

PAYBACKS

by

Gabrielle Goldsby



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CHAPTER ONE

Roheibeth High School Ten-Year Class Reunion

It was, Colby thought, a good plan. Right up until her clit started twitching. As soon as that happened, she should have forgotten about exorcising old demons and instead walked the hell out of her ten-year high school reunion. She was fairly well off, had owned her own business since graduating from college, and had reinvented herself both mentally and physically. What did she care if these people knew how well she had turned out? She'd been there for over an hour and not one of them had approached her. Oh, she could see them whispering behind their hands, trying to place her face. She even thought one of them, a short, squat guy with freckles on his nude scalp, and glasses that looked like they had come in a two-for-one deal, figured out who she was.

Colby didn't mind that she wasn't recognized or approached. The woman with the asymmetrical haircut, short little black dress, and matching stilettos looked very different from the long-haired, skinny, but painfully out of shape girl of ten years ago. Colby didn't think she had worn a dress or a skirt until her sophomore year in college, which was why she loved wearing them now. It made her feel as if she were putting on a disguise. Not that a disguise was needed at her ten-year reunion. If asked

a week after graduation, she doubted any of these people could have successfully picked Colby Dennis out of a lineup.

Colby had hidden in a dark corner of the room where she could put her back to the wall and watch as people she barely recognized filed nervously into the gym. The clit twitching had begun the instant a striking dark-haired woman wearing a white shirt and black pants appeared in the entryway. Colby recognized her own arousal incredulously. *That's just perfect. Nothing for months and then I go hyperaware at the sight of Mackenzie Brandt, of all people?* Colby ignored her instinct to hide behind hair that had been cut off years ago, and instead stared openly.

The photo she had been given of Mackenzie Brandt had not done her justice. A photo could not show how confident she looked when she leaned down to give her name to the woman at the badge table. A photo could not possibly make Colby's heart race up her throat as it did when Mackenzie smiled and reached for her name-tag. Mackenzie said something to the wife of their old high school class president before obediently pressing the sticker onto her shirt just above her full breasts. *Jesus, take the wheel! How could I have forgotten those?* Colby remembered Mackenzie's chest being smaller than her own. By no means had she been flat chested, but she had been far from the perfect handful Colby was looking at now. *Perfect handful? What the...? Remember who you're dealing with and why you're here.*

Mackenzie smiled and talked to people who approached, but she never fully integrated into any one group. Occasionally, Mackenzie would lift her head and scan the room as if she were either looking for someone or had somehow sensed she was being observed. Colby tightened her jaw, pushed away from the wall, then abruptly stopped moving when Mackenzie looked right at her. The smile that had been on Mackenzie's face the whole time Colby had been watching her disappeared almost completely. Colby's pulse hammered at her throat as she locked eyes with the only person in the room she hoped remembered

her. Even from the small distance Colby saw Mackenzie's face darken. *Blushing?* Not the Mackenzie she remembered. Colby recognized her arousal despite not having felt it so fiercely in a very long time. Mackenzie made no move to approach, but based on reaction alone, it was obvious she had recognized her. The plan, if she had ever really had one, was out the window. This didn't feel like she'd expected it would. Where was the anger? The righteous indignation?

"Colby Dennis? I can't believe you of all people came to this farce!"

Colby reluctantly tore her attention from Mackenzie to look down into a pair of jubilant green eyes. The bright red hair was new, but the mischievous expression was the only hint Colby needed to recognize Lara Coulter, her high school lab partner and fellow member of the unpopular crowd.

"That's a great dress, Colby. You got the surgery too?"

"The surgery?" Colby looked down at her breasts. "No, they're mine."

"They are?" Lara moved closer to Colby and peered into her cleavage. "Nice, but that's not what I meant. LASIK, right? Isn't it the best not to have to wear the bifocals anymore?"

"Yeah, fantastic." Colby craned her neck to find Mackenzie again, but she had moved to some other part of the room.

Colby turned back to Lara and felt the tension ease from her as she realized how much and how little her friend had changed. Lara's flair for the dramatic had seemingly increased with age. She wore her bright red hair high atop her head. Her hairstyle was complemented by long daisy earrings of varying colors. Miraculously, Lara had managed to find a dress that had almost all the colors of her earrings. Her hair had been a dramatic black in high school, as had her eye shadow and lips. As the only Goth student in the class, Lara had always stood out.

Colby had never understood why someone would invite that. Her only wish had been to blend in, get through, and then

get out without getting noticed. For the most part, she had been successful—except where Mackenzie Brandt had been concerned.

Colby bent down for the “straight-girl body-separate hug,” but Lara threw her arms around her and kissed her square on the mouth. Colby blinked and stepped back. “What was that?”

Lara shrugged. “I always wondered what it would be like to kiss a woman, and you’re one of the few lesbians I know.”

Colby frowned. “How do you know I’m a lesbian?”

Lara’s expressive eyebrows arched, and Colby realized she had dyed those too. “You mean you aren’t?”

Colby sighed. “Of course I am, but how did you...?”

A movement out of the corner of her eye caused Colby to turn. Mackenzie was standing a few feet away with a strange look on her face. Had she seen Lara kiss her? So what if she had? Colby felt trapped by some question to which she didn’t know the answer. She remembered a similar feeling in high school on the few occasions she actually had conversations with Mackenzie. To her great relief, someone stepped in front of Mackenzie and the contact was broken.

“Whoa, you used to hate gym. Now you look like you live in one.”

“What? Oh yeah, I work out a little.”

“Uh-huh, a little. I can barely get through *Three Minute Abs*. I like what you’ve done with your hair. That asymmetrical looks great on you, but you could do with a few highlights here and there. Here’s my card. You live in Portland, right?” Colby nodded. “I take walk-ins. When are you heading home?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I thought about staying through the weekend.”

“Staying in Roheibeth? What the hell for? I’m driving back to Portland first thing in the morning.”

Colby would have given the answer she had given her staff about needing a vacation, but her attention had already gravitated

back to Mackenzie. She remembered Mackenzie as a menacing figure and had certainly never thought she would turn into this beautiful woman. Colby recognized the smile. It had never been directed toward her, but the way she looked, the way she tilted her head while listening, and even the whiteness of her teeth were familiar now. It was as if all the years dropped away and they were back in high school.

“Damn, she looks good,” Colby said softly.

Lara followed her gaze to the couple having what appeared to be an intimate conversation in the center of the room.

“Yes, she does.”

Colby looked at Lara and back toward Mackenzie. “Looks like that guy is already moving in for the kill.”

“Isn’t he wasting his time? I always thought she was gay too.”

Colby didn’t look at Lara when she answered. “She’s married.”

“Really? You sure she’s not gay?”

Not even remotely sure. Colby struggled to keep annoyance from her face. How had Lara picked up on something like that when she hadn’t? It wasn’t so much that she had thought Mackenzie was straight in high school. She never thought Mackenzie capable of having relationships at all, unless smirking, shoving, and glaring were involved. Ten years ago there were two types of kids at Roheibeth High: those who bullied and those who carried lunch money in both pockets to increase the odds of being left with enough to buy a bag of chips. Mackenzie Brandt was her bully, her tormenter, the one person she had been unable to push to the far reaches of her memory even ten years later.

“Boy, did she have it bad for you,” Lara said.

“Me? I’m the reason she got expelled, remember? She hated me, and the feeling was mutual.”

“Well, it looks like you’re about to get the chance to discuss that mutual feeling. She’s on her way over.”

Any response Colby would have made froze on her tongue.

Mackenzie was indeed on her way over. Her direct gaze left no doubt for anyone watching her that she had a purpose in mind, and that was to get to Colby.

“Okay. It was great seeing you. Don’t be a stranger. Bye-bye, now.”

Colby turned to tell Lara to stay, but she had already disappeared into the knot of drunken swaying people.

Colby looked off to the right, smiled, nodded to someone she didn’t know, and tried to act like she wasn’t shocked by how badly her pulse was racing. Why was she so afraid? It had been so long and things had changed. She had changed. She was no longer a skinny/fat teenager caught in the grasp of a much stronger, impossibly tall aggressor.

“Colby. Hello, you probably don’t remember me, but—”

“I remember you,” Colby said and was surprised at how cold she sounded. Mackenzie’s face blanched as she continued. “Do you really believe ten years was enough time for me to forget how you made my life hell?”

Mackenzie winced. “That’s...not what I meant.”

“Oh, well maybe you thought I had forgotten how terrified I was to come to school, thanks to you?”

“I didn’t think that either. I hoped you would let me explain.”

Someone bumped into Colby, sending punch sloshing over the rim of her glass as she lurched forward. Mackenzie grasped each of her biceps to steady her. The rebuke froze on Colby’s lips, stopped cold by the glare Mackenzie was sending to whoever had bumped into her. Colby thought she heard a sheepish apology, and Mackenzie, apparently appeased, looked down. She seemed surprised to find her hands were still on Colby’s arms, yet didn’t remove them for another few seconds.

“Sorry.”

Colby would have asked “what for?” if she had been able to speak. Her face flushed about the time the rest of her body did. This wasn’t supposed to be how it went. She was supposed to

confront Mackenzie about the crappy things she had done to her. She was supposed to revel in the knowledge she was no longer the weakling skinny/fat kid she once was; instead, she was acting like a love-struck teenager. *No, no, no—not love-struck. Poor choice of words.*

“Can we go somewhere and talk? Just for a few minutes? Please?”

Colby studied the earnest-looking woman in front of her and came up with four biting comments—none of which came out of her mouth.

The “please” was what got her. Colby would have never imagined she would hear Mackenzie Brandt say that word to anyone, let alone to her. Mackenzie bit the edge of her bottom lip. A small, innocent gesture and one Colby probably wouldn’t have noticed if they hadn’t had to stand so close in order to be heard over the loud music.

A familiar thought needled its way into Colby’s conscious mind. *Her eyes are black. If they aren’t black, they’re the darkest brown I’ve ever seen.*

“I’ll give you two minutes,” Colby said sternly. “But I think you’re wasting your time.”

Mackenzie’s sigh was audible. “How about in there?” she asked.

Colby followed Mackenzie’s gaze to the door leading to the girls’ locker room, and the fine hairs on her arms stood up. She had to be kidding. Could she have forgotten that the locker room was the last place they had seen each other before all hell broke loose? Was this some kind of fucked-up form of adult bullying? Act like you don’t know you’re bringing up bad memories to mess with the other person’s head?

Fine, if she wanted to play, they could do that. Colby nodded and walked swiftly toward the locker room. *She has no fucking idea who she’s playing with.*



Colby pushed through the swinging doors of the locker room, turned, and waited, arms folded, legs braced. Mackenzie walked into the room and stopped abruptly upon finding Colby standing just a few feet into the room.

“Say what you need to say,” Colby said, pleased she sounded steadier than she felt.

“First, I wanted to tell you how gorgeous you look.”

Colby’s mouth would have dropped open if shock hadn’t fused it in place. What the fuck was that? A compliment? “Did you ask me in here to get my beauty tips?”

“No, I...I...”

Again with the blush? And what was with that stuttering? This woman was good, really good.

“I didn’t think you would come to something like this.”

Colby had changed her mind about attending the reunion at least half a dozen times. At the last minute, she had rented a car and driven the three hours from Portland. She had been given an all-expense-paid opportunity to prove Mackenzie Brandt wrong. She was successful, not a “little nobody,” as she had overheard Mackenzie say to one of her friends.

She had left this town and made something of herself. She was no longer the scared little nerd hiding behind her hair in the back of the classroom. She wanted to rub all this in Mackenzie Brandt’s face, and if she could get a little dirt on her in the process, then all the better.

The problem was, the woman standing in front of her seemed nothing like the girl she had known. Oh, the resemblance was there, only the thick dark hair wasn’t pulled back into a severe ponytail or cornrows, and Mackenzie’s high school uniform of baggy jeans and sweatshirts would be a travesty on such a fit-looking body. But this was still Mackenzie Brandt, the girl who had shoved her into lockers as an afterthought and who had called her both skinny and fat before settling on the painfully accurate skinny/fat.

A shiver ran through Colby. She rubbed her arms for warmth.

Mackenzie's eyes followed the motion, settling briefly on Colby's breasts before returning to her face. It wouldn't be the first time Colby had caught a straight woman appraising her breasts. But the look she recognized briefly on Mackenzie's face had nothing to do with sizing up a perceived opponent's attributes.

Desire. If she had harbored any doubts about Mackenzie's sexuality before, she no longer did. Her nipples became painfully hard, and her skimpy underwear would have to be removed if she hoped to be comfortable for the rest of the evening. *So that's it? All it takes to get me revved up is some bitch from my past to glance at me sideways? That's just great.*

"I'm here, and your two minutes are almost over," Colby said defensively.

"I'm so sorry for how I treated you when we were kids."

Shock left Colby speechless. She hadn't expected such a quick, and what looked to be heartfelt, apology. "We weren't kids. I was seventeen. You were what, nineteen?"

"No, we're the same age. I may be a few months older, but—"

It was Colby's turn to stutter. "I heard that you—"

"Had been held back? You believed that rumor?" Mackenzie smiled. "It was a lie. Before my parents moved us here, we lived close to the Tijuana border. Fake IDs were easy to come by, and the drinking age was eighteen in Tijuana." Mackenzie shrugged. "The way I made friends fast was by buying cigarettes for people. If any of the cashiers asked, I told them I'd been held back. Word got around, and people just assumed I was some badass delinquent who had missed a few grades while in juvi. I just went with it."

"You...went with it? So you're..."

"Twenty-eight, just like you."

"I'm twenty-seven." Colby glared her warning.

Mackenzie mock scowled in return, but managed to make it seem cute and playful. "Okay, you win. I'm older."

What the fuck was that? Are we playing with each other now? No, it wasn't playing; it was flirting. Mackenzie Brandt

was flirting with her, and she was responding. No way was this happening. No way. “Okay, that’s it. Your time is up. Nice seeing you and all that stuff.”

Colby brushed past Mackenzie and was about to head out the door when a hand on her forearm stopped her. Colby yanked her arm away as if touched by a hot prong. She spun around, her fist up in a warning more than any real intention to strike out. “Don’t you dare touch me. I hit back these days.” She spat the words out with more venom than the gentle hold on her arm warranted. Mackenzie stumbled back. She couldn’t have looked more shocked if Colby had popped her one for emphasis.

“Never. I would never hit you,” Mackenzie said and her words sounded so fiercely possessive that Colby felt disoriented and confused. “Colby, I didn’t mean anything by this. I just wanted you to give me a chance to tell you how very sorry I am for the things I did to you back then.”

“Fine, you’ve told me. You feel better now?”

Mackenzie nibbled at the inside of her bottom lip. Colby soothed her own bottom lip with the tip of her tongue in sympathy and became angry when she realized she was doing it.

“No, I don’t.”

“Sorry to hear that. I’m sure there are people you could pay to listen to you explain about your fucked-up childhood. I, on the other hand, have no interest.” When pain appeared briefly on Mackenzie’s face, Colby refused to care.

“I’d like to make amends if possible.”

“It’s been years. What difference does it make now?” Colby studied Mackenzie carefully. The honest eyes, earnest face, even her height seemed different from what she remembered. But there was a familiarity that contrasted drastically with the nervousness emanating from this woman. She didn’t remember teenaged Mackenzie being afraid of anything. Not that they had exactly known each other.

“I don’t know. I just feel like I should.”

“After ten years? What’s wrong with you?” Colby asked.

“Let me guess. You’ve had a near-death experience, so now you’re on one of those self-improvement quests where you have to apologize to all the people you’ve wronged in the past.”

Mackenzie looked shocked and then she laughed. Colby almost laughed too, but was stunned silent by one traitorous thought. *I would never get tired of hearing her laugh.*

“Not exactly. Let’s just say I have someone in my life who makes me want to be a better person and makes me regret a lot of the decisions I made in my youth.”

“Must be a very special person.” *Special, rich, and a man,* Colby thought bitterly. Mackenzie Brandt was a fool. She was no more straight than Colby herself. The Copelands were right; Mackenzie should have never married their son.

Mackenzie smiled and shrugged, and the pride and devotion in that smile made Colby feel petty and strange. When they were younger she had been certain her revenge would be that Mackenzie would end up alone in a shack somewhere, while she would end up popular and with a family. Instead, Colby knew she worked too hard and barely had a social life. Hell, socializing aside, she hadn’t had sex in over six months, and even then it hadn’t been good. Maybe that’s what this was all about. She was horny and disappointed Mackenzie seemed more well balanced than she was.

“I can tell you still hate me, and I don’t want that between us.”

“What do you care? I don’t live here anymore.”

Colby would have preferred for Mackenzie to have flashed back in anger, but her voice was calm and her eyes steady when she answered. “I care enough to try to make things better between us. I care more than you’ll ever know. I always have.”

“Prove it,” Colby said, shocking Mackenzie and shocking the breath from her own chest.

“How?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who says you care. Prove to me how much.” Where in the hell was she going with this? The

shocked look on Mackenzie's face was slowly changing into something else. The desire she had so quickly hidden was now back. She focused on Colby's lips as she moved forward slowly.

"Is it okay if...?"

Colby blinked. Why in the hell would she? Her order that Mackenzie not touch her came flooding back. She would have to rescind that order if she wanted to see how far this unexpected attraction would go. Colby sighed and gave one nod of her head. Before she could even close her eyes Mackenzie's lips were there, pressing against hers, urging them open. The strength that had always scared her was being used to crush her to Mackenzie's torso.

Colby went limp, and if not for Mackenzie's arms and chest keeping her stable she might have slumped to the floor. Colby wanted the kiss to end and wanted it to go on forever. The decision was taken out of her hands when she heard the clack of heels and the sound of laughter made giddy by alcohol.

Mackenzie must have heard the voices because she wrenched her mouth away. She looked as if she wanted to say something. Colby stepped backward, shivering at the loss of Mackenzie's sexually charged body heat.

"Trust me?" Mackenzie pleaded.

Without thought, without hesitation, Colby nodded, and Mackenzie's arms were around her waist lifting her and carrying her into a shower stall. Colby heard the door push open just as Mackenzie set her down. Her breath left her chest in a soft puff as her back hit the cool tile seconds before Mackenzie's hand landed next to her head. Laughter rang out from two women discussing how badly someone had aged over the years. But for Colby, the voices faded as she stared into the most turbulent storm she had ever seen. Not quite true. She had seen this same typhoon of confusion in Mackenzie's face ten years earlier. Then, just like now, she hadn't known how to deal with it.