

## Chapter One

Sometimes nothing is as it seems. That's what I remember thinking last October--six months that might as well have been a lifetime ago. That was before I lost my best friend. The night everything changed, Devin and I sprawled across a round concrete picnic table long enough for me, but his feet dangled over the edge. Although I lay with arms propped behind my head, Devin rested on his side, an elbow supporting him.

The small town of West Martin was barely a dot on the Illinois map—a dot trying hard to fashion a bed-and-breakfast image instead of a boring lakefront community with two high schools, ten churches, and a handful of fast food restaurants, none of which offered much entertainment. As such, most teens like us, hung out in Lucy Park. Tonight, however, a cold front had lowered the temperature to 25 degrees, and most people had stayed inside. Still, we preferred the cold and liked the way the lights barely illuminated the darkness.

"Is your mom going to kill you? It's already after 11."

"She's out with her fiancé, remember?" I lifted my hands to my mouth and blew on my fingers.

"Cold?" He scooted closer.

*More on the inside than the outside*, I thought. The wind carried a distant burning smell--firewood--and I inhaled deeply, savoring the remembered warmth. "I don't know why she's agreed to marry the jerk." I shook my head. "He's going to leave her—maybe not tonight, but some time."

"Well, maybe you should lighten up." Devin tickled me. "Maybe he'll hang around."

"Right. My dad didn't. He left years ago, and the other guys my mom dates haven't bothered, either. Why would this one be any different?" Cold air brushed my stomach where my shirt had pulled up. I tugged it down.

"He's a different person. Maybe you should get to know him and stop growling."

"Easy for you to say," I snorted. "Both your parents live under the same roof." I rolled my shoulders, trying to move from the unforgiving concrete cooling my back. "You never wonder which state you're going to see on the post card your dad sends. That 'See you soon' is quite a closing, don't you think? It's not 'I love you.' It's 'I'll see you soon.'" Tears seasoned my voice, deepening it.

Devin leaned over me, his fingers dabbing the tears. "Sorry--I should've kept my big mouth shut."

"Yeah, you should have. But since you're my best friend, I'll let you live." I swallowed hard, rubbing the concrete to take my mind off Devin's frown.

He scrutinized my expression, knowing lately I'd gotten good at acting indifferently. If I couldn't trust my parents, I didn't know if anyone else was safe, either. He finally lay back. "I'm glad you let me live. Did you get your driver's license yet?"

"Tomorrow—and it's not soon enough." I shifted closer, resting my head on his chest. "You make a great pillow."

Leaves crackled distantly as someone headed toward our table. Curious, I sat up and saw Kellin Morgan and Tyler Rutherford sauntering into view. *Gee, the proud crowd coming out for a visit*, I thought. Kellin, tall and broad-shouldered, sported his unbuttoned letter jacket and a dark sweater. The street-lamp's far-off glow highlighted the short blonde hair feathering his face, framing his square jaw and blunt chin. Next to him, Tyler

seemed diminished by his best friend's stature; he barely topped my height. Still, thanks to his free-weight addiction, his chest seemed every bit as broad as Kellin's but without the quarterback's glory.

Kellin and Tyler stopped as they spotted us. Our gazes locked, and I looked away before embarrassing myself before two popular guys—and Devin. Swinging my legs over the table's side, I scooted from Devin, wondering what the jocks would make of us lying together.

"Hello, Skye," Kellin said. As he spoke, steamy funnels diffused into the air. Devin quickly sat up, hovering. "Devin," Kellin added on.

I waited for Devin to break the silence thickening like smoke, but my best friend remained quiet as though sizing them up. Shoving his hands into his pockets, Kellin stared intently at me. Tyler glanced from me to his best friend, frowning.

"Hey, Kellin. Tyler," Devin said with forced pleasantry. He scooted to the table's edge as well, intentionally putting his body between them and me.

"We were looking for some friends," Kellin said. "But I guess they aren't here." He gave me one last glance before they turned around and left. As the rustling of leaves faded, Devin lay back down.

"That was weird," I muttered, blinking at where Kellin and Tyler had stood.

"The hell it was," Devin snorted, shaking his head.

Frowning, I looked at the full moon, mesmerized. "What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"They were here because they thought we were...doing something... and wanted a closer look."

I rolled my eyes. "But we're best friends. That's all."

Devin nodded, propping his arms behind his head. "I don't think Kellin and Tyler knew who was here."

"Yeah, well, it's not like they know who I am, anyway—not with all the cheerleaders like Becca. I don't exist to them." I lay back down and again rested my head on Devin's chest, listening to his heartbeat.

Devin laughed hollowly. "Then why did he look at you like that?"

"You said it yourself. He didn't expect to find us here," I replied.

"That's not it. He was looking at *you*. He has eyes like most other guys, Skye." Devin wrapped his arm around me. "You're beautiful, and that's why you're likely to be his next toy if you're not careful. Stay away from him." His heart rate sped up.

My stomach felt funny when he said that, like I had shot down a sharp incline. "He said hello--that's it."

Devin tapped the concrete and still gazed far beyond me, at the stars I had once believed to be jewels. "What's gotten into you?" I jumped off the picnic table and started to walk away when he stopped me, his fingers trying to grasp my arm but missing.

"Skye, wait." He swung his long legs and huge feet over the table's edge and jumped down.

"It's been a long night." I walked toward the car.

"Come on," he said, his hand clasping my forearm. "I'm a guy. I know how it works. I don't want to see you get hurt. That's it."

"The only thing he said was 'hello.'" I looked at Devin's fingers around my arm and willed him to let go.

"What happens when it's more than that?" he asked softly, standing so close our bodies were barely

separated. "What happens when he asks you out? He doesn't have a reputation because he's a great guy. His brains are in his pants, and he's thinking with them right now." As he looked at me, his hair fell into his eyes.

"Thanks for the helpful advice," I replied, jerking from him. "Will you take me home, or do I have to walk?" I willed myself not to shiver.

Devin dug the keys from his pocket. "I'll drive you," he said quietly. "It's over a mile to your house; the last thing you need to do is walk."

"Thanks, mother." I stalked to his Ford Escort, opened the door, and climbed inside. Leaning against the headrest, I replayed what had just happened and wondered if Kellin had been checking me out.

Devin backed out. "Why do you always do that?" he asked, keeping his gaze ahead, his voice even.

"Do what?" I sat up and watched his fingers tap the steering wheel repeatedly.

"Get defensive? What's wrong with me wanting to protect you?"

I gritted my teeth, angry without understanding why. "I can take care of myself. I already have one mother, and I don't need another."

He gripped the steering wheel tightly. "I know, but I don't want to pick up the pieces Kellin leaves behind."

"So don't." I looked out the opposite window.

"Damn it, Skye!" Frustrated, he shook his head. "That's not what I meant."

I leaned back against the seat. "Well, you can just relax 'cause nobody is going to hurt me. Nobody's ever going to get that close." I closed my eyes and shoved my hands into my pockets, trying to warm my fingers.

"Yeah, maybe that's just as bad," Devin whispered.

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"My mother's boyfriend brought me a book." I stood before my open locker and shook my head. "A book." Disgust filled my voice. I rearranged the makeup shelf so I wouldn't have to meet Devin's gaze.

"What book?" he asked, leaning against the next locker, his arms folded across his chest, covering a Queensryche tee-shirt.

"Does it matter? Like I ever read," I snorted, looking in the small mirror hanging on my locker door. A few hairs fell to the side and I brushed them into place and pouted to check my lipstick.

"Maybe," he said. "Which book?"

I scowled. "*To Kill a Mockingbird*. As if I care what they do to mockingbirds."

Devin repeatedly thumped his forehead against the locker. "It's a good book, Skye; you ought to read it."

"It's old. He didn't even buy a new one." I pulled the dog-eared copy from my locker, wondering if it was going to come apart. "He said something about this being sentimental."

Devin took it, opened it, and flipped to the back. He stared at the page for a moment and then read directly from the text. "As I made my way home, I thought Jem and I would get grown but there wasn't much else left for us to learn, except possibly algebra." He smirked at me and shut the book. "Maybe you're right. Maybe math is the greatest evil, Skye."

"Oh, shut up," I replied, taking the novel from him.

"What's his name?"

“Jim, Slim, Richard. Hell if I remember.” I jerked out my algebra book, a spiral notebook, and a pencil.

Devin grabbed my shoulder and lightly shook me. “Come on--you know his name. Will it kill you to use it?”

“Warren Jacobs.” I squinched my nose. “Happy?”

“No, not really.” He slid his arm around me. “Skye, I know you’re pissed as hell at your dad for leaving, at your mom for agreeing to marry Warren, and at Warren for...well...just ‘cause. You never used to be like this. It’s like you hate everybody, but all that hate isn’t going to knock sense into your old man.” He drew me to him, fitting my head just under his chin. As my head rested there, a few bumps prodded my cheek. “Ouch,” I said and pulled away. “What’ve you got on?”

Shrugging, he reached under the t-shirt neckline and pulled out the necklace I’d made out of hemp and shells when Mom had taken us to the Mississippi coast two summers ago. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

Grinning, I touched the shells. “You still wear that?”

Nodding, he said, “Yeah, I like it.”

I looked at the novel. “I wish he hadn’t given me this.”

“Read it.” He smiled.

I sighed and set the novel in my locker as the first bell rang. “I knew you’d say that.” I blinked at Devin’s empty hands. “Where are your books?”

“Don’t need ‘em for biology. We’re discovering where babies come from.” Devin’s tone dripped with forced stupidity. “Mr. Taylor was afraid we might have questions, so we’re watching a video. Man oh man.” He rolled his eyes and regarded my books wistfully. “I’d rather be in algebra.”

I laughed and patted him on the back. “Pay attention. You might learn something.”

“Like how to sleep with my eyes open?” he retorted, heading down the hall.

I strode toward Mrs. Swanson’s room, when a different voice called me. “Skye--wait up.”

I turned and found Kellin darting toward me. Instead of stopping, I upped my pace, forcing him to run. I could hear the legs of his wind pants rubbing with every stride. He caught me and slowed to match my gait. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you didn’t want to talk.”

“What gave you that idea?” I asked, quickening my steps more.

“You didn’t stop. Look--I just wanted to talk. Nothing major.” He darted into my path, stopping me. He jammed his hands in his pockets.

Three freshmen girls sped past, giggling as they glanced at him. “What about?” I forced myself to gaze at his face and found pale blue eyes focused on me. Swallowing hard, I realized I only came to his shoulders. His aftershave--Obsession--washed over me. Wearing a black sweater and jeans, he looked like a model. Then I realized he was speaking.

“What’s with you and Abbott? You going out?”

“Going out?” I repeated. I’m not sure if it was the question that had jarred me or his using Devin’s last name. “Why? Does this interest you?” I cradled my books tightly in my arms--too tightly. I felt my notebook’s spiral wire cut my skin. He stepped toward me, and I wanted to move back but couldn’t. He touched my hair and pulled a piece of lint free.

“Get to class,” Mr. Dempsey called out, and we resumed our stride. The halls were emptying out; only a few students bustled past, chattering loudly. Becca Haskins stared at us, frowning resentfully. She twirled a strand of her long blond hair around a finger while leaning against a locker. Tyler Rutherford stood beside her.

“Well,” Kellin looked away, almost as though embarrassed. “If the two of you aren’t going out, I thought maybe we could. Nothing major. A movie or something.”

I laughed hollowly and shook my head. “What makes you think Devin and I are going out?”

Kellin raised his hand and counted: “One, the way he looks at you. Two, when I see you, you’re usually with him. Three, the way the two of you were in the park.”

“Nothing happened!” I growled. “He’s my best friend.” My pen started sliding out of my folder; I snagged it and put it back, ignoring my trembling fingers.

“Oh.” He shifted his weight to the other foot. “It wouldn’t bother him if we went out, would it?” He smiled and winked knowingly.

*Why were my fingers trembling?* I kept staring at his eyes, trying to find a color to describe that shade. “Nope,” I said, forcing a smile.

“Then how about a movie tomorrow?” He asked it so casually, like “Is it going to rain tomorrow?” I wished it *had* been a question about the weather.

My stomach felt hollow, and the trembling in my fingers gave way to nervlessness. Why couldn’t I feel them? I almost dropped my books, knowing I’d just caught myself in my own trap. If I said no, everyone would believe Devin and I were dating. If I said yes, I would be dating a guy I barely knew, a senior who already had colleges interested in him, or rather his ability to throw a football. It didn’t matter if he was drop-dead gorgeous, which he was. One bite from the right beautiful snake could prove fatal.

“How about I pick you up at seven?” he asked, brushing his fingers through his short blond hair.

“Sure,” I said, despite Devin’s warning. Kellin walked away and I realized I hadn’t told him my address. “Don’t you need my address?” I called out.

Kellin turned and grinned. “Nope. I already know.”

The tardy bell rang as I stepped to Mrs. Swanson’s door. “You’re late, Skye,” she said, frowning. So I’d never been tardy before--there was always a first time. From my desk, I stared at a chalkboard covered with numbers. Who cared if I were tardy? I was still wondering how Kellin had known my address and what else he knew.

Girls giggled behind me, and I turned to find two cheerleaders, Becca’s friends, looking at me, laughing. Blushing, I turned around, knowing that whatever they said, I was now the prime subject.

