

THE TALE OF ARAGORIA



BECOME A PATRON

~ CHAPTER 13 ~ BAILEY

It wasn't until long after the crowd had left, still cheering for James, when Tony finally left the practice field. Bailey had tried her best to console him but he was in one of his moods. She was grateful the library was quiet at this time, but it seemed little help as she scribbled furiously in her notebooks while trying to study her mentoring subject. But James's and Tony's sparring match kept replaying over and over in her mind.

How could he do that to his best friend? she thought. *How could he humiliate him like that?*

Tony really was a great guy—a bit domineering in the way he handled the Medieval Club, and slightly full of himself in his prowess. Which, on the flip-side, made him sulky at best if ever he's bested or embarrassed. James had certainly made sure to do that to him.

Honestly, she didn't know what to think about all of it. She liked Tony—she really, really liked him. But he wasn't the same guy she crushed on all through middle school. Truth be told, she actually always had a small crush on James when they were younger. But when he and his grandfather mysteriously disappeared, she didn't know if she'd ever see him again. That was when Tony stepped into the picture.

They had been together for two years now. He was a complete gentleman to her. . .

She winced slightly at the thought. He *was* a complete gentleman . . . except on his bad days. Thankfully he didn't have many of those. But just over a year into their relationship, Bailey began to notice . . . things . . . in their relationship. She began to see how he was subtle and even manipulative. He flashed his smile and twinkled his eyes to anyone who was in the way of what he wanted and shortly afterward he'd get it. Needless to say, a few areas of their relationship began to feel strained—but Bailey still liked him.

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No, she thought with certainty. *I don't like him—I love him.*

Was that the truth, or was she trying to convince herself otherwise?

Then James had to come back to Hillside!

At first, she was ecstatic when she heard that he was back in town *and* coming to this school. She honestly didn't know how she would react if ever they crossed paths. When she saw him for the first time at the dance she was surprised when she felt her heart pound against her ribs in rapid-fire. He looked completely different, and yet, exactly the same as he did when she crushed on him as a little kid. If anything, the things which she found attractive about him had only become *more* prominent.

Get over yourself, Bailey, she chided herself as she reminisced. *He didn't have any interest in you then and he probably doesn't have an interest in you now.*

Bailey blinked in astonishment. Had she really just thought that? She felt her cheeks flush just a bit at the thought of liking someone else while in a relationship with Tony. A feeling of guilt slowly crept through her gut and into her chest. Was fancying someone else while having a boyfriend cheating?

“Stop it!” she whispered harshly to herself.

She couldn't help but glance around to see if anyone noticed her mini-outburst.

It doesn't matter either way, she tried to convince herself. *Didn't you see the way he looked at you after his and Tony's match?*

She herself wasn't pleased with the outcome of the match. It meant that Tony would most likely lock himself in his dorm for the rest of the day. But that look that James had when the crowd had swarmed and cheered him. It was total gloating.

Bailey had to stop herself from biting down on her cheek. She always seemed to gnaw on her inner-cheek or tongue when she was angry. But was she angry at James beating Tony, or that she still had feelings for him while being in a relationship?

She dropped her pen irritably and held her head in her hands with her elbows on the table. She squeezed her eyes tight and groaned quietly to herself.

Boys are so frustrating.

“Mind if I sit here?”

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Bailey looked up to see none other than James standing beside her, already pulling back the vacant chair next to her. She gave a gesture of indifference in answer to his question, which he must have taken for approval since he proceeded to sit.

She didn't show it, but she watched him intently as he moved. She noticed it at the dance and also during his bout with Tony . . . James did not move like a typical teenager. There was just something about the way he carried himself—like an athlete in control of his body, each movement calculated and precise, but even more so than the usual athlete. Tony was an athlete, and she never saw him move with the efficiency and grace that James demonstrated.

“So. . . .” James awkwardly stammered for words. “H-how’s Tony?”

Like he would care, the words snapped into Bailey’s thoughts.

“He’s fine,” she said casually as she resumed her note-taking.

“I saw him just barely,” James jabbed backward with his thumb and even winced. “He seemed a bit put out.”

“Well, what’d you expect?” Bailey couldn’t help but have a bit of bite to her words. “You practically humiliated him in front of the entire club.”

James shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not the one you need to apologize to.”

“Then why are you mad?”

Bailey opened her mouth to respond then quickly snapped it shut. That was not the question she was expecting.

“I know an angry expression when I see one,” James said softly . . . almost submissively. “Truly, I am sorry for embarrassing Tony that way. I sometimes get that way when I see someone bullying others.”

The nerve!

Bailey bristled!

How could he . . . ? Tony was not a . . .

Bailey bit her bottom lip. She *wanted* to deny it, but she knew deep down that in a lot of ways, Tony *was* a bully. She exhaled slowly, letting her anger flow out. If James had noticed her obvious frustration he didn’t let on about it. He simply waited for her to respond with that submissive look.

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No, not submissive, she thought. There's nothing submissive about those eyes. Those beautiful . . . deep . . . brown eyes.

Bailey nearly gasped in shock. What was happening to her?

“So,” James slowly began when it was obvious she wasn’t going to say any more on the subject. “What are you doing for your mentoring? Is it the whole Medieval Club?”

Bailey pursed her lips tightly together and off to one side as she contemplated whether or not to keep talking to him.

“The Medieval Club is separate from the Mentoring?” she finally said. “We get permission to do it during mentoring block on condition that we fill the required time later on.”

James nodded his head, his expression attentive, but also saying, *that's nice, but you didn't fully answer the question.*

Why does he have to be so irritating? Bailey thought.

But she realized she wasn’t irritated at him specifically. So why was she feeling annoyed by all of this?

“I’m studying mythology,” she said rapidly.

James seemed to brighten when she said that. “No way? That’s awesome!”

Bailey forced a grin. She wanted to be angry at him, but every time he smiled, every time he spoke, she felt nothing but a genuine interest from him.

“Where are you starting?” he asked.

“Um . . . I figured I’d start with the basics—Greek and Roman mythology. After that, I’m not sure where I’ll go.”

“Well, I hope you learn a lot. Mythology is one of my favorite subjects.”

“Really? Which culture do you favor?”

James’s smile widened and his eyes seemed to twinkle. “I’m partial to Northern-European mythology,” he explained. “However, I did start learning more about other mythologies, particularly from South-East-Asia. Now those stories are fascinating.”

Before Bailey knew what was happening James started speaking rapidly about various myths, legends, and creatures of all kinds and across all cultures. She rested her hand in her palm as she listened intently. His words and the way he explained the many

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different characters and creatures seemed to bring the stories to life, almost as if she were watching it like a movie. No—not like a movie—as if she were really there.

How did he know so much? she wondered.

She didn't care. She felt like she could listen to him tell these stories all day.

What am I doing? she caught herself. *I am with Tony—not James.*

James and Tony. . . .

Who knows what kind of rivalry the two *former* best friends would now have. And she was caught between the two of them. She needed to do something, but what could she do?

“He’s not the same kid anymore,” Bailey blurted out.

James stopped his energetic discourse and looked at her perplexed. “What do you mean?”

“Tony . . .” Bailey explained. “He’s not the same since you left.”

Why did she interrupt him? And why on earth did she say that? If anything she’d want the two boys to remain friends . . . wouldn’t she? Was she failing at her attempt to quell the impending rivalry?

James paused for a moment, staring down at the table and fidgeting with the corner of one of her books. Bailey felt her heart plummet to her stomach. She wasn’t making things better . . . she was making them worse. Why did things have to suddenly get so complicated?

“I know he’s not the same,” James finally said calmly. “Heck . . . none of us are the same.”

Bailey let out a deep sigh of relief—and sadness. “If only things could go back to the way they were.”

But did she want them to go back? Or did she want things to just be . . . different?

James smiled politely and stood. “That would be nice.”

Bailey suddenly wanted to put her foot in her mouth. *Did I say something wrong?* she thought.

“I better get back to Timothy,” James explained.

“James . . . I’m sorry if . . .”

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James stopped her by placing a hand on her shoulder. Bailey's pulse quickened. His hand felt so strong, and at the same time so gentle.

"There's no need to apologize," he said softly. "I'm glad you're studying mythology. Maybe by studying these myths, you'll find one of the main truths that myths reveal."

"What truth is that?"

James smiled warmly. "That no matter how hard the challenge gets for the hero or heroine, everything always works out for the best."

"Everything?" Bailey questioned.

"Well . . ." James winked. "Almost everything. It's always been enough for *me* to keep going. How about you?"

Bailey wanted to respond but the words didn't come. James smiled at her and returned to the other side of the library with Timothy who was still as bouncy as ever.

Would everything work out? she wondered as she scrutinized James—the strange new kid at school.

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From my family to yours...thank you so much!

~ Michael ~

