

JUDY CORRY



Kissing
THE BOY
NEXT DOOR



SWEET WATER HIGH

KISSING THE BOY NEXT DOOR

A SWEET WATER HIGH ROMANCE

CONTENTS

[Also By Judy Corry](#)

[Join Judy's Reader's Club](#)

[SWEET WATER HIGH SERIES](#)

[WELCOME TO THE TOWN OF SWEET WATER, NC.](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sneak Peek of the next book in this series.](#)

[SWEET WATER HIGH SERIES](#)

[Read more from Judy Corry](#)

[Coming Soon](#)

Also By Judy Corry
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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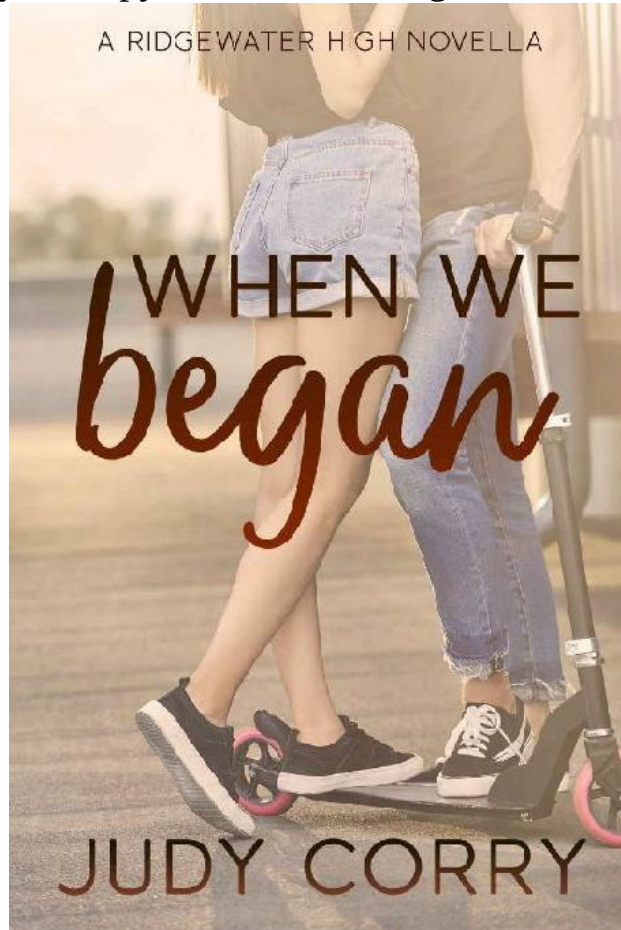
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*For my husband Jared.
I'm so glad we're on this journey together.*

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*What's the first rule when staying at your best friend's house for the week?
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WELCOME TO THE TOWN OF SWEET WATER,
NC.

1 TOWN. 1 SCHOOL. 12 SWEET ROMANCES.

CHAPTER ONE

"*Y*ou sure you don't want to join the cross country running team with me?" I begged my best friend, Jenna, after school on Wednesday as she walked me toward the parking lot. She was still in her cute jeans and a T-shirt while I was in a pink tank top, gray running shorts, and new running shoes with my blonde hair in a high ponytail.

"You know me and running haven't been friends since elementary," Jenna said. "So I must respectfully decline and cheer you on from the sidelines instead."

I gave her my best pout. I hated to run as much as she did. But unlike me, she had taken the mandatory P.E. credits each year. I, on the other hand, had just found out yesterday that because of an oversight on my transcript, I was missing a quarter credit of P.E. and I'd need to fix it ASAP if I wanted to graduate at the end of the year.

But since my schedule was already full of classes I either couldn't switch out of or didn't want to trade, I was forced to join a sport. And sadly for me, cross country running was the only sport that accepted new runners at any time of the season.

When we rounded a corner, a group of runners came into sight, all of them looking way too happy as they warmed up for today's practice. I didn't know how people could be happy when they knew running miles on end was in their near future.

"This is where we go our separate ways." Jenna turned to me, the sunlight hitting her brown hair just right to make it look reddish.

"You sure you don't want to join the team?" I widened my green eyes with my pleading. "They don't cut anyone, so I'm sure we could just walk and chat the whole time."

She shook her head. "Sorry. You know I only run when I'm playing

softball." She glanced over my new teammates, her eyes pausing on someone before she looked back at me with a half-smile. "But your buddy Wes is over there." She pointed to a tall guy with brown hair, wearing a green T-shirt and black shorts. "Who better to show you the ropes than your super hot, next-door neighbor?"

I groaned. I'd forgotten he was on the boys' cross country team. "Maybe I should just plan to do a winter sport instead."

"Or maybe your families could forget about the vendetta you've had against each other since middle school and learn to get along."

Wouldn't that be something?

Wes and I had been best friends throughout elementary, but then in seventh grade, the feud happened. When my dad decided he was no longer going to use Wes's dad's company as a supplier for a certain airplane part, things went downhill, and our families had never gotten over it since.

At that time, I'd thought it was stupid. I had assumed Wes and I could still be friends, but apparently, he had sided with his parents, because the next thing I knew, he was hanging out with the athletes and I was on my own.

And so, even though we were still next-door neighbors and went to the same school, we never hung out again. We weren't exactly enemies. But we weren't friends, either. And he wasn't above hurling an insult or two my way if the occasion arose.

I drew in a deep breath as I watched Wes stretch his long legs. While I didn't like how his personality had changed through the years, I couldn't deny that he'd turned out okay to look at. He had great hair, amazing blue eyes, and the kind of jaw that girls drooled over. And he was never without a girlfriend because of it. He was dating Olivia Matthews, who was pretty much the worst. But since Wes and I had obviously turned out to be two very different people, it made sense they'd gotten together.

Jenna's phone dinged, and after briefly checking the screen, she frowned and said, "My mom needs me to pick up my brother." She slipped her phone into her back pocket and gave me a warm smile. "Call me when you're done."

My shoulders slumped. She was really going to leave me all alone with these running fanatics.

"If you never see me again, it's probably because I died somewhere along the road, all alone because my best friend abandoned me," I called after her.

Jenna laughed. "You're so dramatic sometimes, Lauren."

I shrugged. "Yeah, well. Most people know if they see me running, it's

because there's a fire or a murderer chasing after me."

"You'll do fine. " She shot me one last smile before stepping off the curb.

After trudging over to my new teammates and finding a place on the grass, I tried to copy what I saw everyone else doing to get warmed up. I did a few jumping jacks. Jogged in place a little, followed by a few hamstring stretches.

Someone stepped up beside me as I was stretching my calf muscles. When I stood up straighter, I came face to face with Wes. And as expected, he didn't look happy to see me.

"What are you doing here?" Wes asked, sounding like I was trespassing onto his turf. Like me being at cross country practice was somehow breaking the guidelines of our unwritten agreement to avoid each other.

I cleared my throat and gave Wes the most confident look I could muster. "I just joined the team."

If I showed any sign of weakness, he would pounce on it.

He raised a dark eyebrow. "You joined the cross country team? You do know that we actually run for our sport, not just to warm up for something else, right?"

I gritted my teeth. "I know what cross country is."

"And how long do you plan to be on the team?"

"For the rest of the season." I needed the credit, and I would not let our family feud get in the way of me graduating.

A frustrated look crossed his face, but he sighed and asked, "Does Coach Slater know your plans?"

My gaze quickly darted to the middle-aged guy in front of the group. I hadn't exactly talked to the coach yet, but my advisor had told me she'd speak to him and make sure he knew my situation.

When I didn't say anything, Wes said, "Let's introduce you then." And when I didn't follow behind him, he grabbed my arm and pulled me in the direction of the coach.

"Hey, Coach. I got your new recruit here," Wes said once we were in front of the man with blond hair and green eyes who looked like he could run a marathon at the drop of a hat.

Coach Slater's gaze met mine and he looked momentarily surprised before he held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Coach Slater. You must be Lauren Carmichael."

"That's me." I shook his hand.

"Have you done much running before?" He seemed to give me a quick look over, as if he could tell if someone was a runner just by looking at them.

"I'm not exactly a runner, no," I said. "But I'm a fast learner."

A fast learner? What a stupid thing to say.

Wes chuckled at my side. "I don't think your straight A's will help your stumpy legs move any faster than a B average would."

Stumpy legs?

I looked down at my legs. Sure I was only five-foot five and I might be more torso than legs, but my legs were not what I'd call stumpy!

The jerk!

I glared at Wes.

Coach cleared his throat awkwardly, his eyes sympathetic. "I think I know what you mean, Lauren. And since your friend Wes seems so keen on giving you pointers, I'm sure he'd be happy to answer any questions you may have."

"Oh, we're not friends," Wes and I said at the same time.

Coach Slater gave us a weird look but said, "Regardless of what you are, Wes is my top runner so he's a good guy to get pointers from."

"Okay," I said. I never should have said the whole "fast learner" line. Was there that much to learn when it came to running?

Weren't you just supposed to put one foot in front of the other and do it as fast as you could?

The coach gave the group some instructions on where we were going to be running today. When he said it was the "gray water tower loop," most people cheered. Apparently, it was one of the routes the team preferred.

"So today was a good day to start?" I asked Wes since he was still standing near me. I figured I might as well tempt fate and talk to him again. Maybe he'd even know how to respond without throwing in an insult this time.

He shrugged. "It's the shortest route. Only four miles."

My jaw dropped. "*Only* four miles?" That was four times longer than I'd ever run in my life. And I hadn't run a mile since freshman year.

He shot me a half-smile. "Yesterday we ran eight."

I let that sentence hit me like a diesel truck. Eight miles?

"How long are your races typically?" My voice came out higher than normal.

"Our course here is about three and a half miles. Most of the other schools

we compete against have similar lengths."

"So why have the eight-mile days?" Seriously, who in their right mind would run for that long if they didn't really have to?

"To build up your endurance and help you get in optimal shape." He looked at me like I was stupid. "Coach Slater and Coach Marowsky have coached the girls' team to take state for the past seven years and the boys' team to take state the past five. They know what they're doing."

I held up my hands. "Sorry for asking."

"Why exactly are you here if you don't want to run?"

I shrugged. "I need this so I can graduate."

"I'm guessing that when you broke your leg sophomore year, they didn't give you a pass on P.E."

"Yup." Honestly, I was surprised that he even remembered that I'd broken my leg. "But I have a plan."

I have a plan?

Why did I even say that?

Probably because I wasn't used to talking to Wes and so only stupid sentences were coming out.

He narrowed his blue eyes. "What's your plan for?"

I looked ahead. "Like I'm going to tell you."

He laughed, showing the dimple in his left cheek that I remembered poking several times with my finger back when we were friends. "Well, good luck with your plan. I'll see you at the end of the trail."

I must not have seen or heard the coach give the signal, but a second later, Wes was pulling off his shirt, revealing his tanned and toned torso.

I blinked my eyes, momentarily caught off guard by the sight. I'd seen him surfing in the ocean behind our houses plenty of times, but that had been from a distance since we'd always been careful never to go to the beach at the same time. I'd never been close enough to see how muscular his arms were, or how defined his six-pack was.

No wonder Olivia had dug her claws into Wes.

I tore my gaze away from him before he could notice my stare and drew in a deep breath to bring me back to the task ahead.

The coach blew his whistle, and an instant later, the stomping of feet greeted my ears as everyone started running. Wes tossed his shirt in the back of the coach's truck, and a few seconds later, he was at the front of the pack.

Before I could get completely left in the dust, I drew in another deep

breath and ran after the group.

I was able to keep up with the slowest runners on the team for about five minutes, but then my body decided it was done and I fell farther and farther behind. After another minute of jogging so slowly a baby could probably crawl faster than me, I gave up and started walking.

I wiped my sweaty face with the bottom half of my pink tank top. Even though it was the beginning of October, I was dying in the North Carolina humidity. I put my hands on my hips and tried to catch my breath as I watched my teammates disappear in the distance. I hadn't seen Wes since the first fifty yards into our run.

I looked at my smartwatch. It said I'd only run half of a mile. I did the math in my head. Three and a half miles more to go. This wasn't looking good. If I didn't find shortcuts along the way, I wouldn't make it home until dark.

After catching my breath, I tried to pick up the pace again. I'd looked up a couple of things last night to prepare for today's run and had read somewhere that running slow was the best way to get good at running long distances, so I gave it another shot.

Three minutes later, my lungs threatened to explode on me.

How did people do this for fun? Wasn't running considered a punishment in all the other sports?

I considered just turning around and heading back toward the school when I saw someone in black shorts running toward me.

Oh, no! Wes was already on his way back.

If he saw that I'd only gone a mile, I'd never hear the end of it. So I did the only thing I could think to do and ran onto someone's front lawn to hide behind their big live oak tree.

When I peeked around the trunk to watch Wes as he ran by, I had to quickly pull my head back because he was just about to pass my hiding spot.

I leaned my forehead against the trunk and blinked my eyes shut, hoping he hadn't seen me. But a second later, his voice cut into the air. "Are we going back to our elementary days of playing hide-and-seek behind the tree again, Lauren?"

I scrunched up my face and lightly punched the tree. So much for not looking like a bad runner with stumpy legs.

"Just head back to the school," he called over his shoulder on his way

past. "You can try again tomorrow."

So after Greg Thane, another runner from the boys' team, ran past, I left my hiding spot behind the tree and headed back toward the school.

CHAPTER TWO

I made it back, feeling like a hot mess. I hadn't sweated so much in my life. And my lungs? I was starting to worry they might decide to never inflate again after what I'd just done to them.

A group of my new teammates was surrounding the back of Coach Slater's truck, which had a big water cooler and some plastic cups. I filled one up and drank. The ice-cold water felt so good on my throat, and after drinking two full cups, I felt slightly better.

"How was the run?" a deep voice asked. I turned to see Coach Slater had come up beside me.

"It was..." I debated on pretending that running was my new favorite thing. But since my advisor had assured me that Coach Slater wouldn't cut me as long as I was putting forth effort and not causing trouble, I decided to go with the truth. "Kind of horrible, actually."

He made a funny face, like he didn't know how to take what I'd just said. "It gets easier. Just keep coming back, and soon, running four miles in an afternoon will be a breeze."

I doubted it, but I smiled and nodded like I agreed with him.

"Did Wes tell you about our race tomorrow?" Coach glanced at me as he filled a cup for a freshman boy who just got back to the truck.

"Um, no." Was he expecting me to run in a race after just one practice? And why did he assume Wes and I were buddies? Had he totally missed the stumpy-legs comment?

"It's a home meet, so we'll be running our course—which is a great course for you to start on." He handed the cup to the freshman. "I need to give my varsity girls a rundown of tomorrow's competition, but I can have Wes take you to get your uniform in just a minute."

I was still wondering how he expected me to compete in an actual race. I'd seriously just cut off more than half of our run today. Did he really expect me to race against other schools when I could barely run a mile?

And then I realized something. I had gotten back before a lot of the other runners did, thanks to my ultra-short shortcut. Which made it look like I was a natural athlete.

"I really don't know if I'm ready for a race yet," I said.

Coach put a hand on my shoulder. "You did better today than most of the new runners on my team did, and they've been running every day for a month. I think you may have running in your genetics."

Someone laughed behind me. Wes.

He must have overheard what Coach was saying, because he knew exactly what my run today had looked like, even if no one else had noticed. And if I knew Wes like I thought I did, there was no way he was going to let me get away with it.

So when Wes came over to refill his cup, I prepared myself for the dig.

But it didn't come. Instead, he didn't say anything, just got his water and drank it down. When he finished, he turned to the coach. "So you want me to take Lauren to get her uniform for tomorrow?"

"Yes. That would be great." Coach went to the cab of his truck and came back a moment later with a single key on an orange keychain. "Just bring this back to me when you're done."

Wes took the key from coach, swinging it around his fingers. Then he looked at me and said, "Let's go."

"Um, can you at least put a shirt on first?" I asked. Seriously, he'd probably been back from the trail for fifteen minutes already. Was he just waiting to show off his rock-hard abs to Olivia when she inevitably came to find him after cheer practice?

He chuckled and grabbed his shirt out of the back of Coach's truck. "Don't pretend like you didn't just check me out. I saw you watching me behind the tree."

Yep, he'd gotten both hot and cocky since we'd been friends.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. "I wasn't behind the tree so I could check you out. I was hiding so you wouldn't see how slow I was."

"Sure." He said it like he didn't believe me, and I resisted the urge to stomp my foot until he admitted that I hadn't been checking him out.

But instead, I just patiently waited for him to pull his shirt over his head

and made a point to look away from his perfectly sculpted upper body so he wouldn't have a reason to accuse me of checking him out again.

Once he was back to being fully clothed, he asked, "Is that better?"

"Much better," I said then followed him back to the school.

When we made it to Coach's office near the main gym, Wes broke the awkward silence that had fallen over us. "The extra uniforms are just in here." He turned the key in the lock and then pushed open the door.

Inside there was a desk with various photos of Mr. Slater and his family. There were other photos on the wall of the cross country teams from previous years, and in the corner was a big cardboard box with a couple of uniforms hanging over the side.

"Just grab whatever you think will fit," Wes said, stepping back to let me into the small office.

When I walked past him, I expected to smell sweat, since we'd just run four miles—well, since *he'd* just run four miles—but I caught a whiff of a clean-smelling deodorant instead. He had always smelled good. I remembered when we were kids playing together how I'd often catch a whiff of fabric softener on his shirt and would just breathe it in for a moment.

Even though I'd never admit it to him, I missed those days. A small twist of pain poked at my heart as I thought about how close we used to be. But as I bent over the box to look for a uniform that would fit, I pushed those thoughts away and reminded myself of all the mean things he'd said to me since then. Case in point, the stumpy-legs comment from earlier.

I dug through the few remaining uniforms in the box and eventually came out with green shorts and a gray medium-sized tank with the words S.W.E.H. screen-printed across the chest—short for Sweet Water East High.

"You got them?" Wes asked when I stood.

I held them up so he could see. "Yup."

"You should probably try them on in the girl's locker room just to make sure they're the right size. I'll wait for you in here."

"Okay." I slipped past him and walked across the gym to the girl's locker room. I changed quickly and looked at my reflection in the mirror. I almost laughed when I saw myself. The clothes fit, so that wasn't funny. Just the thought that I was actually going to pretend like I was a runner and run in actual races was the funny part. This was so not me.

Instead of changing back into my gym clothes, I just left them in the locker so they'd be there for the next practice we had, stuffed my school

clothes into my backpack, and walked back to Coach's office.

Wes was sitting on the edge of the desk. He startled when he saw me, and then his gaze seemed to travel from my shoes up to my face.

"So will this work?" I asked, letting him know that I'd caught him checking me out. If he was going to call me out for looking at him for more than a couple of seconds, I'd do the same to him.

His cheeks turned slightly pink and he averted his gaze. "Yeah, it looks like it'll do."

"You sure these shorts don't show off too much of my stumpy legs?" I raised my eyebrows, tempting him to make another dig at me.

He slid off the desk as he took in the length of my legs once again. "Maybe I was remembering your stumpy legs from elementary. They're a little longer now, I guess."

I narrowed my eyes as he walked out of the office. He'd passed up an opportunity to say something rude. Why?

It was probably because we were all alone now and no one was around to laugh at his jab. That was probably it.

He cleared his throat when he looked back at me. "So, are you trying out for the solo in choir tomorrow?"

Was he really trying to make small talk with me now? We'd avoided each other so much over the past five years that him trying to make conversation was just strange. But since it would be rude to ignore his question, and I actually had manners, I said, "Yeah, I was thinking about it."

The solo was for the song *You Raise Me Up*, and if he remembered anything about me growing up, he'd remember my obsession with all things Josh Groban.

He nodded as he started up the steps. "I figured you couldn't pass that solo up even after what happened last time."

My face turned crimson at the reminder of my horrible audition for last year's spring concert where I'd been so nervous that I'd completely forgotten the words to the song and started reciting the pledge of allegiance instead.

Yeah, I was *that* girl.

But I'd hoped that somehow my classmates would have forgotten it by now.

"Are you auditioning as well?" I gripped the rail as I stepped behind him up the stairs, my legs already showing signs of how sore they were going to be after today's run.

"Well, yeah." He said like it should have been obvious. "I mean, it's the least I can do for the general public at our choir concert."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes when he glanced back with a cocky smirk. Wes was so full of himself sometimes. Sure, he was the fastest one on the cross country team. He had a 4.0 grade average. He was popular and had girls drooling over him. Why wouldn't he also try to show off his voice?

When I didn't say anything, he said, "Plus, it would only make sense if one of us got the solo after our video received nine hundred views as of last night."

"Nine hundred views?" I furrowed my brow. One of our favorite things to do back in the day was make music videos and upload them to YouTube with the hopes of becoming famous one day. I hadn't checked our channel in years. And while nine hundred views weren't anything to brag about, it was more than we'd had the last time I'd looked.

"Have you not been checking our stats?" he asked.

"No."

Why would I want to put myself through that kind of torture? Watching my ex-best friend and I sing songs and act like everything was hunky-dory between us wasn't something I'd been able to do after the feud. And even after things had calmed down, I'd hated him too much to want to see his face any more than I absolutely had to.

He shrugged. "Well, I was practicing the solo last night and randomly remembered that we'd done a video with that song, so I figured I'd check in and see how famous we'd become all these years later."

I furrowed my brow, not sure I wanted him watching old videos with me in them. He'd probably just find more things to make fun of me for. But before I could tell him to stop watching our videos, we made it to the top of the stairs and found his girlfriend waiting for him.

"Hey Wes." Olivia sidled up to him and planted a kiss on his cheek. She was a tall leggy blonde with a reputation for stealing other girl's boyfriends while she had a boyfriend of her own.

But Wes didn't seem to mind her reputation because she had the number one quality most high school guys looked for in a girl. She was hot, and she wasn't afraid to go after what she wanted with her flirtatious personality.

And it worked well for her. Even the cool guys, like my cousin Logan, couldn't resist the force that was Olivia Matthews.

Luckily though, my cousin came to his senses before he moved back to

New York last year. Wes, on the other hand, had been under Olivia's spell for the past six months, and from the way he smiled at her when she greeted him, it didn't look like he was going to see through the fake aura she presented him with anytime soon.

"We'll see you tomorrow in choir," Wes said, surprising me that he had the decency to dismiss me before he got too distracted by his girlfriend.

"Yup. Thanks for helping me get my uniform." And before they could start making out in front of me, I made a quick exit and headed for my car.

CHAPTER THREE

I drove my Audi the twenty-minute drive home from school. Sweet Water wasn't a very big town, but the farther away from downtown, the more spaced out the houses were. My family had lived in our shingle-style beach house ever since before I was born. Even the huge family feud hadn't been able to convince my parents to buy a home in a different part of town, since they loved the beach so much.

Apparently, Wes's family loved the beach just as much as we did, since they hadn't moved away, either.

Or maybe they were all just really stubborn and didn't want to be the first ones to fold.

So while we lived next door to each other, we never crossed the invisible barrier between our properties. Not even at the beach behind our sprawling homes. If the Schultzs were at the beach one day, we stayed inside. If we were at the beach, the Schultzs never set foot through their back gate.

Luckily, we both had swimming pools in our backyards, so we could still escape the North Carolina heat on the days the unwritten rules in our family feud didn't allow us to go to the ocean.

I parked my car in its garage on the side of the house closest to the Schultz's and went inside. Our cook Angelica was already in the kitchen, working on tonight's meal.

"It smells good in here." I stepped up to the granite counter and peeked into the stainless-steel bowl Angelica was using to mix ingredients in. I could make out shredded chicken, grapes, celery, and apples. "Chicken salad?"

She looked up at me with a smile. "Your mom requested my famous chicken salad on croissants for dinner tonight."

"Sounds delicious." My stomach growled, hungrier than normal because of all the calories I'd burned on my run. "Do you know when we'll be having

dinner?"

"Your parents said they'll be home by five-thirty."

I looked at the big clock on the wall. I still had an hour. "Maybe I'll go surfing for a bit."

Swimming in the saltwater sounded amazing after this afternoon's sweat session.

Angelica glanced out one of the big windows that overlooked the ocean. "The water looks perfect right now. Catch a wave for me while you're down there."

I smiled. "I will."

I slipped out of my flip-flops when I got to the beach and walked into the ocean with my surfboard. The waves were perfect right now. As I paddled away from the shore a bit, I couldn't help but wish that the school would let me count surfing for my P.E. credits. I'd have way more than enough to graduate if they did.

As I waited for a good wave to roll in, my mind wandered back to cross country practice. I still didn't know what to think about today. It was so weird that after all these years of staying away from Wes, barely ever saying a word to each other, we were suddenly on the same team. And after a little teasing, he had actually been pretty decent when he'd helped me.

Maybe he was only asking me about the audition in choir tomorrow so he could scope out his competition?

Or maybe he had felt as uncomfortable as I did, and he just handled it better by being able to start a friendly conversation. I always had been the more socially awkward one between us.

I only rode about four waves before I decided to head back in the house. My parents made family dinners a priority, and I needed to shower before sitting down at the table. I'd have to come back to the ocean another day.

When I made it back to the shore, I was startled to find that I wasn't alone on the beach. Standing just fifteen feet away, with his surfboard under his arm, was Wes.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, caught off guard that he was even at the beach with me. How long had he been here, anyway? Had he been watching me?

He shrugged. "I figured I'd cool off a bit. Same as you."

"But you're not supposed to be on the beach when I'm out here."

He squinted in the sunlight. "Why?"

"Because it's against the rules?"

"What rules?"

"What do you mean 'what rules'?" Seriously, he was the one who broke up our friendship in the first place because of the rules. Who was he trying to fool?

But instead of admitting that he was playing dumb with me, he glanced around the shoreline. "I don't see any sign posted out here with rules stating when I'm allowed to be on the beach behind *my* house."

I sighed. "Stop playing dumb, Wes. You know I'm talking about the rules of our family feud."

He chuckled, like I was the one who was being delusional. "I stopped caring about those rules a long time ago, Lauren."

What? This was news to me. Pretty sure he'd been following the rules of the feud until now.

I shook my head. "Then why have you never been on the beach at the same time as me until today?"

He shrugged. "I guess I didn't have a reason to be."

"And now you have a reason?"

"I wanted to come out and surf." When he shrugged, I tried not to notice how the sun glistened on his tanned shoulders. Dang, he had not looked like that back in seventh grade.

Was he trying to win the world record of how many times he could stand in front of me without a shirt on in one day? Because this was the third time already.

"You sure you're not spying on me or something?"

He kicked off his flip-flops and chuckled. "I have a girlfriend, Lauren. Why would I need to spy on you?"

From the look on his face when he said it, he might as well have told me that I looked like a drowned cat next to his supermodel girlfriend.

"I wasn't accusing you of spying on me because you had a secret crush on me or anything. I was just saying it for, like, family-feud type stuff."

Why would he go there, anyway? Did he think I liked him or something?

But instead of addressing any of that, he ran a hand through his dark hair and said, "I thought about turning around when I saw you, but since you invaded my cross country practice today, I figured it was okay to come down here."

"But what if your parents see us?" I asked, letting my gaze flick up to his house and then mine to inspect the windows and make sure no one was watching us.

Thankfully, the windows looked empty. But when I turned my attention back to Wes, his lips were lifted in a smirk. He thought my paranoia was funny.

"My parents won't be home for a while so it's fine," he said.

I put my hands on my hips. "I thought you said you didn't care about the feud."

"I don't care. But since I know *your* family still cares about it, I try to respect your boundaries."

He said it like it was *my* family's fault that we were still in this feud.

Stupid, self-absorbed Wes.

"Stop trying to make your family look better than mine," I snapped. "We all know this started because your parents were mad that my dad decided to stop using your dad's company as one of his suppliers."

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Is that really why you think this feud started?"

"Well, yeah..." But now that he was looking at me like I was deranged, I wasn't so sure anymore. When he didn't say anything, I asked, "Isn't it?"

"That's not what my mom told me."

I stuck my surfboard in the sand since my arm was getting tired. "And what did your mom tell you then?" From what my mom had said in the past, Mrs. Schultz was a pathological liar, so this could be pretty interesting.

"She told me your mom threatened to put a restraining order on my family if we tried to talk to you again."

"That's ridiculous." I snorted. "You actually believed that?"

He held up the arm that wasn't holding his board. "I'm just saying what I was told...not that I believe it."

If he didn't believe it, then why did he even say it?

Despite the fact that I knew my parents would be home anytime and that I should probably get off the beach before I was caught conversing with the enemy, I had to ask. "So do you have some other theory about why our moms hate each other now?"

He looked out at the water for a second before meeting my eyes with an intense gaze. "I think there's something else going on that they aren't willing to tell anyone about. They're just blaming their bad feelings on some business

thing."

"Do you have any proof?"

He shrugged. "I've overheard my mom say a couple of things that make it sound like this feud started from something that happened a much longer time ago. Something that my mom didn't know about until we were in middle school."

"Okay. So basically, you're still saying it's all my parents' fault and that your family's the innocent victim in this entire thing?" I blew out a long, frustrated breath. I should have known better than to try to talk about this in the first place.

"I'm not saying that. Just that *something* happened in the past that was hard for them to swallow." His eyes were sincere. I could have been imagining it, but in a way, it looked like he was pleading for me to believe that he hated the feud just as much as I did.

I had to look away before my mind started running away with memories of what it had been like to be friends with Wes. Remembering the good times was the last thing I needed when I was supposed to be hating him for throwing away our friendship.

I crossed my arms and put up a strong front. "So, what do you think happened?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. But I think someone should find out. We're graduating this year. It's stupid that we're still even in this thing five years later."

My heart tried to soften at his words, because once again he was making me feel things.

No wonder he was never without a girlfriend. If he was making me lose my resolve to hate him after one conversation on the beach, how in the world could a girl he was interested in stand up to those baby blue eyes of his and the smolder I imagined he knew very well how to use at will?

But I was not going to fall for it.

So I picked up my flip-flops from the beach and squared my jaw. "Well, good luck on finding reasons that fit with your agenda. But I have to get inside before my parents get home."

I was just about to walk past him when he grabbed my arm. When I looked at him, his eyes were intense.

"Don't you ever wish things were different? Do you miss being friends at all?"

My stomach went up to my throat.

Yes. Yes of course, I missed it. Missed him.

But that didn't matter. Too much had happened.

So I pulled my arm out of his grip. "I wish a lot of things were different, Wes. But this is how things are."

He shook his head and scoffed. "That's sad, Lauren. You give up too easily."

My skin prickled with annoyance. "I'm not the one who gave up on our friendship first. That was you. I guess I'm just better at actually moving on when I have to."

CHAPTER FOUR

*A*fter stomping away from Wes, I climbed up the steps to my house while silently cursing him.

How dare he come to the beach when I was out there and ruin my mood? The beach was supposed to be my sanctuary. The place where I could just be alone with my thoughts and unwind from a long day at school.

I wasn't supposed to have heated conversations with the annoying boy next door or have him talk about wishing things were different between us.

Was he only trying to mess with my brain some more so he could lull me into some false sense of safety before he tried to clobber me at the solo tryouts tomorrow?

We couldn't just go back in time and fix things. We couldn't get back all those years of fighting and pretend like they never happened. We were graduating at the end of the year, and then we would both go off to college and would only have to see each other if we both happened to be visiting our parents the same weekend.

That was how things were supposed to be. I'd been planning on it being that way since seventh grade—once I got over the fact that we weren't friends anymore.

I dropped my flip-flops on the mat by the back door, propped my surfboard against the house, and switched on the outdoor shower. I squeezed a dollop of shampoo into my palm and started scrubbing it into my scalp, hoping that I would be able to wash away the frustration I was feeling. My parents would be home any minute, and I couldn't have them find out I was mad because I'd broken the rules and talked to Wes—not just once but multiple times this afternoon.

I should have known better than to give him the time of day. It may have

gone okay after school, but apparently, we'd reached our limit of civility.

I rinsed my hair and grabbed a towel from the lounge chair nearby and toweled off. By the time I went inside, I felt marginally better. And when I got back downstairs after changing into some comfy black yoga pants, I was ready to face my parents with confidence that I wouldn't spill the beans about speaking with the enemy.

My mom was in the kitchen when I walked in. She'd taken off her heels and was now fixing herself a plate of food.

"Your dad is going to be a little late at the office tonight." She sucked some of the chicken salad off her fingers after plopping a spoonful on her croissant. "He said to go ahead and have dinner without him."

"Okay. I'm starving." I grabbed a plate from the cupboard and started loading it beside my mother.

I studied my mom as we filled our plates. She had long blonde hair like me but was a few inches taller. She'd grown up in Sweet Water, but on the other side of town, making her far from the typical wife of a millionaire. Her parents hadn't had much money and she had worked hard to get herself through college. And when my dad hired her as a personal assistant at his family's big company, Carmichael Industries, it was love at first sight—at least that's how the story goes.

But if you were to meet her outside of work or away from our big ocean-front property, you'd think she was still just a redneck girl from North Carolina. And from what I'd been told growing up, Wes's mom had been much the same. Our mothers had been friends long before they became neighbors. Best friends from childhood who grew up and married CEOs of big companies and dreamed of the day their children would fall in love and get married.

I snorted at the thought of Wes and me getting married one day. We were about the last people on earth to ever wind up together. Even when we were friends, it was never going to happen. We'd tried kissing one time back in sixth grade, just to see what all the hype was about, and after some awkward nose bumping and two seconds of our lips touching, we'd decided that all the teenagers just lied about kissing being fun. It was nothing special—not in our case, anyway.

"Something funny?" My mom looked up at me.

"Just thinking about cross country practice and how bad I was," I lied as I dug the spoon into the chicken mixture and plopped it onto a croissant. I

couldn't let my mom know I'd been briefly thinking about Wes. Even *thinking* about the Schultz family was forbidden.

"Since when did you join the cross country team?" She furrowed her brow as we carried our plates to the table in the formal dining room.

"Since today. Didn't I tell you about it yesterday?"

Mom frowned as she took her seat at the head of the table. "No. I think I'd remember something like that."

I shrugged and took a seat at the corner next to her. "Well, apparently, I didn't have enough P.E. credits, so now I have to participate in a sport if I want to graduate."

She gave me a look like she was just as surprised as I was.

"Anyway, I'm pretty much the worst on the team. But from what I hear, Coach Slater doesn't make cuts, so I'll still get the credit as long as I show up and try."

My mom, who had taken a sip of her water, suddenly sputtered and started coughing like her water had gone down the wrong tube.

"You okay?" I asked her.

She put one hand to her chest and set her glass back down on the table. "Oh, yes." She coughed a couple more times. "I just drank too fast."

I gave her a wary look before continuing with my story. "I have my first race tomorrow, so if you or dad want to watch me come in last place, it starts at three-thirty." I took a bite of my sandwich, the soft flaky crust of the croissant practically melting in my mouth.

Angelica was seriously the best cook. I didn't know what we'd do without her.

"Will Coach Slater be at the meet?" Mom rubbed the front of her neck—one of her nervous ticks. She was always rubbing the front of her neck when Grandma Carmichael came to visit.

"Um, yeah. Coaches usually show up for those kinds of things." I knew my mom was more of a yoga girl, but it seemed like common sense to me. "So, do you think you'll be able to make it tomorrow?"

Mom looked up from her sandwich as if she'd been lost in thought. "What?"

I shook my head. My mom was always a little brain dead on Thursday nights after a long work week. "Will you be able to come to my meet?"

She gave me a non-committal look as she cut her sandwich with her fork. "I'll try to get work off."

"Well, let's just hope your boss—" Who was my dad, "—lets you off early." I said it with a smirk

She nodded but didn't crack a smile, apparently not getting my joke. "Yes. Of course."

We ate quietly for a while. Then suddenly, she gasped. "Wait. Is the Schultz boy on the team? Because you know how your father and I feel about you talking to him."

Which was exactly why I couldn't talk to her about my afternoon.

"Don't worry." I sighed. "Wes is the last person I want to be around. And besides, he's the fastest on the team. I'm the slowest. We'll never be together during practice."

She pursed her lips and studied me for a moment with her narrowed blue eyes, as if debating on whether she could trust me.

I must have looked trustworthy enough because after a moment, she said, "Okay, just make sure you keep away from him. I don't want any more drama with his mother."

It's like she thought that if Wes and I so much as breathed the same air we'd somehow remember our old friendship and sneak around behind our parents' backs to play patty-cake together.

Yeah, right. That was about as likely to happen as a sumo wrestler becoming a prima ballerina.

But her bringing Mrs. Schultz up did remind me of what Wes had said on the beach about the reason for the feud. I didn't doubt the reason my mom had told me years ago, but it did seem odd that such a trivial thing could damage a friendship for so long.

I tore off a piece of my croissant and played with it. "How come you guys never decided to try and fix your friendship? You used to be best friends, right?"

Mom sighed heavily and leaned back in her chair, as if she was suddenly exhausted. "That was a long time ago, Lauren. People change. Friendships change."

"But why let a silly business transaction cause the divide for forever? Don't you miss her?"

She glanced out the window that looked over to the Shultz's property, her expression wistful like she was remembering the good times. But when she turned back to me, her jaw was set. "It's not something you can understand. Sometimes you need to distance yourself from people who aren't good for

you."

I nodded, pretending like her answer was satisfying. Even though it totally wasn't. I mean, I had lost my best friend at the same time, too. And while I knew our friendship would never be the same, it didn't mean that I didn't sometimes wish we could go back and fix things.

But instead of pushing the subject further, I decided to let it drop. I could tell my mom didn't want to discuss it.

CHAPTER FIVE

J

enna: *Good luck with your audition today.*

I glanced at the text from my friend as I anxiously waited for the choir director, Mrs. Beauchamp, to start the audition process. Last year she'd had us try out in front of the whole class. Was it too much to hope that she'd remember last year's pledge of allegiance fiasco and offer to let me audition alone with her in her office?

My gaze flicked to the clock on the wall. We only had about thirty minutes left in the period. We needed to get this show on the road.

I peeked around the room to see if anyone else looked as nervous as I felt. When I glanced at Olivia, she seemed right at ease, relaxed in her seat, with a confident smile as she faced the front of the classroom. But of course she would be relaxed—she had one of the solos in last year's spring concert.

A quick glance behind me showed that Wes also didn't look nervous as he quietly chatted with the other baritones and laughed at a joke.

How did the popular people have nerves of steel? It seemed like nothing could faze them.

I guess since they always got what they wanted, of course they wouldn't expect anything less. Me, I was just average at everything. Pretty much the only thing that set me apart from everyone else was the fact that my parents had gobs of money and were in a famous feud with our next-door neighbors. Aside from those two things, I was your average high school senior, just struggling to get through the day without embarrassing herself too much.

"Now it's the time you've been waiting for," Mrs. Beauchamp's voice interrupted my thoughts. "If you want to audition for the solo, please come and stand in front of the class."

My stomach twisted with nerves as several chairs screeched on the tile

floor and students went to stand behind Mrs. Beauchamp. But I got up and joined the group, standing at the end of the line.

"It's so great that you're putting yourself out there again," Olivia whispered from beside me in her most fake voice. "You're so brave."

My blood boiled at her condescending tone, but I wasn't about to stoop to her level. I forced my sarcastic reply back down my throat and simply thanked her with a smile as fake as hers plastered to my face.

Mrs. Beauchamp grabbed her yellow notepad from her stand and took a chair on the front row. "Let's just start here on the right," she said and pointed to the end of the line opposite me, "and then we'll finish with Lauren, why don't we?"

I nodded, and nervous energy crackled in my fingertips. I needed to remember the words this time. If not, I'd have to relinquish my title of Josh Groban's number one fan to someone else.

Mrs. Beauchamp indicated at the accompanist to do a short intro into the solo section, and soon, the girl at the other end of the line started singing. And since I needed something to keep myself distracted from the fact that I'd be singing my heart out in front of my peers, I focused on critiquing her audition. She actually sounded pretty good. A little flat on the high note, but by the time she finished with the last long note, I decided it was a solid audition.

The next few auditions went much the same. Most everyone did a really great job, and before long I was severely doubting my chances of winning this thing.

"It's your turn, Mr. Schultz." Mrs. Beauchamp gestured at Wes to step forward. He was standing on the other side of Olivia and he had to let go of her hand for his audition.

And though I totally didn't like either of them, I couldn't deny that the way he was always reaching for her hand whenever they stood together was kind of sweet. I'd always envied couples like that, having never had an actual boyfriend myself. It just seemed like it would be nice to have someone to want to be near me in that way.

The pianist played the intro. Wes stood up straighter, pulling his broad shoulders back before he sang the first note. His voice came out confident and clear. As he sang, I couldn't help but notice how much his voice had changed since we'd done our last music video together. It was deeper and richer, and he had amazing control. And when he hit the high note with his

smooth, baritone voice, chills raced across my arms.

When Wes finished singing, I watched Mrs. Beauchamp for her reaction. She had a huge smile on her face, and I knew he was the one to beat.

"Bravo, Mr. Schultz." The teacher clapped her hands quickly before jotting down a few notes.

"I guess I'm next," Olivia said. She planted a quick kiss on Wes's cheek, making me throw up in my mouth a little. Then she took the spot he'd just been standing in.

And as the familiar melody started playing on the piano again, I realized that the next time it was played, I'd be singing. I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants as Olivia belted out the solo. And as much as I didn't like her, I couldn't deny that she was really good as her voice effortlessly glided along the notes.

Who was I kidding? Did I seriously think I could sing in front of people again?

After what happened last time?

I considered slipping behind the piano with Mrs. Stockholm and hiding, with the hopes that no one would remember I'd been up there for the past ten minutes. But before I could execute my escape plan, Olivia finished her solo and stepped back beside me with a haughty look on her face.

"And that's how it's done," she whispered to me under her breath.

I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. Sometimes that girl just really got to me.

Mrs. Beauchamp wrote down a few notes before looking up at me with bright eyes. "Your turn, Lauren."

I unclenched my fists. And gave myself a pep talk.

You can do this. There's no way it can be as bad as last time. It's just thirty seconds and then it's over.

Pep talk completed, I stepped forward on shaky legs and readied myself to sing. And when it was time to start, my mouth actually opened and the words came out on key!

When I was done, I turned around and accidentally made eye contact with Wes. I couldn't tell if he was impressed or just surprised that I hadn't forgotten the lyrics this time, but his blue eyes were wide—and was it possible there was a little awe in them, too?

I pulled my gaze away, pushing my thoughts out of my head. I was probably just imagining it.

Instead of trying to figure out what exactly that look meant—because there was absolutely no reason why I should even care—I quickly took my spot at the end of the line and focused my attention on our teacher.

"You should all be really proud of your auditions." Mrs. Beauchamp looked back to our classmates still seated in their chairs, indicating that they should give us a short round of applause. When the clapping died down, she continued, "But as you know, there's only one solo. And while I know that *solo* means one, I would like to try something new. So if you could all humor me for a moment, I want to hear just one more audition."

A low rumble filled the room as everyone started whispering together.

What did she mean? Did none of us pass her high expectations? Why did she need to hear another audition?

"Silence, please." Mrs. Beauchamp shushed the class. "Can I please have Wes step forward?"

I groaned. Of course. Good ol' Wes.

But Mrs. Beauchamp didn't stop talking, and the next thing she said was, "And Lauren? Could you please step forward as well?"

"Lauren?" Olivia shot me a nasty look before addressing the teacher, "Why Lauren? I'm his girlfriend."

Mrs. Beauchamp gave Olivia a tired look and said, "Just humor me for a moment."

And when the teacher gestured for me to step forward, I did so in confusion. What was she doing?

"If you two wouldn't mind." Mrs. Beauchamp glanced at Wes and me. "I'd love to hear what you two sound like together."

"Like a duet?" Wes's Adam's apple bobbed, his surprise evident in his voice.

"Yes, Mr. Schultz. Both of you did excellent, and I would love to hear how you sound together."

My face was flushed with heat and my heart pounded. "Wes and I can't sing a duet together," I hurried to say. "Our parents would kill us." Even if he claimed my family was the only one who cared about the feud anymore, I didn't doubt they'd try to sue the school and have Mrs. Beauchamp fired if they found out what she was trying to do.

The Carmichaels and the Schultz family did *not* do things together.

Not anymore.

"I am well aware of the feud between your families. I'm also aware that

feuds are oftentimes a waste of energy. How about we teach the older generation a thing or two and let the younger generation show how mature they can be?"

So, was she just doing this to make a statement? I knew Mrs. Beauchamp was new to Sweet Water and all, but she had to know that you didn't try to start any sort of movement where the two most powerful families in town were concerned.

I was about to protest and tell her that I would just have to sit out, when Wes spoke up beside me. "I'm mature enough to sing with Lauren."

I glared at him. Was that supposed to be some sort of challenge? Was he trying to prove that he was more mature than me or something? As if the sole reason why we hadn't mended our friendship all these years was because *I* wasn't mature enough?

Well, two could play at this game.

So I gave him my sweetest smile and said, "Oh, I'd be happy to sing with you, Wes. I only spoke up earlier because I was worried *you'd* be uncomfortable with the duet."

Mrs. Beauchamp just smiled. "Very good."

The pianist started playing the intro and I drew in a deep calming breath. I could do this. I could sing with Wes. It shouldn't be any different than singing with anyone else.

But as we started singing, flashes of memories of all the times we'd sang this song together in the past came rushing over me. I was back in the attic at my house where we'd set up the microphones my parents had bought me for Christmas in fifth grade. Wes had been smiling at me, pushing his shaggy hair out of his bright blue eyes. I had worn my fanciest dress and high heels because you had to dress up fancy to sing like Josh Groban.

And before I knew it, a wave of emotion coursed over me, threatening to make tears spring to my eyes.

This was ridiculous. I should not be reminiscing about the past and feeling sad that things were so different now. So I pushed those thoughts away and focused on the music and on the way Wes's and my voice blended together. And when we both reached for the high note, chills raced up my spine. We still sounded amazing together. It was like our voices had been made to sing this duet together.

When we ended with the final note, the class and Mrs. Beauchamp all rushed to their feet and applause filled my ears.

My knees felt weak with the overwhelming response and I stumbled backward. Wes's strong hand shot out to steady me, pressing against my spine and causing tingles to rise under my skin.

I let my eyes briefly meet his. And when our gazes locked, he seemed to be just as overwhelmed as I was.

"You sounded amazing!" Olivia pushed me out of her way and threw her arms around Wes's shoulders, breaking the brief eye contact we'd shared.

Successfully brought out of my daze, I looked ahead to hear what Mrs. Beauchamp had to say. She came forward and placed her hand on my back that was still tingling from when Wes had steadied me the moment before.

"That was spectacular, you two."

I ducked my head with a shy smile at her praise.

"But I have a confession," she continued. "I would like to give the solo to Olivia."

"What?" Wes and I said at the same time while Olivia squealed with excitement from behind us.

Mrs. Beauchamp kept grinning. "Because I have something else in mind for you two. As you may remember from years past, I've had a few select seniors provide very special musical numbers at each of the concerts throughout the year, and I'd like Wes and Lauren to sing the duet for the upcoming fall concert."

"Y-you do?" I asked, bewildered with the circles she kept leading us in.

"What duet?" Wes asked.

"It's one of my favorite duets of all time. And it works perfectly with the theme of this fall's concert."

"So what's the song?" I raised my eyebrows. Mrs. Beauchamp just loved to drag things out and the anticipation was getting to me.

She grinned. "I was hoping you could sing *All I Ask of You*, which Josh sang with—"

"Kelly Clarkson on his Stages album," I finished for her.

Her smile broadened. "So you're familiar with it?"

Familiar with it? That was probably my most favorite duet of all time. When it first came out, I watched and rewatched the YouTube video of the duo singing it live over and over. I'd belted out the words along with Kelly Clarkson and daydreamed about singing it with a future boyfriend someday.

I never imagined I'd be singing it with Wes.

"I know the song," I answered.

"What about you, Wes?" Mrs. Beauchamp glanced at him.

He seemed like he was still in shock, but he managed to say, "I may have heard it once or twice."

Mrs. Beauchamp clapped her hands together. "Great. How about you two stay after class and I can give you the sheet music along with a practice track for you to practice with? I assume that since you live so close to one another, it won't be too difficult to set up a few rehearsals outside of class."

I looked at Wes, anxious to see how he would feel about it. His expression was unreadable, but he nodded slowly. "I think I can make it work." Wes turned to me as he said the words. "What do you think, Lauren? Think you can challenge the family feud for one concert?"

Challenge the family feud.

When he put it like that, it sounded so daunting and forbidden.

But I wasn't about to let Wes know that the thought scared me. "Yeah. I'm ready to challenge the family feud."

I just hoped our parents would let Wes and me actually sing the song before they made too big of a scene.

CHAPTER SIX

"Hey, Lauren. Do you have a minute?" Wes stopped me before I could leave choir rehearsal. Mrs. Beauchamp had just given us the music for our duet, and I was in a hurry to get to my next class.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. We only had five minutes between classes, and I didn't want to be late.

"What do you need?"

He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, his cheeks slightly flushed. "I was wondering if you could get together sometime this weekend to go over the duet."

Get together this weekend? As in, see him outside of school or cross country hours?

I shouldered my bag as I tried to think of an answer. "Don't you think we can just practice during lunch in the choir room next week or something?" Singing together was already going to be pushing things.

"I'm busy during lunch. Surely you have thirty minutes you can schedule a practice in."

"Umm..." I bit my lip. He was making it seem like it was my fault that we never did things together anymore. If I refused to meet with him to practice, it would just give him more ammo for his argument.

"You guys still have a piano at your house, right?"

"Yes," I said the word slowly. But I couldn't just invite him over to my house this weekend, could I?

"Well, maybe I could sneak over sometime when your parents aren't home, so we could practice."

My parents did like to play golf on the weekends they weren't traveling, and Angelica did have weekends off...

Did I dare risk inviting him into our house?

"This isn't some sort of trap, is it?" I asked.

He furrowed his brow. "Why would it be a trap? I just want to practice our duet."

I shrugged and gripped the strap of my backpack. "I don't know. You never can be too careful."

He narrowed his eyes. "You say that as if you're being asked to invite a serial killer into your house."

"Well, how am I supposed to know all of your motives? I don't really know you that well anymore."

He tilted his head to the side and gave me one of his disarming smiles. "Come on, Lauren. You know me."

Wow, I knew I hadn't talked to him very much since his voice had changed and all, but I had no idea he could sound so charming.

Wait. Why did I just think that?

Wes was not charming.

Before I could focus too much on the weird thoughts my brain was having, I said, "What about Olivia? She probably wouldn't want you hanging out with me."

"I don't think she'd really care. It's for school. Plus, I'm a big boy. I don't need my girlfriend telling me who I can and cannot practice a duet with."

That's right. Only our parents could do that for us.

I looked up at the clock on the wall. Only three minutes until next period started.

"Fine. I'll consider it."

His lips quirked up into half a grin, showing off his dimple. "Okay. I guess that's better than nothing."

"I really need to get to class now," I said, pushing my way past him to get out the door.

"Just let me know at the meet today, okay?" he called after me.

"Ok. I'll let you know." I looked over my shoulder. I'd gotten so caught up in the audition today that I'd totally forgotten I'd be running in front of a bunch of people after school.

Yay.

"You ready for the race?" Sydney Thane, one of the runners, asked me as we sat together on the grass, stretching with the rest of the girls' team.

"Not really," I said. But ready or not, it would start in fifteen minutes.

"I was nervous for my first few races, too. But you'll get used to it," she said, seeming to understand my apprehension.

"So I'll stop feeling nervous right around the time the season ends?" I raised an eyebrow.

She laughed. "I guess that's probably about right."

Her twin brother, Greg, walked past us and yelled 'Good luck' to her before going to join the boys' team.

"How is it being on the team with your brother?" I asked.

She smiled. "It's pretty fun, I guess. It gives me someone to run with in the off season."

"You run in the off season?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes."

"You must really like running if you're doing it in your free time." Seriously, these people who liked running were just crazy in my book.

She smiled. "From the way you said that, I'm guessing running isn't your first love?"

I laughed. "Yeah, I'm only here for the grade."

Her brown eyes widened with surprise. "But you got back before most of the girls yesterday, so you must be pretty good."

"I think that might have been a fluke. Don't be surprised if I come in last place today." I knew I probably wouldn't get in too much trouble if she happened to tell Coach Slater that I'd totally cheated during yesterday's practice...but I didn't want to take the risk. I had plans to have lots of fun the summer before I started college, and summer school was not one of them.

Coach walked over a few minutes later. "Time to head over to the starting line," he told me and my teammates. "Race starts in ten minutes."

I stood and wiped the grass off my legs and butt.

"I see Wes got you your uniform all right," Coach said to me.

"Yeah. I guess he can be helpful sometimes."

Coach nodded. "He's a good kid."

I was about to move on when he spoke again, "Are your parents coming to watch you today? Your first race is a pretty big deal."

"I think so. At least my mom said she'd try."

"She did?" Something flickered in his eyes, but he smoothed his expression a second later.

Before I could figure out what that look meant, Coach cleared his throat. "Well, you better get to the starting line. The race starts soon."

I nodded and headed out the gate and onto the sidewalk that led past the school and to the soccer field. I was just passing by the gym when one of the doors opened and Wes stepped out in a hurry. He barely had time to stop himself right before we could collide.

"Oh hey, Lauren," he said when he realized who he'd almost bulldozed into.

"Hi." I took in his appearance. He was wearing his cross country uniform. The shorts were shorter than the ones he'd worn to practice yesterday, but he actually didn't look so bad in them. And he had toned, strong legs.

Wait, did I actually just think that?

Since when did I become the kind of girl who checks out a guy's legs?

"Sorry I almost mauled you over," Wes said.

"It's okay." I shrugged. I was about to continue on my way when he spoke.

"Hey, so did you have time to decide about getting together to practice our duet this weekend?"

"Oh, um..." I looked around, suddenly sure that everyone was watching us interact and going to tell our parents about it. "I don't really think that's a good idea."

He narrowed his eyes. "It's just a practice. It's not like I'm trying to suddenly become your best friend again."

"Oh, I know that," I hurried to say. "I just..." I trailed off, not really knowing what to say. It was just a duet. It was practically a school project. Our parents couldn't really get upset with us for working on a school project together, could they?

I was about to tell him that sure, we could find the time to get together, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw my mom walking from the parking lot toward the track's entrance.

Crap!

If she saw me talking with Wes, I'd be in huge trouble.

"My mom's here." I turned back to him, my heart thrumming in my chest. "I'm gonna have to talk to you about it later."

He gave me a puzzled expression, but said, "Okay. But the concert is coming up in less than two weeks so we'll need to practice at some point."

"We'll talk later." I stepped to the side. I really needed to get out of here. If my mom caught me talking to Wes, she'd pull me out of cross country for sure. "Good luck with your race."

"Thanks. Good luck to you, too."

And then I rushed away with my heart beating faster than it had during yesterday's practice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"*Y*ou did amazing." Jenna threw her arms around me to give me a hug when I came over to the bleachers after my race. She was standing next to my mom.

"It's a miracle I finished." I laughed and hugged her back.

My mom hugged me next. "You did a really nice job for it being your first race." She pulled away, probably worried I'd get sweat on her fancy work clothes. "Sorry Dad couldn't make it. He promises he'll be at your next meet, though."

"So did you take any shortcuts today?" Jenna asked, a smirk lifting her lips.

"Me? Cheat?" I put a hand to my chest in mock surprise, like she'd offended me. "I'd never dream of doing such a thing."

My mom wasn't in on the joke about how I'd cut out half of yesterday's run, so she gave me a concerned look. "Did you cheat, honey?"

"I came in last place, Mom." I laughed. "If I cheated, I'd have found a way to finish in thirty minutes instead of forty."

Apparently, the fastest girls on the Varsity team only took eighteen minutes, so even thirty would have been believable for a first-time runner.

I was just really, really slow.

But I had finished my first race, without any shortcuts, so I was proud of myself.

"What was Coach Slater talking to you about after your race?" Mom asked, her gaze darting to where Coach Slater was standing with Coach Marowsky on the field.

"He was just telling me that I did good on my first race and to keep trying."

She bit her lip and seemed to be watching the coach with a worried

expression. "Did he talk to you about anything else?"

"No..." I said, confused. What else would a coach who I'd just met the day before have to say to me?

She sighed, as if relieved for some reason. "That's good. I mean, there's... Um, he seems like a nice guy."

I frowned as I studied her face. Why was she acting so weird about Coach Slater? She'd said yesterday that she didn't know him.

"You sure you don't know Coach Slater?" I asked.

She blinked her eyes and looked at me again. "There's something familiar about him. He probably has one of those faces."

Yeah, Mom was definitely acting weird.

Coach looked like he was just about done talking to Coach Marowsky, and I had an idea.

"Let's go meet the coach then." I hooked my hand through her arm.

"Oh, no. That's not necessary, Lauren." She planted her feet on the bleachers.

"Come on. I want you to meet my coach. I think that's the normal thing to do when you join a team."

When my mom looked like she was going to refuse, Jenna cut in, "If you're worried about someone taking your spot on the bleachers, I'll save it for you."

"No, that won't be necessary." Mom glanced at her watch. "Actually, I really do need to be getting back to the office. I have some paperwork to send to the Ridgewater office before five."

"It'll just take two minutes," I said. I knew I was being unreasonable by insisting that my mom meet my coach, but she was acting so weird about him that I couldn't help but wonder why.

Mom looked at her watch again. "I only have a minute. So just a quick hi is all I have time for."

I stepped past Jenna, and my mom started following me down the bleachers. But when we hit the sidewalk, I saw that Coach Slater was talking to someone else with shoulder-length brown hair. When the woman turned her head to the side, I recognized the profile of Mrs. Rena Schultz. Wes's mom.

Dang it. There was no way Mom would go out onto the field if Mrs. Schultz was down there.

And when I turned back to see if my mom had noticed, she had a look of

relief on her face but it quickly turned into a frown. "Maybe another time, Lauren. You know I can't go down there when *that woman* is talking to him."

"Okay." My shoulders dropped. "I'll introduce you at my next home meet."

"Sounds good." She pulled her keys from her dress pants pocket. "I better get back to the office. But I'll see you after work."

I nodded and watched her leave.

A moment later, my stomach growled so I went to the snack shack to buy myself some nachos. On my way back to my seat, my eyes caught on a couple making out beneath the bleachers. A guy from my grade and... I narrowed my eyes to get a better look at the girl to make sure I wasn't just imagining things. The girl had long blonde hair. She was wearing the same floral blouse and short skirt I'd seen her wearing today during choir.

It was Olivia.

But the guy was most definitely not Wes.

The boys' team was just coming onto the track from their first lap around the course when I made it back to Jenna.

"You were gone for a while." She took a chip from my plate and popped it in her mouth.

I sat next to her and set my plate on my knees. "I got a little distracted."

"Yeah? By what? Could it possibly be those long, toned legs of your super hot next-door neighbor?" She wiggled her eyebrows.

Jenna was a hopeless romantic, and for some reason, since I got paired with Wes for the duet, she'd gotten this weird notion into her head that Wes and I could be like a modern-day Romeo and Juliet. Star-crossed lovers who were destined to find a way to be together despite the odds stacked against them.

No matter how many times I insisted that *Romeo and Juliet* was a tragedy, and that I really hoped my love story didn't end with a dagger to my chest, she still had the idea that it could all work out.

"I didn't get distracted by Wes." I rolled my eyes. "But I did catch his girlfriend making out with another guy from school."

Jenna's jaw dropped. "What?"

I pointed in the general direction of where I'd seen them. "Just under there."

Jenna leaned closer. "Did you snap a photo?"

"No."

"What?" She grabbed my shoulder like she wanted to shake me. "Have you learned nothing from me?"

"I'm sure he'll find out soon enough. I don't need to be in the middle of that." I shrugged. "Plus, it's not like I have his phone number to text him the photo, anyway."

Jenna furrowed her brow. "I could give you his number." Jenna had pretty much every senior guy's phone number.

"No thanks."

Jenna shook her head. "You're so boring sometimes."

No, I'd just gotten really good at following my parent's rules. If my mom somehow found out I had Wes's number on my phone, she'd go berserk.

"Speaking of Wes and Olivia, I got invited to a party at Tasha Martell's house tonight," Jenna said.

"You did?"

She nodded.

"And you're thinking about going?" I asked hesitantly. I knew if she was bringing it up, she was planning to convince me to go. And a party at Tasha Martell's house was pretty much just as bad as a party at Olivia's, since they were best friends and all.

Jenna looked at me sweetly. "I was hoping you'd go with me."

Yup. I'd called it.

"And why would we want to go to a party at the house of the devil's best friend?"

She pressed her lips together momentarily, as if fighting a smile before saying, "Maybe because I heard Cam Lasky is going to be there and I'm going to find a way to get him to ask me out."

"I bet me being at the party will have little effect on him asking you out," I said.

Jenna was bold and confident and gorgeous. Guys practically fell at her feet when she looked their way.

"We could always find a new guy for you to crush on tonight," Jenna suggested. "That could be fun."

I shook my head. "I doubt my type of guy would go to a party like Tasha's." I didn't jive with that crowd at all. I could stand to be around them at school, but choosing to hang out with them seemed pretty masochistic to me.

She scratched at a spot on her jeans. "Wes is probably going to be there. And I bet he'll be single fairly soon based on what you said you saw Olivia doing under the bleachers."

I sighed. "When are you going to get that weird notion out of your head that Wes and I would ever be a good idea?"

She gave me an innocent look. "Because even though you say you hate him, I know that deep down there's a huge part of you that misses him."

"Missing an old friend is way different than wanting to date them." When she didn't seem convinced, I added. "He's not even my type."

"Tall, dark, and handsome isn't your type?" She arched an eyebrow. "Not to mention smart, charming, and funny."

I put my hands on my hips, exasperated. "If you think Wes is so amazing, why don't you run over to him after he wins this race and ask him out yourself?"

"Because I'm going out with Cam, remember?" She grinned, obviously enjoying how much this topic annoyed me. "You and Wes are the ones whose relationship is written in the stars."

"Are those the same stars that say you're delusional?"

She laughed. "You can't tell me you don't think he's hot and that the thought of sneaking behind your parents back with the one guy they forbid you to talk to hasn't crossed your mind."

"Why would I want to hang out with a guy who pretty much ruined middle school for me?"

"And how exactly did he ruin middle school for you? Did he ever actually *do* anything?"

"He dropped me, without an explanation. We were best friends one day, and the next day he was hanging out with the very people who used to make fun of us."

I let out a frustrated breath, feeling my emotions rise as I remembered those first two years after Wes cut me off as a friend. Sure, I had Jenna now. But Jenna hadn't moved here until freshman year, leaving me pretty much friendless through the most awkward years of my life.

Jenna touched my arm gently, as if realizing she'd touched a nerve. "Hey, sorry to bring it up. I know it's a touchy subject."

I nodded and took in a deep breath.

I felt slightly better after a moment.

Jenna spoke again, "I just think it might be time to put the past in the past."

You guys have a lot of history."

"Yes. And it's a history I've been trying to forget for five years."

She gave me an understanding look. "Sorry. I get a little carried away sometimes. I just want you to be happy and have fun at the party." She sighed. "I guess I just heard Wes talking to Lucas Addington in the hall today about looking forward to your duet, and my mind jumped back into my whole Romeo-and-Juliet fantasy for you two."

"He was talking about our duet with Lucas?"

She pushed back some of her brown hair that the wind blew in her face. "It sounded like he's hoping it'll help make things better between you two. I really think that he's hoping for an end to the family feud like he told you yesterday at the beach."

I let my brain soak it in for a moment.

I hadn't even entertained the thought of him trying to get together to practice because he actually *wanted* to fix stuff between us. I just assumed he had a big ego and would want to wow the crowd with his amazing voice, and was trying to make sure I didn't make him sound too bad by singing the melody wrong.

She touched my shoulder, breaking me from my thoughts. "Just come to the party, okay? I promise I won't say anything more about you and Wes being star-crossed lovers. I just think it'll be fun."

I thought about it for a moment before finally saying, "Okay, fine. I guess I'll go."

"Yay!" She beamed and threw her arms around me, squeezing me so tight I couldn't breathe. "This party is going to be so much fun."

She released her hold on me. Once I'd filled my lungs again, I said, "Make sure to thank me for this when you and Cam get married someday."

"I don't know if I'd go *that* far." Jenna laughed. "I don't see myself settling down for a long time. But, sure, if that ever does happen, you can be my maid of honor."

"Good."

Then a devious look stretched across her features. "Just like when you and Wes get married, you'll make sure to give me all the credit."

"Jenna..." I shot her a dirty look.

"Too soon?" she asked with an all-too-innocent expression on her face.

I shook my head and smiled despite myself. "Just a bit."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The party was in full swing when Jenna and I arrived fashionably late. Jenna had a knack for being dramatic—she made sure we got all "hotted up," as she liked to say, so that when we walked into the party late, the crowd couldn't help but part for us and Cam would start groveling at her feet.

Okay, so maybe she hadn't actually said all that, but it wouldn't surprise me if that wasn't what she was envisioning in her head as we got glammed up for the night.

I liked to get dolled up as much as the next girl, but now that we were walking down the long hall at Tasha's family's home, I wondered if I'd gone overboard by adding fake lashes and wearing heels with my jeans and an off-the-shoulder pink blouse.

"You sure we aren't overdressed?" I whispered to Jenna when we were about ten steps from the big room where the music was coming from.

Jenna glanced back at me. "You look hot. There's nothing wrong with looking your best."

My leg wobbled with my next step. "Yeah, but tripping over my own feet because I'm wearing three-inch heels that I can't walk in probably isn't going to impress anyone." I took after my mom that way. Hating high heels just seemed to be a genetic trait I inherited from her side of the family.

"You look fabulous," Jenna whispered just before we stepped into the crowded room. "Just smile and tell yourself you're a knockout, and no one will have a reason to think differently."

"Whatever you say." I drew in a deep breath and squared my shoulders, hoping it would boost my confidence. I might be dressed up more than usual, but if I pretended this was how I usually looked on the weekends, maybe everyone else would believe it.

I scanned the room to find Cam. He was the reason we'd come to this party in the first place, so I might as well help Jenna put her plan into place.

But when I noticed Wes and Olivia talking in a corner, I paused. They were standing close, and Wes had his face tilted down as he smiled at her.

He must not have found out about her secret rendezvous under the bleachers yet. Maybe I should have taken a photo of her and anonymously sent it to him. At least he'd know, instead of having her two-timing him any longer.

When he sweetly kissed her on the forehead, I forced my gaze away from them and continued my search for Cam. I couldn't stomach watching them be romantic when I knew she was cheating on him.

Poor Wes.

The sudden ache in my chest surprised me.

Since when did I feel sorry for Wes?

"Do you see Cam?" I whispered to Jenna to get my mind back on the task at hand. Jenna had craned her neck, scanning the crowd as well.

She shook her head. "Not yet. He better be here, though, because I didn't spend an hour curling my hair for nothing."

I laughed. "Let's go look in the kitchen."

Jenna and I were almost to the Martell's kitchen when she grabbed my arm and gasped. "He's right there."

Sure enough, Cam was standing near the staircase with a bunch of his friends. Cam was probably just short of being six feet tall, with reddish brown hair and tons of freckles. He was pretty cute—not my type exactly, since I had a serious weakness for dark hair and blue eyes—but he and Jenna would be really cute together.

We had almost reached Cam when my phone started buzzing in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw that it was my mom calling.

"I should probably answer this." I showed Jenna the screen. "Will you be okay talking to Cam without me?"

If it were me, I would have probably decided to wait until my friend could help me talk to a cute boy, but Jenna just gave me an unfazed smile and said, "Of course. But hurry back."

I turned to find a quiet spot to talk to my mom. I headed to a door that looked like it led to the backyard. I stepped out onto a deck. It was dark outside, with just the moonlight to see by.

"Hi, Mom," I said, the phone pressed against my ear.

"Hey, sweetie." She sounded anxious.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, fingering the necklace I'd gotten for my birthday last year with my name written in shiny gold letters.

"No. Um, I mean, I think everything will be fine." She paused for a second, and that pause made my heart race.

"What's wrong, Mom?" I asked when she still didn't say anything. I darted my gaze around to see if there was anywhere to sit. There was a porch swing at the opposite end of the deck. I walked there on unsteady legs—I needed to sit down in case my mom was trying to get up the nerve to tell me some horrible news.

Had someone died?

Grandma Carmichael had fallen a couple of weeks ago, had she been hurt again?

I could hear my dad's muffled voice in the background, and my racing heart slowed a little. My mom probably wasn't talking because my dad had distracted her.

"Mom?" I said to get her attention.

"Oh sorry, Lauren. Your dad was just asking me which suit he should wear."

"Is something wrong? What does he need a suit for?"

"For tomorrow." Then, as if realizing she hadn't told me anything yet, she added, "Sorry. I just wanted to call to let you know that we're flying to New York early tomorrow morning. Your uncle Bryce has been working on a deal with one of the biggest property developers on the East Coast, and he asked if Dad could come seal the deal since the client seems to be getting cold feet."

I sighed heavily, realizing nothing was wrong at all. Just my parents worried about growing Carmichael Industries bottom line.

My mom continued. "Anyway, I wanted to let you know where we'll be so you won't worry when you wake up tomorrow and find us gone. I'll call Angelica and let her know that you'll be home alone, so she knows to be available if you need her, but I think it should be a pretty quick trip and we should be back by tomorrow evening."

I nodded, before realizing she couldn't see it. "Okay. Well, good luck with the deal. Have fun in New York."

"We will."

"Ok. And make sure to text me when you land."

Even though I knew our pilot Robby was always super careful to do the

necessary checks and was one of the best pilots around, I always worried a little.

"I will, sweetie. Now you have fun at your party."

We hung up, and I was just about to go back inside to see how things were going between Jenna and Cam when the back door creaked open and two people stepped outside. I couldn't immediately tell who they were because of the lack of outdoor lighting, but when they moved out from beneath the eaves of the house and into the moonlight, I realized it was Wes and Olivia.

"How long has it been going on?" Wes asked Olivia. His tone was harsh, and from those six words I had a feeling that he may have just found out that Olivia had been kissing another guy at the meet.

I did not want to be out here to witness this.

"Not long," Olivia said, not sounding regretful at all. "Only about a week."

"A week?" Wes's voice rose. "Were you just hoping I wouldn't find out?"

I knew they were distracted by their argument, but if they happened to turn their heads and noticed me sitting on the porch swing, things would get a whole lotta awkward for me.

I leaned closer to the armrest of the swing and hoped my outline would just look like a throw pillow in the darkness.

"I haven't decided what I wanted to do yet." Olivia shrugged like she didn't see anything wrong with cheating on her boyfriend.

Her boyfriend who I had just witnessed being all goo-goo eyed over her earlier today.

She didn't deserve him.

"You haven't decided?" Wes scoffed. "Well, I'll help you with that decision. We're done."

I expected Olivia to protest. Or put up some sort of a front to try to get him to forgive and forget, but she must have been even stupider than I thought because she just shrugged like it was no big deal and said, "Okay, great. I'll go tell Emilio."

And without another word, she turned on her heel and went back inside the house, looking like she didn't have a care in the world.

A frustration that I didn't know I could feel toward her bubbled up inside. And it only grew when I watched Wes almost collapse against the railing, as if he'd been kicked in the chest.

My heart went out to him. And for the second time today, the words *poor Wes* ran through my mind.

Despite our differences, no one deserved to be treated like that.

I studied him from my spot on the swing. He hadn't noticed me yet, which was good. If it had been me, I wouldn't have wanted anyone to witness that.

A gust of wind blew through the trees, and I shivered. The evenings were starting to get chillier. I should probably go back inside.

But Wes was standing just a few feet from the door, and with the way I walked in high heels, he was sure to notice my feet clanking on the wooden floor.

I looked around at Tasha's backyard to see if there was another path to get into the house, or in the very least, into her front yard, but the steps leading off the deck were on the other end from me.

The only way inside was past Wes.

As if sensing that I needed him to look in the other direction, he turned his back to the house, rested his elbows on the deck railing, and looked up at the stars that brightened the night sky.

Was it too much to hope he was deep enough in his brooding that he wouldn't notice me sneaking behind him and into the house?

Maybe if I took off my noisy shoes, I could tiptoe past him...

I was just slipping my shoes off when my phone chirped with a text.

"Is someone there?" Wes turned around and looked in my direction.

CHAPTER NINE

I quickly silenced my phone and switched it to vibrate mode before it could chirp again.

"Is someone out here?" Wes called out once more, but this time, his gaze seemed to search the rest of Tasha's backyard.

Maybe if I held *really* still, he wouldn't notice me and decide the sound came from the party. But apparently, he was more paranoid than I thought because soon his footsteps were coming toward me.

This was not good. Oh this was not good!

Before I could figure out a way to camouflage myself against the padding on the porch swing, Wes was standing in front of me.

I closed my eyes, desperately hoping it might magically help turn me invisible.

"Lauren?" His voice cut through the air, surprise evident in his tone.

I opened my eyes and slid my gaze up to him. He was bending over me, his eyes narrowed.

There was no magically disappearing now, so I scrunched up my face and said as innocently as I could, "Uh, hi Wes."

"I see you're trying to play hide and seek again." He stood up straighter, his tone wary. "Were you spying on me and Olivia?"

"No. Of course not," I hurried to say.

"But you saw it all?"

I pressed my lips together and tried to come up with an excuse for why I may not have noticed what had just happened in front of my eyes. Could I claim temporary deafness? I was passed out?

I magically just appeared on the porch swing?

I scrunched up my nose. "I might have overheard a little bit."

"Well, that's fun." He sighed and lowered himself down on the seat beside

me. "Guess it was probably too much to hope that no one would find out how badly I got played."

"Yeah, she's not known for being very discreet."

He looked at me, his expression surprised. "Wait, did you know already?"

My palms prickled with sweat. I probably shouldn't have said that.

"Lauren?" he pressed when I didn't answer him.

I looked down at the one heel that I'd managed to take off and was now holding in my lap. "I saw her kissing Emilio under the bleachers at today's meet."

"You did?" Wes slumped against the back of the swing. "Has everyone been laughing behind my back because I was clueless?"

"I don't think very many people knew," I hurried to say before he could feel even worse.

He blew out a long breath and stared ahead. "I guess it was stupid of me to think I was interesting enough to keep her around."

"Hey, don't say that. You're plenty interesting."

"Sure," he said, unconvinced. "Olivia pretty much just told me I was too boring for her."

"And you believed her?"

He just shrugged, not saying anything.

"You're not boring, Wes." I went to touch his knee, before remembering at the last moment that Wes and I didn't comfort each other like that anymore. I put my hand back in my lap. "You're fun, and smart...and witty."

At least he had been back when we were friends.

He nodded and stared at the wooden planks of the deck. "Thanks for saying that. Especially after everything."

"It's all true."

And even though I'd probably deny ever saying any of those things tomorrow, it did feel good to say something nice to him.

But now that it was out there, I couldn't help but wonder about what he thought of me now. Did he see me as a different person than I'd been back when we were friends? Or could he see that despite aging five years, I was still much of the same person deep down?

When the silence started to get too uncomfortable for me, I remembered the text that I received a few minutes ago. I pulled my phone out to give myself something to do and saw it was Jenna who had messaged me.

Jenna: *Where are you? Cam asked me out. Now it's time to make my exit*

so I can leave him wanting more.

I smiled to myself. Jenna was practically an expert at playing the game of cat and mouse with guys.

I shot her a text back.

Me: *In the backyard. Be there soon.*

"Jenna's looking for me." I lifted my phone. "I better get back inside."

I propped my shoeless foot on my knee to put my heel back on.

"Why are you only wearing one shoe?" Wes asked when I put my foot down on the deck to push it the rest of the way into my shoe.

"I was going to try tiptoeing past you when you had your back turned to me."

He chuckled. "You're an interesting girl, Lauren."

Should I be insulted?

Before I could figure out whether to be offended or not, he asked, "What are the heels for, anyway? I don't know if I've seen you wear heels since we did one of our Josh Groban music videos."

"Since when do you pay attention to my choice of footwear?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. You just looked taller than normal when you walked into the party tonight."

He had noticed me walk into the party? Hadn't he been too busy flirting with his girlfriend—well, ex-girlfriend now—to notice me?

I cleared my throat. "Jenna wanted to get all dressed up tonight, so she practically forced me into this outfit."

A look of relief passed over his face. That was a weird reaction. But I soon understood it when he said, "I was worried you were still mad about the stumpy legs comment I made yesterday and thought you needed to do something about it."

"I actually wasn't thinking about that. Believe it or not, I don't usually stew over the things you say to me for too long."

It was mostly true. I was trying to get better about it, anyway.

"Well, that's good." He ran a hand through his hair, which gave him a more tousled cute look than he usually sported. His hair was getting shaggy again. "I just wanted to make sure you knew that you don't need the heels or the fake lashes."

He noticed my lashes were fake, too?

That was embarrassing.

"Anyway, I better get in there," I said, needing to leave. "Jenna likes to

make her exits."

I was about to stand when Wes suddenly touched my arm.

"Hold on," he said, stopping me.

When I looked up to meet his gaze, his eyes were intense.

"What?" My heart raced in my chest.

"If you could keep the fact that I was out here moping about Olivia to yourself, I'd really appreciate it."

"O-of course." I swallowed, my mouth having gone dry. "I won't tell anyone."

"Thank you."

I stood to leave and was a few steps away when his voice drifted to me in the night air.

"And Lauren?"

I turned back, hopeful for some reason, but not really knowing what to expect. "Yeah?"

There was an anxiousness in his expression that I wasn't used to seeing.

"Thanks for talking to me. I know we haven't been friends for a long time, but I appreciate you not rubbing my breakup in my face and telling me that I deserved it after all the things I said to you in the past."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. That was unexpected.

Thankfully, my mouth managed to say, "You're welcome," before I continued toward the back door.

As I went back inside to find Jenna, I couldn't help but wonder if it was possible for Wes and me to be friends again. But I pushed those thoughts away as quickly as they'd come. Just because we'd had a few semi-friendly conversations in the past two days didn't mean that anything was going to change between us.

Still, it was nice not to feel as much hate and bitterness toward him like I'd felt for the past few years, to be able to take a step forward and move onto higher ground.

Maybe being forced to spend time practicing our duet together wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

CHAPTER TEN

By the time I woke up the next morning, my mom texted that they'd landed safely in New York. So I took things easy and slowly got ready for the day. I did my homework after a breakfast of crepes and fruit that were leftovers from yesterday's breakfast. After my homework was complete, I pulled out the music Mrs. Beauchamp had given me the day before.

I'd been playing the piano for twelve years, so I picked at the accompaniment, letting the feel of the keys and the sound of the music take over. For me, playing the piano had always been like a form of meditation. It was a way to experience emotions and just let my mind do what it wanted. The piano was where I went when I needed to figure things out. In a way, the piano was my therapist.

It only took about thirty minutes to get a feel for the song—a perk of being taught by the best piano teacher within a sixty-mile radius. And before long, I was able to sing my part and play through the song with only a couple of minor mistakes.

After running through the duet a few times, I went into the kitchen to see if we had any leftover chicken salad and croissants that I could eat for lunch. As I set the container of the chicken mixture on the granite countertop, my gaze caught on something out the window. Wes was on the beach with a couple from school, Lucas Addington and Charlotte Robertson. The boys were surfing while Charlotte sat on the sand, watching them. I made my sandwich and found myself standing at the counter as I ate it, just watching the three of them out the window.

The waves were perfect for surfing right then, and it looked like Wes was giving some pointers to Lucas.

And I didn't know what came over me, but I suddenly had the urge to

join them on the beach. I didn't exactly want to get in the ocean today since I'd already showered, but it would be okay to just hang out at the beach without looking weird, wouldn't it?

As I finished up my sandwich and drained my glass of water, I decided to go down. After all, Wes had gone to the ocean when I'd been there on Thursday, so it wouldn't be a crime if I did the same.

I had a class with Charlotte anyway, so I could just make the excuse that I needed to ask her about an assignment.

I went out the back door, through the back gate and down the path that led to the beach. When I got closer, I saw that Charlotte was actually reading a book instead of simply watching the guys as they surfed.

The boys were just paddling out to ride another wave when I reached Charlotte.

"Whatcha reading?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't think I was too weird for joining her on the beach and attempting to make small talk.

She lifted the book to show me the cover. It was an older-looking paperback.

"Is that one of those old Sweet Valley High novels?" I asked, taking a seat next to her on the sand.

"Yeah." She got an embarrassed look on her face. "I've been reading a bunch of these lately."

I smiled. I wasn't a big reader, but I could appreciate a good book now and then. "I think my mom and Wes's mom used to read those books when they were younger."

She smiled. "Yeah, they're kind of old, but they're still so good. And don't tell Lucas or anything, but the main love interest is kind of perfect."

I laughed. "Sounds like I might need to read one of those. I could always use a good book boyfriend to get me through the weekend."

Charlotte took the bookmark that was poking out of the back of the book and put it between the pages she'd been reading before she set it down in the sand.

"Are you out here to get in the ocean?" She looked at me expectantly.

I dug my toes into the sand. "Nah. I was just bored and decided to come out and watch the waves."

Watch Wes and Lucas surf, watch the waves...they were kind of the same.

The boys were paddling out again to a spot in the water, bobbing up and

down as a small wave passed them while they waited. Then when a good wave started toward them, Wes stood on his surfboard and expertly rode the wave. I had watched him surf many times from the security of my window but seeing it up close was kind of surreal. It just went to show me how much he had grown up since we'd played in the ocean together as kids.

He ended up falling off his board and crashing into the water after only a few seconds, but then he was able to quickly grab his board and swim back out to catch another wave.

"You've got this one, Lucas!" Charlotte put her hands beside her mouth as she yelled out to her boyfriend who was gearing up for the next wave.

I smiled at Charlotte. "So how is it dating the 'Billionaire Heir?'" I asked.

Her smile broadened, and a hint of pink colored her cheeks. "It's great. Lucas is kind of amazing."

I returned her smile. It was sweet that she was blushing at the mention of her boyfriend. They'd just started dating two weeks ago, but I could already tell that they were a couple who would be together for a long time.

We watched the boys surf for a while longer before they climbed out of the ocean and came ashore, their breathing heavy after their water workout.

"You're getting so good at that." Charlotte jumped up and gave her boyfriend a hug.

"I think Wes is determined to teach me everything he knows before it gets too cold," Lucas said as he hugged his girlfriend.

"I think I've already told you about everything I know." Wes stuck his board into the sand. "Now it's just putting all my expert teaching into practice." He smiled and stretched, and I had to pull my eyes away from his biceps before he could catch me checking him out again.

Why would Olivia ever cheat on Wes with Emilio?

Apparently, she was blind?

I shook my head to get those thoughts out of my mind because I really didn't need to be thinking about how Wes was cuter than most of the guys at our school.

But thinking about Olivia cheating on him had me wondering how he was feeling about the breakup today. He'd been pretty down about it last night. I couldn't blame him. Being betrayed by the person who you thought was your faithful girlfriend had to sting.

"Well, we better get going. Charlotte has to work at the bakery this afternoon and I have to deliver pizzas," Lucas said, taking his surfboard

under one arm and grabbing Charlotte's hand by the other.

"See ya at school on Monday," Wes called to them.

They looked back to wave then walked up the path to Wes's house.

They were out of sight before I noticed that Charlotte had forgotten her book in the sand. I picked it up, deciding I'd give it to her in class on Monday. Hopefully she wouldn't miss it too much before then.

"Good book?" Wes asked.

"Oh this?" I looked down at the paperback in my hands. "It's Charlotte's."

He nodded slowly. "I should have guessed that. You always preferred watching movies over reading books."

I stood, wiping the sand off the back of my shorts. "They're faster. There's only so much time in the world."

Wes chuckled. "It's good to know that not much has changed about you in the past five years."

"Yep. Not that much, anyway."

He looked up at my house briefly before turning back to me. "I'm surprised you're out here at the beach, though. What about the so-called rules of the feud that you were worried about breaking?"

I glanced around, suddenly anxious that someone was watching us on the beach. There was no one, but when I looked back at Wes, he had a smirk on his lips.

"I guess you *are* still worried."

I smacked his arm with Charlotte's book. "Well, I know that my parents are gone until this evening, but I have no idea about yours."

"My dad is fishing. My mom's at a bridal shower for my cousin."

I sighed, relieved. "That's good."

He squinted his eyes in the sunlight. "So what are you doing on the beach, anyway? I didn't know you and Charlotte were friends."

"We have a class together. I just wanted to say hi."

And maybe I'd wanted to be a little rebellious with my parents out of the house and go within twenty feet of my enemy neighbor.

"So you said your parents are gone for the day, right?"

"Yes..." I said the word slowly.

"And you probably don't have a lot of plans this afternoon, right?"

I furrowed my brow. "Not exactly." What was he getting at?

"Well, then I guess you don't have an excuse for why we can't practice our duet together this afternoon, do you?" A triumphant smile spread across

his lips.

I should have known he was setting up some sort of trap.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea." My heart sped up in my chest at the prospect of inviting him into my house to practice. It just seemed so forbidden after all this time.

"Come on, Lauren." He tilted his head to the side and gave me one of those smiles that Jenna would call charming. "We're gonna have to practice it sometime. And it sounds like no one will be around to be worried about you breaking the so-called rules of the family feud."

"Yeah, but..."

"Tell you what," he spoke before I could finish my sentence. "I'm going to go shower off the ocean really fast then I'll come over. I promise that I'll be out of your house before your parents are home. And when my parents ask me what I did all afternoon, I won't even mention the duet."

I bit my lip, considering his offer. I had practiced the duet earlier and the concert was coming up in just over a week...

"Okay." I held up a finger. "But you have to be out of my house long before my parents get home."

There was no way I was going to risk getting caught with the Schultz boy in our house.

He smiled again. "I'll be over in fifteen minutes."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I set Charlotte's book on the kitchen counter, then I ran up to my room to make sure I looked okay. I knew it was weird for me to care what I looked like when I'd just seen Wes a minute ago, but I wanted to make sure I didn't have any extra sand in my pockets.

Okay, so maybe I really just wanted to make sure my hair and makeup were presentable.

I looked around for my perfume—just because I wanted to smell good, not because I wanted to smell good for Wes—when I remembered my mom had wanted to try it out last night after Jenna had raved about how good it smelled when we were getting ready for the party yesterday.

So I went to my parents' room to see if it was on her dressing table, but I couldn't find it. Then I remembered that Mom had set it on her desk in the sunroom the night before. Knowing her, she'd probably left it there, completely forgetting about it.

I headed downstairs to the sunroom where there was a couch and a loveseat in one corner and my mom's desk along another wall. But the coolest part of the room was the oversized hammock bed that hung from four bolts in the ceiling. I probably spent too much time there on the weekends, just watching the ocean through the windows.

Sure enough, I found the perfume sitting next to a cup of pens on the desk. I spritzed myself real quick and was about to take the bottle back upstairs when my eyes caught on an old journal opened to a page that said January of the year before I was born.

My mom was an avid journal writer and usually had her current journal sitting by the chair she liked to read in each night, but I'd never seen one this old before.

I lifted one corner to see what the cover looked like. There was a big pink tulip on the front, and it wasn't leather-bound and expensive-looking like the ones she bought these days.

I set it down flat again and considered reading the entry it was opened to. I only knew my mom as a parent, so it would be interesting to get inside her head when she was only a few years older than I was now. But before I could convince myself that it was okay to read my mom's private thoughts, the doorbell rang.

I jumped.

That would be Wes.

I quickly set the perfume bottle back on the desk where I'd found it, since it would be totally weird to answer the door with it in my hand. Then I hurried out of the room and made my way to the front door.

Hopefully, this practice didn't end up being totally awkward.

"I was worried you weren't going to answer," Wes said when I let him in. He had changed into a blue T-shirt that really brought out the color of his eyes. His hair was still wet, but he looked like he'd showered off the saltwater and ran a comb through it.

"Sorry, I was in the middle of something." My heart was racing, and I didn't know if it was from the way I'd ran across the house to open the door, or if it was because I was nervous to have him come here after five long years.

My parents really better not get back here early, or I'd be toast.

Wes seemed to take in the entry way with curiosity in his gaze. "It looks different in here than I remember." He put his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah, we changed a few things around." We'd updated the floors to bigger rectangular tiles last year and painted the walls a soft gray color. My mom had commissioned a painting of our cabin in the Smoky Mountains that now hung on the wall. "I was thinking we'd practice in the music room, if that works for you."

"So we're not going to the attic where we recorded all our music videos?" His lips quirked up into a half-smile.

I shook my head. "No, I figured the music room would be more appropriate now."

That attic held too many memories that I didn't need to revisit today. I needed to keep a steady head.

Plus, I thought that playing the duet on the piano would probably be less awkward than just standing there facing each other as we sang a love song. Giving my hands something to do and my eyes something to look at was definitely the best way to get through what was sure to be an uncomfortable afternoon.

I led him down the hall and opened the French doors that led into the music room. The black baby grand took up the majority of the space, with a couch along the wall and my dad's guitar sitting in its stand in the corner.

"I practiced the song earlier today, so if it's okay, I'd like to play it as we sing."

A look of surprise took shape on his face. "You already know how to play it? We just got the music yesterday."

I shrugged. "It's not too difficult. And since I was already familiar with it, it wasn't too hard to figure out."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Since you've been practicing, does that mean you were actually hoping to practice with me today?"

"No." I tipped my head down so he wouldn't notice my blush. "I just wanted to play the piano and it was a new song."

He made a sound, like he didn't quite believe me, so I busied myself with opening the sheet music and settling down at the piano. I hadn't been looking forward to practicing with him. Not at all. Right?

I peeked over at Wes as he set his sheet music on the piano and stood to my side. I really hoped he didn't think I'd been *hoping* to practice with him. But then again, I had randomly shown up on the beach today when he'd been there with his friends.

Yep, it totally looked like I was just begging him to spend time with me again.

He looked up from his music. I quickly pulled my glance away so he wouldn't think that not only was I following him around, but I was also checking him out. He didn't need to get an even bigger ego.

I cleared my throat awkwardly. "Should we just start from the top?"

He made a face. "Actually, would you mind listening to the song first? I haven't really had a chance to look into it."

I furrowed my brow. "Then why were you so set on practicing today?"

He shrugged. "I figured it would be good to start on the same page."

"Well, then I guess we might as well just pull up the music video and watch Josh and Kelly's live performance."

"Works for me."

I took my phone out and pulled up the video on YouTube. Then, after looking around for a comfortable place for us to watch it together, I decided to just put my phone on the piano's music shelf.

I expected Wes to stand behind the piano bench to watch the video. Instead, he indicated for me to scoot over and make room for him on the bench.

My heart spiked in my chest for a second at the thought of sitting so close to Wes, but before I could think too much about how weird it would be, I moved.

As soon as he was seated beside me, I became overwhelmed by his closeness. His legs bumped against mine, our hips were mere centimeters apart, and our arms grazed against each other momentarily.

I scooted over another inch to give us both some breathing room.

But even though I'd managed to create a small space barrier between us, I hadn't prepared myself for how good he smelled. I didn't know if it was his deodorant, aftershave, or a sigh-inducing cologne, but I found myself breathing in deeply as we watched Josh welcome Kelly Clarkson onto the stage for their duet.

"Have you watched this before?" Wes asked, and I could have been projecting my own feelings on him, but was his voice slightly hoarse?

I swallowed down the lump in my throat at what the thought evoked. "Yeah, I've watched this music video a few times."

A lie.

I'd watched it like fifty times when it first came out. But he didn't need to know how obsessed I'd been with it.

"Cool," was all he said.

Thankfully, he didn't seem to pick up on my lie, or how weird I was acting. Which gave me hope that I might have been able to finally learn how to act cool on the outside despite how crazy I was feeling on the inside.

Or maybe he just didn't care. He had broken up with his girlfriend only yesterday. He probably wasn't even paying any attention to how I was acting in the first place.

I drew in a deep breath and tried to calm my mind as Josh started singing the famous love ballad. But for some reason, his voice didn't calm me like it usually did. Instead, I was ultra-aware of Wes during the entire performance. And as I watched Kelly and Josh interact on stage, I couldn't help but wonder

if Mrs. Beauchamp expected Wes and me to act similarly when we performed the song at the concert.

They weren't overly romantic or anything, but they were facing each other and acting the part of a pair singing a love ballad together. They had great eye contact as they sang the words where the characters Raul and Christine declared their love for each other in *The Phantom of the Opera*.

And as I listened to the words, my face flooded with heat.

How in the world was I supposed to sing a song like that with Wes?

We didn't exactly hate each other, but we were far from being the type of people who could sing lyrics like that and have it come off even halfway believable.

Even if he did smell amazing and sitting close to him did funny things to my stomach.

I was only reacting like this to him because...because...

Well, I guess I wasn't quite sure why I was reacting to him like this.

I dared another side glance to look at him.

I guess he wasn't *that* bad to look at.

And sure, he might just have the kind of jaw romance writers always gave the heroes of their stories. And if pressed, I might even admit that he was the kind of guy who could turn heads when he walked into a room.

Fine. He was gorgeous. And if it wasn't for the fact that our moms had given us baths together when we were toddlers, he might be exactly the type of guy I'd crushed on in the past. He was smart, he was driven, and he was also incredibly funny when he wanted to be.

I pushed those thoughts away, thankful that his eyes were closed. He was concentrating on the music, so he hadn't noticed me staring at him for the past ten seconds.

The music swelled, and Josh and Kelly sang my favorite part of the song where they talk about how where one of them goes, the other wants to go with them, too.

Wes seemed to breathe in deeply during that part, and I couldn't help but wonder what he was picturing in his mind with those lyrics. Was he simply thinking about the music and how we would sing it, or was he feeling the emotions the song evoked?

They sang the final note, and Wes's long eyelashes caught my attention as he slowly opened his eyes.

He glanced sideways at me as if he had noticed my stare.

"So, what did you think of the song?" I quickly asked before he could wonder why I was staring at him.

He pursed his lips in a thoughtful way. "It was nice. Typical Josh Groban."

I waited for him to give me a little more, to tell me how the song made him feel, but then I realized that guys didn't talk about their feelings, especially with random neighbors they were just barely beginning to speak to again.

So I said, "Yeah, it's one of my favorite songs. I loved it in the movie. But I think I like this version even more."

"The movie?" Wes furrowed his brow.

"*The Phantom of the Opera*. This is the song that Raul and Christine sing to each other when they're on the roof. When they have that amazing—" I cut myself off before I could finish that sentence.

"When they have that amazing, what?" Wes asked.

"Oh, nothing," I hurried to say.

"What happens when Raul and Christine are singing to each other on the roof?" Wes raised his eyebrows suggestively.

"It's probably not what you're thinking." I felt the blood drain from my face.

"Oh, really?" He cocked his head to the side. "And what exactly do you think I'm thinking happened on the roof in that movie?"

Why was I so good at putting myself into awkward situations when Wes was around?

I cleared my throat. "Fine. If you must know. They kiss on the roof."

My cheeks went from drained of blood to burning with heat in a split second.

Why in the world had I even brought this up?

Oh yeah, because I was an idiot.

"So they share a romantic kiss on the roof. That's nothing to be embarrassed about."

Says the guy who has lots of experience kissing girls.

I, on the other hand, had only that failed attempt at a kiss in the attic with Wes to reference as my experience.

My skin prickled with heat when Wes narrowed his eyes again.

"H-how deep in character do you think Mrs. Beauchamp expects us to get in this duet of ours?" His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "You don't

think she's gonna put on her musical theater hat and tell us to act it all out like they do in the movie, do you?"

The image of Wes and me singing to each other in the way that Raul and Christine sang the song in the movie popped into my mind. They were pretty much in each other's arms the whole time. And then that kiss...

Yeah, she wouldn't make us do that, would she?

"I'm pretty sure she just wants us to sing. She did give us the Josh Groban and Kelly Clarkson version to study after all," I said, and my pulse seemed to relax a little with that thought. I had nothing to worry about.

Wes nodded. "Well, I guess we better start practicing it then."

"Yeah, let's do this." I moved my phone to the side, and when Wes stood and went back to where he'd left his sheet music, I finally was able to draw in a decent breath.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"So when should we get together to practice next?" Wes closed his sheet music after we'd gone through the song for the last time.

"I don't know if it's really necessary to have a bunch of practices." I closed the lid on the piano. "I think just singing along to the original version will be the most helpful."

The practice had gone pretty well. I'd had to play through his part a few times before he was comfortable with the accompaniment, but he'd caught on quickly afterwards.

And thankfully, I'd kept my strange physical reactions to Wes's presence in check during the actual practice part. But since I definitely didn't need a repeat of all the weird thoughts that had gone through my mind while watching the video, it would probably be best if we spent very limited time alone together.

I'd never had thoughts like this about Wes before, but you could never be too safe. Which was also why I needed to work harder on finding a new guy to crush on at school. I hadn't liked on anyone since Mason Clark went off to college last month, so it was obvious that my lack of having a guy to focus my teenage hormones on was causing them to land on the nearest breathing teenage boy.

Wes spoke again, bringing my thoughts back to the present. "I'll make sure to listen to the song a few times, but I do think it's important to practice together. Once I get the basic melody down, I might want to try experimenting with harmonizing in different ways. And it would work best if I could hear you to see how our voices blended together."

I sighed. Of course, Mr. Overachiever had to go above and beyond with everything he did. And since I wouldn't want to look like the slacker bound to mess up the harmony, we would have to practice together sometime soon.

I thought about my upcoming week. I had school, cross country, and my weekly piano lessons, but that was about it.

"I guess we could get together after practice some time. My parents have their couple's golf league on Wednesday night, so if you're not busy we could practice then."

"Works for me."

I expected him to leave, but he didn't. Instead, he asked, "Do you guys still have that big hammock bed in your sunroom? I loved that thing when we were little."

"Yeah, we still have it."

"Can I see it?" He gave me the same look he gave me years ago when we were kids, the one that meant he was hoping I'd go along with one of his devious plans.

Wes had a habit of getting us into a lot of trouble back in the day.

I looked at my watch and bit my lip. It was two-thirty. My parents wouldn't be home for a few more hours.

As long as he didn't try to lie in the hammock all day, my parents would never know that he'd been here.

"Sure. I can show you real quick."

His eyes lit up. "Awesome!"

He left his sheet music on the piano and then followed me through the kitchen, through the family room, and onto the sunroom.

Wes seemed to take in our surroundings for a moment. And I couldn't help but wonder what was going through his mind. Was he remembering all the times we'd pushed each other in the hammock growing up? Or the times we'd just lay ourselves in it, side by side, as we read or looked out the windows at the waves crashing against the beach below?

I'd had a hard time getting back on the hammock bed the first few months after our friendship died.

"This room hasn't changed too much," Wes commented.

"Nope. I think the throw pillows are the only thing that really changed." I gestured at the cool gray and seafoam green pillows. The old ones had been pink and brown.

I expected him to sprawl out on the hammock—because of how excited he'd been to see it. Instead, he walked around the room, looking at the family photos that we had on the wall.

"I see you guys have updated these since the last time I came here, too."

One frame held a collection of photos from the trip to Italy our families took during summer vacation after sixth grade. The summer before Wes and I stopped being friends. In it were photos of me and my parents in front of the Colosseum. Others were of us in line waiting to go into the Vatican. More of us in front of the Trevi Fountain.

Noticeably, there were no photos of Wes or his parents, though they'd been on the trip with us.

I swallowed as I remembered how much fun we'd had on that trip.

"I guess my mom got tired of the old photos and switched them out." My voice sounded froggy, but I hoped he didn't notice.

"That was a fun trip," he said. "I wouldn't mind going back to Florence for some of that gelato. I could eat that for breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner."

"Yes, it was so good." My mouth watered just thinking about it. And I appreciated him finding a way to focus on the positive of that trip instead of the fact that my mom had switched out so many of the photos that he had been in with me.

"Have you gone to Luigi's since they started serving gelato?" Luigi's was the brick oven pizza place on Parson's street.

"No. Is it any good?"

"It's dang good. Lucas let me taste every flavor the last time I went there." A smile stretched across his cheeks. "It almost makes me think I'm back in Italy. We should go sometime."

His eyes widened after he said that. Like the words had just slipped out and now he was regretting it.

Awkwardness permeated the air as I tried to think of something to say. It would be rude to flat out say *no thank you, I don't want to eat delicious gelato with you*.

But I also couldn't say yes. Even if I did want to go, I couldn't. If anyone saw us going anywhere together, we'd be in huge trouble. We were lucky no one came out at the party last night and saw us talking on the porch swing together.

When I didn't respond to his suggestion, he cleared his throat and said, "Um, just forget I said that."

I nodded and went back to looking at the photos on the wall. He turned and moved closer to the desk.

"Is this yours?" He had picked up my mom's journal and was flipping through the pages.

I gasped and rushed toward him. "Give me that."

A grin stretched across his features. "So it *is* yours." He held it up out of my reach.

Instead of jumping around like a crazy person, I forced a calm expression on my face. "That's actually my mom's journal. You should probably put it back."

He narrowed his gaze and inspected my face as if checking to see if I was lying. "Are you sure it's not yours?" He opened it, still holding it up high, and I could see his gaze running across the words.

"It doesn't look like a mom's handwriting. And right here," he pointed to a paragraph, "it says 'when he looks at me with those brown eyes, I just want to beg him to run away with me.'" He shot me a teasing grin. "That does not sound like something your mom would write. I think you were just writing about your crush on a guy who," he read some more from the journal, "who 'twists your stomach all up in knots when he's kissing you and makes it so you can't concentrate on anything else.'"

"She wrote that?" I gasped.

"Who's the guy, Lauren?" He arched an inquisitive eyebrow. "Who have you been kissing and writing about in your journal?"

I put my hands on my hips. "That's not my journal, you dummy. And I haven't been kissing anyone, if you must know."

I covered my mouth after I realized that I'd just given him private information about myself that he most definitely didn't need to know.

How humiliating would it be if he found out that my one and only kiss had been in the attic with him.

He cocked an eyebrow. "You expect me to believe that? We all know you and Jenna go to college parties. I've heard the rumors about you being into older guys."

"Rumors?" My voice raised an octave.

He nodded. "Yeah, Craig Bevins was planning to ask you to Homecoming until he found out you were dating college guys."

"I don't know where these rumors are coming from. I'm not dating *anyone*. Especially not any college guys."

Maybe I had gone to a few college parties this summer because I wanted Mason to notice me. But nothing had ever come of it. Mostly I'd just watched him get other girls' numbers or stand by Jenna while she got hit on by a bunch of drunk guys.

And since I really didn't need to go into all those details, I decided to change the subject back to the journal.

"Can you please give me my mom's journal?" I held out my hand. "That's hers from before I was born. She's probably writing that mushy stuff about my dad."

Wes frowned and looked at the journal again. "Prove it."

"See that date right there, Mr. Worst Detective Ever?" I stepped to his side so I could point to the date at the top of the page. "That would be January of eighteen years ago. Your mom was probably barely pregnant with you when my mom was writing this."

He furrowed his brow as he flipped through the pages to see that they had the same year written at the top of each entry.

"Fine." He sighed and handed me the journal. "But you have to admit that you put off the vibe that you're too cool for high school boys. You can't blame me for being curious about your secret love life."

He was more delusional than I thought.

"I have no secret love life. Believe it or not, you were there for my one and only kiss." My cheeks burned when I realized too late what I'd just said.

Wow, way to make yourself look even dumber.

Wes's eyes widened. "Are you saying..."

My skin prickled with heat as I watched understanding wash over him.

I sighed, knowing I might as well continue digging my grave. "Yes, Wes. That fabulous practice kiss in the attic is the beginning and the end of my experience."

His mouth just hung open, like he couldn't believe someone so pathetic could exist. "I'm the only guy you've ever kissed?"

I turned away from him and shrugged as I put my mom's journal back on the desk. "Well, it wasn't that great, so I never saw the need to try it again."

"Hey." An offended grunt escaped his lips. "I've gotten a lot better since then."

"Sure." I almost said 'prove it,' like he'd said to me with the author of the journals, but thankfully, my brain kicked in at the last minute and saved me from humiliating myself even more.

"So that journal is from before we were born?" Wes thankfully changed the subject again.

"Yeah."

"Do you think it has any information about why the family feud really

started?"

"I don't know..."

Was he trying to suggest that we read it?

"Well, don't you think we should check it out? I mean, it was just sitting here on your mom's desk waiting to be read."

Yep. He was suggesting we read it.

"We can't read my mom's journal! Those are her private thoughts, and the chances of it saying anything about a feud that would happen thirteen years later are super slim. I mean, they were friends for years after my mom even wrote this."

"Did you ever ask your mom about why the feud started?" he asked.

"Yes. But she didn't really tell me anything."

He pursed his pouty lips for a second then said, "Well, what if by asking her about it, she was reminded of that time and that's why she's reading this journal?"

"That's stretching it," I said.

"Is it?" The look on his face told me that he actually believed the secret behind the family feud was indeed inside my mom's almost two-decades old journal.

"Why do you care so much, anyway?" I asked.

He stepped closer. "When I told you on the beach that I wanted things to go back to the way they were before, I meant it."

With the way his blue eyes looked into mine, intense and pleading, I couldn't help but believe him. And in that moment, I was surprised by how badly I wanted it, too. We had been really great as friends.

So I did possibly the stupidest thing I'd done all day and reached for my mom's journal.

"We're gonna read it?" Anticipation filled his eyes.

"I'm going to read it." I shook my head. "You, on the other hand, are going to sit over there on the hammock bed that you wanted to see so badly and not read another word. I'll let you know if I find anything interesting."

"Whatever you say." And without a complaint, he walked over to the hammock, moved the throw pillows out of his way, and then kind of rolled into it.

He let out a surprised laugh as it swung to the side with his weight.

"I missed this thing." He placed one of the pillows behind his head and sighed.

Content that he wouldn't be reading over my shoulder, I pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down to read about what my mom's life had been like when she was in her early twenties.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The first few pages in the journal talked about how excited Mom was for her and Dad's upcoming wedding. She wrote about the romantic date Dad took her on to his family's beach house in Carolina Beach. That was apparently the weekend they decided that they would have to buy a house on the beach for themselves when they got married.

There was another entry about how Wes's mom had found out she was pregnant and how my mom couldn't wait until she and my dad were married and could have babies of their own.

There was more about wedding plans and how she had the perfect dress picked out.

Then an entry where my mom ranted about how rude Grandma Carmichael had been to her at their engagement party.

I kept turning pages, skimming through the boring and mushy stuff. When I turned to May of that year, my eyes caught on the words, "*We called off the wedding.*"

"What?" I gasped as my gaze lasered in on those five words.

"What did you find?" I heard Wes sit up in the hammock.

I turned over my shoulder to look at him. "Apparently, my parents called off their wedding a couple of weeks before they eloped."

"They did? Let me see." He was about to climb out of the hammock, but I held up a hand to stop him.

"You stay over there, remember? Them calling off the wedding probably has nothing to do with the family feud."

"But you never knew about it before?"

"No..." I said the word softly. My parents had never said anything about it to me. As far as I knew, they'd been super excited to get married and had

eventually eloped because they couldn't wait another day.

At least, that was the story they'd told me since I was old enough to daydream about my own future wedding.

"Well, are you going to find out what happened?" Wes asked, impatiently.

"Of course. Just give me a minute." I turned back to the journal to pick up where I'd left off.

I checked the date at the top of the page. She'd written that on May twelfth. They'd eloped on May twenty-sixth, and me, being the honeymoon baby that I was, had been born just nine months later on February ninth.

Maybe it was just a cold-feet thing and they'd gotten together the next day? I'd heard of that happening to lots of people before their wedding—even if my parents had never said it happened to them.

When my eyes focused on the journal entry again, I read:

May 12

We called off the wedding today. Micah apparently has reservations about being married to me since we grew up in completely different ways and he doesn't think that we can work out our differences. I don't know what I'm going to do. I feel like I'm falling apart and I don't know how I'm going to manage this. I'm going to have to look for a new job since I can't work with him anymore. I'm going to have to find a new place to live since I already gave up my lease because I was going to be married and moving into Micah's apartment with him in a few weeks.

I'm so lost. My life is over.

And the worst part of it is, I'm still in love with that jerk.

I furrowed my brow. It was so weird to read those words written in my mom's handwriting. She sounded so dramatic. Not nearly as level-headed as she was these days.

My parents had to have gotten back together sometime between their breakup and the wedding, so I turned the page to the next entry to find out how they'd fixed things. If my mom had been able to forgive my dad for

calling off the wedding two weeks before they eloped, maybe this would give me some insight on what it would take to get my mom and Mrs. Schultz to forgive each other for whatever happened between them.

That was if Wes's prediction was even right and it was really something between them, not just a business argument.

May 13

I called in sick today, unable to face Micah. Rena came over with a carton of rocky road ice cream. She has morning sickness pretty bad, so we just lay on my couch and were miserable together all day. We'd planned on having babies the same ages since Micah and I wanted to start a family right away. But it looks like that won't be happening anymore.

And you know what the worst part of it all is? Even though I hate him, I still sit by my phone all day hoping that Micah would call and ask if we can get back together.

I hate that I still want him.

I looked to the next page and started reading.

May 14

Rena called me this morning and told me to get off my butt and get ready because she had a surprise for me today. I didn't want to, since I'd called in sick to work again, but then she showed up at my apartment thirty minutes later with TJ!

Yes, TJ was home on leave. Apparently, he and Rena had been planning this for months so we could all spend some time together like the old days, before it got too weird for our best guy friend to hang out with two old married women.

It's been forever since I've seen TJ since he's been in Kuwait for over a year, but it was good to see him today. We all went out to

lunch and caught up in what has been going on. He seemed different, but I guess that's what happens when you grow up.

Anyway, I was able to stop thinking about Micah for a couple of hours, so that was nice. TJ says he'll be in town for a couple weeks, so we're planning to hang out again tomorrow. It will be nice to keep my mind off of things.

Hmm. I frowned as I turned the page to read the next entry. My mom had never mentioned TJ before, either.

I turned in my chair again to find Wes had grabbed the rope that hung to the side of the hammock and was pulling on it to make himself swing. I couldn't keep a smile from stretching across my face. Even though he was an eighteen-year-old guy, there was still so much of the Wes from my childhood in him.

He noticed me watching him and stopped. "Find anything good?"

"I don't know. Do you know about a guy named TJ who used to be friends with our moms in high school?"

He frowned, thinking. After a moment, he said, "Doesn't ring a bell. My mom only ever really talked about hanging out with your mom in high school."

"Yeah, same."

He nodded toward the journal. "So did they fight over this guy TJ? Were they both secretly in love with him and had agreed that for the sake of their friendship, neither of them could have him?"

I shook my head and laughed. "I highly doubt it. Your mom was already married and pregnant with you, and my mom was missing my dad. It just says that they hung out."

He shrugged. "Then it's probably nothing."

I nodded, feeling the pit in my stomach loosen a bit. "Yeah. Probably just another random friend."

I mean, I couldn't really expect my parents to tell me about every single one of their friends from their formative years. I already had a hard-enough time listening to my dad talk about the tricks he used to pull on kids back when he was in prep school.

Yeah, my dad wasn't always the kindhearted person he was to me now. He could really strong-arm someone if he was in the mood.

Hence the reason why he was the one to go close the deal in New York today instead of my uncle.

I was about to get back to my reading when Wes asked in a quiet voice, "Do you think we'll tell our kids about each other? Or will we be like this TJ guy?"

I bit my lip as I thought about it. He'd already been erased from the photos in the frames on the wall. Was that how it was going to be? Would we run into each other at the grocery store, give each other a nod, but when our kids asked, 'Who was that, Mom?' we'd just mumble, 'Oh, just someone I used to know' and never really talk about our history?

A heaviness crawled its way into my chest. How sad would that be? The first thirteen years of my life just erased because we stopped being friends.

Instead of answering his question, I turned it back on him. "Do you think you'll ever talk about the girl you used to make music videos in the attic with?"

"Well, since I'm fully expecting that video to go viral after our killer concert performance, I don't know if I'll be able to help not telling them. We'll be superstars by then."

I laughed. "I don't know if I'd hold my breath for that."

A regretful expression crossed his face and he was quiet as he stared up at the ceiling. I was about to turn back to the journal when he said, "I'm sorry I stopped being your friend. I was stupid to let my parents take me away from the best friend I ever had."

I looked carefully at him. He still considered me the best friend he'd ever had?

"You are?" My voice came out more gravelly than I'd expected.

"Yes." He held my gaze for a long, uncomfortable moment before I had to break the eye contact and look away.

After a long pause, he finally asked. "Do you think we could start over? Things have been better between us the past few days. Do you think we could try to be friends again?"

My heart ached with the thought, and I didn't realize until that moment just how much I wanted to be Wes's friend again.

But could I trust him?

"I don't know..." I started.

"Before you say anything, just let me say this," he interrupted as he sat up in the hammock and put his feet on the ground. "I told you on the beach that I

wanted things to go back to the way they were before." His eyes searched mine. "I meant it, Lauren. I'm so tired of not being friends with you. I'm tired of not going to the beach just because I see that you're already out there. I'm tired of sitting at the opposite end of the room in the classes we have together. Tired of letting a few people butt me in lines so we don't accidentally have to stand by each other."

It took me a moment to find my voice. "I'm tired of doing those things, too."

His lips slowly spread into a grin. An honest-to-goodness, happy smile that reached his eyes. "You are?"

I nodded.

He stood from the hammock, and I wasn't sure what he planned to do. Was he going to hug me?

Did I want him to hug me?

But I didn't get a chance to figure out what exactly his intent was, because in that moment, I heard the door to the garage lift.

"What's that?" Wes went completely still as his focus went to the door.

"I think my parents are back early from their trip."

Crap!

I jumped up from my chair, banging my knee on the desk drawer in the process.

"We have to get you out of here now!" I said while I quickly turned the pages in my mom's journal back to where it had been opened before I'd started reading.

But then I heard the car doors slam from inside the garage, and I knew I wouldn't have time to get Wes out of here because the closest exit was just off the kitchen, which could be seen from the door coming in from the garage.

Thinking fast, I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the closet in the corner of the room.

"Just hide in here for a bit," I said, shoving him inside.

He obeyed without a word, and then I shut the door.

"Just stay put until I let you out," I said through the crack in the door.

"Okay." His muffled voice sounded on the other side. "But if this is some sort of ploy to hold me hostage, you won't get away with it."

He was joking.

I think.

The door from the garage opened, and I heard the sound of my mom kicking off her heels on the tile floor a second later.

And just so it didn't look like I had been up to anything suspicious, I catapulted myself onto the hammock and pulled out my phone, so it would look like I'd just been having a lazy day relaxing in the sunroom, scrolling through social media.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"*L*

auren?" Mom's voice called.

"I'm in the sunroom," I called back, hoping I didn't sound too guilty.

I heard my parents' footsteps walking across the kitchen's tile floor, heading toward my direction. A moment later they appeared in the doorway.

I darkened the screen of my phone like I normally did when they caught me wasting time on social media. I had to act as normal as possible, or they might suspect that "*the Schultz boy*," as my mom referred to Wes, was in our home.

"Dad is a master at closing deals, as usual, so we're back a little early," Mom said, giving my dad a smile that showed how much she admired him.

"Glad to hear it." I sat up in the hammock and stretch like I was tired of lying there after who knows how many hours.

"How has your day been so far?" my dad asked in his deep, booming voice.

I pursed my lips, hoping that it would help with the innocent look I was trying to portray. "It's been good. I did my homework earlier and I've just been hanging out in here for a while."

Those were both true statements. Technically, anyway.

And if they could just hurry upstairs to change their clothes like they always do after these meetings, I could find a way to sneak Wes out the door.

But instead of leaving, my dad leaned against the door frame, pulling my mom close to his side. "We were thinking about going to The Garden House for dinner. How does that sound?"

The Garden House was my parents' favorite restaurant. It was located on this side of the bridge for people who wanted a nice view of the ocean as they ate their overpriced seafood.

I wasn't a big fan of seafood, but they did make my favorite pasta dish.

"The Garden House sounds great. What time do you want to eat?"

My dad scratched his chin. "We had a pretty early morning, so I think I'll make the reservation for five."

"Sounds good."

Then I turned back to my phone, hoping that they'd get the hint that I didn't see a need for the conversation to continue. Which seemed to do the trick, because my parents mumbled something about going upstairs to change into something more comfortable, and then they turned to leave.

I waited until I heard their footsteps on the stairs before I peeked my head around the doorframe to make sure they were gone. Then I rushed back into the room and opened the closet door.

Wes gasped quietly, putting a hand to his chest dramatically. "There was barely any air in there. Another few minutes and I would have passed out from lack of oxygen."

"Whatever." I rolled my eyes at his smirk and pulled on his arm to get him moving. We didn't have a moment to waste.

I pulled him behind me and stopped at the doorway to make sure the coast was clear.

My parents were still out of sight, so we shuffled as quickly as we could through the house, him just a step behind me. He bumped against my back a few times whenever I would suddenly stop to listen, imagining that I heard my parents coming back downstairs.

Thankfully, I was only hearing things and the coast stayed clear. When we made it to the back door, I turned the knob as quietly as I could. It was probably overkill since my parents weren't within earshot, but I couldn't risk getting caught.

"Just go around the side of the house where the garage is and out the front gate, so my parents don't see you from one of the windows upstairs," I whispered as I pushed him out the door.

He stepped outside only to turn back. "My music is still on the piano."

I waved him away. "I'll get it to you sometime. Just go."

He nodded. "Okay, I'll see you at school on Monday. Make sure to let me know what you find out about our moms."

I nodded and shooed him out the door.

Once he was out of sight, I breathed a sigh of relief and sagged against the door.

That was close.

"Did you get a chance to read more of your mom's journal this weekend?" Wes asked when I was packing up my bag at the end of choir. Mrs. Beauchamp had gotten an important call on her phone and had left us to entertain ourselves for the last few minutes of class.

"No." I frowned. "My parents were home the rest of the weekend. But I'm hoping I'll have a few minutes to look after cross country practice. You don't think we'll be running one of those eight-mile runs today, do you?"

He put his backpack over his shoulder. "Coach said we'll be running the bridge loop. That's only five miles."

I couldn't keep my jaw from dropping. "Has he never heard of a one-mile day?"

Wes laughed. "He may seem like an easy-going guy, but he was in the army for over a decade. The shortest run day you have to look forward to is the gray water tower loop that you played hide and seek on, and that isn't on the schedule until Thursday."

"I wasn't playing hide and seek, and you know it."

"Whatever you say." He shot me a teasing smirk.

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I asked, "So when is the next race?"

I needed to prepare for the next time I embarrassed myself in front of a big crowd of people.

"It's on Friday at North Brunswick High."

"That's in Leland, right?"

He nodded. "Coach probably forgot to tell you all this since you're new and he was busy with our meet on Friday, but we leave after lunch period and then come back that night."

Nice. I'd get to skip out a little early on Friday. The thought cheered me up for about a second before I realized that I'd be running.

Wes must have noticed something in my expression because he said, "It'll be fun. Cross country trips are the best."

"That's easy for you to say. You actually like running." And he was wicked fast. I'd overheard some of the runners after last week's meet talking about how Wes was in the running for this year's state champion.

He grinned. "Just give it a chance. You might find you like it once you get used to it."

I zipped up my backpack. "Don't hold your breath."

A high-pitched giggle sounded from a chair on the row in front of me. Wes and I both looked in the direction of the giggle. It was Olivia, and she was laughing at something on her phone.

I rolled my eyes and turned back to Wes. His expression had shifted from upbeat to depressed—much like what he'd looked like after they'd broken up on Friday night.

"How are you doing with that, anyway?" I nodded toward Olivia.

"I'm doing okay." He shrugged and scratched at a spot on his tanned arm. "It was good to have the weekend to clear my head again. But I won't pretend like I didn't feel like punching Emilio in the face when I saw him and Olivia kissing in the hall this morning."

I gave him a sympathetic smile. "So you're not quite over it?"

He sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair. "It's only been a few days." He glanced over at Olivia once more, and my stomach twisted with jealousy when I saw a longing in his eyes. It was only there for a moment before he blinked it away, but that look told me all I needed to know. Wes had fallen for Olivia. Hard.

That thought made the jealous feeling inside me burn a little more.

Olivia giggled again, and Wes seemed to come out of his daze.

He shrugged. "I mostly just feel stupid that I didn't notice anything was happening with them."

I glanced back at Olivia who was still typing away on her phone.

"You're better off without her."

To be honest, I'd always been bothered by the fact that a guy like Wes had fallen for a girl like Olivia. But I couldn't pretend that the way he cared about her wasn't how I wanted my future boyfriend to feel about me. Part of the reason why I'd never had a boyfriend was probably because I was way too serious when it came to guys. Even though Jenna repeatedly reminded me that we were young and that dating in high school should just be all about kissing and having fun, I couldn't help but get too much into my head every time I went on a date.

I was way too self-conscious and second-guessed everything, putting too much weight on whether the guy and I would be compatible for forever.

In theory, I knew I went way too overboard.

But even though there was a flaw with my thinking, it was refreshing to see that a guy my age might take dating as seriously as I did. It gave me hope that I'd find someone like that for me someday.

The bell rang, breaking me away from my thoughts.

Wes cleared his throat. "I guess I'll see you later at practice?"

I stood from my seat, hoping he hadn't somehow been able to read my thoughts. "Yup. I'll see you then."

And I didn't think it would ever happen, but I was slightly excited to go running after school.

I had hoped to have a chance to talk a little with Wes as we warmed up for our run, but when I arrived for practice, Wes was in the middle of a conversation with the boy's coach, Coach Marowsky. Soon after, Coach Slater addressed all of us with a few instructions, and then we were off running our five miles for the afternoon.

Within a few minutes, Wes disappeared in the distance while I was bringing up the rear. And just like last week, after jogging down a couple of blocks, my lungs begged for me to let them rest.

Today's run was a loop, so unlike my first practice, my teammates shouldn't be turning around when they got to some point and coming back the same way. So, when I saw Latisha Andrews running down a street across a grass field, I couldn't help but feel tempted to lop off a good chunk of the distance and just cut across the field instead of going around it.

It would only be hurting my progress, and not anyone else, really.

I stopped, putting my hands on my hips as I tried to catch my breath and scan the surrounding area. Latisha had been the runner right ahead of me before I started falling farther and farther behind. As long as she didn't look back, no one would ever know...

I glanced at my watch. If I wanted to get back home to read more of my mom's journal before she got off work, I'd need to get this run over with as soon as possible.

So, after making sure the coast was clear one more time, I jogged as quickly as I could across the grass and into the neighborhood Latisha had just been running through.

Tomorrow I'd run the full route. I needed to ease my way into this thing, anyway, so I wouldn't strain my muscles too much.

At least, that was what I told myself.

Maybe I'd have to take Wes up on some of those pointers that Coach Slater said he'd have for me.

When I got into my car after practice, I noticed that I'd left Wes's sheet music on the passenger's seat this morning instead of giving it to him at school. So, when I drove into my driveway and saw him on the beach throwing a frisbee to his dog, I decided to deliver it to him before I forgot again.

If I was quick, I'd still have time to read my mom's journal.

"We seem to be making a habit of bumping into each other on the beach," Wes said to me when I approached him on the sand.

"I forgot to get this to you earlier and figured you might need it to practice before we get together on Wednesday." I held out the sheet to him.

He looked at the music for a second before taking it from me. "About the practice..." He met my eyes with an agitated expression. "I'd forgotten that I'd already promised to go to my cousin's soccer game that night, so I won't be able to practice after all."

I furrowed my brow, surprised at my disappointment. I hadn't realized I was actually looking forward to it.

I cleared my throat. "Well, I don't know if there's another time I could get together. My parents or Angelica will be home pretty much the rest of the week."

His dog brought the frisbee back to him, so he took it and threw it along the shore again. Then Wes turned back to look at me, squinting in the sunlight. "We don't have to practice only at your house, you know."

"But I have the piano."

"And Mrs. Beauchamp gave us a practice track, too, remember?"

Oh yeah. I'd only used the piano as an excuse to not have to look at him as we practiced.

"Okay." I took in a breath. "But even with the practice track, we'd need somewhere secluded to practice. I'd rather not have people watching us sing until the actual concert."

He seemed to think for a moment, and then he shrugged. "My parent's hangar is an option. Think your parents would believe you're working on a school project tomorrow night?"

I pulled out my phone to check my calendar, though I was pretty sure I had nothing going on besides homework tomorrow.

My schedule was empty. "It looks like I'm free."

"Great." Wes smiled, showing his ultra-white teeth.

"Do you want me to just meet you at the hangar then?" I was pretty sure

theirs was just a few spots away from my parents' hangar.

He threw the frisbee to his dog again. "We could just drive there together. Since we do live next door to each other," he suggested.

"I think you're forgetting the fact that if my parents saw us get in a car together, they'd go crazy. We may have decided to try to be friends again, but I doubt our parents would be on board with us spending time together."

Wes's lips quirked into a smirk. "Okay, fine. We'll just meet there."

"Great." I glanced back at my house, knowing Angelica would be leaving soon. The window of time that I could use to check my mom's journal again was coming up here. "Well, I better get going. Gotta get my top-secret research project done."

Wes scrunched up his face. "You have a top-secret research project?"

"I'm snooping in my mom's journal, remember?"

His eyes lit up with understanding. "Oh yes. You better get inside then. I'd love to know if you find anything."

I was about to leave when an idea came to me. A gust of wind blew my hair in my face and I pushed it out of my eyes so I could see Wes. "You know, you should probably be digging around yourself. There has to be two sides to this story."

Wes bent over to take the frisbee back from his dog. "I'll get some snooping done tonight, too, and then report my findings tomorrow."

"Good," I said, and before I could get distracted again by Wes, I hurried back to my house.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"*W*ere you just talking to the Schultz boy?" Angelica asked when I stepped inside the kitchen, slightly out of breath.

My face blanched. When I'd gone to give Wes his music, I hadn't thought about how Angelica was always in the kitchen at this time of day with a perfect view of the ocean.

I tucked some stray hair behind my ear. "I just had to give him some music for choir."

She looked up from the vegetables she was chopping with a surprised expression on her face. "You two are in choir together?"

"Yes." *And we're secretly practicing a duet together that we'll be shocking our parents with at the fall concert.*

"I'm surprised your parents let you participate in the choir knowing he's in there with you."

Hoping to play things cool so she wouldn't guess everything that was really going on, I shrugged and said, "I just try not to remind my parents of the fact that Wes's parents also decided against private school. The less they think about us being trapped in the same four walls as each other, the better."

I hoped that by using the word "trapped," it would make Angelica think I also wasn't a fan of being in the same school as Wes. It had been true enough last week.

"So what are you making for dinner tonight?" I asked, hoping to get her mind off of Wes and me being together.

She gestured at the peppers on the chopping board. "Steak fajitas."

"Sounds delicious," I said. Angelica's fajitas were the best.

I was about to head upstairs when Angelica said, "The Schultz boy has turned into quite the handsome young man, no?"

My face flashed with heat and I froze. "What?"

She looked at me innocently. "Are you saying that you've never noticed?"

I cleared my throat, feeling so caught off guard that we were even discussing this. "He's not the ugliest guy I've ever seen. But other than that, I haven't really given his looks a second thought."

"Really?" She arched her eyebrows like she didn't believe me.

My palms started to feel sweaty. Did she have secret cameras lying around here somewhere and had somehow seen my weird reactions to Wes while sitting on the piano bench with him on Saturday?

"I don't think of Wes like that," I said when she continued to stare at me. "And even if I did think he was cute, nothing could ever happen because of the feud."

The words were out before I realized what I was saying.

Why did I just say that?

Did I want something to happen between Wes and me?

Weren't we just barely deciding to be friends?

Angelica's deep brown eyes widened. "So you do think he's cute."

Maaaaaybe.

"No."

Angelica gave me a smirk, like she'd just figured out a big secret.

"I think you've been reading too many romance novels, Angelica," I said before she could ask me any more questions.

But a big grin stretched across her cheeks. "I think you might be reading too few, Lauren."

I rolled my eyes. Angelica was always trying to set me up with boys. If it wasn't this cute boy who bagged her groceries at the store that week, or the new boy whose family moved into her neighborhood, it was someone else. Apparently, I'd already shot down all the guys she knew, so she was resorting to get me to like the forbidden boy next door.

"I'm gonna go upstairs to shower and change," I said, and then hurried upstairs before she could try to turn my life into one of her romance novels again.

As soon as Angelica announced that she was leaving and dinner was on the stove set on low heat, I raced to the sunroom to see if I could find my mom's journal.

It was right where it had been on Saturday, so I quickly opened it and took a seat at the desk. It only took me a few seconds to find the spot where

I'd left off in my reading.

May 15

I couldn't afford to take another sick day today, so I dragged myself to work this morning. Thankfully Micah decided to go visit some of his manufacturers over the next week, so I won't have to see him for a while.

TJ called me after work and asked if I wanted to go see a movie with him tonight. Rena and Frank had plans already, so it was just TJ and me. The movie was funny, which was just what I needed today. After the movie, we went out for shakes and TJ entertained me with stories from Kuwait. It's so strange to think of how different our lives are from each other. I asked him if he's had a chance to find himself a girl to write him while he's at war, but he just blushed and said no. So I told him that's okay. We could be single together. But he looked at me funny when I said that, which just made me feel stupid. Of course he won't be single forever. Just me.

Blah. Stupid Micah. Part of me is petty enough to want to find some rebound guy to rub in Micah's face when he gets back.

I chuckled as I turned the page. My mom sounded so young back then. Hearing her talk about guys and love and rebounds was so not how she ever talked these days. Sure, she still got self-conscious about fancy dinners with the board, or spending holidays with my grandma, but this lovesick version of Jolene Harris Carmichael was new to me.

The next few entries were much the same. Just my mom hanging out with TJ for the most part. They went dancing at a club one night. Then they stayed at her house to play card games and watch a movie the next night. I skimmed through most of that stuff because I didn't see my dad's name on any of the pages, and I was mostly interested in seeing how they patched things together with so little time before their wedding.

I kept on skimming through the entries until I stumbled on a sentence at the bottom of the page that said something about her rebounding.

I turned the page to see what she meant.

Remember when I wrote that I wanted to have a rebound relationship to make Micah mad?

Well, last night, I think I might have accidentally started one. And I don't know whether to be excited about it or not.

You see, I invited TJ over to my apartment for dinner, since he didn't believe me when I told him that I'd finally learned to cook. As luck would have it, I ended up burning the whole thing, so he was sweet and ordered pizza instead. We turned on the TV, and there was a super romantic movie on. I haven't been in the romance movie mood for the past week, but after a few glasses of wine, it sounded like a good idea to cuddle up to TJ and watch the movie. He's always been like home to me and a safe place when I'm dealing with stuff, so being close to him was just nice.

I hadn't realized how strong he'd gotten in the past couple years, until I was nestled up against his chest. That guy has some serious muscles hiding beneath his baggy shirts. And he smelled so good.

Anyway, I must have gotten carried away with the romance happening on the screen because before I knew what was happening, I was tilting my head up and kissing TJ. It was like my brain just flipped a switch because once he started kissing me back, I couldn't seem to stop or pull away. My brain seemed to forget that TJ and I had only been friends before because pretty soon we were full on making out on my couch.

Had she really made out with one of her best guy friends just days after calling off her wedding?

Who was this woman?

I pushed the journal back farther on the desk, realizing that I probably didn't want to read any more about how good of a kisser this TJ guy was. Or how good his muscles looked after his time in the military.

But my fingers twitched, wanting to take the journal in my hands again and read what happened afterwards. My parents had found a way to get back together just a week later, so obviously her fling with this TJ guy hadn't gone too far.

But was this why I'd never heard of TJ? Had TJ been secretly in love with my mom, and when she chose my dad over him, he decided he couldn't be friends with her anymore because it broke his heart too much?

I chuckled—not that I liked the idea of my mom hurting TJ's feelings, but because I was turning into Angelica. This was just what she would do. Try to turn everything into one of her romance novels.

Most likely TJ thought my mom was cute, and since he was a guy and she tried to kiss him, he figured, *why not?* He'd been deployed for a long time, from the sound of it, so he was probably just happy to kiss someone. I mean, hadn't Wes and I kissed each other way back when? It was probably just something they did once, laughed about, and then they moved on with their lives.

But it still didn't answer the question of why I'd never heard about TJ before, or why my parents had never told me about their brief breakup before they got married.

I looked down at the pages covered with my mom's handwriting. It would probably only take a few more journal entries to find out how my parents had managed to move past this crazy time in their life. I had only read a few sentences further when my mom's voice sounded from the kitchen, causing me to nearly jump out of my skin.

"Lauren?"

How did I fail to hear the garage door this time?

I quickly turned her journal back to the page it had been open to before and bolted out of the sunroom, my heart beating faster than a freight train.

"I'm here," I called when I made it to the kitchen. I sounded out of breath, so I worked on composing myself as she hung her purse up on a hook.

"How was school today?" Mom smiled at me.

"It was good." My voice came out higher pitched than normal. I cleared my throat, hoping it would make me sound less guilty. "How was work?"

That sounded better.

She pulled her blonde hair up into a ponytail. Had this TJ guy enjoyed running his fingers through that same hair that night?

"It was good," she said. "I've been reading through contracts all day."

"That sounds fun," I said sarcastically.

She shrugged. "Someone has to do it."

"Where's Dad?" I peeked my head around.

"He's just in the car finishing up a phone call."

I nodded. "Well, Angelica made us fajitas. Want me to heat up the tortillas?"

"That would be great. I'll just go upstairs to change out of this suit, and I'll come help you set the table."

When she went up the stairs, I just watched her. My mom couldn't have had a secret fling with TJ right before she married my dad, could she?

The rest of the night, I couldn't get the image of my mom making out with another guy out of my head. Had it just been a one-time thing kissing TJ? Or had she kissed him again the next night, too?

I should have just finished reading the journal entry while I'd had the chance. Knowing how everything had worked out between my parents would make it a lot easier to concentrate on other important things, like figuring out how to end this family feud so Wes and I could be the kind of friends who didn't have to sneak around to hang out.

I needed to get my hands on that journal first thing tomorrow. My parents usually left for work at the same time that I headed to school in the morning. But finding out what happened with that TJ guy would be worth getting a tardy for.

So the next day, when my parents were leaving and locking up the house, I climbed in my car to pretend like I was leaving at the same time.

I fiddled with my stereo as they pulled out beside me then watched them through my rearview mirror as they pulled onto the road. Once their cars disappeared around the bend, I turned my car off and hurried back inside.

I went straight for the sunroom and snooped around the desk for the journal.

But it wasn't there.

Had my mom figured out that I'd read it?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

That night, I made it to the Schultz's airplane hangar right at seven. My parents hadn't seemed suspicious of my school project at all, but I was still nervous that someone might see me here and tell them.

I looked around to make sure no one was watching me before I climbed out of my car and walked to the huge metal building where the Schultzs stored their airplane and collector's cars.

Wes opened the door before I could knock, and my breath caught when I looked at him. He'd gotten his hair cut since I last saw him at cross country practice, and while his hair had looked nice before, this new style made him look different somehow. Trendier and slightly more edgy.

Okay, basically, he looked hot. Like, take-your-breath-away good-looking.

"Hey," he said, opening the door wider.

"Hi." The word came out way too breathless-sounding. Why was I suddenly so nervous to be around him?

This was just Wes. Just because he looked like he belonged on the cover of a teen magazine didn't mean I needed to like it.

"Are we practicing in here?" I asked, looking around at my surroundings. For some reason I'd assumed we'd be singing beside his family's airplane instead of in the living area attached to it.

"I figured the acoustics might be less echoey in here." Wes shut the door then led me deeper into the room. "But if you'd rather sing in the hangar, we can do that."

"No, this is good."

I looked around the living area, forcing my eyes away from the guy I was supposed to think of as a friend—not the hottie of my future daydreams. But

the way the cotton of his shirt stretched across his chest was making it difficult.

What was happening to me? What was it about these practices that had me checking Wes out and feeling weird things in my stomach?

The room we were in had obviously been updated since the last time I'd been here. There was a brown leather couch with fluffy white throw pillows on one side. A large, flat-screen TV hung on the wall across from the couch. The kitchen cupboards had even been modernized from the oak cabinets that had been here last time.

"This room always seemed so much bigger when we were little," I commented as I joined Wes at the kitchen counter where he had his sheet music laid out.

He gave me a small smile. "Well, you've probably grown half a foot since the last time you were here, so that makes sense."

"So have you," I commented, taking in his height. "How tall are you now, anyway?"

"Just under six-one."

Nice.

He unlocked his phone and brought the music app up on the screen. Before tapping the play button, he looked at me curiously. "Were you able to find out more about your mom last night?"

"I read a few entries, but my mom got home from work before I got too far. And then when I tried to find the journal again this morning, it was gone."

"Do you think she knew you were reading it?"

"I hope not." It would be weird if she knew that I'd been reading about her kissing some other dude.

"Did anything you read stand out?" he asked.

"Nothing that would lead to a family feud." At least, I really doubted my mom kissing TJ could break up a lifelong friendship.

Unless Wes was somehow right about our moms both agreeing to leave TJ alone until his mom found out years later and felt betrayed.

Yeah, that was a long shot, though. Wes's parents adored each other.

"I was actually talking to my mom about stuff yesterday and she said something a little weird," Wes said.

"Yeah?"

He nodded. "I was trying to figure out what went down between our

moms, and so I mentioned to her that you were on the cross country team."

"And was she mad?" My mom had definitely been upset about Wes and me spending time near each other.

Wes shook his head. "No. But she said something about it making sense for you to be on the team since running is in your genetics."

I furrowed my brow. "Did she not see me at our last race? I don't know how she could think I have running in my genetics with me coming in last and all."

He scratched the back of his neck, obviously uncomfortable. "When I asked if either one of your parents ran cross country back in the day, my mom got all weird. It was almost like she wasn't supposed to talk about your family being good at running."

"Why would that be something bad to talk about?" I asked, confused.

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Maybe she's just worried that I'm going to turn out to be a way faster runner than you." I pulled out a bar stool to sit. "If it's in my genetics, it could be a possibility."

But Wes just laughed at my hypothesis. "I really doubt she's worried about that since it's obvious that I'm way faster than you."

"That's only because you've been running for years. I mean, I'm just four days into this thing, and I've already trimmed off more time than I thought possible."

"And how many shortcuts have you taken to do that?" He raised a dark eyebrow.

"I don't think I need to answer that question." I pursed my lips and studied my music.

Had he somehow seen my shortcut yesterday...and today?

Wes pointed a finger at me. "I knew it!"

I looked up at the cocky expression on his face. "So I trimmed off a couple miles. It's not like I'm hurting anyone."

"You know you'll get disqualified from a race if you try taking shortcuts, right?"

"Well, duh," I said, sounding way too much like my fifth-grade self.

Wes chuckled. "Well, at least you understand that. I'd hate to have to warn Coach Slater about any plans you had for Friday's race."

Coach Slater seemed like a nice enough guy, but I was sure that with his background in the military it wouldn't be too hard for him to find some sort of

punishment for anyone who made his team look bad.

"So, should we get this practice started?" Wes asked, ready to move on to the task at hand.

I nodded. "Sure."

"Good job on your race today," Coach Slater said Friday afternoon as he handed me a cup when I crossed the finish line.

"Thanks." I gulped down the water he offered. My throat was so dry.

He studied his clipboard for a moment before looking back at me with his green eyes. "You cut off two full minutes from last week's race. If you keep this up, you could get under thirty minutes at next week's meet."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." I laughed. I'd busted my butt just to come in second to last place today. I didn't think it was possible for me to cut off another four minutes next week. But when he frowned at my response, I said, "But I'm going to certainly try. Word is that I have running in my genetics, so I guess anything is possible."

I thought I'd said it lightheartedly enough, but when Coach Slater's expression darkened suddenly, I worried I might have said something to offend him.

Did he not like people joking around about the sport he took so seriously?

Deciding it would be best to just leave instead of offend him with more lame running jokes, I cleared my throat and said, "Anyway, I better get to my aunt. She came to watch the race."

He stared down at his clipboard, his jaw flexing. "Sounds good."

I made my way through the crowd of parents congratulating their daughters on their races until I came to Aunt Tracey who was standing at the bottom of the bleachers.

Aunt Tracey was my mom's sister who had lived in Leland since before I was born. We didn't get to see each other as often as I liked, so I'd been thrilled when she said she'd love to catch up at my meet.

She was a year older than my mom, but they could have passed for twins. They had the same wavy blonde hair and blue eyes. I'd always envied their blue eyes, not that I necessarily disliked having green eyes—they were better than my dad's plain old boring brown—but it would have been fun to have gotten their ocean-blue eyes.

At least I got their blonde hair.

"Great job, Lauren." Aunt Tracey had a huge smile on her face.

I laughed. "I came in second to last place, but thanks for not rubbing it in."

"You did great. Better than I'd ever do in a cross country race. What made you decide to start running your senior year, anyway?"

"Because I was stupid," I said, before telling her all about my lack of P.E. credits and how I'd only joined as a last resort.

"Good for you. Doing what has to be done." She smiled then nodded back toward the finish line. "Your coach hasn't aged a day since the last time I saw him."

"You know Coach Slater?" I frowned.

"Of course." She said it like I should have known about them being acquaintances for some reason. "He practically lived at our house growing up. He, your mother, and Rena were inseparable back then."

"They were?" My mom had acted like she hadn't known Coach Slater from Adam.

"Doesn't your mom ever talk about her high school days?" Aunt Tracey narrowed her blue eyes. "Your cousins are always complaining about how I need to stop reliving my glory days. I thought all parents did that."

"Mom used to talk about her and Mrs. Schultz being best friends and all the things they used to do. But she never said anything about Coach Slater being there."

My aunt's gaze went back to Coach Slater who was standing next to Coach Marowsky, clapping for the boys' team as they ran past on their first lap through the course. Wes was near the lead, as usual.

What I wouldn't give for running to be half as effortless as he made it look.

Aunt Tracey turned her attention back to me. "That's weird that your mom wouldn't mention him. They were literally like the three amigos, though I was pretty sure TJ was in love with your mom."

I choked on my gum. After coughing for a moment, I asked, "What? Did you just say Coach Slater's name is TJ?"

"Yeah..." she said slowly.

My heart rate sped up as my mind formulated its next thoughts. If Coach Slater's first name was TJ, and the guy my mom had been making out with in her journal was also named TJ, did that mean they were the same person?

Had my mom kissed my cross country coach?

That would definitely explain why she'd acted so weird when I tried to

introduce them. Things must not have ended well at all if they didn't even want to say a brief hello to each other.

I stared at Coach Slater as my brain tried to process this new information. His back was turned to me, so I could just see the back of his gray ball cap with some of his golden blond hair poking under the rim.

He had acted kind of weird at my first race when he found out my mom was coming to watch. What exactly had happened between them?

"Do you know why my mom would have pretended like she didn't know Coach Slater?"

Aunt Tracey pinched her lips together. "They probably just grew apart once your mom was married. That's normal, especially with a friend of the opposite sex."

"Yeah, but why pretend like she didn't even know him? Why would she never even have mentioned him to me?"

She shrugged. "That's probably a question for your mother."

She was probably right. But if my mom had kept her friendship with Coach Slater a secret from me for almost eighteen years, I didn't know how she'd respond to me asking her questions about him now. Especially if she was suspicious of me reading her journal.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I was standing in line to load the bus, lost in my thoughts about the new information about Coach Slater, a.k.a. "TJ," when someone spoke from behind me.

"How did you do on your race today?"

I glanced over my shoulder. Wes's cheeks were still flushed from his race, which was actually really attractive on him.

Wait? Was I just thinking about how cute Wes was fresh off from winning a race?

Next thing I knew I'd be thinking he was dreamy when he raised his hand to answer a question in Calculus. Or that he was gorgeous when he put his books in his locker.

Yeah, I needed to stop noticing all the ways Wes was attractive.

I decided to answer the question before I could think of any more things Wes looked good doing.

"I came in second to last place this time. So I guess I'm improving."

"Nice." He arched his eyebrows like he was impressed. "And you didn't cut any corners, right?"

"No shortcuts today." Should I be offended that he didn't think I could finish a run without cheating?

"Must be those running genetics of yours kicking in," he said, reminding me of what his mom had said earlier in the week.

I laughed. "Sure."

The bus driver opened the door and the people at the front of the line started boarding. I scooted ahead with the line and Wes stepped along with me.

"Did you ever ask your parents if they used to be runners?" Wes asked.

"No." I frowned. "I completely forgot."

Though now that I knew that my mom had been best friends with Coach Slater, it made sense that they could have met while running. Maybe they'd been on the cross country team together just like Wes and I were.

And with how fast Wes was, maybe his mom had been on the team, too.

The girl ahead of me stepped onto the bus so I followed behind her. I clutched the strap of my backpack in my hands as I ran my gaze along the rows of seats to see if there were any empty seats left.

I sighed with relief when I spotted one about a third of the way down the aisle. I was just scooting into my seat when I noticed Wes was still behind me.

"You need something?" I looked up at him. He'd sat with his friends on the way down, so I'd assumed he'd head to the back of the bus with them.

"Mind if I sit with you?" He briefly glanced to the rear of the bus. "It looks like you got the last empty seat."

I swept my gaze around once more. "Aren't you worried about people seeing us sit together?"

"No." He furrowed his brow. "Are you?"

"Well," I lowered my voice, "if people see us sitting together, they'll think we're friends or something. And if that got back to our parents, I'll probably have to quit the team."

"You worry too much about the feud, Lauren." He waved for me to scoot over. "Everyone is too busy flirting with each other that I doubt they'll even notice."

After thinking about it for a split second longer, I decided to ignore what my gut was telling me and moved close to the wall.

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Wes gave me a triumphant grin and slipped in beside me.

When our thighs bumped, I couldn't keep flashbacks of last week's duet practice from popping in my mind and how we'd sat this close on the piano bench.

And I didn't know how he never seemed to smell like sweat after running as fast as he just had, but the light scent of his cologne or deodorant was the only thing I could smell on him—and it was probably one of my favorite scents in the world.

As he shoved his backpack under our seat, I discreetly sniffed my own armpits to make sure I wasn't stinky. Thankfully, my deodorant seemed to still be working as well, and so I relaxed back in my seat.

Coach Slater spoke into the intercom a moment later.

"Coach Marowsky and I wanted to congratulate you all on your runs today. You did excellent, and I have high hopes of us doing well at the regionals in a couple of weeks."

A few people cheered at the sentiment.

And when I looked sideways at Wes to see his reaction, he had a huge smile on his face. He was no doubt imagining what it would be like to win the region title and then probably go on to win the state title after that.

Coach Slater went on to explain that we'd be stopping at the food court at the nearby mall for dinner in a few minutes, and then he handed the intercom back to the bus driver before taking his seat in the front.

I studied my coach's profile for a moment as he talked with Coach Marowsky across the aisle. Was it possible that he'd hung out with my parents when I was younger, and I just didn't remember him? Maybe they'd all been friends and I'd somehow just forgotten him as I'd grown older?

But as I watched him, I couldn't bring up any sort of recollection of who he was.

"What are you thinking about?" Wes's deep voice startled me from my thoughts.

I turned my attention to him. "Do you know if our moms were friends with Coach Slater when they were younger?"

Wes glanced briefly over to coach then back to me. "Yeah, of course. He and my mom met on the cross country team."

"They did?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"But on Saturday, you said you never heard of them having a friend named TJ."

He frowned. "Coach's name is Travis."

Ooooh. So TJ must have been his nickname back then.

"Do you know if my mom was on the team, too?"

"No clue." He shrugged, and his shoulder bumped against mine. "Coach and my mom lost touch over the years. I didn't actually know that they were friends until I started running freshman year."

Hmm. Interesting. So his mom hadn't thought to tell him, either.

Maybe they had all just lost touch through the years as they moved on with life.

Maybe I was trying to make more out of this than necessary.

But...my mom had kissed TJ just two weeks before she married my dad, and then my parents never told me anything about their brief breakup before the wedding.

It was really starting to feel like they were purposely not telling me something.

"Do you have any plans for tonight?" Wes asked me when the bus pulled into the parking lot at the school. The drive back from Leland had gone quickly. Wes and I had talked a little on the ride, but then a few of the guys around us had engaged him in a conversation about some videogame that had just come out. And I'd put in my earbuds, so I wouldn't have to hear about how authentic the blood and guts were.

"Jenna is gone for the weekend, so I'm just going home." I unzipped my backpack to look for my keys.

"Well, a bunch of us are planning to hang out at Carson's house and have a party to celebrate tonight's win. You should come."

I bit my lip as I looked around at the members of the team who were making ready to get off the bus. "I don't really know anyone that well yet."

Wes just looked at me like I was weird. "You know that hanging out with people is how you get to know them better, right?"

"Of course."

"So, you should come to the party. We could even go together since we're friends again, right?"

"I guess so..."

"Good." Wes smiled. "And since I know you're still paranoid about our parents seeing us go to a party together, how about we meet in front of Jeremiah's house? I can pick you up in my SUV there."

My heart fluttered at the thought of driving to a party with Wes in his G-Wagon. That vehicle was seriously hot, and Jenna and I may have fantasized a time or two about future boyfriends driving up to our houses in that very vehicle, with the shiny rims glinting in the setting sun.

But could I actually get into a vehicle that Wes was driving without feeling guilty about it? It just seemed like such a forbidden thing. So far, all the time we'd spent together had been during cross country or at choir. This would be considered as willful disobedience to my parents.

Though, after finding out that my mom and dad had been keeping things from me, it made me want to return the favor and break a few rules myself.

It wasn't like I would be breaking the law or anything. And from what I'd seen of him driving down our street, Wes was actually a pretty good driver. He came to complete stops at stop signs and everything.

Before my conscience could kick in and tell me I was being stupid, I said, "Okay. I'll meet you in front of the Dermot's."

Wes's smile broadened as he stood from the seat and stepped into the aisle. "Great. I'll be waiting for you there at eight forty-five."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I texted Jenna as soon as I got home from the track meet. She was out of town for the weekend to visit her older sister, but I needed some moral support before I psyched myself out too much.

Me: *Is it totally stupid for me to go to a party with Wes tonight?*

The message went through, and instead of waiting for her answer, I quickly jumped in the shower to wash off any remaining sweat from the race. When I got out, I had a message waiting.

Jenna: *definitely not a bad idea. You're trying to be friends again, right? This is what friends do.*

I bit my lip as I thought about what she'd said. We *had* become better friends over the past week. And I was slowly becoming comfortable around him. But then again, I also had those weird thoughts about how good-looking he was. And the little butterflies in my stomach that appeared when I thought about hanging out with him tonight were probably not the feelings someone would have when they just wanted to be friends.

Me: *But I should probably take my own car right?*

Jenna: *He offered to drive you there in his G Wagon??*

Me: *Yes.*

Her text came through almost instantly.

Jenna: *Why are you hesitating.*

Another text came through right after that one.

Jenna: *If I wasn't already halfway to Raleigh, I'd be begging you to take me too.*

I sighed. I was probably making something out of nothing.

Me: *Okay. Let's just hope my parents don't find out.*

I freshened up my makeup and re-curled my hair afterwards. My parents

were in the family room watching a movie when I got back downstairs.

"Where are you off to?" My dad asked, taking in my appearance. I had changed into my favorite dark-wash jeans and light blue floral blouse. But unlike last week, I had left the fake lashes and heels in my room.

"I'm going to a team party at some cross country runner's house," I said, hoping that I didn't look too guilty of sneaking around behind their backs.

But I probably should've known that just mentioning cross country would raise the alarm because my parents looked at each other with anxious expressions before turning back to me.

"Is the Schultz boy going to be at this party?"

"Um..." I fingered my necklace. "I think most of the team is planning to go, so it's a possibility."

I could see my parents weighing the chances of me interacting with the forbidden boy from next door in their minds.

My mom pursed her lips before saying, "You know how we feel about you spending time around that boy. Just because we've allowed you to be on the cross country team doesn't mean that we're okay with you consorting with him."

Consorting? She made it sound like we were planning some kind of attack on enemy lines.

"You have nothing to worry about," I said. "I know the rules. I just want to celebrate today's win with my teammates."

My mom studied me for the longest moment before she sighed. "Make sure that you're home by midnight."

I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. "I will."

Then I continued on my way to the front door.

"Aren't you taking your car?" my dad's voice called.

I stopped in my tracks. Of course my parents would expect me to drive myself there. I turned back and smoothed my expression while I tried to come up with a believable excuse.

"Um, I was just checking to see if I left my jacket by the front door. But it looks like I left it in my room." Along with my keys and wallet since I hadn't planned to use them.

I rushed up the stairs, my heart racing with worry that my parents would notice how strange I was acting. I grabbed my white jacket from my closet as well as my purse.

Thankfully, my parents were too focused on their movie when I came

back down again to ask me questions.

"See you later," I called on my way toward the garage.

They didn't respond, which I hoped meant they weren't suspicious of me after all.

Wes's SUV was parked on the side of the road in front of the Dermot's house like he had said it would be.

I pulled my car up behind him and climbed out. My parents looked like they planned to stay home for the night, so hopefully they wouldn't notice my car parked down the street.

I went to the passenger side of Wes's G-Wagon and got in.

"Did you just drive five houses down the road instead of walking here?" Wes asked as I buckled in, amusement obvious in his tone.

"Yeah."

He chuckled. "You really do take your shortcuts seriously."

"Har-har." I rolled my eyes. "Actually, my parents wondered why I was walking, so I had to drive to keep them from getting too suspicious."

I looked around at the interior of his vehicle, taking note of the details so I could tell Jenna what it was like when she got back. It was surprisingly clean inside. And it smelled like Wes.

"So where exactly do your parents think you're going tonight?" Wes asked as we headed toward the bridge that connected us to the downtown portion of Sweet Water.

"They know that I'm going to a cross country party."

"You told them the truth? And they still let you come, knowing I'm on the team too?" He glanced over to me, and the lights from oncoming traffic helped me see the shocked expression on his face.

"Don't worry, they did make sure to remind me that I'm not allowed to go anywhere near you."

Wes laughed. "Well, I guess you can never claim your parents don't take their feuds seriously."

"Don't your parents ever warn you to stay away from me?" It couldn't just be my parents.

He switched on the blinker before turning onto the bridge. "Not really."

"But if they knew I was in your car right now, they'd be mad, right?"

He shrugged. "I think they'd be more shocked than mad."

"Shocked, but not mad? Why?"

He glanced over again showing a smirk on his face. "When my mom

came into my room and saw me do my hair instead of wearing a hat, she assumed I was going out with Olivia tonight. And since I couldn't tell her I was going to a party with you, I let her think that."

I furrowed my brow. "Why would she assume you're hanging out with Olivia? Doesn't she know you and Olivia have broken up?"

He scratched at his neck. "Not exactly."

"What?" My voice came out louder than I'd expected. "How could she not know? You guys broke up a week ago."

He rubbed his thumbs along the top of his steering wheel. "It just never came up, I guess."

I thought about it for a moment before asking, "Is that because you're still hoping to get back with Olivia?"

Please say no. And for some reason my body tensed with the thought.

He shook his head. "No, definitely not that."

My body relaxed a little. "Then why didn't you tell your mom about your breakup?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, I haven't really been thinking about it with everything else going on. And maybe a part of me thought that having my mom still think I had a girlfriend would make it easier to sneak around with you."

The way he said 'sneak around with you' caused butterflies to erupt in my stomach.

But that was exactly what we'd been doing. Sneaking around behind our parents' backs.

And it was kind of addicting.

Probably too addicting.

We came to the end of the bridge and he turned on the road I took every morning on my drive to school.

"Would I be right in guessing that your mom also thought our duet practice was actually a study date with Olivia, too?"

He scrunched up his face like he was guilty. "Yeah."

I laughed. "How long do you plan to keep pretending I'm your ex-girlfriend?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I was thinking of just keeping it going until after we were done with our duet rehearsals. It seemed easier than making up some other story, anyway."

I laughed. "I would normally be offended at being compared to Olivia.

But since I know how it is to sneak around behind your parents' back, I'll let it slide."

We made it to Carson's house a few minutes later. After leaving our jackets on a chair in the living room, Wes and I went to see what everyone was doing downstairs.

Before we could get to the final step, Wes touched my arm to stop me.

"What?" I turned to look at him, trying not to notice the electricity that flooded to my arm with his unexpected touch.

He leaned close with a smirk on his lips before whispering, "I probably should have warned you that Carson's parties are a little different from the ones you're probably used to."

"Different how?" I whispered back. Most of the parties I'd gone to involved loud music and underage drinking, so different wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Wes raised an eyebrow and said, "Let's just say, he kind of lets the power go to his head and may be really good at getting us to do things out of our comfort zone."

My stomach twisted up in knots. That sounded cryptic. "Should I be worried?"

But instead of answering my question, Wes let go of my arm and led me through the door.

We walked into a large room with a ping pong table at one end and couches and chairs on the other. There were about a dozen of my teammates sitting on the couches and floor in a circle, like they were already in the middle of playing a game.

Yep, this was not the scene I expected when Wes told me about the party.

"Wes!" Carson stood from the couch when he noticed us. He held his hand out for a fist bump, which Wes returned. "I'm glad you could make it."

Wes turned to me. "You know, Lauren, right?"

"Of course. I'm glad you could make it, Lauren." Carson held his fist out to me, too. "Though I must admit I'm surprised that you two walked in together. I never thought I'd see the day when a Carmichael and a Schultz entered a room together with smiles on their faces instead of death stares."

Wes put his hands in his pockets. "Lauren and I drove here together."

Carson narrowed his gaze. "But I thought you guys were supposed to hate each other. You know, because of what your last names are."

Wes shrugged. "We've come to a sort of truce."

And when I looked at the other people in the room who were staring at us with their jaws hanging open, I realized that no one must have noticed that Wes and I had been sitting on the bus together.

"Well, that's good to hear," Carson said. Then he pointed to a spot on the carpet. "How about you two sit over there? We were just about to start our game of Truth or Dare."

Truth or Dare?

Had I heard him right?

"I told you Carson's parties are different," Wes spoke next to my ear, causing chills to race down my spine.

"I think I might need to leave," I whispered back.

But Wes didn't seem to hear. He stepped over a few people's legs to make his way to the empty spot at the opposite end of the circle. And since I didn't want to stand there looking like a fool, I followed him.

Once we had situated ourselves on the ground, our legs crisscrossed with our knees inches apart, Carson put an empty wine bottle in the middle of the circle.

"I think I'm going to regret this," I said under my breath.

"Just give it a try. Remember how we're all about taking chances and challenging our preconceived notions?" Wes bumped shoulders with me, a smile on his lips. "Carson's parties may be different, but they're always a lot of fun."

"Promise?" I asked, feeling the anxiety in my chest loosen slightly. "Because we're just barely becoming friends again, and I would hate for you to throw me under the bus in front of all these people."

"If the bottle lands on you, just pick truth and you'll be fine." Wes grinned and his eyes smiled. "Unless you have deep dark secrets, that is."

"Not that I know of."

"Will you do the honor of spinning the bottle first, Latisha?" Carson said to the girl with brown curly hair across the circle from us.

She grinned. "Of course."

And when the bottle started spinning, I held my breath, hoping against hope that it wouldn't land on me.

It slowly came to a stop, pointing to Sydney Thane.

"Oooh, it's your turn, Sydney," Carson said. "Do you choose Truth or Dare?"

A nervous look crossed her face as she seemed to think the options over. After a few seconds, she bit her lip and said, "I pick dare."

Wow, she was a lot braver than me.

Latisha seemed to think over what she wanted to dare Sydney to do for a moment, then she whispered to the people beside her. They whispered back, and then Latisha gave Sydney a huge smile. "I dare you to sniff the feet of everyone in the circle."

"What?" Sydney nearly shouted. "That's gross."

But Latisha just smiled. "You picked dare. That's your dare." Then Latisha addressed the rest of us. "I hope for Sydney's sake that you all washed your feet after our run."

"Oops," Carson said with a laugh. "Just don't get too close to me with your nose and you might survive."

So we all started removing our shoes. I had applied my favorite coconut vanilla lotion to my feet after my shower, so hopefully that would make the experience a bit more pleasant for Sydney and less embarrassing for me.

Sydney made the rounds without gagging too much, and then it was her turn to spin the bottle.

We made it through a few more rounds, and I started to relax a little more with each one. Most of the dares and the questions weren't too bad, so I knew that if the bottle ever did land on me, I'd probably survive.

"See, it's not so bad, is it?" Wes bumped his knee against mine to get my attention as Carson completed his dare of eating a tablespoon of hot sauce.

"It's all right," I allowed.

I expected him to move his knee away from mine since he'd already gotten my attention, but he didn't.

Did he realize that he was still touching me?

It was just a slight touch, but for some reason I was hyper-aware of it. My whole knee seemed to have electrodes in it.

After Carson ate a piece of bread to take away the burn from the hot sauce, he took the bottle in his hand and spun it.

The bottle whirled around, and every time it missed me, I sighed with relief. But the relief was short-lived because as it slowed, it got closer and closer to pointing in my direction.

When it stopped, it was pointing straight down the middle between Wes and me.

My heart went to my throat, but I managed to say, "We're supposed to re-

spin it when that happens, right?"

But Carson shook his head. "No, that's fine. I think it landed right where I've been waiting for it to land ever since you guys walked into the party." He said it with a laugh, but my heart stayed lodged securely in my throat.

What was Carson going to do?

Wes came to my rescue. "That's not how the game goes, Carson. If it lands in the middle, the rules say that you spin again."

But Carson shook his head. "Not when you're playing house rules. The house rules here are that if it lands in the center, the person who spun the bottle gets to pick their victim."

Their victim? Yikes.

Carson's smiled kindly at me, though, and said, "And since it's Lauren's first time at one of our parties, we'll give her a break and give the honor to Wes."

Okay, so maybe Carson was actually a nice guy after all. I smiled my gratefulness and my heart slowly moved closer to its regular rate.

Wes sat up straighter, rising to the challenge.

"So what will it be, Wes? Truth or Dare?"

"Dare." Wes didn't even hesitate to answer. For some reason I would have pegged him as more of the "Truth" kind of guy.

Carson rubbed his hands together, clearly excited about Wes's choice.

"I hoped you'd pick that, because I have the perfect dare just for you," Carson said with mischief in his eyes.

"You do?" Wes cocked an eyebrow in a challenge.

"Yes." Carson laughed to himself and I started to feel worried for Wes. "You just broke up with Olivia, and while we all knew it needed to happen way before even you did, we realize that it's sometimes hard to get over an ex and move on to greener pastures."

"I'm not having a hard time moving on." Wes's jaw was set.

"Okay, sure. That's fine, too." But Carson said it like he didn't really believe Wes. "Anyway, everyone knows that the best way to get over an ex is to have a rebound kiss with someone new."

Wes's brow knitted together. "So you're daring me to kiss someone?"

Carson nodded. "And not just anyone." Carson looked around the circle, like he was trying to decide who the lucky girl would be. A few of the girls sat up a little straighter, hoping to do the honors. Then Carson's eyes landed on me and his smirk broadened.

"I think I have the perfect girl for the job," he said. "How about we bring the two feuding families of Sweet Water together for a forbidden kiss? Kind of like our very own Romeo and Juliet."

Several people in the room gasped.

"Are you serious?" Wes scoffed.

At the same time, I said, "I thought you were going easy on me since it's my first time here."

Carson laughed. "What can I say? I just couldn't resist."

I glanced at Wes to see his reaction, but he was glaring at Carson, his face stony, the muscles in his jaw tightening and untightening.

I looked away before my self-esteem could plummet too far.

Apparently, Wes did *not* like the idea of kissing me. Not at all.

Well, I didn't want to kiss him, either.

"So what do you say, Wes?" Carson asked. "Are you up to the challenge, or do you back down from the dare?"

Wes blew out a long breath. "I'm up to it."

Carson rubbed his hands together, like a kid getting just what he wanted for Christmas.

My stomach, on the other hand, had twisted up in knots.

Was Wes actually going to kiss me?

And did I not have any say in the matter?

Almost as if he read my thoughts, Wes turned to me with a soft look in his eyes—a look I hadn't been expecting. He cleared his throat, and when he spoke, his voice was low and gravelly—which twisted the knots in my stomach even tighter. "Are you okay with it, Lauren? I won't kiss you if you don't want me to."

And I didn't know what it was about him asking for my permission, but my heart totally melted with his words. It took me a moment to speak, but I finally managed to say, "It's okay. It's just a dare."

"Okay," he said, his blue eyes searching mine before he swiveled the rest of his body to face me.

I tried not to feel all the eyes that were gaping at us.

As we both looked at each other, I couldn't help but be reminded of our first kiss up in the attic all those years ago. We'd both faced each other for a long time to get up the courage to press our lips together. And when we'd finally counted down from three, closed our eyes, and said "go," our noses had bumped awkwardly. And then our lips followed just as awkwardly. The

kiss had lasted for a grand total of one second before we'd pulled back and wiped our mouths off on the back of our hands.

I really hoped this kiss wouldn't be like that. Hopefully, Wes's apparent expertise would make up for my lack of it. Because ready or not, here we were.

And this time we had an audience.

"Are you ready?" Wes asked.

I swallowed, truly unable to speak this time. So I nodded instead, and he seemed to understand because a second later, he was leaning in and closing the distance between us. My eyes fluttered shut at the last moment, and I remembered to tilt my head to the side before our lips met. I only felt his lips touch mine for an instant before he pulled back.

Had he even kissed me? It had been even quicker than our badly executed first kiss.

I opened my eyes again to find Wes just staring at me.

Before either of us could do anything, Carson's voice startled us.

"Oh no," Carson said. "That was most definitely not the kind of kiss I dared you to do. I said this was supposed to be the kind of rebound kiss that would make you forget about your breakup. Ain't nobody gonna forget an old relationship with the kind of kiss my grandma gives me."

Was he going to make us do it again?

"You didn't give any specific instructions," Wes retorted. "You dared me to kiss Lauren. So I did."

Carson shook his head. "We aren't moving on until you kiss Lauren like you actually mean it. We've all heard the talk around school about what a Casanova you are. It's time for you to show us that those rumors are true."

"Seriously?" Wes just glared at Carson.

Carson crossed his arms. "You're the one who picked dare. That was your dare."

Wes continued glaring at Carson for a moment before eventually rolling his eyes and turning back to me.

"Is it okay if we try that again?" he grunted.

Wow, his serious lack of enthusiasm was doing amazing things for my self-esteem tonight. I was tempted to tell him that if he'd rather put his lips in acid than kiss me again, then he should probably just do that.

But since I didn't want him to know how offended I was, I sighed and said, "I think you kind of have to."

After another long pause where I imagined he was preparing himself for some sort of torture, he scooted closer and said, "Okay, here goes take two."

But instead of kissing me, he set his cheek against mine and whispered next to my ear. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

Was he only hesitating because he was worried about how I felt?

If my heart had wings, it would have flapped right out of my chest, because his thoughtfulness was making it soar. Like a sparrow taking flight into the sky.

It took me a moment to swallow down my nerves, but I managed to mumble, "Yes, I'm okay with it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

*M*y response came out sounding more like a gasp than an actual sentence, but Wes seemed to understand it anyway. His warm breath caressed my cheek as he said, "Then how about we give them a good show?"

I didn't understand why my body was reacting the way it was when I knew this was all for show, but chills raced down my spine and buzzed in my fingertips and toes, especially when he slid his fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck.

In the next instant, Wes's lips were on mine. Soft and slow. And unlike our previous two pecks, this time his lips stayed. They lingered as they coaxed mine into a give-and-take motion that made my pulse throb so hard, I worried I might have a heart attack.

Was this actually happening? Were we actually kissing each other for more than a second?

And was he enjoying it as much as I was?

Because, wow, he was a *really* good kisser. Like, I had no idea that a kiss could make me feel like this.

Breathless and unsteady, the world slipped away for a moment. Kissing Wes like this was like being opened to a whole new line of consciousness. Like there had always been something there, but I'd never been awake enough to see it.

I was just starting to trace my fingers along his jawline when someone in the room whistled, bringing me back from the clouds I'd drifted off to.

Wes pulled away from the kiss, and I slowly opened my eyes to look at him. His chest rose and fell with labored breathing, but it was his eyes that caught my attention the most. They were wide and full of surprise, and I might have been imagining it, but I sensed some desire in them as well.

Was it possible that he had enjoyed that kiss, too?

"Now that's what I was talking about." Carson slapped his leg, interrupting my thoughts.

And the intense gaze Wes and I had been sharing broke as we both turned to face everyone.

Latisha did a slow clap, and I felt a blush rise to my cheeks.

"I think I need my parents to get in a family feud," Latisha said. "Because, dang, that kiss had some serious angst to it."

It had? Had the crazy range of emotions that I'd felt as we kissed been obvious?

Then an even worse thought occurred to me. Could Wes tell how much I'd enjoyed kissing him? I glanced at him to see if I could tell.

But Wes was giving Carson a playful fist bump, like he wasn't affected by our kiss after all.

I guess that made sense. I might have just had my first *real* kiss. But for Wes, that was probably the same kind of kiss he'd had hundreds of times. In fact, that kiss probably wouldn't even register in his top one-hundred kisses—with all the others, at least he'd had feelings for the girl.

With me, he'd only been putting on a good show.

Such a good show that even I had believed it.

But it wasn't like I had a secret crush on him or anything.

As soon as the thought pushed itself into my mind, I had the sudden worry that maybe I didn't know my feelings for Wes as well as I thought. Because hidden in the darkest recesses of my mind, a tiny voice whispered to me that maybe I did like Wes. I just hadn't allowed it to break through until tonight.

This couldn't be good.

"Thanks for going to the party with me," Wes said when he pulled onto our street and parked behind my car. "I hope you had a good time."

We'd been pretty quiet on the drive, just listening to the music he had playing on the radio, both lost in our own thoughts.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and said, "Yeah, it was fun."

The rest of the party had actually been pretty fun, even though the bottle had landed on me shortly after Wes and I had exchanged that kiss. Not about to get dared to kiss anyone else, I'd chosen "Truth," and Riley Williams asked me how many college guys I'd dated.

When I told them zero, no one believed me at first. Not until I explained that while yes, I had gone to some college parties over the summer, I had never actually had a boyfriend.

Yeah, my cheeks had flushed pretty hot with embarrassment, but when Wes confirmed that I'd told him the same thing earlier in the week, everyone let it drop and we continued on with the party games.

But even though we played Mafia after Truth or Dare, I found my mind continuing to wander back to the kiss with Wes.

It had been so much better than our first kiss up in the attic.

But what did Wes think about it?

Or had he even thought about it? I'd thought I caught him looking at me a few times during the games, but as soon as we'd make eye contact, he'd look away.

Maybe he'd just been watching me to make sure I didn't suddenly have a crush on him. He probably knew how good of a kisser he was and that it was a possibility.

I shook my wonderings away. I didn't need to think about the possible ramifications of that kiss one second longer. He'd just been fulfilling his dare. That was all.

Wes put his vehicle in park, and I remembered that we were saying goodbye and I needed to climb out and drive my car home.

"I better get out before the Dermots see me sitting in your car and tell my parents."

I was just reaching for the handle to open the door when Wes touched my arm, "Wait," he said. "Could we plan a time to get together this weekend to practice our duet? With the concert coming up on Monday, we don't have a ton of time."

Crap, I hadn't realized it was coming up so soon.

"I guess that would be a good idea." I absently rubbed at the spot on my arm where his hand had been. "I think my parents talked about going to this charity golf tournament tomorrow, so if you wanted to come over then, that could work."

"What time will they be gone?"

I pursed my lips, trying to remember what they'd told me earlier this week. "I'm not sure. I could text you when they leave, I guess."

He nodded. "That works for me. I don't have anything going on yet."

I was about to leave when I realized I didn't have his phone number. I'd

never had to ask a guy for his number before. Was there a certain protocol I was supposed to follow?

He seemed to sense my anxiety because he asked, "Is something wrong?"

I blinked my eyes shut momentarily before turning back toward him. "I guess I should probably get your phone number so I can text you."

Was it super hot in here? Because suddenly I was imagining how embarrassing it would be if he said I wasn't allowed to have it because of the family feud.

But he held his hand out to me and said, "Hand me your phone and I'll put my number in."

I reached into my purse, dug out my phone, and unlocked it for him. My fingers accidentally brushed against his palm as I put my phone in his hand. I didn't know if it was just because my nerves were standing on end or what, but that simple touch sent a surge of electricity up my arm.

He finished typing in his contact info and handed the phone back to me.

"Can you send me a text, so I can have your number, too?" he asked.

I might have been imagining it, but did he sound slightly nervous when he asked for my number?

Before I could think too much about whether he was nervous about asking for my number and why, I quickly shot him a text with the words, *this is me*.

His phone beeped a second later, and I dropped my phone back into my bag.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, putting my purse over my shoulder.

"I'll be waiting for your text, Lauren."

And I really must be going crazy tonight, because just the way he said my name made me swoon a little.

Yeah, I really needed to get some sleep so this crazy side of me would go away.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"We'll be back in a few hours," my dad said as he and my mom made their way to the garage with their golf clubs in tow.

"Okay, have fun," I called after them as I rinsed my breakfast plate in the sink, hoping I didn't sound too excited that they were *finally* leaving.

They shut the door behind them, and as soon as I was alone in the kitchen, I pulled out my phone to text Wes.

Me: *The coast is clear. We can practice our duet now.*

It only took a moment for his response to come through.

Wes: *my mom roped me into helping her declutter the garage this morning. The disaster should hopefully be put away within the hour. Will that work?*

My shoulders slumped as I read his text, feeling slightly disappointed. I'd been watching the clock all morning, waiting for the time that my parents would finally go out the door.

But instead of showing my disappointment, I texted him that it would be great.

To pass the time, I went to tidy up my dresser in this new way I'd seen done on a show recently. I started with my sock drawer, but only got a few pairs in before I realized Angelica had accidentally added a bunch of my mom's socks into my drawer. She sometimes did that when she was wrapped up in one of her romantic audiobooks.

After I finished tidying up, I grabbed my mom's socks and rambled down the hall to my parents' room to put them away.

I opened the top left drawer in my mom's dresser and laid the socks next to her other pairs. I was just about to roll the drawer closed again when I saw the corner of a familiar book poking out from under a tank top.

It was my mom's journal with the tulip on the cover.

I only hesitated for a second before I took the journal from its hiding spot. The last entry I read had left me with a huge cliffhanger. And since Aunt Tracey had just dropped the bomb yesterday about TJ actually being Coach Slater, I needed to find out what exactly had happened between them. So I took a seat in one of the chairs at the foot of my parents' bed and opened the book to the middle of May.

May 20

It's been a couple days since I last wrote. So much has happened I'm not sure where to start, so I'll just start with where I left off, I guess.

The day after TJ and I had our pizza and movie night, he invited me to go on an adventure with him after work. So as soon as I got home, we drove to Sweet Water Falls. TJ made us a picnic dinner and we ate at the beginning of the trailhead that led to the falls. The whole time we were eating, I could just feel the electricity between us. The memories of our kisses the night before were fresh in my mind. And I couldn't seem to eat my dinner quickly enough because I knew once dinner was out of the way we'd be one step closer to kissing again.

We walked on the trail hand in hand and it just felt right to be with TJ for some reason. I know it probably sounds crazy, since I've only seen him as one of my best friends all these years, but for some reason everything seemed right in the world for the first time in a week.

I looked up from my reading.

It was so interesting to read that after what had happened between Wes and me last night. We'd had one good kiss and suddenly I was wondering if I had feelings for him. Was that how love worked? Was there always just one moment in time when feelings change?

Though, maybe I shouldn't read into it too much since my mom and TJ had obviously not ended up together.

I decided to keep reading.

It only took us about fifteen minutes to make it to the waterfall and since we were pretty hot from the hike, we immediately jumped in the water. We played around for a while, but then inevitably we just ended up making out for a really long time. And somehow kissing him was even better than it had been the night before.

When we finally got out of the swimming hole, TJ led me to a rock and told me he had something he'd been dying to tell me. And that even though he knew it was really soon, he wanted to tell me before he goes back to Kuwait next week. He told me he had liked me since high school and that he'd been dying for me to notice him all these years.

I was so shocked. Then he was sweet and said that even though he knew I was going through a hard thing right now with Micah, he was grateful that I had given us a chance to reconnect and he was looking forward to seeing what happened between us.

So, of course, after TJ said all those sweet things to me, my heart nearly burst and we ended up kissing for I don't know how long. It could've been hours since the sun started setting before we were ready to break apart.

Eventually we made our way back to his truck and after kissing for another long time parked in front of my house, I tore myself away and went inside.

The next day my brain was completely fuzzy as I worked. Micah was still gone on his trip, so gratefully I didn't have to see him again. By the end of the workday, I was more than ready to hang out with TJ again.

Rena invited us over for dinner with her and Frank and it was so hard to keep my hands off of TJ as he sat at the table. We had decided to keep our new relationship a secret since I had just broken off my engagement, but it was exciting to have our secret just to ourselves.

Rena told me that the house next door was for sale and that she hoped the new neighbors would be all right. A week ago I would've told Micah to rush to the real estate agent and tell them we wanted the house. But that was a different lifetime. Micah and I are over.

After dinner with Rena and Frank, TJ took me home. Going all through dinner without being able to kiss him had made us both a little crazy, so as soon as we got inside, TJ locked the door and took

me over to the couch with him so we could make-out again.

I have seriously never kissed anyone so much in my life. It's crazy how much chemistry we had that I didn't ever know about until now. We tried to pretend like we were adults instead of hormonal teenagers by turning on a movie, but though the movie played all the way through, I can't remember a single thing that actually happened on the screen.

When the clock struck midnight, I told TJ that he better go back home because I had work early in the morning. But when he looked at me with his turquoise green eyes and asked if he could stay the night with me, I couldn't say no. I know I've never done anything like that before, but I was tired of holding back and so I led him back into my room.

I blinked my eyes a few times as I read over those last few words. My heart was racing so fast I had to cover it with my hand to keep it from beating out of my chest. How in the world had my mom gone from being heartbroken over my dad to inviting TJ into her bed with her?

The thought made me sick to my stomach. Had my mom really gone all the way with TJ—with Coach Slater—and then eloped with my dad just days later?

How in the world had she managed all that?

I closed the journal over my thumb as I tried to decide if I really wanted to read what happened next. It was totally possible that they'd only slept side by side and that nothing else had happened.

But after reading about how physical their relationship already was, with them being barely able to keep their hands off each other, I worried that they indeed had taken the next step that night.

So even though I was worried about what I might read, I knew I had to find out what happened next. Not knowing would just make me crazy. And if things ended differently than I assumed, it would be good for me to know so I wasn't making up stuff.

I held my breath and let my eyes read over the next section.

I'm not going to write about what exactly happened in my

bedroom last night, but I will say that it was so nice to be so close to TJ. I had felt so broken and unwanted, unloved and unseen when Micah called off the wedding. So when TJ made me feel like I was the most special person in the whole wide world I couldn't help but feel so amazingly connected to him. He told me he loved me and then he showed me. I woke up early the next day, though all I wanted to do was stay next to TJ and forget about the rest of the world. But since I'm not a trust fund kid like Micah and still have bills to pay, I got myself ready and went to work.

Everything at work was great until Rachelle told me that Micah was getting home tonight and would be back in the office tomorrow. I felt a sickening feeling in my stomach the rest of the day but I tried not to think too much about it. He had broken up with me. I didn't need to feel guilty over anything that happened between me and TJ. I was an adult woman making adult decisions.

I just hope that Micah will treat TJ with civility if they ever meet.

Anyway, that's what has happened for the past few days. It's been crazy but also so much fun. TJ will be here in a few minutes and we're going to spend the evening at the ocean with Rena and Frank.

Until next time.

– Jolene

I closed the journal again, not sure what to think. My mom and my cross country coach had been waaaay more than friends. And from the sounds of it, TJ had been totally in love with my mom. But as much as I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, it sounded like even though she thought she had deep feelings for TJ, it really seemed like she was still madly in love with my dad and just on the rebound.

I assumed that with my dad getting back that night, it meant he'd found a way to win my mom back and they'd ridden off on their wedding cruise a few days later, leaving poor Coach Slater in the dust.

Of course I was happy that things had worked out between my parents because that meant I was able to be born. But I felt sad for the casualties their love story had created.

No wonder my mom didn't want to face Coach Slater at my meet. She'd totally torn his heart to shreds, from the sound of it.

But then a more important thought occurred to me. How could Dad just marry Mom after everything that happened between her and TJ? He was not known for being an easy-going guy and frequently had to be talked down from rash reactions.

Which made me wonder. Did Dad even know about Mom's relationship with TJ? Or had she kept it a secret from him all these years?

The chilling thought of how betrayed my dad would feel if he ever found out flooded my mind.

Maybe the real reason why I'd never heard of Coach Slater was because my mom was deathly afraid to slip up and have my dad find out, so she had to completely write TJ out of her past.

I was just beginning her next entry when the doorbell rang.

Wes was here.

As much as I wanted to keep reading and find out the rest of the story, I couldn't leave him standing on my front porch. If he stayed there very long, neighbors might see him and tell my parents we were sneaking around behind their backs.

I carefully put my mom's journal back where I'd found it and hurried downstairs. Now that I knew where she had hidden it, I could sneak in again sometime soon to read more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"*Y*ou seem distracted. Is something wrong?" Wes asked as we were getting ready to start practicing our duet.

"Sorry," I apologized, looking up from my music. "I guess I am a little distracted."

"And what's distracting you?" He quirked an eyebrow.

I fingered my sheet music. "I was just reading some interesting stuff in my mom's journal before you got here."

"You found it again?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"So did you find out anything about the feud?" he asked, his eyes wide with hope.

I shook my head. "No. Nothing to do with the feud. Just some interesting stuff that happened between my mom and Coach Slater that was surprising." I hadn't told Wes about them kissing in the journal entries I'd read on Monday, so he looked confused.

"What did you find out?"

I looked out the window at a bird standing on a tree branch as I tried to decide whether I wanted to say anything or not.

As if reading my mind, Wes said, "Lauren, you can tell me. I promise I won't tell anyone, if that's what your worried about."

"Not even your mom?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Not even my mom."

I sighed as I thought about it. It wouldn't be that bad if I told him, right? Growing up, I'd always been able to trust him with my secrets. I knew he wasn't the type to blab when he said he was going to keep things a secret.

So I told him all about the journal entries that I'd read so far. At first he didn't seem fazed by anything I said, but then when I got to what I'd read

today, his jaw dropped.

"I don't know how you didn't just ignore the doorbell after a bomb like that," Wes said once I finished telling him everything.

"It would've been rude to leave you standing there on the front porch."

Wes closed his music. "I won't be offended if you want to read the rest to find out what happened next. We can practice later."

"You don't mind?" I asked, chewing on my lip.

"Not at all. I'm super interested in finding out how your parents got back together after something like that. Your dad doesn't really seem to be the kind of guy who could just get over your mom sleeping with another guy. Do you think he knows about your mom and Coach?"

I shook my head. "I'm worried that he might not." I couldn't imagine that my mom would feel comfortable having all that information written in her journal, waiting for someone to come along and read it. Though, my dad wasn't the snooping type.

Unlike me, obviously.

But my mom had left the journal open on her desk, practically begging for someone to read it.

"Do you think it'll take long for you to read the rest?" Wes asked before I could make myself feel too guilty over my snooping. "I can just hang out in the hammock while you finish reading."

I smiled. Wes really must have missed that hammock.

"I'm guessing it won't take me too long since my parents eloped just a few days later." I'd always thought how romantic it was that in their excitement to be together, they eloped. Now, I couldn't help but wonder if my mom was the one who suggested it so she could seal the deal before my dad found out about TJ.

Yeah, I needed to find out what happened.

"I'll go hang out in the hammock then." Wes headed toward the sunroom while I dashed upstairs.

I was just making myself comfortable in the armchair in my parents' room when I realized it would probably be better not to leave Wes hanging out alone on our main floor. It wasn't that I didn't trust him exactly, but our families were technically still in a feud, and I knew my parents wouldn't like me to leave "that Schultz boy" to his own devices. You know, if they had even been okay with him being here in the first place. So I stood from the chair and took the journal downstairs with me.

"That was fast," Wes said when I walked into the sunroom. And I was slightly relieved to find that he was indeed in the hammock and not snooping around my mom's desk.

"I decided it was probably rude for me to just leave you alone. So I brought it down here to read."

"Well, cool. You can just read it out loud to me then." He winked.

After telling myself a simple wink was nothing to get excited about, I managed to say, "I think I'll just give you the cliff notes' version, if that's okay."

If the next few entries were anything like what I'd read this morning, there was no way I could read entry after entry of my mom kissing another guy out loud. That would be so awkward. Especially with the kiss Wes and I had shared yesterday.

He sighed. "Fine. I guess I'll just listen to the new Ryker Peak album while I wait."

"Ryker Peak came out with a new album?" I asked. I looooved Ryker Peak. Almost as much as I loved Josh Groban.

Wes nodded. "It just came out this week. I've pretty much been listening to it on repeat since Tuesday." He showed me the album artwork on the screen of his phone.

"I can't believe I didn't know it was out already."

Wes shrugged. "I guess you're not a true fan."

I gently hit his shoulder. "I'm totally a fan. I've just been a little busier than usual."

"Then I guess you better hurry and read those journal entries so you can come over and listen to the album with me."

The thought of lying in the hammock beside Wes as we listened to our favorite childhood band was definitely a compelling thought. It had been so long since we'd done something like that.

"Just give me a few minutes." I hurried over to my mom's desk, pulled out the chair, and made myself comfortable. Wes already had the music faintly playing by the time I had found the entry where I'd left off. It was written on the day after my mom and TJ had gone to the bonfire at Rena and Frank's house.

May 21

The past 24 hours have been so crazy. I thought I had everything figured out but I realized last night just how stupid I've been.

I swallowed as I read that sentence again, having a good idea of what was coming next.

Last night started out as really good. TJ and I went to the bonfire at Rena and Frank's house. We had a good time laughing with our friends and playing in the ocean before roasting marshmallows around the fire.

I had planned to watch another movie with TJ when we arrived back at my house, but Micah's black Maserati was parked in front of my apartment when we drove up. And when I looked at my doorstep, I saw him sitting there, waiting for me to get home.

I didn't know what to do since I was so caught off guard. So I just panicked and told TJ to go home and that I would call him again tomorrow.

He looked worried and offered to stay as moral support since he knew I was going to be talking to Micah for the first time since our breakup, but I told TJ that I'd just call him later instead because I didn't want an audience.

So I jumped out of TJ's truck and walked up to my apartment.

Things were really awkward when Micah saw me, but we managed to say hi and when he asked if we could talk about something, I invited him into my place.

We made small talk for a little while, but then I was so nervous to see Micah again and worried that he'd somehow be able to sense what had happened at my house the night before with TJ, that I just blurted out that he should just tell me why he was even at my house.

So Micah told me about his trip and how it had given him time to think about everything. He told me that he had thought about everything that had happened between us and that he really regretted it. He said that his mom had been putting a lot of pressure on him to marry someone from one of their social circles instead of me, and that

his mom's prejudice was the reason why he had called the wedding off.

I had wondered about that before, because I knew how much his mom disapproved of me. But this confirmed it.

Then after telling me that it was his mom's fault, he told me that he still loved me and that he wanted to elope with me this weekend. He said he'd already made all the arrangements for us to get married on a cruise ship and then go visit the Bahamas.

My heart immediately wanted to say yes, because it knew deep down that I was still in love with him and that it would be crazy to turn him down. But then I also remembered TJ and everything that had happened between us.

So instead of jumping right back into Micah's arms, I told him that I needed some time to think about things and that I'd get back to him tomorrow with my decision.

But when he was about to leave, he pulled me into a hug, and before I knew what was happening, he was kissing me again and I could feel his love for me and my love for him. That love had never gone away. And then in the heat of the moment I ended up telling him that yes, I'd love to marry him this weekend.

I know I'm like the biggest flip flop ever. But I love Micah. It broke me when he called off our wedding. And I'm realizing now that I should have just waited for him to come to his senses.

But since I'm a horrible person, I got involved with TJ and now I'm going to have to break things off with him and do to him what Micah did to me. It makes me sick to my stomach to think about hurting TJ, but I know I have to do it.

I didn't tell Micah about TJ because I was worried that he'd just go away again. I can't bear to lose him again.

And does he really need to know everything? Isn't the most important thing that we realized we do want to be together for the rest of our lives and that we love each other so much?

I know marrying Micah is the right decision. I've known almost since I first started working for him. He's just what I've always wanted. And all my dreams will be able to come true with him by my side. He said he already put in an offer on the house next to Rena and Frank's house. It's like everything I've ever wanted is finally coming

true.

And everything would be completely perfect, if only I didn't have to break TJ's heart first.

But he's a tough guy. He's leaving for Kuwait again in a few days anyway, so it couldn't have worked out in the long run. I can't date someone who is halfway across the world from me.

Anyways, I'm planning to break the news to TJ tonight. He probably won't be expecting anything. But I really hope that we're good enough friends that he'll take the news in stride and that maybe after a little bit of time, he'll forgive me and we can go back to how we were before all this mess started.

I just hope I can make it through tonight.

-Jolene

I turned the page to read the next entry. And just like she had said she would do, she broke up with TJ and never told my dad. TJ had gone back to Kuwait with a broken heart and my parents had sailed off to sea, with my dad completely in the dark about what had gone on while they'd been broken up.

There were only a few more entries in the journal, but they were basically just a travelogue of my parents' honeymoon. And by the time I came to the last page, I was convinced that my mom had stayed true to her plan. She'd married my dad and decided to just completely write TJ out of her life. She had felt bad doing that to him, but it was also obvious that she thought it was the right thing to do, because it meant she got her dream guy and the life she'd always wanted.

The judgmental part of me was frustrated that my mom had been so careless, but I guess she had simply done what she needed to do to keep my dad securely in her life. In her mind, keeping her affair with TJ a secret was a lie for the greater good. And I guess I couldn't fault her too much because it made it possible for me to be the honeymoon baby my mom had always wanted.

I sighed and closed the journal. I sat in the chair for a while as I processed everything. I finally had the whole story. That, at least, was nice. I didn't have to wonder anymore.

"So? What did you find out?" Wes asked when he noticed I was done reading.

I turned in my seat to face him. "Basically, my mom ripped out Coach Slater's heart and then never told anyone about it."

Wes set his phone down and rolled on his side to face me. "Your dad doesn't know?"

I shook my head solemnly. "It doesn't sound like it. At least, he didn't know about it when he married her."

"That sucks."

I nodded. "Yeah, it totally does."

We were quiet for a while, each in our own thoughts. Nothing in my parents' love story had actually changed, but what I knew about it definitely had. Their love story wasn't quite as straightforward as I'd always assumed.

My mom had lost one of her best friends because of her love story.

That thought prickled at me, and I couldn't pinpoint why until I saw Wes's mom through the window, walking on the beach with their dog.

Was it possible that this hidden past could have caused another friendship to end?

From what it sounded like in the journal, TJ and my mom had kept their relationship a secret from everyone. But could that have changed? Was it possible that Wes's mom had found out about the tragic love story between her two best friends, and upon hearing it, she had chosen TJ and written off my mom?

Was that the real reason for the family feud?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I frowned for a moment as I tried to piece it all together in my mind. The feud had started during the fall of seventh grade. Was there something that triggered it?

The only thing I could think of was that Coach Slater had moved back to Sweet Water after years of being deployed or living somewhere else, and when he saw Wes's mom, they'd caught up on everything that had happened. He could have come clean about what had happened with my mom, and then maybe Wes's mom was mad about her breaking TJ's heart and had threatened to tell my dad to get some sort of revenge.

It was a long shot. But if Wes was right and it wasn't a business transaction like my mom had always told me, blackmail could definitely be a good reason.

I pressed my lips together. Mom had always said that Mrs. Schultz had betrayed their friendship. This could be what she meant.

"What are you thinking about?" Wes asked, studying me with his soft eyes.

I smoothed my expression. I needed to be careful. I didn't want to make him mad by saying I was pretty sure his mom had blackmailed mine.

So I shrugged and said as nonchalantly as I could, "Do you know when Coach Slater moved back to Sweet Water?"

Wes pouted his lips, thinking for a moment. "I think our freshman year was his third year coaching at Sweet Water High. So I guess that would make it before seventh grade, at least."

Which was the same time the family feud started.

That couldn't be a coincidence, could it?

"Why do you ask?" A frown took shape on his lips.

"No reason. Just wondering." I stood from my chair. "Now that I've

finished the journal, do you want to practice our duet?"

"In a bit. First you have to listen to my two favorite songs on the album, so we can see if your taste in music has gotten better or worse in the past few years."

"I have impeccable taste in music," I said.

"Then come over here and prove it." He waved me over.

I walked over and stood by the hammock, ready to listen.

Wes looked up at me expectantly. "Aren't you getting in?"

He expected me to climb in the hammock with him?

"Are you sure there's enough room?" I asked hesitantly, my heart racing with the thought of being that close to him. "We're a lot bigger than we were five years ago."

"It's a queen-sized hammock. Neither of us has blown up like a sumo wrestler so I'm sure we'll be fine." He beckoned me with his fingers. "Just come on. I want to see what you think."

He scooted to the other end of the hammock, and I climbed in.

It had been a long time since I'd laid on the hammock bed with anyone, so I hadn't been expecting the way we both sunk into the middle with my added weight.

"Whoa!" I squealed when our bodies smashed against one another. "Sorry!"

"Don't worry about it." He chuckled, his husky voice so close to my ear it sent chills racing down my spine. "I forgot about how much this hammock sinks in."

"Me too." I sighed and tried not to notice how the right side of my body was suddenly sparking to life as it rested against his.

I didn't move. But then I realized it was probably too obvious that I liked being close to him, so I pushed away, gently lifting myself away from his body.

He repositioned himself as well, and after a few awkward brushes of our arms and legs, we were situated on our backs with our arms gently resting against each other.

"Ready for the first song?" he asked.

I may have been imagining it, but did he sound slightly breathless? Was he feeling the same pulse of attraction that I felt?

"Yeah, I'm ready," I said as I tried to push those thoughts away. I really didn't need to think about whether Wes liked being close to me or not.

He pressed play, and the instrumental intro wafted through the speakers. I listened to the unfamiliar melody, but as the song turned into something more like polka, instead of the rock music Ryker Peak was known for, I scrunched up my face.

"Are you sure this is their new album?" I asked. "Because this sounds nothing like them."

Wes hushed me. "Just listen."

So I stayed quiet, almost holding my breath as I listened to the accordion solo. What had Ryker Peak done to their music?

"Is this a collaboration with someone else?" I asked Wes.

"It's not a collaboration," was all Wes said.

When the lead singer belted out the lyrics with a bright tenor voice instead of the usual raspy voice, I turned to look at Wes. "This does not sound like Ryker Peak."

"Are you sure you're actually one of their fans?" He tilted his head to the side and arched an eyebrow at me. "Or were you only pretending to like them back in the day?" A dimple formed on his cheek when he smiled.

"I have all their songs on my phone," I said. "Well, besides this new album, obviously."

Then, just because it was bugging me so badly, I reached over and grabbed his phone to look at the album artwork. On the screen were four guys I'd never seen before, all standing in an urban landscape with an accordion, a saxophone, a clarinet, and a trumpet. Across the cover was written, "The Black Forest Polka Meisters."

My jaw dropped. "You sure you know how to read?"

Wes burst up laughing. "Okay, fine. You caught me."

I shook my head. "So what exactly was the point of that?"

He gave me the cutest guilty smile ever. "I just wanted to see if I could trick you."

"You're such a dork." And though I was trying to look annoyed, I couldn't help but return his smile. He was just too cute.

He reached his arm around me and pulled me closer against his side playfully. "I just wanted to make you laugh."

In theory, I knew that he'd only pulled me closer to be playful, but my body instantly flooded with warmth from his closeness. And I really didn't want to pull away.

So when he kept his arm around me, I decided to be brave and stay,

letting my head rest against his shoulder.

"Did they even come out with a new album, or were you just making that up?" I managed to say without a wobble in my voice.

"No, they really did come out with a new album. I just wanted to lighten the mood for you after everything you just read about your parents."

Aww. When he said it like that, it was actually kind of sweet.

"I'm sure I'll get used to the idea of my mom having a secret affair someday."

Wes tilted his head to the side, his mouth against my hair. "It's got to be weird finding that out about your parents and Coach, though."

I sighed and let myself relax against him even more. "Yeah. Pretty weird."

The girl I'd read about in my mom's journal was so different from the Jolene Harris Carmichael that I knew now.

Wes was quiet for a moment, as if thinking over something. After a while, he said, "You know what I think? I think you need to get out of your house tonight to distract yourself from everything."

"Yeah?" I said the word slowly, anticipation rising in me. The last time he asked me to go somewhere with him, we'd ended up kissing. I wouldn't mind trying that again to see if it could help me forget about my worries.

Wes cleared his throat. "I was actually thinking about going to the airplane hangar tonight to watch *The Phantom of the Opera*, so I can understand Christine and Raul's state of mind when they were singing 'All I Ask of You.' That way, I can really get into the performance next week."

"Yeah?" Was there supposed to be a question in there somewhere?

He shrugged. "Anyway, if you want something to do, you can come watch it with me. You said you like that movie, right?"

I nodded. I loved that movie. And I loved the idea of watching it with Wes even more. "That would be nice."

"Awesome." There was a smile in his voice.

I expected him to move so I'd have to scoot away from him, but he didn't. Instead, he just lay there for a while like he was lost in thought.

"What are you thinking about now?" I asked, wondering if he was thinking about us. Could he have possibly thought about last night's kiss since it happened?

"I don't know. I guess I'm just thinking about how glad I am that we're friends again. It was long overdue." He gave me a gentle squeeze, making my

muscles feel weak with joy.

"I'm glad we're friends again, too."

"So, do you want to listen to the real Ryker Peak album?" Wes asked.

"Sure. As long as it's not another new polka-inspired album, I'd love to hear it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I didn't realize that I'd fallen asleep to the smooth voices of Ryker Peak until the absence of the music woke me. When I came to my senses, my head was resting slightly lower on Wes's chest, with his arm curved around me.

Had I seriously just fallen asleep next to Wes? How in the world did I manage that?

I didn't think he'd realized that I'd awoken, so I tried to hold as still as possible. In my mind, I tried to figure out how to act normal and not awkward once he'd notice I was awake. Should I apologize for falling asleep while cuddled up beside him?

But he didn't seem to notice anything and was scrolling through some playlists on his music app.

I watched his screen, wondering what music he was in the mood for now. There was a playlist titled, 'Running songs.' I saw 'New songs, 'Ryker Peak,' and one more called 'Inspired by her.'

His thumb hovered over that playlist for a moment.

Who was this "her?" Was it Olivia? Was he considering deleting it?

I held my breath as I waited to see what he was doing. Deleting it might mean that he was ready to move on. Would it be too presumptuous to think that because I was cuddled up to him, he might be ready to delete that playlist? Was it possible that he might have feelings for me now?

But instead of deleting, he clicked on it and opened it up.

I released the breath I'd been holding, as normally as I could, hoping my disappointment wouldn't alert him to my state of wakefulness. His head was just at the right angle that I didn't think he could see that my eyes were open or anything.

Inside the playlist, there were only a few songs. And right at the top was

"All I Ask of You."

That was weird. I thought he said he'd only heard the song once or twice before we started practicing it last week.

He clicked open a menu for the playlist to where he could add new songs to it. And after a moment, he added to the list one of the songs on the Ryker Peak album we'd been listening to.

Did that mean he was still thinking about Olivia? While he was lying on the hammock with me?

My chest hurt with the thought. I knew he'd fallen hard for her, but I'd hoped that when he said he was getting over her that it had been true.

He navigated back to the main screen of the playlist and clicked on the song "All I Ask of You." An instant later the familiar intro was playing.

He wouldn't have picked a song that we sang together to remind him of his ex-girlfriend, would he?

He had always seemed like he'd be one of those romantic types of boyfriends who would make playlists for the girl he liked. The type who might also do some sort of big romantic gesture to win her back if he ever lost her. Was that something he was planning? Had he changed his mind and wanted her back?

But when he set his phone back on his stomach and started to slowly run his fingers along my side, I had another thought push itself into my mind.

Was there a chance that the playlist didn't have anything to do with Olivia but was actually meant for someone else?

Could the "her" be referring to me?

My heart raced. And when the racing feeling was followed by a slow burning in my chest, I realized just how much I wanted it to be true. I really wanted Wes to like me.

The song continued to play, bringing me images of Christine and Raul from *The Phantom of the Opera*. In the movie, they had been childhood friends who were separated for years, only to find each other later.

It made me think of how Wes and I had also been best friends separated for five years. And now, we were back together despite the odds.

His fingers gently grazed along my arm, making goosebumps race across my skin.

I closed my eyes again so I could just revel in the feeling of being so close to Wes. We used to lie close together on the hammock, but never like this. But even if he didn't like me the way I was beginning to like him, would

it be too weird to hope we could make cuddling on the hammock a permanent element of our friendship? Guys and girls who were friends could cuddle, right?

I focused on making sure my breathing was slow and rhythmic as I listened to the sound of his heart beating in his chest. He wasn't wearing cologne today, as far as I could tell, but his housekeeper must still use the same laundry detergent or fabric softener she'd used when we were younger because he smelled like happiness and carefree days.

I drew in another long breath as I remembered all the times we'd made sandcastles at the beach or watched movies at his house. But something must have changed with the rhythm of my breathing, because a second later, Wes spoke in a hushed tone. "Lauren? Are you awake now?"

Knowing I couldn't pretend to be asleep forever, I let my eyes flutter open and tilted my face toward him to give him my most sleepy-eyed smile.

"Yeah?" I said as drowsily as I could so he wouldn't know I'd actually been awake for a few minutes.

His lips spread into a soft smile. "Someone's tired today."

"I guess so," was all I could think of to say.

"Do you like the new album?" he asked. "Well, the songs you were awake for, anyway?"

"I like them. How long was I out?"

"Only about ten minutes. Or at least I think it was only that long. I somehow fell asleep, too."

I lifted my head to look at him. "You did?"

He nodded. Up close, I could pick out the flecks of gray in his blue eyes. "I was a little too charged last night after the party to fall asleep very quickly."

I gulped. "You were?"

"Yeah." His gaze locked with mine, like he was trying to communicate something to me. Then his gaze dipped down to my lips before quickly moving back to my eyes. "What about you? Did you sleep well?"

Was this his way of asking me if I'd spent hours daydreaming about that kiss? Because I totally had. I'd been up half the night thinking about it.

But I didn't want to be the first to admit it, so I said, "I slept okay."

I let my head rest against his shoulder again.

When the song finished, another one began with an upbeat piano intro. This would be song number two on his "Inspired by her playlist."

"What's this one called?" I asked when I didn't recognize it.

"It's called, 'Begin Again.' It's a cover that The Piano Guys did of Taylor Swift's song."

"I really like this version of it."

"Me too."

We were quiet for a little while as we both listened to the music, which was a really pretty song. I loved how the music swelled during the bridge, and then the way it moved into the final chorus was beautiful.

"What time do you think your parents will be home at?" he asked.

"They said they'd be back around two." I looked at my watch. "We have an hour and a half left. Do you want to go practice the duet now?"

"I guess." He sighed.

"Don't sound so excited."

He chuckled. "I just don't want to get out of the hammock. It's way too comfortable."

"You could always buy yourself a hammock, you know. If you had a hammock at your house, you could use it all the time."

"Yeah, but it still won't be the same."

"I know this is old, but I'm sure you could find a hammock like it somewhere."

He shook his head. "That's not the problem, though."

"Then what is the problem?"

"Would it weird you out too much if I said I didn't want to move out of this hammock because I like being in it with you?"

Tingles erupted all over my body. Did I just hear him right? It took me a moment to find my voice. "N-not too weird."

He turned to look at me and his cheeks were slightly redder than normal. "And what do you think about being in the hammock with me?"

Was this some sort of test? Did he figure out that I liked him now and he was just trying to get me to admit it so he could...?

So he could what?

How would that information serve him? We weren't in elementary or middle school anymore, so I doubted he'd tease me for it like he teased me about my other crushes growing up.

But there was sincerity in his eyes, so I decided to be brave and said, "I like being in the hammock with you, too."

His arm tightened around me as he squeezed me closer. "That's good."

Maybe someday we'll get brave enough to tell your parents that we're friends again, so we can do things like this more often?"

My heart swelled with the thought for about a second, before the fear of what they might do kicked in. They'd never allow it. They'd send me to live in Ridgewater with my aunt and uncle before they'd ever let me hang out with *that Schultz boy*.

But instead of speaking my fears out loud, I said, "Maybe."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"*Y*our parents will probably be back pretty soon, huh?" Wes asked as we cleaned up our dishes from lunch. We'd practiced our duet a few times, and then since I still wanted to hang out with him, I'd invited him to eat lunch with me before he went home.

I looked at the clock on the wall. "They'll probably be here in the next half hour."

"So pretty soon." He pursed his lips and tapped his fingers along the counter like he was thinking about something.

I wiped the counter down with a washcloth, wondering what he was thinking about. I knew we already had plans to watch the movie tonight at the hangar, but I still wasn't quite ready to say goodbye to him yet.

I had the feeling that I was becoming addicted to him.

I was rinsing the washcloth off in the sink when Wes sidled up to me and said, "I know we'll get in trouble if your parents find me here with you, but how do you feel about going to Luigi's with me to try that gelato?"

I looked up to his tall form beside me, excitement filling my stomach. "Like right now?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Sure."

I put the washcloth away and turned off the water at the sink. "That sounds delicious."

"Perfect." He smiled, showing off his perfect teeth. "Should we be risky and just take one of our cars instead of two?"

My parents weren't home. And they probably would never know if Wes was in my car. "Sure. I'm feeling like breaking all the rules today."

He laughed. "You're such a daredevil sometimes, Lauren."

I shrugged. "Yeah, well. I do what I can."

After grabbing my wallet and keys from upstairs, I led Wes to the garage

and we climbed inside my Audi.

"Should I be worried about my safety as we drive?" Wes asked as he buckled in. "Just how many speeding tickets have you gotten?"

"Ha-ha, very funny. I actually have a perfect driving record, if you must know."

"Good to know."

We made it to Luigi's about twenty minutes later. I parked, and then we headed to the front of the building.

"Let me get that." Wes stepped ahead of me so he could open the door.

"Such a gentleman." I smiled and walked inside the pizza place.

Wes followed. "Well, I figured that since my mom thinks I'm out on a date, I might as well act the part of a gentleman."

"You told her you were going on a date with Olivia?" I narrowed my eyes as jealousy bubbled inside of me.

"No."

"But you told her that you were hanging out with Olivia?"

"No."

"Did I hear you wrong then? Because I thought you said your mom assumes you're out on a date."

The corner of his lip quirked up slightly, telling me that he was purposely trying to confuse me. "You didn't hear me wrong. I did tell her that I was going out on a date. It was the only way of getting out of that garage today."

I furrowed my brow, feeling so confused. "So who exactly does she think you're on a date with?"

Was it that 'her' from his playlist?

I braced myself for whatever name he was going to speak next, because I knew instantly that I'd hate the girl.

He gestured for me to go to the line by the gelato counter, so I did. Then I turned around to wait for his answer.

"Do you have a date with someone after this? Is that what's going on?"

Wouldn't that just be perfect? Wes brought me along so he could meet up with some girl he liked.

But Wes just laughed. "You're kind of cute when you're getting worked up about something."

I made a face at him, barely resisting the urge to stick out my tongue. "And you're really annoying when you're avoiding my questions."

He laughed again. "Let's get you some gelato so the sugar can make you

happy again."

He put his hands on my shoulders and guided me closer to the gelato counter. And even though he was totally being annoying right now, my heart had the gall to skip a beat when he touched me.

"So what flavor looks good to you?" Wes asked, leaning down so his face was next to mine. I'd expected him to move to my side so he could pick a flavor as well, but instead, he just stayed behind me and started massaging my shoulders.

His thumbs gently kneaded a knot at the base of my neck, and I tried really hard to focus on the flavors of gelato in front of me. But it was hard to concentrate because his hands on my shoulders felt amazing.

"How can I help you today?" The short blonde girl behind the counter smiled at us.

"Umm," I said, looking at the cartons of vibrantly colored gelato for the first time. "I might need a moment."

I had hoped that Wes would continue his massage, but he let go and stepped to my side. He said, "I'll have a scoop of double chocolate and another scoop of raspberry mango."

Mmm, that sounded really good.

I looked at the different flavors once more. But when Wes went back to massaging my shoulders again, telling me my muscles were tight, I lost all of my ability to focus.

Did he have any idea what he was doing to me? I knew he was an affectionate guy. But after cuddling with me in the hammock and now with the massage, I was starting to wonder if I should be reading into this.

And I *really* wanted to be reading into this.

I wanted to be the girl he'd told his mom he was out with on a date.

Which reminded me, he still hadn't really explained what had happened in that conversation with his mom.

But the more he rubbed my shoulders, the more I didn't care.

My brain was still muddled when the girl handed Wes his gelato. And I was sad that she hadn't been a slower worker because it meant he had to stop touching my shoulders.

The girl looked at me expectantly. "What can I get for you?"

I scanned the flavors quickly and named the first two that I read. "Can I sample the pistachio and the butter pecan?"

The girl nodded and grabbed two small sample spoons to get them for

me.

Wes chuckled at my side. "I thought you always called those 'grandma flavors'?"

I felt my cheeks fill with blood. But since I wasn't about to let him know how flustered his touch had made me feel, I lied and said, "My taste buds have matured since the last time we ate gelato together."

"Sure they have." He didn't sound like he believed me at all.

The girl handed me the samples. The butter pecan was actually better than I had thought it would be, but when I tasted the pistachio, I wrinkled my nose.

Wes must have noticed my expression because after swallowing a bite of his gelato, he said, "So I'm guessing your taste buds haven't really matured all that much in five years?"

"I guess not." I turned back to the choices once more to see if anything else looked good.

After a moment, Wes said, "You should try the raspberry mango. I think you'll like it."

I was about to ask the girl for a sample when Wes held his spoon out to me with a small amount of the pink gelato on the end.

"Oh, you meant try yours?"

"Yeah." He lifted a shoulder. "Unless you're worried about getting my germs."

"Pretty sure I already got ample exposure to your germs last night and didn't mind."

The words were out before I could stop them. I clamped a hand over my mouth and looked up at Wes with wide eyes before asking, "Did I just say that out loud?"

A big smile spread across his cheeks and he let out a big hearty laugh. "Yes, you did. But don't worry, I didn't mind, either."

He didn't mind that I'd basically announced to the other people in line that we'd kissed, or he didn't mind that the actual kissing had happened?

I wanted to ask him but realized it would be weird to keep him holding his spoon out for me any longer, so I took the small bite of gelato he offered.

"Mmm, that's really good," I said.

"Wanna try the double chocolate while you're at it?" He scooped out a small spoonful of the chocolatey gelato and held it up to my lips.

I felt slightly awkward having him watch me so closely while I ate, but I

tried to ignore those feelings. I liked him, and I wanted things like this to happen more often.

"Which one do you like better?" he asked after I'd savored the small spoonful.

I smacked my lips together as I thought about it. "I don't think I can decide."

Was it bad that I kind of wanted him to offer me another sample of each?

But instead of doing that, he turned to the girl waiting behind the counter, lifted his cup, and said, "She'll take the same."

The girl gave me my order, and then Wes paid for us both.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," I said as he was handing her the cash. "I can get my own gelato."

But he ignored me and said, "It's no problem. I invited you on this date, anyway, so I should be the one to pay."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so this is a date now?"

He took the change back from the cashier. "My mom thinks I'm on a date, remember? And since I don't want to be that son who is always lying to his mom, it would probably be best if we considered this a date after all." He winked.

A date.

Sigh.

"Want to eat this at one of the tables outside?" he asked.

"That sounds perfect."

And it really did. Eating gelato on a lazy October afternoon with one of the hottest guys from school *and* calling it a date really was sounding like a dream come true.

We walked back out the door and Wes put his hand at the base of my spine as he guided me to an empty table on the sidewalk.

"So you never really explained who your mom thinks you're on a date with," I said.

"Who says I told her who?"

I gave him an 'I'm not buying it' look and crossed my arms. "Just tell me. I'm guessing you told her you broke up with Olivia?"

After licking his spoon, he said, "That would be correct."

"And when did that happen? Because as of last night she still thought you were dating."

"It came up today when we were cleaning the garage."

"Really? How did that come up?"

He mixed his gelato with his spoon and wouldn't make eye contact with me for a moment. After a while, he shrugged and said, "My mom had just noticed something was different about me."

Different good? Or different bad?

Had he been moping around the house and just pretending in front of me like he was happy to be broken up with Olivia? He did have that playlist called "Inspired by her" in his music app.

After what seemed like forever, he cleared his throat and said, "My mom just mentioned that I've seemed happier this past week. And when she asked why, I told her it was probably because I broke up with Olivia and have been spending time with someone who actually makes me feel good."

And when he finally met my gaze, his expression was raw. Like admitting that had taken a lot of courage.

My insides warmed. Did I really make him happy?

Spending all this time with him was definitely making me happy. So happy that finding out those things about my mom wasn't bothering me nearly as much as it probably would have a week ago if I'd found it out alone.

It took me a moment to find my voice. "Hanging out with you makes me happy, too."

I'd been really nervous to say those words, and my heart pounded like crazy after, but when Wes's eyes lit up, it was totally worth it.

We were quiet for a while, eating our gelato and looking up shyly every once in a while to look at each other. And each time our eyes locked, little butterflies started fluttering inside my stomach.

It was like I was back in elementary with my very first crush. Except this time, I was looking at the guy who had made fun of all the guys I'd crushed on back then. There had always been something wrong with every guy I'd ever liked.

And now that I was on this side of things, I realized he'd been totally right. Because none of those guys had been Wes. They all paled in comparison to him. None of them had been my best friend who just got me and wanted to be with me despite all my weird quirks.

I was almost done with my gelato when I caught him staring at me with a funny expression on his face.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked. "Do I have chocolate all over my face?"

I wiped at my cheeks, but my fingers came away clean.

"No."

He looked away for a moment. But as soon as I ate another bite, he was back at staring at me again.

"Do I eat my gelato funny or something?" I asked.

His mouth quirked up into a half-smile. "I don't know yet."

"You don't know yet?" I furrowed my brow. "Are you, like, studying the way I eat my gelato?"

He laughed lightly. "Well, you know what they say, right?"

"What?"

"About the way a person eats their ice cream." He set his empty cup down on the table.

And just like that, realization dawned on me. "Are you referring to that thing everyone talked about in middle school? How the way you eat ice cream is how you kiss?"

"Maybe." There was a teasing glint in his eyes.

My cheeks heated up. He had been watching me eat my gelato and judging my kissing ability at the same time. And I knew I shouldn't ask, because it was totally setting myself up for humiliation, but I had to know for some reason. "So, what did you learn from watching me?" I raised an eyebrow and tried to look as composed and confident as possible.

"I don't know. I'm not sure if the theory works as well when there's a spoon involved." Then he leaned closer and lowered his voice just above a whisper. "But the science nerd in me thinks we might need to do more research sometime."

My whole body instantly flooded with heat. I may have thought he was the hottest guy at school earlier, but the way he said that was just flat-out sexy. Like, the muscles in my lower abdomen might have just swooned for the first time with excitement.

Before I could think of a flirty way to tell him that we should find somewhere secluded to test his hypothesis, I noticed Coach Slater sauntering up the sidewalk, holding the hand of a little girl with blonde hair. She looked to be about eight or nine years old and had one arm in a pink cast.

They stopped when they reached our table and said hi.

"I see you guys are trying Luigi's new gelato. Is it any good?" Coach asked with a smile.

"Yeah, it's way good," Wes said. Then he turned to the girl who must be

Coach's daughter. "What did you do to your arm, Bella?"

Bella glanced at her arm briefly before looking back at Wes with a shy expression on her face. "I broke my wrist doing a back handspring at school."

Wes frowned. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

Coach patted Bella on the back. "Bella and her friend like to have fun at recess, trying to teach themselves the gymnastics tricks *before* their gymnastics coaches are able to teach them the proper techniques."

Wes nodded. "Lauren and I used to do stuff like that when we were little, too."

"Oh, are you guys related?" Bella looked at me for the first time, and when I saw her face up close, I went completely still. It was like looking in the mirror at my nine-year-old self. She had the same color of green eyes as me. My hair had been thinner back then like hers was. And even the smattering of freckles on her nose were just like mine had been at that age when I'd spent lots of time out in the sun.

"No, we're not related. We grew up together, though," Wes said with a smile, not seeming to notice how still I'd become.

But when I looked up at Coach Slater, he was watching me. And when our eyes locked, there was anxiety in his green eyes.

How had I never noticed that our eyes were such a similar shade of green before?

Coach turned to Wes and cleared his throat. "Anyway, we'll let you two get back to your conversation. Bella and I are out on a daddy-daughter date, and I promised her two scoops of gelato for herself."

After they had left us, Wes frowned at me, concern in his expression. "What's wrong?" he asked, touching my leg. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I shook my head slightly, and it took me a moment to find my words again. "Did you notice anything interesting about Bella?" I asked.

It was possible that I was just imagining that she could be my younger twin, right? Reading those things about my mom and Coach Slater could just be making me see things that weren't really there.

Wes frowned. "She had a broken arm. Was there anything else I was supposed to notice?"

I blinked my eyes shut, wishing I could just unsee what I'd seen in Coach Slater's daughter's face, and then in his expression after noticing my reaction to Bella.

But he wouldn't have been looking at me that way unless there was something going on that he was worried about me finding out.

When I opened my eyes again, Wes appeared worried. "What's going on Lauren?" His voice was cautious.

I took in a deep breath, trying to decide if I really wanted to say the words that I hoped so badly weren't true. But with everything I now knew about my mom and Coach Slater's history, I was pretty sure the words were truer than anyone wanted to admit.

"I'm worried Bella might be my sister."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Wes's eyes went wide. "What?"
"I think Coach Slater got my mom pregnant." I tried to swallow down the panic rising in my throat, threatening to choke me.

"How?" Wes shook his head. "What makes you say that?"

"Because his daughter looks almost exactly like I did when I was her age. Don't you remember?"

"Do you think you're just reading into things because of what you read in the journal? Your mom has blonde hair. Just because Coach Slater and his daughter also have blonde hair doesn't mean you're related."

"But my mom's eyes are blue. I always assumed that I must have gotten some recessive green-eyed gene from my dad. But what if I actually got my green eyes from my mom's old friend TJ?"

Wes knew all about how genes and DNA came together. He was the science guy.

"My parents always said I was a honeymoon baby," I continued, thinking my thoughts aloud. "But what if I was actually conceived the week before they got married?"

I let my head rest against the table, feeling sick. Wes scooted his chair closer and put his hand on my back, rubbing it up and down in a soothing way. "Everything's going to be okay."

I turned to look at him, tears pricking at the back of my eyes. "But what if it isn't?"

Was it really possible that the man who I had thought was my dad all my life was actually not related to me at all? Had my mom been lying to us both all along?

I didn't want to think that my mom could have done something like this—

to pull the wool over everyone's eyes so much. She wasn't the type of lady who did those kinds of things.

But I also hadn't thought that she was the kind of woman who would never tell her new husband that she'd slept with one of her best friends the week before they got married.

How did I not see this coming? The thought never even crossed my mind when I read all those journal entries.

We continued rubbing my back for a moment, not seeming to know what to say.

But what could he say? He knew just as well as I did that there was a lot of evidence pointing to the fact that my conclusions could very well be true.

He leaned close to my ear. "Do you want to get out of here?"

I looked at him and nodded. "Yes." The tears were coming any second now, I could feel it.

He took our cups and put them in the garbage, then guided me away from the table.

We were just walking past the entrance to Luigi's when Coach Slater and his daughter came out the door with their cups full of colorful gelato.

Coach must have noticed the expression on my face, because when we walked past him and Bella, there was a look of fear in his eyes.

He knew that I knew.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"Where do you want to go now?" Wes asked me when we were in my car. I was not in the right headspace to get behind the steering wheel, so I'd taken the passenger seat and asked him to drive for me.

I sighed, feeling so confused about everything. "I want to ask my parents if it's true, but what if my dad doesn't know anything about this? It would break him to find out."

Then the idea that I'd had earlier in the sunroom popped into my head. I'd thought the feud had started because Wes's mom had found out about the affair and wanted to blackmail my mom with that info. But was it possible that she had actually found out that my dad wasn't my real dad and that this was what caused the rift between our families?

"Do you think your mom would know?"

Wes shrugged. "She's never said anything about it to me. But she did make that comment about running being in your genetics."

My stomach twisted and my muscles went completely slack against my seat.

She had said that. And when I'd jokingly said the same thing to Coach, he'd gotten a weird expression in his eyes.

I lay my head back against the headrest and closed my eyes. Maybe if I closed them long enough this wouldn't be happening.

Wes touched my leg. "Hey, everything's going to be okay."

I shook my head. "Your mom has probably known for years. I bet you were right all along. This is probably why the feud started in the first place."

Coach Slater had returned to Sweet Water right about the time the feud began. If he'd found out that my parents had a daughter with blonde hair and green eyes just nine months after he'd slept with my mom, that would have most likely raised some questions in his mind.

Especially since I looked so much like his daughter. So much like him, now that my eyes had been opened enough to see.

"For your sake, I'm really hoping we're just jumping to conclusions," Wes said with compassion in his eyes. "But it does seem like your mom has a crap ton of secrets."

That it did.

"Do you think your mom is home?" I asked.

"Probably."

"Can you take me to your house? I want to see what she knows before I talk to my parents."

He gave me a wary expression. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Wes parked my car in front of the Dermot's house so we could slip down the street without my parents being alerted to my going into enemy territory.

"My mom is probably in her office. I'll go get her."

He left me standing in the living room that I hadn't been in since I was twelve.

They had updated the furniture since I'd last been here, and on the wall was a recent family portrait with Wes and his parents at the beach. I remembered seeing them taking photos with the photographer on the beach behind our houses last year, and back then, I had thought about how annoying it was that I couldn't go surfing that evening.

But looking at the portrait on the wall now, I didn't have nearly as many annoying feelings as I had that day. Wes was gorgeous to look at as he stood beside his parents on the sand. He was taller than his dad by a couple inches and he just looked so vibrant. His eyes were smiling at me, and I didn't know what it was about that photo, but it just helped me feel more at peace.

Wes had always been my safe space growing up, and now he was doing it again. I had no idea what I was about to find out from his mom in the next few minutes, but I had a feeling that if he was by my side, I would be able to get through it. I wouldn't be all alone.

I was suddenly so grateful that we'd found a way to be friends again. So thankful to have him back in my life.

In the next moment, I heard Wes and his mom talking, their voices drifting down from another room. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but his mom's tone sounded surprised at first and then it turned more

conversational.

What was he telling her?

I continued to check out the other photos on the shelf to distract myself. There were more of Wes and his parents, and others of him alone.

I was looking at a photo of him with a gold medal around his neck, probably from one of his cross country or track meets last year, when I heard him and his mom coming down the hall toward the living room.

I braced myself for whatever was coming. I had no idea if his mom was going to throw me out the door or invite me to sit down for a conversation.

I really hoped she'd at least answer a few of my questions.

When they appeared in the doorway, Mrs. Schultz surprised me by immediately coming toward me and pulling me into a hug.

"It's so good to have you here again, Lauren," she said. "It's been much too long."

Too surprised by the welcoming reception to react, I simply just stood there and let her hug me.

When she stepped back, she had compassion in her eyes. And I had a feeling that Wes must have told her about why we'd come here.

"Go ahead and take a seat." Mrs. Schultz gestured to the loveseat behind us.

I did, and Wes came to sit beside me. Just having him near provided a calming presence for me.

His mom sat on the couch across from us. "Wes tells me that you have some questions about what I might know about your mother and TJ."

I swallowed. "Yeah." I glanced at Wes anxiously, not sure where to start.

"How about you start with what you found in the journal," he suggested, taking my hand in his and squeezing it.

I nodded my head slowly, grateful that he didn't let go of my hand. I turned to his mom. "I'm sure you already know a lot of this, but until about a week ago, I had no idea that you and my mom were close friends with Coach Slater."

Mrs. Schultz nodded. "Yes, that's correct. We were all really good friends before your mom got married to your dad and TJ was in the military."

Ok, so she was confirming that Coach Slater was in fact TJ from my mom's journal and that they had all been close friends before.

Wes squeezed my hand again, urging me to continue. I took a deep breath and asked, "Do you know anything about them dating for a short time before

my parents got married?"

Mrs. Schultz, who had appeared calm the moment before, suddenly looked alarmed. She glanced at Wes with question in her eyes, which told me that Wes probably hadn't actually told his mom why we were here.

At least that meant he was loyal to me. Maybe all he did was explain that I was at their house and that she needed to treat me nicely.

She took a moment to regain her composed demeanor, and then finally said, "Yes. I'm aware that they briefly dated. Though I didn't find that out until many years later."

So it was like what I'd thought. My mom and TJ really had kept things a secret from those closest to them.

"Is it okay if I ask you how you found out?" I asked.

She wiped her hands along her jeans and repositioned herself on the couch like she was nervous. "When TJ moved back to Sweet Water, he didn't contact me or your mother at first. It had been so many years since we'd seen each other, and we were all so busy with our families and work that we just didn't really run in the same circles anymore.

"Anyway, I guess one evening, he and his family went into a restaurant and had dinner at a table somewhat close to your family. Your parents didn't see him there since they had their backs to him in the booth, but he had the perfect view of their cute, blond-haired daughter."

I held my breath.

She sighed. "When you were leaving with your parents, I guess you must have stopped to smile at his baby who was sitting in the high chair, and that was when he noticed that you had green eyes."

She looked down at her hands in her lap before looking back at me with pain in her eyes. And I knew immediately with that one look that things were bad. They were exactly as I had feared.

"So then after he dropped off his family at home that night, he immediately drove over to my house to get some answers. He asked me if your mother had ever said anything to me about their brief affair. I, of course, had never heard of such a thing. As far as I ever knew, they'd simply hung out and had fun catching up during the time that your dad and mom were broken up. I had no idea that they'd had some sort of illicit affair."

The way she said *illicit affair* just made the whole thing sound dirty.

Which, from the secrecy of everything, it probably was.

"Anyway, he just kept on saying, 'she has my eyes, Rena. Jolene's little

girl has my eyes." Mrs. Schultz looked out the window as if she was reliving the memory. Then she shrugged. "I didn't have any information to give him. I told him that you were a honeymoon baby and that Jolene would tell me if something was amiss. She wouldn't have kept a secret like that from me. But when I said that part about you being a honeymoon baby, that's when everything seemed to snap for him."

"Because I wasn't a honeymoon baby," I said, feeling dread and confirmation fill me. "Because it actually happened a week before the honeymoon."

Mrs. Schultz nodded and there were tears in her eyes. And seeing the emotion she was feeling just multiplied my own. The floodgates opened, and my whole world crumbled to pieces.

I was not the person I'd always thought I was. I wasn't really a Carmichael. I was actually the daughter of my cross country coach, and no one had ever thought it was important enough to tell me.

I hunched over, feeling the pain tear through my body. Until this moment, it had all been just a possibility. But now it was real. Everything was so real, and I had all the realness of it crushing me so hard that I couldn't breathe.

"Come here," Wes said. And when he gently tugged on my arm, I let him pull me to him, my body collapsing against him. He wrapped his arms around me while I sobbed into his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Lauren," Wes said quietly. "I'm so sorry you had to find out like this."

I just nodded because I couldn't speak.

How could this be happening? How could any of this be real?

This kind of stuff wasn't supposed to happen in real life. It was only supposed to happen in books and movies where I could experience it from the safety of my bubble. It wasn't supposed to actually happen to me. Not when everything in my life had seemed so perfect.

Mrs. Schultz excused herself from the room, probably to give me privacy while I fell apart.

After a while, my sobbing slowed. I lifted my head from Wes's chest. "Sorry that I ruined your shirt," I said when I saw the mascara streaks and wet spots.

"It's ok. I have other shirts." He gave me a sad smile. "I'm just worried about you."

I drew in a shaky breath. "Me too."

What was I going to do now? How was I going to tell my parents that I had found out their secret?

Or rather, how was I going to tell them that I knew and hope that my dad would still be okay, too? He had been so heartbroken years ago when they'd found out they couldn't have any more kids. He'd gone into a depression for months. How would he feel when he found out he didn't even really have me biologically?

This would break him. He may put forth a tough exterior in the boardroom, but with me, he'd always been like a big teddy bear. I'd always been daddy's little girl growing up.

I wiped under my eyes. My fingers came away black, which meant I had a mascara mess not just on Wes's t-shirt but all over my face.

"Is it okay if I use your bathroom?" I asked Wes.

"Yeah, it's still just down there." He gestured to the hall just to the left of the living room.

In the bathroom mirror, I looked even worse than I'd thought. My eyes were bloodshot with black smudges under them. I turned on the water and got to work scrubbing off the mess on my face. When I was done, my eyes were still red and puffy, but at least I didn't look like a raccoon anymore.

I went back to the living room and Wes gestured for me to sit by him again. I nuzzled up to his side and let him put his arm around me.

"Thanks for being here for me," I whispered.

He bent down and kissed the top of my head. "I'm sorry this is happening, but I'm glad I'm here."

A minute later, Mrs. Schultz came back into the room with some milk and cookies on a tray. "Would you guys like some of these? Cookies always make me feel better."

Despite how rotten I was feeling, my mouth still watered a little. Wes's mom made the best chocolate chip cookies ever.

I sat up straighter, not sure what she thought about me cuddling up to her son. I said, "Those would be really good actually."

I took a cookie and a glass of milk from the tray and Wes did the same.

As we ate, Mrs. Schultz set the tray down on the coffee table and then took the seat across from us again.

"I know this is a lot to take in," she said. "But there's more to the story that I think is important for you to know, though I'm afraid it won't make either your mom or me look very good."

My chest tightened with anxiety. How could there be more?

She must have noticed the apprehension on my face because she quickly said, "The story doesn't get worse. You already found out the most difficult part. But I do feel I need to be upfront with what happened after I found out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"*T*hat night after TJ left my house, I invited your mother to come down to the beach so we could speak in private without either of our husbands overhearing our conversation," Mrs. Schultz continued.

"And did my mom admit to it then?"

Mrs. Schultz shook her head. "Not that night. She told me that TJ was making everything up. That he had tried to come onto her when she was vulnerable after the breakup, but that she had shut him down and sent him away. Then she accused him of saying those things because he was still upset that she hadn't loved him like he wanted."

"But I read in her journal..." I started to say.

Mrs. Schultz nodded. "Yes, I know. But I didn't know what to believe at first, so I decided to just let things be. I told TJ that Jolene was telling me a very different story, and that because I valued both of their friendships, I didn't want to get in the middle of things."

"So the family feud didn't have anything to do with this?" I scrunched up my face.

"No. It most definitely had a lot to do with this, but it didn't come to light for a few more weeks. You see, while I wanted to believe Jolene, since she had been my very best friend for most of my life, I also couldn't help but see similarities between you and TJ when you came over to play. Just like he'd said, you had his eyes. Your hair was blonde, yes, but when I looked closer at you next to your mother, I realized that your hair was a lighter shade than hers, more similar to TJ's."

I'd noticed those slight differences before, too, but had just attributed them to me getting some of my dad's DNA.

"Anyway, I kept noticing little things here and there, but my doubts weren't confirmed until one day when we were watching a bunch of kids

playing at the beach and she commented on how she'd always wished for more children."

She paused, like she expected me to be surprised by this fact. But it looked like my parents had at least told me one of their secrets.

Mrs. Schultz continued, "I had never known that your parents struggled with infertility. It wasn't talked about as much back then as it is these days. I'd been happy just having Wes, so I'd assumed Jolene was the same as me. But when she let it slip that your dad was sterile, I knew immediately that TJ had been right. Your dad couldn't have fathered you if he was sterile."

He was sterile?

While I'd known my parents couldn't have any more kids, they'd never given me a detailed explanation of what this meant. My mom only told me that they'd gotten sad news from the doctor one day, and that my dad was taking it really hard, so I should just tell him I loved him but not really talk about it.

Apparently, she'd only said that to keep me from asking too many questions.

"So has my dad known all along that I'm not his?"

It wouldn't surprise me if my mom and dad had actually come up with some sort of plan to seduce TJ so they could have a child.

I knew that was a crazy thought. But so were all of the things I was hearing now.

Did I even know my parents?

But Mrs. Schultz shook her head and said, "I don't think he knew. At least, he didn't at the time that I found out."

"But he knows he's sterile. How could he not know?"

She gave me a sad smile. "I think he chose to believe that you were a miracle baby. Or that he didn't become sterile until later on."

This was so sad. My dad had probably been doing the mental gymnastics to keep his view of the world intact for years because he wanted it so badly. How crushed was he going to be when he found out it was all a lie?

It just goes to show that when you want to believe something badly enough, you can have all kinds of evidence presented to you but still choose to ignore it. He wanted to believe that my mom had never lied to him. He wanted to believe that I was actually his biological child. He wanted to believe that nothing was ever wrong.

He wanted a lie to be the truth.

I guess he was lucky in a way, because right now I'd give anything to unlearn everything I'd discovered in the past week.

Wes touched my knee, as if sensing my emotions were high again. And when I glanced at him, he had an "Are you okay?" look on his face.

But I couldn't answer him quite yet. Because I really had no idea if I was going to be okay. I was still falling down the rabbit hole.

I figured I knew the answer to my next question, but I decided to ask it, anyway, since this was my chance to get the answers to all of the questions. I cleared my throat. "So when you found out that my dad was sterile, is that when the crap hit the fan and the feud started?"

She nodded, and there was a sadness in her eyes. "I told your mom that both TJ and your father deserved to know that truth, and that it was wrong of her to keep it a secret anymore. But she didn't want to hear any of it again and told me to drop it.

"I'm not proud of how I went about things. But I felt like TJ really deserved to know that you were his daughter, so I told your mom as much. When she continued to refuse, I said that if she wasn't willing to face the music, I would tell him for her."

"So he knows for sure, then?" I didn't know how I felt about Coach Slater knowing I was his biological daughter for all these years and yet he never did anything about it. A weird mixture of sadness and relief filled me.

Would I have wanted to have some sort of relationship with him as my biological father?

Did I even want that now?

And what about him? Did the news shock him when he first found out? Or maybe he was just relieved that he didn't have to share his time with another kid when my mom continued to deny anything was wrong? I wanted to know all the details.

But Mrs. Schultz drooped her shoulders instead and said, "This is the part I'm not proud of. When I said I was going to tell TJ, your mom decided to hold some private business information over my head that I couldn't have anyone finding out about."

She turned to Wes with regret in her eyes. "We had an employee who got our company involved in some insider trading scandal about ten years ago, and I'd confided this to Jolene. We'd been able to bury the evidence, but if anyone had found out at the time, it would have ruined us."

"So pretty much every adult we know has skeletons in the closet?" Wes

scoffed beside me.

His mom nodded. "We have since fired the employee who was behind it. But we still couldn't risk anyone finding out." She turned her gaze back to me. "When your mom said she'd make that information public, I caved in and didn't tell TJ about your dad being sterile."

"So Coach Slater doesn't know?" I asked, surprised.

"I'm sure he suspects, but I never confirmed it to him. And I doubt your mom ever did." She blew out a long breath. "Anyway, as you have seen, we were never able to fix our friendship and things went pretty sour from there. Neither of us trusted the other to be around you two and not say anything about our respective secrets, which is why we tried to keep our families apart from that point on. I wish things could have been different, because I have truly missed your mother's friendship. But we weren't able to come back from it."

I sat there quietly, letting everything sink in.

"Now I don't expect you to just take everything I've said at face value, especially after what I'm sure your mom has said about me. I've heard all the rumors around town about me being a pathological liar. But I do encourage you to talk to your parents about this. The sooner everything is out in the open, the sooner everyone will be able to heal, including you."

Right now, I had no idea how I could ever heal from this. It seemed like having my mom confirm any of this would be like dropping more dirt on my coffin, but I nodded and thanked Mrs. Schultz for answering my questions.

"Do you want to get out of here?" Wes asked when the conversation was over.

"Yes." I rubbed my palms across my jeans and stood.

Wes stood beside me and stretched, and I wondered what he was thinking about all of this.

At least one good thing had happened. We'd finally gotten down to the real reasons for the family feud.

Wes gave his mom a quick hug before we left, his tall frame towering over her. That story had been difficult for all of us, and it was nice to see him be so sweet to his mother. She'd done a good job of raising him.

After he'd thanked her for helping me, Mrs. Schultz turned to me again and said, "I'm sorry you had to find out like this, Lauren. But if you ever need to talk, don't hesitate to come over. We've missed having you around. Not just Wes, but Frank and I have missed you, too. I really hope that you won't

be a stranger anymore."

I glanced at Wes and saw that he seemed to agree with his mom's sentiment. "Thanks. I appreciate that. I've missed your family, too."

Wes and I walked out of his house in silence and then back down the street to where we'd left my car.

"Do you want to drive now?" he asked.

"No," I said.

So he used my key to unlock the car and opened the passenger side door for me. After shutting my door, he climbed in on the driver's seat.

Once I was buckled in, I just stared out the window, numb. But after finding out that the foundation of my life had been a lie, the numbness was a welcome feeling. It hurt too much to feel right now.

Growing up, I'd believed that my mom was an intrinsically good person. I'd thought that if anyone could be counted on to have integrity, it would be her.

But the truth was showing through the cracks now, and it was impossible to go back to how I'd seen her just a week ago.

"My family is so messed up," I said, slumping against the leather seat.

Wes looked at me with sad eyes. "If it makes you feel better, mine has been trying to keep some sketchy business transactions a secret for a decade."

I snorted, even though it wasn't very funny. "Is it bad that hearing that doesn't even faze me now?"

He shrugged. "Not really. It does kind of lose its shock value after hearing everything else."

We were quiet for a while before he broke the silence.

"Are you still interested in watching the movie at the hangar tonight? I understand if you don't want to after everything that has happened."

I gave him a sad smile. "I think I'll take a raincheck. Maybe some other time."

He nodded, and I could see in his eyes that he understood. "Do you want me to take you home then?"

I didn't *want* to go home. But I knew just waiting to face my parents would only make things worse. So I drew in a deep breath before saying, "Yeah, you better take me home. I'm sure my parents are wondering where I am, anyway."

Wes put my car in gear, made a U-turn, and drove down our street. He

pulled into my driveway, and I hit the button for my garage door to open.

"Thanks for taking me to get gelato," I said once we'd pulled into the garage. "Sorry everything kind of went downhill from there."

He turned off the engine and handed me my keys. "I'm sorry, too. We'll have to have a re-do sometime."

"I'd like that." I gave him a grateful smile, happy that he was still planning to spend time with me again even after watching me fall to pieces this afternoon.

We both climbed out of the car.

"You can sneak out through the side yard and back to your house," I said, gesturing to the door at the back of the garage.

He glanced at where I was pointing then back to me. "I'll do that in a second, but first, can I just give you a hug before you go in?"

I gave him a faint smile. "I'll take a hug anytime."

Wes pulled me against his chest. I wrapped my arms around his torso and his arms enveloped me. He was so much taller than me. My head rested against his chest, and I could hear his heart beating, steady and strong.

We just stood there for a while, the rhythm of his heart soothing me, and I took deep breaths to calm my pulse down and match his.

I'd never been held like this by a guy before. It was really nice.

Also, Wes smelled really good. When I'd gone to wash my face, he'd changed his shirt and it smelled freshly of fabric softener.

He rested his face against the top of my head and spoke into my hair. "After you get to talk to your parents tonight, make sure to let me know if you need anything. I'm just next door."

"I will." I took another deep breath. I didn't want to go inside and face my parents. If I could just stay out here in the garage for a long time, I would.

After another long moment, I sighed and mumbled, "Sorry, I should probably let you go." But even though I'd just said the words, I didn't make a move to step away.

"I'm not in a hurry," he said.

I let my cheek rest against his chest again and just soaked in his warmth. I probably wouldn't get a chance to be held like this again for a long time, so I might as well take the comfort of his arms while he was offering it.

This was probably one of the reasons why he'd had so many girls at school crushing on him. He gave the best hugs.

And he was just a great guy all around. Smart. Thoughtful. Fun. Witty.

Amazing.

Ok, so maybe there were lots of reasons to like him.

But one of the main reasons I liked him was that being with him just felt right. He felt like home to me.

Was it too much to hope that I felt like home to him, too? That he could possibly like me as more than a friend?

He'd seemed like he'd enjoyed that Truth or Dare kiss last night. But then again, that all could have just been an act. He had said something about giving everyone a good show.

I sighed.

Figuring out if my childhood friend had feelings for me was tricky. There was something about knowing someone for so long and not wanting to ruin your friendship again that made it hard to just flat-out flirt with them.

Not that I had ever been any good at flirting, anyway. I'd never had a boyfriend for a reason.

Before I could overthink everything too much, I stepped back.

"I should probably go in now," I said, tucking some hair behind my ear.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and cleared his throat. "I guess you should."

Our eyes met and I swallowed. Wes really was such a great guy.

I was just getting up the willpower to go inside, when the door leading into the house opened.

A second later, my mom's angry voice said, "What's going on out here?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*M*y mom was glaring at Wes with daggers in her eyes and her mouth hanging open.

"What is *he* doing here?" Mom asked.

"Wes was just dropping me off. We've had quite the afternoon." I knew she wanted me to feel intimidated, or like I was doing something wrong in having "that Schultz boy" on our property. But I refused to let her stupid feelings about the ridiculous family feud get in the way of my friendship with Wes anymore.

But from the expression on her face, you'd think I'd just told her I was pregnant or something.

Well, it was good she was taking a turn being the surprised one.

"So how long has this been going on? How long have you two been sneaking around behind my back?" She took a step down into the garage. "Is this why you joined the cross country team? So you could make a fool of me in front of the entire town?"

"Not everything revolves around you." I rolled my eyes. "You're delusional, Mom."

Her face twisted with anger. "Excuse me? Since when did you think you can talk to me like that, young lady?"

"Since I lost all respect for you."

Her eyes bulged, mouth wide open, leaving her speechless for a moment.

I'd always been a pretty easy kid who always followed her parents' orders, so I understood her shock and stunned look.

"I don't know what's gotten into you, Lauren, but it's got to stop." Then she turned to Wes, her eyes full of hate. "You need to get out of my house right now, Wesley. Get off my property."

"He goes by Wes now, Mom."

"I don't care what he goes by. He needs to get off my property right now, or I'll call the police."

Wes touched my shoulder from behind. "I'm going to go, Lauren. Just call me if you need me."

But I grabbed his hand before he could walk away. "You don't have to go."

Wes glanced over my shoulder to my mom. "It's probably better that you talk to your parents without me here."

"Yes, Wesley, you need to leave. It looks like I need to remind my daughter about the rules we have regarding keeping secrets and sneaking around."

That was when I lost it. I snapped at the self-righteous tone in her voice. She was the *last* person to be giving me a lecture on integrity.

"That's rich coming from you." I turned on my mom, my whole body shaking. "I can't believe you think that you, of all people, have room to say something about that. I know *all* about the secrets you've been keeping."

She went still, and instead of anger, her face contorted with fear.

"What are you talking about, Lauren?" she said, and her voice came out in a threatening whisper.

My heart beat like crazy in my chest. This was the moment. This was the moment where I would see her reaction and it would tell me what I needed to know for sure.

"I know everything, Mom." My voice came out wobbly, so I worked hard to steady it. "I know all about your fling with Coach Slater. I know all about how you've been lying to me my whole life. How you've been lying to Dad, too."

Her face went blank as shock seemed to wash over her.

After a moment she said, "Was TJ talking to you?"

And that was all I needed to hear from her to know that it was all true. She may as well have just kicked me in the gut because even though I'd already heard the story from Wes's mom, this was different. This was more painful.

Tears sprang to my eyes, a sob rising in my throat. "How could you do this to me?" I asked in a strangled voice. "How could you keep something like this a secret from me my whole life? Did you really think I'd never find out?" I wiped angrily at my tears. "Did you never think Dad would figure it out?"

She swallowed, and it looked like she might fall over if a feather touched her. "You don't understand, Lauren. You don't have the whole story."

"But that's just it, Mom." I shook my head, and my next words came out just above a whisper. "Because I think I finally do."

I turned back to Wes who was still standing quietly by my side. He must have sensed that I needed him right now because he offered me his hand. I reached for it like he was my lifeline. I needed to get out of here.

I stepped toward the door that led outside.

"Where are you going?" my mom called out.

"I'm leaving."

"You're not going anywhere with him. You're not going anywhere with him ever," she called after me.

It was then that my dad appeared in the doorway. He had shaving cream all over his face. He must have just gotten out of the shower and heard us yelling all the way from upstairs.

"What's going on here?" Dad asked. His gaze went from my mom, to me, and then his eyes widened when he saw Wes.

"Your daughter is trying to run off with Wesley," my mom said to him. "You need to stop her. He's trying to turn her against us."

"What?" He looked confused. "How?"

"He's not trying to turn me against anyone!" I yelled back, so frustrated at how my mom was trying to suddenly turn Wes into the bad guy in this situation. "You did that by lying to me my whole life."

My dad stepped forward. "H-hold on. What's happening? What are you talking about?"

I sighed. "Just ask Mom. See if you can get her to fess up to the story of who my real dad is."

The words were out before I could stop them. And when I saw pain reflected in my dad's eyes, I knew my words had hit their mark. He gripped the doorway like it was the only thing keeping him standing.

I regretted my words instantly. That was the worst way for my dad to have to find out. But instead of sticking around to deal with the aftermath, I bolted out the back door.

I'd let my mom clean up her mess on her own.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"*Y*ou want to go for a drive?" Wes asked as we briskly walked down the side yard of my house.

"Yes," I said. I needed to get far away from here. I was obviously in a very volatile mood and needed to get into a better spot before I could say any more things that could hurt my dad. I didn't know how I had expected for that conversation to go, but it definitely hadn't been like that.

But what was done was done, and I just wanted to run away from the problems right now. I could try to face my parents again tomorrow.

Wes grabbed his keys from inside his house, and then we got into his G-wagon.

"Any place in particular that you want to go?" Wes asked once we made it to the end of his driveway.

It was then that I saw my parents storm across our front lawn toward the Schultz's home.

"Just drive," I said, panic rising in my chest. "I need to get out of here now."

We drove out of our neighborhood. Through the rearview mirror, I saw my parents standing together, watching me drive away with the boy they'd been trying to keep me away from for years.

As I watched them grow smaller with the distance, something I hadn't expected happened. I expected my dad to be furious with my mom, furious and broken like me. But just before Wes and I turned the corner, I saw him pull my mom into his arms like he was comforting her. Comforting *her*!

How could he do that? After finding out that Coach Slater was my real dad?

He must've been a much better person than I was.

My phone started ringing before we even made it to the bridge. It was my

mom calling.

Did she really expect me to talk to her right now?

I sent her call to voicemail, and since I knew she'd probably just keep calling, I decided to turn off my phone. I was more than okay with giving her the silent treatment for a little while. She deserved it.

"Was that your mom or your dad?" Wes briefly took his gaze off the road to look at me.

I sighed. "My mom. She's probably trying to tell me more lies." She probably had already been able to magically convince my dad that everything was okay. He wouldn't be hugging her like that if he knew what she'd done to our family.

Wes gave me a sad look but didn't say anything.

"You hungry?" he asked after a while.

I nodded. "Yeah, I could eat."

We went through a drive-thru to get some dinner and took our burgers to the beach. There were a few families there, enjoying the ocean for one of the last Saturdays before it got too cold.

Wes got a blanket out of the back, and then we went to find a more secluded spot on the sand.

We watched a family of kids playing together in the water. They were all wearing shorts and T-shirts instead of swimsuits, which made me think that when they'd come, their parents hadn't necessarily planned on everyone jumping into the water.

"Do you remember when we were like that?" I asked Wes, nodding toward a boy who looked to be about seven and who was rolling in the sand. He was going to be caked in it by the time his family left.

Wes smiled. "Yeah, though I'm pretty sure you were the kid who was always rolling around in the sand and making your mom frustrated because you were always tracking sand all over the house."

I smiled at the memory. I had always been the messier, slightly crazier one between the two of us. I guess it made sense that my life would end up being messier, too.

I took a bite of my bacon burger, hoping the food would help numb the feelings that thought brought up. Wes was quiet too as he ate his burger. We watched the kids run across the sand, chasing each other with seaweed.

I wondered what he was thinking right now. Did he feel sorry for me? Did he think I was acting like a lunatic? I had most definitely not been

putting my best face forward today. And I guess I wouldn't blame him if, once he took me home, he decided he didn't want to be friends with me after all.

He'd just gotten out of a relationship with a girl who collected drama like a banana collected fruit flies. He probably wanted a break from that. Even just being friends with me right now would be full of drama, since it was obvious my mom still was against us spending time together.

I put my burger down. Now that my parents had seen Wes and me together, they'd be watching me like a hawk. And with everything I'd learned, it wouldn't even surprise me if my mom tried to get a restraining order on Wes. Didn't Wes tell me once that she had threatened to get one in the past?

I shouldn't have hugged him so long in my garage. If only he'd snuck out in time, then I'd still have the possibility of hanging out with him after all of this.

"What would you do if my parents got a restraining order on you?" I asked, curious now that the thought had been planted in my mind.

He frowned and squinted in the setting sun. "You think they'd do that?"

"Didn't your mom say they'd threatened it in the past? I wouldn't put it past them."

He seemed to think about it. "I don't know what I'd do if that happened. That's a pretty serious situation."

Which was code for: My friendship with you isn't important enough to risk getting in trouble with the law.

My shoulders slumped. I guess I couldn't really blame him for that. He shouldn't have to risk getting a ding on his record just because I still wanted to spend time with him.

He must have noticed my shift in mood because he hurried to say, "It's not that I wouldn't still want to see you. I just might have to wait until you were eighteen and could remove the restraining order yourself."

"I guess I'll see you in February then."

This sucked. My mom sucked.

Wes shook his head. "I think we need to get our minds off all this doom and gloom." He stuffed his wrappers into the brown paper bag. "How about we play a game instead?"

I looked at him skeptically. "A game?"

He put the bag on the sand beside the blanket. "Yes, games are fun."

"The last time you said that I was roped into playing Truth or Dare."

"And that wasn't so bad now, was it?" He raised his dark eyebrows.

My cheeks went hot as the memory of him kissing me so tenderly popped into my mind. What was he trying to say? Was this his way of telling me that he liked the kiss, too?

Instead of answering his question, I said, "What kind of game do you have in mind, exactly?"

He leaned back on his hands, stretching out his long torso. "I was thinking that since we'll most likely be banned from spending time together after I drop you off tonight, we should play a game that will be memorable. But it should also be a way to get into each other's brains since we have five years of experiences to catch up on."

"So what game would do all of that?"

He shrugged. "Not sure. But the game 'finish this sentence' comes to mind."

I furrowed my brow. "I've never heard of that before."

Shock took shape on his face. "You've never played 'finish this sentence'?"

I shook my head. "Unlike you, I don't really go to parties all that much."

He stared at me for a moment, like I lived on another planet. "Okay, I'll explain the game then." He sat up straighter. "It's pretty simple, actually. One person says the first part of the sentence, and then the other person finishes it."

"That's all?" And this was a game?

He grinned. "We can always go back to Truth or Dare if it's not exciting enough for you." He wiggled his eyebrows and gave me a flirtatious look.

I wiped my palms along the blanket, not sure if I was supposed to flirt back since this was all new territory.

Instead of attempting to be coy, which would probably just make me look stupid, I said, "'Finish your sentence' sounds like a good enough game to me."

"Good." He sat up and rubbed the sand off his palms. "Let's get started so I can find out all your secrets."

"Find out all my secrets?" I asked, suddenly worried. What kinds of sentences was he planning to have me finish?

"Well, find out the secrets that you're willing to spill. Just because I begin a sentence doesn't necessarily mean you have to answer it in the way I expected."

"That sounds fair enough." But did I really want to begin sentences for him that I wanted fake answers from?

No. That didn't sound like fun. So I said, "How are we supposed to really get to know each other if we don't know whether the person is giving true answers or not?"

I mean, if I was going to ask Wes a deep question, I wanted to get a straight answer.

He smiled. "If you want to make that a rule, then we can say that if a person begins a sentence, then the next person is required to answer truthfully instead of randomly."

I thought that sounded okay until he got a sly look on his face, which made me worry a little. Then he asked, "Does that rule sound okay to you?"

My stomach fluttered with nerves because I realized he could start any sentence he wanted. Was it dumb of me to trust him not to humiliate me too much?

After searching his face for another moment, I sighed and said, "I'm okay with that rule as long as you promise not to embarrass me."

"I'll go as easy on you as you go on me."

With everything seemingly settled, I sat up straighter, ready to play.

"I'll start it off with something easy then." Wes pouted his lips for a moment. Then he said, "Finish this sentence. My favorite kind of pizza is..."

"Hawaiian, of course." I released a breath of relief, grateful that he'd decided to go easy on me.

He made a face. "Pineapple does not belong on pizza."

"More like every pizza should have pineapple on it," I countered.

"We'll just have to agree to disagree on that one." He laughed. "Your turn."

I thought about it for a second, and then said, "People who like to run are weird because..."

"Because they're not weird. They're the coolest."

I shook my head. "Are you already breaking the rules?"

"I'm not breaking any rules. I was just finishing the sentence honestly. You're the one who worded the sentence wrong."

I smiled. "Whatever."

He leaned closer. "One of these days I'm going to get you to like running."

"That might take a really long time."

"I'm counting on that." He winked, and an excited feeling bubbled inside of me.

Yeah, I wouldn't mind spending endless hours with him. Even if it did involve running.

But then I remembered that reality probably wouldn't allow it. "Sadly, I doubt you'll have a chance. Pretty sure my parents are going to make me find another way to get my P.E. credits after this weekend."

Which super sucked. Even though I still hated running, cross country only had a couple more weeks left in the season. I had been so close.

"Anyway," Wes said, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. "Since we're not dwelling on depressing things, I'm going to continue the game. Finish this sentence: My favorite thing to do in my free time is..."

"Surf."

He grinned. "Looks like we still have that in common. Too bad we didn't think to bring our gear with us in our escape from your house."

"We'll just have to sneak out to the ocean sometime when my parents aren't watching."

"That sounds good to me."

And the way he looked at me caused my stomach muscles to tighten.

I blinked my eyes before I could start fantasizing about other things we could sneak out of my house to do.

Yeah, I probably shouldn't be daydreaming about kissing him again when he was right in front of me. Those thoughts should be saved for when I was alone.

Once I'd got my thoughts back under control, I said, "My most embarrassing moment was..."

"You really want me to finish that?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah." I'd said it, hadn't I?

He chuckled. "Okay, just remember that I said I'd only go easy on you as long as you were going easy on me."

And before I could tell him *never mind, I have a new sentence for you*, he said, "My most embarrassing moment was when I peed myself during the state cross country meet last year because I drank too much and didn't have time to relieve myself first."

I scrunched up my nose. "Ew, TMI."

He shrugged. "You're the one who asked the question. Just be happy you weren't there."

I shook my head. "Yeah, I'm not nearly that dedicated to running."

"I wanted to win," he said, like it was something any normal person who liked running would do.

"So was it worth it?"

"I came in third, so I'm not quite sure."

"That's pretty amazing, Wes. I wish I was that fast."

"Yeah, but I'm going to win it this year."

"I'll be happy to see it." Then remembering the possible circumstances of my future, I said, "Well, you know, if my parents let me stay on the team."

"You'll be there." He sounded way more certain than I could hope to be. He obviously didn't know just exactly how seriously my parents had taken the feud. I could only see things getting worse once my mom found out it was Mrs. Schultz who had confirmed everything to me. They might actually consider moving this time.

A drop of rain landed on my nose. I looked up and a few more dropped on my face.

"It's raining?" I said, surprised I hadn't noticed that the sky was as gray as it was.

"Do you want to keep playing?" Wes asked, looking up at the sky, too.

The clouds weren't too dark, and it was just barely sprinkling. Would it be too obvious that I was addicted to being with him if I said I wanted to keep playing in the rain?

I looked back at Wes and he really didn't seem bothered by the rain, so I said, "Let's keep playing."

This game was actually pretty fun, and I was nowhere close being ready to go home yet.

"Okay," he said, seeming happy that I still wanted to play even though the families around us were packing up their things. "We've already had some of the easy sentences, so let's move on to the more interesting ones."

I gulped. Hopefully, I wouldn't regret this.

He switched positions so he was sitting cross-legged as he faced me. Then he looked me in the eyes and said, "Being friends with Wes again..."

"Makes me happy," I finished. "That was easy."

His eyes smiled. "Glad to hear it."

Now it was my turn again. What did I want to ask him?

This was my chance to find out pretty much anything I'd wondered about in the past five years. But which question should I ask?

I decided to just go with, "When Lauren first joined the cross country team, I was..."

I braced myself for whatever his answer might be. We were friends now, sure, but a week ago we weren't. He'd been mostly nice that first day, but I couldn't help wondering what had gone through his mind when he'd first walked up to me and asked me why I was at his cross country practice.

He was quiet for a moment, thinking, then he said, "When Lauren first joined the cross country team, I was hopeful but trying to play it cool."

I laughed. "So your stubby-legs comment was you playing it cool?"

He shook his head, fighting off a smile. "Well, I couldn't very well let on that I'd just been checking you out. It was more of a defense mechanism on my part."

My heart skittered in my chest. "You were checking me out?"

"Maybe."

What? Did that mean he was attracted to me? Was that even possible?

"But you had a girlfriend at the time."

"Just because you're committed to someone doesn't mean that you're blind to everyone around you." His voice was low and almost had a seductive quality to it.

My cheeks heated, and it took everything in me to maintain eye contact with him. "That's good to know."

Now it was his turn.

But instead of continuing the game, he looked up at the sky again. The rain was starting to pick up a little.

"It looks like the clouds are going to burst open any minute. Do you want to watch the storm from under the pier?" he asked.

I loved being outside during a storm, so I didn't hesitate to say, "I'd love that."

He hurried and threw the trash from our dinner in one of the garbage cans nearby. I folded up the blanket, and then we rushed under the pier before we could get too drenched.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The pier had huge pillars that held it up from underneath. We stopped and looked for a spot where the sand was still mostly dry. I dropped the blanket on the dry ground while Wes leaned a shoulder against one of the pillars. I did the same.

He said, "Since it's getting dark, I should probably start saying the sentences that I want you to finish the most."

"Okay." And when I looked up at him, my heart fluttered with anticipation over what those questions might be.

His gaze dipped to my lips briefly before he said, "My honest opinion of playing Truth or Dare at Carson's house is..."

"That it wasn't as bad as I'd expected," I said.

"So it wasn't horrible?" he asked with a wink.

My cheeks heated. "No, not horrible."

His smile grew bigger. "I thought it was enjoyable, too," he said in a soft voice. "Your turn to start."

And since his question had been slightly more probing at feelings, I decided to ask a question like that of my own. "If I could go back in time and make it so Olivia didn't cheat on me, I..."

"I would not go back in time."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Really."

That was pleasant to hear. Maybe he really was over her then.

"Next sentence," he spoke again. "The kiss during Truth or Dare was..."

Was he really going there?

I searched his eyes to see if he was serious, and he just sat there with an expectant look on his face.

But since I wasn't quite ready to give out *all* my secrets yet, I said, "The

kiss during Truth or Dare was better than our kiss in the attic."

"I guess I need to be clearer." He shook his head, but a smile crept up his lips, anyway. "The kiss was better than the one in the attic because..."

"Uh-uh." I shook my head. "You already had your turn. It's *my* turn to start the sentence."

"Just finish it, Lauren." He looked at me with his puppy dog eyes and pouted his bottom lip. "Please?"

"Fine." I sighed. "The kiss was better than the one in the attic because our noses didn't bump."

His eyes narrowed. "You're really going to make me work for it, aren't you?"

I shrugged and hoped I looked innocent. "What are you trying to work for? I thought we were just playing a game."

"Oh, we're most definitely playing a game now. But I'm not sure it's the one we started off playing."

The smoldering look he gave me after saying that made me completely lose my train of thought.

When I recovered and found my tongue again, I said, "So if we're playing the game I think we're playing now, finish this sentence: The friend zone is..."

He stared directly into my eyes. "Not a place I want to be in with Lauren Carmichael."

My heart thumped in my chest. "The playlist in my phone called 'Inspired by her' was actually inspired by..."

He looked surprised. "How did you know about that playlist?"

I bit my lip. "I might have been awake in the hammock for longer than you thought."

"You were?" He said it like I had just revealed something bigger than pretending to be asleep. Which I guess I probably had. I'd pretty much just told him that I had pretended to be asleep so I could stay cuddled up to him for longer.

"Anyway, you never finished my sentence," I said.

"And what was it again?" He reached out and tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear, causing tingles to erupt across my skin.

He'd been sweet all day and had touched me in a comforting way when I'd needed it. But there was something in this small gesture that was different. He wasn't trying to comfort me anymore. He was showing affection in a

different way.

And when I stared into his eyes, they were more intense than I'd ever seen them before. They looked like they had last night for that brief moment after our kiss.

Was he thinking about kissing me again? My stomach muscles tightened.

Wes's hand slipped down to my shoulder, down my arm, until he was holding my hand in his. My fingers reflexively curled around his.

He gazed down at our hands for a moment before looking back at me through his lashes. "We seem to have forgotten which sentence I was supposed to finish for you." His voice was so husky it made the blood in my veins throb.

I closed my eyes so I could concentrate on remembering the game instead of how he was making me feel. I'd never felt like this before. So happy and light, excited and desired.

Thankfully, the sentence came to my mind and I was able to say, "The playlist in my phone called 'Inspired by her' was actually inspired by..."

When I opened my eyes again, he lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it ever so softly. I was on the brink of melting when he looked deeply into my eyes and finished my sentence, "You, Lauren. It was inspired by you."

My whole body flooded with warmth, and I had the feeling that we were standing on the precipice of something. Like we were flirting with the chance of our friendship being something more and we just needed to take one more step forward to find out what could happen.

"Was it really inspired by me?" I asked in a whisper, not daring to fully believe it yet.

He nodded, and his gaze went to my lips for the briefest moment before finding my eyes again. "I just have one last sentence for you to finish, if you don't mind." His low voice caressed my ears.

"Yeah?" I breathed.

He leaned his forehead against mine and said, "If Wes tried to kiss me right now I..."

Anticipation filled my whole body. This was it. This was the time for me to finally be brave and put myself out there for a guy.

So I gathered up all my courage and whispered, "Maybe you should find out for yourself."

And in the next instant, Wes cupped my face in his hands and pressed his

lips to mine. Softly. Slowly. I didn't know what I had expected another kiss with Wes to be like, but whatever expectations I had for a third kiss with the boy I'd grown up with were blown out the window as his lips gently coaxed mine to move with his.

At first I was flooded with nerves. I wasn't nearly as experienced in this arena as he was. But he didn't seem to care that I was inexperienced because he whispered, "Just kiss me, Lauren. Don't think. Just feel."

And I didn't know how, but suddenly, any timidity that I'd had melted away.

I didn't need to be afraid. I didn't need to be nervous. So when he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me closer to him, I let myself fall. My mind stopped thinking and only focused on the present moment.

As I let myself get lost in Wes and his kiss, my body suddenly longed to be closer. I wanted to fully experience everything.

I tentatively let my hands slip up his torso. Let my palms rest against his chest so I could feel his beating heart. It was beating strong and fast. Possibly as fast as mine.

The thought that I was making his heart race caused a heady feeling to come over me.

Wes was enjoying this as much as I was.

And that thought made it hard to breathe. I could barely draw in a full breath as his lips weaved a magic spell over my mind and body. Crackles of electricity sparked through my entire body, and I knew that I never wanted this kiss to stop. I wanted this moment to last forever.

I slid my hands up further until my arms were securely wrapped around his body. He reacted by pulling me even closer until we were pressed so tightly against each other there was no space left between us.

It felt amazing. Like nothing I'd ever felt before. He was warm. He was strong. And our bodies fit together perfectly.

"Are you okay with this?" Wes mumbled against my lips a moment later, giving me a second to try to catch my breath.

"Yes." I gasped.

His lips found mine again, but this time, they didn't stay there. Instead, his mouth trailed sweet lingering kisses along my jawline. Electricity surged to my veins with each successive kiss. There was so much voltage going through my body, I worried the lightning in the sky above us might just strike me down because the charge was so high.

"Is it normal to feel like this?" I asked Wes as he trailed kisses down my throat. "Is kissing always like this?"

"No." He stopped kissing my neck and tilted my face back toward him, letting his lips hover next to mine as he looked into my eyes. "Only when it's right."

And I could feel that those words were true. This was right. Me and Wes kissing and being this close together was more right than anything had ever been in my life.

And before I could attempt to catch my breath again, we were back to kissing. But Wes's lips weren't soft and slow like they'd been before—they were hungry and demanding.

I let my fingers comb through Wes's dark hair. His hair was softer than I'd imagined.

My fingers pushed their way up his scalp, and he groaned quietly against my lips. "You have no idea how good that feels."

And when I did it again, he reacted by sliding his hands up my sides, sparking the nerves all along my torso to life everywhere he touched me.

"This is crazy." He sighed against my lips. "I'm not supposed to feel this much so fast."

And his words made me think back to Carson's party last night. Carson said there was nothing like a rebound kiss to help you get over an ex. Maybe Carson had actually been right. Maybe all those feelings had been placed on me now.

His hands moved from my sides and smoothed along my back in slow circles as he pulled me closer and closer. So close I didn't know if I'd be able to breathe for much longer.

But who needed to breathe when they could make out with the most amazing guy in the world instead?

Was this actually happening? Was I actually kissing Wes Schultz under the pier as it rained all around us?

Growing up, I'd daydreamed about what it would be like to kiss a guy in the rain. What would my younger self be thinking if she saw me kissing Wes like this? She'd probably tell me I was crazy, because she couldn't have known just how much her feelings for her first best friend would change over the years.

"Did you ever imagine we'd be doing this after that first kiss in my attic?" I asked after another long while, breaking away for a moment.

"Honestly?" he asked.

"Yes..." I said breathlessly.

He swallowed, trying to calm his ragged breathing. He searched my eyes, as if asking if I was really okay with him telling me the truth.

And I worried that maybe I didn't want to know the truth after all. It wasn't like I had thought about kissing him again back then. I should have guessed he hadn't, either.

But before I could tell him I didn't actually want to know, he drew in another ragged breath and said, "I honestly didn't know if you'd ever want to kiss me again." His chest rose and fell rapidly with effort. "But I hoped you would."

My stomach muscles tightened. "You did?"

He nodded, and I could see sincerity in his eyes. "Yes."

And then he was kissing me again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"*I* should probably get you home," Wes mumbled when we finally separated from each other.

"I don't want to go home," I said. "I just want to stay here where everything is perfect."

The last thing I wanted to do was break away from this magical place we'd been in all evening and go home to face my parents.

Wes kissed me again and then stood up straighter. "What time do you think it is?"

I shrugged and looked around the beach. It had stopped raining a while ago and the sun had set before that.

"Maybe eight." We'd gotten to the beach around six. We couldn't have been here for more than two hours.

Wes checked his watch. Then a slow smile spread across his lips. "It's almost nine."

"Nine?" My eyebrows shot up. "How is that possible?"

He grinned. "Time flies by when you're having fun."

My mouth hung open. Had we really been kissing for two hours?

That was just crazy! How in the world could I have kissed Wes for that long and still not feel like I'd kissed him enough?

He took my hands in his. "So, should we get you out of here?"

I shook my head and bit my lip timidly. "I was actually thinking I might take you up on that movie at your hangar. If it's still on the table, that is. My curfew isn't until midnight."

"Oh, it's definitely still on the table."

Wes and I got to his parent's hangar twenty minutes later. He switched on

the lights in the living space and I went to the bathroom to freshen up while he popped us some popcorn. When I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I was reminded that I had washed all my makeup off earlier.

Wes had just made out with me for two hours while I'd looked like this?

I touched my lips, which were still slightly swollen from all the kissing.

Maybe Wes wasn't as into the flashy girls as I'd always thought.

When I came out of the bathroom, Wes was standing at the stove with his back to me. Before today, I probably would have just gone straight to the couch and waited for him to join me. But instead of doing that, I went over to where he was, slipped my arms around his torso, and rested my body against his back.

He glanced back over his shoulder with a soft smile on his face and murmured, "This is nice."

I smiled back at him, feeling completely content to be near him. "Yes, it is."

We just stood like that for the next few minutes as he turned the crank on the Whirly-Pop to keep the popcorn from burning. When the kernels stopped popping, he switched off the stove and emptied the popcorn into a stainless-steel bowl and seasoned it with oil and ranch popcorn seasoning.

"Ready to watch the movie?" he asked.

I nodded, kissing the spot on his back where my lips were. "Yes."

We made ourselves comfortable on the couch, draping a soft blanket over our laps and sitting close. Once he had turned the movie on, I cuddled up to his side and just sighed. "This is perfect."

He draped his arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head. "Yes, it is."

I had never been so contented in my life. I knew it wouldn't last, because I was going to have to go home once the movie was over. But for the next two hours, I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else in the world.

"Lauren," Wes whispered. "It's time for you to wake up."

"What?" I tilted my face up groggily but was too tired to open my eyes. I didn't want to wake up. I just wanted to stay right here against Wes for a little while longer.

But his voice spoke to me again. "We fell asleep. It's three in the morning."

That woke me right up. "Are you serious?" My heart instantly raced so

fast it pounded in my ears.

I pushed myself away from him and checked my watch. And just like he'd said, it was a little after three.

I pushed the blanket off my lap and practically jumped off the couch. "My parents are going to kill me."

I ran my gaze along the floor, looking for my flip flops and finding them under the blanket that I'd just pushed to the ground.

"Let's go." I turned to Wes who was still on the couch.

For someone who had told me it was time to leave, he wasn't moving very fast. So I tugged on his arm to get him to stand.

After a couple of tugs, he finally got up and said, "I'm coming."

And even though I knew I was going to be in so much trouble for falling asleep next to a guy—a guy I was forbidden from talking to, no less—I couldn't help but think that the groggy look was kind of adorable on him.

After he'd stretched his arms out wide to wake himself up, he grabbed his keys from the kitchen counter and led me outside to his vehicle. We drove in silence back through town, over the bridge, and toward our neighborhood. I kept watching the clock as we got closer, my leg bouncing higher as each minute passed.

"I really hope my parents are sleeping right now," I said when we turned onto our road.

"For both of our sakes, I really hope so, too," Wes said,

But when my house came into view, I saw that all the lights were on inside the house.

Yeah, this was going to be fun to explain.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Wes pulled into his driveway but didn't drive all the way into his garage. Instead, he put his SUV in park and turned it off.

"Do you want me to come over and explain that we just fell asleep?" he offered, probably noticing the look of panic in my face.

I was so dead. Not only had I just run off with the boy my parents hated, but I'd almost spent the entire night with him.

"You should probably just go home," I said, looking longingly at his house that was completely dark. His parents had probably been asleep for hours and had no idea that he was still out.

"Okay." He sighed. "But if you need me for anything, just let me know."

I nodded. "Thanks."

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. "I'll hopefully see you at school on Monday," he said when he pulled away.

"Hopefully."

He reached over and pulled me into a hug. "Everything will be fine," he whispered into my hair.

I pressed my face into the curve of his neck, unable to speak because of the huge chunk of nerves stuck in my throat.

We held each other for a moment longer before I knew it was time for me to pull away. I was just putting off the inevitable. I needed to face my parents.

"Time for me to go back to reality," I said, dragging myself away from Wes.

He nodded. "Remember, you can text me if you need me. I'm only one house away."

I gave him a sad smile. "Thanks. I'll talk to you later." At least I hoped I'd

be able to talk to him later. I had no idea what I was about to walk into.

I climbed out of his car and walked over the lawn between our houses. Stepping up onto the front porch, I hesitated for a moment before going in. But after waving one last time to Wes, who was still standing by his SUV watching me, I turned the door handle and stepped inside.

I didn't know what exactly I'd expected when I walked in the door. Probably more screaming and fighting and threats of sending me off to boarding school. What I hadn't expected was for both of my parents to run to me with open arms and pull me into a big family hug as they quietly sobbed.

"Where have you been?" Mom asked in a quiet voice.

"We've been looking all over for you," Dad said at the same time.

But they were squeezing me so tight that I couldn't answer them. When they finally released me, I managed to say, "Sorry I was out so late. We fell asleep watching a movie."

"Where did you go?" My mom asked. "We were about to call the cops."

I looked down at the tile floor, unable to meet her eyes. "Like I said, I fell asleep watching a movie at Wes's hangar."

"You were at the Schultz's hangar?" Her voice was rising, like she was worried Wes and I had considered flying off somewhere on one of their airplanes.

I guess fleeing the country might have been warranted after finding out I'd been lied to my whole life.

"Jolene..." my dad chided. "Remember how we talked about staying calm?"

She looked ready to hand him a snappy retort, much like she did whenever he went after her for overreacting, but she didn't say anything.

Dad turned his gaze back to me. "How about we all go into the living room so we can talk about everything that happened today?"

"Okay," I said, though all I really wanted was to go to bed and ignore all the crap that had hit the fan today.

After we were seated in the living room, my dad spoke first. "So I understand that you discovered some alarming news today."

Alarming news.

Well, I guess that was one way to put it.

"Yes, I did."

Mom pinched her lips together, and it looked like she was going to launch

into some sort of emotional explanation. But Dad put his hand on her knee and gave her a look that said, *I've got this*.

Which was so confusing. How could he be so calm right now? Hadn't he just found out the same secrets that I had today?

But my dad was an expert businessman who never let his colleagues see him sweat. He must have been using all his years of experience right now to keep his real emotions tightly at bay.

Or he was still in denial. He'd been denying the truth in front of his eyes for so many years that it wouldn't surprise me if he still believed I was a "miracle" baby.

He took a deep breath and watched me carefully with his brown eyes. The brown eyes that hadn't given me the gene that made mine green.

"I'm not sure where to start exactly," he finally said.

I crossed my arms. "I'd be fine with the truth. That would be my favorite place for you guys to start."

Okay, so maybe that was a little sassy. But I was tired and had a really long day, so I wasn't in the mood to try and be my usual easygoing, obedient self.

"Of course," my dad said, not batting an eye. "But first, maybe you should tell us what happened today to make you say that I'm not your real dad."

And when he said those words, I saw the same pain in his eyes that had been there in the garage. He was hurting. He was just better at camouflaging it than I was.

I swallowed and looked down at the rug for a moment as I tried to figure out where to start with my story. There were so many puzzle pieces that had gone into uncovering the truth.

I decided to just start at the beginning. "Until a week ago, I thought everything was just fine. I thought my life was exactly as I'd always believed—that you two were the very people you'd presented yourselves to be."

"Was it Wes or TJ who told you?" My mom leaned forward on her cushion, interrupting me.

"Actually, Wes didn't know anything about this until we discovered it together. And Coach Slater never breathed a word to me," I said.

She didn't look like she believed me, so I continued, "It's true that when Wes and I finally spoke for the first time in five years, he did bring up the fact that he wanted to get down to the bottom of the family feud. But while he

thought there must have been something bigger than a business transaction coming between our families, he had no idea what it was."

"So did he take you over to his mother right then and have her tell you everything?" my mom asked.

"No. Actually, we found out the majority of the story from you."

She sat up straighter, caught off guard.

My dad looked questioningly to my mom and then back to me. "What do you mean by that, Lauren?"

"What I mean is that last week when I was in the sunroom, I noticed an old journal of Mom's on her desk."

And it was finally then when my mom seemed to realize that she had no one but herself to blame for the secrets she'd been keeping for so long to finally come to light.

"You read my journal?"

"Yes," I admitted. "I wanted the feud to end as much as Wes did, so I went looking for clues." I looked down at my hands and continued, "At first I didn't know who TJ was. I'd never heard of him before. But when Aunt Tracey came to my cross country meet yesterday and told me Coach Slater used to be your best friend, I put two and two together."

"So you've known since yesterday afternoon?" my dad asked, surprised.

"Not quite." I shook my head. "I didn't know until I ran into Coach Slater today and saw that his daughter looks just like I did when I was her age. That's when I knew. Mrs. Schultz just confirmed everything."

My parents were quiet for a while.

I studied their faces, but while my dad looked saddened by the story, he didn't seem nearly as shocked by everything as I thought he should be.

I addressed him carefully. "Did Mom already tell you about all of this while I was gone? You seem to be taking this way better than I expected."

He glanced at Mom briefly. "She did tell me. But I've actually known a lot of this for years, Lauren."

"What?" I asked.

He nodded, and his expression was sincere. "I've been trying to find the right moment to tell you the truth—to also let your mom know that I knew, but—" He shrugged. "—there just never seemed like a right time."

"Wait, Mom didn't know that you knew?"

How was that even possible?

My dad rubbed his hand over my mom's knee, and it was then that I saw

that she had fresh tears in her eyes. "I never found the right time to tell her that I knew I hadn't fathered you."

"But how did you find out? Was it when you found out you were sterile?"

He shook his head. "No. It was many years before that."

"What? When?" I said. "How?"

He paused for a moment, as if bracing himself for some huge revelation. Then he said, "I've known since the day you were born."

I froze, letting his last sentence and all the meaning behind it roll over me like a giant tidal wave. "You've known since I was born?"

Tears suddenly sprung to my eyes and started trickling down my cheeks as I realized that my dad had been lying to me for just as long as my mom.

"Yes. I've known since you were just a few hours old."

But how? How could he have known? How could he have known and never said anything about it to anyone?

I shook my head and blinked my eyes, not sure how that could be possible. "But you never treated me like I wasn't yours. Until this week, I never had any kind of suspicion that you weren't my real dad."

He flinched ever so slightly, but he smoothed his expression in the next instant and said, "I didn't treat you differently because you were my daughter. You have always been my baby girl, Lauren."

Now *he* had tears in his eyes. "When you were born, they did all the usual tests that they do for newborns. One of those tests is to find out your blood type. When I saw that you had type A blood, I knew immediately that something was wrong. At first I was worried that they'd mixed up the blood samples with some other baby born that same day, since both your mother and I have type O blood. But when I had them run the test again and it still came back as type A, I knew something had to be wrong. Any child that was both mine and your mother's would have to have type O blood as well."

"So how come you didn't just leave me and Mom at the hospital right then and there?" I asked, still trying to make sense of this new plot twist in the story that was my life.

"I thought about it. I really did." A sign of remorse crossed his face. "But when I held you in my arms, I couldn't turn you away. You were the beautiful baby I'd been waiting anxiously to hold in my arms from the time your mom told me she was pregnant. And while yes, I felt confused and betrayed by your mother, I also knew that I had broken her heart when I'd originally called off the wedding. I'd known that she'd spent a lot of time with TJ during

that time, and I'd suspected for a long time that TJ had feelings for your mother..." He glanced briefly at my mom with a look that could only be called true love. "Because who couldn't fall helplessly in love with her?"

My mom covered his hand with hers, and even though I was still mad at her for the choices she'd made, I couldn't deny that she did love my dad, despite the mess-ups in the past. She wouldn't have been so desperate to keep everything a secret if she hadn't loved him so much.

After they'd had their moment, my dad continued, "So even after everything, I couldn't fault her for turning to someone else when I had rejected her." He turned his gaze away from my mom and back to me. "Now, was I upset that she hadn't told me? Yes, I was extremely upset. But I still loved her. And so I stayed. I always gave myself the option to leave. I could leave anytime, and I knew I'd even have friends and family who would tell me it was justified.

"But the more I held you and the more I took care of you, the more I fell in love with you. And after those first few weeks, I knew I couldn't say goodbye. Maybe that makes me weak, but I just couldn't leave."

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I realized everything that my dad had gone through. And even though I was so confused at how I really felt about everything, I'd never felt more love for the man who had stuck around to raise me despite knowing I wasn't really his at first.

And he was right. He would have been justified in leaving me.

But he hadn't.

We were quiet for the next few minutes as we all pondered everything that had happened.

After a while, my dad leaned forward with his forearms on his knees. "I know this is a lot to take in, sweetie. And that you're probably feeling lost and betrayed and really upset. And those feelings are completely valid." He sighed. "But I do have one thing to ask you."

I nodded, suddenly nervous about what he was going to ask me.

He cleared his throat. "I've heard you say a few times already, something about me not being your 'real dad.' And I'll be honest, having you say that I'm not your real dad has been one of my biggest fears all these years. It's part of the reason why I was so afraid to tell you what I knew. So I just want to be clear on what your definition is of a 'real dad,' because even though I've known for seventeen and a half years that you weren't biologically mine, it wasn't until that moment in the garage that I actually felt like I wasn't a real

dad."

More tears sprung to my eyes when I realized how much my thoughtless words must have hurt him.

But before I could say anything, he continued, "You see, to me, a real dad is the guy who changes diapers. He's the man who stays up late at night when you have a fever and he's just praying that it will break before you get too hot. He's the guy who, though not perfect, is always doing his best to teach you the things you need to know and to raise you to be a good person.

"Maybe that's just me having wishful thinking since I can't be anyone's 'real biological dad' but that's how I see it. That's why I was fine telling you that you were mine. Because to me, you were. You always will be."

My bottom lip trembled as I let his words soak over me and I knew I was about to full-on bawl like a baby.

"I didn't mean it like that, Dad." I wiped at the tears under my eyes. "I really didn't mean it."

He came over and pulled me into his arms in one of the big bear hugs that had always made me feel safe.

"I know you didn't mean it, sweetie. I just wanted you to know that even though we messed up a lot, I never once saw you as anything but my daughter. And when you inevitably have doubts about who you are and where you came from and question everything, I hope you'll remember that I've loved you all this time, knowing we didn't share DNA. DNA doesn't matter to me. I just hope you can find it in your heart to forgive us for what we did. Eventually, at least."

I nodded into his chest, and then we sat down on the couch together. And when I looked at my mom, I saw that she had tears in her eyes, too.

"I'm really sorry, Lauren," she whispered. "I know I probably don't deserve forgiveness for ruining the lives of everyone I care about." Her bottom lip trembled. "But I think I had kept everything a secret for so long that I just started to believe that it would never come out. I figured so much time had passed that maybe it was okay to let the secret live." She sighed. "But it was wrong. I did a lot of stupid things and I wish more than anything that I could just make things better.

"You don't know how many times I tried to tell you and your father. But when we found out that your dad was sterile, and he said that you were our miracle baby, I just couldn't take his miracle away from him."

She sniffled, and my dad waved her over to join us. She stood, and soon

we were all squished together on the couch.

“Lauren is our miracle baby,” my dad said. “If things hadn’t happened the way they did, we never would have had any kids.”

“I know. But I’m sorry that things happened how they did.” Mom leaned her head against my dad’s chest, and then she looked at me with watery eyes. “I know none of my reasons excuse any of this. But I really am sorry for what I did.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I woke the next morning with a text message from Wes waiting for me on my phone.

Wes: *How did it go? I've been worried about you all night. Are you okay?*

My insides warmed as I read over his text. Just the simple gesture showed me that he really did care.

Me: *Everything is going to be okay. Thank you so much for being there for me yesterday.*

His text came through a moment later. Like he'd been anxiously waiting for my response.

Wes: *So glad things went well. I hope you got some sleep.*

I smiled. It was a simple text. But knowing that I could actually text him about life and get a response was so nice. We'd never been able to become texting buddies before the feud, since we didn't have phones back then.

Me: *Did you get in trouble for staying out so late?*

His message came back a minute later.

Wes: *My parents were asleep when I got home.*

Me: *Lucky.*

Though, my parents and I had needed that conversation when I'd arrived home last night. Things would probably be strained and a little awkward for a while as we tried to figure out how to handle Coach Slater's future involvement in my life. But at least we finally had everything out in the open.

Wes: *Do I need to worry about a restraining order?*

Me: *We didn't talk about you yet. But I'll keep you posted. :)*

I went downstairs and found my parents eating brunch on the patio out

back.

"Did you get enough sleep?" Mom asked me when I sat at the table.

"Yes. Did you?" I asked her.

"A few hours. I'm probably going to end up taking a nap again this afternoon, though."

I put a spoonful of the French toast casserole onto my plate along with a square of quiche and poured myself a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. As I ate, my gaze caught on something. Down on the beach, Wes and his parents were throwing frisbee to each other.

When I glanced over to see if my parents have noticed, they were both looking at their phones, catching up on what the rest of the world was doing on this lazy fall morning.

Deciding that it was probably safe for me to watch Wes without anyone noticing, I let my eyes follow him as he ran up and down the beach to catch his dad's bad throws. Wes made a particularly impressive jump to catch the frisbee before it got lost in the waves, which made me smile. Then as I turned my attention back to my meal, I realized that both of my parents were watching me.

Not sure if I was going to get scolded for looking at *that Schultz boy*, I focused on shoveling my food into my mouth.

But I should have known they'd say something, because my dad set his phone down on the table and asked, "So what exactly is going on with you and the Schultz boy?"

I took a big drink of my orange juice before meeting his gaze. "Um, I don't know. We're, um..." I gulped as I tried to decide what label I should give my relationship with Wes. We'd been friends just the day before, but after that make-out session, I didn't know if it would be honest anymore to just call him my friend.

But then again, I didn't know if he was my boyfriend, either, since we'd never said anything about it.

Mom and Dad both looked at each other with knowing expressions, not anger, which kind of surprised me.

"We should have known something like this was bound to happen," my dad said to my mom. "You and Rena did plan on them getting together before they were even born."

I held my breath as I waited for what I knew was coming next. This was the moment when they'd tell me I'd have to cut ties with Wes again.

But instead of telling me to stay away from *that Schultz boy*, my mom laughed lightly and said, "I guess we did plan on it, didn't we? Even despite everything, our plans seemed to have found their way of working out on their own."

I looked at them cautiously. "So you're not going to get a restraining order on Wes?"

My parents both burst out laughing. You'd think I'd just done a stand-up comedy sketch from how hard they laughed.

"Of course we're not going to get a restraining order on Wes," Mom said once their laughter had died down.

"You're not?"

"I know it probably looked like I was on my way there yesterday, but believe it or not, I have done a lot of soul searching over the past twenty-four hours."

I set my fork down on my plate. "Does this mean you're okay with Wes and me being friends again?"

My mom pressed her lips together for a moment before saying. "Of course. I feel horrible that I kept you apart for all these years."

And when I saw deep regret in her eyes, I knew that she really was realizing just how much damage her lies had caused to everyone around her.

It would take time for everything to go back to feeling okay between us, but now that everything was out in the open, there was some hope for changes to be made.

I took a sip from my orange juice as I tried to get up the courage to make my next suggestion.

"What is it, honey?" Dad prodded.

"Do you think you guys might ever think about ending the family feud?" I fidgeted in my seat. "When I was talking to Mrs. Schultz yesterday, she mentioned how much she missed your friendship."

My mom's eyes became moist and her gaze went down to where Mrs. Schultz was throwing the frisbee to her husband. After a moment, she said in a quiet voice. "I'm not sure I know where to start. This feud and my secrets turned me into someone I don't like. It might be too late for us."

When she wiped at a tear, I gave her an understanding smile. "Wes and I found a way to fix things. I'm sure you can find a way to make things better."

My mom nodded and squeezed my hand. "You're a good girl, Lauren. I know parents are the ones who are supposed to be teaching their children

how to grow up, but I'm learning that I still have a lot to learn from you."

The next day I walked into school, excited to see Wes again and tell him that there would be no need for a restraining order. I'd worn my favorite pink blouse that made my skin look like it was glowing and the pair of jeans I'd noticed his eyes linger on when we'd practiced our duet at the hangar last week.

Before I went to choir, I went to my locker and found Jenna waiting for me there, looking like she had the latest gossip from this weekend at the tip of her tongue.

"How was your weekend?" she asked me as I did the combination for my locker.

I met her brown eyes. "Quite eventful." I checked the time on my watch. We only had a few minutes before the warning bell would ring, so there was no way I'd have time to catch her up on everything that had happened. So I said, "I'll have to tell you all about it after school, though."

"I'm anxious to hear it." Then she got a nervous expression on her face. "Did you hear about the latest gossip from this weekend?"

I furrowed my brow. "No."

Had people somehow found out about my family's crazy history?

But Jenna smiled and said, "You really do live in your own little bubble, don't you?"

Well, considering my own little bubble had kind of imploded this weekend, I'd say it was completely normal for me to be totally absorbed by it.

"Anyway," she said, grabbing a purple notebook out of her locker. "I was talking to Emmy Banks in the yearbook room this morning, since she was showing me some of the photos she took during homecoming week. She told me that when she and Ky were at the movie theater this weekend, they overheard Olivia breaking up with Emilio."

"They broke up?" A nervous pit formed in my stomach. If she was telling me this, then there had to be a reason for her to consider this juicy gossip. Olivia breaking up with a guy wasn't big news at Sweet Water High since she did it so often.

Jenna nodded. "Apparently, Olivia wants to get back with Wes."

My heart stuttered. "What?"

"Isn't that crazy?"

Yes. It was insane.

But I should have guessed Olivia would do something like this since she'd pretty much done the same thing to my cousin, Logan, last winter. Though, in that particular case, she'd accidentally ended up making out with Logan's identical twin brother Jace instead.

Was it too much to hope for Wes's look-alike to show up and distract Olivia from her plan today?

"Do you know if she already tried talking to Wes?" I asked, my anxiety moving its way up from my stomach to my chest.

"No idea." She frowned. "I'd say he's too smart to take her back after everything she did, but he did fall pretty hard the first time."

Jenna didn't seem to notice just how anxious her words were making me feel. But of course she wouldn't. The last she'd heard, I was still worried about going to a party in the same vehicle as him. She had no idea just how much I liked him. I hadn't had a chance to tell her about everything that had changed since that Truth or Dare kiss.

"Do you really think he might go back to her?" I put a hand to my chest, hoping it would keep my anxiety from spilling out in some sort of emotional outburst that would let everyone around me know I was totally freaking about this.

Jenna shrugged. "If he's like the other ninety-five percent of the male population, then it's a possibility. I mean, Olivia may not be super nice, but that's never stopped guys from following after her like lost puppies before."

I needed to find Wes so I could confirm the status of whatever we were before Olivia could step in and take him from me.

I should have snuck out to see him yesterday for a little while instead of spending all day with my parents. I should have known better than to think that everything was calming down in my life.

As far as Wes knew, there still might be a restraining order in his future.

Why wouldn't he take Olivia back when he probably thought my parents were crazy still?

But then I remembered the way he'd kissed me under the pier. He wouldn't just forget about that, would he?

He wouldn't pick her over me.

"Is everything okay?" Jenna asked when I had stared into the depths of my locker for too long.

I blinked my eyes and set the rest of my notebooks inside. I shut my locker. "Everything will be fine."

She gave me a look that told me she suspected something was up. But instead of probing, she glanced at her watch.

"I better get going. Let me know if you notice any sparks between Wes and Olivia when you're in choir."

I swallowed the huge lump in my throat. "Sure. I'll let you know."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

When I walked into the choir room a few minutes later, I immediately wanted to turn around and bolt out the door. Because in the bass section where Wes always sat, the seat next to him was occupied by Olivia. And her body language told me that she had most definitely *not* been turned down by Wes.

Instead of looking dejected, she was laughing flirtatiously at something he'd said and touching his arm. I couldn't see his face, since his back was turned to me, but the fact that he was letting her sit so close made me want to throw up.

The rational part of my brain knew Wes was a nice guy, and that it was possible that he was just being nice to her. But the other part of my brain was whispering to me that Olivia would take anything she could and use it to her advantage.

Yeah, it probably wasn't a good sign that I had multiple voices speaking in my head right now.

I drew in a deep breath in an attempt to center myself before I went in.

"I totally listened to their new album all weekend," Olivia was saying to Wes when I took my seat in the row right in front of them. "It's one of their best so far."

Was he talking to her about the new Ryker Peak album? But that was supposed to be *our* album. He'd even put one of those songs in *my* playlist.

Had he lied to me when he'd said it was inspired by me?

"Yeah, I really liked it, too," he said.

I expected him to say more, to expound on it since I knew how much he loved talking about Ryker Peak. But he didn't.

Was that because he didn't really want to talk to Olivia about it after all?

Or was it because he knew I was eavesdropping?

Ugh. Why was I worrying so much about this?

Everything was probably just fine.

"Can you text me your favorite songs from their album so I can listen to them again?" Olivia asked, just before the bell rang.

Say no. Say no. Say no, I chanted in my head, hoping I would somehow be able to connect to Wes's brain.

But apparently, we weren't on the same wavelength, because instead of telling Olivia that they didn't share favorite songs with each other anymore since they were broken up, he said, "Sure."

This means nothing, I told myself. *Him being nice to his ex-girlfriend, who he'd totally adored a week and a half ago, means absolutely nothing.*

Olivia was just taking her seat on the front row when Wes leaned forward and spoke next to my ear.

"Hey, Lauren," he said. I couldn't be sure, but was there a guilty tone to his voice? Like he was worried about something? "I know class is about to start, but do you think we could talk later?"

My stomach shriveled up on itself because his request was most likely code for: *I just got back with my super hot ex-girlfriend and I need to make sure you're cool with it.*

I forced a smile onto my lips because the last thing I needed was for him to see me break down again.

"Yeah, of course." I swallowed. "We can talk later."

He smiled with obvious relief. "Awesome."

Was he relieved because I'd made it seem like I didn't know what was coming?

Mrs. Beauchamp tapped her baton on her music stand, thankfully making it so I didn't have to make more small talk with the boy who might be planning to break my heart.

"Let's get this last rehearsal started, why don't we," Mrs. Beauchamp said in her upbeat voice. "We have a lot to run through before the concert tonight." Then she looked at Wes and me. "You two have been practicing your duet together, is that correct?"

"Yes," Wes and I said at the same time.

Mrs. Beauchamp clapped her hands together. "Very good. I can't wait to hear what you've come up with."

And all I could think about as we ran through our scales was that I hoped Wes at least would wait until after our performance to completely rip my

heart out.

Wes and I didn't have any classes together the rest of the day, and he had his club meetings during lunch, so I didn't see him again until he showed up beside me at cross country practice. He wore gray running shorts and a dark blue T-shirt that really brought out the color of his eyes. He looked happy to see me, which was a good sign, but he didn't do anything that led me to believe he thought of me as more than just a friend.

Instead, aside from asking if everything was really okay between my parents and me, he just acted like how normal friends would. There was no sign that he had given a second thought to all the kissing we'd done on Saturday.

Had I just imagined it all?

I'd kept my ears open all day, just waiting to hear the gossip about how he and Olivia had gotten back together, but so far, I hadn't heard anything.

What if he'd asked her to keep it quiet until he'd had a chance to tell me the news himself?

"Have you told him you know yet?" Wes startled me from my thoughts.

"Told who?" I asked, nervous he knew what I'd just been thinking about him.

He nodded toward Coach Slater. "Did you tell Coach that you know everything?"

Oh, he was talking about Coach Slater and not himself.

"No, not yet," I said, looking up at him. "I'm kind of waiting for him to come to me, I guess. It's just that it's such an awkward conversation to have."

"Yeah, I can see how it would be awkward," Wes said, watching Coach Slater talk to a few of the varsity girls. "But Coach is a nice guy. I'm sure he's just as nervous as you are about it."

Was Wes speaking in code? Was this his way of telling me that he was just as nervous for whatever he had to say to me as I was?

Or was he actually just talking about Coach Slater?

I was making myself crazy.

I pushed those thoughts away and stared at the group. Coach briefly glanced away from the varsity girls, and our eyes met for a second. But as soon as he saw I was looking at him, he turned away again.

I sighed. "It might be better to bring it up later."

Wes nodded. "Just do it when you're ready." Then he got a thoughtful

expression on his face. "Speaking of important conversations, I still need to talk to you about something."

"Yeah?" I asked, feeling a lump form in my throat.

"Do you think we could talk after practice?" he asked.

But after practice would be *before* the concert. If we were going to talk about what I think he wanted to talk to me about, there was no way I'd be able to sing with Wes one of the most romantic duets of all time right after getting dumped. It would be like scraping a wire brush along my heart and pouring alcohol on it.

So I hurried to say, "I'm actually really busy after practice. Maybe we can talk later?"

He furrowed his brow, like he didn't believe me. "It'll only take a few minutes. Ten minutes tops."

Yeah, maybe the conversation would only take that long. But the aftermath would take much longer to get over with. And I was already dealing with more aftermath from difficult revelations than I could handle right now.

"I really don't have any extra time before the concert. Jenna was coming over to help me with my hair and makeup. And then I just have a bunch of other stuff to do first."

"Okay," he said the word slowly as he studied my face.

Was he trying to figure out if I already knew? He had to suspect it since I'd already caught him and Olivia flirting during choir.

"Would your busy schedule permit for talking after the concert then?" His tone sounded almost annoyed. As if he was put out that I wanted to make him wait before he could rip out my heart.

Well, he could be as annoyed as he wanted. I needed to think of *my* needs right now. So I said, "After the concert would be best for me."

Doing it before I went to bed would give me time to cry myself to sleep, and then hopefully, find a way to get over him before I had to watch Olivia flaunt their relationship in front of me tomorrow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I was almost out of the school's parking lot, just a few strides behind my other teammates, when Coach Slater came running up beside me. Usually, he was way ahead of me during practices, helping to pace the varsity girls, so I was surprised to see him in the back.

I kept my gaze forward and concentrated on keeping a steady stride, suddenly self-conscious that he was judging my running ability.

Was he disappointed that I wasn't a natural runner even though I had gotten half of my DNA from him?

I expected him to quicken his stride and catch up with the faster girls, but instead, he kept looking over at me.

"How set are you on finishing this practice?" he asked when we had passed the fence that surrounded the football field.

"What?" I glanced at him, wondering what he meant.

He straightened the baseball cap on his head. "I was wondering if you would be okay to talk for a minute."

"Like, right now?" I gulped.

He nodded. "Yes."

"We have a race this weekend. Don't you think I should practice?" I said, wanting for the first time in my life to actually run the next four miles.

I wasn't ready for this. I couldn't have this conversation with him right now. Not when I still wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to happen with him and his family.

But he spoke again. "I think it'll be okay if you skip one practice. I promise your coach won't mind."

I wanted to refuse him and tell him that I'd be in a better place tomorrow or the next day...or possibly in a few months. But when I saw the

nervousness in his eyes, I couldn't turn him down.

He was probably just as anxious as I was about what might happen if we actually broached the subject of him being my biological dad.

So even though everything in me wanted to just run away, I slowed my gait down to a walking pace. "I guess I can talk for a minute."

We ended up walking back to the school and sitting under one of the trees by the parking lot. Most of the kids from school were long gone by now, either at home or at a sports practice, so we were pretty secluded even though we were outside on school property.

He'd made small talk about how he was happy to have me on the team and how he was pleased with how much I'd improved already.

I was sure he would have continued to make small talk for another twenty minutes, so once we were seated on the grass, I decided to just jump in with, "I'm guessing you know that I recently discovered that we share the same DNA."

It wasn't exactly the gentlest way to enter the conversation, but it seemed to work because the tension went out of his body like a popped balloon. He said, "So you do know?"

I nodded. "I figured it out on Saturday."

"At Luigi's?"

I nodded again. "When I saw your daughter, things became pretty obvious."

He squinted one eye in the sunlight. "Did your mom tell you everything after that?"

I tilted my head. "Not exactly."

"Then how did you figure it out? Had you ever suspected anything before Saturday? Is that why you really joined the cross country team?"

"No. I actually didn't know anything until after I was on the team." I picked up a blade of grass and played with it as I told him about reading my mom's journal and how everything just snowballed afterwards.

"Your mom wrote about all of that?" He seemed surprised—like he'd assumed his short time with my mom hadn't warranted any kind of documentation.

"Um, yeah. Pretty sure my mom would make a great romance writer with how detailed she makes her journals."

I didn't realize how bad that sounded until the words were out, and Coach

Slater blushed so hard his ears turned red.

"I mean, she wasn't *that* detailed," I hurried to say. "She skipped over the juiciest parts."

I cringed and put a palm to my forehead. That sounded bad, too.

What a way to have my first real conversation with the man who'd fathered me.

He coughed. "Well, um," he started, lifting the cap off his head and running his fingers through his light-blond hair before putting it back on. "I guess there's no mystery about how everything all happened then."

Yeah, this was awkward.

Deciding that it was probably best to just move on, I said, "Anyway, I'm guessing you probably wanted to figure out where we go from here."

"If you want to." He cleared his throat. "I just wanted to make sure you knew that I didn't stay away all these years because I didn't want to have a relationship with you." There was a cautious look in his green eyes. "I just didn't really know what to do since you were already twelve when I found out, and I didn't want to do something that would cause you any trauma."

I tossed the blade of grass that I'd been playing with and picked another. "I'm not sure how I would have responded back then. But I do appreciate that you were just trying to do what you thought was right in a really messy situation."

We were quiet for a moment, but I could tell he was trying to get the nerve up to say something else.

He scratched the back of his neck. "D-do you think you'll want to get to know my family at all?" He gave me a hopeful look. "If you're open to it, I have three other kids who would love a big sister."

I'd always wanted a bigger family. Before I'd found out that my parents couldn't have any more kids, I'd constantly begged my mom for a brother or sister.

"I think I'd like to get to know you and your family better since I've always wanted younger siblings. But I should probably talk to my parents about this first."

"That's a good idea. I don't want to upset your parents any more than I probably already have." He smiled. "And, like you, I'm okay with taking this new dynamic slow. This is a new situation for all of us."

When our conversation was over, we stood. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to hug him or anything, since technically he was my other dad. But

he didn't seem to know what to do either, so we just stared at each other for a few awkward seconds.

"Well, I better let you go," he finally said, clasping his hands together. "I'm sure the team will be finishing their run soon."

I nodded. I would be more than happy to get off of the school property before Wes got back and tried to get me to talk to him now.

But just before he could walk off, I realized I still didn't know exactly what I was supposed to call him now. So I asked him.

He turned back to me. "You can call me whatever you want. I'm okay if you want to keep calling me Coach Slater, if that's more comfortable for you. Or you can call me Travis, since that's what I go by when I'm not at school."

"Okay, I'll do that." Then, just because I wanted to try it out right then, I said, "It was good to talk to you, Travis."

It didn't quite roll off my tongue or anything, but when he smiled from ear to ear, it felt good.

"It was good to talk to you too, Lauren."

And as he went back toward his truck to wait for my teammates to start trickling in, I told myself: *One difficult conversation down. One more to go.*

I just hoped my conversation with Wes would magically turn out this well.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Wes: Any chance you found the time to fit in one more practice before the performance?

I just stared at the text as Jenna curled my hair, not sure if it was even safe for me to respond.

"What is it?" she asked after creating one of the perfect curls she was famous for. "Do you not like your hair?"

"No, the hair is great. It's this." I showed her my phone. "What should I tell him?"

I'd told Jenna all about my weekend when she first came over, so she knew everything.

She squinted her eyes to read the text. "It's probably fine."

"But what if he's only trying to get me alone so he can officially get back together with Olivia at the concert without a guilty conscience?"

Jenna sighed and grabbed another chunk of hair and started curling it. "I suppose it's possible. Do you think you need the extra practice before the concert?"

"We had a good practice on Saturday. And then Mrs. Beauchamp had us run through it during choir this morning. So I think we'll probably be fine."

"Then just tell him you're busy but you'll see him at the concert." She released the curl and hairsprayed what she'd done so far.

"Okay, yeah. I'll do that."

I quickly typed out my text, and then as soon as it went through, I powered off my phone.

"Did you just turn off your phone?" Jenna asked with amusement in her voice.

I met her reflection in the mirror with a guilty expression on my face. "If my phone is off, he can't try to talk me into something else."

Jenna laughed. "You're funny, Lauren."

"More like desperate."

"Did you ever think that maybe he just wants to spend time with you?" She pieced out another part of my hair to curl. "Because from what you told me about the fireworks between you on Saturday, I don't see why he'd want to take Olivia back. What if you're just worried about nothing?"

"You're the one who said Olivia was hoping to get back with him," I countered. "And then right after that I caught them flirting."

"Yes. But just like you, I never heard anything about them actually getting back together." She shrugged. "Maybe he already turned her down, and the reason why we haven't heard anything is because Olivia was too embarrassed that she actually got shot down for once."

"Maybe..." A little blossom of hope bloomed in my chest.

But then why would he make it sound like this conversation was so important? Why was he so serious?

My shoulders slumped and I put my phone on my vanity counter.

"Everything will work out." Jenna gave my shoulder a squeeze. "I haven't been shipping you two all this time for nothing."

I met Jenna's reflection in the mirror. "Let's just hope our star-crossed lovers' story doesn't end like Romeo and Juliet."

Jenna laughed. "As long as you don't see any daggers or poison sitting near you when you're alone, I'm sure you'll be fine."

She finished styling my hair and set the curling iron down on the vanity next to my phone.

"Now let's pick out the dress you'll be wearing for your duet tonight."

"Pick out a dress?" I frowned. "Don't you think I should just wear my choir dress?"

"Oh no." Jenna tsked. "You may not have a choice about wearing that formless black thing while you sing with the choir. But if you're singing a duet with the guy that you want to keep from looking at his ex, you're going to do it in one of those amazing designer dresses you got in Paris this summer."

I was about to claim that those dresses were for my parents' boring charity events and not a Sweet Water High School event, but Jenna just pulled me out of my bathroom and to my walk-in closet.

She flicked on the light and immediately zeroed in on the strapless, blush-pink cocktail dress that I'd bought just because of the lace work on the

bodice.

"I think this will be the perfect outfit for the night." Jenna held the dress out to me, making the layers of sheer fabric swish over the skirt. "It's time for Wes to see just what a knockout his next-door neighbor turned out to be."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

"Where have you been?" Wes found me when I walked out of the girls' bathroom after changing into my pink dress. "I've been looking for you all night."

Sometime between our choir going on stage and now, he'd changed out of his choir tux and into a very nicely tailored suit.

And while he'd looked *really* good in the tuxedo, he looked drop-dead gorgeous in his suit.

"I was just changing for our duet." We were supposed to be backstage any minute.

"I've been texting and calling you all night," he said with a frustrated tone in his voice.

"You have?" I gulped.

He nodded. "I was hoping we could go over our duet one last time before we went on stage." He looked at his watch. "But we don't have time now."

Oh man. I had really messed up, hadn't I? A mountain of guilt piled on top of me.

"Sorry, I left my phone at home." *On purpose*. Because I was stupid and had been avoiding him all night.

I was such a chicken.

When I finally dared to meet his gaze again, he was staring at me with a confused expression.

"Are you purposely avoiding me, Lauren?" he asked, and I imagined I saw pain in his eyes. "Did something happen between Saturday and today that you aren't telling me about?"

I scrunched up my face. Why was he asking *me* if something had changed? Wasn't he the one who had changed things by getting back with Olivia? By flirting with her right in front of me and planning to let me down

gently tonight?

"Nothing happened on my end," I finally managed to say.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He crossed his arms, clearly offended by what I'd just said.

I looked around us to make sure no one was listening. We were in one of the dimly lit hallways behind the auditorium, so no one was around.

I sighed. "It means that I'm not the one who went back to his ex-girlfriend this morning."

I'd expected some sort of reaction to show on his face. For him to realize that I'd figured everything out on my own. But instead of looking guilty, he just appeared even more confused.

His eyebrows squished together. "What are you talking about?"

Was he just playing dumb?

I huffed and put my hands on my hips, angry that he was making me spell it all out for him. "I'm talking about you and Olivia. I know all about how she broke up with Emilio this weekend because she wanted to get back with you."

"Okay?" He cocked an eyebrow, as if he didn't understand why I'd have a problem with it.

"So that's why I've been avoiding you all day." I looked at his shoulder instead of meeting his eyes. "I didn't want to hear you tell me that you were dating Olivia again until after we'd sang our duet."

He stepped closer. "Why in the world would I want to go back to Olivia?"

"Because she wanted you back. And you were so in love with her."

But now that he was staring at me like I was missing part of my brain, I was starting to wonder if I'd misinterpreted a few things.

He took another step closer, close enough that I could smell his delicious cologne. "Why would I want to get back with Olivia when the only thing I've thought about since Saturday was how I was going to get past a possible restraining order to see you again?"

"But my parents are okay with us being friends," I said, feeling confused. "Didn't I tell you?"

I'd texted him about it. Hadn't I?

"Not until just barely." His expression softened and his eyes smiled at me as he traced his thumb across my cheek again. "I thought you were avoiding me because you were nervous about telling me everything was over."

"And I thought you wanted to talk to me tonight so you could make sure I

was okay with the friend zone."

"The friend zone?" He reached out and ran his thumb across my cheek. "Don't you remember what I said during that game we played on Saturday?"

When he'd said that the friend zone was not a place he wanted to be with me?

I lifted a shoulder, feeling so stupid for all the assumptions I'd jumped to today. "I guess I thought things changed when Olivia wanted you back."

I finally dared to meet his eyes. And my heart banged against my ribcage when I saw that he was looking at me in the exact way he'd been looking at me Saturday under the pier.

Nothing had changed.

Everything I'd imagined today had all just been in my head.

He slipped his hand behind my neck and into my hair. "Why would I want to go get back with Olivia when the only thing I've thought about all day is finding the right moment to kiss you?"

And before I knew what was happening, he pulled me closer and pressed his lips to mine. I went still, my brain needing a moment to catch up to what was happening.

"You're the only girl I want to date, Lauren," Wes said when I still wasn't responding. "The only girl I want to kiss."

My heart squeezed in my chest. "I am?"

"Yes."

And when he kissed me again, I was ready for it. I took a step closer and slipped my hands up his chest. His heart beat strong and fast, almost as fast as mine, and I knew he really did want to be with me as much as I wanted to be with him. I slipped my hands up his strong arms, over his shoulders, and then behind his neck so I could pull myself closer.

My lips melded with his, fitting together so perfectly. And when he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me close until there was no space left between us, there was no place I'd rather be.

"This is what we should have been doing all afternoon instead of hiding from each other," Wes mumbled against my lips.

His hands smoothed their way up my back, moving in slow circles against the lacy fabric of my dress. And my brain went foggy as I just let myself feel the way he was kissing me. I'd never experienced this feeling before, and my stomach muscles tightened and twisted as he continued kissing me.

I held on tight to him, needing him to hold me up because my legs were

so weak. He responded by pushing my back against the wall and pressing himself closer against me.

And as he deepened the kiss, I couldn't help but wonder if every kiss with Wes would be like this. It was all I could do to draw in a decent breath as he made me feel things I'd never felt before.

Cherished.

Seen.

Wanted.

He threaded his fingers into my hair, causing chills to course through my body.

"Sorry I'm messing up your hair," he panted, pulling away briefly to smooth my hair back down. "You still have to go onstage tonight."

I went still.

And that seemed to break Wes out of the spell we'd both been under because his eyes widened with alarm. "We're supposed to be onstage."

Crap!

He was about to pull me along with him to the stage entrance when I stopped him. "Hold on," I said. "Is my hair okay? Did it get too messed up?"

He inspected my hair. A slow smile spread across his lips. "Your hair looks great."

I didn't trust that sneaky smile. "Okay, but does it look like I was just making out with you in the hall of our high school?"

He laughed. "No, I was careful." Then his gaze ran over the rest of me. "And I failed to mention this earlier, but that dress looks amazing on you."

A deep blush filled my cheeks. I decided to be brave and said, "I was hoping you'd like it."

He cocked his eyebrow flirtatiously. "I most definitely do."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

We made it backstage as the a cappella choir was singing their final number. We had just another minute before Mrs. Beauchamp would be introducing us and I'd be singing in front of a huge crowd of people.

"If I start singing the ABC's, could you please remove the mic from my hand?" I said, a sudden fluttering of butterflies taking flight in my stomach.

Wes stepped close behind me and wrapped his arms around my torso. "That's not going to happen."

"You remember last year's solo auditions, don't you?" I tilted my head back to look at him, daring him to tell me something like that wasn't possible.

"You're going to be just fine." He squeezed me closer and bent his lips close to my ear. "You did awesome when we sang in front of our class a week and a half ago. And you've done amazing at all of our practices. You've got this."

"I sure hope so." I released a long breath and tried to let myself relax against him.

But he must have sense that I was still nervous because he turned me around to face him. He took my hands in his and rested his forehead against mine. "If you start to feel nervous, just look at me instead of the crowd." He gave my hands a gentle squeeze. "We're in this together."

And I didn't know if it was the reassuring look in his eyes or having him say that we were in this together, but a wave of confidence washed over me.

I could do this. With Wes by my side, maybe I could sing this song without blacking out.

When Mrs. Beauchamp's voice came over the speakers introducing the last special duet for the night, Wes asked, "You ready to get into position?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

"*T*hat was amazing!" my mom said when I found her and my dad after the concert. The hall behind the auditorium was bustling, full of choir students being congratulated by their family and friends on a job well done.

"I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you were the one singing the duet," my dad said, pulling me into a side hug. "Why didn't you tell us you were the special number?"

I tucked some hair behind my ear and shrugged. "I wanted to surprise you."

And until a day ago, I'd also been worried you'd force me to pull out of it since I was singing with Wes.

"Well, that was a great surprise," my dad said, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

I just smiled, happy that I'd made my parents proud. For all the anxiety I'd had over singing the duet, it had turned out so much better than I'd anticipated. I'd channeled my inner Kelly Clarkson, and just like Wes had suggested, I'd focused on him instead of everyone watching us.

And I was so glad that I had, because it made the experience exhilarating. I had been able to feel the music flowing through me and really focus on how Wes and I were working together to create a beautiful experience for those listening to us. And even though I'd only hoped to do well for the audience's enjoyment, there were a few moments during the performance when I nearly swooned. Because when Wes looked deeply into my eyes and sang the romantic lyrics, it was like he was singing only to me and no one else.

Pretty sure if someone was to put a video of our performance on YouTube, I'd watch it over and over again so I could relive the moment.

"Do you think we could get a photo of you and Wes together?" my mom

asked, breaking me away from my musings. "I took some while you were on stage, but I wanted a close-up, too."

My jaw dropped. "You don't mind having photos of me with *that Schultz boy* on your phone?" I asked teasingly.

She shook her head and gave me a small smile. "Did I really sound like that?"

I scrunched up my nose and nodded. "Yeah, you kind of did."

She sighed. "Well, thank goodness you helped me see the light."

I glanced around to see where Wes had gone and spotted him standing in a corner with his parents.

"He's over there, if you want to get the photo now." I pointed.

I watched my mom's expression to see if the presence of Wes's parents would deter her from getting a photo, but instead of coming up with an excuse or wait for them to leave Wes alone, my mom hooked an arm through mine. She reached for my dad's hand and said, "Let's go get that photo."

"Are our parents actually talking to each other?" Wes whispered to me after we'd posed for several photos. Several photos where he'd had his arm behind my waist, with his hand pressing into my side like he was making sure I knew he wanted me. Several photos where I'd just let myself relax against him, breathing in his delicious cologne and smiling blissfully at the camera.

I'd never been so happy.

"I think they are," I whispered back, watching the four adults in front of us who were cautiously beginning a conversation that was five years in the making.

I glanced around at the crowd of other students and their parents. Quite a few of them were watching our parents with shocked faces.

Wes tilted his mouth toward my ear and whispered, "Do you think this might be the end of the family feud?"

Chills raced down my spine from his closeness, but I forced my gaze to remain on our parents. They all looked slightly uncomfortable, as was to be expected, but they seemed to be really making an effort.

"I don't want to jinx anything," I whispered back to Wes. "But I think the end of an era has finally come."

"Which reminds me." Wes slipped his arm around me. "I still need to talk to you about something."

"But I thought we already had that conversation in the hall."

A half-smile lifted the corner of his lips. "There's still something I need to ask you."

My heart stuttered in my chest because I had no idea what more he could have to say, but I said, "Okay."

"Do you think our parents will mind if we slip away?"

I glanced back at them again and saw that they seemed to be laughing about something.

That sight alone made my heart soar.

I turned to Wes. "I don't think they'll mind at all."

CHAPTER FORTY

"Are you just taking me home then?" I asked when Wes pulled into our neighborhood twenty minutes later. We'd held hands and talked the whole drive from school, but he didn't ask me any difficult questions. At least they hadn't seemed difficult.

Was this just an excuse to drive me home from the concert? Because if that was all it was, he could have just asked and I'd have totally said yes.

He looked over at me with a soft smile on his lips. "No, I'm not taking you home yet."

But he didn't say anything more.

He pulled into his garage a moment later, and then I was really confused.

"I thought you said you weren't taking me home."

Wes put his vehicle in park and gave me a smile. "I'm not taking you to *your* house." He unbuckled his seatbelt. "Just wait here for a moment. I'll be right back."

While he went inside, I just waited in his dark garage, trying to figure out what the heck he had planned.

He returned a moment later with a grocery store canvas bag. Then he came to the passenger side and opened my door.

I frowned, but I climbed out and took the hand he held out to me. He said, "We're going out back."

My curiosity was piqued about what might be in his backyard, but I let him lead me.

When we made it to the backyard, it was set up like a romantic scene from a movie. There were lights strung all around the pergola. The patio table had big lanterns with candles flickering inside. The faint sound of the Ryker Peak album played through the outdoor speakers attached to the house.

"This is beautiful," I said after taking it all in. "Who did all this?"

Wes beamed at me, clearly happy with my reaction. "I did most of it after school."

"You did?"

He shrugged. "I wanted to make a good impression."

"Well, I'm definitely impressed. This is like a setting from a fairytale."

He smiled at my praise as he set the bag on the ottoman nearby. Then he walked me to the other side to sit on a bench covered in colorful cushions.

"So," I said, looking around at the backyard once we were comfortable. "Is this the typical setting that you like to have when you're having your serious conversations?"

"Not necessarily." He grabbed a couple of cushions from behind him and tossed them onto the patio to make himself more comfortable. "But I did think it would be a nice setting to have for a re-do first date."

"A re-do first date?" I asked, feeling my insights brighten. "When did we have our *first* first date?"

"On Saturday." He said it like it should be obvious. "Don't you remember how I told my mom I was going on a date that afternoon?"

"Yeah," I said. "But I didn't think you were actually serious."

"Oh, I was very serious." His intense gaze made my muscles go weak. "But since that date at Luigi's didn't quite end how I'd planned, I figured we'd give it another try. This time where we wouldn't be interrupted by anyone."

My insides warmed at his thoughtfulness. And from the look he gave me, I was very thankful we were all alone, because it made me hope he might kiss me again before the night was over.

"Anyway," he said after briefly flicking his gaze to my lips. "I know that we pretty much already told each other the things I was hoping to find out from this conversation tonight. But I was never able to officially ask you my biggest question."

My pulse raced. A big question. What was he planning to ask me?

But then the bag on the ottoman caught my eye. "Does it have anything to do with what's in that bag?"

"How did you guess?" he said with mock surprise in his voice.

I lifted a shoulder. "It's a gift."

He stood from the bench and retrieved the bag. Setting it next to him on the seat, he pulled out two small containers of gelato with "Luigi's" written on them. "This one is for you," he said, handing me a container with what looked like a scoop of the very two flavors that I'd had on Saturday.

He really was making this a re-do of that day.

He set the other small container of gelato next to him. Then he grabbed out a small pizza box.

"You're feeding me?" I asked.

"Of course. All proper dates must include food." He handed the box to me. "I even got your favorite."

"You had them put pineapple on pizza?" My mouth hung open in shock.

"I figured if I was going to make a grand gesture, I might as well go all the way. Even if putting pineapple on pizza goes against my moral code."

I grinned and opened the pizza box, still not fully believing him.

But instead of searching for pineapple tidbits, my eyes went to the top of the pizza box. Written in permanent marker on the underside of the box lid were the words, "I know this might be kind of cheesy. But will you be my girlfriend?"

I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"Too cheesy?" He quirked an eyebrow.

I kissed his cheek. "It's perfect."

"So what do you say?" he asked, looking nervous for the first time since we'd come to his backyard.

And I loved that it made him nervous, because it showed me just how much he cared.

I set the pizza box on the ottoman in front of us, and then wrapped my arms around his neck. "My answer is definitely yes, Wesley Schultz. I would love to be your girlfriend."

He wrapped his arms around me, too, and pulled me closer. "Good answer."

I pulled back slightly. "Don't you have something better to say than that?"

He grinned, and after giving me a quick kiss on the lips, he said, "I'd love to be your boyfriend too, Lauren Carmichael."

"You'd better."

He chuckled and kissed my cheek quickly.

I sighed contentedly, soaking everything in. Then a cold feeling near my leg reminded me that I still had gelato next to me, and it was probably melting. I took it into my lap and turned back to Wes. "I know why you got the pizza now. But was there a special purpose behind the gelato?"

An impish look immediately found its way to Wes's face. "Do you remember what we were talking about the last time we were eating gelato

together?"

"I remember you teasing me about the way I ate it."

"Exactly." He grabbed two spoons out of the bag and handed me one.

"We're going to put that theory to the test tonight."

"Oh we are, are we?" I bit my lip, feeling little bubbles of excitement in my stomach. "I think this is one research project I can get behind."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

EPILOGUE

"Happy birthday," a voice entered my sleepy brain. It was a nice voice. A soothing voice. The deep voice I most loved to hear in the whole world.

I let my eyes slowly flutter open and looked around my dark bedroom before I saw Wes standing just inside my door.

My lips curved into a sleepy smile. "What are you doing in here?" I quickly checked the time on my watch. "It's six forty-five a.m. on a Saturday."

He took a few steps closer until he was at the side of my bed. "I wanted to be the first person to wish you happy birthday." He smiled, his gaze running over my face, like he actually thought I was pretty first thing in the morning. "Plus, I was hoping you might be up to eating breakfast with me on my balcony, so we can watch the sunrise together on this all-important first day of your adulthood."

My smile broadened as I rolled on to my side to better see him, the covers of my bed rustling with the movement. "So, is this the real reason why we said goodnight so early last night? Because you knew you were coming to wake me up at the butt-crack of dawn?"

He nodded, a guilty expression on his face. "Maybe."

"Well, I guess I better get dressed so we don't miss the sunrise." I pushed the comforter back on my bed and sat up.

"You really don't have to change if you don't want to. What you're wearing looks just fine to me." He let his gaze slowly run over me, checking me out in my tank top and shorts.

I just laughed. "Fine. But I'm putting on a robe. We can't have these stumpy legs of mine distracting you too much during breakfast."

He shook his head. "You're never going to let me live down that comment

now, are you?"

I grabbed my robe from its hook in my bathroom, put it on, and tied the sash around my waist. "Nope. Pretty sure you'll be hearing about it for the rest of our days."

I walked back to him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, so he'd know I was just teasing him. When I started toward the door, he snagged me around the waist and pulled me closer to him.

"Do you really mean it?" he asked.

"That I'm going to keep reminding you of your interesting choice of compliments?"

"No. The other part."

"There was another part?" I asked, looking up at his face.

"Yes. I'm talking about the part where you'll be teasing me about things for the rest of our days."

I felt my cheeks flush. Had I really let that slip?

Wes and I had been dating for over four months, the happiest four months of my life so far. And while we were both planning to go to the same university, we hadn't necessarily made any big permanent plans for the future.

Had I just scared him by hypothetically talking about being together for the rest of our lives? We were only eighteen, so I could totally understand how that might freak a guy out.

I swallowed and peeked at him shyly through my lashes. "I only meant that part if you wanted me, too."

His fingers pressed more firmly into my back. "Oh, I want you to mean it."

Warmth filled me, and I couldn't keep a huge smile off my face. I placed my hands on his chest. "Then I meant it."

He grinned. "That's good to know." He took my hands in his and looked at me cautiously, like he was nervous about something. He cleared his throat. "With that in mind, there's something I've been trying to find the right moment to say. And since this seems like the perfect moment, I'm just gonna go for it."

I nodded and waited for him to continue, a breathless feeling coming over me.

He stepped slightly closer, so his shoes were touching the tips of my toes. He ran his thumbs over the knuckles of my hands.

"So..." He swallowed and looked me directly in the eyes. "You probably already guessed this, since I'm not very good at keeping my feelings a secret from you. But I just wanted you to know that I love you, Lauren." He sighed. "These past few months with you have been the best months of my life, and I can't imagine loving anyone else in the way that I love you."

As he spoke, it felt like fireworks were exploding inside my chest. I'd been waiting for the right moment to tell him that I felt the exact same way.

"I love you too, Wes," I said. "I never thought it was possible to feel like this about anyone. But I have never been so happy, either."

A huge smile stretched across his face. Before I knew it, Wes was pressing his lips against mine and kissing me. And while our first kiss all those years ago had been timid and awkward, this was nothing like it. This kiss had so much more emotion behind it and communicated just how much Wes loved me.

When we broke apart a moment later, I couldn't help but sigh contentedly. "I have a feeling this might just be my best birthday ever."

"And it's just getting started."

Wes checked the time on his watch as the first rays of sunlight peeked through my curtains. His eyes went wide. "We better get to breakfast so we don't miss the first thing on my list of activities for Lauren's Epic Eighteenth Birthday Surprise."

He grabbed one of my hands and pulled me out of my room.

"You made a schedule for my birthday?" I asked as we quickly went down the stairs to the main floor of the house.

He glanced sideways at me. "You only turn eighteen once, so of course I had to make a list of all the things we needed to fit in today. I want you to have the best birthday ever."

"Hold on." I stopped him when we made it to the bottom of the stairs. "What exactly did you plan for us to do today?"

Because if I was being honest with myself, I had kind of hoped to just relax and chill with the people I cared most about. Being busy and running from place to place was not my idea of the best birthday ever.

"I only planned to do your favorite things, if that's what you're worried about."

"And what are those?"

I knew he loved me, and that he knew me pretty well. But if he didn't realize that I wanted to have a lazy day hanging out at either my house or his

house, then I might need to be worried.

"Well, at first, I thought about taking you surfing, since that's your number one favorite activity of all time. But then I figured that might actually ruin your day instead of make it better since it's February and not nearly warm enough."

"Good thinking." At least, he hadn't gone crazy all-out with his plans.

He pursed his lips like he was thinking through the schedule in his mind. "So, aside from breakfast, I also planned on taking you to Luigi's for pizza and gelato."

"Good choice," I said. I could always eat pizza and gelato.

"I thought you'd like it." He winked. "Then after that, since I woke you up so early, I thought it might be nice to take a nap on the hammock." He checked my face, probably to see what I thought of his plans so far.

"Umm, yeah. Saturday naps with you in the hammock are definitely one of my favorite things." I smiled, feeling more excited about his plans since it sounded like he actually had taken into consideration what I wanted from today.

"That's good, because they're one of my favorite things to do as well." He chuckled. "After that, we'll be eating dinner at my house with your parents and Coach Slater's family."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yep."

We'd been doing things with Coach Slater's family every few weeks, so we could all get to know each other better, and things were going well so far. I still called him Travis instead of Dad, since the man who raised me was the only person I could ever imagine calling Dad. But things were getting more comfortable between us all, and I adored his kids. Having younger siblings was pretty fun.

"Are you the one cooking?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. I was going for a meal that was actually edible, so I made arrangements with Angelica. She's going to fix you your favorite dishes."

"Smart guy," I said. "Angelica is the best cook the world has ever known."

"Glad you approve."

He led me out and across the lawn between our houses, through his front door, and upstairs to the balcony that overlooked the ocean.

There was a small table with breakfast set up on one end, but instead of sitting down to eat, we stood by the railing—Wes stood behind me with his arms around my waist and we watched the sun just barely peek over the horizon.

"Did you have any plans for after dinner?" I asked in a quiet voice, so as not to disturb our peaceful mood too much.

"Well, I was thinking that since I know one of your most favorite things to do after a big meal is to go out for a nice refreshing run, I figured we could put in a good eight miles while watching the sun go down."

I turned my head to look at him over my shoulder.

"You're joking, right?"

He fought off a smile for about three seconds before he laughed. "Of course I'm joking. I know better than to get you to try running on your birthday. I'm saving that for tomorrow morning."

"Wes?" I chided. Sure, he'd won first place at State Cross Country last fall, but just because he loved running didn't mean I had to enjoy it.

His chest shook with repressed laughter. "Ok, fine. No running will be happening this weekend."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Feeling completely content with the plans for today, I let myself relax against my boyfriend's strong body and enjoyed the perfect morning as I thought about how much had happened to make this moment possible.

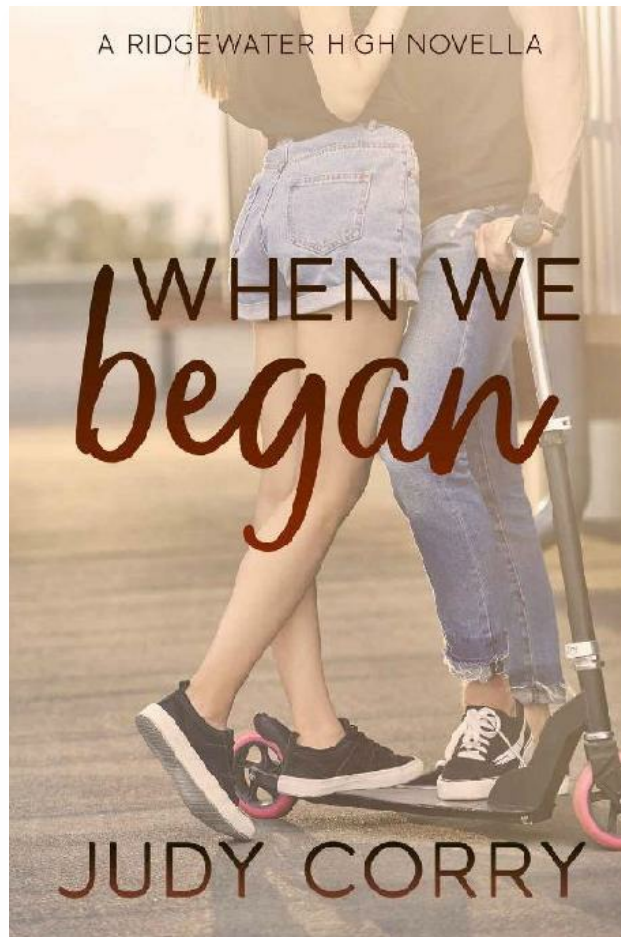
Even though I still hated running, I was so thankful that I'd gone to that first day of cross country practice. Because of that oversight on my transcript that I'd been so frustrated about, I'd been able to reconnect with Wes. Because of cross country, the feud between our families had finally ended. And instead of fighting with him, I now got to spend the most favorite parts of my day kissing the boy next door.

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Chapter One

I never knew how much volleyball would teach me when I started playing in the seventh grade. I mean, sure my mom's reasons for signing me up were so I could learn teamwork and commitment and discipline, but that was just the beginning.

Volleyball taught me to not be afraid of floor burns, bruises or sprains. I learned that the best kind of silence is the moment before a serve and that a square of gym floor can feel more like home than your house. When I screw up, I learned to fix my ponytail and go on the attack. Lately, volleyball has taught me that having a passion for something is lonely.

After a long summer of camps, training, and practices, the pressure inside me was mounting with our first game only a week away. I didn't have time to be lazy—to not give every moment of practice everything I had.

“Good effort today, Amber,” Coach Sydney said after dismissing us to go get changed. “Don't forget to ice that ankle tonight.”

Right. My bum ankle that continued to haunt me. I'd sprained it badly during a game last season and it had haunted me every day since. But the weakness just increased my determination to make my dream of playing college ball for Duke a reality. Growing up in Sweet Water, North Carolina, there was nowhere else I'd want to go.

As I walked back to the locker room with my hands on my hips and my lungs still heaving for air, I glanced at my teammates all headed for the hallway instead and rolled my eyes. As usual, while everyone else wanted to show off in their spandex butt-shorts for the football players when they got out of practice, I just wanted to go home. It wasn't that the football players weren't hot—but I didn't want the distraction. From what I'd seen, boyfriends were nothing but time-sucks who created way too much drama. If I was going to get on the Duke team, not only did my game have to be top-notch, but my grades as well. So, no boys for me. Not yet.

I got my bag out of my locker and sat down to change my shoes. Two of my teammates, Sadie and Maya, came in. They went to the mirror to fix their high ponytails and put lip gloss on. Glad they were ignoring me so I didn't have to talk to them, I got up and threw my bag over my shoulder.

“Holy cow, Amber. You aren't going out looking like that are you?”

I turned and raised an eyebrow at Sadie. “Yeah, I am.”

“The Hammer doesn’t care what she looks like,” Maya told her, a smirk on her shiny pink lips.

My nickname. It was like a two-sided coin. When I was dominating in a game as outside hitter, being called The Hammer was definitely a good thing. But off the court, it took on a derisive note that meant I was too tall, too tough, too...different. Though Maya and Sadie could be fierce competitors in a game, they knew how to switch it off when there were guys around. I was missing that switch.

“Have fun drooling over the sweaty jocks,” I said, waving a hand and heading to the door.

“We’ll do more than that,” Sadie said, giggling. “You probably wouldn’t know what to do with a guy if you caught one.”

“She’d probably arm wrestle him or something.” Maya’s lips twisted in disgust.

Eye roll. “Maybe,” I said. “If he was man enough.”

They stared at me with blank faces as they tried to process my response, so I just left. Even after years as teammates, they didn’t get my sense of humor—or anything else about me, actually. And that was fine. I had other friends who did.

But Charlotte and Maddie were super busy all the time, and now that Charlotte was dating Lucas, we hardly ever got together.

As I got to the main locker room hallway, the football players were streaming inside from the nearby indoor practice field on their way to the enormous football locker room next to the weight room. It was just down from ours. I stared down at my feet, watching the glare of the fluorescent lights on the polished tile floor. In the periphery of my vision, I saw sneakers and hairy, grass-covered legs passing by. There was a certain sound that shoulder pads made—a sort of muffled, rustling, creaking sound. Then there was the smell of sweat and Axe body spray. It was like walking through a tunnel of testosterone. But if I didn’t make eye contact, I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone.

“Hey, it’s The Hammer,” one of the guys called. I didn’t look to see which one.

I needed to up my avoidance game, so I stopped and pulled my phone out of my bag. I unlocked the screen and headed the last fifteen yards or so toward the glass doors ahead of me. With my eyes on my phone screen, I

reached out for the handlebar of the door. But instead of cold metal, my hand landed on someone's hot, sweaty hand.

Looking up, about to apologize, I stopped when I saw the stocky, bull-shaped guy in front of me. Dugan Wesley. From the way he was grinning and blocking the whole doorway, it was clear he was just being a jerk. He always went out of his way to annoy me. He always succeeded.

"Gross!" I pulled my hand back and wiped it on the hem of my t-shirt, scrunching up my nose in disgust. "Doofus! Man, go wash your hands."

"Stop calling me that."

I squared up to him, our eyes almost level since I was five foot ten and he was lucky if he was five foot eleven. "Stay out of my way and I won't call you anything at all."

"I like being in your way. Hey, what's the hurry? You got a hot date or something?"

My eyebrow rose, a twitch of expression I was well-known for. "I can't stand the stench around here."

Dugan leaned further in front of me, raising his arm up the door frame, exposing his armpit since the sleeves of his t-shirt had been cut off. I almost urped in my mouth at the sight wet fuzz in his pit. "What? This stench?"

Before I knew what he intended, he grabbed the back of my neck and tried to shove my face into it. I bent forward, ducking out from under his hand and freed myself in time, but before I even managed to straighten up, there was a rush of wind at my back and a flurry of movement and curses. When my eyes focused again, Jason Hunt had Dugan pinned to the wall a few feet away. With Jason's brawny forearm pressed against his throat, Dugan couldn't do anything but gulp like a goldfish while his eyes bulged.

Jason was a new guy in school and I didn't know much about him—no one did. He walked around school like it was the last place he wanted to be and didn't talk to anybody. Even though he wore dusty cowboy boots, ratty ball-caps, and a bored expression, there wasn't a girl in school that didn't think he was hot. Like, *super* hot. There were so many rumors about him. That he'd been recruited by the football coach. That he'd been expelled from his last school. That he disappeared for days at a time and no one knew where he went.

My only impressions of him besides his obvious good looks were that he was rough, arrogant, and ripe for trouble. But I had no idea what was going on here.

I wasn't the only one gaping at him. A crowd had gathered around them chanting *fight, fight, fight*. For a tense dangerous moment, I thought I was about to watch Doofus meet his maker, but then Jason stepped back and flung him to the side.

Dugan grabbed at his throat. "Dude!"

A vein throbbed in Jason's forehead and his muscles remained tense. "Walk away while I'm letting you."

The crowd whooped and jeered as Dugan pushed his way through them to get away. Still in shock, I watched Jason pass me to pick up his gym bag from where he'd dropped it on the floor. As he headed for me—or the door—he seemed to get bigger the closer he got till I found myself craning my neck up to meet his eyes.

"You going out?" he asked, his voice terse and clipped. He reached around me and pushed the door open. He held it wide and waited.

Jolted back to my senses, I turned and passed through, coming so close to him that my shoulder brushed against his chest. Even just that brief touch nearly made me panic. Ordinarily, I would have gotten away from him as quickly as I could, but I needed to thank him first. "Thanks for what you did. I mean, I could have handled it, but—"

"Sure you could have."

I blinked, confused. His words should have sounded sarcastic, but they didn't. "I could have."

"I know. That's not why I jumped in."

"Then why did you?"

"Because I wanted to. And because you shouldn't *have* to deal with it."

I nodded and started walking toward the parking lot. "Agreed. I don't even get why he did that."

He turned and leveled a look at me, clearly questioning my intelligence. "Really? He has a thing for you."

"What? So he tried to rub my face in his sweaty armpit?"

Jason gave a half-smile. "I didn't say he was smart."

"No way. Why wouldn't he ask me out or give me his number or something? Not that it would work, but at least that would make sense."

He shook his head. "Because you intimidate him. And most other guys for that matter. Surely you know that."

I was used to getting teased by the girls on my team. Hearing it from a guy—especially the first one to ever really catch my attention—was a whole

new low. “I didn’t, so thanks for telling me. I can’t tell you how awesome I feel now.”

“What’s wrong?” He asked, stopping with me next to my car.

I put my bag on the hood of my pearl white BMW—which I had a love-hate relationship with—and dug for my keys. “Never mind, big guy. I’ll live.” But as I found my keys and hit the button to unlock my door, I turned and almost ran into his chiseled arm. Now he was blocking my way. Somehow, I didn’t mind.

“Look, I’m not sure why you’re offended. You’re out of everyone’s league and we all know it. I pegged that the first time I saw you.”

I looked up at him, at his masculine jawline, wavy dark hair, and sharp blue eyes. He was so close I could feel the heat radiating from his skin. I refused to be distracted. “You don’t even know me. None of you do.”

“So what?”

“You and I have never even talked,” I said, my temper flaring. “At least I’ve known Doofas since he was a chicken-legged punk in middle school. You? We are strangers.”

“True. All I know is what I can see...and that is a pretty girl with a hard-as-nails expression and her rich nose in the air. Clearly, you don’t need anything from us jokers who...”

I felt like punching him for assuming I was a snob, but there was just enough vulnerability in his voice as he trailed off to make me pause. “Who what?”

He dropped his arm and shrugged. “Who aren’t going the same places you are.” Then he walked away and got into a giant, teal green truck with rust spots just a few parking spaces away. Even as his engine rumbled to life, I continued to stare at him, trying to figure out what he’d meant—and what had just happened.

Too bad volleyball hadn’t taught me anything about tough guys who talk in riddles.

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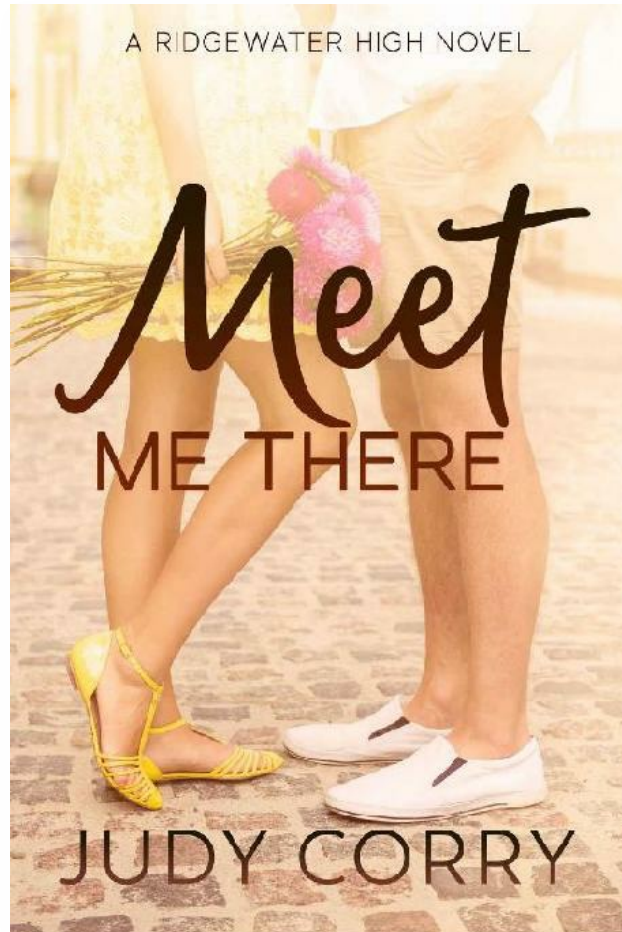
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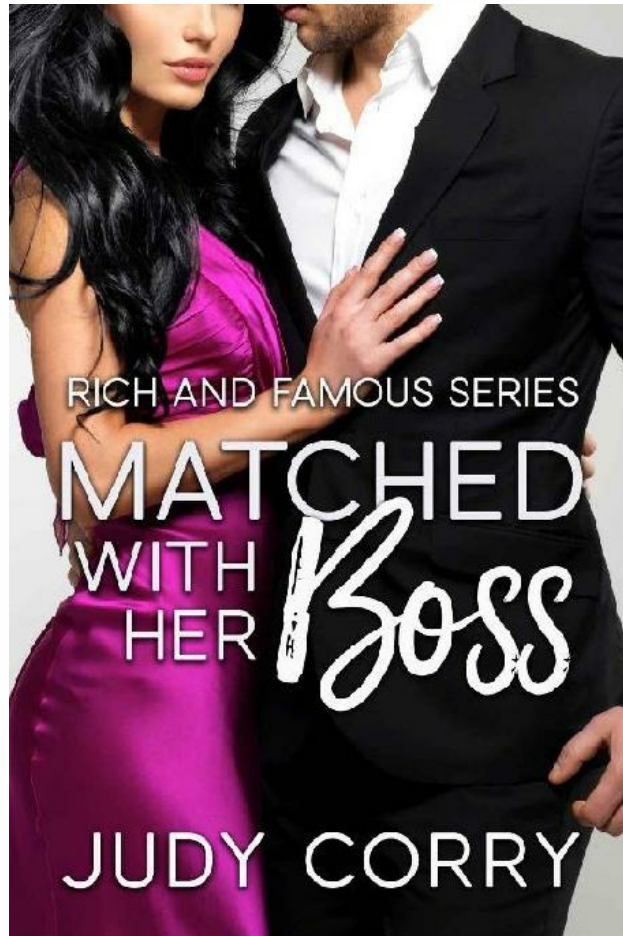
pranking Ashlyn to keep his mind off his loss. But the more he gets to know her, the more he regrets using his fake British accent in the first place. Soon Luke is walking the thin line of keeping his lies a secret and wishing he could tell her that the boy she's falling for is really him.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Judy Corry has been addicted to love stories for as long as she can remember. She reads and writes YA and Clean Romance because she can't get enough of the feeling of falling in love. She graduated from Southern Utah University with a degree in Family Life and Human Development and loves to weave what she learned about the human experience into her stories. She believes in swoon-worthy kisses and happily ever afters.

Judy met her soul mate while in high school, and married him a few years later. She and her husband are raising four beautiful and crazy children in Southern Utah.

