

*The*  
**Shortest**  
**DISTANCE**  
*Between*  
**LOVE**  
*& Hate*

*Sandy Hall*



*Swoon Reads*  
SWOON READS | NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK  
An imprint of Feiwel and Friends  
and Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC  
120 Broadway, 25th floor, New York, NY 10271

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.  
ISBN 978-1-250-11912-4 (hardcover) /  
ISBN 978-1-250-11911-7 (ebook)

Book design by TK  
First edition, 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For Shayla Flournoy.

Giver of ideas.

Receiver of complaints.

# CHAPTER ONE

-PAISLEY-

**R**ecord scratch.

Freeze frame.

Yup, that's me. Paisley Turner. Making out with a random guy at my first college party. You're probably wondering how I got into this situation.

Not that it really matters at the moment, seeing as how all I can think about is this guy's hand on my waist and his fingers in my hair and, oh my god, there's his tongue in my mouth.

WE HAVE TONGUE, PEOPLE.

This is the weirdest, most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me.

Should I be thinking so much?

I turn my brain to silent mode and concentrate on the kissing.

When that doesn't work, I take to cataloging the

moment, so I can remember it always. The way his fingers lightly brush my neck and send a chill down my spine. How the pulsing bass seems to beat along with my heart. The way the dark basement around us fades from existence. The lightly minty flavor on his lips that makes me wish I had brushed my teeth before leaving my dorm room.

But I wasn't thinking about making out when I left my dorm! I was thinking, "I've never had beer before, and I don't want the first time I taste it to be tainted by toothpaste breath."

Is this how college is going to be? Walking into parties and being swept away in a kiss?

This was not in the brochure.

Did I even get a brochure?

Focus, Paisley!

All too soon he pulls away from me. I want to chase his lips with my own, but I realize I'm breathless and a bit dazed and could probably use a break. I look up at his face. He's so tall I want to climb him like a tree. Just scamper up him and perch on his shoulder and hang out there in his sandy-brown hair. But then I wouldn't be able to see his eyes, which are dark brown, at least in the dim light of the basement.

I am the whitest white person, there's no denying that, but my hand on his neck practically glows white because he's got this tan that's like something you'd see in a teen drama that takes place near the beach.

"That was . . .," I say.

"Yeah," he responds when I don't finish my sentence.

I lean back and try to ignore the way the damp of the wall immediately seeps into my shirt.

“I could use a beer,” mystery boy says. “You want a beer?”

I nod and almost as soon as he walks away my new roommate, Stef, ambushes me.

“What the hell is going on?” she asks. Her voice isn’t accusing, more intensely curious. Which I understand. This is a very curious situation.

“I don’t know!” I stage whisper, glancing over at The Boy. He’s standing in the beer line, waiting for a new keg to be tapped. I turn my back to him because I don’t want him to be able to read my lips. I start talking. Fast. I need to get this full story relayed before he comes back over.

“So, I’m standing here in the corner, playing with my phone, trying to talk myself out of begging you to leave early. Then that guy comes up to me and he was like, ‘Remember me?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, totally!’ Because I didn’t want to admit to not knowing him. I figure he’s probably one of the guys who was in our group at the choosing-a-major thing earlier.”

“Yeah, maybe. I don’t remember him either,” Stef says. “But I’m following you so far.”

“But then! Then!” I say, gesturing wildly to emphasize how completely unexpected this situation is. “Then he’s like, ‘I’ve always wanted to kiss you.’ And I was like, ‘Huh?’ But I didn’t say ‘Huh,’ because honestly, all I could think about was that literally on the walk here we were talking about how I’d never kissed anyone and this was, like, too good to be true.”

Stef is watching him, observing him. I can tell she’s going to be a really good roommate. “I wish I could place

him,” she says. “We’ve been inseparable for the past three days. Maybe he was sitting behind us at the welcome convocation yesterday?”

“I don’t know. But the thing is, who cares? He’s a really good kisser, and I can play along.”

She grins. “Well, I’m glad to hear he wasn’t harassing you. When I looked over and saw this big dude all over you, I was worried for a minute. I was this close to interrupting.” She holds her fingers a hair’s width apart.

“I like and appreciate those instincts,” I say.

“But then I saw your arms wrap around his neck, and you seemed relaxed and into it. This makes me think we should have a sign for a time when you aren’t into it. Or when I’m not into it, for that matter.”

I nod along even though what I’m really thinking about is kissing this boy some more right away.

“He’s coming back over!” Stef says in a whisper yell. “Try to find out who he is! I’m going to talk to that girl over there, the one playing beer pong. You can’t be the only one of us who gets to make out at our first college party.”

She slides away just as The Boy returns with two red Solo cups of beer.

“Here,” he says. He smiles a sort of tight-lipped smile that might not be attractive on most people, but on this guy, it really works.

“Thanks,” I say.

He shuffles in place looking as awkward as I feel. Possibly even more awkward.

I wish we could go back to making out immediately. I

suppose we can't enjoy our beer and make out at the same time.

All I know is that I am not the same person I was when I walked into this damp, slightly gross basement a little over an hour ago.

"I like your T-shirt," he says, his cheeks pinking up. I might actually be in love with him. "Pilot episode," he reads out loud, gesturing toward my boobs. He quickly puts his hand down when he realizes where he's pointing.

I want nothing more than to assuage his embarrassment. That is my only goal.

"You should know that the way to my heart is through complimenting my T-shirts. I make them myself. I got really into screen printing a few months ago. It's like my hobby." Oh god, that's so unbelievably weird. Why did I say that?

"You're really into screen printing T-shirts?" he asks, a bemused expression crossing his features.

"It's a long story," I say.

"You'll have to make me one sometime."

"I could definitely do that." Okay, that's a little more like it. Maybe he's not totally turned off by my bizarre, nerdy hobby.

"So why 'pilot episode'?"

"Well, I figure if my life were a TV show, this party would be featured in the pilot episode."

He laughs.

"Though I have to say," I continue. "I feel like they really distort college parties on TV, unless this isn't a fair



representation of one to begin with. I'm pretty sure we're currently being exposed to asbestos." I point up toward the world's saddest disco ball hanging from one of the exposed pipes.

"My roommate, Ray, his brother Luis lives here," The Boy explains even though I don't technically know who any of these people are. He gestures toward the corner where there are two boys with their heads bent over the keg, laughing about something; their dark hair is nearly black and their golden skin like something from a teen telenovela that takes place near the beach. I don't get a good look at their faces, but I can tell they're brothers even from across the room.

"That's how I got invited," he continues. "I have to admit this seems pretty spot on to me."

"I must watch too many shows about rich kids," I say.

He laughs again. I'm beginning to really like his laugh.

## **-CARTER-**

This is unbelievable! This is amazing! How is this even happening?

Paisley Turner is right here in front of me, chatting away, making me laugh, and acting like nothing happened five years ago. And we're bonding. At least I think we're bonding.

I saw her a couple of times in passing over the past few days. But we weren't in the same orientation group so I never got close enough to talk to her.

I'm not sure how I got up the nerve to tell her that I

always wanted to kiss her or why it was the second thing that came out of my mouth. I guess I'll blame the sip of vodka I had with Ray while we were pregaming in our room.

When Ray invited me to a party at his brother's house, I expected a dank, dim basement. That's how my older sister Thea always described college parties. I was prepared for that. I was not prepared for Paisley Turner to wander in.

She takes a sip from her cup and turns away for a minute, giving me the chance to really look at her. She hasn't changed much since eighth grade. Same brown hair, same short haircut, same inquisitive green eyes.

"So are you on the swim team?" I ask.

"No," she says. "But my roommate Stef is."

I nod and take a sip of beer. It's really not great.

She takes another sip and wrinkles her nose.

"Is this supposed to be good?" she asks.

"I was thinking the same thing! The way people go on and on about beer, I always expect more from it."

"Right? I've never tried it before and I was expecting much better." She pauses, shaking her head as she takes another sip. "This might be the worst thing I've ever tasted."

I twirl the liquid in my glass and sniff at it. "I'm detecting swamp water and something else. Something earthier," I say in a snobby tone.

She laughs. "It has a bouquet of skunk."

"Ah yes. Organic, I'm sure." I take another sip. "It's medium-bodied with a whisper of backwash."

"And the finish," she says. "The finish is something

heretofore unknown to me. Something like butts with a hint of ass.”

We can’t stop laughing now.

Somehow in the midst of this conversation, I’ve actually finished my beer.

I stare down at the empty cup. “I guess making fun of it makes it go down easier. Maybe that’s the trick that no one tells you about.”

She takes a last gulp from her cup. “Guess so,” she says.

This time we go over to the keg together, little bursts of giggles bubbling up as we think of something new and funny to add.

“There really must be some kind of beer industry conspiracy. I don’t know how so many people can like it when it tastes like this,” I say, taking another gulp.

“We should really get to the bottom of this. Maybe start a podcast about the beer industry conspiracy.”

“We need to start with beer industry propaganda.”

“You mean, the commercials with the scantily clad women and the endless summer fun?” she asks.

“Exactly.”

Anytime I think we’re about to lose steam in this conversation, one of us says something else funny, insightful, or both. I’m not sure I’ve ever actually laughed this hard. Hours seem to pass like minutes. I’ve heard people use that phrase before but had never personally experienced it in real life.

“Okay, so aside from hating beer, what else do you hate?” I ask. I have a feeling anything that Paisley says is going to be enormously entertaining. “Like what are your pet peeves?”

“Hmm,” she says, eyes going wide. “I have so many, starting with people who walk more than two across on a sidewalk and won’t get out of the way when you need to pass them. Also, when the fitted sheet comes off one corner of the bed, chewed pen caps, and people who use radar sounds for their cell phone ringtone.”

“That’s quite the list,” I say.

“I could go on and on,” she says. “What are yours?”

“I hate excuses,” I say. “I hate people who make excuses and I hate making them myself.” This is the truth, but I didn’t expect to share such a serious truth at the moment. But might as well be up-front from the beginning.

“Wow. That’s very specific and makes my pet peeves seem petty.”

“Nah, I’ve just thought about this a lot.”

“Obviously. And duly noted, I will never make excuses to you.”

A yell erupts from the beer pong table.

“Dammit, Bart!” someone yells and I look over.

I glance at Paisley and she’s looking at me. “What?” she asks.

“I thought I heard someone call my name.”

“Oh, okay,” she says, and giggles. I think she might be getting drunk.

On our third or fourth beer, I’m not sure because I’m definitely drunk at this point; Paisley takes a long sip and ends up with some froth on her nose. My life has become a god-damned romantic comedy tonight.

“You’ve got a little something,” I say, pointing at my own nose.

She tries to brush it away and misses it, so of course I have no choice but to brush it away myself.

“Thanks,” she says, her eyes lingering on mine.

This is the moment to kiss her again. This is the time to make my move. I don’t want to be greedy but I want more.

As I’m about to lean in, a human blur runs past us toward the stairs and out the back door. Paisley pulls back and away from the moment.

“I think that was my roommate,” she says.

“You think?” I ask, trying to get Paisley’s focus back on me.

She stands. “I know it was my roommate.”

Abandoning her empty cup, she runs up the stairs and out the back door in pursuit.

I figure I might as well follow. Couldn’t hurt, might even be seen as chivalrous.

I find them in the corner of the tiny backyard. It’s mostly full of garbage. College kids have no pride in a place. There’s a perfectly good bicycle in the corner with two popped tires and a rusted chain.

Paisley’s roommate is standing near that bicycle, bent at the waist with her hands on her knees, breathing heavily, her long, dark hair creating a curtain around her face.

“What’s up?” I ask Paisley.

“Stef doesn’t feel well, so I think we’re going to head back to the dorm.”

“What dorm do you live in?”

“Robinson.”

“Oh, me too! I’ll walk back with you.”

We head out to the street, leaving the depressing backyard behind, and Stef walks a few feet in front of us, swaying a little.

“I don’t think she can really hold her alcohol,” Paisley says.

“Oh right, yes, not like us.”

“No, you and I are obviously seasoned drinkers.” She lets out a loud belch and giggles.

“This is probably the most I’ve ever drank in one night,” I admit.

“Same,” she says. “I just feel so full.” She rubs her stomach.

“Maybe this is why people do shots. So they don’t feel so full,” I suggest.

Stef stands at the corner waiting for the light to turn in our favor. There’s not a lot of traffic out in the wee hours of the morning on the roads surrounding our campus, but it’s good to know that even though she’s drunk, she still remembers to follow the rules of the road.

“I am Estefania Gomez! And I am here to have fun!” she yells into the street.

“Sure you are, Stef!” Paisley calls back to her.

“I’m sorry I interrupted your time with the cute boy,” Stef says over her shoulder as a lone car passes.

“I’m cute?” I ask Paisley.

“Don’t be coy. You know you’re cute.”

“I really don’t know that. It’s nice to hear,” I say, my neck heating up.

She gives me a sidelong glance and steps in front of me

to link arms with Stef as the walk sign lights up. I stay a few paces behind them, realizing that I probably should have told Ray I was leaving the party. We don't have each other's numbers yet, so I can't text him.

Hopefully he'll realize I left and come back to the dorm on his own. Or maybe he's staying at his brother's tonight. I don't know his life.

Either way, I doubt he'll be worrying about me. I make a mental note to exchange numbers with him tomorrow, though.

When we get to the dorm, Stef tries to use her card to get in, but she's holding it backward. She's basically the cartoon stereotype of a drunk person. Paisley helps her out and we enter the building. I stand and wait for the elevator with them.

"Um, so this was fun," I say.

"It really was," she says. Stef tugs on her arm, pulling her into the elevator.

"Good night," I say.

"Night, Bart," she says as the doors slide shut.

It takes me a second to process, and when I do, I almost hit the up button to stop the elevator.

"Did she just call me Bart?" I ask the empty hallway.

# CHAPTER TWO

## - PAISLEY -

I wake up with a smile on my face.

I don't think that has ever happened before, in my entire life. I can't imagine that it will ever happen again, so I hold onto the feeling. I honestly didn't know it was something I was capable of.

All thanks to The Boy.

Ah, The Boy. So cute, so silly, and he even walked Stef and me back to the dorm. Not that I believe we needed protection, but it's nice to feel like he cared enough to leave the party. Especially since I might be in love with him.

I shake my head because that thought is way too embarrassing. We just met. I am in lust with him. And even that might be too much. I don't really "do" emotions.

But we made out.

And it was *good*.

I can't stop calling him The Boy in my head, even



though I know his name is Bart. I roll it around but it doesn't really suit him.

"I see you smiling over there," Stef says.

I hadn't even noticed she was awake. She's sitting up in her bed, reading something on her phone. She's not even looking at me but that doesn't keep me from blushing.

"Are you feeling better this morning?" I ask, hoping my embarrassing thoughts aren't written all over my face. I roll onto my side and realize that living with a roommate is going to be like a yearlong slumber party. Hopefully in a good way.

"I am," she says, putting down her phone and turning toward me. "I'm sorry I dragged you out of there, but I got claustrophobic. And I was so full. I definitely drank too much beer."

"Never apologize," I say. "I was happy to walk home with you."

"But you would have been happier walking home with your mystery man."

"We did walk home with him. And his name is Bart."

She smacks her forehead. "Wow. I seriously drank too much. It wasn't even like I felt that drunk."

"You were pretty drunk."

"I'm really sorry."

"No reason to apologize."

"He doesn't seem like a Bart," she says.

"I know."

"Well, he's a cutie no matter what his name is."

"I honestly can't believe any of that happened," I say,

my mind going back to that moment over and over again. He just walked up to me and asked to kiss me. Stuff like that doesn't happen to me. I suddenly can't wait another second to tell my high school friends.

I pick up my phone as Stef leaves the room to go to the bathroom.

But as I try to compose a text to Lizzie and Madison, I feel like I don't even know where to start. I feel so off from my usual self because of what happened last night. I feel like they won't even recognize me. They'll be like, "This isn't Paisley. Who stole her phone? Paisley, blink twice if you're in a hostage situation." And Henry! I can't fathom trying to explain this to Henry. Even though he's my best friend on earth, he'll judge me so hard.

Instead I go for something simpler, setting myself up for later so I have somewhere to talk about The Boy. Bart, I remind myself.

**Paisley:** I've decided we need a new group text now that we're away from each other. A sacred group text, one where we can come together and share our most sacred thoughts.

**Madison:** I concur.

**Lizzie:** Seconded.

**Paisley:** Motion passes.

**Madison:** Do we have anything to address yet?

**Lizzie:** I would like to propose that the Sacred Group Text (aka SGT) is not a place for eye rolling or disregarding of feelings.

**Madison:** LIZZIE do you feel like we eye roll and disregard your feelings?

**Lizzie:** Not really. It was more of a disclaimer so I can say that I really miss my boyfriend even though he literally left for college yesterday. I'm eye rolling at myself for being like this.

**Paisley:** I withhold my eye roll.

**Madison:** I regard your feelings with the utmost respect.

**Lizzie:** Thanks, guys.

“So, what’s on the agenda today?” Stef asks, breezing back into the room and throwing herself back down onto her bed.

“Orientation stuff out the wazoo,” I say. I glance back at my phone, trying to justify not telling Lizzie and Madison

about The Boy. The time will come soon enough, and I'll be able to explain so much better once I know his name.

"Ah yes, the wazoo. People don't use that word nearly enough."

"Seriously. I guess I need to shower," I say.

"Yeah, same," she says, taking a sniff at her armpit and making a face.

I laugh.

We shower and brush our teeth and head out to the dining hall. We have another campus tour this morning and some kind of speech from someone about something and a barbecue tonight. I'm already so over tours and speeches.

I suppose I should enjoy it while it lasts seeing as how classes start soon enough and I have my first work-study shift in just two days.

I was really happy when my financial aid package included work study. Apparently, all the work-study jobs mostly involve managing desks and checking IDs while you get homework done, something I definitely need.

The only thing is, my work-study assignment ended up being the six to nine shift at the campus fitness center. That's six to nine IN THE MORNING. I'm exhausted just thinking about it.

Stef and I eat breakfast, taking our time choosing options at the omelet station.

"I can't believe they have an omelet station," I say.

"I hope they taste as good as they smell," she says.

The good news is that, yes, they do taste as good as they smell. And there is no bad news at breakfast.

**-CARTER-**

I wake up to the beautiful sounds of Ray snoring.

He came in late last night and pretty drunk but didn't ask about where I went before he passed out.

I check my phone and try to convince myself not to call my sister Thea. I need to check on my mom, and normally, I'd just text. But it's too easy to hide reality in a text. I need to hear that everything is okay, not just read it.

I go out into the hall so I don't disturb snoring beauty.

"Hey, Thea," I say when she answers.

"Hey there, little brother. What's up?"

"I've been at college for almost three days, and I haven't heard from you or Mom. Therefore, I'm worried."

"There's nothing to worry about," she says, almost too fast.

"How can I know that for sure?" I ask, sliding down the wall outside my door and landing hard on my butt.

"Well, you can't know anything for sure," she says.

"Where's Mom right now?"

"She's out on the porch, drinking a cup of tea."

"It's not too cold for her?" I remember the good old days, where it felt like my mom was always worried about me. But things change fast when your mom gets diagnosed with breast cancer. A lot of plans changed and decisions were made. We sold our house in Delaware, and the two of us moved in with Thea in New Jersey. I'd already planned to go to college in New Jersey, to go to the same university Thea did, so this worked out really well.

"It's not. She's fine."

I sigh.

“Was that a sigh of relief or frustration?” she asks.

“Probably both.”

“I understand.”

“I need you to swear that you won’t lie to me about stuff. I need to know that I can trust you. I know Mom will never tell me if she doesn’t feel well, and I have enough guilt about being away.”

It’s Thea’s turn to sigh. “Which is why you don’t always need to know everything. We’ve been over this, Carter. Why would I add to your guilt? When I’m here and taking care of things? Let me be the adult.”

“But.”

“But nothing. There’s a reason you and Mom moved back here. It was so she could live with me and you could go to college. You’re only an hour away. If I need you, I promise I’ll let you know.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and lean my head against the wall. I nod. Even though I know she can’t see me.

“Listen, Carter. I love that you care. I love that you want to know what’s happening with Mom. And I know that Mom loves that you care too. But I don’t want to bug you with every little thing. With inconsequential things.”

“Is there anything inconsequential about cancer?”

“No. But I need you to trust me. How can I make you trust me?”

“Will you text me every day?”

“Do you really want me to text you every day?”

“I want to know that everything is fine. You can literally

text me in the morning and be like, ‘She’s alive. Everything is fine.’”

“Okay,” Thea says after a beat. “I can do that.”

“But also, you know, tell the truth. ‘She’s alive. Things aren’t fine, but there’s no cause for concern.’”

“How about this? I’ll text you when I get to work. Then you’ll know everything is fine. If I’m at work, that means I know she can handle being alone most of the day. Or at least until the nurse comes for her infusion at lunchtime.”

“That seems fair,” I say, because it does.

“You have to promise you won’t get pissed off at me if the texts wake you up every morning.”

“Oh, don’t you worry. I’ll be up earlier than you will.”

“Because you stayed up all night? I remember college, Carter. You can’t fool me. I’m not that old.”

“No, because I got my work-study assignment and I’m going to be working the early-morning opening shift at the fitness center three days a week at six a.m.”

“Ew. Gross.”

“Yup.”

“That’s a rough assignment. You should see the face I’m making right now. It’s like I smelled something bad. Even I don’t have to be at work until nine, and I have a real-life grown-up job.”

I laugh. “I’ll think of you fondly when I’m dragging my ass out of bed at five thirty in the morning. Or maybe five forty. Or five forty-five. My dorm is pretty centrally located. I’ll have time to walk over to the fitness center and maximize

my sleep. Hopefully. But no matter what, I'll think of you fondly."

"I'm sure you will."

"So you absolutely promise to keep me updated?"

"Do you absolutely promise not to get mad at spam messages?" she shoots back. She knows me too well.

"I will text 'STOP' if I want them to stop."

"Good, so tell me. How's everything so far? Let this twenty-four-year-old live vicariously through you."

"It's good. It's different than I expected. So far, orientation has been more like summer camp."

"How's your roommate?"

"I like him. He's got an older brother who goes here, so that helps. He's on the swim team, so we went to a party at his house last night. It was fun, but I don't really know why people like beer."

"Not liking beer isn't a bad thing."

"There's also this girl, Paisley," I say. Even just saying her name out loud makes me happy. "I went to middle school with her before Mom and I moved away, and I honestly can't believe she's here. I had such a crush on her."

Thea laughs. "That's a serious coincidence. Definitely keep me posted on that."

"I'm not sure if anything is really going to happen there."

"How come?"

*Because nothing good ever happens to me,* I want to say. But I don't want to go down that road with Thea. She'll just give me a pep talk about keeping my chin up and all that bullshit.



I'm not really that much of a defeatist; I just haven't been much of an optimist lately.

"I don't know," I say after a few more seconds. "Just a vibe? I didn't get her number. It was probably just a onetime thing."

"Who knows? Maybe the universe will help you out."

"Does the universe take requests?" I chuckle. "She didn't even seem to remember who I was. And she called me Bart."

"Bart?"

"Yeah, I think she misheard someone at the party."

She laughs again. "My advice? If you're interested?"

"Are you going to tell me to be myself?"

"Well, normally yes. But as I recall, middle school Carter was such an asshole, so maybe be better than yourself."

"I could be someone else entirely. I could be Bart."

She laughs. "But seriously. Next time you see her, say something about how you wanted to hang out, and if you had her number, you could text her. It's just testing the water. Very casual. If she rejects that, back off. If she doesn't, you can move forward."

"That's so smart."

"It's what I'd want a guy to do in this situation."

"I feel like I'm cheating on my gender," I say. "Like I'm getting secret tips."

"You are, Carter. You are."

When I finish my call with Thea, I go back in the room and Ray is awake.

"Hey," I say, remembering something he mentioned the other day during icebreakers with the rest of our floor mates. "Were you serious about being on the trivia team?"

He rolls his eyes and sits up. "I'm ready. Make fun of me. Luis never holds back, so I'm prepared."

"I'm not going to make fun of you," I say, sitting down on my bed. "Were you on your high school quiz team?"

"I was," he says. "Were you?"

"Nah. I was busy with other stuff, but it always looked fun."

"I was the *Jeopardy!* teen tournament champion last year," he says.

"What?" I ask.

"Yeah, I haven't mentioned that?"

"Um, no, definitely not," I say. "That's amazing!" If not also a little intimidating. Pretty sure that means Ray is a lot smarter than me. And definitely a lot more interesting.

## - PAISLEY -

After a morning and early afternoon spent doing orientation things, and keeping my eyes peeled for Bart around every turn, Stef and I decide to go back to the dorm for some quiet time rather than going on a guided tour of the science building.

It's way too hot out for even one more guided tour.

By the time we get back to our room, I'm a sweaty mess.

"Who knew our dorm was on the opposite end of campus from the science building?" Stef asks, slightly out of breath.

"We do," I say. "We know that now."

"I'm so glad I'm not planning to major in anything sciencey."

We lounge on our beds and stare at the ceiling for a few minutes.

“What am I going to do?” I ask without any type of preamble.

“I don’t know. How do people do this?” she asks, automatically knowing exactly what I’m talking about.

I flip onto my stomach. “I need to find him. I’m pretty sure he lives on the first floor, and everyone has their names on their doors right now. So we could just go down there and look around.”

Stef taps her finger to her lips. “This is like Cinderella minus the glass slipper.”

“He’s my Cinderella,” I say with a cheesy grin.

She shakes her head but starts to laugh anyway.

“I must find my Cinderella!” I say in a high-pitched falsetto.

“Please, ma’am, have you seen this boy?” Stef whips out her phone and pulls up his picture.

“When did you take this?” I ask, grabbing her phone and holding it close to my face, like I can glean some further information from it. Also, he might be even cuter than I thought.

“I just got lucky at one point. The crowd parted and I got a really clear view of him. It seemed like something that you might appreciate.”

I laugh. “Send that to me. I need to examine it. Maybe he has a tattoo of his own name somewhere on his person.”

We spend the next several minutes examining Stef’s paparazzi photo of the boy, but that doesn’t get us anywhere.

My phone rings in my hand and I yelp with fright.

“It’s just my mom,” I say.

“I’ll go get us some brain food from the vending machine,” Stef says, leaving the room.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, answering the phone.

“Hey, sweetheart. How are you?”

I smile. “I’m excellent.”

“Good.”

“How are you? Are you lonely yet?”

“Not yet, but I’m sure I will be soon.” It’s just been Mom and me for pretty much my whole life. We lived with her parents for a while, but mostly it’s been the two of us. Leaving for college was . . . emotional. No matter how much I hate to admit it.

“Make sure to drink things besides beer and energy drinks.” This is her way of trying to be extra mom-ish. It’s kind of adorable.

“When have I ever had an energy drink?”

“I don’t know. That just seems like something kids these days would drink for pulling all-nighters or whatever.”

“Well, the good news is that classes don’t start until tomorrow, so I don’t have any homework or exams and therefore don’t have to pull an all-nighter.”

“So relieved,” she says. “Anyway, I wanted to hear your voice before I knew you got busy with classes. I hope I didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Nah,” I say. I almost tell her about The Boy, but it feels too new, too ephemeral to talk about with my mom. I’ll tell her. Eventually. It’s the same with telling my friends from

home. I'm not ready yet. "Just chatting with my roommate Stef."

"You like her?"

"I do."

"Are you lying?"

"I'm not," I say with a smile.

"I had to ask just in case she was in the room."

"I understand. You're very covert. I feel like you've learned a lot from all those cop shows that you watch."

"I really have learned so much. Someday maybe I'll be a detective."

"Good luck with that," I say. Missing her comes over me so quickly that it makes my eyes sting and my throat close. For a second, I can't swallow.

"Well, I won't keep you, like I said, I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Thanks, Mom."

I hang up with her a minute later, and Stef comes back in the room, tossing me a bag of French Onion Sun Chips.

"How did you know these were my favorite?" I ask.

"I might be a little bit psychic," Stef says. "About snack food."

I laugh.

We while away the rest of the afternoon and then get ready to go to a carnival off campus. It's not part of orientation week, but according to everyone we talked to, the whole school goes to it.

I'm sure Bart will be there, and all my questions will be answered.

# CHAPTER THREE

-CARTER-

The big carnival that everyone is going to tonight is a solid twenty-minute walk off campus. Apparently, they're trying to make it look like the boardwalk at the Jersey Shore, but it's not really working. Especially since we're actually in New Jersey and I'd guess 95 percent of the people at this thing know exactly what the boardwalk looks like. And it does not look like this super generic carnival.

Ray and I arrive together, and I keep my eyes peeled for Paisley.

"You're going to tell her who you are, right?" he asks. I explained the whole situation to Ray on our walk over here.

"Of course," I say, even though I'm lying. After talking to Thea this morning, I can't help but think maybe she was onto something. Maybe it's okay not to be myself, just this once. At least for a little while. It's not like I purposely introduced myself to her as someone else. She just misheard and made assumptions.

“But are you *really* going to tell her?” he asks, eyeing me like he could just hear every word of my thought process. “You look kind of sick to your stomach.”

“Look, I just want a chance to make a better second impression. Middle school Carter was kind of an asshole, as my older sister put it so delicately. But I just want to show her I’ve changed.”

“By being someone else?” He puts his hand on my shoulder. “This is a terrible idea.”

“I need to at least try.”

He drops his hand and shakes his head at me. “Well, she’s right over there,” he says, gesturing.

I turn and find her and her roommate wandering through the carnival games. Paisley looks completely adorable, as usual. She’s wearing a T-shirt that says “Now What?”

“Are you coming with me?” I ask Ray.

“I think I’d rather be pretty much anywhere else.”

He walks fast to catch up with some of the other people from our floor and doesn’t look back.

Maybe I should feel bad, but this is such an incredible opportunity. When do you ever really get a second chance to make a first impression? Never.

Paisley catches sight of me then and waves.

I wave back and jog over, unable to keep a smile off my face.

“Hey, Bart,” she says. “I’m Paisley, by the way. I can’t remember if I actually mentioned that last night.”

“Hey, Paisley,” I say, grinning. “I kept hoping our groups would run into each other today.”

“Same,” she says. “But I’m really happy to see you now.”

She twists her hands together in front of her and blushes. I can tell she really means it and that only solidifies my decision to keep letting her think I’m someone I’m not. It’s not my best plan ever, but it’s not my worst. Just for a little while longer. I’ll tell her later. Like maybe I’ll take her on the Ferris wheel, and when we’re at the top and there’s nowhere else to go, I’ll confess. She’ll have to sit and listen to me for as long as it takes for the ride to end. She’ll understand.

Stef leans and waves in my face. “Hey there,” she says.

“Oh hey, hi,” I say, coming back to reality.

“Well, I’m going to let you guys get to it,” Stef says, awkwardly clapping her hands together, before wandering off.

“She could stay and hang out with us,” I say to Paisley.

“I know. I don’t think she really wants to. I’m sure she’ll run into someone she knows soon enough. I’m pretty sure the entire swim team is here.”

I nod. We smile at each other a little too long.

“So,” she says, gesturing around us. “This is quite the spectacle.”

“That would be one way to describe it,” I say.

We’re jostled by a group of people, so we move out of the way.

“Are you from around here?” she asks.

I should probably stay away from any and all details about my life, but I’m pretty sure I can answer this one without adding to my lies. “Nah, I’m from Delaware.”



She nods.

“All my high school friends went to University of Delaware,” I continue. “And they started orientation last weekend. So I feel . . .” I pause, looking for the right phrase.

“Out of step with them already?” she offers.

I nod. “Exactly that.”

“All of my friends are scattered at home and other colleges, but I can imagine if they were all in the same place, it would feel weird.”

“It does. I figure I’ll see them when I can, but I’m going to make new friends.” I chew my lip. “Seems like I already have.”

“Maybe even more than friends,” she says, with an adorable little head tilt.

“Seems like it, maybe,” I agree.

I can’t stop smiling.

“So, where should we start?” she asks.

## **- PAISLEY -**

We wander around for a few minutes, looking at the food trucks and the game booths and the ride offerings. It’s a really good carnival and I can see why the student body attends en masse.

“Let’s get something to eat,” Bart says.

“Definitely.” I inhale deeply. “I love funnel cake. I wish funnel cake was a regular offering at each and every meal. I hate that it’s so limited in availability.”

“Weirdly, they used to sell these mini funnel cakes in my high school cafeteria.”

“Were they any good?” I ask.

“There were pretty decent. Because let’s be real, as long as the cake is hot and fried and they put the powder sugar on at the right second, there’s no such thing as a bad funnel cake.”

We get in line for food at the taco truck and Bart pays. I let him. I really don’t know what I’ve become. Letting a boy buy me dinner. Usually I’d be all like I MUST PAY FOR MYSELF. But it’s kind of like, if he wants to do nice things for me, it makes me feel nice.

I hate myself.

But I like HIM so much.

We grab the end of a picnic table just as the group who was sitting there leaves. I take a sip of my drink and look around.

“I can’t believe school starts the day after tomorrow. I’m totally not ready,” he says.

“I know,” I say.

“I’m taking a history class with a professor that everyone really likes, though. I was talking to people about her at the party last night, and when I told them I had history with Professor Brightly, they all said she’s the best.”

“Cool.” I file that information away for later. “I definitely haven’t studied my schedule closely enough to remember any of my professors’ names.”

“Oh, well this one stuck out because her name is Henrietta Brightly. She sounded like she should teach at Hogwarts.”

I laugh.

As we throw away our garbage after eating, Bart grabs my hand.

I can barely think about anything else. I can only concentrate on the way his fingers feel intertwined with mine. Now I understand why people walked all over high school like this. I always thought holding hands seemed arbitrary and unnecessary, like what's the point. But I get it. It's special. It feels good.

"So, I feel like if we're really going to lean into this whole carnival thing, I should win you a teddy bear or something," he says.

I balk at this. I haven't completely lost my sense of self. "Or I could win you something."

"Or we could compete and see who's best at something." He waggles his eyebrows at me.

"All right. I like that idea."

"What's your game?" he asks.

"Well, usually I'm better at arcade stuff—claw machine, Skee-Ball, that kind of stuff. But I don't see any of that around here. What about you?"

"I'm pretty good with a basketball throw or maybe that balloon game?" he says, gesturing.

"I like darts," I say. "Pointy things sound like the way to go." I tug his hand in that direction and he follows.

I'm definitely sad to have to drop his hand when it's our turn.

He goes first. He misses initially, but then hits the next two, winning me a medium-sized prize. I pick a zebra because it's a little bit cooler than your average stuffed animal.

"I shall name her Debra. Debra the Zebra," I say, pronouncing *zebra* with a short *e* so it rhymes with Debra.

When it's my turn, I pop three balloons and get a bonus dart, so I pop another.

He's impressed so I channel Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*. "What, like it's hard?"

He selects a giant unicorn. I can't stop laughing.

"It's so fluffy!" he yells in a silly voice.

With our winnings in tow, we continue to wander until we decide it's popcorn time. After buying a bucket, my treat this time, we find an empty bench near the rides and sit down to people watch.

I crunch on a handful of popcorn, while Bart pretends to feed his unicorn.

"What are you going to name her?" I ask.

"It's a her? How do you know?" he asks, examining the toy. "Is there a certain way to tell male and female unicorns apart?"

"Obviously, all unicorns are women because they are perfect and wonderful," I explain.

"Oh right, right," he says, and then laughs. "So what do you think I should name her?"

"I don't know. That's up to you."

"I think I'll call her . . . Hula."

"Hula? Like the hoop?"

"And the dance. She just looks like Hula to me."

I laugh. "I'm really glad we have more to talk about than just beer."

"Me too."

"I think it's just about ride time," I say. "But first! A trip to the bathroom."

**-CARTER-**

While Paisley runs to the bathroom, I eat more popcorn and check my phone. I have three texts from Ray.

**Ray:** I can see you two across the carnival. I'm not stalking you. I swear.

**Ray:** But I can tell that you haven't told her yet. It's pretty obvious from the way you're talking and laughing.

**Ray:** And I just don't think this is cool. I don't want to be that guy. And I hope you won't hate me for saying so, but you need to set this straight.

Rather than responding to him, I turn my phone off. I know this isn't the best idea. But like I promised myself earlier, I'll tell her on the Ferris wheel.

When Paisley returns, she's ready to roll.

"But what do we do with the kids?" I ask, holding Hula and Debra.

She bursts out laughing. "I think the kids can handle riding with us."

The ride operators at the tilt-a-whirl and scrambler won't let us take our prizes on, but there are no such rules at the Ferris wheel.

Paisley holds both of them in her lap.

We get to the top and have to wait for people to get on. It's now or never. I need to tell Paisley the truth. My hands are sweating so I wipe them on my shorts.

"So," I say. I have to get as much of it out as I can before we get to the bottom of the ride again. Before she can leave me. "I'm really nervous, but I want to say—"

Paisley interrupts. "I know what you're going to say, and I just want you to know that I'm in. I like you too."

"You do?" I ask, shocked.

"I do." She licks her lips and the ride starts moving again. She puts her hand over the unicorn's eyes and she kisses me briefly, softly.

"Is that okay?" she asks.

"That's amazing. That's unbelievable. That's incredible," I say. Before I can babble more, she starts kissing me again and she doesn't stop until the ride stops. We're both dizzy and dazed, from the height, from the ride, from the kiss.

As we walk back to the dorm, hand in hand, Paisley keeps up a line of chatter but I can barely keep up. I'm just so happy that she likes me. It's like all my dreams are coming true.

When we get to the elevators, she pushes the up arrow.

"So when can I see you again? Should we exchange numbers?" This question makes me panic; there's something about her putting me in her phone under the wrong name that makes me feel totally wrong. Like that's a line I can't cross.

"This is so silly," I say, shaking my head. "But my

phone's dead, and I got a new number and I don't know it by heart yet."

She giggles. "That is silly," she says.

"But let's meet tomorrow?" I say. The elevator dings.

"There's more orientation stuff tomorrow."

"I know, but there's also the first-year barbecue tomorrow night. Let's meet there at six?" I say as the doors open.

She kisses my cheek. "I can't wait."

### **-PAISLEY-**

I step in the elevator and I stare at him as the doors close.

As soon as it's moving, I start dancing and twirling around in the small space.

I can't believe what an amazing night I had.

When I get into my room, Stef is still out. I shoot her a text that's all exclamation marks and happy face emojis. I consider getting in the shower, but instead I just lie down on my bed and think about Bart. About kissing him, about holding hands.

I should be embarrassed, but instead, I just feel . . . happy. Completely, totally, genuinely happy.

I roll over and grab my laptop. I open up the scheduling website and search for a history class with Professor Brightly. There's only one available for freshmen; every other one of her classes requires a prerequisite, so this must be the class that Bart is in. Before I can overthink it, I click on the class and change my schedule, dropping the anthropology class that I was originally assigned.

It's not like I know what I want to major in. During the placement testing, I was advised to take a wide range of courses this year to figure out what I like and what I don't like.

I like history. I might as well take a history class.

It's just a bonus that Bart's in the same one.

A wonderful, amazing bonus.

I float on a cloud all the next day. I desperately want to see Bart, but he's nowhere to be found. Not at the activity fair, or the library tour, or the ice cream social.

Thank goodness we made plans to meet up at the barbecue.

After the longest day ever, it's finally almost time to go.

"You ready?" Stef asks.

"I was born ready," I say. We'd stopped back at our room after our last orientation event ended to change into jeans and freshen up. I even put on some mascara.

Before we walk out the door, I text the selfie Bart and I took the night before to Lizzie and Madison along with the statement "I think I'm in love" and then I turn my phone to silent.

I look forward to seeing what they have to say later on.

I can't wait.



# CHAPTER FOUR

-CARTER-

The welcome barbecue is being held on the field inside the track near the fitness center. I time the walk over there and adjust my alarm settings accordingly. It'll take me about seven minutes to get to work in the morning.

As soon as I see Paisley, all thoughts of my 5:38 a.m. wake-up time are forgotten. I make a beeline for her while Ray holds a spot for us at the end of the very long food line. He hasn't said anything else to me about confessing to Paisley. He hasn't said much of anything at all.

Paisley and her roommate are busily filling plates. Neither of them notices me until I'm right next to them. Stef nearly drops her plate when she sees me.

"Good lord," she says. "Make some noise or something."

"I just wanted to say hi," I say. "So, hi."

Paisley turns around and grins at me, her eyes glittering in the early evening light. I can't believe how cute she is.

“I like your T-shirt,” I say before she even says hi back.

It’s a simple white shirt that says “sup,” all lowercase, in a fancy navy font across it.

“I figure it’ll start the small talk for me,” she says. “But I have to admit. I didn’t make this one.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” I say. “I’m going to get in line with my roommate, but I’ll find you when I’m done.”

She nods and I walk away, looking over my shoulder a few times, just to smile at her again. This is ridiculous. I am ridiculous.

When I slide into the line next to Ray, no one behind us protests. Maybe people care less about cutting in college.

“I swear the entire freshmen class is here,” Ray says.

“It’s really crowded,” I agree.

“How do you even go about planning something like this?” he asks.

I only hum in response, because the logistics of a barbecue for thousands of people is not in my wheelhouse. I can’t quite work up the interest in it. The line moves at a crawl.

“Did you tell her?” Ray asks, his voice serious.

“Soon, I swear.” He just shakes his head.

When he’s done filling his plate, he stalks off without a word.

I search the crowd for Paisley, and I spot her and Stef sitting along the fence. I walk over, totally forgetting about Ray.

“Hey there,” I say, taking the empty seat next to Paisley.

“Hi there,” she says.

“Ho there,” Stef says, staring at me from Paisley’s other side.

I nod and smile, but I really only have eyes for Paisley.

“How was your day?” I ask.

“It was good,” she says. “Kind of boring. Sad I didn’t see you around.” She shoves the rest of her hamburger in her mouth and that reminds me that I have food of my own to eat. I take a bite and look away. We don’t need to watch each other chew.

She and Stef make small talk for a minute or two, and then Stef excuses herself to go hang out with some of the other first-year members of the swim team. We smile at each other. Things feel more awkward tonight, but that’s definitely my fault.

“Ah!” Paisley says. “I forgot chips.”

“I’ll go get a plate of them for us to share because I didn’t take any either,” I say. I take a deep breath while I wait in line and give myself a pep talk. I need to come clean. I need to tell her that my name isn’t Bart. She might be annoyed, or maybe even embarrassed, or hate me for lying to her, but I can’t let this go on indefinitely.

I feel ready to confess.

When I get back, she’s staring at her phone. She looks up at me, and I know something has gone horribly wrong while I was gone.

“Who are you? Tell me your name,” she says, her tone accusing, her whole demeanor changed in the minutes I was away getting chips. She’s leaning away from me and looking intently at my face, trying to read my expression. “Your real name.”

“Carter Schmitt,” I say, along with what I hope is my most charming smile.

“You can’t be serious.”

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but she shakes her head and jumps up, leaving me in the dust. Literally.

### **- PAISLEY -**

I run all the way back to the dorm. It’s only as I go to enter the building that I realize I don’t have my wallet. Where my student ID is, which is what I need to use to get in the front door of the dorm.

I touch my room key in my pocket, but my ID card is definitely on my desk. I should probably get one of those phone cases with the card slots so I never leave my dorm without it.

I debate going back to find Stef, or at least text her, but then Carter is right there and I suppose I have no choice but to talk to him. Apparently, he can’t take a hint. Running away from him wasn’t enough.

He doesn’t say a word. I purse my lips at him dramatically and turn away. There’s a picnic table right outside the door to our dorm, so I take a seat on one of the benches and Carter sits next to me.

I stand up and walk around the table, taking the seat across from him instead. I want to see his face while I tell him exactly what I think of him. I am almost shaking with anger. I couldn’t believe when I took out my phone and saw the responses I’d gotten to the picture I’d sent Madison and

Lizzie. Madison asked who the guy in the picture was because he looked familiar.

But Lizzie. Lizzie knew immediately.

**Lizzie:** That's Carter Schmitt. Didn't you used to hate him?

He was indeed Carter Schmitt and I did indeed hate him. We went to middle school with him, but then he moved away before high school.

I clasp my hands together and grind my teeth. I suck in a deep breath.

"I'm so pissed off now that I know who you are."

He studies me, squinting at the setting sun, but doesn't say a word.

"You lied to me."

"Technically—"

I cut him off. "You can shove that technicality right up your ass."

He holds his hands up defensively. "You acted like you knew me at the party."

"I thought I'd met you earlier in the day. Not because I thought I knew you from middle school! I didn't recognize you. I think I blocked you out because you were so hateful."

"Ah, right," he says, leaning back and crossing his arms. "Um. Well. What does this mean in terms of us?"

I can tell he's picking his words very carefully. I can't believe I didn't recognize him. I guess I didn't spend much

time looking at him in middle school. I always regretted not defending Henry more, but anytime Carter got on his case it was almost always when Henry was alone. Makes sense. That's how bullies tend to work.

"Us?" I ask. "You were hideous to my best friend. And you've been lying to me from minute one."

"I didn't lie to you. I wanted to make a new first impression."

I hold out my hand in a "stop" gesture. "Sorry. There's no excuse for some of the stuff you did to Henry. And there's no excuse for lying to me. Also, I thought you hated excuses." I make sure my tone is extra mocking on that last word.

"I do," he says. "But it's not an excuse. It's a fact."

He has obviously never dealt with someone who knows how to hold a grudge. He's about to find out how much I care about his "facts."

"You flushed his clothes down the toilet during gym class. You hid his glasses so he had to walk around in his sports goggles all day. You copied his homework. You cheated off of him during tests. You stole his lunch. You didn't even eat it. You would take it and stomp on it and make a mess and leave the remains in the hallway for the custodians to clean up."

I'm rattling off the things I remember. There was probably a lot more, stuff that Henry never told me or that I never heard about.

"You remember all that, huh?" Carter asks.

"Of course I do. And so does Henry."

"So you probably had an I Hate Carter Schmitt Club."

“We called you Farter Shit, but yes. Basically.”

“Clever. I can’t believe the whole school didn’t call me that.”

“Well, I was the only one who called you that, mostly to make Henry laugh. And since I’m not a horrible person, I never spread it around school.”

He gulps. He knows I’m right.

“This does not look great for me.” His face is bright red, like he has the worst sunburn that I’ve ever seen.

“It doesn’t,” I say. I’m glad he seems resigned to this, that he’s not fighting me, even though I’m kind of in the mood for a fight.

“Well, I’m sorry. Whatever good that does at this point.”

“It’s a little late for sorry.”

He wipes his hands down his face and sighs. “Can we at least be friends?”

“I don’t think so.”

“We live in the same dorm, we’re at the same school. Wouldn’t it be easier to be friends than enemies?”

“No. I’ll avoid the crap out of you. Don’t worry. This won’t affect your life at all.”

“Jeez, Paisley, that’s not what I’m worried about.”

I hate how my name sounds coming from his mouth. I honestly don’t know the last time I was this angry. It probably involved Amelia Vaughn, queen bee of my high school class. Carter and Amelia would be perfect for each other.

“I liked you,” I say, my voice teetering too close to tears. I need to get away from him. Especially because *like* barely

covers how I feel about him. How I felt about him. At least he proved he wasn't worth it sooner rather than later.

I stand and stumble over a large rock, stubbing my toe. That was super smooth. I march toward the door, ignoring the pain in my toe and the lump in my throat.

Of course, when I get to the door, I remember again that I left my room without my wallet, so now I get to wait for either someone to let me in or for Carter to notice and help me.

I want to throw up.

Carter sits at the picnic table with his head in his hands, like he might cry. He better not cry. He doesn't deserve to cry.

He looks up then and meets my eyes. I put my hands on my hips and stare at the door, willing it to open.

I hear him shuffle across the path over to the door, and he slides his ID card through the reader.

"Thanks," I say.

"The least I can do," he mutters.

He doesn't come into the building with me and I don't look back. I run up the six flights of stairs to my room and text Stef.

**Paisley:** Don't leave the BBQ on my account, but when you get home have I got a story for you.

I add a few angry emojis for emphasis before hitting send.

I know I should text Henry but I'm not prepared to text



Henry. Or anyone else from high school. I have betrayed myself and everything I stand for by making out with Carter Schmitt. I really thought I was falling for him. I can't be trusted.

Stef comes in a few minutes later. "What's up? I need to know right now."

I suck in a deep breath.

"It's bad news. Very bad news."

### **-CARTER-**

Well, that went poorly.

At least I know that if I run from the fitness center to my dorm, it only takes four and a half minutes.

I go to my room and lay down on my bed, putting my hands over my face. I honestly can't imagine a worse turn of events than what just happened.

The door to my room opens and Ray comes in.

"Did you tell her?" he asks.

"Well, she found out."

"That's weak, dude," he says, shaking his head. "I don't know what you were thinking."

I shrug. "I wasn't really."

"Did you apologize?"

"She didn't want to hear it."

"I feel like that's just the worst excuse. You didn't have to get yourself wrapped up in this in the first place. Just so not cool. Not a good look for you."

"Listen," I say, sitting up and scrubbing my hands across my face. "I'm not usually like this. I just made a mistake."

“Sure, whatever you gotta tell yourself. I’m going to my brother’s tonight. He lives closer to my first class tomorrow anyway.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Later,” Ray says.

Great. The girl of my dreams hates me and my roommate can’t stand to be around me and I have to be up for work in less than ten hours. Everything is just perfect.

### - PAISLEY -

“So,” I start. I slide down to the floor and lean against my bed. Stef sits next to me. “His name is not Bart. His real name is Carter Schmitt.”

“I like it. Carter Schmitt.”

“I hate it. I hate him.”

“What the hell happened at that barbecue? I left you alone for thirty seconds. What could he have possibly done in such a short amount of time?”

“Well, I found out that he lied about who he was.”

“Yeah, that’s not cool.”

“On top of that, we went to middle school together. And he was really mean to my best friend, Henry. I sent a couple of my friends a selfie Carter and I took last night, and one of them recognized him right away.”

“Friends are so useful like that.”

“They are.” I sigh. “I can’t believe how mean he used to be to Henry. I swear I blocked it out.”

“Sometimes boys are mean,” Stef says.

“This was above and beyond twelve-year-old boy mean. Carter made sure Henry’s life was miserable. Like, I don’t even really want to go into it.”

“How did you not recognize him?” Stef asks.

“Well, he moved away before high school. And he looks different now. Taller, better haircut. No braces. And in a dark basement? I didn’t recognize him. I don’t know why I didn’t put two and two together after that when I saw him when I was sober and in better light. But I guess I didn’t think I knew him. I don’t know. I can’t explain it. Maybe I was protecting myself.”

“An ignorance-is-bliss scenario.”

“Exactly.”

“Were you and Henry ever together?” she asks.

“No. Definitely not. I told you we went to the prom as friends. Nothing else.”

“And you never had a crush on him?”

“Henry?” I ask with a laugh. “It never even went through my head to have a crush on Henry. People in high school always assumed we were together but we’re friends. Really good friends. It’s kind of annoying how you can’t be best friends with a guy without it being suspect in some way.”

Stef nods. “Sorry. I just want to get the story straight, you know?”

“Yeah, I suppose these are all important details for someone coming into this later in the game.”

“Exactly.”

I put my head in my hands and sigh.

“I can’t believe he lied to me like that.”

Stef rubs my back and I feel a little better.

“So what are you going to do?” she asks.

I shake my head. “What can I do? I need to dodge him for the next four years.”

“You don’t want to confront him?”

“I kind of did confront him. He followed me back from the barbecue and we had a fight outside.”

“He seemed so nice.”

“Well, he’s not. He obviously hasn’t changed since we were thirteen if he’s pulling crap like this.”

“Yeah,” Stef agrees.

“I’m just really sad,” I say. “I thought he liked me. I really liked him. I thought this was going to lead to something. The whole thing didn’t even last forty-eight hours. It’s like I’m not even allowed to be happy that long.” I hate how whiny I sound, but I also feel like I need to get it out of my system.

“We need to think of a distraction.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

“You could make an angry T-shirt to wear tomorrow, and that way, if you see him, you can point at it and he’ll know to stay away.”

I laugh. “I like that idea.”

“Now we just need to come up with the perfect saying for it.”

I decide to compose a lengthy text to Lizzie and Madison, explaining what’s been going on with me for the past forty-eight hours.

But Henry. How am I ever going to tell Henry?

I frown at the thought. Telling Henry is not something I'm prepared to do at the moment. I'll leave that to FuturePaisley. She can handle that I'm sure.

For now, I respond to the texts from Lizzie and Madison and brainstorm angry T-shirt slogans with Stef.

It's exactly the kind of catharsis that I need.