Chapter One

*Haley*

I turned into the Greenbrier High school parking lot with a singular mission: figure out a way to keep my brothers from chasing off every guy who seemed interested in me. Telling them to mind their own business hadn’t worked. What I needed was a guy who wouldn’t let my brothers intimidate him. A guy who was confident enough to stand up to them. At this point I didn’t even care if I liked the guy, he just needed to prove I was datable. Maybe I should put an ad online. Honor student seeks overly self-confident young man for fake relationship. Terms negotiable.

But that might bring the weirdos out of the woodwork, and I wasn’t that desperate...yet.

I parked my yellow Volkswagen Bug and I’d barely stepped out of the car when my best friend Jane descended on me. “Tell me it’s true,” Jane demanded. “What are you talking about?” She jumped up and down in her brown, furry Uggs.

“Everyone’s talking about it, Haley. It’s so exciting.” I placed one hand on her shoulder to make her stand still. Merry-go-rounds make me sick. Watching her bounce after I had scarfed down a glazed doughnut on the drive to school wasn’t a good idea. “Everyone’s talking about what?” “Bryce Colton is telling everyone you hooked up after

the bonfire Friday night.” “What?” Everyone in the parking lot turned and stared.

Okay, maybe I said that a little loud. I hooked my arm through Jane’s and steered her toward the sidewalk. “I went to the bonfire with you. Do you remember seeing me naked with Bryce Colton?”

She pouted and kicked a rock off the sidewalk. “I thought maybe you went back after you dropped me off.”

“Why do you sound disappointed?” “It would be nice if one of us had a sex life.” I laughed so hard I snorted. That’s one of the reasons

I’m best friends with Jane. I never know what she’s going to say.

“Sorry to disappoint you. My life is as boring as ever.”

She tugged me toward the main entrance of the school. “That’s not true. You’re the talk of the school.”

And that’s when I noticed my fellow students whispering and pointing. “Crap, do you think my brothers have heard?”

Jane took off at a run, dragging me with her.

Clutching my backpack, I concentrated on keeping up with her. “What are you doing?”

“We have to find Bryce before your brothers kill him.”

Why the sudden interest in Bryce’s safety? Better question, why would he start a rumor about me? He was a gorgeous, popular, country-club golden boy known for organizing the Golf-a-thon charity event to help raise money for cancer research since his freshman year.

As Jane pulled me down the math hall, I allowed a fantasy to spin in my head. Bryce started the rumor due to his overwhelming crush on me. Yeah. Right. I’d been secretly lusting after him since sophomore year, just like every other female in a fifty-mile radius. Not that I’d admit it. It’s not like we had anything in common. He was a year older, and we didn’t run in the same social circles.

I geeked out with the honor students while he hung with the high-class jocks who lettered in tennis and golf. He lived in one of the new McMansions down the road from the country club. My dad owned the landscaping company the country club hired to mow the grass. In short, he existed on a different plane than a mere mortal like me.

Rationally, I knew I should be angry about the rumor that made it sound like my name and number would soon be scrawled on the boys’ bathroom wall. My reputation, not that I had much of one, was at stake. But as pathetic as it might sound, thanks to my brothers’ interference in my social life, this was the most exciting moment of my junior year, so far.

We slowed down as we rounded the corner into the biology hall. Bryce stood lounging in front of his locker, wearing a crisp white shirt and khakis. I felt underdressed in the Levi’s and the black Talk Nerdy to Me sweatshirt I’d thrown on this morning.

With his blond hair, broad shoulders, and perpetual tan,

Bryce looked like a California underwear model. Not that I’d thought about him in his underwear.

Much.

He was talking with his friend Nathan. Where Bryce had the whole tan, blond, hazel-eyed thing going on, Nathan was fair with dark hair and dark eyes. They looked like opposite sides of the same coin. A really hot, totally unreachable coin that a collector would keep in a special locked case, which normal girls like myself were not allowed to touch.

Bryce glanced up as we came to a stop in front of him. It was probably the first time he’d noticed me. I was cute, but he tended to date girls with boobs bigger than my head.

Trying to look angry rather than curious, I did the hands- on-my-hips maneuver, which told my brothers I meant business. For extra emphasis, I threw in a glare. “Why are you telling people we hooked up after the bonfire?”

His eyes roamed from my dark blond shoulder-length hair down to my knock-off tennis shoes and back up again. “Who’re you?”

“I’m Haley Patterson.”

He shook his head. “The Haley I hooked up with has red hair.”

“Haley Hoffman has red hair.” I held my hand six inches above my head. “She’s about this tall and wears a lot of makeup.”

“That’s her,” Bryce confirmed. “She said her name was Haley Patterson.”

I turned to Jane. “Why would she use my name?”

Jane gave Bryce the same once over he’d given me. “Maybe she was slumming and didn’t want anyone to find out.”

I laughed.

Bryce’s eyes narrowed. Apparently, he didn’t appreciate my friend’s sense of humor. He opened his mouth to return Jane’s volley and then paused staring down the hall like a freight train was headed our way. I followed his line of sight and discovered Haley Hoffman coming down the hall, holding hands with a guy who looked familiar, like I’d seen him hang around with my brothers. Huge didn’t begin to describe him. He could’ve doubled for a pro-wrestler.

In an unexpected move, Bryce reached for my hand and pulled me to his side. “Play along. We’ll straighten this out later.”

Good Lord, the school hottie was touching me. It felt like I’d won some sort of geek-girl lottery. And depending on how this played out, Bryce could be the answer to my boyfriend problems. If he wanted me to cover for him, then he needed to help me with my overprotective brothers.

When they reached us, the other Haley winked at me. “Hi, Haley. Denny came back from his cage-fighting match this Sunday, and we got back together.” She held out her left hand. “Look at the promise ring he gave me. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Not the word I would have used to describe the silver band with red and pink heart-shaped stones, but she seemed to like it, so I nodded. “Very nice.”

“Anyway,” she laughed, “someone told Denny I hooked up with Bryce after the bonfire. Isn’t that ridiculous?”

Denny kept coming until he was toe-to-toe with Bryce. “Why are people saying they saw you with my girl?”

Technically, Denny and the other Haley had been broken up, but mentioning that probably wouldn’t make

much difference. Denny didn’t seem like the live-and-let- live kind of guy.

Bryce kept his cool and chuckled. “Do I look that stupid?”

“We do have the same first name,” I volunteered.

Denny squinted at me. I could almost see the hamster on a wheel turning the engine in his brain as he worked to figure out who I was. “You’re Charlie and Matt’s kid sister, right?”

I nodded.

Jerking his head toward Bryce, he said, “You hook up with him Friday night?”

“No.” Even though the rumor that I’d had wild post- bonfire sex with Bryce gave me a perverse thrill, I wasn’t about to let people believe it was true. Bryce’s grip on my hand tightened. Time to let Bryce know how this game was going to play out. “When he said we were together, he meant we’re dating, not that we hooked up. You know how people exaggerate.”

Bryce squeezed my hand tighter. I dug my nails into his palm and he backed off.

“Your brothers are going to kick his ass,” Denny predicted.

I was betting Bryce was the one guy my brothers couldn’t intimidate.

At that moment, my older, fraternal-twin brothers, Charlie and Matt, rounded the corner. Together they were a formidable sight. Thick-muscled and broad-shouldered, they would’ve made great football players if they’d given a crap about team sports. It was no wonder they’d managed to chase off any guy who had ever acted interested in me.

A small crowd followed, spoiling for a fight. Denny stepped aside, allowing my brothers to reach Bryce. Before they could throw a punch, I said, “We didn’t hook up. We’re dating.”

Eyes narrowed, Charlie said, “He doesn’t date. He hooks up and moves on.”

Bryce smirked and put his arm around my shoulders. “Maybe I like your sister.”

My body was pressed against Bryce’s from shoulder to hip. He smelled warm and spicy like the expensive cologne at the mall. Heat seeped through his clothes, warming my skin and making my face flush.

“Haley, tell me you’re not dating this jerk,” Matt said.

“He hasn’t been a jerk to me yet.” Not that I had high hopes for him being a nice guy.

Matt crossed his arms over his chest. “How did this happen?”

Good question. Best to stick with something close to the truth. “Well...I pick up donations for the animal shelter from the pro shop at the country club once a week. We started talking, and one thing led to another.”

There that didn’t sound so bad. Matt’s stance relaxed a bit. Charlie reached up to rub his chin. A sure sign he was

plotting something. “Student Council started selling tickets for the

Homecoming Dance this morning. If you’re dating, you’ll want to buy a pair.” He turned to the crowd. “Who’s got tickets?”

“I do.” A tall girl dug into her backpack and came out with an envelope. She pulled out two tickets and passed

them to my brother, who in turn held them out to Bryce.

Homecoming? I’m going to Homecoming with Bryce Colton?

Jane started bouncing.

Without hesitation, Bryce took out his wallet, removed several twenty-dollar bills, and handed them to my brother. Must be nice. If I was lucky, I had enough money in my pocket to buy a soda and a pack of gum.

The girl took Bryce’s money, and my brother passed me the tickets, which I slid into my backpack. The homeroom bell rang. Matt and Charlie looked at me expectantly. I rolled my eyes. “Like I’m stupid enough to leave him alone with you two.”

Matt snorted. Charlie shook his head. “I don’t like this.” The situation was not ideal, but I could use Bryce to

my advantage. Fake-dating Bryce could eliminate the anti- boyfriend barrier my over-protective brothers had created around me. But since they meant well, I offered them an olive branch “If Bryce annoys me, you can hit him. Fair enough?”

Bryce glared at me. I gave him my most innocent smile. “Walk me to homeroom?”

He spent a moment sizing up my brothers and must’ve come to the conclusion I was the lesser of three evils. “Sure.” Keeping up the pretense of togetherness, Bryce walked down the hall with his hand on the small of my back. No one had ever done that before. It was annoying and exhilarating at the same time. On the one hand, I didn’t need to be

steered. On the other hand, Bryce was touching me. When we reached my homeroom, he crossed his arms

over his chest, and spoke in a quiet voice. “I appreciate your help back there, but we aren’t dating. We aren’t going to the Homecoming Dance. By the end of school today we’ll break up and go our separate ways.”

Since he didn’t seem to understand the situation, I felt it my duty to enlighten him. “Wrong. You started this stupid rumor and half the school probably believes it’s true. Now you have to stick around and pretend to be my boyfriend to convince everyone I don’t have sex with random guys. Not to mention the fact that if you’d kept your mouth shut about getting laid, you wouldn’t be in this situation.”

He raised a brow. “So you’re my punishment?”

A spark went off in my brain. I may not be centerfold material, but I wasn’t a troll. Poking him in the chest, I said, “I clean animal enclosures at the shelter twice a week. Unless you want to find your shiny, black Mustang filled with dog shit, I suggest you play nice.”

“You want me to pretend to be your boyfriend so people won’t think you sleep around?”

“Yes, but there’s more to it than that. If I pretend we’re dating, then I’m saving you from Denny. If you pretend we’re dating, then other boys will see that, despite my brothers, I’m datable.”

“Are your brothers still watching us?” I nodded. “Good.” Before I could figure out why he asked, he leaned down

and pressed his mouth against mine. His lips were soft and warm and he tasted like cinnamon gum. My brain shut down. When he pulled away I was shocked into silence.

“Detention for both of you,” my homeroom teacher

declared. “Public displays of affection are not tolerated in this school.”

My first detention. Totally worth it. Ignoring the tidal wave of whispers surrounding me, I

entered my homeroom and recapped the morning. Haley Hoffman used my name to cover up her pre-promise-ring- fling with Bryce. Bryce went along with the lie to avoid a beating from Denny. I used the lie to trap Bryce into being my boyfriend and break the bubble of “protection” my brothers had created around me. He kissed me to annoy my brothers and land me in detention.

Best Monday ever.