

"Oh I'm counting on it." He kisses the tip of my nose. "I'm hot as hell."

Then there's no warning. Kinda like every other day of the year that I've been with Zack, I find myself free falling.

My belly does a flip before I land in the cold water. It feels amazing, and I come up for air with a smile, only to see that he's already diving in after me.

He surfaces right in front of me. He can stand here, but I can't, so he pulls me into his arms and settles my legs around his waist. "How long do you think we have?"

He's already dipping his head, his mouth finding that spot I love so much with ease as his hands start to roam. My mind goes instantly sluggish. *How much time?* 

"Not nearly enough," I sigh.

The sound he makes is part groan and part laugh. "To be continued?"

"Mmm." I settle my chin on his shoulder as I watch the rest of his family and our friends arrive. I smooth my hands over his toned shoulders as he slowly heads toward shore.

"You know..." I pull back just enough so I can tease him with a kiss at the corner of his mouth. "You're going to have to pay for throwing me into the lake." "I'm counting on that too." His voice is little more than a growl. There's laughter in his voice as he adds, "But why do I get the feeling you already have a plan?"

I lean back to give him an impish grin. "Because of course I do."

His head falls back with a laugh before he meets my gaze and leans in close to kiss me. "That's my girl."

THANKS FOR READING! If you enjoyed it, reviews are much appreciated.

Looking for more enemies-to-lovers romance? We've got you covered! Turn the page for a free sample of Maggie's bestselling YA romance, *Just One Kiss*, available now on all retailers.

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## **JUST ONE KISS**

Is it super petty to hold a grudge for a decade?

Possibly.

Okay, probably.

But in my defense, I'm nothing if not constant. I can be depended on to hold a grudge—*and* to be on time for my shift.

I shield my eyes from the sun's glare as I glance up at the giant clock hanging over the entrance to the Lakeview Country Club's main office.

He's late. Again.

Just as the minute hand hits five after the hour, Ryan comes strolling out from the clubhouse wearing sunglasses, with his dark hair slightly mussed like he's just rolled out of bed. I blow my whistle to get his attention and he smiles. The idiot *smiles*, like I'm greeting him with that whistle and not publicly reprimanding him for being late.

He's already in his swim trunks and ready to go, but that doesn't change the fact that he's late. It also doesn't change the fact that the mere sight of my lifelong nemesis automatically makes my blood pressure skyrocket. When he strides straight toward me with that cocky grin every muscle in my body tenses.

Ryan Hunter, ladies and gentlemen. The guy who's been annoying the crap out of me since kindergarten.

I point to an imaginary watch on my arm, but he doesn't make a single attempt to pick up the pace. He's ambling over toward me, taking the long

way around the giant pool like he's having a casual stroll on a Sunday afternoon.

I blow the whistle again, mainly because it's stress relief. It's the only outlet I have for this boiling rage that I've never been able to shake.

He gives me a smile and a salute, and I wish I could give him the finger in response. But considering there are currently five children under the age of ten in my shallow area of the pool, I refrain.

"You're late," I say instead as he walks toward me.

"By five minutes," he says.

"Late is late."

He stops short when he reaches the lifeguard stand. "You're so hot when you nag."

"It's not nagging if I'm your boss." I climb down off the stand. "It's your manager reminding you of the rules for the millionth time this summer."

Before he can respond, the little girls in the pool are shouting for Ryan's attention. "Watch me, Ryan, I can do a backflip!" That comes from Evie May, a girl whose mom is on the country club board.

"Nice work," Ryan says, squatting down by the pool's edge to give her a fist bump.

Evie grins like she's just won the lottery, because even grade school girls have a crush on Ryan. I can't entirely blame them since they don't know his personality. All they see is the tall, tanned lifeguard with a chiseled jaw, broad shoulders, a six-pack, and bright blue eyes.

So you know, I get that they have a crush. It's my fellow female staff members' crushes that make me wonder about their sanity. Because they've *met* the guy.

I sigh, hands on hips as I wait for him to stand up, turn around, and at least acknowledge the fact that he's wrong. Just once, I'd love to hear the words, *you're right*, *I'm wrong* coming from his smug, smirky mouth. It'll never happen. But a girl can dream, right?

I'd sell my soul for an *I'm sorry* from this guy, but after ten years of waiting for an apology, I'm not holding my breath.

I tap my bare foot on the water-drenched edge of the pool. We have to do this whole lifeguard checklist routine when he takes over for his shift. I'm not off-duty entirely—I still have work to do in the office. Part of the glories of being assistant manager means I get to do loads of paperwork.

But I've been out here baking in the sun for the past four hours. I'm hot and I'm hungry and...yeah, okay, maybe I'm a little hangry because my irritation is way more extreme than it should be.

But still. Ryan knows I've been waiting for relief and he's taking his sweet time about it on purpose just to annoy me, I know it.

My foot's splashing in a little puddle, making an obnoxious slapping sound that he can't miss. He knows I'm standing right there. He knows I'm waiting. He knows this, and yet he takes his sweet time talking to Evie and her friends like he's got nothing better to do.

Which, by extension, is basically saying that *I've* got nothing better to do than wait around for him to pay attention to me.

"How's your backstroke coming along?" he asks Evie's friend. "Have you been practicing?"

That's it. I'm done playing nice. I lift the whistle that's hanging around my neck and blow as hard as I can right behind him.

Phwwwwwhht!

The girls in the pool wince at the loud, long whistle blast. But Ryan? He doesn't even flinch.

He stands up slowly. Too slowly. And turns to face me with that smirk I despise. "If you want my attention, Sunshine, all you have to do is ask."

The girls in the pool giggle at his low, too-cool-for-school drawl.

Me? I sneer at the mention of my childhood nickname. Not for the first time, I wish pink had been my favorite color as a kid. Or purple. Or blue. Basically, any other color of the rainbow because then I wouldn't have gotten stuck with the Sunshine nickname.

Not that anyone calls me that anymore. I am so not a *Sunshine* kind of girl. I'm a whistle-blowing, clipboard-carrying, straight-A student, senior-class-president kind of girl.

But that's why it's even worse when Ryan calls me that. It's clearly a joke at my expense.

Those are the only kinds of jokes Ryan knows how to make.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**MAGGIE DALLEN IS** a big city girl living in Montana. She writes romantic comedies in a range of genres including young adult, historical, contemporary, and fantasy. An unapologetic addict of all things romance, she loves to connect with fellow avid readers. Subscribe to her newsletter at <a href="http://eepurl.com/bFEVsL">http://eepurl.com/bFEVsL</a>

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