



The Dare



Dayo Benson

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Some Scripture is taken from the New King James Version of the Bible.

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Dedication

For every young person who has ever been discouraged by a moral failing in a parent or authority figure.

From the Back Cover

A good girl with an edge, a bad boy with a heart, and a devastating secret.

Sloane:

"I dare you to kiss Marshal."

If I knew what was good for me I would have run a mile when I heard those words. But I didn't, and now Marshal, the campus bad boy, is stalking me—his version of courting.

Marshal:

I'll admit to nobody that I'm a sheep in wolf's clothing. My reputation served me well until Sloane got close enough to peel away the façade.

But our parents have a crazy secret that is tearing Sloane apart. And it might spell doom for our relationship—just when I've lost my heart.

Is love enough for Marshal and Sloane, or are there too many obstacles?

Chapter 1: Sloane

Marshal Aaronson was probably the most dangerous guy on campus. I generally kept my distance.

I watched him from beneath my lashes as I fiddled with my cell phone, trying to look busy for the benefit of any guys who might try to catch my eye. The last thing I needed was guys trying to talk to me and get my number.

Loud thumping music pounded from the speakers, seeming to echo in my chest. Spotlights in every color flashed all over the hall. I usually avoided college parties, because once the guys got a little alcohol into their system they were all hands. I wasn't in the mood to have to think up polite ways of saying 'get lost', and I really didn't want to have to slap anybody.

I *had* had to slap in the past, the time Noel Jones, under the influence of Dutch courage, followed me into the ladies' room at Bar Heat and tried to kiss me. He actually did manage to kiss me for a few seconds before I overcame my shock, slammed him against the wall, and slapped him hard when he advanced again. It had been unpleasant for all parties involved.

I rubbed my temples, where I seemed to have an ever-present dull ache these days. It didn't help that the music was too loud, and the hall was so dark. I wasn't sure whose bright idea it had been to have a smoke machine. The fight was starting in ten minutes, so we really needed to actually be able to see the fight.

"Baby," came a drawl from behind me. "Can I buy you a drink?"

I knew it! I immediately began to head toward the door, not bothering to turn and see who was talking to me. For all I knew he could be blazing hot. *Even if he is, I have a boyfriend.*

"C'mon, girl." A hand clamped down hard on my shoulder.

I turned in annoyance. I paused, just to check if he was hot. Nope. "Get your hands off me."

He was big and burly, with thick brows and bloodshot eyes that hinted at more than just alcohol being responsible for his presumption that any girl would be interested in his company. I wasn't small by any stretch of the imagination, but this guy dwarfed me.

"Geez, girl. I just wanted to buy you a drink."

I felt slightly guilty at the hurt look in his eyes, but at least he removed his hand from my shoulder. I heaved a sigh of relief as he walked away. I had a thing about being approached by guys at clubs or parties. I hated it.

I noticed a few other guys around, watching. One gave me a tentative smile. I ignored him. From experience I knew that if I smiled back he'd only take it as an invitation to come over.

I turned away and cast a surreptitious glance across the room at Marshal again. I hated the way my heart thumped in my chest as I watched him. He was at least six-three with dark olive skin and an evening shadow darkening his jaw. He was every inch the rich bad boy stereotype, doing drugs, partying, womanizing.

He wasn't my usual kind of guy. I liked my guys clean-cut and law-abiding. I didn't subscribe to the whole bad boy thing that appealed to most girls. So I wasn't sure why four years since the day I first laid eyes on Marshal, I still felt a flutter whenever I looked his way.

Not that I looked much, since I always avoided him like my life depended on it. His dad was a billionaire casino owner whose latest antics were always in the papers. Marshal himself was just bad news. I didn't need any complications at college. I got enough of those at home from my mom.

A group of girls in tiny skirts and crop tops jostled me as they walked past. A guy elbowed me as he guffawed loudly at something one of his friends said. I rubbed my arm. This fight needed to start already.

Marshal glanced in my direction, and my breath froze in my throat. Heat rushed to my face and I felt like I'd been caught stealing, or something. Then I remembered that the hall was in darkness, while he was in the spotlight, so he wouldn't be able to see me. At least not clearly. He looked away, his dark gaze settling on the boxing ring in front of him.

I sighed, relieved.

There was always something closed off and guarded about Marshal, and tonight was no exception. He looked every bit as dangerous as his reputation said he was.

A spotlight swept over him, momentarily illuminating him in a stream of red light. Unease fluttered in my chest like a caged butterfly. I hoped Marshal wouldn't completely murder Lawrence tonight. Lawrence was a good boxer, but this was Marshal he was fighting. It was for good reason that nobody messed with Marshal. He was plain scary.

I dragged my gaze to Lawrence, who was talking to his coach by the boxing ring. Lawrence was a big guy too, but Marshal's powerful build made Lawrence look slight. Not that I cared. I loved Lawrence, and I was rooting for him tonight. This wasn't one of his all-state inter-college boxing tournaments, but there was the matter of bragging rights, campus cred, and ego.

Marshal hasn't been boxing that long, I told myself. Lawrence has more experience.

But Marshal was built like a tank, with wide shoulders and biceps that bulged with muscles. An air of danger hovered around him the way cologne hovered around Lawrence. I didn't think I'd ever seen him smile. Probably a good thing. A guy that gorgeous probably shouldn't smile much. Girls got stupid enough around him as it was.

Just then, Grace and Rhiannon emerged from the crowd around me.

"Sloane!" Rhiannon yelled over the music. She held out a glass of something pink and sparkling.

I accepted it gratefully. "Thanks." I eyed their clothes. Rhiannon was wearing a teeny dress with a neckline that scooped almost down to her belly button. The middle of her black lacy bra was on show. Grace was wearing a playsuit with a neckline similar to Rhiannon's dress. Grace's bra was red. Suddenly my black turtle-necked dress felt like a nun's tunic. I was overdressed. No, overdressed meant I looked too good. Underdressed? Hmm, that wasn't the right word either.

Rhiannon ruffled my hair. "You get your hair colored?"

I slapped her hand away and smoothed my hair back. "Yeah." I liked to get my roots done at least a week before a pageant so that it didn't still look too bright and artificial.

She held a handful of her long golden blond hair next to mine. Mine was a couple shades darker to match my darker skin tone. "When's your next pageant?" she asked me.

"Next week Saturday." I didn't want to think about it. I'd been preparing, but when I checked the list of contestants yesterday I saw that Zara Holmes had entered just before the cut-off date. Zara won every pageant she entered so really, what was the point?

Grace smirked at me.

I gave her a dubious look. "What?"

"I put your name in the dares."

"What dares?"

"Ten names in a bucket, and ten dares in a bucket. One name and one dare get pulled out together."

I rolled my eyes. I'd heard about that. If someone refused to do their dare they had to pay a hundred bucks to the person who put the dare in the bucket. If they did do the dare, the person who put it in would pay them a hundred bucks. "You know I hate things like that."

"It's just a bit of fun, Sloane." Rhiannon flipped her bangs out of her eyes. "You hate parties, you hate guys coming on to you, you hate dares. Have I left anything out?"

"Yeah: I hate you."

Grace chortled.

Rhiannon rolled her eyes and handed me a pen and scrap of paper. "You need to write a dare for the bucket. Something that no one will want to do."

I considered it and then took the pen and paper from Rhiannon and scribbled something.

Grace took the paper from me when I finished, reading the dare I'd written. "Dance in your bra?"

Rhiannon snorted.

I shrugged. I wouldn't do that dare if I got it. I figured no one else would.

Grace shook her head and her dark curls, which were in a glamorous pile on her head, bobbed. She usually wore her hair straight, but she liked to unleash the 'fro for nights out. "Most of the girls here are tipsy and would dance in their bra in a heartbeat. They'd probably even dance naked. You're not going to make a hundred bucks with this dare."

"What did you write?" I asked her.

Grace's gaze skittered in Marshal's direction, and my heart missed a beat. She was always trying to get me to admit that I liked Marshal, but I never had. "If there is a dare in that bucket that has anything to do with Marshal, I am not participating, period."

"Too late," Grace returned. "Your name is in."

"Why did you put my name in?"

"Because you hardly ever come out with us, and now that you're out I want you to lighten up and have some fun."

"Yeah," Rhiannon agreed. "You're too focused on achieving goals, being a pageant queen, planning to start your own charity. What do they tell you in all those self-help seminars you attend? Do they say fun is evil, and slavish hard work is the only way to the top?"

I decided not to reply. Rhiannon was one of those girls who considered pageants anti-feminist and who thought all successful people were selfish and trampled on others on their way to the top, just because her father was like that. Whether pageants were anti-feminist or not, they were a good launching pad into public office.

"You know what all work and no play did to Jack?" Grace put in.

"Who the hell is Jack?" I asked. I sipped my drink. It was ice cold and sweet with a tangy kick. I eyed Grace's drink. We'd all been teetotal throughout college, but Grace's parents had split up over the summer, and when we got back in September she'd been partying harder than usual. And drinking.

"Before you ask, yes it's vodka and diet Coke," Grace muttered.

"What dare did you put in?" I asked her, before she thought I was judging her. "Tell me it was nothing to do with Marshal."

I eyed Rhiannon's drink. It looked like Coke, but I wouldn't be surprised if she was drinking vodka and Coke too. Rhiannon was always happy to go off the rails with whoever else wanted to.

Grace rolled her eyes. "I put to buy Marshal a drink."

My heart rate steadied somewhat. That wouldn't be all that embarrassing. If I got that dare I could just have a bartender send him the drink and he wouldn't even know it came from me.

Grace looked like she was only barely holding back a smirk. Rhiannon snorted with laughter.

I narrowed my gaze. "You're lying."

Just then, Lorna Griffiths emerged from the crowd around us and grabbed Rhiannon's hand. "Let's go dance."

Rhiannon wiggled her shoulders. "Yeah, let's show those girls on the dancefloor how to move."

"Just don't let your boobs pop out of your dress," I mumbled.

Rhiannon winked at me as she shimmied away with Lorna. "Stop hating."

The two of them minced over to the dance floor. I exhaled, pressing my back against the cool wall behind me. Why did I bother coming tonight? Oh yeah, Lawrence would be annoyed if I missed another of his fights. But I just didn't like boxing.

Grace slurped her drink through a pink straw. "How's your mom?"

It was a loaded question. I'd called Grace on Monday after my mom left for Vegas. She'd sat me down before leaving and told me she wanted me to stop doing pageants. It wasn't the first time she'd mentioned it, but it was the first time she'd sat me down and ordered me to stop.

I shrugged. "She's fine."

"She back from Vegas?"

"Yeah. She got back yesterday." I hadn't been to see her yet. She was currently in one of the pristine halls upstairs, holding a dinner for the delegates to her success summit which started tomorrow evening. It was pretty sad that we were currently in the same hotel but couldn't be bothered to meet up.

Grace slurped again, her eyes thoughtful. Some of her dark curls had escaped her updo. They hung around her large almond-shaped eyes. "Your mom is so nice. I can't imagine that she would say some of the things you tell me she says to you. If she was so against pageants, why did she let Sadie do them? Did she compare you to Sadie again?"

Being almost lifelong friends, Grace knew about a lot of my family drama. Not that there was much drama, apart from me and my mom clashing all the time.

I shrugged. "Sadie's her favorite."

"I don't get it. You and Sadie are like twins, except that you're taller. How can your mom ever say Sadie is prettier than you?"

I steeled myself against the memories Grace's words were dragging up. My mom had pushed my younger sister, Sadie, into pageants as a child. Sadie was gorgeous, and had that large-eyed innocent beauty, but she hadn't grown tall enough by the time she was in her preteens, whereas I got our dad's tall gene. I decided to get into pageants when Sadie stopped, but our mom had made me promise never to enter the ones that required swimwear.

Now she was against my participation in beauty pageants full stop, claiming that she'd only ever allowed it because she wasn't a serious Christian. Now that she was supposedly a more 'serious Christian' she considered anything where you were showing off your body morally wrong.

Grace sighed. "I know you and your mom don't have a great relationship, but be grateful." She paused, pursing her glossed lips. "My dad has a constant stream of other women,

and my mom has been a doormat for years. I'm glad she finally divorced him, but I'm not glad they're divorced, if you know what I mean."

I shifted my weight uncomfortably, my feet already screaming for release from the four-inch heels I was wearing. "Let's talk about something else, please."

Grace immediately began to talk about guys in the room. I was grateful. I laughed at her humorous commentary for the next few minutes, although I was only half-listening since my gaze kept straying to Marshal. I sipped my drink, irritated with myself. Marshal was no good. He might *look* good, but he was a bad boy—the kind of guy I needed to stay well away from.

Well, it didn't matter whether I stayed away from him or not. *He* didn't even know I existed, so nothing was ever going to happen. Even if he did know that I existed, he wouldn't be interested.

"You've spaced out on me," Grace said.

I didn't reply. I didn't feel like talking. The music was too loud for talking properly anyway. Over the past few minutes, the hall had filled up even more, and I was beginning to feel claustrophobic.

The music stopped abruptly and there was a loud chiming sound. I covered my ears. I was going to wind up deaf after tonight.

"Ladies..." a voice boomed all over the hall, "...and gentlemen..."

Grace grabbed my hand and dragged me further into the crowd, closer to the boxing ring.

"Welcome..."

I waved to Lawrence as he stepped away from his coach and stood behind Marshal. He didn't see me. I tried to catch his eye as the emcee warmed up the crowd and announced the fight, but he was staring into space. I guessed he needed to stay focused. God knew I didn't need the distraction of someone waving to me from the crowd during a pageant—if I had the nerve to disobey my mom and continue to do them.

Doing pageants gave me a strange sense of triumph. I loved my sister, Sadie, to bits, but she was so perfect and my mom adored her so much that it was good to be able to do something she couldn't do. And my dad was very supportive of my being a beauty queen. He wasn't a Christian and didn't go to church with me, mom and Sadie, but he was a much better person than many of the church folk I knew—especially my mom.

I snapped to attention when Marshal and Lawrence entered the ring. My gaze, of its own accord, traveled down the length of Marshal's wide muscled chest and ripped abs.

"Check him out," Grace cooed.

I tore my gaze away. I wasn't interested. "Who, Lawrence?" I focused on Lawrence. He was in good shape too.

"Lawrence my butt. I'm talking about Marshal. I really don't know why you're with Lawrence."

If ever you wanted tact, you wouldn't get it from Grace.

The fight started a few minutes later, and the chanting and screaming in the room reached deafening levels. I smiled as Lawrence advanced at Marshal, throwing punches, although Marshal ducked them all. Lawrence was on the offensive. That was good. He was taking charge from the get-go.

Lawrence took another swing at Marshal. Marshal blocked it. As Lawrence pulled his fist back to aim another punch, Marshal hit him square in the face. I grimaced as the noise in the room heightened. Lawrence staggered backward. Marshal punched him again, and I almost passed out on Lawrence's behalf. That looked bad.

"I *hate* boxing," I growled, almost gagging as Marshal continued to beat Lawrence like he was trying to kill him.

"What was that?" Grace yelled.

I cupped a hand over her ear. "I hate boxing."

Grace nodded her agreement. "Me too. It's brutal."

I looked back at the ring in time to see Marshal spraying Lawrence with punches. Blood was splattering from Lawrence's mouth.

I decided I'd had enough. I headed for the door. Two minutes. I'd lasted two minutes. Lawrence always called me a wuss, but I just couldn't handle it. Boxing wasn't a sport. It was just a chance for men to beat each other up and feel tough.

The noise was drastically muted in the foyer outside the hall. A woman sat at the reception desk, typing on a computer. Apart from her, the place was empty. Occasionally the noise in the hall would surge, and I knew someone was either down or getting pummeled.

I checked my cell phone as I waited. I had a message from my dad: *Are you coming home for lunch tomorrow?*

My dad liked Sadie and me to come home for Sunday lunch each week, despite the fact that we were both in college and it would be an hour's drive for me, and a three-hour drive for Sadie. He usually offered to send Sadie a car or insisted that she get a flight.

I'd be keener on going home if my mom was still away. It was terrible that I felt that way, but she always made me feel so small. Maybe I should try to meet with her tonight so that we could talk and have it out before lunch tomorrow. Dad and Sadie hated it when me and mom were on bad terms.

I found my mom's number in my contacts and called her. For some reason my heart thudded as the phone rang. I never felt this way calling my dad.

I'll just ask if we can meet up and talk after her dinner with her delegates, I told myself. I won't yell or cry when we talk. I will be a mature adult, which is what I am.

The phone continued to ring.

Maybe I can tell her that she makes me feel like I'm not good enough, and that she seems to prefer Sadie.

My mom's voicemail kicked in. I hung up. A part of me was relieved. I guess I didn't *really* want to speak to her.

My cell phone chimed and I looked at it. Another wave of relief hit when I saw that it was Grace, not my mom returning my call. Maybe the fight was over. I checked my watch. That was quick.

I made my way back toward the hall, my heeled shoes clicking loudly in the quiet foyer. The receptionist looked up and grinned at me before resuming her work.

I pushed through the doors to the fight hall. Marshal was crouched down in the ring, his dark eyes hard, his chest rising and falling. Where was Lawrence?

I pushed my way closer to the ring. Somehow, I managed to find Grace, Rhiannon and Lorna in the crowd. "Was it bad?" I asked.

Grace's eyes were wide. "He completely destroyed Lawrence. The medics had to take Lawrence away."

I frowned. Lawrence was supposed to be really good. He'd been to all-state championships. This was just a pathetic week-long college tournament that he'd entered as a training exercise in preparation for his next big tournament.

Marshal was announced the winner. He stood, his back muscles flexing as he straightened. He didn't look like he'd even broken a sweat. Maybe he was using performance-enhancing drugs or something.

The emcee tried to interview him, but he said little and just seemed to want to get out of the ring. A few minutes later, after all the ceremony with presenting him with his trophy, the loud music resumed, the spotlights woke up and began to scatter colors all over the hall, and everyone flocked either to the dancefloor or to the bar.

Grace, Rhiannon and Lorna started guy-watching.

I waited twenty minutes and then called Lawrence. He didn't pick up but he sent me a text message. He'd gone home. He was probably suffering more from the bruise to his ego than any physical pain. Although the physical pain must be a factor too.

Meanwhile, Marshal was standing in a shadowed corner of the hall, drinking from a suspicious bottle with no label and looking like nothing had happened. Three of his buddies flanked him—trouble-causers like him who were never up to any good. It was a wonder they'd made it to the final year of college along with the rest of us.

"I don't know if he's actually hot," Grace yelled into my ear. "Or if it's just the bad boy thing he's got going on that makes him hot. What do you think?"

I frowned. "Who?"

"Marshal." She wiggled her brows. "You've been staring at him all night."

"Can you not yell his name, please?"

"Never mind. The music is loud enough. We're good."

"Answer her question," Lorna said, smirking at me. A spotlight bathed Lorna's short black bob with blue.

I maintained as neutral an expression as I could, but my heart was racing. Pathetic, considering that this was a guy I'd never even spoken to before. "He's okay. Nothing amazing."

Grace and Rhiannon raised their brows. "Then why've you been staring at him?" Grace asked. "Why do you *always* stare at him?"

This conversation was beginning to annoy me. "I don't *always* stare at him." I downed my drink. "I'm going to get a refill."

I walked away before they could continue the conversation. Why couldn't I just admit it? I'd admitted to lots of crushes over the past four years of college, as had my friends, and we all just giggled about them. Why was this Marshal thing different?

I made my way across the hall to the bar, and joined the crowd of people trying to get the attention of bartenders. It was at times like these that I was usually thankful for my height, but I could barely see the bartenders with all the tall guys in front of me. And of course none of them was gentlemanly enough to step aside, or even buy me a drink. I guessed I should be showing more in the way of legs and cleavage if I wanted guys to buy my drinks.

I sensed, rather than heard, someone approach behind me. The smell of leather and a spicy male fragrance tickled my nose. I turned and looked up into Marshal's steely dark gaze. I quickly turned back around, frowning at the sudden jump in my chest.

"A JD and Coke," Marshal said from behind me. He flashed his ID.

I growled internally when one of the bartenders bypassed everyone else to serve him. Of course, Marshal was tall enough to get everyone's attention. And I guess he didn't look like the kind of person you wanted to keep waiting.

As a boxer, Lawrence's diet was completely clean. He wouldn't touch alcohol with a ten-foot pole whenever he was in a tournament. But Marshal was guzzling alcohol, and still able to fight. He had to be on some kind of steroids.

Marshal walked away with his drink.

Ten minutes later, I was still waiting. I gave up and returned to my friends, hoping they'd changed the subject.

Grace and Lorna were laughing hysterically. They were surrounded by other girls who were also laughing. Rhiannon wasn't with them.

"What?" I asked. "What's going on?"

Lorna pointed, still laughing.

I looked across the room and saw Rhiannon on the dancefloor in her bra. She'd pulled down the top of her dress and was going hard, everything jiggling around.

My jaw dropped. "What is she *doing*?"

"Your dare," Grace spluttered, still laughing.

I winced. I hadn't expected one of my friends to get my dare.

Grace and Lorna squealed with laughter as Rhiannon batted away the hands of tipsy guys who were trying to grab her. Was it just me, or was Rhiannon dancing in her bra stupid and not at all funny? Especially since people were taking out their cell phones to video her.

I tried to work up some humor for the next two minutes until Rhiannon returned, pulling the top of her dress back into place. Her blond hair was all messy and her cheeks were pink.

"Whoever put in 'dance in your bra' owes Rhiannon a hundred dollars," a tall girl with an abundance of cleavage on display announced.

I took out my purse grudgingly and handed Rhiannon the money. I should have thought of a better dare. Better yet, Grace shouldn't have included me in this stupidity.

"Whose idea was this dare thing?" I grumbled. "Seriously, we're not in Junior High anymore."

Cleavage Girl shot me a glare. "You might want to try taking that rod out of your butt, sweetie. Lighten up."

I raised my brows. "Obviously it was your idea then."

Grace nudged me. "Chill out. It's just a bit of fun."

"Next up..." Cleavage Girl said, dipping her hand into a small tub. She removed a piece of paper from the tub and unfolded it. "Sloane. Who's that?"

I smiled brightly and waggled my fingers at her.

"Oh. You."

I grimaced. I really hoped I didn't get anything stupid. My parents had stopped paying me a monthly allowance after high school. What I made at The Beijing Restaurant was hardly enough to live on. I couldn't afford to part ways with another hundred bucks over a stupid dare.

Another girl produced another tub and took out a piece of paper. She grinned, and her gaze flitted to the corner of the room Marshal and his bad boy buddies were lurking in.

Alarm bells went off in my mind. If I had Grace's dare to buy Marshal a drink I would send it through a bartender. That should be sufficient to get my hundred dollars back.

"I dare you...to kiss Marshal."

"What?" I was certain I hadn't heard correctly. "What did you say?"

She held up the piece of paper and I recognized Grace's writing. *Kiss Marshal.*

Grace screamed with laughter. "You should see your face, Sloane!"

I glared at her. *Kiss Marshal?* Seriously, was she trying to give me a heart attack?

Chapter 2: Sloane

"Omigosh, what were the odds!" Grace said, giggling.

"One in ten," Lorna replied.

"No, it's one in a hundred," Rhiannon said. "Conditional probability."

Lorna rolled her eyes. "Okay, smartass."

Well, there were lots of Marshals at our college campus, so I looked around, hoping to sight one of them. "Oh, Marshal McKenna," I said with relief, spotting him near the bar. I could kiss him easily. He'd lived across the hallway from me during our sophomore year and he was pretty cool. He wasn't much of a looker, but I saw him shirtless once in the kitchen, early in the morning. His body was surprisingly nicely toned, almost even ripped. "Get my hundred bucks ready, Grace."

"*Not* Marshal McKenna," Grace said, standing in my way. "I meant Marshal Aaronson, and you know it."

"The dare says 'kiss Marshal.'"

Grace looked at the girl who was holding the dare. "I meant Marshal Aaronson."

The girl looked at me. "She meant Marshal Aaronson."

"But she didn't write Marshal Aaronson. She wrote *Marshal*, so I can kiss anyone whose name is Marshal."

"No, it's Marshal Aaronson," Grace told the girl. She included Cleavage Girl in her gaze. "She knows I meant Marshal Aaronson."

Cleavage Girl stepped forward. "It's Marshal Aaronson."

Great. I should have been nicer to her before. Now she was siding with Grace.

The other girl nodded her agreement. "Marshal Aaronson. If you don't want to do it, hand over the money."

I glared at Grace. "You told me the dare was to buy him a drink."

Grace nodded guiltily. "Sorry, I lied."

Rhiannon laughed heartily.

I wished the ground would open. "I think I would actually rather die than ever approach Marshal." The mere thought of kissing him...*Sheesh!* No way! I couldn't. "Girls, I can't kiss anybody. I have a boyfriend."

Lorna rolled her eyes. "Lawrence will be fine with it. It's a dare."

"Not if it's the guy who just about killed him in the ring."

"Look, we don't have all night," Cleavage Girl snapped. "If you're not doing it, you owe Grace a hundred dollars."

I glared at her. I was going to lose two hundred dollars in five minutes because of this stupid dare game? But I just couldn't kiss Marshal. They didn't understand. He was so ridiculously hot. I didn't have the confidence to approach a guy like that.

This was all my own fault for not leaving once the fight was over. I glanced at my watch. Taylor would be coming to pick me and Rhiannon up at nine-thirty. I couldn't wait. Immediately after the fight finished I should have gone outside to wait for her.

"If you don't do it I'll just go over to him and tell him you like him," Lorna told me. "I'll tell him you've been watching him all night. You *so* have a crush on him."

"That's fine, Lorna," I replied. "Go ahead." Marshal wouldn't even know who 'Sloane' was if Lorna went over and said 'Sloane likes you.'

"And I won't put in a good word for you with my dad," Lorna added.

"What? No way!" I couldn't believe my ears. Sometimes Lorna didn't know the difference between fooling around and being outright mean. I could see the mischief in her eyes. A few drinks and she just got all stupid. "You know I need that job, Lorna."

Lorna's dad was Henry Griffiths, governor of New York. Working with him would be more than a paycheck, it would be valuable experience. And after fifteen unsuccessful applications to other local government roles this semester, I was pretty desperate. I hated working at The Beijing.

"Then do the dare," Grace replied, still giggling.

I glared at Lorna. "You wouldn't do that to me."

"Okay, I wouldn't," Lorna said. "But Grace is doing you a favor, really."

"Yeah," Rhiannon piped up. "Who knows? Marshal might like you too, and then y'all can get together and you can stop battling those feelings and suffering in silence."

Grace and Lorna exploded with giggles.

I glared at Rhiannon. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"Nah, I'm firmly on Grace's and Lorna's side in this. Go kiss Marshal Aaronson or we're going over to tell him you like him."

The other girls around us were rolling their eyes, obviously wondering what the big deal was. I glared at my friends, allowing my gaze to linger on each of them in turn. They looked unmoved.

I figured I could go over to Marshal and say something else, like ask him for the time. Then I'd come back and tell them that he refused to kiss me. I should still get my hundred dollars for trying to do the dare, shouldn't I?

Marshal would think I was strange, making a beeline for him just to ask for the time. But that was better than kissing him.

"Look how bothered she is," Rhiannon said, shaking her head.

"I know." Lorna smirked. "That's a sure sign of a major crush. You really do have a crush on him, don't you, Sloane?"

"Are you doing it or not?" Cleavage Girl snapped impatiently.

I nodded.

Grace's brows shot upward. "Really?"

"Yeah," I replied.

Dread filled me at the very thought of approaching Marshal. *He's just another human being, like anyone else*, I told myself, licking my lips which had suddenly gone dry.

I would go over, ask for the time, maybe even pretend I was a little tipsy so that he wouldn't think me too weird, and then I'd come back and get my hundred dollars back into my wallet.

"Freshen up your lip gloss then," Rhiannon said.

I was about to tell her to shut up when I figured I'd better play the part so that they'd think I was really going to do it. I took out my cherry lip gloss and dabbed a little onto my lips.

Marshal Aaronson. I was really going to go and speak to him.

"Omigosh, look at how hard her heart is beating," Lorna said, placing her hand on my chest.

I swatted her hand away. My heart was beating pretty fast though. Because I was scared. Not because of...anything else.

"Are you okay?" Grace asked.

My friends looked a little concerned now. Maybe they would stop fooling around if I acted a little pitiful. I shook my head. "I can't do it."

"Then hand over the money," Cleavage Girl snapped.

Lorna rolled her eyes. "I'm going over to tell him you like him. And then I'm going to drag him over here to talk to you."

My heart skipped a beat. "I'll just leave."

"We'll come and find you outside." Lorna smiled sweetly. "You really do love him. Your heart's racing and everything. As your friend this is something I have to do. You'll thank me when you and he are an item."

I scowled. "Love? Are you out of your mind?"

"I'm going over," Lorna sang.

"I'll go myself. But let's get one thing straight first. If I go over to him, you are not allowed to go to him afterward and say anything about me, whether he kisses me or not."

"Of course he'll kiss you," Lorna replied.

"Yeah," Rhiannon agreed. "What guy is going to turn down a hot chick in a Prada dress?"

"I can't believe you're doing this to me," I muttered.

I turned and looked over at Marshal. Dread, along with something else I didn't want to analyze, filled me. His ears were probably burning.

"Go on," Rhiannon prompted.

I started making my way over, slowly. All I had to do was ask him for the time. *That's not so hard*, I told myself. But my heart didn't believe me. He was gorgeous, brooding and dangerous, and I didn't ever want to speak to him. He was the kind of guy that played around, and only with girls with like G-cup boobs. I wasn't anywhere near his standard. In fact, he'd probably never even noticed me before.

As I approached the shadowy corner of the hall that Marshal was standing in, I glanced at the door. The door was only a few steps away from Marshal. Maybe I should just run away.

As I was about to take a step toward the door, I felt someone grab my arm and push me toward Marshal and his friends.

I turned. "Lorna!" I glared at her. "What are you doing? Get off me now."

Lorna marched me over to Marshal's group and pushed one of his friends out of the way. I was mortified to say the least.

"Hi, Marshal," Lorna purred.

I took a deep breath, and then looked up, not lifting my gaze beyond Marshal's chest—the pretty wide expanse of his chest. Heat rushed to my cheeks. I was going to kill Lorna. I was so going to kill her.

Marshal was silent. He was probably wondering what two silly girls were doing invading his personal space.

I made myself look up and was shocked to find his gaze on me.

His gaze snapped to Lorna, and then he nodded once. "Lorna. Sloane."

I almost passed out with shock. *He knows my name?*

"What's up?" His voice was deep and all rumbling. Something in my gut twisted in response.

Lorna nudged me hard, and I felt like slapping her. Marshal probably thought we were a pair of nutcases. I licked my lips and was shocked when Marshal's dark gaze drifted to them. My heart thumped harder.

I wasn't sure if it was a surge of confidence that filled me, or just plain stupid recklessness as I opened my mouth. "Hi, uh, Marshal. Well, uh, I've been dared to kiss you."

Marshal's expression didn't change. His eyes were as cold and calculating as ever. I looked around at his friends. One looked mildly amused. The others looked bored.

I looked back at Marshal. He was watching me, studying me in an unnerving way.

"But, uh, only if that's okay with you," I told him quickly. "You don't have to." Heat was flooding my cheeks. It was an effort to look into those eyes—dark pools of mystery. *Say no and let this be done with*, I pleaded silently.

Marshal shrugged one shoulder slightly. "Yeah. It's okay with me."

What?

I was vaguely aware of Lorna releasing me as Marshal's head lowered.

Turn away, I screamed at myself internally. *Do not let him kiss you*. But I couldn't move if I tried. My head knew I shouldn't let it happen, but there was something in my heart that wanted it.

Marshal's lips touched mine. I wasn't sure what I expected, but I certainly didn't expect his lips to be warm and soft. The kiss was slow, lingering. Everything else faded away—the music, the flashing lights, the other partygoers. Marshal was all that existed for three long seconds.

And then it was over and I realized that my heart was doing battle with my ribs, and my breaths couldn't get out quick enough.

Someone pulled me away. I was halfway across the room before I realized that it was Grace.

"What on earth were you doing?" Grace hissed between clenched teeth.

"Oh, I thought it was a super funny dare two minutes ago."

"I thought he'd say no since there are rumors about him and Tia Marsh at the moment." Grace's tone was accusing, as though it was my fault he'd decided to say yes.

"So did I."

"You actually kissed him!" came a squeal from behind us.

I glanced over my shoulder. Rhiannon and Lorna were hopping over on their heels.

"Try and be a little quieter, Rhiannon," I hissed. Marshal must think us incredibly immature. "Give me my hundred dollars, Grace."

Grace handed the money over.

I glanced across the room at Marshal as I tucked the money into my purse. He was still in a huddle with his friends, and he wasn't looking at us. *Of course not*, I thought with a snort. *Kissing me probably didn't even register on his radar much*. He'd probably already forgotten it had even happened. While I, on the other hand, was still reeling.

"Was it good?" Lorna asked.

"It looked good," Rhiannon said, winking.

"I can't believe you did it," Grace muttered.

I felt my cell phone buzz in my purse. I quickly took it out, hoping it'd be Taylor. I smiled when I saw that it was. "Taylor's here."

"Good," Grace replied. "It's about time you left. Going around kissing bad boys that most people steer clear from."

"Listen to you acting like you weren't the one who wrote the dare and weren't one of the people pressuring me to doing it."

"I didn't think you would actually go and do it!"

I rolled my eyes and looked at Lorna. "Make sure you put in a good word for me with your dad."

"Sure. That was so funny, the way you asked him. Who knew you had some balls under your prim Christian girl front?"

"Yeah," Rhiannon agreed. "She deserves a double good word after that hot kiss."

"Are you guys leaving?" Lorna asked.

"Yeah," Rhiannon replied, linking an arm through mine.

"Lightweights."

"Sloane's got church in the morning," Rhiannon told her, rolling her eyes. "I'm just tired and need to go sleep."

"I'm staying," Grace told Lorna. "I haven't done my dare yet."

"I hope you get a dare that is your worst nightmare," I told Grace.

Grace smiled. "Not bitter, are you, Sloane?" She grabbed Lorna's hand and headed back to Cleavage Girl and the others.

I followed Rhiannon toward the doors. I kept my gaze firmly away from Marshal's side of the room as we went. The only problem was, Marshal and his friends weren't far from the exit.

As we neared my gaze swung toward him of its own accord. I caught him mid-motion, pushing away from the wall. My heart stuttered as blue light from one of the spotlights overhead swung over him, illuminating his face for a quick second. His expression was a mask, as always.

His friends all followed, and it took me a moment to work out that they were heading toward the doors too. I slowed my steps.

Rhiannon glanced at me. "This crush of yours is pathetic."

I know, I agreed internally. Unease widened in my heart. I liked Marshal Aaronson. If I was braver, I'd figure this was my last year of college so I could afford to make a mistake or two, knowing that when it all ended, it wouldn't hurt so bad since we'd go our separate ways after college and never have to see each other again.

But I didn't want to make mistakes.

And I was a Christian. I should stick to Christian guys.

Lawrence isn't a Christian.

True. So if I could date Lawrence, I could date Marshal.

Date Marshal? I gave myself a mental shake. Marshal didn't date. He slept around. And even if he did date, I couldn't date him. And he wouldn't ask anyway.

Thankfully, Marshal and his friends had all disappeared through the door by the time Rhiannon and I got there. They weren't in the foyer either.

Outside, the air was cool, and the quiet was a welcome relief from the noise inside the party hall. I looked around for Marshal and his friends. They were a group of big shadows way down the street. Probably moving on to some other party.

"Are you going to tell Lawrence?" Rhiannon asked, as we walked down the street toward Taylor's car. There were lots of taxis at the curb, and a line of people in fancy eveningwear. They were probably the delegates for my mom's conference. The dinner party must be over, and some must be taking taxis into the city, seeking entertainment elsewhere.

Lawrence. I grimaced. "I'll have to."

"He won't be mad, will he? He should understand that it was a dare."

"I hope so."

I looked back at the hotel and paused. My mom may still be inside, in that suite that she used whenever she was holding conferences here.

"You okay?" Rhiannon asked. "Thinking of going back in there and asking Marshal for another kiss? Oh no, he left already."

"Very funny. Actually, I might go see if my mom is still here."

"Nice try. Was the kiss that good? Are you hoping he'll return for more?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'm going to see my mom. Really."

Rhiannon grinned, rubbing her bare arms and shivering. She didn't know as much about my relationship with my mom as Grace did. "Okay, I'll see you later. Actually, I won't since I'll be sleeping when you get in. See you tomorrow."

"Okay. Please don't tell Taylor that I kissed Marshal."

Rhiannon grinned. "Why? It might inspire her to break out of the Christian straitjacket you both wear."

"Seriously, don't tell her."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, I won't." She turned and hurried down the street toward Taylor's car.

I walked back toward the hotel. A dozen different perfume smells hung in the air around the line at the taxi stand. From the jewelry the women wore and the suits the men wore most of them were already successful. I'd always wondered why it was successful people who attended my mom's success conferences. Maybe they just wanted to be more successful.

I entered the hotel. The lobby was still pretty quiet. I made my way to the reception desk.

"Hey. Is my mom still in her suite?"

The receptionist smiled at me, and handed over a key card. "I think she's still in the dinner party. I definitely haven't seen her leave."

"Thanks."

I made my way to the elevators and pushed the button. I called my mom again while I waited. Still no answer. She was probably still hobnobbing with her rich clients, but she should be done soon. I'd wait in her suite.

I entered the elevator when the doors opened and rode up to the penthouse. I let myself in, and paused. There were clothes all over the floor in the den. I frowned at a man's shirt and jeans in a tangled heap with one of my mom's silk Chanel blouses. A low voice sounded from the master bedroom. A male voice. It didn't sound like my dad.

Soft laughter followed. "I told you, my daughter might be here tonight so I have to be careful."

I froze. My mom sounded...different. I'd never heard that teasing syrupy tone before. My eyes widened as her words registered. *My daughter might be here tonight so I have to be careful?*

There was a soft giggle. "You're not listening."

"I get bad around you, Charlie."

Confusion exploded in my mind. Then my jaw dropped as unmistakable noises floated out from the room. My mom was *kissing* some other man in there. My gaze cut to the tangle of clothes on the floor. Maybe more than kissing.

And he was calling her Charlie. Her name was *Charlotte*. My dad and the media called her *Lottie*.

Horror washed over me. My head began to spin. I needed to burst into there before things went any further. But I didn't want to see.

But I needed to make sure I wasn't jumping to conclusions.

Maybe it was my dad. Maybe he'd been drinking again and sounded different.

No, that wasn't my dad.

Trembling, I cut through the den silently and looked through the ajar door. I had to swallow back a scream when I saw my mom. She was wearing nothing but teeny pink panties. The man looked familiar. Very familiar. White with 'permanent tan' skin. Dark hair. A body rippling with muscles. But I wasn't interested in him. I focused on my mom. Anger boiled in my belly.

They were standing by the enormous bay window. The heavy red drapes were drawn closed. She groaned as the man trailed a finger across her jaw. She broke the kiss and opened her eyes. "Eli—"

The man, Eli, raised his hands to my mom's chest. I felt like screaming. I kicked the door open to stop them. My mom jumped, startled. Her face twisted into a look of pure horror.

Eli, or whatever his name was, looked at me. His gaze was calm, almost indifferent. He said nothing. Then he looked at my mom.

My mom grabbed the red drapes and covered herself. "Sloane?"

My heart was beating too fast.

Eli touched her bare shoulder. "I'll leave."

I turned and ran out, blind with tears. A scream rose up my throat again. I swallowed it. My mom had another guy. She was having an affair.

But my dad was a great guy and they seemed to have a great marriage.

A million questions filled my mind.

How long had it been going on?

What did she see in that other man?

Outside the suite, I pushed the button for the elevator. As I waited, I kept glancing over my shoulder at the door to the suite, expecting my mom to come out. She didn't.

And neither did the guy. Eli?

When the elevator arrived, I stepped inside with shaky legs. What was my mom still doing in there? Was she freaking out over getting caught, or had Eli calmed her down, kissed away her fears and told her she could deal with it later—after they finished...

Ugh! I squeezed my eyes shut. The thought was unbearable. I wished I could un-see what I'd just seen.

I rode down to the first floor, and left the hotel, my mind completely blank, but full of thoughts at the same time.

Tears filled my eyes. I wasn't sure if I was more angry or more hurt.

Eli.

All of a sudden, I knew who the guy was. My heart stopped for a brief moment and then began to gallop. *No way!*

I dug out my cell phone and tapped my way to the Internet. I Googled him, hoping that my suspicions wouldn't be confirmed.

My heart dropped to my toes like a stone when I tapped on the 'Images' tab and a dozen pictures of the man filled the screen.

My mom was having an affair with none other than the billionaire casino owner, Eli Aaronson.

Marshal's dad!

****End of Sample****

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