

Reckless and Yours; The High School Years  
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### **Before it all went to hell...**

“He’s looking at you.”

Paige Avery followed Francine across the busy cafeteria, clutching her food tray tighter and pretending she couldn’t actually feel those eyes—hot, thick-lashed, and green like clovers—coming at her from the back of the room.

Zachary was looking at her...

“He’s still looking,” Francine whispered under her breath, and Paige’s eyes burned from the effort it took to keep them glued to her lunch plate.

She dare not look up. If she met those striking green eyes she’d stumble. She’d fall. She’d flush beet red and then everyone at school would realize. Less than two hours ago...

He’d had his tongue inside Paige’s mouth.

God!

At a long table in the very center of chaos, Trista, Becky, and Jasmine sat nibbling on their salads.

As she took her seat across them, Paige sent a sidelong glance at Francine as she eased right next to her. “So I’m supposed to know who he is?” she teased. But of all her friends, Francine knew; she had to know there was only one he in Paige’s entire world.

And he was staring at her.

While Paige, tummy clenched in both anticipation and dread, settled down in the exact spot she’d sat in for the past seven months of her senior year—with her back to him.

Even without looking his way, Paige still found it easy to picture him. Leaning back comfortably, one arm draped across the back of his chair, the other on the long table next to the windows overlooking the basketball court.

She already knew that out of the eight bench seats, only three would be occupied. One by the pale, angry-looking guy with the shaven scalp, one by the curly-haired slim one who



was always funny in class, and one by him. Him with the tousled black hair, the lean, broad-shouldered body, him with the still mouth and the eyes that watched her.

He watched her with her friends. He watched her walking up to school. He watched her quietly, somberly, totally.

Swiftly picking up on the conversation, Trista bent across the table to gossip. “The bald guy with him, the Terminator? He’s telling him something about you.” The delicate shudder that shook her slim frame proved how uncomfortable she found that fact. “You should talk to the principal, Paige.”

Paige had spoken plenty of times with Mr. Davis, and the last thing that old man wanted to hear was that Zachary Rivers was so much as glancing in Paige’s direction. “Mr. Davis is senile,” she grumbled, and fingered the napkin under her plate. “And I’m not scared of him.”

That made Trista laugh. “Nobody’s scared of Mr. Davis.”

“I meant I’m not scared of Zachary.” The knot in her stomach tightened at the thought of him—his sable-black hair going this way and that, his shirt rumpled from where she’d pulled it out of his jeans, his thick lips moist and reddened from her mouth...

Meet me later.

Feeling herself grow hot, Paige kept playing with her napkin, her food untouched.

Her friends stared at her in silence, but it was Trista who spoke on behalf of all of them. “Paige, the guy’s father is in jail.”

“Jail,” Becky emphasized.

“Your father sentenced him to jail,” Jasmine said.

“Lifetime sentence, too.” Trista gave a grave nod.

Paige frowned at the reminder. “And?”

“And don’t you think the guy is resentful? I mean. Have you heard what they say his locker looks like? People say he has weapons there, honest to God.

And what if he uses one on you? What if he drags you to some dark little closet where nobody can hear you scream and does you bodily harm? I mean, farfetched, but it has happened before. High schools have known worse.”

“Ladies, I beg to differ,” Francine said as she waved a half-bitten French fry in the air, “but I don’t think what Zachary would do to Paige in a dark little closet would qualify as bodily harm. Bodily, maybe. Harm, definitely no.”

Trista blinked, and for three seconds, nobody ate except Francine—they were all seemed to be digesting Francine’s opinion. Trista’s mouth worked before she actually hissed, “You think he wants to make-out with Paige?”

Francine sighed impatiently, setting down her fry. “Trista, seriously. Wash your contacts.”

It took a moment for the blonde to get herself back in working order, and when she finally recovered, she scowled. “Francine, I should toss my water at you—no. Paige should slap you on the head. She’d die before making out with Zachary Rivers, and you know why? Because her father would kill her, that’s why. Paige is too levelheaded to do something so reckless. Tell her, Paige, tell Francine she shouldn’t repeat that bit of nonsense unless she wants people to know she’s a nutcase and in serious need of direction.”

“Can we not discuss Paige’s sex life while I’m eating?” Jasmine protested.

“Go on, Paige, tell her!”

Rather than stare into Trista’s demanding brown eyes, Paige cautiously lifted her sandwich lid and peered inside. She scowled. “I thought I said no tomatoes.”

“Paige.”

“Three slices of tomatoes, can you believe?”

“Paige.”

Paige plucked them out one by one. “I should just go for the cheese enchiladas, are they any good, Fran?”

“Paige Avery!”

She glanced up at Trista. “What?”

“Oh. My. God.”

As Trista’s eyes widened to saucers, a crimson heat spread up Paige’s cheeks, and she hated how telling it was.

Because she had been warned. She had been given specific, direct orders to avoid all contact with ‘that boy’.

Her father had spoken to the principal, had explained the dangers the ‘new kid’ could pose to Paige with the trial underway. He’d demanded Zachary be under strict teacher surveillance. Under no circumstance was he to be within three feet of Paige.

And as the good, studious, mild-mannered daughter she’d been raised to be, Paige had tried. She’d tried to act as if that the tall, dark-haired menace didn’t actually exist. She’d kept her gaze averted when he sauntered down the halls—but his smell would dizzy her when he passed her. He smelled of leather, and one time when his U2 t-shirt had been wetly plastered to his chest, he’d smelled of rain.

She’d tried not to gasp when their hands brushed as he walked by, and once when he’d turned his hand to hook her pinky in his, she had honestly tried not to die.

Across the school lawns, she did her best to keep to her area, and though she successfully managed to keep herself from glancing his way, she sensed where he sat. She’d know the angle of his folded knee and how his elbow rested on top of it, she’d know who stopped to talk to him and when, and when he canted his head and tilt it just so to look at her with his eyes.

The day his father was sentenced, his name had been called out in class. Zachary Rivers. Like a sleek, heavy reptile, he’d uncoiled from his desk. He was tall, so it had taken a moment. Mr. Davis would like to see you in his office, she’d heard the teacher say. And Paige knew. Everyone knew.

The trial was all over the headlines.

Zach curled his hand around his books, that hand that had long fingers, a path of strong veins, and square, hard knuckles. He ambled between the desks and when he flicked his eyes up to hers, her stomach knotted, and she ducked

her head into her open book. She’d felt so ashamed for some reason. Ashamed to know everyone would be judging him by his father’s sins, just as they’d think Paige a saint because of hers. She’d asked to be excused as soon as he left the classroom, and she’d caught up with him in the hall. Zachary, I—

She’d meant to say I’m very sorry. I know how you must feel! but was startled when he dropped his books. He spun around, pinned her against the row of lockers, and hungrily took her mouth with his.

She stiffened in shock, then whimpered when he eased her mouth open with his. She’d never imagined her lips could melt like butter under the incredibly hot pressure of his, or that the feel of having Zachary’s brick wall of a body against hers would give her such a

sweet ache. Her breasts burned where they scraped his chest. Her stomach moved up and down and sideways.

She ought to have slapped him. Send her knee ramming into his groin. Instead she twined her fingers into his hair. It was soft and silky and a great part of it was waded tight in her palms. When Zach raised his hands to firmly hold the sides of her flushed face, it was to angle her head so he could put his tongue in her mouth.

He tasted divine. Of mint and bubble gum. His tongue was so strong, so wet and warm as he twirled it around hers. Her lips, her tongue, greedily wrapped around his warm moist one.

She had never kissed a guy. Not with her tongue, not with her heart, certainly not like this. She made a strange gurgling sound of need when he slowed the kiss, deepening it until she felt drugged. He searched so far inside her she thought he was out to find her soul. She whimpered softly when he drew away from her.

“I’ve got to go,” he whispered.

Her lips felt tingly and raw, and when he spoke, his breath blew over the moistened flesh.

“I’ve got to go, Paige.” He bent and swept his books up, and his forehead creased when he glanced up. “You okay?”

His voice had a different timbre; husky, a little soft, as if she were a baby or something fragile he felt concern for. Paige nodded, she was too stunned to do anything else.

When he stacked his books and straightened, she almost wished one of her friends came over to slap her: she had a horrible urge to fling herself into his arms. As they stared, she realized every priceless moment they looked at each other, they saw something no one else did. Themselves. She felt seen by him—when Zach’s eyes were on her, she was Paige Avery, not the judge’s daughter. And all she saw was the most handsome, male, tempting creature to ever walk this Earth.

His lips glistened with remains of her lipstick, and that glittery pink substance smeared across the upper curve of his top lip looked disturbingly sensual on his tanned, hard-boned face. His breathing was almost as ragged as hers. His eyes were so dark she could not see his pupils.

They were eyes that made her think of more kissing, of heart-wrenching songs, the back of a car, that first time you were with someone.

He took a hesitant step forward, studying her under drawn eyebrows. The muscles in his throat worked as he swallowed. “Do I owe you an apology?” he asked.

When she did not reply, he shifted his books to his other hand, looking a little impatient.

“Do I owe you an apology? Paige?”

She dropped her head in belated embarrassment, softly said, “No.”

She wasn’t sure, but she thought he nodded. He’d taken three steps down the hall before he returned, fingers sinking into her hair, his mouth coming down on top of hers, hungrier than before. “Meet me later.”

And Paige had. Met him.

“Ohmigawd! You made out with Zachary Rivers?” Trista screeched, yanking her from her thoughts.

“No!” she denied, almost pushing to her feet in her urge to deny it. “No, no, no, I’m not stupid!” But she was. Foolish. And stupid. And reckless when it came to Zachary. And she couldn’t stop herself, couldn’t stop the recklessness.

“He stares at you all the time,” Becky said.

Francine sighed. “He’s in love with her, any fool can see.”

“He’s got doodles in his notebooks and he’s fixated on the letter P.” Jasmine shrugged when Trista demanded an explanation with a glare. “I’m next to him in Government.”

“Plus that slut Vicky asked him to the prom and he said no, she was so embarrassed. Everyone heard.”

Paige felt a horrible stab of jealousy. “Vicky!” she gasped.

Francine held her arm as though to calm her. “I didn’t know that, why would he say no to a free ride like Vicky?”

“He just said he wasn’t going.” They stared at her, but Paige was too busy cursing that cheap, filthy, slimy, long-handed slut had approached Zach to...

“Has he asked you, Paige?”

“No, no, of course not,” Paige said, desperate to take the topic somewhere else. How could she tell them? Trista, who specialized in gossip. Jasmine, who was too innocent not to let it slip. Becky, who worked at the school newspaper. She could not, she simply could. Not. And it felt like a wild, beautiful secret. The most important part in her, and it was just theirs to keep.

“What would you do,” Trista said, narrowing her eyes. “If he came up to you in the hall one day and asked you out?”

“Oh, that’s easy. She’ll kiss his heart out and hand hers over in a basket.”

Paige scowled at Francine, because this was no joke. Her father was a serious man, and his warnings had been dead serious. If he knew Zachary had set so much as a finger on Paige...if he knew Paige was dying to put her hands inside Zachary’s pants!

Paige pursed her lips and faced Trista. “What would you do if Terminator asked you?” Paige returned.

Trista laughed. “Terminator isn’t quite as yummy as Zachary.”

Oh, God. She couldn’t not blush when she talked of him. “He’s all right,” she muttered.

“Just all right?” Trista tried.

A universe more than all right. Paige hurt. She’d never understood why all that fuss about sex was about, because she’d never wanted a boy. Now all she thought of was places. Moments. The time when she could be with him.

Paige pulled her book from her tote bag and set it on the table. She wondered what would happen if her friends knew. How it would reach her father’s ears. How he’d take what she most wanted. “He’ll be transferred if he’s seen within an inch of Paige,” Becky said.

And everybody knew this. Paige knew this. Zach knew this.

“You five look like trouble.” Matthew slipped into the bench beside her. Cooley slipped across, and they began to gobble up their food.

“Get your own trays,” Francine said, laughing.

Matt gazed at her, smiled in concern. “What are you talking about?”

The table fell silent. It was expected, everyone expected them to be an item. Matthew was gorgeous, a jock, and he was interested. But Paige was interested in...

As if reading her mind, his gaze slid across the cafeteria space, to the table at the far end. He frowned, then his face hardened.

“We’re speculating.” Trista grinned. “Girls like to do that.”

“Speculating on Rivers?”

“Yes. And on what you’d do if Paige kissed him.”

“I’d rearrange his face.”

“Yeah, man.” Cooley high-fived him.

They said that all the time. Rearranging his face. Send him back to the devil.

The truth was, nobody was stupid enough to mess with Zachary Rivers.

Nobody was stupid enough to relate with Zachary.

Paige had been warned.

Matt put his arm around her shoulder. “If he ever bothers you, Paige, you let me know.”

Matt said ‘me’ a lot, almost as much as he said ‘I’—and with the importance of a word like ‘president’. She shrugged it off, then grabbed her tray and backpack. “I have to run. I promised Mrs. Rittenhaus something.”

Matt caught her. “Drive you home after school?”

Her smile trembled. They were frequent. And he was putting his hand on the back of her seat. And... “I’m staying for a few minutes afterward. Maybe another time.”

The bell rang.

Everyone shuffled into the hall, the cafeteria vacated in a manner of minutes, and Paige slowly returned to the doorway while everyone exited. She mumbled to her friends, “I forgot my book,” and charged back inside.

She stopped mid-stride at the sight of him, her heart turning over in her chest.

The tall, lone figure of Zachary Rivers stood over her table. Dark, lithe, and strong, like a storm. Fascinating. Dangerous. One you were warned time and again to keep your distance from...

He held her book open in one splayed hand, sooty tendrils of hair falling to his forehead as he bent his head and held the 4 x 6 yearbook picture she’d purposely left there up to his scrutiny.

Her nerves went haywire when his forehead furrowed. He flipped it around to read the words she’d written on the posterior, and a muscle jumped in the back of his jaw as he clenched hard.



He slapped the book shut, tucked her picture into the back pocket of his jeans, and lifted his head.

Their gazes collided across the room—they held like magnets.

She dragged in a breath, clutched her bag tighter around her shoulder, and began to walk to him. Around the cafeteria drink dispensers, there were whispers. Zach lifted the book before she reached him, just said, “Yours.”

Oh damn. She could barely hear his voice, it was so sexy. Deep, rich, rumbling. She grabbed it, careful not to touch him, and held it to her chest. “Mine.”

He smiled, his eyes so tender, like fingertips on her skin. He chuckled her chin, murmuring so only she would hear. “I’ve heard that before, haven’t I?”

Her knees felt watery and her mouth dry as he gazed down at her. “Yes.” When you’re kissing me and I beg you to tell me your lips are mine, and your hands, and your eyes.

Someone cleared their throats and his smile faded. He took a step back—away from her. Like everyone expected him to. Like everyone wanted him to except Paige. She did not move, but it felt like the earth did while they stood there.

The second bell rang.

Quietly, she turned to leave. He fell into step beside her, in silent understanding. “You didn’t eat.”

“No,” she agreed.

He caught her backpack, looked at her. “I could get you something.”

“Another dad?” she teased.

The halls were frightfully empty. A janitor stepped out of the closet, making their smiles fade. Zachary held the door open so the man could pull out his cart. “Thank you,” he said, and when the janitor disappeared around the corner, Paige quietly slipped into the darkened room with the mops, and Zachary Rivers followed. The door banged shut.

She could hear him breathing. She was breathing fast, too. He did not say a thing, so she smiled lightly. “We were talking about you.”

He gazed at her across the small space, silent. “I know.”

This made her uneasy. She fidgeted with her hair.

She bit her lip, thinking of his mouth, wondering why he did not kiss her. She gazed across, then back at him, laughing softly. "My friends don't like you too much."

He stared, unsmiling, and hooked a thumb into his jeans. "I don't like it when Rawlings touches you. Paige."

She glanced at her sandals. "We're just friends."

He pushed away from the wall and stared out the tiny window slit high up. Paige stared at his back, his hair, his hands at his sides. "What about you and Vicky, do you bring her to the closet, too?"

He ignored her, stared outside, and she imagined how Vicky would let him peel her clothes off when Paige had squealed in embarrassment all the times he'd tried. The time he'd eased her stretchy top down one breast and kissed her nipple, she had screamed from the jolt.

She drew a shaky breath. "I'll bet Vicky puts out like you want me to, doesn't she."

He stared at her as if she'd gone insane.

"I'll bet...I'll bet she lets you do anything to her."

He scowled. "Are you finished?"

She hated thinking Vicky Squealer would let him kiss her everywhere...

Then she resented taking it for a fact that Zach would want to only because he'd always seemed ready and willing to kiss Paige.

Zachary's welcome to school had been a "we know what your father did and we don't want you causing any trouble here". He was quiet in class, just twirled around his pencil. The girls were intrigued, but he'd steered away from their advances. He stayed away from trouble, he stayed away from fun, he stayed away from stupid Vicky, she knew. He stayed away from everything but Paige.

He was still staring up at the slit and said softly, "I can't do this."

Her heart was near exploding. Her shirt felt glued to her skin. She couldn't find an answer. He was breaking up with her?

She stammered. "I'm sorry, Zach, that was unfair."

He was quiet.

“Look...you knew we could never be seen together. My dad would—”

“It kills me, Paige.”

She bit her lip.

He grabbed at his hair, letting go a breath. “It kills me when he touches you, it kills me when he looks at you, it kills me to see you at your locker and I can’t stop to talk to you.”

She felt a clog in her throat. “It’s not easy for me either.” Anger rose inside her then, anger that she wanted him and could not have him, anger that she loved him and shouldn’t. Anger at life and having everything and nothing—she felt miserable. “I lie to my friends, I lie to my parents, I lie and lie and lie and my whole life is just a lie!”

“Fuck!” He moved away and stared up at the ceiling, then his head fell forward. “Fuck.”

There was frustration in his voice, but she could not hear it. Panic gripped her, agony and despair.

He was breaking up with her...?

After she was drugged with wanting him? After she could only think of these ten minutes of the day when she would touch and smell and be with him? After months sleepless imagining she and Zach in every romantic movie she ever saw, and reliving every look, every kiss. The lump in her throat grew.

“Are you breaking up with me?” She would weep. She knew it the instant he said it, she would weep. She dragged in a breath. “Is this what this is about, you’re breaking up with me?”

He laughed cynically and shook his dark head.

“Just tell me.” Her voice quivered. “Tell me I was some sort of conquest and that everything you told me was just you...trying to get some.” Her gaze fell on her hands at the crudity of her own words, her stomach tightening.

“I can’t do that,” he said softly.

“Just say it, Zachary!”

“Damn it, I don’t want to!” He approached, so close they almost touched, his head bent to hers. His breath tickled her face, of mint, and the scent of his jacket teased all around him. He reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “I want to do this in broad daylight.” He laced their fingers together in one

hand, the other cupping her face. "I want everyone to know that you're with me. I want to know you're mine."

She tucked her cheek into his palm, glorying in his calluses on her cheek. "But I am."

His hand lingered, his thumb rubbed. "Are you, really?" He ran his thumb across the lower lip. "You're mine but I can't hold you. You're mine but I can't touch you." He paused. "Why don't you ever look at me?"

She was looking now. Entranced by his face, his jaw was so square and so smooth, his skin taut across the bone. "I just don't want them to see."

"That you love me?"

"Yes." She nodded. God, it was hard... She could not say the words, even though she'd blurted them out before. She was afraid if she said it enough she would never be able to take the words back, and saying them would brand her forever and ever and ever...and then he would be taken away from her...

He did not speak, his eyes on her face, meeting hers. She melted under that look. Nobody ever looked at her the way Zach did. It gave her wings, made her yearn, made her hurt. He wanted to break up with her...

"Please stop looking at me like that, Zach."

Matthew touched her, uninvited, sometimes. But when Zachary's hand cupped her cheek and turned her to stare into his eyes, she felt an uncontrollable urge to sob. "How am I looking at you?" he whispered against her ear, brushing his lips up to her temple.

When he drew back, he was studying her face like something reverent, like there was nothing else to him but her, and she gazed at his plump lips, remembering the dozens of kisses he'd given her, and breathed, "Like you want me above anything."

His lips twisted. He lowered his head, softly said, "I do." Her eyes widened at the feel of his lips, moist and cold. "Still?" she murmured hopefully.

"Still."

"But you said you can't do this anymore—"

"I'm going quietly insane." Her eyes fluttered shut and she felt his heat, drawing her air until she could not breathe. "I hate keeping my distance."

"I can't bear it either."

He hugged her. "I hurt like a son of a bitch." He expelled a breath. "Every night I dream of us. Together."

She turned her head, her body throbbing with the nearness of his. "Like this?"

He glanced down at her and smiled. "Sometimes like this."

"And others?"

He smiled. "I can't tell you."

"Yes you can."

"It'll scare you."

She was silent, waiting.

His chest heaved against hers. "You make love with me." When she glanced up at him, he fingered the button of her shirt. He was aroused by it, his body taut. "You let me get you all hot and bothered and naked."

She closed her eyes, his finger at her throat. In the confined closet, his whisper was the most erotic thing she'd ever heard. It was the rawness in his voice, the genuine need, that called to a like one in her.

He shifted his hands, rested his forehead on hers and closed his eyes. "You let me do everything to you. Touch wherever I want to touch, see whatever I want to see." His hand covered her ribs, and she was panting as he moved his thumb up the underside of her breast. His voice was thick, and it vibrated with arousal. "You let me put my mouth on your skin, and you let me touch your breasts, and you're so excited you let me kiss your sweet little—"

"—don't!—"

"—kitty." He rubbed his face against hers, and into her ear, he whispered, "You're so excited you beg me to kiss it."

She imagined him down there and felt flushed. He was at her ear, and he was devouring it as if it were her mouth. "You kiss me there, too, and you get my cock all wet."

"Oh, God."

"And then I'm pushing into you."

They groaned together as though the thought were too much to bear, and his hand slid from her cheek into her hair. “Fuck. Open your mouth,” he rasped, slanting his head, he thrust his tongue in, then pulled it out. “Pretend I’m making love to you now.”

One second her lips were unresponsive under his, the next he was tracing the seam of her lips with his tongue, and she was parting them to taste him. “Zach.”

“Baby.” His was a slow, drugging kiss, and it was one that made the room hot, their bodies quiver as their hands roamed into each other’s hair. Their bodies rubbed heatedly—it had been months of teasing them. They were both wound up and desperate.

“I feel you through your clothes,” she whispered, trembling at the feel of Zach’s aroused body against hers. “I can feel how much you want me.”

He groaned. “Jesus, I need you, I need to feel you.”

He seized her mouth and they kissed some more. Zach had much more restraint than she did. Paige was trembling, and it felt like her heart was a burning, throbbing flame between her legs. She had held out for six months. He wanted it; it was in the heat of his kisses, the tight bulge pressing against her, in his eyes. It was in his ragged sighs when he made to touch her breasts and she squeaked in embarrassment and made him pull away. It was in his groans when she’d shyly cupped him over his jeans and her hand retreated.

These stolen moments, she was playing with fire, because they were both so wound up they couldn’t think right. It was all she wanted, all she thought of, being with Zach.

“Zachary?”

“Hmm.” He seemed fascinated by the lobe of her ear.

She could hardly think with him nibbling, nipping, tugging.

“Friday night...I’m sleeping over at Francine’s. If my mom lets me borrow her car I could steal away and we could...you know...maybe start slowly...”

He lifted his head.

The impossible happened. The hard, biting ridge pressing against her pelvis grew. He inhaled hard. “Where.”

“What—”

“Where will I meet you, tell me where.”

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