

to be her
FIRST



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To Be Her First

By

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For Megan...
I wouldn't have survived high school
without you.

CHAPTER ONE

Blue My Mind

Bright blue nail polish was the only thing sixteen-year-old Journey Durant was willing to wear to show her school spirit. She wouldn't even do that if it weren't required to attend the pep rally in lieu of seventh period chemistry. Most everyone else at West Emerson High loved Fridays during football season, and it was evident by the spectacle in the parking lot. Cars were decorated with soap, streamers, and balloons in the school colors of red, white, and blue. Cheerleaders were in full uniform, football players were in jerseys, and all the teachers patrolling the lot sported blue or red polo shirts. Journey would never understand the patriotic color choice of WEHS; it was like the Fourth of July threw up all over the school.

Journey was perched on a brick half-wall, waiting on her best friend to pull into the junior's parking lot. In stark contrast to her classmates, she wore a black, vintage rock t-shirt over a white thermal and ripped blue jeans. She had on her favorite pair of purple Doc Martens, and her short platinum hair had bubblegum pink tips.

She was swiping on a coat of "Blue My Mind" nail lacquer when Kara Robertson's red sports car rolled to a squeaky stop in its normal spot. Kara angled out of the car, tossing her long brown hair over her shoulder. Like Journey, Kara stood out in the crowd—just in a more literal

sense. She had been towering over everyone else in their class at over six feet since the age of eleven. Her mile long legs were on display underneath a short blue dress, which Journey knew was for the benefit of the football team's running back, Justin Kruse.

"Hey, girl," Kara said, smiling as she crossed the lot.

Journey screwed on the cap to the nail polish and dropped it in her backpack. "You look like a cast member from *The Disney Channel*."

Kara arched an eyebrow and put a hand on her hip. "You look like a cast member from *Cops*."

Journey laughed and hopped down from the wall. She and Kara joined the herd of teenagers heading for the bright red entrance to the school.

The two girls made an awkward pair, but they had been best friends since the fourth grade. When they started high school, Journey cut off her long blonde hair and dyed it purple. Most people, including Kara, assumed she did it out of rebellion against her parents. The truth was, she was tired of failing to fit in with the popular crowd, so she became the exact opposite of them. The change suited her.

The starting string of the football team was huddled around a table in the cafeteria, just like they were every morning when the girls walked in. Journey and Kara assumed their normal position against the wall, so Kara could ogle Justin from a distance.

Rebecca Ashburn, the captain of the cheerleading squad, rushed up to Journey and pressed a glittery blue sticker over the Grim Reaper's face on her t-shirt. "Go Falcons!" Rebecca bubbled before doing the same to Kara.

Journey flinched and ripped the bird sticker off her chest. She contemplated sticking it to the wall behind her but slapped it to her forehead instead.

Kara rolled her eyes. "You're so weird."

Journey slid down onto the tile floor and rested her head on her backpack. "I know," she said and closed her eyes.

A moment later, a shoe nudged her in the ribs. "Hey you."

When she looked up, the quarterback was towering over her. David Britton was a life-sized Ken Doll in a high school letter jacket. Not long after Journey had sworn off the popular

crowd, David had decided to befriend her in geometry class. He knelt down on one knee and tapped the sticker on her head. “Is this your idea of supporting the team?” He had a straight-from-the-dentist smile.

“It was a drive-by stickering,” Journey answered.

“Are you coming to watch me play tonight?” he asked.

“Nope.”

The smile melted from his face. “Why not?”

Kara laughed. “She’s grounded.”

“Again?” he asked. “What did you do this time?”

Journey sighed. “Got busted with cigarettes.”

He cringed. “That sucks.”

Kara was still laughing. “Tell him how.”

Journey pointed at her. “She left her cigarettes in my car.”

He shrugged. “Did you tell your parents they weren’t yours?”

“Oh yeah,” Kara said. “And when they didn’t believe her she said, ‘I don’t smoke Marlboros. I smoke Camel Lights.’”

David raised an eyebrow and chuckled. “Seriously?”

“Shut up,” Journey said. “It’s not funny. They took my car and everything.”

“For how long?” he asked.

She sighed. “Till I’m dead probably.”

“Well, let me know if you need a ride.” He reached down, pulled off the Falcon sticker, and stuck it to his own forehead. “I’ll see you around.”

“Bye, Dave.”

David joined the rest of the jock-squad at the table, leaving Journey to wonder—once again—why the most popular senior made it a point to talk to her every day. They were from two different social universes where David was the sun in his, and Journey was a moon rock in hers. His daily pleasantries made absolutely no sense.

“I think Justin got a haircut,” Kara said, snapping Journey out of a daze.

Journey closed her eyes again. “Good. He needed one. The way his stupid hair always

falls into his eyes makes me want to go out and buy him a headband.”

Kara slapped Journey on the leg. “He’s perfect.”

“He looks like he belongs in a boy band.”

Kara sighed with a sing-song hum. “I know.”

Journey was just as boy crazy as Kara, only not as vocal about it. She wasn’t allowed to date, however, until she turned seventeen which was still over seven months away. Not that it mattered. No one was calling to ask her out, but maybe that was because she wasn’t allowed a cell phone either. Her parents were old-fashioned like that. They were devout Southern Baptists and Republicans in the most conservative sense of the term. They had developed a strict timeline for all her major life events: thirteen to wear makeup, sixteen to go out with boys in groups, seventeen to date alone, and no kissing until she graduated. A cell phone was out of the question until she could afford to pay the bill.

The bright side to being the daughter of Randall and Carol Durant was they were rarely around to enforce their ridiculous set of rules. Just after her magical thirteenth birthday, when she was finally allowed to wear concealer and lip gloss, the Durants opened an antique store just off Church Street in downtown Emerson, Georgia. By the time Journey started high school, she was coming home to an empty house every day, cooking late dinners for her parents, and spending most weekends at home alone or at Kara’s. With her parents always working and her sister, Elena, living in Tennessee, Journey had little to no accountability at all.

Despite her lack of adult supervision, Journey hadn’t yet experienced her first *anything*. No first boyfriend. No first date. No first kiss. Outside of the youth group prayer circle at church, she had never even held hands with a boy her own age. But she was already planning for all that to change.

Kara nudged Journey’s arm and lowered her voice. “Your boy’s here.”

Butterflies took flight in her stomach as she pushed herself up onto her elbows and scanned the room. Steven Drake wasn’t dressed in school colors either. He was in a black leather jacket, relaxed blue jeans, and boots. Steven wasn’t the kind of guy who cared about the pep rally; he would miss seventh period anyway if he wanted to. His dark hair was long, and it hung straight down to his chiseled chin. He always smelled of cologne, tobacco, and motor oil. By

some miracle, he was a senior, but he had repeated a couple of grades making him the oldest student in school. If he hadn't been cursed by growing up in Emerson with a lousy family, Steven probably could have been a model. Instead, he was a mechanic and the town's reigning bad boy.

Journey watched him saunter through the cafeteria and lean against the wall near the gym. She groaned with sweet agony. "He's so hot."

"Talk about someone needing a haircut," Kara said smirking.

Journey's eyes rolled back in her head. "I just want to run my fingers through it."

Kara laughed. "I dare you."

Journey had considered running her fingers through Steven's hair many times since she first laid eyes on him in middle school. Unfortunately, he didn't know she even existed. But sometime during her junior year, she was determined for that to change. Journey had plans... plans that included Steven Drake and her very long list of *firsts*.

* * *

"The school called again." Steven's mother lit a cigarette and didn't bother to look up when her son entered the kitchen just after lunch. She raked her fingers through her black hair that hadn't been washed in days. "That's the second time this school year, and you've only been going for a month."

Steven pulled open the refrigerator door and retrieved the half-gallon jug of milk. He checked the expiration date before taking a swig. "So?" he asked as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"So"—she took a long drag—"they're gonna kick your ass out if you keep ditching school." Smoke puffed out of the corners of her mouth with each word. She shook her head. "You're gonna wind up in jail right next to your brother."

He leaned over to kiss her wrinkled cheek. "Not today, Mom." The smell of gin was mixed with the smoke on her breath. He sighed with disappointment but didn't say anything. She'd been sober for almost four months.

Deirdre "Dee" Drake had been really pretty once upon a time—back before she married Steven's dad. After years of a two-pack-a-day habit, enough Seagrams to trigger the early signs of cirrhosis, and an ex-husband who liked to teach lessons with his knuckles, Dee's yellow skin

hung awkwardly around the misshapen bones of her face. His mom was only thirty-nine, but she could easily pass as his grandmother.

Steven squeezed her bony shoulder. "I've gotta get ready for work."

"Hot water heater's busted again," she said. "I hope you don't need a shower."

He pressed his eyes closed. "Great," he mumbled as he walked toward his room.

As he passed through the living room of the single-wide trailer, he noticed a stack of envelopes on the table. He stopped and picked them up. The first was the bill from the electric company, which Steven knew was already overdue. The second was his mom's disability check from the state. And the third was an envelope with his name on it. He noted the red stamp on the front. *Lincoln County Jail*. He walked to his room, kicked the door closed, and stretched out across his black comforter. His eyes strained to decipher his brother Brian's chicken scratch handwriting on the notebook paper.

Hey little brother,

Hope things are OK at home. I just got out of lockdown for fighting. Knocked a guy's tooth out. I have to go back to court for assault now, but it was worth it. Dude won't run his mouth again. I need a favor. My commissary account is almost dry. So I need you to drop some cash in there when you come this weekend. Don't let mom come this time. I have a black eye, and you know how she worries.

-Brian

Steven groaned and draped his arm over his eyes. First the water heater, then Brian. His paycheck for the week was already spent before he even had it in his hands. The principal wouldn't be calling his mom for much longer; it was only a matter of time before he dropped out to go to work full-time.

He wadded up Brian's letter and tossed it across the room toward the trashcan.

He missed.

* * *

At 3:05, the afternoon bell rang dismissing the pep rally. David stood up from the

bleachers as students scattered like cockroaches across the gym floor. On the far side of the room, heading out through the door to the cafeteria, was Kara Robertson's towering blonde head above the sea of red, white, and blue. David minded his steps as he navigated down the risers.

A hand came down hard on his back when his sneakers squeaked to a stop on the floor. He spun around to see his best friend, Marcus Garrett. A perky blonde in a cheerleading uniform was tucked securely under his arm. She was from the junior varsity team. Her name was Karie. Or was it Katie? David couldn't remember. The girls of West Emerson flocked to Marcus like ants to sugar. He had a year-round tan, black hair, and eyes the color of antifreeze. Marcus always had a girlfriend, though the position had a pretty high turnover rate. It was no wonder David couldn't keep up with their names.

"We're gonna grab some wings before we've got to be down at the field house. You wanna ride with us?" Marcus asked.

David shook his head. "Nah. I'll try and catch up, but I've got something I want to take care of."

Marcus narrowed his eyes. "What's her name?"

David rolled his eyes. "Shut up."

"Bros before hoes, man." Marcus quickly planted a kiss on Katie's—no, Kasey's—cheek. "Not you, baby."

She blushed and gathered a fistful of the front of his blue jersey.

"It's not that," David said, turning back around. "Save me a seat at the restaurant."

David jogged across the room and out through the cafeteria. Kara's head was bobbing through the door to the outside. He pushed his way through the crowd. As he had hoped, the spunky, pink-haired girl was next to her. "Hey, Journ," he said, reaching for her arm.

She stopped walking so suddenly that two people bumped into them from behind. Her hazel eyes widened. "Yeah?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "You want a ride home?"

She jerked a thumb toward Kara. "I have a ride. Thanks."

Damn it.

He nodded. "OK, cool. Just checking." He gave a little wave. "Enjoy being grounded."

Her eyebrow arched. “Uh. Thanks.”

Enjoy being grounded? How stupid are you, Dave?

She was still eyeing him with confusion as she turned back around with Kara. “Good luck tonight, Dave. I’ll see you around.”

“See ya.”

He watched her until she and Kara disappeared down the steps to the junior’s lot.

David had met Journey the year before, just after his breakup with Rebecca Ashburn. By lunchtime that day, the entire school had heard Rebecca dumped him in a note that was taken up and read aloud by their first period English teacher. What no one knew was that just the night before, the quarterback had finally scored off the field as well. Rebecca had been David’s first, and she’d dumped him before he even had a chance to tell his friends about it.

Journey Durant wasn’t the kind of girl who gave a shit about high school gossip, so she was the only person who hadn’t laughed at him that day. She had simply asked if he was all right and tried to cheer him up. From that day on, he made mental notes of all the ways she was different from all the other girls he knew. She was smart, unique, and completely unimpressed with him.

David hadn’t seen Journey all summer, but on the first day of school, he ran into her—literally—in the hallway. When she looked up and registered his face, she winked at him and said, “Look! It’s my favorite cry-baby.”

He had blushed for the first time ever in front of a girl.

Girls didn’t speak to him that way, and it caught his attention. The way her t-shirt dipped off her shoulder had hung in his mind as well.

Journey Durant was an enigma that had been keeping him awake at night for over a month, and David was determined to get close enough to figure her out.

CHAPTER TWO

Crushes and Concussions

Journey nibbled on a cookie where she lay sprawled out on her back across the cafeteria floor. It was Monday. She was still grounded, and she had spent the entire weekend playing solitaire on the computer at her parents' shop. Kara was out sick, so that meant she had to ride the bus home from school. She didn't think the day could possibly get any worse, but she was wrong.

When the bell rang, signaling the end lunch, Journey pushed herself up off the floor, slung her backpack over her shoulder, and dropped her garbage in the trashcan. Ms. Lacey's algebra class was only the second door outside of the cafeteria, so Journey took her time and sauntered down the hallway. She stopped for a drink at the water fountain and visited the girls bathroom, pausing at the mirror to sculpt her short hair and swipe on some lipgloss. She walked into math class with three minutes to spare.

On the white board at the front of the classroom was a large note in blue marker.
'Weekend practice tests due today! Turn in your test in the front basket.'

Shit.

Journey had finished her practice test during class on Friday and had left it in her locker.

She dropped her backpack on the floor by her desk and sprinted from the classroom. The locker she shared with Kara was in a completely different building on the other side of the school. Journey cut through the cafeteria, zig-zagged through the rush of new students coming in for lunch, and raced down the hallway on the other side. She ran out the door at the end of the hall, crossed the courtyard over to the arts building, and reached for the door handle just as it flew open.

The bright red door smacked her in the center of the forehead, sending her flying back through the air onto the concrete sidewalk. The only thing she could hear was laughter.

Dizzy and confused, Journey blinked her eyes to get them to focus. Poised against the bright sunlight, a silhouette hovering above her had an angelic glow. “Are you OK?” a deep voice asked.

The world swirled back together, and Journey saw Steven Drake’s hand outstretched to help her up. She closed her eyes and prayed for death. Next to him, his friends were still laughing.

“Are you OK?” Steven asked again. His hand, stained by motor oil, wrapped around her wrist and pulled her to her feet.

She rubbed her forehead. “Yeah. I’m all right.” She swayed on her wobbly legs, and he grabbed her shoulders to steady her.

His friend, Kurt Something-or-Other, smirked. “You should watch where you’re going.”

Steven bent slightly to examine her face. “You don’t look all right.”

Steven Drake is within kissing distance right now. Oh. My. God.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. She was far from fine. She thought she might puke on his boots.

The bell rang. The sound rattled painfully around in her skull.

Damn it.

Kurt pushed past her, snarling as he went. “Keep your head up next time, you freak.”

Steven gave her a once-over again and hesitated before following after Kurt and the other guy.

Journey ducked her head and ran into the arts building. She made it safely inside the girl’s bathroom before uncontrollable tears spilt down her cheeks.

* * *

When the afternoon bell rang, David walked outside and saw Journey walking toward the buses. Kara wasn't anywhere in sight. He jogged to catch up with her. Something was wrong. Her head was down, and her shoulders were slumped. When he caught her, he spun around and walked backward so he could face her. "Hey," he said.

She looked up briefly. There was a bright red splotch across her forehead that looked a little swollen. "Hey, Dave."

"Whoa, what happened to you?" he asked.

"Lost a fight with a door today," she mumbled.

He looked around. "Where's your ride?"

"At home with cramps." Her eyes were focused back on the asphalt.

His face broke into a smile. "I'll drive you."

She stopped walking. "Why?"

He laughed. "Do you want to ride the bus?"

She shook her head.

He tugged on her sleeve. "Then come on."

She looked at the row of yellow buses, then back at him, obviously weighing her options. She let out a deep sigh. "OK. Thanks."

He jerked his head back in the direction they had just come. "I'm in the senior's lot."

She raised an eyebrow. "Where else would you be parked?"

David did a mental eye roll and cursed his own stupidity. Why couldn't he be cool around her? He hooked his thumbs under the straps of his backpack. "What happened with the door?" he asked.

"I was late and running into the arts building to get some homework I left in my locker. The door was opened from the other side, and it smacked me in the head," she answered.

He cringed. "Sounds like it hurt. You OK?"

She shook her head slightly. "It almost knocked me out. I've had a headache all day."

"I'll bet," he said as they neared the steps that led down to the senior's parking lot. She looked like she was in a lot of pain. He wondered if he should offer her his arm. He didn't.

The senior's parking lot was already swarming with students who were glad to be free from the prison of high school. David looked around and pointed to his white pickup truck.

"That's me."

"I know," she said.

So, she knew what he drove. He smiled. That was a good sign.

Marcus was parked next to him, and he had the little blonde cheerleader pressed against the driver's door of his truck. "Get a room," David called out as they approached.

Marcus detached his mouth from hers and turned around. "You're just jealous." Marcus's eyes landed on Journey, and he raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

David pointed to her. "Marcus, you remember Journey, right?"

His chin tilted up in confirmation. "Sure. What's up?" he asked her.

She smiled but didn't respond.

David could tell she really wasn't well. He ushered her past Marcus's truck. "We're gonna take off. I'll see you at practice later."

Marcus looked down at his watch. "Practice starts in fifteen minutes."

David shrugged as he walked with Journey around to the passenger's side of his truck. He pulled her door open and looked back at Marcus. "Cover for me, will ya? I won't be too late."

Marcus looked confused. "Uh... OK. Sure."

Journey paused in front of him, questioning him with her eyes.

He nodded into the cab. "Hop in," he said with a smile.

She hesitated for a moment before climbing into the passenger's seat. He closed her door.

Marcus held out his hands and lowered his voice. "What are you doing?"

"I'm giving Journey a ride home," he answered. "What's it look like I'm doing?"

Marcus laughed. "It looks like you're blowing off practice to hang out with a chick!"

David rolled his eyes. "I'll be back. Just tell coach I forgot something at home."

Marcus shook his head and sighed. "All right."

He got into the truck and jammed his keys into the ignition. Journey looked over at him.

"Are you sure you have time for this?" she asked.

He smiled over at her. "I'm the captain of the team. I won't get into trouble." It was a lie.

David knew he would have laps and pushups waiting for him when he showed up late for practice, but he didn't care.

She smelled nice, like coconut cream pie.

He turned the engine over and backed out of his space. He looked over his shoulder at her. The pink in her hair had faded a little, and she was wearing a skirt with her purple combat boots. Her face was sad. "I know what will make you feel better," he said.

She looked over with wide eyes. "Morphine?"

He laughed. "Ice cream."

She pulled her head back and scrunched her eyebrows together. "Seriously?"

He lowered his gaze. "I never joke about ice cream."

She laughed, and he nearly melted at the sound.

* * *

There was a familiar brown sedan parked in the driveway in front of Steven's house when he pulled in after school. The back fender was missing, and the back driver's side door was a green junkyard replacement that hadn't been bothered with a paint job. Steven shifted the Chevelle into park and rested his head back against the headrest.

There was a short list of things in the world that Steven loved more than he loved his black muscle car. His mom and his brother were the only two things he could think of. The Chevelle had been nothing but a rusted piece of scrap metal when his grandfather had given it to him.

It was Grandpa Joe who taught him how to rebuild an engine, replace worn out parts, and sand away the years off a classic. He had also been the glue holding the remnants of the Drake family together. Until June anyway. Steven knew it was the beginning of the end as he stood over Grandpa's casket. His mom was doped up on Xanax she'd gotten from Brian, Brian's eyes were bloodshot from God-only-knows-what, and it was the first time Steven had seen that ugly old sedan.

He sat in the driveway with the engine running and debated going inside or just backing out onto the road again. He'd known this was coming the minute he smelled the alcohol on his mom's breath the week before. Unfortunately, his work uniform was in his room, so he blew out

a deep sigh and killed the engine. Leaving his Earth Science book on the passenger's seat, he got out of the car and slammed the door shut.

The front door creaked when he pulled it open, but the house was quiet. Maybe he could get in and get out undetected. He ducked into his room and found his work shirt on the top of the laundry pile in his floor. He stripped off his black sweatshirt and slipped his arms through the sleeves of the uniform. Then a door opened down the hallway.

Steven groaned as his mother stepped into the doorway to his room. "Hey," she said, leaning against the chipped doorframe.

He didn't look up as he stepped toward his closet to get his work boots. "Hey."

"Your daddy's here."

He picked up the boots and dropped them on his bed. "I know."

"Is 'at my boy?" he heard a familiar gruff voice call down the hallway.

Steven's stomach soured. He focused on changing his shoes as quickly as possible.

A moment later, Ricky Drake's large, shirtless frame filled the doorway. Thankfully, the only physical feature Steven got from his dad was his height. Ricky was balding and pale, with a beer belly that sagged over his waistband. He scratched the hair on his chest and yawned, displaying a mouthful of rotting teeth. "How ya doin', boy?" he asked.

"I'm busy. I'm gonna be late for work," he said as he laced up his boots.

"Well, ain't ya gonna even say hello?"

Steven shook his head. "Nope."

Ricky shifted on his feet. "Is that sass I hear?"

Steven stood up and grabbed his jacket. "Yep." He stared his father down, as his mother pushed her way back into the room between them.

"Now, boys," she began. "Let's not start this."

Steven shook his head as he walked past her. "You're so stupid, Mom."

Ricky took a bold step toward his son, but Steven didn't flinch. "You don't talk to your momma that way, boy!" Ricky roared.

Steven narrowed his eyes. "No, that's *your* job, isn't it?" He shoved past his dad, knocking shoulders with him as he pushed through the doorway.

In three long strides, Steven made it across the living room and out the front door. Outside, the trusty Chevelle rumbled to life under him and spun up gravel as he peeled out of the driveway. Everything inside him wanted to turn the car around and go back to kick his dad's ass. Instead, he tried to think about work. He tried to think about the new Terminator movie. He even tried to think about school.

Thinking of school reminded him of knocking down that girl with the pink hair. He wondered if she was all right.

CHAPTER THREE

Smoke Rings

By Tuesday, Kara's stomach cramps had progressed into the stomach flu. She wasn't at school again. Journey assumed their normal spot sitting by the wall in the cafeteria that morning by herself. But she wasn't alone for long. David Britton waved to her as he came through the door.

Journey watched a lot of movies in her spare time, and she began to wonder if she had inadvertently fallen prey to some sick high school bet between members of the popular crowd. Why else was he being so nice to her?

He ignored the football table completely and walked straight toward her, his perfect smile cemented in place. "Hey. How 'ya feeling today?"

She smiled up at him. "Better. It only hurts when I touch it now."

He nudged her leg with the toe of his tennis shoe. "Don't touch it then."

She rolled her eyes.

"Still no car?" he asked.

"Nope."

He looked around. "And no Kara, I assume?"

She shook her head. "She was puking this morning."

He scrunched up his nose. "That sucks." He rocked back and forth on his feet. "Well, do you want a ride again this afternoon?"

She laughed and squinted up at him. "You really don't have to, Dave—"

He cut her off. "It's not a big deal. I want to."

Her mouth fell open a little. "Why?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Is it really so hard to believe I'm a nice guy? Do I have some douchebag reputation I'm not aware of?"

Whoops, she thought. It was time to back peddle. Fast.

"No, not at all." She looked around. "You wanna sit?"

He glanced back at the football table. Her eyes followed his. Marcus Garrett, Justin Kruse, and several others were watching him expectantly. Journey sensed this was some sort of pivotal social moment, but she wasn't sure what role she played in it.

Finally, David's eyes settled on her again. "Yeah." He slipped his arms out of his backpack and dropped it on the floor. He sat down across from her and leaned back on his arms, crossing his feet at the ankles.

Behind him, Marcus's head drop quizzically to the side.

She looked back at David and tapped her fingertips together. "So..."

A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "So..." he echoed. "What do you and Kara usually talk about?"

Boys. You. Your friends. Steven Drake...

As if on cue, Steven Drake walked through the door. His presence was a magnet for her attention, and Journey couldn't help but let her eyes linger on him for a moment. Then he locked gazes with her.

Her eyes widened as her heart pounded in her chest. She looked back at David, who turned to look in time for Steven to stop just behind him.

"Hey," Steven said.

Journey looked at Steven, then at David, then back up at Steven again. Steven Drake.
This can't be happening right now.

“Hi.” Her voice cracked.

Steven stuffed his hands into his pockets. “I was just wondering if you were all right.”

Journey looked to see if someone was behind her that she was unaware of. Nope. He was really talking to her. Her stomach fluttered as she remembered the pressure of his hand around her wrist. “Yeah. I’m OK. Um... thanks for asking.”

He looked as awkward as she felt. “I also wanted to say I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—“

She shook her head to stop him. “No, don’t worry about it. I should’ve been paying more attention.”

He took a half-step backward. “OK. Well, see ya.”

And then he was gone.

David raised his eyebrows. “What was that about?”

She nodded toward where Steven was walking away and pointed to her forehead. “He was on the other side of the door yesterday.”

David jerked his thumb in Steven’s direction. “And he just apologized to you.” He laughed with surprise. “He doesn’t strike me as the apologetic type.”

Journey was surprised as well, but she was too shocked to agree with him. She pinched her arm to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. When she decided she was awake, she rubbed the knot on her skull again, looked across the room at Steven one more time, and then looked back at the quarterback. *What a weird morning. Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought.*

* * *

After school, David waited for Journey at the split in the sidewalk where one path led to the buses and the other path led to the parking lot. He was determined to intercept her if she tried to sneak away to the bus. Marcus showed up before Journey did.

“Where’s your girlfriend?” David asked, noticing the cheerleader was missing.

Marcus winked at him. “What girlfriend?”

David laughed and shook his head.

Marcus looked around. “You waiting on someone?”

David smiled. “Maybe.”

Marcus’s eyes widened. “Dude, what’s with you lately? Are you dating that chick?”

“Nah, man. We’re just friends,” he answered.

Marcus laughed. “Good.”

David’s head snapped back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s kinda weird, Dave.”

David folded his arms over his chest. “She’s actually pretty cool. And maybe if you thought about girls with your brain instead of just your dick, you’d see that.”

Marcus held up his hands in defense. “Dude, chill out. I’m just saying she’s not your type.”

“What’s my type?”

Marcus cast his eyes over to a group of girls surrounding Rebecca Ashburn.

David laughed. “Rebecca certainly isn’t my type. Not anymore.”

“Whatever, Dave,” Marcus said, shaking his head. “Justin and I are going to Shady Side to watch the mud races tonight if you wanna go.”

Journey was coming down the sidewalk behind Marcus. “I’ll let you know,” he replied, still looking past his friend.

Marcus turned and saw her, then looked at David and rolled his eyes. “You’re fucking smitten.”

“Fuck you, Marcus.”

Journey smiled politely at both of them when she approached. “Hi, Marcus.”

“Hello again,” he said. “We were just talking about you.”

David slapped him, hard, on the chest.

Marcus winced but laughed.

Journey pointed to a pencil drawing of a throwing star on the cover of the notebook Marcus was carrying. “Did you draw this?”

Marcus looked down at the doodle and nodded. “Yeah, it’s the—”

She cut him off. “It’s the Metallica ninja star.”

David watched Marcus’s eyes double in size. “Yeah. It is.”

She inspected his drawing more carefully. “It’s pretty good,” she said.

David decided that Marcus couldn’t look more surprised if she had spoken to him in

Mandarin. The three of them turned in the direction of the parking lot with David in the middle.

Marcus looked over at her again. "You like Metallica?"

Journey nodded. "They are my second favorite band."

"What's your first?" he asked.

"Alice in Chains," she answered without hesitation.

"No shit?" Marcus asked.

She nodded. "No shit." She looked over at him. "I think Layne Staley has the best voice in rock and roll."

"Better than James Hetfield?"

"It's a close race," she answered.

David didn't miss the impressed grin on Marcus's face. He caught Marcus's eye and shrugged as if to say 'I told you so'.

When they parted ways at the bumper of David's white truck, Marcus slapped the tailgate. "Let me know if you're gonna make it to the races tonight, Dave. And Journey, you're invited too, if you can make it."

Her brow crumpled with confusion. "Uh, OK. Thanks."

"I'll call you later, Marcus," Dave said and opened Journey's door.

"What was that about?" she asked as she climbed into the cab.

He lingered at her door. "Oh, me and the guys sometimes go down to Shady Side on Tuesdays. They have mud races. It's pretty fun."

"Oh," she said.

He looked past her. "Do you, uh, wanna go?"

She turned her palms up. "Grounded, remember?"

His shoulders deflated. "That's right. I forgot." *I wonder if she'll be ungrounded in time for the Homecoming game next week. There's a dance after. Too bad I've already got a date. Abby will probably be named Homecoming Queen, and this late in the game I can't cancel on her. I wonder if Journey knows I'm only taking Abby as a friend. Maybe if...*

Journey snapped her fingers in front of his face, and he realized he was staring out into space. She laughed. "Are we going to leave or camp out here for the night?"

He chuckled and closed her door.

Ten minutes later, they were parked in front of her two-story brick house. She studied the house for a minute before looking over at him. "Do you want to come in for a few minutes? Nobody's home, but you can't stay long because if they catch you here, they might kill us both."

He laughed and turned off the engine. "Sure."

He followed her inside the house and up the wooden staircase. The Durant family had expensive taste in furniture. There was a baby grand piano and grandfather clock in the room that over looked the driveway. The den had a big screen television with maroon leather couches. And the dining room had a fancy-looking dining table and a matching display cabinet filled with gold-rimmed dishes. Journey, in her flared blue jeans and army jacket, didn't look like she belonged at all.

He studied a vase that was four feet tall while she picked up the house phone. "What do your parents do?" he asked.

She looked up. "Uh, they are antique dealers."

That explains a lot, he thought, looking around the room.

She dialed numbers on the keypad and held a finger up to her lips. "Gotta call and check in with the warden. Be quiet."

He nodded and walked over and ran his hand across the couch to see if it was real leather. It was.

"Hey, Dad," she said into the phone. "I'm home... Yeah, it was a pretty good day. What time do you want me to have dinner ready?" She listened for a minute. "Ok. Yeah. Love you too."

She disconnected and walked into the kitchen toward the refrigerator. "You thirsty?" she asked. "I've got Coke, Diet Coke, tea—"

"Coke," he said.

She handed him an ice cold can and took out a Diet Coke for herself. She looked at him and bit her lip. "Give me one sec."

He nodded and opened his can. "OK."

She took off in a jog down the hallway off the living room. On the refrigerator was a

photo of a little girl playing in a water sprinkler. She looked like she was five years old. A moment later, Journey was at his side again. "Is this you?" he asked, tapping the photo.

"Yeah," she said, hooking her thumb in her pocket.

"Look at your cute pig tails," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "Shut up. I'm going to the porch. You coming?"

He nodded and followed her through a sliding glass door off the kitchen. The back deck was huge, and there was a picnic table that overlooked rolling hills off behind the house. "This is nice," David said, walking to the railing and looking over.

She stepped up on the table bench and sat down on the top. Her can popped open with a soft hiss. "Yeah. It's not bad," she said.

He watched her flip the lid of a pack of cigarettes open and he laughed. "So, the grounding wasn't enough to teach you a lesson, huh?"

She lit the cigarette with a pink lighter. "It taught me to keep my big mouth shut."

He stepped over beside her. "Can I have one?"

She looked up, shock evident in her eyes. "You smoke?"

He nodded. "Don't tell my coach."

She shook her head and handed him her pack. "You're just full of surprises."

He sat down next to her and lit the cigarette. "Really?"

She laughed. "I had you pegged for a Boy Scout."

He leaned toward her and blew out a puff of smoke into a perfect ring. "I am certainly not a Boy Scout."

She giggled. God, he loved it when she giggled.

He nodded back toward the house. "So, what's your life like here?" he asked. "No offense, but you don't look quite like you fit in at this place."

She tilted her face up toward the sky and laughed. "That's the understatement of the year!"

"So, what are your parents like?" he asked.

She sighed. "They're really strict. They work a lot, and when they're not at work, they're at church." She took a long drag on her cigarette, signaling the end of the conversation. "What

about yours?" she asked.

"My dad's pretty tough, a retired Master Sergeant. He bugs me a lot about joining the Army like he did. Mom is cool though. They don't hover much, which is nice," he said. "I'm sure you'll meet them sometime."

She blinked up with surprise. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Why not?" He bumped her with his shoulder. "I'm afraid you're going to have to create a permanent position for me in your social group."

Her eyes sparkled when she laughed. "You're so fucking weird."

David leaned into her. "And now, you're stuck with me *forever*."

* * *

Steven finished tightening a bolt on the engine of his team's rebuilt Nova and slammed the hood shut. The Tuesday mud circuit was the only bright spot in his week. He didn't have to work. He didn't have to deal with his family. And, he could drink as much beer as he wanted without having to worry about cops. Law enforcement in Georgia had an unwritten rule about giving Shady Side a pass.

He wiped black grease from his hands onto his jeans and walked back to sit next to Kurt Nicholson on their bench on the sidelines. Kurt handed him a beer. The two had gone to school together since kindergarten. They weren't exactly friends, but Kurt was the closest thing Steven had to one.

Steven propped his boots up on a cooler and lifted the cold can up to his lips. The engines roared to life at the starting line causing the ground all around them to rumble. The crowd began to whoop and holler. There was a loud crack from a pistol, and the motors screamed as the cars sped off around the track.

Kurt slapped him on the arm. "Let's move. I can't see turn three."

They got up and walked to the fence near the bleachers. The Nova quickly pushed to the front of the pack, and when they came around turn one again, mud slung up across the front of Steven's jeans. Steven laughed and took another deep swig of beer.

Off to the right of the track, Steven saw David Britton walking from the bathroom.

Steven pushed off the fence and turned around. "Hey, Dave!" he called out.

David looked up and walked over. “Hey, man. What’s up?”

Steven leaned his elbows on the fence. “Your friend, the girl with the pink hair. What’s her name?”

David blinked and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Journey Durant.”

Kurt laughed. “That bitch you knocked out yesterday?”

Anger flashed on David’s face.

Steven rolled his eyes toward his friend. “Shut up, Kurt.” He looked back at Dave, who was still fuming. It was obvious he had a thing for the girl. “What’s her story?”

“She’s a junior,” David said. “She’s cool.”

“She dating anybody?”

David shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Steven knew he was lying, but he kept it to himself. “OK. Thanks.”

David walked back toward the bleachers to join the rest of the West Emerson football team, and Steven turned his eyes back to the race. His attention, however, was still stuck on the girl with the pink hair. She’d had his attention for two days.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mr. Most Likely

Wednesday afternoon, Journey didn't protest David giving her a ride home at all. He was making progress. When they pulled into her driveway, he heard her breath and saw a Cadillac sitting in the open garage. A woman he assumed was her mother was unloading groceries from the trunk.

Journey groaned.

David looked across the cab at her. "Are you going to be in trouble for me driving you home?"

She sighed and wrenched her door open. "Probably. You'd better get out. She's going to want to meet you."

The woman turned around when she heard the truck. Journey slammed her door. Her mom was in a black skirt suit with her blonde and gray hair tied back in a neat bun. She looked like she had just come from a funeral. Her eyes widened when David walked around to the front of his truck. He couldn't exactly read the expression on her face; she looked caught somewhere between confused and angry.

"Hi, Mom," Journey said.

“Hi, sweetheart.” She looked at David again. “Who’s your friend?”

David stepped forward before Journey could answer and offered his hand to her mother. “Hi. I’m David Britton. I hope it’s all right that I offered Journey a ride home from school.”

Her mother’s head snapped back with surprise as she shook his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, David. I’m Journey’s mom, Mrs. Durant. And, uh, no it’s fine. I’m sure she appreciates not having to ride the bus.” Mrs. Durant tilted her head to the side. “Britton? You’re not, by chance, Dennis and Gail’s son, are you?”

David smiled. “I am.”

Carol tugged on his sleeve. “I should’ve guessed. You look just like your father. I graduated from high school with your mother.” She motioned toward the house. “David, would you like to come inside for some sweet tea?”

He nodded. “Sure, but only if you let me help with those groceries.”

Behind Carol’s back, he flashed Journey a grin. She rolled her eyes.

David had always had a way with parents. They loved him. When they reached the kitchen, Journey looked impressed as she settled in the chair across from him at the table. Journey’s mom poured three tall glasses of iced tea.

“So, you’re on the football team?” Carol asked.

He nodded and sipped his drink. “I’m the quarterback,” he said. “We’ve got a pretty decent team this year. Have you been to any games?”

She shook her head. “No, but the season isn’t over yet, correct?”

“No, ma’am. We have a game this Friday, and the homecoming game is next week. You should come, since you’re a West Emerson alumni like my mom. She’ll be there.”

Carol’s cheeks flushed under her layers of makeup. “Well, I appreciate the personal invitation, David. I’ll talk with my husband about it.”

David had a plan. He looked at Journey. “Are you coming to the game on Friday?”

Her eyes widened. “I, uh... I don’t know. Mom, can I go?”

Carol raised an eyebrow. “I’ll talk to your dad.”

David grinned and focused his eyes on her mom. “I believe there will be some scouts from the University of Georgia there, so you’ll have to say a little prayer for me. I could use all

of the support there that night that I can get.” It was a lie, but it worked.

Carol’s face brightened. “That’s wonderful, David. I’ll add it the prayer list at church, if you want.”

I’m going to hell, he thought.

“That would be great. Thank you, Mrs. Durant,” he said.

He caught Journey’s eye across the table and winked. She blushed and covered her face with her hand. She peeked at him through a crack in her fingers. She looked like a pixie.

He stayed for another fifteen minutes before remembering he was already very late for football practice. He cringed when he looked at the clock. “I really have to get going. Coach is going to kill me for being so late.”

Carol frowned. “I was just about to ask you to stay for dinner.”

He stood up and smiled. “Can I have a raincheck?”

She nodded. “Absolutely.”

Journey pushed herself up from the table. “I’ll walk you out, Dave.”

David shook Carol’s hand again. “It was wonderful to meet you. Thanks for the tea.”

Carol was beaming. “I hope we see you again very soon, David.”

“I hope so too.”

Journey walked with him downstairs and out to the driveway. She was hugging her arms in the cold. “You are a parent wizard,” she said with a laugh.

He spun around and walked backwards so he could smile at her. “You’ll be ungrounded by midnight, my dear.”

She nodded. “Probably.”

He put his hand on his door. “So, will you come to the game on Friday?”

She scrunched up her nose. “Football’s not really my thing.”

He tapped his chest. “But it’s my thing, and you should come be supportive.”

Her eyes widened, and her smile was mocking. “Yeah, since UG scouts will be there, and my mom is putting you on the prayer list and all.” She laughed. “That was a nice touch, by the way.”

He winked at her again. “You can thank me later.”

She stretched her arms up over her head, flashing a bare strip of smooth skin across her stomach. "We'll see."

He jerked his eyes back up to hers. "We'll see about what?"

She shoved him the shoulder. "We'll see about the game on Friday. Go to practice. You're going to be late."

"Call me later?" he asked.

She folded her arms across her chest. "I don't have your number. And, I don't have a cell phone."

"Well, you have a house phone." He reached into his truck and grabbed a pen out of the cubby in the console. He stepped over to her, pushed her sleeve up, and inked his number on the inside of her arm. Her skin was so smooth against his fingertips. "No excuses now."

She smiled. She was close enough to be kissed. "I'm also grounded from the phone."

He laughed and took a step back. "Well, put my number somewhere safe. Bye, Journ."

She turned back toward her front door, then smiled back over her shoulder. "Bye, Dave."

David thought his knees might buckle.

* * *

Journey was sitting on the hood of her old BMW the next morning when Kara pulled into the space next to hers.

Kara smiled as she got out. "You got your wheels back, I see."

Journey slid off her car. "Yeah, thanks to David Britton."

Kara's head snapped back as she pulled her backpack out of the back seat. "David Britton?"

"Yeah." Journey slung her backpack over her shoulders. "It's been a weird few days since you've been gone. How are you feeling?"

"Better, thank God. I thought I was going to die. I lost five pounds this week because I was so sick," she answered as the girls turned toward the school. "Is that a bruise on your head?"

Journey laughed. "Yeah. Steven Drake opened a door in my face and knocked me down on Monday."

Kara stopped walking. "What?"

“Yep. It almost knocked me out,” she said. “He helped me up off the ground and even stopped to apologize to me the next morning, so it was kinda worth it.”

Kara laughed and did a double step to catch up with her friend. “Only you,” she said, shaking her head. “What’s the story with David?”

Journey looked up at her. “He’s been even weirder than usual. He’s given me a ride home from school every day this week. He took me out for ice cream on Monday, and yesterday, he met my mom.”

Kara stopped walking again. “Seriously?”

Journey turned to face her. “I know, right? Mom is crazy about him. She didn’t shut up about him at dinner last night. She thinks we’re dating or something.”

Kara’s eyes widened. “Are you dating?”

“Hell no,” she answered.

“It sounds like it to me,” Kara said.

Journey rolled her eyes. “He’s not interested in me like that. We’re just friends.”

They continued up the sidewalk. “David’s hot. I don’t see why you don’t like him.”

Journey shrugged. “He’s not my type. And I’m certainly not his.” She smiled up at her. “Steven’s my type.”

Kara rolled her eyes. “Of course, only you would give up Mr. Most Likely to Succeed for Mr. Most Likely to Go to Jail.”

“I’m not giving up anybody. I’m not dating David.”

Suddenly, Journey winced as Kara dug her nails into Journey’s arm. “Oh my god. Can you get him to introduce me to Justin?”

Journey pried her hands away. “Geez, Kara. You don’t have to draw blood.”

“Will you ask him?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m going to go the football game on Friday, so maybe you can meet him after,” she suggested.

Kara skidded to a stop for a third time.

Journey spun toward her. “We’re going to miss first period if you don’t keep walking.”

“But you’re going to the football game! I’ve tried to get you to go for two years and

suddenly, you're going. You do like David Britton!"

Journey rolled her eyes. "No, I don't. I'm just going because I kinda owe him for getting me ungrounded. He asked, so I'm going."

"He asked because he loves you."

Journey started walking away. "Shut up, Kara."

* * *

It was already half-time when Steven pulled the Chevelle into the parking lot for the football game at school. He rarely ever went, but his friends were going and he assumed that Journey might be there. The moment he opened his car door, he immediately remembered why he hated football games. The screams of rowdy fans wafted through the air accompanied by the off-key racket of the marching band. Steven groaned and zipped up his coat.

The smell of burgers and popcorn was strong enough to make anyone's stomach rumble, and Steven had worked through dinner to get off early. The marching band was in the middle of the field murdering 'Crazy Train' by Ozzy Osborne as he made his way toward the concessions building behind the home team end zone. His eyes scanned the crowd, but he didn't see pink hair anywhere.

After ten minutes of waiting in line, he ordered a hamburger and a Coke. The band marched off the field, and the crowd cheered as the team ran out of the field house behind where he was standing. Steven carried his dinner back to the home grandstand and heard a familiar whistle above the roar of the crowd. He caught sight of Kurt waving his arm from the top of the bleachers.

"What are you doing here?" Kurt asked as he approached.

"Got done early," Steven replied, sitting down. "Is it a good game?"

"See for yourself." Kurt nodded toward the scoreboard as he took a swig from a metal flask. East Emerson was killing West Emerson by three touchdowns.

Steven cringed. "Well, that was a waste of a ticket." He took a bite out of his burger.

The game didn't get any better. WEHS lost to their biggest rival by seventeen points. Kurt was half-lit by the end of the fourth quarter, and he slapped Steven on the back. "We're

going to Matt's kegger out on the hill tonight. You down?"

Steven had an early shift at the shop the next morning, but he also didn't want to go home. He nodded. "I'll stop by for a while."

At the bottom of the bleachers, he saw Journey wearing a bright blue toboggan with long braided ear covers. How had he never noticed her before? He stood up. "I'll catch up with you guys later," he said to the group of guys behind him.

Kurt pushed himself up and wobbled a bit. "I'll come with you. I've gotta take a leak."

Steven didn't wait for him. He navigated the stairs and the crowd as quickly as he could. He followed the blue hat all the way to the field house. Kurt slipped into the bathroom, and the girls disappeared around the side of the building. He followed them and heard giggling when he turned the corner at the back wall.

Both girls looked up with wide eyes, like they were caught in the middle of some terrible act. Journey had a cigarette dangling from her lips, and she was patting her pockets, obviously looking for a lighter. She froze when her eyes met his. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a Zippo, and struck up a flame. He took a step closer and offered it to her. She hesitated before leaning into the flame and lighting her cigarette.

"Thanks," she said when she withdrew it from her lips.

He smiled. *A bad girl.*

"Can I bum one?" he asked. She offered him the pack of cigarettes, and his fingers brushed against hers as he accepted it. He didn't miss the way she nervously bit her lower lip as she looked up at him. "Who are you hiding from back here?" he asked as he lit one for himself.

Journey shrugged. "Everyone."

He nodded. "That's probably smart. You can still get in trouble even though school's out."

"Know that first hand?" she asked with a grin.

He pointed the cigarette at her. "Yes." He stuffed his free hand into his pocket. "You're Journey, right?"

She blinked with surprise. "Yeah. This is my friend, Kara."

The tall girl gave him a small wave as she puffed on her cigarette.

Steven looked back at Journey. "How's your head?"

She rubbed the spot under her hat. "It's better."

He laughed. "I thought I had killed you."

"I thought so too," she agreed.

He looked down at his feet. His heart was racing in his chest. Girls didn't usually have that effect on him. "Well, I'm glad you're all right."

Kara nudged her friend. "We'd better get back out there before we miss the team."

Journey sucked in a deep drag and dropped the butt onto the grass. She ground it out with her boot. Her purple combat boot. He smiled.

She looked up at him. "Thanks for the light."

He wanted to stop her from leaving, but he didn't. The girls walked back around the side of the building. While he mentally blasted himself for not at least asking for her number, there was some commotion and the rise of a familiar, angry voice.

He dropped his cigarette and bolted around the corner. Kurt had Journey backed into the wall. "What the hell are you doing?" Steven yelled.

His drunk friend shoved her in the shoulder. "Can you believe this brat ran into me again?" He was shouting and drawing attention from the people who were waiting for the football team to leave.

Steven grabbed Kurt's arm. "Leave her alone, man."

Kurt jerked his arm free. "I'll leave her alone when I'm ready to." He stepped closer to Journey and pinned her against the wall with his arms.

Steven grabbed a handful of Kurt's red hair and threw him backward onto the ground. Kurt was too stunned to move for a second. Steven looked back over his shoulder. "You girls get out of here."

Journey and Kara got a few feet back toward the crowd before Kurt sprang in his direction with his fist flying. Steven dodged to the right, then swung hard toward Kurt's face. He knocked him back a few steps, and blood poured from his nose. People started yelling, which he knew would attract the cops, but there was no time to bolt. Kurt lunged at him again, and Steven landed a left hook into his jaw. Kurt ducked and grabbed him around the waist, tackling him to

the ground. Steven began punching him in the ribs till someone pulled Kurt off. It was a police officer.

A hand reached down to help him up. It was David Britton.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bloody Knuckles

David said goodbye to his parents while Journey explained to the cops that Steven was saving her from his friend. She was shivering next to Kara by the girls' bathroom when his parents left. As David walked toward them, he slipped off his letter jacket.

"Here," he said, wrapping it around her shoulders. "I'm not sure why you wore a skiing hat but not a coat."

She shrugged as she slid her arms into his jacket. "It was a fashion choice."

David tugged on the ends of the braids that dangled off her blue hat. "I like it."

She scrunched up her nose. "Sorry you lost your game."

He shook his head. "We always lose to East. Nobody was surprised." He nodded over to where Kurt was in handcuffs. "I'm sorry I wasn't around to keep that creep away from you."

A smile crept across her pretty face. "I would say Steven handled it pretty well."

He could tell her blushing grin was more than just grateful.

Principal Edith Cook stepped over toward them. "All right guys, there's nothing more to see here. It's time for you to head on home."

Journey stepped forward to object. "But, I wanted to tell Steven—"

The principal cut her off. "You can tell him on Monday, Miss Durant."

David nodded toward the parking lot. "Come on. Maybe we can still catch Justin in the parking lot." Kara's eyes lit up, and David had an idea. "There's a keg party tonight up on the hill. I'm pretty sure Justin's going." He looked at Kara. "Do you and Journey want to come?"

Kara clapped her hands together with glee. "Yes!"

Journey looked down at her watch. "No."

David frowned and draped his arm around her neck as they walked out of the stadium. "Why not?"

She laughed. "I just got my car back. I don't wanna lose it again."

"Steven Drake might be there." David regretted the words the second they left his lips. Using another guy was definitely the wrong way to bait a girl into attending a party.

She looked at her watch again, obviously turning the idea over in her mind.

Kara tugged on her arm. "Please, oh please!"

When they reached the senior's lot, Journey finally shook her head. "No. I'm going home. I don't want to, but I've got to play it safe for a while."

David's shoulders slumped, and she noticed. She looked up at him with questioning eyes. He leaned into her. "Are you sure?"

They stopped at the driver's door of her car. "I'm sure." She looked at Kara. "You should go. I'm sure it will be epic."

Kara looked at David with a hopeful smile.

He nodded. "Yeah, you should come."

Steven's car was parked on the grass on the other side of the lot, and when Journey saw it, David watched her eyes sparkle again. She reached into her car and ripped open her backpack.

"What are you doing?" David asked.

She pulled out a notebook and a pen. "I'm going to leave him a note."

And probably your phone number, David thought. As Journey scribbled a note, David looked at Kara. "Do you want to ride with me or follow me?" David didn't even want to go to the party.

"I'll follow you," she answered as Journey jogged across the parking lot to Steven's

muscle car.

When she returned, Kara hugged Journey goodbye before getting into her car. Journey walked back over and started to slip off David's jacket. He held up his hand to stop her. "Just wear it. I'll get it back later."

"Are you sure? You don't need it if you're going out?"

He shook his head. "I'll be fine."

"Thanks," she said, letting the weight of the jacket rest on her shoulders again.

She stood there for a long time, and David's heart began to thump louder in his chest. *Do I hug her? Do I beg her to come with us? Do I pull her in by those ridiculous strings on her hat and kiss her?*

Instead, he stuck out his hand like he was closing a business deal.

She cocked her head to the side and chuckled before shaking his hand. "I'll see you Monday, Dave."

"Monday," he repeated.

When she pulled out of the lot, he dropped his face back toward the sky and sighed. *I'm an idiot.*

Kara was laughing at him through her car window when he opened his eyes again. She pointed a long fingernail at him. "Smooth moves, Casanova."

He groaned and threw his football bag into the truck.

* * *

The only reason Steven didn't go to jail was because Journey Durant stuck up for him. She told the officer that he was protecting her from Kurt. By the time he was finished with the cops, Journey and her friends had gone. He walked to the Chevelle and found a note under the wiper on his windshield. He pulled it out and read it in the light from the street lamp.

Sorry I couldn't stay longer. Thanks for saving me tonight. - Journey

He smiled and got in his car. He folded the note and stuck it in the glove box before

pulling out of the lot.

It was almost eleven o'clock, and even though he didn't want to go home, he turned his car in that direction. When he got there, he immediately regretted the decision. His father's car was in the driveway and every light in the house was on. Even with the doors of his car still closed, he could hear raised voices inside. If it hadn't been for the sound of his mother crying, he would've never gone in the house.

The trailer looked like it had been burglarized when he walked in. The coffee table was turned on its side, the television screen was busted, and a beer bottle had been shattered against the wall. His mother was sitting on the kitchen floor, holding a bloody paper towel to her lip.

"Where is he?" Steven demanded.

"Steven, don't," she pleaded.

He let out a huff. "I've had enough of this shit." He picked up the house phone and dialed the police.

She clambered to her feet. "No, you can't!" she cried, trying to pull the phone out of his hands.

Heavy footsteps fell in the hallway from the bedroom. A moment later, his dad was standing before him, his eyes red with anger and whiskey. "You calling the cops, boy?" he yelled in Steven's face.

Steven dropped the phone and let it dangle by the cord. "Did you put your filthy hands on my mother again, you son of a bitch?" Steven shouted back.

The backside of Ricky's hand landed square on Steven's jaw, and that was it. Nineteen years of resentment was unleashed, fueled by the rage from the brawl with Kurt. Steven's right hook split open the skin beneath Ricky's eye, and blood streamed down his cheek. Stunned, Ricky wiped the blood on the back of his hand and looked at it. Then, like a bull let out of a pen, he charged his son and slammed him into the living room wall. A framed picture of Jesus crashed to the floor and shattered.

Steven pushed his dad off him with all of his strength, but Ricky outweighed him by more than fifty pounds. When he ducked to ram Steven into the wall again, his forehead slammed against Steven's eye socket. Steven brought a knee up and jammed it between his dad's

legs. Ricky buckled and fell to his knees. Steven landed a right cross against Ricky's jaw that knocked him backward.

Dee was screaming as Steven jumped on top of his dad and pounded him in the face again. A moment later, two cops stormed in and pulled him off.

Then, for the second time in one night, Steven was put into handcuffs.

His drunk father pushed himself up onto his knees. His face was so bloody it made Steven smile. Ricky spat blood onto the floor and pointed at Steven. "He came at me!"

Steven turned his bruised cheek in Ricky's direction. "Only after you hit me!"

The cop pressed his hand against Steven's chest. "Have a seat, or I'll put you in my patrol car."

Obediently, Steven slumped onto the carpet.

The cop squatted next to him. "What happened here?" he asked.

Steven spoke up. "Look at my mom's face! The drunk bastard was wailing on her again!"

"*You* hit her!" Ricky shouted.

Stunned, Steven's head snapped up. "I wasn't even here! I called the fucking police!"

"You started this, you little shit!" his father screamed.

The cop looked at Dee. "Ma'am, can you tell me who hit you?"

Dee looked from her son to her ex-husband, and then back at Steven again. Her eyes were glassy and bloodshot. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Before it even happened, Steven knew what was coming. No one had Dee's loyalty like Ricky did.

With a shaky hand, she pointed a bony finger at her son.

* * *

On Monday morning in the cafeteria, Journey got another earful from Kara about the party she had skipped. She had spent all night with Justin and his friends on the hill. He even asked her to dance in the bed of his truck while Marcus Garrett blasted music from his new sound system. Apparently, David hadn't stayed long, and Steven never showed up at all. It didn't sound like Journey had missed out on much, despite Kara's inability to shut up about it.

While Kara blabbed on and on, Journey watched the door for Steven Drake.

David came in, walking with Abby Carter. Abby had waist-length blonde hair, crystal

blue eyes, and a figure that made boys trip over their own feet when she walked by. She was inarguably the most beautiful girl at West Emerson, and unlike Rebecca Ashburn, she was smart and infinitely kind. In that moment, however, Journey hated her. David didn't so much as glance in her direction as they passed by.

Kara noticed. "That was weird."

Journey thought so too. She had his letter jacket spread out over her legs, so she stood up and draped it over her arm. She crossed the cafeteria and stopped at the football table where David was laughing at something Abby had said. Still, he didn't notice her. Finally, she cleared her throat to get his attention.

He looked over at her and smiled. For the first time in a while, she felt completely out of place standing in front of him. She held up his jacket. "Here. I thought you'd like this back."

"Oh yeah." He reached out to take it from her. "Thanks."

She shifted awkwardly on her feet before turning back around toward where Kara was watching. David didn't stop her. With wide eyes, she gave Kara a small shrug as she walked back over.

"Totally weird," Kara said again. "Did you two get into a fight or something?"

Journey shook her head. "I haven't even talked to him since we left the game on Friday."

A smile crept across Kara's face. "He's trying to make you jealous."

Journey rolled her eyes. "No, he's not."

Kara nodded. "He asked me at the party if you had a thing for Steven."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him the truth, and he wasn't happy about it," she said.

"Whatever, Kara."

Kara laughed. "I'm not sure who's more thick-skulled. You or David." She leaned toward her. "Marcus asked about you too. You're making quite a name for yourself."

Journey had no idea how or why. "What did he ask?"

"He just wanted to know if you were there or if you were coming," she answered.

Journey sighed. "So strange." She was desperate to talk about anything other than herself. "Are you going to see Justin again?"

Kara looked across the lunchroom to where he was seated with the team. She sighed heavily. "I hope so."

David was waiting at the locker that Journey shared with Kara after first period. "Hey," he said with a smile that was devoid of his chill from that morning.

She cocked an eyebrow. "Hey."

"How was your weekend?" he asked.

Journey spun the combination lock and didn't look at him. "It was fine."

He leaned into her. "You mad at me?"

She turned toward him. "You totally blew me off this morning."

He shook his head. "I didn't blow you off. I was in the middle of a conversation."

She sighed and turned back toward her locker. Out of the corner of her eye, she could swear she saw him suppressing a smile.

He bumped her shoulder. "Guess what I heard?"

"What?"

"Your boy's in jail."

"Steven?"

He nodded. "Beat up his old man over the weekend."

Her mouth fell open.

David leaned against the row of lockers with an odd mix of satisfaction in his eyes.

"Yeah. They say he's done here. He won't be back to school."

Her heart plummeted. Steven Drake had been her reason for getting up every morning for two years. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." He knocked his knuckles against her locker door. "Hey, are you going to the Homecoming game on Friday?"

She shrugged. She couldn't think about anything other than Steven.

"What about the dance after?" he asked.

She grimaced. "Dances aren't really my thing."

He nudged her in the ribs. "You've gotta come. It's the biggest night of football season. I'll even be wearing a suit after the game."

She pulled back and looked at him. “A suit?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I’m on the Homecoming Court. I’m taking Abby.”

Journey’s hand paused as she reached for her English book. “Nice.”

“So, will you come?” he pressed.

She slammed her locker door a little harder than she intended to. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

He smiled that stupid, handsome smile of his. “Cool. I’ll see you later.”

She watched him till he disappeared down the hall. She felt nauseated, but she didn’t know why.

CHAPTER SIX

Dirty Dancing

It took Steven's mom five days to come up with the money to bond Steven out of jail. Part of him wished that she didn't bother since she was the one who sent him there. Even though his mother didn't press charges, the state of Georgia did because of his mother's lie. He would have to go to court and pray she didn't testify against him.

On Friday, he went to his house to pack up his stuff. His father wasn't home, and Steven didn't ask where he was. He exchanged only necessary words with his mom. His grandmother in Dalton, Georgia offered for him to stay with her till he could figure out other living arrangements. She knew his mom was a drunk, and she knew that she had probably lied about what happened that night.

It was dark by the time the Chevelle was loaded down with his clothes and tools. Before he left town, he was determined to see the pink-haired girl one more time. It was the night of Homecoming at West Emerson, and while he didn't dare set foot into the stadium, he waited in his car near the gym till the game ended. When students began flooding toward the gym where the dance would be held, he got out and leaned against his car door. As the crowd began to thin, he wondered if maybe she didn't come. When he was just about to leave, he saw her. In a sea of

suits and dresses, she was the only girl wearing blue jeans.

Her face brightened when her eyes landed on him, and for a moment, his mind went blank. He smiled and crossed his arms over his chest as she approached with the tall girl. “Hey, you,” he said.

She couldn’t contain her giddy smile. “Hey. I heard you’ve had a shitty week.”

He nodded and kicked the curb with his boot. “You could say that.”

Journey pointed toward his face. “Nice shiner.”

It had taken days for the swelling to go down, and a deep purple pool of blood lingered below his eye. “Yeah. The other guy looks worse.”

She smiled.

Her friend nudged her arm. “I’ll see you inside,” the girl said.

Journey just nodded before looking back at him. She jerked her thumb toward the gym. “Are you going to the dance?”

He laughed. “No. I don’t do dances, and I’m not a student anymore.”

She scrunched up her nose. “That sucks.”

He shrugged. “It’s not exactly a shock.”

She chuckled. “So, if you’re not going to the dance, what are you doing here?”

“I’m moving to Dalton for a while to stay with my grandmother. I just thought I’d drop by and tell you goodbye.”

She pulled her head back in surprise. “Me? Really?”

He laughed. “Yeah. I almost killed you, and then I beat up my best friend for you, so I think that qualifies us as friends.”

The pink in her cheeks deepened. He liked it.

He pushed himself off his door and tapped the hood of his car. “You wanna hop in and go for a smoke break before I head out?”

She giggled and covered her mouth. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Get in.”

She looked like she might squeal, but she didn’t. She bounded around the front of the Chevelle and slid into the passenger’s seat.

He grinned over at her and started the engine. “You might wanna buckle up.” He waited for her to click the seat belt into place before he peeled his tires on the asphalt and sped away from the curb.

* * *

Abby tugged on David’s arm in the direction of the gym, but his feet were cemented to the sidewalk. He watched Journey bounce around the front of Steven’s muscle car and get in the passenger’s seat. The tires smoked and screamed as Steven sped out of the parking lot.

“Are you OK? What’s the matter?” Abby asked, waving her hand in front of his face to get his attention.

David blinked his eyes and looked at her. Abby was the prettiest girl in Emerson, and her Homecoming Queen crown was sparkling in the moonlight. He had just thrown a perfect game against C.T. Burns High, and his team had won the biggest—and last—game of the season. A scout from Georgia Tech had introduced himself after the post-game interview with the Emerson Times News. Yet, he couldn’t get his feet to move across the sidewalk toward his victory celebration. *What’s the matter with me?*

He shook his head to try and clear it. “I’m sorry.” He nodded toward the gym and offered her his arm again. “Shall we?”

Everyone cheered when he entered the gym with Abby. The room was dark except for the light from the disco ball hanging from the ceiling and the rented lights attached to the DJ’s booth. Pop music reverberated around the room, but it faded away as a spotlight landed on them.

The DJ’s voice came over the speakers. “Everybody give it up for this year’s Homecoming Queen and West Emerson’s Football MVP, Abby Carter and David Britton!”

The screams of teenage girls nearly pierced his eardrums as the traditional song, ‘I’ve Had The Time of My Life’ began to play. He let Abby lead him out to the dance floor as the whole school watched. The whole school except Journey Durant, anyway.

He’d been sure he had succeeded in making her jealous that week. She had been positively glum when he told her he was escorting Abby to the dance. It took all week to convince her to come, and she even promised him a dance.

Then, with one slam of a car door, the night David had been dreaming about for weeks

was ruined.

He slumped and rested his head on Abby's shoulder. She must have found the gesture endearing because she rested her head against his as they rocked from foot-to-foot under the swirling lights of the disco ball.

When the song ended, the rest of the students flooded the dance floor. David leaned toward Abby's ear and pointed toward the back of the room. "Let's go get a drink."

She nodded and gripped his hand as they walked toward the refreshment table. Kara was by the punchbowl talking to Justin. She locked gazes with him. "Have you seen Journey?" she shouted over the music.

He pointed toward the door. "She was leaving with Steven Drake when we got here."

Kara's eyes widened. "For real? Like, leaving in his car?"

David gritted his teeth and nodded.

Kara looked like she wanted to say something else, but she just sipped her drink and turned back toward Justin. Abby said something to him, but he only caught the last couple of words. He leaned close to her. "What?" he asked.

She giggled and squeezed his hand. "You look really handsome in your suit!"

He smiled. "Thank you." Behind her, he saw Journey walk through the door. His heart quickened, and his stomach clenched. He tried hopelessly to focus on Abby. "You look amazing."

And then Abby kissed him.

* * *

Journey stumbled as she walked toward her friends at the refreshment table. David was lip-locked with Abby Carter. With a blink she went from a Steven-Drake-induced schoolgirl daze to absolute shock, followed by a flash of unjustified anger. *Just friends, my ass*, she thought.

Kara waved her arms to get her attention. "There you are!"

David disconnected from Abby's face, and the four of them turned in her direction. She was forced to continue her walk over rather than run from the room. "Yeah, sorry. I'm back."

"Where did you go?" Kara asked.

"Steven drove us around the block so I could smoke a cigarette." She poured herself a

glass of punch. "He's leaving for Dalton tonight to live with his grandmother."

David perked up. "Really?"

"Is the inside of his car as nice as the outside?" Justin wanted to know.

Journey nodded. "It's really nice. Leather and chrome everything."

"He's moving?" David asked again.

Journey ignored him and looked at Abby. "Congratulations," she said. "You look really pretty."

Abby smile was irritatingly sincere. "Thank you so much!"

Journey wanted to hate her, but she couldn't. Abby did look spectacular, and so did Dave. The pair of them looked like they belonged arm-in-arm on top of a cake. Journey grabbed Kara by the arm. "Come dance with me."

Kara scowled. "You don't dance."

Journey tugged her away from the group. "I do tonight."

When they were on the dance floor, out of earshot from David, Journey looked up at her friend with wide eyes. "Did you just see David kissing Abby?"

Kara moved with the music. "Yeah. But what do you care? You were off with Steven."

Journey didn't exactly have an answer. She wasn't sure why she cared so much. "He told me they were just friends. Why would he kiss her?"

"I think she kissed him, technically," Kara answered.

"He sure wasn't putting up a fight about it!"

Kara laughed and grabbed Journey's hands, swinging them with the beat. "What happened with Steven?"

For a second, she forgot about David and remembered the thrill of being confined in such close quarters with the guy who had dominated her fantasy life for so many years. "It was short, but fun."

"Did he kiss you?"

Journey laughed. "No."

"Ask you out?"

"No."

Kara's eyes widened, and she stopped dancing and put her hand on her hip. "Did he at least get your phone number?"

Journey deflated. "No." Maybe her drive with Steven Drake wasn't as noteworthy as she thought. Her bottom lip poked out. "We just sort of drove around. He did say he would see me again sometime."

Kara scrunched her eyebrows. "But he's moving, like two hours away."

"Yeah, I know."

"For how long?"

Journey shook her head. "He didn't say."

Kara tossed her hair back off her shoulders. "So, absolutely *nothing* happened with Steven."

Journey dropped her head. "I guess not."

Kara laughed and hugged her friend. "Oh, you poor thing."

The music faded to a slow song. Someone tapped her shoulder, and she knew it was David before she even turned around.

Kara squeezed her hands. "I'm going to go find Justin."

When she was gone, Journey turned toward David trying hard to not appear as annoyed—and disappointed—as she felt.

He held out his hand. "You promised me a dance."

Her face twisted into a frown, but she draped her arms around neck, and he linked his fingers together behind her waist.

They made a ridiculous pair on the crowded dance floor. He was in a suit; she was in jeans and a black Anthrax hoodie. David wasn't offering any conversation, and she felt awkward as hell doing the high school shuffle to a song she didn't know. "Good game tonight," she finally said to break the silence.

He nodded and took a step closer to her. "Did you have fun on your little joyride?" There was a distinct bite of bitterness in his voice.

She smirked at him. "Where's your girlfriend?"

He shook his head. "I don't have a girlfriend."

Journey laughed and stopped dancing. “You may not realize it yet, but yes, you do.”

His brow crumpled. “She kissed *me*.”

Journey rolled her eyes. “It takes two sets of lips, Dave.”

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Will you *please* shut up and dance with me?”

The way his face was twisted up in frustration, almost made her smile. Almost.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rhinestones & Glitter

Journey had been right about Abby being David's girlfriend. They dated until the spring, even though David never was exactly sure how it had transpired. He hadn't meant to kiss Abby at Homecoming, but it nevertheless sealed his fate with Journey. From that night on, she never gave him a second glance. They still talked almost every day, but she was as cool as ice around him.

Prom was the only event at West Emerson that surpassed Homecoming and football season in hype. Two weeks before the big night, he decided to break things off with Abby. She had since found a date; David hadn't. Marcus was ribbing him about it while they played a Mortal Kombat video game in David's basement.

"The most popular guy at school can't find a date to the prom," Marcus said laughing.

David's character kicked Marcus's character in the face on the TV screen. "It's not that I can't find a date. I haven't asked anybody yet."

Marcus sighed. "You know you really want to ask Journey. I don't know what your problem is."

David shook his head. "She doesn't want to go."

“All girls want to go, man. They just don’t all say so,” Marcus argued.

David wasn’t so sure. He’d brought up the subject with Journey a few times, and he never picked up any signs of hidden enthusiasm. “She’s different.”

“So you’ve been telling me for a year now. Why aren’t you with her again?” Marcus asked.

David looked over at him. “I thought you said she wasn’t my type?”

Marcus sighed. “You just dumped your type, so I guess I was wrong. I would sell my right arm for a date with Abby. I don’t know what’s wrong with you.”

“By all means, man, ask her out.”

Marcus grimaced. “I don’t want your sloppy seconds.”

David laughed. “Who are you taking to prom?”

“Lauren Ashburn.”

David paused the video game. “Rebecca’s sister? She’s in college!”

Marcus smiled. “A senior at UG.”

David shook his head in disbelief. “Sometimes I wonder if you struck some kind of deal with the devil.”

“Maybe I did.” Marcus grinned, eyeing David sideways. “And maybe I’ll add Journey to my list since you’re apparently too chicken shit to ask her out.”

David’s mood darkened. “I’ll kill you in your sleep.”

Marcus laughed and threw his cell phone at David. “Call her. Right now.”

“I’m not going to—“

Marcus cut him off. “Pussy.”

That was the biggest challenge word among high school boys. David couldn’t back down from it and maintain any of Marcus’s respect. “Fine,” he said, turning the phone on. He dialed Journey’s number and hit send.

Marcus laid his controller down on the sofa with a grin and watched David nervously pick at a thread in his jeans as the phone rang in his ear.

“Hello?” a man answered.

David’s heart was pounding in his chest. “Uh, hi, Mr. Durant. Is Journey home?”

“Is this David?” her father asked.

“Yes, sir,” he answered.

“Sure. Just a second.”

David yanked the string on his jeans, ripping a hole in the seams. Marcus covered his mouth to keep from laughing.

A moment later, he heard her bubbly voice. “Hi, Dave!”

“Hey, Journ. I need a favor.”

Marcus groaned. “A favor?”

David launched a pillow in Marcus’s direction to shut him up.

“Sure, what’s up?” Journey asked.

He swallowed hard. “You know prom is in a couple of weeks, right?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Well... since I just broke up with Abby, I haven’t had time to find another date. You wanna go?” He was gripping the phone so tight, he realized it might break. “With me?” he added.

There was silence on the other end of the line. Stone silence.

“Journey?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Well? What do you think?” David thought he might be bordering on having a stroke.

“Um, sure. I guess so.”

He let out a breath he had been holding for the entire conversation.

“OK, I’ll talk to you later.”

He nervously hung up before she had a chance to say goodbye.

Marcus laughed. “Do you need to change your pants, Dave?”

David threw the phone back at him. “Shut up, Marcus.”

* * *

On Saturday, Journey almost cried at the sight of the prom section inside the mall. She held out her arms toward the frilly dresses and sequined shoes. “This is my hell!” she announced for the whole store to hear.

Kara pulled on her arm. "Oh, shut up. This is going to be fun! How much money did your parents give you?"

Journey did the math in her head. "A hundred and fifty, but I bought a carton of cigarettes."

Kara groaned.

"And I've got to get my oil changed this afternoon," Journey added.

She thought Kara might slap her. "What's David wearing?"

Journey's eyes widened. "Am I supposed to know that?"

Kara huffed and pulled her toward the nearest rack. "Well, normally, he would match his tux to your dress, but since he waited so late, I assumed he already had one."

Journey held up her hands in question. "I have no idea."

"Why did he wait so long to ask you?" she asked.

Journey shrugged. "I don't know. He couldn't find anybody else to go with since he and Abby just broke up."

She put her hand on her hip. "David Britton couldn't get a date? Whatever."

"That's what he said."

"He's a terrible liar."

Journey held up a pink and orange dress covered from head to toe in sequins and glitter. "If you expect me to wear anything even closely resembling this, we can just go home right now."

Kara laughed and put the dress back on the rack. "Trust me."

"You've been dressing me up since middle school. I don't trust you at all," Journey said.

Kara held up a long purple gown with flowers down the front. "What about purple? You love purple."

Journey shuddered with disgust. "I'd rather wear something out of my mom's closet."

"I think we need to divide and conquer," Kara said, tapping a manicured nail over her lips. "You go right, and I'll go left."

Journey headed in the direction to a red sign marked 'Clearance'.

"I thought you weren't allowed to go out alone with a guy till you're seventeen," Kara

called over the racks. “How did you talk your parents into it?”

Journey laughed. “Are you kidding? My parents love David. I think they would let me run off to Mexico as long as David was going.”

“So, what’s the plan? Is he taking you to dinner? Renting a car?” she asked.

“No. He hasn’t said anything about that stuff. We’re just going to the dance.” Journey held up a long leopard print dress. “What about this?”

Kara turned up her nose. “No.”

“Where’s Justin taking you?” Journey asked. Kara had already told her, but Journey had only been half-listening.

“The fondue place,” Kara answered. Even from across the room, Journey could hear her sigh. “Isn’t that romantic?”

Journey rolled her eyes. “Just dreamy.” She picked up a red and black dress. “This is kinda cool.”

“You’ll look like a vampire.”

Journey bared her teeth and growled at her friend.

Kara laughed and shook her head. “Next!” She turned toward Journey with a green shimmery fitted gown. “This?”

Journey began singing the theme song to *The Little Mermaid*.

Kara groaned and slammed the hanger back onto the rack. “You’re impossible.”

Journey picked up a short white and black dress. “Ooo, I like this one.” She carried it across the room toward her friend. “And it’s half-off.”

Kara scrunched up her nose. “It’s half-off because it’s totally out of style. Nobody is going to be wearing anything above the knee.”

Journey smiled and held the hanger up to her chin. “Then it’s absolutely perfect!”

* * *

Steven reset the check engine light on a minivan before closing the hood and wiping his hands on his coveralls. He gave the thumbs-up to the woman behind the wheel. “You can go ahead and start it up, Mrs. Smith!”

The engine rumbled to life. “You’re a miracle worker,” she said as he approached her

window.

“It was a pretty simple fix this time,” he said. “But I recommend you bring it in when you have some time for a full tune-up.”

She nodded. “I will. How much do I owe you?”

“Just pull through the garage, and Becky will bring out your invoice,” he said.

She smiled and put the van in drive.

There was a familiar car waiting behind hers, but he couldn’t place it. He motioned the driver forward, and the car rolled over the pit in the floor. He held up his hand for the driver to stop and heard the transmission slide into park. He walked to the driver’s side window as it rolled all the way down. Inside, a pair of startled hazel eyes met his.

A smile spread across his face, and every nerve ending he had began to tingle. “Journey Durant.”

She laughed. “What are you doing here?”

He leaned an arm across the roof of her car. “I work here. What are you doing here?”

She squeezed the steering wheel. “I need an oil change.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. Get your butt out here.” He smiled and reached for her door handle. The door squeaked as it opened, and she stepped out of the car. “Come here.” Without thinking, he pulled her in for a hug. Her hair was blonde and blue, and it smelled like coconut.

“I thought you moved?” She looked up at him and hooked her thumbs in her belt loops.

He nodded. “I did, but I moved back just about a month ago. My brother and I have an apartment off of Washington Avenue.”

She sighed. “That’s awesome. I wish I had my own place.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Aren’t you a little bit young for that? You’re what, thirteen?”

She elbowed him in the ribs. “Almost seventeen, thank you very much.”

“Well, *excuse* me.” He had thought about her a lot since he left, and looking down at her in the garage, he wondered what had taken him so long to come back. He noticed a dress hanging in the back window of her car. He tapped his finger on the glass. “What’s this?”

She rolled her eyes. “Prom is on Friday.”

He laughed. "You're going?"

She groaned. "Unfortunately."

He looked her up and down. "Too bad I'm going to miss it. I bet you'll look amazing."

She blushed a deep crimson. He loved that he still had that effect on her.

She twisted her hands nervously. "Well, what are you doing on Friday? Me and a couple of my friends are going to skip school and hang out at my lake house. You should come." She smiled and cut her eyes up at him. "Maybe you'll get to see me in that dress before I leave."

He bit his lower lip. He had to work on Friday. "I'll do what I can." He drummed his fingers on her hood. "You have a lake house?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Up on Lake Ilahee." She laughed. "My dad had quite the midlife crisis a few years ago. We've got jet skis and a boat, too."

He leaned toward her, just to try and catch a whiff of coconut again. "I'll see if I can get off, for sure."

"Awesome." Her voice was a pitch higher than usual.

He knocked his knuckles against her window. "So, just an oil change today?"

She grinned and rocked back and forth on her heels. "I don't know. What else are you offering?"

God, he liked her.

He lowered his voice. "What about a phone number too? I'm going to need directions for Friday."

She pulled the pen out of the chest pocket of his coveralls and held out her forearm.

"You'd better write it on my skin so I don't lose it."

He smiled so wide it hurt his face as he took the pen from her fingers. "We wouldn't want that."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Worst. Prom. Ever.

Lake Ilahee was barely big enough to be classified as a lake, but it was sufficient for swimming and water sports. It was also just big enough to sink a body in, as Journey's mother had pointed out to her husband on the day he 'surprised' his wife with the purchase of the house, the boat, and two jet skis. Randall Durant proved that when it comes to mid-life crises, one should go big or go home. It was a wonder that he lived to see fifty-one.

Journey rarely visited the lake house with her parents, but she often sneaked off there with her friends. Friday before prom was one of those occasions. Kara and Journey hung their dresses in the master bedroom and changed into their bikinis. The end of April in Georgia was plenty warm enough for sunbathing and beer, though not quite warm enough for swimming.

"Who bought the beer?" Kara asked as she pulled open the refrigerator.

Journey smiled. "I did. I flirt with the guy at the truck stop, and he gives me whatever I want."

Kara opened a beer and tilted it up to her lips. "You're a beer slut."

Journey opened one for herself and grinned. "Aren't you glad?"

Kara laughed. "Yes!"

“Is Justin coming up here?” Journey asked.

Kara nodded. “Yeah. He said he would be here before lunch. What about Dave?”

Journey shook her head. “No. Mr. Alfred threatened to flunk anyone in his class who ditched today.”

Kara’s brow crumpled. “He can’t do that, can he?”

Journey laughed and walked out on the back porch. “No, but you know how David is when it comes to following rules. I’d probably have to dope him up on tranquilizers if he did show up. He would be a nervous wreck.” Journey lit a cigarette and sat down on the porch swing. She flashed her friend a devious smile. “Guess who I did invite.”

Kara sat down next to her. “Who?”

Journey bit her lower lip. “I didn’t want to say anything till I knew for sure if he was coming or not.” She let out shrill squeak of excitement. “Steven Drake!”

Kara’s eyes doubled in size. “Seriously?”

Journey kicked her feet against the deck. “Yes! I ran into him after prom dress shopping last weekend. He’s working at that shop behind Barry’s Bar & Grill. I called him last night and gave him the address. He says he’s coming!”

Kara slapped Journey’s bare thigh so hard she left a handprint behind. “Shut up!”

Journey winced but laughed. “I know, right?”

Kara held up her beer can. “This is going to be the greatest day ever.”

Journey clinked her can with Kara’s. “Cheers!”

“What’s all the racket I hear?” a male voice came from around the side of the house.

Journey’s heart sped up, but then Justin walked up onto the porch. She let out a sigh as Kara ran over and put her arms around his neck. “You made it!” Kara cheered.

He gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “I made it,” he said.

They had been dating pretty regularly since Christmas, and Journey had never seen Kara happier. She also couldn’t help but feel a little bit jealous of her friend. She was getting everything she had ever wanted while Journey was still daydreaming. But maybe, now that Steven Drake was back in Emerson, all of that was about to change.

* * *

It was just after lunchtime when Steven killed his engine in the driveway of 4 Ilahee Road. Looking up at the two-story cabin overlooking the water, he realized how far out of his league this girl was. He wondered why she had invited him at all. He grabbed the six pack of beer out of his back seat and carried it to the front door. On the door hung a hand written sign that said, 'If you brought beer, we're around back. If you're a cop, nobody's home.'

He laughed and walked around the side of the house, following the sounds of Stone Temple Pilots and giggling. When he reached the clearing and could see up on the deck, he spotted Journey kicked back in a lawn chair. She had on a mismatched bikini, black bottoms with a pink striped top without any straps. Steven closed his eyes and tried to recall the age of consent laws in Georgia.

"Hey, don't be a creeper!" a girl's voice called.

He opened his eyes, and Journey was standing, shielding her eyes from the sun. His eyes drifted from hers, down the whole of her figure. He decided jail might be worth it.

"I hope I didn't miss too much." He smiled as he stepped up onto the deck.

She clapped her hands together. "I'm just glad you made it!"

He nodded and held up his six pack. "And I brought beer."

She pointed to the other couple on the deck. "You know Justin Kruse and Kara, right?"

He waved his free hand, and they smiled in return.

"Good to see you, Steve," Justin said.

She reached for his arm. "Come on. We'll put your beer in the fridge."

He let her lead him into the huge, open living room and into the kitchen. "This place is nice," he said, taking it all in. "I think my whole apartment would fit in just this room."

She pulled the refrigerator open and laughed. "If only my parents knew how many times I've gotten hammered up here without them."

He laughed and stepped over beside her to put his beer in the fridge. He pulled one of the cans out of the plastic before he shut the door. He popped the top and tipped it up to his lips.

"From the way you talked, I thought this was going to be a party."

She pushed her bright blue sunglasses up on her head. "Oh no. Parties attract too much

attention. I'm sorry if you thought—"

He held up his hand to stop her from apologizing. "No, it's cool. I get it. I'm just happy I made the short invite list." He took a step closer to her. She smelled like booze and tanning oil.

"You know, they frown on kids who ditch class at West."

She laughed. "They frown on me for a lot more reasons than just skipping school."

He smiled. "Me too."

They walked back outside, and she straightened her towel on the chair.

Steven shook his head. "Screw sitting on the deck." She looked up, and he nodded toward the lake. "Let's go for a swim."

She laughed. "I don't think so. That water is about twenty below."

He frowned. "Don't be a drama queen. It's not that cold." He offered his hand to her. "Come swim with me."

Her eyes widened and fell to his outstretched hand. She tried to suppress a smile but failed. Pink spread through her cheeks as she laced her fingers with his. A chill buzzed down his spine.

"You're crazy," she said as he led her past her friends.

He nudged her with his elbow. "I think I'm in good company."

Up the path in front of them, a large oak tree stretched out over the still water. There was a rope dangling from a branch. He looked over at her, and she was shaking her head.

He raised an eyebrow. "Chicken?"

She pulled away and put her hands on her hip bones. Her tantalizing hip bones. "I'm not a chicken."

He winked at her. "Prove it."

A wild look flashed in her eyes. "I'll race you!" She took off running barefoot toward the lake.

Steven put his beer down and ran after her. She ran up the hill toward the tree. He stopped just short of her, laughing. "You won't do it."

"Wanna bet?"

Did he ever.

He nodded toward the tree. "Go on then."

He stood back as she tiptoed to the edge of the bank. She grasped the branch over her head as she carefully stretched to retrieve the rope. When she had it in her hands, she crept back a few steps and tossed her sunglasses onto the grass behind him. "You ready to eat those words?"

He was ready to get in the water with her.

Gripping the rope with both hands, she jumped toward the water. When she was out over the lake, she let go, held her nose, and squealed as she splashed down. Steven doubled over laughing. When her face broke the surface, she was screaming.

"Oh my god! It's freezing!"

He covered his mouth with his hands. "I didn't think you'd actually do it!"

"You're insane!" Kara yelled from the deck.

Journey pointed at him. "Now it's your turn."

Even from the bank, he could see her teeth chattering. He shook his head. "I don't think so!"

"Chicken!" she taunted.

His desire to maintain his body heat was overridden by his desire for the possibility of her warming him back up. He walked up to the tree and grabbed the rope. He pulled off his t-shirt and tossed it near her sunglasses. He took a deep breath before swinging toward the water. He hit the water a few feet away from her, and every ounce of his flesh screamed out in pain as he kicked back to the surface. She was laughing and swimming toward him when he came up for air.

He laughed. "You're right. This was a bad idea!"

She splashed him in the face. "I told you so!"

He lunged toward her and caught her by the arm. She squealed as he pulled her body close to his. She was close enough that he could count the water droplets sliding down her skin. When she draped her arms around his neck, he no longer cared about the water temperature.

She grinned. "You ready to get out?" Her body was bobbing up and down against his.

His eyes were fixed on her mouth. "Hell no."

As his mind wandered, his feet forgot to kick, and they both dipped under the water

again. She was laughing and wiping her eyes when came back up. Pulling on her hand, he tugged her closer to the shoreline, just shallow enough to sink his toes into the mud. She let her feet float up to the surface and rested her head back on his shoulder. He slid his hands down her arms and tangled his fingers with hers.

His lips brushed against her ear. "You should blow off prom and go out with me tonight."

Her fingers tensed against his. "I can't." She looked over at him. "I'm not allowed to date till I turn seventeen."

He grinned. "You don't strike me as the type who follows those kinds of rules."

She turned around to face him. "Well, my daddy is the type who owns a personal arsenal, so I suggest you weigh the risks carefully."

Her arms were back around his neck and her bare stomach kept sliding against his. "I don't care about an arsenal." And, in that moment, he meant it.

"I still can't skip out on prom," she said. "I'm going with David Britton."

The cold returned to his extremities. "Oh. Sorry, I didn't know."

She shook her head. "Oh, we're just going as friends. He couldn't get a date. It's not a big deal."

Steven had a hard time believing David Britton couldn't get a date. "Well, if it's not a big deal, why don't you at least let me take you out to dinner? I can drop you off after at the dance." He wrapped his arms around her waist.

She sucked in a deep breath and smiled. The lake water reflected flecks of green in her hazel eyes. "Like a date?"

He smiled. "Exactly like a date."

She bit down on her bottom lip, making his brain go blank for a second. She smiled and nodded her head.

"Yeah?" he asked.

She giggled and pulled herself even closer toward him. "Absolutely."

* * *

When the afternoon bell rang, David and Marcus left seventh period in a hurry. Marcus shook his head when they reached to top of the empty senior's lot. "I think we're the only

upperclassmen who actually showed up and stayed all day today.”

David grimaced, thinking of his friends partying at the lake. “Don’t remind me.”

Half-way down the steps, David’s cell phone rang. He looked at the unknown number and answered it. “Hello?”

“Hey, Dave.”

He smiled at the sound of Journey’s voice. “Hey, Journ. How’s the lake?”

“Interesting.” She sounded more chipper than usual. “How was school?”

He groaned. “Boring. Marcus and I were just saying that we were the only ones who bothered to show up.” David reached the bottom of the steps. “What’s up?”

She was giggling on the other end of the line. “Is it cool with you if I just meet you at prom?”

David stopped walking, and Marcus looked back at him. “What?” he asked her.

“I’ll just meet you there. Go on without me.”

He really didn’t know what to say. “Uh, OK.” His words sounded like more of a question than an answer.

“I’ll be there by six,” she said. “I’ll meet you in the parking lot of the hotel.”

David pinched the bridge of his nose. “All right, I guess.”

“You’re the best, Dave. Bye!”

She ended the call, and David stared at the phone in his hand. Marcus shoved his shoulder. “What was that all about?”

David looked at him. “She just blew me off.”

Marcus’s head snapped back. “She’s not going?”

David started walking again. “Oh, she’s going. She just wants to meet me there.” He cursed and shoved the phone back into his pocket. “My mom’s gonna be pissed. And I guess I need to cancel our dinner reservations.”

Marcus looked at him sideways. “Does she know you put so much effort into this?”

David thought it was obvious. He shrugged. “It’s prom. She should know, right?”

“Did you tell her?” Marcus asked. “Because when you asked her out, you made it sound like she was your last resort.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Marcus laughed. “Yes, you did! She probably didn’t know this actually meant something to you... because you’re a dumb ass and all.”

David frowned. “Sometimes I don’t know why I’m even friends with you.”

Marcus pointed at him. “Brother, you’ve got nobody but yourself to blame for this one.”

It took David a half an hour to explain to his mother why she wouldn’t be able to take pictures of him with his date to the senior prom. After hearing the whole story, she smacked him in the back of the head and agreed with Marcus that he was an idiot. It wasn’t until the black stretch limo pulled up that David truly felt the weight of his stupidity. And it got even worse when he rode alone past Journey’s house and on to the hotel.

The driver pulled up to the curb of the hotel, and a handful of his classmates were straining their eyes to see who was on the other side of privacy-tinted glass. He groaned and rolled down the window between him and the driver. “Can you just park, and I’ll wait till my date shows up to get out?”

“Are you sure she’s coming?” the driver asked.

“Yes.” *No.*

The driver parked off to the side, giving him a clear view of the entrance. Justin pulled in driving his uncle’s Mustang. He and Kara walked hand in hand inside. He half-expected Journey to be with them. She wasn’t. Then, David slouched in his seat as Marcus pulled in with Lauren Ashburn in a rented Corvette convertible.

“Worst. Prom. Ever,” he mumbled to himself.

Just when he thought his evening couldn’t possibly get any worse, it did.

A shiny black Chevelle pulled up to the curb, and Steven Drake stepped out.

David’s jaw dropped open as he watched Steven run around to the passenger’s door and offer Journey his hand.

For a moment, David considered leaving. But then he saw her get out of the car.

Every girl in front of the hotel was wearing a floor length gown, every girl except Journey. Her short dress was white with black flowers that went up one side and over one shoulder. The waist was encircled with a black sash. Her sun kissed legs looked edible beneath

her skirt, and he did a double-take when he realized she was wearing black heels.

It occurred to him that if he left, she would likely leave with Steven. That simply wasn't an option. So, David picked up her corsage, stepped out of the limo, and left his dignity on the back seat.

CHAPTER NINE

Firsts

Steven let his hand linger around Journey's when he helped her out of the car. He had tried unsuccessfully the entire drive from the restaurant to talk her out of going. He had never attended the prom before, and looking at her in that dress made him regret it for the first time ever. He looked down to where their fingers were laced together. "I'm really glad you let me take you to dinner."

She smiled. "Can I tell you a secret?"

He leaned his ear toward her.

"It was technically my first real date. Don't tell anybody," she whispered.

He shivered from the tingles sparked by her warm breath against his neck. "Really?" he asked.

She cringed. "Is that totally lame?"

He laughed. "Are you kidding? It's awesome." He shifted on his feet and cast his eyes away from her to keep from blushing. "Every guy likes to hear he's a girl's first."

She buried her embarrassed face against his chest, and he couldn't resist the urge to press a kiss against her hair.

“So, let me ask you,” he said. “When do you turn seventeen?”

She thought for a second. “In almost a month.”

“Can we sneak around some over the next month?” he asked.

She pulled back and beamed up at him. “Hell yeah, we can.”

He thought about leaning down to kiss the red lips he’d been staring at all through dinner, but he hesitated a second too long. David Britton walked up onto the curb carrying a red rose corsage in a plastic container. He looked pissed.

Steven cleared his throat and took a step back. “Hey, Dave.”

David’s mouth was smiling; his eyes were not. “Hey.” Then he turned his gaze on Journey, and every bit of anger faded from his face. He took a step toward her. “Wow, you look amazing.”

She smiled up at him. It was a smile that said a lot. She let go of Steven’s hand and took a step toward the quarterback. Steven felt... angry? Jealous? He touched her arm. “I’m going to take off, Journ.”

She spun back around and put her arms around his neck. “Thank you again, Steven.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched David stiffen.

Steven kissed the bend of her bare neck, deliberately, for David’s benefit. Then he rested his cheek against hers and lowered his voice. “Have fun tonight. I’ll figure out a way to see you tomorrow.”

One more time, she flashed those golden green eyes up at him. “OK.”

He squeezed her hand before letting it drop, and he caught David’s eye and held it for a second before turning back to the Chevelle. Smirking, he pulled the heavy driver’s door open.

* * *

Journey gave Steven a little wave as he drove away, then she turned back around to David. He looked her up and down again, then shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe how beautiful you look.”

She did a complete turn for him, then grabbed onto his arm. “Listen,” she said as she swayed her hips from side to side. The skirt swished when she moved.

He tilted her chin up with his knuckle. "Have I ever seen you wear makeup before?"

She laughed. "I don't think so."

A smile spread across his lips. "You don't even need it."

He was wearing a black tuxedo with a silver vest and tie. She tugged on his lapel. "You clean up pretty well, Mr. Britton."

His face was serious. "Journey, nobody is going to be looking at me tonight."

Heat rose in her cheeks. "Thank you, David."

He held up the corsage in his hand. "I got you this." He lifted the flower out of the box. "It goes on your wrist, I think."

She slipped the stretchy band over her hand and twisted the flower around to the front. "It's pretty. Thank you." She looked around the parking lot. "I didn't see your truck."

He sighed and moved behind her. Resting his head on her shoulder, he pointed his finger across the parking lot to the row of limos.

Her mouth fell open. She looked back at him. "You rented a limo?"

"See that bald guy?" he asked. "That's our driver. I'm sure he's watching to see if I really had a date."

Her heart sank. She turned slowly around and looked up at him. "Why didn't you tell me? I had no idea you went to so much trouble."

He shrugged. "What was I supposed to do? Insist that you ride with me?"

Laughing, she nodded her head. "Yes. You were supposed to insist. I really didn't think it was such a big deal to you."

He shook his head and offered her his arm. "Forget about it. Let's go in."

She hooked her arm through his.

Journey had never been to prom before, so she half-expected the hotel ballroom to look like another patriotic explosion of red, white, and blue. She was wrong. The ceiling had been covered with some sort of dark tulle filled with tiny white lights imitating the night sky. The dance floor was surrounded by fake trees decorated with twinkle lights. And the tables were covered in soft golden tablecloths and candles. The scene was breathtaking, like something straight out of a high school romantic comedy.

Kara had been right; none of the other girls at the prom were wearing short dresses. There were frilly floor length gowns all over the ballroom. The crowd seemed to part when they walked in, and Journey cringed with embarrassment as all eyes turned on them. She knew they were all probably wondering what David Britton was doing at the prom with her. She felt David's hand cover hers on his arm. He smiled down at her as he paraded her through the room.

"Do you want to dance?" he asked, nodding toward the dance floor.

She squeezed his arm. "Can we go find Kara first?"

He nodded. "Yes, but you're not getting out of dancing with me tonight."

She laid her head against his shoulder. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Kara was holding her hands up in defense as they approached. "I tried to talk her out of it," she said.

David moved his hand around to her lower back. He shook his head. "It was my fault. I should have made a bigger deal about it than I did. You look beautiful, Kara."

And she did. Her hair was pulled up, and she was wearing a long pink gown. Her heels added a few inches to her already excessively tall frame.

"Thank you. Doesn't Journey look amazing?" she asked.

His hand slid around Journey's waist to her stomach. "I may have just fallen in love."

Journey rolled her eyes and elbowed him in the ribs.

Kara laughed. "You may want to take a picture because I don't remember the last time I saw her in a dress."

Journey frowned. "I wear dresses."

David leaned his head against hers. "Mini skirts and combat boots don't count."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

Kara leaned toward her. "What happened with you and Steven?"

David squeezed her side. "I'm going to go find a bathroom. I'll be right back."

She nodded as he walked away. She smiled back at Kara. "Well, first we stopped by his apartment so he could change clothes. Then, we went to this little Italian place, and he paid for dinner." She motioned toward the door. "He just dropped me off a few minutes ago."

Kara lowered her voice. "Did you kiss him?"

Journey shook her head. “No, but he wants to go out again. He said he would see me tomorrow!” Journey clapped her hands and squealed just loud enough to be heard.

Kara laughed and rolled her eyes. “Well, I’m happy for you, I guess.” She nodded in the direction that David had just gone. “What are you and Dave doing after all this?”

Journey shrugged her shoulders. “I have no idea, but my parents think I’m spending the night at your house.”

* * *

When David came out of the bathroom, Marcus was standing in the hallway with Lauren and Rebecca Ashburn. His ex-girlfriend was wearing a dark blue sequined gown that was molded to her body. The front was open almost all the way down to her bellybutton. “Hey, David,” she said, as he snapped his eyes back up to meet hers.

Her long dark hair was piled up high on her head, and she wore the largest pair of sparkly earrings he had ever seen. He forced a smile. “Hey, Rebecca. You look beautiful.”

She put her manicured hand on his arm. “I hear you and Abby broke up. Are you doing OK?”

David was confused. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

She made a pouty face. “I just worry about you. I don’t like seeing you all brokenhearted.”

David almost laughed. Girls like Rebecca thrived off their ability to manipulate the emotions of guys. David knew it first hand. He pried her fingers off his arm. “No need to worry. I’m just fine.”

She tilted her head. “Do you have a date?”

He nodded. “Journey Durant.”

Rebecca made a sour face. “The girl with the weird hair?”

He laughed. “Those are big words coming from the chick wearing a bird’s nest on her head.”

Her eyes doubled in size. Marcus covered his mouth to keep from laughing.

David shook his head. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Dave, wait up!” Marcus jogged to catch up with him. “Are you going to the after party

at Mike's house."

"Is Rebecca going?"

"I think we're all going."

David laughed. "I'll pass."

"C'mon, man. It's our senior prom," Marcus whined.

David pointed to where Journey was still talking to Kara and Justin. "And I'm spending it with my date."

Marcus followed the direction of David's finger. When his eyes found Journey, his head fell to the side. "Did she rent new legs to go with that dress?" he asked. "Wow."

David narrowed his eyes at Marcus. "Don't make me knock your teeth out."

Marcus squeezed David's shoulder. "I hope you change your mind, brother."

"Bye, Marcus," David called as he left.

David slipped behind Journey and put his arms around her from behind. He lowered his lips to her ear. "You ready to dance now?"

She smiled over her shoulder. "I guess."

As the night began to wind down, David pulled Journey out to the dance floor for one final slow song. He put his arms around her waist as they swayed to an 80's love song. "So." He looked down at her. "What time do you have to be home?"

She shook her head. "I don't. My parents think I'm sleeping over at Kara's."

His heartbeat kicked up a notch. "Well then, what do you want to do tonight?"

She looked around the dance floor. "Everybody is talking about some big after-party."

He grimaced. "We can go if you want to."

She looked surprised. "It's all your friends. You don't want to go?"

He shrugged. "Not really."

She looked away from him. Her face was unreadable, but she was lost in thought about something. He wondered if she was thinking about Steven. Maybe she had made plans to see him after.

Finally, she met his eyes again. "We could go back to the lake house. Pick up some movies or something."

His lips spread into a wide smile. "That sounds awesome."

Two hours later, the limousine driver dropped them off at Journey's lake house. David was in awe when they walked through the living room toward the kitchen. He had heard her talk about the place, but it was the first time he'd actually been there. She pulled open the refrigerator. "Do you want a beer?" she asked.

"Sure." He walked over to the large glass doors that looked out over the lake. "Do your parents not know that you come up here without them?"

She laughed as she handed him a beer. "Nope. I don't think it's ever even crossed their minds. I clean up pretty well when I leave, and I try not to get too crazy with the AC or the water so I don't spike the bills."

He nodded toward the other houses around the lake. "And no one ever rats you out?"

She shook her head. "Most of the houses are owned by northerners who just come down for the winter. So, we don't really know the neighbors."

He lowered his eyes. "Sooner or later, you're bound to get busted. You know that right?"

She laughed again. "I have no doubt. But until then, I'm going to enjoy it." Journey stepped over to a stereo that was built into the wall. "Open the doors."

He pushed the double doors open, and music flowed over the back deck. 'Champagne Supernova' was playing. He pointed up to the speakers. "This is a danceable song." He put his beer on a side table and offered her his hand. "I think it's a sign."

She smiled and let him pull her outside and into his arms. Her hands were on his chest. "I hope I didn't ruin your big night, Dave."

He pulled his head back. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, first I didn't ride with you. Then, you didn't go to the after-party because you're with me." She darted her eyes away from him, out toward the water.

He tried to make sense of what she was saying. "You think I didn't want to go to the party because of you? That's crazy."

"But Marcus and Justin and the rest of the team were going..."

He bent his knees to be eye-level with her. "Are you serious? Why would I want to go to a party when all I really want to do is hang out with you?"

“I thought—”

He cut her off. “Whatever you were thinking, it’s wrong. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else than right here, right now.”

She smiled up at him, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight. “Why do you like me so much, David Britton?”

He thought for a moment. “Because you’re different than every other girl in Emerson.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure if that’s meant to be a compliment or not.”

He nodded. “It’s most definitely a compliment.”

She sighed and looked up at the stars. “This has been a crazy day. My first date and the prom.”

“Prom was your first date?” he asked, surprised.

She shook her head. “No, dinner with Steven was.”

She could have stabbed him in the chest and it wouldn’t have hurt any worse. “Your date with Steven was your first?”

“Yeah. Crazy, huh?”

He blew out a sigh. “Yeah. You really like him, don’t you?”

“I’ve liked him for years.”

He shook his head. “But it wasn’t your first date. I’ve taken you out a few times before today.”

She rolled her eyes. “But those weren’t dates, David.”

Of course they weren’t, because she didn’t think about him that way. He really wished she would just stop talking, but she kept going.

She started counting on her fingers. “Before today I hadn’t been on a date; I had never held hands with a guy; I’ve still never kissed anybody, or done anything else—”

He cut her off. “You’ve never kissed anyone?”

She scrunched up her nose. “Nope. How sad is that?”

He smiled. “I think it’s sweet.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I wouldn’t have pegged you as the innocent type.”

She laughed and put her hands on her hips. “What? Did you think I was a slut or

something?”

He shook his head. “God, no. That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

He sighed. “Just forget I said that.”

She put her arms around his neck again. “OK. I’ll forget it.”

He stopped dancing. “Close your eyes.”

“What?” she asked.

“Close your eyes,” he said again.

She huffed but obediently pressed her eyes shut. David took a deep breath and cupped her face in his hands. He leaned down and gently touched his lips to hers. When he pulled away, she was smiling.

He traced her bottom lip with his thumb. “Now you can cross ‘first kiss’ off your list.”

CHAPTER TEN

Sandbox Confessions

“Journey, phone!” her mother called down the hallway.

Journey jumped off her bed and grabbed the telephone. “Hello?” she answered, pressing it to her ear.

“We have got to get you a cell phone.” Steven’s voice was deep and playful.

Journey was so excited she did a drumroll with her feet on the floor. “Hang on a sec.” Pressing the phone against her chest, she walked over to her door and peeked down the hall. Her mother was on the couch, and her dad was in the kitchen. Neither of them had the other cordless phone to listen in on her call. She carefully closed her door without making any noise. “I’m back,” she told him as she flopped down on her bed.

“Are you still going to make it out tonight?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“What did you tell your parents?”

“That I was going to the movies with some friends from school,” she answered.

He chuckled. “Well, I guess that isn’t a complete lie. What time do you have to be home?”

“Eleven.”

He was quiet for a moment. “So, we’ll have some time after the movie?”

Her stomach fluttered. “A little while.”

“Cool. Well, I’ll see you at seven?”

“I’ll be there,” she said and hung up the phone.

At six o’clock Journey dressed in her favorite pair of jeans and a dark gray jersey shirt that didn’t quite meet the top of her pants. When she walked out of her room, her father frowned. He pointed back down the hall. “I don’t think so,” he said, scowling at her midriff.

She groaned, rolled her eyes, and stalked back to her bedroom. She changed into a button-up flannel and shoved the jersey into her purse. She walked out and did a turn for her dad. “Better?” she asked.

He nodded. “Better.” He handed her a crisp twenty dollar bill. “You’ll be home by eleven?”

She folded the money and tucked it in her back pocket. “Yes, sir.”

He adjusted his glasses and looked at her seriously. “Not a minute after?”

“I promise,” she said.

He gave her a side hug and kissed her forehead. “Have fun.”

She bolted out the door before he could say anything else. It was a twenty minute drive to the theater. She pulled in and parked in the most abandoned spot she could find. When she was sure no one else would see her, she stripped off the flannel and put the jersey back on. As she checked her hair in the mirror, she heard the rumble of a loud engine. Steven’s car pulled into the space next to her’s.

It had been two weeks since prom, and it was the first time she’d seen him since. Her parents seemed to foil every plot they put together to see each other. The day after prom, they needed her help at the store. His next day off, they insisted she attend a revival night at church. The weekend before, they forced her to visit her grandparents. He had called her almost everyday, but quiet chats on the phone weren’t nearly enough. When he stepped out of his car, with his hair pulled back and wearing her favorite black button-up shirt, she had to remind herself to breathe.

She got out of her car and leaned back against the door to close it. "Long time, no see," she said.

"Too long," he said, walking toward her. He stopped when they were toe to toe, and he put his arms around her. He let his head rest against hers. "We could just forget the movie."

It was a tempting idea, but Steven still made her a little bit nervous. She looked up at him. "We'd better not."

His grin was playful. "Are you sure?"

She bit her lip to keep from saying no. Stepping away from him, she tugged on his hand. "Come on or we'll miss the previews."

Groaning with reluctance, he draped his arm around her shoulders.

She sort of expected him to be all over her during the movie, but he wasn't. He just held her hand, and stroked her fingers with his thumb. They made it in and out of the theater without being seen by anyone who could rat Journey out to her parents. It was just after nine.

He looked down at his watch when they got back to her car. "What time do you need to leave?"

"10:30 to be safe," she answered.

He thought for a second. "Wanna go to the park?"

"Sure. I'll follow you," she said.

The baseball fields of Johnson Park were lit up for the spring season Friday night games, but the playground was deserted. Steven and Journey walked hand in hand toward the monkey bars. She climbed up the ladder and swung her way across the bars to the other side. Steven watched from the ground as she climbed up the stairs to the slide. Peeking over the top, she smiled down at him. "Are you going to catch me?"

He grinned and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Nope. I'm hoping you bust your ass in the sand."

Giggling, she stuck her tongue out at him before she slid down the slide. When she reached the bottom without falling off, she dangled her legs off the end and shrugged up at him. "No sand for me tonight."

He laughed and offered her his hand. "Too bad."

She gladly slipped her fingers between his and tugged him toward the swings. "Come swing with me."

"What are you, twelve?" he asked, laughing.

She led him to the swings and sat down. "Have you been on a swing since you were twelve?"

He shook his head. "I'm sure it's been much longer."

She nodded toward the other swing. "Try it. You'll feel like a kid again." She pushed back on the ground then began to pump her legs as she soared higher and higher. Leaning backward, she looked at Steven upside down as she flew forward. "Do it, you big sissy!" she teased.

Finally, he pushed off the ground and began swinging back and forth. After a few passes, he was laughing. Really laughing. She stretched her legs out straight, and when she swung forward again, she let go and sailed through the air, landing hard on the sand. She rolled onto her back laughing. He let go and jumped toward her. A moment later, he was covered in sand, lying on his back.

She crawled over beside him and sat down. Breathing hard, she looked down at him. "I think you just busted your ass, sir."

He shook his head and laughed. "You're the strangest girl I've ever met."

She pointed at him. "And the coolest girl you've ever met."

He grabbed her finger. "That too." He pulled her down so she was leaning over him. He slipped his free hand behind her head and drew her lips down for a kiss. Her second kiss.

* * *

Steven was breathless when he released her. He'd been dreaming for weeks about what it would be like to kiss her, and he wasn't disappointed. Her inexperience was intoxicating as she awkwardly moved her lips against his. He was falling for her. Hard.

She sat back up, and he pushed himself off his back. His ponytail was covered with sand. He pulled the tie out and let it fall around his chin. She was watching him with excitement. "What is it?" he asked.

She wiggled her fingers in front of his face. "Can I touch it?"

He laughed. "I guess. Go ahead."

Her mouth fell open with delight as she ran her fingers through his hair. "I've wanted to do this since the seventh grade."

"What?" he asked, laughing. "The seventh grade?"

She nodded. "Oh yeah. I don't even care what a stupid fangirl I sound like right now."

"You should have said something," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah right. You didn't even know I was alive till you almost killed me with that door."

He cringed. "I still feel bad about that."

She laughed out loud. "I don't!"

Steven had dated plenty of girls, but none of them had been so blatantly honest. Or maybe none of them had liked him as much as she did. Whatever it was, she proved over and over how incredibly different she was from all the other girls in Emerson. He suspected he could get away with quite a bit with her, but he didn't dare do anything that might diminish that goofy smile on her face.

Finally, when she had dusted all the sand out of his hair, she gathered it back and tied it up again. "Can I ask you a question?" she asked.

"Yes." He bent his leg and draped his arm across his knee so he could trace his fingers up her bare arm.

"And you'll tell me to shut up if it's none of my business?"

"Ask me," he said.

She hesitated for a second. "Why did you go to jail?"

For the first time ever, Steven was nervous around a girl. He looked down at the ground.

She touched his arm. "Sorry. Forget I asked. I'm sure you don't—"

He cut her off with a reassuring smile. "It's OK." He took a deep breath. "Well, my dad hasn't been around much since I was born. When he has been around, it's never been a good thing. He's a mean drunk, and he takes it out on my mom."

Her shoulders sank, but her eyes urged him to continue.

"They've been divorced since I was five, but she's never been able to completely get rid

of him. She let him come back home last fall. It was right around the time I met you. When I came home from the football game that night after the fight with Kurt, she had a busted lip. I tried to call the cops, but he came in yelling and pushing me. I just lost it, and I hit him.”

She frowned. “Sounds like he deserved it.”

He nodded. “Oh yeah. He did. But my mom lied and said I started it, so I went to jail.” He sighed. “I had to do thirty-two hours of community service and got a year of probation.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah.” He smiled and slid his fingers up the side of her neck. “Now, can I ask you a question?”

She smiled. “OK.”

“What’s with the pixie hair?”

She covered her blonde head with her hands. “You don’t like it?”

He laughed and pulled her hands away. “It’s not that. I think it’s pretty badass. It’s just really different.”

“It used to be long,” she explained. “I just got tired of looking like everybody else.” She giggled and held up her fingers just millimeters apart. “And maybe I have a tiny case of ADD.”

He gripped his ponytail. “Maybe I should cut mine off.”

She laughed and got up on her knees in front of him. She slid her hands back across his head. “Then *you’d* be like everybody else.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Like David Britton?”

She sat back on her feet. “What about David?” Her tone was a little defensive.

“What’s going on with the two of you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing. We’re friends.”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you. He’s definitely got more than just friendship on his mind,” he said.

She leaned up over him again. “Do I detect a hint of jealousy in your voice already, Mr. Drake?” She grinned down at him. “Isn’t it a little early to be getting territorial?”

He slid his hand along the hipbone that had been peaking out over her jeans all night. “I don’t think so.”

Her face went from playful to serious with a blink. “Really?”

“I like you.” He hooked his arm around her waist and lowered his voice. “I like you a lot.”

She bent and kissed him, hard on the mouth. It came more natural for her the second time, and he opened his mouth a bit and felt her tongue. Then, as quickly as she kissed him, she released him and sat back again. She laughed and stood up.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’ve got to go home.”

He groaned and looked at his watch. She was right. Somehow an hour had passed in a flash. He pushed himself up off the ground and followed her back to their cars. When they got to her door, he closed the space between them, cornering her against it. “When can I see you again?”

She hooked her finger between two buttons on his shirt. “I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

* * *

David hadn’t seen Journey outside of school in the two weeks since prom, and his suspicions as to why were confirmed on Monday afternoon when Steven Drake’s car showed up in the parking lot after school. He joined Kara and Justin in the courtyard as he watched Journey jog down the sidewalk and get in the passenger’s seat. David stuffed his hands in his pockets. “So, she’s officially dating him now?” he asked.

Kara gave a non-committal shrug. “I’m not sure what they’re doing. I know they went to the movies over the weekend. She hasn’t told you anything?”

He shook his head. “No. She’s hardly talked to me at all.”

Justin narrowed his eyes. “I’m a little confused. Have you ever actually asked her out?”

Kara looked at him and answered before David could. “No.”

Justin chuckled. “Then what are you so upset about?”

David wasn’t sure why he was so upset other than none of what was happening was what he wanted. How in the hell had Steven Drake ruined everything so quickly?

He kicked the grass with the toe of his sneaker. “Maybe it’s time for me to give up.”

Kara laughed and shoved him in the shoulder. "I'm not sure when you started anything *to* give up!"

David threw his arms into the air. "I asked her to prom. We stayed up all night together watching movies at the lake. I even freaking kissed her! How much more obvious could I be?"

Kara looked surprised. "You kissed her?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "She didn't tell you?"

Kara just shook her head.

"Great. I guess it meant a whole hell of a lot then." He huffed and pressed his eyes closed. Finally, he looked at Kara again. "Can't you talk to her?"

Kara's brow crumpled, and she put a hand on her hip. "This isn't kindergarten, David. You're a big boy. You need to talk to her yourself."

He sighed. "I know."

She pointed at him. "But it's not going to do you any good to start singing underneath her window now that Steven's in the picture. You're going to have to wait for that to fizzle out."

He closed his eyes again. "What if it doesn't fizzle out?"

She shook her head.

Justin put his hand on David's shoulder. "Then you're shit outta luck, bro."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

She's Late

It was seven fifteen on Friday night. In the month they'd been going out, Journey hadn't been late once. Steven's mind was working overtime on the implications of her tardiness. *Maybe she got caught lying. Maybe she's blowing me off. Maybe she's changed her mind. God, I hope she hasn't changed her mind.*

"Dude, what's your problem?" Steven's brother, Brian, asked from the couch as Steven paced around the room.

"My girlfriend's late."

Brian sat up straight in his chair. "Pregnant?"

Steven sighed and shook his head. "No. She's *late*," he said, dramatically tapping his watch.

Brian relaxed. "What girlfriend?"

"You don't know her."

"How do you know her?" Brian asked.

Steven looked out the front blinds of their apartment. "We went to high school together. She's a junior."

Brian glanced over. "How old?"

"Sixteen."

Brian sucked in a sharp breath through clenched teeth. "She's jailbait, little brother."

"She'll be seventeen next week." Steven wiggled his fingers. "The magical age of consent in the great state of Georgia."

Brian pointed at him. "You can still get popped with contributing to the delinquency of a minor till she's eighteen."

Steven rolled his eyes. "It's too bad you're such a slacker. You'd make an excellent attorney."

Brian pushed himself up off the couch and slapped his brother on the chest. "Take the free advice, Steve."

"Where are you headed?" Steven asked.

Brian shrugged into his jacket and picked up his keys. "Savannah for a couple of days." He pointed at him. "Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't if you won't."

Brian laughed and opened the front door. Journey stood on the other side, her hand poised in the knocking position.

"Well, well, well," Brian said, stepping out of her way. "You must be the girlfriend."

Journey's eyes widened. "I don't remember agreeing to that title," she said, winking at Steven.

Brian took a step toward her, and she cowered back. "Oh, I like her, Steve." His brother's tone made even Steven's skin crawl. He reached out, grabbed Journey's hand, and pulled her against him.

Steven slipped a protective arm around her waist. "Have a good trip, Bri."

Brian looked Journey up and down again. She shivered against Steven's chest.

"See you, brother," he said and walked out the door.

"Brother?" Journey asked, turning around to face him.

Steven sighed. "Unfortunately."

She jerked her thumb toward the door. "He's creepy, and he looks way too old to be your

brother.”

“He’s twenty-six.” Steven shrugged. “He’s lived a pretty rough life.”

Journey shuddered. “I can tell.”

Steven put his hands on her hips. “Forget about him. He won’t be back tonight.” He pulled her closer. “I was getting worried. Why are you so late?”

She groaned. “Oh, twenty questions before I left, ya know.”

He sighed. “I’m glad we don’t have to sneak around much longer.” He kissed her forehead. “Where do they think you are?”

“Kara’s.”

He smiled. “All night?”

She put her hands on his forearms and let out a deep sigh. “All night.”

Sliding his hand under her chin, he tilted her face up to kiss her. After a moment, she put her hands on his chest and pushed him back a step. “What’s this girlfriend business?”

He laughed and pulled her hips against him. “I can’t call you my girlfriend?”

She looped her arms around his neck. “You haven’t asked me.”

He rolled his eyes. “Do you want me to write you a ‘check yes or no’ note?”

She nodded. “Maybe!”

He kissed her nose. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

She dropped her head back dramatically. “Yes!”

He kissed the soft skin of her throat before she straightened. “Say it again,” he whispered. “Yes.”

She kissed him again. “What’s for dinner.”

He tightened his arms around her. “I’m not hungry,” he said against her mouth.

She giggled. “Well, I am.” She broke free from his grasp and pointed at him. “And don’t get the wrong idea just because I don’t have a curfew tonight.”

Shaking his head, he smiled. “I don’t have any ideas.”

She laughed. “You’re a rotten liar.”

He couldn’t argue. He had been planning this night since he first had his arms around her in the freezing lake. But, he knew that being a girl’s first was a big responsibility if he cared

about her at all. And he cared. God, did he care.

Steven ordered a pizza, and they watched a movie in the living room. As the movie wore on, it was becoming harder and harder for him to keep his hands to himself. It quickly became a game of him trying to touch her and her slapping his hands away.

He had never been so thankful to see the credits scroll in all his life. He reached across the couch and grabbed her hand. "Come here," he said, pulling her onto his lap.

She dropped her knees on either side of his thighs, and he reasoned this was the safest position for both of them. She was in control of whatever happened, and he was determined not to push it any further than she wanted to go.

She put her arms around his neck. "Did you like the movie?"

He laughed. "What movie?"

She dipped her head and kissed him.

The phone rang.

She pulled away slightly. "Need to get that?"

"Get what?" he asked and kissed her again.

He slid his hands up her thighs, and she didn't stop him when they glided over her hips. He almost whimpered when she pulled the ponytail holder out of his hair, letting her nails scrape down the back of his neck. His hands snaked up under the back of her shirt, all the way up her spine to the clasp of her bra. He didn't dare touch it for fear of spooking her. She kissed him harder.

His damn phone rang again.

He broke the kiss and groaned. Reaching across the arm of the couch, he picked up his phone off the end table. It was an unknown number. "Hello?" he answered.

"Steven, it's Kara. I need to talk to Journey."

He sighed and handed the phone to his girlfriend. "It's Kara."

Her eyes widened as she put the phone to her ear. "Hey." She listened for a minute, then panic washed over her face. "Shit. OK." She started to get up off his lap, but he pulled her back down. "Thanks, Kara." She ended the call and dropped the phone on the cushion next to them. "I've got to go. My parents know I'm not at Kara's."

“Fuck. Seriously?” he asked, not stopping her when she tried to get up a second time.

She straightened her shirt and slipped on her flip-flops. “Yeah. They called over there and got Kara’s mom. Kara played dumb and didn’t tell them I was here or that I was with you.”

He felt slightly relieved.

She grabbed her keys and stopped in front of him. “I’m sorry. I’ll try to call you later if I can.”

He nodded and kissed her quickly. “Be careful.”

And then she was gone.

* * *

Journey made it home in record time. Every light in the house was on. She cringed. “Shit, shit, shit,” she muttered as she turned off the engine and got out of the car.

She sucked in a brave breath before pushing the front door open and walking inside. Her father was standing at the top of the steps with his arms folded over his chest. When he was in a good mood, Randall Durant was about as intimidating as Bill Nye the Science Guy. When he was mad, which was becoming more and more often, he was downright scary. His graying red hair was mussed like he’d been pulling it out, and his cheeks were hot with anger.

Swallowing hard, she closed the door behind her.

“Where have you been?” he demanded.

“I went out with some friends, and then I was going to Kara’s house,” she said as she slowly ascended the steps.

He pointed at her. “Don’t lie to me, young lady! Kara’s mother had no idea about you coming over. In fact, she said she hasn’t seen you in weeks!”

Journey knew to keep her mouth shut.

“So who have you been sneaking around with?” he asked.

Her mother was right behind him. “Is it that boy who’s been calling here?”

“David?” Journey tried to feign innocence.

Her mother’s eyes narrowed. “No, not David.” She huffed. “He hasn’t seen you either.”

Journey put her hands on her hips when she reached the top of the steps. “You called David too?”

Carol held up the phone in her hand. “We were about to call the police!”

Journey rubbed her hands over her face. “You’re overreacting.”

“Then where were you?” her dad asked.

“Out with friends! I told you that!”

He laughed. “Well, I hope you had fun because it’s the last time you’re going to see them for a while.” He held out his hand. “Keys.”

“Dad, I—”

“Keys, Journey!” he shouted.

She slammed the keys into his palm. “For how long?”

He glared at her. “Until you can afford to buy a car!”

Tears were brimming in her eyes, but she refused to break and cry in front of them. Instead, she stormed past her dad and ran down the hallway to her room. Her phone was gone, so was her television and her stereo. The truth was, they were pissed; they hadn’t been worried about her at all.

It wasn’t until Monday that she could explain to Steven what had happened. He was waiting for her after school in the parking lot, leaning against the Chevelle. He opened his arms as she approached.

She stuck out her bottom lip and walked into his embrace. “I hate my life.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I know.” He pulled back to look at her. “What happened?”

She took a step back. “They took my car. Permanently. And, I’m grounded for a month. And, my birthday is cancelled.”

He smirked. “They can’t cancel your birthday.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m really sorry about all this.”

He tugged on her belt loops. “We need to talk, Journ.”

Her heart melted. “Oh, please don’t say that.”

His eyes were serious. “I could get in a shitload of trouble if your parents decided to come after me. I’m on probation, and if I get caught violating it, I’ll go to jail.”

Her eyes began to sting. “Steven, you can’t just—”

He bent so he was eye level with her. “I don’t like it either, but we’ve got to cool it for a

while till this blows over.”

“For a year?” she asked, her voice cracking.

He shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks, but she refused to break and cry. He brushed them away with his thumbs. “It’s just temporary, babe. I promise.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Whatever.”

He tried to pull her back when she stepped away. “Journey, wait.”

She shook her head. “Just go.”

* * *

David watched Journey almost run away from Steven’s car toward the buses. Even from a distance, he could tell she was crying. He wanted to go after her, but he knew her well enough to know that she needed some space. He had heard from Justin about what went down at her house over the weekend, and how she’d lost her car. He wanted to knock Steven’s teeth out.

On his drive home that day, he called the Durant’s store downtown. Carol Durant answered on the first ring. “Village Antiques, how may I help you?”

“Mrs. Durant, hi. It’s David Britton.”

There was a pause. “Hello, David. What can I do for you?”

He sighed. “Well, I’m hoping you can help me. I know Journey’s grounded, but I have a really big favor. My graduation is tomorrow night, and she’s like my best friend. I was really hoping that maybe you’d bring her or let her come.”

“Well, David, if she was really your best friend, maybe you wouldn’t sit idly by while she made such bad decisions,” she replied.

He swallowed. “I know. I’m really sorry. She’s been really distant from me for the past month or so.”

She was silent for another beat. “I’ll talk to her father, but don’t get your hopes up.”

“Thank you,” he said.

She ended the call.

The next evening, when his name was called to walk the stage and get his diploma, David looked up in the stands and saw Journey sandwiched between her mom and dad. They looked

like two centurions standing guard like she might bolt at any second. He smiled, and she waved to him. Her mom and dad were clapping and smiling almost as proudly as his own parents who were seated right behind them. The crowd cheered when he accepted his diploma and shook hands with the principal. He heard Marcus whistle from where he sat with the rest of their class.

When the ceremony was over, he couldn't get up to the bleachers fast enough. He hugged Journey before he hugged his own mother. It was the first time he'd touched her since the night of prom. He pressed a kiss to her temple. "I've missed you."

She dug her nails into his side. "I've missed you too. Thanks for breaking me out of jail even if it's just for the night."

He winked down at her.

"Let me take a picture!" her mother insisted.

David wrapped his arm around Journey's waist and pressed his cheek against hers. They said 'cheese' together, and the camera flashed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A New Year

Journey spent most of the summer on lockdown because she refused to come clean about where she was and who she was with the nights she was supposedly with Kara. She went to work at her parents' shop only because they refused to drive her to a job anywhere else, and she saved every penny she made.

By the end of July, she had saved up enough money to combine with what was in her saving's account to pay cash for a used white hatchback. Her savings was supposed to be for college, but her parents couldn't stop her from spending it. She finally had her own car, she was paying her own insurance, and she was buying her own gas.

It wasn't until the very end of summer that her parents realized how much their plan had backfired. She broke curfew out with Kara, and when she came back home, they couldn't take away her keys.

Just after starting her senior year, she quit working for her parents and took a job as a hostess at Barry's Bar & Grill. It didn't pay as well, but her boss wasn't her mom, so she considered it a fair trade. Between school and work, she didn't have much time left for a social life, but the time she did have, she usually spent with David. She hadn't heard from Steven

Drake at all.

In mid-October, she was home on a Saturday when she received an unexpected phone call.

“Hey, Journ,” a male voice said.

“Who is this?” she asked, walking out on the back deck of her house.

“Marcus.”

She scratched her head. “Marcus who?”

He laughed on the other end of the line. “Marcus Garrett.”

She put her hand on her hip. “Who is this really?”

He laughed again. “It’s really Marcus. I got your number from Dave.”

“Why?”

“Well, I have two tickets to see Metallica in Atlanta this weekend. Justin was supposed to go, but he bailed out on me. Do you wanna come?” he asked.

Her mouth fell open. “Uh. Why me?”

“Because you might be the only person I know who likes them as much as I do,” he said.

“Come on. You know you want to.”

She laughed and covered her mouth with her hand. “Hell yeah, I want to!”

“Awesome. Do you want me to pick you up, or do you want to meet me at my house?” he asked.

She thought for a second. “I’ll meet you. Just let me know when and where.”

He gave her the address and told her to be there at four o’clock on Friday. She squealed when she got off the phone.

Her mother stuck her head out the door. “What’s all the yelling about out here?”

Journey held up the phone. “I just got a free ticket to the Metallica show in Atlanta this Friday night!”

Her mother laughed, but she wasn’t amused. “You’re not going to Atlanta.”

Journey nodded. “Yes, I am.”

Carol put her hands on her hips. “Not while you live under this roof.”

Journey laughed. “Then kick me out. Please! I won’t object.”

Her mother froze.

Journey walked past her to go back inside, but instead of storming through the living room, she turned calmly around to face her stunned mother. “Mom, I’m going to the show. You can either stay up all night, pissed off about it, or we can come to some sort of compromise right now.”

“Are you on drugs?” her mother shouted.

Journey laughed. “What?”

Carol took a step toward her. “Are you on drugs?”

Journey held up her hands. “I don’t even know anybody on drugs.”

“You’re not going to that concert, and that’s final!”

Journey chuckled. “OK, Mom.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m going over to David’s to watch a movie. I’ll be home by eleven.”

Journey could tell her mother wanted to object, but she was too dumbfounded to move. The truth was—because Journey wasn’t getting into trouble and she wasn’t running away—legally, there wasn’t much the Durants could do to stop their daughter now that she was seventeen. She knew it, and they knew it. That didn’t stop them from giving it a good effort, however—when they were at home long enough to try.

* * *

David hadn’t gotten any offers to play football from any of the colleges he really wanted to attend, so he didn’t commit to anywhere. And though his father had been pressuring him for years to join the Army, he wasn’t quite ready to commit to that either. Instead, David took a job at the local hardware store and signed up for a few classes with Marcus at the community college till he made up his mind about his future. His father warned him that he had one year to decide, but his mother said he could live in the basement forever. Not that David wanted to.

While Journey was moping around about her breakup with Steven Drake, David had met Amber Jones, a waitress at Lottie’s Diner. She was nice and very pretty, but he had warned her going into it that he wasn’t looking for anything serious. He didn’t tell her why.

After she got her car, Journey regularly showed up in his life again, but she still never showed any interest in him beyond their infuriatingly platonic friendship.

He heard the doorbell ring upstairs. "David!" his mother called down the steps.
"Journey's here!"

"Send her down. We're gonna watch a movie!" he replied.

He quickly put on a clean t-shirt and sprayed on a pump of cologne. Downstairs, he had his own living room, bathroom, and bedroom. He had saved up the summer before to buy a pool table. He walked into the living space and turned on the television just as Journey appeared at the bottom of the steps.

She was wearing the widest smile he had seen on her in months. She held up her hands.
"Guess what!"

He mimicked her hands. "Marcus called, and you're going to Metallica on Friday!"

Her face crumpled. "You suck."

David laughed. "You know he called me to get your number."

She skipped across the room and put her arms around his neck. "I'm so excited!" She pulled back and looked at him. "You're wearing the cologne I got you. It smells awesome."

He smiled with satisfaction.

She tugged on the hem of his shirt and batted her eyes up at him. "I'll bet your girlfriend loves it."

He sighed. "I don't have a girlfriend."

She clicked her tongue at him. "Famous last words," she teased as she dropped down onto her knees on the sofa. She leaned over the back toward him. "What does she think about you spending your nights with me?"

He walked around the couch and put a DVD in the player. "I don't tell her."

She gasped dramatically and plopped onto the seat. "I'm your dirty little secret?"

He smacked her in the face with a pillow as he sat down next to her.

"What are we watching?" she asked, propping her feet up on the coffee table.

He held up the box. "Scarface."

"Ugh!" She stuck out her bottom lip. "Enough with the Mafia movies!"

"We've watched all the Godfathers and Casino. We have this and Goodfellas and we're done," he said.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Did I lose a bet that I don’t remember or sign my name in blood to a contract I didn’t understand?”

He hooked his finger in the collar of her hoodie. “If I were going to bet you something, the terms would definitely not be Mafia movies.” He pulled her over closer to him and pressed play on the remote.

* * *

Steven had thought about calling Journey every day since she ran away from his car in the school parking lot. He had dialed her number a few times but had hung up before the call was answered. For the first time in his life, Steven had voluntarily visited the library to research the laws in Georgia. Unfortunately, his brother was right. Journey’s parents could make a lot of trouble for him if they tried. He had no other choice but to wait or roll the dice and possibly wind up in jail.

To make the agony worse, by the fall he was seeing her from a distance almost every afternoon. She was obviously working at the bar near his shop, but she never dropped by to see him. With the way he had left things with her, he couldn’t really blame her.

But Steven didn’t have much time to sit around feeling sorry for himself. Brian was spending more days in Savannah than he was in Emerson, so Steven was working overtime to keep up with rent and the bills alone. When Brian was in town, there was a steady stream of people coming and going from their apartment. And when it was time for him to leave again, he always left Steven with a wad of cash.

Steven knew Brian was dealing drugs again. It was his fall-back career whenever the constraints of legitimate employment became too much for him. Steven tried his best to turn a blind eye, and he certainly didn’t participate. His probation subjected him to random drug testing, so Steven had determined to keep his nose clean.

Journey Durant had been the strongest drug he’d ever sampled anyway, and if he wasn’t willing to go to jail for her, he certainly wasn’t willing to go just so he could get stoned on second-hand reefer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sad But True

At four o'clock on Friday afternoon, Journey pulled up in front of Marcus's house. It was a light gray, double-wide trailer with an extension built onto it. She stepped up onto the covered porch and wiped her muddy boots on the astroturf welcome mat. She rang the doorbell.

"It's open!" she heard Marcus yell.

A little surprised by the fact that he didn't bother to open the door, she walked inside. It was a large bedroom with a big-screen TV, a king sized bed, and a weight bench. "Marcus?" she called out.

"In here," he said on the other side of an open door at the far corner of the room.

She stepped out into the hallway and found him in the bathroom, shirtless, and leaning over the sink toward the mirror. He was putting in a green contact lens.

Journey slapped her hand over her mouth to try and suppress a giggle. She was unsuccessful. He turned around and looked at her. One eye was bright green, the other was crystal blue. She lost it. She doubled over laughing.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

She straightened again and covered her face with her hands. She wasn't sure why she

thought it was so funny that Marcus's claim to fame in high school, his electric green eyes, were fake.

His handsome face crumpled. "Quit laughing."

She was still chuckling. "I'm never going to be able to look at you the same way again."

"Shut up!"

She took a closer look at his eyes. "Why the green? The blue is much better."

He scowled. "Nobody asked you."

She shrugged. "You're right."

He turned back toward the mirror and put the other contact in. When he was done, he brushed past Journey back into the bedroom. He picked up a black t-shirt off his bed, and she noticed the dragon tattoo on his chest. "Nice ink," she said.

He cut his eyes over at her. "Don't try to suck up to me now."

She held her hands up in defense. "I wasn't sucking up. I mean it."

He tugged the shirt over his head. "You have any?"

She shook her head. "Not yet, but I have my first one all planned out. I want a phoenix on my leg."

He looked mildly impressed. "That's cool. You ready to go?"

She smiled. "Absolutely."

It was a two hour trip to Atlanta. She and Marcus talked about music the entire drive. She'd also gotten it out of him that his year-round tan was thanks to his aunt's tanning salon. She laughed at him again, and he shot her the bird before turning up the radio to drown out her giggles.

The Lakewood Amphitheater was packed with fans by the time they arrived, and dark clouds loomed in the distance. Their tickets were for the lawn, which was standing room only.

Marcus pointed up to the sky. "It might rain."

She grinned at him with wide eyes and tugged on his arm. "Then we'll get wet."

It was drizzling by the time the band took the stage, and it was pouring half-way through their set. Journey and Marcus didn't care though. Journey jumped up and down, splashing in the mud, and Marcus stripped off his t-shirt and joined in the mosh pit. When they sang her favorite

song, with mud and sweat dripping down her face, she sang along at the top of her lungs. Marcus draped his arm across her shoulders and sang with her.

She stopped singing and looked over at him. He was drenched, and his cheeks were red from moshing. "Thank you, Marcus."

Smiling, he winked a ridiculous green eye at her. "I'm glad Justin couldn't make it."

* * *

Somehow, Brian managed to score tickets to the sold out Metallica show in Atlanta, but Steven didn't want to know how. They drove to the show in the Chevelle, and Brian bought Steven a beer before immersing himself in the crowd on the lawn to find new friends to burn a joint with. Steven imagined his brother would finance their beer tab and the gas money to cover the trip before the show even began.

Sipping his beer, Steven wandered through the crowd until the sky opened up and rain poured down. The band took the stage, and the crowd went crazy, moshing through the mud and head-banging in the rain. When he moved toward the covered part of the pavilion to try and squeeze under a tiny bit of shelter, he saw her.

Journey Durant was dancing in the rain.

She was wearing cut off shorts and a black tank top that were both soaked and covered in mud. Her hair was solid white, and she was wearing her favorite purple boots. Rain drizzled down her skin as she splashed in the puddles and sang along with every word.

Next to her, a shirtless guy curled his arm around her shoulders and pumped his free fist in the air along with the beat. It was Marcus Garrett.

First David. Now Marcus. What the hell was she ever doing with me? he wondered.

Steven felt like he had been kicked in the stomach.

"The concert is this way!" a voice shouted into his ear as a hand spun him around in the direction of the stage. It was Brian. Steven's face must have looked as bad as he felt. "You OK?" Brian asked.

Steven slammed his beer down onto the ground, and jerked his head back toward Journey and Marcus.

Brian looked over his shoulder. "Oh, it's Jailbait."

“Yeah,” Steven grumbled.

Brian slugged him in the shoulder. “Forget about her, man.”

Steven rolled his eyes.

Brian shoved his hand into his pocket, then pulled out a small piece of pink cellophane. He unwrapped a tiny green pill and dropped it into Steven’s hand. “Here. This will make you forget all about her.”

Steven studied the pill for a moment. He knew it was a bad idea. He looked back over his shoulder and saw her arm in arm with Marcus. *What the hell?* He dropped the pill into his mouth and Brian laughed and shoved his beer into his chest. Steven washed it down with a gulp.

And for one night, he forgot all about her.

* * *

David couldn’t sleep on Friday night. He stared up at the ceiling fan, counting its rotations and willing himself to not think about all the fun that Journey and Marcus were probably having without him. All week long he had regretted giving Marcus her number, despite Marcus’s argument that he wasn’t interested in her and that he had a girlfriend. Like his having a girlfriend even mattered. David trusted Marcus but only so far.

At almost two in the morning, David was considering calling Marcus’s cell under the guise of making sure they got home OK. He knew Marcus would see right through it, but it was almost worth it. He was dying to know what they were doing.

Interrupting his deliberation, was a knock at the basement door that led out to the backyard.

David threw off his covers and pulled on a pair of gym shorts over his boxers. He crossed through his living room and saw Journey waving like a mad woman through the glass. He sucked in a deep breath and sighed. He eased the door open to minimize its creaking. “What are you doing here?” he whispered.

She was covered in dried mud. “It’s too late for me to go home without waking my parents up, and I didn’t want to stay at Marcus’s, so I came here. Let me in!”

She didn’t want to stay at Marcus’s. His face broke out in a smile.

He moved out of her way. “Where’s your car?”

“Down the street at the house that’s for sale,” she said, walking inside.

He laughed. “What happened to you?”

“It was raining,” she answered as she slipped off her boots. “Can I crash here?”

He locked the door behind her. “Of course. But you need a shower.”

She grinned. “And some pajamas.”

Lying on his bed again, he tried to ignore the sound of the shower. He wasn’t very successful. A few moments later, she came out of the bathroom wearing his Dallas Cowboys t-shirt and a pair of his shorts that were rolled a few times at the waist. She grinned. “All clean.”

David forgot to breathe.

She frowned. “Are you going to scootch over, or am I going to have to sleep on the couch?”

He smiled and slid over in the bed. She pulled back the covers and stretched out next to him. He rolled onto his side and propped his head up on his arm. “So, how was the concert?”

She squeezed her eyes shut and grinned. “It was absolutely amazing.” She looked over at him. “I had the best time. Marcus isn’t just a dumb jock after all. We had so much fun.”

He forced himself to not look disappointed. “Yeah. He’s a good guy.”

She rolled to face him. “I wish you could have been there. You would have loved it.”

“What was your favorite part?”

She thought for a moment. “Enter Sandman.” She narrowed her eyes. “No, Wherever I May Roam... No, Sad But True.”

David laughed. “So, the whole thing?”

She nodded. “The whole thing!”

He rubbed her shoulder. “I’m glad you had a good time.”

She yawned and covered her mouth with her hand. “Guess what?”

“What?”

She giggled again. “Marcus wears contacts.”

He grinned. “I know.”

She rolled back onto her other side, and to his surprise, she scooted back against him. “Thanks for letting me in, Dave,” she whispered.

He reached back and turned off the bedside lamp, then he wrapped his arm around her waist. “Anytime, Journey. Anytime.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Christmas Story

David was in the kitchen popping popcorn when he heard the gravel shifting under the movement of tires in the driveway. He walked to the living room and saw a white hatchback roll to a stop. Journey was the first person to arrive at David's house on Christmas Eve. When he met her at the front door, she was scratching her head and looking around the empty driveway. When she saw him, she pointed toward her car. "Did I get confused about the date? Are we watching Christmas movies tonight?"

He laughed and shook his head. "No. It's tonight. You're just the only one in our group who has the ability to show up on time." He stepped out of her way as she walked inside.

She looked cute in a white knit hat and matching scarf. She offered him the small wrapped box in her hands as she unbuttoned her coat. "Here."

He smiled. "What's this?"

"Edible panties." She hung her coat on the hook. When she turned around, his mouth was still hanging open. She smacked him in the back of the head. "It's a gift, you dork."

He laughed and rubbed the spot where she hit him. "You can't say shit like that."

She was wearing a blue sweater than hung off her shoulders. David had always had a

weak spot for her collar bones. He realized he was staring when she snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Huh?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "I asked, where are your mom and dad?"

He blinked. "Oh, they went to some church thing somewhere."

She laughed. "Maybe they're on a double date with my parents."

He nodded toward the basement door. "Come on. Let's go downstairs, and I'll give you your present too."

She pointed back outside. "What about everyone else?"

He shrugged. "They'll figure it out."

She laughed when they got downstairs. "Look at your cute baby Christmas tree!" She walked to the corner of the room by his bedroom door and bent over the two foot tree he had gotten for free from the hardware store.

"Grab that bag," he said, pointing to the gift bag by her feet.

She picked it up and carried it over toward him. Her eyes were wide. "It's heavy. Is it mine?"

He nodded. "Come sit." He led her over to the couch and sat down. "You first."

She ripped the white tissue paper out of the bag and peered down inside. Before she removed anything, she burst out laughing. "No, you didn't!"

He laughed. "It's the perfect gift, right?"

She began pulling jars of Manic Panic hair color out of the bag and piling them in her lap. "Oh my god, how many are there?"

He leaned over her shoulder. "I bought every color they had at the store."

She squealed with delight and put her arms around his neck. "It's the best Christmas present ever, Dave! Thank you so much."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm glad you like it."

She tapped her nails, which were painted a festive green, on the box he was still holding. "Now your turn."

David ripped the wrapping paper off the box and pulled off the lid. Inside was a black picture frame holding the photo her mother had taken of them together at his graduation. He

smiled as he studied their faces smushed together. "I love it."

She wrinkled up her nose. "You do? You're not just saying that?"

He shook his head. "No, I really love it."

She clapped her hands together. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Journ." His eyes softened as he stared at her.

She gasped and pointed at him. "You're not going to cry and shit are you?"

He grabbed her finger, and she screamed as he used a high school wrestling move to pin her underneath him. The bottles of rainbow colored hair dye toppled to the floor and rolled across the carpet. David pinched her sides and tickled her until she couldn't breathe. They were both laughing. Finally, he pinned her hands against the couch cushion over her head. "Take it back, Journey!"

"No!"

He leaned down closer to her. "Take it back!"

She was panting and trying to catch her breath. She tossed her head from side to side. "Never."

Without a reasonable thought in his mind, he kissed her. She instantly froze under the weight of his lips, and David realized what a mistake he had made. But when he released her hands, to his surprise, they tangled in his hair. She was pulling him closer.

"A merry Christmas indeed!" he heard Marcus yell behind them.

David jerked upright and spun around. Marcus was laughing. Kara's mouth was covered by her hands. Justin was facing the wall. Journey tugged her shirt back into place as she sat up. David could feel the heat of embarrassment in his cheeks. "We didn't hear anybody come in."

Marcus crossed his arms over his chest. "Obviously."

Kara pointed up the steps. "Should we go?"

Yes.

"No!" As soon as Journey untangled her legs from his, she jumped up off the couch. David noticed that her cheeks were as red as his felt. "We were just exchanging presents."

Marcus rubbed his hands together and smiled. "I can't wait to see what you got me!"

David hung his head and groaned. He should have locked the front door.

* * *

Concentrating on *A Christmas Story* was impossible for Journey. And by the way Dave kept catching her eye and blushing during the movie, it must have been impossible for him as well. They needed to talk about what had happened, but wow, what was there to say? They'd crossed a line in their friendship, but she was unsure what it meant. Was he caught up in the moment? Was he interested in her? Was it all a mistake?

She realized her fingernail was bloody from nibbling on it. She pushed herself up off the couch and walked to the bathroom to wash her hands. Kara followed her. "What are you doing?" Journey asked as Kara closed the door behind them.

Kara jerked her thumb toward the door. "What was that about earlier? You and Dave are making out now? How long has that been going on?"

Journey laughed and shook her head. "Nothing's going on!"

"That wasn't 'nothing', Journey. How did it happen?"

Journey rubbed her fists against her eyes. "I'm not really sure, to be honest. We exchanged presents, then he started tickling me, and then he just kissed me out of nowhere."

"Did you kiss him back?"

Journey laughed. "Yeah. I did. It was pretty great."

Kara's mouth fell open. "So, what does it mean?"

"I don't know!"

"Are you guys like *together* now?"

Journey tossed her hands into the air. "Kara, we kissed for thirty seconds, and now I'm talking to you about it, so I guess it means we're back in middle school."

Kara rolled her eyes. "You don't just casually make out with your friends, Journ. That's a good way to screw things up."

Journey sucked in a deep breath. "Do you think that's what will happen?"

"I think you'd better be sure before you let it go any further. Dave has had a thing for you for a long time—"

"No, he hasn't," Journey interrupted.

Kara huffed. "You're so blind it's almost funny. Just please promise me, you'll think this

through. Dave could get really hurt if you're not careful."

Journey rolled her eyes and shook her head. She wasn't David's type.

She followed Kara out of the bathroom, and Dave smiled over at her as she settled back in her place next to him. She rested her head against his shoulder, then thought about Kara's warning. Kara was right about one thing: Journey needed to be careful. Nothing was worth ruining her relationship with Dave. She sat up straight just as he moved to put his arm around her.

When the movie ended, Journey walked upstairs with her friends as they prepared to leave. She didn't miss David's look of disappointment. He stepped over beside her while she shrugged into her coat. "Can't you stay for a little while?"

She hesitated before letting the coat settle over her shoulders. "It's Christmas Eve, Dave. I've got to get home so Santa will come."

He lowered his voice. "We need to talk."

His parents walked in from the driveway, his tiny mother clapping her hands with glee. "I was hoping we would get to see you all tonight!" She stopped and hugged Journey first. "Merry Christmas, Journey!"

Journey patted her back. "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Britton." Over her shoulder, she saw David's pained expression. He looked... hurt? Mad? She wasn't sure.

She said her goodbyes to Marcus, Kara, and Justin before they left, then she pulled David out the front door, out of earshot of his parents inside.

"Please don't leave," he whispered.

She put her hands on his arms. "I've got to go to my grandparents' tomorrow, but I'll be back in time for New Year's Eve. Are you still going to that party with me?"

He cast his gaze to her feet. "Yeah."

She nudged him. "Hey, don't get all weird on me. I just don't want to rush into anything and do something we will end up regretting."

He opened his mouth like he wanted to argue, but he closed it again and nodded. "All right."

She put her arms around his neck. "Merry Christmas, David."

He squeezed her tight and nuzzled his face into the scarf around her neck. "Merry Christmas, Journey."

* * *

Steven sat in his Chevelle in the parking lot of Waffle House on Christmas morning and watched tiny snowflakes melt on his windshield. Brian, who had been out till almost four that morning, was asleep in the passenger's seat. The Drake family didn't have traditions except for breakfast at Waffle House on Christmas morning. As the minutes ticked by without any sign of his mother, he wondered if the tradition still existed.

He couldn't find a radio station that wasn't playing Christmas music, and while he examined his dash wondering how he could install a new stereo, 'All I Want for Christmas is You' came over the speakers. He cursed under his breath and shut off the radio. But it was too late. Journey Durant's memory launched a hostile takeover of his thoughts.

It had been six months. Why couldn't he shake her from his mind? He'd never had a problem getting over chicks before. What made her so different? Steven almost wished he had never met her. She had been the first person ever to make him feel like he mattered, and since he had ended things with her, he felt more alone than ever.

Just when he thought Christmas couldn't suck any worse, his mother pulled into the Waffle House parking lot with Ricky Drake sitting in the passenger's seat.

"Brian, wake up."

Brian didn't move.

Steven reached across the car and smacked his brother in the shoulder with the back of his hand. "Brian!"

Brian jolted upright and searched his surroundings with startled, bloodshot eyes. "Yeah. I'm up! What?"

Steven nodded across the parking lot where their parents were getting out of the car in the snow.

Brian laughed, but it wasn't funny. "You've got to be shitting me." He looked at his younger brother, who was seething in the driver's seat. "Well, what do you want to do? It's your call."

Steven shook his head. "Dude, greasy hash browns aren't worth going back to jail."

Brian slapped his chest. "Let's get out of here then." He smiled as Steven put the car in gear. "I've got a different kind of hash to make our Christmas merry and bright."

Steven sighed and pulled out of the lot. "Fantastic."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Auld Lang Syne

Journey didn't see David again all week, except every time she closed her eyes. She couldn't get him out of her head. She wondered if he was as busy thinking of her too. Her older sister, Elena, had come home from Tennessee for the holidays, but even she wasn't much help. She had said the same thing Kara had—that Journey had better be absolutely certain of her feelings for David before she did anything that might alter their friendship.

Making up her mind was harder than she had anticipated, and by New Year's Eve, she was no clearer on the subject than she had been a week before. She couldn't stop thinking about how right it felt to kiss him. She wasn't sure she could ever just be his friend again. But if things were to go south between them, she couldn't imagine her world without David in it. And she wasn't sure if that was a risk she was willing to take.

He had told her after prom that the reason he liked her was because she was so different from all the other girls. The last thing she wanted was to be lumped in with the masses and become a number in the David Britton fan club. She had once been honest with another guy about how much she had liked him, and that had blown up in her face.

Her mother snapped her out of her daze as she sat on her bed and stared out of her

window. "Are you coming home tonight?"

Journey turned and looked at her. "I doubt it. I'll probably crash at David's."

Carol Durant groaned and shook her head. "Do you just not care that we worry about you?"

Journey didn't, but she knew it wasn't a smart idea to admit to it. "Mom, David's house is probably the safest place in the world for me."

"You know we like David, but he's still a teenage boy."

Journey rolled her eyes. "It's not like that." Though, she was no longer sure that was true.

Journey could tell her mother was torn between being exhausted by the same old fights and wanting to put her foot down. Finally, Carol's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I'll be fine, Mom."

Her mother didn't respond. She just stepped out of the doorway and walked down the hall. Journey felt almost guilty. Almost.

The doorbell rang. Journey picked up her keys and her purse and took a deep breath before going to the front door. David was wearing a black polo shirt and jeans. She blushed for the first time ever looking at him. She walked outside and closed the door behind her. "Hey."

He was smiling from ear to ear. "Hey." His hands fidgeted at his sides. Finally, he pointed toward his truck. "You ready to go?"

She held up her keys. "I thought I would drive tonight."

He laughed with surprise. "It's New Year's, and you don't want to drink?"

If she were honest, she would admit that she didn't trust herself to drink around him that night. She smiled. "I have to work tomorrow, so I thought I would babysit you for a change."

David's mouth dropped open. "I feel like we should write this moment down or take a commemorative picture or something," he teased.

She elbowed him in the stomach.

As they walked to her car, he began fidgeting again. "So, are you going to crash at my house tonight?" he asked.

She swallowed hard. "That's the plan."

He pointed to his truck. "Is it cool for me to leave my truck here?"

She nodded. “Yeah. It’s fine. It may help keep my mother calm if she has a reminder that we are together.”

He laughed. “Good point.”

They got in her car and drove, mostly in silence, to the party on the outskirts of town. He didn’t bring up the kiss, and neither did she.

The three-story log cabin where the party was being held belonged to the parents of a bartender she worked with at Barry’s. Apparently, the owners were in Aspen for New Year’s. The party was in full swing by the time she parked and they walked up the long driveway. The deck on the main floor had a keg on ice beside a packed hot tub.

David grinned down at her. “Did you bring a bathing suit?”

She shook her head and hooked her thumbs in her belt loops. “Nope. I didn’t get the memo.”

He winked. “Too bad.”

She rolled her eyes as they walked inside. In the large living room, just off the open kitchen, was a big screen TV playing the live broadcast from Times Square. Beside the kitchen were stairs leading down that buzzed with the rhythms of dance music. On the other side of the living area, another staircase led upstairs. Judging from the coziness of the couples who were ascending, Journey assumed bedrooms were on the floor above them.

Journey tugged on David’s hand in the direction of the stairs going down. “This party is either going to be epic, or we’re all gonna wind up in jail,” she said.

His eyes doubled in size and he stopped walking. “Do you think we might get busted?”

She smacked him on the chest and giggled. “Oh, lighten up.”

In the basement was a bar filled with more liquor than they had at the restaurant. Journey poured a shot of vodka for David and popped the top of a Diet Coke for herself. She briefly considered downing the vodka just to calm her nerves.

David eyed his shot glass skeptically. “If I didn’t know any better, I would think you were trying to get me drunk so you can take advantage of me.”

She rolled her eyes. “We both know I wouldn’t have to get you drunk if I wanted to take advantage of you.”

He lowered his face toward hers and lowered his voice. "Do you want to?"

"You wish."

"Maybe, I do."

Her heart skipped a beat. "What?"

He grinned and leaned close to her ear. "You never know what might happen this year, Journey Durant." He clinked his shot glass against her can and dumped the liquid down his throat. "You just never know."

* * *

David had never been drunk in his life, so it didn't take long for the alcohol to start making him feel dizzy, tingly, and... *awesome*! "This is the greatest party ever!" he yelled, leaning on his best friend for support.

She took the beer out of his hand. "Maybe you should pace yourself, Dave. It's still pretty early."

He hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her close as they walked out onto the deck. "You smell like coconuts."

She laughed and put her hand on his chest. "Do you want some water?"

"No! I want my beer back. Why did you steal my beer?" He tried to pout but kept smiling instead.

She handed it back to him. "I don't envy you in the morning."

He tapped his chest. "I envy me in the morning!"

Journey scrunched up her brow as she leaned against the deck railing and lit a cigarette. "That makes no sense."

He pointed the beer bottle at her. "Yes, it does. I'm going to wake up with you in the morning, and that makes me very jealous *of me*." He motioned around to all the other people on the deck. "You should all be jealous!"

She groaned and looked up at the sky. "Oh god."

Her cigarette looked amazing. "Gimme that." He reached out and grabbed the fiery red end, screamed like a girl, and dropped it.

"Geez, Dave." She bent over to pick it up.

He pointed at the cigarette. “That shit’s hot.”

She laughed. “Yes. I know.” She turned it around and handed it to him, this time by the filter. “Don’t burn yourself.”

He tried to examine his stinging fingers, but his vision was blurry. “Too late.”

She lit another cigarette and held it up to her lips.

“God, I love your lips.” He took a step toward her but stumbled over his feet. She laughed and shook her head.

Someone opened the door behind them, and a guy he had never seen stuck his head outside. “Larry is here with the moonshine!” he announced.

David’s eyes widened. “Moonshine!” He pushed his beer and his cigarette toward Journey. She didn’t catch the beer before he let go of it, and it landed on the deck in a bubbly mess. “Oh, shit. I’m sorry. I’ll bring you another one! I’m gonna go get some moonshine and some more beers!”

“David, I don’t think that’s a good idea—”

He held up his hands. “No, shush. It’s OK. It’s OK. I love moonshine!”

She shook her head. “You’ve never drank—”

He put his finger over her mouth to silence her. “Shhh.”

She smiled under the weight of his finger.

“I’ll be back.” He held his hands up as he slowly backed away. “You stay right here.”

She laughed. “OK. I’ll stay right here. Please be careful.”

He waved his hand toward her. “Baby, I’m always care—” He stumbled backwards into the wall.

Journey doubled over laughing.

He grabbed the wall for support. “It’s OK. I’ve got this.” He carefully gripped the door handle and held up five fingers. “Five minutes. Stay right here.”

Inside, a large group had formed around the island in the kitchen. He pushed his way to the center where a guy wearing overalls was pouring clear liquid into a spoon. He flicked a lighter and lit the liquid on fire. “Whoa, that’s awesome!” David said and shoved the guy next to him who he didn’t know. His eyes went glassy as he watched the contents of the spoon burn.

“Who wants some?” the guy in the overalls asked.

David’s hand shot up in the air.

A moment later, the man handed him a red cup with a swig of clear liquid in the bottom. Everyone was staring at him; David felt like a rockstar. He tipped the cup up to his lips, and the liquid burned like battery acid all the way down his throat. David gagged. Everyone cheered.

“Here! Drink this!” someone shouted, handing him a jug of orange juice.

David grasped the jug with both hands and chugged. The alcohol burn worsened. “David, put that down!” a girl yelled. Then two tiny hands jerked the jug away.

It was Rebecca Ashburn.

“David, that juice has vodka in it!”

“Rebecca!” he cheered, reaching for her.

She patted his back as he leaned on her. “Hello, David.”

“Oh my god, I’ve missed you!” He pressed a sloppy kiss to the side of her head. “Where have you been?”

“At college,” she answered. “What are you doing here?”

He pointed—somewhere. “I came with Journey. Oh my god. You have to come see her. She will be so excited you’re here!”

Rebecca laughed. “I doubt that.”

He draped his arm around her shoulders and stared down at her. “God, you’re hot.”

She patted his arm. “And you’re really drunk.”

“I know!” He nodded so hard he felt dizzy. “It’s awesome.” He cocked his head to the side as he looked at her. “Are you really drunk?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

“We should fix that,” he said. “Bartender!”

She laughed. “David, there’s no bartender.”

“There should be.”

She tugged on his hand. “Come on, let’s find me a drink.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

* * *

The New Year's Eve party was in full swing when Steven followed Brian up the driveway toward the house. "If the party's lame," Brian was saying over his shoulder, "we won't stay long. I've just got to make a drop, and then we can go."

Steven groaned and rolled his eyes. He should have known this was a business deal for Brian. Nobody invited his older brother to parties because they enjoyed his company. The party looked promising, though, even from the driveway. There were girls in bikinis in the hot tub on the deck. *Oh shit*. Steven stopped walking.

"What are you doing?" Brian asked.

Steven hung his head. "Nothing. I'm coming."

Journey Durant was leaning against the deck rails, smoking a cigarette.

Brian walked up the steps toward the front door and disappeared inside. Steven stood at the bottom of the stairs and stared at her until she looked down and caught him. Her mouth fell open. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and trudged up onto the deck.

She inhaled a long drag and blew it out slowly as he approached. She looked caught between wanting to cry and wanting to hit him.

"Hey," he finally said.

Panic flashed through her eyes, and she slowly turned her back toward him. She leaned her elbows on the rail and rubbed her hand down her face.

"You're not even going to talk to me?" he asked, stopping just behind her.

She looked out over the woods behind the house. "I don't have anything to say to you."

Unable to stop himself from touching her, he put his hand on her waist. "Come on, Journ. Don't be like that."

She looked over her shoulder. Tears sparkled in her eyes. "What the hell do you expect, Steven? It's been months!"

He hung his head. "I know. I told you—"

She spun around and cut him off. "I know what you told me. I don't need a reminder." She shook her head. "Excuse me. I've got to go and find my date."

He caught her around her waist. "Marcus Garrett?"

"Marcus?"

“I saw you with him in Atlanta,” he said.

She looked confused. “Atlanta? Are you following me?”

“No. I just saw you there.” She pushed his hand away and walked toward the door. He followed her. “Journey, please just talk to me.”

She stopped walking so suddenly that Steven slammed into her from behind. He followed in the direction of her gaze up the steps. David Britton was being led upstairs by his ex-girlfriend. The expression on Journey’s face told Steven everything he needed to know. She was there with David, and David was hooking up with someone else. Steven decided to capitalize on the moment, and he took her hand. “I’m sorry, Journ.”

She looked back at him. Tears had spilt down her cheeks. She ripped her hand away. “Just leave me alone.” She turned and walked out the front door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Drunk on Sunday

It had been over two months since David had woken up on New Year's Day with Rebecca Ashburn and the worst hangover in the history of mankind. Journey had been gone when he stumbled down the stairs that morning, she'd already left home by the time he showed up to get his truck. He had apologized—a few times—but things were never really the same after that. All the ground he had gained in trying to have a real relationship with her had gone down the toilet along with all the leftover alcohol in his system that day.

Marcus was really the only winner in the whole situation. Journey had taken to hanging out at his house rather than at David's, which he enjoyed rubbing in David's face. Marcus found it pretty funny that, for once, he was the good guy, and Dave was the douchebag.

It wasn't until the beginning of March that Journey seemed to have finally forgiven him. Justin was home on Spring Break from the college he was attending in Florida, and the whole group went out to lunch on Sunday afternoon. Kara clinked her fork against the side of her tea glass. "Attention, attention everyone!" she announced dramatically. "I have an announcement to make." She giggled and looked at Journey. "Well, *Journey* has an announcement to make."

Journey was rolling her eyes in the corner of the booth where she was sandwiched

between Marcus and Kara. She put her napkin down on her plate and leaned her elbows on the table. “As you all know, Kara is forcing me to go to prom again this year.”

Marcus rubbed his hands together with a grin that David wanted to smack off his face.

“After much deliberation, I have decided”—she looked dramatically around the table—“to ask David Britton to be my date.”

David pointed at Marcus and laughed. “Boom, sucker!”

Marcus wadded up his napkin and launched it at David’s head.

Journey held up her hands. “Marcus, dear, you were a very close second.” She rested her head against his shoulder for a moment. “However, I did go to incredible lengths to ruin David’s senior prom, so it’s only fair that I allow him the opportunity to return the favor.”

David’s face would have broken if he were smiling any wider. “I am honored.”

She pointed at him. “You should be, you big idiot.”

Marcus covered his mouth with his hand, pretending to muffle his voice. “Just make sure you go home with the right girl, Dave.”

David stuck up his middle finger toward his friend.

Journey pointed at him. “Yeah. I’d better not see or hear a word about Rebecca Ashburn, or I promise, I will kill you.”

Everyone laughed.

David made an ‘x’ over his chest. “Cross my heart.”

Justin looked at Kara. “When is prom?” he asked.

“April 1st.” She pointed a long nail at him. “And you had better figure out how to get out of school and get back here to take me.”

He kissed her hand. “You know I will.”

When they left the restaurant, David draped his arm across Journey’s shoulders as they walked through the parking lot. “Come over and watch a movie with me tonight,” he said. “And you can pick the movie. We’ll watch anything you want.”

She laughed. “Thanks, but I’m going home.”

He was skeptical. “You’re going home before sundown?”

She elbowed him in the ribs. “Shut up, Dave.”

“All right, but come over soon. We’ve got planning to do,” he said as she pulled away from him.

“I will. I promise.”

He smiled as she walked to her car.

April 1st, he thought. David had a month to plan the most unforgettable night of her life.

* * *

“Hi, Mom,” Journey said when she walked into the house that evening.

Her mother looked at the clock and then back at Journey. “You’ve been home before curfew every night for weeks. Should I be worried?”

Journey laughed. “No.” She sat down next to her mother on the sofa. “Wanna hear some news?”

Carol put down the crossword puzzle she was working. “I would love to.”

“David’s going to take me to prom,” she said.

A smile spread across her mother’s face. “Oh really?”

Journey pointed at her. “Don’t get any crazy ideas. We’re still just friends.”

Her mother was skeptical. “Are you sure about that?”

“Positive.”

“Can we go dress shopping?” her mom asked.

Journey thought for a second. “Well, I was planning on going with Kara, but sure. Why not?”

Carol looked like she might cry. “I’ll clear my schedule and pull you out of class one day this week. How about it?”

Journey smiled. “Sounds like fun.”

Carol pulled off her glasses. “I have some news also. Good news and bad news.”

Journey folded her leg underneath her. “OK. What’s the good news?”

Her mother sucked in a deep breath. “Well, your father and I have been invited to a very prestigious convention for international art dealers.”

Journey nodded. “That sounds pretty cool. Where is it?”

“At the British Museum in London,” she answered.

“Very cool. That might be a business thing I wouldn’t mind tagging along for,” she said.

Her mother’s face was a clear mix of worry and surprise. “Well, that would be an option, but I’m afraid there’s also a downside.”

Journey was confused. “What’s the downside?”

Carol folded her hands in the prayer position under her chin. “Our flight leaves on May 27th.”

Slow realization washed over Journey. She tilted her head to the side in confusion. “But that’s my birthday. My *eighteenth* birthday.”

Her mother grimaced.

Journey covered her mouth with her hand. “And it’s my graduation.”

Carol hung her head. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

Journey smirked. “You’re just going to miss it? You’re going to miss one of the biggest days of my life for a bunch of pictures painted by dead people?”

Carol reached for her hand. “Journey, please don’t be—”

Journey had heard enough. She stood up. “No, I’m good. Don’t worry about it.” She picked up her keys again.

“Where are you going?” her mother asked.

“Out,” Journey said. “Don’t wait up.”

Journey’s eyes were swollen from crying by the time David opened the back door to his downstairs living room. He looked around her in confusion. “Hey, Journ. What are you doing here?”

“I changed my mind,” she said.

He was searching her eyes with alarm. “What’s the matter?” he asked, reaching for her hand.

Her chin began to quiver again, but she just shook her head. She didn’t know what to say. She honestly wasn’t a hundred percent sure why she was so upset.

“Come here.” He pulled her into his arms.

She buried her face in his t-shirt and sniffed. “Can I stay here tonight?”

He nodded against her head. “Of course you can.”

David slipped an arm around her shoulders as he guided her to his room. They sat down on the edge of his bed, and he held her hand. "You wanna talk about it?"

She wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "It's so stupid."

He shook his head. "I doubt that."

"Did you know that I've come home to an empty house almost every single day since middle school?" she asked.

He nodded.

She pointed to the ceiling. "Your mom's been here every time I've been over."

"Yeah."

She tapped her chest. "We don't have home cooked meals unless I make them."

He shrugged. "Your parents are pretty busy."

She turned her palms over. "They're so busy they're going to miss my birthday and my graduation."

He laughed. "Whatever."

She pointed to her own face. "Does it look like I'm joking?"

"Surely you misunderstood," he said.

"David, I didn't misunderstand anything."

He slumped and rested his elbows on his knees. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." She felt tears prickling the corners of her eyes again. "Why are they so surprised when I don't come home? They never do."

He put his arms around her when she began to cry again. "I'll be there." He pressed a kiss against her hair. "I'll always be there."

* * *

Brian had been gone most of the weekend, but he finally came home on Sunday. He put a take-out pizza on the table and dropped his duffle bag on the floor by the kitchen.

Steven was on the couch, in sweatpants and socks, watching a show about tattooing. "How was Savannah?" Steven slurred as he tipped his seventh beer up to his lips.

Brian stopped and counted the bottles on the table before looking at his brother. "It was good. Are you drunk?"

Steven nodded. “Yep.”

Brian looked at his watch. “At four o’clock on a Sunday?”

Steven shrugged his shoulders. “Isn’t it kind of a rule that you’re supposed to get trashed on your twenty-first birthday?”

Brian clapped his hands together. “That’s right! Happy birthday, little brother!” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a joint. “This calls for a celebration.”

He fired up the joint and passed it across the couch. Steven studied it in his hand for a moment. “Thanks,” he said, void of any emotion.

There were three sharp knocks on the front door. “Emerson Police Department! We have a warrant!”

“Fuck!” Brian yelled and grabbed his bag. He took off running through the bedroom and slammed the door.

Steven, too drunk and stunned to move, was still holding the smoking joint when the cops kicked in the door and started screaming and waving guns around. He was thrown face first onto the carpet and put into handcuffs. Two more cops ran through the apartment, kicking in the bedroom door as well.

There goes my security deposit, was the only thought in Steven’s altered mind.

On the day after his twenty-first birthday, Steven Drake woke up in jail with a hangover and a simple possession drug charge. Brian hadn’t been so fortunate. He would be in prison for a very long time.

For almost a year, Steven had kept his distance from Journey to stay out of trouble, and he wound up there anyway. The irony of the situation wasn’t lost on him. It would take a little time to clean up the mess he’d made, but he was determined to win her back as soon as he did.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Senior Prom

Kara stepped back with her eyeshadow brush in her hand and smiled down at Journey. “I’m so glad you picked that dress. It makes your eyes really pop.”

Journey studied the job Kara was doing with her makeup. She swiped a stray piece of glitter off her pink cheek. “It was David’s idea, actually. He said I should wear green, but I hate green, so I compromised with teal.”

“What did your mom say about it?” she asked, pinching the sides of the shimmery mermaid gown that showed Journey’s skin through the fabric.

Journey shook her head. “She didn’t see it.”

Kara sighed and handed her a lipstick. “You two still haven’t made up?”

Journey groaned. “I don’t think we’ve spoken in a month.” Journey held up a finger. “No, that’s not true. She asked if I had sent in any college applications, and I told her I was waiting to hear from Oxford. I asked if she could stop by and check for me while they were in England.”

Kara scrunched up her nose. “So, they’re still going to Europe?”

“Yep,” Journey answered. She was desperate to change the subject. For once, she was actually looking forward to a formal night out. She didn’t want it ruined by her parental

abandonment issues. “What time is it?”

Kara looked at the time on her cell phone. “It’s 5:45.”

“The boys are supposed to be here at six, right?”

Kara nodded. “Yep. Dinner is at seven.” Her phone buzzed. She looked at the screen. “It’s David,” she said, handing Journey her phone.

Journey pressed the answer button and cleared her throat. She mustered up her best Jersey accent. “*Billy’s Meat Market. Nobody beats our meat. How may I direct your call?*”

“Very funny,” David said.

She smiled. “I thought so. What’s up?”

“You’re going to kill me.”

She put a hand on her hip. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not.” There was a long pause on the other end of the line. “I wasn’t able to get out of work in time to pick up my tux.”

Journey looked at Kara. “Are you serious?” she asked him.

“I wouldn’t joke about this,” he said. “I got busy at work, and the tux place closes at five. I’m sitting in their parking lot now.”

Her mouth fell open. “You’re not a brain surgeon, Dave! You work at a hardware store! How could you forget?”

He sighed. “Well, Rebecca stopped by and we started talking—”

“You what?” she shrieked.

Kara’s eyes doubled in size. “What’s going on?” she whispered.

“I’m sorry!” David’s voice was filled with panic. “Please, Journ. I didn’t realize they closed so early. I even tried to call the owner of the shop at home and beg him to reopen. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Screw you, David Britton!”

He groaned. “Please, just go on without me. You’ll have a great time. I’ll come pick you up tomorrow and make it up to you.”

“I’m sitting here in a two hundred dollar dress and enough makeup to be a damn drag queen! How could you possibly think you can make this up to me?”

"I'll think of something. I swear. I'm sorry," he said.

"Damn right, you're sorry," she said and hung up the phone.

Kara turned her palms up. "He's not coming?"

Journey pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to control her breathing. "No. He's not coming! He didn't pick up his tux before the shop closed."

Kara covered her mouth with her hands. "No!"

Journey balled her fists. "Because he was talking to fucking Rebecca Ashburn."

This time Kara screamed. "No!"

Journey pressed her eyes closed. "I'm going to kill him. I'm going to kill him!"

The doorbell rang.

Journey grabbed her pack of cigarettes and followed Kara to the living room. Justin was smiling through the front door. Journey pointed at him. "Your date came from another state, and he managed to be here on time!"

Kara pulled the door open, but before Justin came inside, Journey stormed out onto the porch.

"Whoa," he said, stumbling out of her way.

Journey lit a cigarette and folded her arms over her chest. She was cursing under her breath.

Justin looked at Kara. "What's with her?"

"David stood her up."

Justin laughed. "What? There's no way."

Journey turned and glared at him.

His eyes widened, and he took a step backward. "That stupid asshole," he grumbled.

Kara gripped Journey's arm. "Well, forget about him! We're going to go and have so much fun without him that he will feel even worse than he already does."

Journey smirked. "I didn't even want to go to this stupid prom to begin with." She held out her hand toward Kara. "Give me your phone."

"What are you going to do?" Kara asked.

Journey narrowed her eyes. "I'm calling Marcus."

* * *

David felt extremely triumphant as he parked the convertible his dad had rented and walked proudly inside Valentino's. He was wearing a dark gray tuxedo and carrying a white corsage. The hostess smiled brightly as he approached. "I have reservations for four, under the name Britton," he told her.

She nodded and picked up a stack of menus. "Certainly, Mr. Britton. Right this way."

The restaurant was the only part of the evening that he had told Journey about. He knew she would be impressed. Valentino's was the nicest place to eat outside of Atlanta. Between the car, the restaurant, the tux, and the hotel suite he had rented, he had to borrow from his college savings to fund the evening. It was going to be worth it though. This night was going to change absolutely everything.

Their table was draped with a pristine white tablecloth, and David took a seat with a clear view of the front door. He didn't want to miss the look on Journey's face when she walked in.

The hostess touched his arm. "Your server will be with you shortly. I'll bring the rest of your party when they arrive."

He turned his permanent, oversized grin toward her. "Thank you."

The year before, Journey had canceled on him at the last minute and had shown up with another guy. But this year, he would finally settle the score. He thought about how fuming mad she probably was, chain smoking on the front porch of the Robertson's home. Kara would be begging her to go on without him. Justin might have to even throw her over his shoulder and stuff her into his car against her will because there was no way Kara would let her out of going. It was too important of a night.

He tried to picture her in a dress as he waited for them to arrive. She had told him that her dress was a surprise. He liked it when she wore green, but she had turned up her nose when he mentioned it. Green brought out tiny flecks of emerald in her hazel eyes. Her hair would have a fresh batch of highlights, of who knows what color, and just for the occasion, she would probably wear some makeup. David didn't care if she wore it or not. He never thought she needed it.

He sat forward in his seat as the restaurant door opened, and an older couple walked in

hand-in-hand. He relaxed and watched them walk across the room together. He wondered what Journey would be like in thirty years. Would they stay in Emerson? Would they have kids? *Shit. That reminds me, I need to stop at a drugstore.*

He glanced back to the door just in time to see Justin and Kara enter.

No Journey.

Uh-oh.

Kara's eyes widened as she stormed angrily across the room toward him. "What the hell?" Her raised voice drew stares from the other patrons.

David's brain was scrambling. He held up his hands and waved them with mock enthusiasm. "April Fools'," he said, more than a little panicked.

Kara slumped into a chair and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, you are so stupid."

"Where is she?" he asked.

Kara sat up and threw her hands into the air. "She thought you stood her up, so she called Marcus to come and get her!"

David blinked with surprise. "Marcus? He's going to take her to the prom?"

She shook her head. "No, he can't because they won't let him in without a ticket. He told her to leave her dress on though and that he was going to take her out."

David groaned.

"Dude, she was pissed," Justin added, taking a seat beside his girlfriend.

"It was a joke!" David raked his fingers through his hair. "She was supposed to come here without me!"

"Hello?" Kara yelled at him. "Have you *met* Journey? I had to force her to even agree to go. You gave her the perfect excuse not to come!"

"You weren't supposed to give up so easily!"

She pointed at him. "Well, if you had clued someone in about your little joke, maybe I would have tried harder. I'm pretty pissed off at you too, ya know? I swear, you should win some kind of award for being the stupidest guy who ever existed!"

David couldn't argue.

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He dialed Marcus's phone number and

drummed his fingers on the table as he waited for him to answer. He never did. The phone rang instead of going straight to voicemail, telling David that the phone wasn't powered off. He also knew that Marcus was never without his phone, so he was either being ignored, or Marcus was dead. David dialed the number again to no avail. The third time he called, it went straight to voicemail. David slammed the phone down on the table. "That son-of-a-bitch!" He pushed his chair back as he stood.

"What are you going to do?" Kara asked as he walked around the table.

"I'm going to go find her. This town isn't that big." David stormed out of the restaurant.

* * *

Journey was on her third cigarette when Marcus pulled into the Robertson's driveway in his black truck. He stepped out of the driver's side door and smiled. If Journey hadn't been so livid, she would have smiled back. Marcus looked spectacular in the black tux he had worn the year before to the prom. She stood up and tossed her cigarette into the bushes.

He let out a slow whistle. "Sweet Jesus, you look amazing!"

Despite her anger, she grinned. "Thank you."

He walked over and offered his hand. "Screw Dave and screw the prom." He kissed her knuckles and cut his eyes up at her.

She gasped. "Your eyes are blue."

He winked. "This pretty smart chick once told me they look better blue."

For the first time since they met, Marcus made her blush.

He nodded toward the truck. "Come on. We've got an asshole to forget."

Marcus blared Metallica all the way to Miako's, Journey's favorite hole-in-the-wall Japanese place. By the time they arrived, her mood had significantly improved. Marcus pulled out her chair and sat down beside her. "Order whatever you want."

"Don't tell me that, or I might overdo it on the sake, and you'll end up carrying me out of here," she warned.

He rested his arm across the back of her chair and smiled. "That wouldn't be so bad."

She looked over the menu. "You'd better watch it, Marcus, or I'll accuse you of flirting."

He laughed and shook his head. "No accusations needed, miss. I admit it!"

She rolled her eyes and elbowed him in the ribs.

When their food arrived, she watched as he poured white sauce all over his fried rice.

“I’ll never understand how you stay in such good shape. You eat nothing but crap.”

“Good genes,” he answered, scooping up a forkful. “You think I’m in good shape?”

“Modesty doesn’t suit you,” she said, glaring at him.

He smiled. “What do you want to do after dinner?”

“I wanna get drunk so I can claim intoxication when I murder David.”

He laughed. “We can do that. I wanna take you out dancing too. Where can we dance?”

She thought for a second. “We can do both at Barry’s. They have a DJ tonight, and the bartender will sneak us drinks as long as nobody’s watching.”

He nodded. “OK, but I’m not drinking.”

She frowned. “You’re no fun.”

He pushed some vegetables around his plate. “I applied for the police academy this fall.”

Journey nudged him with her shoulder. “You’re going to be a cop?”

He leaned on his elbow. “Yep. That’s why I’m getting my associate’s degree in criminal justice.”

“Good for you.” She smiled at him. “And good for me. I expect special treatment.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I can’t wait to lock your ass up one day.”

She grinned at him over the top of her water glass. “You’re just fantasizing about putting me in handcuffs.”

He pressed his eyes closed and smiled. “Yes.”

Sexual tension was never lacking between Journey and Marcus, though neither of them would ever act on it. Journey had enough complications in her friendship with David to want to add in any with Marcus. It was nice to have one uncomplicated relationship with a boy in her life. Besides, the last thing she wanted was to be another notch in the bedpost of the heartthrob of Emerson.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Marcus asked, interrupting her thoughts.

She blinked and looked at him. “That you’re a man whore.”

His face turned serious. “I prefer to think of myself as a relationship connoisseur.”

Her eyebrow rose. "Can you spell connoisseur?"

He looked at the ceiling. "C-O-N-N... *oissuer*." He pronounced the last part with an eye roll.

She laughed and laid her head on his shoulder. "You're a dork."

He stabbed a piece of steak with his fork. "Finish your dinner. I'm in the mood to dance."

They arrived at Barry's Bar & Grill just after nine o'clock, and the April Fools' party was in full swing. Most of the patrons were in costume, wearing jester hats and masks, so Journey and Marcus didn't look too out of place.

Martin, her boss, was at the hostess station when they walked in. He was grinning from ear to ear. "Well, never did I think I would see Journey Durant in a dress. Aren't you a little overdressed for the night shift?"

Journey pointed at him. "I'm a paying customer tonight, Martin." She looked around. "Is Barry here?"

Martin shook his head. "He says it's too loud for him."

Journey smiled. Barry's absence meant others would be more willing to sneak her alcohol. "Thanks, Martin."

"What are you so dressed up for?" he asked.

She wrinkled up her nose. "I was supposed to be at prom tonight."

He looked at his watch. "So, why are you here?"

"I was stood up," she answered.

His eyes flashed to Marcus who held up his hands in defense. Marcus shook his head. "I didn't do it."

Martin snapped his fingers. "That reminds me. There was a guy who stopped by earlier who was asking for you."

Journey sighed and rolled her eyes toward Marcus. "Dave," she said.

Marcus laughed and reached for her hand. "I'm guessing he realized how bad he screwed up." He nodded to the dance floor. "Come on. Let's dance."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Do It Right

Steven washed his hands and looked in the mirror. After doing a mental calculation of how much money was left in his bank account, he decided to have one more drink before going home. He walked out of the bathroom and down the long, smokey hallway toward the sound of bad Irish music. What Irish music had to do with April Fools' Day, he wasn't sure.

At the mouth of the hallway, the gleam from a sparkly dress stopped him in his tracks.

It was her.

Steven's heart was pounding louder than the awful music. This was exactly what he wanted. He'd been planning what to say to her since he sobered up in jail a month before. He had been crushed when her boss said she wasn't working that night, and then suddenly, there she was. So why couldn't he get his feet to move?

Watching her, dancing with Marcus, Steven's chest began to tighten. He had never wanted anything more than he wanted to be with her again, to be the center of her universe again. He took a deep breath and a bold step forward.

His feet didn't stop till the he reached the dead center of the dance floor. A few feet away, Marcus was twirling her around. Several other partiers stopped and stared before Journey or

Marcus registered his presence. Marcus saw him first, and he stopped spinning. Journey straightened, panting, and she grabbed his arms for support. When she noticed Marcus staring, she followed his gaze till her eyes settled on Steven.

Her expression sobered. She stumbled back a step. "Steven."

Being that small town gossip was better than any dance song, the DJ turned the music down. Everyone was watching them. He felt the corners of his eyes begin to prickle with tears, but he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was the beer.

"Can I talk to you?" he finally said.

She looked around the crowded room and pulled her dress straight. "Here?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah. It doesn't matter."

She exchanged a confused look with Marcus. "Uh, OK."

Steven took a step toward her and turned his palms over. "I'm sorry. I screwed up." He took a deep breath. "I have regretted breaking up with you every single day since I did it. I don't care about your parents. I don't care about going back to jail. I don't even give a shit how stupid I look right now."

Her lips were parted, but she didn't—or couldn't—speak.

He closed the space between them. "I'm sorry, Journey. I can't keep pretending that I'm OK without you anymore." There was a collective melodic sigh from the older women who were scattered around the bar. Tears sparkled in Journey's eyes. That had to be a good sign. He cupped her face in his hands. "Please give me another chance."

She blinked, and a tear slid down her cheek. Finally, she smiled. "OK." She nodded her head and looped her arms around his neck.

He held her head against the the bend of his neck and breathed in the scent of her coconut shampoo. He almost started crying, but somehow he reigned in his emotions. Standing just behind Journey, even Marcus looked a little impressed. He gave a slight nod of approval. Steven closed his eyes and pressed his lips against the side of her head.

She looked up at him, the teal in her dress reflecting the green in her eyes. She chuckled and swiped at her tears. "I never expected you to be the apologetic type."

"There's a lot you don't know about me." He leaned down and kissed her lips. "But

we've got time for you to learn."

She wrapped her arms around his neck again and nodded against his neck. He pulled back and jerked his head toward the door. "Can we get out of here?"

She smiled. "Please."

* * *

David had checked all of Journey's normal hangouts. She wasn't at Marcus's, and his truck was gone. Her car was at Kara's, but no one was home. He went by Barry's, but they weren't there. He drove by her favorite coffee shop, the movie theater, the mall... She was nowhere to be found. On his drive back toward his house, he went by Barry's one last time. Marcus's truck was parked out front. David sighed with relief and pulled in the lot.

The bar was crowded with guests in costumes, and there was loud music playing from a DJ's booth at the back of the room. The guy at the hostess station held up his hand to stop David when he entered. "It's a ten dollar cover, man."

David sighed. "I'm just looking for Journey. Is she here?"

The guy thought for a second. "I saw her come in."

David pulled out his wallet and handed him a ten dollar bill before pushing his way back through the crowd. Past the bar was a dance floor. Marcus was on it with a brunette who was twice his age. David scanned the room, but didn't see Journey anywhere. He walked over and grabbed Marcus by the arm.

Marcus's eyes doubled in size. "Dave!" He looked him up and down. Confusion built in his gaze as he took in David's tuxedo. He pointed at him. "What's going on?"

"Where is she?"

"David, why are you wearing a tux?" Marcus demanded.

David sighed. "Because it was an April Fools' joke. I tried to call you."

Marcus nodded. "I know, and I shut my phone off."

"Why?"

Marcus crossed his arms over his chest. "Because you did a shitty thing to her!"

"It was a joke!" David insisted.

Marcus laughed with sarcasm. "I guess that backfired on you, didn't it?"

David scowled. “Where is she?”

Marcus shook his head. “She’s not here, man.”

“What do you mean? I thought she was with you?”

Marcus shrugged. “She was. Then we got here, and she ran into Steven.”

His words knocked the wind out of David. “What?”

“He stood up here, in front of God and everybody, and apologized to her. He begged her back, man.” Marcus laughed. “It shocked the hell outta me.”

David grabbed the lapel of Marcus’s jacket. “Where did they go?”

Marcus shook his head. “Beats me.” David started to turn toward the door, but Marcus stopped him. “What do you think you’re going to do?”

“I’m going to find her.”

Marcus laughed. “That ship has sailed, brother. You missed your chance.”

“No. I refuse to believe that.”

Marcus rolled his eyes. “Believe it or not, she’s with him now. I’ve never seen her that happy.”

For a second, David considered punching Marcus in the face even if it wasn’t his fault. He put his hands on his hips and hung his head. “I really fucked it up this time, didn’t I?”

Marcus put his hand on David’s shoulder. “I hate to say it, Dave, but you’ve screwed this one up from day one.” He shook his head. “Maybe it’s just not meant to happen. Let it go.”

David knew Marcus was right. Every single thing that had happened between them—or *not* happened between them—over the two years they had been friends, was all his fault. Even Steven had the balls to apologize to her and win her back. Why didn’t he?

* * *

After her longest make-out session to date, Steven had one hand on the steering wheel and the other wrapped firmly around Journey’s fingers as he drove through town. She rested her head back against the headrest and smiled as the spring breeze washed over her face.

“I would die to know what’s going through your head right now,” he said.

When she opened her eyes again, he was staring at her over his shoulder. His black hair was pushed behind his ears, and he was wearing her favorite shirt—a vintage style mechanic’s

work shirt that was rolled at the sleeves. He had gotten a new tattoo on his arm since the last time she had seen him. She smiled and squeezed his hand. "Can you still go to jail for being with me?"

He nodded. "It's worth it though."

"I'll be eighteen next month."

He smiled, and mischief danced in his dark eyes. "I know."

She shifted toward him in her seat. "What changed your mind?"

"You." He pulled her hand up to his lips and held it there for a second. "I tried to forget about you for a year. I couldn't do it."

His words made her body tingle. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feel of his breath against her skin.

"I promise you," he said, and she looked at him, "I won't mess this up again."

He brought their hands back to rest on the leather middle console and turned his attention back to the road.

She looked around at their surroundings as they rolled down the highway. Her eyes narrowed. She had assumed he still lived downtown where he had been before. "Where are we going?"

"Home."

She sat up. "My home?"

He twisted his hand around the steering wheel. "Yeah."

Her eyes widened. "Please tell me you're joking! You can't take me home. I thought we were going to—"

He shook his head and cut his eyes across the car. "I'm going to do this right." He flashed her a devilish smile. "At least for tonight."

She sighed and sat back hard in her seat. Five minutes later, true to his word, Steven Drake put the car in park in her parents' driveway. She looked up at the dark house. "You're completely blowing your reputation for being a bad boy."

He laughed and tugged on her hand till she turned toward him. "We've got time. Plenty of it." He smiled and nodded toward the glove compartment. "There's something in there I want

you to have.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Open it,” he said.

She pulled open the small door and a little light flickered on inside. On top of a small stack of folded papers was a key ring with a single key and rolled piece of notebook paper stuck through the ring. “What’s this?” she asked as she pulled it out.

He was drawing small circles with his finger on her bare shoulder. “It’s a key to my apartment.”

She smiled up at him. “You move fast.”

He shrugged. “I know what I want.”

She pulled the piece of paper out of the ring. “And this?” He didn’t answer as she unrolled it. She recognized her own handwriting. It was the note she had left on his car after his fight with Kurt a year and a half before. Her breath caught in her chest as she read it aloud. “*Sorry I couldn’t stay longer. Thanks for saving me tonight.*” She couldn’t hold back her tears as she looked up at him. “You saved this, all this time?”

He turned his hand up on the steering wheel. “Maybe it was you who saved me that night.”

She stretched across the car and put her arms around his neck. After a moment, he pulled back just enough to kiss her. It was deep and passionate, and she prayed he would change his mind and drive back to his place. He didn’t. When he released her, a light was on in the house.

He pointed out the windshield. “You’d better get in there before this gets ugly.”

“You don’t have to do this,” she begged.

He traced her lip with his thumb. “Yeah, I do. I’ll see you tomorrow, Journey.”

“Promise?”

He smiled. “I’ll come pick you up and take you out for breakfast before I have to go into work.”

She sighed and kissed him once more before she got out of the car. She walked around till she was in front of his headlights and could see his shadowed face inside the car. She saw him smile. Then he put the car in reverse and drove away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hooah!

David went home from the bar, but he didn't sleep at all that night. Thoughts of Journey and Steven together assaulted his brain until daybreak. He didn't know it was possible to feel so absolutely miserable. When the smell of coffee from the kitchen flooded his room, he kicked off his covers and got dressed for the day. He trudged upstairs and found his mother cooking at the stove.

She looked at him and then at the clock. "I didn't realize you were home. How was the prom?"

He pulled a cup out of the cabinet and filled it with black coffee. "We didn't go."

His tiny, white-haired mother put her hand on her hip. "What do you mean, you didn't go?"

He sighed and slumped down at the table. "I mean, you have the most idiotic son who has ever walked the planet."

She leaned against the oven. "What did you do?"

"Remember how Journey sort of stood me up last year?" he asked.

She nodded.

“Well, her prom fell on April Fools’ Day.”

She gasped and dropped her face into her hand. “You didn’t.”

He sipped his coffee. “I called and told her I was with my ex-girlfriend and forgot to pick up my tux in time before the store closed.”

His mother winced. “Oh, David.”

He held up his coffee cup. “I thought she would show up at the restaurant, see me, and we would all have a good laugh before we went to the dance and had the most memorable night of our lives. Instead, she went to a party with Marcus where she ran into her ex.”

“Oh, no.”

He nodded and closed his eyes. “Oh, yes. They had a wonderful little reunion before leaving the bar together to go back to his place. I showed up about twenty minutes too late.”

She walked over and put her arms around him. “I’m so sorry, son.”

He shook his head. “This one is all my fault.”

She looked down at him and grimaced. “Well...” She nodded, sadly, in agreement.

He let out a deep sigh. “It’s over, Mom.”

“What’s over?” his dad asked, walking into the kitchen.

His mom leaned against the chair. “His relationship with Journey.”

His dad looked up as he filled a coffee mug. “Oh really?”

David didn’t answer.

Dennis Britton carried his coffee to the table and pulled out a chair. “Well, maybe now you’ll have some time to give your future some serious consideration.”

David groaned. “Not today, Dad.”

“Dennis,” his mother scolded.

His dad opened his newspaper. “I told you, you had a year to decide, David. That year—and my patience—is almost up.”

“I know.” David pushed his chair back with more force than he intended when he stood up. “I appreciate the pep talk.”

His mom slapped his dad on the back of the head as David walked out of the kitchen.

Unable to stand his house any longer, David got dressed and decided to go into work

early. He drove through Emerson toward the hardware store and took Main Street through the middle of downtown. On the last block of the main strip, Steven's Chevelle was parked in front of Lottie's Diner. He was sitting on the hood of the car with Journey standing between his legs. She was smiling from ear to ear as she draped her arms around his shoulders and leaned in to kiss him. All of the fears that had kept him up all night were confirmed as they stood in front of the breakfast joint plastered to each other.

He crumpled over his steering wheel.

A second later, a car blasted its horn behind him. The light was green. He put the truck in gear and drove through the intersection. As he blinked back tears, he drove right past his work.

He turned left on Washington and then right on Church. He flipped on his blinker and pulled into a parking lot that was just at the edge of the city limits. Before he could change his mind, he put the truck in park and climbed out of the cab.

This was the new start he needed.

This was his ticket out of Emerson.

This would get Journey Durant out of his head.

David sucked in a deep breath and walked into the Army Recruiting Office.

CHAPTER TWENTY

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