

Chapter One

I'm late.

I stand outside the doorway of my Western civilization class caught in a dilemma. Either go in and have thirty pairs of eyes stare at me, or leave—which means missing my test. The decision is already made. I only need to open the door and walk in.

I suck oxygen into my lungs, past my tightened airway as I try to calm down and turn the doorknob.

My professor is standing at the white board, writing *Ancient Greece* in a big scrawl with a blue marker that is running out of ink. He barely pauses as he lifts his eyes at the sound of the door hinges before returning to his task, yet my heart still pounds in my chest. My breath still catches.

I can't do this.

In spite of the surety that I will flunk the test and ruin my 4.0 GPA, I choose to leave. I spin around and slam into something hard. When I stumble backward, strong hands grab my arms and right me.

"I know I make girls swoon, but this is a first," a deep voice drawls.

I instantly know who this voice belongs to. Tucker Price. Southern University's soccer team superstar and resident man-whore. He sits in the end row, second seat.

I jerk out of his hold and confusion flickers in his eyes before he grins. "You're not the first girl to fall for me."

It has to be one of the worst lines ever, but it doesn't stop half the class from laughing.

I'm about to combust from embarrassment.

Dr. Eggleston looks up this time and puts a hand on his hip. One bushy, gray eyebrow hitches as he stares. “Are you two going to stand there for the rest of the class or take a seat?”

My face is on fire. I force my eyes to focus in the empty seat in the middle aisle, middle row—my usual seat—and I take purposeful steps toward it. If I sit down without attracting any more attention, this moment will pass, and I will be alone with my mortification.

With shaky fingers, I dig my scan tron sheet and pencil from my bag as Dr. Eggleston begins to pass out the booklets. “When you have completed the test, turn it in at my desk, and you are free to leave.”

The guy in the seat in front of me hands me a test, and I set it down on the desk, smoothing the sheet with my hand as I try to get a grip on my emotions. *Arriving late to class is no big deal.* Sure, it’s slightly embarrassing, but people like Tucker Price thrive on the attention. People like me want to curl up and die.

Light-headed from my humiliation, I try to read the questions swimming on the page in front of me. I know this information backward and forward. It doesn’t hurt that I’ve found Ancient Greece fascinating since I studied a unit on Greek gods in fourth grade. Nevertheless, my heart still beats furiously and blood whooshes in my ears, making it difficult to focus. I might know everything under the sun about the Spartans and Athenians, but it doesn’t do me any good if I don’t answer the questions.

I hear the rustle of paper and look up. People are already moving onto the second page of the test, and I haven’t even read the first question. A quick glance up at the clock, tells me I’ve wasted ten minutes.

Sucking in a deep breath, I close my eyes, holding oxygen in my lungs until I’m sure they will burst. When I release the breath, I imagine pushing all my anxiety out with it. After a couple

of rounds, I settle enough to start. Fourteen months of free campus counseling boiled down into a simple breathing exercise.

Forty minutes later, I rise from my chair, my completed test and essay in my hand. Most of the class has finished, but two girls still huddle over their essays, their hands flying as they hurry to finish. In the second row, Tucker stares out the window, his pencil hovering over his composition book. For someone who was about to run out of time, he looks remarkably relaxed.

I should be more like Tucker Price. The thought burns itself in my head, and I want a gallon of bleach to purge the errant idea from my brain. Never in a million years would I want to be like Tucker Price.

Unfocused. Irresponsible. Dangerous.

Tucker Price's reputation is well-earned, and if the university rumor factory is correct, Tucker is well on his way to losing his soccer scholarship after his last DUI.

I turn in my test and grab a quick lunch in the student union before I report for my shift in the math lab. My friend Tina sits next to me, plopping her tray on the table as her backpack slips down her arm. Tina is a sophomore and we met last semester. There are few female math majors at Southern, and we tend to hang out together. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we both have forty-five minutes between our last class and our shift in the lab so we usually meet for lunch. Today we are discussing mundane topics—the weather and an upcoming math club meeting.

“My friend Kyle is having a party on Friday night,” Tina says before she takes a bite of her sandwich. Her eyes lift to me to gauge my reaction.

Tina is not the typical math student. She straddles both the demanding academic world and a social life. Parties included. For some reason she seems intent on dragging me from my comfortable hovel.

“Tina, we’ve discussed this before—”

“You don’t date. You don’t go to parties. Yeah, I know, I know,” she grumbles.

I frown. “You don’t ask anyone else from the math department to go. Why me?”

“Don’t you see that you have so much more potential than spending all of your time studying?”

“But I—”

Her face lowers close to mine. “Look, Scarlett. Everyone knows you’re a brilliant mathematics student. But it doesn’t mean you can’t have some fun. Just once.” Her eyes plead with mine. “You don’t have to say yes or no. Just think about it. Okay?” She gives me an exaggerated pouty face.

I laugh, shaking my head, my ponytail brushing my back. “You’re incorrigible.”

“And that’s why you love me.”

I laugh again and see Tucker at a table twenty feet away. He’s sitting with several soccer players and their groupies. Two of the girls openly flirt and Tucker flashes his cocky grin.

I’ve paid little attention to him before, other than casually observing his self-destructive behavior. Rumor has it he’s on academic probation as well as behavioral. Tucker might be Southern University’s soccer superstar, but he’s close to burning out at the pace he’s keeping. Watching him now, I know that people like him bring this upon themselves. Tucker Price has been given a gift I’d kill for—a full ride scholarship—but he chooses to throw it away so he and party and screw.

He catches me watching him, and I freeze, waiting for the look of derision that’s sure to come. I know that my own look of disgust isn’t what he’s used to seeing. Instead, his face loses

all expression before his arrogant grin is plastered back on his face, like he's just taken a stage break and he's jumping back into a performance.

Tina stands to leave, noticing that something has caught my attention. She grins when she sees who it is. "There may be hope for you yet."

"What? No. Way."

"I heard he almost got arrested last weekend for disturbing the peace, but the policeman turned out to be a huge soccer fan and let him off with a warning."

I throw my trash away, but Tucker's face haunts me while I head to the math lab for our afternoon shift, dodging the raindrops that fall as I'm halfway across campus.

The rain continues, heavy drops pounding the window next to me. The gloomy January afternoon perfectly reflects my mood when a few hours later, Tucker stands in the doorway of the lab, looking around. His gaze stops, and he moves toward me.

What is Tucker Price doing here?

The room isn't that large, enough room for four tables where tutors can work with students. Old office chairs, the fabric on the seats torn and faded, line the walls. There's no one waiting so Tucker slides into the chair on the opposite side of my table, and lifts an eyebrow with an amused grin. "You're in my Western Civilization class."

My face burns at the reminder, and I wait for him to call me out for staring at him at lunch. Although why he'd care what I think is beyond me.

He watches me in confusion. "So you teach math?"

"Tutor." The word catches in my throat. "I tutor in math."

I want to scream. I want to hide in a corner. Working in the math lab is perfect for my social anxiety. While my reaction to awkward social situations has eased quite a bit since I've

moved away from my dysfunctional family, it's still present, even in its milder form. The math lab is one-on-one and a more controlled situation, but my run-in—literally—with Tucker earlier is pushing all my trigger buttons.

He leans forward, resting his hand on the table, and looking around before his eyes land on mine. “I need help with algebra.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place.” I search the room to see who’s available. Mark is with a pretty freshman and from the way he’s attempting to flirt, I can see they will be a while. But Tina is not only free but practically salivating at the sight of Tucker. I point toward her.

“Tina will help you. Right over there.”

His forehead wrinkles. “Why can’t you do it?”

My mouth parts and a whoosh of air escapes. “I usually work with students in more advanced courses,” I say flustered. Why would he care if I tutored him or not?

All expression leaves his face. “Are you calling me stupid, Scarlett?”

“I...no...that’s not...” I say flustered. How does he know my name?

A slow smile lifts his mouth. “I was teasing, but seriously.” He leans even closer. “If you teach advanced math, I’d rather have you. I’m in serious trouble if I don’t pass this class. I’m going to lose my scholarship.”

I want to tell him that’s not the only thing putting his scholarship at risk, but figure he’s already well aware of that fact, despite the continuation of his behavior.

He continues to watch me, waiting for my answer.

I’ve never been this close to him before, and I can’t help studying him. I can see why girls fall at his feet. He’s gorgeous. Light hair with lots of natural streaks of blond from all that time in the sun. Tanned skin, with a hint of stubble, like he’d forgotten to shave this morning.

But those eyes, a pale blue with just a touch of gray. I'm sure they are what seal the deal for him with the women he collects.

Only there's no smile in his eyes. Only sadness and fear.

I should say no. I'm out of my element around him, and it will affect my ability to tutor him, but something in those eyes touches a place deep in my heart that I keep hidden from everyone. I can't help but wonder if there's more to Tucker Price than he shows the world.

I nod. "Okay."

His eyes close, and his body slumps with relief. After a moment, his eyes open, and he's the cocky guy that bumped into me hours earlier. "So let's set up a time."

"It doesn't work that way. The math lab is drop-in. You work with who's available when you come in. We can get started now."

He frowns and his top teeth bite his lower lip.

"Why don't you get out your problems and show me what you need help with?"

He pulls his textbook and a notebook out of his backpack. "You should know right off that math isn't my thing."

I can't help but smile, in spite of my nervousness around him. "I suspect it's more your *thing* than you give yourself credit. It's simply a matter of understanding the rules."

His cocky grin is back. "I'm not a fan of rules."

"And look where that's gotten you." The words are out of my mouth before I realize I'm saying them. My eyes widen in horror. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for."

He shakes his head, his expression changing again. Tucker's face is a chameleon of emotions. "No." His gaze narrows. "I need that."

"What? Snarky remarks?"

“No. The truth.”

I wait for a sarcastic comment to follow but it doesn't come.

We spend the next half hour starting with the basics of mathematic operations. He's focusing on what I'm telling him, but the concepts are slow to sink in, and he's frustrated.

“Don't worry. You'll get it. The problem is that everyone's brain is wired differently. Some gravitate to words and concepts. Others are hardwired for facts and logical order. The human brain is capable of both. We just need to figure out how to activate your brain.”

“So I'm a cyborg?” he teases, but it's not cocky or arrogant. He's sweet. And so unlike his public persona.

“If you were, you wouldn't need me.” I grin. “We're the ones who tell our brains we are incapable. Maybe you need to tell yourself that you *are* capable.”

He watches me for a moment, his palm resting on his closed book. “When are you in here again?”

“Why?”

“I want you to tutor me. No one's taken the time to work with me the way you have.” I wonder if he's flirting, but he seems serious.

“Uh...I work tomorrow from three to six.”

He scowls. “Do you do private lessons?”

I shake my head, now worried where this is going. I thought *this* Tucker, the one I've spent the last half hour with, was too good to be true. “No. I only work here in the lab.” I force a smile. “But there's always someone here who is more than capable of helping you.”

“You like that word. Capable. You've said it multiple times.”

I'm caught off guard and a blush rises to my cheeks. My gaze falls to my folded hands on the table. "Maybe it's because I think we tell ourselves that we can't when we should be telling ourselves that we can."

I refuse to face him, instead, pretending my hangnail is fascinating. Several seconds pass before I make myself look up.

Tucker's blue eyes flicker with confusion and surprise. He gives me a soft smile before he scoops up his books, grabs his backpack and walks out of the lab.

He must think I'm weird, the brainy math geek, and part of me is glad. I've always steered clear of guys like him, and I have no intention of changing. Guys like him are who Momma and my sister ended up with. Smooth-talkers, who take your money, screw you until the next piece of ass comes along, and then leave you pregnant and living in a trailer park for the rest of your life. I'm running away from my past, creating my own future. There is no room for men like him or self-destructive relationships. With my schedule and drive to succeed, I don't really consider dating much at all, not that I have men begging me to go out. The male math majors have either tried or consider me untouchable. They leave me alone, and I like it that way. Only classes, work and mathematics. The logic of math will never let me down.

I stay several more hours, helping other students before my shift ends. I pack up my stuff and head for the exit. "See you tomorrow."

"Scarlett, wait." Dr. Carlisle calls out of his office. He gets out of his chair and stands in the doorway. "I saw you helping Tucker Price earlier. How did it go?"

I shrug. "He doesn't understand some of the basic rules. But despite the impression he likes to give, he's capable of learning the material. I think he just needs repetition."

"And how comfortable were you with him?"

I know what he was asking. Dr. Carlisle is well aware of my anxiety disorder. Although we don't discuss personal relationships, my preference for not dating is well known in the math department. And the entire school knows Tucker's penchant for trying to get every girl in school out of their panties.

"It actually went really well. He surprised me."

He smiles and leans against the door frame, looking relieved. "Good to know, because I received a phone call from the chancellor. He wants you to personally tutor Tucker Price. Outside the math lab."

My mouth drops. "*What?*"

"The chancellor himself called, Scarlett. You know the department is up for funding for the new computer program. This could..."

Bile burns my throat. The university needs Tucker to keep his eligibility. The math department needs funding. If I can help the university with the former, they'll help with the latter.

Damn it.

I nod with a jerk. "Okay."

"You can tutor him during your scheduled lab hours if you like." He sighs and his brow wrinkles with worry. "Scarlett, if don't feel comfortable—"

"No, I'm fine. It will be fine. I can do it." But it won't be fine. And I'm sure I can help him as long as I'm dealing with the Tucker from this afternoon. But if I'm dealing with the Tucker I saw in lunch room then I'm screwed.

But then again, part of me knows I'm screwed either way.

Chapter Two

Caroline is at our apartment when I get home. She's curled up on the sofa with an afghan and a bowl of mac and cheese, watching *Gossip Girl* on Netflix. Other than my family, Caroline has known me longer than anyone. Before college, the trailer park we grew up in was the one commonality that linked us. While we were friends in grade school, in our high school years we were more acquaintances. Caroline hovered on the periphery of the popular crowd, not quite breaking in because of her address. By high school, I had retreated from everyone and everything, focusing on my goal of graduating with honors and getting a scholarship to college. When we realized we were both going to the same college, we ended up rooming together, then became best friends. We left Shelbyville behind, and we're all that we have left of our past. Now we're more like sisters than friends. We're our own little family.

"Bad day?" I ask.

She twists her mouth to one side but doesn't answer.

Caroline says her goal in life is to be Blair Waldorf, headbands included. Not surprising since she's a fashion major. But in the two and a half years we've lived together—freshman and sophomore years in the dorm and our junior year in our apartment—I've learned that her *Gossip Girl* marathons are her clue that something's wrong.

"Is the sidewalk at the bottom of the stairs still flooded?" she asks, licking her spoon.

The rain has come down in sheets off and on all day. Still, the question seems random.

"Yeah."

She scowls. "Damn. I wanted to wear my new suede boots tomorrow."

I shake my head as I scoop up a bowl of the mac and cheese. “It’s January in Tennessee, Caroline. It’s wet and cold. What’s tomorrow?”

She shrugs, but one side is higher than the other. She has a reason but doesn’t want to tell me. “How was geek lab?”

I shove her feet off the sofa to sit next to her, but she puts them in my lap, and I pull the corner of her throw over the both of us. “*Math lab* was fine, although I tutored an interesting student.”

Laughing, Caroline leans over and scoops some macaroni from my bowl. “Interesting student. In the math lab.” She eats my noodles and shrugs. “I give up. I got nuthin’.”

“Tucker Price.”

Her eyes narrow, and her mouth puckers around her spoon. “Yeah, right.”

“Ever heard of *academic probation*?”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope.” I give her a smug smile. “And guess who will start privately tutoring him?”

She bolts upright. “Shut. Up.”

Ever since I’ve agreed to do this, I’ve been trying to see this in a positive light. The mathematics department needs the new program that maps arbitrary complex functions, and experience with this program will look fantastic on my resume. I already have the disadvantage that Southern University is a relatively small school with a slightly above-average mathematics department. Besides, I tutor students one-on-one all the time. Why is tutoring Tucker any different? To my surprise, Tucker wasn’t the cocky, asshole I’m used to hearing about. As long as he checks his attitude at the door, I can live with it.

I shrug. “He wasn’t anything like I expected. He was... polite.”

Sinking back into the cushions, an ornery grin lights up her face and she scoops several noodles. “Oh, he’s *polite* all right.”

“Not like that. Kind of quiet. Other than a few slips into character, he was... normal.”

“Are we talking about the same Tucker Price? Blond with incredible blue eyes? About six foot? Stunning legs when he wears those soccer shorts? Guy who flaunts his good looks and his *sportsmanship*?”

“Good, Lord. Is everything a sexual innuendo to you tonight?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, it was the same guy. Different personality.”

“Shh!” She grabs the remote and increases the volume. “Chuck’s about to trade Blair for a hotel.”

My jaw drops. “You’re kidding, right?” I’ve never been able to get into *Gossip Girl*, despite Caroline’s multiple and relentless attempts to sway me to the dark side. As a poor girl from the other side of the tracks, I just can’t relate to spoiled rich kids. Or maybe it’s the spoiled, rich bad boys I’m trying to avoid. Why anyone would willingly subject themselves to that type of person is beyond me.

“Want to talk about anything?” I ask.

Tears fill her eyes, but she shakes her head.

“I’m here if you need me, okay?”

She gives me a tearful smile, and I wrap an arm around her shoulders, leaning my head into hers. I suspect her despondency is related to her break-up from her boyfriend Matt. He broke up with her several months before, but she’s still not over it. She’ll talk when she’s ready, probably in another hour or two.

I force myself off the sofa, not an easy task since it's so cozy under the afghan with Caroline. "I've got some equations to work on."

Caroline fakes a snore.

I put a hand on my hip and look down my nose at her. "Don't the nerdy-math jokes ever get old?"

She twists her mouth to the side as though she's giving it thought. "Nope. Never do."

"I could tease you mercilessly about your fashion design degree. Tons of fodder there."

"Go for it." She grins with exaggerated glee, the tears still in her eyes. My heart breaks for her yet I don't know what to do to help her get over this awful pain. For the moment, we ignore the elephant in the room.

"Turns out I'm a nicer person than you," I call out to her as I walk down the hall to my bedroom.

"You just keep telling yourself that."

I turn my desk light on then lie down on my bed and listen to the ping of the rain on my window, taking a deep breath. I try to do my relaxation exercises every night to help my overall anxiety, and the soothing sound of the rain helps.

One of many godsendings about college was my access to free counseling. After struggling to control my anxiety since the sixth grade, I was grateful to find ways to not only cope with it, but improve my life. I can thank Caroline for making me go only a few weeks into our freshman year after she found me lying on my bed struggling to breathe during an panic attack.

My therapist taught me to use guided imagery to help reduce anxiety before a potential situation that makes me nervous, but I also like to do it after situations that upset me. I relive what happened and reimagine how I wanted it to go. I focus on the incident in Western

Civilization and how I should have appropriately responded to being late—walking in without feeling embarrassed. When people turn their attention to me, I smile and walk to my seat. But when I think about how I should have reacted to running into Tucker, my anxiety rises. I know the situation would have been humorous to anyone else. Why do I have to make such a big deal of it? But whenever I try to relive how I should have handled it, I see Tucker's face in the student union. The disinterest. The sadness in his eyes. I hardly even know him so I'm not sure why I care.

Perhaps it's because I see the same expression every morning when I look in the mirror.

With a sigh, I sit upright and take my long, dark hair out of its ponytail, then run my fingers through the strands. I'm imagining things. That's the thing about people, you never really know where they stand. You have to rely on gestures and social cues, and still, you really don't know.

I move to the desk and pull out my homework. Anxious prickles have poked the back of my neck since I began thinking about Tucker. I pull out my book and study the equation for my linear algebra class. As I write the numbers onto the paper, my shoulders begin to unfurl and my tension fades away. Some people knit or read to relax. I do math problems. My mother and younger sister never let me live it down when I was younger, making fun of my love of arithmetic. With math, as long as you have all the necessary factors in a math problem, you can find the answer. Life, on the other hand, is so much messier.

I stay up another two hours working on my equations before I quit for the night. When I go into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, Caroline's exactly where I left her hours ago. She doesn't comment when I pass her on my way to the kitchen.

I grab a pint of Ben & Jerry's from the freezer along with two spoons and sit next to her on the sofa, throwing the afghan over my legs. I toss the lid onto the coffee table and hand Caroline a spoon.

She digs in, eating several bites before she finally talks. "I saw him today. With someone else. It's been three months, Scarlett. Why is it so hard to see him?"

I've never been in a relationship that I wanted to stay in, but I know the pain she went through when they broke up. The pain she still goes through. "Three years is a long time to be with someone, Caroline. I'm sure it takes time to get over it."

"I don't like feeling this way. It hurts too much."

"Maybe you should start dating again." I'm not really sure it's an appropriate response, but I can't stand to see her this miserable. This moping person isn't the vivacious girl that took the campus by storm her freshman year. The girl I knew when we grew up together. Hiding out in our apartment for the last several months has made her more like me, a terrifying thought. "If nothing else, you need to get out and at least go to parties again."

She sits up and points her spoon at me. "You know, Scarlett. I think you're on to something. It just so happens I've been invited to a party at a guy named Kyle's house Friday night."

"Well, there you go. Tina was invited to the same party."

Her eyes light up. "Oh really? Then the fates have aligned. I'm going to the party, and you're coming with me."

My breath caught. "What? Oh, no. No way."

"Yes! Come on! You never go to parties. You need to loosen up and have some fun."

“I do have fun.” Caroline went out all the time when she was with Matt. Our freshman year, she invited me to parties, but she soon gave up after my many refusals. Plus, Matt began to suck up more and more of her time, and my lack of a social life was simply accepted.

She scrunches her nose. “With math problems. Don’t you want any boy problems?”

“Look how well that’s worked out for you.” I immediately regret my words, but they are at the root of my hesitancy to date. I can’t afford to get close to someone, to let them get close to me, only to have them break my heart. I’ve made too much progress over the last two years to throw it away at the risk of potential heartbreak. But Caroline thrives on human contact and connections. Staying holed up in our apartment is making her worse.

Tilting her head to the side, her lips pucker. “True. That’s because I stuck with one guy for so long.” Her eyes widen with excitement. “Let’s make it the semester of boys. We’ll go out with a different boy every week.”

“Are you drunk? When was the last time *I* went on a date?”

“My point exactly! When was the last time *either* one of us went on a date?” She puts the back of her hand against her forehead and arches her back. “Two beautiful young women, home alone night after night. It’s a tragedy.”

“You should have been a theater major,” I say dryly. “I like my life the way it is. Neat and orderly.”

“But life is meant to be messy, Scarlett. You need to live a little.”

“You can’t live a little or a lot, Caroline. You simply live.”

“Says the girl who’s never lived at all.” There’s no malice or sarcasm, only a hint of pity.

I’d prefer the sarcasm. I take the empty ice cream container and toss it in the trash. “I’m not going to a party, Caroline.”

She gives me a wicked smile. “Oh, we’ll see about that.”

Oh, yes we will.

The next morning when I wake up, there’s an email in my inbox time stamped ten minutes earlier.

I would have texted, but the school refused to give me your number. We need to set up a tutoring time.

Tucker. I’m almost surprised he got in contact with me so soon. Not to mention he’s awake before 8:30 a.m. Maybe he’s taking this seriously after all.

I email him my free times then get in the shower, worrying about the Friday night party. Individually, Tina and Caroline are manageable, but I made the fatal mistake of introducing them last November. Now they’ve made it their combined effort to force me into some kind of social life. I seriously don’t understand why they can’t leave me alone. I’m happy with the way things are. Don’t they get that?

But when I rub my towel across the mirror to wipe off the steam, the expression on my face says differently. Funny how I never considered whether I was happy or unhappy until the last twenty-four hours. After I saw Tucker’s face in the cafeteria.

I shake off my melancholy and dry my hair, mulling over the question of happiness. Isn’t happiness getting what you want? If so, I’m the epitome of happy. My academic track has me well on my way to helping me get my dream job: working for the CIA or DOD, analyzing data. I have a great roommate and a handful of friends. I have student loans, but nothing monstrous to pay off after I graduate.

By my definition, I’m happy. So why does it feel like something was missing?

I get dressed and check my email, surprised to see Tucker has responded already.

3:00 at the coffee shop on campus.

The hair on my neck prickles. I breathe in, filling my lungs and blowing out the air as I imagine blowing my anxiety away and try to reason through my fear. I didn't have problems with tutoring Tucker in the lab, so why does meeting him at the coffee shop make me nervous? It's an easy answer. I'm comfortable in the lab. It's a familiar environment. The coffee shop is an unknown variable.

Also, Tucker is a wild card. He was behaved in my environment, but I know that isn't his usual behavior. I'm having major second thoughts about this endeavor, but I shake my head and force myself to calm down. This situation is manageable as long as I don't flake out.

I pack my messenger bag for the day and pour a cup of coffee in my travel mug before I poke my head into Caroline's room. Her clothes are scattered everywhere, and her sheets and blanket are a tangled mess. She's lying sideways on the bed, her feet hanging off the side.

"Caroline."

She buries her face into her pillow. "What?" she mumbles.

"You're going to miss your textiles class. Get up." She's not usually like this, but this isn't uncommon after late night *Gossip Girl* and ice cream binges.

She pulls the covers over her head.

I step into the room and grab a handful of the sheet and jerk it down to her waist. "Come on. This is your last warning. I'm leaving now or I'll be late for class."

"You're so mean, Scarlett."

"I can't even imagine how you'll survive in the real world," I mumble and walk out of the room.

“I heard that!” she yells after me.

I meant her to, knowing it would get her out of bed. The more I study people in my attempt to fit into life, the more I realize that people are often driven by their fear. With my mother and her drinking and her many men, it was her fear of being alone. But with Caroline, whose family insisted she was wasting her time with college, her fear was that she’d never escape her trailer park roots. My own fears are too numerous to list.

I grab my coffee and a banana then head for the front door, pausing until I hear her padding around in her room.

The rain has stopped, but heavy gray clouds hang in the sky. My first class is at ten, but I want to get there early. Set and logic is the class that separates the wheat from the chafe in mathematics majors, and I want to make sure I’m doing everything possible to ensure I do well. This includes ensuring that I get to school early enough so I don’t have a repeat of what happened in Western civilization yesterday. I can’t afford to spend ten minutes recovering from the embarrassment of being late. I can’t afford to miss thirty seconds in this class.

Some days the lessons are more difficult, but I’m thankful when today’s concepts slip easily into place. When I struggle, all my fears that I can’t do this, that I’m destined to fail swamp my head. And I need all the confidence I can muster to face this afternoon.

After my afternoon Arabic III class, I head to the coffee shop, a knot in my stomach. I arrive ten minutes early and order my drink and sit at a table by the window, pulling my Arabic homework out to work on while the subject matter is still fresh in my head. I lose myself in verb conjugation, and I’m surprised when I see that it’s already twenty after three. Tucker hasn’t shown. I pull out my phone and double-check his email to verify the time. He said three o’clock, and this is the only coffee shop on campus.

Tucker enters the shop with two friends as I'm packing up. They are loud and boisterous, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. My anger flares at his lackadaisical attitude as well as his disrespect. But mostly I find myself disappointed with him, although for the life of me, I can't figure out why. Tucker Price is Tucker Price. The guy I saw yesterday was a figment of my imagination.

Tucker sees me and wanders over, a lazy smile on his face. "Where are you going?"

This part I dread. The attention Tucker has drawn follows over to me. My face flames, and I keep my head down as my shaky hand stuffs my books into my bag. It would be so much easier to stay and avoid the eyes of everyone in the room, but the truth is that all these eyes would be on me anyway. Tucker is the center of chaos everywhere he goes. I refuse to be sucked into it. Computer program or not.

He puts his hand on my bag. "Scarlett, where are you going?"

I look up into his face. Confusion wrinkles his brow. He really doesn't get it.

I dig deep down and find the strength to do this. "You said three o'clock, Tucker. It's now three-twenty-two. You're late, and my time is valuable."

His eyebrows rise in surprise.

I jerk my bag from his hand and loop the strap over my shoulder.

He holds his hands out from his sides, his cocky attitude bleeding through his stance. "I'm here now."

"Good for you. I'm not." I head for the door.

Tucker follows behind, cutting in front of me and blocking the exit. "Scarlett." My name rolls off his tongue smooth as silk. I'm sure many a girl has given him much more than their

attention when he's used that voice. Fortunately for me, I'm not one of them. "Let's just sit back down, and we'll work during the time I have left."

"Tucker, if you don't get out of my way, I'll call campus security."

All eyes in the shop are on us. If humans were capable of spontaneously combusting, I'd be in flames by now.

He shakes his head in disbelief. I'm quite certain he's used to getting what he wants whenever he wants it. He's not sure how to handle me.

My throat tightens, and my lungs burn for oxygen. My body wants to gasp for air, but I fight the sensation, focusing every speck of my attention on the puzzled blue eyes less than a foot in front of my face.

We have a standoff, in the doorway of The Higher Ground coffee shop. People are outside the door waiting to get in, but Tucker's hand is on the handle, preventing their entrance as well as my escape.

I lift my chin and grit my teeth to keep them from chattering. "Get out of my way. Now."

He stares for another three seconds before he curses under his breath. His hand drops, and he takes a step back.

Someone outside pulls the door open, and I push through the group, my eyes stinging from my unshed tears and the cold. I walk at a brisk pace until I get to the mathematics building, then find a back stairwell and sink to a step. Closing my eyes, I bury my face in my hands and give into a full-blown attack as the realization of my fate sinks in my head.

I may have stood up for my principals, but I've just committed career suicide.

Chapter Three

After fifteen minutes of sitting on the stairs fighting to breathe, I feel like I'm ready to move. Thankfully, only a few people have passed me on the seldom-used staircase, and I've struggled to look relatively normal as they pass. As normal as someone sitting on the stairs crying can look.

My scheduled time in the tutoring center is three to six on Wednesdays. If I'm not going to tutor Tucker, I may as well head back to the lab and face my fate. I doubt I'll lose my job in the tutoring center, but Dr. Carlisle is bound to be disappointed in me despite the fact he said I wasn't required to tutor Tucker. Still, I can't help but wonder what it means for the department's funding. As well as my resume.

After I make my decision to go upstairs, it still takes me another ten minutes to calm down enough to move off the step I'm perched on. I may be able to breathe again, but my nerves are raw and jittery.

Dr. Carlisle isn't in the room when I arrive. The other tutors are all busy with students who are waiting for assistance. I dive right in, helping with calculus and statistics problems. I keep glancing to the door, my anxiety rising as I wait for Dr. Carlisle to show up so I can share my bad news.

When my shift is over, I stay a half hour later and help the last of the students. If nothing else, it will make up for the time I should have spent with Tucker. Dr. Carlisle still hasn't returned, but I can fill him in on the details tomorrow. If the chancellor hasn't beat me too it.

I sigh and grab my bag, heading out the door. My study group meets off campus every Wednesday night at Panera, and I should only be a few minutes late. The sun has already set and

the lights in the hall are dim, casting dark shadows. My gaze is lowered as I replay the incidence with Tucker in my head. I don't notice the person leaning against the wall.

“Scarlett.”

My feet stick to the floor, but I stumble as my body continues its forward momentum. My chest constricts when I see it's him. Anger fueled my backbone earlier. Now I'm dealing with worry, and I know it's not enough to face Tucker and stand my ground.

“I'm sorry about this afternoon.”

My mouth opens to answer him, but nothing comes out. I can't say *it's okay*, because it's not. Instead, I wait.

He takes a step toward me out of the shadows, and I notice right away his cocky swagger is missing. His shoulders are slumped in defeat. “Look, Scarlett, I screwed up. I was disrespectful of your time and rude to you when I finally got there. I know that I don't have any right to ask this, but I'd really like for you to give me another chance.”

I stare at him in shock, still unable to answer. Who is this person in front of me? Because it's definitely not the Tucker Price I saw hours earlier. He sounds so formal, like he's rehearsed his appeal. I shake my head to clear it. “I'm not the only person who can tutor you.” I pause to assemble my thoughts. “We're just not a good fit, but don't worry. I know at least two or three people who would jump at the chance.” Tina included.

He takes another step closer, his eyes pleading. “I don't want anyone else. I want you.”

I blink. “Why? I don't understand. You don't even know me.”

“I know you're not going to take my shit. Today was proof of that.”

Anger blooms in my chest, catching me by surprise. “So today was a *test*? To see if I'd put up with *your shit*?”

He grabs both sides of his head and shakes it. “No! That’s not it at all! I fucked up, okay?” His hands lower, and pain and fear fill his eyes. “I fucked up, just like I fuck up everything.”

I swallow, unsure how to answer. His response is unlike anything I ever expected to hear from him.

He takes my silence as encouragement. “Please, Scarlet. I swear to God I’ll be on time the next time.”

“I still don’t understand. Why me?”

His lips press together, and he runs his hand through his wavy blonde hair. He sighs and gives me a sad smile. “You treat me like I’m everyone else. You’re not star-struck by Tucker Price the soccer star.”

My heart is softening.

He cocks his head to the side. “Please. One more chance.”

Something in his eyes melts the guard I have up. There’s something so familiar there. It’s as though I’m staring into a bottomless pit of regret and sadness. I groan, frustrated with myself for falling for this. “Okay.” The word flows out so softly even I have trouble hearing it.

But he doesn’t miss it. His mouth lifts into a smile, and I realize he has a dimple in his right cheek. “Thank you.”

I shift the strap of my messenger bag on my shoulder, hooking my thumb underneath to relieve some of the weight. “What do you have in mind? How much tutoring do you need?”

“What do you suggest?”

I know deep in my heart that I will regret this decision, yet I can’t stop the words from tumbling out. “You’re still struggling with the basic concepts of algebra. Let’s work on it two

days a week, right after your algebra class while what you just learned in class is still fresh in your mind. If you need more, we'll add another session."

He nods. "Yeah, that's good."

"Why don't you email me your schedule, and I'll tell you what will work. And we won't meet at The Higher Grounds. We can meet at the library since you have an aversion to the math lab."

The happiness fades from his eyes, and his breath shallows. "Not the library. Please. How about somewhere off campus then? Like Starbucks?"

His reaction is odd. While I know people study better in different environments, I can't help but wonder if this is a ploy to goof off in public again. "Fine. How about Panera?" I reason it's still public, but there are tables tucked to the side we can sit at while Starbucks is completely in the open.

Relief floods his face. "Thanks, Scarlett."

I lift my chin and thrust my shoulders back, trying to show a strength I'm not currently feeling. "I will only give you one more chance, Tucker Price. And that's one more chance than I give most people."

The emotion that flickers in his eyes is unreadable yet intense. He swallows and nods, but doesn't say a word.

I head toward the stairwell, and he falls in step behind me. When we reach the exit, he pushes the door open, and I look up at him with wariness. What's he up to?

He grins, a mixture of the Tucker upstairs just now and the Tucker from this afternoon. "I'm not some kind of stalker, I promise. I just happen to be going this way too."

“Oh.” *I’m an idiot.* I walk through the door and head for the parking lot as he heads for the fitness center.

The look in his eyes haunts me during the short drive to Panera. Why does he affect me so? Strangely enough, it’s not the way every other girl on campus reacts.

The study group has already taken our usual table in the corner. Stephen looks up from our group of eight as I head to the counter to order a bowl of soup. In high school, it would have been every girl’s daydream to be in a study group with seven guys and two girls. But this is not your average study group. We’re all in set and logic and determined to pass this gauntlet to continue our degree path, which means we are hyper-focused on the work and not the company. Everyone but Tim, who has asked me out three times in the last year and a half. Each time I say no. Each time he says I’ll eventually see the logic and change my mind. He never says it with malice, merely with the surety of someone who has very definite plans in life, and for some bizarre reason they include me.

When I take my seat, everyone looks up from their notebooks.

“Where have you been? You’re never late to anything.” Stephen pins me with a questioning gaze.

I shrug. “There were people still waiting when my shift was over at six.”

“We were just discussing Monday’s lecture.”

We spend the next ten minutes going over our notes, but everyone’s eyes keep darting to me. I can feel my face reddening.

When we move onto today’s lecture, I find it harder and harder to concentrate. My study group is usually a safe place, but tonight it feels like anything but. I lock eyes with Tim for a brief second then shift my gaze to the table next to us. “Why is everyone acting so weird?”

“We heard about this afternoon.”

When I turn back, all eyes are on me. Waiting for my response. The blood in my veins rises ten degrees. I set the pen in my hand on the table with a careful movement. As though the correct placement will affect the direction this conversation is headed. “What did you hear?”

“That you blew off Tucker Price in The Higher Ground.”

I stare at the pen, noticing the logo is partially hidden the way it is laying. I resist the urge to turn it. “He was late.”

Tony, a quiet Asian boy, clears his throat. “We need that program, Scarlett.”

My mouth parts in astonishment. Tony is the most non-confrontational person I know, even more so than I am. But seeing how we have the same career plans, he of all people knows how essential this program is to our resumes.

Against my better judgment, I look at their faces and realize the truth. They all *know* about the arrangement. Am I the mathematics concubine, offered to the soccer god as a payment?

Without a word, I slide out of my seat, grab my books and pick up my bag.

“Scarlett.” Miranda’s eyes are wide. “Where are you going?”

“I have a headache.” I throw my trash away and walk out the door to my car.

How have I gotten here? How has my life taken this detour? I know I’ve overreacted. They are huddled over their sandwiches and equations, worrying that meek Scarlett Goodwin has sabotaged their academic careers. I should have stayed and told them Tucker and I have worked out a new arrangement. That their lives are safe for now, but another part of me rebels.

Screw them.

I drive home and walk into an empty apartment. Caroline has an evening class on Wednesdays so I pull out my homework, searching for solace in numbers. Math is the one constant in my life, the one thing I can count on to always be the same. I brush the stray strands of hair from my face, ignoring how sad my life is if that statement is true.

Tucker has algebra on Tuesdays and Thursdays so I schedule a session with him the next afternoon at three o'clock at Panera.

He's sitting in a booth staring out the window when I pull up, his face void of expression. He doesn't notice me as I walk in and order a bagel and a coffee. I stop several feet away and study him, trying to prepare myself for our session. He's wearing jeans and gray long sleeve thermal shirt. His jacket is folded and in the seat next to him, his bag on top of it. His hair is tousled, as though the gusty wind blew the strands around, and he hadn't thought to right it. It's easy to understand why girls follow him around like a lost puppies.

I've stood here for several seconds, long enough to make it awkward if I'm caught. I sit across from him and offer him a small smile. He looks so sad, it pulls a thread on my heart.

When he sees me, he instantly changes, a smile spreads across his face, and he holds his hands out from his sides. "On time. Early even."

I can't help smiling. "I noticed." And I also can't help noticing his dimple.

He opens his book. "Ready?"

We spend fifteen minutes going over the orders of operation again and then move onto the lesson from today. His professor has covered linear equations using one variable and he doesn't understand how to use the multiplication and division properties of equality.

"Tucker, what's you major?"

His face lifts, confusion crinkling his eyes. “History.”

“Why history?”

His mouth opens to say something then he unconsciously licks his lower lip. I’m sure most girls would drool over it, but I see a guy who’s suddenly lost his shield of confidence. Still, I can’t ignore the slight stir in my emotions from the movement. Finally, he shrugs. “I like history.”

His answer is a lie, but I don’t see what good would come from pointing it out. “So what exactly do you like about history? It’s full of dates, which are numbers.”

He shakes his head. “Not the numbers. They get scrambled in my head. That’s the hardest part.” He pauses. “I like the stories. People who did extraordinary things and people remember them. They’re not forgotten and lost forever.”

I watch him as he speaks, the pain that flickers in his eyes.

“Do you like soccer?”

My question catches him by surprise. He blinks and sits up slightly. “Yeah. I’m good at it.”

“I know you’re good at it. I asked you if you liked it.”

His gaze turns out the window, and his mouth turns to a slight frown. “Do you know you’re the first person to ever ask me that question?”

I realize he hasn’t answered, and although I’m curious, I refuse to invade Tucker’s personal life any more than necessary. “I’m trying to figure out how you learn. Some people are auditory learners, while others are kinetic. Most guys are visual.”

He shoots me a wicked glance, and to my surprise, I’m happy to see his cockiness return. Sad Tucker makes me feel too personally involved.

I lean forward, my hand forearms on the table. “I think there’s more to learning than just the senses. If we can tie learning to something we love, we can remember it, and it sticks in our heads longer. So then when we retrieve the information later, it’s easier to find. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah.”

“So what do you love? What excites Tucker Price?” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize I’ve set myself up for a raunchy response.

He ignores it. His jaw works, and he leans back against the seat, stretching his hands across the table. I notice the multiple scars on his knuckles and the back of his hand. “No one’s ever asked me that before either.” His gaze returns to the gray sky.

While I wait for an answer that never comes, it occurs to me that he doesn’t know. As he shuffles through his thoughts, I search my own and ask myself the same question that no one has ever asked me either.

I press my head into the seat, stretching my hands out on the table top and close my eyes. I’m surrounded by people every day yet I always feel alone, no matter how hard I try to connect. It’s as though a veil has been thrown over my heart and no one has ever been able to tear it down. Until this boy. This unattainable, untouchable, unreliable boy.

My eyelids flutter open, and I see the despair I’ve stirred in him. My fingers flex, millimeters from his hand, his palms splayed on the table.

For the first time, I feel genuinely connected to another human being and just my luck, it turns out to be Tucker Price.

And that’s the saddest fact of all.