

Falling for the Ghost of You

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By Nicole Christie

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Chapter 1

“I can’t believe you’re still unpacking, Violet,” Lauren says, shaking her head.

She’s judging me from her lofty perch on my desk. I don’t know if she realizes, but I’m pretty sure she’s sitting on a Ho Ho I had left on there last night. Good news for her, though—I never got a chance to unwrap it.

My method of unpacking involves transferring my clothes from the suitcases lying on my bed to the big square hamper I had dragged in from my bathroom. Most of the clothes weren’t dirty, but they all smelled like oregano for some reason. I glare at the growing pile in horror. I guess I know what I’m going to be doing all day.

To Lauren, I say, “Well, we just got back last night, and some of us aren’t that anal. I barely had the energy to shower. Besides, my mom talked my ear off all night about her new fiancée.”

“Did they really meet in an elevator?”

“I know, it sounds so fake. Trapped for two hours when the power went out in her doctor’s building.”

Lauren arches a blonde eyebrow in that way that I wish I could copy.

“Hmm. Have you met him yet?”

“No, we’re meeting him for dinner tonight. Did I tell you he has a son? He’ll be there, too.”

“You’re going to have a stepbrother.” She smiles when I make a face at her. “I still can’t believe your mom got engaged to someone she met in the two months that we were in Hawaii. That doesn’t seem like her at all.”

“I know,” I agree, flopping down onto my bed. “But she says she fell in love with him in that elevator. I don’t know. She’s happy, that’s all I care about. As long as he treats her good, I’ll play nice.”

Lauren seems to be impressed with my accommodating attitude. Either that, or she’s shocked. “Are you guys really moving in with him?”

“Yup,” I say. “It’s weird, but it’s only for a year, then I’m off to college.” I pause and roll over onto my stomach to look at her. “He moved here from L.A. He just bought a house in Emerald Point.”

Her eyes widen. “He’s **that** rich? Wow.”

Emerald Point is the really fancy section of Hidden Cove. I’ve only been in that part of town once, for a sleepover at Summer Rosen’s mansion. Her father owns two hotels in Vegas. Yeah, they have a theater room. And an indoor tennis court. Just to give you an idea.

Lauren and I are strictly lower middle class girls. We live in the same apartment complex, which is fortunate for Lauren, since I drive her butt to school every morning. We aren’t exactly ghetto here, but we’re more likely to **be** the maids, than to have them.

“You think the snobs who live there will be able to tell I don’t belong in that neighborhood?” I ask, half-jokingly.

Lauren shrugs. “Maybe they’ll think you’re the really young trophy wife of an old perv. You’ve kind of got that look about you.”

“Do I really?” I say, and present her with not one, but two upraised middle fingers.

She just laughs. “Does Matt even know you’re moving?”

“Nope.” I sit up, and rummage around in one of my suitcases until I find the small package I’m looking for. “We’ve hardly talked all summer. I’m meeting him at Taco Bill’s in a couple of hours, so I guess I’ll tell him then. Do you think he’ll like the shark’s tooth necklace I got him?”

“I can see him wearing it. He’ll probably tell everyone he caught the shark, himself.” Lauren shifts awkwardly on my desk. “What am I sitting on?”

“Ooh, you’re right. And he’d say it in that fake accent he swears is Australian.” I point at her, ignoring her question.

She removes the smashed up Ho Ho from under her rear and stares at it. “I’d better go. I have to pick up some stuff for dinner. I’m making sweet potato soup.”

Lauren likes trying out new recipes. That’s not always a good thing. “The twins won’t eat it,” I predict. Her little sisters were picky eaters, but what can you expect of pre-teens?

“Probably not.” Lauren shrugs indifferently. She hops off my desk in a quick efficient move, “Let me know how it goes tonight.”

“Sure,” I say. “Or, you could come with.”

“Not even if you paid me,” she says over her shoulder as she practically runs out the door. “Text me!”

Shoot. I should have tricked her into saying yes. Lauren hates social situations more than I do, but if she accidentally agreed to go, she would have gone through with it. I know what I’m talking about, I’ve done it to her before.

Lauren and I met back in kindergarten. We sat next to each other in most of our classes, but by the end of the first week, the teachers had us separated for talking too much. We had bonded over our mutual dislike of public speaking. We’re both quiet and shy, sharing a love of reading and writing. When I first saw her, I knew we were going to be best friends. She had me at her pirate stickers collection. We’ve been attached at the hip ever since.

In sixth grade, I became convinced Lauren suffered from Asperger syndrome. She made me look it up, and to my disappointment, she only had two or three of the traits, and they weren’t severe enough to qualify. Not that I wanted there to be something wrong with her, but the girl is even more socially dysfunctional than I am. It’s weird, but that’s one of the things I like best about her. Lauren doesn’t give a damn what anyone thinks

of her, and she'll usually just say whatever's on her mind. Best of all, she never lies. Even when sometimes, you prefer she did.

I've tried to look at Lauren objectively, and I've decided that she's more cute than pretty, with her tiny build, huge brown eyes, and wispy blonde hair. She kind of reminds me of a fuzzy little kitten, the runt of the litter. The one who always has its back turned on everyone, with its tail curled protectively around its body.

In retaliation, Lauren always tells me I look like every guy's pornographic fantasy. Since I've heard some version of this from not a few people when I lost all the weight, it irritates the crap out of me.

I used to be fat. Really fat. I was an emotional eater. I mistook Twinkies for love. Common mistake. I blame it on my dad. When he left my mom for some woman he found on the internet, I stopped overeating. I'm not going to say that my overeating was entirely his fault. But it was.

My poor mom. She never really got over what that loser did to her (until now, that is). A few years after he left, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. What a horrible, horrible disease it is. It devastates the lives of the person who has it, as well as everyone who cares for her. My mom had to quit her job as a school counselor. She lost thirty pounds in two months, and when she started chemo, she lost most of her hair—including her eyelashes and eyebrows! She was so self-conscious about that, I remember. My pretty vivacious mother...she became this shrunken pain-filled shriveled thing I didn't recognize. A shadow who lived on the couch for almost a year, and needed help with the most basic of tasks.

It sounds weird, but the scariest thing for me was that she wouldn't tell me **anything**. She wouldn't admit to being in pain, or tell me just how bad her prognosis was. Had the cancer spread? What did the doctors think of her chances? She wouldn't say, insisting that she was fine and was feeling stronger—when clearly, she wasn't. And I was too much of a coward to come out and ask her, "*Are you going to die?*" I wanted to believe her, I wanted to pretend with her, but every night I lost sleep to check on her, and make sure she was still breathing. My secret fear was that I would wake up one morning and touch her cold lifeless body. No warning, no goodbyes.

It's hard to think about those days. I try to forget them, and it's almost easy to when I look at my mother now. Cheerful and pretty, with a head full of pale blonde hair and a smile full of love and rainbows. I try not to remember how ravaged by the disease she was just a couple of years ago, and I try not to think about how it could come back again at any time.

Wow, I really don't want to talk about that. She's doing so much better now. Mom couldn't return back to her job at the school, but she has a better set up now, maintaining her best friend Jane's "Healing Lotions" website—which she can do from home. So, yes, my mom's home all the time, and yes, I consider it a good thing.

So that's why I don't begrudge my mother finding herself a fiancée while I was away for the summer. Hell, I'm thrilled he's apparently loaded. If anyone deserves to be lavished with expensive gifts, it's Mom. I'll even call him Daddy if he keeps her happy.

No, I won't. That's just weird.

Chapter 2

I have to meet Matt in less than an hour. What should I wear? Normally, I don't put too much thought into my outfit, being a t-shirt and jeans kind of girl. But I haven't seen my boyfriend in two months, so I should make some kind of effort, right? I bought a shirt in Hawaii, a hot pink tee with a giant glittery Hibiscus flower on it. I should have tried it on before I bought it because, damn, I did not realize it would make my boobs look so huge and...bouncy.

Oh, who cares. I never show them off, and today is a special occasion. But if I wear a nice top, does that mean I can wear my grungy black shorts with the elastic waistband? I've been told before that I should never wear them out of the house, and that was by my own mother. Maybe she's right. I decide to go with my favorite pair of old jeans instead, and congratulate myself on the effort.

Aw, crap, they're kind of tight. I blame it on working in my grandmother's bakery over the summer. I didn't even have to eat anything to gain weight—just breathing in that wonderful freshly baked pastries smell was enough to put on the pounds. But Lauren didn't gain any weight, and she was right there behind the counter with me, selling baked good for minimum wage. Must be nice to have a bird's metabolism.

I wonder what Matt will think of my new hair color. My long dark brown curls are now a golden brown, closer to my real hair color, which is blonde, like my mother's. I've always thought my light hair didn't match my naturally tan skin and almond-shaped eyes, so I've been dyeing it since I was fifteen. I feel like a brunette trapped in a blonde's body. Is that weird?

I've spent too much time worrying about my appearance, and now I'm going to be late. I grab my bag and dash out the door—but then I have to come back in for Matt's souvenir necklace—and also I decide to put my hair up in a clip, because I hate the weight of my heavy hair on my back on a hot day like today.

Wow, it's really hot. I hope the air conditioning in my old Toyota works today. It blows air, just not very cool air. I think I'd be better off rolling the windows down. Ha, good thing I put my hair up. I start the car and pull out of the carport in a hurry, eager to get some air moving around in the car's stifflingly hot interior.

Despite the brain melting heat, it's a nice day. The sky is a bright shade of blue, with fluffy cotton candy clouds drifting lazily around. I live in Hidden Cove, a small-ish coastal town in southern California. Because of the beautiful beaches and perfect weather, we're kind of considered a party town, and we seem to attract more than our fair share of drunk college kids. Now some people may think that makes Hidden Cove sound like a fun

place to live, but not me. It gets really irritating. I hate being hit on by obnoxious frat boys who have vomit breath and grabby hands. And ladies, do **not** flash me your boobs. I have a pair of my own, and I have absolutely no desire to see yours. Really, put some clothes on, girls.

As I'm speeding toward Taco Bill's, I feel excited butterflies fluttering around in my stomach. I missed Matt! I didn't realize I did until just now. Isn't that weird? Okay, I sort of missed him. I think. But to be honest, I didn't really think about him, uh, at all when I was in Hawaii.

Matt and I have been together just over a year, but we've known each other since middle school, having shared several AP classes together. I've always thought he was funny, cute, and smart, but we really bonded when we were partnered together for a history assignment on the Hundred Years War. He impulsively kissed me during a study session, and it would have been a nice surprise had my mouth not been full of pizza at the time.

So the first kiss was kinda gross, but we improved after that. Kind of. The truth is...I don't like kissing! It's so messy, and awkward, and...I don't know! Smothering. I don't know if that's the right word. I just don't like kissing, okay? Ugh! Sorry, Matt. Not that I'd ever admit it to him.

Kissing aversions aside, I can't wait to see my boyfriend. As I park in front of the sombrero shaped Mexican restaurant, I suddenly feel self conscious and weirdly shy. What will he think of my hair? Will he notice the five pounds I've gained? I feel tired and jaded, like I've just come back from a war.

The parking lot is crowded at Taco Bill's, which I expected since it's lunchtime and just a few days before school starts up again. When I'm getting out of the car, I notice a bunch of tween girls standing in front of the restaurant, gawking at a sleek foreign-looking sports car. No, they're staring at the guy leaning against it.

Okay, wow. He just turned around, and I can't help the little gasp that escapes me. Um. Wow. This guy is incredibly gorgeous! No wonder those poor girls seem awestruck.

Tall and muscular, with a lean build and impressive broad shoulders, Mr. Gorgeous exudes sex and danger—even from where I’m standing. He’s turned sideways, so I can only see his profile, but what I can see is sculpted perfection. Short dark hair, carelessly tousled, an intense brow, the elegant sharp planes of his bone structure...wow, lips so clearly defined and sensual that I get embarrassed just looking at them.

Mr. Gorgeous turns away again, breaking my lust-filled trance, and the world abruptly tips back into perspective. Still, I can’t look away—out of curiosity. Who is he? He looks a bit older than high school, and he’s wearing a long-sleeved dress shirt, almost in defiance of the heat. A businessman? He’s talking on his phone and seems oblivious of the attention he’s getting, his sunglasses covered eyes focused on the passing cars zooming by in the street.

I shake my head slightly. It’s not like me to ogle guys that are just standing there, minding their own business. Not that I’ve ever seen a guy this hot, like, ever. So I excuse myself, because someone who looks like that...how can you not stare? And drool. At least I’m not surreptitiously taking pics of him with my phone like the junior misses are doing over there.

I put Hot Guy out of my head as I open the door to Taco Bill’s. Ahh, the salsa and cooking ground beef hits me like a savory slap to the face. I look around the brightly colored restaurant and note that it is indeed crowded. Damn, looks like all the booths are taken. I wonder if Matt is here yet?

I exchange quick hellos with a few people from school while I look for my boyfriend. Some of the guys give me overly enthusiastic greetings, and I attribute this to the pink shirt. I shouldn’t have worn it. I hate when people look at me, and I know they’re looking at me because I see them out of the corner of my eye. I never know what to do with my hands when I’m the center of attention. I end up clasping them nervously in front of me. I know not to fold my arms over my chest because that just brings more interest to where I don’t want it.

“Violet!”

I hear Matt's voice calling me. Relieved, I head toward the back of Taco Bill's, toward his voice. There he is, and yes, he has a booth!

"Hi," I say gratefully, sliding into the bench opposite of him.

Wait, should I have hugged him? I half stand uncertainly, but Matt makes no move towards me, so I just sit back down again.

He looks good, cuter than I remember. Maybe absence does make the heart grow fonder? Oh, look at that. He's wearing his holey pirate shirt and faded cargo shorts. I guess some of us didn't feel the need to dress up for our reunion.

Matt is no Mr. Gorgeous, but he's cute in his own normal boy way, with his wavy auburn hair, sparkling blue eyes, and laidback grin. Matt is one of those guys that everyone likes because he's so easygoing and funny, always ready with a joke and a smile.

He's not smiling now. "Wow, Violet, you look really great," he says, staring at my boobs.

Huh. I bet he won't notice my hair color change. "Thanks," I say. I put his gift box on the table and reach for a menu. I always read the menu, though I don't know why. I order the same enchilada dish I do every time I come here. "Did you order yet?"

"Nah, I'm just going to have a Coke." He gestures to the half empty drink in front of him. "Is that a present for me? Looks too small to be a hula girl," he jokes.

"I thought about getting you one of those things for your dashboard, but I thought it might distract too much from driving."

Something's not quite right here. There's a funny tension to Matt, and when he's not looking at my chest, he's looking out the window, or scanning the restaurant as if searching for someone.

"How was your summer?" I ask carefully.

He shrugs slightly and plays with the straw in his Coke, stirring it around a little before taking a drink. “Same old thing. I was stuck here, and nothing much was going on. But what about you? You’re the one that was in freaking **Hawaii**. How was it? I mean, you weren’t stuck working in your grandma’s bakery all summer, were you?”

It’s my turn to shrug. “We went to the beach, did some hiking. It was fun, but we were mostly busy working. So nothing too exciting.”

“Huh.” He makes a funny chuckling sound and runs a hand through his wavy hair. “You didn’t get together with some hot surfer dude, did you?”

I stare at him. He has a funny pained smirk on his face. A huge pit of dread opens up in my stomach. Oh, my God. He hooked up with some college skank. Look at his face. The guilty sign is flashing in neon on his forehead.

“What’s going on, Matt?” I say, and I’m fighting hard to make my voice stay casual and composed.

Matt fidgets in his seat and flicks a quick glance at my face. “What do you mean?”

I don’t say anything for a moment. I have to work up the courage to ask this next question, because once it’s out there, it will change everything, I just know it.

“Did you hook up with someone?”

Long silence. In that moment, my heart falls off a cliff because I know it’s true. I don’t even need to look into his guilty bastard eyes for confirmation. I can’t breathe. I’m in shock. I can’t believe this is happening. How could I not be prepared for something like this? When the mice are away, the cats will play, right? Did I get that backwards? Oh, who cares.

“It’s not what you think.” Matt suddenly rushes to fill the silence. “It’s... let me explain...”

He reaches out to grab my hand, but I yank it away with a violence that startles the both of us. I'm shaking. I stare blindly out the window, willing myself not to break down and cry. Or punch him in the junk. I also want to stab that straw through his forehead. Maybe later.

"How did it happen?" I finally look at his cheating flushed face. "Who is she?"

"I..."

Matt trails off as his gaze moves past me to something behind me.

I turn to see what he's looking at. Rachel Ward, one of our friends, is slowly approaching our booth. She probably wants to just say hi and ask how my summer was. I like her well enough, but I want to scream at her to get the hell away.

"Hi, V," Rachel says in a small voice. But her big hazel eyes are trained on Matt.

Oh. Duh.

I whip my head back and pin Matt with my evil glazed eyes. "**What!** Really?! You and Rachel?!"

To my complete and utter astonishment, that lying ass slides over and beckons for Rachel to sit down next to him.

Are you kidding me?!

They are holding hands right now. Seriously, what the hell is this? Are they dating? I want to hurt them both.

"I'm so sorry, Violet," Matt says, staring down at their entwined fingers. "It just...happened. We were working together at Smilin' Jack's, and...I don't know, we always got along so good—you know that. So we started hanging out after work and...it just happened," he concludes helplessly.

"I'm really sorry," Rachel whispers, her eyes downcast. Her pretty face is wet with tears.

Aw, let's give the sweet pretty bitch a hug!

"Don't talk to me," I snap. I have found my anger, and it's the only thing keeping me from breaking apart. I focus on my former boyfriend with laser like intensity as a revelation hits me like a falling coconut to the head. "Did you sleep with her?"

Matt's mouth tightens, but he doesn't say anything. Rachel, however, is blushing bright red, so I guess that's all the confirmation I need. *Slut!* a voice in my head screams.

I feel like someone's kicked me in the chest. Matt and I...we've never had sex, and he's never pressured me to do it. And to find out that he slept with **her**...ugh! I thought he was just scared he might do it wrong! Does that mean he never really wanted to have sex with me? Why the hell not?!

Matt begins to talk rapidly at me, but I can't hear him. A roaring noise, like crashing waves fills my ears. I can't seem to look away from the two of them sitting there together, like a couple. Well, I guess they are now. *Ex-boyfriend*. The term runs through my head like a cocky sprinter. Distantly, I wonder how everyone at school will react. Or do they already know? Were Matt and Rachel flaunting their new status while I was slaving away in a delicious-smelling bakery in Hawaii?

I hate them.

"...hope we can still be friends."

Yeah, my ex-boyfriend actually says this. I gape at him disbelievingly.

That—wow, that just pisses me off! My hand twitches spastically with the urge to claw his eyes out. I have to get out of here. I stand up abruptly, but the ass clown grabs my hand—you know, with the other hand that's not hanging onto his new girlfriend.

"Please, please don't be mad at us, V," he begs. And tears are spilling down his cheeks. "I swear, I never wanted to hurt you. I don't want to lose your friendship. Please say we can still be friends."

A deadly calm suddenly drapes over me, like a super villain's cape. But it's the calm before storm that I can feel building up inside of me. "Friends," I repeat coldly.

"Yeah. Like how we used to be." Matt forces a smile to his weasel face at the sudden awkward silence. He glances down at the box on the table. "Do I still get my gift?" he jokes feebly.

"Sure," I say. I snatch it off the table and make as though to hand it to him. When he reaches for it, I hurl it away with the strength and speed of a major league pitcher. It lands in some old guy's plate of refried beans with a splat.

I take off. I can't hold it together anymore, and to my horror, I'm sobbing uncontrollably. I **never** cry in public. I hate it! I hate **him**!

Are people looking at me? Most certainly. I don't care. I run blindly toward the door and shove it open. And then I trip over something.

I don't know how it happens, or what I trip over. It's all a blur. I'm suddenly on my hands and knees, somehow wedged painfully in the threshold, the door trying to shut on my arm.

I can see myself laughing about this after. I squeeze my eyes shut and hold onto the hope that if I wish for it hard enough, a wormhole will open up in front of me and suck me into that future point in time.

Who knows how long I would have stayed there, like a girl-shaped doorstep. Moving would make it more real. But someone's yanking the door open, and without any help from me, I'm being easily raised to a standing position.

"Hey. You okay?" my rescuer says in a voice that I can only describe as sex on a stick.

I find myself being led outside, the door slamming shut behind us. I kind of know what I'm going to find when I look up, but still, the up-close beauty of Hot Guy's face renders me speechless—even more speechless, I mean. Is that a thing?

It's Hot Guy. Of course it is.

His eyes. I can't look away from them. Dark and intense, thickly lashed. They burn and smolder with intensity, vitality, charisma...sex...

My gaze drops from his, only to be captured again by his mouth. God, that mouth is sinful—all seduction and danger. It sends shivers through me, but the hot, turned-on kind. Not the I'm-cold-get-me-a-blanket kind.

What do I mean? I don't know! Hot Guy's still holding onto my arm. God, snap out of it! I pull away and try to gather myself. How embarrassing!

Wow, he's tall. Taller than I thought—maybe a few inches over six feet. And he smells so good. Like fresh laundry and something else, something clean and autumn-y. The scent makes my stomach quiver in weird and exciting ways.

“Are you alright?” Hot Guy repeats while I gawk at him.

“I'm not crying,” I snap, unfortunately finding my voice. “I'm just having one of those days.”

“Sure,” he says agreeably, backing off.

I notice he's checking out my ass. No, wait, it feels weird back there. Is that...is that a breeze?

My mouth drops open in absolute horror. “Oh, God, no. Don't even tell me...the back of my pants are ripped, aren't they?”

Hot Guy cocks his head to the side and glances at my rear end again.

“Okay, I won't tell you.”

I can't help the groan that escapes me. “Really?” I say to the sky. I notice he glances up, too, wondering who I'm talking to. To him, I ask, “How bad is it?”

“Scale of one to ten? Or do you mean how much of your hot pink rabbit panties can I actually see right now?”

I immediately clap my hands over my butt. “Oh, crap!”

Hot Guy chuckles a little, and I'm not too distressed to notice how sexy a sound it is. I can't help the blush that warms my cheeks. I am so—wait, what is he doing?!

Hot Guy is unbuttoning his shirt, and as I watch, mesmerized, he shrugs out of it, and hands it to me. I automatically take it, because I am distracted by the sleekly muscled swimmer's build revealed in the gray t-shirt he's wearing under the dress shirt. It's just ridiculous how hot Hot Guy is. Crazy ridiculous!

Sigh!

My heart is doing some unusual things right now, but let me tell you, I'm not the kind of girl whose head gets turned by every cute guy that walks past. But this guy is beyond the everyday normal. He's like, walk out of every woman's fantasy gorgeous.

I've got to stop staring at him.

I clear my throat, and force myself to look up at his *oh my god* flawless face. "Thanks," I say, holding the shirt up. "Um. If you want this shirt back, I guess I could mail it to you."

But Hot Guy shakes his head slightly. "Don't worry about it." He opens the door to Taco Bill's, and holds it open for the elderly couple that totters out.

Oh, it's the old guy that I threw Matt's present at! He sees me and shoots me a bushy glare. "Hooligan!" he huffs, shuffling past me.

"I'm so sorry!" I call after him, but he just throws a *hmpf* over his shoulder.

I am even more humiliated, if that's possible. I sneak a glance at Hot Guy. He looks amused, his beautiful mouth curved up in an adorable smirk. I'm so glad the odds are I'll never see him again.

"Hope your day gets better," he says, and disappears into Taco Bill's.

Thanks, Hot Guy. I'm pretty sure it can't get much worse.

Chapter 3

I head straight to Lauren's. She makes her weird soup, while I go on a tirade, verbally assaulting Matt and Rachel with every bad name I can think of. Sometime during this madness, Lauren's twelve year old twin sisters slink into the kitchen and watch me curse and fume with wide fascinated eyes. I don't get really mad often, but when I do, I tend to go a little bit *Hulk*. Ish.

Two hours later, I feel better. Sort of. I go home to take a shower, and I cry a little under the soothing hot spray. Soon, my tears dry up and I begin to feel really stupid. And pissed. I keep thinking of Matt and Rachel together, sneaking around and rubbing their hands together gleefully...laughing, kissing, having sex...ugh!

I shut the water off with more force than necessary, and dry myself off vigorously. I wrap my towel around my body and stomp into my room, muttering to myself.

"Cheating ass bastard!" Saying it out loud is weirdly cathartic.

"What was that, Violet?"

I scream and jump awkwardly in the air. My mom's sitting on my bed! She's looking at me with a funny little half-frown on her face. Did she hear what I said?

"W-what?! Nothing!" I stammer out, clutching the towel against me. "I was just...rapping. I like to sometimes, when I think I'm alone. What—what are you doing here in my room, on my bed? What's, uh, going on?"

"I didn't know you rapped," Mom says, confused by my babbling.

"That's...weird. Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I thought you might want to wear this for dinner."

She holds up a long dress in a sapphire blue for my inspection. The dress is one of those wraparound styles, with a shimmery leaf pattern embellishing the clingy fabric. It's very pretty.

My poor mother. She has great taste and loves clothes, and she's stuck with me, the girl who puts comfort above fashion. Half of the shirts in my closet are from the box of clothes my dad left behind when he dumped us for the ho on that dating site. It's not that I'm a fashion clown. Right after I lost a bunch of weight, I'll admit that my outfits tended to be showy and slutty. But after a short while, the thrill of the attention wore off, and now I just don't care. I got tired of the middle aged guys eye licking me. Pervs.

"It's nice," I say to Mom, because she's beaming excitedly at me. "But I was thinking about wearing jeans and a nice shirt. I don't want to give your fiancée the wrong impression that I'm some kind of proper young miss. I mean, think of how disappointed he'll be when he finds out the truth."

"Hm, you're probably right. But I'm sure Bill will get over it." Mom drapes the dress over my crossed arms. "I know you're going to look so beautiful in it! Did I tell you how much I love your hair? The new color really makes your complexion glow."

"Thanks." I sigh quietly. "If I wear a dress, I'll have to shave my legs."

Mom tucks a lock of smooth blonde hair behind her ear and looks at me in surprise. "Don't you shave every day, anyway?"

"Well, yeah, but most days I'm not thorough. I just run the razor over my legs really quick if there's noticeable stubble. But I don't check to see if they're really smooth."

"Why do they need to be smooth tonight?" Mom asks with a shrug. "Do you plan on anyone touching your legs? I suppose there could be some cute waiters at the restaurant."

"Mom." I roll my eyes. "You know I only let valets feel me up. It's the bow ties."

Mom grins. "Oh, well, then you're in luck. We're going to the Four Seasons. I'm pretty sure the waiters there wear bowties."

“Ugh! We’re going somewhere fancy? Is this the start of a new trend now that you’re marrying into money? Are we going to have to start pretending we’re classy people?”

“Hey!” Mom points a finger at me, looking hurt. “You don’t need to be rich to be classy. Don’t you think I’m classy?”

How can I disagree with her? Especially when she’s got her finger halfway up her nose? Yeah, she’s got a really weird sense of humor.

“Thanks, Mom, that’s very attractive. What a role model. You’re going to wash your hands, right?”

Mom springs up from the bed. “Of course. That’s what classy people do,” she sniffs as she glides by me.

She comes back in while I’m slipping my robe on. “You keep distracting me, V. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

I immediately tense as I turn to her. Mom looks nervous—she’s not meeting my eyes. Oh, God, please don’t let it be the cancer...

She plops back down on my bed again and picks up my pillow, settling it down on her lap and then resting her arms over it. My muscles stiffen painfully as I wait for her to say the dreaded words.

“Promise you won’t think I’m skanky.”

“Oh, my God! I’m so—wait, what?”

Mom doesn’t look up. And is she blushing? She takes a deep breath, and I get another kind of feeling. “Bill and I—”

“No, stop!” I put both hands up in a stopping gesture. “I so don’t need to know that you two have had sex!”

“What?” Mom looks almost as horrified as I do. “Violet! That’s not what I was going to say! Trust me, you would be the last person I would confide in about my sex life.”

I’m nearly weak with relief. “Oh, thank God. Same here.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Excuse me, missy? You have a sex life?”

“No, **some** of us are still pure, here.” Not like Matt and Rachel, the sex-crazed traitors.

Mom looks at a loss for a second. Then she shakes her head. “Anyway, what I was going to say...well, Bill...he surprised me with an early wedding present—an extended tour of Europe for our honeymoon!”

My jaw drops open. “Mom! That’s fantastic! You’ve **always** wanted to go to Europe!”

She nods excitedly. “Yes, it would be a dream come true. England, France, Italy...can you imagine? But the thing is, Bill’s got a really important business merger, like, right after the wedding, so he wouldn’t be able to take a day off, let alone a month. So...” She pauses and looks at me uncertainly. “He was thinking that maybe the best idea would be to go on our honeymoon **before** the wedding. It makes sense, especially with the house undergoing renovations, and right now it’s Jane’s slow season—I could work on her website from anywhere, and, you know we hired that wedding planner, and she said that she can communicate with me via text and email, she does it all the time with some of her other clients, and...”

Mom has a tendency to babble when she’s nervous. I wonder how long she’d go on like this if I let her?

“Well, that’s great,” I finally interject when she pauses for a breath. “It sounds like you have everything worked out. And you totally have my blessing, if that’s what you were after.”

“Thank you,” she says, reaching over to squeeze my hand. “That means a lot.”

I shrug. “You deserve it.” I flop down onto my comfortable puffy desk chair. “When do you leave?”

“Well...next week.” Mom peers over at me. “So I talked to Jane, and she said she’d love to have you stay over at her place. Would that be okay with you? Because if it’s not, I can—”

“Wait, why can’t I stay here? I’m seventeen, I don’t drink or do drugs. You can trust me—I’m boring.”

“I do trust you, Violet,” she says. “But it’s not like I’m away for the weekend. I’ll be gone for a whole month, in Europe. I couldn’t enjoy myself if you were here alone. And,” she continues when I start to protest. “we have to completely moved out of this apartment by the end of the month, remember?”

I get a sudden slap to the face by reality. We’re not going to live in this crappy apartment, anymore. I’m going to have a rich stepfather! Our lives are going to change drastically.

Oh, yeah, and I’ve been cheated on and dumped by my first boyfriend. Yes, Matt was my first boyfriend. I’m a late bloomer.

It’s all a tad overwhelming.

Mom’s still talking. “No, it’s fine,” I say. “I’ll stay with Jane. She’s cool, and we get along pretty good. Besides, it’s only for a month, right?”

Mom’s blue eyes are bright with unshed tears. “Right,” she says quickly. “Thank you so much, Violet! I know I kind of ambushed you with—with all these changes, but you’re being so wonderful about it.” She jumps up to give me a big hug. “I’m so happy! I can’t wait for you to meet Bill.”

I hug her back, thrilled with the strength of her embrace. I decide right then and there that I wasn’t going to do anything to screw up this up for her.

God knows she deserves it.

Chapter 4

I don't wear the sapphire colored dress after all. Instead, I slip on a pair of tailored black pants that do good things for my butt, and a short sleeved crimson blouse. It's still hot at five in the afternoon, so I put my hair back up. I inspect myself in the full-length mirror on the back of my bedroom door and decide I don't look like I'm trying hard enough. Eyeliner and lip gloss help a little, and that's as far as I'm willing to go.

Mom seems pleased by my appearance. She's wearing a dress remarkably similar to the one she wanted me to wear—clearly, she was aiming for the twinsies look. I don't like to disappoint her, but there's only so much a good daughter can take.

The restaurant is a beautiful brick and glass building with a stunning view of the bay. And they have valet parking, which Mom and I both handle awkwardly.

"They're going to see all the candy wrappers I left in there," Mom whispers anxiously after she hands the guy her keys. "We'll look like slobs!"

"We are." I try to shrug it off, already starting to feel nervous.

A man in a suit opens the big glass doors for us, smiling and gesturing for us to go on in. Mom grabs my hand and pulls me forward, over to the little alcove where a model-like young woman is standing behind a fancy glass lectern.

"Welcome to the Four Seasons," she greets us with a professional smile. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Um, yes. I'm Lily Mercer," Mom says timidly, tucking a lock of hair behind an ear. "I believe the reservation is under O' Connor. Bill O' Connor."

I don't like the superior look the toothpick girl bestows upon my mother. "Yes, Mr. O' Connor is already here. Follow me, please."

I don't miss the snide up and down look she gives me, either. She exchanges smirks with another stunning girl who we pass by on our way to be seated. I can't help but feel self-conscious. Do we have signs on our foreheads saying we don't belong? Is it our cheap-looking shoes?

Why couldn't we have gone to Taco Bill's? I've already been dumped there. It can't possibly get more humiliating than that. Right?

The interior of the restaurant is all shiny dark wood and glass. The bar is off to the left, full of well-dressed people. Mom and I follow Toothpick Girl as she expertly weaves her way through tables. Please don't let me trip!

She shows us to a table next to a window that displays the setting sun casting pink and gold rays over the water. The man sitting at the table half-rises at our approach.

"Enjoy your meal," Toothpick Girl says to me with another smirk.

"Thanks," I say sweetly. "Enjoy your...waitressing."

I turn away before she can react. Whatever. I don't know why she thinks she's so fancy. My attention returns to the man—Bill. My mother's fiancée and my future step daddy.

Bill is not the powerful corporate tycoon I imagined. He's really good-looking, but not in that rich sophisticated way I was expecting. He looks so young in his casual shirt and jeans, and kind of scruffy-looking, with longish red gold hair and an unlined, unshaven face. His ice blue eyes never quite look me in the eye, just a quick glance here and there if I ask him a question.

So I find out that Bill actually created the Arpeggio OS—which is what I use on my phone! Mom goes on and on about how revolutionary it is, more user friendly and interactive than any of its predecessors. As if I didn't know! It's so cute how she gushes on about his accomplishments, while he just remains quiet, occasionally looking at her and smiling. I find myself really liking him. He's not what I expected at all, and I'm relieved. I like his silent awkwardness. He'll fit right in with us.

"So where is Zane?" Mom asks after taking a sip of her iced tea. "I think they're going to come for our order soon."

Bill barely looks up when he says. "He said he was going to be late, so we should go ahead and start without him."

“You’ll like him, Violet,” Mom tells me, her eyes twinkling excitedly. “He’s only a few years older than you, and he’s...he’s a software engineer, right Bill?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Bill mutters, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. I picture a younger geekier version of Bill.

“Zane lives in L.A., but he’s going to be staying at the pool house so he can supervise the renovations while we’re in Europe. Isn’t that nice of him? In fact—before I forget—let me give you his number, Violet. You can call him if you need help with anything. Zane’s going to be working on some project for work, but I’m sure he won’t mind if you give him a call once in a while.”

Mom digs through her purse for her phone. When she finds it, she makes me put his number into my phone. I have no intention of ever calling him, but I do as she asks, since I know it will help her worry less about leaving me for a month.

Four waiters come to take our order—I’m not sure why. I decide on the tempura shrimp, which I had in Hawaii and enjoyed. Despite my nerves, I’m starting to feel a little hungry. This atmosphere, while beautiful and posh, is not the most relaxing. I wish I could just get some fast food and take it home. I wish I could sulk over Matt in private, instead of pasting a smile on my face that feels like it’s going to break into a million pieces any minute. I’m honestly thrilled for Mom, but watching her and Bill exchange secret smiles and glances...it’s just too lovey dovey for me right now.

I have the sudden urge to jump up and shout, “I’ve been dumped! Screw you all!”

Will this night never end? I surreptitiously text Lauren, keeping my phone in my lap.

Me: Bill is cute! And nice.

Lauren: Really? What does he look like?

Me: Young, kind of scruffy-looking. He created Arpeggio!

Lauren: !!! A cute, rich, genius? Your mom really scored.

Me: I know! This restaurant is really snooty.

Lauren: Better get used to it. What's the son like?

Me: He's not here yet. Sounds like he's going to be a computer ge

"Sorry I'm late."

The warm deep voice startles me. I look up from my phone, and my jaw drops open.

My eyes meet a pair of gorgeous dark ones.

Hot Guy!

"Oh, crap!" I shout.

Chapter 5

So, turns out Hot Guy is Zane O' Connor, son of Bill, and my future brother-in-law. Yes, really, because that's my kind of luck.

After my initial outburst, I clamp my mouth shut and stare down at my lap. I can't help sneaking glances at him, though. Hot Guy—Zane—is just as impossibly beautiful as I remember. He looks really good in the white shirt and jeans he's wearing—casual and effortlessly elegant.

I have his shirt hanging up in my closet right now. In the Hot Guy Hall of Fame section.

He gives my mom a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek, then slaps Bill on the back in greeting. My heart flutters nervously when he takes the empty seat next to me. I angle my face away, wishing I had left my hair down so I can hide my red cheeks behind it. This could not get more embarrassing.

“Zane, this is my daughter, Violet,” Mom introduces us. “I was just telling her all about you.”

“Good things, I hope,” he says easily. I sense him turn to me. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Violet,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his sexy voice.

“Uh-huh,” I say faintly, looking everywhere but at him. I see Mom’s eyebrows go up at my rudeness, but I am suffering here!

“Zane, why don’t you go ahead and order something,” Mom says, while giving me the silent “what’s wrong with you?” look.

“Great idea. I’m starving.” He flags down one of our waiters with an authoritative ease I can’t help but admire.

A sudden silence descends on our table like a wet blanket. Mom and I seem to be the only ones bothered by it—which is bad. One of us is bound to break and start babbling senselessly.

"So, Zane, doesn't Violet have a nice tan?" Mom says, smiling desperately. "She just came back from Hawaii."

"Oh, yeah?" He leans forward, resting an arm on the table. "Which island?"

Oh, wow, he smells so good!

"Oahu," I mumble shortly.

I know Mom is waiting for me to elaborate, but I don't. She tries to catch my eye. I pretend to be fascinated with my fork. I can feel her growing more and more flustered by my unfriendliness.

"Yes, she worked as a stripper in her grandmother's bakery!" she blurts out.

What?!

It's so unfortunate that my mouth is full of rice right now. Why did I take such a big bite? It's taking forever to chew!

"Stripping in a bakery, huh?" Zane says with a ridiculously adorable half smile. "That's pretty awesome."

I just keep shaking my head in a tiny mortified sort of way. "I don't...I'm not a stripper," I stumble over my words, hideously embarrassed.

Mom's eyes are huge right now. "Oh, no!" she gasps. "Did I just call you a **stripper**?!"

Indeedly-doodly, Mother.

"I'm not," I scoff to Zane and Bill. "That's so...why would you say that, Mom?"

I didn't really see a resemblance between father and son. Not until they both start coughing behind their fists.

"I'm so sorry! I don't know why—things just slip out when I'm really nervous. Violet is the furthest thing from a hooker there is—"

Aaaaauughh!

"Stripper, Mom," I say through gritted teeth.

We never look more like mother and daughter than when our faces are the color of humiliation.

"Right," Mom is saying. Her hands are actually shaking now! "She is not a hooker or a stripper. In fact, today she just told me she's a virgin."

It can't get any worse. It just cannot.

For some reason, I find myself staring at Bill. He catches my eye. "Good for you, Violet," he says awkwardly.

Mom shoots me a horror-filled look. "I think I should go to the bathroom," she whispers.

I rub my throbbing temples. "Please do."

Both guys stand up when she excuses herself. Bill stares after her indecisively for a second, then mutters something and goes after her. I stare longingly towards the exit. If i made a run for it now, who could blame me? Not the woman who called me a hooker and a stripper, that's for damn sure.

"So, Violet." Zane turns his chair in my direction. "Is your day getting better yet?"

"Pretty sure it's getting worse as we speak," I say.

He laughs, displaying brilliant white even teeth, and a sudden jolt of attraction sizzles through me, sending my pulse skittering out of control.

Matt who?

I can't believe I'm here, sitting in this fancy ass restaurant, talking to this guy, who is easily the best-looking person I've ever seen—and he's my future step brother. I don't know how to act around him. Nice? Flirty? Or should I just continue making a fool of myself?

Yeah, that sounds like more fun.

Zane's dark eyes are sparkling with humor. "Come on," he says. "It's not that bad, is it?"

"Oh, let's see." I stare up at the fancy glass ball lamps hanging from the ceiling. "I got dumped at Taco Bill's today; fell down, split my pants, and generally humiliated myself in front of a complete stranger; went to dinner at a snooty restaurant, found out said stranger is my future step brother; got called a stripper, hooker, and virgin by my **mother**...did I leave anything out?"

"Well, I don't know. The night is still young—anything could happen." The corners of his beautiful mouth twitch upwards. "It can only get better, right?"

I frown. "Don't say that, you'll jinx me. Now my mom will come back and blurt out how she and Bill had kinky bathroom sex, and I'll run away before she can go into detail, and trip over that waiting carrying that flaming dessert—he'll go crashing into the lady with way too much product in her hair, and then the whole restaurant will be on fire."

Zane just looks at me for a moment, as if unsure what to say. He probably hangs out with gorgeous super confident women all the time, and I'm like a new species of insect to him. The neurotic kind that fly into your face, and freak out when you try to swat at them.

"So, you got dumped, huh?"

I wince. Me and my big dumb mouth. "Yup."

"Hey, it happens to the best of us. Hang in there, you'll find someone new in no time."

I peer over at him. "Are you reading from a list of the ten worst clichés, ever?"

"Saved the best for last: there's plenty of fish in the sea." Zane shrugs good-naturedly. So some asshole dumped you at a Taco Bill's. Do you really think he was the love of your life?"

A waitress sets his food in front of him. She is pretty and bold, striking up a random conversation about the weather, all the while flashing the "do me" eyes.

When she finally leaves, I raise an eyebrow at him. "Have you ever been dumped before?"

He looks up from his plate, that cute half smile on his face. "Is this a trick question?"

"I thought so." I go back to poking at my food with a fork.

"Alright," he says. "Tell me one thing you didn't like about your ex."

"He has tiny girl wrists," I say promptly. "They're so delicate, he should model, like, tennis bracelets for a jewelry store. It really bothered me. And

he would make these huge spit bubbles whenever he'd get excited and talk. I used to worry the bubble would explode, and splatter me in the face. So gross."

"Wow, that's just off the top of your head, huh?"

"And he's a terrible kisser." I blurt out. "It's kind of like he's...attacking my face! Even my friend, Lauren—she saw us kissing, and she said it was the most disgusting thing ever. Like a snake eating her young. Or maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the bad kisser."

Zane is staring down at his food, and it looks like he's really trying not to laugh. "Have you had any complaints before?"

I bite my lip. "No, but, I've only ever kissed Matt."

His head comes up at that, but before he can say anything, Mom and Bill show back up. She looks much more calm and composed as she takes her seat. I try not to notice that Bill is wiping lipstick off his mouth with his napkin.

"Violet," Mom begins, reaching over to grab my hand. "I am so sorry for calling you a stripper and a hooker. You know how I go on when I'm nervous." She smiles tremulously at me, then turns to Zane. "Zane, I hope you can understand...sometimes I say things that are completely out there—and have absolutely nothing to do with the subject at hand. For example, Violet. She worked as a cashier at her grandmother's bakery, not as a stripper. She would never take her clothes off for money, nor would she **ever**—"

I clear my throat loudly to interrupt the train wreck that is her good intentions. "I accept your apology, Mom. It's in the past, and let's just let those painful memories die."

Mom opens her mouth. "But Zane..."

"No worries, Lily," he says smoothly. "I assure you, I didn't believe for a second that Violet was a stripper, or a hooker."

"Thank you," I say warmly.

"Welcome," he says, and smiles over at me. My heart bumps around erratically.

Mom looks pathetically relieved, and things go better after that. Zane is super easy to talk to, and seems nothing like his awkwardly shy dad. I can't help stealing glances at his incredibly perfect profile, the sculpted features...that sexy mouth...I bet he's a fantastic kisser. And I've always been a sucker for broad shoulders. And a hard muscled chest and washboard abs—visible even under his shirt.

My eyes helplessly trail down his trim waist and hips to his long jean-clad legs sprawled carelessly under the table. When I finally get back to his face, I realize he's watching me check him out.

Oh, my god! So embarrassing!

I meet his amused gaze for a split second, before I turn away so fast I nearly give myself whiplash. I try to think of something to say to explain my staring, but what can I say that will excuse all the drooling?

I'm not really drooling. I touch the corners of my mouth to make sure.

Oh, thank goodness. Mom is talking.

"Zane, I gave Violet your number in case of an emergency. I hope that's okay?"

"Absolutely. Feel free to call me anytime, Violet."

"Thanks," I mutter, still blushing like a freak.

"Violet, call Zane so he can have your number," Mom says to me.

"Um, I will," I say uncomfortably. "Later."

Never. With any luck, I won't have to see him until the wedding. Maybe by then he will have forgotten about my perverted eye-lick.

Ugh!

"So, what do you think?" Mom asks me on the drive home.

"Bill seems nice," I mumble, looking out the window at the passing scenery. "Good-looking, too. You guys are cute together."

"Thanks! He likes you, too. I know he seems like the strong silent type, but once he gets to know you, he'll open up more."

I try to picture Bill and I sitting side by side on the couch, eating popcorn and talking about our feelings. The image refuses to come. Instead, I see us sitting quietly together at a table, sewing different parts of a quilt.

I don't know why I'm imagining that. It doesn't make sense.

"Once again, Violet, I am **so** sorry about the stripper/hooker thing. I don't know why those words were in my head, but I would never—"

I turn away from the window to pat Mom's shoulder. "Forget it, it's fine. I know you didn't mean it. It's like the time you had car trouble, and that mean cop hassled you."

Mom clutches the steering wheel with both hands and groans. "Oh, don't remind me about that. I nearly got arrested for that one."

I snicker. "Hey, anyone can get 'blowout' confused with 'blow jo—'"

"Ah, don't!"

"I think that cop would've taken you up on your offer if I hadn't been there."

Mom cringes. "It wasn't an offer!"

She suddenly bursts out laughing, and I join in. We giggle our heads off--until Mom accidentally runs a red light.

After a breathless silence, Mom clears her throat.

"So, " she says. "That Zane is really cute, huh?"

I freeze, my cheeks instantly heating up. "I guess," I mutter.

"Charming, too. Bill doesn't really say much about him, but I get the feeling he's a bit of a player."

"Mm-hmm."

Mom swings her blue-eyed gaze towards me. "Well...he's going to be your step brother, so you'll probably be seeing a lot of him, and—oh, I don't know. I guess I'm trying to say, a guy who looks like that, what woman—or girl—wouldn't maybe get a crush on him? Which would be a bad idea because—"

"Whoa, Mom," I interject, holding up a hand in a stopping motion. "Are you trying to tell me you're crushing on...Bill's **son**?"

"What? N-no!" Mom sputters. "I mean—that is ridiculous! I'm not a cougar! I was talking about **you**, Violet."

"Me, what?"

She takes a deep breath. "I hope you see Zane as a future brother, and not anything else. Okay?"

"Um...okay."

Did she see me looking at him like a piece of meat? Is that why she called me a hooker? How embarrassing!

"I just don't want you to get hurt," Mom is saying. "And any guy who looks like that—well, he's bound to break your heart."

I don't say anything. Is she thinking about my father? He was handsome and charming, and he broke her heart with his cheating ways.

And look what happened with Matt. He didn't exactly break my heart, but he destroyed my trust. Do all guys cheat? Some days, it seems like it.

This is depressing.

I turn back to the window, lost in thought. I want to brood over Matt's betrayal, but a pair of gorgeous dark eyes keep popping up in my head, distracting me.

No! I will those eyes to disappear. Mom is right. Any guy who looks like Zane would surely break my heart. And what did I want with a broken

heart?

Absolutely nothing.

Chapter 6

My first day as a senior.

Why did I expect things to be different this year? I go to my classes, see the same people, barely talk to anyone except for Lauren.

Well, I would have been walking the halls of Hidden Cove High with my boyfriend. Instead, it's just me and Lauren, keeping our heads down as we push through the crowds. Neither of us are very patient, and we have no problem shoving people aside.

Why, yes, we are on the same menstrual cycle.

I haven't seen Matt or Rachel yet, but I know we all have Mr. Tanner for AP English. I consider skipping class, but what's the point of delaying the inevitable?

"Are you going to tutor this year?" I ask Lauren as we stop by her locker.

She makes a face as she shrugs out of her jacket. "I don't know. It depends on Mr. Tanner. I heard he's a jerk, and he's always coughing right in peoples' faces."

"Gross. Let's sit in the back."

"Fine by me." Lauren slams her locker shut and looks at me appraisingly.

"So, are you ready?"

I bite my lip nervously, and lean against the wall for support. "I don't know," I admit. "Have you heard anything? Is anyone talking about it?"

"A few people," she replies honestly. "Brooklynn asked me if it was true this morning."

"Ugh. She's liked Matt since eight grade. What did you tell her?"

"I said she should just ask you if she's really that nosy."

I laugh. "I saw her in the commons, but she didn't say anything to me. I saw Danny, too, but he didn't say anything, except, 'nice tits' to me."

"Okay, there's a silver lining," Lauren says with a smile. "You won't have to put up with that idiot anymore."

"True. I never understood why Matt was friends with him. He's such a creepy perv." Anger starts boiling in my veins. "Or maybe they have more in common than I realized."

We stomp towards English class. A muscular brown-haired boy smiles at Lauren as we pass by him. "Hi, Lauren."

Lauren nods in greeting. He heads in the opposite direction, and I turn to her, eyes wide. "Was that Chase? Wow, he got tall over the summer! And he must've been working out, too."

Lauren shrugs indifferently. "I saw him yesterday at the store. He said he's been helping his uncle out at his farm."

I study her expression carefully, but she gives nothing away. I know Chase likes her, but does she like him back—especially now that he's new and improved? Hard to say with Lauren.

Well, we're almost to our class. Here we go.

The room is about half full. Mr. Tanner isn't there yet, so kids are kind of roaming around, chatting with each other.

I spot Matt instantly. He's half-sitting, half-leaning on a desk, talking animatedly to Fitz Carvallio. Rachel's back is pressed up against him, and

he's got his arms wrapped around her waist.

It's the pose of a couple, familiar and intimate with each other. Seeing them like that is a slap in the face. I quickly turn my head.

Lauren taps my shoulder and gestures toward the back of the class. I follow her lead gratefully. Is it my imagination, or did it just get quieter in here? I dump my things on my desk, careful not to make eye contact with anyone.

"No one's looking," Lauren mumbles under her breath.

I sigh in relief. I can't help but steal a glance at Matt from under my lashes. Rachel is standing next to him instead of leaning against him, and he's got his arms crossed awkwardly, studiously avoiding looking in my direction.

Great.

For some reason, Zane pops into my head. I remember telling him the things I didn't like about Matt. Then I mentally replay the scene where Matt's chatting to Fitz, with Rachel cozying up to him—only this time I can see him spitting into her hair as he talks.

I start laughing. I cover my mouth with my hands, muffling the sound, but I am giggling so hard, my eyes start to water. Lauren glances at me in concern, but I just shake my head. I picture Matt and Rachel holding up their arms, showing off matching BFF bracelets—only both wrists are so thin and fragile, you can't tell who's who.

Then I see myself breaking that delicate wrist, and Matt screaming, "Arrgh, mate! What'd you go and do that for?! I'll never be able to have me a barbie again!"

I don't know why. My imagination is a weird place, okay?

At least I feel a little better now.

A teacher finally shows up, but it's not the rotund wheezing Mr. Tanner. A very young looking, very handsome guy with strawberry blonde hair,

glasses, and a short beard introduces himself as Mr. Jensen, a substitute for Mr. Tanner. I notice some of the girls take notice as he talks.

"We'll go over the syllabus, so you guys kinda know what to expect this year. Then you all can introduce yourselves while I pretend to listen," Mr. Jensen says with a laidback smile. The class laughs appreciatively.

Lauren and I exchange blah looks. We both hate the stand up in class and talk about yourself thing. Lauren always talks too softly, and I always end up sounding psycho.

"Lauren Cooper."

Lauren rolls her eyes at me, and half-stands at her desk. "I'm Lauren," she mumbles, and that's all I can make out—and I'm sitting right next to her.

"Speak up, Lauren. I don't read lips," Mr. Jensen says. His nice hazel eyes twinkle behind his glasses.

Lauren glares at him, looking like a pissed off kitten. "I'm Lauren," she snaps. She plops back down in her seat.

"Oo-kay, I think we've established that. Care to tell us anything else?"

"Nope."

I don't know how she gets away with talking to teachers like that, but she does. Maybe it's because she looks so cute when she's mad. Even her hair sticks up cute.

As if to make up for Lauren's curtness, everyone else seems to be in an extra sharing mode. When it's Matt's turn, he talks in his ridiculous "Australian" accent. People laugh, but I cringe in embarrassment for him.

"—and this is my right best summah evah 'cause I fell in love with this beautiful sheila."

Matt's grin is huge as he points dramatically to a blushing Rachel sitting at the desk next to him.

My jaw drops open. I can't believe he just announced it in class like that!

Everyone's looking at me for my reaction. Flushing hotly, I stare down at the scarred surface of my desk.

"Asshole," Lauren says quite clearly.

"Excuse me, Lauren?" Mr. Jensen says. "Did you decide you want to share something after all?"

"Nope."

I refuse to look up. Tears of humiliation threaten to fall, so I keep my eyes wide, willing them to dry up.

How could he do that? What, all of a sudden he doesn't care about my feelings anymore? I have to wonder if he was always this big of a wad, or did losing his virginity fry something in his little brain?

I hate him. I hate her!

"Violet Mercer."

Great.

I don't bother to stand. "I'm Violet," I growl. "I thought I lost something this summer, but I just realized, I never needed it."

Total silence.

Then someone mutters, "Is she talking about her virginity?"

In retrospect, I realize I could have worded that better.

Thank God the day is over. I'm exhausted, like I've been through a war. All I want to do is lie in bed and cry tears of self-pity. And then order a meaty pizza. I'm starving!

"I need to get my jacket from my locker," Lauren reminds me as I make a beeline for the door.

I sigh and reverse direction. "Okay."

On the way there, I hear someone call my name. It's Kim Marshall, Matt's younger sister.

I like Kim. Like her brother, she's always good natured and cheerful. She knows all the latest gossip, but never spreads any herself.

"Violet, just because my brother is a giant douche bag, I hope that doesn't mean we can't still be friends," Kim says, an anxious look on her pretty face.

"Of course not," I reassure her. "I've always liked you better, anyway."

Kim laughs and nods. "You know, everyone's telling Matt that you were too hot for him, anyway so it's good he downgraded. I can't believe him and Rachel!"

I shrug. What can I say to that?

"Oh, and I hear your English sub is pretty hot," she says, opening up her locker.

"He's okay," I say.

"I don't like him," Lauren says flatly. "But you probably would, Kim. He's blonde and kinda scruffy."

Everyone knows Kim has a thing for scruffy blonde guys. Just look at her locker—it's plastered with pictures of the singer, Aiden Cross and John Heller—some WWE wrestler, I assume from the pictures. Aiden Cross is gorgeous, and his voice is amazing—as are his darkly beautiful songs. But that other guy is scary-looking, from his huge bulging muscles, to the bloodthirsty look in his sea green eyes. Kim is obsessed with them both.

"Hmm, maybe I'll have to visit your class someday," she says, waggling her eyebrows. "Well, I'm off to my job at Freezy Pete's. You guys should stop by sometime. My shift ends at nine."

We agree to visit her soon, then we exchange goodbyes, and Lauren and I head for the parking lot.

I feel better after talking to Kim. I'm glad she still wants to be friends, despite me hating her brother's guts. I wonder if she'll be friendly with Rachel, too?

No. I quickly banish that thought from my head. That's none of my concern.

"At least you got that awkward first run-in over with," Lauren says as we get into my car.

"Yup," I sigh. "And now everyone thinks I've lost my virginity. I can tell this is going to be an awesome year."

"Oh, V," she says comfortingly. "Most people think you lost it a long time ago, anyway."

Great. Thanks, Lauren. I can always count on my best friend to make me feel better.

Chapter 7

Mom is leaving for her honeymoon, and I don't want her to go!

"You can't overdo it," I tell her for the fifth time.

We're at the airport right now. Bill and Jane are here, too, but I ignore them.

"I'll be fine, Violet." Mom laughs. Her eyes are sparkling excitedly. She can't wait to get on that plane.

"And remember to stay away from anyone that looks sick. But even if they don't look sick, they could still—"

"Violet."

Mom stops my babbling by putting both hands on my cheeks. "We don't have to worry about that, anymore. I'm okay. In fact, I've never felt better

in my life."

I stare into her shining eyes, seeing the happiness there—and I swallow all my words of caution. "Maybe I just don't want you to have too much fun without me."

Mom grins and squeezes my cheeks together. "You'll always be there in my thoughts," she says sweetly.

"I hope not always," I say through squished lips. "At least, not when you and Bill are getting it on."

"Violet!" Mom laughs and lets go of my face. She turns to Jane to hug her goodbye.

I look over at Bill who is standing there, fidgeting with his armful of electronic devices. I suppose he has them out and ready for when they go through security.

"Have a good trip, Bill," I say. "Send me lots of cool pictures."

He nods at me, a hint of a smile on his lips. "I will. I'll take care of her, too."

I tentatively pat his shoulder. "Thank you."

We all say our goodbyes, and then all too soon, Mom and Bill get in line at the security checkpoint. Both Jane and I are sniffing at this point.

"Doesn't Lily look so beautiful?" Jane sighs, staring dreamily after Mom.

I've always wondered if Jane had a thing for her. Sometimes, the way she looks at her...it's kinda like the way I used to look at Twinkies.

Or the way I stared at Zane...

"Well, kiddo," Jane says, throwing an arm around my shoulders. "Looks like it's just you and me. How do you feel about pizza and Ho Ho's for dinner?"

"Jane," I reply, looking at her. "I'm think I'm going to love staying with you."

“Oh, my God, Violet. You can’t stay with me, anymore!”

I sit up from the couch I had been lying on. “Huh?”

Jane is pacing back in forth, cell phone in hand. Her bushy black hair is floating in a disheveled cloud around her head. “Emily’s going into labor right now,” she says tersely. “I have to go to her.”

My eyes widen in concern. Emily is her only daughter, pregnant with Jane’s first grandchild. “Isn’t she only six or seven months along?”

“Six and a half. I need to book a flight to Atlanta...oh, where did I put my purse?”

I point towards the kitchen. “I saw it on the counter, next to the microwave.”

“Thanks.” She stands there indecisively. “I don’t know what to do—I don’t know how long Emmy will need me to be with her. I guess I should call your mother. Or...is there anyone you can stay with?”

I bite my lip, thinking. I quickly discard Lauren from my prospects. Her apartment is way too crowded already, and her mom is really weird about people staying the night over there—I doubt she’d allow it. Who else did that leave? Not Matt’s, for obvious reasons. God, I don’t know. None of my relatives live close enough to Hidden Cove for it to even be feasible, and I’m not close enough friends with anyone else to ask. “Can’t I just stay here by myself?” I ask.

Jane mulls it over, but then quickly shakes her head. “No, no! The whole point of you staying here is so you wouldn’t be alone. Lily would freak. Oh, I hate to do it, but we don’t have a choice. I guess I’ll call her...”

“No, wait!”

There is no way I’m going to allow this to interrupt Mom’s dream vacation. And knowing her, she would immediately hop on a plane and head back home. I couldn’t let her do that.

“You know what? I can stay with Lauren,” I say quickly. “It’s totally fine. I can sleep on the couch, no problem.”

Jane hesitates. “Are you sure? Call her right now and ask.”

“Um...okay.”

I jump off the couch and grab my phone off the coffee table. Pretending to punch in her number, I walk towards the kitchen for privacy. Then, in case Jane is listening in, I pretend to have a conversation with Lauren, in which she agrees to let me stay at her place.

When I come back out into the living room, Jane stares at me hopefully. I force a smile and nod. “She said yes.”

She sighs in relief. “Oh, thank God! Okay, I’ve got to order my ticket online, and pack and everything. Honey, do you think you could book the flight for me? My credit card is in my purse—use the business one, though. I don’t think I have room for a ticket on my other ones.”

“Sure, no problem.”

I secure a one way flight for her from here to Atlanta, leaving at seven-fifty tonight—in five hours. Jane runs around frantically, packing her bags and worrying about her daughter. I try to stay out of her way, doing whatever she asks of me.

Finally, she is packed and ready for me to drive her to the airport. She checks her purse anxiously, making sure she has everything.

“I gave you a key, right?” she asks again as we head out the door.

“Yep.”

“Okay. I called Linda from next door to check on my apartment and water my plants, so you don’t have to worry about that. Oh—could you do something with all the perishable in the fridge? Take ’em with you, or give them away.”

“Okay. And relax, I’ll take care of everything over here, and if you forget something, I can always mail it over to you.”

“Right, right.” Jane exhales loudly. “Poor Emmy. She was crying so hard over the phone.”

I pat her hand. “She’ll feel better once she has you there with her.”

“Yes. Violet, I’m so sorry! Please tell Lily that I’ll make this up to her somehow.”

“No, don’t worry about anything,” I cut her off swiftly. “I’ll be fine. Lauren and I will have one extended sleepover—it’ll be great. But do me a favor—don’t mention any of this to Mom. She’ll just worry.”

Jane tugs on a loose curl. “You’re right. I won’t even tell her about Emmy. Knowing her, she’d fly straight to Atlanta to help out. But, gosh, I hate lying to her.”

“It will be fine,” I say firmly as I start the car. “Mom will have the fun she deserves, you’ll be taking care of your daughter, and I’ll be safe with Lauren. It will all work out.”

I wish I could believe my own words, considering I’ve just made myself homeless.

I find myself at the airport for the second time in two days. With one last hug and a reminder to lock up before I leave, Jane hurries off toward her gate.

Okay, now what? I can buy maybe a day or two alone at the apartment, but that’s it. Maybe I could hide in the closet every time Jane’s neighbor came over to check on things?

Yeah, I can definitely see that going badly when the neighbor decides to get nosy and opens the door—ending with me being arrested for something.

What am I going to do?

I call Lauren for real this time to see if she has any ideas. She tries to ask her mom if I can stay over, even for a few days, but her mom freaks out on her, so that’s a no.

“What are you gonna do?” Lauren wants to know.

"I don't know," I reply, trying not to let the panic creep into my voice. "I'll think of something."

I hang up with Lauren, then I flop down on Jane's couch, scrolling through my pitifully short list of contacts for ideas.

I stop on the last name. A tiny seed of hope sprouts in my chest. But did I dare call him?

Do I have a choice?

I don't call. I decide to just show up. I don't know. Somewhere in my head I get the idea that it will be harder to turn me down if I show up on his doorstep with my suitcases and a sad panda face.

Am I really doing this?

I am.

I've been by the house once before, when Mom gave me a quick tour.

Bill's new house (our house, too) is a sprawling mansion with a private drive, and a stone fountain in the courtyard. I think it looks like a Mediterranean villa, with the red tiled rooftops and the big gleaming windows. Inside is just as gorgeous. I love the vaulted ceilings and the elegant curving staircase. Also, the house has seven bedrooms and eight bathrooms!

I can't even picture me and Mom living there. What would we do with all that space?

But those are happy thoughts for another day.

I pull around back to where the pool house is located, next to the Olympic sized pool, of course.

Slowly, I get out of my car, more and more unsure about my plan. Should I bring a suitcase to look more pathetic? No, that's dumb. If he says no, I'll feel ridiculous. Maybe I should just go.

No, I can't. I don't have anywhere **to** go. If he says no, I'm screwed.

The pool house is a cute little home matching the style of the main house. It looks smaller than I remember, and I just pray it has more than one room.

The lights are on. He's home. Taking a deep breath, I knock briskly on the door. And I wait.

Wow, he's taking a really long time to answer. I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans and prepare to knock again.

The door opens and, I just barely stop myself from rapping my fist on his chest.

His bare chest.

Oh. My. God.

Shirtless Zane is a revelation. He is all smooth honey colored skin and sleek muscles. His shoulders are broad and dense, and his chest and ab muscles are so clearly defined, they could have been carved from granite.

My eyes continue their journey down to his slim waist, and...oh, my. The top button of his jeans is undone.

For some reason, that undone button strikes me as the sexiest thing ever. Pure lust explodes in my body at the sight of it.

So hot!

"Violet."

Zane's raspy voice snaps me out of my sex-crazed coma. He runs a hand through his tousled, seriously cute, just-woke-up hair. "What are you doing here?"

"Um." I clear my throat nervously. "I kind of need a place to stay."

In a rush of words, I explain my situation. He listens silently, his expression neutral, leaning an arm against the door jamb. I am totally distracted by his bulging biceps.

"I promise I'll stay out of your way," I conclude. "You won't even know I'm here."

A slow smile tugs the corners of his mouth upwards. "Somehow I doubt that."

He opens the door wider, and I take that as an invitation to carefully slip past him. Um, **yum**, he smells like warm sexy male, just out of bed.

I glance around at my new surroundings. It's a little bigger than the old apartment, with a simple floor plan. The rectangle-shaped living room is sparsely decorated, with an L-shaped couch and a recliner angled toward a huge impressive-looking flat screen TV. I note with amusement that the entertainment center holds what appears to be every kind of gaming machine known to man. There's not much else: a glass coffee table in front of the couch, a couple of floor lamps, and a fancy bookcase crammed full of leather bound classics.

The small open kitchen is to the left, and I'm glad to find it neat and clean—no dirty dishes piled in the sink, or empty pizza boxes on the counter.

There's a short hallway directly across from the front door which I assume leads to the bedrooms and bathrooms.

I'm about to go check it out when a tall stunningly beautiful girl suddenly appears from an open room.

My eyes widen in shock and dismay. Ms. Supermodel is wearing an itchy bitsy thong and nothing else.

Without a hint of self consciousness, she sashays up to Zane, tossing back her long glossy hair. "Zane," she says in a husky accented voice. "Come back to bed."

He smiles down at her as she wounds her slender arms around his neck. "Natassia, we have company."

"Natassia" gives me a lazy once-over with dark exotic eyes. "Who is this? She come to party with us?"

What? Ew!

Zane sees my horrified reaction and smirks. "No. This is my step sister. Why don't you get dressed?"

Supermodel pouts prettily. She stretches up to whisper something in his ear, making him chuckle sexily. He puts a hand on her hip and murmurs something back.

What the hell? I'm standing there awkwardly, trying to look everywhere but at them. Why am I the only one embarrassed here? They're the half-naked ones!

Natassia mutters something in another language, then stalks back to the room, hips swaying seductively. Zane's eyes seem glued to her butt.

"I'll be right back," he says to me, then follows her into the room, shutting the door behind him.

I'm rooted to the spot, waiting. Should I leave? They better not be having sex in there.

It feels like hours have passed when they both finally reappear. Natassia, to my relief, has on clothes. She's wearing a thin gray dress, killer black boots, and a smug smile. Zane's thrown on a long-sleeved shirt, left unbuttoned. They both look romantic and sexy, like the cover of a racy spy novel.

As she is leaving, Ms. Supermodel throws a smirking look in my direction. My polite smile slides off my face. She says something to Zane in her language (Russian, maybe?), over her shoulder. He just laughs and shakes his head.

Once she's gone, I turn to him. "What did she say? Was it something about me?"

Zane shuts the door and regards me through half-lidded eyes. "You don't want to know."

I grimace and shift awkwardly. "Is she your girlfriend?"

"I don't have a girlfriend. Got any bags?"

"Um, yes, in the car."

He holds up a hand. "Give me your keys, and I'll get them for you. Make yourself at home in the meantime."

I fumble in my pocket for my keys, and toss it to him. "Thank you."

"No problem. Be right back."

Zane goes out the door, and I immediately start exploring. The kitchen has a sliding glass door that opens right to the pool. Nice.

I head over to the hallway. The first room is small, and contains a queen sized bed, chest of drawers, and a antique looking vanity. The window shows a view of the main house. I smile in relief. This will be perfectly fine for a month. Okay, let's check out the bathroom.

It's right next door and looks completely unused, which is great. It has a toilet, a sink, and...

No shower.

I look around wildly. Where's the shower? Oh, this isn't good.

I peek my head in the other room—Zane's room. My eyes skim over the huge bed, dresser, desk, bookcase...and there's another door. The master bath.

I hear the front door and run back out. Zane has all my bags, carrying them like they weigh nothing.

"Why doesn't my bathroom have a shower?" I demand, as if it's his fault.

"Because it doesn't. The master bath has one," he says. He moves past me into my bedroom.

I follow and watch him dump my bags on the bed. When I continue to stare at him, he raises an eyebrow. "Is there a problem?"

"Well, yeah!" I throw my hands in the air. "This isn't going to work! I **need** to shower."

"Shower in my bathroom," he says with a shrug.

I stare at him, appalled. "I can't just walk into your room!"

"Yeah, you'd knock first, I hope. It's no big deal, Violet."

Zane walks back out and heads toward his room. He stops in the doorway and gestures me over. "Come on."

I stare at him warily. I wish he would button his shirt. I would be able to think better. The open material frames his flawless skin and hard muscles. I seriously feel like a perv right now—I can't stop peeking at his chest.

Meanwhile, Zane is waiting. He crosses his impressive arms over his impressive chest. "Don't be scared, little girl," he taunts. "I don't bite."

Ugh! "I do," I growl, and push past him.

"I'll have to remember that." He laughs.

Did he take that to mean something dirty? I don't see how, but you can never tell with guys.

Oh, never mind. I'm standing in Zane's room with him! It smells like him: a fresh clean scent and some kind of masculine body wash—and lingering above that, the exotic scent of a girl's perfume. I can't stop staring at his bed, where he probably just had sex with that Natassia girl. I blush bright red at the thought. I don't want to picture Zane having sex. Um, ew...right? Not hot at all.

Nope.

"I'm hardly ever home," his voice says from behind me. "I'm sure we can work out a schedule. Bathroom's right there."

"Okay."

Cautiously, I check out the bathroom. It's really nice, and big. Double sinks, a glass enclosed shower, and—ooh!

“A jetted bathtub! I’ve always wanted to try one of those!” I exclaim, bending over for a closer inspection. “Are the jets adjustable?”

“I believe they are.”

Why does he sound so amused? I whip around and study him suspiciously. He smiles back innocently.

“My back muscles get stiff sometimes,” I say, just to clarify. “Having something hot and hard aimed at me would definitely help me loosen up.”

Zane only grins wider. “No doubt.”

Oh, god, what did I just say?!

“That’s not what—I meant the jets, not you!” I quickly backtrack. “Not that you would ever aim something hot and hard at me! I mean—what I was talking about was the **jets**, not your...not anything on you, that’s for sure!”

I’m taking deep gasping breaths right now. Stop talking, Violet! Shut up! I collapse against the edge of the tub, seriously appalled at myself, and shaking with humiliation.

“Violet.”

Zane crouches down in front of me, and pats my knee. “It’s okay,” he says sympathetically. “I know what you meant.”

I glare at him. “I wasn’t trying to sound like a perv! It’s your fault, answering the door shirtless, and then the naked girl with the...and then you and her—right in front of me! Well, no wonder dirty thoughts are in my head.”

“I’m...sorry?”

“Thank you.” I stand up abruptly. “Okay, well, I’m going to...go. I’ve got school tomorrow, and it’s...” I check my phone. “It’s eight o’ clock. Way past my bedtime. So...thanks for letting me stay. Bye, now.”

I wouldn’t say I walked, so much as ran out of there.

Yeah, no, that went great. I’m gonna go smother myself with a pillow now.

Chapter 8

"Beef and broccoli," Lauren announces, lifting the lid off the pan on the stove. The entire kitchen is filled with the savory aroma of beef and gravy. She takes a spoon from the drawer, scoops up some of the broth, and hands it to me.

I blow on it a little to cool it down, then I take a cautious bite. "It's good!" I declare.

I'm eating dinner at Lauren's tonight. We're babysitting the twins and baby Brianna while her mom works a double shift at the hospital.

I love Brianna. She is the cutest little thing, with her blonde curls and wide gray eyes. She's so sweet and easygoing, too. She's teething right now, but only makes soft whimpering noises on my shoulder. It's so cute. I can tell by the way she's breathing that she's about to pass out for the night.

"Rice still isn't done," Lauren announces, checking the pot. "Should be a few more minutes."

"Okay," I say. "I'm going to put Brianna down. She's out."

"Oh, can you tell the twins it's time to wash up for dinner?"

I groan quietly. "Do I have to? I still haven't recovered from the time I caught them French kissing their Aiden Cross posters."

Lauren laughs, even as she's making a face. "They were more embarrassed than you were."

"Yeah, I've never seen that shade of red before on a human face."

I carefully put the baby down in Lauren's mom's room. She gives a tiny sigh and rolls over on her side—so cute!

I wonder what I would do if Mom ever told me she was pregnant? I'd be thrilled and horrified at the same time.

I turn the baby monitor on and grab the other unit from its base so we can listen for Brianna. Then I go across the hall to the room Lauren and the twins share.

"Dinner's ready soon," I say, poking my head in. "Lauren says to wash up."

Thank goodness, all they're doing is painting their toenails. Identical heads lift up to look at me.

"What're we having? It smells good," Ashley wants to know.

"Beef and broccoli."

The twins exchange grimaces.

"It's good," I say before I turn to go.

"Hey, V?"

Kylie's voice stops me. "Yeah?"

"Is it true you're living with a guy now?"

"What?!" I glare at the giggling girls. "Were you guys eavesdropping again?"

"Is he really hot?" one of the little monsters asks.

"Do you sleep in the same bed?" The other one smirks.

"No! And I'm not even—ugh! You know what?" I point a finger at them warningly. "Quit listening in! And I'm not sleeping with anyone!"

"Is that why you're so grouchy, then?"

The twins erupt in laughter. Dirty-minded little buggers. I stomp away.

"Your sisters are evil," I tell Lauren as I come back into the kitchen. "They overheard us talking about my new living arrangements. They actually asked me if I'm sleeping with Zane!"

Lauren laughs. "See, remember when you were complaining about being an only child? This is why I wanted to hit you."

"Yeah, I wanted a baby sister or brother, not pre teen demons."

"Ha, well, babies do eventually grow up." Lauren checks the rice again. "Done. So, how's your hot roommate doing?"

"I haven't really seen him," I say with a shrug. I get four plates out of the cupboard and hand them to her so she can dish them up. "He's almost never home, and when he is, he's usually with a different hot girl. It's like living at a frat house."

"Your mom would freak if she found out."

"I know! I talked to Jane this morning. She said the baby's fever has gone down, they're really optimistic about his chances."

Lauren smiles in relief. "That's great. How's her daughter doing?"

"Holding up okay. The doctors are now saying he has a ninety percent chance of survival, which they're thrilled with. Jane says she'll probably have to fly back home before the end of the month, because by then she'll have to replenish her stock."

"Has she talked to your mother yet?"

"Yeah, but she's kept her mouth shut. She really doesn't want to spoil Mom's happiness, and neither do I." I take the plates that Lauren hands me and place them on the table. "She wants to come clean when Mom gets back, but I nipped that in the bud. Why make her mad for nothing, right? It's not like I'm doing anything with him."

"Mm-hmm. It's just a matter of time," Lauren predicts. "You like him."

"I barely know him," I scoff. "And you should see the kind of girls—women, actually—that he dates. I'm so not his type."

"Right. Fork or spoon?"

"Both. So, you really don't think I'm his type?"

She rolls her eyes. "I don't know, I've never met him. Do you want an iced tea?"

"I'll get it." I go over to the refrigerator to get the pitcher. "Well, do you think I—"

I cut myself off when the twins come bouncing into the kitchen. It's just as well. I don't know why I'm obsessing over whether I'm Zane's type or not. Like that even matters. I'm sure he just sees me as his future step sister, the silly babbling geek that he's forced to put up with for a month.

God, I'm such a loser. Lusting after a guy who will never look twice in my direction. Matt didn't even want me, why the hell would a guy like Zane? Why would I want him to, anyway? He's with a different girl every day of the week, obviously a player.

Ugh. I need to stop thinking about him.

After dinner, Lauren asks if I want to get a head start on our English essays. I remind her that I start work tomorrow, so I need to get to bed. Then Ashley says something about having my boyfriend tuck me in. I leave so I don't have to think up a clever response to that.

On the way home, I try to mentally prepare myself for waking up at five in the morning. I'll be working the morning shift, from six to two, at Sunset Parks Assisted Living. This will be my second year there as a resident aide. The job basically involves assisting the elderly residents with daily living tasks—getting them up in the morning, straightening up their rooms, helping them shower, etc.

It's actually much harder work than it sounds. I'm pretty much running to get everything done in time. Each resident has a schedule they strictly adhere to, and I never hear the end of it if I don't get to their room in time. The old guys don't care as much, but the ladies—they ride their call buttons if you're even a few minutes late.

I love it there, though, and I love all my old people. Once you work a schedule out and learn everyone's routines, it gets easier. I worked there last summer and on the weekends during school, so I got to know those guys pretty well. I missed them, and I should have visited sooner, but time kind of got away from me.

I wonder if we got any new residents, and I try not to think about the ones we might have lost.

When I get home, I check the garage for Zane's car. It's not there, of course. I don't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed.

I decide that a long hot shower is just the thing to make me nice and sleepy. I gather up my things and head to Zane's room.

As always, I resist the urge to snoop around. Like me, he's not much for decorating. His room contains the basics, no personal touches or pictures. He has a very expensive-looking laptop sitting on his desk, but no sign of any other computer equipment. I would think that a software engineer would have all kinds of high tech crap everywhere. But then how many software engineers do I know—especially ones that look like Zane?

Well, at least he's not a slob. Hey. I wonder what's in his closet?

Feeling brave, I take a quick peek. Hmm...lots of clothes, shoes, a set of weight—oh, it smells great in here, like some kind of spicy woodsy cologne.

I think I hear the door, and jump about a mile. It turns out to be nothing but my paranoia. I hurry into the bathroom, anyway.

The shower was a great idea. I get out feeling sleepy and relaxed. I put on my favorite pink tank top and matching pajama pants, then I use my bathroom to brush my teeth, and I am done.

Okay, time to hit the sack.

I lie down on my bed, but I can't get comfortable. I hate it when I know I have to be somewhere in the morning, and I need to get a good night's rest for it. The anticipation usually keeps me tossing and turning for hours.

This isn't working. I decide to get up. I am kind of hungry, so maybe a snack would help.

That's one good thing about living here: the kitchen is always well-stocked. Zane is hardly here, but someone's been keeping the fridge and cupboards full of healthy crap. I've been buying some junk food and TV dinners, but I haven't really touched it. It just occurs to me that I've been eating out a lot lately. No wonder my clothes have been fitting me kind of tight. I'll have to put a stop to that. Maybe I should start dancing again. That was great exercise.

I've got my head buried in the fridge, waiting for something delicious to jump out and hit me in the mouth, when I hear a noise behind me.

I give a little yelp and whirl around, my heart going into overdrive.

Somehow, it beats even faster when I see Zane standing there, leaning forward against the counter, resting his forearms along the top. He looks a little tired, but impossibly handsome in his fitted black shirt and jeans.

"Hey, Violet," he says, nodding at me. "What are you up to?"

"N-nothing," I stammer, caught off guard. I quickly straighten and shut the refrigerator door. "I was just looking for a snack before I went to bed."

"Bed already?" He raises an eyebrow and checks the time on the microwave. "It's nine o' clock on a Friday night."

"Yeah, well, I work tomorrow," I explain. When I notice his gaze drop down, I suddenly remember I'm not wearing a bra. I cross my arms over my chest as casually as possible, and clear my throat self-consciously.

I love that half-smile of his. It slowly lifts a corner of his mouth up.

"Where do you work?"

I tell him about my weekend job at Sunset Park, and he listens attentively. I even find myself going on about Helize, my favorite resident.

"She used to be an accountant for some big Hollywood studio, and she's traveled all over the world. She's got some great stories—you should hear

the one where she spent the week in a Mexican prison."

"Yeah? Sounds interesting. I'd love to hear about it," he says, his dark eyes shining with interest.

"I'm not sure you want to. It involves a wooden puppet, body cavity searches, and a--um--butt load of cocaine."

"You're right, I think I'll pass," he says with a laugh. "Besides, I think I heard versions of this story one time too many."

I smile at him. I can't help it—he's just so, **so** cute!

Suddenly, I can't think of anything to say. I stand there with my arms crossed, shifting my weight from foot to foot. I hope he doesn't think I have to pee.

After a minute of total silence, we speak at the same time.

"I guess I'd better—"

"Maybe one day you—"

We both start laughing. "What were you going to say?" I ask him shyly.

But he just shakes his head. "Nothing important. You'd better get some rest, huh? Goodnight, Violet."

I watch as he stretches slowly, the hem of his shirt lifting up slightly to reveal his flat stomach. My mouth goes dry. All I can manage is a stiff nod before he goes to his room.

I suck! When he's gone, I let my head fall onto the counter with a thud.

Ow. I'm pretty sure I just gave myself a concussion.

Oh, Violet, you are a prize.

Chapter 9

The next morning, I wake up feeling hung over. Not that I know what **that** feels like, since I don't drink. Or smoke, or do drugs. I'm a good little virgin, all right.

I wish I could take a quick shower to wake up, but Zane's home, so there's no way I'm going in his room.

I settle for splashing my face with cold water. I move like a zombie as I dress in my blue work scrubs and wind my long hair into a tight bun. On the way out, I grab a sports drink from the fridge, hoping it will give me some much needed energy.

It's still dark out, which makes me feel vaguely depressed that I'm not lying snug in my bed. Yawning, I climb into the car and start the fifteen minute drive to work.

Sunset Park is a grand two story white clapboard building, surrounded by trees and colorful flowers. As far as facilities go, you could do worse. At least they make an effort to make it a cheerful and classy environment.

I park in the back, in the employee section. I'm happy to go through those glass doors again—I just hope not too much has changed since I was last here.

I run into Liz while I'm clocking in. She greets me with a hug, and immediately starts filling me in. Both the Freemans have passed, within a week of each other. That is sad, but not surprising—and I'm glad they went around the same time. I learn Ginnie had a stroke, which I'm shocked to hear. Ginnie was in better shape than me—she went swimming at the Y every day.

"We got two new people downstairs, but they're pretty self-sufficient," Liz is saying. "Oh, and Helize was asking yesterday when is her 'flower' coming back."

"Aww," I say. "How is she?"

"The same," she replies, pulling her dark hair back into a ponytail. "But Irma broke her right hip a month ago, so now she's a full assist."

"Poor Irma."

We head over to the office for a meeting. Everyone there welcomes me back with hugs and questions about my vacation in Hawaii. But was it really a vacation if you're working full-time in a bakery? According to the others, as long as you're in Hawaii, you're on vacation.

I look through the communication log for updates on my residents while we have our meeting. After it's over, I grab my walkie and pager and head for the storage room to get a box of tissues. Helize always needs tissues, and she's the first one on my list.

She's already awake, lying in her bed.

"Rise and shine, woman," I announce, flipping on the lights.

Her clear blue eyes blink up at me. "Is that my flower I hear?"

"Your one and only." I turn off her oxygen concentrator on my way to her bed. "Good morning, beautiful."

Helize frowns at me, causing her delicate skin to bunch around her mouth and eyes. "I was just lying here, trying to think of your name. Lily, was it?"

"Close. Lily is my mother's name. I'm Violet."

"Ah, that's it."

I help her pull back the covers and begin the long process of helping her sit up. Then we work at untangling the nasal canula from her fine white hair.

Meanwhile, I tell her all about my summer in Hawaii, and my mother's surprise engagement.

"And what have you been up to?" I ask her as I push her wheelchair over.

"Oh, the same. Not much changes around here." She sighs tiredly and reaches for a crumpled tissue stuffed in the sleeve of her nightgown.

"No wild parties? Dancing on tables?"

Helize cackles. "Oh, my table-dancing days are long over. Have I ever told you about that time in Nogales when the federales thought I was a prostitute?"

This is what I love about Helize. You can say anything to her and she'll come up with something even more wild.

I get her up and in her chair, and start pushing her toward the bathroom. As we pass her mini fridge, I fish in my pocket for the magnet and slap it on there.

"I got you a souvenir from Hawaii," I say, stopping so she can look at it.

"Oh, sweetheart!" Helize peers at the magnet, then frowns slightly.

"Violet! Is that a **vagina**?"

"What?! No—it's a humpback whale with its mouth open! Here, put on your glasses."

I hand them to her and she slips them on. "Oh, I see it now!" she exclaims.

"It's like one of those paintings that you have to stare at a funny way until you see the picture."

"No, it's actually nothing like that," I say, wheeling her into the bathroom.

After getting her situated in there, I get to work on straightening out her room. I make her bed the way she likes it, and throw away all the crumpled tissues she has stashed everywhere. Gross.

It's weird how easily I fall back into my old work routine. I get all my residents down to breakfast, then before I know it, it's after lunch, and time

for shift change. I stay for a few extra minutes to catch up with the mid-shift girls, and then I'm clocking out and on my way home.

That went good! I'm not even tired. I can't wait to have a nice long soak in the tub, and then eat something. A whole cake, maybe. I'm so hungry! All that running around.

I check the garage like usual to see if Zane's home, but his car isn't there. If that's disappointment I'm feeling, I do my best to ignore it.

As soon as I get in the house, I grab some clothes, my ear buds, and some candles and make a beeline straight for the bathroom.

I really need a relaxing bath right now. I quickly peel off my yucky scrubs and start the bath. While it's running, I light the candles and turn off the lights. The sound of running water and the flickering lights makes me feel calm and spiritual, like I should have a dagger and an altar, or something.

Pretending that I'm a virgin sacrifice drowning myself in the waters of purity, I step delicately into the tub.

Aaah.

My whole body sighs in happiness as I sink into the hot water. The jets are all fired up, vanilla candles wafting their vanilla-ness...heaven. I pop my ear buds in and play some Aiden Cross on my phone.

I guess I drift off for a bit. The next thing I know, I'm blinking my eyes open and stretching languidly in the now cool water, completely relaxed.

That was great! I climb out of the tub and my stomach growls fiercely. Right, time to eat. I towel off and slip on a long white sundress, then I clean up after myself. Wouldn't want Zane to think I'm a big slob. I gather my things, open the door, and—

Aaaaaaughh!

The first thing I see is a naked chick, crawling around on Zane's bed.

It's not Natassia this time, it's some blonde chick, according to my shock-filled eyes.

I'm rooted to the spot. The naked blonde girl notices me standing there and screams, grabbing a sheet to cover herself with. Zane is lying on his bed, fully clothed, hands tucked behind his head in a casual position.

"Hey," he says, turning his head to look at me. "I didn't know you were home."

He says this so calmly!

"Oh, my god, I'm so sorry!" I blurt out, clapping a hand over my mouth. "I swear, I had no idea you were home! I was just taking a bath with candles, and I had my music on, and I think I fell asleep—ear buds..."

"No worries," Zane says with his half-smile. "Violet, this is Anna. Anna—my roommate, Violet."

"Hi." I wave lamely, trying desperately to imagine her completely dressed.

Quick—I need to say something to her to diffuse this awkward situation!

"Um...nice ass!"

Not that, though.

"Oh, god, I didn't mean that!"

Naked Girl stares at me, mortified. She crosses her arms over her chest, and angles her body away from me—like I'm some kind of peeper!

"I was just trying to make conversation. I didn't mean it, like, sexually," I babble, making it worse. "It was just an observation. Yeah, I'm gonna...go. Now. Okay."

I stare down at the ground and make a run for it. I don't stop until I reach my room. I throw myself on my bed, facedown, and order myself not to move as punishment for gross stupidity.

Maybe twenty minutes later—or an hour—there is a knock on my door. I don't answer, but someone comes in, anyway.

Zane. I could sense his presence in the pitch dark.

"Hey," he says, and I feel a tug on my foot. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I say into the mattress. "Thanks for checking. Bye."

The bed dips down from a sudden weight. Holy crap! Zane is sitting on my bed!

I flip over and scramble into a sitting position, scooting away from him like he's fire.

Never in a thousand years would I have dreamed of someone as gorgeous as Zane sitting on my bed. Ever.

I lock my arms around my knees and peek up at his smiling face. "I'm really sorry about—what happened. I had no idea..."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry," he says. "I shouldn't be bringing my dates home. Not while you're staying with me. I put you in an awkward situation, and I apologize for it."

I shake my head. "No, it's your place and I'm the one that intruded. And I'm not a little kid," I point out. "If you want to bring a different girl home every night, go for it. Maybe we could work out some kind of system...I could put a sock on the bathroom door when I'm using it, or something."

Zane starts chuckling as he rubs his chin. "Hey. I wouldn't say I'm with a different girl **every** night."

"Right" I roll my eyes. "I've been here almost a week, and so far I've seen you with five—no, Naked Girl makes six—different girls."

"Yeah, well, I like variety." He shrugs adorably.

"Really? Because they all seem kind of interchangeable."

"And by interchangeable, you're saying...?"

"They were all slutty. And dumb."

Zane bursts out laughing. He reaches over and taps my knee. "Hey, Anna is a Yale grad."

I don't say anything. The spot where he touched is still tingling. I struggle to keep a neutral expression.

Zane grins and nudges me again. "She does have a nice ass, though."

"Oh, god!" I groan, dropping my head into my knees. "I can't believe I said that! I should go apologize."

"You'll have to catch her on the road. She's on her way back to L.A. right now."

My head shoots up. "Because of what I said? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ruin your date!"

"Nah, forget it," he reassures me, waving it away. "It was me she was pissed at."

I frown slightly. "You? Why?"

Zane glances at me sideways, eyes crinkling in amusement. "After you left, I wouldn't stop laughing."

"Oh," I say. "Umm..."

Helplessly, I start laughing and he joins in. We chuckle together for a few seconds. In that moment, I can literally feel my little crush on Zane grow exponentially.

So not good.

He stands up and arches his back, stretching. I try not to notice how his gray shirt molds to his stomach to show off his ripped abs.

"You wanna get something to eat?" he asks, looking down at me. "My treat. You can tell me all about how work was."

I should have said no, made up some kind of excuse—I'm too tired, or something. Because I could sense the danger of remaining in his presence, the overwhelming temptation to say yes to him.

I'm balancing on the edge of something here, and when I agree to go with Zane, I can feel myself falling...

Chapter 10

We go in his sleek gray car. I don't know what kind of car it is—I don't care about that kind of thing—but it's totally luxurious. I sink into the seat and inhale the heady scent of leather and rich boy. The ride is ridiculously smooth. Not anything like my old Toyota, where you can feel every bump on the road.

And even the way Zane drives is sexy, the casual confident way he leans back in the seat, one hand on the steering wheel. In control. Hot.

I have to admit, I'm not immune to these superficial pleasures. Riding in this incredible car with this amazing-looking guy, I kind of feel like a celebrity. It's a glamorous decadent sensation. I could totally live like this. We cruise along, listening to a classic rock station, smiling at each other, and talking about what kind of music we like. Zane says he listens to old rock, like Metallica and Led Zeppelin; I tell him I like mostly anything, from songs in the Top 100, to Broadway musicals. He doesn't even make fun of me for liking the McPigs, a folksy little L.A. band. I play one of their quirkier songs for him on my phone, and he asks to hear more.

We end up at a cool little restaurant right across the street from the beach. It's decorated to look like an old beach house, with bright yellow shutters. I love the circle windows everywhere.

"This place has the best cinnamon rolls," Zane says as I slide into the booth. He waits until I'm seated, then sits on the other side.

"Really? How's their clam chowder?" I pick up one of the colorful menus and look it over.

Yikes! Their prices are crazy! Over twenty bucks for a dinner plate—please!

"I don't know, I don't like seafood. The pasta is good, though." He leans forward and taps the pasta section on the menu.

I squint at the choices, then my eyes widen. "One hundred and eighty-one dollars for a plate of spaghetti?!"

"What? That can't be right."

"That's what it—oh, the extra one came off!" I hold up my finger to show him the slight back smudge on it.

To my utter shock, Zane grabs that finger and rubs his thumb over the mark until it disappears. Then he wipes his hand on a napkin. "I've been to two hundred dollars a plate restaurants before, and this ain't it," he says, balling the napkin up and tossing it on the table.

It takes me a while to find my voice again. I put my hands in my lap and force a casual smile to my lips. "So, what are you getting?"

"Chicken," he replies, without having looked at the menu. "You?"

"I think I'll get a bowl of clam chowder."

Zane raises an eyebrow. "That's it? I thought you were hungry."

Yeah, until you started in with the casual touching. Now I'm freaking out!

Out loud, I say, "I had a big lunch at work."

The waitress finally comes by to take our order. She seems to recognize Zane, and greets him warmly. I might as well not be there. Zane has to tell her my order because even though I say "a bowl of clam chowder" at least three times, she continues to ignore me. That really irritates me!

So, it may or may not have been an accident when she trips over my foot. I think I have anger issues.

After our orders are taken, Zane turns back to me. "So, how was work?"

Feeling strangely nervous, I start babbling about my day. I even tell him about the magnet "vagina" mix-up. That makes him laugh, and I feel like the wittiest person ever. He's a good listener. Even when our food comes, he doesn't take his eyes off of me.

"So, what about your job?" I ask him. "Do you like being a software engineer?"

He's slouched back in the booth, one arm resting along the top, and the other hand holding his glass of water. He keeps swirling the ice around, then staring into the glass.

"It's a job," he says with a shrug. "The good thing about working for Cronus is they allow me a lot of freedom to develop my own projects."

"Oh," I say inanely. "Uh, how's it going with the one you're working in on now?"

"Finished it last week," he says with a smile. I'm relieved he doesn't go into detail about it because I would be so lost.

"So does that mean you're going back to L.A.?"

"Nope. As far as work is concerned, I'm still figuring out the bugs. How's your clam chowder?"

Of course he waits until I have a huge bite of bread in my mouth to ask me. "Good," I choke out.

He laughs. "Make sure you leave some room for the cinnamon rolls."

I groan. "No way! I'm too stuffed."

"So we take them home." Zane drops his fork on his plate, and squints over at me. "How do you feel about scary movies?"

"Love 'em," I say promptly.

"I got a copy of 'House of Bone and Blood.' Wanna see it?"

My eyes widen in disbelief. "That doesn't come out for two weeks. How do you have a copy of it already?"

"I know a guy who knows a guy," he replies casually. "Do you want to watch it, or not?"

"Yeah!" I shout enthusiastically. Then I pause uncertainly. "With you?"

"Yeah, with me. You got an objection to that?" he asks teasingly.

"Well, that depends. I like watching scary movies in the dark," I say. I take a sip of my iced tea. "I don't know, it might be too...intense for you."

What? I'm not flirting, I'm being playful, in a strictly platonic way.

Zane tilts his head to the side, amused. "Oh, really, little girl? Maybe you'll be too afraid to sit next to me in the dark."

The way he says it, with that rough sexy voice of his is so...**hot!** Is **he** flirting?

I pretend to sneer while my heart bangs crazily against my chest. "Yeah, right," I say to both him and myself. "Just don't jump like a girl at all the scary parts."

"I'll try not to." He grins and motions the waitress over. She's comes a-running. "Let's get out of here."

Zane orders two cinnamon rolls to go, then pays for it all, despite my protests. When I try to argue, he just gives me a look. I know it's not a date, and he was just being nice, but still. I can't help the giddy feeling that washes over me.

Or maybe he knows I wasn't going to tip that horrible waitress.

On the way home, we discuss favorite movies. We're both surprised to discover that we like many of the same ones because they're mostly older ones: "The Princess Bride," "Big Trouble in Little China," and "Boondock Saints" to name an eclectic few. I love movies, almost as much as books. I could talk about them all day, and I can't believe Zane seems to feel the same way. I would think he'd be too busy charming the pants off girls to go

to many movies. When I tell him that, he just grins and says he can do both at the same time. Then I mutter something about porn.

"Have you ever watched porn?" he asks curiously, glancing at me when he should be watching the road.

"No!" I say quickly, blushing. "Only guys do that."

Zane chuckles. His gaze switches back and forth, from me to the road.

"How old are you again, Violet?"

"Seventeen," I snap. "Why?"

"Sometimes you act much older, but then sometimes you seem so innocent."

I frown down at the warm bag of cinnamon rolls on my lap. I know he really means "naive," but I don't know what I said that would make him think that. Heck, I even said "vagina" in front of him. I guess if he's comparing me to the women he knows, then I probably do seem innocent. I don't see that as a bad thing—does he?

When we get back to the pool house, Zane goes in his room to get the movie, and I pop the cinnamon rolls in the microwave and close all the blinds. With the day already being cloudy and rainy, it gets to be pretty dark in the house. Perfect.

"I hear this movie's pretty intense," Zane says, coming into the room. "You sure you don't want a light on?"

I roll my eyes. "Uh-huh. Don't come running into my room when you get nightmares."

He smirks back. "Don't worry, little girl. The last place I'd run to is your room."

He puts the movie in the player while I glare at his back. What the hell does that mean? Is he trying to imply that he finds me repulsive?

I stomp into the kitchen to grab the cinnamon rolls. Oh, my god, they smell heavenly, all gooey and soft-looking. I stick them on separate plates and

carry them into the living room.

Zane is sprawled on the couch. I hand him his plate then plop down on the recliner with my treat.

"What's up, Mercer? Why are you sitting way over there?"

"Because," I sigh. "It's comfortable."

Zane pats the cushion right next to him. "So is the couch. Come on. What if I get scared? You'll have to hold my hand."

I hesitate. I don't want him to think it's a big deal, but I know I won't be able to concentrate on the movie if I'm sitting right beside him.

Ultimately, I can't pass up the opportunity to be closer to him. So I shrug and get up. I casually plop down a few careful inches away from him.

He smells so good! That freshly cleaned laundry scent mixed with soap does funny things to my insides. I clamp my legs together to keep them from bouncing nervously.

To take my mind off his nearness, I take a bite of my cinnamon roll. My eyes automatically close in delight.

"Oh, my god," I mumble, my mouth full of edible heaven.

"Right?" Zane says, enjoying my reaction.

"It's so good!"

For a minute, I forget Zane is there. I am loving this cinnamon roll. It practically melts in my mouth, all that golden gooeyness overwhelming my senses. Yum!

I lick my sticky fingers afterwards, savoring every last bit. I've got my thumb in my mouth when I happen to glance over and catch Zane watching me intently.

My thumb comes out with an embarrassing popping noise. "I'm so sorry you had to see that," I murmur shame-facedly.

"Not a problem. Here, take mine, too."

I laugh and shake my head. "Just start the movie."

He continues to look at me instead. "I think I'd rather watch you eat."

I smack him on one rock hard bicep. Chuckling, he presses the remote and the movie starts.

I have been dying to see this movie. The trailer for it looked awesome, and it's getting really good online buzz.

But as the movie opens with a pan of creepy house, I find myself barely paying attention. I can't stop staring at Zane's profile, trying to search for any flaws, but there really is none. I marvel that it was just the luck of the draw that he was born with that perfect face.

Well, that and a good gene pool.

"Eyes on the movie, Violet," Zane murmurs, keeping his gaze straight ahead.

Blushing furiously, I whip my head forward. I can't believe he caught me staring! Again.

Mentally scolding myself, I focus on the movie, and not on the gorgeous guy sitting next to me in the dark. I tuck my legs under me, and prepare to be terrified.

Okay, so the movie is about this family who moves into a creepy old house. Strange things begin to happen, culminating in the disappearance of their six month old baby. The teenage daughter does some research and discovers the house belonged to a satanic cult leader. Rumor has it that he built the house using the blood and bones of his followers.

The story's been done before, but the special effects are awesome. There are plenty of jump-worthy moments—especially when the girl gets sucked into another dimension in the house to find her baby brother.

It's totally creepy. I keep thinking there is something lurking behind the couch, waiting to claw my brain out. I want to turn the light on, but I can't, not after I made a big deal about how brave I supposedly was.

I look at him out of the corner of my eye. He appears engrossed in the movie, smiling a little—even at the scary parts.

If he were my boyfriend, he'd have his arm around me, and I wouldn't be scared at all.

Ugh, get those thoughts out of your head, Violet!

I was doing so good—up until the end. The girl and her brother had just returned from the evil dimension, and was safe back home. I totally didn't see it coming when bloody hands suddenly popped out of the wall and yanked her backwards, back into their dimension.

So I jump and scream a little, pressing back into the couch. Zane turns to look at me, eyebrows raised.

"You okay, Violet?" he asks with a teasing grin.

"I'm fine," I say quickly, standing up. "I just thought I saw a spider."

"A spider, huh?"

There's a sudden chirping noise, making me jump again. Zane checks his phone. He frowns down at it, then tosses it on the cushion beside him.

"Wow," I say, eager to change the subject. "That's the first time I've seen you with a phone. I just realized, that's weird."

"Why is that weird?" he asks, running his hands through his hair.

I shrug. "Because of your job, and your, uh, extremely active social life."

"Yeah, well, I hate the damn thing," he mutters, sounding annoyed. "I usually have it turned off."

"Huh."

Zane leans over and flicks on the lamp, bathing the couch in light. "Well, what about you? Most teenagers are glued to their phones, but I rarely see you on yours."

"I only ever talk to my friend, Lauren, or my mom," I reply. Then I smack myself in the forehead. "And now you think I'm a real loser."

Zane laughs. He stands up and looks down at me with his gorgeous dark eyes. "I think you're beautiful and funny, and if I didn't have to be somewhere tonight, I'd make you watch another scary movie with me just so I can watch you pretend you're not scared."

I stare up at him, speechless. He thinks I'm beautiful?!

We stand there for a breathless minute. The eerie soundtrack of the movie plays in the background. I am desperate to say something—**anything**—to break the sudden tension.

Finally, Zane looks away, shaking his head a little, as if to clear a thought away. He grabs his phone and our plates and goes into the kitchen to put them in the sink. The plates, not his phone.

"You gonna be okay alone?" he asks before he heads into his room. "You look a little spooked."

I scowl at him. "I'm not a little kid."

He only smiles at me over his shoulder before he disappears into his room.

In a daze, I turn off the lamp and the television, then I go straight to my room. I do a swan dive onto my bed.

I can't stop smiling. I replay our day together in my head, especially the really good parts. I can't believe we spent the day with him—complete with the awkward is-he-gonna-kiss-me moment at the end.

Knowing he's right across the hall from me makes me feel restless, giddy. There's a funny fluttering in the pit of my stomach that only grows when I think of walking that short distance to his room, and—I don't know what I'd do. Kiss him. Run my arms up and down his back...

He thinks I'm beautiful and funny!

Yeah, right, Violet. Then why is he going out—probably with yet another gorgeous woman? He must have felt sorry for you.

Ugh, the voice of reason in my head is right. I need to stop thinking like that. Zane is my future step brother, and the most we can be is friends. I can ignore that spine tingling electricity, that feeling of falling, whenever I'm around him. I just won't allow it.

Yeah. The next night I walk in on Zane just coming out of the shower. He's wearing nothing but a towel knotted low around his waist. Beads of water

slide down his tanned muscles, from his chest down to the fascinating ridges along his hips...

Don't worry, I handle it well. I scream, "Ewww!" and run from the room.

No, I really did. I walked into that room and saw the hottest sexiest guy I've ever seen--wet and half naked. And I said, "Ewww."

I know. How am I still single, right?

Chapter 11

"Look at this pic," I say to Lauren, showing her my phone. "My mom sent it this morning from Paris."

Lauren takes it and squints at the screen. "What is that she's holding?"

"That would be a phallic-shaped French pastry that my mother is holding up to her open mouth. I don't think she realizes, however—or she wouldn't be posing like that."

She laughs and hands my phone back to me. "She looks really good, V. Happy."

"Yeah," I agree with a sigh. I poke unenthusiastically at my taco.

We're at Taco Bill's right now, having lunch off campus for a change. We aren't really allowed to, but usually the school doesn't enforce this rule. So we're seizing the day. I order tacos instead of my usual enchiladas, just to be different.

"What did you get on that Chem quiz?" Lauren asks me.

"Ninety-six." I say. "What about you?"

She smiles. "Ninety-eight."

I make a face at her. "Show off."

"Right, I studied my butt off. You rarely crack a book open. Are you going to work on your essay tonight?"

"No." I busy myself with running my fingers through my hair. "I think I'm hanging out with Zane tonight."

Lauren raises an eyebrow. "Again?"

"Yeah," I mumble nonchalantly. "It's no big deal. He asked if I wanted pizza for dinner. We might watch a movie after."

Lauren doesn't say anything, but her brown eyes seem judgmental.

"What?" I say, a tad defensively. "We're just friends. In fact, why don't you come over? You can finally meet him."

"Not today. I'm tutoring after school."

"Ugh. Is Mr. Tanner back yet, or do we still have Mr. Jensen?"

Lauren takes a long sip from her soda before answering. "Jensen. Mr. Tanner is still out sick. I think he's actually having some kind of surgery."

"Oh. Poor guy." I tsk sympathetically. "I like Jensen, though. They should just make him be our permanent teacher. He's been there more than Tanner has."

"Yeah, I'm sure all the girls would love that." Lauren rolls her eyes. "Did I tell you about yesterday, after school? Kari Geddes was all leaning up against him when I came in."

"Really?" My eyes widen. "And what was **he** doing?"

"Leaning away from her." She laughs. "You should've seen the look on his face."

"Well, yeah," I say, squirting hot sauce on my taco. "If he ever got caught with a student, he'd be in so much trouble. Remember Mrs. Alvarez?"

"Yeah, but I still wonder if Casey was making it all up. Mrs. Alvarez was sixty, with rheumatoid arthritis."

"True," I agree, licking the hot sauce off my fingers. "So, do you wanna come over after tutoring?"

"No, thanks," she declines. She takes a small bite of her burrito, then suddenly bursts out laughing. Covering her mouth, she mumbles, "I still can't believe you said 'eww!'"

Even now, I flush with embarrassment. "I was flustered. You know how I get when I'm flustered."

"It's totally something Fat Violet would have said."

"I miss her," I sigh. "She was fearless."

"She was. Why don't you take a pic of Zane so I can see what he looks like?"

"I don't think he likes having his picture taken," I say. "I asked him once why he doesn't have any pictures in his room, and he said something to that effect. You know, he's not vain at all. I never see him look in a mirror."

"Hm, sounds like someone else I know." Lauren balls up all her used napkins and sticks them on her plate. "We should go. We have ten minutes to be back on campus."

I didn't get to finish my tacos! But Lauren is already standing up, getting her things together. I take a giant bite and follow after her.

We get in the short line to pay our bill, and I don't notice Matt and Rachel are standing in front of us until I hear his familiar laugh.

Oh, great. I exchange eye rolls with Lauren. She quietly asks me if I want to wait outside, but I shake my head.

Oh, that's nice—he's got his hand on her butt. He never put his hand on my butt in public. We barely held hands.

By the way, I've still got a mouthful of taco. Seeing my ex-boyfriend caress my ex-friend makes me want to puke. It makes me...I'm just so...

I'm not hurt, I realize. I'm irritated. When I think about Matt, I can't help but compare him to Zane, and next to Zane, Matt is...nothing.

Inconsequential. Faded gray, school lunch, immature boy. Zane is—he's fireworks, bursts of color, exciting, dangerous, sexy, and he makes me **want**. What, I'm not quite sure. All I know is if he—

“Violet.”

Matt suddenly turns around, spotting me. His blue eyes widen as I start choking on taco meat.

Ow!

My eyes water as I gag helplessly. Matt reaches for me—maybe to perform the Heimlich—but I hold a hand up. Lauren hands me a napkin, and I snatch it and discreetly spit out half a masticated taco. Ugh.

Coughing hoarsely, I glare up at Matt like it's his fault. I turn to Lauren and hand her money. “I'll be waiting outside,” I mutter.

Rachel looks like she's actually going to say something to me. I give her a look, and she hastily turns back around. Just because I've decided Matt isn't worth crying over doesn't mean I'll forgive either of them for betraying me.

I don't forgive people. Just ask Shauna Bradley. We were best friends in kindergarten—until I discovered she was the one stealing the fruit snacks from my desk. She lost my trust that day, and even now when I see her, I have to refrain myself from shouting, “Why? Why did you do it?!”

The rest of the school day seems to go on forever. By the time Spanish is over, I am all but jumping up and down with impatience. I can't wait to get home. To see him.

He's not there when I get home. I do my homework, and take a quick shower. What to wear? I know, it's not a date. My first instinct is to reach for something flattering, but I know I'd end up feeling stupid and uncomfortable. So I slip on a plain gray t-shirt and a long pink skirt with little bunnies printed all over it. How did I even get that skirt, anyway? I don't know why I even packed it.

I'm sitting on the couch, pretending to read a book while acutely listening for the door. When I finally hear the sounds of Zane coming in, I am so nervous, I nearly fall off the couch. Scrambling to maintain a casual expression, I try to calm my racing heart, while blindly turning the page of my book.

"Hey," I greet him, proud of how normal I sound.

"Hey, yourself."

Zane sets a large flat box on the kitchen counter, and wanders into the living room. He looks absolutely beautiful and dangerous with his windblown dark hair and dark sunglasses.

"Someone smells good," I blurt out when he leans over the couch to inspect my book. "No, I mean something! The pizza. It smells good."

He just grins at me, and grabs hold of my book, turning it—oh, god—right side up.

Yes, it was upside-down. I was pretending to read Tolstoy upside down. And he caught me.

I'm such a dork.

Zane heads back to the kitchen while I sputter incoherently. "You hungry?" he asks over his shoulder.

I take a few deep calming breaths before joining him in the kitchen. I give up. I totally accept the fact that I'll forever be making an ass out of myself in front of the hottest guy I've ever known.

Forget it. It's fine—I'll just be the awkward yet amusing friend.

Having resigned myself to a role, I feel a little of the pressure I put on myself ease up. I follow him to the kitchen. He's opening up the box, and I find myself looking at a bizarre pizza. Why's there green stuff on it?

"What is that?" I ask, unable to keep the horror out of my voice.

Zane chuckles, glancing up at me. "I take it you've never had a Greek pizza?"

I shake my head. "It...is there any meat on there?"

"No. There's spinach, olives, tomatoes, feta...trust me, you'll like it."

He's getting plates down from the cabinet, so he doesn't see the dubious face I make. "It smells good," I say hopefully.

He nods, handing me a plate. "Tell you what—just try it. If you don't like it, you don't have to eat it. And tomorrow, you can pick whatever you want for dinner, and I'll pick it up. Okay?"

My spirits soar crazily. He wants to hang out with me tomorrow, too? "Okay!" I agree—way too enthusiastically.

We grab our pizzas and a couple of bottled waters, and move to the living room. I thought we were going to watch a movie, but Zane brings out his laptop and we end up watching how-to videos on the internet. Yeah, it turns out Zane is really into do-it-yourself projects, and alternative forms of energy. We watch videos on how to make your own greenhouse, gasifiers, parabolic mirrors, and Stirling engines. It's actually really fascinating, and I'm impressed at his knowledge.

"What, are you gearing up for the zombie apocalypse?" I tease him, after taking a bite of my delicious Greek pizza (Zane was right—yum!).

"I just believe in being prepared." He smiles, leaning forward to click on a link. "And I think this stuff's really cool, you know? I have a farm in Oregon that actually runs on some of the things I've built. I'll take you out there, sometime so you can see for yourself."

I am stunned by his casual invitation. "That'd be awesome," I say faintly.

I wonder if he really means it. Or was it one of those things that people say? Like the way I always invite my third grade friend—Janie Donnelly—over to my house to hang out whenever I run into her—even though I barely know her, anymore, and I really don’t want her to come over, because what would we talk about? The last thing we had in common was our sticker collections.

Moving on.

Once the pizza’s gone, we decide to switch to hot chocolate and some guy name Jinky’s video of the Top One Hundred Horror movies of ALL TIME. Most of the movies on Jinky’s list comes from the seventies, and I’ve never heard of them before. A few of them look pretty cool, though, so I write down the titles of the ones we might want to watch later.

I’m no good at multitasking. I’m writing on the back of a Taco Bill’s receipt, while watching the screen, **while** taking a sip of my scalding hot cocoa. You can guess what happens next.

The whole cup. The steaming liquid spills all over my lap. I jump up, gasping at the searing pain.

Zane immediately pulls my skirt off of me. “Sit down,” he commands, then disappears into the kitchen.

I’m still standing when he returns with a wet towel. He gently pushes me down onto the couch, crouches down in front of me, and places the cool towel over my thighs. It instantly helps soothe the burn, and I sigh in relief.

After a couple of minutes, the sting subsides. Zane lifts the towel up to check my skin. “No blisters,” he says softly. “It’s just a little red.”

He gently brushes a finger over my inner thigh, in a feather light touch that steals my breath and makes me tremble in a way that has nothing to do with pain.

I guess I make some kind of noise. Zane looks up at me, and as if suddenly realizing what he’s doing, he stands abruptly and backs away.

“Keep it covered. I’ll go look for some aloe gel,” he mutters.

I watch him walk away in a daze. Oh, my god. I can't believe I'm sitting here in my underwear. I can't believe he touched me...there. I see-saw between utter mortification and a nervous exhilaration. And I'll admit it—pure lust.

Um, thank goodness I'm wearing nice underwear. Ugh, I just realized, this is the second time he's seen them. Not the same pair, though. Today's selection is lacy and a buttercup yellow.

God. This is so embarrassing.

Zane comes back with a tube of something and a light blanket. He drapes the blanket over my lap and hands me the tube. "Wait a few minutes, then put some of this stuff on your—on the burn," he says gruffly.

"Thanks." I risk a peek at his expressionless face. "Sorry I'm such a klutz."

He allows a ghost of a smile. "You are a bit accident prone, aren't you?"

I shrug, my cheeks heating up. I spread the blanket so it's covering most of my legs.

He doesn't say anything for a minute, just staring down at me. Then he mumbles something about fixing his contacts, and disappears into his room again. He wears contacts? Hm...I bet he would look really hot in glasses.

Just when I'm convinced he's not coming back, he walks back out, and sprawls next to me on the couch. "You up for some mindless TV?" he asks, picking up the remote.

"Yeah," I say gratefully.

So we sit there and watch sitcoms, reality shows...whatever is on. We laugh at the same things, and make fun of the people in the reality series. Zane doesn't even seem to mind my sarcasm. He seems to enjoy it. We spar back and forth over our favorite shows.

I don't even remember falling asleep. The next thing I know, Zane is lifting me up from the couch, and carrying me into my room—as if I weigh

nothing.

Being in his strong arms is so...it's an incredibly precious feeling. I pretend to be asleep just so I can stay there. He gently lies me down on my bed, and draws the covers over me. My eyes blink open when I sense him lean over me.

"Sweet dreams, Violet," he whispers, kissing me on the forehead.

Sweet dreams, indeed.

Wait, I'm not quite done being the stupid damsel in distress.

Lauren and I leave Taco Bill's the next afternoon, and discover my car has a flat tire—and I don't have a spare. Where did it go? I may have moved it to make room in my trunk one day—I remember now. For those boxes of piñatas. Don't ask.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm calling Zane. He laughs at my sheepish tone, and promises to be there in twenty minutes with a new tire.

He gets there in fifteen minutes. I introduce him to Lauren—who is suitably awed—and he effortlessly changes the tire, while we look on. Why is it so sexy when hot guys do manly things, like work on cars? Or maybe it's just Zane. Everything he does is sexy. I'm not the only one who thinks so, judging by the group of girls who stop to drool over him.

Damn it, I should be the only one allowed to drool over him. I found him first! Or something not as stupid.

Lauren is appalled by my behavior. I become a giggly loser around him. I disgust myself, but I can't seem to help it. I clamp both hands over my mouth and force myself to stand silently next to Lauren. When Zane is done, he pats my head like a puppy, and warns me to stay out of trouble. Then he jumps into his hot little car and zooms off.

"Wow," Lauren says, watching him drive off.

"To Zane, or to my ridiculous dorkiness?" I ask meekly.

“Both.” She eyes me sympathetically. “V, you’ve got it bad for him.”

“I do,” I finally admit, slumping back into my seat in the car. “Pathetic, right?”

“He likes you, but he doesn’t want to.”

“What?” I turn to her, eyebrows raised. “You could tell that in the five minutes he was here?”

“No.” She sighs. “I could tell by the way he had to keep tearing his eyes away from you every couple of minutes. You called him and he came running to the rescue. He hangs out with you all the time. You think a guy like that wouldn’t have better things to do than watch movies with you all night?”

“Ouch,” I say, not a little offended.

Lauren looks at me in that no-nonsense way. “You’ve seen for yourself the kind of women he dates. Have you seen him with another girl since you two started getting so chummy?”

“Chummy,” I repeat, smirking. “And, no. But he said he wasn’t going to bring the skanks home since that last time. For all I know, he’s going over to their houses, or...whatever.”

She just shrugs. “If you want him, V, I’m pretty sure he won’t turn you down.”

I scoff as I start the car. But deep down, a little flower of hope blooms in my chest.

If I want him, she says.

I don’t think I’ve wanted anything more in my life.

Chapter 12

“So, basically, my dad is a giant douche,” I say.

Zane and I are sitting on the chaise lounges by the pool. It’s late, but neither of us felt like going to bed, so we’ve just been hanging out here and talking. I’ve just explained how my dad left us, and didn’t look back. Not even after Mom found out about the cancer.

I stare moodily at the softly lit pool, glowing like a jewel in the night. Zane is silent for a moment.

“Your mom told me about how you took care of her,” he says finally. “That must’ve been really tough.”

I give a half shrug. “We had a lot of help. Friends and family.”

“She said you helped with a lot of the bills. But she got a little weird about it, like she didn’t want to say how.”

I shoot him a sharp glance. “It wasn’t from hookin’ or stripping, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

He hides a smile. “Never crossed my mind.”

“It wasn’t anything illegal,” I say after another long silence, in which I debate whether I should share my secret with him or not. “I...I write books.”

Zane turns to me, surprised. “You...write?”

I nod, embarrassed. “I always liked to make up stories. I used to write all the time. When my mother got sick, and we desperately needed money to cover all her medical bills—it was the only thing I could think of doing. So, I looked into it. Turns out, it’s remarkably easy to self-publish.”

“That’s awesome,” he says. When I look at him, he looks impressed.
“What do you write about?”

“Um...” I shrug. “I have this series out. It’s called ‘*Breaking Time*.’ It’s about a bunch of teenagers who keep getting reincarnated into different lives. They have to find each other, and figure out how to stop a certain cataclysmic event in time. It’s...stupid fluff.”

Zane shakes his head, smiling incredulously. “It sounds amazing. That’s seriously cool, Violet. How many books have you written so far?”

“Five.” I fiddle with a loose string on the hem of my shirt. “I’m kind of on hiatus right now, though. Before, there was, like, a lot of pressure on me to pump out the books, you know? I guess I kind of burned out. So, now, I’m taking a little break.”

I have to squash down the urge to brag to Zane about how much books I’ve sold, the websites and videos that have sprung up, dedicated to my *Breaking Time* series. People not only buy my books, they talk about it, obsess over the characters. And constantly harass me about when the next book will be coming out.

“So why was your mom so secretive about it?” Zane wonders, tapping my leg to get my attention. “I would think she’d have a bumper sticker made: ‘My Daughter’s a Famous Author.’”

I scoff. “I’m not famous! And...no one knows that I write besides her and Lauren. I use a pen name.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m kind of weird about stuff. I didn’t want my name out there on the internet. I don’t even use Facebook. I don’t like the thought of kids at school, judging my work. They’d tease the hell out of me. There are some real bitches at Hidden Cove.”

Zane starts laughing. “What’s your pen name?” he wants to know.

I cringe a little. “Elizabeth Bunnei. Elizabeth is my middle name. And Bunnei...well, bunnies are cute.”

He cocks his head to the side, running a hand over his mouth. “Got a thing for rabbits, huh?”

I totally know he’s referring to the rabbit on my underwear. I shift uncomfortably in my chair. “Let’s change the subject,” I say. “Um...so, what about your mom? Where is she?”

Zane leans back. His smile is still there, but the edges of amusement are gone. “She’s dead,” he says matter-of-factly.

Great, Violet. Way to bring up bad memories. “I’m so sorry,” I say in a hushed voice.

He glances over and seeing my remorseful expression, he reaches over and squeezes my hand. “Don’t be. It happened a long time ago. When she was alive, I barely knew her.”

I surreptitiously study his face to gauge his mood. “What happened, if you don’t mind me asking?” I ask cautiously.

“She was a paranoid schizophrenic. She didn’t live with us most of the time.” Zane’s gaze goes distant. “I remember going to visit her at various facilities. When she did come home, she used to lock herself in the bathroom and just cry and scream for hours. When I was really young, I used to...I used to stand outside, and just listen to her talk to herself. I thought maybe she knew I was out there, keeping her company.”

It’s my turn to take his hand. “That’s a nice thought.”

He shrugs. “We thought she was doing better for a while. She was taking her meds, and sometimes she’d even ask me how my day was going. Then, one day I walk into her room and...there she was. She hanged herself with some wire from a hook in the ceiling.”

I cover my mouth with both hands, horrified for him. “How...**awful**.”

“Yeah, it was,” he says simply. “I had nightmares for months after. Couldn’t watch scary movies, or go out at Halloween. It was a long time ago, though. I made my peace with it.”

I really have no freaking clue what to say. “I...uh...do you want to...?”

Zane waves the topic away with an impatient hand gesture. “Seriously, I’m okay. I don’t need to talk about it. Some things happen that just don’t make sense, you know? And talking about it doesn’t help anything. Sometimes it’s better just to forget.”

“I...” I stare down at my hands. “I’m sorry.”

“No worries, Violet. Let’s change the subject again, okay?”

“Thank goodness,” I agree gratefully, and he laughs.

We are quiet for a moment. The awkwardness brought on by the topic of his mother’s suicide dissipates like fog, leaving a comfortable camaraderie. It’s nice. Okay, it’s more than nice. I can’t stop stealing glances at his beautiful profile out of the corner of my eye.

“I wish I could go swimming,” I say idly, staring at longingly at the pool.

“Why don’t you?”

I make a face. “Too cold.”

Zane sits up. “The pools heated, you know.”

“It is? Wish I knew that before.” I sigh.

“So, let’s go for a swim,” he says, tugging at my ponytail.

“What, now?” I laugh. “It’s almost midnight!”

“So? You gonna turn into a pumpkin? Come on.”

Zane is already standing up and taking off his shirt, and I have to tear my eyes away from the bronzed muscled perfection of his chest and shoulders. Oh, God, am I drooling? Look at those chiseled abs!

He pauses with his hand on the button of his jeans (gasp!) and glances up at me expectantly. “Are you gonna swim in your clothes?”

He seems totally unaware that he’s giving me a heart attack right now. When he starts to unzip his jeans, I turn around so fast, I almost fall out of

the chair. I am sure I'm beet red from head to toe. I have to clear my throat to find my voice. "I'll get my swim suit," I manage to choke out.

The sound of his sexy chuckle sends my pulse spinning into overdrive. "Don't forget your arm floaties, too. What are you, ten? You don't need your swimsuit. It's just us."

I am so shocked by what I think he's suggesting, that I whip around to glare at him. "I'm not going skinny dipping with you!"

Zane is standing there in black boxers and nothing else, and I don't think I've ever seen a sight more beautiful than his long lean body and the complex contours and ridges of his sleek muscles. He's smirking at me now—can he feel me eye-licking him?

"Swim in your underwear," he says with that almost-smile of his. "I don't skinny dip with good girls like you."

I can't help the frown that pulls down the corners of my mouth. It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him why not. What's wrong with me? Then I think...*what's wrong with me?!* Of course I don't want to go skinny dipping with Zane!

He looks at me and shakes his head slightly. "Go get your swimsuit, Violet. And relax. It looks like your head's about to explode."

I frown harder. "I'm fine! You just caught me by surprise, is all. Just... turn around. I can't undress while you're looking at me."

He gets this funny look on his face. He opens his mouth to say something, then shuts it quickly. Shaking his head again, he turns and dives smoothly into the pool. When he resurfaces, he immediately begins to do laps.

I clutch the bottom of my shirt with trembling hands. Am I really doing this? Wait, do I have on nice underwear right now? Oh, God, I can't do this. My boobs are too big. It will be too embarrassing.

God, don't over think this, Violet. It's just swimming in a pool with a friend. An incredibly hot and sexy friend. In our underwear. It's not like he hasn't seen me in my underwear before, damn it. He's not making a big

deal out of this, so neither should I. Don't want him to think I'm a prude. I'm not a prude!

I stand there, agonizing over the prude-ish thoughts in my head. Then something wet grabs my ankle and I scream and flail backwards.

It's Zane. His dark eyes gleam up at me, made luminescent by the reflection of the lit pool water. His dark hair sticks up in cute little spikes when he runs a hand through it. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking," I say, patting a hand over my still-racing heart.

"Yeah? About what?"

"Um...I don't know if I should go swimming. I don't think I—"

"Let me make this easy on you, then."

Before I can ask him what he means by that, he lifts himself up, grabs my hand, and tugs. I'm pulled off balance, and with a scream and a huge splash, I'm drowning in the pool!

Okay, maybe I'm not drowning. I break the surface, already yelling at him. "You idiot!"

"You're welcome!" he yells back. Laughing, he swims away.

Now that the shock has worn off, my tense muscles start to loosen at the pure enjoyment of being in a beautiful pool on a beautiful night, with a beautiful boy. The water is the perfect temperature, cooling my heated skin and gently lapping against my body. I glance over at Zane to make sure he's not looking, then I quickly struggle out of my shirt and pants under the cover of the water. Thank goodness I'm wearing my black lace bra and matching panties. Nice, but not too revealing.

Okay, this isn't too weird. I can do this.

I swim over to Zane, and we splash around for a little while before challenging each other to a swim race. He wins, of course. I'm a good swimmer, but his 6'2" frame gives him an unfair advantage. That doesn't stop me from demanding a rematch or two. I don't win any of those, either.

After doing a few lazy laps together, we decide to take a break in the shallow end. By this time, I've completely forgotten I'm only in my underwear. I lean against the edge of the pool, the water hitting me at the top of my rib cage.

"This is really nice," I sigh contentedly, tilting my head back to see the star-filled sky.

"Yeah. Really nice."

Something in the dark tone of his voice makes me look at him. His eyes meet mine, then his gaze slowly lowers down my body. They linger deliberately on my chest, and there's no mistaking what he's looking at.

I can't help the audible gasp that escapes me as Zane moves over to me, placing his hands on either side of me on the edge of the pool and caging me in with his body. We aren't quite touching, but close enough that I can feel the heat of his skin and become dizzy at his nearness.

He lowers his head so he can look me in the eye. "I was wrong," he says softly.

His proximity is making me squirmy in places I never knew I had. It's all I can do to try to relearn to breathe and not give in to the sudden ache that is driving me to connect our bodies.

"About what?" I ask in a low voice. My eyes helplessly drop down to his crazy sexy mouth.

That beautiful mouth moves into his familiar half-smile. "I thought I could control myself enough to be with you like this," he murmurs. "But it turns out, I can't. You need to go, Violet."

I'm so surprised, I barely take in the meaning of his words. "What? **You** go. Wait...why?"

Zane inhales deeply and turns his head to avoid my confusion. "Because," he says through gritted teeth. "If you don't, I'm going to kiss you, and if I kiss you, you're going to end up naked."

Oh...wait, what?!

Shock and desire have my nerves tingling like I've been struck by horny lightning. My heart is doing joyful leaps. He wants me!

He wants **me**.

"You're very sure of yourself," I manage to say, almost steadily.

He grins. My hormones react wildly. "You should be scared of me right now, little girl."

Sexy banter. I can do this. Taking a deep breath, I boldly meet his gorgeous eyes. "I'm not," I squeak. "I'm not scared at all."

Great, now he's amused. But he doesn't move away from me, staying within kissing distance, maybe moving a fraction of an inch closer. "If you knew what I wanted to do to you, you would be," he says.

Um. Yikes.

"What do you want to do to me?" I whisper.

Zane stuns me by hooking a finger under the front clasp of my bra and tugging me close enough for me to brush up against his hard chest. Then he leans down and whispers in my ear.

He says...

Oh, god.

I know what he's talking about. I've heard girls in my school giggling about their boyfriends doing it to them. But I've never thought about having that done to me, never in a million years imagined someone like Zane whispering in my ear that he'd like to do that with me. To me.

Oh, god.

Zane takes a step back. His jaw is clenched, his whole body is tense and alert. He seems to absorb my wide-eyed shock and his voice is strained when he says, "Told you you should be scared of me. Just...I'm begging you, just go, okay?"

There is a tense silence that last for a few agonizing seconds. I want to touch him so badly, with a ferocity that scares the crap out of me. Hesitantly, I reach a hand up to his face.

Zane backs away from my touch with insulting speed. "I'm sorry," he says quickly, seeing the hurt on my face.

His rejection stings, leaving me confused and angry. So he thinks he can turn me on, then turn me away?

I use the ladder to get out—after having unsuccessfully tried to hoist myself over the edge of the pool. Thanks, gods of humiliation! Like I needed that parting shot! Zane doesn't say a word as I start to walk away.

But after a couple of shaky steps, I stop. If I leave it like this, he will continue to think of me as the scared little girl he always accuses me of being, and we'll go right back to pretending there isn't this...**thing** between us.

I take a deep breath and say a prayer for courage. Then with clumsy fingers, I slowly unclasp the hook of my bra. The straps slide off my shoulders and I let it fall to the ground with a soft plop. I don't quite have the nerve to turn all the way around so he can see me. I look at him over my shoulder.

Zane is standing very still in the hip length water, staring at me with an intensity that steals my breath away.

I swallow thickly. "Screw your control."

Then I walk away, forcing my hands to stay at my sides instead of covering my breasts.

Please, please don't let me trip and fall!

I make it to the pool house, and by then I am a quivering mass of nerves. I cross my arms over my chest and make a run for my room, my heart trying to thud its way out of my rib cage.

I cannot believe that just happened! In my underwear! What do I do now? Do I risk running into him to take a shower? I really don't think I have the energy to face him right now, but I'm covered in chlorine. It dries the skin, you know?!

God, that was so...

Hot.

I decide to take my chances and shower, but it's the fastest one of my life. I make it back to my room, where I dive into my bed and under the covers.

I am...exhilarated, confused, angry, turned on. Why does Zane always make me feel this way? Crazy and hormonal, that is. Sometimes I am so comfortable with him, I feel like I can tell him anything. But then there's always this insane rush of emotions brewing just below the surface, when I look at him, or when he smiles at me...

He wants me, too.

That pesky thought runs through my head like the sweetest song. It makes me giddy.

He wants me!

I lie awake for a long time, listening for the sounds of Zane coming in. If he did come in that night, I am asleep before it happens.

Chapter 13

Zane is pissing me off!

Okay, so it's been a couple of days since the pool incident, and out of nerves and embarrassment, I have been avoiding him—that is until I realize he's been avoiding me!

How dare he?!

He's been staying out late, sometimes not coming home at all. I rarely see him in the morning before school, and by the time I get home, he's gone again. The few times I manage to run into him, he is polite and distant. Our teasing arguments and easy banter are a thing of the past, and I find myself missing it—him—more than I could imagine. The tension is so thick between us, I become self-conscious of my every movement, and of his. It's like the two of us together create some kind of chemical reaction between us, both helpless to stop it, and desperate to ignore it. I'm so jumpy and awkward around him, I don't know how to cope, and I start picking fights in an attempt to illicit any kind of reaction. We argue over silly things, like who drank the last of the milk, or who left the lights on in the living room. I know—who fights over things like that, right? Old married couples, maybe.

I am a silly teenage girl, I'll admit it, and like any other silly girl that's being ignored, I decide there's only one thing to do:

Make him suffer.

I don't want to be too obvious, but I do make an effort to dress up a little more around Zane. Instead of my usual old t-shirts and old jeans, I pair short skirts with cute flirty tops that show a little more cleavage than I'm usually comfortable with. But desperate times call for desperate measures. Our month together is almost up, and I've already packed up most of my belongings and hauled them over to Jane's house. I feel this...nail biting urgency. I feel like if something is going to happen between us, it has to happen now, or I will lose him forever. And that's a thought I couldn't bear.

Friday night.

I am oddly agitated and restless. Zane is home for a change, but locked away in his room. He's barely said two words to me.

Okay, so I have a terrible idea, and I'm trying to work up the nerve to go through with it.

It's a really bad, really slutty idea. I should be ashamed of myself for considering it.

I'm going to do it.

Before I know it, I'm standing in front of his door, holding my pink towel. After taking a deep breath, I knock lightly on his door.

Without waiting for a response, I let myself in. Zane is at his desk, doing something on his laptop. My heart stumbles when I realize he is shirtless.

"I...uh, I'm going to shake a shower. Wait, I mean take!"

I flush with embarrassment, but Zane barely turns around. "Go for it," he mutters indifferently.

Son of a b!

"Thanks!" I grunt, and stomp past him to the bathroom, slamming the door for good measure.

I am fuming as I strip off my clothes. How dare he act like I'm nothing to him but an inconvenience! I thought—I don't know what I thought. We, at least, used to be friends. Zane would have teased me mercilessly over my awkwardness. Now he can't stand to look at me.

Angry tears well up in my eyes, but I blink them back. I let myself relax under the spray of the steaming hot shower, taking my time washing my hair and scrubbing my skin with my coconut scented body wash.

How long have I been in here for? Half an hour? Maybe longer. I shut off the water and reach for my fluffy pink towel. After I dry off my hair and body, I wrap the towel tightly around myself and tuck it in the front between my breasts. It's just long enough to cover my torso and graze the top of my thighs. Um. Much shorter than I anticipated.

Well, I've managed to steam up the bathroom good. I swipe at the fogged up mirror with a hand towel and glare at my reflection. I try to practice making sexy faces, but I quickly give up, feeling completely ridiculous. Like one of those girls who uploads thirty pictures of herself making duck faces in the mirror. Why do girls do that? I make the duck, and it's not sexy at all. Creepy, maybe.

What is Zane doing right now? Is he wondering if I've drowned in here? Is he even still in his room? I half hope not.

Well, I can't stay in here forever—can I? I run my hands through my hair, pushing it back from my face. Gosh, I look freaked. Well, it's now or never.

Here I go.

Nope. Okay...and now.

I open the door and take a tiny step out. A cloud of coconut scented steam wafts past me. Zane is still at his laptop! He doesn't turn around, but I can tell by the sudden tensing of his back and shoulders that he knows I'm there.

I clear my throat, clutching the towel against me. "I forgot my clothes," I mumble in a way that is more mentally challenged than seductive.

Oh, well. But I've finally gotten his attention. Zane's head comes up slowly, and I catch a glimpse of his achingly handsome profile. A tiny muscle jumps in his clenched jaw. Is he mad? The only light comes from the bathroom behind me, and the muted glow of the laptop's screen, too dim to read his expression.

The silence yawns between us, growing until it becomes a living thing that fills the room, robbing us of our voices, and turning us to stone.

My eyes suddenly snag on my reflection in the full-length mirror on the closet doors. I search for Zane's image, and my gaze catches his and holds. We stare at each other through the mirror for seconds that feel like a lifetime.

I am utterly blown away by the sudden certainty that if he turns around, or if I were to go to him—touch the smooth curves of his back like I so badly wanted to—I would be spending the night in his bed. That dark tortured look he's giving me right now silently promises that.

Do I want that? I don't know. I want *him*. God, do I want him. But what do I know about sex? I'm just a seventeen year old virgin who doesn't know how to kiss right.

Finally, Zane tears his gaze away from mine, back to his laptop. His voice is rough and strained when he mutters, "Get dressed."

Only he can turn me on and piss me off at the same time. Who does he think he is?! Half-naked here, and looking damn good, if I have to say so myself (obviously I do). Will he be able to maintain his indifference if I "accidentally" drop my towel right now?

I don't, out of fear that yes, Zane would take one look at my naked body, shrug, and turn around again. Also, I would never actually do something like that. This goes way beyond my expertise. Hell, Matt—my first and only boyfriend—never even got my shirt all the way off. Zane is a **man**, and I know for a fact that he's gotten more than a few girls—women's—shirts off. And more.

I am way out of my depth here. Still, I can't leave him with the last word.

"I think I'll walk around naked for a while," I snap as I stomp past him.

"You should probably stay in your room. I wouldn't want to offend you."

I sneak a look at him out of the corner of my eye, and I could swear I see a hint of a smile. I don't stop to make sure, heading straight to my room.

Breathing unsteadily, I don't bother to get dressed as I grab my cell phone and start tapping in a phone number. Yes, I'm angry-dialing, similar to drunk-dialing, but not as stupid because I'm able to hang up before I complete the call when I realize it's almost one in the morning. Tomorrow, then.

It's our last night together.

I'm in the kitchen, boiling noodles for the spaghetti I'm making for dinner tonight. I'm only half paying attention to what I'm doing, so I have serious concerns for how it will turn out.

Where is Zane? What if he decides to stay out all night? I debate whether or not I should call him, and wisely decide I'd better not.

I stir the noodles around so they don't get burned to the bottom, then nervously pace back and forth. This is my last chance. After tonight, I can kiss my chances goodbye, instead of kissing Zane. Once our parents get back, Zane will go back to L.A. And I'll hardly have a chance—or excuse—to see him.

That's why I brought out the big guns. It took me three hours to get ready tonight, and that was with Lauren's help (after I promised I would keep her updated with texts). This outfit is new—just got it today, in fact. The shirt is sexy and red, made out of a gauzy material, with a deep v-shaped neckline. The front of it is held together by tiny hooks that show little gaps of skin when I lean forward. A floaty black miniskirt and high heels complete my hot-or-is-she-trying-too-hard look. I've kept my makeup minimal, just some lip gloss and eyeliner, and my hair is product-free, long and curling down my back.

So what took me so long to get dressed? Choosing my underwear! Because I am determined that **somebody** is going to be seeing it tonight. I just hope that—

"What are you making?"

I scream, my hands flying up—which is very unfortunate, since I'm holding a colander full of noodles.

Oh, crap!

Miraculously, Zane somehow catches the colander and most of its contents, save for a few stray noodles, which rightfully land on me. Guess what? They're scalding hot!

I shriek and fling the strands off me and into the sink. Humiliating? I think so.

Zane is trying not to laugh as he sets the colander on the counter. He takes in my appearance, slowly scanning me from head to toe before speaking. "What's up, Violet?"

"Um...nothing." I busy myself with brushing sticky bits of noodles on my shirt. "Uh, actually, are you going out tonight? Because I have a date coming over. For dinner. I'm making spaghetti. For this guy—his name is Mark."

Zane stares at me for a couple of seconds. "You're having a guy come here?"

I nod nervously, running my hands down my short skirt. "Yes. For dinner—spaghetti." I gesture lamely to the meatballs simmering in pasta sauce on the stove.

He leans against the counter and crosses his muscled arms over his chest. "Actually, I think I'll be staying in all night."

"What? Why?"

"Because no way in hell am I leaving you alone with some horny jackass—especially looking like that."

My mouth falls open in outrage. "Like what?!"

"You know like what." He gestures angrily at me. "He'll take one look, and be all over you. Then I'd have to beat his ass into the ground."

"Uh, no you don't! I can take care of myself, and I really don't need you interfering!"

"Interfering?" I flinch back as Zane explodes in exasperation. "Violet, you're god damned seventeen years old! You think I'm going to sit back and do nothing while some punk takes advantage of you."

I slam a sassy hand on one hip. "Who says **I** won't be taking advantage of **him**?"

Zane stares at me like I just grew another head. He shakes his head slightly. "You don't mean that," he says quietly.

I glare at him. "Yes, I do. God, you're such a hypocrite! You used to have a different girl over here every night, screwing their tiny brains out. I know—the walls here are very thin and sounds are **really** amplified, you know! So don't you dare lecture me!"

Zane's eyes narrow dangerously, dark fires burning in their depths. "It's not the same thing."

"Why? Because you're a guy?"

"Because you're **seventeen**!" he growls. "Fuck! Why are you being like this? Are you trying to get back at me for what happened...that night?"

That really pisses me off! "Maybe I just wanna be with a guy who finishes what he starts," I sneer.

Um. Uh-oh.

Just now I realize I am the little kid poking the tiger with a stick, one time too many. There is definitely a predatory gleam in Zane's eyes right now as he stalks toward me.

I back up, but I'm not afraid. Agitated, and that weird combination of excitement and...need, whenever I'm around him. But not afraid.

Well, maybe a little.

Zane traps me against the counter, leaning into to me so that we're touching from our chests to our knees. I gasp at the contact. God, the feel of his heat against me! Something primal in me roars with greed. I can feel his heart racing with mine, we're both breathing fast and hard. I inhale his amazing Zane scent, so sexy and utterly masculine, turning my insides to warm melting chocolate.

"So, you want me to finish what I started, huh?" His voice is low and rough when he talks.

Zane places one big hand on my hip and pulls me against his body, and I gasp again. Holy crap, he is so...hard...everywhere. In my head, I give a maidenly scream.

"Um," I say nervously, trying desperately to remain absolutely still, and not wiggle against him! "I don't know what..."

Zane searches my face, seeming to silently ask a question I have no idea how to answer. His mouth is inches from mine. If he would just lower his head a bit, we could be kissing instead of fighting.

But, no. He gives a small sigh and backs away. He runs both hands through his short dark hair, turning away. "That night was a mistake," he mutters.

Grrr!

"What was a mistake? Getting me almost naked in the pool, and whispering dirty nothings in my ear, and **then** acting like I've got the plague?!" Furious, I shove against him with both hands. "You can't just play games with me like that! I thought that I—I thought we were friends. And now...you can't even stand to be around me! You're—you're such an asshole!"

"I know!" Zane yells back at me. "And you've been making me suffer for it every god damn day."

I glare at him. "Oh, really?! How exactly are you suffering?!"

"You know how." He smiles grimly. "You've been parading around in those hot little outfits, brushing past me...teasing the hell out of me. You think I don't know what you're doing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lie, flushing to the roots of my hair.

"Yes, you do," he says, and reaches over to tug on my skirt. "What about that stunt you pulled in my room, 'forgetting your clothes?'"

That makes me cringe in embarrassment. I knew it was too obvious and skanky. "I did forget them," I say weakly.

“Right. Shit.” Zane laughs, and shakes his head. “Who would've thought a little girl like you would have me so fucked up, I can't think straight?”

I'm stung at the "little girl" comment. “You being fucked up has nothing to do with me,” I say coldly.

He suddenly grins. “Language, Miss Mercer.”

“Oh, screw you, O' Connor!” I give him the finger.

“Yeah, I'd take you up on that offer if I didn't think you'd run screaming in the opposite direction.”

I stomp up to him and poke him in the chest. “Uh-huh, you always accuse me of being the scared one, but it's always **you** doing the running.”

Zane looks down at me, anger once again darkening his features. “I'm trying to protect you, Violet,” he growls.

I poke him again. “And I told you, I can take care of myself—”

Zane suddenly steps closer, cupping my face with his hands, and effectively cutting me off mid-sentence. His head lowers, and then his mouth is on mine.

Everything else spins away. The strong smell of the meatballs and sauce burning on the stove is replaced with Zane's purely male scent. I am consumed by it, consumed by him. We are the only two that exists in this one moment, unaffected by time or reason.

We kiss frantically, half-crazed with need. He pulls back a little, changes the pressure of his lips on mine. Our tongues touch. I moan helplessly, locking my arms around his neck, and trying to climb him like a tree. Zane helps me out by lifting me up by gripping the back of my thighs. We slam into the counter, he sets me on top of it, and distantly I am aware of crashing sounds.

I'm burning from the inside, a burning ache that causes me to move restlessly against him. I can't get close enough!

Zane growls low in the back of his throat at my movements. I tug at his shirt, insistent. I need to feel his skin. He lets go of me only long enough to help me get it off, raising it over his head and tossing it away. I run my hands up and down his chest. Finally, finally I can touch him! He's incredible...silk over steel, so smooth and streamlined. My hand moves over his wildly beating heart. I'm doing that to him! A sense of power rushes over me as he groans and kisses me deeply.

My shirt is hanging open, I realize when he pulls back slightly. Zane watches my face carefully as he slowly unhooks my bra. I flush with embarrassment when his gaze lowers and he exhales softly. Then his warm hands and talented mouth are on me, and I forget my self-consciousness, and I'm swept up in how good it feels.

My hands trail slowly down Zane's ripped abs. He stops me when I reach his zipper.

"Hold up, Violet." He chuckles unsteadily. "You're killing me here."

I take a deep breath. "Do you have anything? I mean...protection?"

"No." He smirks when I make an incredulous face at him. "I got rid of it all so I wouldn't be tempted to break down your door one night and have my dirty way with you."

I gape at him. "Were you really that tempted?"

He looks down at me, letting his gaze linger on my exposed skin. "Oh, yeah."

"Oh, um, okay," I mumble, crossing my arms over my chest. "I guess we should..."

I trail off, gesturing at...nothing. Zane places both hands on my thighs, and crouches down a little so we're face to face.

His gaze is serious, intense. "Do you want to have sex with me?"

Whoa. I blush at his bluntness. "Um...wow, that's kind of personal..." I look everywhere but at him.

Zane catches my chin and holds me still. He raises an eyebrow and waits.

I force myself to look at him, his fathomless star-lit eyes, the dark angel beauty of his face. "Yes," I say finally, my voice soft but steady.

Zane searches my face intently. After a couple of seconds, he smiles. "Okay, then. Not today, though."

I smile back. "Guess not."

I can hear the disappointment tinged with relief in my tone and so can Zane.

He runs a finger gently down my jaw to my neck. "Hey," he says teasingly. "There are other things we can do."

He doesn't have to spell it out for me—the promising gleam in his eyes say it all. He pushes me down on the counter, and proceeds to take me to heaven.

Chapter 14

I'm lying there, panting and limp as a noodle—and utterly speechless.

Zane lifts his head to look at me. He cracks a grin at the look on my face. "You okay?"

I clear my throat, testing to see if my brain is working. "Um. Give me a minute."

He chuckles, and I can hear that hint of male satisfaction in his laughter. He lets me catch my breath before he starts talking again.

“You know, I read your books,” he says out of the blue.

“You...” I can’t look at him, suddenly feeling incredibly vulnerable. “Oh.”

“They’re really great. Funny as hell, and clever.”

A warm glow falls over me like a cozy blanket. “Thanks,” I say shyly. “I didn’t—”

The sound of the doorbell interrupts me. Panicked, I look towards the direction of the door.

Zane glances over at me. “You expecting someone?”

I shoot up into a sitting position so fast, I think I give myself whiplash. “Oh, my god! Mark!” I gasp.

“Your dinner date?”

I nod frantically. The clock on the microwave reads 6:57. I look down at my mostly naked body. Crap!

“Relax,” Zane says with a lazy smile. “I’ll get rid of him.”

I look him up and down. He’s shirtless, his jeans unbuttoned and unzipped. “Uh, not looking like a sexy Calvin Klein ad, you won’t.”

He chuckles, but to my relief, buttons and zips. He grabs his shirt on the way out. “Better?” he calls over his shoulder.

“Definitely not,” I say under my breath.

I lie back down, grinning my head off. That was incredible! So that’s what all the fuss was about! And we didn’t even have sex—technically. If real sex is anywhere as good as not-sex, then yes, please! Wow, I feel great, sort of boneless, and kind of dirty—but in a good way.

My afterglow is cut short by the sounds of hideous screaming.

Mom’s ringtone!

I fall off the counter, scrambling to find my phone. As I shout “Hello!” into the phone, I wonder why I didn’t just let it go to voicemail.

"Hey, hon! What are you up to?" Mom's voice chirps in my ear.

Oh, nothing. Just had an incredibly mind blowing experience, courtesy of your soon-to-be step-son.

Ugh!

"No one—I mean, nothing! Nothing at all, is what I meant. How are you? Shouldn't you be on a plane right now?"

"Actually..." Mom laughs. "That's why I'm calling—"

"Delayed, huh?" I interrupt, distracted by my efforts in trying to get completely dressed. I cannot talk to her half-naked like this. I feel so dirty.

"No, no! Actually, the opposite. Bill got called in early for the Starpoint project. I thought I'd surprise you—we're on our way to Jane's right now!"

"Holy shit!" I shriek. "That's...awesome."

"I know," Mom says excitedly. "I can't wait to see you! We'll be there in ten minutes."

Crap! "Uh, wait! I'm not really...there at Jane's. Physically, I mean." I think furiously. "What I mean is, I'm at Lauren's."

"Oh, okay," she says, and I can hear the puzzlement in her voice at my weirdness. "Bill, go to my old apartments instead," I hear her call.

"No, wait!" I blurt. "I'm actually spending the night. Lauren is—she's really upset. She, uh, she just found out she has a secret half-brother."

What?

There is a long pause at my mom's end. "Really? Wow, that's...unexpected."

Right now I'm smacking myself in my fool head. "Yeah, crazy, right? Um, I better go—she's throwing stuff right now. So I'll call you tomorrow, okay? Bye, now!"

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

Zane ambles back into the kitchen, and watches as I run around in panicked circles. "What's going on?" he asks, amused.

I shoot him a frantic look. "Our parents are back! My mom thinks I'm at Lauren's, so—I've got to get over there, like, right now!"

"Shit," he mutters, rubbing his hands over his face. "That's awesome timing."

"I know!"

I dash into my bedroom and grab a shirt from my bag. I somehow manage to get stuck in the shirt—oh, that's an armhole I'm trying to poke my head through! I finally manage to right myself, only to turn and find Zane in the doorway, eating an apple, and watching me with what better not be enjoyment.

"Would it be so bad if your mom found out about us?" he asks, leaning an elbow against the door jamb.

"Yup," I reply swiftly. "My mom's cool, but not that cool. Besides, she's already warned me about you."

"Really? What did she say?"

I unplug my phone charger from the outlet next to my bed and stuff it into my purse. "She said not to fall for you, because you would only break my heart," I finally answer.

"Huh." He takes another bite of his apple.

I grab my bags and my purse and push past him. I make it a couple of steps when he grabs me from behind and swings me around to face him.

"Wha—?" I start to say.

Zane pulls me to him, and our lips meet with a violence that sends my senses spinning out of control. I drop my things and wrap my arms around him, meeting his intensity with a fire of my own.

He's the first to draw away. I'm ridiculously pleased to see that his eyes are slightly unfocused and he's breathing hard.

"Your mom is right," he says, almost under his breath. He grabs my bags like they weigh nothing and walks toward the front door.

Dazed, I pick up my purse and trail after him.

I am so afraid that I'm going to run into Mom and Bill as I leave the house that I almost drive off the side of the road—twice! On the way, I quickly text Lauren to let her know what's going on. Like a true best friend, she promises to have snacks waiting when I get there.

Luckily, she answers the door when I knock. She looks me up and down and bursts out laughing.

"I know!" I say, handing her my purse. She takes it and gestures me into the apartment.

"You look like the aftermath of a hurricane," she says, still snickering as she leads the way to her bedroom.

I look around cautiously. The twins' side of the room is a disaster area. They could both be hiding under the mounds of clothes tossed everywhere, and I would never know until they popped their little red heads out and shouted, "Boo!"

Lauren sees my look, and smiles. "Don't worry," she says, placing my purse on top of her ruthlessly organized desk. "They're at a sleepover tonight."

"Fantastic." I sigh and plop down onto her bed. I give in to another compulsion to check my phone for any text messages from Zane that I might have missed on the drive here.

There's nothing. I left him fifteen minutes ago. Why would he text me? I'm dumb.

“So, why are you wearing a Sponge Bob shirt?” Lauren wants to know.
“What happened to the new one you had on earlier?”

“Oh...um...” I cover my blushing cheeks with my hands. “Zane kind of... tore it.”

Lauren’s brown eyes widen comically. “Should I go get the popcorn?”

I nod weakly. “And chocolate.”

I tell her almost everything. We sit on her bed, munching snacks, and she’s so enthralled by my recount that she doesn’t even yell at me about crumbs.

“Wow,” she says when I’m done. “That’s so...hot.”

“Right?” I sigh and pop a piece of chocolate into my mouth barely tasting it.

Lauren hands me a napkin. “Okay, but what about that comment about your mom being right? Is he admitting that he will break your heart?”

I throw my hands up in the air. “Of course he’s going to break my heart. I know, realistically, these things never work out. I’m still in high school, and he’s got a life and a job in L.A. I can’t even envision a scenario where we end up together. Right?”

She stays silent for a moment, then gives a shrug. “It could happen. We’ll be off to college before you know it, and you want to go to UCLA, right?”

I flap my hand at her. “That’s months and months away—we probably won’t be together by then. Why would he stay with me? I mean, do you know how many girls Zane’s been with? Like, a lot. A **lot**.”

She is taken aback by my vehemence. “V, are you, like, falling in love with him?”

“No! What? No...” I laugh weakly, and run a nervous hand through my hair. “I just...I like him.”

“Okay.” Lauren backs off and drops down on her desk chair. “So...what now? Are you guys dating? Are you going to sneak around and see each

other?"

I automatically check the phone in my hand for messages. Nada. "I don't know, Lauren. I guess I'll just—I don't know. I'll wait and see, I guess."

Privately, I scoff at the term "dating." That's just a way too immature and...and weak term to describe my relationship with Zane. What happened between us was way too intense an experience to be defined so mundanely.

Or I'm romanticizing what is essentially a hook up. Yup, that's probably it.

Still. The look in Zane's eyes when we kissed. I want to believe that what I saw there was more than just lust. Was it?

I don't know. I wish he would call. More than anything, I want to hear his voice, reassuring me that what happened wasn't a mistake, and that we would see each other again.

Chapter 15

I missed my mommy. I didn't realize how much until I see her running out the door to greet me, and I nearly burst into tears when she gathers me up in a rib-crushing hug.

She looks great! Apparently, Europe agrees with her. I gush over her sophisticated new hairstyle and expensive-looking outfit. Mom's entire being glows with happiness, and—yes—love. She ushers me into the house

to show me all the clothes and souvenirs she got me. Even Bill seems...content. He pats my back awkwardly when I compliment his tan.

We've officially moved into Bill's house. I should be excited, right? My new room is easily three times the size of the old one, and Mom went a little nuts decorating it princess style. All that purple and antique Victorian furniture's not really my taste, but whatever, it's pretty. I do like the little balcony outside the French doors, perfect for any prince who wants to climb up it and rescue me. And the giant four poster bed with the dramatic gauzy canopy makes me feel like a harem girl—which I can't figure out why I think that's a good thing.

So it's been three days since I've seen Zane. Our schedules never seemed to match up. But we've been talking on the phone, for hours at a time. And yes, I'll admit it: we are sexting.

I can't believe I just admitted that. One night with Zane, and I've suddenly turned into a sexpot. Sigh, I miss him. He's been in L.A., taking care of some business, but he's coming over for dinner tonight.

Yes. Dinner with our parents. Yikes.

I am ridiculously nervous, and suddenly shy at the thought of seeing him again. How should I act? What should I wear? My dilemma is complicated by the fact that my **mother** is going to be there—and his father.

Oh, this could be so bad.

Mom wants me to wear the pretty peach dress she got me in Paris, and it's clear to me why when I wander into the sitting room, and she's wearing a matching dress! I immediately turn back around to go change, but Mom's voice stops me.

"My goodness, you look so beautiful, Violet!"

I sigh inaudibly, halting in my tracks. "Thanks," I mumble.

Mom's got her iPad tucked under one arm. When I ask her about it, she beams.

"I thought Zane might like to see some pictures of our trip. I know you've seen most of them—I must have sent you a hundred a day."

I open my mouth to say that I enjoyed getting them—then the doorbell rings, and I scream and jump instead.

"Oh, that must be Zane. Get the door, will you? And why so jumpy today, Violet? Maybe cut down on the caffeine?"

He's here!

With my heart in my throat, I walk with shaking limbs to the foyer. I take a deep breath and open the door.

And lose it completely when I see Zane standing there, looking incredibly gorgeous in a long-sleeved white shirt and tan cargos. His soft dark hair looks like he's been running a hand through it, and his chin is covered in a light stubble—so hot!

"Hi," he says, flashing that sexy half smile.

"Hi. Hi." I stare at him.

"Uh, can I come in?"

"Oh! Yeah, sorry."

I open the door wider and move aside. Zane slides past me, then turns around to face me. We stand there in the foyer, caught in an uncomfortable silence.

He goes to grab my hand, but I pull away from him. He raises his eyebrows as I hastily back away.

I don't know how to explain to him how I'm feeling, that if he touched me he'd break the dam of overwhelming emotions I am so desperately trying to control right now. And this was not the time to lose it, not with Mom in the next room.

Speaking of...

Mom appears, saving me in the nick of time. She rushes over to give Zane a hug, and is it weird to be jealous of my own mother? Also, I have the sudden urge to blurt out, "He's seen me naked!"

I don't, thank god. I clap a hand over my mouth and follow them into the sitting room. They sit on the couch and I fall into an armchair. Dazed, I watch as Mom babbles at him, making him look at the pictures, and telling funny stories about their European adventures.

Zane is so nice to her! Patient and charming, he jokes with her about his own experiences traveling. Every so often he'll glance over at me, amused and questioning. I avoid his gaze but sneak looks at him whenever his attention is elsewhere.

I trace the perfection of his features with my eyes: his elegant forehead, dark eyebrows over intense dark eyes, straight nose...that sexy beautifully sculpted mouth. The exquisite curve of his cheekbones. That strong square jaw, unshaven...

Hey, I just realized—Zane's stubble is much lighter than the hair on his head. Hm, so is the fine hairs on his arms. I never noticed before...does he dye his hair? I wonder if it's the same red gold color as his dad's. Or maybe he's just one of those people whose body hair comes in light? I knew a girl who was an exotic mix of Hawaiian, Filipino, and German. Her hair and skin were dark, but she had a light blonde mustache. You could totally see it in the sun.

Anyway. I make a mental note to ask him about it later. Not that it's a big deal to me. I dye my hair all the time, after all.

Bill comes into the room, and he and Zane start talking about work stuff. Mom excuses herself to go check on dinner. I fidget uncomfortably in my chair, torn between wanting to escape to my bedroom, or throw myself into Zane's arms.

"Violet?"

"Huh?"

Mom is standing in front of me, and by the look on her face, I must have been really out of it. Sheepishly, I jump to attention.

“What’s going on with you, today?” she asks, peering at me closely. She reaches out to feel my forehead with the back of her hand. “Are you okay?”

Don’t look at Zane. Do not look at him. “Yeah,” I mutter distractedly, rubbing my sweaty palms down the front of my dress. “Yeah, I, uh, you know...penis.”

“Excuse me?”

My horrified eyes meet Mom’s. “Oh, my god! What did I just say? I meant to say **penis!**”

Could Mom look any more terrified? I don’t think so. “You did say ‘penis,’” she points out.

I slap a mortified hand over my mouth. “Oh, no.”

Is it too much to hope that Zane and his father didn’t hear that little penis exchange? Yeah, of course. I am not going to look over there. I am going to ignore that muffled cough/laugh sound coming from Zane’s direction.

“I’m going to help you in the kitchen,” I tell Mom miserably.

She eyes me warily. “I think you’d better.”

Once inside, she interrogates me mercilessly. I am forced to tell her that Lauren made me watch a dirty movie the other night—and now she thinks my best friend is some kind of pervert with a secret brother. I wonder why I always make her my scapegoat. I guess that’s what best friends are for, right?

Mom wants us to eat at the little kitchen table, since she deems the one in the dining room too big and formal for just the four of us. I set the table, and put the food in serving dishes, and I honestly could not tell you what we are having for dinner.

I thought sitting temptingly close next to Zane would be bad, but sitting across from him is worse, because now I have to look at him. I poke at my asparagus as Mom prattles on happily about the wedding.

“Well most of the guests have RSVP’d, and it looks like we’re going to have about two hundred,” Mom is saying. She shakes her head. “And that’s mostly from my side. It’s a shame you don’t have any family besides Zane. I’m glad most of your friends from work can make it.”

Bill hunches his shoulders and stabs at his roast beef. “They’re more like acquaintances than friends,” he mutters. You can totally tell he only invited them because Mom must’ve hounded him into it.

“Zane, when are you going back to L.A.?” she asks, and my ears perk up, waiting for his response.

“Tonight. I’m all packed up,” he says.

“Oh, that’s a shame you have to go so soon after we just got back.” Mom sighs. “You’ll be able to come back for our engagement party, right?”

Zane flashes her his killer smile. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

He glances over at me and catches me gaping at him. I hastily look away, slamming my hand down on the table. My fingers hit the edge of my spoon that’s balanced on the plate, catapulting a blob of mashed potatoes into the air. It lands with a splat on Bill’s shoulder. He doesn’t even notice.

While I’m wiping the mashed potato blob off his shirt, Mom turns to Zane again. “So, did you and Violet see a lot of each other while Bill and I were gone?”

EEK!

Zane manages to catch my panicked gaze, and his eyes sparkle with mischievous malice. “Oh, a fair amount, wouldn’t you say, Violet?”

I grit my teeth and rub harder at the damp spot on poor Bill’s shoulder.

“That’s good. I’m glad you two are getting to know each other.”

“Oh, yeah,” Zane says and smirks at me. “I had her for dinner once. Best meal of my life.”

Oh, my god! “Really?!” I snap, glaring at him.

I feel like I might burst into flames. How could he say that, with **that** smile on his face?! And look at the suggestive way he's slowly chewing his asparagus.

Oh, god, they're gonna know what we did! They...

“I think you got it out, Violet,” Bill's voice interrupts my frenzied thoughts. He tries to pull away from my vice grip on his sleeve.

“Don't say things like that!” I blurt out, accidentally glaring at Bill. “I mean—uh, sorry!”

By some miracle, Mom is completely oblivious to Zane's double meaning dirty talk. “I was almost worried that you guys wouldn't get along,” she laughs.

Zane chuckles along with her. “Well, Lily, we did have a bumpy ride in the beginning, but now Violet's like the little sister I never wanted.”

I kick him under the table. Hard.

“Ouch!” Mom yelps, and looks down. “Violet! Did you just kick me?”

I gulp, eyes widening guiltily, meanwhile Zane—the jackass—is making muffled sounds behind his fist. “No!” I deny, and cut my gaze to Bill, silently implicating him.

It only goes downhill from there. After dinner, I yank Zane by the front of his shirt into the bathroom. I just shut the door when he shoves me against it, trapping me with his body.

“Are we doing it in a bathroom?” He grins down at me. “Violet, I'm shocked.”

“Oh, shut up!” I place both hands on his chest and try to push him back. He doesn't budge. “How could you have said those things in front of my

mom, you pervert?! What if she had caught on?"

Zane just shakes his head. He braces a hand against the door, above my head. "Oh, come on. Parents only hear what they want to. Your mom's so distracted by the wedding plans, I could do this in front of her, and she wouldn't even notice."

He presses closer, trailing kisses down my neck. I shiver uncontrollably.

And just like that, we're making out wildly against the doorway. In the bathroom.

I can't help it—Zane does something amazing with his hand, and I moan loudly.

"Ssh!" He laughs and presses a finger over my lips. I freeze under him.

Suddenly, there is a knock on the door.

"Violet? Is that you in there?"

Mom!

I stare helplessly at Zane. Oh, crap!

"Uh, no, it's me, Lily," Zane answers, saving me. "I'm just having some problems with my...zipper."

I snort loudly. Zane, his dark eyes dancing, covers my mouth. We both snicker at Mom's silence.

"Oh," she finally says in a subdued way. "Well, let me know if you need any help. Oh—no, I didn't mean it like that! I just meant if you—oh, no. Okay, I'm going to go! Well, good luck!"

Zane rests his forehead against mine, trying hard not to laugh. "Okay! Thank you!" he manages to say.

We both collapse in laughter. Zane's hand is still over my mouth, so I bite it. He winces and pulls away with a little smirk.

"You go out first," I whisper as he buttons up his shirt. "And don't say anything dirty again!"

"Don't run from me again." He says it teasingly, but his dark eyes are deadly serious.

He bends down to give me one last kiss, then picks me up and moves me away from the door.

When he's successfully escaped, I shut the door and lean against it once more. I let my head fall back, laughing incredulously to myself. My bones are like mush--whether from the near miss, or Zane's kisses, I couldn't say.

But that half-painful, half-ecstatic soaring and diving feeling?

What can I blame that on?

Chapter 16

It sucks that Zane is an hour and a half away in L.A., but we are always on the phone with each other, and he drives down to see me whenever he can. We still have to sneak around because I'm paranoid we'll run into my mom—which is why we avoid the local spots. I'm torn between wanting to show Zane off to people I know, and wanting to keep him my own smug little secret. He doesn't seem to mind either way. We go to movies in different towns, have dinner at restaurants so exclusive and fancy, I'm certain no one I know can afford them.

Oh, and here's something that really annoys me: everywhere we go, girls are constantly hitting on him! Blatantly, and right in front of me—when,

clearly, we are together. Zane reacts with a practiced friendliness that suggests it happens to him all the time. I, however, don't handle it nearly as well as he does. Yeah, it turns out I'm a jealous freak who has no problem telling a b she needs to back the hell off. Zane thinks it's funny, but it really bothers me. Who knows how many girls are all over him when he's home in L.A.? Does he flirt back? I obsess over it, but I can't bring myself to ask him about it, or ask him to define our relationship. I'm afraid of what he'll say.

I like the times we just hang out at the beach at night best. We talk about everything and anything. I tell him about my boring day at school, he tells me about a complex project he's working on.

That's what we're doing right now. Hanging out at the beach.

"Okay, are you sure you want to see this?"

I sit on my knees, facing Zane. His profile is to me, he's sprawled in the sand leaning on his elbows and watching the waves crash to shore. The breeze blows gently through his short dark hair, but tosses my locks mercilessly about.

"I am dying to see a picture of you as an adorable ten year old girl," Zane says mock solemnly. "Come, on, let's see it."

"Okay." I'm clutching the picture in my hand. "You're going to laugh, so I forgive you in advance."

I thrust the picture at his chest. He takes it and squints at it in the softening light. Then his eyes widen. "Holy shit," he breathes. "Is this the girl that ate you?"

"Ha, no. You're funny." I snatch my picture back. "So I was super fat. It's my father's fault. He never hugged me."

"So, what, you ate him?"

I punch him in the shoulder. "You are so mean."

He laughs, and grabs my hand. "Okay, I'm sorry. Can I see it again? I promise I'll be good."

"You'd better," I huff.

I hand the picture back to him, and he studies it carefully. I don't really mind his teasing—heck, I know I was a brick house. But showing him my fat ten year old self feels kind of like a confession. Will he look at me differently now?

"You were cute," Zane says finally, handing it back to me.

"I was not," I correct him. "I looked weird. I had that light blonde hair with this skin color, and the funny-shaped eyes. I looked like an alien. A fat blonde alien."

"Nah. You were exotic."

I roll my eyes. "Okay. So, what did you look like as a kid?"

Zane sits up, bringing his long legs up and resting his arms on his knees. "Ah, you know, about the same as I do now, except shorter. And adorable, of course."

"Yeah? I bet you were a little brat."

"Me? Nah, I was a good kid. When I was, I don't know—five, maybe—I used to tell everyone I was Chinese."

"What?" I start laughing. "Why?"

Zane shrugs, smiling a little as he scratches his chin. "I don't know. We had a Chinese cook. I guess I liked how she talked. Okay, I guess I was weird."

"That is kind of weird," I agree. "What did you want to be when you grew up? Did you always want to be a software engineer?"

"Hell, no." He chuckles. "Uh...a school janitor. What? Don't laugh." He nudges me with his shoulder. "I liked the green coveralls."

"Oh, yeah, I can totally see you in those," I say, nudging him back. "You would look *hawt*."

"I **would** look hot," he says. When I snort, he tosses a handful of sand at me. "Your turn, Mercer. What did you want to be?"

"A dinosaur," I say matter of factly, and he laughs. "Okay, I guess I wanted to be a writer."

"And now you are. A successful one at that."

I shrug uncomfortably. "Oh, not really," I mutter. "I just make stuff up that I think people want to read."

Zane cocks his head at me, squinting in the dying pinkish light. "Sounds like a writer to me."

"No, it's not the same." I shake my head. "To me, it's not really writing, because I'm not writing what...I want to write. I'm writing what sells. It's following a successful formula, you know? All the popular books out there are just the same story, with the names changed. I don't even enjoy the process of it because I feel like a sellout."

"Hey, you paid your mom's medical bills with it, didn't you? That sounds pretty damn amazing to me." Zane reaches over to tug on a lock of my hair. "If it were that easy, we'd all be doing it."

I sigh moodily, digging my bare toes into the cool sand. "Maybe."

"Sometimes you have to compromise a little to get to the point where you can do what you want," Zane says philosophically. "I think you're at that point, Violet."

"Getting there," I murmur. I shake my head. "Let's change the subject. Uh...when did you lose your virginity?"

He slants me a look. "You first—when do you **want** to lose your virginity?"

I laugh nervously. "Uh-uh! I asked you first."

"Yeah, but my question's more important. So...I think your answer would be better as more of a show than a tell."

I lean forward to smack him, but he grabs me and pushes me back. We wrestle a little, and I end up lying on my back in the sand, with him on top of me.

Zane looks down at me from his superior position on top. "I win," he says smugly.

He's bracing most of his weight on his forearms, so why can't I breathe? Oh, right, he always does this to me when our bodies are touching. I'm sinking into his warmth, his scent. If we kissed, it would taste slightly salty, like the ocean air.

His face is inches from mine. "You cheated," I say softly, looking into his shiny dark eyes. "You're trying to distract me."

He gently brushes loose strands of hair from my face. "It's working, isn't it?"

"Hey, you kids! No public fornicating! Get a room!"

The sudden shout is jarring. Zane and I both look up to find a creepy skinny guy with scraggly red hair and a long beard, grinning toothlessly at us. He hitches up the back of his threadbare shorts and cackles maniacally as he wanders away.

We look at each other and laugh. Zane rolls me on top of him so I end up straddling his hips. He puts his hands behind his head in a relaxed position.

"I'd like the view a lot better if you were wearing less clothes," he murmurs. That lazy sexy smile is back on his face.

"Sure, why don't I just take my top off, then?" I glance around at the few dots of people further down the beach. "You think I could get any money for showing off the girls?"

Zane laughs. "Honey, I'll give you the grand that's in my pocket right now if you show me your girls."

"Oh, is **that** what's in your pocket?" I ask innocently. "So, that's what one thousand dollars feels like."

"No, that's what eight in—"

I cover his mouth, then poke him in his hard flat stomach. "So," I clear my throat. "How old were you when you first did it?"

Zane takes my hand and kisses my palm. "Okay, but don't judge me. I was twelve."

My eyes widen in disbelief. "What?! Was it...were you...?"

"She was an older woman—thirteen." He squints adorably at me as he pauses. "I was kind of precocious. After my mom killed herself, I went a little wild. Drank a lot, slept with every girl stupid enough to say yes to me...I don't know what I was trying to prove."

I slide off of him and lie beside him in the sand. "Shoot, you were just a kid, trying to cope in a horrible situation, any way you could."

"Yeah." Zane exhales lightly and stares up at the clouded sky. "You wanna know something pretty screwed up? I wasn't sad that she was dead. I was pissed. Because she fucked up my life yet again with her crazy shit. You know, I didn't even miss her—her death was more of an inconvenience to me than anything. Guess that makes me an asshole, huh?"

I'm careful to keep my gaze heavenward. "No. You said you barely knew her, and all your memories of her were traumatic. Just 'cause she's your mom doesn't mean you're required to love her. She was just some poor crazy lady that happened to give birth to you. Maybe you were just relieved that she wasn't suffering anymore."

He is quiet for a minute, then turns his head to look at me. "Where were you when I was twelve?"

"Well, I was nine." I cut my eyes over to him. "And probably locked in the back of a Ho Ho truck, eating my way to freedom. Yeah, that really happened."

Zane rolls over onto his stomach, laughing. "I bet you were awesome."

"Well, yeah," I say modestly.

He reaches over and trails a finger feather light down my cheek. His eyes seem to darken with some serious emotion. "I would have liked you even back then."

The intensity of his gaze is too much to bear. It makes me feel helpless, exposed. I break contact, turning away. "You like fat chicks, huh?" I say, pushing my hair back.

Zane grabs my chin, making me face him. His eyes look steadily into mine. "I like girls with eyes the color of honey and cinnamon, lips I can't stop kissing, and an incredible body made to fit against mine."

Had I been able to speak, I would have totally ruined the moment by saying something dumb, like, "And who would that be?" or "penis."

Thank God I am speechless.

Zane leans over. His mouth comes down on mine, sweeping away all conscious thought.

I am falling into a sweet golden light. The touch and taste of him! Soft and firm, light and darkness, pleasure and pain...The pain is a lovely ache, a need I can't explain. I wrap my arms around Zane's neck and draw him closer. He is...everything.

We kiss for endless moments. Zane is the first to pull away, maintaining eye contact.

I am dazed with emotions. How can just a kiss feel more...intimate than the things we did on the kitchen counter that night?

"Gotta stop," he says, and kisses the tip of my nose. He smiles crookedly down at me. "Wanna go for a swim? I could use a distraction."

I laugh shakily. "Me, too."

Zane climbs easily to his feet, then helps me up. We don't bother to roll up our jeans, we just wade out into the water and watch the rolling waves.

"I was really pissed at her, too," I blurt out suddenly. "My mom. She knew—knew something was wrong with her. She felt the lump in her breast, but she was in denial about it. I just kept thinking, if she had been responsible about her health, they could have caught it early and taken care of it. The cancer...it just got sprung on me, you know? I thought she had the flu."

I choke out a laugh. Zane takes my hand in his. The warmth of his grip strengthens me.

"I keep thinking it's going to come back when I least expect it. When I'm at my happiest. So I'm always afraid to be happy."

Zane looks out at the horizon. "You know, there are so many things that can go wrong in this world, you could spend your whole life worrying about them and forget to appreciate every moment you have with someone. Then, you're like, 'God, why wasn't I thankful for what I had when I had it?'" He glances over at me. "You know what the secret to a happy life is?"

I shake my head, silent tears falling down my cheeks.

He squeezes my hand. "No regrets. Just live in the moment."

We stand there, knee deep in the water, holding hands. The silence is thunderous with words we don't speak. I feel his presence beside me like it's an extension of my own body, tall and strong, and so, so beautiful. But I can't look at him. Right now, it hurts too damn much.

Everyone at school is talking about the Halloween dance. Lauren and I get asked by several guys, but we both say no. We never go to any extracurricular activities—you think people would realize that by now. It's just not our thing. Like cheering at spirit assemblies. The two of us sit there with the other geeks, doing homework while kids around us stomp and cheer.

I can't explain my disconnection from the whole high school experience. I mean, I tried to make an effort with Matt, since he loved that kind of crap, but my heart was never in it. Is something wrong with me?

It's fortunate for Zane, however. I don't nag him to attend a silly school dance with me, or try to drag him to a friend's party. I tell him I'm not into that scene, and he seems relieved.

There is, however, a sweethearts dance coming up at Sunset Park that I would like to go to. I debate furiously with myself whether I should invite Zane or not. Would he think I'm lame for asking?

I text him after school one day before I can chicken out.

Me: Hey. What are you doing for Halloween?

He messages me back a couple of minutes later.

Zane: Don't know. Might have to work. What's up?

Me: Nothing. I was just wondering if you wanted to go to this dance they're having at my work.

I put my phone down, anxious as hell. I pretend to be preoccupied with looking for something in the kitchen, and I don't know why I bother—

there's no one around but me. My phone beeps a second later, and I jump like a...I don't know what. I nervously check my phone for his reply.

Zane: R u asking me to the "senior" prom?

Me: Ha ha

Zane: What time?

Me: Six-ish?

I wait two minutes and thirty-seven seconds. Then my phone beeps.

Zane: I'll be there

I am so glad he can't see me doing my insanely dorky victory dance right now.

Unfortunately, I am not alone like I previously thought. Bill is standing by the refrigerator, and by the horrified look on his face, he's been there a while.

Awesome.

"You don't need to bring a date."

Lauren and I are in our usual lunchtime spot--our favorite bench in the commons. She's eating her turkey sandwich while I work on an essay on *Crime and Punishment*.

Actually, what I'm really doing is trying to convince her to go to the sweethearts dance with me.

Lauren rolls her eyes and takes a dainty sip from her water bottle. "I don't do dances. Why do you even want me to go? You'll be with Zane."

I can't help the stupid grin on my face. "But you could have your pick of guys to dance with!"

"Wow, a geriatric dream come true." Lauren rolls her eyes. "No, thanks. And didn't you say those old guys were pervs?"

"Not all of them--just Gil and Doc. The rest of them are perfect gentlemen." I point my pen at her. "I'm trying to get you to broaden your horizons, since you won't give the guys here a chance. You know, Chase asked me about you **again** in math today. He's pretty cute, why don't you just go out with him?"

"Not interested. Just because you're in love, don't go trying to set me up."

"I'm **not** in love," I swiftly deny. "I'm just tired of that boy harassing me about you every day."

Lauren grimaces in annoyance. She starts to say something, but stops when we someone calls our names.

It's Kim. She's got a worried look on her pretty face as she jogs up to us.

"Hey, do either of you guys have the vocab list for the Spanish quiz today? I totes forgot to study for it!"

Lauren checks her backpack and pulls out a paper. She hands it over to Kim, who looks smiles in relief.

"Thanks! You're a lifesaver. I can't fail another quiz! My mom says I can't go to the dance if I don't get at least a B. And I have a super cute costume, too! Are you guys going?" When we shake our heads, she says, "Lauren, I think Chase is going to ask you to go. He keeps asking me if you have a date yet."

I snicker at Lauren's sour voice. "That boy can't take a hint," she growls.

Kim laughs, tossing back her curly hair. "You should go with him. He's cute, and nice!"

"Yeah, Lauren," I join in. "Give the poor guy a chance."

Lauren just gives me "the look." I smirk until Kim turns to me.

"So, Violet, you're not gonna go with your boyfriend?"

"My who?"

"I saw you at the beach with him. He's freaking gorgeous! Is he in college?"

"Oh," I mumble uncomfortably. "He's not really my boyfriend. We just kind of hang out."

"Uh-huh," Kim says disbelievingly. "Well, if I was hanging out with a guy who looked like **that**, I would be showing him off to everyone. You looked really hot together, like a supermodel couple."

"Yeah, whatever." I laugh. Zane, sure. Me, not so much.

"No, seriously. Oh, I would have come over and said hi, but you two looked pretty busy." She waggles her eyebrows suggestively.

Ugh! I feel a massive blush come on, but it doesn't wipe the huge smile off my face. Well, if anyone had to catch me making out on a beach with Zane, I'm glad it was Kim. She wouldn't go blabbing to the whole school.

But I wonder if she told her brother?

Kim says she'll see us in Spanish and rushes off. I pretend to be working on my essay, but the smug smile probably gives it away what I'm really thinking about. Or who. Whom. Lauren just shakes her head at my ridiculousness.

I don't care. I think...I think I'm going to ask Zane to clarify our relationship.

I just hope I like his answer.

Chapter 18

The day of the dance.

I decide to wear my long gray dress with little white flowers scattered all over it. It's not a sexy dress by any means, because I don't want to offend the residents by looking trashy. I end up putting my hair back in a ponytail when a curling attempt goes awry.

I'm glad Zane's meeting me at Sunset instead of picking me up at Lauren's like usual. I am ridiculously nervous. I screw up Helize's hair so many times, she decides to wear a beret. It's jaunty.

"Will you get me ready for bed tonight?" she asks me for the third time.

I'm squatting in front of her wheelchair, trying to get her leg brace on right. "I don't work today, remember? Today's the sweethearts dance. I came to dance with you."

Helize waves a hand in a "pshaw!" way. "Why would a young beauty like you dance with an old lady like me? Violet, I think you have that on the wrong leg."

I smack myself in the face. No wonder. "Sorry, Helize! I guess I'm really nervous."

"Oh, right. Is your young man coming to the dance?"

I stand up slowly, rubbing my back. "I think so. He said he was. I haven't talked to him today, though. Do you think I should call him?"

Helize lifts her frail shoulders in a shrug. "If you feel like it, why not? Dear, check that drawer for some tissues, will you? My nose gets so drippy from the oxygen."

I check her nightstand. "Ugh, you need to stop re-using Kleenex, Helize. It's disgusting. I can get you a box from the supply room."

She sniffs haughtily. "And get charged an arm for it? I refuse to be nickel and dimed to death."

I hide a smile. My penny pinching old lady. "If you don't tell anybody, I'll bring you in a bunch of boxes from home."

"Oh, Violet, you're too good to me. Don't you worry about it." She reaches a wrinkled hand over to pat my arm. "Now, what time is it? We haven't missed the dance yet, have we?"

I check one of the five clocks she has in her room. "It's 5:53. We should go down now, probably."

Helize checks her watch anxiously. "Oh, dear. Maybe I should go to the bathroom again. I don't want to have an accident."

"Sure," I say, and wheel her back in, resigning myself to being at least five minutes late.

Helize makes a distressed sound, and I change that estimate to fifteen.

By the time I wheel her down to the dining room, it's ten after and the dance has just started. Helize immediately starts humming along to the romantic old music playing over the intercom. Tables have been cleared from the middle of the room and rearranged around the edges. Orange and black decorations festoon the area, and two long tables are set up with delicious refreshments.

I park Helize at a table next to her cronies, Mel and Gretchen, then hurry over to the lobby.

Zane is here, talking to the insanely hot receptionist Marissa. She's laughing flirtatiously up at him, and he's smiling down at her.

I fight back a wave of nauseous jealousy. I see Marissa has no problem dressing trashy in that little black see-through napkin she has on.

Zane better not be looking down her dress.

"Hey," I say hesitantly, walking up to them. I can't help but feel like I'm interrupting something.

"Hey, yourself," Zane says, flashing that killer smile at me. He looks fantastic and sexy in an olive green dress shirt and black slacks.

"Oh, hey, Violet," Marissa chirps to me while continuing to point her perky boobs at Zane. "Does this one belong to you?"

I force a smile to my face, but I choose not to answer such a stupid question. "Thanks for coming," I say to Zane.

"You don't have to thank me." I only realize he's holding a bunch of blood red roses when he hands them to me. "Happy 'senior' prom, Violet."

"Oh," I gasp, holding them up to my nose.

"That's so sweet," Marissa sighs. "I wish someone would do that for me."

Don't ruin the moment, bitch.

"Thank you, Zane," I say, embarrassed by my shaky voice.

"No problem." He winks at me.

"Um, come on. The dance is in the dining room."

Excusing ourselves, I lead the way. I bring him straight over to Helize's table and introduce him to the ladies seated there.

"So you are the young man that has our Violet all in a tizzy," Helize declares, studying Zane with sharp eyes.

Zane shoots an amused glance in my direction, while I die a little inside.

"I sure hope so, ma'am," he says, taking her hand.

"So handsome and tall!" Gretchen beams her chubby smile at us. "What a lovely couple you two make. So, when is the wedding?"

At first, I think she's talking about my mom's wedding, so I say, "November thirtieth."

Helize's eyes widen dramatically. "Violet, you're getting married?!"

"Yeah...*what*?! Wait, no—"

But the ladies choose to go deaf at that moment, and the gossip chain is activated. Helize takes off, wheeling herself like the fast and the furious.

Great. The woman can't roll herself three feet to the bathroom, and now she's a rocket.

Zane is laughing his butt off while I am crimson with mortification.

By the time I get around to introducing him to the other residents and my co-workers, everyone already knows him as my fiancée. Zane takes it all in stride, but I am horribly embarrassed.

Of course, they all love him—his face and easy charm pretty much guarantee his acceptance. He works the room like a pro. My co-workers keep pulling me aside to gush about him, and Amy, one of the nurses, is disturbingly graphic in singing his praises.

Later, Zane asks me to dance. We join the few couples on the dance floor. I am self-conscious until he pulls me into his arms and moves me in a rhythm that can't be taught.

"I like your old people," he says in my ear, sending shivers down my spine, and into the pit of my stomach.

"They like you, too," I say.

"Although," Zane leaves forward confidently. "Some of the women are forward as hell. This one tiny lady—I swear she had octopus arms. One hand in my shirt, one on my ass, and six down my pants. Kind of wanted to scream for help."

"Oh, no," I laugh. "That must have been Mary. She's kind of...grabby."

"Short little thing? Crazy beehive wig, and a pincer-like grip?"

I can't hide my grin. "That's her."

"Yeah, you might want to think about keeping an eye on her because, **damn.**"

Zane has the most irresistible frown on his face right now. I pat his chest. "Aw, poor baby! Did she hurt you?"

He smiles and expertly spins me to the beat of the music. "Kind of. I might need therapy. To get rid of those painful memories. Know anyone who could help?"

I pretend to think. "I could probably hook you up with my school counselor, Mr. Bob."

"So, it's gonna be like that, huh?" Zane looks down at me with a sly expression on his too-handsome face. "And I was going to give you something."

"What?" I say suspiciously.

"It's a surprise," he says. "Check my pants pocket."

I snort. "Yeah, right. I've heard that one before."

"You have, huh?"

The song ends and Zane leads me off to the side in a little alcove by the fireplace. The location offers a little bit of privacy from everyone else, and I wonder what Zane has up his sleeve. Probably something dirty, knowing him.

"Come on, Violet," he taunts me. "Check my pockets. I'll give you a hint: it's the left one."

I stare at him suspiciously. He waits, holding his arms out at his sides, inviting me to search him.

Well, okay. If Mary can do it, so can I. I take a quick look around. No one's looking in my direction, so I cautiously stick my hand into his left pants pocket.

"I swear to God, if you make one little peep, I'll get Mary and her iron grip over here," I threaten him.

He just smiles. "I promise, I won't even enjoy it. Much."

I don't get very far when my fingers encounter something hard.

No, not that!

Frowning, I pull the light blue box from Zane's pocket.

Um. It says *Tiffany & Co* on the front.

I hold the box like it's a bomb. It's flat and square shaped. I look at him uncertainly. "What is it?"

Zane grins teasingly. "It's a box. Open it."

I blink rapidly for way too long. Then I thrust the box at his chest. "Whatever it is, I can't accept it. I'm sure it's way too expensive."

Zane sighs. "Violet," he says patiently. "You know I can afford it."

He tries to hand it to me, but I back away, my heart beating rapidly. Because I really want to open that box.

Zane grabs my hand and places the box in it. "You're starting to piss me off," he says. If you don't accept it, I'll take it as an insult. Come on, it's no big deal."

He's watching me expectantly. Now I feel completely ungrateful.

Well, no harm in looking, right?

Feeling incredibly self-conscious, I carefully open the box. Inside, I find a soft drawstring pouch, and...

Oh, wow!

Very, very carefully I pull out a glittering diamond bracelet. Set in platinum, the diamonds are alternating sizes and shapes. It's beautiful.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask if it's real, but of course it is!

"This...wow, this is amazing, Zane," I say breathlessly. "But this is way too much! I can't—you know I can't..."

"Yes, you can."

He takes the bracelet from me and fastens it around my wrist. My skin tingles at the delicate weight. I am mesmerized by the way the diamonds catch the light and refract it into tiny little sparkles.

Zane's amused voice breaks my trance. "Now I'm going to save us both a lot of trouble by telling you right now, I'm not taking it back, and if you try to refuse it, you really are going to piss me off. So you have to love it."

"Oh, I do! It's beautiful! But—"

"Then that's it. You're welcome."

I grab his shirt and pull him down to my height. "Thank you," I whisper.

Then I kiss him. Long and hot and hard. We break apart, smiling.

"So," I say, running my fingers over his well-defined jaw. "Does this mean I have to put out?"

Zane tilts his head to the side, pretending to consider. "Yeah, I think so."

I grin up at him. "I was going to, anyway."

"I know."

Okay, now's the perfect time to ask him about us. I take a deep breath.

"Sorry to interrupt."

Grr! It's Marissa and her slutty dress.

"What?!" I snap. "I mean—what?"

She twirls a lock of her long blonde hair. "So, Gil keeps pestering me for a dance, and you know what a pervert, he is, right, Violet? Well, I said that I told Zane I would dance with him. So can I borrow you for a little bit, Zane?" She blinks vacantly up at him. "So is that okay?"

Seriously?!

Zane looks at me questioningly, one eyebrow raised.

I say nothing. In fact, my mouth is clamped shut. But Marissa takes my silence as a yes and squeals like a piggy. She grabs Zane's arm, tugging him away. He looks back at me with a shrug.

It's okay, Violet. Be calm. Look at the sparkly diamonds.

It's not working. I hide behind a pillar and glare at my date and the receptionist, dancing like they're a couple in televised competition.

No, people, don't applaud them!

If it weren't for Marissa, it would be pure pleasure to watch Zane. His moves are professional and effortless, and I realize he must've received training.

"He's just full of surprises," I tell my bracelet.

I don't know why I'm talking to my bracelet.

By the way, the sparkle of a diamond will catch the eye of any woman, regardless of age. Heck, Adele spots it from across the room, and she's legally blind.

My old ladies ooh and ah over the sparklies on my wrist. Meanwhile, I'm watching Zane twirl the slutty Marissa around in the longest song ever.

Ugh! I hate always being the jealous one. How would he like it if I danced with some hot guy? In fact...

I scout the area, but the closest I can find to a hot guy is the short-haired Raquel, who works the night shift. She **is** wearing pants tonight. Maybe from behind...?

Okay, no. I try to talk myself into being rational, and enjoying the evening. I know I'm being stupid. I can stop.

I dance with wheelchair bound residents, holding their hands and trying not to flinch when their foot rests bang into my ankles yet again. Zane gives

quite a few old ladies the thrill of their lives, twirling them on the dance floor. They respond so enthusiastically, I know there's going to be a lot of aching bones in the morning.

It's almost eight. Helize wants me to take her upstairs, so I tell Zane I'll just be a few minutes.

"Well, Helize, you were the belle of the ball," I say as I wheel her into the elevator. "Did you have a good time?"

She chuckles tiredly, clutching a colorful bouquet of paper flowers in her lap. "I don't know about the 'belle of the ball,' but I did enjoy myself. I was very pleased to meet your young man. You know, he reminds me of an old boyfriend of mine. Charlie was his name, though he wasn't quite so handsome as your Zane. He was a charmer, though. Everyone just loved him. He could light up a room like nobody's business."

"Oh, yeah? So, why didn't you marry him?"

I have to wait for Helize to unlock her door before she answers me. I turn on the light and wheel her in.

"Because everybody loved him," she replies simply. "And he loved them all back. Biggest womanizer I ever knew!"

"Oh," I mutter sourly.

Helize shoots me a crafty old look. "You gotta watch 'em like a hawk when they're that handsome and charming, Violet. You remember that."

"I definitely will."

"Good girl." She pats my hand. "You're a very beautiful, very wonderful young woman. You two make a stunning couple. Just you make sure to guard your heart, you hear?"

I bend down and give her a loud smacking kiss on the cheek. "I hear, Grandma."

She cackles and starts to head for the bathroom. "Send Liz up to help me, would you, dear? I'm ready for bed now."

"Good night, Helize," I say, closing the door for her.

Her warning echoes in my head as I take the stairs back down. I run into Liz in the lobby on my way to find Zane, and I let her know about Helize. She thanks me, and also congratulates me on my engagement to a super hottie.

Where is Zane? I look everywhere, including the kitchen and the three unoccupied rooms downstairs. With a sinking heart, I notice Marissa is missing as well. Then Gina, the activities director, mentions that she saw them going outside.

Oh, really.

Pulse thumping, I make my way to the parking lot, where the employees' cars are.

Guess what I find? Zane, leaning against Marissa's sporty little car—and the ho is standing very close in front of him.

As I watch, she goes up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. They share an intimate laugh and then Marissa gets in her car. Zane steps away as she backs out, and watches her drive off.

So. Angry.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I move into his line of view. I'm shaking. I hope he doesn't notice.

"There you are," he says, walking over to me. "I was looking for you."

"Really? You were looking for me out in the parking lot when I told you I'd be upstairs with Helize?"

Zane goes to grab my hand, but I yank away. He frowns slightly. "What's with you?"

"Nothing," I snap. "Did you have a good time with Marissa?"

"Not really. I just walked her to her car because she was afraid to go out by herself."

I look around the well-lit parking lot, to the door to the building, literally five feet away. "Uh-huh," I say, my words dripping in sarcasm. "That's totally believable."

Zane sighs almost imperceptibly, running a hand through his hair. "Not really. She just wanted to hit on me."

My blood turns to ice, while the top of my head explodes. "That fake-nice bitch!"

"That about sums it up."

"Oh, you know what? Don't even! You were encouraging her all night!" I burst out, throwing my arms up in the air.

Zane stares at me incredulously. "Are you kidding me?"

"You spent more time with her, looking down her dress than you did with me!"

He makes an exasperated noise low in his throat. "I was trying to be **nice**," he growls. "I never touched her. And, yeah, I looked—she was shoving herself in my face! Just **looked**. Since when is that a crime?"

The more he talks, the angrier I get. I feel some kind of dam in me break, and a red mist settles over my vision.

"Yeah, lucky for you it's not a crime, because you'd be locked up for life!"

Zane eyes me warily. "Do I even want to know what you're talking about?"

"Like you don't know!" I shriek. "You know, with all the girls you flirt with in front of me, I have to wonder how many more there are when I'm not around!"

Zane is starting to look like he's getting a headache. "Wait, let's get this straight. You don't want me looking at, or talking to other girls?"

I can hear how I sound, I really can. I just can't seem to stop the crazy train my mouth has become.

"You're right," I say to him. "You can do whatever you want, sleep with all the slutty little receptionists you want—"

"Violet," Zane reaches for me.

I pull away furiously. "Because we're nothing to each other. Just 'cause you gave me a diamond bracelet doesn't mean a damn thing. You probably hand them out like candy. You can have this one back, though. I don't want it!"

I go to take off my bracelet so I can throw it at him.

Stupid tiny clasp!

I try for a good half minute to get the damn thing off. Frustrated, I sigh explosively and glare at Zane. "Okay, I guess I'll mail it to you!"

I turn on my heel and stomp away. I only make it a couple step when Zane catches me from behind, trapping my arms against my sides. He holds me firmly against his body while I struggle uselessly.

"So—what? You don't want to see me anymore because of something you **think** I did?" His soft breath tickles my neck.

"Yeah," I snap. Can he feel my heart beating alarmingly fast? I hope not.

"I don't think so," Zane whispers. "Call me when you're over your tantrum, little girl."

I stiffen angrily. He trails a kiss down my neck before he releases me. My body already misses his strength and warmth.

I tell it to shut up. Whirling around, I flip him off with both hands.

"Don't hold your breath!" I scream.

Yeah. Like a little girl.

Chapter 19

"So, to recap, Zane gives you roses and a freaking **diamond bracelet**...and you accuse him of cheating on you. Then you throw the bracelet in his face?!"

"Um. No. I couldn't get the bracelet off. It was dark, and I couldn't...figure out the...thingy."

Lauren sighs. "Violet?"

"Yes?"

"Can you come over here so I can smack you with something?"

"Okay," I say in a small voice. "Smack me hard, okay? I deserve it."

We're in Lauren's kitchen right now. Lauren is making zucchini bread while I feed baby Brianna something pureed and green—peas, maybe. Brianna has a cold and keeps sneezing green mush at me. I figure it's some kind of karmic punishment for stupidity.

It's been two days. I haven't talked to Zane, and he hasn't called or texted me. I don't know why I thought he'd come chasing after me. He is so not the type.

Lauren measures out a cup of sugar and dumps it into a big mixing bowl. "So, why don't you call him and apologize?"

That gets me all fired up again. "Because! Marissa was flirting with him, and he was probably encouraging it!"

"Did you see him flirting back?" she asks practically. "Did he touch her?"

"No, but he was smiling at her, and talking to her!"

Lauren just looks at me. I smack myself in the face. Baby Brianna laughs heartily, spitting peas in my hair. I make a disgusted face, and she laughs harder. Babies are so easy.

"You don't understand," I tell Lauren, while wiping peas out of my hair with a wet wipe. "Girls are **always** hitting on him—it's so annoying!"

"He can't help that," Lauren points out. She's huffing slightly from her efforts in stirring her ingredients together. "Guys stare at you and hit on you all the time. Do you take any of them up on their offers?"

I sigh loudly. "No, but it's not the same thing! I'm mean to all them. Plus—guys never hit on me when I'm with Zane! I feel like the sad little wife of a celebrity. Our balance of power is very uneven. I don't like being the insecure one in the relationship. And, yeah, I know I'm probably in the wrong here, but still...it pisses me off!"

"Ugh, can you check the spice rack to see if we have cinnamon?" Lauren pushes a lock of wispy blonde hair back with her forearm. "I guess what it comes down to is, do you trust him?"

I consider this. Do I trust Zane? I told him a lot about myself, things that I've never shared with anyone but Lauren. I also know that if I needed him, he'd be there for me. But...did I trust him not to break my heart?

I just don't know.

I check the spice rack for cinnamon, but don't find any. "Nada," I tell Lauren.

She looks confused. "Are you talking about the trust thing, or the cinnamon."

"Yes," I say. I go over to Baby Brianna and pick her up. "Come on, baby. Let's get you cleaned up." She grins toothlessly up at me, and I hug her to me, pea-covered face and all.

"Are you going to call him?" Lauren wants to know.

"Nope," I reply. "But I'll probably see him tomorrow if he comes to the dinner party Mom is having."

"What are you going to say to him?"

I look down at my beautiful glittering bracelet. Brianna is currently using it as a teething ring. "I don't know," I sigh. "I just don't know."

So Mom invited Jane and a few other friends over for dinner tonight. I heard her on the phone asking Zane to come, but she caught me eavesdropping before I could hear his answer.

I don't think he'll come all the way down here for some silly dinner party. Why would he? And he hates me, so...there you go. He's not coming.

Still, I take extra care getting dressed that night. I'm wearing a clingy pink blouse and these tight black pants that I know make my legs look like they go on forever. I wish I could wear my bracelet, but I can't in front of Mom. I can just imagine how that conversation would go.

I'm just putting my hair up in a ponytail when she pokes her head in my room to let me know the guests are arriving.

Okay. I can do this. If Zane comes tonight, I will be cool and calm and offer him an adult apology—nothing too gushy. Then the ball will be in his court.

Cool and calm. Okay.

I go downstairs to greet the guests. I give Jane a hug, and she fidgets nervously. She's still feeling guilty about the whole deceiving Mom thing, and I worry that one day she's going to blurt out the truth. I think about drawing a line across my throat in silent warning, but it seems a bit much. I smile politely at the other guests, not really seeing them.

"I wish Bill could be here today," Mom is saying to her friends. "But you'll get to meet his son, Zane. He should be here any minute."

As if on cue, the doorbell chimes. Mom asks me to get it, and I stare at her vacantly. She has to ask again before I finally get moving.

Here we go. I put a neutral smile on my face before opening the door.

Zane stands on the other side.

And he's not alone.

Chapter 20

Standing next to Zane is a pretty dark haired girl, probably about his age. She is short and just a bit on the chubby side, but with eyes the color of emeralds. Her green sweater and long velvet skirt make her seem romantic and kind of witchy. I can just tell she's the type of cool laidback chick guys find sexy.

"Hi, Violet," the jerk says with his half-smile. "Can we come in?"

"Oh, why not?" I mutter, moving aside. I slam the door shut behind them.

“So, you’re Violet,” Zane’s new girlfriend says with a knowing smile at him.

“I guess so.”

Mom comes into the room and goes straight to the hugging, of course.

“Zane! I’m so glad you could make it!”

“Thanks for having me.” Zane straightens and gestures to the girl. “Lily, this is the old friend I was telling you about, Jenna. Jen, this is Lily, my father’s soon to be wife.”

"Thanks for letting me tag along," Jenna—Jen—says sweetly, shaking Mom's hand.

"Not at all, we're happy to have you," Mom replies enthusiastically. "It's so nice to meet a friend of Zane's. Oh, this is my daughter, Violet."

Jenna turns to me with her lovely green eyes. "It's great to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you."

I glare at Zane, instantly paranoid. So he's talking to his little girlfriend about me?! Did he tell her how immature I am?

He seems amused by my reaction. He leans over to murmur something in dear Jenna's ear. Her eyes widen and she nods quickly.

Mom finally senses the tension in the room and is puzzled by it. She raises her eyebrows at me, trying to decipher my stiff expression. Shaking her head, she herds us into the sitting room with the other guests.

I keep on the opposite side of the room from the happy couple, forcing poor Jane into an intense conversation about reality television. I can't resist peeking over at Zane and Jenna, however, and it makes me grit my teeth to see them talking with so much familiarity.

How dare he bring a girl over here! I mean, really? After what happened? Is he trying to shove my face in it, or what? Grr...

I do a good job of avoiding them until dinnertime. As luck would have it, they are seated right across from me. I alternate between wanting to sink

down into my seat and disappear, and wanting to flick my peas at them with my spoon.

Fortunately, I decide that both urges are beneath me. I can be an adult about this. So, he brought another girl over here after we just had a fight about him being a giant flirt, a gift-giving, receptionist dancing, tricks-up-his-sleeve mother—

Okay, you know what? We never actually said we were officially together. So, he can do whatever he wants. And so can I.

I turn to the good-looking boy next to me and start a lame conversation about the weather. Cute Boy seems thrilled that I'm talking to him, and he's nice. We get on the topic of music, and it turns out he likes Aiden Cross, and the McPigs, too. Meanwhile, I resist the temptation to look over at Zane.

Well, I don't resist it very well. I surreptitiously peek at him from the corner of my eye. Guess what? He's not even looking over here! He's talking to an older-looking woman sitting on his other side. I think her name is Lorraine—one of Mom's old co-workers. They're having a grand old time laughing about something. Me, maybe? No, I'm being paranoid.

"...so, do you think you'd want to go? With me?" Cute Boy is saying.

"I'm sorry, what?" I tune him back in, an apologetic smile on my lips.

Cute Boy clears his throat nervously. "The dance on Saturday. Do you think you'd want to go...with me? Our school really goes all out for dances. I heard this one time, they rented out an ice rink, and kids were just skating and dancing...doesn't that sound awesome?"

"Oh, yeah," I say uncomfortably, fidgeting awkwardly in my chair. "But I don't really go to dances, and my schedule is so packed, what with school and work."

Cute Boy looks so crestfallen, I start feeling really bad. "Oh," he says. "That's okay. I didn't really think someone as pretty as you would say yes to me, but I figured I'd give it a shot."

Aw. I feel even worse, especially since I was using him to make Zane jealous. It wouldn't hurt me to be nicer about my rejection. "Um," I start to say. "When did you say it was?"

"Well, Saturday, but they also—"

"Oh, too bad. I work on the weekends. I totally would have gone, otherwise."

"Really?" Cute Boy suddenly perks up in a way I really don't like. "That's great, because I was going to say they have the fall dance that we can go to on the Friday before. It's actually for seniors only, but I can totally get us in! My older brother's friends with the band."

"Oh, no...I mean..." I trail off and stare at him suspiciously. "Wait, what did you say about the senior thing?"

"Yeah, it's only for seniors, but—"

"Well, you two look like you're having a good time!"

A beaming blonde-haired woman descends on us, patting Cute Boy on the back. She's got that soccer mom look about her, and I don't like the way she's eyeing me with that speculative gleam in her eye.

"Oh, yeah, Mom," Cute Boy says eagerly. "Guess what? Violet's going to the dance with me!"

"Oh, Jakey!" she exclaims so, so loudly. "You're going to your first freshman dance, and with an older woman!"

Freshman?!

I have lost the ability to blink. I look closely at Jakey for the first time. Smooth tender skin with no hint of facial hair, faint pockmarks from what I assume is a recent bout of forehead acne...awkward, puppy dog look, overall...

Oh.

“Violet,” Mom calls from her seat at the head of the table. “Did I hear right? You’re going to a school dance?”

“With Jakey!” Soccer Mom announces proudly. “It’s his first dance—isn’t that sweet. And I’m sure he’ll score major cool points showing up with a hot babe like Violet!”

“Mom,” Jakey groans, embarrassed.

Don’t do it, Violet. Don’t look over at Zane. Don’t...

I do.

Our eyes meet. His dark brown eyes are shiny with held-in laughter. He raises his eyebrows at me like, "Really, Violet?"

I'm being punished, right? That must be it. This is what I get for being a silly jealous girl.

Cheeks flaming, I refuse to look up for the rest of the meal. Jakey acts as if we're dating and slings a possessive arm along the top of my chair.

Meanwhile, Jenna decides to pepper me with questions: where do I work, what school do I go to, what do I like to do for fun, etc. On the other hand, she seems to know an awful lot about me already. She is genuinely interested, and I find myself wanting to know about her, too.

"Zane and I go way back," Jenna says, poking his arm. He smiles, but doesn't say anything. "He was always the hottest guy in school, and I was just the dumpy girl who hung out with him. And now look at him, a—"

"Pain in the ass," Zane interjects smoothly. "I'm sure Violet would agree."

"I do, and you are," I say coolly.

Jenna laughs, pushing her her long hair behind one ear. "That's right, you tell him. This guy here is used to getting everything he wants."

"Well, not everything." Zane's intense gaze settles on me. "Not yet."

We stare at each other for endless seconds. Why does being near him have to feel like this—a combination of crushing pleasure and soaring pain? The

intensity of my feelings for him scare me, and the way he's looking at me now...it's like he's reading my thoughts.

A hand on my thigh breaks my Zane-induced trance.

I glare at Jakey and shove his hand off of me. He gives me a giant gap-toothed smile in return. I ignore him.

"So, Jenna," I say. "Do you live in L.A.?"

"No, I'm actually in town town for a few days to visit friends, then it's back to good ol' NYU. Although, I may consider moving back if I get to hang out in Zane's Jacuzzi all night like we've been doing."

She smiles up at him, and I throw up a little.

What?!

Throwing off Jakey's wandering hand again, I ask in a choked voice, "You're staying with Zane?" I don't even look his way.

"Yeah. He's the best! You would be so jealous if you knew how soft his bed is."

His **bed**? Oh, God.

I can feel the blood drain from my face. I finally look at Zane, unable to speak, move.

He sees my stricken expression, and his eyes widen. "Jen. You're giving Violet the wrong impression."

"Huh?" Jenna frowns, and turns to me. She appears to mentally replay her words. Finally, she gasps. "Oh, no, it's not what it sounds like! I meant his **guest** bed! I'm sorry! It's not like that with us. It's never been."

I don't know what to think or say, so I don't say anything. There's a good chance I might burst into tears. Numbly, I remove Jakey's hand from my knee.

"Violet," Zane says softly, serious. "We're just friends, I promise you."

"Yeah," Jenna joins. Her big green eyes suddenly sparkle. "Besides, I happen to know for a fact that Zane, here, is stupid crazy over some hot chick whose name is like a flower."

Startled, I stare at Zane. A cautious hope blooms in the vicinity of my chest.

He stares down at the table, shaking his head slightly. "Thank you, Jenna. When do you go home again?"

She just laughs. "Oh, lighten up, Zane. I'm doing you a favor. Seriously, though, you two so need to have a conversation."

I smile weakly at her. "If we don't kill each other first."

"Yeah, he tends to have that effect on people."

"Really over-staying your welcome here."

"Hey," Jenna says. "You were the one who wanted me to meet her."

"Yeah, that was a stupid idea." Zane suddenly leans across the table.

"Touch her one more time, and I'll break your arm."

At first, I'm shocked because I think he's talking to me—but then I feel a hand slowly wither away from my leg.

Jakey's eyes are wide and panicked as he gulps at the dark violence in Zane's face.

Whoa. Maybe trying to make him jealous is not a good idea after all.

By the end of dinner, Jakey whispers in my ear that he can't see me anymore, and promptly un-invites me from the dance. Then, making sure Zane's not watching, he asks if he can take a picture of me with his phone. I pose with the dorkiest open-mouthed grin I can manage.

He still takes my picture!

Well, I don't think he was pointing the lens at my face. Yuck.

Right after dinner, I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. I think my period just started (it's early!) and I'm right. Ugh.

After I get cleaned up, I go back down, determined to find Zane and apologize. It still burns me to think of other girls throwing themselves at him, but I suppose it's unrealistic of me to expect him to push them away with a "blah!"

I run into Mom downstairs. Right away she asks me if I'm really dating a freshman.

I roll my eyes. "No, that was a **huge** misunderstanding."

She looks relieved. "Oh, thank goodness. I was starting to wonder if you were getting desperate. Because Barbara's kid is a little punk, and you can do so much better."

I have to laugh at her serious tone. "Thanks, Lily."

"You're welcome, child. And call me mom. Oh, could you do me a favor and start a pot of coffee?"

"Anything for you, Mother, dear."

She pats my cheek and thanks me. I walk slowly to the kitchen, hoping to run into Zane, but no such luck.

I still don't know what to think about Jenna. How come I didn't know about her, but she knows all about me? And do I even have a right to be pissed about her staying with him? I think about texting Lauren for advice, but Lauren's never been in a relationship before, so it would kind of be like the blind leading the blind. Maybe I could ask Kim? She's certainly had a lot of experience with relationships, having been in dozens herself.

Or maybe I should post an anonymous question on the internet. Hm. I ponder my choices as I fire up the coffee maker. Matt was friends with lots of other girls, and I never cared—until he cheated on me, that is. But with Matt, I never felt that connection—or heart-stopping attraction—that I do with Zane. He really just does...what's that on the ground?

I kneel down to examine the shiny little object stuck to the tile. Looks like a rhinestone. I wonder how it got here, and who it belongs to.

While I'm wondering these things, I hear the door open. The sound of Jenna's laughter freezes me to the spot, and raises my hackles.

"No way in hell," Zane is saying. "But they're still all over me about it."

I hear a thump on the counter above me. They're standing right on the other side. I plaster myself against a cabinet, praying they won't come around.

"Aw, poor baby! Must be hard to be a wanted man. So you're definitely turning it down?"

"Yeah."

"So no career change for you after all, huh?"

Career change? Zane never mentioned anything about that to me. I listen closely, jealous of Jenna's insider knowledge.

"So, I can't believe you haven't told her," Jenna is saying. My ears prick up. "Dude, that's so not good."

Told who? Me?

Zane seems to sigh. "It's complicated. I know what I'm doing."

She makes a tsking noise. "If you say so. But she's going to find out eventually."

There is a pause where I picture Zane running his hands through his hair. "I'll deal with it," he says shortly. "Come on, let's go find Violet."

I hold my breath as I listen to their footsteps walk away. When I hear the door swing shut, I breathe a sigh of relief.

I sink to the floor, back against the counter. Okay, so what was that about? Was it about me? If not, then who? Either way, Zane's keeping something from me. What? And what do I do about it? No way am I going to admit I was listening.

My heart sinks as I absorb everything. I can't trust him, no matter how badly I want to.

The sounds of people entering the kitchen snap me out of my thoughts. Before I can react, creepy moaning noises and breathless giggles erupt from the other side of my counter.

"Oh, Grant," a familiar voice sighs.

I pop up suddenly, unable to believe my ears. Guess what I see? Jane, locked in the embrace of a balding middle aged man whom I'm pretty sure is married.

"Jane!" I gasp.

They both scream a little and break apart, wide-eyed.

"Violet!" Jane gasps, holding a hand against her heart.

"I thought you were a lesbian," I blurt out.

"It's not what it—what? Why would you think I'm a lesbian?"

"Oh..." I shrug. "Never mind. I should go."

I make a run for it. The things you find out when you hang out on the floor!

Chapter 21

I find Zane and Jenna saying their thank yous and goodbyes to Mom. I try to catch Zane's eye, but Jenna ends up pulling me to the side.

"Violet," she says with a smile. "I'm glad I finally got to meet you. I hope we can hang out more next time I'm in town."

I hesitate, staring into her gorgeous green eyes. "Yeah, that'd be...weird."

She bursts out laughing. "Kinda, huh?"

"Sorry. It's just that Zane never mentioned you, or said he had anybody staying with him. I've never even been to his house in L.A," I mumble in an agitated burst of words.

"Oh, no, I totally get it," Jenna reassures, me patting my arm. "I just kind of showed up on his doorstep one night, you know? It's a long story. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know—Zane and I are just **friends**. You have absolutely nothing to worry about with me."

"Oh, well...thanks."

"Now, I'm not gonna lie and say that if he ever wanted something more, I wouldn't jump at the chance." She laughs and rolls her eyes. "But once Zane places you in the 'friend zone' you're there for life."

"Actually," I say. "He and I started out as friends."

Jenna just grins. "Believe me, Violet, I happen to know for a fact that you were never in danger of being put in the 'friend zone.' That was just Zane trying to be a gentleman for once in his life."

I think about that night in the pool, and I can't help but blush. "Really," I murmur. "Tell me more."

"Oh, no you don't." Jenna wags a finger at me. "But I will say this."

She casts a look over her shoulder to make sure Zane is still busy with Mom. Then she leans close, conspiratorial.

"Zane's been with a **lot** of women, you know? A **lot**. Like, he can literally get any chick he wants. Like super models, and—"

"Okay, Jenna," I interrupt quickly. "Wherever you're going, get there faster."

She hunches her shoulders sheepishly. “Right. What I’m trying to say is, I’ve never heard Zane talk about **any** girl before, not the way he does about you. He really cares about you, so...just remember that, no matter what happens, okay?”

I want to be excited about what I think Jenna is telling me, but that huge cloud of doubt hovering over me refuses go away. I can’t forget what I overheard in the kitchen.

She’s going to find out eventually.

I smile uncertainly at Jenna, unsure how to take her. “Thanks,” I mutter. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Keep what in mind?”

Zane appears suddenly besides Jenna. He slings a playful arm around her neck. “Spilling state secrets, Jen?”

“I would never!” she huffs, opening her eyes wide. “You know me. I’m like a bank vault.”

Zane sends me an amused glance, eyebrows raised. “Yeah, the open kind, where there’s a tiny little Jenna standing just inside, handing out codes and keys. Violet, don’t listen to her—she has a very vivid imagination.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I just stand there, flustered. It’s awkward for a minute. Then, Zane turns to Jenna again.

“Hey, do me a favor,” he says, sticking a hand into his front jeans pocket. He comes up with what looks like a fancy little remote thingy and tosses it to her. “Drive my car home tonight. I want to stick around for a bit and talk to Violet.”

She catches it clumsily. “You’re letting me drive the Aston Martin? Are you serious?!”

Zane locks eyes with me as he answers her. “Yeah, just don’t go nuts, okay?”

"What!" she screams excitedly, jumping up and down. "Oh, but how will you get home?"

"I'll take one of my dad's bikes." Zane shrugs. "We'll walk you out "

I trail after them, following them outside to Zane's car. Jenna is way too giddy, and if I were him, I would be nervous about letting her behind the wheel of such a crazy expensive car. But Zane doesn't seem worried, simply telling her to not drive too fast. Jenna hugs him tightly before she gets in, and I have to squash the jealous witch in me that starts shouting obscenities.

I really need to get this possessive thing under control.

With squealing tires, the car rockets out the driveway. Jenna toots the horn before she reaches the end of the road.

Zane watches her go. "I'm gonna regret this, aren't I?"

"Oh, yeah," I reply swiftly. Distantly, I hear a scream followed by the sound of screeching breaks.

Shaking his head, he turns back to me. I can barely make out his suddenly serious expression by the pale light of the moon and the winking stars.

"So, you wanna get out of here?"

"Um." I stare down at the ground. "Let's go back to the house. We can hang out in my room."

"I don't think your mom would approve."

I roll my eyes. "I'll sneak you in."

"Oh, really?" Zane's tone is half-amused, half-surprised. "Are you sure you want to risk your good girl rep?"

"Well," I say matter-of-factly. "She hasn't caught onto all the wild drinking whips and chains orgies I host in their yet."

"Damn, those are the best kind. Now I'm **really** excited to see your room."

I gesture toward the house, and Zane starts walking, hands stuffed down his jeans pockets.

When he's a little bit ahead of me, he turns around, walking backwards.

"Did anyone ever tell you you're a real smartass?"

I nod. "It's really starting to make me wonder."

It's ridiculously easy to sneak Zane upstairs. Mom and her friends are chatting over cake and coffee, reminiscing about the good ol' days from the sound of it.

Zane's never seen my bedroom before. I wonder what he'll think of it. I haven't added any personal touches to it yet, so it's still showroom perfect.

Except for all my underwear, lying in a heap on the top of my dresser.

Ugh, it was laundry day today. How could I have forgotten to put them away?!

I rush forward, opening up the top drawer and shoving all the lacy scraps in there in one big arm swoop.

Okay, I know it's not like he hasn't seen my underwear before. But, still, I don't want him thinking I'm a huge slob.

Zane is looking around. He picks up my quartz paperweight and examines it. "Nice room, but it doesn't feel like you at all."

"I know," I acknowledge. "I should put some posters up, or something, huh?"

"Yeah. And where's all the empty energy drinks, and the dirty underwear tossed on lamps and dressers, like a normal teenager?"

"What kind of messy ass teenagers do you know?"

He laughs. "I guess that's more of a guy thing, anyway."

"Oh. Ew." Now that I think of it, he could have been talking about Matt's room.

There is an uncomfortable silence. Then Zane moves to stand right in front of me.

"So," he says, looking down at me.

"I...uh..."

I am totally distracted by his clean sexy scent!

"I like Jenna," I blurt out. "She seems...nice."

"Yeah. Sorry about springing her on you like that. She showed up a couple of days ago, unannounced."

"Oh," I say, striving for a casual tone. "So, you two are really close, huh?"

Zane reaches over and tugs on a stray lock of my hair. "Are you asking if we slept together?"

"What?" I huff indignantly. "That's not what I...did you?"

"No. Never." He looks me directly in the eye. "We're friends—that's it."

"Well, she's pretty," I say almost defensively, like he can't be friends with a pretty girl. "She has great eyes."

"Yeah, they're beautiful."

"Yeah! They're so big!"

I make an inappropriate gesture with my hands, much the same way an immature boy would to pantomime grabbing boob. Zane starts laughing.

I close my eyes briefly. "Um, is there anything I can say right now to convince you that I don't actually have latent lesbian tendencies?"

"Say? No. Show, maybe. And you have to be very convincing." He offers me a sexy half-grin.

"Ha," I say weakly. Then I take a deep breath. "Actually, I wanted to apologize to you about—for...going all cracked out on you about that little tramp, Marissa. Even though I think you were unnecessarily nice and encouraging to her flirty ways—well, that's your right, and I shouldn't have

acted like a jealous girlfriend." I pause, then my eyes widen in horror. "Oh, god, I didn't mean **girlfriend**! I meant to say bitch! Because obviously I am not...we're not...you know...like, **dating**, or...penis?"

Zane crosses his arms over his chest, full out laughing now.

"Oh, come on!" I plead. "Put me out of my misery."

"I really should," he agrees, shaking his head. "But I kind of don't want to. It's like watching a train wreck."

"Thanks. I'm going to go now. Maybe I'll go find a convent. They like virgins there, right?"

I start to turn away, but Zane pulls me against him. He is so solid, warm, sexy...I melt into him.

"I don't think they'd take someone who looks like you into the convent. Too distracting. Think of all the hot nun jokes you would inspire." His big hands settle over my hips, settling me more firmly against him. "Besides, I have plans for you."

My hands snake up behind his neck, fingers brushing into his soft dark hair. "Really? What kind of plans?"

Zane teases a soft kiss on my mouth. "The kind that involve nudity. And lots of sex."

A heady recklessness falls over me as my body responds helplessly to his. "Yeah, you're all talk, and no action."

"Really?" He smirks. "Okay, little girl, you asked for it."

Zane picks me up with thrilling speed and ease. He carries me onto the bed, and throws me down on it, then moves over me.

"How's that for action?" he murmurs, smiling down at me.

I reach up to touch his beautiful face. "You're still talking."

Now there are no spoken words between us—just an intense conversation with our hands and mouths, a small gasp or a moan frequently puncturing

the silence.

"Violet." Zane looks intently into my eyes. "I don't want Jenna, or the receptionist—or anyone else. Just you, like this."

Does that mean...?

He slides a hand down my quivering stomach to the button on my pants. It's only when he's sliding down my zipper that I suddenly remember.

"Wait." I grab his hand to stop him. "We can't. I—it's that time of the month."

Zane pulls his head back a little, and squints at me. "So?"

I make a face. "So...no!"

He groans into my neck. "You're killing me, here, Violet."

"You?" I glare up at him indignantly. "What about me? At this rate, I'm going to die a virgin."

Zane chuckles, and kisses the tip of my nose. "Trust me, I'm **not** gonna let that happen."

He rolls off of me onto the bed. We both lie on our backs and stare up at the canopy.

"Wow," Zane says after a moment. "This bed is really soft."

"Right?" I sigh comfortably, stretching my arms in the air. "It's like sleeping on heaven."

"You'd like my bed. It's huge."

I roll onto my side to face him. "And will I ever get to see your bed?"

"Well, that depends." Zane tucks his hands behind his head. "Will you bring me breakfast in bed, and perform other girlfriend type duties?"

I raise my eyebrows at him. "Girlfriend...or maid? And...are you saying what I think you're saying? Zane, you're going to have to spell it out for me."

"Really? You're going to make me do it, aren't you?"

"Yes, please."

"Okay, then." Zane turns his head to look at me. "Violet Mercer, will you be my girlfriend?"

I can't stop the giant smile that spreads across my entire face. "Okay! Yay."

He laughs. "Awesome."

I lean over to give him a big kiss. "Now what?"

"Now you put on your shirt, and I'm going to go home and take a really cold shower." He glances over at me again. "**Really** cold."

He starts to get up, but I grab his hand. "Stay with me tonight," I say impulsively.

I can see him think about it. He runs a hand through his tousled hair and sighs.

"Are you sure you want to run the risk of getting caught?"

"It's worth it," I say promptly. "I want you to stay."

"Then I'll stay."

While Zane takes a shower, I text Mom that I've got terrible cramps so I'm going to bed early. She texts me back with offers of tea and a back rub. Feeling crazy guilty, I tell her I'll be fine, I'm just going to sleep.

I've never really lied to her before these past few months—honest. I've never really had a reason to. But now, well, the guilt and anxiety I feel is worth it. Zane is worth it.

We watch weird crap on the internet, and it's just like old times—except that I'm sitting on Zane's lap, wearing just his shirt. I still think it's strange how he's never seen any of these viral videos, considering he works with computers for a living. Aren't all those techie guys usually always plugged into the internet?

Or maybe they wouldn't be if they looked like Zane.

Around midnight, Zane convinces me to go skinny dipping in the pool. We end up kissing more than swimming—then it's cold showers for both of us.

This is...incredibly frustrating, yet...exciting. There's this anticipation, building up to a painful level, but I'm certain that when it's time, it will be even more amazing because of the tension. Zane seems to feel the same way, constantly testing the limits of his control by driving both of us to the edge of crazy, then pulling back just in time.

We talk, too. Sometimes, it seems like he's on the verge of telling me something, but then he changes his mind. It makes me obsess over his conversation with Jenna. Why can't I ask him about it? I think I don't want to know. Not yet, not in this moment that is one of the best experiences of my life.

I would've thought I wouldn't be able to fall asleep with Zane in my bed, but it's so peaceful. We lie next to each other, me on my stomach as he rubs my back with his magic hands. I fall asleep, smiling.

Early, the next morning, Zane wakes me up to let me know he's leaving. I insist on walking him to the garage, though I try to use that time to convince him to stay longer. Of course, he can't, and I have to be at school in a couple of hours, anyway.

Zane's dad has a garage full of shiny toys, and I doubt he'll miss the sleek black motorcycle Zane decides to commandeer. He gets the keys from a safe hidden behind a glass display of a signed motorcycle helmet. I don't know or care whose signature it is, I'm so tired right now!

"Are you sure you're okay to drive?" I ask Zane for the fifth time as he straddles the bike.

He takes a pair of sunglasses and slips them on. "Sure," he says with a lazy smile. "I'll just think about you, and the sexual frustration will keep me awake."

"Oh, that's so sweet."

God, he looks so hot right now in his leather jacket, and on top of that dangerous looking motorcycle. Like an ad for sexy smelling cologne. Yummy.

Zane gestures me closer by crooking his index finger. I wrap my arms around his waist. He cups my face with both hands, and claims my mouth in a surprisingly gentle kiss.

"Thank you," he says softly, his face just a couple of inches from mine. "I remember who I am when I'm with you."

Serious Zane is just as appealing as the playful one. I try to stare into his eyes through his dark lenses. "That's...a really weird thing to say."

"Yeah." He flashes a wry little grin. "Maybe I'm just too tired to know what I'm saying."

"Huh," I say. "You're a spy, aren't you? That's why you wear contacts and dye your hair."

I'm only half-kidding.

"You got me. I'd tell you but then I'd have to kill you. Later, Violet."

After he drives off, I push the button to lower the garage door, mulling over the secrets Zane could be hiding. Does it have something to do with his past? He never talks about it, never gives me anything but vague generalizations about his high school years. I wonder what happened. Does it have anything to do with his mother's suicide? Does Bill know about it?

Or maybe I'm just making this out to be bigger than it really is. Maybe the conversation I heard had something to do with work, and nothing to do with me at all.

God, I hate lies. Especially when I lie to myself.

Chapter 22

I barely make it to school in the morning. I only have time to brush my teeth and throw on some clothes, then I'm running out the door. Lauren calls to tell me she's got the flu and will be in bed all day, so I don't find out till I get to school that my shirt is inside out. People keep asking me if I'm hung over, and I just say yes to make them go away. Pretty soon rumors are swirling around school about me being stupid drunk at a college frat party. I don't care. Lots of things have been said about me before: I'm a slut, I got implants, I tried out for Playboy, I'm adopted...blah, blah, blah...

Come to think of it, that's probably why I have no school spirit, and couldn't care less about this place. It's a crappy experience, especially for someone with a bad attitude. And I never deny a rumor, I just change it enough to be confusing. When kids would come up to me and ask me if my boobs were real, I would tell them I was adopted. It confused the gossip train—those guys are easily confused, and stone stupid.

I make it to English a few minutes early, so I pull out my Chem book. I can't remember, but I'm pretty sure there's a test today.

I'm flipping to chapter nine when Matt stops by my desk.

"Hey, V," Matt greets me with a casual smile. Like he hadn't cheated on me, then avoided me since school started.

My stomach does a funny little flip, but I no longer feel the strong urge to flush his head down the toilet.

Still not my favorite person, though.

"Hey, Matt," I mutter, self-consciously straightening my shirt.

He seems relieved at my civil reply. "So did you start on your paper yet?"

"Start? It's done. Isn't it due tomorrow?"

Matt's face falls comically. "Oh, shit, really? I didn't even start it!"

"Sucks," I say with a shrug.

"Yeah." Matt is glum for a moment, then he brightens. "I heard Tanner's gonna be out for, like, the rest of the month, and Jensen is subbing. Maybe he'll give me an extension."

"Or," I say, shutting my Chem book. "You could just whip it out tonight."

Okay, that sounds funny. I realize this as soon as the words come out of my mouth. By the way Matt is grinning right now, I probably slipped a "penis" in there somewhere.

"So, I hear you're going out with some college guy," he says, changing the subject. He half-sits on my desk the way he used to when we were together. I want to kick him off badly.

"Zane's not in college, he works for Cronus," I say somewhat snootily.
"He's a software engineer."

I can't help it. The best revenge you can get on your cheating ex is to replace him with someone about a hundred times hotter, and more successful. And if that's a petty sentiment...well, I'm a petty kind of girl.

"Wow, you're moving up in the world, huh, V?" Matt pats my arm good-naturedly. "But then you were always too good for us high school jerks. I always knew some guy would steal you away."

I look up at him. "Really? So that's why you dumped me?"

He stares down at his hands uncomfortably. "Well, kinda, actually. It was pretty stressful dating you. Every time we went out, I felt like I had to kick some guy's ass who was staring at you. I was just waiting for you to realize you were way out of my league."

What a bunch of crap. Did he forget the part where he cheated on me?
Ugh.

"Okay," I say to him, opening my book up again. "Thanks."

Matt just sits there, staring dreamily at my chest. I have to clear my throat loudly. I tell him that it looks like Rachel—who is staring at us anxiously from her desk—wants to talk to him. He flushes and hastily excuses himself.

That was weird. I start an imaginary conversation with Zane in my head about the experience. We both decide Matt is an ass.

"Hey, Violet."

The deep voice startles me out of my daydream. I look up into a pair of twinkling hazel eyes.

"Oh, uh, hi, Mr. Jensen," I stutter, surprised to be singled out.

He winks at me before making his way to the front of the room to call attendance.

Okay, that was weird. I didn't even think he knew my name. Maybe he heard the wild frat party rumor, too. Oh, well.

If it persists, I think I'll start spreading the word that I'm donating a kidney to a long lost sister.

The rest of November officially sucks. I've got four different projects due around the same time. Why do teachers do that? Do they want to see us fail? Our English project is worth half our grade and Lauren and I can't agree how to tie in the six books we've been assigned to cover. She's being so difficult lately, I can hardly get a hold of her. She must be tutoring half the school, with how often she's gone.

Work is a zoo. We get three new high needs residents, including a wheelchair bound woman named Marge—while sweet as can be—works the call button like a buzzer on a game show. I'm in her room every five

minutes, and it throws off my whole schedule. I have to run to get everything done on time, which leaves little time to hang out with Helize.

To top it off, Zane is tied up with some special project at work—some new software that needs to be ready for launch by the beginning of December. I haven't seen him since the night he stayed over. He's missed all the pre-wedding events, and Mom is starting to freak out that he'll miss the actual wedding. She's already a nervous wreck, and guess who has to hear about it?

So I've been a bit grouchy lately. Okay, a lot. Zane missed Thanksgiving, which sucked. All of Mom's side of the family manages to make it down—and since the wedding is in eight days, they've been staying with us. So now the house is full of Harringtons.

Maybe it's a good thing he couldn't make it. Though I did tell him about the highlight of the evening—Great Grandma Frances cornering Bill in the kitchen with a spoon and a (clean) adult diaper. The look of terror on Bill's face was...sublime.

Great Grandma's a little nutty.

We've been fighting a lot, lately—Zane and I. I'll admit, most of it is due to my insecurities. I can't help but obsess over what Zane's doing at the moment. Is he eating dinner alone like he says he's doing? Is he really still at work at eight at night? Why can't he spare a few hours to make it to the rehearsal dinner?

My imagination starts going wild, and Zane gets exasperated. Especially since I don't come right out with what's bugging me. Even though we both know. But the sick thing is...I kind of like starting fights with him. It's devastating, exciting...foreplay.

I know. I'm a freak. God, I can't wait to see him again

Chapter 23

Mom's wedding...

The day starts out cloudy with a cool breeze. Mom is freaking out, worried that it will rain, even though the wedding planner assures her they can easily move the ceremony into the great hall if even a tiny drop of rain dares to fall.

She's driving me crazy. Mom—not the wedding planner, that is. She refuses to let me leave her side for even a minute. She is ridiculously nervous, and shaking like a leaf.

She looks beautiful, despite her nerves. Mom's wearing a simple white sheath dress that doesn't overwhelm her delicate figure. She keeps her makeup minimal and natural-looking, her pale blonde hair pinned up with a white lily. I love her classy elegant style. It's what I'd want for my own wedding. Assuming I'd ever get married.

The wedding is being held at Woodburn Estates, in the fairy garden. Vibrant exotic flowers bloom everywhere and colorful twinkle lights are subtly woven through branches and wrapped around old fashioned lamp lights. The big white gazebo drips with lights and flowers, and Jeri, the wedding planner, informs us that most of the guests have been seated.

"You look so lovely, Violet," Mom says, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Don't cry," I warn her, handing her a tissue just in case. "And thanks. You look amazing, too."

She carefully wipes the corner of her eyes, then waves a dismissive hand.

"Thanks, love. At my age, I just hope I don't look too ridiculous. Oh, have you seen Jane? I found some earrings she can borrow."

I grab my phone and ask Jane to come to our cottage. Then I text Lauren for the fifth time.

Me: Is he here yet?

Lauren: Haven't seen him. Don't worry, he'll be here!

I sigh. Zane can't miss the wedding. I will kill him if he does.

To distract myself, I check my reflection in the full-length mirror. I love my dress. It's a strapless dark blue jersey material with a full knee length skirt. My hair is down in loose curls, one side pinned up by a glittering barrette made by my grandmother. I wish I could wear Zane's bracelet, but today is so not the day to have the attention focused on my wrist.

I feel sophisticated and glamorous for a change. I wonder what he'll think of me. It's going to be so hard to pretend he's just my future step brother. How am I going to pull that off in front of my family? What if I blurt out something completely inappropriate again? I might—it's been known to happen.

Worry and doubt swirl in my head until I am nervous as Mom. We stand by the window, shaking like leaves in the wind, and jumping whenever anyone tries to talk to us. Then Mom chokes on a mint, and I unnecessarily perform the Heimlich maneuver on her—unnecessary because she spit the mint out as soon as she started choking. Fortunately, I don't break any of her ribs, and we end up laughing hysterically about it. Not sure why.

Before we are ready, Jane and Jeri are ushering us to the gazebo. On the way, I text Lauren.

Me: Do you see him??

Lauren: Yeah. And wow!

Me: Wow what???

Lauren: You'll see

Ugh! As if I wasn't nervous enough already! And why does Jeri keep pushing me? I slap her hands away, annoyed.

"Go, Violet!" she hisses.

She gives me a giant shove, and I'm suddenly stumbling down the aisle with everyone in the rows of chairs turning to look at me.

I only trip twice, which is amazing, considering these three inch heels. Clutching my bouquet, I concentrate on floating down the aisle.

I barely see the smiling faces of family and friends, barely notice Bill, looking spiffy and uncomfortable, waiting in the gazebo. My gaze is completely focused on the beautiful boy in the crisp tux, standing straight and tall next to Bill.

He is amazing, the most perfect thing I've ever seen in my life. So effortlessly elegant and sexy, he seems utterly untouchable to me.

And that god is my boyfriend!

Zane watches me walk down the aisle, a hint of a smile on his ineffably beautiful face. I can't help the huge grin on mine. I take my position, overcome with a lovely sense of joy. I am so grateful to be right here, right now.

I have to tear my attention away from Zane to watch Mom make her entrance.

Here we go.

I am far from the sentimental type, but I fight back tears as Mom and Bill exchange their vows. His is laughably simple, but the smitten look on his face says it all. Mom is much more elaborate, tears falling freely as she expresses gratitude for her life, her family...and the man standing beside her. Those who know what she's been through cry with her.

I am so happy, and so proud of her right now.

In a daze, I realize it's over. Zane reaches for my arm and escorts me down the aisle. He supports most of my weight, which I am super grateful for. I'm an emotional mess, and I don't think I could have made it alone.

"Well, now you're officially my step sister," he says out of the corner of his mouth. "Is it inappropriate to tell you how god damn beautiful and sexy you look right now?"

I laugh shakily. "Not any more than me telling you I'd like to rip that tux off your body with my teeth."

Zane leans his head back and laughs.

I don't know why. I'm not kidding.

The reception is held indoors, in a ball room decorated in the wedding colors of blue and silver. The multitudes of candles set off the gorgeous chandeliers with their flickering lights. It's magical, and I can't enjoy it.

I stand next to Lauren's table, fuming. I should be with Zane, but I'm not. Why? Because we both decided we couldn't be that close, and be able to keep our hands off each other. Lauren also confirms that the sexual tension between us is so obvious that **she** feels like taking a cold shower.

And that's why it's my slutty cousin, Taylor, pressed up against Zane's side instead of me.

Taylor is the current Miss Nevada. I know she's blood, but I hate her guts. I hate Aunt Barb and Uncle Mike for raising such a pretty ho. I hate that no one is telling her that this is a wedding reception, not a whorehouse.

"She's touching his arm again!" I growl. "That—ugh! Do you think she's prettier than me?"

"I don't know," Lauren says tiredly, poking at her chicken. "You have bigger boobs."

I barely hear her. "Oh, look at me! I'm Miss Nevada, tee hee! Oh, Zane, you're so strong. Oh, I can't keep my hands to myself because you're just so

—oh, there I go again, running my hand down your chest. Because I'm a tramp! That's how I got to be Miss Nevada, one blow—"

"V," Lauren interrupts me. "Just go over there."

"I can't," I say. "You know we can't risk it. Did you just throw up in your napkin?"

She folds said napkin and places it on her plate, grimacing. "My stomach's a little queasy."

"Are you okay? You're not pregnant, are you?" I say with a little laugh. Because it's Lauren, and there's no way...

She doesn't say a word, carefully not meeting my eyes.

My jaw drops. "Oh, my god," I gasp.

I grab Lauren's arm and drag her into the restroom. Once inside, she pulls away and locks herself in a stall. Moments later, the sounds of violent retching fill my ears. I grab a bunch of paper towels and wet them.

Lauren finally comes out from the stall, sweaty and pale. I help her clean up, then I run out to grab her a bottled water.

When I come back, she's leaning against the counter, eyes red and watery.

"So," I say cautiously. "Just to clarify—you **are** pregnant?"

She bows her head. "Yes."

I can't believe it! Narrowing my eyes, I study her intently. She looks the same—thinner, maybe. And tired.

Lauren is pregnant. How can this be?!

"So...how many weeks?" I ask tentatively.

"Nine," she says bleakly.

"What? How? Who is the father? I'm going to kick his ass!"

She brushes her hair away from her face. "I've been sort of seeing someone. I never told you because...I don't know. It's complicated. And no, I'm not going to tell you who he is yet. Not until I tell him about the baby. And don't try to guess who he is!"

A million questions are on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow them down. "Do you—what are you going to do, do you know?"

Lauren's shoulders slump forward. "I don't know. I don't want to take care of another baby. I mean, I'm practically raising Brianna. I...just don't know."

I take a deep breath, carefully considering my words. "Well, you know there are options if you don't want to keep it. And whatever you decide, I'll be there to help you. With anything you need. Hey, if you decide to keep the baby, I could be Aunt Violet!"

Even though this is impractical, I could see us raising a baby together. I would be the cool fun one. We could be on a reality show! I love babies!

Lauren just gives me that look. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet. I guess I'll talk to the father first. And I still have to tell my mother."

"Okay, well, have you been to a doctor yet?"

She starts to look sick again. "No. I'm not on Mom's plan anymore."

Oh, yeah. I pat her arm. "Well, we can look online for some resources. I'm sure there are a lot out there for pregnant girls. I'll look tonight when I get home."

"Thanks." She nods weakly. "Um...can we talk about this later? I think I need to go home and get some rest. Tell your mom I said congratulations, okay?"

"Sure. Do you want me to drive you?" I ask.

"No, that's okay, I'm going to call my Mom. Thanks, though."

After a quick look in the mirror to reassure herself she's presentable, Lauren heads for the door. She opens it, then hesitates and turns back to me. "Go

talk to Zane,” she says.

Then she’s gone, and I’m left staring at the door.

I am...I don’t know. Shocked. Hurt. Terrified for Lauren. I just can’t believe she’s pregnant. If there was anyone more virginal than me, I thought it was her. And all this time, behind my back, she’s been doing it!

I guess I should be mad she’s kept a whole relationship from me, but it’s just so bizarre. Lauren is such a private person. She doesn’t like talking about herself, and—

Oh, wait! I bet I know who the father is!

Damon Fox, the football player. She’s been tutoring him since the start of school, and they seem to get along pretty well. And the relationship is complicated because Damon has a girlfriend. Shanna something. She’s in our Spanish class, though I’ve never really talked to her. And Lauren’s never liked her! She said once that she thought Shanna had the most chilling laugh she’s ever heard.

It’s Damon, I know it is. He’d better be there for her, or I will beat the crap out of him.

But then what? They get married and raise the baby together? I highly doubt that. He’d better at least support whatever decision she makes.-

God. Lauren is pregnant. She’s going to have a baby.

What would happen if Zane got me pregnant? I have no doubt he’d support me no matter what. But what would I do? A part of me (and I feel horrible for admitting this) would be thrilled to have his baby. A big part of me, if I’m being honest.

That is, until reality sets in and I find myself an unwed teen with a baby and more responsibility than I’m ready for.

Feeling disturbed—and worried for Lauren—I finally leave the restroom. I want to talk to Zane. I won’t tell him about Lauren—I just need to see him.

I am extremely annoyed to find him still in the clutches of Taylor. I've never liked her. She used to ignore me when I was fat, then was completely mean to me when I lost the weight.

I hate how perfect they look, standing together. Taylor, with her long honey blonde hair, big blue eyes, and model like figure totally complements Zane's dark beauty and powerful physique. If I stood next to them right now, some photographer guy would yell for someone to get the dumpy girl out of the magazine shoot.

Okay, but this isn't the first time I've had to shove a pretty girl away from Zane's side. I have no problem yanking Taylor away by her beautiful blonde hair.

Dare I say I would enjoy it?

Oh, yeah, I dare.

Zane watches me approach, and I love the way that half smile of his lights up his entire face.

"Hi, Zane," I say, coming up to them. "Got a minute?"

"Actually, we were in the middle of something," Taylor snaps, glaring at me. She puts a possessive hand on Zane's arm.

Oh, it's about to get ugly.

"Yes, I saw." I put on my concerned face, and then lower my voice confidentially. "I'm going to spare you the humiliation—he was about to turn you down."

I grab Zane's hand and start leading him away.

"Violet!" Taylor gapes at us in disbelief.

Zane shrugs at her. "She's right."

Ha!

I lead Zane out to the garden, and to a more secluded area near a little fish pond. It's softly romantic out here, with the little fairy lights twinkling in

the creeping dark, and the exotic scent of flowers perfuming the gentle breeze.

Away from the crowds, I lean against him and inhale his fresh clean scent. Once connected, I feel like everything's gonna be okay.

Zane's arms immediately go around me. "What happened to keeping our heads down?" he asks, sounding amused.

"I know," I say, my voice coming out muffled against his chest. "I just...missed you."

"I missed you, too." I feel him kiss the top of my head. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just a problem Lauren is having."

"Anything I can do to help?"

I peer up at him. "I may need you to bail me out of jail for beating someone up."

"Who are you going to beat up, and why?"

"It's for Lauren, and it's—well, it's not for me to say."

"Don't beat anyone up," Zane says. "Call me first. I'll take care of it for you."

"Oh, what, you don't think I could handle it?" I feel a little indignant. I draw myself up to my full height of five feet, four inches (five-seven in heels) and poke him in the chest. "I've been around, man. I've done things."

"Oh, no, I can tell you're a real hard ass." Zane grins and runs his hands down my back.

"I could kick your butt," I say, moving closer to him.

"Oh, no doubt."

Somehow, we end up kissing. I forget where I am—it's been too long since we've touched like this. I press myself against him, and he trails kisses down my neck.

Ohh, I want to...

"Violet!"

Aaaaaaaughh!! Grandma!

Chapter 24

I jump away from Zane. He moves in front of me so I can fix the top of my dress. When I'm resituated, I peek out from behind Zane's broad shoulder.

Grandma is standing there, arms crossed as she glares at us severely. Talk about hard asses—Kathy Harrington is the real deal.

"Hi, Grandma," I wave weakly. "We were just..."

"Hm, I think I know what you were 'just' about to do. And in public, too!"

Oh, this is so not good! I might catch fire, I'm burning with embarrassment. I can't even look at Zane. He's probably covered in my lipstick.

"May I have a word with my granddaughter in private?" she addresses Zane coldly.

"Of course," Zane replies respectfully. Then he leans down to speak in my ear. "Do you want me to stay?"

I shake my head regretfully. "You'd better go. I'll see you inside."

He hesitates, and I realize why when I look down and see I'm clutching his shirt with both hands. Hastily, I let go.

Zane gives me a reassuring smile and kisses my cheek before he nods once at Grandma. "Ma'am."

Once he's gone, I turn to her. "Okay, I know what you're going to say, but first let me remind you that I'm seventeen—almost eighteen. And I know that—"

Grandma stops my rush of words with a wave of her hand. "Violet, I'm not so out of touch to think that you aren't having sex by now. And I'd like to think that you are smart enough and responsible enough to be safe." She pauses and sighs. "But with **that** one... Violet, does your mother know?"

"No! I just...it just sort of happened with Zane." I shrug and pleat my fingers together nervously. "I was going to tell her after the wedding. I didn't... I don't know. Please don't tell her—I promise I'll do it myself."

Grandma raises one perfectly groomed eyebrow. "I'm surprised she doesn't already suspect. Anyone can see the sparks flying between you two every time you're together."

I bite my lip, both pleased and embarrassed. "She's been really distracted with the wedding and stuff."

"I suppose so!" She allows a smile to crack her disapproving expression. "He's absolutely gorgeous. I can see the temptation."

"Grandma!" I laugh and hook my arm through hers. "I am still a virgin, though."

"Hm, but from the looks of it, you won't be for much longer." She pats my cheek hard. "Take steps to protect yourself. I am far too young to be a great grandmother."

We start strolling back towards the ball room. "I'm not the one you should be worried about," I snicker.

"Taylor?" Grandma nods knowingly. "She'll be lucky to know who the father is, that one. She's a bit of a tramp, isn't she?"

I beam at her. "I love you, Grandma."

"I know, dear." She smiles and squeezes my arm. "That doesn't mean I won't kick your ass if I catch you carrying on like that in public again. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

I think if I were to keep track of all my humiliations, I would probably have to kill myself.

I find Zane talking with a couple of guys that I assume are Bill's co-workers. When he sees me, he raises both eyebrows. I shrug and smile sheepishly in response. He excuses himself and walks over to me.

"Everything okay?" he asks, rubbing my arm.

"I think so. I don't know if I'll ever be able to look her in the eye again, but she was pretty cool about it."

"Yeah?" He chuckles. "From the look on her face, I thought I was gonna have to climb an ivory tower to rescue you."

"Mm," I say, squinting up at him. "Would you really do that for me?"

"I could probably be talked into it."

"Well if I ever—"

"Violet!"

Something rams into the back of my legs, propelling me forward into Zane, who catches me against his chest.

Oh, my god. What's happening right now?! Ow.

I whirl around, still supported by Zane's arms. "Hunter!" I gasp.

My six year old demon cousin grins at me. The blonde Mohawk he's rocking makes him look like a miniature biker dude--in a suit.

"I'm a shark! Rawr!" He slaps me in the belly—hard.

"Ha," I say, ruffling his stripe of hair. "Sharks don't say 'rawr.' And what did I say about you hitting me?"

Hunter jumps into a karate pose. "That you'll hit me back, only harder 'cause your waaay stronger than me." He walks up to Zane and tilts his head back to look at him. "Mom says you're my cousin now. Is that true?" he demands suspiciously.

Zane looks down at him with that half smile. "Guess so, little man. What do you think about that?"

"It's okay, I guess," Hunter says thoughtfully. "But...you're not really gonna eat Violet, are you?"

Zane and I exchange puzzled looks. "Hunter, why would you ask that?" I want to know.

"My mom says he looks at you like he wants to eat you," he replies matter-of-factly. "She says it's 'cause of your ginormous boobies. But why would that make you want to eat her?"

Zane starts laughing while I cover my flaming cheeks with my hands. I'm going to kill my aunt!

He crouches down and waves Hunter over. My little cousin leans close and listens intently to whatever Zane is whispering. Suddenly, his eyes widen. "For reals?" he demands skeptically.

"Would I lie?" Zane says solemnly.

"Whoa!"

Hunter suddenly whirls around and takes off like a bullet. I turn to Zane.

"What did you tell him?" I ask suspiciously.

Zane shrugs and watches Hunter go. "Just a little secret that us older guys have discovered."

A scream draws my attention to across the room to the table my aunt's sitting at. Aunt Lisa is covering her chest with one arm, and slapping wildly at her feral-looking son with the other. Hunter is jumping up at her, jaws snapping. It looks like he's trying to...

Zane gives me a sideways glance. "I told him boobies taste like chocolate cake."

"Oh. That is so wrong."

"Yeah, I don't think your aunt is going to like me much."

"Probably not." I catch Aunt Lisa's eye. She's glaring. "Quick—wave at her. That will really piss her off."

We both give little waves. Lisa starts shouting and jabbing her finger around like a deranged disco queen. I look at Zane and we both burst out laughing.

"We're not really doing a good job of hiding us, are we?" I say, pushing back my hair.

He shakes his head, smiling. "Nope. Come on. Might as well really give 'em something to talk about."

He takes my hand and pulls me to the dance floor. A sexy salsa is playing and Zane whirls me around to the beat.

I'm a pretty good dancer, and he's fantastic. We move together in perfect synchronization. With him, dancing like this feels like second nature, and I effortlessly follow his lead. I know all eyes are on us, but I don't even care. I can't remember why I wanted to keep us a secret.

I'm having so much fun right now. I'll worry about the consequences later.

But "later" is not as far away as I had hoped.

After the song is over, Mom takes me aside.

"Do you know what's wrong with Lisa?" she asks, her eyes wide with concern. " She said that Hunter tried to bite her breasts because of something you or Zane said?"

I smooth out the skirt of my dress nervously. "Yeah, I don't know. I think she's drunk. I **might** have said something, and Hunter picked it up. You know how little kids are." I exhale noisily. "She's just trying to start some drama at your wedding."

Mom just looks at me. "Uh-huh. And what's going on between you and Zane? You two looked pretty cozy out there." She gestures toward the dance floor.

"What? Why would you say...? Nothing. We're just...you know. He's a good dancer."

"Okay. Well, it's good you can have fun with a guy again. I mean, after Matt..."

Crap, why don't I just tell her? Zane is my boyfriend. See? Simple.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out, except maybe a sigh. Why is this so hard?

Mom watches my discomfort with a frown. Suddenly, she reaches over and puts both hands on my cheeks. "Violet, I trust you," she says directly, looking me in the eye. "You've never given me a reason not to. And when I was...when I was sick, our roles got reversed. You were the one taking care of me and paying the bills, and being strong for the both of us..."

"Mom," I try to interrupt when her eyes start going misty.

"No, I just want to tell you how proud I am of you. You sacrificed a lot for me, and you never complained. And then I when I sprung Bill on you, and—and the honeymoon and the wedding...you were so great about it all." She stops gushing to kiss my forehead. "Thank you, Violet. You're a wonderful daughter, and...you know you can tell me anything, right?"

"Wow." I shift my feet awkwardly. "Yeah. Thanks."

We just stand there, for the longest minute ever. Then we both try to hug each other at the same time—and miss. It's painful.

"Okay, well, I'm going to go rescue Bill from your grandmother. He's got that deer-in-the-headlights look." Mom points to where Grandma has Bill cornered by the bar. "That woman is a trip. She actually told me I'm too old to have another baby, so I'd better practice safe sex. Can you believe that?"

"Uh, yeah. She's wacky, that one." I pat her back. "Go—save your man."

Mom winks at me. "I think I will. Love you."

"I love you, too."

She blows me a kiss. I watch her walk away, stumbling in her heels quite a few times before she reaches Bill and Grandma. Is she drunk? I don't remember smelling any alcohol on her breath. Wow, I've never seen her under the influence before. I make a note to keep an eye on her, just in case. Or Bill will, I'm sure.

Bill.

Reality suddenly sinks in. He is now officially my stepfather. He made a vow in front of witnesses to be there for Mom in sickness and in health---and he'd better mean it. It's weird to me to think that Mom and I would have someone else to rely on. If the cancer ever came back...

No, I don't want to think about that. Not today, especially.

My sentimental mood shrivels up and dies when I see Zane—with Taylor. Again. They're sitting at a table together, leaning towards each other, and carrying on what appears to be a hilarious convo.

Grr. Why does he have to talk to her? Out of all the people here—why can't he say hi to Great Uncle Larry? He's a funny fascinating guy. He used to be a pearl diver! That's way more interesting than a stupid slutty Miss Nevada!

No, you know what? He can have fun with Double Jointed all night. I'm not storming over there like the jealous girlfriend again. Whatever.

I decide some fresh air might cool my heating temper. I don't want to go through the gardens, though—too crowded—so I head out through the front.

As I walk towards the parking lot, I try to calm myself down. Okay, Zane's not doing anything wrong. He's a nice, good-looking guy who enjoys talking to giggly totally obvious girls who undress him with their eyes. And would I say he maybe encourages their behavior by flirting back? No, not to his face.

Argh! I can't do this anymore! It's like a merry go round of jealousy. But I can't help the way I feel. Maybe...maybe this isn't working out. Us, I mean. Obviously, I feel like I can't trust him, so...maybe we should just go back to being friends.

My heart breaks a little at the thought of never being able to touch Zane, kiss him. I can't. But I can't be like this anymore.

I don't know what to do!

Footsteps sound behind me. Zane. I turn around with a smile on my face.

But it's not him.

A blonde-haired good-looking man I don't recognize is smiling at me. "Hello," he says. "You're Lily's daughter, right?"

First thing I do is glance around to see if I'm within screaming distance of people. There is a group of workers standing around in the parking lot, talking to each other, and there are a few people milling around in front of the building, just a few yards away. My shoulders relax slightly.

"Yep," I reply with a polite smile. I am so not interesting in chatting right now.

"My name's Sean. I work with Bill," he introduces himself. "Well, I work on his floor. I'm actually in a separate division—just basic data entry. Bill

is good friends with my father, in case you're wondering how I got invited.”

Why are you telling me this? “That’s nice,” I mutter lamely.

I don’t like the way his eyes keep drifting down my body, so I start angling myself back towards the building.

“So I didn’t catch **your** name.” Sean says, stepping closer to me, cutting off my subtle retreat.

“Violet.” Maybe if I resort to one word answers, he’ll take the hint and go away.

“Violet,” he repeats. “That’s pretty. Can I just tell you...I have been staring at you all day. You are so gorgeous, and your body is **incredible**.”

Okay, then. I start walking, but he follows closely behind.

“Hey, where you going?” He reaches out to grab my arm, halting me.

“What’s the matter? Can’t take a compliment?”

I glare at him, pushing his hand off of me. “A compliment, yes. An eye rape? No, thank you.”

Sean chuckles, like he can’t see the laser beams shooting out of my eyes.

“Oh, don’t be like that, honey. I’d really like to take you out for a drink, sometime. Maybe some shopping—I’ll buy you anything you want.”

Seriously. “I’m seventeen,” I snap. “Not a hooker.”

Sean’s eyes widen in glazed surprise. “You’re seventeen? Wow, you look older. Must be that smokin’ hot body of yours.” His eyes crawl up and down me.

“Ew.” I shudder in disgust. “Look, just go away. You don’t have me cornered in a dark alley, you know. There are a lot of people around—and most of them are my relatives. If you try anything, I will punch you in the junk, and then I’ll scream for help.”

Sean is oblivious. “Oh, yeah, I’ll make you scream, you hot little bitch...”

I hate when random perverts talk to me like this. And he actually tries to grab at my chest!

But he never makes contact. Sean is jerked violently backwards by the collar of his shirt.

You know what would be so awesome? If it was Grandma standing there, dangling the pervert like a worm on a hook.

It's not. It's Zane. Of course it's Zane.

Zane's grip seems to tighten—if the mottled color Sean is turning is any indication. "What were you saying to her?" he asks in a deadly quiet voice.

"S-sorry! I'm sorry!" Sean gasps, trying to wiggle free.

Zane looks at me, eyebrows raised, silently asking me if I accept his apology.

I shrug sullenly. "You're lucky he came along," I mutter to the creep.

For a second, it looks like Zane might not let Sean go. He appears to be thinking while the pervert's movements become more and more panicked. The sounds of choking fill the night. People are starting to head towards our direction.

Finally, Zane gains control of himself. He releases Sean, then shoves him hard enough to drive him to his knees. "Don't even look at her again," he says tonelessly.

I watch Sean scramble away like a cockroach. Man, I wish I could say something to a guy like that to make him feel as cheap and sleazy as he made me feel. But every insult I can think of would probably only turn him on. Stupid perverts.

"I can't leave you alone for a minute," Zane says with a wry smile. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I say quickly. "I had everything under control, actually. You can go back to having fun with Taylor."

Zane stares briefly up at the dark sky. "We're not doing this again," he groans.

"Doing what?" I snap. "If you want to hang out with my cousin every time my back is turned, be my guest! I just came outside to do my own thing."

"Yeah, does doing your own thing include getting groped by some asshole?"

"Apparently!" I shriek, throwing my hands up.

Zane shakes his head. Why does he look like he wants to laugh? "We're not doing this again," he repeats tiredly.

"Yeah, **we** aren't! So go back to flirting with your little girlfriends—I don't give a damn."

"Violet," he sighs. "What can I do to convince you that I won't cheat on you?"

I run a hand through my wild hair. "I don't know! Every time I turn around, you're talking to another girl. And they're always pretty. Why can't they ever be fat? Really fat?"

Zane just laughs. "Talking doesn't mean cheating. You know that, right?"

"Tell that to my dad and Matt," I say bitterly.

"Yeah, well, I'm not them. I don't cheat. Alright?" He leans down to look me in the eye.

"But you're hiding something," I whisper.

"It's not what you think. I **will** tell you, just not..."

"Just not now." I turn my back to him. "That's part of why I can't trust you."

Zane is silent for a moment. "So what do you want to do?" he asks finally.

"I don't want to fight," I say.

"What do you want to do?" he repeats.

I lean back against him. His arms go around my waist, pulling me against his warmth. "I want to feel how soft your bed is," I say quietly.

"Let's go."

Zane takes my hand and we practically run towards the valet. While we're waiting for them to get his car, someone screams hideously.

I slip my phone out of the little pocket in my dress and reluctantly answer. "Mom?"

"Please tell me you're somewhere close by," she says in a rush. "Great Grandma Frances is throwing a huge fit, and you're the only one that can calm her down."

I glance at Zane. He's watching me intently. "I'll be right there," I groan.

"Hurry, Violet!"

"Great Grandma emergency," I tell him after I've hung up. "She's going nuts in there, and I'm the only one she responds to."

Zane lets his head fall forward. "When you and I finally happen, I may not survive it," he mutters, staring down at the ground.

"I, uh, I'll talk to you later, I guess?"

I start forward to kiss him, but he quickly backs off. "Nope. Don't touch me right now."

"What? Why not?" I frown at him.

A little self-deprecating smile plays about his beautifully-made mouth.

"Trust me, it would be a bad idea. I'll call you later, okay?"

Zane's car appears like magic. A valet hops out of the driver's seat, looking thrilled to have been behind the wheel of such an awesome car.

"Okay," I say in a dazed voice. I don't know what to do with my hands, so I wave awkwardly. "See you later?"

He stops to look at me before getting into the Aston Martin. "Definitely."

How does this keep happening? I look to the heavens for an answer, and do you know what I get?

A raindrop in the eye.

But the real treat is waiting for me in the ballroom, where Great Grandma is in the process of removing every last stitch of her clothing. It's time for her bath, she says.

Wow. Naked old woman flesh kills the mood. Kills it real good.

I may never have sex.

Chapter 25

The next time I see Damon at school, I shoot him an evil glare. He looks away guiltily. This confirms my suspicions of him being an impregnator.

"Do the right thing," I mutter to him as we pass each other in the hall.

He stares at me, wide-eyed, then hurries away.

Really, Lauren, how could you have gotten involved with someone like him? He's cute, but there's not much going on back there.

So I've decided to start writing again. I update all my web pages, answer as much fans' questions as I can, and sit at my computer, waiting for some ideas to hit.

Nothing comes to mind. I didn't anticipate how hard it would be to get back into my characters' world after months of not thinking about them at all. And I keep getting distracted. While I should be thinking of plot lines, I find myself surfing the web for funny cat videos. Then Mom calls me down to help her with the Christmas decorations.

Ugh, Christmas! What am I going to get everyone? I still don't know about my present for Zane. We wandered into a local gallery in some tiny town once, and Zane had pointed out an exquisite sculpture of a beautiful mermaid sitting on a rock. It had reminded him of a painting he used to be fascinated with as a kid. He even joked that the mermaid looked like me.

The next day, I drove back to the town and bought it for him. I have no idea if he'll like it. I also got him a mini model of a Stirling engine, though I'm having second doubts about that one, too. Rich people are so hard to shop for.

Ugh, so much for getting any writing today. I'll start tomorrow for sure.

"Go ahead, just get it all out."

"How could you have told me? When did it start? Did it hurt? I can't believe you did it before me! **Where** did you do it?"

I have to pause to take a breath. Lauren just stares at me wearily. I doubt she'll answer most of my burning questions, but I so needed to get them out of my system. I've been repressing them so far, not wanting to add to her stress.

There are dark circles under Lauren's eyes. She hasn't puked yet, but she looks exhausted.

"I told you, I'll tell you everything after I talk to the father. Sorry, V. It's such a mess."

All I can do is nod sympathetically. Anyone can see the embarrassment on Lauren's face to be sitting in the waiting room of a women's clinic, waiting to have her pregnancy confirmed on paper so she can apply for government

assistance. Her pride almost wouldn't let her, and I had to remind her it was for the baby.

"It did hurt," she says out of the blue. "In the beginning. But then, it didn't. It was...I thought I would regret it after the first time, but then I felt—I don't know—I wanted to do it again."

I'm speechless for a moment. This is **Lauren**. She doesn't even like it when people brush against her in the hall. Did she turn into a nympho before my eyes?

"Do you love him?" I blurt out.

Lauren appears startled, as if she's never considered the question before. "I don't know," she admits softly, staring down at her hands in her lap. "It's weird to say, but I think it might depend on his reaction."

I scowl, remembering Damon's cowardly cringe. "He'd better act right. Or, I don't care what you say. I'll stomp him. I'll go all Fat Violet on his ass."

That makes her snicker a little. "Thanks, V."

"I'm serious, Lauren." I look her in the eye. "He'd better treat you right."

She just shrugs and shifts uncomfortably in the hard plastic chair.

We are quiet for a while. Someone named Sidney is called back and a scared-looking girl who couldn't have been much older than the twins, stands up with a scowling woman. The pair make their way grimly into the back room.

"Violet?" Lauren says suddenly, diverting my attention.

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever talked to Zane about...well, you said he's been with a lot of people...?"

I grimace at the reminder, but I know what she's getting at. "He gets tested regularly, and he always wears a condom. We talked about that before, when he asked if I was going to go on the pill."

"Are you going to?"

"I know I should, but—ugh—it's so embarrassing!"

Lauren looks around pointedly. "More embarrassing than this?"

"Good point."

Her name is called then. I try to go back with her, but she tells me I'm not going to watch her go pee. So I sit back down, left with my thoughts.

I want to be thinking about Lauren and her predicament, but my mind keeps turning back to Zane.

Should we wait to have sex? There were so many times we were so close, only to be cruelly thwarted. Is that a sign that I'm not ready yet?

Physically, I am **so** there. Really, just thinking about Zane, looking into those amazing dark eyes...I would do anything he asked.

And maybe that's the problem.

Ugh, why does it have to be so complicated? It's just sex, right? Lots of people do it, and it's fine.

Right.

Chapter 26

Saturday morning.

It's just a few hours into my work day when Henry, who is six about 6'5" and two-eighty, slips coming out of the shower and falls right on top of me.

I am squashed. I just barely manage to reach my walkie talkie and call for help. Meanwhile, Henry is trying to get up, using my neck as leverage. I bet even Helize could hear my screams from her room.

"I'm fine," I tell Amy, the nurse for the third time.

She's holding my arm, moving it gently. I wince a little when she rotates it to the left.

"I still want you to take the weekend off," she says. "Get some rest, take hot showers. I don't think you'll have any bruising."

I shake my head. "Honestly, I'm okay. I can even finish the rest of my shift."

"Jody's already on her way, and she asked if we need her for tomorrow. She's dying for more hours, what with Christmas being around the corner." Amy smiles and pats my shoulder. "Besides, you've been looking exhausted lately. Just take it easy."

"Okay," I say reluctantly. "Should I fill out an incident report before I go?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll do one with you."

I go up to tell Helize goodbye before I go. When I tell her what happened, she shocks me by cackling her head off. I don't know what's so funny about a naked old man falling on and crushing her favorite flower. That woman has a weird sense of humor.

I get in my car and text Zane:

Me: I got hurt at work. :(

Zane: Are you okay? What happened?

Me: Old guy fell on me. I'm ok. Good news is I get a 3 day wknd--no school on Monday, either!

He doesn't text me back, so I start my car and head home. Minutes later, my phone beeps with an incoming message. I check it while waiting for the light to change.

Zane: I'm coming to get you now. Plan on staying with me for those days.

My heart lurches excitedly in my chest. He wants me to stay with him! Hell, yes!

On the way home, I think up a suitable lie to tell Mom. She fusses over me when I explain why I'm home so early, trying to get me to go lie down in bed. I tell her about my plan to spend three days with Rachel (yeah, that one) and her family in L.A., and she insists I should stay home and rest instead. Feeling horrible, I tell her I'm fine, and I'm really, really excited to go. **Then** she relents, and even tells me I should visit Zane while I'm there. That has me erupting into hysterical giggles.

I pack maniacally fast, throwing my best underwear and my most favorite outfits into my bag. Then I take a long and thorough shower. Tonight might be the night! I make sure to take care of all my shaving issues.

When I'm certain I'm shiny and silky smooth, I hop out of the shower and put on the daring purple lingerie Zane bought for me. I haven't even tried it on until now, and I have to say, I'm very happy with how it looks on me. I slip on my pink Hawaii shirt and my best pair of jeans over the lingerie, then it's time for makeup.

I text Zane to meet me at Lauren's apartment. He texts me back, saying he's twenty minutes away. Ugh, he must've sped like crazy. He might even beat me there. I stick my bracelet in my jacket pocket so I can put it on once I'm outside, grab my bag, and fly down the stairs.

I just barely have time to explain things to Lauren when there's a knock on her door. Shaking her head, she opens the door to Zane, who looks ridiculously sexy and dangerous in his black leather jacket and faded jeans. His eyes meet mine and the heat in them makes me want to fan myself.

He nods once at Lauren, then looks back at me. “Ready?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I..” I break away from his intense stare and turn to Lauren. “Use my car whenever, and call me if you need me.”

Lauren gives me a small smile. “Thanks. Be careful, okay?”

“I will.”

Zane grabs my bag, and we say our goodbyes to Lauren. Then we’re out the door and walking briskly to his car.

No, it’s a truck—a big, shiny, black one.

“I didn’t want to waste time to go back and get the car,” he says, opening my door for me. “I hope this is okay.”

The cab of the truck is roomy and luxurious. “I don’t mind,” I reply, and smile my thanks when he gives me a little boost to get in.

He sticks my bag in the backseat, then gets in himself. He sits there for a second, staring at the steering wheel. “Are you okay?” he asks finally, starting the engine. “You aren’t hurt?”

I make a face. “Yeah, it’s no big deal.”

I tell him about the shower and Henry losing his grip on the shower handle, and the horror of it all.

Zane squints over at me, the corners of his mouth already twitching. “Wait, you’re telling me he was **naked** when he fell on you?”

I glare at his amused tone. “Well, who comes out of a shower clothed? And it’s not funny!”

“Absolutely not funny. At all,” Zane agrees solemnly, shaking his head.

“Only an immature ass would laugh at that.” And Helize.

“Oh, yeah. A total jackass.” He flashes a brilliant white grin at me.

I can't help but snicker a little. Okay, no one got hurt, and I guess I can see the humor in being trapped under a naked writhing elderly gentleman.

Yeah, that wasn't traumatic at all.

"I have a surprise for you," Zane says. He nods toward the console. "Hit that button over there."

There are literally, like a hundred buttons. I push one and cold air blows in my face.

"Not that one." Zane laughs and pushes another one.

Gypsy-like music suddenly fills the cab. I swivel my head to stare at him.

"Is this the McPigs?"

"Yup. From their new album."

My mouth drops open. "But that hasn't been released yet!"

Zane shrugs modestly. "I know a guy who knows a guy."

I raise my eyebrows. "Are you sure you didn't illegally download it?"

"Who, me?" His eyes widen innocently. Then he laughs. "No, little girl, it wasn't obtained illegally."

I actually don't care how he got it. I can't believe he got it for me! I can't stop smiling as the McPigs shout/sing about seeing John Lennon in a doughnut hole.

When the song ends, Zane lowers the volume. "Hey, Violet? I just wanted you to know--just 'cause you're staying with me for a couple days doesn't mean I expect anything from you. Know what I mean? We don't have to have to do anything if you're not ready."

I just stare ahead, smiling a little. "Then how else are you going to see me in the purple lingerie you got for me?"

Total silence, then:

"Are you wearing it right now?"

"Yup."

Zane swears under his breath, and the truck suddenly accelerates. I gasp and grab the dashboard.

Laughing nervously, I look over at him. "Not in a patient mood, are you?"

"I have been patient," he growls. "Keep teasing me like that, and I'll pull over. You'll find out how little patience I have left."

His rough voice only excites me more, nudging me into dangerous territory. "I could give you a little sneak peek," I say, tugging at the hem of my shirt.

Zane curses again and grips the steering wheel with both hands. "Oh, honey, you are so gonna get it."

"Am I? Finally!"

He shakes his head, and to my relief, he starts laughing. "Why don't you be a good little girl and take a nap? Quit torturing me."

"I think I will take a nap," I murmur, snuggling into my seat.

"Sweet dreams, Violet," he says quietly as my eyes drift shut.

"I'll dream of you, and it will be sweet," I whisper drowsily.

Chapter 27

I've been sleep deprived for a while, and it suddenly catches up on me. Safe and warm in the comfort of Zane's truck, I fall into a deep sleep.

When I finally wake up, we are pulling into what looks like a really fancy hotel designed to look like a medieval castle.

"Where are we?" I ask Zane groggily. I thought we were going to your house?"

"Yeah, well, I thought I'd surprise you." He smiles over at me.

I am mesmerized by the giant colorful fountain in front of the hotel. Then I gasp excitedly. "That's Marvy Marcus and Princess Pippy! We're in Fairytale Castle?!"

"Where every girl is a princess and every boy is a pirate."

I bounce excitedly in my seat. "Zane! Thank you! I never dreamed you'd take me here!"

"It'll be fun," he says bravely. I'm almost convinced he means it.

A valet dressed like a pirate takes the truck away and another matey pops up to try and takes our bags for us. Since we only have my bag and his, Zane declines, carrying them himself. While he checks us in, I admire the Renaissance theme in the elaborate lobby. The ceiling is a sparkling masterpiece, cherubic Fairytale Castle characters frolicking in a twilight sky.

"The penthouse was already booked, but I did manage to get us a suite," Zane says, coming up to me. "Is that okay?"

I put my arms around his waist and press up against him. "It's perfect," I murmur into his chest.

Most people might be bothered by the FC Christmas music playing in the elevator, but I love it. I enthusiastically point out the elaborate castles etched into the elevator, and Zane just smiles at me.

He's being awfully quiet, not taking his eyes off me this whole time. I'm not that naive, I know that guys get that look when they're thinking about sex. He's watching me the way a predator watches its prey right before it's about to pounce. And that weird tension is back—I can feel it sizzling in the air between us, and see it in the strained way Zane is holding himself.

I try my hardest to ignore it, blaming my jittery movements on the excitement of being here. I accidentally bump into him when we exit

the elevator, and I jump back, as if burned. Zane reaches out to steady me, a sexy smirk on his gorgeous face.

Okay, the suite is freaking huge and beautiful. The décor is a cross between an old tavern and a sultan's palace. That may sound like an odd combination, but it works. I love the dark gleaming wood floors and the exotic rugs, and the jewel tones of the elegant furniture. The spacious living room has windows everywhere, with a sliding glass door leading to a balcony with an incredible view of the theme park. I don't stop to admire the view, however. I want to see the bedrooms—is there more than one?

There is. There's the master suite, with a giant fluffy bed and an adjoining bathroom that has a jetted bathtub. The other bedroom has two beds, and the other bathroom has a glass-encased shower big enough for three skinny people. Plenty big for me and Zane. My face becomes too warm when I picture us in there, doing things that have nothing to do with getting clean.

Are we going to stay in separate bedrooms? That seems pretty silly at this point. Zane brings both our bags into the master suite and sets them on the bed. He's been watching me with amusement as I zip around, inspecting every detail of our luxurious accommodations.

Now I find myself standing next to him by the bed, both of us silent and tense. We're staring at each other as though lost in a dream. Why do I suddenly feel so shy and uncertain around him when a couple of hours ago, I was ready to jump him?

Come on, Violet, make a move! This is simply the next step in our relationship, a natural progression that's been a long time coming. And it isn't like we haven't already done other intimate...things before.

Ahh, I shouldn't have thought that—now I'm really blushing!

"What are you thinking?"

Zane's voice startles me. He's got that half-smile on his face as he studies my expression.

"N-nothing," I stammer, turning even more red.

"Yeah? Why is 'nothing' making you blush?"

"I don't know!"

Zane sits down on the edge of the bed and beckons me over. "Come here."

I go over to him and he pulls me into his lap. When I put my arms around his neck and absorb some of his strength and warmth, I feel a tiny bit more relaxed.

"You're over thinking things again," he says, resting his hands on my hips. "Just relax, okay? There's no pressure."

I take a deep breath, inhaling his familiar sexy scent. "I know. But don't you want to...?"

One hand leaves my hip and moves up and down my back, rubbing the tension out. "Let's get something to eat first, maybe check out the park. Okay?"

I can't help the relieved smile that bursts onto my face. "Okay! I'm kind of starving."

I jump off his lap. Zane sighs quietly and runs a hand over his face. Impulsively, I step toward him, nudging into the space between his legs, and place my hands on his shoulders.

"Thank you for being so patient," I say, looking directly into his eyes.

"You don't have to thank me for that."

"Yes, I do. Thank you for this, too." I gesture at our surroundings.

Zane pulls me closer, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Anything for you."

I lean forward to kiss him, and it's only meant to be a light peck. But once I touch his mouth with mine, a wild hunger springs up and overwhelms me. It drowns every little doubt and voice of reason in my head, taking over my limbs. My hands move to cup Zane's face as the kiss deepens and spirals

out of control. He responds by aggressively lifting me up and onto him so that I'm straddling his lap.

A beautiful aching heat rolls slowly through my insides, while the outside trembles with need. I feel desperate, crazy to get closer to him. I yank his shirt off, and hold my arms up so he can return the favor. Then I push him back on the bed so I'm lying on top of him.

I feel all this frantic need, but...I'm not quite sure what to do! My inexperience makes me clumsy when I want to be bold, when I need to—I don't know what I need!

Fortunately, Zane takes over. He rolls us so that he's on top, taking control of the kiss. I move restlessly beneath him, my fingers working to undo his jeans.

Half-laughing, half-groaning, Zane grabs my hands and pins them above my head.

"Stop, Violet," he says breathlessly. "We have to slow down, or I'll hurt you."

"I don't care," I tell him recklessly. "I want you to."

"Shit," he mutters, and briefly closes his eyes. When he opens them again, they burn into mine. "**No**. We're taking it nice and slow, even if it kills me."

Does he not understand I'm the one dying here? I strain against his hold.

"**No**, Zane," I almost sob. "I can't wait another second!"

"Fuck, Violet." He swears roughly. The tortured look on his face is hitting all my good time buttons in just the right spot. "I owe you new underwear," he growls.

"Why?"

"Because I'm ripping this one off you."

Yes, please.

Chapter 28

What happens next is...wow, I don't know how to describe it. It's not anywhere near what I pictured my first time to be. I was expecting a bittersweet love song, full of candlelight and soft sighs.

But that's not me—not with Zane. Maybe it's because it's been building up between us for so long, or maybe that's the way we're both wired—I don't know. Instead of the gentle rain tapping at the windows, I get a beautiful savage hurricane. Instead of my love song, I get hard rock—a screaming outdoor concert in the storm, with pounding bass and feral dancing in the rain and mud. It's pain, mixed with an overwhelming pleasure, and that somehow makes it more amazing.

It couldn't have been more perfect, or more right.

I roll on my side, wincing a little at the tenderness. Zane immediately turns to me, concerned.

"You okay?"

"Oh, yeah." I smile up at him, giddy with an overload of emotions.

Zane laughs reluctantly. He rubs a hand over his face. "Damn it, I've never been that rough before—not even with girls I know can take it. With you... I lost control." He reaches out and smooths back a lock of my hair. "I'm sorry."

I prop myself up on one elbow and peer at him. "Wait. You're admitting sex with me is different than with any other girl, and that it was so hot, you couldn't control yourself. And you're **apologizing**? Dude."

Zane stares up at the ceiling. "I've created a monster," he mutters.

I snicker smugly, nudging his arm. "Not bad for a virgin, right? So, am I the best you ever had?"

He smirks back at me, tugging the sheet from my tight grip. "Yes, Violet Mercer, you are a sex goddess. You're the best I've ever had. I think I went

deaf there for a while."

Embarrassed, but laughing, I try to wrestle the sheet back from him. "Is it because of my smokin' hot body?"

Zane suddenly rolls so that he's half lying on top of me. He caresses my face with one hand. "It's because of this." He dips his head down and covers my mouth with his. "And this." He moves his hand over my heart. "This," he whispers. Then his hands trails down, over my stomach, and past it.

I gasp and lock eyes with him. Unspoken words pass between us. He lowers his forehead to mine, and we stay connected like that for one precious moment.

"What do you wanna do now?" he asks lazily, breaking the spell. "We could go down to the park and grab something to eat."

I run my hands up and down his smooth hard chest. "Or," I say. "We could eat up here, then go down later."

Zane chuckles, low and sexy. "I like the way you think. Tell you what—why don't I run you a hot bath, then I'll take a quick shower, and order us some food? What do you want?"

"Meat," I say promptly. "You know what I like. And I'd rather have a shower."

"Trust me. You'll feel better after a bath."

I frown at his back as he gets up and disappears into the bathroom. A minute later, I hear the sound of running water.

Why would I need a bath? I ache a little, but not that bad. Zane's just being overly cautious. It's sweet.

Then I try to stand and—okay, ow. Wrapping the sheet around me, I grab some clothes from my bag and carefully hobble to the bathroom. Zane says something to me, but I'm too distracted by his incredible body to understand. He just laughs and shakes his head.

After helping me in, he leaves to shower in the other bathroom. I lean my head back against a convenient little ledge and close my eyes, sighing in content.

I don't know where the tears come from, but once they start, I can't stop them. I sob quietly into my hands, not even sure why I'm crying. I just had the most amazing experience of my life, so why do I feel this way? How do I feel? Not happy—that's not the right emotion. Ecstatically miserable? Joy mixed with razor blades? I can't explain it. I feel like I could soar through the clouds, but it costs me dearly.

I'm in love with Zane—of course I know that. Just like I know I can't keep him. The distance and my insecurities...it's only a matter of time before they tear us apart. How long before he gets tired of me? I mean, he never said he loved me, never talked about our future. He doesn't owe me anything. He doesn't have to love me back. No matter how much it hurts to...

Never mind. I'll take Zane any way I can get him. I just want to live in the moment. No regrets.

That's the secret of life, right?

Zane comes in to give me some Tylenol and a glass of water, and to let me know the food will be here in twenty minutes. Did I mention how good he looks just out of the shower? His damp hair looks almost black, and that freshly showered smell clings to his skin.

He's wearing a pair of black sweatpants that hang a little from his hips, and no shirt. He should never wear shirts, or pants, or...

Ugh. Need to get my head out of the gutter.

I get out of the tub, feeling invigorated and refreshed. After vigorously drying myself off with a fluffy towel, I put on my hot pink bunny panties and a green silk robe—perfect attire for lounging around with your hot boyfriend.

Our food is here by the time I'm done in the bathroom. We sit on the ground next to the windows in the living room. I've got a huge juicy bacon

burger with steak fries while Zane has his usual healthy crap—some kind of wheatgrass and cabbage wrap things. Blah.

I'm starving! It's almost three in the afternoon, and this is only thing I've had to eat all day. Zane doesn't care that I eat like a pig—he seems to enjoy my appreciation of food, thank goodness. I don't stuff my face like I used to, but I do like to eat.

"So, am I ever going to see your place?" I ask him after taking a big drink of water.

Zane hesitates, glancing out the window. "I was thinking we'd go by there on Monday before I take you home."

"Really?" I bounce excitedly. "That'd be awesome."

"Yeah." His smile is stiff, but I pretend not to notice. Could he be less enthusiastic?

I decide to change the subject. "So," I say, pointing a fry at him. "What do you want for Christmas?"

"You."

I make a face and throw my fry at him. "I'm serious."

"So am I." He tosses my fry back at me. "You've got Christmas break coming up, right? Spend it with me."

I start laughing, but when I see the utterly serious look on his face, my laughter fades. "You must be joking. My mom would never..."

"I'll talk to her," Zane says, sitting up from his sprawled position. "She'll say yes."

My eyes widen. "You're going to tell her about us?"

He smirks slightly. "You don't think she already knows?"

"That we're together like this?" I wave my hand at our casual state of dress. "She'll freak out! I'll be grounded for the first time in my life!"

"What, you think she expects you to be her good little girl forever?" Zane takes a swig from his water bottle. "Look, I'll take care of it, okay? If you want to stay with me, I'll make it work."

My heart stumbles when I look at him. "Of course I want to. That would be so...incredible."

I love the way Zane's face lights up. He leans toward me, his eyes darkening. "You're incredible. Come here."

I immediately crawl over to him. The food forgotten, we start kissing. He tugs on the sash of my robe, pulling it open. When he glances down, he bursts out laughing.

"Wait—turn around. Is that...?"

I have no idea what he's talking about, but I turn so that my back is to him. He slides my robe off my shoulders, then I feel his hand on my butt.

"There's that rabbit." He chuckles, sounding way too amused.

I whirl around with a gasp. "You remember?!"

"How could I forget? Hell, I had dreams about those panties."

"What kind of dreams?"

Zane grins wickedly, patting my bunny's face. "I'll show you later."

My mind goes back to that embarrassing incident. That was the day Matt broke up with me. I remember being totally devastated, crying like a fool. Ugh, then bumping into Zane—or Hot Guy at the time—and how mortified I was at a gorgeous stranger seeing me at my blubbering worst.

Who could have ever predicted that I would end up like this, with said gorgeous stranger, and that Matt's betrayal would be nothing more than a distant memory?

Shaking my head, I smile at Zane. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"If I didn't know I'd see you again, I'd have gotten your number."

"Aww, that's so...wait, what?" I stare at him, puzzled. "How'd you **know** you'd see me again?"

He leans back against on his elbows, regarding me with a teasing look. "I recognized you from the fifty pictures your mom showed me of her beautiful daughter, Violet."

"Really? Ugh! Why didn't you say something?"

"And miss that look on your face when I showed up?" Zane smirks.

"That's just great," I mutter. I slip my robe back on and tie the sash up uncomfortably tight.

"Come on, Violet, don't be mad." He grabs my arm and pulls me against his bare chest, so I'm half lying on him.

I snuggled up against him, resting my head on his shoulder. "I'm not. Just horribly embarrassed. Again."

Zane chuckles, moving his hand over my hair. "You know," he begins after a short silence. "I told myself to stay away from you."

I tilt my head back to look at him. "Why?"

"When I first saw your picture, I wanted you," he admits. "Then that day I found you crying and stuck in a door...you were so sweet and vulnerable. And then you showed up on my doorstep. I didn't want to hurt you, so I tried to keep my distance."

He's smiling wryly down at me. I poke him in the chest. "And that night in the pool? Was that keeping your distance?"

His smile gets bigger. "Oh, that."

"Yeah, **that**."

"That was...an experiment."

"An experiment?" I repeat incredulously. "Are you kidding me?"

“Hey, it’s all good now, right?” I can feel the vibrations of his quiet laughter, and it tickles.

“More than okay,” I admit. A yawn escapes me, and I stretch languidly against him. “What time is it?”

Zane reaches for his phone on the table a few inches from our heads. He snags it and squints at the screen. “Three-fifteen.”

I sit up, suddenly full of energy. “Do you want to check out Fairytale Castle now?”

“Sure you’re up to it?” he asks lazily.

“Yeah, I feel great! Let’s go.”

Shaking his head at my enthusiasm, Zane gets up. We clean up our little picnic mess, then get dressed. I watch in giddy fascination as my boyfriend(!) puts on a gray shirt and changes into jeans. It’s such a shame to watch that drool-worthy body of his disappear behind clothes, but the long-sleeved fitted shirt does cling to his muscled torso in a tantalizing way, and his butt in those jeans...mmm...

Zane catches me staring and throws a shirt at me. Then, to return the favor, he crosses his arms and watches while I get dressed in a soft pink sweater and black pants. His attention makes me nervous, and the sweater ends up in a tangle, with my arms stuck over my head. Then he has to help me fix it, which is just my luck. What if I ever tried to be sexy—like do a striptease for him? I would trip and end up in the hospital with my bra wrapped around my neck.

Yeah, that sounds about right.

Chapter 29

I love Fairytale Castle! It's like an elaborate Renaissance fair, with rides and balloons and cotton candy, and wandering minstrels, and...oh, everything! Of course since it's December, Ye Olde Towne Square is adorned with Christmas decorations galore: Christmas trees, colorful wreaths, twinkling lights—everything to make a little fairy princess at heart happy! Patrons are encouraged to dress the part, and we pass by countless sparkling princesses, seductive wenches, dashing little pirates, and...vampires? Really?

Okay, I know this is going to sound really dorky, but I've always wanted to come here with a boyfriend. Matt never wanted to go—he never wanted to go anywhere. Not even when I told him about coming here in my pre-teens and dreaming that I was here with a gorgeous guy who I could hang on to during the scary parts of the rides, or lean against while standing in line. I'd seen other couples do it before, and it just seemed so romantic to me.

Well, I'm glad Matt always turned me down, because now I'm here with Zane, and it couldn't be more perfect. We are standing in line for the Pirates' Cove ride—my favorite roller coaster—and he has me encircled in the warmth of his strong arms. While I'm eating cotton candy! Could life get any better?

I notice a girl with braces watching us with a wistful expression on her face. She's a couple of people behind us, and appears to be with her rowdy family. A freckled little boy keeps whacking her rear end with a toy sword, and she's trying desperately to ignore him.

Her eyes meet mine. I try to silently convey my sympathy to her with a smile. She's too busy staring at Zane to notice me. Figures.

"I love cotton candy!" I turn around in Zane's arms to smile up at him.
"The only thing I hate is the sticky fingers."

I hold my fingers up, and he takes my hand and gently sucks on each one. My eyes go blurry at the tingling sensations he evokes.

"Mm," he says, grinning. "I love your sticky fingers."

"Gross," I laugh, tossing the rest of my cotton candy into a nearby trash bin.

The line inches forward. I have to tug Zane to get him to move. When I look at him, I find him staring up at the giant structure that houses one of the scariest roller coasters ever, a tense look on his handsome face.

"Are you okay?" I ask, concerned.

"Fine."

His curt answer has me frowning. "No, you're not. That little muscle in your jaw is jumping. That means you're upset about something."

Zane glances down at me. "No, it doesn't."

"Yes, it does."

"Nope."

I study his face closely, while he avoids my meeting my eyes. Is he pale beneath his golden tan? I think so.

"Wait, are you scared of roller coasters?"

"No," he answers quickly. Then he frowns, staring off into the distance. "I wouldn't say 'scared'. I just don't like the part before the big drop. That slow build up, the anticipation...it's annoying."

Big strong Zane O' Connor afraid of roller coasters? Cute!

"Don't worry," I reassure him, taking his hand. "I'll protect you."

"Thanks, Violet," he replies dryly.

"We don't have to go on it if you don't want to."

"Oh, don't you worry about me." Zane smirks. "It's not that serious."

I can't the giggle that escapes me. I turn away to hide it, and that's when I notice the girl with the braces.

"Ugh," I mutter, facing Zane again. "That girl over there is taking pictures of you with her phone. She's been staring at you this whole time."

Zane doesn't bother looking, he just angles his face away. "Don't tell me you're jealous."

I scowl at the girl. "Of course not, but it's rude! She's probably texting all her little friends, 'oh, look at the super hot guy standing next to the dumpy girl.' Ugh!"

He squints down at me. "Did you just call yourself dumpy?"

"She's probably thinking that, the little bitch. Do you want me to go over and say something to her?"

"Easy, tiger." Zane grins and rubs my shoulders. The line is moving."

Grumbling, I move forward. I catch the girl's eye and glare at her. Frightened, she quickly turns around.

Great, now I feel bad. And completely immature. What's wrong with me? Remembering Helize's words, I inwardly groan.

Guard my heart. Yeah, right.

I am having so much fun right now. Zane goes on every ride with me, not complaining once. Not even when I make him go on the Princesses' Carousel. I buy him a dorky canary yellow shirt that reads 'Fairytale Castle V.I.P'. and dare him to wear it. He just shrugs and puts it on right over his long-sleeved shirt, not self-conscious at all. And he looks hot in it! Of course, when I put on the same shirt, I look like a big-breasted circus clown.

We eat dinner at Pirate Dan's, a restaurant on this big wooden boat sailing in a man-made lake. I have clam linguini and Zane has a salad of some kind. The ambience is perfect—the dark dining room lit by the soft glow of big

Chinese lanterns, and the music is whimsical and romantic. Pirates and wenches roam around, making sure our drinks are always filled.

After dinner, we go up to the deck and kiss and kiss under the stars. Then Zane takes my hand, towing me back to the hotel with breathless urgency.

Afterwards, we stand at the balcony, watching a special fireworks show. As I watch bursts of color light up the night sky, warm and secure in Zane's arms, I finally let go of my fears and doubts, and allow myself to be really truly happy.

No regrets.

Chapter 30

We don't get much sleep that night, so when I finally get up, it's already ten in the morning. I stretch my whole body feeling wonderfully achy and content.

Zane leans over and kisses my bare stomach. "Wanna grab a shower together?"

I laugh and pull the sheet back up. "No, Yeah, separate ones. I'm kind of...achy from last night."

"Sorry," he says, grinning unrepentantly. "Separate showers, it is. Then we'll get breakfast. Sound good?"

I smile back at him. "Sounds great."

As I'm getting clothes from my bag, Zane's phone rings. Scowling down at the screen, he mutters, "It's work. I need to answer."

He walks out of the room, mumbling a curt greeting to whoever called him.

I can't stop smiling right now. Last night was amazing. If I could wake up next to Zane for the rest of my life, I wouldn't need anything else.

If we got married...

Shut up, Violet. No silly day dreams. Just live in the moment.

Shaking my head at myself, I shuffle into the bathroom. I soak in the tub for a little while until my growling stomach convinces me to get out and get dressed.

Ugh, I forgot a bra. I wrap a towel around myself, grab my clean clothes, and head back to the bedroom. After making sure Zane is still in the shower, I drop my towel and rummage in my bag for a clean bra.

Did I not bring one? Why did I bring fifteen pairs of panties?

Oh, great, I just knocked Zane's bag off the bed. And it's open, so all his things tumble onto the floor.

I pick his bag up and carefully replace the neatly folded clothes. There's something half-under the bed. It looks like a thick manuscript. Curious, I pick it up, and turn it over to the front.

Hm. The title reads, "Falling for the Ghost of You" and there are two neon green sticky notes attached under it. Frowning, I scan over the elegant scrawl on the first note:

Aiden,

The part of Logan was made for you! He's a rock star who wants to lead a normal life, and enrolls in high school, incognito. He ends up falling for a sweet and brainy girl. The writer is Jennifer Kingsley, and it's being

backed by Noah Dickensen! Also, Chazz says Alaina is in if you are. Read it and tell me what you think!

Aiden? What the hell? I read the second note.

You were right about the ending and that scene in the cafeteria. Talked to Drew and she said it was negotiable. We could discuss the change—if you ever answer your damn phone! Or are you too deep in your role as "Zane O' Connor" in Nowheresville? Drew needs an answer a.s.a.p. Please keep your phone on!!

P.S., you were right, I totally didn't recognize you! The dark hair and eyes are hot!

My hands shake so badly, the script falls from my hands and lands on the carpet with a soft thump.

It can't be what I'm thinking. There must be a reasonable explanation. There is no way Zane is...**no way**.

Zane's wallet is right there on the dresser. I've never touched it—never actually went through any of his things. I float to it as if in a dream. It takes me a couple of tries to simply get it open.

A bunch of black credit cards—all with the name "Crosswinds Corporation" on them. I find his driver's license—Zane O' Connor. But the picture is of scruffily gorgeous superstar Aiden Cross.

I stare disbelievingly at the picture. I've never seen his license before—why would I have? The longish dark blonde hair, those extraordinary sky blue eyes...I've seen his face countless times on television, magazine covers...all over Kim's locker.

He looks like Bill this way, I realize faintly. The hair dye, the contacts...all for what? To research a role for a movie?

Is that what this is? Is that what I am? Research? It makes sense now. Zane—Aiden—was using me. Of course he was. I **knew** there was something he was hiding, and like an idiot, I never pursued any of my suspicions. Because, deep down, I trusted him.

What an idiot I am.

I stand there, frozen, until the sounds of the shower turning off propels me into action. I put Zane's wallet back, and his script, then I frantically throw on something to wear.

I need to get out of here. I don't even want to look at him, or be in the same room as him. I have to go.

I grab my things together, not caring if I missed anything. Shoes—where the hell, are they?!

I spot them under a chair. I grab them and sling my bag over my shoulder, and race towards the door.

The bathroom door is just opening. I don't stop. I reach the door, throwing it open, then carefully shutting it behind me. I don't want him to know I've left. Not yet.

Heart pounding so fast, I'm breathless and dizzy, I slap at the elevator's down button. Finally, the doors slide open. When I'm pressing the lobby button, I hear my name being called.

I look up to see Zane running full speed down the hall, shirtless and shoeless. He is coming so fast, he might catch me before the doors close. I stab the close button over and over. The doors slide shut with Zane just an arm's length away.

I guess I'm crying. Hot tears fall relentlessly from my eyes as I sag against the wall.

The look on his face—confused, frustrated, a little angry. He doesn't know I know.

I don't remember getting out of the elevator and going through the lobby. Everything is becoming increasingly foggy. I just find myself standing in front of the hotel all of a sudden.

A blue and white car stops in front of me. Numbly, I open the back door and slide into the seat.

"Can I help you?" the dark haired driver asks, swiveling his head to look at me.

"I need to get home to Hidden Cove."

"Lady, this isn't a cab."

Oh. Great.

"Sorry," I mutter, quickly sliding back out.

This time I make sure the car says cab on it before I get in.

Rico's Cab Service. Wonderful. I climb into the backseat of the tiny white car.

"I need to get to Hidden Cove. Please hurry," I say to the grandmotherly woman behind the wheel.

She frowns at me through the rearview mirror. "Hidden Cove, you say? That's two hours away. I don't really..."

She trails off, studying me harder. "It's going to be quite a bit of money," she warns.

"That's fine, I have it. Just—please, go!"

Zane has just appeared out the doors. He spots me just as we are pulling away.

It's close. He manages to thump on my window before my cab driver accelerates and we leave him behind.

I can't help glancing back to look at him. He's standing in the road, breathing heavily, watching me go.

I turn away from the sight of him, squeezing my eyes shut. The pain in my heart is crushing.

"That you boyfriend?" Grandmotherly Lady asks. "What'd he do to you?"

"Nothing," I say, my eyes still closed. "It's just—he's...not who I thought he was."

"They never are, dear."

I ignore my phone's constant beeping, letting me know I have missed calls and text messages. I've been on the internet, looking up Aiden Cross. According to pictures and various gossip sites, Aiden Cross and beautiful young actress Alaina Skye are a hot item. **God**. According to one article, the picture of Aiden and Alaina, laughing with their arms around each other, was taken just a couple of days ago. I want to vomit.

There are pictures of him with many other gorgeous girls as well. At clubs, restaurants...on the red carpet. He's caught in one picture with his hand on a supermodel's ass in one. He makes headlines when he's pictured sporting a sexy new short-haired clean-shaven look. His hair is blonde in all the photos, his eyes that vivid swimming pool blue.

I try to look for the Zane I know in the pictures of the famous singer, but I don't find him. I'm looking for someone who doesn't exist.

I'm so cold. My insides are frozen, and my chest aches. The rest of me is numb. I don't know...what am I going to do?

I scroll through my messages, and my heart gives a jolt when I see I have fifteen calls and texts from Mom.

He called her?

Shit! I send a quick text to her, letting her know I'm okay and on my way home. I send Lauren the same text. She's texted me about a billion times, too. The rest are from Zane. I erase all his messages without even looking at them, then I turn my phone off.

I spend the rest of the ride looking out the window, not seeing anything, and trying desperately to not feel anything.

I don't know where to go once I'm back in Hidden Cove. Not home. God, no. Not Lauren's, either. I'm not ready to talk. Not yet.

I end up having the cab drop me off at the beach. It's the only place I can think of. I drop down into the sand, and just stare at the waves.

I'm there for a long time. When I come back to myself, the sun is setting over the water in a dazzling display of color.

I wipe my cheeks and discover they are cold and wet with tears. I need to go—or pee in the ocean.

Before I leave, I turn my phone on and call Lauren.

"V, where are you?! Are you okay?"

She sounds panicked. Did she talk to Zane?

I start crying again. "Lauren, can I come over. Zane—he—"

"He's here," she interrupts me. "He's been standing in the hallway for hours now. What **happened**, V? He looks destroyed."

"No!" I shake my head emphatically. "I can't...I don't want to see him!"

Lauren sighs. "You have to. He said he's not leaving until you talk to him--in person. If he stays, we'll get in trouble. You know how the manager is."

I let my head fall back in frustration, tears pooling in my eyes. "Okay," I say into the phone. "I'll—I guess I'll be there."

Damn Zane. I don't want to do this now. I'm not ready to face him.

Aiden Cross. This has got to be some kind of dream.

Chapter 31

I walk to Lauren's from the beach. By the time I reach the complex, I'm exhausted—physically and emotionally. I'm sure I look horrible. My eyes are gritty from crying, and my hair is a windblown mess. I guess I don't really care.

I see him before he sees me. He's leaning against the wall directly across from Lauren's door, arms crossed over his chest.

Lauren said he looked destroyed, and I'm shocked to see she's right. Zane's face is pale, dark circles under his eyes. He looks as exhausted as I feel.

His head suddenly comes up at my cautious approach. His eyes seem to burn into mine. "Violet."

He reaches for me, but I flinch away.

"Don't touch me!"

I mean to snap, but my voice comes out high and panicked. I cringe away from him. He is not the guy I sat in the sand with and talked for hours and hours with. He's not the one I had the most incredible night of life with. He's a stranger—an incredibly famous...**liar**.

"You know," Zane says. His voice is quiet, emotionless.

I nod stiffly. "Good bye, Aiden."

I try to walk past him to Lauren's door, but he grabs me and cages me against the wall.

Leaning down to look me in the eye, he speaks urgently. "Violet, I am so damn sorry you found out like this. I was going to tell you—"

"It's okay," I interrupt, turning my head away. "You were using me—I get it. I should have realized. It's done, it's over with, so just leave."

Zane exhales loudly in frustration. "No, that's not what this is about. You and me, it's—look, can we go somewhere and talk?"

"No!" I shake my head, suddenly furious. "I'm not going anywhere with you!"

I'm too loud. Mrs. Jacobs' door creaks open next to us. She peers out through the crack, concerned.

"You okay, Violet?" she calls.

Zane backs up an inch. I manage to force a smile on my face. "I'm fine, thank you. Sorry about the noise."

Mrs. Jacobs frowns, with a suspicious look for Zane. "Holler if you need me," she says before she shuts the door.

"Let's get out of here," he mutters, putting a hand on my waist.

I pull away. "I'm not going with you. I don't know you. I don't **know** you!"

He glares down at me, frustrated. "You knew me really well last night, when you were screaming out my name."

I gasp, then I slap him—hard as I can. We are both stunned. My palm is stinging. I rub it gently against my pant leg.

His expression darkening, Zane nods slightly. "I deserved that. I'm sorry," he acknowledges grimly. Then he leans closer, his mouth brushing against my ear.

"I haven't changed. I'm still me. You **do** know me, the real me. I'm the same guy who found you stuck in a doorway, crying, with your pants split—the same one who was inside of you all night."

His voice is low and fierce. I tremble violently at his words and the memories they stir up.

"Please just let me go," I plead. The tears are falling faster and faster now. "Just stay away from me!"

"I can't." His forehead touches mine gently, but he is grim with determination. "Come with me...hear me out. I'm not going anywhere until you do."

I glare up at him, pushed past my limit. "Why are you doing this to me?! You've had your laughs. Just—go! Leave me alone!"

He shakes his head, his expression implacable. "Three more seconds, and I'm carrying you out of here. One."

I try to wiggle away, but he has me pinned with his body. "Someone will call the cops," I threaten.

"I don't give a fuck. Two."

What choice do I have? More people are starting to peek out their doors, and it won't be long before someone complains. I don't want to get Lauren in trouble.

"Fine," I say stiffly. "I need to tell Lauren."

Zane moves back so I can step away. As I approach her apartment, the door swings open. Lauren stands in the doorway, her expression confirming that she's been listening in—which is fine. The twins are crowding behind her, red heads bobbing eagerly—so not fine.

"You okay, V?" Lauren shoots a quick glance at Zane, then back to me.

I nod. "I'll call you later. If my mom calls you, can you tell her I'll be home very soon?"

"Sure. Call me if you need me."

She gives me a meaningful look. I just shrug. When she shuts the door, I turn to Zane.

"Let's go."

I silently follow him to his truck, refusing to look at him. I don't even want to breathe too deeply and inhale his soap and fresh laundry scent, because it always turns me on. I'm appalled I can still feel that way about him, but I guess I can't help those teenage hormones.

"Go to Taco Bill's," I blurt out as he starts the engine.

Zane stares down at the steering wheel, his jaw clenching. "That's hardly a private place to talk."

"I don't want to be alone with you," I say bluntly.

"What, I'm a psycho killer now?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "I don't trust you. Because you **lied** to me."

Zane doesn't respond. We drive to the restaurant in total silence. It's so surreal to me. I am in the car with **Aiden Cross**, my favorite singer. I had sex with him. How could I have not known? How **could** I have known? Who would guess that their boyfriend is actually a famous rock star? That doesn't happen in real life. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that this would be his big secret.

Ha, if I thought me and Zane didn't stand a chance before...yeah, there goes that dream, right out the window.

I'm so stupid.

Zane pulls into a parking spot at Taco Bill's, but neither of us get out. Why did I pick Taco Bill's? Looking out the window, I spot Matt's car, and Kim's. Kim is, like, Aiden Cross' biggest fan. If she saw Zane up close, she might guess his secret identity.

I feel dumb for saying that. Like he's a superhero or something.

"You must've thought I was so stupid," I say, my hand on the door.

He looks up at me. "What?" he says warily.

I give a bitter little chuckle. "All those times I accused you of flirting with receptionists, waitresses, and cousins...when you were really screwing

around with actresses like Alaina Skye, and—and—supermodels."

"Alaina and I are just friends."

"Right." I snort. "That's why there are pictures of the two of you with your hands all over each other."

"No, those were photo ops arranged by our agents for publicity," he growls through clenched teeth. "Like all the other pictures you probably saw. I don't even know most of those girls' names."

"Right," I say, rolling my eyes. "But then I guess you don't have to know someone's name to put your hands all over their ass."

He leans across and takes my hand in his. "I haven't been with anyone since that first day we went to lunch together."

I snatch my hand away. "Why should I believe you? You lied to me about everything. You don't even work at Cronus, do you? Was it all research for your big movie role? The fake name, the appearance...us?"

Zane is shaking his head. "No! I turned that down a while ago. My agent was trying to change my mind--she snuck that script in my bag to get me to reconsider. That's not even why I came to Hidden Cove."

"Why did you come, then?"

"I don't know." He sighs and glances out the windshield. "I guess I wanted a break from being me. Don't get me wrong—I've got the best job in the world, doing what I love. But it doesn't afford much privacy. Hell, I get a haircut, and it's front page news."

"When I'm Aiden Cross, I'm always putting on a show, you know? I'm whoever my fans want me to be, and that's fine—I get that it's part of the job. I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't love it. They can have Aiden Cross—he's all theirs. He's not real. That's why I came here—I was starting to lose myself in all the hype. I needed to find the real me again. Then I found you."

I look away from the intensity in his face. I tug at my skirt nervously.

"Jenna knew," I say softly. "You told **her**."

"Jenna was there from the beginning," Zane says. "When I was twelve and getting all kinds of shit, my dad decided we needed a new start. We moved from Seattle to L.A. I started school with a new name and a clean slate. Aiden is my middle name, O' Connor is my mother's maiden name. I was Aiden Cross when I met Jenna. Then someone took a video of me singing at a party, and put it online. I've been Aiden Cross since."

Zane gives a little shrug, like it's no big deal that he was discovered as a kid and became an internet sensation overnight.

"You could have told me!" I burst out. "You should have told me. I mean—god, I told you—I told you **everything**! I trusted you, and all this time...you didn't trust me with your little secret."

"I did trust you—I do. No, look at me, Violet!" He grabs my hand, but this time doesn't let go. "I'm so sorry I hurt you. But please believe me. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to lose you. I thought I could have it all. I fucked up."

I'm a mess right now, choking on my tears. I desperately try to hold onto my control, but I just can't. My heart is breaking.

"Were you ever going to tell me?!"

Zane looks pained. Does he feel sorry for me now? Is that what this is about?

"I was going to tell you when I took you to my place."

I yank my hand away from his grasp and angrily wipe my eyes. "Then what, huh? 'Thanks for the memories, it was good while it lasted'?"

"No." He leans back in his seat and sighs. "I was going to tell you everything and beg for your forgiveness. You were supposed to say it's okay, you understand, and you love me, anyway—because you know the real me. Then I was going to ask you to stay with me, because I am **so** in love with you."

My heart gives one big thump before it falls to the floor and shatters into a million pieces. Shaking my head, I whisper, "Don't say that to me. Not now."

"Why not? You wanted the truth, right?"

"So, what now? This—it won't work. **We** can't work. What am I suppose to do? Follow you around to your concerts and watch while girls flash their breasts at you? God, you thought I was jealous before..."

"None of that matters!" Zane runs his hands through his hair, frustrated. "You're the only thing that matters. Violet, please....give us a chance. I can't lose you."

"You lied to me!" I sob. "I don't know what's real."

"**This** is real."

He pulls me close and kisses me, hard and deep.

I kiss him back, helpless to resist. I climb onto his lap, sinking into him, shutting everything out—all the lies, the millions of reasons why we can't be together—for a few precious seconds.

"Tell me you love me," Zane says roughly, between our desperate kisses.

"I love you," I whisper. "But I can't be with you."

I pull myself away from him, and it's the hardest thing I've had to do.

"I don't want to see you again...Aiden."

I reach blindly for the handle. Zane grabs my hand.

"Violet—"

"No!"

I twist away from him, and open the door. Refusing to look at him, I slip out of his truck and walk towards the restaurant.

Don't look back.

Before I go in, I swipe my hands over my face to wipe away the tear tracks. I don't care how much of a mess I am, but I don't want them to see me cry. Not again.

Taco Bill's is super crowded, of course. I spot Matt and Rachel, sitting on the same side of a booth. Matt sees me and waves. He seems shocked at my appearance. I just nod at him and look for Kim.

She's sitting at a big table with a bunch of her giggly friends. I catch her eye and wave her over. She comes immediately.

"You okay, Violet? It looks like you've been crying."

I shake my head and force a smile to my face. "Kim, can you do me a favor? Can you take me to Lauren's?"

"Um, sure. Just let me tell the gang, okay?"

Before we leave, I hesitate by the door, peering out at the parking lot. I am relieved to see that Zane's truck is gone.

I'm never going to see him again.

Chapter 32

Kim let's me cry on the car ride to Lauren's in silence, for which I am immeasurably grateful. I ask her to come up with me, and she does.

Lauren is surprised to see the both of us, but quickly invites us in. She orders the twins to go to their friend's apartment downstairs, and they obey her no-nonsense tone.

I tell Lauren and Kim everything. Kim's eyes grow wider and wider.

"You had sex with **Aiden Cross**?!"

I nod, hugging my knees to my chest. "Except I didn't know it was him at the time. I thought he was...I don't know. Now I'm, like, mortified. It changes everything, you know?"

"For sure," Kim agrees, looking star struck.

"But he's still the same person, V." Lauren twists a lock of hair around her finger. "And he said he loves you."

"Yeah, but..." I frown, staring off into space. "I don't care what he said. He didn't care enough about me to tell me the truth. And what about all those pictures of him with other women? Kim, do you know if he's dating anyone?"

"There are rumors about him and Alaina Skye," Kim admits. "But neither side has officially confirmed it. And there's never been any pics of them kissing." She gives a little laugh. "Believe me, I'd know."

I lapse into a miserable silence. Lauren carefully eases down onto the floor beside me. "So, can you forgive him for lying to you about who he really is?"

"You really should," Kim enthuses, patting me on the shoulder. "Dude, he's **Aiden Cross**! I would give my left boob to go out with him."

I can't help but laugh at that, even though the image it evokes is disturbing.

"Seriously, though," Kim says, looking me in the eye. "I can see why he did it. I bet he gets sick of all the little fan girls—like me—throwing themselves at him. You're probably the most normal relationship he's had in years. Maybe he wanted to keep it like that for as long as he could."

"Insightful," Lauren murmurs, impressed.

Kim grins and shrugs. "I saw a couple of movies like this."

"Yeah, it **is** like a plot out of some lame movie," I say. "That's why--I just can't wrap my head around it. It's so surreal, I just don't know what to think. But he **lied**. Not about something stupid, like what his favorite color is. He lied to me about his identity! How can I forgive him for that?"

"There are all kinds of reasons why people have secret identities," Lauren says, in a not-so-subtle reminder that I have one, too.

I let my meaningful look convey to her that it's totally not the same thing. I use a pseudonym for my writing—I don't fake a whole other life. And besides, I told Zane about my writing. So, there.

"It doesn't even matter whether I can forgive him or not, guys," I say finally, resting my chin on my knees. "It can't ever work out between us, anyway. It's stupid to even hope."

"No, Violet!" Kim groans. "Don't give up."

Lauren surprisingly agrees. "There's always a way to make it work," she says. "If you love him, you would find a way."

"Yeah, well, if he loved me, he would have told me the truth."

I climb wearily to my feet. "Time to go home and face the music," I mutter.

"Where did that expression come from, anyway?" Kim wonders. "You would think that would be a good thing, right? Who doesn't like music?"

Lauren shrugs. "Maybe because it sounds better than 'face the year long grounding,' or 'face the dragon mother.'"

"Face the end of your life."

"Thanks for joking about it," I say. "I'll let you know if I make it out alive. Maybe."

Face the dragon mother. Ha. More like gentle lamb mother. I bet she doesn't even raise her voice. Maybe a quiet reprimand, between bone-crushing hugs.

Ten agonizing minutes later...

"--never ever leaving this house again! Is that clear?!"

I cringe back into the chair. "Crystal."

Mom takes a deep breath. Clearly, screaming at the top of her lungs drains her.

"—never have dreamed you would be capable of being so irresponsible! What were you thinking?!"

I grimace at her disappointed tone. "All I can say is I'm sorry. I don't have a good excuse, and I deserve whatever you decide to do with me."

Mom just looks at me for a long minute. Then she sighs and kind of collapses onto the couch. "Did you sleep with him, Violet?"

"Well, Mom, there wasn't much sleeping involved."

She groans. "Oh, Violet! Really...ugh. Okay, were you at least safe? You used protection?"

"Um...yes?"

"That doesn't sound very convincing. Are you sure?"

I squirm uncomfortably. We definitely did the first three times, but the fourth...it was really early in the morning, and I don't remember...

"I'm sure," I say to Mom, because I want to spare her the gory details.

She covers her eyes with her hands. "It wouldn't be realistic of me to think this won't happen again. So I think we should discuss birth control options. And Zane should be here, too. I'd definitely like to have a talk with him."

"I don't—you don't have to worry about that," I say quickly. "We aren't together anymore. We broke up."

Mom opens her mouth to say something, changes her mind, then opens it again. "Oh, honey. He dumped you, huh? I'm so—"

"Uh, no," I interrupt. "If anything, I...it was—it was mutual. The distance thing, you know. It was too hard. Why would you assume I was the one who got dumped?"

She flushes. "Oh, no, I didn't mean to—I'm sorry, sweetie. You seemed so upset, so I thought—it's not that I think he's out of your league or anything —"

"No, I—it's okay. Can we talk about my punishment and stuff tomorrow? I'm really tired right now."

Mom searches my face intently. Finally, she comes over to me and puts one hand on my cheek. "Okay. We'll talk tomorrow."

Thank god. I don't know how much longer I can hold it together.

It's stupid. I'm the one that broke it off with Zane, yet I keep checking my phone for messages from him. Now I wish I hadn't deleted all his texts and calls. Pathetic, right?

It's when I'm lying in bed that it hits me in a sudden crushing pain in my chest. I curl into a ball, crying out in despair.

Zane. *Zane*. I'm not going to see him again, touch him, talk to him. I've been so caught up in who he really is that I haven't had time to comprehend this huge...loss in my life. How am I suppose to go on without him to look forward to? How am I suppose to face each day, knowing he won't be in it? I'll survive, of course I will. I just...it just hurts **so** much right now.

I'm sobbing so hard, I don't hear her come in. The bed dips and then I feel Mom's comforting warmth curled against my back. She doesn't say anything, she just strokes my hair and lets me cry.

We stay like that for most of the night. It's exactly what I need.

Chapter 33

The next morning, I'm in the kitchen, listlessly eating fudge pop tarts, when Bill wanders in.

He appears startled to see me, and for a moment, it looks like he's going to turn right back around and leave.

I watch him internally wrestle with himself for a couple of minutes. It's funny how he looks from me to the door, whipping his head back and forth, until I feel like getting a laser pointer and shining it in his eyes. Finally, he addresses me.

"Hi, Violet," he mumbles reluctantly.

"Good morning, Bill," I mumble back.

He stands there and rubs the back of his neck. While studying him, I realize how much Zane resembles him. As Aiden Cross, that is. It's funny how I never noticed before. Ha ha.

"I'm sorry," he blurts out, startling me. "About the thing with Zane. I didn't realize the two of you were...together. I should have told him to stay away from you..."

"It's okay, Bill." I smile weakly. "Zane did try to stay away. I didn't let him."

"Oh," he says, looking—if possible—even more uncomfortable.

He half-turns as if to leave, then awkwardly twists back around again.

Zane's a good guy," he says quickly. "Being Aiden Cross is—it's hard on him, sometimes. It's—it's not who he really is. Who he really is—he's Zane. When he—uh, he's never let anyone know the **real** him, unless he really cares about them. I—maybe he...I think he let you in."

Bill's sweet bumbling little speech makes me want to hug him, even if I'm not quite sure what he's trying to say.

"Thanks, Bill," I say. I offer him a more genuine smile this time.

He smiles back, quick and relieved. Then he abruptly turns and leaves.

That was nice. I wonder how he and Mom communicate with each other, with both of them being so awkward and inarticulate. Now that I've met and lived with Bill, I just cannot imagine him sweeping her off her feet like she claimed. I guess being stuck in an elevator for two hours brought out the romantic beast in him.

Huh. Maybe he's secretly smooth. Zane must've got it from somewhere.

Zane.

My appetite completely disappearing, I throw my barely nibbled on pop tarts in the trash, and go back upstairs to cry.

The next morning, I wake up with a horrible headache. I text Lauren to let her know I won't be going to school, and she texts me back saying she hopes I feel better, and to not worry about her getting a ride—her mom is off for the next couple of days, so she can use the car.

Relieved, I turn off my phone and toss it...somewhere. Then I bury my head under the blankets and surrender to the pounding pain in my head.

I feel like the survivor of a bloody war the next day, but I suppose I feel well enough to go to school. Might as well, I guess.

I am so late. I throw on a raggedy old shirt and a long blue skirt that appeared in my closet one day, origin unknown.

Where is my phone? I vaguely remember throwing it somewhere last night. Crap, I don't have time to look for it. At least I don't have to pick up Lauren today.

At first I think it's just my paranoid imagination that people are staring and whispering about me, but by the end of first period, I'm ready to start screaming at all the gawking idiots. Did Kim tell about Zane?

"What?" I say to Chelsea Lopez, who has the locker next to mine. "Why do people keep staring at me? What's going on?"

Chelsea looks surprised that I'm talking to her. We've only exchanged smiles and mumbled greetings until then.

"I guess everyone thinks you have the inside scoop," she says cautiously.

I am bewildered. "What inside scoop?"

Chelsea pulls back her light brown hair, and laughs uncomfortably. "On Lauren and Mr. Jensen," she says, like I should know.

"Lauren and Mr. Jensen? What about them?"

Now she looks really uncomfortable. "You really don't know?"

I grip the edges of my folder tightly. Ice forms in the pit of my stomach. "Please, just tell me."

"Ummm...you know Alissa Shermer? She caught Lauren and Mr. Jensen making out in his car yesterday morning."

"What?!"

Lauren...and Mr. Jensen??? Okay...what?! What the hell?! That can't be right. She doesn't even like him! Lauren would never...

Then a horrible thought suddenly occurs to me.

"I have to go," I say abruptly, turning on my heel.

I spot Damon heading for his English class. I grab his arm to get his attention. He immediately backs away, looking worried.

"What's your problem?" he demands nervously.

I glare at him. "Have you been hooking up with Lauren?"

Damon's eyes widen. "Hell, no. I have a girlfriend. Besides, I hear your girl, Lauren is into older men—"

I shake my head impatiently. "Why do you always look so guilty every time I see you?"

He rubs the back of his head—guiltily. "I, uh, thought you knew I was the one who spread that rumor about the naked pictures of you online."

"What naked—never mind, I don't want to know."

I turn to leave, but before I go, I whirl around and smack him in the arm. "Quit spreading rumors about me! Asshole."

I would have just left, but I'm on thin ice with Mom as it is. So I go straight to the nurse's office and fake a migraine. Ms. Hahn knows me as the straight A student who never gets in trouble, and I'm immediately cleared to go home. I knew my good girl rep would come in handy one day.

I drive straight to Lauren's, a million thoughts zooming through my head.

Lauren and **Mr. Jensen**? How? Why? How could she have not told me her boyfriend is our English teacher?!

A zombie resembling my best friend opens the door. She looks awful! There are huge bags under her eyes, and it looks as if she hasn't slept in a year.

"I tried to call you," she says dully, coming out and closing the door behind her.

"I turned my phone off and threw it somewhere," I say. "So. Is it true?"

Lauren nods tiredly. "Yeah."

Having her confirm it makes my heart sink. "Can you...talk somewhere?"

She glances back at her apartment. "I can't go far. Let's go outside."

We go to the apartment complex's tiny park and find a bench to sit down on.

"So he's the father?" I have to make sure. I've had enough misunderstandings to last me a lifetime.

Lauren looks down at her hands folded over her stomach. She gives a tiny sigh. "Yeah."

"Okay. How? When?"

She shrugs. "It just sort of happened. When I started tutoring after school, he was always there. We started talking about our favorite books and authors, and...whatever. Then one night, he gave me a ride home. He kissed me. It was nice."

"Nice?" I echo faintly.

"He's different from all the other guys at school—he doesn't make stupid jokes all the time, or act like an idiot. We talked about everything."

"I told him about the baby. I was really freaked out, and he was trying to reassure me...we didn't think there would be anyone around so early."

I take a deep breath, a thousand questions on the tip of my tongue. "Okay, so he's going to step up and help you through this, right? Or am I gonna have to—"

"V, he's married," she blurts out.

A white hot bolt of fury shoots through me. I jump to my feet, shaking with rage. "What?! That bastard! What's his address?"

But Lauren is shaking her head. She looks so pale and fragile, I sit back down and try to calm down for her sake.

"He's probably going to be arrested. They're doing a formal investigation right now. I-I'm dropping out of school."

My jaw drops. "You can't! What about Stanford?"

"I don't know yet. The school called Mom. She had to come down to get me."

"Oh, god. What did she say?"

"She cried," Lauren murmurs. "Then she yelled a lot. When she finally calmed down, we had a long talk. She kind of blamed herself for always working, and never being around. Then...she said I helped her raise her babies, she can help me raise mine." She exhales loudly. "We're going to talk to the school counselor to see what my options are. My grades have always been good, and I have all that extra credit, so...we're optimistic."

"Does that mean you're keeping the baby?" I ask hopefully.

"I don't know," she hedges. "Mom's going to talk to one of my cousins to see if she might want to move in with us. To help out."

I poke her in the arm. "You'll have to get a bigger place."

She laughs weakly. "Yeah. We're probably going to move."

We sit there in silence for a while. My mind is reeling, trying to wrap my head around all the coming changes.

"It will work out, you know," I say, trying to sound convincing. "I'll help out any way I can—with whatever you need."

"Thanks, V. Sorry I didn't tell you before. It's just..."

"Yeah, you knew I'd kick your ass."

Lauren smiles. "Yeah."

I shake my head at her. "A teacher," I sigh.

"A rock star," she shoots back.

We look at each other, and laugh. What a mess the two of us are. Good girls gone bad.

What are we going to do?

Chapter 34

Without Lauren at school, the days are so long. But they're nothing compared to the night.

I dread the night. I lie in bed, unable to fall asleep. I can't stop thinking about Zane. What is he doing? Is he lying in bed, thinking of me? Or is he with Alaina Skye—or some other gorgeous woman? I could find out. All I have to do is check any of those celebrity websites that chronicles Aiden Cross' every move.

But I can't go there. I change the station whenever I hear his honey and sex voice come on the radio (which is all the freaking time). I can't even stand to see his picture on the magazines in the store. It just hurts too much. I can't see Zane anywhere in Aiden's electric blue eyes. I miss **Zane**. I keep replaying that night we spent together in the hotel. I lie in bed and my body aches with the loss of his. I toss and turn all night, restless with a bone deep misery.

I know this is pathetic, but I check my phone all the time to see if he's called or texted. Why would he, right?

I try to get on with my life. I work at Sunset Park during winter break, and it helps a lot to keep busy. What doesn't help is the Christmas music, playing over the intercom all day and all night. Even the residents complain. Helize threatens to stab the life sized Santa in the dining room if someone doesn't turn it off. I kind of want to see her do it—it would so make my day.

So I started another book. It's not from my *Breaking Time* series—which I swear I'm going to start working on very soon. It's about a normal high school girl who meets and falls in love with a prince. Only she doesn't know he's a prince—she thinks he's just a regular gorgeous high school guy. Because he's disguised as a regular high school student...

Okay, so it's more like a diary than fiction. But writing it is a kind of catharsis for me. The girl's name is Rose and the secret prince is named Zeke. I know—who ever heard of a prince named Zeke, right? But his real prince name is Adrian George Harris, Prince of Valdania. I'm giving Rose an unrealistically happy ending, though. Fiction should be a place of lollipops and escape. Real life is depressing enough—I, for one, don't want to read about make believe misery, too.

Christmas day.

I was doing just fine, putting on a happy face for Mom. She loves every holiday, especially Christmas, and now that Bill keeps shoving money at her, she can afford to go all out. The house is like Christmas town. When I walk down the stairs, I half expect snowflakes to start falling on me. There's tinsel everywhere. I trip on it sometimes, when I'm half asleep.

Our enormous fake Christmas tree has a mountain of present piled beneath it. Mom, wearing a cute little elf hat, starts passing out presents. There's just me and Bill, but she calls our name each time to receive yet another beautifully wrapped gift. Even Bill is smiling at her exuberance. He looks rumpled and so cute in his gingerbread men pajamas.

I get practically a whole new wardrobe, boxes of expensive technology, and cotton underwear from Grandma Mercer. Why does she insist on sending me flowered panties every Christmas? It's so weird. I wear them when I have my period. Which happens to be right now, yuck. No wonder I'm so cranky.

"This one's yours, too," Mom says, handing me a thin flat box. Her eyes are shining like, I don't know, Christmas stars, or something.

I accept the lightweight gift warily. Judging by the way she's eagerly watching me, I'm guessing this is the important present. "Thanks," I say.

"Open it!" she exclaims as I study the fat little reindeer wrapping paper.

Because it looks like she might pee herself with excitement, I quickly unwrap my present. A bright red shirt box. I open it up, move aside the

tissue paper to find what look to be a white shirt.

More clothes? I paste a happy smile on my face and pull the shirt out, shaking it out to unfold it.

My smile sort of dies on my face when I see what's written in pink glitter on the front.

Big Sister.

For real.

I drop the shirt and gape at Mom—who is capturing my reaction on camera.

"Really?" I say. "Is that...?"

Weird words run through my mind: safe, legal, practical...none of them really fit the situation. I don't know how to react.

"I'm pregnant!" she exclaims gleefully.

"Well...congratulations!" I say, and I get up to hug her so she doesn't think I'm not happy for her.

I include Bill in my smile, and notice he's red with embarrassment and pleasure. Mom reaches over and squeezes his hand. If Mom gets any happier, she may burst. I'm a little freaked at the thought of being a big sister for the first time, but I can get over it for her.

Oh, my god. A baby. Everyone's turning up pregnant these days.

"Have you seen a doctor yet? Everything's okay?" I ask nervously.

"Everything's wonderful, honey," Mom assures me. "They're going to monitor me a little more closely since I'm a bit older than the average mom." She makes a funny face. "But the doctor says so far so good!"

"Well...that's great. Just think--you'll have another kid to embarrass the crap out of after I've left the nest."

"This is true," she admits happily, pushing the sagging elf hat off of her eyes. "I'll still embarrass you when you come visit, though. Wouldn't want

you to go through withdrawal."

"Thanks, you're always thinking of me."

Bill gets an emergency call from work, which he has to take, and with an apologetic look at Mom, he disappears into the den.

There goes the father of my future half brother or sister, I think.

Hey, that baby could do a lot worse. I realize I really like Bill. I'm glad he seems pleased by the model pirate ship I got for him.

Mom wants me to try on the Big Sister shirt she got me. It ends up being a size too small. She keeps looking from my chest to her own petite one, frowning mournfully. I hope she doesn't ever consider getting implants after the baby.

"Violet, I have to tell you something."

Mom scoots over to me on her knees and hunkers down in front of me, looking me in the eye.

"What?" I ask fearfully. She looks so serious, it must be something bad.

"I talked to Zane."

I inhale sharply. My hands start to shake, and I have to suppress the sudden urge to pounce on my own mother and assault her with a barrage of questions. *What did he say? How is he? Did he talk about me?*

"Oh," I say finally. "I...uh...why did you...what did you talk about?"

Mom raises an eyebrow. "Quite a bit, actually. Turns out I have a lot to say to the young man who took my seventeen year old daughter's virginity."

I am absolutely mortified. I can feel my face pale with the horror. "Mom!"

"Wait, it was—Zane was your first, right?"

The blood suddenly returns to my face with a vengeance. "Yeah, Mom. Ugh."

“Hey, not like it isn’t weird for me, too,” she says, straightening her shoulders indignantly. “Zane is my stepson, after all. But...we came to an understanding—let’s just leave it at that. Anyway, he wanted you to have something.”

Mom hands me a little square-shaped box. I stare at her, stricken.

“Whatever it is, I can’t accept it,” I whisper, staring at the tiny foil wrapped present like it’s going to bite me. “We broke up.”

“He said he got it for you about a month ago, and he wants you to have it. No strings attached. He says you don’t need to contact him, or anything, and he’s not taking it back, so you might as well keep it.” She chuckles a little. “He knows you so well.”

I start to protest. “Mom...I—I...I can’t—”

“He loves you, you know,” she says softly. She grabs my hand and gently places the box in my palm. Then she lightly touches my cheek. “You love him, too, don’t you?”

So easily, the tears start falling from my eyes. “Yeah,” I half laugh, half sob. “I do.”

“Oh, Violet.” Mom reaches for me and hugs me sympathetically. “My poor girl.”

I pull back awkwardly. “I’m okay,” I say quickly, wiping my face. “So...do you know what this is?” I gesture with the box.

Mom grins mischievously. “Yep. And the only reason I’m okay with it is because of how he feels about you, and because I know he can so afford it. Come on—open it.”

I take a shaky breath. The box weighs almost nothing. Is it...a ring?

I quickly banish that crazy thought. Of course not. It’s a goodbye present, not a promise for the future.

I unwrap it carefully. Inside the box is a little black...remote? I look up at Mom uncertainly.

She's beaming. "It's the remote to your Bentley convertible! It's parked in the drive."

"No way."

We rush outside, Mom giggling like a school girl along the way. I run out the front door, and—there it is, sitting in the driveway, gleaming in the mid morning light.

A shiny purple Bentley convertible.

"Oh, my god," I gasp.

I can only stand there with my mouth hanging open. Mom takes the remote and uses it to open the doors. Then she pulls me over so we can check out the interior.

It's beautiful inside. All the buttons and dials and displays overwhelm me. The dark gray leather seats are just luxurious.

I sit behind the wheel and feel like—like a rock star. "I can't keep this," I tell Mom in an awed voice.

She's sitting in the passenger seat, poking at what looks to be a phone in the middle console. "Zane was very clear that he wasn't taking it back," she says. "He wants you to have it, Violet."

I grip the steering wheel with both hands, my shoulders slumping. "Out of guilt."

"Violet. Keep the car. Enjoy it. Start smiling again." Mom smooths back a lock of my hair. "You've only got a few more months until you're off to college. Just...take it one day at a time. Okay?"

I close my eyes and see Zane's face. I quickly open them again. "Okay," I say. "I'll try."

No regrets.

Yeah, right.

I help Mom clean up our Christmas morning mess, then I hop in my old Toyota with a bag of gifts and head to Lauren's. After doling out presents and accepting my own, I pull Lauren aside and hand her the keys to my car.

"It's old, but you know it runs good," I tell her while she stares at me, dumbfounded. "You can use it, or trade it in, or whatever."

"Are you kidding, V?" Lauren tries to hand me back the keys. "You can't give me your car. What are you suppose to drive?"

I rub my forehead uneasily. "Um...well, Zane kind of...bought me a new one."

Lauren's mouth falls open. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. Drive me back home and you can see it."

I have to bully Lauren into taking the Toyota. In the end, I guilt her into it by bringing up the fact that it would make it much easier for her family if there were two cars—especially when the baby comes. Finally, she gives in, and surprises me by giving me a tight hug. Lauren never hugs. Must be the hormones.

I debate all night with myself, and finally I decide to send Zane a simple thank you note, along with the mermaid sculpture and the Stirling engine model I was going to give him for Christmas. I know it seems stupid—he gives me a Bentley, I give him a mermaid and a toy. But...I don't know. I did buy it for him before we broke up.

I get his address from Mom and mail it off before I can change my mind. Then I immediately regret it. What was I thinking?! He's going to think I'm an idiot, playing games. He's going to think the statue is stupid. I'll bet he doesn't even remember that day at the gallery.

Oh, god, what did I do?

Chapter 35

I work on New Year's Eve, which is fine since I didn't have any plans, anyway. One of the resident's nephew brings fireworks, and we bring everyone outside to set them off. The residents are delighted with the small display, gazing up at the burst of lights in the sky with big smiles. Then we go back in for hot chocolate and root beer floats.

I've been doing good at acting cheerful and full of happy energy, but by the end of my shift, I feel exhausted with the effort. Helize notices how quiet I'm being and asks if I'm okay.

I force a smile. "I'm fine. Um...can I ask you a personal question?"

She's having a particularly lucid day today. She meets my eyes in the reflection of the mirror as she brushes her thin white hair. "Well, you've wiped my butt and washed all my odds and ends, dear. I guess that earns you the right to ask. Go on."

I laugh. "Ew. Okay. Do you...do you ever regret not marrying, and starting a family?"

Helize's gaze suddenly turns inward, her expression far away. "No, I wouldn't say so," she says finally. "I had a lot of amazing experiences—done things that I don't think I would have the opportunity to do, had I settled down. Traveled a lot. Did I tell you about the time I hand glided in Paraguay?"

"No, but it sounds like a good story," I say.

"Well, I'll tell you..." And she launches into an amazing story about her adventures in Paraguay. This story doesn't end with her in jail, for a change.

Later, when I'm pulling her blanket and comforter up to her chest, Helize's eyes suddenly take on a sheen.

"Sometimes I wonder what might have been," she whispers as I lean over her. "The thing is...I was a very proud girl. I never wanted to take the chance I might get hurt. Isn't that funny? I was game for any exciting adventure that came my way, but when it came to risking my heart, I was a coward. Charlie used to say..." She lets out a little chuckle. "He used to say, 'Helize, you're going to regret not forgiving me. I could have been the greatest adventure of your life.' 'Course, last time I saw him, he had gained two hundred pounds, and lived in an Arby's."

"Wow," I murmur, fixing her nasal canula. "Bullet dodged."

"Indeed."

"Well, Helize," I say, tucking her in. "You'll always have me."

"Yes...what was your name again, dear?"

She's kidding, of course. See, no one ever told Helize she's not funny. Big mistake.

It's the dawn of a new year, and I'm lying in bed by myself, full of regrets. Did I do the right thing by breaking it off with Zane? He lied to me. Maybe he didn't use me, but he didn't trust me with the truth, either. Even if I could forgive him that, how would I ever fit into his rock star life? I couldn't stand all those girls chasing after him constantly—I would have to beat them down. And being with him would put me in the public eye. Could I handle that? No, I don't think I could. Oh, god, I can just imagine the paparazzi catching me off guard, surrounding me—and I start shouting "penis!" at them. Then Mom would jump in and tell them about the summer her sweet daughter turned tricks in her grandma's bakery.

I can just see the headlines now: *Aiden Cross Dating Girl with Family History of Tourette's*.

No one wants to see a headline like that. Way too long.

Yeah. It wouldn't be good.

So being back at school sucks—especially without Lauren. At least everyone is too busy talking about what they did over break to gossip about her and Mr. Jensen. I'm sick of yelling at everyone about it, anyway. Like it's the first time a teacher hooked up with a student at Hidden Cove. It's not even the fifth, if the rumors are true about Ms. Goolihan and Edward Alva.

Oh, there's a new rumor going around that my drug dealer pimp bought me the Bentley. I may have inadvertently started that one when that snotty cheerleader bitch, Alissa asked who I had to do to score a car like that. I may have replied something about my drug dealing pimp daddy. But who really knows how these things get started, right?

I'm at home, working on my book when my phone rings. I look at the display in surprise. It's Kim.

"Hey, Kim," I answer. "What's up?"

Kim's cheerful voice comes through loud and excited. "Oh, my god, Violet! Did you watch *The Joanna Show* today?!"

"Uh, no. I don't really watch..."

"Aiden Cross was on, and he was talking about you!" she shouts.

"W-what?!" Holy crap! "What did he say?!"

"Oh, my god! I saved it—you have to come over and watch!"

"What did he **say**?!"

I'm already running around, looking for my shoes, while Kim squeals in my ear.

"You have to come over and see for yourself. Violet! I'm so j! He is sooo hot!"

"I know!" I shout back. "Can I pick Lauren up and bring her over, too?"

“Yeah, of course! Oh, my god!”

I text Lauren on the way to let her know I’m coming to get her. She just barely opens the door when I’m already dragging her out by her arm. I’m so jittery I can barely drive. Zane talked about me?! On a nationally televised talk show! What did he say? Oh, my god—did he say my name?! What was he **thinking**? Or was he talking about some other chick, and Kim is just confused? Grr, if that’s the case.

Matt answers the door as I’m raising my hand to knock. I’m so flustered, I almost rap my fist against his forehead.

He looks shocked to see me. “Violet! What are you—?”

“Yeah,” I mutter and practically push him aside.

I drag Lauren in and spot Kim bouncing around at the top of stairs. Her eyes are sparkling excitedly as she waves us up.

I take the stairs two at a time, Lauren following much more slowly behind me. It’s inevitable that I trip, but I bounce right back up.

“What did he say?” I gasp, reaching the top.

Kim shakes her head grinning. “No, you have to watch it!”

“Wait, just tell me—was it good or bad? I mean...”

“Definitely good. Come on!”

She ushers us into her room, and we plop down on the bed, in front of her large flat screen TV. Kim grabs the remote and pushes a couple of buttons.

I’m unprepared for the sight of Zane suddenly appearing on the screen. After seeing him only in my dreams for so long...to actually **see** him...it’s completely overwhelming. Oh, god, he is **so** gorgeous!

As Aiden Cross, his masculine beauty just hits you like a physical blow. He looks so amazing and sexy in a v neck black sweater and dark jeans. His dark blonde hair is perfectly tousled (no doubt courtesy of some floozy hair

stylist), and his cerulean blue eyes are so bright, they seem to pop out of the screen.

Everything else fades away as I watch Zane (Adrian!) laughing and chatting with Joanna, the quirky talk show hostess. He is completely charming and sexy, and the women in the audience can't seem to stop screaming and giggling at his every word. God, I don't blame them.

I listen raptly as Joanna gushes his praises, talking about how many albums he's sold, how many Grammys he's won—while sneakily mixing in questions about his love life. Zane smoothly evades her inquiries, laughing it off or joking his way out of any tough spots.

The more I watch him, the more I see the ghost of Zane in the famous rock star. His half-smile. The way he rubs his jaw sometimes when he's thinking about something else. How he tilts his head to the side when he's amused by something.

The way the muscles in his chest and arms tense when he's...

Oh, wow. That image just popped out of nowhere. Bad Violet. Shaking my head, I try to focus on the interview.

"So you're a busy guy, I've noticed," Joanna is saying casually, smiling innocently at Zane. "All that dating must be hard with your schedule."

He leans back in his chair, completely at ease. "Yeah, no. I've actually been in my recording studio every day working on some songs. And I'll be going on tour in October, so I've been preparing for that, too. I know it's a long way away, but I'll be gone for, like, a year, so—"

"Yeah, mm-hmm," Joanna nods thoughtfully. "So what does Alaina think about you being on the road for so long?"

I bite my lip hard at the mention of that famous bitch. "You're sadistic, Kim," I mutter.

She shushes me. "Just wait."

"Nothing..." On TV, Zane remains inscrutable, continuing to smile. "Why would she care?"

"Because she's your girlfriend, right?"

"We're **friends**."

"Huh. Okay." The spunky hostess tries another tactic while the audience giggles at her antics. "So, Valentine's day is coming up."

"Is it?" Zane plays it cool.

"Yup. So, Aiden, I'm sure all the women in the audience would like to know—what would be your idea of a perfect Valentine's day date?"

The audience whoops and cheers. Zane looks out at them, and chuckles.

"Well, damn, now I have to say something romantic and elaborate, huh?"

"Not necessarily. I'd say it depends on the woman. Like, for example...Alaina Skye."

He looks heavenward as if for help. "You're not gonna let that go, are you?" he asks good-naturedly.

"Did I say her name again?" Joanna shakes her dark curls. "I'm sorry. You just seem like a romantic kind of guy. So what would you have planned for that special day?"

I lean forward, eager to hear his answer. What would our Valentine's have been like? The perfect day, to me, would be just the two of us hanging out together—preferably in bed.

Zane hesitates for a second. He takes a drink from his cup before answering. "Well, this is going to sound really bad—and lazy—but I think I'd just want to hang out, you know? Spend all morning in bed—" The audience screams, and he flashes that sexy grin. "Then have a picnic in the living room, just her and I. Time is very precious to me, and I think I'd just want to be alone with her, have her all to myself for the whole day. I know that's not really every woman's idea of a great date, but..."

Lauren turns to look at me. "Did he just describe that day at the hotel with you?"

I nod, dazed. "I...think so."

"So yum!" Kim squeals. The whole bed bounces with her excitement.

"Well, Aiden, you could probably take a girl to the dump, and she'd be thrilled. Am I right, ladies?" Joanna winks at the wildly approving audience. "Now let's talk about this 'her.' What does she look like? Five-seven? Blonde hair, blue eyes? Dolphin tattoo?"

Alaina Skye. Ugh.

For a minute, Zane and Joanna stare at each other like gunslingers at high noon. Then they both burst out laughing.

"Alright." Still chuckling, Zane shrugs slightly. "Actually, Joanna, she's about five-four, brown eyes, long golden brown hair. No tattoo, but if she did have one, it would probably be of a bunny."

I flush, my heart suddenly thudding. *He is talking about me!*

I'm ninety percent sure.

"A bunny, Violet? Really?"

"Shh!"

"Wow," Joanna is saying. "That is very...specific. Are you describing your perfect woman, or your girlfriend."

Zane smiles. "Both."

"Aww!" Kim and the audience say simultaneously.

Joanna leans forward, resting her chin on her hands. "Tell us more."

"Uh..." Put on the spot, he chuckles, staring down at his hands resting on his lap. "Well, the truth is...I screwed up with her big time. I don't think she's going to ever forgive me. So...I don't know."

The audience "awws!" again.

"Oh, no," Joanna says sympathetically. "What'd you do?"

Zane just shakes his head with a small smile playing on his beautiful lips. When she continues to stare piercingly at him, he just laughs. "What? That's...all I got."

"Aiden, you can't just leave us hanging!"

He remains silent, still smiling. Those aching blue eyes of his look right back at her, refusing to give anything away.

Finally, she huffs a sigh. "Okay, you. We're running out of time. But I must say, whoever she is, she would be a fool not to forgive you. I bet it works out between the two of you."

Zane exhales softly. He seems to look straight into the camera, into my eyes when he says, "I hope so."

I can't stop thinking about Zane's interview. Does that mean he still wants to be with me? Does that mean the ball is in my court now? What am I suppose to do? Nothing's changed. He's still one of the most famous faces in the world, and I'm...just me. I mean, say we get back together...then what? What happens when he goes on tour for a year. I'll be miserable.

I'm miserable now. I don't know what to do. I miss him. I miss him so much.

Mom is planning me a surprise birthday party. I know this because she is the worst at keeping secrets. Last month, she dropped a whole bunch of invitations at my feet. It looks like she's inviting every living relative we have—maybe because I don't have many close friends.

I don't want a birthday party. That's about the last thing I want. But how do I tell her that without hurting her feelings? She's been so sensitive lately, crying at the drop of a hat. Between her and Lauren, I feel like I'm in the middle of a soggy Kleenex commercial.

The day of the party (that I'm not suppose to know about), Mom takes Lauren and I to a high end spa. We get facials, massages, and our hair done—and I'm not sure why since all three of us don't like strangers poking and prodding at us. Mom especially hates when anyone touches her face, but she grits her teeth and get through it—and I do the same for her. Lauren simply tries to bite anyone who comes too close to her. She is super grouchy lately.

Afterwards, we go shopping for outfits to wear for the party. My mind is a million miles away, so I kind of give Mom carte blanche on my picking out my dress. I keep thinking about what Zane said to me one day at the beach. Live in the moment. Don't worry about what might happen.

I really try to picture my life as a Aiden Cross' girlfriend. I can't see it. Hell, I could barely see myself as Zane O' Connor's girlfriend. But I try to imagine a life without him—and it makes me want to cry.

"Violet, you have to try on this dress!"

Mom pushes some red material in my hands. When she sees my face, she frowns. "Are you okay? You look like you're crying."

"No," I say, blinking rapidly. "This, uh...dragonfly. It almost got me in the eye."

"Dragonfly? Where?" Mom looks around, paranoid. She hates insects with an almost psychotic intensity.

“Yeah, it left. Um, where are the dressing rooms?”

“Right there,” she replies, pointing to the sign we’re standing in front of, which says, “Dressing Rooms.”

I clear my throat. “Oh. Okay. Lauren, do you have anything to try on?”

Lauren unenthusiastically holds up several dresses. I can tell they were all picked by Mom—who by the way, has no idea Lauren is pregnant.

We both drag our feet. I hate dressing rooms. I always feel so weird about standing in front of a mirror to change. And I’m always so paranoid that some little kid is going to crawl into my stall. It’s actually happened before. The kid was eight and a perv. I’ll never forget his huge eyes and giant grin as I held my shirt in front of me with one hand and tried to shoo him away with the other.

I quickly wiggle out of my shirt and jeans and shimmy into the dress. It’s fire engine red, with a halter top and almost no back. The skirt is short and full and kind of swirls against my legs when I move. Okay, I love it.

“Violet, come out so I can see!” Mom calls from outside.

Rolling my eyes, I do as she asks. When she sees me, her eyes widen slightly.

“Oh, wow. I didn’t realize that dress was quite so...sexy. You look great, though. Do you like it?”

“I do,” I say. I try to adjust the top so not quite so much cleavage is showing, but the dress was designed to show cleavage, so my attempts are unsuccessful.

“Well, I’m not sure if it will be appropriate for—uh—dinner tonight. At the restaurant.”

“Oh. What restaurant was it again?” I ask, unable to resist putting her on the spot.

“Didn’t I say?” Mom fidgets and smooths back her pale blonde hair.

“Um, was it The Four Seasons?”

“Are you asking **me**?”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure it was. I mean, it is.” She makes a little snorting sound. “Sorry. Pregnancy brain. You know how it is. No! No, you should definitely not know how it is—because you’re **not** pregnant, right?”

“No, I’m definitely not,” I sigh.

Mom gives a relieved chuckle. “Thank god. Not only are you way too young, but how weird would that be? Us being pregnant at the same time? Me, pregnant with your little brother or sister, and your baby would be my baby’s niece or nephew—on both sides! Is that right?”

A young couple standing near us give us a wide-eyed look, then quickly shuffle away. “Lauren!” I shout a bit desperately. “Come on out!”

I decide to get the dress. I don’t have anyone to look sexy for, but I feel good in it, so why not? Lauren chooses a pretty black dress that looks striking against her pale skin. We get ready in my room, then Lauren is suppose to take me out for a few hours so Mom can get my party set up.

Lauren knows I know, so she doesn’t bother to pretend. We decide to watch movies all day at her place until it’s time to go home and be surprised. I wish I could just stay here, instead of put on a happy face for a bunch of people. Actually, I wish I could just hang out at the beach all day, just staring at the waves, and thinking. I know what I want to do—I just need to find the courage to do it.

So Mom went all out for my party: elaborate decorations, caterers, a deejay...a marching band. Okay, I’m kidding about the marching band. Almost everyone that was at the wedding is back again for my birthday—even Taylor. She’s probably hoping to hook up with Zane.

Oh, and Matt and Rachel are here! Why did she invite them? Why did they come? It’s super awkward when they come up to say happy birthday to me. Rachel still can’t look me in the eye, and neither can Matt. I don’t understand. He was never this interested in my body when we were dating, but now he can’t keep his eyes off my cleavage. Weird.

I wonder if Zane knows it's my birthday? I bet Mom told him. She must've told him about the baby, too. Will he take time away from his celebrity lifestyle to visit when she gives birth?

I am restless throughout the party. I stick close to Lauren, not caring if I seem rude. I want to talk to Zane. The moment I decide to sneak away to call him, Mom grabs me and tells me the caterers are bringing out the cake. So I put a smile on my face while they bring in a huge chocolate cake—Dobash, my favorite! Everyone sings to me, and I try not to grimace as I blow out the candles. Someone, though, put trick candles on my cake, and I blow so hard, one of the cake decorations—a tiny little basket made to look like a birthday present—flies off the cake and hits my baby cousin, Bella, in the eye. She screams and screams, and in the chaos, Great Grandma manages to hobble her way over to me and squeeze my boobs really hard—for what purpose, I don't know. Fortunately, several people manage to capture these special moments on video, so I'll always have these memories. Documented. Online, probably.

My boobs hurt. I just want everybody to go home. I try to escape to the garden, but Lauren grabs me.

"I need to talk to you," she says. There's a strange furtive look in her big brown eyes.

"Um, okay." Alarmed by her expression, I gesture toward the back door. "We could go out in the garden, or—"

"I saw a bunch of your cousins head out there. I think they're going to play football, or smoke pot."

"What?! They'd better not," I say, trying to peer through the window.

But Lauren grabs me and tows me along. "Let's go to your room."

What is going on with her? I wonder if she's going to tell me she's having twins? Yikes! Has the pressure finally gotten to her? Even though the lights in my bedroom are already on, she flips the switch twice.

I blink at her. "Is that a new ritual of yours, or something?"

Lauren makes a face. “It’s a pregnancy thing.”

Okay. Being pregnant obviously turns women nutty. “What did you want to talk to me about?” I ask her.

“I wanted to ask you if you’re happy,” she blurts out. She paces in front of the French doors. “Because you don’t seem to be. You’re putting up a good front, but I can tell. Are you regretting breaking up with Zane?”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “Yes,” I sigh. I drop down onto my bed. “I miss him so much, it hurts. I—I think I’m going to call him. I know it’s probably not going to work out, and I’ll end up getting my heart shattered into, like, a million pieces. But I love him. I’d rather have a piece of him for even just a little while, then nothing, never at all. I’ll just—I don’t care, I’ll just deal with it.”

Lauren stares out the window during my rant. “Are you sure he’s worth it?”

“Yes,” I say. “He is.”

Finally, she turns. Smiling at me, she throws open the French doors. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

“What...?”

The sounds of a guitar playing float in through the doors. Are those my pot-smoking cousins? If so, they’re awfully good. Frowning, I follow the melody out to the balcony. It’s hauntingly beautiful, yet achingly sexy at the same time.

My room overlooks the gardens below. I squint into the darkness, trying to find the source of the music. A tall figure suddenly steps into the light cast by my room.

I gasp, hands flying to my mouth.

It’s Zane!

He’s strumming the guitar with expert ease. And he’s looking up at me with those famous azure eyes that seem to glow in the half-light. Our gazes tangle and lock.

Then he starts to sing, in that amazing raspy voice that I've listened and dreamed to for so long. He's singing to me.

Standing on the edge of a broken lie

Trying to find my reason; can't find my way

Left myself in the fall

I lost my way

Can you help me find my way home

You're the breath I couldn't take

My burning truth

Life of glitter; everyone's fake

Your hair across my pillow

Your skin against mine

In your eyes is where my peace lies

You are my way home

The garden is suddenly illuminated with thousands of twinkle lights, revealing Zane's band members set up behind him. Drums, guitars, keyboard, amps...the whole deal. They join in with Zane's guitar, lifting the song and powering it into the atmosphere.

So tell me you love me

I need to hear you say

You forgive me

When everything's golden lies; tell me

You see me

You need me

You are my way back to me

Back to me

Inside my soul there lives a war

You are my war

In your grace is everything I'd fight for

Say my name

Bring me back to the place I need to be

You said goodbye so how could it be that you're still here with me

You move through me

You speak to me

Your face is the only one I see

I just wanna come home to you

So tell me you love me

I need to hear you say

You forgive me

When everything's golden lies; tell me

You see me

You need me

You are my way back to me

Back to me

Back to me

Say you still love me

Forgive me

Move through me

Speak to me

Bring me back to the place I need to be

Back to me

Back to me

You are my way back to me

Please come back to me

Zane plays the last few stunning notes on his guitar, moving closer so he's almost directly under me. Distantly, I am aware of cheering and wild applause. I didn't realize...I was so focused on *him*, I didn't notice the crowds of people standing out there, avidly watching this very private moment.

I don't care. All I can see is Zane. I see **him**, not the rock star—every girl's dream. I see the guy who laughed with me, fought with me, held my hand, and loved me. There he is, looking up at me like I'm the only thing that matters.

I have to get to him. I throw one leg over the railing. Lauren quickly grabs my arm to stop me. Laughing, Zane holds up a hand in a stop sign.

“I’ll come to you,” he calls.

He flips his guitar over so that the strap holds it in place across his back. He looks so sexy like that, my knees go weak. I watch breathlessly as he deftly scales the tree growing near my balcony. The next thing I know, he’s balanced on the railing, right in front of me.

My hungry gaze drinks in the sight of him—his familiar sexy grin, those flawless features. Finally, here in front of me, within touching distance.

His electric blue eyes look down at me, burning like dying stars in his fallen angel face.

“Happy birthday, Violet,” he says softly. His fingertips gently skim my cheek.

I am so blown away by this boy I love, I can barely manage a “thanks,” in reply.

He flashes that half smile again. “This railing’s kind of slippery.”

“Oh!”

I jump back to allow room for him to climb over. He does so easily, throwing one long leg over the railing, and turning to swing the rest of his body over. Then he’s standing in front of me, nothing between us.

“So…” I begin awkwardly, feeling incredibly shy. I tentatively reach a hand to touch his tousled hair. “Blonde, huh?”

He stills at my light touch. “Guilty,” he murmurs.

I take a deep breath, praying for courage. I have so many things I want to say to him, but now that he’s here, I don’t know how to begin.

“Aiden—”

“**Zane**,” he corrects me fiercely, taking my hand and squeezing it. “I’m Aiden to **them**.” He jerks his head to the side to indicate the rest of the

world.

Breathing unsteadily, I stare up at him. “What if I’m in love with both?”

He grins, holding out his arms. “Then I’m all yours.”

Epilogue

I wish I could say that we lived happily ever after, but that would have been too easy.

People took videos of Zane singing to me—of course—and they all ended up online. The very personal details of our relationship explode messily all over the internet. I am picked apart and scrutinized by every media outlet and teenage girl alive, and it is not pretty. I mean, I’m used to being insulted and gossiped about, but this is on a whole different level. Seeing pictures of me online, and on television...buying tampons at the store, checking out my rear end in the reflection of a store window, and—my favorite—being chased around the Taco Bill’s parking lot by a freaking crazy fan girl.

She was really big. You bet I ran.

Oh, and school sucks more than ever. Half the school hates me, the other half wants to be my best friend. Alissa Shermer actually tries to hang out with me. I nip that right in the bud. Stupid gossiping hag.

All this attention is mind blowing, and not in a good way. I hate it! Being an A-list celebrity's girlfriend means a girl can't eat a whole pizza without

being put on "bump watch." I'm on bump watch a lot. I've learned not to go out until after I've digested.

How does Zane stand it? I'm a nobody, and the paparazzi stalk me on a daily basis. How do you deal with those pushy jackasses shoving cameras in your face, asking personal questions like they have a right to know every aspect of your life? One particular creep waits for me at work, and across the street from school every day just to ask me what my bra size is.

When I mention this to Zane, he immediately hires a couple of bodyguards to accompany me places. They act as my chaffeurs, too, which I have no problem with. I love my Bentley, but I'm forever worried something will happen to my baby. Like a jealous crazy fan girl.

I **hate** being in the spotlight like this. But I will put up with anything to be with Zane. I even try to tolerate (ugh!) all the obsessed fan girls. It's hard, but I'm dealing with it. I trust Zane completely now, and I'm learning to live in the moment.

Oh, I finished my secret prince book. I titled it "Secret Prince." Creative, huh? It's actually selling really well. I guess there are a lot of people out there who want that simple happy ever after. Heck, I'm just thrilled I got mine.

That's not the only good news. I've finally decided to do a deal with a major publishing house for my *Breaking Time* series, and I'm contracted for at least five more books. There's also talk about making them into movies! I still haven't decided if I'm ready for my writing to have that kind of exposure. Zane thinks I should go for it. I tell him I'll consider it only if he gets cast in the lead role.

July...

“Violet!”

Kim gives me a big hug. I'm surprised by how much I missed her. Her curly hair has blonde streaks in it now, and it suits her golden tan.

"You look great," I tell her as she leads me up to her room.

"Me? Look at you! You really do look like a rock star's girlfriend." She laughs. "I love your hair that color."

"It's actually my natural one," I say, self-consciously running a hand through it. "Oh, before I forget—Lauren said to tell you thanks again for the outfits you sent over for the baby."

"Oh, no problem! So little Rosie's going to be okay?"

"Yup!" I brighten. "Lauren finally got to take her home from the hospital last week. The doctors don't think she's going to have any problems from being so premature, so we're all relieved."

"Thank goodness." Kim gestures for me to sit on her bed. "She looked so cute and tiny in the pictures Lauren sent. How's Lauren doing, anyway?"

I shrug. "She's good. Her mom and cousin are helping out with the baby, and it looks like she can start Stanford in the fall."

"That's great! I'm so happy for her. And you." Kim changes the subject slyly. "So what's it like living with **Aiden Cross**? Dude, I'm so jealous!"

I can't help the huge smile that comes to my face. "It's going really good. Better than I thought. But how are **you** doing?"

"Oh, no," Kim says swiftly. She plops down in her beanbag chair and points to me. "You're going to tell me everything about your fabulous life first. Have you gone to any parties yet? Met any other famous people? I saw pictures of you guys at the 'Deep Ones' premiere! How was it?"

"It was fun," I admit. "It was kind of scary on the red carpet, though. All these people telling you where to go, and all the fans screaming and cameras flashing. It made me nauseous. I kind of threw up."

"Oh, no! Right there?!" Kim is horrified for me.

“Right on Alaina Skye. She was behind us.”

We look at each other and burst out laughing. I’ve met Alaina Skye, and turns out she’s a bit of a bitch. I don’t know why Zane is friends with her, but whatever. And I didn’t try to aim for her like she claims. How can you aim vomit? Silly bitch.

“So, are you gonna go on tour with Aiden—I mean, Zane—in October?”

I nod, playing with the chain of the necklace hidden under my shirt.

“Yeah...I’m going to put off college while I work on my books. And I can do that anywhere, so why not do it on tour with him, right? I’m really excited, too. I’ve never been outside the U.S.”

“And you’ll be with your honey,” Kim teases. “You are so lucky!”

“I know!” I can’t help but giggle with her.

“Be sure to invite me to the wedding,” she jokes, her eyes sparkling with amusement at my flushed cheeks.

“Yeah, funny you should mention that. I wanted to tell you in person...”

I pull out my necklace from my shirt. Kim’s eyes grow huge as she spots the ring dangling from the end of the chain. She rushes over to me to inspect it, and her screams are so loud, I worry the neighbors are going to think I’m murdering her, or something.

“Oh, my god!” she squeals, taking hold of the ring, and slightly choking me in the process. “It’s gorgeous! When did he ask you? **How** did he ask you?”

“Like, a month ago, when we were in Maui.”

I smile to myself, remembering that most perfect moment under the waterfall. Just the two of us.

I watch as Kim admires the flawless square cut diamond set in platinum. I can tell she’s wondering how much the ring costs. I wonder that too, but I’m too afraid to ask Zane. I have a feeling it’s worth a small country.

“C-congratulations!” she sputters, giving me another hug. “When’s the wedding?”

I stick the ring back under my shirt. “Um...we’re not sure. Zane wants to do it soon, but I kind of want to wait. I haven’t even told my mom yet! I’m waiting until after she gives birth. Don’t want to send her into early labor,” I joke feebly.

“Do you think she’s going to freak?”

I suck in a breath through my clenched teeth. “Probably,” I say, picking nervously at my nails. “I think she’d want us to wait until after college, but...neither of us want to wait that long.”

Of course, our definition of waiting is vastly different. Zane says he wants to do it before we go on tour in October; I want to wait a year. I don’t know. He did promise that if we got married right away, he would draw up a prenup in my favor—where if I ever catch him cheating on me, he would have to gain—and keep—a hundred pounds, plus tell every woman he meets from then on that he has a raging case of head lice. I don’t think these stipulations would be legally binding, but it’s a nice thought.

Kim and I chat for a few minutes longer. She tells me about a college guy she met at the beach last week, and shares some local gossip. Oh, Matt and Rachel broke up! Kim says Rachel caught Matt cheating on her with an out-of-towner. I find myself feeling sorry for Rachel. After the way things turned out, I kind of feel grateful to her. No, that’s going too far. Let’s just say I’m happy with the way things turned out.

I meet my fiancée(!) for dinner at Mom and Bill’s that night. Mom is **huge**. I almost make the mistake of joking if she’s sure there’s only one in there, but I catch myself just in time. She’s an emotional mess—crying one minute, and sparkly and giggly the next. Poor Bill looks terrified.

After dinner, Zane and I go for a walk. Guess where we end up? At the pool, where the magic all started.

“I told Helize we’re engaged today,” I say to him as we make ourselves comfortable on the chaise lounges.

“Yeah? What’d she say?”

“She swears I have a bun in the oven.” I laugh. “She said that’s the only reason a young girl like me would have for getting married so quickly. She still doesn’t trust you. Says you’re too handsome for your own good.”

“Yeah, it’s a curse.” Zane smiles and shakes his head. He reaches over and presses a warm hand over my abdomen. “About that bun in the oven, though...think we should put one in there?”

My eyes widen and I put my hand over his. “No! Not yet. I’m too young to be a mother. I still have to go to college.”

He picks me up and pulls me onto him so I’m lying across him. “You could do both. You’d have plenty of help.”

I immediately snuggle against him. “Let’s wait a couple of years, then we’ll talk. In the meantime, we could practice the baby-making part. You know, just so when the time comes, we have it down pat.”

“Mm.” Zane’s arms tighten around me as I tilt my head up for a kiss. “Practice does make perfect. And here we are, with a pool house at our disposal. I’m feeling kind of sentimental. Want to go relive some memories on the kitchen counter?”

“You talked me into it.”

As he pulls me into the pool house, I’m overcome with memories, the sweetness of the beginning of our relationship: the long talks, the laughter, the fights, the...love. It seems so perfect that we come back to reminisce over old memories, and to make new ones.

He kisses me in the kitchen, hands cupping my face. “I love you, Violet,” he whispers.

I smile, my heart near to bursting.

“I love you, Zane.”