

The
Accidental
Boyfriend

Lori Freeland



Lavender Latte Press

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for my fellow *Teen Wolf* fans

chapter 1

Jess

I've been watching T at school for three weeks. The first thing I noticed? His strong hands. Allie thinks he's just another boy I'm obsessing over and that liking our quarterback is cliché. But there's something about him that's different. And I can't stop wondering if being wrapped in his huge hands would ground me on days like this when I feel like floating away.

~ from the diary of Elizabeth Sara Thorne (age 16)

Telling the truth. Dodging drama. Staying invisible. Painting butterflies on my toes. Things I used to be good at. I glance at my perfect pedicure. I'm down to one out of four.

Without knocking, Dad opens the door and strides into my bedroom.

I quickly close my laptop before he sees Mom's profile on my screen and shove her diary under the stack of writing books piled on my desk.

But he doesn't even turn his head on his way to the bursting suitcase on the end of my four-poster bed. Pushing down the top with his huge hand, he zips it on the first try and grabs the handle.

Feeling reckless, or maybe just desperate, I resume last night's argument. "I can drive myself downtown." Or stay home and spare my self-esteem a few thousand skid marks.

"Vi's already here to pick you up." He throws the words over his shoulder on his way out the door. The only words he's said to me all morning. And they're not words I want to hear. Riding and

rooming with my literary agent leaves me no escape when my first writers' conference spirals south. And it *will* spiral south.

Pushing my feet into my flip-flops—one pink, one purple—I shove my laptop and the diary into my backpack and tuck my earbuds into my pocket. Then hurry to run after him. I don't even make it to the top of the stairs before my chest starts to sink and hollow. Gripping the railing, I try again. "If you let me drive, I'll text you the second I get there."

All I get is a short grunt as he tramps down the back staircase looking out of place with my neon purple suitcase. Trained by decades of marine posture, his wide shoulders stay at attention while his wardrobe falls at ease. Retired five years, he's replaced the starchy uniform with wrinkled tees and faded jeans, clung to his buzz cut, and cried rebel with a single hoop earring—giving him an odd vibe of uptight casual.

I take the steps two at a time to catch up. "The hotel's twenty minutes away. I'll keep the car in the parking garage the whole week."

"Jess." He barks my name in his standard *stand down private*. "You're not driving in Dallas traffic." He drops my luggage on the kitchen tile and rounds the corner into the great room.

Normally, he wouldn't notice if I *played* in traffic. I throw my backpack on the island and hurry after him. "It's Sunday afternoon. No traffic."

My flip-flops slap to a sudden stop when I see him standing next to Vi, who's kicked off her heels and gotten cozy with our wing chair and an oversized mug of coffee. Sunlight streams through the wall of windows overlooking our pool, highlighting her lavender bob and brightening her fuchsia suit. Twenty years past her party-queen prime, she still somehow manages to rock both those colors.

I'd kill to shop where she buys her confidence.

"Vi brought donuts." Dad gestures to the side table.

The smell of powdered sugar swells into a phantom pastry that sticks in my throat. Swallowing hard, I turn from the white box, my gaze landing on the lipstick on Vi's mug.

Mom used to leave the same stain. On wine glasses. Shot glasses. Tumblers. Even the tops of bottles—until she started hiding them.

"I have bagels for Jess in the car. The donuts are for *you*," Vi says. "She doesn't eat them."

He looks surprised. "Since when?"

She shakes her head, her long silver earrings dancing. "Since I've known her?"

"Since two years ago," I mumble too low for him to hear. The day he kicked Mom out, filed that stupid restraining order, and wrecked our family. I breathe through the familiar ache trying to twist-tie my chest and rub the inch-long scar on my jaw—the only memento I have left of her besides her diary. And I know she didn't mean to leave either.

"Not that I mind the detour between the airport and the hotel," Vi tells Dad, "but your almost-adult daughter does have a point about the traffic."

"She's seventeen." He shifts his focus from me to her.

Holding his gaze, she casually flexes her bare feet on the ottoman. "Like I said, almost an adult."

"Victoria." Dad crosses his beefy biceps, his tone lodged between disapproval and irritation.

"Trevor." Vi raises her mug.

Dad powers up his military glare, but when it only triggers her smile, he marches across the great room into his office and shuts the door.

"Sorry, Homeschool." Using one of many nicknames she's given me, she tilts her head. "I tried." Slipping on her silver heels, she scoops her keys from the footstool and clicks across the hardwood to open Dad's door and lean inside. "Jess and I are leaving."

If she's waiting for a response, she should've worn more comfortable shoes.

I join her in the doorway.

As predicted, Dad's fused to his laptop behind the U-shaped desk, deep in a writing coma, muttering about missiles, sounding rockets, and explosives. Research for the latest in his special ops series.

Behind him, built-in shelves showcase his novels—hardcover, softcover, foreign covers, audio. Reviewers call him an indie Tom Clancy. He hit the bestseller lists a few years ago on his own and sells enough books to keep it that way.

I lean my shoulder on the doorframe and narrate in my best *National Geographic*. "Here in the great plains of Highland Park, Texas, observe writing God Trevor Gray in his natural habitat creating yet another edge-of-your-seat thriller."

Vi moves in front of his desk, reaches over his laptop, and taps a fuchsia nail on his screen.

He slides her finger off.

But Vi isn't easily dismissed. She might look like a tie-dyed poodle on the outside, but inside she's pure Rottweiler. From the moment she discovered *Haunted*—and me—after I posted on DigitalReads, she's been determined to sign Trevor Gray as a client and make it a family affair.

Vi slowly tips down his screen. "Don't forget Jess's book release party Saturday night."

Not where I thought she was going.

He shifts the laptop to the left side of his desk and pushes up the lid.

My skin tightens. Stupid because I don't want him there. I don't even want to be there.

"Trevor," she says. "This is your daughter's debut."

This time she gets nothing. And I force myself to feel nothing.

Vi follows me into the kitchen and jerks up the handle on my suitcase a little too hard. "Your dad doesn't mean to..."

He totally does. Dad doesn't do labor intensive. Not when everything blew up with Mom. Not during the fallout with me. Especially not after he typed *the end* on our old life and informed me we were writing a new one. His concession when I begged to homeschool after she left was to hand me his Visa to pay for online classes.

"I have good news." Vi tosses me my backpack, *Hello Kitty*'s face splashed across the front triggering her mini eyeroll. "Since Julie Ann was already coming Sunday for the awards ceremony, she changed her schedule so she could fly in a day early to support her wonder girl on her book birthday."

A slow-mo churn starts low in my gut. "My editor's coming to my release party?"

"Isn't it great? You can turn in your second book in person. But that's not the best part." Her face brightens. "A reporter from that Dallas entertainment show is covering the conference, and she contacted me about interviewing you during your release. Hashtag trendyteenauthors."

That slow-mo churn steps into real time. "*The Dallas Daily Dish*?" Mom's other addiction. "Tell the reporter no."

"Already said yes." Vi railroads over me. "I can't wait to show off my writing prodigy." There's pride in her voice. Expectation in her eyes.

She has no idea how epically I'm about to disappoint. When Vi learns I haven't written a second book and the truth behind the first, she'll snap her rosary. When my editor finds out, she'll shred my three-book contract. And when Mom sees that interview, I can forget about her ever coming home.

chapter 2

Gabe

“Don’t grow up until you have to.”

~ Meredith Morgan

(played by the award-winning Meredith Wade)

Raising Ryder: Pilot

I’ve been an adult half a day, and it already sucks.

Instead of spending my birthday clubbing with my friends, wearing out my fake I.D., and posing for the paparazzi, I’m struggling to breathe against what feels like an eighteen-wheeler rolling back and forth across my chest.

Twenty minutes late for my visitation to Mom’s hell, I pull my ’69 Mustang along the curb behind David’s boring black sedan. That’s where I lock my gaze. Not on the iron gates to my right or the sprawling estate behind them that could be a fancy bed-and-breakfast—but isn’t.

The rough rumble of my engine merges with the Eminem blasting through my speakers and shimmies under my skin in an anxious vibration that has me palming the gearshift, tapping the clutch, itching to bail.

Before I can peel off the curb, David’s out of his car, striding toward me already on his way to an OCD aneurism. Silver-haired and sixty, his inner lawyer comes wrapped in a lean runner’s body, leaving no doubt to the miles he clocks on his office treadmill. He’s also all business, only business, and nothing but business—down to the tailored gray suit, sharp black tie, and third-degree vibe. Solid trait in an attorney. Not so much in a self-appointed watchdog.

Pulling off his dark glasses, he knocks once on my window. “You were supposed to be here at three, Gabe.”

When they were handing out personalities, David got shoved into the *Uptight Robot* line. Except for the summer we refurbished this car, he’s spent my life circling the outer edge of our family. First as Mom’s lawyer, then as her I-don’t-know-what, now as a last lifeline I don’t want.

Before he can knock again, my sister exits the passenger side of his sedan.

She’s the reason I cut the engine and get out. The ten months between us make her less older sibling, more twin. My partner in crime, best friend, cheerleader, and the only family I really have left.

Instead of running to hug me the way she always does, she plants her feet on the sidewalk and hugs herself. On par with Mom’s slavery to style, my sister’s face is porcelain-perfect. Sleek blonde hair spills past her shoulders. But her flawless appearance doesn’t mask the stress in her eyes or distract from the way her maxi dress hangs on her too-slender waist.

“Nicole thought it might be easier for you if she came.” David’s the only person who refuses to call Coley by her nickname. It’s not that hard. Cole-y.

And nothing will make this easier. Especially not the hopeless way she’s looking at me. I tug the brim of my cap.

“Items we need to cover.” David holds up two plastic keycards like he’s logging evidence in the courtroom. “Your room’s under my name.” He hands me the card with the logo from the hotel closest to his office. “And no Gabriel Wade bullshit while you’re here.” In one barbed look, he manages to nail me with equal amounts of accusation and disappointment. It’s his gift.

“It’s not like I’m planning to rattle the fangirl radar.” My gaze accidently strays toward the iron gates. I flex my fingers. I don’t need David to remind me any limelight I draw comes with the risk of

outing Mom. The impossible promise I made to her to hide *why* she's here tightens around my neck, choking me hard enough to strangle a rabid pit bull into submission.

David holds up the other card—my ticket past the gates and the reason we had to meet outside—and resumes his lecture with a deep-ass frown. “Don’t lose this one.”

Didn’t lose the old one. I know exactly where it is. Shoved under Trevor Gray’s latest novel on my dresser back in North Carolina where my show films.

He slaps the card into my palm. “Do you know how much red tape it took to replace this?”

I pocket both cards without my usual sarcastic comeback. The embassy-level security, the privacy tacked onto that security, is the reason David picked The Oasis. No one here gives a rip my mom is Meredith Wade, former star of *Raising Ryder*—one of TV’s longest-running family dramas—and TV land’s twist on your traditional mom-next-door.

“Visiting hours end early on Sunday.” Coley finally decides to join us. “Since you’re already three months late . . .” She blows out a long breath.

I sweat under the brim of my cap. Not because October in Dallas would be summer anywhere else. “I was working.” Mostly. “Your tuition’s due at SMU and—”

“Mom paid both semesters before—”

“Right.” Because I love my sister, I swallow the truth that I’m the one bankrolling her and let her keep living in Fantasyland like Mom didn’t lose everything we had. Almost everything I had.

“The power of attorney won’t go through until the end of the week.” David makes a microscopic adjustment to his already-straight tie. “Couldn’t file until you turned eighteen.”

Eighteen. A joke of a number the court picked that proclaims me ready to deal with grown-up shit when I haven’t even graduated high school.

“You should take the power of attorney.” I step closer to Coley. “You’re in college.” Smarter. Not a screw-up. I already asked David, but he refused.

“I’m two months into freshman year.” Linking her fingers together, she squeezes until the skin on her knuckles turns white.

“Nicole’s juggling classes.” His soft, fatherly voice fades when he faces me. “You holding the power of attorney makes more sense.”

It actually makes so little sense I bite back an ironic laugh. Letting me steer my family’s future is like tossing a thirteen-year-old boy the keys to a Ferrari.

David shifts on the sidewalk. We’re behind schedule and, judging by his twitchy feet, it’s getting to him. “I added our meeting with the Realtor to your calendar.”

The thought of walking into my house knowing Mom’s never coming back spikes a spin in my stomach. “You coming to the meeting?” I glance at my sister.

She glances at the ground.

“Nicole has class that afternoon.” Once again, David jumps to her rescue and hangs me out to fry. “We’ll meet you inside the gates.” Turning, he heads toward his car.

Coley gets into the Mustang with me.

I drive in silence behind David’s sedan to the entrance where he passes his access card through the small guardhouse window.

“Cancel the Realtor.” Coley’s small voice draws my gaze.

I grip the gearshift. “It’s not like I want to sell.” Our house in Highland Park is the only real home I have. The North Carolina condo I share with guys from the show doesn’t count. It’s a frat house minus the college education.

She picks at ragged fingernails that used to be perfectly painted. “Then don’t,” she says, as if any of this is a choice either of us gets to make.

Coley sounds so much like Mom, I'm sucked back to the gritty replay of the day we brought her here. The day we left her here.

The wild panic that flooded her eyes still shoots adrenaline through my veins, her screams pierce my ears, and the claw marks she gouged down my arm sting—every single second of that day carved into my memory in angry, puckered scars. Shaking my head in a silent *no, No, NO*, I shift into reverse and back the Mustang into the street.

“Don't do this to me.” The anxiety in Coley's voice scrapes my skin like razor blades.

I rev the engine and focus on the floor, her sandals, the flowery design of her dress. Everything and anything but her eyes. “I'm not ready.”

“Do you think I was ready?” Instead of yelling, which would be so much better, she's crying. “Do you think I want to see Mom like this?” Mascara streaks down her cheeks. “She's not even supposed to be here.”

“I'm sorry.” That Mom *is* here, that Coley can go inside when I can't, that it's a crapshoot that even if I force myself through those gates that Mom and I will be able to have a conversation.

Coley touches my hand, her fingers trembling. “I can't do this alone anymore.”

That semi rolling over my chest doubles its cargo. Triples its weight. I want to be there for her. I do. But when I think about what happened the last time I saw Mom . . .

I.

Can't.

Breathe.

Reaching across Coley, I push open her door, then slump into my seat. “I'm sorry,” I say again.

“Then I'm sorry too.” She stumbles out of the car, shaking so much her legs look seconds from giving out. “Don't call me. Don't

talk to me. Don't come see me." Tears track down her face. "Not until you see Mom."

"Coley—"

"I mean it."

The ache in her eyes presses those razor blades deep. "Don't do this. I need you."

"And I needed you." She wraps her arms around her almost nonexistent waist. "Be there for me, or I can't be there for you."

Her ultimatum locks my lungs. When I finally take in air, it burns worse than my last escape—a giant-ass bottle of Fireball.

I wait until my sister reaches the sidewalk and clears the car. Then I pop the Mustang into gear, fishtail hard enough to swing the passenger door shut, and race down the street, Coley's mandate and memories of Mom the way she used to be chasing me long after I check into the hotel.

chapter 3

Jess

I'm the only junior in senior physics. Guess who sits across the row? I wore my red, off-the-shoulder shirt today. Allie said T looked, but his eyes didn't leave my face!!! Figuring him out gave me something else to think about when Dad blew up at dinner, and Mom threw our food into the garbage along with the plates.

~ from the diary of Elizabeth Sara Thorne (age 16)

If *Fake It to Make It* were a class, I'd be getting an F. My failure litters my hotel room bed. Six dresses. Four skirts. Nine shirts. Three hours of my Monday morning wasted.

It doesn't matter how much I lipstick, flat-iron, or push-up, my smile misses the mark, my hair has too much kink, and my black-and-white dress requires double D's when I have B's.

Chugging my *tranquility peppermint* tea, I check out my red heels. They're perfect. For a pole dancer.

The hallway door opens, and Vi and her lavender bedhead spill into the room, crumpled pantyhose in one hand, yesterday's dignity in the other. A glance between me and her unmade bed holds a flash of what might be guilt.

I'm sheltered, not stupid. It's not like I haven't already figured out she test drove one of the cover-model contestants she met in the bar last night.

"Love the shoes." She beams at my feet. Scowls at my chest. "In your case, less is not more." She tosses her pantyhose onto the chair, takes my tea, and messes with my scooped neckline until my dress

has a major malfunction. “You’re not in the one-room schoolhouse anymore, Little House on the Prairie.”

This nickname I could do without. I can’t get behind that show. Not just because I watched every season with Mom during one of Dad’s longer deployments, but because there’s always a happy ending, and I can’t deal with happy endings anymore. They make me sad. “You know your idea of homeschooling is totally warped,” I tell Vi. Her idea of a lot of things is totally warped.

She frowns. “You need to get out more with your friends.”

If I admit the only friends I’ve had since the *incident* at my former school are the friends who hang out inside my head, she’ll round up some live ones—whether I want them or not. Ignoring the comment, I tug up my plunging V, which takes my hem for a ride up my thigh. “This dress was supposed to sell me as stylish, not give me away for free.”

“Never do *anything* for free.” She works the fabric until she manages to cover enough leg so I won’t get arrested, then grabs my conference badge off the desk.

My heart catches on my penname, *Jessica Thorne*. Not because it’s my way to avoid the Trevor Gray gravy train, but because it’s Mom’s maiden name—my way to stay connected. And in hindsight, probably a huge mistake.

“There.” Vi slips the lanyard over my head and frees my hair to tumble over my shoulders and down my back. “Now you’re official.”

I don’t feel anything close to official. I feel like a reality show reject. And a fraud. How am I supposed to sit on the debut author panel—with real writers—and dissect a story process I don’t own?

An anxious itch skates along the skin on the inside of my wrist. “I should skip the panel.”

“You’re not skipping. I went to a lot of trouble to get you a seat.”

“What if I can’t breathe? What if I pass out? What if I can’t answer the questions?” I grab her wrist above her new chunky silver bracelet and squeeze. What if someone asks about my second book? Or worse, how I came up with *Haunted*?

“Sweet Mary and Joseph.” Vi’s recovering Catholic flares. “Get a grip.” She pries my fingers off. “Panel.” She points a fuchsia fingernail toward the door. “Twenty minutes. Don’t make me look bad.”

“You’re not coming?” That anxious itch intensifies. I scrape at the spot until tiny red bumps pop up.

“Stop scratching.” She bats at my hand but softens her voice. “I have appointments all morning, but I asked Donna to swing by our room on her way. She’s hosting the panel.”

“Super.” Perfectly put-together Donna. Also Vi’s client. And the author of an email rant that *accidentally* went agency wide on why I shouldn’t be the exception to the conference’s eighteen-and-over policy.

Swiveling me toward the full-length mirror, Vi sets her hands on my stiff shoulders and stands behind me. “Who I wouldn’t push under a bus for this waist and those hips.” She gives my reflection a longing glance, even though she’s curvy everywhere I want to be. “You look—”

“Exactly like my mom,” I whisper. Right down to the makeup that pops the green in my eyes and slight wave that shows off the faint red highlights in my dark brown hair.

No wonder Dad doesn’t like to look at me.

I fluff my hair to try to bring back the curls and reach for the makeup wipes on the desk.

Vi hides them behind her back. “Your mom is gorgeous, so you’re good to go.”

I freeze. “How do you know that?”

“I found a picture of the three of you in your dad’s bottom desk drawer this morning.” When I lift my eyes to hers in the mirror, she shrugs. “I’m nosy. This is not a surprise.”

I thought the only picture of Mom he didn’t banish to the attic was the one I stuffed under the bras in my top dresser draw—someplace he’ll never venture. Does that mean there *is* a chance he hasn’t completely cut her out of his heart the way he cut her out of our lives?

“And Trevor being Trevor”—Vi waves her hand in the air—“took it and put it face down on a shelf I can’t reach.”

I tip my chin away so neither of us see my eyes get blurry.

“Now go and be all the awesomeness that is Jessica Thorne.” She grabs a silk robe from her suitcase. “And smile.” She tugs my neckline lower, kisses my cheeks like she’s suddenly gone European, and disappears into the bathroom with the makeup wipes, leaving me alone with my slutty dress and an unsettling resemblance to the woman Dad hates.

“You need more help with your outfit?” Vi yells from the bathroom.

Afraid she’ll turn my dress into a bikini, I grab my lame smile, my event schedule, and what’s left of my lukewarm tea. Before I head into the hall, I peek at the end of my bed to ensure she can’t see the diary I slipped between the mattress and box springs—one of the many hiding places I’ve learned over years of living with Mom. The slim journal fits better than a fifth of Jack Daniels.

My door doesn’t even have time to click behind me when I plow tea-first into Donna. In one horrific second, the lid flies off my cup, and I paint her cream silk blouse in brown impressionist art.

She flaps her hands over her shirt like she can somehow shoo the stain away. “Are you kidding me?” Her everyday alto shoots past soprano.

“I’m so sorry.” I reach out to dab her blouse, and my cup slips from my fingers and hits the carpet, splashing her tan pants with the remaining liquid.

“What’s wrong with you?” She jumps back, her face blazing with a color Crayola would call *fire engine*.

Merging into the wall behind me, I wait for her to spontaneously combust, praying for the floor to have mercy and suck me in. “I’ll get it dry-cleaned.”

“That doesn’t help me now. I’m going to be late. Or was that your plan?” She yells like I can’t hear her. Like the ladies wearing conference badges who just came around the corner can’t hear her.

She thinks I did this on purpose? By the looks on the ladies faces, they do too. “I would never...”

“This is what I get for doing Vi a favor that involves you.” Holding her sopping blouse away from her chest, she stomps back the way she came.

Blinking back the sting building behind my eyes, I speed-walk away from the judge-and-jury blocking the way to the elevator and head toward the huge hotel atrium and the multiple sets of escalators that lead five floors down to the lobby.

It’s not until I get on the second set that I realize my hands are empty. I lost my schedule along with my tea. “Adult up, Jess,” I channel my inner Vi. “Figure out where to go.”

Two floors from the lobby, I’m distracted by a commotion at the bottom of the escalator. A group of women swarm some guy, taking pictures, handing him things to sign. Close to my age, he reminds me of a younger Sam from *Supernatural*—the only show I sometimes watch. I’d rather be scared than sad.

A few inches shorter than Sam’s 6’4”, this guy’s still tall and lean in a pair of washed-out jeans. A fitted Eminem T-shirt puts the muscles in his chest and biceps on parade, and messy brown hair flops over his forehead in the front and grazes his collar in the back. Wearing charm like a million-dollar smile, he’s laughing with the

crowd, but there's a subtle stiffness in his spine that makes me think he'd rather be anywhere else.

We could start a club. I get onto the last escalator and like my empathy becomes a beacon he lifts his head and finds me. His slow study starts with my heels, dallies on my legs, moves to my misbehaved neckline, then rests on my face.

A trace of what might be a genuine smile lifts his lips, stirring an unfamiliar spiral in my stomach that ripples out making it impossible to look away.

As the steps carry me closer to the landing, closer to him, he inches closer to me.

Is he trying to ditch his rabid fans by running past me *up* the down escalator? The last step levels off, leaving me nowhere to go but into him. Turning sideways, I attempt to squeeze by, but my stupid heel sabotages me again and sticks in the groove between the step and the carpet, and I start to go down.

Strong hands catch me around the waist, firing tingles that spark up my spine and set off alarms around the perimeter of my hot-guy immunity. My savior has major melty eyes. Milk-chocolate, suck-you-in eyes. They take me hostage, twist me up, giving me a thousand words to describe my next heroine's crush—if only I could write her.

His hands slide to hug my hips. Heat from his palms sizzle through my dress. He leans so close his mouth grazes my ear. "Do a desperate guy a favor?"

"W-what?" The smell of fresh laundry and the hotel shower gel combine into kryptonite that buckles my knees.

His hands hold me up, but he pulls back so I can see his face. His fifty-watt grin comes with its very own set of to-die-for dimples.

"Baby," he says. "I've missed you." Then tilts his head, closes his eyes, and presses his mouth to mine.

My world slips sideways, and I know I've written Sara and Dante's first kiss in *Haunted* all wrong. I never mentioned the shivers that pour over Sara's skin at the same time her body flushes. I didn't describe the flutter in her stomach as Dante's lips brush hers. I left out the very real urge for her toes to curl when he flattens his palms against her back. I'd given their kiss a paltry paragraph when it deserved an entire freaking page.

Because up until now, Jessica Thorne—the girl who's penned thousands of words and hundreds of pages of romance—has never, ever been kissed. Not even once.

