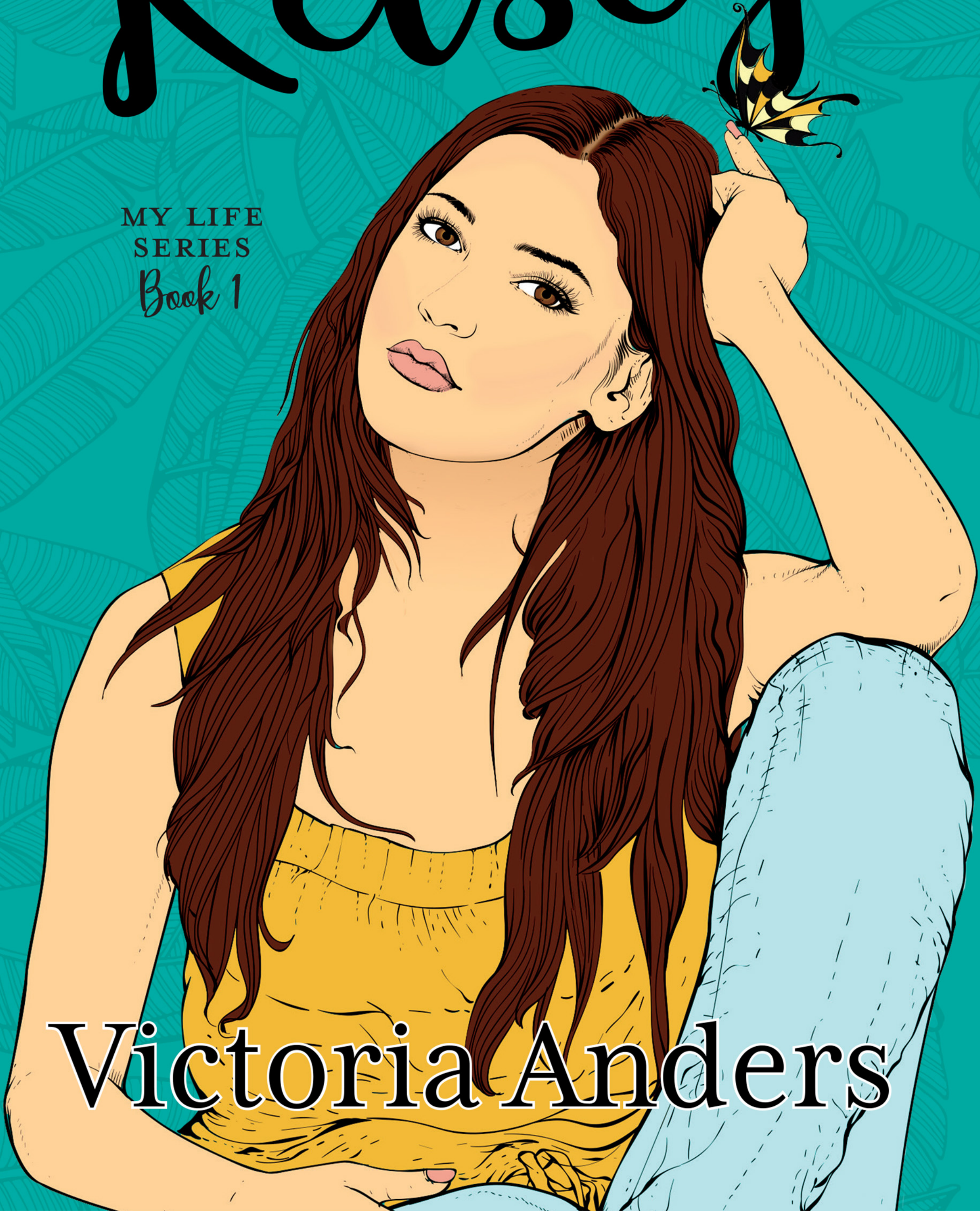


MY LIFE AS
Kelsey

MY LIFE
SERIES
Book 1

Victoria Anders





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My Life as Kelsey
My Life Series Book 1

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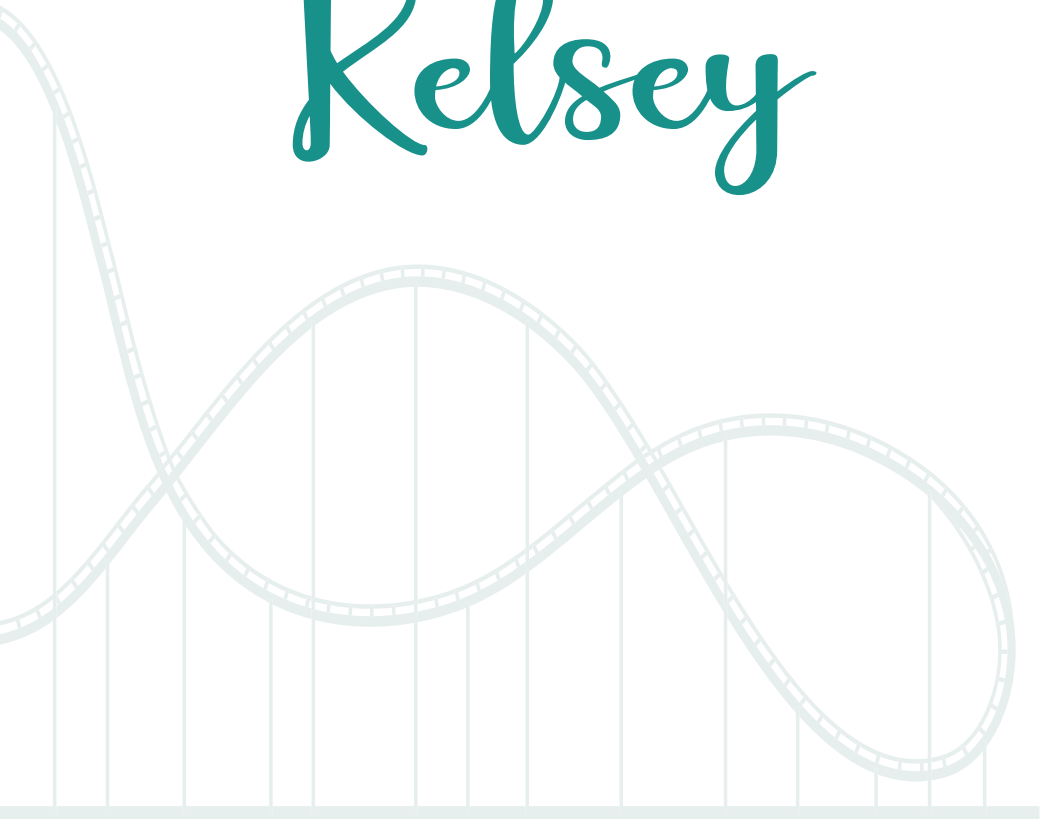
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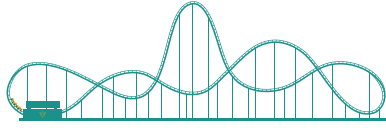




MY LIFE AS

Kelsey





CHAPTER 1

Welcome to the Working Week

BERTHA THE COASTER grinds to a halt. The smell of smoking rubber fills my nose. “Lift your arms and wait for the bar to raise,” my voice automatically says. “Exit to your left.”

The human sheep exit the train, and a child’s scream pulls me from the monotonous work.

“Dad, I’m stuck,” the sweet little lamb cries out.

I rush over and squat down, looking in her tear-filled eyes. “It’s okay, sweetheart. You’re so special that Bertha wants you to stay with her.” Her eyes grow larger, and her cheeks look like two ripe tomatoes. “But, the good news is, I have a special key so she can’t keep you.”

I jingle the key in front of her face before inserting it in the release slot. *Click*. The stuck safety bar pops open, and she jumps out of her seat with relief.

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“And now you get a special treat. Do you like ice cream?”

The gentle lamb nods.

“When you exit, go to the right and present this card to Micah at the ice cream stand. He’ll give you a free cone.” She grabs the coupon with her tiny little hand, crumpling it in the process. Her cuteness causes me to giggle as I pat her blonde curly head.

With a smile from ear to ear, she skips to her dad on the exit platform. “What do you say, Zoe?”

“Thank you,” whispers the girl in a sugary voice.

The gate opens, allowing the next sets of sheep to file in, and my auto-play continues. “Pull the bar down until it clicks.”

The sweat rolls down my cheek as I meander to the last cart in the back of the roller-coaster. My chafed thighs burn with each step. When are they going to fix my fans? It’s ninety-seven degrees today with no hint of an afternoon thunderstorm; the thick air feels heavy in my lungs.

I walk the length of the train, tugging on each unmoving bar. Safety check complete. My hand raises, not caring about any potential sweat stains. The extra deodorant applied during my lunch break feels long gone.

A new train with its cheering occupants replaces the outgoing one that is now clicking up Bertha’s wooden hill. And it all begins again. Monotonous. That’s my job.

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“Sir, take your sunglasses off, please,” I say, pulling on the safety bar as I see my flushed face in the mirrored frames.

“What do you want me to do with them?” the teen sheep barks. His pinched face makes me want to punch him. I’m usually not a violent person. I blame it on the heat. My grandma always tells me I’m sweet as peaches as she squeezes my cheeks, because I put spiders outside instead of squishing them to oblivion.

My customer service attitude toward hostile teens disappeared once it hit a sweltering ninety-five degrees. “You’re supposed to put them in a locker before getting in line.” *But since you can’t read*, “I’ll take them and put them on those shelves right over there.” My middle finger points to the shelves at the exit with the sign “WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ITEMS LEFT IN CUBBIES” hovering over. “You can get them on your way out.”

He removes the glasses, revealing sapphire eyes that lighten in the afternoon sun as it peeks into the station. My unchanging brown eyes scream jealousy. “Can you hold onto them for me? They’re kind of expensive.” His friend guffaws and punches him on the shoulder.

I huff and paste a glower on my face, but hang the sunglasses on my collar by the temple. I’m a sucker for blue eyes.

He grabs my hand, forcing me to look even deeper, causing my knees to go weak as a surge of energy

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courses through my body. “Thanks, Ma’am.” His tone holds condescension, and all five guys he’s with snicker.

I’m not willing to let this guy have any effect on me. My arm jerks from his grip, and then I continue to check the remaining safety bars.

I hate rich kids. And this guy—although his strategically tattered t-shirt and khaki shorts are nondescript—has rich and entitled written all over him. He looks like one of those rock band singers who graces the covers of teeny-bopper magazines. His friends look like they belong in a gym advertisement.

I could accidentally drop and step on the sunglasses, or better yet, I should tell him I lost them then sell them on eBay. The profit would be more than my next paycheck. But that’s not me. The dollar signs dissolve as I shake the mean idea away.

Rich rocker guy’s train returns to the station. He stands, struts over, and tries to grab the sunglasses from my shirt. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

My hand wraps around his wrist with a firm grip causing my knuckles to go white. “Don’t call me sweetheart.” I release him then remove the sunglasses from my shirt and drop them in his awaiting hand.

“Thanks, Ma’am.” He puts on the sunglasses, covering the sparkling beauties, which makes it easier for me to be meaner.

“I’m not an old lady; I’m your age. Don’t call me Ma’am,” I snap and start to stomp off.

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“Thank you, Kelsey.” His tone is musical, halting me; his sweet voice won’t sweet talk me. Its cadence is not glazed in creamy milk chocolate and covered in rainbow sprinkles like my favorite donut. *Liar.*

I cast a sneer in his direction. “How do you know my name?”

His mocking smile causes the hair on my neck to rise. “Nametag.”

Turning on my heels, my ponytail smacks my face as if trying to slap the unusual nastiness away. The laughter of teenage boys echoes behind me as they head out. The tallest one winks at my mean girl co-worker, Willow, as he brings his hang-ten hand up to his ear. Her blinding teeth show as she acknowledges him with a thumbs up. She collects more phone numbers than Bertha’s wishing well, disguised as a feeding trough, collects pennies.

Put your game face back on, Kels. I run to check the safety bars on the next herd of seated guests, smiling at each of them, giving special attention to a boy crying to his older brother. Patting his head with reassurance, I say with a voice as sweet as my favorite donut, “Don’t be scared. You’re going to love Bertha.” He stops pouting and smiles at me.

Ten minutes later, rich rocker guy is back at the front of the line with his sunglasses on, and my bad attitude returns. Wednesdays at the amusement park equal short lines for repeat customers. As he sits down in the cart, he hands me his glasses again.

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I slip them in my collar with a roll of my eyes and a snarl to my lips, knowing he *forgot* about the lockers on purpose. He's not surrounded by his male chauvinistic entourage.

"Did your winning personality run your friends off?" I ask.

He sneers. "Well, aren't you funny? They had somewhere to be."

I turn to the short queue and yell out, "Need a single rider." Two people raise their hand, the closest being a rotund male. *Perfect*. I walk over to release the gate and let him through.

Rich rocker guy narrows his eyes and presses close to the opposite side of his seat as the large man squeezes in the cart. Rich rocker guy mimics my sinfully sweet smile as I check his safety bar, ignoring his hard but beautiful eyes and the way those eyes seem to look deep down into my soul. *Payback*.

Through the intercom, Jett, the lead foreman, says over the clicking sound of rich rocker guy's retreating cart, "Kels, it's five. You can go."

A real smile crosses my face when my fist pumps to victory. I don't know why I'm excited to leave other than getting out of this blazing heat. I usually stay and work a double when my mom can't pick me up until ten. Today, it's just too darn hot to offer myself up for overtime. The cool cafeteria is calling my name, and so is the last book on my summer reading list. Two weeks should be plenty of time to read *Jane Eyre* before eleventh-grade starts.

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A burst of cool air hits my face when I open the door to the control room. “Thanks, Jett. Tell Sophia I said hello, and I hope she gets to feeling better.” I walk over to the panel board and give him a departing fist bump.

I grab my see-through purse from the cabinet, standing for a minute as the icy air blasts me, momentarily relieved. I wipe my sweaty palms on my uniform shorts then hold them up to the vent. Maybe next year, I’ll be tenured enough to work in this luxury. Departing the igloo in revolt, my feet take me down the stairs to the exit, and my eyes squint when I’m blinded by the afternoon sunlight.

“Kelsey!”

Rich rocker guy runs down the stairs toward me, his jet-black hair spiked in all directions and not even flopping. What does he want now?

The sunglasses still dangling from my collar reflect the bright sunlight into my eyes causing them to burn. *Shoot.* I hand them to him. “Sorry. I forgot I had them. That’s why we recommend the lockers and not the workers.”

I make a one-eighty as the sweat starts to roll down my neck. Cafeteria, here I come. I’m so ready for this scorching work day to end. Only for it to begin again tomorrow, precisely the same. Monotonous. That’s my life. Work. Rinse. Repeat. At least for one more week.

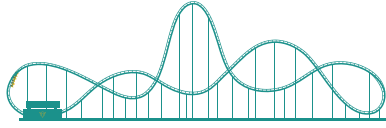
The musical voice draws my attention, and I make an about-face as he steps right in front of me, invading

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my personal space. “Hey, since you’re off, you want to walk around with me? Ride some rides?”

Is this some lame ass joke? Am I being punk’d? I scoff and elude him, stepping toward the employee gate. What should come out of my mouth is, *I live in a trailer down a dirt road. And not a double-wide. A single-wide two-bedroom with my mom and grandma. I share a room with my mom. Why would a rich boy like you want to walk around with a poor girl like me?* That would shut him up instantly.

Boys don’t fit in the monotony of my life.



CHAPTER 2

Like a Stone

I STOP TO PULL my employee I.D. from my clear bag. Before I wave it in front of the gate pad, the irritatingly musical voice rings out from behind me.

“Come on. Join me.”

My foot taps on the ground before I turn around with a clenched jaw, taking in his pouted lip. I guess he’s not used to being turned down. “Why should I join you?”

“All my friends left for football practice, and I don’t want to go home.” *Poor baby.*

“And you don’t play football?” He’s not small by any means. He’s just under a head taller than my five-six frame and lean. Half the players on the football team at my school are smaller.

“Nah. Music is my thing.” Of course it is. “Take me to your favorite ride.”

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“Uh, no.” I wave my I.D. and hear the click of the door, the air-conditioned cafeteria calling me from a distance. His hand covers mine as I turn the knob, sending an uncomfortable shock to my fingertips. My hand jerks away from his electrifying touch.

He shifts his sunglasses to the top of his head and bats his long eyelashes, those beautiful blue orbs on full display. How unfair is it for a guy to have beautiful eyes and long lashes? “Give me a tour of your park,” he demands.

I keep my face tight telling myself he has black demon eyes. “Maybe in your world, you’re a god, but in my world, you’re just another rider. So, no.”

My disdain makes one corner of his mouth to rise in a crooked grin that causes my knees to buckle. *You aren’t going to let this guy affect you, Kelsey.* This is probably a game to him.

“I’ll buy you dinner. I’m sure you know the best place in the park to eat. Come on, please? I could use the company.”

My stomach grumbles at the word dinner, and chocolate covered donuts with rainbow sprinkles dance to the beat in my mind. *Donuts for dinner? Yes, please.* The two dollars in my pocket aren’t enough to fill my belly. Settling for fries and a cup of water doesn’t sound like a good dinner now that someone is offering to buy me real food, if you can call amusement park food real. *Those donuts are real.*

Come on, Kelsey. Don’t even think about it. You don’t use people. That’s not who you are.

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But he used you as a sunglass stand. Consider it as him paying a rental fee for your shirt. It's obvious that one dinner isn't going to break his bank.

My stomach grumbles again causing my mouth to move in automatic response. "Okay. But give me fifteen to change out of my uniform. Wait right here."

A victorious smile washes over his face. He even has perfect teeth? This is a bad idea. He's way too hot, like a five hundred degree oven hot.

I cock my jaw to the side and wave my I.D. again. At the click, I open the door and put space between rich rocker guy and me.



Jane Eyre is staring at me from my locker after I change out of my damp uniform. A wet paper towel absorbs the sweat collection between my boobs. The brush snags as I try to perform a magic trick with my straight brown hair, but it flops into a stringy mess. Side braid it is. A shower would be on the get-ready-for-rich-rocker-guy agenda if I had a towel in my locker. Thankfully, the clearance bin body spray turns me into a girl again, mostly.

I should save myself the torture. He'll run for higher—or richer—waters with one look at my scrawny body and farmer's tan. The dollar store tank makes me look even more flat-chested than I am. My thrift store jean shorts are a size too big, so they're cinched with a worn leather belt. The Old Navy flip flops I got for twenty-five cents at the end

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of last summer have seen better days and make my bony feet look even bonier.

My stomach grumbles as I take another look at *Jane Eyre*. She can wait. My tummy can't. And I'd feel bad if I ditched him in the heat without a word.

A sigh of relief escapes when I don't see him where I left him. The stomach revolts at the thought of my meager dinner, and the dancing donuts go up in smoke. My eyes complete a quick scan as my hand reaches for my I.D. ready to perform the wave at the gate.

"Hheeyyy." His long drawl comes from the right of the employee door. He's leaning against a sign that says, "COME PET BERTHA THE SHEEP."

At the thought of being fed, my tummy causes a smile to grace my face.

He stands up straight and walks over; his steps are rhythmical as if he's grooving to a tune only in his head. His walk and the donuts could perform a flash mob scene that would garner a million YouTube views. "And she smiles," he says.

I purse my lips knowing what he sees in that smile, a front tooth slightly set back from its mate. Food on the table was more critical than braces in my household.

"You should smile more often. It really brightens your face." He presents a beaming expression. "See, didn't my face just totally make your day?"

"Haha. What do you want from me? I don't even know your name."

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He cocks his head. “You’re giving me a park tour, and I’m buying you dinner.”

Oh, food. Yes. “I think I should know the name of the person who is buying my dinner.”

He holds his hand out. “Stone.”

His grip is firm, but his skin is soft and dry like a knitted blanket. No physical sign of sweaty palms or hard labor, unlike me. “Is that even your real name?”

“Why yes, it is.”

“Prove it. I’ve never known a Stone, except those that are rolling.”

“Like I haven’t heard that one before. And those that roll are stones. I’m just Stone.” He pulls out a black leather wallet and flashes his driver’s license within an inch of my eyes. I push his hand back so I can read, ignoring the warm sensation I get from touching him. *Stone Maverick Avery. 319 Edelweiss Drive.* He yanks his hand away before his birthday is in view.

I raise my eyebrows. “Maverick?”

“My dad is a lover of the Rolling Stones and Top Gun.”

My abdomen lets out a grumble so loud the people around us could probably hear it. I feel my face flush, and it’s not from the heat.

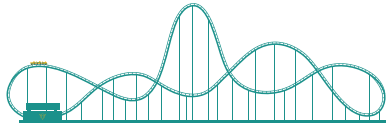
He smirks. “So, dinner first?”

I glance down at my unpainted toes and smile. “That works for me.”

He places his hand at the bottom of my chin and lifts my face. “And she smiles again.”

Victoria Anders

Instinctively, I pull my lips in as a wave of tingles runs across my face. “What kind of food do you want?” I tear my face from his grasp and shake the wave away. He’s not going to play his rich boy tricks on me.



CHAPTER 3

House of Memories

THANK YOU FOR the park tour. I had fun tonight.” Stone gives me his crooked grin I’ve grown accustomed to in our four hours together. It’s the most frequent of his faces.

I’ve never met anyone who has so many different facial expressions. He could do YouTube videos for actors on how to express themselves through facial movement: *The Many Faces of Stone*, a web series.

LESSON ONE: how to be playful. Cock up one side of your mouth in a crooked grin while finding the light to make your eyes sparkle. This look can totally make any girl’s heart melt.

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At first, I got my least favorite face of Stone's, and I thought about ditching him after dinner. But then I'd live with guilt for the rest of the night because he ordered half the menu and I ate half the food he ordered, including two of those chocolate covered donuts with rainbow sprinkles, which are now also Stone's favorite.

LESSON TWO: how to be an arrogant asshole. Lift up one side of your mouth in a snarl while rolling eyes up but holding head down. It can make any girl think you're inhuman or just a douche.

I may be on the skinnier side, but as Stone put it with his arrogant expression, *this chick can eat*. A girl with a food complex may have slapped him. His rudeness was quickly followed by his playful grin, *how do you maintain such a smokin' body?* This started another parade of taunts on why my face instantly looked like I'd been baking in the sun for hours.

Just put a neck brace on me now because his from-one-extreme-to-another comments caused me whiplash, which leads me to how I feel about him at this moment. Kind of indifferent?

We make it back to the employee gate, and I pull my I.D. from my pocket. "Thank you for dinner." I wave the card and grasp the knob. Before I can turn to go through the door, he leans down and plants a kiss smack dab on my lips. I jerk and pain courses

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through my hip from bumping into the doorknob. That'll leave a bruise.

He gives me that now annoying crooked grin. "I didn't mean to scare you." His face straightens and then widens into a beautiful smile, his eyes intense. This is the face that I've tried to ignore when I caught it a couple of times throughout the evening. And this moment is no different.

LESSON THREE: how to make a girl totally fall for you. Starting with a straight face, slowly smile from ear to ear until you reach the maximum level of teeth showing without looking goofy. It's a fine line. Slow is the key. An intense stare is a must addition to really get her heart racing.

His face is quickly replaced with the arrogant one as he walks backward. "Call me. I'm pretty sure we'd have a good time together." He winks then spins and walks toward the exit.

I stand in shock. I can't believe this pompous boy just stole my first kiss. As if reading my mind, he turns around with the crooked smile and waves.

It wasn't a kiss, Kelsey. His lips touched yours for less than a second. It doesn't count. No way your first kiss is going down like this. A heavy sigh releases from deep within my lungs as I wave my I.D. again and walk through the door.

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The napkin in my pocket is burning a hole through my denim shorts. Call you? I don't think so. We'd have a good time together? Um. No. That statement alone makes me wish I'd ditched him after dinner. What the hell did he mean?

I know what he meant, and that's not happening with me. My fingers wad up the napkin and toss it in the trash can without a glance before heading to the locker room.

I purposely didn't watch as he wrote the number down. I deliberately folded it over without a peek when he handed it to me. It was easy to not look at what he wrote because he was making fun of me for not having a cell phone.

You're like the only sixteen-year-old on the planet that doesn't have a cell phone, he taunted.

What about those teens that live on a remote island with no cell towers? I bet even their parents don't have cell phones. My mom doesn't.

One glimpse at that paper and the phone number would be ingrained in the brain. Numbers are my jam. His address is still burning a hole in my retinas. *319 Edelweiss Drive*. I won't be able to forget it. But what could I do with his address? Go toilet paper his house for stealing a kiss?

I don't have a car, and he said he lives in the city. Twenty minutes away. No way my mom would take me to meet a boy. A boy I hung out with. I'm not allowed to date boys. I'm sure she'd classify this as a date since he bought my dinner. If she knew, I'd be on

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restriction for two months. Not that it would make a difference in my monotonous life.

Stone isn't the first boy to ask me to walk around the park. I quickly discovered that working at Adventures is like being on a dating app. He's not the first to give me his number. But he is the first to buy me more than a soda and pretzel to share. And he's the only one to kiss me.

It wasn't a kiss, Kels.

Then why are my lips still tingling?



CHAPTER 4

Red Flag

“IT’S ABOUT TIME you got up.” My mom’s icy voice sends a chill down my spine as I walk into the kitchen. “It’s already nine. You’ve slept half the morning away.”

I’m usually up by seven. It was after two before I fell asleep. Tossing and turning, trying to rid myself of the feeling of Stone’s lips against mine. Trying to block out his broad smile and intense, sparkling eyes as my head replayed the dreamy highlights of the evening.

The time he told me I was beautiful. The time he said I smelled like cinnamon and he loved that smell, whether that was the body spray or us walking by the churros stand at that moment beats me. The time he grabbed my hand to hold it up as we plummeted down the first hill of the steel coaster, Gigantor, and didn’t let it go until well after the end of the ride. The

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time he didn't make fun of me for going to one of the poorest schools in the area, North Lane. The time he didn't gloat about going to the wealthiest school in the area, Pine Valley Prep.

But then the hellish highlights would come through with the arrogant face of Stone. I've tried to rid them from the memory bank, so I won't relive them now.

Who is this boy, and why can't I stop thinking about him?

"Why are you smiling?" my mom says.

My body responds in salute, wiping the smile off my face and jerking myself out of la la land. Her cold blue eyes penetrating my mind.

"Why were you mumbling about stones in your sleep?"

"Stones?" I squint at her trying to cut off the path to my brain.

"Something about lips as well. Are you dating someone behind my back?"

I shake my head at her with a shrug. "How would that even be possible?"

"Boys are bad news. Remember that."

"Oh, stop it, Elizabeth, or she'll wind up lonely and miserable at age thirty-two like you," my grandmother says as she hands me a plate of pancakes. "Let her find her own happiness in life. Let her grow up and make her own mistakes. Boys or no boys."

My mom scowls but stops the berating. "Did you put in your notice?"

"Yes, my last day is Wednesday."

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“Good. It’s time to stop fooling around and get back to your studies. The library called and said the SAT study guide you put on hold is available.”

“That’s good. I’ll check it out while I’m there. I should finish *Jane Eyre* today. Then I’ll be able to focus on the study guide until school starts.”

“You’ve got twenty minutes before we leave. Gammy’s picking you up at four, so keep track of time. Don’t make her wait like last time.” She turns with a sling of her stringy blonde hair.

My grandmother rolls her eyes and waves her hand at my retreating mother. “You can be as late as you want. You know I don’t mind waiting for you.”

“Thanks, Gammy.”

Maybe my mom slept poorly like me. We don’t share a bed, but we do share a room. My tossing and turning could’ve prevented her from a night of good sleep. She’s usually not this bitter. I shake my head trying to rid the pity party that’s celebrating for my mother.

It’s not my fault that she had me when she was sixteen. It’s not my fault that my father, whoever he may be, is not in the picture. It’s not my fault that she chooses not to date. But why does she always make me feel like everything is my fault? I’m just an innocent victim of sperm colliding with an egg. She could have a happy life if she’d erase the constant scowl that lives on her face.

