

Labeled:
Miss Popular

Award-Winning Author

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Paxton Chase. Gorgeous. Rich. Popular. Every boy wants to date her and every girl wants to be her. Everything about Paxton screams passion, but something people don't know about Paxton Chase is she's not the typical popular girl everyone perceives her to be. She's unmistakably kind, warm-hearted, and the most generous person Solar High has ever met. People just never see that part of her because all they see are the long lashes that frame her almond gray eyes, her pristine auburn hair, that utterly flawless body, those long legs that go on for days, and the power that is the Chase name. Everyone is blinded by the loneliness she hides so painstakingly well.

Of course, being popular comes with perks. People are always talking about her, always wanting to be her friend, and the friends she does have, would do anything she asks—although she never abuses it. She's been dating the hottest guy at Solar High since middle school, too, Jack Thompson—his dark brown hair matches his eyes, his chiseled jawline, and his perfectly toned body appears to be carved by the gods themselves. His charm has always been a bother to Paxton since he flirts with the fairer sex every chance he has. He still tells everyone that Paxton is his girl, no matter the flirtatious meandering he does—or the reckless cheating that occurs behind her back. She hates him but stays because she feels like she has no one else.

As time goes on, Paxton rolls her eyes at Jack, knowing he's been cheating on her for the past year and a half. She hates that she can't leave him, hates that even though she holds her head high and is confident in herself, her self-esteem is at its lowest when it comes to Jack. No matter what he does, she constantly finds herself drawn to him, like a moth to a flame. She knows it's wrong, she knows he's bad news, but he's also all she knows when it comes to boys.

That is until Grayson Beckett enrolled in Solar High. They have a couple of classes together, and even though he doesn't take care of his handsome appearance that much, Paxton knows there is a heartbreaker under that short beard, his dirty blonde hair that is always tied in a man bun, and behind those thick-rimmed glasses that hide his bright blue eyes. She will never admit it, but she has a thing for Grayson the moment he stepped into their first class together—but what is a gorgeous, popular girl like her to do with someone like him? This school holds highly to their labels, and she knows if she values her reputation, she can never be with a geek like him no matter how handsome he is...however, things do tend to change, even for Paxton Chase.



Chapter One

“Miss Chase?” Mr. Donald, the history teacher, called as everyone began to pile out of the class. “And Mr. Beckett, please stay behind a moment.”

“What did I do?” Paxton scoffed, looking at Jack as he winked at Chelsea, the woman he’d been sleeping with from time to time when Paxton wouldn’t let him touch her.

He approached Paxton—Freddy, not too far behind him—and raised his eyebrows. “I’ll see you later, toots,” Jack said, tapping Paxton’s bottom and making his way out of the class with everyone else. Chelsea followed close behind and gave Paxton a smug grin.

Paxton rolled her eyes, knowing she’d have to put an end to her relationship with Jack sooner or later before the rumors continued to spread and embarrassed her more than she already was.

She moved some of her hair behind her ear and grinned at Grayson as he put his hands in the pocket of his jeans, hesitantly standing beside her. He didn’t want to do it, knowing how creepy it would seem if she noticed, though he did it anyway and inhaled slightly; the scent of her floral perfume lingered in the air as it always did around her. Grayson was infatuated with Paxton as well, but he would never show it given that she was Miss Popular, and he was still labeled *the new kid who joined the nerd clan*.

“I wanted to talk to the two of you about your grades,” Mr. Donald said, looking between Paxton and Grayson.

“I-I thought I was getting straight As.” Grayson pointed out, adjusting his glasses up his nose.

“You are,” Mr. Donald said, nodding and handing each of them their quizzes back.

Grayson had a ten on ten marked in red ink on top of his, and Paxton had a two on ten in red ink on hers. She sighed, folding her paper and stuffing it in her bag; embarrassment flowed through her. Paxton was many things, but book smart was definitely not one of them. She tried her hardest and studied for hours on end, yet she still couldn’t get herself more than a passing grade—sometimes, much less than that. The information just wouldn’t process.

“So, what’s the issue?” Grayson asked, looking at Paxton’s blushing face as she fixed the strap of her bag to her shoulder.

“I’d like you to tutor Miss Chase if that suits the two of you. I don’t like commenting on other students’ grades, but Miss Chase, if you fail this class you will not graduate,” Mr. Donald answered.

Grayson nodded and looked at her again as she met his eyes. Even behind those thick glasses, his eyes sparkled, and she couldn’t help but hate that this was the first time they spoke.

“Yeah, I don’t mind—i-if that’s okay with you?” Grayson asked.

She let out a soft chuckle and sighed. “Doesn’t seem like I have a choice.”

“You can use this classroom after school on Mondays and Fridays, everything else you can schedule between the two of you. We have a test coming up in one month’s time, the test will be cumulative. And as I stated, Miss Chase, you need a passing grade in this class in order to graduate,” Mr. Donald said, picking up his things from the desk. “The door locks on its own, take as much time as you need.”

Mr. Donald made his way out of the class as Grayson adjusted his glasses again, looking at the time on his silver watch. He was nervous, that was apparent and kept fidgeting until she said something. Of course, she didn’t because she couldn’t help thinking that maybe this wasn’t worth it, and she should just take her mother’s advice and marry the first rich guy to bat their eyes at her. That way, she never had to worry about anything other than her happiness.

“I-I don’t have all my notes here, um,” he started, his nerves shining through his voice.

“I don’t want to stay in school longer than I need to, either,” Paxton said, chuckling. “Are you busy now?”

Grayson shook his head. “No.”

“Where do you live?” Paxton asked.

“Fifteen-minute bus ride,” he replied.

“I’m coming over then.” She chuckled. “But I’ll drive, we’re not taking a bus.”

“Oh, okay,” Grayson said, scratching the back of his head.

“Is that okay?” Paxton asked.

He nodded. “Yeah, that’s—it’s okay.”

She smiled, making his palms clammy and his heart flutter. Grayson wouldn’t admit it, but he had a major crush on Paxton, trying his hardest to avoid her at all costs for fear of saying something stupid to her without realizing it or embarrassing himself in front of the popular chick.

Even in Paxton’s wedge sandals, Grayson was taller than her. She admired him for this, too, since Jack hated it when she wore heels because she was always taller than him. The tall men at school used their height to their advantage, joining whatever sport was available. Grayson, on the other hand, did not. He chose his studies over his physique. And she admired him for it.

“Do you need to grab anything from your locker before we leave?” she asked, onlookers whispering as Grayson walked with her.

“No,” he answered, giving her a shy grin.

“Good, then let’s go.” She picked up her speed and led them out of the school.

Grayson kept his head down, his insecurities shining as he wasn’t supposed to be seen with someone like Paxton Chase. This didn’t bother her because labels were slowly becoming less important ever since Jack started messing around on her. She was titled Miss Popular, her boyfriend titled The Jock and Mr. Popular, while Grayson was titled loser, nerd, outcast...the words went on. They weren’t supposed to be in the same click by Solar High standards, but Paxton didn’t care. She spoke to anyone, no matter the labels that were slapped on them, especially recently.

“Pax?” Dean called, jogging over to her as she walked toward her car in the parking lot with Grayson trailing behind.

“What’s up?” Paxton asked.

Dean was Jack’s right-hand man, and he knew all of Jack’s secrets, even the ones he believed she didn’t know about. His slicked-back hair shined in the bright sunlight and he nodded at Grayson who stopped behind Paxton.

“Jack wanted to know if you’re coming to Lilly’s party tonight,” Dean said, looking at Grayson again, then back at Paxton.

“Probably not, gotta study date with this guy. Tell Jack to say hi to Freddy for me. Maybe Chelsea, too,” she answered. Paxton turned to Grayson and grinned, cocking her head to continue to her car.

“Won’t be the same without you,” Dean sang.

“I’m sure you’ll survive without lil ol’ me,” she said, sticking her tongue between her teeth.

“You’re sure you can’t come?” Dean pressed.

“I’m sure,” she stated, giving him a dazzling smile.

“All right, well, see you later, Pax.” Dean let out a chuckle and watched as Paxton walked away, his eyes trailing to her bottom and long legs before he nodded at Grayson. “Have fun.”

Grayson put his hands in his pockets again, hunching his shoulders like he did when he walked through the halls at school, trying to be as invisible as possible. He wasn’t used to this attention, let alone attention from someone like Paxton. His heart beat rapidly, trying to think of things to say to her without sounding like a complete fool.

Paxton placed her bag in the backseat and got into the driver’s seat, starting the car and adjusting the air conditioning. Grayson eased into the passenger’s seat, hesitantly putting his backpack between his legs. It was painstakingly obvious how nervous and uncomfortable he was. Paxton admired Grayson for his relaxed attitude. He didn’t try hard at all, and there was something about that, that Paxton liked. Jack made sure everyone always looked his way; his hair was always coiffed, his eyebrows so perfectly plucked, and his designer clothes were specifically picked out for every day of the week.

She smiled. “No need to be nervous, I don’t bite.”

He chuckled awkwardly. “I’m not nervous.”

“I’m not like people say I am, I won’t judge you or anything.”

“Your kind isn’t supposed to be seen with someone like me,” he said, sighing.

She frowned. “My kind? Says who?”

He shrugged, boring into those almond-shaped eyes. “Everyone.”

“I’ll have you know, I could give two shits about my reputation anymore. So, shall we?” she stated, a small smile spread to her lips.

“O-okay,” he said, grinning slightly.

“What’s your address?” she asked, opening the GPS on her dashboard.

“Can I?” he replied, pointing at her dashboard. Grayson’s hand shook as he punched in his address on the GPS and they were off.

Paxton was silent through the drive, knowing that Grayson was already nervous. She turned up the music on the radio, seeing his fingers tapping on his legs and grinning as she glanced over at him; at least she knew they had one thing in common, good taste in music.

He tried not to look at her exposed legs or watch her at all for that matter. He was still in shock that he was currently sitting next to Paxton Chase. Her beauty was even more alluring up close and she smelled so perfect, he only imagined what she tasted like. Of course, he knew he couldn't do anything—someone like her would never go for someone like him, no matter how much he crushed on her.

Arriving at his house, she was surprised it wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. He lived in a completely different area than she did, her house being a seven-bedroom mansion, but his two-story home was something she dreamed of living in. As much as she loved being able to have it all no matter what, the simple things in life like making her meals, cleaning her clothes and room, or bonding with her mother over a batch of homemade cookies, wasn't something she was able to enjoy. Her parents were rarely home, and when they were, her father was in his study, and her mother was drowning in a bottle of wine while giving all her attention to her cell phone. The home before her was just what she always dreamed of living in with someone who would love her unconditionally.

"Cute," she said, grinning.

"It's probably not what you're used to," he mentioned.

"As long as I have a bed to sleep in, the size of the house doesn't bother me," she added, unbuckling her belt.

Grayson stepped out of her car and searched for the keys in his backpack as she grabbed her bag from the backseat. He pushed his glasses up his nose and looked back at her as she walked behind him, folding her arms from the chilly breeze that took over the heat from the sunny day. Her auburn hair always had this natural wave to it, something he wished she would let go wild.

As the breeze blew, some of her hair moved away from her face, revealing her jawline and neck he wanted so badly to kiss. She was breathtaking, but he would never build up the courage to say anything romantic to her...what was she going to do with a guy like him?

"My parents won't be home until late," he started. "Are y-you staying for supper?"

"Depends how much time we take," she said. "But if you're offering to cook me dinner, I will not be opposed to that."

"Yeah, um, okay," he stammered nervously.

"Why are you so nervous?" Paxton giggled. "Stop."

"Sorry, you're just, you're really pretty," he said and unlocked the door, his face a deep red as he squeezed his eyes shut, regretting saying that.

"Ah, take all this makeup off and I look like everybody else," she said with a dazzling smile as she stepped into his home.

She lifted her leg, taking notice of how clean and organized the home was, to unclip her wedge sandals. At her house, she truly didn't care what she dragged in, there was a live-in maid, a butler, and their chef at their beck and call whenever they needed it. Paxton did over-abuse what she had, but respecting other people's homes was always top of that list.

"You can leave them on," he said, pointing upstairs. "We're just going to my room."

She fixed the bag on her shoulder and followed him up the stairs. Very few family photos hung on the walls. There were more family photos in her home, but the photos were mostly faked or edited since it was rare to have all three of them in the same room.

Grayson pushed open his door, a large sign that read *Look Out, Aliens Afoot* hung on the front of it. Paxton grinned and dropped her bag on his bed, sitting down on it as he quickly picked up some of the clothes and books that scattered the floor. He had many books in his room, his bookshelf spilling out as Lego models and video games also scattered the shelves. His nervousness was expressed in the redness of his face. It was no lie that the two of them would never be seen together, let alone having to study a subject she couldn't grasp, yet there was something about Grayson that Paxton wanted to get to know. She wanted to poke and pry into his brain, simply listening to the sound of his husky voice was enough for her to know that they were destined to be friends—and if she had it her way, so much more.

“First time we ever speak and you already got me in your bed,” she joked and leaned back on her elbows. Grayson didn't say anything, his cheeks reddening even more as he placed the pile of books on his desk.

“U-um,” he stuttered nervously.

“Say *um* again, and I'll throw a pillow at you,” she chimed.

Grayson chuckled, realizing that maybe she wasn't so bad after all and her beauty was so much more than what other people perceived.

He took his history notebook from his desk and sat at the edge of the bed. “What do you need help with?” he asked, holding his notebook in hand and looking up at her, his heart fluttering.

She sat upright, ashamed to show him her quiz, but she needed all the help she could get. She took her quiz from her bag and unfolded it, handing it to him. He raised his eyebrows as he looked at the mark and she sighed.

“It just won't go in for some reason,” she replied, tapping her temple. “I've tried really hard, and I do study, I swear. It just doesn't click with me.”

“Well, we have a month to get it to click. If you're serious, I think we can, um, we can work on this together to get you there,” he said, putting her quiz on top of his notebook. She took the pillow from his bed and hit him with it, emitting laughter between the two of them.

She chuckled, smiling at him. “I warned you.” He removed his glasses to fix the pieces of hair that escaped, glancing at her before he removed the elastic.

“Should we set up a schedule before we start?” he asked, retying his hair into a manbun.

She moved closer to him, taking his chin and turning it to her. Nerves struck him and his palms became sweaty once again. A small part of him thought she was going to kiss him for some reason, but he realized something like that would never happen. Especially from a girl like her.

“You have really nice eyes,” she commented. “You should show them off sometimes.”

He scoffed with a nervous chuckle. “Not like anyone would notice.”

“I'd notice,” she added, smirking.

A grin spread on his blushing face and he looked away from her to the quiz and notebook on his lap and slid his glasses back on his face. Grayson wasn't usually this nervous around girls, before moving to town and attending Solar High, he had a serious girlfriend, Amy, back home, they were somewhat affectionate, they appeared to be inseparable, and many of the other girls at school were jealous of his ex-girlfriend because Grayson was one of the better-looking guys in school. When he moved, Grayson shut down, he hated moving and his family seemed to do that quite often, resulting

in him having to start over again and again. He didn't care that they moved away from Amy, frankly, he was happy they ended. He hated moving because he was shy and hated experiencing new things. He never tried to make friends, knowing it was going to be short-lived. He never tried to get a girlfriend either, his self-esteem was too insecure for that. Every six months to a year, they picked up and jetted off on his father's next business venture. Except for their last move. They were living there for well over three years, and Grayson was finally happy with his life, his studies, and his friends. Until he moved and had to start over again.

"So, a schedule?" he persisted.

"A schedule," she agreed, taking her phone from her bag.

She opened a new contact and typed out Grayson's name, handing him the phone. He entered his number and she immediately sent him a text message so he'd have her number as well.

Um, she sent it with a winking emoji. He fished for his phone from his pocket and chuckled when he saw her message.

"I don't have a busy social life like you do, so I'm usually free every day unless I have something with my family," he added.

She narrowed her eyes. "And who says I have a busy social life?"

"Oh, I just assumed because you're, um," he said, looking down at his phone.

She hit him with the pillow again and chuckled. "I'm not like everyone thinks I am, y'know. I don't sit in front of a mirror all day and tell myself how pretty I am while brushing my hair and applying lipstick," she said, licking her painted lips. Grayson couldn't help but stare at them, two plump pillows he wanted to kiss. "Most nights I'm home alone watching movies or listening to music."

"And hanging out with your boyfriend," Grayson added for some reason.

"No," she scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Don't believe everything you see, cute stuff. I assure you that's one part of my life that's the biggest lie."

Grayson didn't say anything and looked back at his phone, opening his calendar app. They had exactly a month to get Paxton up to date with what she didn't know. He knew he could do it, school came easy for Grayson. He even skipped a grade, but no one needed to know that.

"I, um, I didn't mean to assume—" he started, but was interrupted by Paxton hitting his arm with a pillow again. He let out a laugh, insatiable and contagious.

"I don't have anything planned for the next little while—and before you say anything, I don't usually go to the parties that Jack or Dean throw unless it's my birthday and my birthday already passed. So, I'm all yours for as long as you need me—or for as long as I need you, I should say," she said, smiling.

"I'm free, too. Just a warning, I'm the eldest of four, so by the time they all pile in, it might get loud in here," he mentioned, glancing at her as he pushed his glasses up his nose.

"No one's usually home at my place, and if they are, Dad's in his office, and Mom's lost in a bottle of red. We'll get loads of privacy there," she suggested.

"Okay," he agreed, looking at his calendar. "Monday to Thursday at your place, Friday at mine? My parents don't come home until later on Fridays, I have to make supper for everyone."

She smirked. "Does that mean I get to meet your siblings?"

"I-if you stay for supper, yeah," he said, nodding. "If you want to, that is."

“What about weekends?” she asked. “Would it bother you if we studied weekends, too?”

“No,” he said. “I usually spend my Sundays studying, anyway.”

“And Saturday?”

“I, um, don’t do much, unless my friends want to hang out,” he said, then chuckled before Paxton could hit him with the pillow.

“Then it’s settled.” She clapped her hands and took off her wedge sandals, getting comfortable on his bed. “After school, we’ll hang out at my place—except Fridays—and weekends we’ll play it by ear?”

“Sounds good to me.” He got comfortable on the bed as well, opening his notebook and looking up at her as she smiled at him. She had such a beautiful smile.

*

For the next two hours, they studied the first module. Some parts Paxton got instantly, other parts she struggled with, though Grayson didn’t judge her or get frustrated. They would’ve continued studying, too, but a ruckus began and the stomps of his siblings echoed throughout the home. It didn’t take his youngest siblings long before barging into his room. His door opened and his little brother and sister stormed in, heading directly for the bed and bouncing on it behind Paxton.

“Maggie, Josh, get out!” Grayson exclaimed, nearly lying on Paxton as he leaned over her to grab his younger siblings.

“I’m telling Mom you have a girl in your bed,” Maggie sang as she jumped off the bed and onto the floor.

“Just get out,” Grayson demanded.

Josh jumped off next and they ran out of his room, leaving the door open as his other brother, Wyatt, marched up the stairs. Grayson got to his feet as Paxton was chuckling, still lying on her side as her head leaned on her hand. A sigh left him when he grabbed his doorknob and his brother checked Paxton out, raising his eyebrows at Grayson. He shut the door and turned to Paxton as she grinned, biting her bottom lip.

“You need to lock your door,” she pointed out.

“I would need a lock on it to do that,” he said, blushing from embarrassment.

“They’re cute,” she mentioned.

He nodded. “That’s Maggie and Josh, they’re twins and the youngest of the bunch. And my other brother is Wyatt, he’s just a year younger than me.”

“Must be nice to have a packed house all the time,” she thought out loud for she never had such a packed house—aside from the business dinners and parties her parents threw.

“It gets annoying,” he said, making his way back to the bed. “I have to start supper...”

“Then let’s get to it, cute stuff,” she said and sat upright. “I could use a break.”

“You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to,” he said, watching as she put her wedge sandals back on.

“If you want me to leave, I will,” she said, smirking.

“No, no, o-of course not, I just don’t want you to feel obligated to stay.” He shrugged, scratching at the back of his head.

“It feels like you don’t want me here,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“I do, sorry, I do—I don’t usually have friends over and you’ll get bombarded with questions and embarrassing stories about me. I’m saving you from yourself,” he said, letting out a breath.

She nodded, that unwanted feeling washing over her. “Oh.”

Paxton never had that feeling before, people always wanted her around and wanted her to join them. Something was different about Grayson; it seemed that maybe being labeled in their school was somewhat of a good thing. Clashing with someone who wasn’t part of the same label seemed to be nothing but judgement. For the first time, Paxton felt rejected.

“Um,” he stammered.

“Yeah, that’s okay. I’ll head out and we can meet up tomorrow.”

“No, no.” He let out a frustrated breath and put his palm on his face, dragging it down. “Stay.”

She chuckled. “Getting whiplash over here.”

“Sorry, you just—you make me nervous,” he admitted.

“I noticed.” She laughed, fixing her jean skirt as she stood. Grayson gave her a once-over, then looked at the ground, her long legs were making it hard for him not to stare. “I’ll just leave, it’s no biggie. I’ll come pick you up tomorrow morning and we can hang out at my place.”

He sighed. “I feel like a dick right now.”

“Don’t sweat it, cute stuff,” she said, tapping his chest lightly and taking her bag from his bed. “I’ll text you when I wake up.”

“I asked you to stay for dinner earlier without taking my brothers and sister into account—”

“It’s okay!” She laughed. “You just owe me a dinner.”

She opened his door and looked back at him with a smile as she made her way to the staircase. Grayson followed her, feeling utterly horrible for making her leave suddenly, but he didn’t want to make her feel like she had to put a smile on her face and act like she was enjoying herself around his family.

“Who’re you?” Maggie asked, popping her head out from behind the couch.

“I’m Paxton,” Paxton said with a smile.

“Are you Grayson’s girlfriend?” Josh asked, popping out right beside Maggie. Grayson put a hand on his face again and blushed as Paxton let out a chuckle.

“No, he’s my friend,” Paxton said, nodding.

“Grayson’s friends don’t look like you,” Maggie pointed out. “All his friends are boys.”

“I guess I’m the lucky one,” Paxton said, gazing at Grayson.

“Can you stay for supper? We’re having spaghetti!” Maggie asked excitedly as she jumped on the couch.

“Not this time,” Paxton replied.

“Please?” Maggie said.

“Yeah, please?” Josh added.

“God, I’m sorry,” Grayson whispered.

Paxton smiled. “I promise, I’ll stay over next time.”

“Just, um, yeah, just stay,” Grayson said, his face staying a deep red.

“I really don’t have to,” she said, entirely confused at his indecisiveness.

“I want you to,” he admitted, meeting her eyes.

She chuckled. "You're one confusing human being, you know that."

"I'm sorry." He sighed. "Here, let me bring your purse back to my room."

Paxton handed him her very heavy bag and crossed her arms, watching him jog up the stairs to his room. Maggie and Josh leaned their heads in their hands as they stared Paxton up and down. One thing the family all had were those blue, sparkling eyes. Maggie's hair was in pigtails, the same dirty blonde as Grayson's. Josh's head was shaved, though he was a much lighter blonde. Paxton didn't get a good look at Wyatt, but the small glance she stole; he sure did look a lot like Grayson. They were nearly the same height as well.

"You're really pretty," Maggie said.

"Oh, thank you," Paxton replied as Grayson jogged back down the stairs.

"You look like a doll," Maggie continued.

Josh grimaced. "Grayson's old girlfriend looked like a troll."

"Oh?" Paxton laughed and Grayson let out a deep breath. "Well, I'm not his girlfriend and I'm sure she was very pretty."

Grayson cocked his head to follow him to the kitchen, his cheeks still a deep pink.

Paxton wished she knew how to cook, whenever she wanted something, the live-in chef her parents hired would cook it for her. As amazing as it was, she barely knew how to make herself a grilled cheese.

Grayson took a bag of spaghetti from the cupboard and a jar of tomato sauce, placing them on the counter by the stove. She watched him lean down and take a pot, filling it with water and igniting the gas stove. The muscles in his arms flexed, their defined curvature made Paxton wonder what he looked like shirtless.

He sighed. "Sorry for being flaky."

"It's okay, you know, if you don't want me to stay, I can leave. I'll sneak out the back or something," she mentioned.

He shrugged. "No, don't do that. I asked you to stay for dinner, then got cold feet because of my siblings. Sorry for that, I just don't want you to judge me or my family."

"And who says I'd do that? I keep telling you I'm not this bitch you perceive me to be. Just because I'm popular, doesn't mean I'm going to act like it," she said, raising her eyebrows.

"Your friends sure do act a lot like it," Grayson pointed out.

"And they aren't really my friends just people I hang out with so I'm not alone at school," she said. "And if you really feel that way about me, then I think I'm going to leave. I don't need you judging me when you don't even know me."

She shook her head and rolled her eyes, marching out of the kitchen to Grayson's room, where she grabbed her bag and swung it over her shoulder.

Paxton's life was private, and many people judged her for being the popular girl in school, instead of taking a second and getting to know her. She hated being that bimbo-airhead people labeled her as, she was so much more than that.

Paxton let out a deep aggravated breath and marched down the stairs, her clunky wedges making more noise than she intended. She grabbed her keys from her bag and opened the front door.

The afternoon sun was setting, making the warm day much cooler. Goosebumps covered her exposed arms and legs as she yanked open the door to her car and hopped in.

Grayson didn't come after her, frankly, he had no reason to. He owed her nothing, and she owed him just as much. She let out a frustrated sigh and started her car, backing out of his driveway and making the trek back to her place. So much for having someone to help her with her studies—something she desperately needed.

She turned the volume up on the radio and drowned out her mind with music. She couldn't understand how something so minuscule was bothering her so much. She owed nothing to Grayson and he owed nothing to her, yet for some reason, his opinion of her was bothersome. She wanted him to see that she wasn't that *desperate for attention* girl everybody said she was. There were days where she would love to be hidden from the world, to walk down a hallway and have no one notice her. They always did, always.

She drove up her long driveway and parked her car in its usual spot, taking her bag with her as she stomped into her home. As usual, the sound of her father's voice moved through the silence, his arguing and loud rants overlapped as it escaped the closed doors of his study. Paxton didn't even bother greeting her mother in the living room, she went straight for her room and fell face-first onto her bed.

A deep breath escaped her as she lay there in her king-size bed of white fluffy pillows and a thick comforter. She rolled onto her back, hearing her phone chime a few times—ignoring it most of the afternoon at Grayson's. She took her phone seeing a slew of messages from her friends. None of them were important, mostly asking her if she was going to the party tonight, and at this point, she felt like she just might need a few drinks. There were messages from Jack and Grayson. Her first instinct was to open Grayson's, but she opened Jack's instead.

JACK: *Toots, just wanted to know if you're going to the party tonight. I'm not going in the end*

She knew that it meant he was off with God knows who.

PAXTON: *Wasn't planning on it.*

JACK: *I'm busy now, but wanna come over later?*

PAXTON: *No, thanks.*

JACK: *C'mon, toots. I miss you <3*

PAXTON: *And sometimes I miss you, too, but be realistic here, Jack.*

JACK: *I am! I fucked up and want you back.*

PAXTON: *Why? Because you saw me leave with another guy?*

JACK: *Are you trying to piss me off?*

She groaned and closed their thread, wondering what the use was of keeping up with this charade. She was over it and he just stayed so his secret wouldn't be exposed. Opening the messages from Grayson, she was already annoyed with Jack, she could only imagine what Grayson had to say.

GRAYSON: *I'm sorry, you're right, I shouldn't judge someone I don't know.*

Paxton shook her head with a scoff, looking at the flashing cursor where she would type a new message wondering what to say. If he wanted to judge her, then so be it. Her life wouldn't change with or without him in it.

PAXTON: *Don't worry about it, and don't worry about tutoring me, either. I'm sure my parents can find me someone since I'm the typical rich girl and all.*

Grayson read the message and felt even worse than he did when she stormed out and he didn't follow after her. He locked his phone and tossed it on the kitchen table, frustrated with himself for pushing her away when he didn't even have to. She was nothing but nice to him and he let a stupid remark ruin his chance of having her as a friend.

Paxton locked her phone, dropped it beside her, and rose from her bed. She undressed, unbuckling her wedge sandals last, and stepped into the shower. The water fell on her like rain, washing away her makeup. Paxton never truly worried about school, she always passed by the skin of her teeth, and if she didn't, there was always her father's money to help. She hated that most of all and just wanted to pass without his help. She failed all her life without realizing it, and this time, well, this time she didn't think she'd be able to succeed without his help again.

She bathed quickly and towel-dried her hair, building up the courage to ask her mother if she could hire a tutor for her. Paxton had asked many times before, always getting the same answer and feeling bad about herself.

Marry a rich man and you won't need a tutor, Paxton.

A tutor? Why rot your brain with that stupidity? Men like submissive women, not one smarter than them.

And people wondered why Paxton forced a smile and kept to herself when she could.

She threw on a gray dress and marched out of her room, ignoring the chimes coming from her phone. Her mother was still in the living room, one empty bottle on the glass coffee table, and another in her hand, filling the glass.

"Darling, how was school?" Georgia asked, sipping her wine.

"It was, it was okay...that's what I came to ask you about," Paxton started. "I'm failing history, is there anyone we can hire to help me?"

Georgia let out a menacing cackle, holding onto her stomach as she leaned back. Paxton shook her head and folded her arms, the same response she always got, wondering why she didn't ask her father first.

"Oh, darling, you don't need a tutor. You need to find yourself a rich man and marry him. School doesn't matter and won't matter so long as you have someone bringing in the money," Georgia slurred, sipping her wine. Same answer, different day.

"I want to go to college, Mom, you know this, or at least try—"

"Oh, please, you don't need to stress that gorgeous head of yours," Georgia added. "Stress gives wrinkles and wrinkles are the enemy."

Paxton scoffed and rolled her eyes as she marched off, thinking maybe her father might be of some help. She opened the door to her father's study and he spotted her, putting a finger up to advise that he'd be a moment. She sat in front of his desk and waited for him to get off the phone. He nodded and hung up.

After a few moments, Frank looked up at her. "What'll be, Paxton?"

"I wanted to ask again if you could hire me a tutor or something. I'm failing history," she admitted.

"What did your mother say?" Frank asked.

She scoffed. "She said I don't need an education, that I should marry someone rich."

"She's right," Frank agreed with Georgia, and they weren't even in the same room. His phone went off again and Frank answered it. "Hi, David, yeah just a moment—Paxton, I have work to do. Go back to whatever it was you were doing. Don't worry about school, either. I'll make sure even if you fail history, you'll graduate."

"But that's not right, that's not—"

"Paxton!" Frank blared.

She grumbled and left his study, deciding to just go back to her room instead. There was no denying her parents were very neglectful, she was raised by the countless nannies that walked in and out of the house. Nannies that she could barely remember their names because all she wanted was the love and affection from the people that made her. Paxton learned to be very independent at a young age. Depending on no one but herself for so long. Even when she and Jack were going strong, she never leaned on him for support. She had herself to do that.

She locked the door to her room and lay back on her bed, her wet hair sending a chill through her. As privileged as she was, she sometimes wished she had another life.

Her phone chimed, reminding her that she had missed messages. Jack wrote to her again, as did Grayson. She opened Jack's message first, wondering why she still gave a crap about him.

JACK: *Are you guys dating?*

PAXTON: *No, he's just tutoring me.*

Three dots popped up and disappeared as quickly as they came and Paxton rolled her eyes, annoyed with why they were continuing this façade of being in a relationship when it was over long ago.

She opened Grayson's messages, and a smile spread to her lips.

GRAYSON: *All right, let's start over. I'm Grayson Beckett, eldest of four, I got blonde-ish hair, blue eyes, and I'm kinda really tall. I'm a nerd, but we don't need to label anyone. Mr. Donald asked me to tutor this really pretty girl who makes me all flustered, and I might've said some stupid shit to make her not like me, but I think we should still work together so she can see I'm not a dick and I'm a really nice guy because I would really like to be her friend and help her pass history and graduate if that's okay?*

PAXTON: *Paxton Chase, pretty face, but dumb as shit, and I think we can work well together, Mr. Beckett, so long as you don't act like a dick anymore ;)*

Paxton didn't know it, but she emitted a smile on the other end of the phone as Grayson read the message.

GRAYSON: *See you in the morning ;)*

It would be easy for Paxton to brush him off and tell him to shove his head where the sun don't shine, but something about Grayson made her see things differently. She truly wanted to be friends with him, and who knew, maybe she'd put her guard down and let them turn into something more than the labels they were given.