

*There is nothing so agonizing to the fine skin of
vanity as the application of a rough truth.*

~ Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Chapter One

I love the first day of school. There's nothing like a new start. New clothes, new classes, new goals. And maybe, just maybe, the possibility of meeting a new guy.

Especially when you're a senior in high school.

With a last glance at the ensemble I've put together for my last first day of high school and a mental kiss to the hair gods for my stunning naturally blond wavy hair, I close my bedroom door then dance downstairs.

Where I slam headfirst into reality.

Next to my "*You Are Special Today*" plate, a tradition my mother started on my first day of kindergarten, polished silverware sits on top of a rhinoplasty brochure.

No napkin. Just the brochure.

I ignore my mother's watchful eyes. "Real subtle, Mom." I move the silverware, then flick the glossy trifold with the tip of my finger, scoring a beautiful two-pointer as it lands in the silver and black trash can.

I totally hate the word *rhinoplasty*. How can you not think of a disgusting two-ton mammal when you hear that word?

Just call it what it is – a nose job.

Spatula in one hand, she pops the other onto her hip. "Just a suggestion, Sarah."

“Yet still offensive. Couldn’t you have waited until, like, the *second* day of school to start in on me?” I stab the tasteless egg white omelet on my plate, wishing there were some crispy strips of bacon sitting next to it. It’s hard to believe I was actually born to this health-conscious runway-worthy woman. Being a Burke can be a serious pain in the butt.

“I only want what’s best for you. Now that you’re a senior, you’re old enough to make those changes we’ve always talked about.”

I drop the fork to my plate. “Not we, Mom. You. I don’t recall asking for the privilege of having some whack chop away at the nose *you* gave me. Just because you changed yours when you were eighteen doesn’t mean I have to.”

The honest truth is that I never would have requested this particular nose, but I’ve spent seventeen years learning to accept it.

“Sarah...” Mom stares at me, the wheels of her brain churning at top speed while her own omelet sizzles in the abandoned skillet. She doesn’t have to say what I know she’s thinking. *How in the world will Beth Burke’s daughter ever follow in her news broadcasting footsteps with a honker the size of a Buick?*

I nod at the smoking skillet. “You’re burning.”

Cursing under her breath, she drops the tiny pan into the sink just as a car horn beeps from the curb, officially signaling the end to our fight like a bell at the end of a boxing match.

Thank God she’s on time. For once.

“That’s Kristen.” I swallow the last of my orange juice before leaning across the expansive polished granite counter that serves as our breakfast table to kiss Mom on the cheek.

“Have a good day, Mom.”

“But you didn’t eat anything.”

“No time. See you tonight.” Grabbing my backpack, I walk out the door with one final look back just in time to see her fishing out the brochure I’d tossed in the trash.

Mom and I moved to Houston when I was in third grade. When I was young and foolish and thought my face was “*special*”. When I thought it was cool to be different.

I met Kristen Gallagher on my first day of school. A boy named Beaver Collins called me Pinocchio and Kristen thumped him on the ear in my defense. We’ve been best friends ever since.

I slide into Kristen’s bright yellow Mustang, Fergie blasting from the radio. A huge Wal Mart bag of school supplies and a zebra-striped backpack, with the tags still attached is strewn over the back seat.

“You’re killing me with this.” I reach in the back and grab her supplies, knowing that if I don’t, she’ll walk into school completely unorganized. Just the thought of it makes me cringe. And she knows it.

With one last smack of her freshly-glossed lips, she closes the visor mirror then turns and smiles, affording me the full view of her spectacular face and, for an instant, a moment, a nanosecond, I hate her. Every single feature on her face is the the right shape and textbook proportionate.

“Now why should I bother with that? You’re just going to tell me I did it wrong and redo it for me anyway.” She flashes her dimple – yet one more facial feature that adds to her good looks – and puts the car into drive.

The truth is she’s right. Despite my tendency to be a tiny bit compulsive, especially when it comes to organization, she doesn’t give me any grief. Instead, she takes it in stride,

laughing at my insane need to control things. Not that she hasn't totally benefitted from my downfall. I've been keeping her on track for as long as I've known her.

In return, she's my personal cheerleader. The one who keeps telling me my face has character. That I'm destined for greatness with a face like this. Although I doubt my face is going to make me famous. More like infamous.

"How's Mom this morning?" Kristen knows the tragic history of first day events with my mom. Like the first day of my freshman year when she brought the news cameras to follow me around school, chronicling "The Life of Today's High School Student" for an in-depth news expose. Not exactly the innocuous beginning I'd had planned for myself.

"For breakfast, she served me an egg white omelet with a nose job sales pitch."

Kristen shakes her head. "I swear, they should make adults pass some sort of test before they're allowed to have children. I don't know why she even bothers. As far as I'm concerned, you're perfect just the way you are."

"That's why I love you," I tell her.

By the time we screech to a halt in front of Northwest High School, Kristen's supplies are organized and my ears are ringing, still echoing the Nickelback lyrics blessedly cut off when she yanked the key out of the ignition. Don't get me wrong, I love Nickelback as much as the next person, but not at a pulse-pounding volume at seven-thirty in the morning.

"Ready?" she asks, hand on the door handle.

"Born ready," I say, repeating the same thing we've said to each other every day for the last four years.

The first day of school is really a double-edged sword for someone like me. Yes, I love “first days”, but it also means I have to meet a sea of new faces in the hallways, freshmen who’ve never seen me before.

Or more accurately, freshmen who’ve never seen my *nose* before.

Walking shoulder to shoulder with Kristen, we hike the twenty-one steps that lead to the front doors of our antique high school, waving at friends, and handing out smiles and shout-outs like presidential candidates. If someone had a baby, we’d kiss it.

And then it happens. The inevitable. The one thing I dread on the first day of school. It starts with a whisper that becomes a giggle, then spreads into a small rumble of conversation. By the time we’ve reached the top of the stairs, my heart is thudding in my chest like a jackhammer.

“Here we go,” Kristen says with a conspiratorial wink. I follow her lead when she stops and turns to face the gawking students lining the stairs.

“Everyone take cover! She’s gonna blow!” Kristen shouts, covering her head dramatically.

Immediately, every visible person drops to the ground, covering their heads. Everyone except Mr. McGinty, the school counselor who’s been trying to be my best friend the entire time I’ve been a student at Northwest. I’ve always ignored him, convinced he’s trying to use me as a case study for some psychology journal. But now, he’s standing at the base of the stairs, smiling up at me with a goofy thumbs-up held high above his head. I can’t help but smile back.

Kristen lifts her hand and high fives me.

“Kidding,” I sing out right on cue, then give a small wave to the shocked students. As we walk into the building, I hear the melody of students laughing and clapping behind us.

Kristen and I have only three classes together: Journalism, Choir, and Gym. Despite my best efforts to prove to her the importance of advanced placement courses on college acceptance, she’s content with an average GPA. While I’m taking Advanced Physics this year, she’ll be soaking up Intro to Geology. While I’m in Trig, she’ll be lounging in Fundamentals of Math. Then again, my focus has always been on scholarships. Something Kristin doesn’t need to worry about, thanks to the sizeable trust fund her grandmother left her.

When I walk into Journalism for third period, Kristen waves to me from our usual spot in the back right corner of the classroom. She’s got her feet stretched out on the seat in front of her in an attempt to keep others out of her space. I love her, but she can be a snob like that.

I slip into my seat beside her, the cold, aged plastic scraping the back of my jeans. God, I hate school chairs. “How have your classes been?” I ask.

“Good, I guess. It’s lining up to be an easy coast year.” Kristen slides her hand in a rolling-with-the-flow kind of motion.

“And you’re okay with that?” I don’t know why I even ask when I already know the answer.

“Are you kidding? It’s what I’ve been praying for. This year is all about having some fun. When are you going to take a break and just let loose? Go a little crazy?”

“After college.” I have it all planned. After I graduate, land my dream job, and get an apartment in Dallas, I’ll let loose, just be wild and crazy. But until then, I work my ass off.

At precisely that moment, the balance of my orderly life crumbles like a house of cards.

The once-buzzing classroom freezes. Standing in the doorway is the hottest guy I've ever laid eyes on. Golden brown hair cut just short enough to be stylish and a body I've only seen on television. Honest to God, the room has fallen dead silent while he looks at his schedule and compares it to the number on the door.

You can almost hear every girl's thoughts.

Please be in this class.

Please take me to the prom.

Please marry me.

And every guy's thoughts.

I hope he plays football.

I hope he plays baseball.

I hope he's got a girlfriend and leaves mine alone.

When he looks up and finds everyone staring, he glances behind himself to see what they're looking at. Realizing he's the center of attention, he smiles, upping the charm of his rugged good looks when his slightly imperfect teeth are revealed. I give an audible sigh of appreciation.

Kristen reaches out, grabs my hand, squeezes it and whispers, "I'm in love."

I know how she feels. It's the same thing every single girl in the class is feeling, including me.

Then all at once, the spell is broken and the class is back in action. A group of girls from the drill team wave to get his attention, but none of them stand a chance against Kristen.

Sliding from her seat, she stands, flicks her straightened long blond hair over her shoulder, and walks her tan, long legs to the door. Without a word, they proceed, arm in arm like

they've just been nominated homecoming king and queen, back to the vacant seat in front of her.

"Welcome to Northwest," she purrs, her voice resonating with a hoarseness I've never heard. When'd she learn that? "I'm Kristen Gallagher, and this is my best friend Sarah Burke."

He nods back at Kristen, a smitten smile spread across his face. "Rockford Conway. Everyone calls me Rock."

I instantaneously think how much I'd love to be stuck between Rock and a hard place when he turns to acknowledge me. His gaze stops at the most obvious spot on my face.

Not my killer blue eyes.

Not my plump pouty lips.

Not even my precious little chin.

His eyes lock dead center on my face.

On my nose.

As he studies me silently, fire burns its way up my cheeks. There can be no doubt he's taking in the beak-like quality I've learned to appreciate. Well, "appreciate" might be a stretch. You learn to appreciate fine art or classical music, and my nose is a long way from those things. I guess you could say I've learned to tolerate my nose.

Until now.

At this very second, I'd give anything to be sitting in the doctor's office, taking "before" pictures and scheduling the blasted rhinoplasty.

"Nice to meet you, Rock," I say, extending my hand for a shake. Anything to break the intensity of his eyes on my ginormous flaw.

As if shaking himself awake from a bad dream, his eyes meet mine and he smiles. You know how you can just tell you're going to hit it off with someone when you first meet? That's how I feel the second we make eye contact. There's a tenderness, an understanding in his eyes that makes me feel like I already know him. He's actually looking me *in the eyes* and I get the feeling he's trying to send me some sort of telepathic "You're uniquely beautiful" message. Of course, I'm no psychic. That's just my interpretation.

His hand totally covers my own, sending a jolt of awareness through my body and landing squarely in my stomach like a basketball. Our school has like a thousand students and you can assume that half of those students are boys. But not once have I ever been so taken with a guy. Ever. It nearly kills me to break the contact with him when he pulls his hand away. I do my best to look unaffected as the jackhammer works overtime in my chest.

"Where are you from, Rock?" Kristen leans forward, effortlessly executing a move she calls the "lean and look". You lean in, he looks at your chest. I'm silently satisfied when he doesn't do his part, but keeps his eyes on her face.

"Atlanta."

I'm frozen in place, watching Kristen keep his attention while I sit speechless which, in and of itself, is something of a rarity. For once, I wish I'd listened to Kristen when she was telling me about the romance magazine article on how to get a guy's attention.

Speak, damn it, speak!

"A southern boy," Kristen drawls, leaning even closer so that she – and her boobs – are mere inches from his face.

“When did you move here, Rock?” I finally get the words out, barely recognizing my voice, which sounds squeaky and pre-pubescent to my own ears. Great. This is so typical. Kristen sounds like a lioness and I sound like Kermit the Frog with a head cold.

“A couple of weeks ago. My dad’s an oil and gas attorney. In that industry, all roads lead to Houston, right?”

“Absolutely,” Kristen answers.

But a funny thing happens. Instead of turning his attention to the hard-to-ignore wet dream nearly sitting on top of him, Rock’s looking at me.

As if Kristen hadn’t said anything.

As if I what I have to say matters.

As if...

My thoughts are callously interrupted by Mrs. Freel’s scratchy voice, well-earned from years of screaming at out-of-control students. “Welcome back to school, kids. Let’s get started.”

Kristen falls back into her seat, exhaling for the first time in five minutes.

Rock smiles and gives me one last lingering look before facing the front of the classroom, as if to say we’d continue our conversation later.

Right.

As if.