

Chapter One

A locker clanged behind Eden just as someone shoved her elbow, knocking the folder from the crook of her arm. Papers flew from the pockets, fluttering to the ground, and then kicked along by the sea of teenagers.

“Oh geez, sorry,” a boy said over his shoulder. He was gone before she could even tell what color his hair was. She stooped, retrieving her class schedule, school map, emergency contact sheet, and other forms from the office for her parents to sign and return. Straightening up, she glanced one last time at her schedule before tucking it in her jeans pocket. *First trig- and then Biology.* On second thought, she pushed the map into her pocket too. *Just in case. Bon Air High’s a lot bigger than Portsmouth.*

“Hey, watch it, man,” a boy crowed. Two boys began scuffling and, anxious to avoid having her belongings knocked to the floor again, she quickened her pace. As much as she wanted to blend in, standing inches above those around her made it difficult. Avoiding eye contact, she maneuvered through the crowd, determined to reach her destination. She couldn’t help but notice how plain her white Keds were compared to the fuzzy, knee-length boots on the two girls in front of her. The giggling girls reached their lockers, and the view in front of Eden temporarily cleared.

She bit the inside of her cheek, the instinct to duck behind the two girls intense. Spine tingling with adrenaline, she pushed her glasses up. Down the corridor, sandwiched between two girls and a guy, was her childhood best friend, Micah. Though no longer a lanky boy, she still recognized his light blue eyes. The mop of black hair he had as a kid was now short, a little longer than a buzz. Eden was drawn to his smile, even if it was meant for the blonde girl at his side. A good foot shorter than him, the girl craned her neck up as she wrapped an arm around his waist. *Has to be his girlfriend.* A stocky, jock-type boy with chestnut-brown hair and a tan girl with jet-black hair stood next to them. The jock slugged Micah’s shoulder as his bellowing laugh made its way down the hall to Eden.

Then the scene was gone as jeans and a myriad of different colored t-shirts blocked her view. She sucked in a deep breath, her lungs burning from holding it too long. Sweat was beading at the top of her forehead as she prayed she could pass Micah's entourage unnoticed. *If I can't see him, he can't see me either, right?* She hoped.

The staircase loomed nearer. *I'm going to make it*, she thought, wishing the kids in front of her would move faster.

"No way, dude. Coach always gives you the ball, Micah," a male voice boomed.

Eden glanced over. Micah's group was directly left of her now.

He hasn't noticed me, just keep moving, she told herself.

Face ducked down, she lifted her leg up, only to have her foot land sideways and to the left. Her weight uneven, she feared toppling over, but a pressure on her left side held her up. Confused, she again attempted to move away, only this time, her body made a ninety-degree turn, bringing her a foot away from the blonde girl.

Horrified, Eden's legs stepped one in front of the other, heading straight towards Micah. Within seconds, she stood dead center, stopping his small group of friends short. Sky-blue eyes swam in front of her vision before she was lunging forward, throwing her arms around his neck, hugging him.

Funny the things you notice in a moment of sheer humiliation, she thought, as time dropped into neutral, prolonging her torture.

There was a hiss-like sound from the short blonde. *Yep, definitely his girlfriend.*

A male was chuckling. *Not Micah. Must be the jock.*

Arms wrapped around her, hugging her back. *Oh my gosh!*

She shifted her weight back, trying to detangle herself from Micah's arms. Pulling her face away from his neck, the memory of his scent automatically tucked away in her mind, she met Micah's raised brow line, wide eyes, and even wider grin.

"Eden? Is that you?" he asked, as they separated further.

Aware his hands still held her forearms, she was forced to remain and maintain eye contact. She nodded, terrified to speak.

"Wow! How the heck are you? It's been forever!" Though *his* face appeared delighted, she couldn't help but notice how *un-delighted* his girlfriend was, as her amber eyes glared up at her.

Unfazed, Micah continued, “My dad told me your dad got hired on at his firm. That’s awesome! So, did you guys move back then?”

Again she nodded, hoping Micah would realize he was still holding onto her. *What’s wrong with me? Running up and hugging him!*

“What’s it been four, five years?” he asked.

Deciding his friends might think her a mute, she answered, “Five.” Her mouth was so dry her upper lip got caught on one of her braces as she spoke. She licked her lips, pulling her mouth shut.

Micah didn’t seem to notice but the tan girl did and smirked.

“Yo, Micah, are you going to introduce us or what?” the big guy asked.

“Oh, yeah, sorry guys. This is Eden. We grew up next door to each other, best friends our whole lives.” Micah’s eyes danced with pleasure. He gestured to the jock. “This here’s Chase, his girl Willow, and Megan,” there was the slightest hesitation, “my girlfriend.”

At the word *girlfriend*, Micah’s blue eyes registered something and he released Eden’s arms.

She gratefully let them drop to her sides. “Nice to meet you.”

Willow cocked an eyebrow at her, her icy-blue eyes sweeping up and down Eden’s frame as she twirled a lock of her black hair between two fingers. “Where’d you move from?” she asked.

Eden tried to answer under Willow’s icy stare, but her voice cracked.

Micah jumped in. “Portsmouth, wasn’t it? That’s where your dad got work after—” he stopped, searched her face, and then glanced at his friends.

Oh gosh, he’s embarrassed by me!

“I, I have to go, get to class,” she said, sidestepping, tugging at her backpack.

Micah frowned. “Do you need any help? Know where you’re going?”

Her eyes were stinging. *Not now, please not now.* She hated her overactive water works. She waved, saying, “Yeah, I’m good, thanks,” and shuffled away.

“It’s sweet you’re back,” Micah called out.

She peeked back. Megan was scowling at her from behind Micah.

“Yeah, see ya.” She slipped into the throng of almost-tardy kids. She had barely ascended the steps and darted into the classroom when the bell shrilled.

Spying the only free seat on the opposite side of the room, she hurried across, aware of gawking eyes. In the second to last row, three seats back, she sank down into the chair, sliding her backpack to the floor.

“Mr. Giles’s not going to like you, you know,” a boy to her left leaned over and whispered.

She wanted to ignore him, but his emerald-green eyes were startling bright and so close.

“Whatever, Andrew,” the redheaded girl to her right whispered.

“Ah-hum,” the teacher coughed.

Eden snapped to attention.

“Are you a transfer student?” Mr. Giles asked, holding the roll in hand, his bald head reflecting the overhead lights.

“Yeah, from Portsmouth High.”

“I need your *name*,” Mr. Giles said, apparently not caring where she’d come from.

“Oh, sorry, Eden McCarthy.”

“Ok, I assume you were given the right textbooks at the office. We’re now halfway into the school year. You missed the final before Christmas break.” There were a few grunts of ‘so not fair’ and ‘lucky you’. Mr. Giles’s stare silenced them. “I’ll get you a syllabus at the end of class to get you up to speed.”

She nodded, anxious for everyone’s eyes to be elsewhere. Mr. Giles walked away, methodically taking roll.

“He’s the worst teacher ever,” the redheaded girl muttered.

Eden’s face flushed, afraid the teacher might overhear.

“I’m Jessie, by the way,” the girl said, offering a hand. “So, from Portsmouth, huh? Navy brat or something?”

“No, my dad switched jobs.” She shook the proffered hand as inconspicuously as she could.

“So, where’s your family’s mansion?” Jessie asked.

“I, we don’t live in one. I live in Sturbridge.”

“A townhome baby like me.” Jessie smiled. “We’re neighbors.”

She smiled back. “Really? Cool.”

“I can tell I’m going to like you,” Jessie announced, receiving a stern *shh* from Mr. Giles and snickers from other students.

Eden sunk deep into her seat, ready to be buried in her comfort zone of solving math equations.

Chapter Two

“So, what was up with you and that girl today?” Megan asked, hands on hips.

By the way she stood in front of the couch glaring down at him, Micah had one guess why he’d gotten the silent treatment the entire drive to his house after school. *She’s upset about Eden still.* He sighed. “I already told you—she’s my best friend. Or was,” he added, seeing his girlfriend flinch. “Why are you being like this anyway? What’s the big deal?”

Megan let out a short blast of air from her mouth, making a face at him. He hated when she did that; it really wasn’t attractive.

“*What’s the big deal?* Micah, you’re leaving me in like two weeks!” Her voice hitched up in a hysterical sob.

Great, now everything’s my fault because she’s crying. He cringed.

“Sorry, Meg. I know you’re upset I’m going,” he soothed. He patted the seat cushion next to him. “Come here.”

Pouting, she sank down beside him. She sniffed and then leaned her head against his chest. “Why do you have to leave? Just stay here with me.” She sniffed again.

Irritated, he rehearsed the same lines over again. “My parents already paid for the semester. My cousin gets here next week. I’m only going to be gone three months.”

“And you’re probably going to flirt with every girl in Rome too, right?”

“Meg, don’t you trust me at all?” Now he didn’t hide his irritation.

“No, not after how you acted today with that Eden girl!”

Ironically, what was irking her was the same thing bothering him too. He’d been happy to discover the tall blonde bowling him over was Eden. His parents told him the McCarthy’s were moving back to Bon Air and he’d been hoping he’d get to see his old friend again before leaving. What he hadn’t counted on was how rude his friends would act.

“Yeah, about that. What was up with you guys today?” he asked.

Megan stared at him.

“You all acted like jerks,” he reminded her.

Her eyes bulged. “I can’t believe you’re making this all about *her*. You’re totally dodging it.”

“Dodging what?”

“You were holding her arms like forever! I saw the way you looked at her. Don’t even try to deny it!”

Micah threw up his hands. “Meg, really? Are you *that* jealous of Eden?”

“Yes, well, no... I don’t know! So you swear you don’t *like her* like her?”

“No more than Chase or any other of my friends. She’s just a friend to me, I swear.”

She smiled and then giggled. “Ok.” She laid her cheek against his upper arm, too short to reach his shoulder. “Guess I just want you all to myself until you leave.”

He moved his hand to the top of her head, brushing her hair back. Normally, he’d kiss her forehead or utter some reassuring nonsense, but not today. Since Megan was engrossed in the TV show, he let his eyes wander the living room. *Hard to believe I’m actually leaving*. With football done for the season, he didn’t mind being gone the last half of his junior year. Megan minded.

Knowing his parents were out to dinner with friends, a movement in the front entry caught his eye. Rotating to get a better look, he disturbed Megan. She peered up at him.

“Sorry, I thought I saw—” He froze, staring.

Poised in the entryway, a woman appeared out of nowhere. Her pearly white skin contrasted with the form-fitted crimson gown she wore. Her face was beautiful: a straight nose, red full lips, and riveting, onyx eyes. Black hair reached the leather belt at her waist.

Megan spun around, searching the room. “Micah, saw what?”

His eyes flickered to Megan and then back to the woman in red. *She’s breathtaking*. His jaw went slack, his mouth gaping open.

“What is it? Why won’t you answer me?” There was panic in Megan’s voice now, but he felt transfixed. The woman’s lips slowly parted, opening. His breath caught,

waiting for her to speak. Instead, her head inclined, her body bowing, and then she was gone. Disappearing into the nothingness she'd come from.

"Sorry," he said, exhaling, his shoulders slumping forward.

Megan was either going to cry or scream, he wasn't quite sure yet. "I thought I saw something," he explained.

"What? What'd you see?"

"Uh, nothing, really." It sounded lame. *I'm a terrible liar.*

"Nothing? You're totally freaking me out! That wasn't *nothing*."

"Sorry," he repeated. He didn't know what else to say. *Man, I feel like I just did football drills.* He noted Megan's scowl. *I'm not sure I can handle her hysterics. I just saw a freaking ghost!* Somehow, he knew Megan would *not* be able to handle *that* truth.

"Sorry? You're sorry! I swear, Micah—"

"Megan, please. I just can't do this with you right now."

Her mouth snapped shut, her eyes narrowing.

When he remained quiet, she stood in a huff. "Fine, be that way. I'm going home."

He forced himself to his feet, but she was already storming from the room. *Do I even want to follow?*

"Meg, wait," he called, stepping after her.

"First the flirting and now this... I just can't take anymore." They were by the front door now. She whirled around, facing him. "Go to Rome and forget all about me." She jabbed a finger at his chest. "We're through, Micah!" She threw the door open and slammed it behind her, leaving Micah speechless.

Wow, didn't see that coming... Chase wasn't kidding about her being the jealous type. Feeling guilty, yet relieved she was gone, he returned to the couch, sinking down into its cushions. He kneaded his eyes with his knuckles before staring back at the entryway.

Who was that woman? he wondered. *Will she come back?*